

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

*Michael M. Pacheco*

### **Until the Embers Die**

**B**eryl served Aiden his hot oatmeal, sliced bananas, and a slice of whole wheat toast. He saw something unusual about her, his wife of sixty years, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Now, she walked to the coffeemaker and spoke without looking at him.

"You want French Roast or Colombian?"

Her English accent had faded over the years and now she sounded very American. Before he could answer, the metal spoon she'd been holding clanged on the granite counter. She caught herself before leaning against the kitchen countertop. Aiden rose quickly and rushed to her side.

"Are you all right? What's going on?"

She turned and faced him with misty eyes. "I'm dying, Aiden."

"What?"

He thought he knew everything about her. The pounding of his 80-year-old heart hurt in his chest as he gave her a gentle embrace. "Do you want to go to the hospital, maybe get checked out?"

She looked normal to him except for the slight pallor of her face. The crinkle of her eye, which he loved, was still there, but the forced smile scared him.

"No, they can't fix what I have."

He leaned back and studied her eyes. "What exactly do you have? Is it cancer?"

She gulped a deep breath. "I don't know what to call it, but it feels like walls closing in on me."

He wasn't sure whether she was referring to the walls of their home or the pressures of everyday life. She looked left, then right, then buried her face in his chest. At that moment he realized she was suffering from a psychological condition rather than a physical ailment. "What can I do to help?"

He felt stupid, feeling so disconnected from the love of his life.

Six decades prior, they'd met while she was an exchange student at the university in Portland, Oregon. As classmates, they slowly began to know each other and by the end of the first semester, they were close friends. Their friendship grew and matured, gradually tipping the scales toward an improbable romance. He was from an Idaho farm. She was from the Midlands of England. Aiden forged many friendships in college, but in Beryl, he'd found a companion for life.

After graduation, they married and settled in La Grande, Oregon, in the heart of the Blue Mountains. Their new home was amidst mountain ranges and rolling uplands in the northeastern part of the state. They fell in love with the "Valley of Peace" as the Native Americans called it and never moved since. Their love had planted a fire in their hearts and given them a peace they'd never known.

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Aiden glanced out through the kitchen window at the dense forest behind their modest two-bedroom house. He pulled back, then leaned forward into her and kissed her softly on the lips. Her muscles relaxed in his embrace. "You wanna go for a drive? Get some fresh air?"

She nodded at the idea. She seemed more at ease now, face calm, shoulders relaxed.

He wanted to ask her questions about her ailment, but for a couple in their eighties, they knew each other well. Some things were better left unsaid at moments like these.

Driving on the winding roads around the city was one of their favorite pastimes. The huge Western Ponderosas, Douglas firs, and other lush flora never got old. Aiden loved this part of the country just as much as she did. His childhood was spent in Blackfoot, Idaho, the potato capital of the world. On their occasional jaunts, Beryl would tell him stories about her childhood in Birmingham. The Midlands was a place completely foreign to Aiden until Beryl's parents died in a tragic auto accident. Without the funeral, the trip to England might have been fun. As for his parents, they had the misfortune of contracting an aggressive viral infection. They died within a month of each other. He and Beryl were now each other's only family.

It was still early on this sunny day as they left the city limits eastbound toward Sacajawea Peak in the Wallowa Mountains. They'd been there before, but this time Aiden wanted to try new roads recently cleared by the Bureau of Land Management. Their four-wheel drive SUV was well-equipped to handle the steep terrain.

Over the years, they'd driven and hiked many of the trails in the surrounding mountains. Living a clean life, hiking, and eating wholesome foods, resulted in them being healthy octogenarians. On a clear day like today, the scenic views from the tourist vantage point would be awe-inspiring. Perhaps this is what she wanted, what she needed.

He knew she missed the fellowship of her Jewish friends in the Tri-Cities, the closest metropolitan area several hundred miles away. In that sense, they shared a common want, to be amongst people of their faith. His mother, a full-blooded Shoshone practiced traditional Native American rituals all her life. His father had been a Christian of Irish descent but he respected his wife's Native religious beliefs. Aiden followed neither of those faiths preferring instead to carve his own path. Some would say he was an agnostic loner, but he missed his parents tremendously.

When Aiden had taken Beryl to visit his mother in Idaho, Beryl showed genuine interest in learning about the Shoshone belief system. The spiritual realms and concern for the environment intrigued her. She even learned a sacred chant from his mother to commune with the universe. It was a calm, soothing repetition of a deep, humming sound.

"Back in England," she said, "You can only read about these things."

The road to the pull-out area where the foot trail began was well-developed. Decades ago, the Army Corps of Engineers had bulldozed a two-lane dirt road on the side of this volcanic behemoth.

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When Aiden drove within 100 yards of the pull-out, he felt a mild vibration in the steering wheel. He stopped the SUV, turned off the engine, and glanced around, unsure what he was looking for. "Did you feel something?"

Aiden was aware this was not earthquake country, but he also remembered the St. Helens volcanic eruption. Mother nature could be very unpredictable.

She frowned. "Yeah. What was that?"

His mind reeled back to a night when he slept in a tent in his family's backyard. At midnight, he woke to a similar tremor. He bolted upright and then relaxed when he heard the horn of a train several miles away. But here, today, the shaking was different, ominous and foreboding.

Before he could answer, his attention was drawn to a bird of prey overhead. He wasn't sure whether it was a large osprey or an eagle. He unbuckled his seat belt and was about to climb out to look around when the rumbling started again, this time louder and more intense.

He turned and saw a bewildered look on Beryl's face. Through her window, he saw a boulder the size of a city bus rolling directly toward them.

Time stood still.

His mind yelled at his mouth to scream.

"Look out!" That was all the warning he had time to give. He reached for her.

Beryl didn't have time to turn around before the boulder struck. Her head remained still as the massive stone smashed her door inward. Her head whipped back and shattered glass flew toward him. Aiden braced himself, using his chest to shield her, absorbing the impact.

He became aware of a loud crashing sound and a feeling as if he'd been shot out of a cannon. Then, everything went blank.

When he came to his senses, he was lying on his side with his left cheek pressed against the ground. Deep pain pounded in his head and chest when he opened his eyes. He lay for a second assessing his condition, checking for danger, his survival instincts taking control. He couldn't feel his legs, except for the pain, an agony so intense he thought he might pass out again.

He looked up and recognized the rugged cliff thirty feet above him that they had been atop before the sudden and powerful impact struck the side of his SUV. He pushed himself to his elbows. A jagged pane of light at an angle parallel to the mountainside now reached him. The sun had been higher in the sky before the impact. The change in light meant he'd been unconscious for at least an hour.

What had happened to him? Then, he remembered.

"Beryl!" he cried out.

He managed to turn his head and look behind him. His face twisted in agony at the sight of the devastation. His SUV lay on its top, crumpled like an old toy.

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Was his sweetheart inside that tangled mess of metal? Fighting for calm, he tried hard not to follow his imagination down a questionable rabbit hole. The muscles in his arms burned with the sheer effort of dragging the rest of his body along. He was only about twelve feet away but it seemed like an eternity before he reached the edge of the upturned vehicle.

To his shock and dismay, Beryl lay inside, unconscious, lying sideways and still buckled in. His heart pounded and his eyes welled.

Somehow, he managed to squeeze into the tight crawlspace. He pulled himself over the broken glass and tried to awaken her. "Beryl, can you hear me? Honey, stay with me."

When she didn't respond, he wanted to shake her but then thought better of it. He looked around at the blood spatter everywhere, some dried, some fresh.

His muscles relaxed when she pushed open her eyelids and the corners of her mouth turned upward.

She smiled dreamily. "I feel like I fell from the monkey bars."

Aiden started to laugh but then stopped suddenly when pangs of pain shot from his rib area to his head.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "Looks like you're pretty banged up too."

"Yeah, don't worry about me. I'll be okay. How about you? Can you move your arms or legs?"

Beryl winced and groaned as she tried to move her limbs. "Sorry. It hurts too much."

"Okay, then let's leave you buckled in till help arrives. Moving you might make things worse."

"How are we going to get help?"

Aiden shook his head slowly. He pushed himself up with his right hand and cupped her cheek with his free hand. "I'm hoping someone comes up the same trail we were on and notices our car down here." He glanced out from beneath the vehicle. "I didn't see my cell phone when I scooted to our car."

She squinted, looking at his bleeding legs. "Boy, we're a match made in heaven." A trite cliché, yes but it was Beryl's favorite. She said it to him on every one of their anniversaries.

They had never been a perfect couple, occasionally fighting and challenging each other. But they had a common trait. They loved to get lost in each other's eyes.

"Do you remember the day we met?" she said, her eyes searching for his.

He knew what she was doing. She was trying to get his mind off the inevitable. She was trying to distract his pain.

"Of course, I do. It was the best day of my life," he said. She had been standing in the courtyard looking at one school building and then another.

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When their eyes locked on each other, his heart lurched and his knees softened. "But there will be more good days ahead." When she stayed quiet, he added, "You promised me, we'd grow old together."

She breathed in as if the mere words caused her pain. "I did, and then we did."

"That was a long time ago," he said, "a couple of lovestruck kids."

If he could, he wanted to suck all the pain she felt so that he could hurt instead of her. He didn't tell her he was having more and more difficulty breathing as the minutes passed.

They lay there in silence for a long time lost in their own thoughts. She startled him when she spoke up.

"You know what I regret?"

He tried to look her in the eyes but she seemed more comfortable keeping them closed. "Tell me."

She took her time, then said, "We never made it to Machu Picchu."

Aiden thought she was going to mention missing her parents or taking that ocean cruise that hadn't materialized. "Never say never."

"If we make it out of this alive, I might not be able to feed myself, let alone climb precarious mountain trails in South America. You'll have to go it alone."

Her eyes were still closed she almost looked at peace with her tragic predicament. He wished he could hug her tightly. Before this calamity, holding her in his arms was more natural than breathing. Now, such a gesture would actually cause her more pain. "I meant what I said when we got married. You are mine and I am yours forever. I'm not going anywhere without you."

He thought he saw the corners of her mouth curl upward again, but he wasn't sure.

Aiden's pain was not subsiding. He turned toward Beryl when she began humming a strange, soothing sound. It was the Shoshone chant his mother had taught her. "Whoa ho ho ama ho."

It felt and sounded like a lullaby, followed by an eerie silence.

Overhead, birds chirped and woodpeckers knocked on trees. A yellow butterfly landed on Aiden's bloodied shoe. He thought he heard a mountain lion growl nearby. The rib pain was excruciating as he reached over her body. Luckily his 9mm Glock was still in the glove compartment. Beryl didn't move, oblivious to his actions.

He stared at her motionless body. He smiled remembering their many nights beneath the stars learning from each other and growing in love.

Aiden lay down beside his love and took her hand in his. Her grip was soft and warm, but it wasn't the heat of burning love. He wept in silence. She was becoming fiery hot. Her fever would soon pass and that would be a telling sign. As long as her headaches continued and the fire burned in her, her body was still fighting. But he knew eventually, the struggle would be over. It was only a matter of time.

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His chest tightened as he struggled to breathe. Even so, he would not let her go alone. He'd stay with her till the embers died.

Minutes passed.

Upon the signature bang of a nine-millimeter Glock, all the birds from the nearby trees took flight, all but two lovebirds who lay in quiet repose.