

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

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Scars

Myrtle put the red Ranchero into gear and pulled out of the parking lot of Good Shepherd Nursing Home. Fred in the passenger seat stared out the side window. He ran a quivering hand, mapped with veins, through his thin white hair, and then tremulously drummed his fingers on the black vinyl seat.

"What's so fascinating?" Myrtle said.

"Nice day."

"Yes. Chilly this morning, but the afternoon's supposed be really nice. Keep your fingers crossed. Maybe we've definitely seen the last of winter. And I think having the windows open will put your mom in good spirits."

"Yes, it will."

"She was pretty much all there. A good day for her."

"Yep, I think so."

"When you went to the restroom, she asked me why they kept her door locked. I just went ahead and told her that she had been stealing other people's things. And she said, 'That's awful. I just hate a thief.'"

"Sounds like her it does."

They turned onto Jasper Road. The pickup stayed in second gear as the narrow road twisted its way up Empire Hill. Fred straightened his glasses and cleared his throat. "I think I would like to get out."

"What?"

"I think I'll walk from here. It's a nice day."

She slowed the Ranchero but didn't stop. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Nothing's wrong. I just want to walk from here. It's not far and it's a nice day."

Myrtle stopped the Ranchero where forsythia bushes bristling with yellow flowers lined the road. Fred opened the door and stepped onto the pavement. "See you at the house," he said.

"Mom upset you, didn't she? She doesn't mean what she says. She even still thinks she's going home someday."

"No. I really just want to walk since it's a nice day." Fred shut the door, shuffled to the shoulder of the road, and began to trudge up the hill.

Myrtle continued home and parked next to the garage in the alley. She stepped carefully, tapping the concrete walk with her aluminum cane on her way to the backdoor. In the kitchen, she opened cans of chicken broth and chunked chicken. She diced carrots and celery, and dropped everything in a warming pot on the stove. She reached into the freezer for a bag of egg noodles that crackled as she dragged them out. From the refrigerator she pulled out a bottle of beer and opened it using a church key with a hula girl painted on it. When the soup reached a boil, she added the egg noodles. Occasionally, she glanced out the windows to the backyard.

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After a half hour, she rinsed and wiped her hands, picked up the cane, and walked outside—past the walk and stood in the alley. She looked both ways, sighed, and walked back. She saw Fred sitting in a green plastic lawn chair on the west side of the house, his morning shadow leaning north-northwest. She stepped off the walk and probed the rough grass with her cane as she teetered across the yard sloping down to Fred.

“I was beginning to worry about you. You must have slipped by me while I was making supper.”

Fred sat with his blue plaid shirt open to reveal a white potbelly with a long scar, red from its freshness, running down the middle. His glasses, darkened into black voids by the sun, masked his eyes.

“What are you doing with your shirt open?”

“The sun feels good on my scar.”

“Mmm. Supper is done. You about ready to eat?”

With a grunt and a moan, Fred adjusted himself in the chair. “Do you remember I once told you that if you ever left me, I would kill you?”

She stood silent before saying, “Mmm. Yeah. A long time ago.”

He stared at the valley to the south. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Myrtle turned to look at the valley Fred had been gazing upon and to the town of Galena on its south rim. The valley curled around the north and west sides of the former lead- and zinc-mining town. Mountains of mine tailings rose over the blighted land. From their graveled tops, the winds wisped away toxic dust that settled across the city and on the nearby country. In between the hulking behemoths lay the black pox of mineshaft openings—abandoned, uncovered—in a ground gray, gritty, and gashed. Nothing grew in the poisoned, sterile dirt—neither scrub nor weed.

Fred rubbed his scar. “Read the governments coming in to clean up all mining waste and seal up the open mines.”

“Yes, saw it on the news,” Myrtle said.

“Should be the mining companies doing that. They’re ones that made the mess.”

“That’s right. Well, supper’s ready.” Myrtle turned and walked back to the kitchen.

A few minutes later, Fred entered the kitchen as Myrtle sipped the last of her beer and tossed the spent bottle into the trash with a clink. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to drink in front of you,” she said. She stirred the pot. “If you want to go on into the living room, I’ll bring your soup out to you.”

She flinched and straightened with a gasp when Fred grabbed her around the waist and, leaning around, kissed her on the lips, his breath tainted with the residue of Marlboro cigarette smoke. Salty-scented steam from the simmering pot shrouded their faces. His bare belly, round as a beach ball, pushed against the small of her back. The front of her thighs grooved deeply into the oven handle. Her hands shook near the stove’s flame.

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He released her and stepped away. "You're my special gal."

Myrtle's trembling hand dropped the ladle onto a spoon rest. "You did that just because you wanted a taste of beer," she said and tittered as she glanced around.

But Fred had already entered the unlit hallway that led to the living room where the shadows swallowed his shambling form.