

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

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Death Wish

FOR YEARS I LIVED ACROSS THE STREET FROM DEATH WISH PIANO MOVERS. They occupied the basement of a big brick apartment building filled mostly with B.U. students. The owner, Bo, lived upstairs. He was a shaved-head, scary-looking dude in his 50's, but we became friendly through our dogs. He had a bruiser of a mixed breed who got along just fine with my all-purpose rescue dog Max.

Bo was rough but kind and he often had his guys do favors for people in the neighborhood: carry in and set up a giant Christmas tree for an older couple, the Gambles, who lived next door; or move the big piano in the church across the street. His "guys" were even scarier looking than Bo. They were huge, bearded, long-haired; and even in winter they often went around in cutoff shirts or jean jackets which exposed their enormous, heavily-tattooed arms.

Death Wish had a reputation for taking on the most difficult and delicate jobs. Once, while waiting outside a Harvard auditorium, I saw their big black truck with the Death Wish logo, a white skull and bones, drive up. Curious, I followed Bo and the guys into the building and took a seat to watch them work. They approached the massive Steinway Grande and stopped. Bo circled the piano and then, holding an old-fashioned stopwatch, silently nodded at his men. Despite their mountain-man looks, the guys moved with a balletic, coordinated precision and grace. They quickly disassembled the legs, banded the piano body with straps, and began to carry it out of the hall. Bo saw me sitting there and nodded. As he passed me he held up the stopwatch. "Seven minutes," he said, the first and only words from this demonic, efficient crew.

In addition to his rough efficiency, Bo also had a playful, artistic side. One June day, he had the guys set up an old, yellowed piano with its innards removed on the small bare lawn on the corner in front of their building. And then he filled the bed of the piano to overflowing with a jungle of ferns and flowering plants. This unexpected, delightful sight of the green-growing piano became famous throughout the area, eventually even popping up on a postcard. It also became something of a tourist destination with people often getting out of their cars to gawk and snap photos. Of course, these pianos would eventually wither and crack in the New England winters; but come spring, Bo would always have a new, freshly-planted one in place on the corner. It was his gift to the neighborhood.

So it was with sadness and surprise when I learned Bo had decided to sell Death Wish and retire to Florida. He told me he had met his true love in a biker bar; and they had chosen to relocate to a trailer park on the sandy coast where it was warm and they could ride their bikes year round. The big black trucks disappeared from the neighborhood along with their beefy, scary but kindly crews. The old flower-strewn piano in front of the building eventually disintegrated and was carted away.

But about a year and a half later, I was out walking Max and there was Bo sitting in a massive black Ford pickup idling in front of his old build-

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ing. We exchanged friendly greetings and I asked him what he was doing back here.

"Just a little nostalgia," he said. "Couldn't keep away from my old stomping grounds."

"So you thinking of coming back?"

"No, never! I like the heat," he said with a toothy grin.

I asked how things were going with the girlfriend he had told me about the last time we met.

He laughed. "Oh, she turned from mermaid to piranha." He said she had left him for another biker. "Just upped and road off on the back of his Harley. Go figure." Bo shook his head, then smiled impishly. "But guess what. They busted up in some freak accident and both were killed. So there's some justice in the universe."

"That's terrible," I said.

"Nah." He shrugged his big shoulders and ran a hand over his bald head. Then Bo told me he had already met another woman. "And this one has surgically altered nipples."

"Say what?" I said.

"Yeah, she had them fixed. So now they just stand straight out." He smiled. "It's a strange world, my friend. You can't make this stuff up."

Bo gave Max and me a little wave, then rumbled his big truck around the corner and away. Back to his alternate but just universe where the sun was always shining and you can't make this stuff up.