

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

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Jiminy

To the west, valleys peak into leveled expanses of hilltop. There are several such plateaus. These breakers rise and fall, at last carrying sight to where a town rests, flattened out like a rocky shoreline.

Benny's small cabin is alone on his hilltop. From his vantage point, sitting on his porch, he can behold the frontier undulate in the hot sun of noon like a sea. And in the dusky hours, the terrain resembles sawdust-laden waves.

Stretching outside Benny's window from the east there is the curvature of road as it bends into view, clearing onto his plateau before ebbing down into the valley below. Benny's pickup is the only thing to ever ride up this stretch. Long ago, he took down the signpost a few miles back that used to signify the eastern entrance, and he covered it in rocks and camouflaged the entrance in bramble and thicket. No one has looked. There is no town deeper east of the peaks, only forest, so he figured no harm was being committed by steering away stray travelers who were "headin' nowhere anyhow."

At the eastern base of his plateau, obscured by the abandoned road and a ring of thick trees, he devotes much of his time to the cultivation of poppy fields, budding in vermilions. And in Benny's valley to the west, he cultivates barley without success. He mostly watches the stalks sway, and come harvest, he views most of his crop dead. He slashes the patches from the dirt and ignites them into fire.

Before arriving in town to sell his opium, Benny must ride through the wavering hills and valleys, passing other shimmering fields and the suspicious men who work them. The men will always halt their plows, follow you with their necks as you buck down their roadway, remaining motionless until viewing your figure ascend the next climb, leaving their land. A clever Chinaman operates a den in town, and he has been distributing Benny's product since opening the establishment; he has been managing with the townsfolk's morality, the county officials' licensing and the consumers' demands for years. But that's none of Ben's business.



When he was younger, Benny would go more often to town. Now he goes merely as often as needed to secure funds. Back then, given to women and drink, he would drive into town and unload pounds at a time for the Chinaman, spending the rest of the night revolving from the brothel to the bar. In both establishments, he recognized men who lived on the peaks nearby him and who worked the fields near his own.

He would wander around the Chinaman's den, waiting for the latter's assistants to unload the crates and calculate the figures. Benny would gaze upon the faces of men gone listless, whom he would sometimes see working their fields, red and vigorous. Bodies strewn everywhere, prostrated in varying degrees of stupor. Bodies laid on carpets and in downy chairs: some asleep, some smiling and closed-eyed, some totally apathetic, reclin-

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ing as a Chinese boy holds a pipe to their feebly puckering lips. Down every hallway, he saw compartments indenting the walls, containing expressionless people consolidated into their closets of bliss. Ladders rose into a low hanging loft, a depth of pillows at the bottom of each of them, and men would descend sometimes like sloths, moving from one rung to the next in a dreamy deliberation, while pony-tailed assistants who had bald foreheads and carried bamboo sticks rustled their shoulders if they happened to nod off halfway during the descent, helping them sink off the ladders as soon as within reach.

On such an occasion of exploration, young Benny climbed one of the ladders into the loft above. It was a capricious decision induced by his extra degree of boldness that day lingering from a happy night of carousing, which he deemed justified because he had sowed, reaped and processed his largest harvest to date. Also, at the moment he had some added time to waste, as the boy working the scales and abacus was diligent when calculating, getting the figures perfectly squared.

Benny was not a user. He climbed up through the wafting brume to see if the loft above had any different shades of languid idleness to gaze at. One of the pony-tailed boys with a stick looked at him inquisitively but unmoved. At the top, Benny opened a drape that veiled the entrance, pulled himself in, and saw the floor was covered in blankets and cushions; a candle burned on a center table with nothing else on it. One of the assistants was recumbent on the ground, waiting to be murmured to by any of the presently slumbering smokers. This assistant was an old man; he looked straight at the American on the ladder and mumbled words in his native language. Benny smiled at him.

“Don’t mind me,” he said, “I’m just peeking.”

He turned and was about to descend the ladder, when he glimpsed a form out of place — he had to do a double-take. And it was, indeed, the image of a beautiful young woman he saw, with long brunette curls that on one side of her head hung over the temple, shrouding her eyebrow and masking one side of her face.

She must have been a recent inductee to the smoking den, for her lips were crimson with blood and her pallid skin shone a glow of vitality. However, she seemed to be asleep. Benny gazed at her. The old man said something else to him, this time a little more audible but still indecipherable. He moved closer to her, and with his chest rocking, extended his hand to the side of her face hidden beneath the locks, and he gently moved her hair back, brushing his hand passed her temple. The old man began raising the tone of his voice by octaves and increasing the tempo of his word-flow.

Just then she was roused, opening her large eyes and exposing their great whites. Benny couldn’t remember ever being embarrassed.

“I’m so sorry. I just came up here — I’m the supplier here, you see — I was just checking on — I just saw you up here, and you looked out of place against the rest of the scenery.”

Her dilated pupils stared at him, unblinking. Benny continued in his confusion: “this old man here,” he pointed to the assistant, “looks like he

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can't make out a hole in the ground, so I was just making sure you were okay." He finished. The old man in the cramped space with them lowered his voice again, but his fast words continued to be ignored by Benny. Yet the young lady appeared to follow the gist of his speech.

After the old man was done, still staring at them, her small lips trailed into a smile at the edges, and she chuckled inside her nose and closed mouth. She turned her head on her pillow, holding eye contact for another second until she passed out on her cheek.

Benny did fall in love that day.



He had a drink with the head Chinaman later that night, endeavoring to discover all he could about his diamond in the rough. It turned out, as he predicted, that she lived in town; although contrary to his assumptions, she had been orphaned. Her father and eldest brother were both killed on the battlefield; her mother died during childbirth; her remaining sibling, a sister, only a few months prior was a casualty of typhoid. The Chinaman said that she worked as a governess at her childhood home. She began renting it out to a small family after her inheritance was given to the county treasury following the death of her family's patriarchal line. And, lastly, he related how she was not a staple of his den, but that she came on Sundays when the family she subleased to gave her the day off.

Benny spent all night in town occupying the quarters of a hired woman. He laid up most of the time, retracing her features in his head, resolving what course to take in order to achieve her hand. The woman he commissioned slept naked next to him most of the night, and he imagined periodically it was *her*, turning over, embracing the prostitute, sliding himself inside her while covering her shoulders in passionate kisses, pretending they were lovers. It was a restless sleep for him that night at the brothel. In the morning, the woman rose with him, not seeming to recall him or their enthusiasm shared the night before. After he paid her, he kissed her warmly on her stolid lips.

The rising sun blurred his vision as it gleamed clouded by the misty morning ether, as it was a pink ball hovering in front of him on a big belt of eastern sky. He was looking straight into it, stupidly, thinking of something distant, similar to the night before when he projected the intensity of touching her, like a shadow, onto another woman.

Benny, being young and inexperienced in courtship, did the one thing he could think of in order to reach his romantic goal: he became the orphan's not-too-secret admirer. He would send her bouquets ordered from the florist in town, trinkets purchased from the jeweler, and weekly stipends of money. All the while, ascending into her loft every Sunday (where he managed to convince the Chinaman to allow him to usurp the old assistant's position) he would pass her the pipe when she would moan. At times when he thought she was resting, she would laugh suddenly, unprovoked. He wouldn't speak to her very much. He would sit by her and, unsolicited, fluff her pillow. Every now and then she would dazedly stare at him or dozily mumble sounds in her throat as if she were cooing.

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As the weeks went by, her wrists and fingers gathered more of the ornaments he would buy and send to her. And when he would pass by her house (the Chinaman pointed it out to him), he would imagine there was a room where she ate and slept, surrounded by all the bouquets he sent her.

As he watched her luxuriate inside her dreams, he became aware that he was occupying more space within them. She would bare her voluptuous corneas to him, fighting the sleepiness seeping in, tempting him to fall in and probe for what's behind the pupils, to start taking guesses at the extent of her growing love. His gifts and his fervent doting were winning her over. Soon, she would fall to sleep with smiles. Her bright face, shut off in slumber, would fluctuate with the fancies of her drug hallucinations, when, half-aware of his presence, she would stretch out her leg and touch him with her toes; the nails coating her tips were like pearls. He would caress her in her sleep, and she would wake up smiling, then turn over on her side, teasing him by withholding any more contact for that day. She'd fall into deep repose.

He thought his wish for a wife was being granted. After those many nights when glimpsing the shooting stars dissolve over his valley and above his cabin, now, when descending the ladder and driving home from the den, he considered himself the most prominent light in this girl's star-filled head.

When their sojourn in youthfulness was over, they were ready to be married. She turned out to be the fairest wife indeed. Whether moonlit on her pillow, or reflected by the sunlight against her sheets, she was filled with an organic grace showing in her smile and resounding in her laughter. He would rise very early and do all his work in the fields so he could be back in time to greet her morning chuckle, as she woke up and stretched:

"Benny..." she would drawl, petting his head, running her hand down his chest and stomach, "I love you."

"Oh, I love you, my own," he would say with unbridled feeling, nearly welling up in tears.

She was the subtlest thing, and he was in love with her mystery. She never went back to her childhood home. Not to work nor to visit.

Every Sunday, he'd bring her the pipe and fill it with a special blend, made aromatic with roses and extra ingredients. He would brainstorm all week for new mixes to concoct for her weekly treat. During the week he would also cook for her, bring it to her bedside, read novels for her entertainment, talk of his ideas about life, and she would smile at him with a perfection of contentment that inspired Benny to be a better husband and lover. He always tried to become even more in tune with the discreet love she transmitted, which he felt was already sumptuous as it electrically coursed inside him.

Then they were with child. She gave up the pipe the moment her belly began distending. They were both ecstatic...but it was the incandescence which began to illuminate her skin, and, in fact, shined throughout her whole being, which made him almost fall in love with her all over again. She would lie in bed and smile throughout the day and night, held within

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the conference of joy in her heart. He couldn't even look her in the face anymore, for the sensation he experienced was so powerful.

But, as the neglected fields of his valley would die and have to be burned if unattended, regardless of a year's worth of fertility, despite his ardent love, he had missed something essential in maintaining her delicate fabric, and he could not keep the baby alive. It fell from her body into his hands, lifeless.

The rest is a blur for Benny. How her uneasiness overtook her smiles, how her domestic warmth led to coldness toward him, how her sweetness around him gave way to her urge to compel him; how, in time, if he didn't bring her the opium, morning, afternoon and night, she would wrinkle her face in a terrible menace. She became a ghost of what he knew, of what he loved. But how could he cease loving?



Benny's love never smiled again. She was fixed within her somber contemplation. He would read to her, and she would stare at him with a stillness making her recognizable as one of the living only because her breathing chest heaved. He would still bring her breakfast, lunch and dinner, and she would eat little and smoke a lot. She never talked anymore...

Except once, he was sitting at the table staring through his screenless window, as it became his tendency to do, and she said in a softer, more even tone than he'd heard her use in some time:

"Benjamin, come here." He moved to her bedside. She gave him a serene gaze. He was more nervous than the day he first touched her hair. She reached for his hand. He gave it to her, his knees trembled. She was staring in his eyes and he was melting. She pulled him close to her. "I wanna 'nother baby," she said, and she clasped her free hand around his neck, pulled him on top of her.

The seed took. Then she stopped speaking. And they never lied together after that, she preferring to sleep alone. She grew bigger and bigger and gaunter and feebler. At times when she was asleep he would rub her belly; she might moan and turn to the other side; once she opened her eyes with infinite sadness, then turning her back, she cried into the pillow. It was a fact that she was inconsolable.

Her birth pains were too much to bear in conjunction with a throbbing heart. She left this world with a baby boy in her arms, using her last breathing words to name him:

"Benny," she looked up, pale, imploring her husband with what was still unsaid... "Jim—" she gasped for a final breath, "Jiminy..." she smiled down at the child, "you're ours, baby."

II

Ten years later, Benny's driving up the eastern highway inclining into their plateau. He glances at the pink sky ascending the hillside as he turns around the bend; the next second, he is seen by Jiminy in the bright sun beating on their hilltop. The engine of his truck jostles the iron and wood

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frame on its axle, causing unsynchronized movements like a cartoon car as it moves up the path to the cabin. As it rolls closer, Jiminy can better make out the hazy mass raising the dust into his vision.

"It's just a normal truck," the child thinks.

Along the dirt pathway leading to the porch, crows dotting a brown, weathered fence scatter from their barbwire perch; behind, a cow grazes indifferent to the approaching truck and its clanking sounds. Jiminy walks out of the battered door to the front porch, where he remains idle as Benny disengages the engine a few paces before him.

"Help me," he calls after slamming his door closed. Benny walks to the back of the pickup, and, as he is unloading a sealed wooded crate, Jiminy hurries down the cabin's steps.

"How many bulbs you think are here?" His son asks, acting as a conveyance for the inventory. Benny hands him the smaller crates and watches him stack them on the ground.

"If I could count 'em with my eyeballs alone, heck, I'd be counting cards or running numbers instead of working these fields."

Jiminy laughs, squinting up at the great tall man who is darkened somewhat by the setting sun's halo as it crowns their hilltop at this hour. Benny glances down at the boy. He smiles to himself as he unloads the crates too big at the moment for Jiminy to lift.