

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

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The Coincident

The silver gray of the photograph he held tightly in his hand burned deeply into his consciousness. He clearly remembered the color of her hair and the brightness of her smile from so long ago. It amazed him to think she'd been gone for over nine years. The face in the photograph looked deeply into his eyes.

So many years ago, he thought. Where did it all go? *Why can't I remember?*

Fleeting moments, some call it. There was that time in the man's life when the two of them had been as one. A few precious, easy moments he had with her. At times he wanted to bring everything back like it was yesterday, but the pain it caused was almost unbearable. Ironically, the pain, its familiarity, was a comfort for him, like a ragged blanket full of holes.

Christ help me, he thought more as a prayer than an oath. Everyone avoids me now. Do I put off that kind of vibe? What day is it? Thursday. Perhaps it's a good day to say goodbye to everything. Can't think straight. Yesterday I had reasons for living and today I can't seem to recall what the hell they were.

I remember when we met. It wasn't any spectacular occasion as far as the world is concerned, but it held for me the answer to life. Dead now. God took her from me nine years ago. Why me?

He hated that phrase when other people around him said it. It irritated him to hear those words in his mind.

I'm alive, he thought. Messed up, but alive. Where am I going though? She at least had her God and Jesus. I could never accept that. Those TV preachers never made much sense to me. Selling salvation for a hundred-dollar donation never made me want what they had. Well, I wanted the wealth, that's for sure. I can't afford God. It's not that I don't believe, God just cost too much.

She believed. She's dead. The sickness that took her caused great pain and yet she still believed. It's a mystery to me. If it had been me, I wouldn't have been praying like she did, I'd have been cursing.

She seemed to have this effect on people who knew she was going to die. Some people actually thought God was doing the right thing. I can't accept that. No one should go through that much pain because of God.

When she left so did my faith.

Leonard stepped back, forcing himself to stop ruminating on the past. *Why the hell am I damn near suicidal? My wife wasn't the only one who'd died from cancer before her time. My wife wasn't the only one who'd left a husband and daughter behind. Besides, I'm wealthy. Very wealthy.*

Time for a smoke, he mused. When she was here, I never smoked much. That damned cancer kept me from doing it. She never smoked and still got lung cancer.

If there ever was a time when I thought a man and a woman were equal it was when she was here. When she died....

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I need a match. Got to find a match. Coat pocket. Bathroom? No one coming over tonight. Might as well sit down and have a drink. Forget about it. Shouldn't drink though, it's pointless. I've tried a million times to stop, but after she died it became next to impossible to stop or to care to stop.

He walked to the bathroom and found his match. With the cigarette lit, he walked to the kitchen where he kept his liquor and poured himself a strong one.

He heard a knock and the opening of the door. It could only be one person.

His daughter Amy. She never used the doorbell, but then again why should she. She used to live here. The house had twenty rooms and what seemed like a thousand locked doors with no keys in sight. There were no keys in his thought as he took a sip from the first drink of the day.

Leonard walked to the front room where Amy stood. His mind momentarily flew off to a dry and barren land. Rocks of various size and shapes speckled the landscape in an impossible jigsaw puzzle. The points on the stones were razor sharp. He pictured himself falling on these rocks whenever his hapless mind took him to this place. Bleeding, lacerated and in excruciating pain. He watched himself crawl across the rocky desert sand, eyes shut tightly.

"Amy," Leonard said with a tear in his eye.

"Dad," Amy hugged her father.

Leonard cringed, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and took a drag on his cigarette.

"Things will get better," she said softly.

The memory of her birth twenty-four years ago flooded his mind. At the time he thought it was the happiest day of his life. When his wife died, it took ages before he would acknowledge any of the good days. During the worst days he forced himself, no matter how reluctantly, to remember how he fell in love with the woman who gave his daughter life, to recognize that was indeed a happy day for Leonard. Moments like that gave him reprieve, even something to live for.

The cigarette he smoked dropped from his lips to the floor which was crushed by a black heel.

"You've got to stop smoking," Amy said. "You know how bad your heart is. And what's this drink?"

"Yeah, yeah," Leonard said. "Quit smoking, quit drinking, quit living, is that what these people want?"

"I know why you're doing this, Dad," Amy said. "You've got...."

"Just don't say anything. Nothing can keep me from my memories Amy. Nothing."

"Don't leave them behind, Dad. But if you don't let go a little bit it'll kill you. YOUR life didn't end."

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"It DID!" he said vehemently.

Silence filled the room for a long moment.

"Dad, I've talked to you a hundred times about this. Don't you listen to me? You've got to stop doing this to yourself. All I can do is pray for you, Dad. I can't make you do anything you don't want to do. There is a way out. You just have to accept it, Dad. You've been killing yourself for nine years. Are you listening?"

"No," he said. "You and your mother are the most beautiful women I've ever seen."

Amy blushed slightly. She wore regular jeans, much to the dismay of her wealthy father, and a tight black t-shirt. She had slender hands with closely cut nails because she hated that long fingernail feeling when she put on her socks.

Amy kicked off her shoes and strolled into the kitchen with Leanord following close behind.

The refrigerator held only a gallon of milk, six eggs and a half gallon of orange juice.

Amy stared hard at her father.

"What's this?"

"I don't know."

Amy grabbed the orange juice and filled a glass she'd pulled down from the cupboard.

"I've been thinking," her father said.

"What?"

"I've been thinking about things," he said and moved to living room and sat down on a red crushed velvet couch. Amy sat in a chair across from him.

"What kind of things?" she asked.

"I don't know."

After the silence took over the conversation Amy stood up.

"I came here to rest a bit, Dad. Hope you don't mind. The apartment is just too noisy right now and I can't deal with it. If I don't get some rest, I'll drop dead."

"I wish I could rest," Leanord said.

"Dad, c'mon. Why don't try to meet some women?"

"Don't ever say anything like that to me again! EVER!"

Amy just looked at him with distant eyes. She couldn't remember every hearing her father sound like that.

"I'm going to sleep, Dad. Wake me at one."

"Okay," Leanord said and stood up to go back in the kitchen and mix another drink.

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While Amy walked upstairs, she felt a stirring in her chest. It was a little sharper than some of the pains she'd had earlier and usually they just went away if she stood very still, putting her hand to her breast.

A slight fear filled her entire body for a second which made her gasp quietly for breath. She stopped for a moment, breathed deeply, felt her face flush and then everything relaxed. She continued upstairs and entered her old room.

There it was in the same disorder she'd left it in. It reminded her a lot of how her life was at home before going to graduate school. All through college she'd lived at home to be there for Dad because he seemed so incredibly sad and lonely. But after four years taking care of Daddy, she finally met a very nice man and she decided to get away. Escape, really. But she always came back to make sure Dad wasn't smoking, but he always was. She always came back to make sure he wasn't drinking, but he always was.

The slight pain still crept around in her chest. This had happened so many times before she learned to ignore the pain. It really didn't hurt that much and besides, who couldn't take a little pain.

Amy got ready to take a nap. She took off her jeans and t-shirt and slept in her underwear. It was much more comfortable inside Dad's over-heated house. She'd tease about the place being a greenhouse, but Dad never had any plants and never seemed to want to open any windows.

Leanord lit another cigarette and poured yet another drink.

"God," he said quietly out loud. "I can't believe I'm having a third one. I don't want to be drunk when Amy wakes up. I don't. I can't stop myself."

His mind tried to empty itself of thought. All that came to him was some insane notion that this was all wrong. The wealth he gained through hard work and the mansion he owned. Burn it all down. Don't need any of this.

No, Amy's up there. I'd never go through with it anyway. Too damned chicken. Maybe I should just fall asleep. After this drink.

Amy woke from a cold chill that shook her body. The window to her room was open and a slight breeze swirled around. The clock read three. She mentally scolded her father for not waking her up when she had told him. It was time to get up anyway.

A sharp pain attacked her chest. She waited, breathed, and considered. This time it wasn't as prominent as the one she had walking up the steps. It took her quite a while to slip into her jeans. Before she could button them, she collapsed to the floor and stopped breathing.

Leanord found himself drunk at three. It irritated him because he'd promised himself not to drink at home. Again. The realization that he'd forgotten to wake Amy at one made him feel stupid. He didn't want to face her because of that oversight. But he'd better get her up now because she may have had something to do later on. She might even be late.

Leanord wanted to ask Amy what her mother meant by believing in God. The question had been there for quite some time because Amy

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always seemed to carry that part of her mother with her. Leonard also noticed how contentment clothed his daughter, something he never understood.

Leonard walked up the stairs with a bit of uncertainty, feeling even more stupid. Can't even stay sober when my girl is here! He pressed a hand against the wall to steady himself, saw Amy's door was closed and knocked once he reached it.

No answer.

My, that girl could sleep through a tornado. He knocked again, a little louder.

"Sorry, honey, I forgot to wake you at one. It's after three."

Nothing.

His body filled with a surge of pain and a wave of nausea. Something was dreadfully wrong! He knocked harder.

"Amy, I'm coming in, I hope you're decent."

He pushed the door open harder than he intended. When he saw her on the floor, he discovered he couldn't cry. He hadn't cried in years, not since his wife died. He pressed a shaking finger against her neck, checking for a pulse.

Nothing.

Leonard exploded. He leaped up to her dresser, and with one sweep of his arm and with a strident scream, he swept everything onto the floor. Jewelry, make-up, perfume bottles, clattered to the floor. Her book shelf was next. Leonard pulled hard on it, sending it crashing to the floor. He kicked and flailed and screamed insanely until he finally dropped to the floor.

A book lay open on Amy's bed he had somehow not knocked to the floor. He read the words before him. "All things work to the good for those that love God."

He stopped screaming, looked at the ceiling and mouthed three words. Then he had nothing to say.

Later, after the funeral, after the gathering in the church basement, after saying goodbye to all the hundreds who came to the funeral, he sat alone in the church, sweating in the stifling heat of the building. When the priest began walking toward him, he stood up and left as quickly as he could.

While he sat at home, the phone rang. Leonard stumbled to the phone, slurred a hello and listened to the doctor tell him Amy had a rare heart condition and there was nothing that could have been done even if they'd caught it.

Only through cruel coincidence could his daughter and wife die on the exact same day. September twenty-fourth.

After he hung up, he poured another drink, contemplated how he found the house emptier than he'd ever known. A blind rage burst out of

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Leonard towards the being that took his beloved child and wife. The only thing he knew how to do was drink it away.

So that's what he did.

"There is nothing left," he said grabbing the bottle. "I'll join oblivion."

Coincidentally, a business partner of Leonard's stopped by to see how he was doing because he knew how much Leonard's daughter meant to the man. When Leonard wouldn't come to the door, the man tried the door and he found it open. He saw Leonard sitting in a chair with a bottle beside his hand. The way his head slumped forward made the business partner jump quickly. It didn't matter though. Leonard was cold to the touch. The man knew what happened and tried not to believe it and couldn't help but feel sorry for the man. He supposed he might do the same thing if all those things occurred in his life.

Leonard only sat there. Gone.