

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

Olivia Murray

TRANSPORTATION

THE HOUSE IS SMALL. Ranch-style, brick. Black shutters. The lights are on. The front door is open. In it, a black silhouette, edged in gold. A cop, shiny badge on his chest, catching the headlights of the van. A dog in the yard, snuffling around in the grass. Chasing something.

In the driveway, a white sedan. A rusted-out pickup. A cop car. The ambulance is parked on the street with its lights off. Frick puts the van in park and wrenches up the handbrake. We sit. He watches the house. I watch the dog. It's a golden retriever. Brown leather collar on its neck, dangly silver tags. He is – or was – loved.

The key turns in the ignition. The engine cuts. I reach for the door handle. Frick reaches for me, stops short of my shoulder. He rests his hand on the back of my seat instead. He's got crazy blue eyes. I can't look at them for long. His real name is Fred. He drives like a bat out of hell and curses more than I do, but he won't say fuck. It's indecent, he says.

"Listen," he tells me now, in the dark of the van.

I listen.

"He's in the back bedroom, on the left. Get your gloves on, keep 'em the hell on. Don't talk to nobody."

I reach for the handle again. Now, he finds my shoulder. Squeezes it. I stop.

"Watch for sharps," he says. "Don't get stuck."

"Alright."

He's satisfied.

We get out. At the back of the van, Frick opens the doors. He wheels out the gurney. On top of it is the body bag. Black plastic, zipper all the way down. The straps are unfastened. The buckles are clanking against the legs of the gurney. The dog comes over, nudges my hand with his nose. It's cold and wet. I start to scratch behind one of his ears. From the house, someone whistles. The dog darts away.

Frick takes the foot of the gurney. I take the head of it. I don't like walking backward. Frick and I don't have to talk about it.

The cop is still in the doorway. Frick asks him about someone named Jimmy, if he's still playing basketball. The cop answers that Jimmy ain't ever gonna stop playing basketball. Frick passes him by. The cop nods at me. I nod back.

Inside, it smells like weed and gardenias and rot. There's something sweet about it. Like a bowl of fruit left in a window, blackening, softening, leaking out onto everything. The gnats won't stay off of it. There's a cracked leather sofa and matching chair in the living room, covered with towels, blankets. A gray hoodie. A threadbare Smashing Pumpkins t-shirt. The dog is pacing between the sofa and the chair, back and forth.

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

To the left, a hallway. At the end of it, two EMTs, pressed into the shadows outside of an open bedroom door, light flooding out. Next to the EMTs is a woman, young, with shaggy blonde hair and eyeliner smeared as far up as her browbone and as low as the tip of her nose. Big t-shirt, tennis shoes with mismatched socks sticking out over their tops. A man, hollowed-out eyes, lack of sleep that goes further back than tonight.

We stop outside the bedroom door. Frick is ahead, just on this side of the threshold. He could see in, if he wanted. I can't on account of the wall. Frick exchanges words with the EMTs. I catch twenty-six, male, a week, maybe more. Sharps. Frick lets go of the gurney, pulls a pair of gloves from his back pocket. Latex, black. I dig around in the pockets of my pants and my jacket until I find mine. The latex resists. I wipe my palms on my thighs and try it again. Flex the hands inside the plastic. Everything settles.

From the bottom of the gurney, Frick calls out to me.

"All set?"

"Yeah."

The smell is worse in the bedroom. It's in everything, on everything. Frick's murmuring under his breath, cursing it. I breathe through my nose. Try not to open my mouth or move my tongue around too much so I don't end up tasting it. I will, anyway.

The overhead light's on. The comforter's stripped off the bed, bundled up on the floor. Frick kicks it out of the path of the gurney. We sidle it up right against the foot of the mattress.

"They think they got all the sharps," Frick says. "Keep your damn eye out, you hear?"

"I hear," I say.

We take up the bag, stretch it out sideways across the foot of the mattress. Unzipped, it's like a black hole. Dark and dark and more dark. Frick's talking to himself, alright, let's see here, moving up toward the head of the bed. I follow him on the other side of the mattress, eyes on the floor, knocking balled-up t-shirts and whatever else out of the way with a steel toe. Scan the top of the mattress, powder blue sheet, a long-dried puddle of sickness at the head. A pillow, still with the indentation of a head.

He's lying diagonally across the mattress: legs and feet on my side, torso in the middle, head over by Frick. On his back, left cheek to the mattress, shoulder-length hair, light brown or dark blonde. Marbling on the left side of the face, blood pooling where it should've been pumping. Blue-gray around the lips and the eyes, half-open, cloudy, colorless. Arms outstretched on either side, palms facing up. Black long-sleeved t-shirt, left sleeve rolled above the elbow. He didn't even get to take the belt all the way off his arm before it all went down. Puncture wounds, new and old alike, turned black.

I grab him around the ankles. Straighten out the legs. Frick takes hold of his arms by the wrists, starts to move them, then stops. Lifts the left shoulder up, pulls something out from under it. It's fuzzy, plush, covered

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

in vomit. Frick puts it on the pillow and goes back to rearranging. I look at the pillow. On it, now, a teddy bear. Beige, with black bead eyes, one of them hanging on by a literal thread. White ribbon around its neck, stained brown. Stuffing coming out of a little hole in its foot. Loved, too.

I look back down at the feet. Two gray blobs. We don't speak. I hold him a little higher up, the bottom of the calves. Frick taps along the armpits, fleeting contact, before he commits to putting his hands under them.

"The belt," I say.

"Just frickin' leave it," he says.

We start the move. He's lighter than I expected, but he drags down.

"Wait," I say.

"No," Frick says.

I set down my end. Frick doesn't set his down. Won't, not for anything. I take his left arm by the wrist. I see the nails, clean and trimmed, like mine. I pick up his arm and look under it. Just the sheet. I fumble with the belt, unravel it. The skin beneath is plum-colored. Not a bruise; something more stubborn. I leave the belt beside him on the bed. Too-blue eyes follow my hands.

"You don't listen for nothin'," Frick says.

I don't say anything back. Just help him get the body in the bag, and the bag zipped up, and the bag onto the gurney. Strap it all in. I take the bottom of the gurney this time. Frick gets the head. He backs out of the room, head turned, looking over his shoulder.

"Comin' through," he says.

I keep my eyes on Frick. There's crying behind me, soft, at first, then louder. Not from the woman, but from the man. The sound gets muffled, maybe into someone's shoulder, maybe into his own hands. The woman's voice, soft and wavering, thick with mucus. The dog's whining in the living room, lets out one sharp bark. The cop snaps his fingers at it. It settles.

"See you 'round, Frick," the cop says.

"Not too soon, I hope," Frick says.

The cop laughs at this.

The gurney gets hefted into the back of the van, secured with two more straps. One across the chest, one across the knees. Frick triple-checks the straps before we close the doors.

On the ride back, we don't speak. Frick hums along with the radio. It's an older song, Tammy Wynette. I don't know what it's called. At the train crossing, the gates are up. Lights out. Frick drives us over the tracks, the van bouncing, up and down, the gurney rattling in the back like crazy.

I stretch my arm back, between the seats, and place my hand on the edge of the gurney. Press down on it. Hold it steady.

"Hold on, fella," Frick says.

We're on the other side now. Smooth sailing.