

Pros and Cons of Wildflower Collection

by Marcus Walton

Joshua had never seen a field of cotton before, never set eyes on the real thing. So he pulled over. Slamming the door of his mustard-colored truck, he hopped down from the elevated curb of the old highway and started making his way in towards the best preserved part of the limp remains of a crop. These broken white blooms had flowered improbably after the harvest, left behind to wither without the purpose and future process of the others. Kneeling, he dug with his fingernails into the fragile, barbed husk of one that stood waving above the others in the sharp November winds. He stretched out the little ball of compacted strands and made a soft web of it on his hands. The stillness of dead cotton and the manic passing of cars both made a contrast that he felt summed this place up neatly and the air, now choked by exhaust fumes, felt polarized. He broke off a handful of the hardened bolls and pocketed them in his denim jacket, turning his wind-sore face back towards the promised shelter of his truck. Shutting the door on the cold, he breathed in the thickly contrasted scent of his vehicle, sealed with his own odor and peculiar, messy charm. The smell was like wet leather wrapped around long dried out pine, useless for tinder, impossible for the fire.

His dad had bought the truck for him a year ago, it still stinking like the cigarettes of the old woman they had bought it from. Technically it was her deceased husband's smoking, his truck, his life still laying thick upon the upholstery. Along with the truck his wife had offered them some of his other things cheap, like a pair of boots he had bought new a few weeks prior to his untimely fall off the roof. Joshua asked if he had ever gotten to wear them, when what he really wondered, knowing better than to ask, was whether he had been wearing them when he died. The old woman suddenly got choked up, though, and clutched the boots back to herself. She

had Joshua's sympathies, his little sadness only compounded by the boots' not having collected the smell of the man yet, the old woman senselessly loving shoes void of any personality.

"Joshua, this truck is kinda like your coming into being an adult, now, you know that?" his father had said after handing him the keys, fixing his eyes on him.

"I've been an adult, dad. I'm already eighteen."

"Yeah? So you've smoked for two years, and smoking is stupid no matter what you are. . ." faltering and thinking better of his words. . . "What I mean is. . . What I mean to say is, this is a level of trust you've never known before. A new road you're goin down. Do you understand that, boy?"

Joshua's exploration of adulthood had begun early, he thought, and he wondered when he would ever reach the part in the realm that his father inhabited. If it was truly new territory of the mind, he thought he might find some place that resembled the world as his dad envisioned it, having already decided that his father could never turn back across the frontier to the old world of youth. Nothing revealed such an understanding, though. The man and the boy spoke in different dialects, the latter always cursing itself and throwing out the old and the former traveling in tight, impenetrable circles of the commonest kind of sense.

This kind of sense, carried out on Joshua, had driven him into himself for the day, to an inner place and another county. He'd played with the idea of seeing more of the country for awhile, with the deep wooded nowhere surrounding the little town of Host being only ten miles west of his parents' two-story house. Today presented itself, the rage still ringing off the wood-paneled living room walls as Joshua had exited, all pricked, huffy, and flushed, kicking the trash can over and jumping in his truck. His mother was out on the porch, screaming after his screeching tires, knowing he wouldn't hear, "Joshua, your heart! You don't forget it!" This was her daily task: to remind everyone that she, her husband, Joshua, they all had bad hearts. As if they'd forgotten sometime in the night. As if the

medication, the tests, and the breathing exercises were things thoughtless and fun.

Now he pulled the dead plant from his pocket, using his free hand to wriggle an empty ziplock open from among the other already prettily occupied bags. He put the new bag among the others, taking time to consider the collection: toothwort, columbine, bloodroot. Bishop's Cap, Dutchman's breeches, and showy orchis. Synandra, jewelweed, larkspur, mayapple. And the trillium and bluets he had picked first, two weeks ago on the first day of the new hobby. He had been collecting for longer than this, but his prior experience was related to a class project. This new development was for himself. Whether it was something he wanted to "pursue" or merely something that had inexplicably pursued him, he didn't now know or care.

He was exhausted. He hadn't had much sleep or food in the last thirty-eight hours and his stomach took lead of the rest of his body in protest against what they lacked. A hazy wash of hunger pain went through his head and he decided to delve further beyond the threshold he had just crossed of a little town, for a Mexican restaurant or whatever he could find. He began to scan the roadside in its twilight, listlessly passing darkened junk stores, gas stations and barbecue places with illegible wood-carved signs and black muddy ruts of parking lots. He slowed as he passed a combination gas station/ dive bar that still had gigantic, shapely gas-pumps such as he had only seen in old movies. A large sign read "HOT SANDWICHES, COLD BEER, GOOD TIMES," and he guessed that out here he might even finagle a beer out of an easy bartender. He moved on, however, thinking the men who were standing in the doorway barking jokes at each other were likely covetous of their own good times and not over-willing to share with a suburban teen like himself.

He saw the moon loom softly on the edge of the east like a frozen deer, saw it startled by a great gray cloud. As the cloud passed over the retreating sun the effect was counter-intuitive: a darkening of its form. The rest of the sky stayed wide, opaque and blue, but there in

the center groaned a blacker, colder mass than as before. The sun was slipping from the grip of the greying sky as his growing hunger became tinged with an unsettled kind of sleepiness, and he knew he had to stop. He mounted the top of a long, high hill and began searching the new, dusky horizon for the nearest anything. He passed cows and horses standing askance, giving him thick glances that said, "There's nothing more than more of this. Why don't you turn around?" He ignored them, turning his attention instead to a truck climbing up towards him, fast approaching in the other lane, startling him as he hadn't seen another car in hours. The truck flashed its brights at Joshua, so that he checked his own lights to make sure they were on. Then, at a distance of about a hundred yards, the truck swerved into Joshua's lane, revving up full on, and it all took a different meaning.

"What the hell!? Hey man! Hey man, what're you doing!?" he yelled with all the conviction of being heard and understood by the unknown driver coming at him. A charismatic hand could now be seen waving from the edge of the high beam glare, waving as if Joshua and whatever was attached to the hand were old friends. The only decision possible had to be made quick, and was, as Joshua veered hard off the high right bank. His truck hit the rocky soil at the edge of a field with such gravity that the tire popped like gunshot and dissipated the lunatic momentum of his truck in seconds. His torso lurched forward upon impact, thumping his face against the wheel, leaving him crumpled and dazed with a high, hollow whine lingering in his ears. Disconcerting metallic clucks and pings ricocheted round —then under his hood, now entering his brain— until he was finally able to complete the unspoken sentence "Why has this happened?" He lifted his head to examine it in the rearview mirror, looking for blood on his face and finding only the shape of the other truck slowing and turning at the top of the hill, coming back down it fast. Joshua composed himself the best he could and tried to swallow the adrenaline accumulated spit before kicking open his door and clambering out onto the pavement.

Darkness had come quick over the little valley. He eventually strained his eyes onto a farmhouse that was barely visible but for the one lonely window lit like a dying candle. He presumed better sanity of this domesticity, but mainly irrationally sought a witness of some kind, some other human to cry out to for salvation, recognition, anything. Scenarios ran through his mind now as he ran breathless over the open land, having reflected on and discussed with friends exactly what to do in similar horror movie circumstances. The solution was usually so simple. He hopped over a low fence, looking back towards his truck to see his pursuer arriving, hopping out of his truck and looking immediately in Joshua's direction. His throat clenched shut with fear as he turned, running more frantically now. How had he seen him in this darkness? Just like a horror movie really. Senseless. Slow.

"I'm gonna get you, you bastard! Ain't no use in runnin'!"

Joshua felt played with like a rubber mouse, as if the man might chew him, shake him and spit him onto the ground whenever he tired of the texture, climbing back into his truck and forgetting the whole incident, taking back to the road until someone new caught his eye. It was raining and the ground had begun taking it in as Joshua's path had started sucking at his boots. He could hear laughter, maybe thirty feet behind him. He saw the outline of a man, presumably the landowner, sitting stiffly in a wooden chair that was nestled into tall dead grass, some thirty yards from the house as if in the middle of a field. As the farmer stood up and took off his hat to swat at bugs, he saw his smile replaced directly with a look of repentance and a hand meant to stay his pursuer.

"Pussy! Cmon you little pussy, face me! Face me!"

The rubber mouse cried warm tears and muttered broken strings of curses, his adrenaline pumping uselessly into cramping legs. He felt as if he had released his spirit when the last giggle and taunt came together in a high falsetto that seemed playfully benign: "Hee!-- I got you now, Lindsley!" All was black as his legs buckled and he crossed his arms wide into the air, as if in surrender to a coercive authority. The body was inanimate when the pursuer dived

and tackled it too easily to the ground. A silent moment passed as this culprit wondered at his prey's unsatisfactory flaccidity. The next moment's activity was strangely just as silent, as the lumpy heap that was Joshua bucked violently like a mechanical bull, sending his assailant into the air and thudding down, reduced to another unmoving lumpy heap in the mud.

For a few minutes the farmer looked over both men cautiously, finally startled by the assailant's sudden movements. "Look, what in hell you done now, Obie? That ain't Leonard Lindsley, or don't your eyes see clear no more! Get up off him!"

Joshua had a note sewn inside his jacket addressed-
To any that should find me unconscious:

DO NOT TOUCH ANY PART OF MY PERSON.

THERE IS A STRONG POSSIBILITY OF ELECTROCUTION.

I have most likely suffered an attack of ventricular fibrillation
and as a result my internal defibrillator has
attempted to regulate this irregularity.

Call 911 and then my mother Jean at 889-9852.

Thank you for potentially saving my life,

Joshua Bardeau

He had no real hopes of this warning actually working, and neither of the men had thought to look inside his jacket. It was raining now, the new wetness slowly saturating the tangled scene in a quiet sheen. The farmer leaned over the two men, turning to hover over Obie, the assailant, a bit longer.

"You alright?"

Obie turned over slowly, propping himself up on his elbow and blinking hard as if to test if his eyes still worked.

"What do you think?! I just got the shit shocked out of me by a . . . damn alien or something. . . I feel like horse-shit, Coney. . ."

Marshall Cones, whom most referred to as Coney, turned, looking over the stranger with his fists set high on his hips.

"You look like horse-shit. He *ain'ta* alien."

"Is he moving?"

"Nope. . . and what in hell made you think this was Leonard Lindsley? Don't even favor him."

"Why don't you look at that truck up on the road? Is that not the exact same model, make, everything of Lenny's?"

"Yeah. . . yeah, looks like from here, I guess. . ."

"Well it is. He's about the same height, too, and how could I judge from the distance I was?"

"Well, for one, what about this old army jacket he's wearing? You ever see Leonard Lindsley in such a thing?"

"Yeah. . . but see, the pure facts of it was in my favor, Coney. Can't deny me that."

Marshall laughed and took his hat off, mussing his sparse grey hair with his free hand.

"Time would be a better favor for you now. This boy's gonna wake up any minute and demand some justice. You got assault on your hands, Obie. He's probably from in town, got some parents that'll raze the heavens gettin you put away or else squeeze every penny outta your ass they can for. . .*psychological damages* you caused their baby boy. Anyways, this poor boy ain't moved yet. You better hope to God you ain't killed him."

Obie struggled onto his feet and peered over the boy from a safe distance.

"Jesus...how old you think he is?"

"I don't know. Twenty."

Marshall said this for Obie's benefit. The boy looked more like seventeen.

Obie looked over at Marshall who was cleaning his glasses with his shirttail in such a way as to make him look bookish. "Coney. . . what happened?"

"Huh?"

"The electricity?"

"Now that. . . that's just a matter of fact that I cannot see time telling us. Perhaps he can tell us."

He looked back at Joshua lying there and saw his chest rising and falling.

"Ok! Yes sir, he'll be fine! Look here! Yes sir!" Obie said, jittery, defiant and proud.

Joshua's eyes fluttered and he began to push himself up off the ground. Marshall and Obie backed up at once, not knowing what would come of the groggy stranger who seemed to demonstrate certain powers over electricity whom Obie had, as it might have seemed to the boy, indiscriminately stalked, assaulted and nearly killed.

"Did either of you even bother reading the inside of my jacket?"

Neither could do anything but acknowledge that words were just spoken. Joshua pulled open his army jacket and motioned for them to come close and read. He did this without ever letting go of a quiet, squinting sneer.

"I see. Well that should really be on the outside of your jacket, shouldn't it've?" Marshall reasoned.

"I prefer the whole world not know I have a weak heart."

"I always thought people with... you know, *problems*, had a sort of endearing quality about them," Obie confessed to no one. For some reason the idiocy and odd placement of the comment comforted Joshua and made the tighter muscles in his face loosen up.

"How did you gentlemen come to find me out here? I'm afraid I don't really remember how I got here."

Marshall and Obie exchanged sideways, serious glances.

"We've been trying to figure that out ourselves, in a way, you see..."

"Well Coney, tell the boy already!" Obie hastily interjected. "I mean, heh... I mean there ain't nothing to it to tell, Joshua. I was driving by Coney's place here and I guess he was inside looking out the window at the storm clouds coming when you caught both our eyes, I guess. A stranger here in Host, you know, gets attention, especially if he's lying in the middle of a field waiting for a storm. So, naturally, I come out to see and Coney comes out to see. And I leant down to see if I could rouse you and got that jolt I got off of you, uh...heart regulator... I guess that's all there is to say, really."

This all came out so fast that no one knew how to follow it. *It didn't make much sense but it would do for now* was the feeling and it was accepted. Marshall's lips were clenched tightly as if the truth wanted out, and his eyes searched the ground as if he were looking for someplace to spit it.

"Of course there's no hard feelings over that," Obie said, stretching his arms up and yawning at the clouds. "I'm okay and you couldn't help it. That thing packs a punch though. Hey, I don't guess you caught my name's Obie, Josh. Obie."

"Joshua, please. Only my parents call me Josh. My defibrillator is set for 320 joules, which is much higher than what is necessary for the average sufferer of chronic arrhythmias. My case of ischaemic heart disease is particularly advanced and requires drastic preventative and regulatory maintenance. The causes are primarily genetic."

"Well. That is news to me," said Marshall.

"That's all *very* interesting." Obie was immediately swept up by Joshua's technical vocabulary. "You know we should sit down here and talk for a minute. This, Monsieur Cones, is a man who knows his way in the world of information."

"I do need a little rest from all... this...before I try to get back on the road."

A light in the sky drew the group's attention as one upward into the black spreading clouds and their shoulders all shrunk a little at the force of the thunder that followed.

“Boys, you are welcome to avoid whatever the weather's got coming inside.

I guess we're all pretty tired and I got some soup on.”

They both silently followed Marshall inside.

* * *

They sat circled around an oval table looking like participants in a séance.

The first few minutes kept the silence that had begun outside with the thunder. All eyes were trained nowhere in particular in the dining room table's deep Formica cracks, and one by one each eagerly burnt his tongue on the chicken Florentine. The small circle of light cast by the overhead lamp just enclosed the men and shifted slightly with each fresh thrust of thunder crack, making the room's shadows sway nervously over the wood-paneled walls till Obie lifted his eyes towards Marshall and became the first to speak.

“Hey Coney, I say this is some of the best soup of yours I've had.”

“Yeah? Well you know what I did this time is I tried some...”

Obie interrupted, “Had a mouthful of cow shit earlier and this here is loads better!” Obie looked from Marshall to Joshua and dropped his jaw to let out a violent shot of laughter followed by a bellyful of rapid doggish tittering. Joshua ignored this as Obie gave the old man a quick still-smiling wink.

“I'm afraid I don't know just what you mean, Obie! Did you like my soup or didn't you?!” He stood to his feet and reached for Obie's bowl.

Here Obie's laughter died out as he pulled his bowl out of Marshall's reach. “Easy there Coney! You're getting silly, now” enunciating the words emphatically and pointing his spoon at the old man. “I only meant to give you a good jab to open up the air in here, huh? You'd think it was three dead men sitting here, huh Josh?”

Joshua didn't feel it necessary to respond to this directly.

“I'm probably right in assuming that you two have known each other for some time. . .”

Marshall answered, looking annoyed to be distracted from his soup but somewhat pleased to respond. “*Some* time? I know Obie there for damn near all time.” He set a steady glare on Obie over the top of his glasses. “Had that same big open mouth since the start, gave me that ridiculous nickname with it when he's bout eight year old. One time back when his daddy, his daddy's named Gabe, back when Gabe still owned the gas station...”

Marshall looked slowly over at Joshua, who had raised his eyebrows at Obie as if to say, “Like we really wanna hear *your* life story according to Marshall ‘Coney’ Cones.” This was how Marshall took it anyway. “Boy? Don't you *ever* mock me in my own house, eating my soup, taking my hospitality, I that've taken you in a stranger, a violator of my property! You... you damn near killed Obie!” standing up with his fists planted on the table and his hurt face turned towards Obie. “Obie, like my own son, the boy! What gives you the *right* to try and tell what's what? What gives *you* the right?” In all this Marshall seemed to take on the persona of an opera singer, as if outlining the events of a historic tragedy, his lips just trembling as if freshly ravished by an aria. Marshall seated himself a little shakily. Joshua had no answer for this last question, and the silence that followed Obie's stifled laughter with the ever-clanking soup spoons forced the undesirable reflection of each man on the other for the next several minutes.

“Cones here can't stand to be mocked. Guess you know all bout that by now.”

“It's my right to be respected in my own home, ain't it? That's all, Joshua. Every man's got just a few rights in the world, is all.”

In spite of Marshall's performance, Joshua was the only one of them that could have been mistaken for an opera man—a tenor—both in the timbre of his voice and the framing of his body. He appeared prematurely large and had outgrown his man-sized camouflage army jacket in the shoulders and the belly some thirty years earlier respective to when his father had before him. The forsakenness inherent in the absurd jacket and blond stubble struggling to cover his chin and bubbly cheeks were contradicted by

the neatness of his over-combed mop of hair and lucid dedication to the art of enunciation. He was, as Marshall had guessed, only seventeen, and for him independence was every window and door he could open, be it unlocked, axed or bloody elbowed open. Of his life or of his parent's house, which were synonymous, from death or rebirth or some idea he couldn't describe or defend he was led to Host. He swore to himself that he'd never see nightfall again in such a place like this, never again on a school night like tonight. And alone. Never again alone in one of these nowhere backwoods rural hell nothing towns that used to sit up on his mind like something mysterious, something special like his mother thinking that he was still a virgin.

"I'm sorry, I meant no offense, Mr. Cones."

Marshall nodded his approval and acceptance without looking at Joshua as Obie giggled behind clenched teeth. It really could only be called a giggle and that's exactly what it had been for all his life, slowly winding down the register in pitch and purity with the cigarillos and the years. There was always a quality of dirtiness that accompanied it now, even and perhaps especially in the moments that were the most innocent. His head was shaved close and his teeth were abnormally perfect, like they were shaped from white ice that you suspected the heat would melt any minute and leave you with that giggling black hole of his. From farming his body had been hewn into something like weathered limestone and his skin had browned like dust fading towards the dark. All about him was woven this newness and youth that was dispelled at any moment with a tired lifeless joke that Obie could not resist. He was covered now in the accessories appropriate to the hip-hop club that didn't exist in a fifty-mile radius of Host. His baseball cap, uncreased, white like teeth and that same new skin that crowned the filth acquired in the incident, great brown formless markings puzzling his carnation pink dress shorts and fleecy white sweatshirt framing the golden letters *-TRIPLE D-* miraculously untouched by the rainfresh mire of Marshall's inviolate land. They were clean, their own, the clothes and the land, until today when they had met.

"Yall go on and finish up your soup. I aint throwing no slumber party."

"Aw damn!" Obie jested, looking again at Joshua for the desired reaction. This time, feeling somewhat leveled by Marshall's handling of him and hoping for an ally, Joshua managed a weak smile intended to humor Obie as he looked down at his empty soup bowl. These men had saved his life in their way, but he wanted them to like him, too. In their way. It didn't seem like much to save someone's life, anyone with half a conscience would do that for anyone. The herd instinct. But to genuinely look someone in the eyes and like the way they speak or think or something like that, that would be going out of someone's way. That would be heroic. There weren't yet theories capable of dismissing such actions.

Marshall thought that both of them didn't know what the hell they were doing with themselves. He hated to lie. He hated it more than anything in the world and his eyes passed back and forth between them wondering which was the greater liar. Joshua lied bigger with his eyes and posture and every little parcel of his person because that's what he *preferred*. But pleasure wasn't their principle, as with Joshua. With Obie and Marshall it was survival. The people of Host survived and there wasn't any pleasure in survival unless you were used to not worrying about surviving and it had become some kind of video game without resulting fruit or virtue.

A groan dispelled their collective silence and brought all eyes upon Obie.

"Aw damn Coney..." Obie leapt up, nearly tipping the table over, scrambling toward the hall behind Marshall. Marshall just closed his eyes and smiled in satisfaction at what Obie had supposed he had done to him.

"Boy's got a weak stomach. Don't keep his mind on it neither. Likes the spice to spite himself, I guess."

Lights passed over the front windows, temporarily blinding Joshua.

"Well who in hell's that, I wonder. This time a night too, and I got all the visitors I wanted for two days worth."

Joshua stood to see a mud-smearred mustard-colored truck that was exactly the same make, model, everything of his. The face of the driver approaching was wide and dark, even in the darkness, which was only compounded by his black uniform.

"Well I'll be shit. . ." Marshall muttered before he opened the door. "What seems to be the problem officer?"

"Officer? Coney, you never called me officer since I took the badge! I smell soup?" The officer's voice was deep and kind.

"Heh, yeah, a little. Say, what'd you want exactly? It's gettin to be pretty late now, and. . ."

"What I wanted to know was just *where* exactly this truck with a busted tire up on the road, *exactly* like mine, come from?! That's *exactly* what I want. Tell me over some soup, and while you're at it, you could introduce me to this gentleman over here. Where's your manners, old man?"

"I'm sorry, I guess I. . . this is, uh. . ."

"Joshua. Joshua Bardeau," with a planted nod, declining to offer his hand.

"Alright, Josh, nice to meet you. I'm *Officer* (here looking at Marshall) Leonard Lindsley."

Joshua was struck with something like *deja-vu* when he heard the name. Something about it shocked him. He suddenly wanted to go home.

Marshal said, "Look, I don't mean any rudeness, Leonard, it's just been a long day. . ."

"The truck's mine, officer."

"Well that follows, don't it? I mean you ain't just been hanging up in Coney's closet or growing in his garden have you? Coney that soup smell's driving me crazy, how bout it?" He pulled a chair around backwards and straddled it, leaning forward with his face closer now to Joshua. "So what happened?"

Coney clanked the bowl down between the two men's rapt faces, Leonard's with curiosity and Josh's with the intensity of a memory straining to make some pieces fit. "We found this boy sitting in the

middle of my yard! Had some sort of heart attack right there in the mud."

"Coney, Im asking him. This true?"

"I guess so. I have a heart condition and. . . given the circumstances, it seems it must've flared up. I don't actually remember--"

"Must've been the lightening, don't you think?" All turned towards Obie, standing in the hall doorframe looking dead serious about his makeshift hypothesis. "Like people with metal rods or pins inside 'em. My momma always knew a storm coming, pop called her Weathervane Jane, remember Lindsley?"

"Sure, Obie. So Josh here was just telling me about these weird happenings. What're you doing in Host anyways?"

Suddenly the wildflowers flooded Josh's mind, and the sounds of he and his father's yelling, and running scared through the mud towards a chair in high grass and the old farmer, and that last word "Lindsley," the name hollowing out and then filling his now dizzy head as his eyes traced the letters across Leonard's broad chest.

"I remember--"

Obie started towards Leonard, "I thought he was you in that ugly old truck, Lindsley! I was just playing like usual! It ain't my fault!--"

"He liked to kill Obie with that shock--"

Leonard stood up and back and listened to Josh's story, told only with his silent eyes, the loudest, only sensible of the three dissonant songs being sung in the room as thunder cracked and all light left the room for the night.

