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Night's End

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NIGHT'S END

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
English

by
Michael Cameron Whiteside
May 2014

Accepted by:
Mr. Keith Morris, Committee Chair
Dr. Rhondda Thomas
Dr. Cameron Bushnell

ABSTRACT

The following work has two chapters; the first is a short story entitled “Night’s End,” and the second is a short essay entitled “The Dilemma of Evil in Donald Ray Pollock’s “Dynamite Hole.””

“Night’s End” is loosely based on a true story. To respect the parties involved, I will not mention their names. The events are fictional, and deal with people’s potential for corrosive, immoral action. The story depicts an evening in the life of Jennie Weston, a woman whose husband has cheated on her and left home. Her daughter, Becky, runs away soon thereafter to live with her boyfriend, a drug dealer. Jennie’s only hope in life is her daughter, and her mission is to get her back from the hands of the dealer, in any way possible. Occurring over the span of only a few hours, “Night’s End” is a bullet, a story of tragedy. And hope.

In the critical essay, “The Dilemma of Evil in Donald Ray Pollock’s “Dynamite Hole,”” I introduce an apparatus for reading “Dynamite Hole” (and other stories containing graphic and grotesque plots) through the lens of Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject and Fred Alford’s conception of evil. The apparatus proposes one way to read “Dynamite Hole,” and by extension, my story as well. The key word is “one.” I don’t want to force a perspective. Yet I maintain that the apparatus is a useful device that assists in understanding the powerful effects of evil as represented in fiction.

Ultimately, “Night’s End” is edgy, raw, and lurid, but it does not surpass the debauchery of Pollock’s writing, specifically “Dynamite Hole.” I used his story as a check on how far I wanted to go as a writer confronting morally profound, artistic

decisions. Should I push the limits and make “Night’s End” as violent as possible, or should I tone it down? I chose the latter. Stories such as “Dynamite Hole,” with sinister actions including murder and rape, can be used to monitor my own writings. I don’t want to go as far as Pollock. By withstanding, I am able to present hope.

DEDICATION

To my family and friends. To Chief. And to Chewy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Night’s End” is loosely based on a true story. I am deeply thankful for those people who helped create the world presented.

I view this story as due respect to the parties involved. It has been my duty to write “Night’s End,” and I hope that they will appreciate it as a contribution to the human experience. Some stories must be told.

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CHAPTER ONE

NIGHT'S END

Jennie Weston was vacuuming beside a brick fireplace on a July night, drowning the images of her daughter, Becky, being force-fed amphetamines from her crank-dealing boyfriend.

She didn't care that the lamps were off in the den, dimming the landscape paintings of Appalachia and the Wild West, now the only light radiating from the streetlamps. The room grew darker as the reflection of a train flooded the walls, rocketing by her side of the tracks. The shadow consumed the den and then was gone.

A strand of hair twirled in a house gust. She held it between her fingers. She was prematurely balding, and the hair still growing was silver. But this hair was blonde.

Near the distant stop sign, headlights swerved onto the street, aiming towards her house. The driver stopped on the curb beside the shop, the neighborhood's hangout spot.

She looked for her diabetes medicine. The coffee table. She lowered her pants and prepared to administer her insulin. Her bare hips were still smooth yet purplish from needle bruises. But this syringe seemed sharper. She tossed the syringe into the fireplace and ignited the gas logs with a remote.

She opened the patio door, walked down the steps, and hiked across the yard to the shop.

Alone, Brady, Central's deputy, was rocking in an old leather La-Z-Boy, drinking a tall-boy as the TV blared motorsports. Decorative deer antlers knifed the open air.

Jennie's guitar leaned in the corner, tainted by spider webs. In his starched, navy uniform, Brady stared at his belly breathing up and down like a cartoon.

She thought he was handsome in a mannish way, with a sharp profile and determined eyes. She found them more attractive than her ex-husband's, Henry. Two months ago, Henry abandoned his family for a stripper, leaving Jennie penniless.

“What is it?” Brady said.

She reached in her pocket and pulled out the strand of hair and dangled it in the air. “I found this on the coffee table.”

“Doesn't matter. You're beautiful—”

“It's Becky's hair. I've been vacuuming that damn house for two months since she's been gone, and I...I missed a fucking hair.”

She stood in the doorframe and stared at her right leg. Her eighties jean shorts went just past the knee, her shins seemingly suffering from dull razor blades. She needed new flip-flops because every time she walked through the lawn she felt something like watery shit sliding between her toes. “Please turn that fucking TV and music off.” Holding the hair as if she was planning to plug it into her scalp, she said, “You just get back from the boy's house?”

Brady opened another beer. Nodded. His pistol belt lay to his left on the wooden shop counter. The flashing red from his walkie-talkie insinuated crime in the outlying rebel-world ringing Central, but the device was silent as a dead dove.

“Where'd you spy from?” she said.

“The backyard.”

“Was Becky there?”

“I heard moans.”

“Moans?”

“I couldn’t get close enough to hear words. I only saw their shadows.”

“How did you know it was them?”

“I know what your daughter and Matt look like.” This time, Brady didn’t look at the TV but instead his heart.

“I don’t want her with that boy anymore. Go there and take that little fucker to jail and bring my daughter home before he knocks her up.”

“I’d have to take Becky to jail, too.”

“Just make it so you don’t have to.”

“Jennie, listen to me...He’s got a lot of guns. Saw them on his Facebook page. I can’t go guns blazing like some movie. Doesn’t work that way. Besides, no room in the prison for kids like him. He’s not *pushing* it. In for a week, max. And you know Becky will go *right back* to Matt once he’s out.”

“For fuck’s sake, it’s all because of those boys,” she said. “Her old chickenshit boyfriend blows himself away and now she’s stuck with that dealer and she won’t leave because of guilt. Simple psychology. I bet he knows how to egg her on, hit the right spots. ‘I’ll shoot myself,’ I bet that’s what he says.”

She turned and looked across the lawn. About fifty yards in front a barren patch of garden ground sprawled, bordered by baby pear trees that looked like overgrown twigs gored into the soil.

“I’d be at Myrtle Beach right now with Becky,” Jennie said. “With you and Henry. And now the only thing I do is worry myself sick that Matt will get her pregnant. She doesn’t have her birth control pills. She left them in her room...but something is different.”

“What?”

“She came back today. While I was napping. This hair is fresh—”

“These thoughts will make your leg hurt—”

“They’re all I have left!” She rubbed her chin. Lowering her head, she said, “Look me in the eyes: where do people think you are right now?”

“Fishing until dawn.”

“You fish alone?”

“That’s what I like to do.”

“Are you supposed to be meeting the boys here tonight?”

“No. They’re starting to feel bad about coming over and using the shop since Henry is gone.”

“Henry’s your brother, so they’re welcome...but not tonight.” Brady held his eyes on Jennie’s head. You could nearly see her scalp.

“Brady, we’re gonna go kill that fucker. We’re gonna go kill his mother, too. Let’s...let’s burn his home to the ground.”

Brady rotated in the lazy rocker and stood. The leather sounded like a fart. He wrapped the pistol belt around his waist, sucked in his gut, leaving little love handles flopped over his belt like lab ears. Buckle snap. “We need a candle lighter.”

*

Jennie started walking back up the hill to the sitting area near the patio. It had rained the day before. The wind ruffled her hair, disheveling her thinning bangs. She usually got angry when her bangs waved in the wind, but tonight she was energized as she saw her gathering area and patio porch just up the grassy knoll, nestled underneath maples and cedars with pillowed lawn chairs encircling a party fire. A sign read: “All is good under the cedars.” She prided herself knowing she owned her house, a plantation mansion with crisp pillars, the oldest house in Central, surrounded by millhouses and new houses with cheap foundations and flimsy vinyl siding. She imagined back in the early 1800s when Central was still a farmland, free of the pines. Fuck it, she thought. Her ex did buy and rebuild the house, but it was hers now. She fell to her knees.

The Pain. When her blood sugar level lowered, it felt like someone was taking a small hammer and thumping her funny bone. Stress intensified The Pain. She went to the ground, knees and elbows buried in the slick grass. Sometimes she even heard noises, and sometimes she coughed a lot. Everyone hears noises sometimes, she thought, good and bad, and everyone coughs, sick or not.

Jennie knew that tonight was only beginning, but she couldn't stand. The image of Matt fucking her daughter while his degenerate mother watched courthouse dramas in the meth house den haunted Jennie. The mother didn't give a fuck; she probably took some sick pride from her son's conquests. Jennie puked. She wiped a chunk of ground beef off her lips.

Staring at the grass, she saw a shadow encircle her ground perimeter. Brady helped her up. “Why’d you stop?” he said.

“To wait for you.” She put her right arm over his shoulder so she could limp through the door. “Wait in the den,” she said.

“Why do you have the fire on?”

“I was cold.”

“It’s July.”

“I was cold.”

The loose hardwood floor shook under Jennie’s steps. She hesitated beside her daughter’s bedroom before walking up the stairs. An open note sat on her daughter’s diary desk.

Pens with frilly ends and pink erasers and black ink rolled a little as Jennie approached the desk. A letter that Brady had written to Becky while Becky was in the institution. Jennie read the sentences: “You’re an adult now, and you could be an example. You have been given an opportunity to help people with your story.”

A veteran Army Ranger, Brady served in Mogadishu during the Black Hawk era. Once Jennie asked him if he had seen the movie *Black Hawk Down*.

“No,” he said.

“Why?” Jennie said.

“Because I was there.”

Now, he was becoming a big-time cop of Pickens County, South Carolina. He chose Central as his district because he liked stopping by his brother’s house on evenings

while on shift. Jennie always offered him sweet-tea with strong caffeine for the long evenings of patrolling.

She held the letter to her stomach and bent the edges. Brady would do anything for his niece. Henry, on the other hand, would simply wallow in the corner and not do a damn thing. As the lead facilities director at Clemson University, the sole breadwinner of the family, it would seem logical for Henry to help his only child, his bloodline. But no. While Becky cried herself to sleep every night, Henry would party in the shop, downing dark whiskey, trading pistols with ex-shift mates in preparation for an economic apocalypse.

Jennie dreamed of killing her husband. She didn't want to have those feelings, but Henry hurt their daughter. Enough said. He even killed Becky's favorite pet on the evening he left two months ago. The family once had a bird, Chewy, a twenty-one year old cockatiel with pink cheeks. Becky was sitting on the fireplace beside Chewy's pinkish cage as she told her parents that she had been seeing the ghost of her ex-boyfriend who shot himself because she cheated on him at the beginning of their senior year at Daniel High School. While Becky talked, Chewy would get a little louder, whistling half-broken renditions of the *Andy Griffith Show* theme song. He tried listening to the story, but the bird's song – “that fucking racket!” – ticked him off something awful. He brushed his daughter out of the way and picked up that cage and shook it like he was trying to murder a three-year old. The bird bounced from one end of the cage to the other. Some seeds and feathers flew through the thin cell bars. The cries ended. He stopped shaking the cage and held it perpendicular in front of his belt. Chewy had fallen

to the bottom of the cage, his neck dangling at an odd angle. Henry stared at his hands, then his family. He packed a bag, mounted his Harley, and was gone. And then Becky said, "I'm going to get some Hibachi, I'll text you." Two months and still no text.

Nothing.

"Hurry up," Brady said from the den.

The stairway rose like a cobra. She nearly fell backwards on the ascent.

She walked in her bedroom door and sat on the bed. On her nightstand, white candles at different heights with hardened wax towered above the alarm clock. The lighter was long and red and rotatable. She squeezed the black trigger. Thick flame. Blue at the base and then orange. She held the flame by some drapes, imagining Matt's house burning to the ground. Punched the nightstand. Knocked over a cup of lukewarm water. The mother and son would die.

Brady said, "What's that racket?"

Jennie gripped the rail as she walked down the stairs. She heard Brady say from the den, "It is cold."

Back outside, near the shop. The grass was green and would stay green in the winter. She stared at the left side of the barren garden. Chewy's tombstone along with roses were the tallest items. She had prayed over the grave every afternoon since her family left.

Then a gust intruded, loud.

"You didn't change out of your flip-flops?" Brady said. "Jennie...you hear me?"

"You hear that?"

“The wind?”

“No. I—I just thought I heard a—nevermind.”

Approaching the squad car, she saw a blue bird shit on the hood of her car.

*

Brady curved throughout the squared neighborhood streets. “Keep your head down and rest,” he said. “And think.”

She wanted to roll the window down and get some fresh air. She hadn’t been out of the house in more than two weeks except to buy groceries at The Pantry. “About what?”

“Going to hell.”

He stopped at a sign. “God will understand,” she said. “Thank you, Brady...Brady...I said thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“I feel like I have to say it.”

“No, I mean, don’t mention *this*.”

The streets were deserted, the streetlights weak. The road rose so that a little league baseball field lay below them on their right, walled off by a chain link fence with vines winding through the holes. Most of the lights were off in the mill-home windows except for some upstairs bedrooms and the occasional den lit by a thin TV.

Watching the houses glide by, Jennie remembered her daughter playing with the neighborhood kids, enjoying dodgeball and pinecone wars. Tire swings still hung from oak limbs. The evolution of that wholesome Becky into having a cobra tattoo stamped

above her ass-crack consumed Jennie. She recalled her daughter coming home and standing in the center of her room, naked, unable to shut the door because her dad had nailed the door to the wall.

“Why did you do that to yourself?” Jennie said that evening.

Becky smiled. “Highlights my ass.”

“Those boys, they’re gonna think you’re a slut.”

“That’s the point, mother.”

Now, Jennie squeezed the birth control bottle in her pocket, opening and closing the lid just loud enough for her to hear a snap.

They were two miles from the neighborhood when Brady said, “We have a problem.” He stirred Jennie. She leaned up. “Stay down,” he said.

“What do you mean we have a problem?”

“Gas.”

They stopped at a sign. A gas station that didn’t accept debit cards at the pumps sat on the left.

“Didn’t you notice this right when we left?” Jennie said.

“Yes.”

“So you were just waiting to tell me.”

“I don’t think you realize what you’re fucking with. Premeditated double homicide.”

“We need gas.”

“People could see me in there.”

“And people can see you stopped right here like an idiot, yet they still can’t see *me*. That means they can’t see *us*.”

“It’s closed.”

“You’re a fucking cop. Make Andy open it.” Jennie looked at the floorboard.

“You hurt?”

“I need to come clean. I made a mistake in the den.”

“What mistake?”

“Before going to the shop I got mad and threw my last needle into the fireplace. My leg is freezing up. Your aunt, she has an extra shot, doesn’t she?”

“You want me to get one from my aunt?”

“She has an extra and I don’t have one right now! After this. Let’s hurry.”

Brady pulled beside a pump. “How long has it been since you’ve slept?”

“Too long,” she said.

“You know, it feels good to see you feisty again.” He opened the center console and gripped a flask and took a slug. “You would have never killed someone, though.”

“You don’t have children,” she said.

“None that I know of.”

“So you don’t know what you’re fucking talking about,” she said. “Brady, no one seems to stay with me. And I try *so* hard. I still make food for Henry’s dumb friends most every night, but no one eats at the table. I feel like damaged goods. But,” she trailed away, and then said, “if we kill the fucker, she’ll come home. That’s...that’s enough for now.”

The pumps were darkened, but inside The Pantry was bright enough to highlight a shopkeep with a comb-over sweeping under rows of Camel Lights and Newports. Brady motioned to open the door, but he hesitated. Static. “Officer Brady, we...”

“Stay down.” He held the walkie-talkie to his left ear and said something, glancing right at Jennie all the while. “Roger that,” Brady said and put the walkie-talkie back in its slot beside his berretta.

“Who was that?”

“My friend’s cat died.”

Brady smacked his cheeks and then squeezed the center console. Jennie rested her hand on his hand. He hesitated. Blushed. She lifted his hand and opened the console and gripped the cool flask.

Before shutting the door, Brady watched Jennie lean over the carpet like she was about to puke again. “What’s in this?” she said.

“Shine.” He shut the door.

She stared at the little specks of orange dirt on the floorboard. Her head hurt, but her leg hurt more. She took another swig from the flask. Burned. She tasted blood, attributing it to some hick with an open cut brewing the shine like a witch over a pot.

She squeezed her leg, trying to suffocate The Pain. She lifted her shoulders past the head rest so she could fully extend her leg. She saw Brady standing in the center of the parking lot, eyeing her through the tinted windows, his strong hair enduring the wind.

She calmed and looked over the railroad tracks to where the Minnow Lounge sat, empty. On most nights, her old band, *The Sticks*, would be running the show. Brady entered the store, the lot now bare of sentient life except for insects.

One thing was certain, Jennie thought as she held the lighter in front of her eyes: she should have followed his advice and re-entered the world to be reminded that her friends still loved her. She was welcome to rejoin *The Sticks* and rage renditions of “Stairway to Heaven”

Then she heard the Harley. She couldn’t describe it to Brady when he asked her what she had heard in the lawn. She could feel the motorcycle’s engine as it pervaded the atmosphere of Central...

Lights swerved into the lot. She thought for a moment that they were from her husband’s bike, but they came from Matt and his mother’s car. She ducked and saw the Oldsmobile with an ugly green paint job park to the right of the store between an igloo ice dispenser and a rusty soda machine.

Matt got out and stretched his arms. His nose was twice the size of his chin and his balding scalp shined under the shop lights. Chain tattoos encircled his scrawny shins.

“He’s going to get a pipe, the fucker,” Jennie said. But instead Matt walked in front of his car and opened the passenger seat door. After tossing a cigarette into a puddle, he helped his mother out of the car. She put an arm over his shoulder and limped into the store. The mother had a bandage on her right leg like she was a war-survivor, but her shoulders seemed to be the real issue. Weak. Dejected.

Jennie sipped the shine, now hating the mother even more: the mother had a child who would carry her.

As Brady signaled for the shopkeep to turn on the gas for just a moment before counting down the register, Matt walked in front of the store window with his mother. Jennie saw Brady stutter-step. Matt and his mother began walking between the candy aisles. The mother would hold something in front of her face and hand it to Matt. He would inspect it and then put the item back.

Brady slid the change into his pocket. He said something to someone. He walked out the door, heading towards his car. Looking at the concrete, he opened the car door and flicked the fuel lever. Half-gallon. The car made a creak when he opened the door again and it was quiet when he shut it.

“What the fuck was that?” Jennie said.

Brady didn't latch his seatbelt. He drove out of the lot, headed further from Central. He said, “What did it look like?”

“Matt and his mother.”

“What do you want to do?”

“We got no choice but to off em now.”

“Or maybe that's a sign that we should turn back.”

“Or maybe you should shut the fuck up. Did you say anything to them...Brady, what did you say?”

“Half gallon on two.” He took a right, now headed for the country with its brisk air, the beginning of hillbilly land where cousins porked each other and had premature births.

Jennie’s energy level rose as she imagined her husband in leather jeans riding his Harley while the wind ruffled his beard. Brady was squeezing his temples. Swerving. “His mom looked like my mom,” he said.

“What?”

“I never could take care of her. She died when I was overseas. That’s what I know. I only saw pictures. I didn’t like the way her hair looked in those pictures.”

“Stay on the road,” Jennie said.

“I got it...What makes you think Becky will come to you?”

“The hair.”

Brady looked at Jennie toying with something in her pocket. “You brought the hair?”

“She’s gonna come home.”

“Alright. What are you going to do when you get to Matt’s house?”

“Are you drilling me right now?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I’ve figured it out,” she said. “You’re going to drop me off at the bottom of the hill. I’ll climb up through the woods—”

“Will your leg make it—”

“Meanwhile, you’re gonna have to do whatever is necessary to get my daughter out of the house. Anything. Hopefully those assholes won’t be home from the store. And if they put up a fight, kill them.”

“Then what?”

She checked her pocket and grew afraid until she felt her phone. “Text me when you get her and then I’ll make the move once the mother and son get home.”

“Then what?”

“I’ll burn the house to the ground.”

“How will you get inside?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“This isn’t a game,” he said.

“You’re not bellying up on me, are you?”

“No. I just didn’t like seeing that woman...or her son either.”

“Why?”

“I can’t explain it.” She rolled down the window and spit. Shutting the window, she wiped her lips. Ripe blood striped her index finger.

*

Solid country except for a streak of electrical wires cut this world. Solitary houses spotted the hay that would wave in the day and sparkle in the night, a sea of stalks churning in the wind. The Blue Ridge Mountains undulated into eternity.

Jennie’s belly rumbled. Brady heard it and grinned.

She examined her belly. It was growing fatter because of the half-tubs of ice cream she wolfed at ten every night. It also reminded her of when she aborted a baby as a teenager before she got out of the drug house.

She held the birth control pill bottle in front of her lap. Brady looked at her again, but this time he didn't laugh. Then he slowed.

Matt's driveway approached them on the left, a lone gravel road shrouded by tall pineland rising up a hill. Beyond the crest was Matt's front lawn, the highest point in Central, overlooking the town like a lighthouse. In the lawn, bonfire smoke swirled, a peaceful tornado in the breeze. Fresh fire = fresh meth.

He drove about a hundred yards past the house until a side-road jutted into the woods. He turned into the wide trail and made it forty yards before it dead-ended. In front, a steep hill rose, and if ascended, you would be in Matt's backyard. Hand on his weapon, he looked in the rearview mirror. Even though he could see passing cars, the drivers couldn't see him.

Brady drove slow enough to hear twigs snap. Stopped. He said, "This isn't right."

"Stop thinking about your mom."

"This ain't natural. That boy is trying to help his momma. I don't know what it is but she's got some disease. Involves eating and her bones. Apparently her damn bones break with just a touch."

"You're the one who's killed people and now you're afraid to kill people that deserve it. Brady, his mom listens to his son fuck my daughter."

“You don’t understand what it means to kill. You’ve never taken someone’s life.” Brady coughed as he leaned back in his seat. He pulled back his sleeves. “I had to kill a kid overseas who had a suicide bomb strapped to his chest. He pulled the string and it didn’t blow. You see my hand? That scar? That’s where he stabbed me. I shot him in the head. My stomach is heavy, but I can still breathe.” He hesitated. “Not after this.”

“Well I’m not afraid to look God in the eye and say what needs to be done,” she said. “Shit!” She grabbed her right calf. “Mother fucker.”

“What?”

“I can’t move it.”

“Your leg?”

“Shit... Wait...” she coughed again. She leaned up. “I can.”

“That’s blood running down your lip,” he said. She slid her hand over her chin and saw syrupy blood.

“I’m through with this,” he said. “Something is wrong with you. More than diabetes. You’ve been sick the past couple of months. I’ve noticed it. And now it’s damn showing. We need to get you to a hospital!”

“I’m fine.”

“What do you mean you’re fucking fine! You’re spitting blood. That’s what happens before people die—”

“I’m fine, damn it,” she said, cackling.

“Why are you laughing so hard?”

“I can’t help it. I’m... I’m just happy!”

“What are you laughing at?”

“The motorcycle! Don’t you hear it?”

“No.”

“You have to! I know it!”

“You’re scaring me.”

“I haven’t been excited in two months!”

“Even when I’m at your house?”

“That’s not what I mean. I know what this Harley sounds like! Your brother-in-law is back in town! We’re going to have a family again!” She rested against Brady’s right side and held his hand: “Come be Henry’s brother again.”

Brady grabbed the flask and tried to take a sip but Jennie had drunk it all. “I will not do this,” he said. “I can’t go any longer.”

“You’re a cop! I *need* you to *carry* me.”

“Jennie...I love you,” he said. “I loved you the day you met and fell in love with my brother, and I’ve hated myself ever since. I enlisted for you.”

“Let’s talk about this later—”

“You want me to put my life on the line, and I’ve listened to you for the past two months every night when I give you the shot. It’s *my* turn to talk. For the past months I’ve been over, I would drive around your neighborhood at night after I left. One time I parked beside your house and listened to the rain.” Silence. “Would you marry me?”

“I have Henry.”

“He’s gone, Jennie. He really is, and you need to be happy.”

“Unlike you, I don’t stop loving people.”

“You mean to tell me that you have no feelings for me whatsoever? Is it because I’m fat? Listen, I can lose weight. You saw those pictures of me. I’m not even forty yet. I could get us out of this town. We’ll...we’ll go anywhere. Alaska. Oregon. Puerto Rico—”

“What would I do there for money?”

“I’d take care of us until you find something you like. They’d hire me in a second.”

“Why do you even like me?”

“Look, love isn’t hard to explain.”

“I’m a fucking cripple, and I’m *old*.”

“Well...so, no it is, then. Ain’t that a thing. *But*,” he wagged his finger, “you *used* me. You let me pay the bills. I see this now, this big picture.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“You’re going to kill a kid and his mother and you’re lecturing me about shame?”

“You should be ashamed.”

“What do you keep hearing! Stop smiling and laughing. You’re mocking me! Focus on me, please...I could get us out of here, don’t you understand that? To a clean town. To a place where Becky doesn’t know anyone. Where she can’t get into trouble. Don’t you understand that?”

“But I like it here,” she said. “I like being the lead singer of *The Sticks*. Everyone knows me. Henry loves it when I sing. How will Henry know where to come get me? And she’ll come back home if you’re home.”

“How do you know?”

Jennie took the letter out of her pocket. “Because she came back to read the note you gave her.”

She gave the note to Brady. He set it on his lap and pinched the note’s edges.

“Brady...we’re not lovers. She and I love you—”

“But not the way I want *you* to love me. I want you to think that I’m Becky’s *father*.”

“I need you to carry me. Now.”

“No.”

“Fair enough. But...I need my shot. I’ll do this on my own, but please get me my shot, or I’m—”

“How about you let me get you to the hospital.”

“You’re worthless.”

“Get the fuck out of my car.”

“So that’s it? No more helping your niece?”

“I said ‘get the fuck out of my car.’”

Jennie grabbed her right leg and swung it out the door and stood like a hobo. “I’ll rebuild my family,” she said. “By my Goddamn self. Go catch those fucking fish, asshole.”

*

Jennie heard Brady reverse the squad car and peel into first and second and then he was a trailing roar. She waited to hear the motorcycle. Not a sound. She limped back to the road and tried to wave Brady down. He was gone.

The inclined clearing was a football field long, cloaked by a variety of trees, thick as sin, but the pathway was visible in the dark. She dragged her right foot through pockets of moist leaves. At times her right foot would get stuck between fallen logs, but she had strong biceps. Strong shoulders.

She reached the summit and didn't see Matt's car. The ranch house was wide with fading brick. The canine corral was barren except for an empty leash lying lazily on the thin dirt.

To her left, an oddly placed mound of thick mud stood two feet tall. A dog's leg and tail were sticking up out of a freshly dug grave, stabbing the sky.

Lying on her stomach, she soiled herself and prayed for God to agree that she was doing the *right* thing, that she could be both judge and executioner. She pulled her hair and yanked out a few chunks.

Commotion from the right wing of the house. A shadowed figure paced about a room.

“Becky!” The blood tasted saltier than before.

Jennie cut through the grass-less lawn towards Becky's window. She rested against the rugged wall. Looking up, she saw fluttering white drapes, and her daughter's flowing, thick blonde hair. Becky never stuck her head outside.

To Jennie's right, a cement handicapped ramp led to a screened-in porch patio. Crawling towards the porch, her right shirtsleeve clung to a hose-less faucet. The water soaked her shoulders. She twisted the rusty valve, but she stopped when it began creaking like a loose door hinge. She dithered, waiting for movement in the bedroom. But there was only the slight sound of the waving drapes.

She crawled forward and opened the porch door and the sliding glass door and then she was in a stasher's dream den. Ten coffee pots. Three TVs. Same station but one flickered. She collapsed onto the sofa. Red, hard and itchy. Centering the room, she saw a picture of a smiling family hanging over the sofa. Looking at her reflection in the dead TV, she noticed that the wrinkles surrounding her eye sockets had sunk an inch since her daughter left.

Down the corridor she saw the rectangular orange outline of a door. What she would say when Becky answered was unforeseeable. Jennie would simply knock and hope for the best.

Headlights illuminated the lifeless backyard. She lunged outside and inched back under the bedroom window and buried herself deep in the weeds so that they framed her like a castle wall, fortifying her person in the shadows.

Silently, she stood up and looked inside the bedroom. It doubled as a meth lab. She didn't know the names for the materials. Only that they would explode.

Becky had walked down the corridor, leaving the bedroom door open for Jennie to see down the narrow hall to the kitchen. Noises were loud enough to echo.

Matt opened the kitchen door and carted his mother in on a wheel chair. He had a gallon of milk and nothing else. The mother had large blue veins on her neck and an acne scarred face. Missing tooth. She scratched her cast.

Matt gave his mother a hug and whispered in her ear. He moved to the sink and started washing dishes, the coffee mugs first. The soapsuds were thick and floated just above the sink. He blew at them like a child and said, "Becky, can you finish burying the dog?"

"I'm sorry, Becky," the mother said. "I tried to...but I gave out."

Becky walked down the handicapped ramp. Weeds and mulch covered Jennie as she lay on her back, fisting the soil.

Becky seemed to contemplate the moonless night. Did she hear the Harley? Her stare appeared to mark the beginning of a plan, one belonging to Becky only. Jennie felt small. Becky walked into the shadows at the end of the yard.

The drapes were still fluttering. Lighter to the drapes. Low fluid. No luck.

Jennie looked towards the shadows. Becky returning. Jennie rolled on her back, hearing footsteps traverse the dirt behind her.

Before walking up the ramp, Becky stopped. Jennie tried to speak. Becky went back to the kitchen.

Jennie looked through the window.

"Where's the shovel?" Becky said.

"Against the wall over yonder," Matt said.

The mother said, "Why did this all have to happen...I miss my dog."

Becky hugged the mother. Jennie saw a name tattooed above Becky's right breast. Matt 4 Eva.

Jennie resumed lighting the drapes.

But she hesitated. She took out her cell phone to text Brady, yet her right leg suddenly gave out, and then her left. She held her face just over the window frame, her legs now dangling over the ground like dead weight.

The mother said, "I hear dogs barking."

"What dogs?" Becky said.

"Just listen."

"I don't hear anything," Becky said.

"What! How can't you?"

"Mom, lie down for a while. It will help. Get some rest."

"Damn it, Matt, no," the mother said. "I want to go hear my dog."

Jennie fell on her back. Droplets descending from the gutter landed on her forehead. She began praying, thanking God for her daughter's strong shoulders.

The screen door opened. Becky rolled the mother to the porch. Matt followed with a shotgun leaning upwards against his right shoulder and a Winston dangling from his mouth.

"Muffin!" the mother said.

"Mom, Muffin's in heaven. You're only hearing wolves."

The family went inside. The loose faucet gently sprayed garden hose-water over Jennie's frame.

Jennie heard the mother talking from inside the house, but Jennie couldn't identify the words. She thought they were sad, for she could sense sadness in others. But when she heard accompanying laughter, she changed her mind, something she had forgotten how to do.

"Brady's right," she thought, relaxing her scalp on the moist weeds while licking her bloody lips. "Love...it isn't hard to explain."

CHAPTER TWO

THE DILEMMA OF EVIL IN DONALD RAY POLLOCK'S "DYNAMITE HOLE"

Ted Giola, Oxford-trained cultural critic, prefaces his discussion of "Dynamite Hole" by describing the short story collection in which it originated, *Knockemstiff* (2008): "Some folks have compared [Donald Ray] Pollock to Raymond Carver. But the trailer park deadbeats in Carver's stories look like Parisian sophisticates compared to the characters who populate *Knockemstiff*" ("Review of *Knockemstiff*"). *Knockemstiff* is a collection of eighteen stories centered in the town of Knockemstiff, Ohio, a microcosm of morality so lost that Pollock, in the "Acknowledgments" section, assures the reader that the characters are fictitious (205). "Dynamite Hole" has graphic depictions of incest between young siblings, along with the murder of the siblings by a pedophilic outsider roaming the holler like a demon. Nearly all the stories feature evil seemingly recognizable in the same manner that one instinctually recognizes pornography. However, as the following discussion will show, evil is not always what it seems.

What is gained by reading about an evil character? The answer is the maintenance of a healthy, morally sound culture. Pollock's "Dynamite Hole" is a useful case study. It concerns the transgressions of Jake, an outcast who dodges the WWII draft by hiding in Mitchell Flats, the hills bordering the west side of Knockemstiff. His family has abandoned him, leaving him to scrape a living as he deteriorates into moral destitution. Pollock's depiction of Jake in "Dynamite Hole" becomes an aestheticization of the abject and evil, a notion that has profound implications for the maintenance of a culture. Many readers may instinctually avoid the reading about Jake's plight because his

story makes them uncomfortable. If they avoid the story, however, they can miss an insight into the universality of humanity. Therefore, what is to be said of not reckoning with the emotions felt while reading “Dynamite Hole?” If Jake is evil, how should readers react if they feel both disgust *and* fascination as the story progresses?

Approaching “Dynamite Hole” from a reader-response framework, utilizing both Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject along with C. Fred Alford’s conception of evil, creates the aestheticization of the abject/evil in the story, prompting readers to both vicariously experience evil and to subsequently judge their ethical registers. This process leads to “abjecting” the story to relieve one’s fascination with the evil characters. The intricacies of Alford’s theory, one implying that people should become *educated* to understand – not label – evil and its universal residence in all people, allow readers to understand Jake as a profound symbol that demarcates the boundaries of appropriate behavior. For however controversial Jake’s actions are, his existence in literature is essential: his story is a narrative of evil, one that enables readers to reaffirm a culture’s moral position.

*

Kristeva’s notion of the abject connects readers to Jake, compelling them to associate with a character they may consider evil. In “Approaching Abjection,” Kristeva outlines the specifics of the abject: typically, a separation exists between the subject and the object, a separation demarcating acceptable societal binaries/boundaries: e.g. father and son. The abject, on the other hand, operates in the middle of the subject and the object, disrupting order, disturbing the “*I*” (1). It is a non-entity yet paradoxically an

entity, consuming the imagination (1-2). When *confronted* by the abject, such as a corpse, extreme, nauseating emotions are evoked in a subject and directed toward a non-object that has been out-casted from the body and/or society. Subjects experience emotional abjection, and subsequently expel the emotion/image from the imagination (1). However, complete expulsion is impossible. A subject is not free once the separation process begins: the subject is drawn back, fascinated. The abject compels subjects to focus on the abjected entity as if their emotions were operating as a boomerang (1). The subjects are imprisoned.

In *What Evil Means to Us*, Alford takes a slightly different approach to evil by offering a theory that does not attempt to categorize evil (1). He asserts that one *experiences* evil, ultimately an experience of dread, doom, and abandonment (4,14, 51). *Committing* evil is the attempt to inflict such a feeling on another person in order to rid the feeling of evil from the perpetrator (52), an act similar to abjection. To prevent these actions, Alford maintains that people must educate themselves about evil, and the requisites for education include the use of symbols and discourse: e.g. narratives/stories of evil that enable readers to self-reflect (1, 45, 144). Ultimately, Alford claims that all people are inherently evil, for they all embody the potential for a pre-categorical, pre-verbal experience of helplessness, abandonment, and dread (46). Therefore, evil is the *foundation* of existence, and if evil is not contained via narratives, people are more likely to commit evil acts because they will not have a visual, creative outlet to vent their imagination. Alford does not maintain that social forces spawn evil, as was supposed by the Milgram experiment (26). Instead, the locus of evil is loneliness, a feeling natural to

all, and from there, one merely builds on evilness, not necessarily increasing the *scale* of evil, but its *dimensions*.

Kristeva's conception of the abject and Alford's vision of evil can help the reader understand the complex, and, likely, disturbing emotions felt when reading about Jake's character in "Dynamite Hole." The first question to be asked is, does Jake attract the reader via the abject? If so, a connection between the reader and Jake will develop.

Jake compels reader identification through the abject by his interactions with a brother and sister involved in an incestuous relationship in the water-bank known as the Dynamite Hole. Walking to the Dynamite Hole, Jake notices the couple, watches, and proceeds to kill the boy and rape and kill the sister (Pollock 15). Jake murders the girl with "...both hands around [her] neck...[strangling her] until there [isn't] anything left but [her] sweet face all bloomed out like a purple flower and a skinny little body turned to wax" (20). Reading these lines, the reader becomes fascinated with the scene through abjection, for a good example of an abjected entity is a corpse (Kristeva 3). Even though these images/events are appalling, they arouse emotions; they are fascination-oriented, and compel not all readers, but *some* readers, to re-read, to re-experience, a morbid description. By the conclusion of "Dynamite Hole," these readers might be repelled by Jake and his actions but may also feel drawn to re-experience the emotional turmoil/rush through the aesthetic distance of the text. They may want to grin once again, for the images trigger a morbid fascination in the readers' imagination. Therefore, in this process of re-reading, the reader may develop an identification with, as one example of Kristeva's abjected figures, the shameless rapist (4).

Consequently, by reading the story from the perspective of the abject, *some* readers may feel vicariously involved with evil. This experience provokes self-reflection – education, as Alford implies – in order to abject their fascination with a shameless rapist. Readers are pressed to *abject* the aestheticized abject – “Dynamite Hole.” They are compelled to divorce the story from their mind, for it disrupts balance, spawning guilt and remorse. In addition, the implications of “Dynamite Hole’s” final line further compels the reader to abject the story: As Jake finishes narrating his account, readers are left with the command, “. . . , save me” (Pollock 23), which in turn promotes self-reflection because they can acknowledge the instruction to seek help. In re-reading the text and re-experiencing the depths of debauchery, readers understand the implications of the emotional investment in the story. Ultimately, this reflection leads to education about one’s ethical registers, thus drawing readers closer to absolution. Readers trace Jake’s evil in order to symbolize – to verbalize – his actions and thus begin to educate themselves on the nature of evil.

A location for reader education is the rape scene, a defining moment of Jake’s character, for it demonstrates his potential for committing evil. As Alford implies, lasting loneliness is a requisite for evil (31), and as Jake discusses his family abandoning him to live in the hills, he recalls, “I never saw [my family] again, and after that, I never could get rid of that feeling that I wasn’t much welcome nowhere in the world” (Pollock 17). Then, while Jake is raping the girl, he states, “All those years and the loneliness [flow] out of me and [bubble] up inside that little girl” (19). This expulsion of his repressed loneliness via violence is evil: Similar to Alford’s depiction of a man who killed his

family as a release of years of repressing aggression (33), “Dynamite Hole” depicts Jake unleashing his loneliness, and in doing so, he gives graphic, physical voice to a muted interiority.

Locating the scene where Jake commits evil enables the reader to self-reflect. Education – in this case, verbalization – enforces the reflection process. In Alford’s view, the most vital position of existence – the position that works to discourage evil – is deemed the “depressive position” (41), where subjects are capable of symbolizing, of verbalizing, remorse by realizing the gap between subject and object instead of resorting to a pre-verbal mental state (44). In other words, people can *speak* and *express* remorse and understanding (41), acts that are absolutely necessary, for as Alford states, “...avoiding evil depends on the ability to symbolize dread” (44). However, Jake cannot reflect on the majority of his crimes, as evidenced by how he does not remember killing the brother and ending up with the sister in his arms, ready to rape her: “*Somehow*, I ended up with that [sister] in my arms” (Pollock 18, italics mine). In addition, before Jake commits his crimes, he recounts, “...all of a sudden it seemed like everything inside of me started swirling around like a storm cloud” (17). These examples imply that in the act of *committing* evil, Jake oftentimes verbally breaks down and is unable to express his actions. Although he is capable of describing how he strangles the girl, he also has difficulty putting his entire story into words – to *symbolize* the full picture. Consequently, Jake is overwhelmed by the “autistic-contiguous” (Alford 41) experience of existence, implying that he is residing in the “...complete absence of symbolization”

(41). He is left wordless, thus vulnerable to committing more evil acts. Jake is not self-aware.

On the other hand, readers can distance themselves from the text and reflect on the thought processes they had while reading “Dynamite Hole.” These readers are the same ones who would re-read Jake’s depiction of when he strangles the sister, except this time, I suggest it is possible that the reader will react with a desire to not merely absolve themselves of guilt but also to understand the necessity of self-restraint. For example, counting myself one of those readers, when I interacted with the text in the previous section where I re-wrote the scene where Jake strangles the sister, my ethical registers emotionally responded to the violence. As I paid more attention to the language, such as the phrase, “skinny little body turned to wax” (Pollock 20), I grew more aware of how Jake’s actions were socially deviant and would break laws. Eventually, re-reading and re-writing the lines made me uncomfortable, thus compelling me to find freedom from the guilt of previous fascination with Jake, a shameless rapist. Following suit, evil thoughts, such as imagining assault on enemies I had made in the past weeks, were discouraged. Ultimately, I was able to inhibit and discharge my forbidden, evil desires – to abject them.

By re-reading the abject lines, readers may cease to find themselves fascinated but instead more distanced from violence. In a sense, readers may berate themselves while in turn inculcating the idea that the actions described in the abject lines can lead to prison if actualized. Readers would be left to imagine evil, however, not actualize it. By this self-reflection and verbalization, they can acknowledge the evil actions within the text. From

there, readers can bury their own sense of guilt; in this case, the feeling of being fascinated by a shameless rapist, and other violent thoughts. The reader can abject the story and be free.

The byproduct of abjecting “Dynamite Hole” is a feeling of peace. The reader may appreciate the importance of educating one’s self with evil as a result of reading Jake's story. The education process helps one “...to recognize [evil’s] potential within, not just [what one] could *do* [but also to test one’s] judgment, [one’s] soul” (Alford 24). By using “Dynamite Hole” as the aestheticization of the abject and evil, readers have not simply educated themselves with the locations of evil and its forms contained in associated acts; they have also realized that the reading and writing of evil stories are a necessary good. In doing so, people have narratives – vessels of signifiers – that work as guidelines to help monitor behavior.

*

Both fictional and non-fictional evil narratives demarcate boundaries of acceptable behavior. Admitted, because of common knowledge of laws, most readers would not commit the actions Jake performs in “Dynamite Hole.” Furthermore, most readers would not re-read Jake’s story, and more specific, the abject lines. Yet some readers inevitably will. Instead of prompting violence, however, the result may be that the text promotes the *containment* of evil urges. Thus, evil narratives can reinforce the strength of readers’ ethical registers, helping readers to understand when they may be wading too far in the mental – or physical – ocean of corrosive action.

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When I reflect on writing “Night’s End,” I understand how the notion of the abject and the conception of evil were operating. I was not conscious of it at the time, though. It was after the fact that I related Kristeva and Alford’s apparatuses, and they helped me understand the subtleties of my narrative. I realized that the motivations of my characters – their desire to kill for selfish reasons – are evil. To say that it was disturbing to know that my story is a reflection of Kristeva and Alford’s theories is an understatement, because “Night’s End” is loosely based on a true story: a crank-dealer enslaved my cousin with meth while my family imagined ways to disband the relationship. I sincerely believed that the only way to save my cousin would be to murder the dealer. While I did not commit the act, I could see myself performing it.

Writing “Night’s End,” I realized that one of the strongest powers of fiction is its ability to prevent violence. I wanted that dealer dead. Case. Closed. I consciously based “Night’s End” off that dealer’s demise as a way for me to breathe, to abject my desire to commit evil. Fortunately, fiction helped me not kill, for I didn’t kill the characters, and I’m proud for it, because in the process, my story becomes an ode to peace. Ultimately, theorists help me understand *how* my writing works. Relating the lofty vocabulary to my writing makes my writing seem more valuable, and it is, at least to me. The concept of theory “working” may seem mechanical, turning the ineffable beauty of prose into a technical device for stopping murder. But why can’t fiction both be appreciated as beautiful and practical? Hasn’t that always been the goal of fiction – to better the human condition? My cousin’s recent true story of rehabilitation, of getting

married and having a baby boy, proves it. In theory, if I would not have written the story, I might have done something that would forever have changed the fates of the ones I love the most.

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