

4-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Wallace, Milland (2010) "Addy's Isaac," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 30: No. 2, Article 65.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol30/iss2/65>

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Addy's Isaac

Milland Wallace

There was a time, long ago, when God walked among men. He was familiar and man would greet him and talk to him at ease; much as if you would talk to friend or family. God was omniscient, but man was young and innocent and the world was new and less complex. The world was a dangerous place even then but man, in those early days, was less of this world. God was close by and there was less to fear. Man acknowledged God as Creator and Ruler but he was mostly friend and benefactor and man trusted God with his life and the life of his family and friends. And when God called the man Abraham to do his bidding, he did it willingly and without pause.

Beauty Under Glass

Annual flowers and butterflies are seemingly delicate, beautiful things and it is good that they are so for beauty has little effect and meaning unless it is short-lived. My mother would seed flower beds and the best were found in a 4'x 25' span on the south side of the house. She would plant the bed with marigolds and zinnias. The marigolds were in front and kept the rabbits out of the showpiece- the zinnias. They were stunning, growing some three feet in height and with colors of the rainbow. They opened up to the sun and pushed back against it, protecting us from fire of the summer day and until the earth cooled to evening shadow. They rested, from their Atlas travail, in the dew-laden Southern night until the sun broke hot on the grass in late morning.

I liked the zinnias because they attracted butterflies. At ten years of age, I was developing a collection of Southern specimens. I would capture them in a wide mouth Mason jar with small holes punched in the lid that I covered with a wad of cheesecloth soaked in rubbing alcohol. The insects asphyxiated from the vapors and I would place them on a cotton pad backed with wax. I placed straight pins into their torsos and appendages so they would dry in natural positions. After a month or so of drying, I would mount them in a glass case made by my father for the occasion. My big score was a Blue Zebra Swallowtail butterfly (*Eurytides marcellus*) that I found on a tall zinnia at the back of the bed. Blue Swallowtails were rare and far more difficult to capture than the Tiger variety. I could have Tigers anytime I wanted but the Blue Swallowtail was wary and smart. They would seldom light on a flower unless other insects weren't around. It was late morning on a hot June day in 1969 when I captured my specimen. I had made beauty my own. I had taken the life but was holder of the trophy for my pleasure. I was to be satisfied, I was without fear, I was dominion, and the sacrifice was by me, for me.

Addy

In 1967, my mother went back to work after getting my brother and I established in elementary school. She was an example of the rising tide of women who entered the workforce during the 1960's and 1970's as the American economy needed workers and women were there to fill the need. My parents, not wanting my brother and me to be latchkey children and to care for us during the summer vacation, hired a domestic. She was named Addy and she kept my brother and me for seven years. Addy was African-American, of

slight build, with seven children of her own. I never found out what happened to her husband but it was accepted that he was not around and Addy had one great skill and that was raising kids and keeping them in line.

What I can remember about Addy was that she was genuine. What you saw was what you got. And what you got was honesty, hard work, and no differentiation in the way she treated me and my brother from her own. Addy loved coffee and I don't think I ever saw her without a cup. Perhaps it was perpetual caffeine high that gave her the energy to keep up with my brother and me as we roamed the neighborhood, woods, and local golf course looking for something to do in a town and time not known for it. Addy always had the radio or stereo on and tuned it from my parent's country music stations because she said the music sounded like "an old tom cat whining at the full moon for a girl cat." She taught me to love the soul of Percy Sledge, The Temptations, Wilson Pickett, Gladys Knight, Jackie Wilson and Sam Cooke .

Addy was there for us and her duty to my brother and me was without question. She looked out

for us, expected us to tell her where we were, and arrive home from school on time. In the spring of 1968 I was in the 4th grade and was walking home from school on a rainy and cool afternoon. The air was laden with moisture and the earth was alive, and I happened upon a small creek that ran through a well-tended backyard of azaleas, tiger lilies, tulips, roses and a stunning wisteria vine wrapped around a pine. The creek ran over a slight waterfall before it turned a corner and, in my mind, it was the most beautiful sight I could have imagined. I tarried in this spot skipping rocks into the creek and feeling as if I had found the first garden. But I must have waited too long because, when I looked outside my garden, the school traffic was gone. There was not a soul in sight. I became aware that I was soaked and cold. So, realizing that Addy would be upset, I ran the rest of the way home. Upon arrival, Addy looked at me sternly and asked me where I had been. I confessed and she told me to get out of my wet clothes. After I had changed, I remember her making soup, telling me to eat it to "get the warmth back in your bones." And as I sat at the kitchen table, she sat across from me, and looked at me intently.

"Now, tell me about these flowers."

I described the scene and the flowers and water running through the creek and she knew the location. She told me that some decades earlier, a prominent physician had owned the land and planted tiger lilies on both sides of the creek for his daughter who "wasn't quite right" but was soothed by flowers. They had moved away long ago but the flowers loved the creek and decided to make it a spring and summer home. They came back every year starting in April and leaving in October before the leaves fell.

At heart, Addy was a gentle soul who had had a rough life but I never heard her curse her circumstances. She liked simple things of beauty and, despite her small frame, the poverty she suffered and the general difficulty of her life, she bore it with a strength rooted in something ancient and strong; it was as perennial as the lilies.

In the late fall of 1968, Addy's eldest son, Greg, was drafted into the Army and sent to basic training at Ft. Bragg. He had come to pick her up a few times at our house the year before. He was big, far larger than his genetics would suggest, and he had an easy smile and quiet demeanor. They would leave in an old car that seemed to burn as much oil as it did gas.

On a hot June day in 1969, not long after I had captured the Blue Swallowtail, Addy got

a call from one of her daughters who said that the Army had called with a message about Greg. Addy milled around the kitchen, wringing her hands, and fretting.

“You know, a few months of basic training are not enough to fight a war. Why did we have to get involved in some old war in a jungle half-way around the world?”

A brown Plymouth rolled into our driveway and two men in Khaki uniforms got out and came to the screen door. My mother's zinnias stood proud behind them. The men pulled off their wedge caps.

“Are you Miss Jumper?” asked the lead one with cropped blond hair.

“Yes,” she said, flanked by me and my six year old brother.

“Maam, we are sorry to inform you that your son has been killed in action in Vietnam.” Her cries pierced the midday and she slumped to the floor holding my brother to her breast. He put his arms around her neck and hugged her.

Lives Out of the Back

My younger brother lives in a sixty year old house in the Coastal Plain of North Carolina. The house was custom built by the long deceased CFO of the A.C. Monk Tobacco Company. It is made of cypress clapboards and framed in yellow pine. The pine's resin has hardened and you can try to drive a ten penny nail into it only to watch the fastener bounce off, hit you in the chest, and have the hammer jar your arm to the funny bone. The house has an elevated front yard that goes down to a sidewalk. A large Magnolia tree is off to the side and the front porch is covered in red brick. But the impressive part of the home, the part that appeals to most people, is the back yard. It is long and flat and goes back to a wooded area full of maples, poplars, redbuds, tupelos and pines. The house, as my brother says in a light drawl, “lives from the back.”

He has put considerable work into the home and his young family and pretty wife have given him reason to live and grow. He is solid and strong and stoic and leads a life I envy. He is like his house, seemingly old but with sufficient things of the modern day. When you first meet him, he seems like anyone else. But, if you pay attention to him, the house, the family, and the view out back and let the thoughts rest awhile, you feel alone and winsome as if something in your life is missing and you want to return. He is the kind of person that grows on you because you know goodwill and legitimate suffering are there and it is reliable. Your heart knows it before your head acknowledges it. He can absorb bad times and turn them into hope. He is like his maternal grandfather in that way.

Last year, after our father passed, we were grilling on my brother's flagstone patio and watching a winter evening end, from the back, and in the mild weather of North Carolina. The sky was hues of red, orange and a tinge of blue and we were talking about our father, a Veteran of the European Theatre, as we toasted him with our German Beer.

“Do you remember the time when Addy's son died in Vietnam?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Do you remember how Dad looked when he came back from the funeral?”

“Yes. It was the only time he poured a drink in front of us. Mom was quiet as he sat at the table and finished it.”

“There are times I can still hear her cries” he said. “She just slumped there on the kitchen floor with her arms around me. Thank God Ms. Hendrick was outside tending her roses and heard her and came to help. Do you remember how she tried to help Addy off the floor and to a chair? She went as limp as a ragdoll.”

“No, I wasn’t there. When she started wailing I ran away to the rows of corn in the garden and hid. Will Hendrick came looking for me after his mother calmed Addy down and they didn’t know where I was.”

The Lucky Ones

What does one say about a country and a government that sends its young to a war where the objective, over time, becomes anything but clear? What does one say about the leaders of a country that let the most fortunate avoid the terrible duty by deferring to college while the poor, those with the least options, are sent? How does one reconcile the sacrifice of a young man of color whose people suffered the ignorance and prejudice of a recalcitrant South for a full century after they were given their freedom? And how does one explain to a ten year old boy, who suffocated beauty to make it his own, about the anguished cries of a mother whose son, a young man with an easy smile, had taken a grenade in Vietnam?

As a ten year old, I became a cynic. I thought of the sacrifice of a young man I knew, and in witnessing his mother’s pain, I began to doubt the wisdom of experience and years greater than my own. I began to believe that fathers sacrificed their sons and daughters all too easily because they are afraid and insufficient in faith to offer themselves.

When the man Abraham lowered the dagger toward Isaac’s breast, he was not like the fathers of rank and experience who sent the Nation’s poor, young men who had no power over them, off to war. He stood full at the altar with the weapon in hand; Isaac did not move. And when God stopped the down thrust, he knew that Isaac had strength both different and greater than his father. God learned to have faith in sons and loved them for it; they were men enough to deliver his covenants to fathers. His promise was progeny more numerous than the stars but far less in number than men of this earth. For the Stars of Isaac are like Blue Swallowtail butterflies; they are rare and of a season and they appear frail but are, in fact, strong enough and wise enough for beauty. We confuse their ephemeral nature with weakness without considering they are destined to inspire and pass away while suffering our small belief in the great unseen things.

I was born late for the Vietnam War. They say that I am one of the lucky ones. But I am not so sure, for at a young age I learned that fathers poor in faith would errantly and selfishly sacrifice beauty and youth and I learned to both fear and hate it. I began to view men as weak who kept trying to get back what they had lost or keep what was theirs, no matter how they came to obtain it. In the getting back, they lost sight of what was coming forward and failed to appreciate the work of the day. In the keeping, they failed to realize that what they had was merely rented. It never belonged to them in the first place and, not knowing this, they worshipped the wrong things.

As a boy, I learned that the Isaacs of this world are aware, almost from birth, that they will suffer pain and possible death from those who are caught up in the getting back and keeping. But they go ahead anyway. For they know the world and its reasons and leaders are often fucked up and afraid; the only sure means of conquering the situation is to risk life against it. They dare to love us more than we love ourselves.

I am older now and for many years I carried bitterness, resentment and suspicion. At a tender age, perhaps I witnessed things I should not. I was well into my 40’s before I learned forgiveness and mercy and put to rest some of my doubt. But I am no match for the Isaacs; I never was. For I am too much of the world, of the getting back and keeping kind, and too deep in it to see butterflies and flowers as I once did. But they are there;

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they come in the warm seasons. I see them as my sight is aided by a Brother who builds with Spirit and timber while living from the back. Their beauty is stunning in their colors of forgiveness and understanding. And they are not fragile, not in the least; you can count on them just as sure as the zinnias push back against the sun and the lilies bloom year after year.