

“Communion” by Willow Maloney

On the morning of April 25, 1953, the air was unseasonably warm. It drifted in the open window to rouse Wilbur Smith from a dreamless sleep, waking him up to face the 162nd hotel room of his life.

He woke with an unprecedented, unsettled feeling, as if he were somehow out of place. He got up and made his way to the bathroom, where he splashed the cold, metallic water on his stubbled face. The mirror was always reassuring, and he was able to quickly shake the feeling from his thoughts.

He went through his morning routine without a thought. Shower, shave, brush teeth, comb hair, button shirt, tighten tie, check mirror. He nodded approvingly at his sharp suit, wetted hair, and horn-rimmed glasses, which were essential for a pitch where the client would be skeptical.

Wilbur was a traveling salesman; the best of the best. He was universally admired and envied, as he always not only sold the most units, but had a knack for winning the sympathies of lonely housewives along his routes. “Oh, the many trials of a life of travel,” he would say.

He was lucky enough to have been born with handsome eyes and a reassuring smile, but Wilbur did not attribute his success to such superficial features. For him, his great fortune was due mainly to his artistic method of manipulation, which consisted of a subtle and carefully crafted cocktail of charisma, strength, and fear. He heard the other salesmen speaking about the art of finding the right client and knowing who will buy what. For Wilbur, this was never a problem. He was a charmer, born to do what he was doing.

As he strode confidently into the main room of the suite, he grinned shamelessly at the wine glasses, left out from the night before, taking special notice of the red lipstick left on the rim of the empty glass. He got his coat, hat, and briefcase and left the room still smiling.

His latest product was a tonic which claimed to alleviate the anxieties of the everyday. None of the salesmen had been told what was really in it, though the company's founder was fond of joking that it was 3 parts cauliflower and 7 parts potato vodka. Wilbur himself had always been a skeptical man. While this meant that he could rather efficiently convince other skeptics, it also meant that never in a million years would he try something he was selling, and so the theory was never debunked to Wilbur's satisfaction. He currently had 87 three-ounce brown bottles filled with the stuff, along with 87 eye-droppers which came free with the order, clinking around in his briefcase as the rental car skidded and bumped over the anonymous town's sad and scattered roads.

The first thing Wilbur noticed as he drove was the lack of churches. Where he came from there was practically a church on every corner, and each one full to the brim every Sunday. He decided to revise his pitch to exclude the religious appeal.

The first house he came to was a pale yellow, modest one story with rows of pansies planted by the door and a few scattered toys abandoned on the lawn. Wilbur parked the rental, knowing he had come to the right place.

He rang the bell and adjusted his glasses, timing it all perfectly with the clicking of heels behind the door so that as it opened he was smoothing his hair with a humble, earnest air. The woman who answered was dressed in a clean blue dress, a model of domesticity, but with obvious cracks around the edges. Her dress was slightly wrinkled at the hem, and there were a

few stray locks of hair falling out of her carefully pinned bun, which he glanced at pointedly before adopting his most condescending smile.

“Good morning miss, if you could just spare a few moments I’d love to tell you about your opportunity to reduce the amount of stress in your life.”

The woman looked from the wisp of hair which had drifted in front of her eyes to the toys in the yard. “Come in.” she said.

They sat down on the worn but attractive sofa, and the woman, who had introduced herself as Mrs. Clara Rice, began nervously smoothing her dress and trying to nonchalantly repin her hair.

“Where’s your husband today miss?” he asked as he unpacked the little brown bottles, carefully inspecting the cloudy, pulped liquid inside each one.

“He’s been away on business. Conference or something like that. He couldn’t get away in time...” Wilbur looked up at this, smiling and expecting the eyelash flutter that usually accompanied such comments. Instead however, he found her looking worriedly out the window, with a stern mouth and empty eyes.

“You expecting someone?” He asked.

“No.” she replied after a long, empty pause. She seemed reluctant to make eye contact, and held her gaze to the adjacent wall.

He brushed it off and began his pitch, allowing a touch of his southern accent. “Now, Miss Rice, times lately have gotten tougher. There are more little worries in the world, and after a while, they can pile up and drive one into a kind of madness. This,” he indicated the little brown bottles of varying sizes, “contain all the necessary ingredients, most of them plucked straight off the vines of the most exotic locales, to make your life a little easier. Now, we are

running a special where...miss are you alright?" Clara had shifted her focus to the window, and was looking all the more frantic.

"No." she replied calmly. "You should leave." She got up from the sofa, all things but graceful, and he heard her heels click all the way up the stairs.

Finding himself alone in the pleasant but eerie yellow house, he packed up his things and made his way back to the rental car, this time unable to shake the feeling of unease.

Inside the car, he checked the roster his boss had given him, crossing off the address of the little yellow house. He lifted up his glasses and pressed his thumb and forefinger to his eyes, noting the burning of the back of the lids. Maybe he was coming down with something.

His next house was obviously not as well cared for as that of Mrs. Rice. There were flowers, but they had long since given up, not unlike the yellowing lawn and sun-bleached patio furniture. Wilbur noticed all this with a frown, quickly making his judgments about whomever he should find inside.

When he rang the bell, it was answered almost immediately by a man who must have been watching from the window and waiting for the bell to ring. He was enormously tall with a bald head and small grey eyes. He frowned suspiciously at Wilbur's bag. "Leave." He said, in a voice so small it did not sound like it could have been his.

"Who's at the door, Sammy?" Came another voice from behind Sammy's massive frame. An old woman in a green dress and matching headband adorning her white hair peeked out from behind his torso, smiling serenely at Wilbur. "Oh, Sammy, go back inside." She said, clasping her hands together like sheets of rice paper. "Excuse him, he's not well."

"Perfectly fine, ma'am. If you could just spare a few moments I'd love to tell you about your opportunity to reduce the amount of stress in your life."

“Oh well certainly, come right in.” she said, with an air that suggested this was mainly out of obligation to politeness. Wilbur couldn’t help but notice that Sammy had not left the room, but was simply sitting at the dining room table, snipping flowers for a vase.

“Lovely flowers,” he said, trying to sound casual as they took their seats on either side of the coffee table.

“Oh yes,” she said in a sad voice, “we’re attending a funeral later today.”

“Oh I’m sorry. Who died, if you don’t mind my asking?” he wondered where the funeral would be held in a town with no churches.

She tilted her head down and offered a hesitant smile, “So, young man, what are you selling?”

“Well ma’am,” he said, moving to a whisper and ignoring the sudden shift. The old woman maintained her pleasant disposition but was obviously a bit distracted, and would even get visually shaken each time the scissors snapped a stem in the next room. “I don’t think I could have come at a better time, what with all the obvious misfortunes you’re facing,” he said, indicating the funeral flowers as Sammy looked on suspiciously. “You see, times lately have gotten tougher for everyone. There are more little worries in the world, and after a while, they can pile up and drive one into a kind of madness. This,” he pulled out one of the little brown bottles, “contains all the necessary ingredients, most of them plucked straight off the vines of the most exotic locales, to make your life a little easier. Now, we are running a special where not only do you get the larger size for the same price as the smaller one, but if you don’t feel calmer overall after a two week regiment, you get all your money back.”

The old woman had been slowly losing her friendly countenance as he was talking, and now looked as if she were on the verge of tears. She just kept rubbing her rice paper hands back and forth until Wilbur was sure they would tear.

“Oh dear, you do seem nice. I’m sorry but I really don’t think I’ll have any use for such things.” She looked at the ornate silver watch on her wrist, obviously an antique. “It’s about time for me to be changing into my funeral dress,” her voice was wavering, “wouldn’t want to be late.” She walked into the dining room and looked tearfully from the finished flower arrangement to Wilbur, reaching up to pat Sammy on the shoulder. “My son will show you out.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Wilbur said, trying to hide his frustration at the day’s irregularity. “Have a nice day, sorry for your loss.” Once back in the car, he could still see Sammy staring out at him, looking almost confused.

He drove a ways down the street so he was away from the strangeness of the sun-paled house, and took a moment to glance at the roster. The third house was just one street over. Out of a desire to get out of the neighborhood, he flipped to the second page of the report, only to find that it was blank. Usually he had over 10 appointments a day, and yet today only three? He couldn’t imagine why they’d bother to send him to a town with so few prospective clients, but he was relieved that he had to meet only one more person before leaving.

On his way, he passed several other houses where people were standing outside on their lawns, all holding wreaths or bouquets and wearing black. “Whoever died must have been very important,” he thought, as he made an effort not to give in to the paranoia that everyone he passed stared inanely at his car until out of sight.

The last house was an attractive brown color with green shutters. The lawn was perfectly kempt, the flower beds straight, and the patio swept. An American flag waved from the

porch post in the ever-present breeze from that morning. He rang the bell, too flustered to go through his usual routine. His hair was in his eyes, diminishing the effect of the glasses.

The woman who opened the door smiled widely from behind red lipstick and dark eyes. Her black dress indicated that she would also be attending the funeral, but there was nothing to suggest it in her demeanor. She was everything inside that smile.

She looked him up and down, obviously admiring the cut of his suit, and extended her hand, “Carolyn Hunter.” She shook his hand and smirked coyly, “what are you selling?” she cocked out her hip and pointed to the bag he was clutching with sweaty fists.

He attempted to stammer through the first bits of his usual sell, “M-miss... I-if you could just spare a few moments, I would...that is I’d like to tell you about an opportunity to reduce the stress-”

“Would you like to come in and have a drink?” she interrupted. He nodded and tried to pull himself together. Things were going exactly as they’re supposed to if he took his behavior out of the question. He ran his hand through his hair and came back with his cool, confident voice as Carolyn brought in iced tea on a wicker tray. “So,” she said, sitting down next to him on the sofa, “go on with your pitch.”

“Well you see,” he said, slyly reaching across her to extract a small brown bottle from his bag, “this contains all the necessary ingredients, most of them plucked straight off the vines of the most exotic locales, to make your life a little easier. The stresses of everyday life will be a thing of the past.” He was glad to be back on familiar ground. He took a sip of the iced tea, noting its strange aftertaste as she let out a small laugh, seemingly to herself, and looked up at him from behind long eyelashes.

“I hate to cut you short, but I don’t think I’ll be needing that.” She said simply, holding her hand to her heart and trying to assuage her laughter.

“Now, that’s what the last woman said. How peculiar.”

“Well, while I admire your devotion to your trade, certainly you understood that, today of all days, no one would buy that tincture.”

“And why not?” Wilbur protested, starting to become upset with the woman’s vague intentions.

“Well...because the world is ending today.” She said, no longer laughing. “I can’t believe you hadn’t heard. Well, I suppose when one spends one’s life on the road it is hard to stay up to date on current events and so forth...Oh the trials of a life of travel, right Mr. Smith?”

“You’re cracked.” Wilbur said defiantly, jumping up from the sofa, spilling the iced tea and breaking the crystal glasses.

“Well, I suppose it’s possible, but there seems to be a consensus from what I’ve heard. I for one am just glad it’s all ending on such a lovely day.” She said, standing next to him and gesturing out the window. “Too bad it’s getting dark.”

It was possible to see the sun turning the sky into shades of pink and orange, turning the pine trees into darkened silhouettes.

“But even if it’s true, wouldn’t people want to buy some, in order to dull the experience, the fear?” Wilbur’s vision began to flicker, as if the lights were browning out.

“Well, you know the answer to that. Did anyone buy any, or even seem like they wanted to?” She was still smiling, and the lights were completely out now. Only a small beam of light entered his vision from the setting sun outside, casting Carolyn’s lovely face into harsh rose-coloured shadow.

Wilbur was silent, and she put her hand on his neck, gently. It was warm and clammy; so close to comforting. “They wanted to experience every second, right to the very end.”

On the evening of April 25, 1953, the air was unseasonably warm. It drifted over the serene, sleeping faces of the residents of the small town, who were breathing their last metallic breaths which joined the wind to blow away all at once, into the vast and truthful and unending dark.