

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Steve Patterson
Cold Dinner

HE TOOK THE COVER FROM THE GREEN BEANS—sprinkled with almonds, steam rising—and, if possible, his daughter looked even sadder. How could an eight-year old have such weary eyes?

The hour he told himself, as wind and rain shook the windows, walls. She'd be fine as soon as she ate, as he brought stovetop barbecued chicken from the kitchen. Finding an open place on the table, right next to the empty plate—untouched silverware atop a folded white napkin.

He poured her a glass of sparkling cider, refreshed his wine, and held the glass in a toast, and the kid looked at him like he'd walked in naked. He tapped her glass anyway, took a substantial sip and sat, spreading a napkin across his lap, no idea what to do next.

He spooned a small portion of green beans, leftover roasted vegetables, rice, on both their plates, knowing she'd eat little if anything—the same portions her mother favored—and reminded himself not to pressure her. Truth be told, he wasn't really that hungry. He glanced at the phone. Felt for his wireless, flat in his left front pocket and set to vibrate. He asked her to pass the chicken. Her favorite, he knew, but she made no move to take a piece, and he chose not to push it. These days, the slightest pressure and everything slid sideways.

As he moved, he caught his bent, elongated reflection in the empty wine glass. For some reason, he'd picked her favorite, a long tulip with etched flowers. The clock ticked between gusts, rain like ripping fabric, as he saw his daughter watching the window—the drapes wide open, porch light flickering. Power surging and dimming, flashlights and blanket at the ready.

Not fair to the kid. She'd gone so quiet, nervous after his brief absence. Wary, like a skittish animal. It would be a long time to forgive, to let her guard down. He knew from his own dad's stints in hospitals—breath caught in the throat, heart, snappish, and then immediately sorry. Hard to see the old man—so big, vital, loud—shrunken down in a nest of tubes and chirping machines. Even harder, the nights home; so tired after the visits. Listening to the quiet. Covers pulled up to the chin, while his mom rattled round, doing things to do things. Hollow and wishing, praying, just for things to be normal again, no matter the good or bad.

The first night at the motel, cheap neon outside the window, and it was all he could think about before he drank himself to sleep.

She poked her food with her fork as though testing if it was real. He felt the problem: not her absence so much as her not calling, probably working late, or an after-hours drink with friends, the time skipping away. It'd had happened once or twice, followed by a flood of apologies. And he even wondered if maybe she'd found someone who she could talk to without slipping into overload: red zone of clenched lips and slamming doors. They'd both likely call the match, walk away, bitter and bruised, had it not been for the kid. He wondered if they helped or hurt her, but both remem-

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

bered that emptiness when parents walked different directions, a sputtering light finally winking out.

Sound of engine, crackle of studded tires climbing up the driveway, and headlamps lit up the living room, foyer. The kid visibly relaxing. He felt it too, how fear spread like a blood infection. He put his finger to his lips, rose, stood alongside the wall, with his back to the door, hand on the knob—an old gag where he'd open the door when he heard her keys jingle, the door seemingly opening by itself. Welcome home, said the ghost. Listening for footsteps as the rain crashed in waves, really ripping it up. There. He tensed up, saw his daughter's smile, felt it himself. Funny how the world seemed impossible, but one hated change. Knowing chaos would ensue, wiping away what little mattered, quiet bets on better days. Maybe someday. Maybe inevitable. But not tonight.

The doorbell rang.