

Wilderness House Literary Review 2/2

old mama

"Dreams are the fabric of life spun from the inner selves of who we desire to be and, on occasion, who we desire never to be."

I had dreams. Dreams of great success, lots of money and women, big fancy cars—you know, the whole works. When I was a kid, all I ever heard about was the American dream. You can have it all in America, if you work hard enough. Well, my old man worked hard, sixteen-hour days of hard labor, and all he got for it was a heart attack. Dead at forty-five.

He was too young to have a pension yet so my mother, who was ten years younger than he was, went to work in a bar. I was nine years old when my old man passed and my Mom went to work in that there bar.

I guess it wouldn't have been so bad if the bar was far away, but my Mom, the ditz that she is, went and got a job in a bar two blocks from the house. She said she wouldn't have to drive then, and we sure couldn't afford a car.

Soon, Mom was telling me to stay at my aunt's house on certain nights. Seems Mama had to entertain some of the neighborhood men at night when she wasn't working at the bar. One time, I was at my aunt's house and left something home. So I rode my bike on over there and, to my surprise, there was my Mama and three naked men in the living room. I shot upstairs, got my stuff and came back downstairs. Mama and those men were licking on each other and never even heard me go through the door. I decided then and there that I had to find somewhere else to live.

When I got back to my aunt's house, I told Uncle Paul what I'd seen. He sat me down and talked to me like a man. Told me my old man came home one night just like I did and had a heart attack. Seems my Mama had been entertaining the neighborhood men for a long time and Daddy didn't know it.

I know it isn't right, but I don't rightly care for my Mama. I love her but I didn't want to live with no whore. 'By the way, my name is James Linstrom and I am the son of a dead man and the neighborhood whore. Can I take your daughter out?' You see what I mean. I wasn't going to have much of a chance if I stayed with my Mama, so I asked Uncle Paul if I could live with them. I was pleased when he said I could — even more pleased when his job transferred him to Burlington, Ohio, about a hundred miles from here.

You see, no one there knew me. My Mama came to see me when we were leaving. She hugged me and kissed me and told me how much she loved me. I told her she better be careful what holes those men were sticking their things in and she slapped me in the face. I do have as much hate as love for that woman. She walked on down the street, the ladies all put their noses up in the air when she passed by. I was happy to see her go and was ready for my new adventure in a town where no one knew me.

II

We loved living in Burlington, a nice small town with one factory. Uncle Paul worked hard at his job. His wife, Emily, waited for him to come home each evening. They would sit and talk about the day's events and I always admired how he listened to Emily.

The years passed quickly in Burlington. I was proud to take a girl to our house because Emily always had fresh pie and refreshments, and she would treat them so nice. When I was

seventeen years old, Uncle Paul asked me if they could adopt me as their son. You see, Emily and Paul never had a child. I thought I was a bit old to adopt by this time, but I said hell yes and from that day on I called Paul and Emily Dad and Mom. They had done good by me, saved me from that other situation I was in.

I received a card in the mail from my old Mama when I graduated high school. Inside the card were ten one hundred dollar bills. There wasn't even a note written in the card, nor was it signed. I hadn't spoken to my old Mama in at least seven years and I wasn't planning to start now.

I took that thousand dollars and put it under Paul's socks in his dresser drawer. Shortly thereafter, Paul and Emily took a trip to Florida with money he'd found that he didn't know he'd had. I smiled a bit after that. I liked to see them happy.

Now, what I didn't tell you was that Paul and Emily were older than my parents. So when I entered college, they were 65 and on pension. Even though my grades were good enough for a full scholarship to the state university, I took a job while in college and sent money home to them every week. It was the least I could do.

While at university, I met Charlene. She was a fine looking woman and I became enchanted with her. We stayed together for four years and planned to marry after graduation. I went home and told Dad and Mom. They were happy for me.

It was then they told me Paul had gotten sick. He had the cancer and it was too late to operate. It wasn't long before Paul left this life and Emily followed soon after. They had left me the house in Burlington so Charlene and I moved in.

I took on a job at the local factory as an expeditor and did real well at it. Charlene was hired by the school district as a teacher. We made a nice life with each other. I never did tell

my old Mama that Paul and Emily passed on; in fact, Charlene always thought Paul and Emily were my natural parents. Charlene didn't know about the old Mama.

I was happy in Burlington. I had a nice house, beautiful wife, enough money to be comfortable and two nice cars for us.

When I think of my dreams from when I was a kid, I often wonder how those men who run around with lots of woman do it. Let me tell you one thing, Charlene is a handful. When she gets a fire in her belly, she just wears me out. I never needed the company of any other lady, nor would I ever want them. As far as the riches go, we were doing just fine. I couldn't be happier. There were times when I dreamed that my old Mama was normal, that everything had been wonderful growing up, and then I would wake up and realize Emily really was my Mama. Funny how, after all the years, a son still needs acceptance from his Mama.

III

It was a Saturday afternoon when Charlene woke me up. I was having one of those Old Mama dreams again and was a bit woozy when I stood up.

"There is a woman at the door who says she is your Mama. She says her name is Becca Linstrom."

In a matter of minutes, I told Charlene how Paul and Emily had saved me, how I never saw my Old Mama and that is why I never spoke about the woman.

"We'll talk about this later," Charlene said. "Go down and see that woman."

I went to the screen door and there she was, looking not so well. She was wearing a wig and rouge was smeared on her pale face. The bones showed through her dress and there

were lesions on the skin I could see. Mama was almost fifty years old now and looked every bit of eighty. Something wasn't right.

She looked through the screen door at me and asked if I was going to stand there staring at her or invite her in. I looked back at Charlene, and then invited her in. Mama moved slowly across the living room and sat down in a wing back chair.

Looking at Charlene, she said, "James, you got yourself a pretty one. School teacher, so I heard."

"How would you have heard that?" I asked.

"I kept tabs on you. I went to your high school and college graduations. You just didn't see me, James."

"I'm glad I didn't."

"I knew you felt that way, especially after I heard you saw me and those men. I am truly sorry I lived such a lifestyle that affected you that way. I truly am sorry, James. Maybe some day you will forgive me."

"How did you know I saw you with them that night?"

"Your Aunt Emily wrote me once a month to let me know how you were doing. I used to send Paul and Emily five hundred dollars a month for taking care of you. It wasn't that they needed it, but I didn't feel right with them raising my son. They used the money to pay for your clothes, your first car, that sort of stuff."

"Paul and Emily were my parents. You were nothing but a damn whore!"

"Well James, I might have been a whore, but I am your Mama. And if you speak to me like that again, I will stand up

and slap your face!"

"Yeah, that's my last memory of you, Mama—you slapping my face!"

"James, you were fresh that day."

"I spoke the truth!"

"Maybe I shouldn't have come here."

"I would have been happier if you never had."

Charlene looked at me. I thought for a minute that sweet Charlene was going to slap me in the face. "James, go to the store and pick up some milk and bread."

"What?" I said.

"Go now, and come back in an hour."

Now, I didn't know what Charlene was up to, but I climbed in the car and took off for the store.

IV

I returned home after an hour. Walking through the front door, I didn't see my Old Mama there in the living room. Charlene called me into the kitchen and told me to sit down.

"Did you see those lesions on her face, James?"

"Yes, I saw them."

"Do you know what caused them?"

"She has an infection or something, I would guess."

"James, your Mama came here to make peace with you. She has AIDS and not much more time to live."

"Well I'm glad she's gone!"

"James, she didn't leave. She is sleeping in the guest bedroom. She doesn't have much energy left."

"Damn it, Charlene. I don't need this!"

"You told me how selfish your Mama was, how she was all about herself. You are beginning to sound just like that, James."

"What am I suppose to do, Charlene?"

"She came here to make peace with you. She loves you, James. She just didn't know how to be a mother, which happens sometimes."

"Charlene, I hate her as much as I love her. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, James, I do. This is the time to love her."

I sat there with Charlene, thinking how lucky I was to have found her. In the space of two hours, she had met a woman she didn't know existed and had settled her in our guest room. Now she was offering counsel to me about my Mama. Sometimes I wish I had her understanding of things.

Now, you have to understand how Mama dreams have plagued me since I left her behind all those years ago. Sometimes there were dreams of seeing her and all in the world was right. Then there were dream of when the other kids used to call her a whore and the neighbors would put their noses in the air when she passed. I'd even had a dream that she showed up at my wedding and ended up with the groomsmen. I'd never dreamed Mama would die.

The next morning I went to the guest room and sat in the chair beside the bed, waiting for Mama to wake up. I looked at the dresser strewn with pill bottles. Mama woke and smiled when she saw I was sitting next to her.

"James, I know this is hard on you. You are all I have in the world, the only family I have left."

"Charlene and I are going to take care of you, Mama."

"James, I've always loved you."

"I always loved you Mama."

We sat for most of the day talking about when I was small. She knew everything I did growing up thanks to Emily. She told me she was my mother but Emily was really my mom. I knew that was hard for her but it was the truth. Mama didn't eat much this day; I sat there just holding her hand. Charlene came in for the night watch.

The sun came up and I put Charlene to bed. Mama woke and we spoke again. She drank some juice and looked at me.

"James, I needed to see you, to make peace with you. I felt you needed to know how much I have always loved you." Mama passed away that night. There wasn't much left of the woman I once knew to be so full of life, sometimes too much life. Had Charlene not with me, I might have lost this opportunity to love my Mama once again. I don't dream about Mama anymore; guess she put that to rest by coming to see me.

I am grateful that I was able to be who I desired to be when she passed. The alternative would have left me with someone I wouldn't have liked very much. I didn't turn out so bad

after all, and a lot of that had to do with Becca Linstrom being smart enough to let me go. For that, I will owe her forever.

- G Emil Reutter