

Wilderness House Literary Review 2/1

IT TOOK HARDLY ANY TIME AT ALL

Nobody ever figured out where he got the gun. Not from anywhere inside *this* house, I'll guarantee you that. At the hearing some guidance counselor got into a long song-and-dance about the shock of his father dying when he was so young; but he and I never had any trouble getting along. They kept muttering about *attitude*, too. But I never saw any sign of it, except the one time.

Understand, this family doesn't go in for raised voices. But one afternoon, I'm taking a nap, and I hear shouting down in the kitchen. It's him, unloading on his mother -- she said she'd just asked how school was going, and he blew up: "You just stay out my face, Bitch!" I stepped in, right there and then: "That's your mother, Boy. No way to talk to her, and you know it." He stomped off to his room and turned up his radio, top volume.

Drugs? Don't be silly. Booze? Well, he was a normal young guy, so I suppose he had a few beers, now and then. And, yes, sometimes he's leave the house right after supper (never one to miss a meal!) and get home late. Or not until the next morning, when he'd show up expecting to find breakfast all laid out for him. Just ordinary kid stuff, is all.

Then his grades started to sag, and that girl started

showing up. Pretty, in a flashy way. Older. A figure that could stop traffic on the Mass. Pike. Tell the truth, I didn't much like the way they were all over each other, no matter who else was in the room. But young people are young people, right? I could tell you some stories about myself, before I was married.

It all seemed like a nice, calm, ordinary life. Times were tough when I lost the job with the City, but I wasn't on the street more than a month. The fire at the house was a jolt, but thank God at least nobody was hurt, and I'd find a way to handle the repairs myself, especially with him around for the heavy work. He caught on as a lifeguard over at the public pool -- I suspect he liked getting paid to watch girls in skimpy swimsuits. But the pay was actually decent, plus he could walk to the job, so we didn't need to take on the expense of a car to replace the old Dodge that had died in the driveway.

So one night I come home from bowling, and he was sitting at the kitchen table. Crying. I knew better than to ask. I just patted him on the back and figured he'd work it out somehow.

That was just precisely two weeks before The Night. There he was, in the kitchen again, but not sitting or crying. Just standing there, waving a gun. I tell you it looked like some sort of circus prop, twice real size "This whole thing just sucks so hard, Pops. Jezebel and I are going to take a long, long trip." Jezebel was his cat -- nobody else could stand her. I wasn't at all sure what he had in mind, but I didn't think it would be anything safe. The way he was waving that gun around, he might shoot his mother, or me,

or even that damned cat. "Hey, Kiddo, just put the gun down and let's have a talk."

"What good is talking going to do? Time to move on past talking." I was slowly easing my way nearer to him, and then grabbed his arm holding the gun. He pulled one way, I pulled the other, we went into a clinch. The gun went off.

They never decided whether I shot him, or he shot himself, or whether it was an accident, or what. The only thing for certain was he was nineteen years old and dead.