

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/1

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Scapegoat

ONE MORNING, WHEN I WAS AROUND TEN YEARS OLD, my parents ordered take out from O'Malley's diner. They were particularly hung over this morning, so a greasy omelet was just what the doctor ordered. I had been awake for hours, quietly waiting for them to come to, so by the time my father arrived with our breakfast I was ravenous. I began devouring my cheese omelet, home fries and toast while my mother and father clumsily unloaded their meals.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" My father bellowed, out of nowhere. "We haven't even sat down and you're halfway through your fucking food!" My mother scoffed in agreement, giving me a side-eyed look of disapproval.

As if she had any other choice. To not support my father's rage was to bring it upon yourself.

'Oh shit,' I thought with immediate guilt. 'Why didn't I wait until they were seated?'

But then a series of clear, God-given thoughts followed. As often happened in times of turmoil, the truth revealed itself.

My family was never one who valued family meal times as a time of bonding and togetherness. In fact, my parents had a rule that we were not to talk at the table, as that was a time for (ahem) "peace and quiet." Ed and Denise ignored me every time we happened to eat together, reading the newspaper or watching TV instead.

So, why did it matter if I started eating before they sat down? Because my father needed someone to blame the day's anger on, and I was right there. His diseased brain quickly justified: he'd had a plan for us to eat breakfast together in silence that morning, and I had ruined that expectation by beginning to feed my starvation before everyone was properly situated. He had an idea, and I had not read his mind and adhered. He wanted something and he didn't get it so, like a child, he threw a tantrum.

"You couldn't wait two fucking seconds for everyone to sit down!?" He continued screaming.

I didn't know I was supposed to. His demands were so random, they were impossible to anticipate. I started to cry. "I was hungry," I whispered, afraid that he'd hit me. He was livid.

"We haven't even unpacked our food and she's halfway through her fucking meal!" He reinforced to my mother, who was shaking her head in ashamed disbelief.

"I'm sorry," I said softly.

"You should be fucking sorry, you selfish little bitch! I don't even wanna eat at the same table as you now! Get the fuck outta my sight!" He took his to-go container and stomped into the living room, and my mother obediently followed, mimicking his outrage.

Triggered and alone at the table I tried to finish my omelet, but my appetite was gone. I forced a few bites down, then got up, cleared my place, and went upstairs to my room.