

## Wilderness House Literary Review 14/2

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Near Miss

**M**aking pancakes is artful, not to be underestimated. Ferris loves my Sunday pancakes. His Papa did too. "Where are them cakes?" he'd say and Ferris would laugh, and I'd be at the stove, and I'd look over and see the two of them, Ferris climbing him, Papa tickling, morning hair, crusty eyed, arms all over each other.

I glance over at Ferris, sitting alone now, like a little gentleman. "Have you ever seen a five-year old with such a posture?" his Papa said one time, at the sink, his arms around me.

Now Ferris sat the same way, hands tucked neatly between his legs. Most little boys would be swinging their legs, sticking their tongues out trying touch their nose. Not my Ferris.

"I am hungry you know."

"Almost time to flip."

Most days, since Papa's death, feel strange, vacuous. But today is a new kind of normal. Ping. I look down on my phone. Trulia Realty is texting me more houses similar to the the one I inquired about on Seneca Drive. Vultures. Once you connect, there's no quitting. I don't know why I think I can buy a house. I never expected to use all of our down payment on the funeral. But I'm stuck on it lately, buying a house. Some glitch in my brain. Maybe it's Papa telling me, don't give up, Liza. And the Seneca Drive house caught my eye on Facebook, and it looked quaint, had a sort of character with the crooked black shutter, overgrown shrubs in front, and I couldn't help but imagine a garden in front, some orange begonias, some pink and purple petunias the way they curl into themselves in the morning frost. Soft Lamb's Ears. A cement planter with geraniums. Heavy headed dahlias, lasting well into October, leaning against a split rail fence, or a trellis. Why not? But then I remembered last month, Bill Donahue, the realtor, clever, glib, polished, smug expression, reading my life in that credit report. "High debt ratio," he said, something like that, and me, standing there, wilting.

"Two bubbles...almost time, Ferris."

Pancakes never judge.

"I know I have lots of inaccuracies in the report that shouldn't be there. It's just a matter of getting in and tweaking it a bit." I thought I sounded pretty smart. But Billy boy eyeballed me the way Father Maloney did when he offered me the Body of Christ and I was too nervous to say amen, or stick my tongue out.

"Two bubbles now, Ferris."

Those gloating house people, what do they know? Realty agents propagate our whole stinking class system.

"Mama, how many bubbles now?"

"Soon, Ferris, soon."

We're not so bad off. Ferris's Papa liked it here. And it still has his

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scent. And how about the ones worse off like Henry, the new tenant, and his prison stories? Just yesterday on the front porch, this one about Luis, an old Bunkie of his who got a ten bid because he broke into some lady's house, and this lady, she had to be ninety or so, had rigged up a rudimentary system, the string, cans, the whole nine yards, and the guy tripped on her string, a bell rang, cans flew, and he got so flustered he tripped over her cat, and he fell backwards and hit his head on the hearth, knocked himself unconscious. No you don't need no fancy system, Henry said.

"How many now, Mama?"

"Almost time."

Henry always gets me laughing. But then the way he touched my shoulder, getting too friendly, maybe, and his comment, "so how you and the boy getting on without the old man?" The way he cocked his head to the side when he said it, lowered his voice.

"Mama, how many now?"

"A few more."

Can never really trust an ex-con. I'll have to keep my distance. I don't want him near Ferris. I look over at Ferris now with a new urgency, as if he were in imminent danger, and an ominous chill settles over me, just like that, and the need to check on him, sitting there so still and sweet, pudgy cheeked, delicate. I watch him lick his lips, puffy lipped, ruby red. One day my boy will spit at me or swear in my face. I try not to imagine it. Why think those thoughts? Maybe it's Henry. Maybe he's doing it, underhandedly, preying on the vulnerable, supplanting negative ideas in my head, stories about his time in the pen, which should never be funny.

"Papa is heaven now," I told Ferris, "He left us with nothing...not a pot to piss in." My voice had trailed off. I never meant for him to hear the last part.

"What's a pot to piss in, Mama?" he asked, his face in a grimace.

I laughed, tousled his hair, and then he did too.

More bubbles form, pop, perfectly. The timing is everything in these situations. Maybe when that Bunkie, Luis, tripped the old lady's makeshift alarm he was thinking of a girlfriend named Bella, how this would be his last home invasion, and they'd get married, and he'd buy his Bella a cute little house like the one on Seneca Drive, and he lost his bearings, and he got a ten bid instead and Bella found another.

"I'm waiting so patiently, don't you know, Mama?"

"Yes Ferris. I do know."

But then I look down at what was once perfect and see chaos, bubbles like miniature volcanoes erupting, and I panic, flip the monstrosity, hand shaking, and the damn cake flops and slaps and sputters in the pan. A near miss, I think to myself, looking back at Ferris, glaring at me, suspiciously. He's got his Papa's eyes for sure.

Ping. Another one from Trulia. Maybe it's a sign. We need to get away from here. I smell the burning, consider how quickly a thing can turn on a dime, even a pancake, and it makes me shudder.