

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

Chris Jones

Twenty-One

It's getting dark, but the little yellow lights strung from the trees around the patio are plenty bright. Piped-in mariachi music blends with the happily socializing voices at the tables around us. I'm on my third beer. My dad's on his fourth. I've never had a drink with him before tonight.

'So Mom wanted to stay together?'

'I don't know. Probably. She didn't really say one way or the other.' He pushes his sweaty hair off his forehead and takes a long sip.

'Then why'd you want to split up so badly?'

'It's not that I wanted it so *badly*, Tommy. It's just that I felt ready for some new experiences.'

I watch him over the rim of my glass as I take a drink. 'And how are those new experiences working out?'

He shrugs and dabs at his face with a napkin. 'Meh.'

The waitress comes over and asks if we want anything else. I shake my head, but my dad keeps his eyes on her and says, 'Eres muy bonita.'

'Gracias.' She forces a quick, irritated smile. She must be at least thirty years younger than him.

'Como te llamas?' my dad says. I don't know Spanish, but I can tell his accent is awful. He also sounds a little drunk.

'Rosa,' she says quietly and looks across the patio.

'Mucho gusto, Rosa bonita.' His cheeks are red and shiny.

'Dad,' I say. I turn to Rosa. 'I'm sorry. Could we have the check please?'

She nods. Thankfully my dad doesn't protest. He just raises his glass as if he's toasting her as she walks off.

'That was embarrassing,' I say.

'I was just giving her a compliment. Don't you know anything about complimenting women?'

'I know they prefer them from guys who aren't old enough to be their father.'

He's silent for a moment and then takes a sip of beer and says, 'okay.'

I look across the table at him. I don't want him to feel bad. 'I mean, do you ever try to meet women your age?'

He pauses. Then he says, 'It can be slim pickings, you know, trying to find an available fifty-four-year-old who gets my juices flowing.'

I do my best to ignore his choice of words. 'What about online dating?'

'I've tried it. It's just so damn hard to get a response on those things though. And then when you finally meet someone ' He rubs the back of

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his neck and sighs. 'I went out with this one woman three times and then she just stopped returning my messages. Who does that?'

'That sucks, Dad. It happens to everyone though. You just gotta keep trying.'

'I don't know. . . Maybe it's time to admit I'm over the hill.' He puts his glass down and lets out a soft burp. 'I've been thinking about buying a nicer car,' he says.

'Seriously?' I laugh and shake my head. 'To try to impress women?'

'You don't know how it is out there.' His face turns a deeper shade of red. 'People make judgments about those kinds of things.'

Rosa comes and sets the check on the table. My dad winks at her and says, 'Gracias, chica.'

I take a long drink. The alcohol helps soften the cringe.

'When do you have to go back to school?' he says, dabbing his face with a fresh napkin.

'Next week.'

'You just got here though.'

'My job at the lab's a summer-long commitment.'

'I was thinking maybe we could go to a Dodgers game or something before you go. I could take a day off.'

'Yeah, sure. If I have time.'

We're both quiet for a minute. He runs his fingers up and down the side of his glass. He takes a deep breath. Finally he says, 'Does your mother ever tell you if she's dating anyone?'

'She doesn't talk about it. I don't ask her.'

'You're not curious?'

'Not really. She can do what she wants.'

'Of course she can do what she wants.'

I take a last sip to empty my glass. The other tables are thinning out. My dad leans back out of the light and gazes off into the trees past the railing.

'You don't have any guy friends you hang out with?' I ask.

'Once in a while I'll join a happy hour after work. Other than that it's a lot of Netflix.'

'But you have your freedom now. You can have new experiences without anyone telling you what to do.'

'Well, Tommy, everything in life's a trade-off. I guess the trick just lies in making the right trades.'

My father leans forward so his face is halfway out of the shadows. There are more lines around his eyes and more gray at his temples than

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when I saw him last Christmas. When he called me on my 21st birthday a few months ago, he said, 'I can't wait to buy you a beer the next time I see you.'

'So,' I say. 'When should we make that Dodgers game?'