

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/1

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The Child

He wanted a big gun and thought he just might buy one someday. That would be a bold step and a big responsibility. He would need to learn how to care for it, cleaning and such. His fear was shooting himself in the face while cleaning it. Then there was the problem of where to keep it, where he could and couldn't carry it, where to shoot it, what bullets were best. It seemed such a colossal bother, such a daunting job. He hardly felt capable and yet the wish remained. He had thought, the one time he held a big gun in his hands, long ago with his father, "This is for me. It feels good and I want it." But fear trumped desire and he only toyed with the idea of buying a big gun, in the abstract like dreaming of a lottery prize, until the child showed up. Then the abstraction assumed weight and--if he thought about it hard enough--heft in his imaginary hands.

He rented an apartment in the city in the same neighborhood where his parents had lived their entire lives, where he had lived his entire life. The whole area had gone to seed. Men in wool hats and coats huddled on street corners in summer; women in threadbare skirts and half-tops huddled on the same street corners in winter, but his parents ignored the grubbiness and crime and stayed put. Inertia was in the genes.

His parents invited him to dinner once a week, knowing he could never pass up a free meal. They ate in the kitchen under an erratic tube light at a loose-jointed table. Its aluminum legs shifted in all directions under the weight of their elbows; its yellowed linoleum surface never quite came clean and felt greasy to the touch. The kitchen faucet suffered a chronic, slow drip.

"So tell us," his mother would say. "What's new with you?"

"Nothing."

"That's good. What are you going to do on your day off? Any plans?"

"No. I'm not doing anything, just relaxing, taking it easy."

"Of course. You need to rest, you work so hard."

One time, his mother showed up at his door in the middle of the afternoon. "We were worried," she said. "You haven't answered your phone for hours."

"I was just hanging out, didn't feel like getting up."

She peeked over his shoulder into his apartment.

"I see," she said. "I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"It's nothing, really."

"Well then. . ."

"Well then."

Another time, his phone had been ringing all morning and then he heard a knock at the door but it wasn't his mother. It was the child. It wore a fine church-going suit and a little black cap. Pinned to its lapel was

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/1

a large envelope from which he extracted a long letter crammed edge to edge in tiny, baffling script. He didn't recognize the language--something Balkan, perhaps. In his distraction with the letter he didn't notice the child slip inside and jump into his television chair.

"I suppose I'll keep you," he said to it. "I could use the company."

And that was how the child came into his life. Right away it was as if it had always been there.

It acted pretty much the same as all children, as far as he could tell, knowing nothing about the little creatures. He took it for walks around the block. It would dart into stores he'd never noticed before, make straight for a woman and poke its head under her skirt. She would jump, at first, then laugh and say boys will be boys.

His habit was to take train rides to points distant for solitary treks through the woods; now he took the child along. It easily outpaced him and didn't seem at all constricted by its suit of clothes, bounding onto trails he would never have taken by himself into remote hills. "There could be bears or murderers up there!" he would call out but the child didn't care. It would run ahead and wait smiling on a giant boulder for him to catch up, patent leather heels thumping.

At his favorite bar it would get falling-down drunk and many a night he had to carry its inert little body all the way home in the cradle of his arms. It seemed to do nothing but watch television when he was away at work--he could tell by the glaze over its eyes when he came home--but if he tried to watch his own favorite shows it was prone to switching off the set and stomping around in a huff, red in the face.

Its impishness forced him to negotiate the threshold with care. Sometimes, expecting to find it lounging in his chair watching a nature show, it would instead be crouched and ready to dash between his legs as soon as he came in. One of these times, after he'd chased it down out on the sidewalk, a woman said, "You've got quite a rambunctious little tiger there!" It embarrassed him still further by tugging and twisting and leaping as he dragged it inside by the arm.

It liked to wedge itself between his parents at the unsteady kitchen table. They didn't seem to mind.

"Tell us," his mother said. "What are you going to do on your day off?"

"Nothing. Relax. Maybe go to the movies."

"How exciting!"

The child made it hard to enjoy his favorite pastime: pacing through his apartment telling jokes. Pacing, his hands knitted in the small of his back when he wasn't waving them around, he would say, "A man and a woman meet in a bar. They get to talking and, you know, they hit it off. The man says I want to go to your place and have some really kinky sex. The woman is into it. She says Okay. So they go to her place and have sex. Pretty normal stuff, ten toes up, ten toes down. Afterward, the woman says That was great, and all, but I thought you wanted to do something really kinky. The man says I did, I--" And at this point, right at the punch

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/1

line, he would falter. He would look at the child playing with a scissors, or pretending to be a diving and climbing airplane. "--I--" He wouldn't know quite how to finish it off, then he would blurt, after the timing had been completely ruined, "--I defecated in your purse."

The child wouldn't crack a smile. It would continue playing and not regret one bit fouling up the joke. At those times he conceived a blistering hatred for the child, like a pure, hot, glowing iron rod.

On the phone--"I was just wondering if you wanted to do something. . I don't know. . .Maybe go to a ballgame or a movie or something."

The child sat on the floor placidly looking up at him.

"Yeah. . .well. . ." his friend from work said. "I'm a little busy right now, a lot of stuff to do. You know how it is."

"Of course! You bet I know, believe me. I've got a ton of stuff to do, too. What about next Tuesday?"

"I don't know. . .um. . .I've got to go."

"Okay, sure--sorry--I didn't mean to keep you."

He hung up.

The child threw itself against a window and began banging its head; the glass bent under the blows but did not break.

"There there," he said. "There there."

The child left off its head banging and crawled onto his lap, shuddering and gasping. It curled into a trembling little ball. He ran his fingertips through its hair. The act calmed it and it soon fell asleep. If he ever went ahead and bought a big gun, like he always wanted ever since he could remember, he would shoot it in the face.