

Parker Tettleton

Right Here

Blood crumbs caked the sides of their house, forming a ruddy shell around the windows, doors, chimney and roof. The TV burped static at all hours of the day and night but no picture, intelligible sounds in two weeks. The pipes dried and burst, staining everything in the vicinity a previously unknown shade of charcoal. The power went next. When asked why he wasn't going to work and she to school, the father told his daughter the Earth was sick. This pleased the daughter, evoking several giggles and spotlighting the dimples in her cheeks. Another week had since passed, the daughter now crying when she was awake and screaming in brief bouts with sleep. The mother kept silent during all this, locked in the master bedroom, eating scrapbook pages one picture at a time. When asked why mommy had abandoned them, the father told the daughter mommy was *right here, in her heart*. His was an unwanted touch, and the daughter brought blood to all six of their ears. The TV screen had long since shattered when the father swore he heard burps from his fetal position on the couch. The daughter, hair falling out, blue gaze glazed over with bulging red veins, took his thumbs into his ears. She no longer desired comfort, feeling remarkably clean without water, food, TV. One night with the father asleep, the mother spurting up polaroid puke, the daughter took a hammer to her bedroom window. She tapped lightly at first, then, after clearing away the glass, increased her taps to half-swings then swings then wind-up throws. Thick brown shards gathered at her feet. She had to cover her eyes when dawn arrived. Her father and mother stood in the doorway, crust raining from their eyes.

This Winter

This Winter would be cold, as usual. It came to be known as the coldest season in several generations. The brown flakes of dried up leaves spun around their heads like ashes from a volcano. As warm as Vesuvius has been, and will surely again be, that is how cold the approaching Winter was.

He would get her a dress. It was decided before he'd even had the idea. Throughout the town, ladies in bright, seasonal red and green dresses flitted about, appearing in his dreams as skiers happily disappearing into an avalanche. He had the elderly clerk match a dress with a pair of his wife's earrings.

It would be hers in a matter of days. She would come to him, cheeks full of the rosy hue adorning the tree in the city middle. He didn't sleep at night, instead thinking of what she would prepare for that special evening and how he would smile, how thankful she would be.

On that morning, he rose before the stars had finished making their periodic descent. How the moon looked now, he thought to himself. How it looked and how it would look come this enchanted evening! He spared no detail in describing the inevitable sky to himself. He sat at their breakfast table, seeing every crease of her smile in the grain of the wood.

She woke with a deep coldness in her chest. She was accustomed to waking earlier than her husband, though she did not work a paying job. There were tulips on the nightstand - her favorite. She wrapped herself in the blanket that was on their bed and went to make her husband breakfast.

She smiled. A careful smile, he thought. A pitiful smile. His hands curled in his lap. She went into the bathroom. What had he done to deserve this? Was it the elderly woman's intention all along? He sat picking his beard. He looked at his plate. There had been warm toast, fresh strawberry jam, a lingering hopefulness in this bitter frost.

How does it look, she said. I am not fit for this dress, she said. Perhaps if it was a different color, she said. He kept picking his beard. She was right. He had gotten her the wrong gift, but there was no turning back. The past was only getting older. She matched his smile and bent down for a kiss.

Places For Two

There was a young couple to her left, a foursome to her right, an empty booth behind her and an elderly couple in her sights. They had smiled politely when she was seated. She took her time, making lists of threes out of the most desirable appetizers, cocktails, beef entrees, chicken entrees, and desserts. She used both napkins. She's got fine penmanship, the old man said.

My name is Gloria, she said. I'd like to order now, she said. I'd like two shrimp cocktails for starters, then the ribeye, medium well, with a baked potato, extra cheese, bacon and sour cream, she said. I'll get back to you about dessert, she said. The young couple was sharing a slice of apple pie. The foursome ordered another pitcher. The old woman put down her fork.

The young couple finished the slice. The young woman leaned over for a kiss. She sure is putting it away, she whispered into the young man's ear. He grinned. Let's get out of here, he said. The foursome ordered another pitcher.

She had finished the shrimp cocktails and ribeye. The baked potato was half-gone. Excuse me, she said. I'd like to order a piece of apple pie, she said. The old woman turned to her husband. I'd like a piece myself, he said.

The foursome ordered another pitcher. The baked potato was empty. Let me clear these out of your way, the waiter said. I'll be back in a flash, he said. She looked to her right. She adjusted her top. She tried not to breathe.

The old man finished his slice of apple pie. The foursome ordered another pitcher. One of them looked to the left. She'll be here a little longer, he said. I might as well go and introduce myself, he said. The other three grinned.

She ate her pie slowly. The foursome ordered another pitcher. The one was staring now. I'm afraid she'd puke on me, he said. Where's it all go to, he said. She didn't look at the bill. She reached down her shirt and placed a twenty beside her plate. Okay, we can go now, the old woman said. Glad that's settled, she said. The old man stood up.