

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

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The Glass Boy

River's mom sat at the head of the table, and like snowflakes the white feathers of her earrings flecked her long brown hair. She had eyes the color of my 'Forest Green' crayon, and she seemed too young to be a mom. For one, she didn't wear mom clothes. Instead of a paisley blouse or a dress patterned with carnations, she wore jeans and a t-shirt that read, "No Nukes."

River's dad sat across from me. His hair too was dark and long, and he had tied it in a ponytail so, I guessed, it wouldn't reach his food. As we ate, strands came loose, and he pushed them behind his ear, and they fell loose again. Although his palms were clean, his short fingernails were chipped and dark with dirt. His glasses had round lenses and slid along his nose. When he wasn't pulling back his hair, he was shifting his glasses, so his hands seemed always to be working. I had never seen a man with a ponytail before, not up close.

He sat next to River's brother, who had no hair at all. He was maybe four years old, half my age but old enough, I thought, that he should have hair. River's dad spooned bean salad to the younger brother's small pink mouth, and his mom watched the younger brother, and they treated him as if he were made of glass. His skin was very white, and you could almost see through it, and for these reasons I called him in my mind the 'Glass Boy.'

"What did you play today?" River's dad asked.

I was about to answer, tell him about 'cops and robbers,' and how River had shot me reluctantly with my cap gun, but River said, "Hide and seek in his yard."

"A nice day for hide and seek," his mom said, "but cold. I wonder why the snow won't come. What do you think?" she asked me.

"I think it's stuck," I said. "But when it comes, a lot will come. Maybe for Christmas."

"River said this is your first sleepover," his dad said. "So this must be a big change for you. Are you nervous?"

"A little."

For a week I had practiced at night sleeping with the light off. It had been hard, and I still wasn't used to it. I kept waking and seeing my Fonzie poster, and the shadowed Fonzie seemed to wait for me in the darkness.

"I'm curious," his dad continued while wiping vinaigrette from the bottom lip of the Glass Boy. "How is this different from your house and your dinners?"

"Well," I said, "you have two front doors. My house only has one."

"It's a two-family home," he said. "We rent one side."

"And my dad always sits at the head of the table."

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

"In our house we take turns," River's mom said. "Even the kids."

"And we always have meat," I said. "Usually chicken."

"We don't eat meat," his dad said.

"Don't you have to? I thought people needed meat to live."

"No," his dad said. "It's really a choice. We just have to eat other things that give us the same vitamins."

"Why don't you eat meat?" I asked.

"We don't want to hurt animals," River told me.

I brought a few lentils to my mouth. I began to picture my mom's baked chicken as a live chicken running around and pecking corn and then having its head chopped off and its feathers plucked out.

"It's okay," his mom said. "We don't eat meat, but that might not be right for your family. In fact, we grow a lot of our own food. But we don't judge others or try to make them believe what we do."

The Glass Boy just chewed quietly and smiled.

After dinner we worked together to wash our dishes. River's dad and the Glass Boy did the scrubbing with a soapy sponge, his mom the rinsing, and River and I dried. At my house, my mom did everything, although sometimes I helped. My dad never touched a dirty dish, not that I remembered. Usually he went into his downstairs study after dinner to read and 'rest his stomach.' Often I wouldn't see him again until he tucked me in.

In the hall on the way to River's room sat a small golden figure of a shirtless fat man. He was laughing and his belly was huge and spilled out over the waistband of his pants. His golden mouth was open wide and I could almost hear the laugh that shook his body as he sat.

"Rub his stomach," River told me.

"Why?"

"He's a Buddha. You rub his stomach and make a wish."

"All right," I said. I touched the statue. It was cold metal. I rubbed the big belly with my fingers and wished to make it through the coming night. I wished that as I slept I could feel my parents somewhere nearby in this house, that I wouldn't be scared or feel alone, that I would have dreams in which people I loved would visit. I hoped the night would be short and the sunlight would come early.

"What did you wish for?" River asked when I opened my eyes.

"A new bike," I said.

River's room had two twin beds, each with matching sheets with large white-petaled flowers printed in a repeating pattern, so it seemed the flowers were paused mid-fall.

"Why do you have two beds?" I asked.

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

"That's my brother's bed," he said, pointing at the one nearest the window. "You'll sleep in that one."

"Where will he sleep?"

"With my mom and dad. He does that a lot anyway. He likes it."

"You like flowers?" I asked.

"Sure," he said.

"My sheets have the helmets of every football team in the NFL."

"What's the NFL?"

"You don't know? It's the National Football League."

"Those are magnolias," he said, touching one flower with his fingers.

"They're nice," I said.

"Want to play?" he asked.

"Sure. Do you have any army men?"

"No," he said. "But I have a game called Mille Bornes. It's from France and has French words. You play with cards. It's really fun. I'll teach you."

"Sure," I said.

We sat together on a thin blue rug on the wood floor. His room was much cleaner than mine. In my room, plastic army men and superhero action figures lay scattered, and sometimes the army men caught in my toes. Other than a Rubik's Cube, his room didn't have toys, only a few board games - Yahtzee, Clue - stacked neatly on a dresser. His walls were light blue, as if we were sitting in the sky. At one point his brother came in, looked at us playing, and then left again.

"Why is your brother bald?" I asked.

"He has a disease."

"And the disease makes his hair come out?"

"No, but they do stuff to him at the hospital that makes him sick and makes his hair fall out."

"Why do they make him sick instead of better? That makes no sense."

"Well, he gets sick from the treatments but they kill the disease so he can get better."

"Is he very sick? He doesn't look that sick."

"Yes."

"My mom says I have a strong immune system, which means I never get sick."

"You're lucky."

He didn't seem to want to talk about it, and I had already lost interest because he was winning the game, which I now didn't like.



Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

That night I lay in the Glass Boy's bed in the darkness and thought about the Buddha and the wish I had made and waited for it to come true. I could hear River in his bed, could hear him breathing, a soft and steady rhythm, and some light from behind the window blind told me that outside in the night sky was a moon. I stared at the ceiling and waited for that wish to come true, for a sense of my parents nearby to come, but I didn't feel them there, I was just alone in the darkness. And then I began to think of the Glass Boy, how this was his bed, where he slept, his small sick body in these sheets, and I wondered if I would catch his disease from sleeping in his bed. I knew you could catch a disease from germs, and that germs could hide in sheets, and I wondered if I would get sick like him. I imagined my parents angry that I had caught the disease from sleeping over, and then I pictured myself at the hospital, getting treatments that made me sick instead of better, and then I imagined my hair falling out, clumps of it in my hands as I tried to put it back on my head, but it kept coming out until like River's brother I was bald, and my parents treated me like I was made of glass, and then I wondered if his disease was something that could make you die. But I told myself, No, no disease could make a kid die, kids didn't die, only adults and mostly old ones. That made me feel a little better. I wouldn't die, I told myself, not from a disease and not from the fact that I couldn't sleep in the dark, these things couldn't make me die because I was a kid and kids didn't die, not while they were still kids. I would make it through this night I told myself and in the morning I would go home and see my parents and because I was a kid I wouldn't die. That made me feel better and I even smiled because now I knew what I had been afraid of. I was afraid that I would die on the sleepover and be separated from my family and in death never see my family again, but thinking about the Glass Boy and lying in his sheets made me realize that I was a kid and I wouldn't die because kids didn't die. I grew braver and I thought what is death anyway maybe it was just like when we played and I was shot by River and I stared up at the sky and in my mind became a part of it all maybe that was dying and that didn't seem so bad to become a part of everything but then I became nervous again thinking about the fact that someday I would die and then I told myself that I was a kid and kids didn't die not even sick ones and I told myself that I should think of that and not what would come when I was old because that was so far away and tomorrow I would wake and see the sun and trees they would all still be there and I would see my family again and my own room and my toys and my mom and dad would be with me again and the darkness would be gone and while I was feeling better I must have fallen asleep.



The snow finally came that year, a New England blizzard, and school was canceled and the world became all white. Snow hung in the bare branches and even the gray bark of the trees was wrapped in white. My yard became an unbroken white and stretched and blended into the other yards, and my dad and I spent hours clearing the snow from our driveway, my shovel making my hands rattle as it found the ice beneath. River's house was at the bottom of a hill, and drifts like frozen waves hid the house from my view, and it seemed an ocean of snow lay between us. And then Christmas vacation came soon after, and I forgot about school, it seemed years since I had held a pencil or sat at a desk. The snow made us

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

stay inside more, and the world became my warm home with Christmas lights in the living room and fallen pine needles beneath the tree, and my mom and dad with me all day, although my dad did go to work again a few days after Christmas. I watched him through the window pane with ice in the corners as he scraped the car windshield clean and snow ran from the doors as the engine throbbed and the car warmed. I wondered about River, but I thought he was probably stuck in a good way in his house with his mom and dad and the Glass Boy. I remembered the Buddha, and River's dad's fingernails, and the Glass Boy's smile, and the time in the Glass Boy's bed seemed like a dream I had struggled through on a night when I had been much younger.



When we finally returned to school, River's desk was empty. I had been looking forward to seeing him, to ask him about his Christmas, to ask him what presents he and his brother got, whether he had army men now. But he wasn't there. I thought he might be sick. I thought he might have caught his brother's disease. I imagined he would come in a few days bald like his brother. I was glad I hadn't caught his disease. I had slept in the Glass Boy's bed but I had stayed healthy and I was thankful. I never missed school because of my 'strong immune system,' which I only understood kept me from getting sick. Obviously, I told myself, River didn't have a 'strong immune system' and neither did his brother and now they were both sick. Or maybe his brother was better because he passed on the sickness to River. I knew that sometimes happened. In my family one of us would catch a cold and then someone else in the family would get it and the first person would start to feel better. I figured that was what had happened. I figured River's parents had kept him home so other kids wouldn't get sick. Otherwise I imagined every kid in the school would go bald and have treatments in the hospital.

But River didn't show up the rest of the week. And then his desk was empty the week after, and soon it seemed that maybe he had never been there, maybe I had never slept over his house, maybe I had dreamt it all.

And then one day, as snow melted in my driveway, I could see his house again. The snow between us turned to water that seeped into the ground and the mounds of snow slowly dwindled, and I saw a truck across the lawns at River's house, and people carrying in a sofa, trying to angle it through his front door. The sofa was too big and the men dropped it down on the wet step and scratched their heads.



That night as my dad tucked me into bed I told him what I had seen.

"Isn't that River's house?" I asked.

"It was."

"Where I slept over?"

"Yes. Your first sleepover."

"My only one so far."

"I'm still proud. I know you were nervous."

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

"But I made it through."

"Yes."

"Maybe I'll do it again someday at someone else's house."

"Sure."

"But where's River?"

"I heard they moved."

"Why?"

"Because of his brother."

"Why because of his brother?"

"He died."

"How?"

"Well, he was sick."

"But kids don't die from being sick."

"Sometimes they do."

"Could that happen to me?"

He reached for my hand suddenly. His hand over mine was soft, but the nails were bitten. I tried to see if my hand was very white or clear, but it was still just my hand.

"It could happen to any of us," he said. "But don't worry. You have a strong immune system."

"That's what Mom says."

"Sleep well. I love you. See you in the morning."

"I love you too. Could you do one thing different tonight?"

"Sure. What?"

"Could you leave the light on?"

"Sure," he said.