

The marriage wine

The first time I met Barry, he was stalking through the house in his tighty-whities. Believe me when I say the shock of meeting your girlfriend's father for the first time is always compounded by such things. Nothing is more disarming than a half-naked Dutch giant striding through his domain toward you, his voice booming, his hand extended as if to rip your thumping heart out from your throat. Needless to say, that was the first and last time I arrived unannounced.

In the early days I used to dread going to my girlfriend's house for dinner. I was always drafted into kitchen duty seconds after walking through the door (which I didn't mind because it kept me busy). I would chop vegetables and he would take care of the meat. Beads of sweat would cluster on Barry's high-domed forehead as he hacked through a turkey with a butcher's knife. He would often launch on a thunderous monologue while preparing the food, which I was grateful for, because then I could just nod appreciatively and watch the unfortunate bird being slowly dismembered.

He would go on about St. Augustine and Aristotle, or about the ancient Greek textbook he would write about when he retired, or about how the Muslims were taking over the Christian world. I could never tell if Barry was addressing me because his lazy eye kept wandering to one side and it always seemed as if he were sermonizing to the air slightly to the right of me. I would look to his wife, but she would be nodding too, her eyes slightly glazed over, her body slightly crooked in her wheelchair. So I just ended up nodding a lot and saying very little.

After a few holiday dinners the day came when Barry decided I was trustworthy enough to enter into the sacred chamber of his lair – the wine cellar.

On that day he instructed me to follow him down the treacherous stairs of the basement. The air was musty and cool. There was an eerie peacefulness to this sanctuary, and Barry spoke in hushed tones as he proudly showed me the wine-making apparatus that cluttered the area. His eyes lingered for a moment on a row of crucifixes on the wall that his daughter had brought back from Mexico on a pilgrimage to see the pope. He then loped over to gigantic glass jars of homemade wine lined on shelves against another wall - wine made from blackberries he picked in the ditches of Langley farm roads. Picking up a flashlight he pointed it at one of the jars; a beam of light suddenly stabbed through the ruby hue of its contents.

“What do you think of the colour on that?” he asked a corkscrew to the right of me. I told him I was impressed. “Yes, yes, this batch is clearing up nicely, thanks be to God,” he said, handing me a straw. “Go ahead and try some – tell me what you think.” I tentatively poked my straw into the jar and took a sip of the fermenting liquid. It tasted like petroleum flavoured punch, but I made an appreciative noise. He seemed placated by this.

Barry started to move some equipment around in an attempt to clear some space. He needed a spot to put his stone wheat grinder. He’d bought it on Craig’s List from an old hippie in California who put it up for sale when the world didn’t end after Y2K.

The scrape and clink of bottles echoed off the walls.

I wanted to tell Barry that I jogged past him and his wife every morning as they drank coffee at the New Westminster Quay. Barry would read his Greek concordance while his wife sat listless, her head tilted to one side. It was their special time.

Once Barry told me about love, about how love fulfills the deepest needs and longings of the human person, about how I should get on with the business of marriage, about the “incredible satisfaction that comes from the gift of conjugal love.”

I wanted to tell Barry the truth about love, about how his daughters slept around and lied to him about it, about how they hurt when he pushed their hugs away and told them to save it for their husbands.

Barry picked up a dusty bottle off the shelf. It was filled with a murky brown substance. “This is my marriage wine,” he said. “I made this wine twenty-seven years ago. My wife and I drank it at our wedding.” He opened one of the bottles and poured the gurgling liquid into a small dusty glass. He then handed it to me with reverence, the way a priest would at Holy Communion.

There was something touching in his posture as he offered me his bottled love. And for a second there was a sadness in his eyes, as if he knew.

I took the wine and drank it. This time I couldn't hide the bitterness.