*Dinner at Home*

by David M. Hamlin

 “Honey, what’s a five-letter word for ‘dismissed an employee?’”

 Ruth looked up from her crossword. Their therapist said puzzles helped with cognitive agility. Her eyes were alert and intent; that gave Jonathan comfort.

 “Any letters?”

 “The second one may be an i.”

 “Try ‘fired.’”

 Jonathan turned to the stove.

 “Are the kids coming over?”

 Jonathan’s shoulders tensed.

 “Rick’s in Kansas City. Janice is in Newark.”

 “No. Janice’s in Durham. At school.”

 “She graduated. We were there, remember? She teaches in Newark.”

 “Oh.”

 Jonathan went to the freezer.

 “Peas in the soup?”

 “I like peas.”

 “OK.”

 Jonathan had come to terms with being the cook and grocery shopper. For years, Ruth had managed it all, shopping, cooking, serving, housekeeping. When the children left, the routine changed. Dinner in the kitchen had drawn them closer, he at the table, she at the stove. Now it was all upside-down and the intimacy was gone.

 Earlier, Ruth had awakened him before dawn, certain she had missed a doctor’s appointment which didn’t exist. Jonathan ignored his impulse to respond sharply, but then he couldn’t sleep. The therapist had counselled patience. Jonathan did his best.

 Ruth had dismissed the diagnosis. After all, Jonathan couldn’t find his car keys now and then – what’s the big deal? – but the tests confirmed progressive dementia.

 When he found Ruth in a bone-dry bathtub, fully clothed, the diagnosis paled before the reality.

 Flipping the chicken breasts, a familiar, unsettling sensation stabbed him. He turned.

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Ruth was gone.

 “Ruthie?”

 Nothing.

 He turned the burners off and searched the downstairs rooms.

Nothing.

The front door was wide open.

 At the door, he checked the yard.

 Nothing.

 Anxious and annoyed, he loped to the sidewalk and looked both ways.

Nothing.

He trotted next door. Sometimes, Ruth imaged that she had a tea date with Carol Anderson. Carol always welcomed Ruth and alerted Jonathan.

 Carol shook her head.

 “Not here. Maybe the Antonelli’s?”

 “I’ll try there.”

 Nothing.

 Perhaps she had walked to the park down the street. Kids playing kickball, nannies with baby carriages. No Ruth.

He quick-walked home to contact the police. The phone was in his hand when he heard something upstairs.

 Ruth was in bed, the covers snugged at her neck.

“Honey, it’s not bedtime. The front door was open.”

 “How odd. The pea soup was good.”

 “We haven’t eaten yet, Ruthie.”

 She gave him a quizzical look.

 “Oh, dear. Did I go away again?”

 “Nope. You’re still right here. At home. Supper’s ready.”

 She sat up. She was still dressed.

 “Let’s go. Time to eat.”

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“Are the kids here?”

Exhausted and bereft, Jonathan did something he had sworn he wouldn’t. He lied.

“We’ll start without them.”

Just a little lie, but his guilt and remorse hung in the air like a ghost.

She took her seat and looked at the puzzle.

“I need a five-letter word for ‘dismissed an employee.”

“Fired, dammit!”

His frustration was palpable. He cringed.

Ruth carefully entered the word.

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*Dinner at Home* originally appeared in Potato Soup Journal

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