

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

*Christine Stark*  
**The Sisters**

**T**he sisters, windblown, choose the patio table on the other side of the plate glass window. A fat golden dog that looks to be a retriever and collie mix twice as wide as it should be, stands, head low, on the far side of the black wrought iron glass top patio table. Someone tied a pink bandana around the dog's neck. Its shaggy paws, the size of small frying pans, dig into the concrete sidewalk. It doesn't want to move. One sister, grinning, in a white hoodie, her bangs in her eyes, pushes a matching black wrought iron chair with a periwinkle cushion away from the table. The other sister, in a brown hoodie, also grinning, stands behind the dog. It is the end of the Bryn Mawr Festival of Garage Sales—the oldest annual garage sale in Minneapolis. It is sunny, windy, and 55. It is late afternoon, May 2nd, 2010. I am on the other side of the plate glass window.

The dog's snout is too long for a golden retriever. Its nose is large for any breed. Mostly, it is a golden tan, but a top layer of wiry black hair sticks straight out, instead of falling gracefully to its side the way the tan fur does, the way normal dog hair behaves. The sister behind the dog pushes its rickety rump. The other sister, her back against the window, coaxes the dog to move forward by waving her hands as if she is guiding someone backing up a trailer. The dog digs in. It braces itself against the sisters, but the sisters push and prod until finally the sisters win and one front paw lurches the rest of its body one step closer to the window.

Laughing with joy, the sisters continue to coax and prod their dog until finally it lands in a harrumph between the table and the window. The dog settles. Its bandana disappears beneath its girth. Finally, it places its chin on the sidewalk. The sisters smile. I imagine them at the garage sales early this morning, laughing together at the slightest provocation, sharing sister-jokes with just a twitch of their eyes, buying up the four inch hostas and tomato plants for their garden this spring where they will plant half organic seeds and half not. I imagine them together for the past five decades, nearly always, except for the year the one in the white hoodie moved to Florida. What a mistake! They shake their heads every time they talk about it. The shaggy dog has been in their lives at least a decade and a half, I'm sure of it.

I watch, my face turned toward the women. If they look in here, they will see me staring at them. Behind them is a street and just to the right an intersection. The intersection is two blocks from Interstate 394 where a homeless nineteen-year-old Indian woman's body lies, motionless and rotting, in tall grass. On the other side of the street is a two-story storefront built brick by brick, hand-over-hand in the early 1900s. I can tell, given the dark, dirtied color of the brick and the beige brick designs near the roof line, that it's not one of those fake, turn-of-the-century candy red and pink brick buildings actually constructed last year, the kind they build on vacant lots in north Minneapolis after they've torn down the old ones to keep in line with the existing architecture (much of which has already been torn down). Bryn Mawr Market, a convenience store, predictably open 365 days a year; Fast Freddie's Pizza Deli, a take-out pizza joint with

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seventeen-foot blood red walls; and a shiatsu acupuncture practice, with clean white lines take up the space on the first level. Four closed windows, presumably apartments, are spaced evenly above the businesses on the second floor.

The sisters are twins. If not twins, then they are a year or a year and one half apart. Both are white, in their mid 50s, with prominent, elongated noses rounded at the tips. Fairly thick black eyeliner rides their top and bottom lids. Both have long, straight dyed auburn hair with three inches of peppered gray strands shining through at the roots. Both have their hair pulled back into pony tails on the top of the back of their heads. Straight across bangs and long ears with big lobes frame their faces. Both wear jeans. The brown hoodie sister has slip-on brown shoes. The toes are scuffed to the point where the first layer of leather is absent in spots. A cell phone in a dirty red cover is clipped to her belt loop. The white hoodie sister's sweatshirt has a black floral design running up the front and down the back. She sports clean white tennis shoes, which look like running shoes. She does not run (I feel sure of it).

The white hoodie sister disappears around the corner while the brown hoodie sister settles into her chair. She removes her red cell phone and places it on the table next to the brown wooden pole shooting up the center of the table, attached to a bright blue closed umbrella. The periwinkle cushions and bright blue umbrella clash. It is bothersome. A 1/3 full plastic liter Coke bottle was on the table before they arrived. It is still there. Three teenagers left it. A yellow plastic straw wiggles inside the bottle because the brown hoodie sister bounces her feet on the wrought iron X that provides a foundation for the table's umbrella.

Suddenly, the brown hoodie sister turns her head and grins at me. I smile shamefully. I am writing about them. I wish her grin was for me, her birth sister. I force myself to look away from her. I finish the article in an online newspaper I was reading prior to the sisters' arrival, but what I really want is to stare out the window at the sisters. Out of the corner of my eye I see the white hoodie sister set down three glasses of amber liquid and disappear once again. She reappears quickly and sets water in front of the dog. It lifts its head, takes a few laps, and then rests its chin on the sidewalk again. The sun, beginning its descent to whatever is on the other side of the trees, holds for a moment to shine through the sisters' glasses, lighting them up like lamps. The top 1/3 of each glass is a lighter color because of the ice cubes stacked against each other unexpected angles. They are watery mosaics.

The brown hoodie sister takes a drink, and smiles at the dog below that does not lift its head off the sidewalk. Then white hoodie sister returns and sets down two plates of perfectly sliced carrot cake along with a Panini sandwich and a one-ounce yellow bag of Lay's potato chips. I can't help but look at the glasses, in their amber glory. Why are there three? Are they waiting for someone? A third sister perhaps? The white hoodie sister tears the Panini sandwich into bite-sized chunks. Cheese limps across her hand and the plate. She finishes ripping the sandwich and drops the large white ceramic plate onto the sidewalk in front of the dog's snout. The plate rocks from side to side until it settles. She smiles at her sister while the dog gulps down bits of the sandwich. The brown hoodie sister smiles back at

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her sister. I am conscious I am staring. But I can't stop. What if I'd had the sister I always wanted, would my life would be like theirs.

I imagine the sisters live in Bryn Mawr, an upscale gayborhood with no visible gang presence. They live in a 1500 square foot Craftsman bungalow or a tudor with dark woodwork, enormous built-ins spanning entire walls, glass doorknobs, and heavy wooden futon frames that double as couches in front of the gas insert fireplace. Lively plants stud the rooms, including the slate tiled bathroom. Good friends drop in daily. The neighbors call the sisters eccentric, but the sisters don't mind. They are too busy smiling and laughing.

Yet reality sneaks in and I realize they don't look fancy enough to live in a neighborhood where slim people drop by the gay-owned coffeehouse at ten am in all-black cross country outfits, fresh from the trails. The sisters talk and laugh and eat their cakes. The white hoodie sister rubs her shoulder as if she is cold. Then they each rub the tops of their heads within seconds of the other. Their eyes widen at times during their conversations. Sometimes, they even drink their amber liquid in unison. I wonder what it would be like to have that.

Occasionally, the brown hoodie sister looks at me, catching me watching them and I look away quickly as if I am not aware of them at all, even though I can't stop staring. Sometimes I glance up as if I have been considering the late afternoon sky in this peaceful, upper middle class white neighborhood. Sometimes my eyes shoot to the side as if something has been telling me, all is not right, even here. Your sister lies dead in the weeds, her body and spirit dishonored. Sometimes I stare at the street behind them as if I have been thinking of the miscarriage my mom had when I was four and how different I would have been had she been born. How I feel the absence of her life in mine. Not a hole, but more like the sketchy outline of a body struggling to materialize, to sit across from me, to be. How I catch myself searching for her, the one who did not appear.

The brown hoodie sister waves at me through the plate glass window. I smile and nod. I wonder if she wonders if I'm writing about her and her sister and their deadbeat dog. Of course, I remind myself, she isn't. I'm sure of it. Now the carrot cake plates are piled on top of each other, the forks next to each other on the top plate. The third amber liquid glass has not been drunk, although a white straw pokes out the top. The white hoodie sister returns and removes the ceramic plate and water from the dog. The dog does not move. The brown hoodie sister says something particularly funny and both sisters crack wide open, big mouthed smiles. The white hoodie sister looks at me through the window as she walks around the table, picking up all the plates and I smile, as if I'm not writing about her sister and her. We could be friends. I'm sure of it.

The white hoodie sister disappears briefly and then returns with a pile of newspapers from inside the coffee house. I imagine they will figure out their weekend activities from the papers while sitting in their craftsman style house on a plush maroon couch. White hoodie sister leans over to rub the dog between its shoulder blades. She drinks from the third liquid amber drink. Both sit on the edge of their seats, feet close together, hands on their laps. But just for a moment. Then they move into different positions, as if it were orchestrated.

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The white hoodie sister leaves and returns with a fourth amber drink, which she gives to the brown hoodie sister. They sip on their respective second amber drinks in silence, and then, as if on cue, they push away from the table and stand. They gather their drinks, their dog, and walk west, the sunlight murmuring spottily through the trees on the threesome and on the weeds billowing around the contorted Indian woman's body. I am indoors, on the other side of the plate glass window, hidden.