

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

Karen Costa

The Saddest Girl

“WAIT. TURN HERE,” Jill said. Sarah turned the car down a side street, lit by only one streetlight. “If I ran I’d just head for where I was going and stay in the dark.” Jill pointed toward the end of the street as Sarah’s beat up Honda crept slowly forward. If Jessi was there, the street hid her secrets, presenting no sign of her.

“I’d head for somebody’s backyard and sit behind a tree for a couple of hours. Wait till everybody stopped looking,” Sarah said. She’d never run away as a teenager but some of these girls, really, they put no thought into it. They’d find them sitting on the front step of the convenience store down the street from the group home, begging people to buy them cigarettes. Then there were the ones that wanted to run but were too scared to go anywhere. They’d walk a block or so and sit down on the sidewalk, crying, like a car might pull up any minute and take them to another life, a life that was better. Course almost anything would be better. Almost any car would do for some of the girls, Sarah thought.

“Head back,” Jill sighed. “Fifteen minutes is plenty. Did our job.”

Sarah gripped the underside of the wheel and turned toward the house. They were only a couple of blocks away, never went much further than that. Caseworkers. Paid ten bucks an hour. Not cops. Plus Sarah was the overnight asleep tonight. The sooner they got back the sooner she could lay down on the ratty couch and attempt to sleep. The house wasn’t full though. They could take ten and they had nine before Jessi ran. Now they were down to eight. Two open beds after they called in Jessi. She’d be lucky to get a few hours before the phone rang. Open beds never stayed open for long. She felt her tired compounded by the knowledge that her fatigue would likely persist unabated.

They walked through the front door, past the common room with its threadbare sofa where a lone DVD case sat open next to the television. *Bring It On*. It was all they had but luckily the girls loved it, at least at first. You could always tell how long they’d been inside by their reaction to that movie. If they squealed with delight, rolled their eyes, or just stared at the walls.

“I’m gonna call David before we switch,” Sarah said, walking around to the furthest desk in the small office and picking up the phone. She tried the landline in their apartment first. It was 10:45 at night, Sarah noted, looking up toward the clock. Her eyes were always on the clocks. Urging them toward the end of a shift, noting what time she handed out meds, wondering what David was up to, where he was. Their answering machine picked up. She hung up quickly before their joint message began to play, before she could hear his laughter. She quickly tried his cell phone, nodding at Marion, the overnight awake, as she walked into the office, dropping her bag on the floor and starting to chat with Jill, getting the informal take on the day before their official rundown began. She could hear Jill start with Jessi’s story. The girls’ days always played out like stories. You could always see foreshadowing in hindsight.

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David's cell phone went to voicemail. It was a Tuesday night. He'd told her he was going to stay in and watch TV. One more try. She called the house again. Still no answer.

Sarah pressed the first two fingers of her right hand to the center of her forehead, slowly wiping them to the left across her eyebrow as she hung up the phone, smiling at Marion. If she could only get some sleep. If David would just pick up.

"You and me tonight huh?" Marion asked. Sarah nodded and forced her mouth upward into a smile. Marion was huge, her hips jutting out from what was just typically overweight above and beneath them to form a wide mass in the middle of her body. The office chair at the opposite desk had two solid wooden arms on each side. Marion lifted it with an arm that was probably almost a normal size, but in comparison to her hips, it looked like a child's arm. She replaced it with a chair kept in the office just for her, a chair with no sides. Sarah looked down at the desk, realizing she'd been staring, and picked up two pens, putting them away in the drawer. She put the phone at a right angle to the large desk calendar where the caseworkers jotted notes or doodled. She saw Marion sit out of the tops of her eyes. She heard her exhale in a whoosh.

"All right let's do this," Marion said.

"You got this Jill?" Sarah asked. "I'll let Marsha get out of here." Sarah pushed up on the desk with both hands, as if she didn't expect her legs to hold her. Jill nodded. Marion and Jill's faces turned to the large dry erase board that hung on one wall. The column to the left was small, only a few inches wide, and listed numbers that corresponded to each girl. One at the top, ten at the bottom. To the right were names, dates of arrivals, and a list of meds. Sarah heard Jill start with Nicole, number one. Nicole had a fine day, which was to say, she didn't cut, get into a fight, or run. She'd bitched and moaned at dinner, complaining about the food like she did every night. She was possible ODD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, which Sarah thought was the biggest bullshit diagnosis she'd ever heard.

The second the Shepard's Pie was put in front of them Nic had started in. "This looks so nasty," at first. Then something in Spanish.

"English Nic, don't start," Sarah'd said.

"Aye, I think you got a problem with Spanish people Sarah. What now we can't even talk?" she'd spit back.

"English." Sarah sat on the bench to the right of the table, pulling absentmindedly at the keys that hung around her neck.

"That ain't even right Nic," Melissa chimed in. "Just because she can't speak Spanish don't mean you shouldn't be able to." Melissa leaned toward the center of the table, craning around the girl sitting next to her so that she could see Sarah's face. "And this food is so nasty. I can't eat this shit with my acid reflux."

The girls reminded Sarah of her grandmother that lived in an old-age home, always talking about their ailments, old beyond their years.

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"Warning one Melissa," Sarah said, wishing she could let some things go, wishing one stupid word didn't have the potential to turn the entire house into chaos, but it did. "Watch your mouth."

"Yeah Melissa, what do you think this is, America?" Nicole said, laughing, but there was also heat behind her words. Sarah wished she could laugh too, because Nicole was right. These girls, they didn't know what they didn't know, but an unformed, nebulous knowledge of the hand they'd been dealt bubbled up from inside them. Did Nicole know ODD was total bullshit? Sarah could never ask, but wanted to. She could write her an anonymous note, put it in her backpack. ODD is just another way of saying you got screwed over in life, she could write. Stop taking your meds.

The pharmacy put the girls' meds in blister packs, specially packaged so you had to pop out one pill at a time. Sarah had asked why when she'd first started working there. You always had to wait longer at the pharmacy for blister packs.

"It makes it harder for them to swallow all the pills at once," Jill had explained.

Sarah walked down the hall and pulled open the heavy door that divided the bedrooms from the rest of the house. Marsha was sitting at the desk with a small reading lamp illuminating the files she was working on, entering notes on each girl. If Sarah had to guess, the most used word in those files was "redirected", as if the girls were cars, boats, vehicles of someone else's needs and desires.

"Go head," Sarah nodded back toward the office. "I'm overnight anyway." She replaced Marsha in the chair.

"Thanks. Files are done. See you tomorrow?" Marsha asked.

"I'm off tomorrow. Probably sleep all day right?"

"Exactly. Night."

"Night."

Sarah considered the possibility, as she sat in the dark hallway where eight teenage girls now slept, that David was sleeping too, and that he had slept through the sound of the phone ringing. It was possible, she thought, and if it was possible she shouldn't jump to conclusions. But it wasn't probable.

"If a man ain't coming home at night it's either drugs or women," Marsha had told her once. "Don't matter either way. If he ain't comin' home you get done."

David must be an overachiever then. For him it was booze, drugs, women, and gambling. But he'd been clean for a week since he backed her car into a fire hydrant, forcing her to lie to her insurance agency because his insurance was fucked from having accidents like that so many times before. He could possibly be home, possibly. She'd sworn to him she'd leave if he didn't get it together, and it didn't make sense that he'd risk that, because he loved her. There was the hospital of course. He could be hurt. But damned if she'd start calling hospitals again.

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She stood up and rubbed her upper arms with her hands, up and down quickly, like she was trying to start a fire to warm herself. She walked down the hallway and paused, listening. Chantal's room was on the end. Poor thing, Sarah thought. Poor Chantal. Sarah's chill deepened as she remembered last week, the fourth of July, when Chantal had waited for her mother. She was still waiting. Chantal wasn't like most of the other girls. Didn't have much of a mouth on her. Within a few days inside she'd proven herself to be strong, smart, an independent thinker, willing to tell the other girls to shut up when necessary. Her only flaw, as far as Sarah could see, was loving a mother that hit her and hated her. That's the best Sarah could tell. That her mom hated her. Because Chantal had looked at that clock all morning, willing it to be 1:00 p.m. when her mom and her aunt were going to pick her up for the barbeque, her mom's first chance to see her in weeks. But she hadn't come. She hadn't called either. Chantal had begged and begged to call her, insisting that if she could just get her on the phone, that everything would be fixed. They'd let her at first, but after the fifth call Sarah'd lost the stomach for it. Right now, in the house, Sarah thought Chantal was the saddest girl.

The call came around midnight, just when Sarah thought she might have dozed off. Marion came to wake her but she was already sitting up on the couch, then into the bathroom to make herself look presentable. No reason to scare the poor girl on her first night. Sarah brushed her teeth, and adjusted her ponytail, smoothing her hair and tucking several loose strands behind her ears. She was twenty-three years old, and even at night, on her fifteenth hour in this place, the glow of youth protected her face from the ravages of stress and fatigue.

Marion opened the door for the social worker. Sarah stood to the back. The girl was wrapped in a white blanket, a bigger version of what Sarah's nephew had been brought home from the hospital in. She was tall, all legs and arms, and she looked down at her feet, covered only in worn pink slippers. There were new bruises. They hadn't taught Sarah what new bruises looked like in college, but she'd learned it well enough since. New bruises were dark at first, like the skin was surprised. Tomorrow they'd be angry. Angry when they realized what had been done to them.

They'd just come from the hospital, the social worker said, pulling Sarah aside into the hallway while Marion sat with the girl, named Idalis. Aunt took a belt to her. Sarah asked why. The social worker didn't answer, just said she'd stay through the intake, which was Sarah's job. She was the lucky one that got to ask every question this girl probably didn't want asked, at midnight no less, only a few hours after her auntie came at her with a belt. She skipped over a bunch, told Idalis they'd finish tomorrow when she'd had some sleep. She noticed Marion's approving nod and the social worker's deep sigh as she said good-bye to the girl. Sarah felt at once far too young to be in charge of the girl and too old to be herself, like her true age was being pulled in both directions like a piece of taffy.

"Bed nine all set?" Sarah asked Marion. Jessi's old bed.

"All set."

At least she'd have her own room. Bed ten was still empty. Sarah led her to the room and handed her some extra pajamas they kept on hand for

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girls that came in with nothing more than blankets wrapped around their shoulders and the clothes they'd been beat up in. Idalis lay down with her back to Sarah and pulled her knees to her chest.

"Marion and I are here if you need us," Sarah said, turning off the light and heading back down the hall to the office. That girl didn't need them. She'd never need them. She needed a car to pull up and take her to her new life. Her better life.

Sarah sat down at the desk across from Marion and pulled out a new file, quickly writing Idalis' name and a few notes. Marion sat across from her, sipping her coffee.

"Doesn't ever get easy, I'll tell you that. I've worked here for eight years and it stays the same. Nothing ever changes for these girls. You'd think something would change in eight years but no. Shit runs downhill right onto them." Marion shook her head. Sarah could feel her eyes on her face but she looked down. She had nothing to say to that. That was not a conversation she wanted to have.

"I'm going to make a quick phone call," Sarah said, lifting the phone to her ear. She decided there'd be no answer as she dialed, thinking that might push some reverse psychology into the universe that would make him be home. Then when there was no answer, when the machine picked up, she took solace in the fact that it was what she'd predicted. She told herself that at least she hadn't hoped for another outcome. She told herself that Idalis was the saddest girl tonight, then Chantal, Nicole, Melissa, maybe Marion.

Sarah returned to the file. "12:45 a.m. Intake. Idalis was quiet and compliant."