

## Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

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**Is It Sirius?**

WHY IS THE FRONT DOOR UNLOCKED? Should I be concerned? I should be concerned, right? Maybe even worried? Who leaves their door unlocked in this day and age, with murderers and rapists and pedophiles lurking around practically every corner? Our neighborhood used to be safe as any other, even safer, but how many break-ins have we had in the past few years? Three? More? Not a good sign if I can't even remember exactly, no?

What's been going on in here? Wasn't the house spic 'n' span when I left? The counters wiped and floors mopped and carpets vacuumed? Yet now there are peanut butter and jelly sandwich crusts on the couch, crumbs on the hand-woven Indian rug, half-empty glasses of Dr. Pepper on the teak wood coffee table, a family heirloom? Why no coasters? The magazines—*Cosmo* and *Vogue*, *National Geographic* and *Sports Illustrated*—were all meticulously stacked and arranged, too, so why are they now strewn across the living room floor? Who tore out all these pages? Why have images been cut out of those torn pages with my good scissors, which are now splayed out on the hardwoods? How many new scratches, chips, and gouges will I be made to suffer?

Why did we agree to take Danielle again?

Well, what else could we do? It's not like Jay's sister Leslie could handle her after Mike took up with that little aerobics instructor from their health club, right? Then Leslie's nervous breakdown and the messy divorce? Is that any kind of environment to raise a child in? And wasn't it Jay's idea? Didn't he say, It will give us a chance to get some experience, just in case?

Only who ever said anything about having kids?

Now where's Jay? Why's he watching the Rangers and Astros in our bedroom? With the volume on low? By himself?

—Jay?

—Mmnnhh?

—Are you awake?

—When?

—When do you think?

—Who's that?

—Remember your wife?

—Mindy?

—Do you have another one?

Why does he squint and shield his eyes? Does he really have to study me for so long, as if maybe he really doesn't remember me or was expecting someone else?

—What's with the yoga mat, Mindy?

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—Didn't I tell you I was going to work out?

—Back already?

Has he really been asleep this whole time?

—What happened in there?

—Where?

—Have you seen the living room?

—Did we have another break-in?

—Maybe a tornado blew through?

—You mean, one named Danielle?

What is that trickling sound? Did Jay leave the water running in the bathroom? Is it the sink? The toilet? The shower? How long has it been since Jay actually bathed?

—Where is she, Jay?

—Who?

—Your niece?

—Oh, her?

—Aren't you supposed to be watching her?

—She needs supervision even while she's asleep?

—Is this nap time?

—Is that not okay?

—Why didn't you say so?

—As long as the masked bandits didn't abduct her in broad daylight on a Saturday afternoon, right?

Shouldn't I check on her anyway? Even though I need a shower and something to eat? What would Leslie think if she knew I was going about my business, sun salutations and loofah exfoliation and mixed greens with toasted walnuts and sundried tomatoes when I don't even know for certain that her daughter is one-hundred percent safe and accounted for, sound asleep on the futon in the guest bedroom?

Didn't we ask Danielle to keep the door open? So why is it closed? And locked? And why doesn't she answer when I knock?

—Sweetie, are you in there? Can you open the door for Aunt Mindy, please?

What was Jay thinking?

—Where is she?

—She's not in her room?

—Would I be asking if she were there?

Why does it take an act of God to rouse a man from his afternoon slumber? And how is it that Jay can use a toothpick to jimmy a lock?

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- Where is she, Jay?
- She was in here last time I checked, okay?
- And when was that?
- How should I know?
- Well, who was supposed to be watching her?

Why isn't she in the bathroom or kitchen? Why can't we find her in the office or dining room? Why isn't Danielle hiding in the master bedroom or bathroom, pantry or linen closet? What if masked bandits really did sneak in and abduct her in broad daylight?

—Do you see what happens, Jay? Why did you have to go and leave the front door unlocked? Why didn't you just put a *Pedophiles Welcome* sign in the front yard?

—Who went out that way, Mindy? Who didn't lock the door behind her?

Oh, why does Jay always have to be right? Doesn't he realize how irritating that is? Anyway, why do I have to carpool with my friend Rachel? Isn't the health club where I take yoga classes close enough to walk to? Wouldn't that give me even more exercise, a half-mile of warm up and cool-down?

- Do you think she would've gone outside, Jay?
- In this heat?
- How far could she have gotten?
- Aren't these the dog days, Mindy? Who in their right mind goes out in this weather if they don't have to?
- Where does that even come from?
- What?
- Dog days?
- Gimme a minute, okay? Well, is it Sirius?
- Is what serious?
- No, Mindy, the Dog Star? Brightest one in Canis Major?
- Is that some kind of constellation?

What are we even talking about? And where is that damn trickling sound coming from?

- Maybe we should've gotten her a puppy, Mindy?
- That's a little out of the blue, isn't it?
- A puppy dog, like she asked for?
- We're just her aunt and uncle, right? Isn't that her parents' job?
- Okay, then, a pool?
- What are you talking about?

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—Why didn't we get her a pool?

—You think we should've dug up the entire backyard and spent thousands of dollars on a pool to keep our six year-old niece happy for a few weeks while her parents get a divorce?

—Months, right? And she's eight, I thought?

—She's your blood relative, right? Shouldn't you know for sure?

—Split the difference then?

—Seven?

—Don't all seven year-olds want a pool, Mindy?

—Why not one of those plastic kiddie pools?

—Wouldn't that be a little trashy?

—Then how about the city pool, Jay? Wouldn't that have been the easiest thing to do?

—It's closed, remember? And they don't have slides, do they?

—Why is Danielle so dead-set on water slides?

—How should I know?

—Maybe it's all those commercials for White Water?

—But there's no way we're taking her there, right? Don't kids sometimes get sucked down to the bottom of the wave pool and drown?

—Or fall off those giant tower platforms?

—Who says we don't have our niecelette's best interests at heart?

—Who says we'd make terrible parents, Jay?

—Let's not get ahead of ourselves, okay?

Why did Jay have to say that? Why can't he for one second consider that we could have kids without forgetting to feed them or losing them when we go to the park? Why haven't we ever been able to have a rational conversation about the subject? After all, we're no more flawed or inept than anyone else, are we? We're no less responsible than most people, including the majority of parents, such as our friends and neighbors and relatives, and perhaps even more so than, say, Jay's sister Leslie and her selfish, dishonest husband Mike, right?

But if that's true, why can't we find Danielle?

—So any ideas, Jay?

—About what?

—Don't you realize we've got a possible crisis on our hands?

—What crisis?

—Why are you turning on the TV?

—Did you catch the score just now before they cut to commercial?

—Have you lost your mind? Isn't our niece missing? Hasn't she pos-

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sibly been abducted by masked bandits in broad daylight, while her lazy, deadbeat uncle was snoozing in front of a stupid baseball game?

—It's just a game, okay?

—Is that what you think this is?

—Have you checked the dirty clothes hamper? Or under all of the beds? Won't she come out before she gets bored or hungry, giggling and smiling and refusing to be tickled?

—Or maybe she's playing in the sprinklers? Ours or someone else's?

—Why not?

No one's kidnapped her, dragging her out by the hair and stuffing her into a Seventies-era van, the old kind with the curtain behind the driver's seat and no rear windows, right?

—But Danielle would have to be with some of the neighborhood kids, since our sprinklers are on a timer, remember?

Where is that trickling sound coming from? Is it getting louder, swelling into a distinctive, yet unidentifiable gurgle?

—Are you hearing this, Jay?

—Hearing what?

Why does he like baseball so much? Isn't it the most tiresome, inane, boring sport ever invented?

—Don't you hear that?

—What? Like running water?

—A trickling or gurgling?

—Maybe Danielle rigged up something with the garden hose?

—Could she do that? She's only six, right?

—Didn't we decide on eight?

—Or seven?

—Can't you just see her hatching some grand plan, Mindy?

—And enlisting the neighborhood kids to help?

—Wouldn't that be just like her?

—But aren't we supposed to keep her inside?

—Are we?

—Isn't that what Leslie said? Murderers and rapists and pedophiles?

—Then Danielle's probably not out there, right?

What harm can it do to take a peek outside? Just to rule out the possibility? Process of elimination, right? Reassure myself Danielle's not running around in the heat of the day?

But what kind of uncle is Jay, muttering something about top of the

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seventh, tied at one, pitchers' duel? Doesn't he even care about what may or may not have happened to Danielle, his only sister's only child?

—Jay? Are you seeing this?

—Seeing what?

—All these kids? Where are they all going?

—I'm watching the game, remember?

—What do you think they're up to?

Doesn't he have anything to say about the hoards of neighborhood kids streaming by our front windows? Heading both directions? Some of them wet, others dry, all of them grinning and laughing, with snaggly smiles and tousled hair? How could the world's most boring sport be more interesting than this?

And couldn't any one of these kids be an abductor in the making? Might they all not have the germ of the criminal sprouting in their little delinquent hearts? What if they're all after Danielle? Maybe they get their kicks by corrupting, abusing, and defiling little girls? Even though some of them, many, maybe even most, are little girls themselves?

Why am I still standing here?

When I finally step outside, why do I use the front door instead of going out the back way? How do I manage to push through that wall of heat and humidity and cross the lawn to the sidewalk, the thrum of lawnmowers filling the stifling afternoon air? How long do I stand there, watching the neighborhood kids push past as if I'm invisible? Can I even remember when I was their age? How I relished those long summer afternoons? How happy I was for summer vacation every year, when I could finally escape those dreadful classrooms and monotone teachers droning on about Santa Anna and the Battle of the Alamo?

Where is all that laughter coming from? And why do I hear so much water?

Why is the garden hose stretched from the front spigot across the lawn and down the driveway? Did Danielle do this? How could she have even managed it? What's with the empty Hefty trash bag boxes littering the driveway? And where did the dogs come from, a yellow lab, a German Shepherd, and some kind of mutt, barking and chasing each other around? Why are all these kids huddled around Jay's new VW bug? Because it's a convertible? With the top dropped?

—Where have you been, Danielle? We've been worried sick about you, okay?

—Want to come swimming, Aunt Mindy?

—What on earth are you doing?

Why are all the kids staring at me with saucer eyes? Why are they frozen in place, a petrified forest of little girls and boys? Why does the garden hose run through the mob of kids into the car?

—The city pool is closed, right?

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—Okay?

—And didn't Uncle Jay say White Water is dangerous and dirty?

—Did he?

—Then you talked about a car-pool, right?

Why is there a time lag before I piece together what she's done? Now why am I laughing uncontrollably? Perhaps even hysterically? Why does it take me a minute to catch my breath before I turn and scurry inside through the back door? Why is Jay still spread-eagled on the couch, beer in hand, eyes glued to the TV?

—Don't you hear what's going on out there, Jay?

—That's why I turned the volume up, right?

—Aren't you even a little curious?

—Should I be?

How could he possibly be excited about this game going into extra innings? Aren't nine of them torture enough for anyone, even the most extreme masochist?

—You like your new car, right?

—Sure, who wouldn't?

—But you *love* your niece, correct?

—Of course, but what's—? Anyway, can't I love them both?

—Not the same way, surely?

—Come on, Mindy, what's this all about? Is it serious?

Why am I nodding and grinning, my body all tingly?

—Aren't these the dog days, Jay?

—Well, isn't that what they're called?

—Then I'd say it's pretty Sirius.