

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/2

Edward Lee
PUSH

Aidan's eyes focus on the dust on the handle of the rocking horse. He quickly looks away, knowing if he concentrates on it too much he will want to wipe it away, but part of her remains there in that dust, as a part of her remains in the bed he sits against, or the stuffed unicorn he holds in his hand, and, especially so, the pyjamas carelessly tossed on the floor in her excitement to get dressed for her cousin who was coming for a play-date, an act of untidiness he would normally give out to her for but hadn't this time, not wanting to spoil her excitement.

He wants to leave the room as it is, as it was when she ran out of it for the last time, and, he too wants to remain where he is, on the floor, finding it difficult to breath. He wants to remain here, frozen as this bedroom is, and never leave or even move again, simply stay sitting here as the world stubbornly keeps turning.

This is the thought, the wishful thought, he has had every day over the past six weeks, and just like all those times, all those moments of sitting in this exact spot, he will breath as deeply as his heavy chest will allow and rise and reinsert himself back into the world, be it to go to work, or attend the grief counselling sessions, or spend time with his wife watching pointless tv, mechanically eat tasteless food, or talk without talking. All the things that make up a life that continues on no matter the circumstances.

Outside he hears a car come to a stop and his heart tightens. Is this them? He looks at his watch. If it is them they are early, and in all the time he has known them, they have never been early, never even managed to be on time.

He hears his heart hammering in his ears, waiting to hear the doorbell, or, more likely, his wife to call up to him to tell him they're here, sitting as she will be in the chair facing the front room's window, the chair she was sitting in when he came upstairs hours ago, the chair she seems to sit in every day. But there is no sound but his heart in his ears, and he squeezes the unicorn in his hand.

Thunder. Her favourite teddy. She slept with it and brought it everywhere, yet, in her excitement at her cousin visiting, she had left it on her bed as she ran out of her room and down the stairs and...

He closes his eyes and feels like vomiting.



Aidan had warned Jessica, his wife, that something like this would happen, that it was almost inevitable. He knew it was unfair to think such things of a five year old, but he couldn't help it, not when faced with what he saw as the repeated and deliberate behaviour of a bully, a thug. They had argued about it more times than he could count. It got to the stage that he couldn't bring it up anymore, because an argument would always follow, each time the words growing more bitter, harsher, as though they were not a loving husband and wife, but instead were newly-made strangers in the throes of a savage divorce, willing to draw blood to get what they deemed theirs.

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He wished he had continued arguing. He wished that he had stood his ground and said enough was enough. He wished that he did not need to wish.

He had tried to monitor it, always making sure there was an adult present when they were together, but sometimes, for whatever reason, though it was usually when he himself was not around, the adult would leave the room for a moment and the boy would hurt his daughter. Her favourite cousin who she adored and always wanted to be with, would inevitable push her to the ground, or pinch her hard enough to bruise, or, on two occasions, catch her fingers in a door.

It was always brushed off by the boy's parents as an accident, the two of them ignoring the fact that it happened so often and only when they were on their own.

If he could have he would have stopped them seeing each other, but that wouldn't be fair, not on his daughter, and not on his wife. It was her nephew, her brother's child, and they were close, closer than any family Aidan had ever known, certainly much closer than he was himself with his family of origin, which in itself was another reason it would be unfair to stop his daughter from seeing her cousin: Jessica's family was his daughter's only extended family, the poison of his own family something Aidan refused to expose his daughter to. Also, she loved her cousin. No matter how much he hurt her, she was always quick to forgive and continue playing with him. She'd always been like that: kind, loving. Owner of a big heart.



Aidan hears another car pull to a stop outside, followed quickly by doors opening and closing. Again his heart hammers, but, again, nothing.

Maybe they're not coming.

He almost smiles then, his face moving in some unfamiliar, almost alien way. Muscle memory attempting to work, yet failing. They will come. They'll be late, yes, but they will come. They don't believe they've done anything wrong, that their son has done something wrong. Something terribly, terribly wrong.

So they will come. He doesn't want them to come, while at the same time he does, because it would break Jessica's heart if they didn't. She misses them. Misses her brother, Michael, and his wife, June, who is almost like a sister to her. She hasn't seen them since the funeral, though they have spoken on the phone, Aidan overhearing one of the conversations which mostly consisted of his mother-in-law's latest hypochondriac-fuelled health issue.

She even misses her nephew, the bully, the thug, because she, like the boy's parents, believe he has done nothing wrong, that it was an accident, that he is only a child and cannot be held accountable for it. She has said as much to him, her eyes unable to meet his, a few days after the funeral. He did not reply, could not, so instead he walked away and brought himself to his sanctuary, his church of grief: his daughter's room.

Aidan doesn't like Michael. Or June. They are too fond of looking

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down their nose at him, his job as a librarian not earning anything close to the salary that Michael earns working in banking. It was even said to Jessica, at the start of their relationship, her brother and mother taking her aside for what could only be called an intervention, that she was slumming it, and when she was done, when she had got whatever it was out of her system, she would return to the man she had been with, had in fact been engaged to, the man she had left to be with Aidan, the man who happened to be Michael's boss.

He had never known an anger like it when she told him this. He had always been someone of an easy temperament, rarely raising his voice, always seeking the words or actions to diffuse any potential argument. But not this time, no. He had shook with rage, and when he spoke, shouted almost, his voice, the words he spat, made him a stranger to himself. They had ended up arguing of course, he and his wife. At first she had tried to defend what had been said, then wished she hadn't said anything, before tearfully saying she would stop talking to them if they didn't accept him, that she loved him and if they couldn't live with that it was their loss. Aidan's anger had dissolved at this, and he told her no, she wouldn't do that, she couldn't. He would learn to live with it, even if they never changed their minds about him, which they never did, their snobbishness and elitism coating every word they ever spoke to them.

And he *had* learned to live with it, spending time with them whenever he had to, pretending not to dislike them, to not know what they thought of him. They had dinner together, either in each other's houses, or in their mother's house, events that occurred at least once a fortnight at the beginning, increasing to every weekend when Jessica and June became pregnant around the same time, the children born within a week of each other.



Sarah. Sarah was her name. He whispered it to himself every morning, every night. His daughter. Six years old. The most beautiful, wonderful, loving, kind girl you could ever meet. Always smiling, always happy, even when sick, even when she had chicken pox and her entire skin itched and her stomach wouldn't hold down anything more than water. When she'd been a baby, people would stop them to say how beautiful she was, and as she got older, she would smile at everyone she passed, sometimes saying hello, and everyone, without fail, would smile back.

Once, just before her fifth birthday, she had seen a homeless man on the street, and though she said nothing, her eyes had lingered on him until the traffic lights turned green and they crossed the road. Later that night, clearly having thought about it all day, she said she wished she could have brought him home so he would have somewhere to live. "I would take his hand and say 'come on'" she had said.

She would have changed the world.



Another car, and he knows it's them, though there is nothing in the sound to differentiate it from any other car. He simply knows, a pain settling itself in his heart that is deeper than the ache that already resides there. In moments the doorbell will sound or Jessica will call him and he

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will have to rise and place *Thunder* on the bed, leave the room, walk down the stairs, smile and say hello to people he doesn't want to smile at, people he doesn't want to say hello to. There they will be, and there will be him, that boy, that bully, that thug, and... and what?

Aidan doesn't allow himself to think about that.

But no, that's not true. He has thought about it. Thought about it every day. Thought about it in great detail. Thought about it until his teeth had cracked and pain has shot from his gums to behind his eyes and back down to his gums again, jagged ice piercing his nerve endings.

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"Dylan, stop!"

Those had been the words they heard as they sat at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, Jessica in deep conversation with June, while he and Michael spoke about sport and politics, both topics seemingly the air that Michael breathed, while neither interested Aidan in the slightest.

"Dylan, stop!"

The two of them had gone upstairs, Sarah wanting to show Dylan some new toy she had just got from her granny. They were only to be up there to get the toy and come straight back down. Aidan had been about to object, or at the very least say he would go up with them, but his wife had looked at him pleadingly, and so he said nothing, instead sitting tight in his chair, waiting for them to return, forcing himself to concentrate on Michael's words and not reveal that he was a heartbeat away from jumping from his chair and storming up the stairs, every single instinct in his body on fire with fear and surety.

"Dylan, stop!"

Aidan was already out of his seat when the sound of her crying out followed, then the heavy thud, loud and sickening. She was at the bottom of the stairs when he got there, lying at a funny angle, her head twisted further than it should be. Unmoving. His body froze and shook at the same time, his wife's screams joining with the roar in his ears.

"Dylan, stop!" The last words his daughter ever spoke.

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"Honey, they're here," Jessica calls up the stairs, her voice sounding as light as air, like the voice of someone else, some stranger untouched by grief.

He opens his eyes and stares at the dust again. He reaches across and with the tip of his finger touches it gently, small grains of it sticking to his skin. He looks at it for a long moment, then makes a fist, trapping the dust against his palm.

He stands up, puts *Thunder* gently on the bed, and walks towards the bedroom door. He stops there, his back to the room.

He hears Jessica open the front door, hears her say hi, her voice nervous, subdued, and he recognises her then, recognises her as the woman he loves.

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He hears the boy say hello, a child's voice full of innocence.

Something like anger expands Aidan's stomach, watery and cold. He feels momentarily dizzy, like he might pass out, but it passes as quickly as it came, and, taking a deep breath that shakes his body, he walks out of the bedroom, a facsimile of a smile arranging itself on his face, the dust from his daughter's room safe in his still clenched fist.