

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

Margaret G. Kiernan
Sandymount Park

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The village park is small and surrounded by mature trees. Heavy with Summer foliage they create a backdrop to the narrow tall houses on the square. A smouldering heat lies heavy, and the promise of a thunderstorm seems imminent.

The brown-haired girl in the blue denim jacket picks up a piece of wood and playfully throws it at the spaniel dog. She scans the houses while she throws and collects with the dog. She focuses on the house with the blue door. Three steps lead up to it. A brass plate shines brightly to the right side of the door. Two gleaming empty milk bottles stand in a neat line.

All is quiet with few people around. It is tea-time or that time before evening activities begin.

The girl takes out her phone and quickly photographs the house. Calling to the dog, she makes her way through the heavy iron gates. She walks quickly and disappears. The number three bus drives past.

Next day, and one hour earlier, she returns to the park. It seems like she is not one to give in easily. Walking slowly, she sits on a park bench and plays with the dog. The Park is busy, but she does not speak to anyone. She is holding herself apart from getting involved. She is busy studying the coming and goings near the house with the blue door. She settles into a corner and takes out an I-pad. It looks like she is not in any rush. The dog senses this and curls up under the seat, while sea gulls fly and squawk overhead. Spits of rain fall to the ground.

A sudden movement rouses the sleeping dog. He whimpers and the girl pats him on the head. She too has become aware of movements. A man in a pink sweater and jeans is standing on the top step at the blue-door house. In his hand he holds a black umbrella. Opening it out, the girl standing beside him steps closer and, they proceed in unison down the steps. Across from the house stands a small green sports-car. They get into the car and drive away. The girl with the dog begins to cry.

2

Eliza Harmon found the morning difficult. It felt to her like she had aged from the previous day. Her joints ached. She had no appetite. Coffee was the only thing she allowed to pass her lips. All the events from the previous day were playing in a loop in her head. Non-stop, and she was frustrated with herself. She hadn't performed at all as she had planned to. She had wanted to say something, shout aloud, chase this girl in her fabulous body-contoured dress, cinched at the waist with a red leather belt. Her doll like appearance helped to make Eliza more furious. Now, the blood pounded in Eliza's head, raced across the pupils of her eyes.

In that moment, Eliza was back to her own unloved image of self, that never-smart enough belief. Jealousy ripped her apart, she wanted not to care. The house was silent, her mother had gone to work. Eliza sat in front of the burning stove. It

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was warm and she was glad her mother had lit it before leaving. She leant into the heat and cupped the mug in both hands. She felt grateful for not having to go into work. She had previously planned the day's leave to go elsewhere. How little had she known, back then?

Recalling yesterday, and how she had watched with fierceness as he held the umbrella over the curly head. Eliza wished with all her heart that she practiced magic. Instead, she shook with rage. There had been hope before finding out the state of things, between herself and Jack, she thought. Last year when she found him kissing a girl from work, he had explained it away.

"We all can be casual enough with affection .It doesn't mean much in itself .Affectionate messing goes on all the time at drama class."he had stated.

Not always easily placated but Eliza had let it go then. Jack was popular. A lad's youth. His dimples and bright smile endeared him to people almost immediately. He told stories against himself. Disparaging his own talent, was how his football coach described him. He really was a collaborator. Jack wasn't averse at all to flirting. He quite liked the fact. His parents had allowed him broad scope in what he did as he grew up. They were professional people in the Arts world. They had four daughters and one son. They were certainly broad minded.

Jack had what amounted to a charmed childhood. His parents travelled for work, so he was in the care of the au-pair. In summer months they all departed to France, to Nice. They rented a large house there each year. The walls were yielding, chipped away in flakes of dust. There was a wobbly dining table where all indoor things happened. Jack's mother threw a large cloth across the table to hide its hacked off bits. When they played scrabble of an evening, the table moved slightly, back, and forth. The first time that Jack kissed a girl, it happened in France. She was English, and she initiated the kiss. Years later, he recounted this to Eliza. Those were his strongest memories of childhood, long warm days in the sun. His summers when all his family were in the one place together.

These past months, Eliza had a sense, things were not adding up. She lacked focus. An instance of this was her refusal to join in a walking group with friends. Her reluctance to accept a work promotion, not a big one but, it would have set her up better for the next step up. She had talked to Jack about this. He sympathized with her excuses for not accepting the offer, but stated she knew what was best for her. She wasn't sure that was the response she wanted. Apathy was her new companion.

Jack was spending more time on his car. It seemed amazing to Eliza the number of hours that a guy could mess with an engine. The endless body works. The hand shining or waxing that a car received. Many times, Eliza had questioned herself about her leisure time. It dawned on her that she may be stuck in a rut. Or was she just imagining that too?

This indecisive train of thinking had been going on for months. Until the day she was sitting in a café in town. She would always remember this day. It was a defining moment for her. In her mind she referred to things as before, and which things were after, this time.

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Her best friend Anna was the messenger of change. She told her she was slipping up quite a bit. Well at first, Eliza was not fully listening to Anna. It was a case of no cigarette smoking indoors, so, Anna felt miffed. She hated having to go onto the street to smoke. Still, Anna went back to her subject. She wasn't letting this one drop. It was time to waken this one up and get her to notice things, thought Anna.

"You, Eliza, have gone to sleep on the job," was how she put it.

"Why, Anna. What am I not doing now?"

Eliza hated confrontations. This was just that. There was no wriggle room. Eliza had been friends with Anna for a long time. Anna Duggan was out-going, but she could be secretive. She did not share her life-story with people, but she had, with Eliza. People said that she was the exact opposite to Eliza in her personality. She was outgoing and confident. An outrageous flirt, she spoke her mind. She lived Southside, in the suburbs.

Her Father was a public servant. Something in a government department, or committee. The family had their own secrets. Her mother, Zita, was dead. She killed herself with sleeping pills, according to the County Coroner. People whispered and said that Anna's father had killed Zita. Said that Joe Duggan had made her life miserable. He didn't love his wife, they said. Anna was quick to defend him. She made attempts to persuade people and present the story she wanted .

However, at the golf club, others told a different story. They knew things. Joe was a member and he liked to hang around the clubhouse. He had romantic interests with women. Rich and isolated women who were lonely. In time, most people just forgot about what really happened to Zita. Life went on.

Anna always said that she, and indeed her family, were reserved people. Eliza usually smiled at that, she thought it sounded like someone was booking a restaurant, or a table, or the best table, by somebody for somebody. The maître d' might have ideas on that. Or saving yourself for others. Eliza found that idea could make her imagination travel. It was one of her quirky responses each time Anna mentioned the reserved word. Anna smoked John Player cigarettes. She smelled of smoke. She loved idle chit-chat.

Working in an insurance office of a large global company, she was never short of news and juicy bits to recount to her friends. Eliza worked in an office not far away. In a museum. It was quiet most days, as she didn't meet visitors to the building. Her office space was overhead. She was part of the staff that oversaw the curating and cataloguing for exhibitions. New pieces arrived inwards, and others shipped out, to exhibitions overseas. It was a job she liked. In time, she could travel for the job. Going to cities across Europe, and museums.

Anna now had things on her mind. She had decided to tell Eliza what she had heard about Jack from her other friend. It was a case of having Eliza to protect, as she saw it. She had made the arrangement on the phone and was meeting Eliza at lunchtime in Stephens Green Park, which they did regularly, anyhow.

Anna told a story that caused Eliza's heart to miss a beat. She only

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heard bits and pieces as her ears were thundering and booming loudly. She saw fleeting glimpses of color as people and children moved around the park.

Something about Jack and a nightclub and a girl with curly hair. The daughter of someone rich or powerful, she said. Well-known. An actor type or such. Anna stated that her friend Tracey from work, whose father drove a taxi, she said he did the run to Sandymount green and the house with the blue door. He had also said, the curly headed woman spoke to Jack in a familiar way, instructing him at one point to not be late calling, she said loudly,

“See you at mine no later than five, on Thursday evening. I’m dying to get things moving. Don’t bring any wine.”

Eliza listened to her friend recounting all this news .

“ Friends were talking,” said Anna.

They would swear it was Jack. Spitting image. They had smooched to the music, let their hair down. There were other big shots of the theatre crowd there too.

“ Loud as hell,” said Anna.

Tracey had said that taxi drivers should draft books. The things they saw and heard could fill a library.

“Don’t you remember last year and that kiss business?” reminded Anna .

Eliza tried her best to keep up with Anna and her tales. However, questions arose in Eliza’s mind. How could anyone be sure it was Jack? It could be anyone. Tracey was one to gossip, Anna had mentioned this multiple times. Eliza didn’t know Tracey at all , but she was in a café at lunchtime months ago, and Anna had pointed her out .

So many questions filtering through her brain, trying to remember the sequence of events. What could she do? She did not want to ring Jack and ask him straight up. He would ask her who said those things. Anna was her friend. She was not going to spill on her.

However, she was desperate to know and to find out if Jack travelled in the taxi that night. She pondered on this deeply. It nagged at her. She just couldn’t put the question out of her mind. She wanted to, if only she had never heard a word of that story, Eliza would have felt happier.

In time, Eliza decided to check things out for herself. She borrowed her neighbors’ dog and walked miles to arrive at the house of her suspected enemy. No point watching Jack’s house, she reasoned. He came and went at leisure and so did his large family. He drove a car, low and green. He had collected her in it. They had driven up into the mountains at week-ends and once, they had camped up there. Just the two of them. That was back then, before Anna had thrown that rock into her still pond .

Now that she had become aware that people were talking, it was up to her to confront Jack, thought Eliza. Have it out with him. She decided that the following week, she would take the number three bus from town, from her work, and wait for Jack to arrive. Thursday, she remembered was

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the day that she had seen him for herself. She wasn't likely to forget. The house and the blue door stayed in her mind. Same day as she had viewed them both leaving the house on the Green.

It seemed the best plan. The decision relaxed her. Anna was not so sure about the plan. Outlining the possibility of him not arriving on the day, and if he did, would there be trouble? Anna believed asking Jack straight up, was the way to resolve the matter. Eliza disagreed. They argued about it. Eliza was more than curious, and she was sticking to her plan.

Jack had a way of talking her down about issues. He wasn't bossy as such but, he liked to wrap things up neatly. Less time spent pondering on the "what ifs."

Cut and dried was more his style. Unless it was in a script. Then he could pursue the debate at length. This was part of his craft, and it was something he liked to do too.

So, Eliza had made up her mind. She was going to have her day out. Remembering a girl with curly hair in junior school and the way she liked to bully her, Eliza decided, there and then she did not like girls with curly hair. She had to face-up to her. For a change, deciding came easily to Eliza. She had grown quite enthusiastic about her intentions. She felt buoyed up and positive.

3

On the bus ride however, Eliza still faulted herself. Feeling like a coward inside, she recalled how their love was un-complicated in the beginning. The interior of the bus window was grimy. She began to poke and rub at the glass. She felt annoyed about grotty buses. She wanted to remove herself, from everything, from thinking about things. The world appeared shabby to her just then. She could feel the wheels beneath the bus riding over the bumps. She began to reminisce in her mind about life with Jack before she had heard what Anna choose to tell her, about the taxi driver's daughter, and her story telling, and indeed what she had witnessed herself that fateful Thursday at the village green. The very reminder made her shiver.

Eliza remembered where and when she first met Jack years previously. It was at a disco. Her cousin Kate was with her. Kate had arrived from London, as she did a couple of times a year, for long weekends. It had been a toss-up wither they would go to Bray or into the city. They settled on Bray. It would be easier to get a taxi home.

Dressed to impress, Eliza was in London gear, borrowed from Kate. The place was full of people, and there was a buzz. Flashing lights bounced off the furniture and the mirrors. The alcohol was flowing. The girls considered starting the night by having cocktails. They chatted to the bartender about his recommendations. He was busy but, he took time to outline a couple of options. He eyed Kate, with interest. She flirted with him. While he mixed and shook the drinks in a shaker, he found out all about Kate. Or at least, what she wanted to share. Eliza watched them and silently wished she could copy Kate and appear confident and wise.

The night had got off to a good start, as shortly after arriving, Kate spotted Jack at the bar. Kate covered her mouth with her hand and shout-

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ed over the music to Eliza, “don’t look now, but see your man at two o’clock?”

Raising her head slowly, Eliza had looked.

He is gorgeous, thought Eliza. She had picked up her bottle and drank a gulp of beer. The bartender had arrived earlier bearing two cool beers, a follow on from the cocktails. Inwardly groaning, Eliza realised that she knew she didn’t stand a chance with the guy at two o’clock. Her cousin would fare better. She leaned forward and said to Kate,

“Go for it, he looks your type too.”

Kate had stood up and walked over to where Jack was standing. Eliza went to the toilet. Later they all sat at a table together drinking. They chatted about everything. They danced, all three of them, multiple times during that night. The DJ put on a slow set and Jack invited Eliza to dance. Kate had looked a little miffed but got over it quickly.

Eliza was feeling awkward and shy. She walked onto the dance floor and faced Jack. He held out his arms and Eliza stepped into the space. It was the start of the romance. On Sunday evening, the following day, they had travelled out to the airport together, and Kate went back to London. Now, those memories seemed like a thousand years ago.



On the number three bus travelling along the riverside at low speed, Eliza remembered the story of her life with Jack. Now she became teary eyed. At heart, the trip to Sandymount was a journey of a lifetime. She had wrangled the time and the hours away from her desk, time owed to her.

“Time off in lieu,” stated her boss.

Eliza believed that she understood herself better when she was with Jack. She had thought he was happy enough. He never said he wasn’t.

As the bus rattled and squealed along, her mind was evaluating everything. Now if she discovered he was cheating; she did not know what she would do. She felt her stomach heave, feelings of despair washed over her. She was struggling to practice deep breathing, but for once, it wasn’t working.

Her mind kept racing. She was trying to imagine how the future would be on her own. Giving up things and old haunts and his friends. She would be at odds with the world, she thought. She could go to London, move there permanently. Live with Kate?

She watched enviously at a young couple on the bus. They cosied in each other, snuggled tightly. Forcefully twisting the rings on her fingers, Eliza broke her nail. Further back on the bus, an elderly woman with purple hair in a bandana, held a ghetto-blaster to her chest and talked into it, while she ate handfuls of crisps. Eliza felt herself slip into a dark space. She began to doubt herself for making the choice to go on this journey. Everything felt shaky, unsure.

The bus sped on, now past the Quays, past the large bottle plant near lines of grey shabby houses. The houses appeared to be reflecting her mood, thought Eliza. The bus cruised onto Sea Road. Smelling the ocean

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as she watched seagulls dipping and diving, Eliza thought she might just stay on the bus. Not get off. But she did not stay on, she alighted in the middle of the village, at the Green.

She had time to wait. The pub on the corner was like a beacon to her. The interior counter tap lights appeared, to call her inside. She felt tempted but she resisted and walked to the far side of the Green, kicking up rustled leaves as she went. Summer heat had dried them out. Cats darted, as she approached. Eliza was figuring out how to conceal herself, while she waited. She had no idea how things would play out. Tragedy or comedy, she had made up her mind to see it through.

A cooling breeze blew in off the Bay. She was wearing a thin sweater with capped sleeves. If only she had a coat, she thought. Four thirty, then five o'clock, time ticked slowly. Then, she saw him. He cruised around the small park, driving slowly. She had to duck under to avoid detection. Parking spaces were scarce. He eventually found a spot and pulled in.

When he stepped out of the car, Eliza realized with a pang, he was wearing her favorite Diesel shirt. She had bought it for him. She began to crumple as she watched him skip up the steps to the blue door. Eliza took out her phone to call Anna. Eliza was feeling dreadful, and her hands shook. Jack was suddenly no longer visible on the steps. Eliza wondered to herself how long would she have to wait. How long should she wait? Anna's phone rang out. No answer.

Eliza began to shake. She reached into her bag, retrieved a perfume bottle, and she sprayed herself. She quickly moved across the road, looking neither left or right.

4

Eliza pressed the bell. She waited, reminded herself to breathe deeply. She was intently focused and tried to hear through the blue door. Traffic moved along the road, creating sound. This annoyed her. She stood there scowling.

She pressed the second time, only kept her finger down for longer. Somewhere from around her toes, her anger was rising. The blood in her ears was making whooshing sounds. The seagulls overhead, were rowdy. The door opened, and a glamorous woman stood there. She was looking at Eliza with what appeared to be, curiosity. She was wearing a kaftan of orange hues, floating and light. She gave off an aura of confidence. She was slim but her presence gave the illusion of filling the doorway. She held a bunch of papers in one hand.

Both women stared at each other. Eliza scowled still further, feeling awkward and furious at the same time. Eliza also noted the woman was not as young as she had thought previously. Inwardly this made her feel better. Just for a moment, she didn't feel so small or inferior. Sly look exchanged between them. For an instant, the woman reminds Eliza of her own mother, only not as old. Finally, the woman in orange at the door spoke,

"Hiya, what's up?" she asked.

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Eliza froze for moments, cleared her throat, and said nothing, as it suddenly felt like her voice was absent. The woman began again,

“Have you the right address? I’m a bit rushed as I’m working right now.”

Eliza met her eye and held its gaze, and asked in a new-found steady pitch,

“What kind of work is that now exactly?”

The woman in the orange kaftan frowned deeply, then she looked up and down the street before answering Eliza. She used her bunched papers to swat her curly hair,

“Now, that’s not a question you ought to ask me. You rang the doorbell. Who are you and what do you want here?”

Eliza had to start again. She felt unwell by now. She gathered herself together, pulled a deep gulp of air into her lungs and began,

“I know my boyfriend is inside. I know it is not his first time here. I saw him myself and others have told me too.”

The girl in the orange kaftan now looked very annoyed. Her eyes flashed dangerously, as if she might do something. She appeared not so lovely as before. Frowning deeply, she asked,

“Who is your boyfriend. Why should he be here? For the love of God, what do you want?”

The end words trailed into a long lamenting sound, spoken loudly. People passing on the footpath began to stare up at the doorway.

Eliza was becoming confused. This whole thing was not going as she had thought it might.

At that moment, Jack came to the door. He had the sleeves of his shirt rolled up and he looked confused.

“Eliza, what are you doing here? I don’t understand. Has something happened to you? You are miles off-course”

“Am I now. It’s me that is confused. I believed us to be a couple with a future. No secrets. I knew you were not as interested in me lately. I’m not a fool you know. I notice Jack when your love is absent. Now I know why. How could you do this to me?”

“Do what, exactly?” He asked.

Jack rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand, frowning deeply.

“Cheating with her.”

Eliza extended her full arm to point a finger at the other woman.

Jack stepped forward, waved his hand from one woman to the other and said tersely,

“Eliza, this is Marianne, my voice coach. I am having lessons from her. I want to expand into other areas for work. She is helping me with that.”

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Eliza began to stammer, then stuttered aloud, " But I saw you last week, you went away together in your car."

Jack began to shake his head, he looked perplexed, even worried

"Did we?"

"Yes, it was raining, you had that large blue rugby umbrella"

"Oh then , silly you. I was giving Marianne a lift to the Theatre, in time for performance practice. It was too wet for her to take the bus."

Eliza felt dumbfounded. One thought after another was fleeting by in her head, she was adding up all the information. Assessing it in her mind for veracity, wondering how much of a fool she had been. She was also wondering about the damage done, because of her confrontation.

Suddenly, she felt weak at the knees. All the fighting spirit left her. Her face was burning. She simply did not know how to end the conversation.

Marianne made the decision for her, she thrust the bunch of papers at Jack stating, "Go home this minute. Make up your mind if you want an appointment next week. Leave the crazy woman at home."

Jack and Eliza walked down the steps together. Bashfully, she looked at Jack. He reached for her and pulled her into a bear hug.

"I never knew you had it in you. How you cared. I am truly bowled-over."

"Are you cross with me at all?" asked Eliza.

"Come on you, we will go into the pub for a pint and a long overdue chat."

Eliza disagreed. She said it had been a long day for her. She would like to go home.

Jack showed surprise but reluctantly agreed. They got into his car and drove away. Marianne watched them go from a window on the first floor.



The café on George's Street was full-up with customers. Lunchtime workers were in a hurry and tourists needed food, it appeared. Eliza poked her way through the throng to the back of the room. Anna was there first. She had secured a small table. Whipping off her coat, Eliza asked if her friend had ordered. Anna replied,

"No, I haven't, I arrived just ahead of you."

"Great," said Eliza and went and grabbed a menu from the counter.

They then hugged each other and began to read the offerings for the days lunch.

They were both reluctant to start talking about the events at the "blue door" house. They knew this was the reason for the lunch get-together. Eliza had phoned Anna the previous evening. First to berate her on not answering her phone that day. It had niggled at Eliza. She wasn't one to bear a grudge, but it somehow rankled with her. Her friend was the one

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person she wanted to rely on that afternoon. Then to discover her missing support, it had left her feeling vulnerable .

It wasn't as if Anna didn't know she was going for the showdown. Eliza felt that Anna was being careless. So here they were to have that promised chat about what had happened. The evening before Eliza had declared herself too tired to talk about any of it, she was heading to bed, saying, "To-morrow, I will tell you all."

So here they were, lunch ordered and, Anna stretched herself into her seat and said,

"Well let's be having you, begin at the beginning, tell me all."

Eliza played with her spoon, eyed her friend with one eye closed, then spoke with a plaintive voice,

"If only it could be at the beginning. I wish with all my heart that I had never gone there," Anna retorted, with an attitude of disbelief, "Why not"?

Eliza pulled and tugged at her jacket, swiped her scarf off the back of her chair and wound it around her neck, and said,

"I made an idiot out of myself. I am so embarrassed about it all. I even send Jack home, I refused to discuss the whole thing, now I am not at all sure about anything."

Taking a long gulp of water, she went on to reveal the events, of her trip on the bus and what happened afterwards. Step by step, she recounted everything to her friend, as they ate. Finally, Eliza stopped talking. The only sounds were from other diners' cutlery on delph and, chatting.

Anna stared long and hard at her friend. Then quietly, she began to speak.

"Where do you go from here, what is next. Have you made up your mind what you want?"

"I have," Anna

"Oh, that was quick. I am curious to hear what you have decided," said Anna.

"I have made up my mind that my lack of trust is in myself. I doubt my own feelings. It isn't fair to transfer that onto Jack. It is time for me to step out and become a fuller version of myself. Indeed, to live my life. I have made up my mind to apply for that job advertised in the Madrid Museum. I am going to spread my wings, become less jealous. I need to be brave and stand up on my own feet."

Anna stared, open-mouthed. She couldn't believe her ears. Finally, she spoke, "What about me, what about Jack? You are making a rushed decision Eliza. Think this through a bit more. Take more time, go away for a weekend at least. You are over-reacting."

"That is where you are wrong Anna. I realize that for the past year I am avoiding having this conversation with myself. I have avoided living my life fully. Now I have made up my mind, I will let Jack know my decision later to- day. Anna, you can come to Madrid to visit, after I have

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settled in. It will be great. So much to see and do. All those street Fiesta's and Flamenco dancing. The night life there will be fabulous too. Now I am so excited to get moving."

With that Eliza stood up, pulling her scarf tighter around her neck. She was now in a rush. She dropped her money for her food onto the table, told her friend she would be in touch later, she was due back to work. Pecking her friend on the cheek, she left.