

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

Robert McCready
The Backfill People

My daughter Rae, when we met in the airport, kept looking over her shoulder, grabbing and twisting her purse strap.

I said, "Did you rob a bank? I've never seen you paranoid before. Don't worry about these airport people. They aren't real, just energy."

Rae said, "There's no way the airport is paying for the technology to give us a more crowded experience."

I said, "O technology! Please. They're here because of our unconscious. We believe people should be here, we usually like having people around, so they're here. But go try to talk to one of them and the illusion falls apart."

Rae said, "Try it out, Mom. Go speak to someone."

I said, "Please use my name. I hate unearned parental titles."

Rae said, "Test your strange hypothesis or stop talking about it. I don't want to think about it once we're in Vancouver because we'll be too busy sightseeing and eating."

I said, "The culture, the culture of Vancouver! What delicacy is it they are known for again? Salmon candy? Let me run over to Chick-Fil-A and bother some moron eating waffle fries. If I want to find a backfill person, I'd rather it be someone I never would speak to in real life."

I went to a lone man, a silver mustache lighting his dark face, in an ivy cap, sitting in a hybrid booth, where one side has booth seating and the other has chairs, you know the type, and he sat on the chairs' side looking forward at nothing but the empty booth. We spoke—backfill person if I ever met one. I tried not to smile as I walked back to Rae.

Rae said, "I couldn't hear word one what you said to each other, but the exchange seemed real enough."

I said, "He serves a purpose, so says you. He's definitely backfill, not in the least real. Couldn't be a real boy if he wished for it. He stopped chewing when I spoke to him and started breathing through his mouth. I saw the food. I wondered what would happen if he choked. Not likely because seeing someone choke in public is not something I need to see in life."

Rae said, "Waiting to hear why you say he's not real."

I said, "I told him that I love flying out of the Charlotte airport and that I always find at least one person to keep on my mind while in the air. Today I was choosing him, and I wished him the best."

Rae said, "No sane person would say that to another person."

I said, "It's a perfectly lovely thing to say. Wouldn't you want to know in a sea of strangers in an unknown land that another soul regarded yours as valuable?"

Rae, as if I weren't in the middle of discussing the results of our experiment, went to the row of white rocking chairs and sat, impertinently.

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

Rae called across the concourse: "Mom."

I didn't look at her because, in my spirit, I knew she thought me to be foolish, and I couldn't look at her knowing how she felt.

Rae said, "Lynne, come sit and tell me what you discovered."

That's what I did.

I said, "He wasn't real."

Rae said, "How do you know?"

I said, "The response was not human."

Rae said, "Could it be that English isn't his first language?"

I said, "I live in Albuquerque. I can go days without seeing another white person. I know when someone doesn't speak English."

Rae said, "I think I hurt your feelings."

I said, "Nonsense."

Rae said, "I don't want you to be upset. We're both here. It's amazing we could both fly in and spend so much time in layover. This is how real families are supposed to be."

I said, "We are a real family."

The windows let in so much light. Outside on the tarmac, men wearing Bose noise-canceling earmuffs drove golf carts pulling trailers of luggage. A pang of sadness filled the moment between us, and I wondered if sadness might fill all the gaps in our relationship.

Rae said, "You know what I mean."

I said, "I hate these windows. Do you hear that music? Follow me."

We walked concourses towards faint piano music until it got loud. There, a lady with long blonde hair, in a tuxedo with no jacket, played Bach. A standing sign read, "Angelle Trosclair."

Rae said, "You're going to make her mess up." I felt her breath on my neck

Angelle didn't mess up. When she finished Prelude in C Major, she asked, "Mother and daughter, I can spot it a mile away, where are you headed?"

I said, "N'Orleans."

Angelle said, "You have got to be pulling my leg. I played in Lafitte's for years and years. Oh, and you know Anne Rice used to live there. I played at one of her parties during Mardi Gras. She threw the best parties. Once in Lafitte's, Kirsten Dunst sat on my bench, and I yelled at her to get off. Later someone said who it was. What was I to do? I might have fallen. Is this your first time?"

I said, "Our first together. She's not a big drinker, but she must have a hurricane. Tell her how good they are."

Angelle said, "It feels so good to be able to walk around with your

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

drink on Bourbon street. You try doing that in Myers Park, here in Charlotte, and you'll see the inside of a police car. It's so dumb really. I've got to play a little background music, but keep talking."

Rae said, "How long have you been playing the piano?"

Angelle said, "About as far back as I can remember. My mother used to clean the church and take me with her because we didn't have daycare back then. I picked it up."

I said, "If I wanted to learn the piano, at my age, what would you suggest I do first?"

Angelle said, "Buy a piano."

I put a dollar in her tip jar. Rae and I walked away feeling happy. She seemed more relaxed.

I said, "See what I mean?"

Rae said, "No."

I said, "She was real. She's not a backfill person, and she believes that she can have something more."

Rae said, "She talked about stuff you like. I can't imagine any musician or artist not being real. They can play and move us the way other people cannot."

I said, "Au contraire, darling. Many artists are backfill people. All Hollywood stars and probably every actor on every stage across America. They're either in character or not. They ignore their fans or sign illegible autographs. People pretending to be people. It's disgusting."

Rae stepped up to the escalator. "Pretending to be people."

I got on behind her. "That's the spirit. Think about the people who zone out waiting in lines at the DMV or any government office, wandering grocery stores, posting on social media, politicians, ambassadors, people of the third world, people on game shows, dull people who quote television and movies in conversation, anyone with tattoos, and everyone stuck in five o'clock traffic, their idling cars filling up our atmosphere with exhaust. Get rid of the backfill and save the planet. They're not anything but energy. You look shocked."

Rae said, "They can't all be fake."

I said, "The backfill people aren't fake, but they aren't real either. They don't have souls. When you talk to them, they look at you like you're crazy because they don't know their next line. Most of them have dull jobs. Backfill people tend to commute from a far away town. They graduated from private schools, so they never know anyone you might know."

Rae said, "Assuming I believe any of this, we must be able to test it."

We stepped off of the escalator. I felt myself getting excited to be telling Rae about the Dolores Cannon theory.

I said, "Backfill people will fill the plane. All of them will have a hard time finding their seats and then getting their luggage into the overhead compartment. By the time we land, and we will land because planes al-

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

ways do—have you ever met the family of a plane crash victim—no one will have learned a thing, but we'll be in India because we want it to be there after the long flight."

Rae said, "Vancouver."

I said, "It could be India if we really wanted it."

Rae said, "The time it would take—"

I said, "—Science already proved time isn't real."

A woman wearing white pants, about Rae's age, walked up and stood near us. I didn't notice anyone else. Other people blurred around the edges, all pulling suitcases behind themselves.

White pants lady said, "I don't know if you remember me, but I think we had the same dance troupe in high school. I took over the lead when you broke your leg."

She said all of this while looking at Rae, but neither Rae nor I had stopped looking at each other.

Rae turned and said, "Zelda, of course I remember you, and your performance." They embraced. "You really came through in a time of need. I want to introduce you to my mother, Lynne."

Zelda said, "I thought your mother had passed away." She held her hand to me as she was saying that line.

I said, "I don't shake hands."

Rae said, "This is my birth mother."

I said to Rae, "I want to know about your dance troupe."

Rae said, "Lynne, there are things you're never going to know about me just as there are things I'm never going to know about you."

I said, "That's what Amy says to Sandy in *Englightened*."

Rae said, "And now I'm saying it to you."

I felt the gulf between my daughter and me.

I said, "I'm going to find a drink."

Walking past bookstores and convenience stores with book stands and newsstands with books, missing the Sandia mountains, their purple magic and splendor, and blinking in tears, I found sanctuary: Jose Cuervo Tequileria.

I sat on a stool by the bar while the bartender, a man wearing a black polo with black Under Armour sleeves extending down his arms, probably covering tattoos, literally dried a glass with a towel. No name tag.

I said, "Really, an idiom?"

He said, "Are you eating or just drinking?"

I said, "Drinking only."

He said, "There's a two-drink maximum unless you're eating."

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

I said, "That's crazy. Who are you to enforce that sort of a thing? A two-drink maximum. Here, I'll have some chips."

He said, "M'am, those are someone else's, and I'd have to charge you either way."

I said, "I see no one in here other than me."

He said, "Gone already."

I said, "Just bring me a margarita."

He brought over a drink and a plastic basket of chips, which I crunched with my mouth wide open. The bartender looked at me and shook his head; then he went back to looking at the touch screen cash register. I watched him. The screen he tapped kept flipping and minimizing. I laughed.

He said, "It's a new program. I'm going to have to call it in."

I said, "My flight doesn't leave for an hour, and I've got plenty of time because my daughter ran into an old friend. She just interrupted us and started talking. Didn't even ask what we were talking about. She was like a robot."

He picked up the cordless phone from a mount and shouted into it. He kept saying, "This new darn system stinks." Touchscreens are intuitive. I might've been able to figure it out for him. Babies can use i-Pads; chimpanzees can use Instagram; but it's not my job to interfere with the backfill.

I turned away. The airport looked like a mall, but the Coach store across from me had no customers in it, only workers looking at their phones. I wondered how it stayed in business and what workers did all day. Ah, backdrop people work in airport retail stores.

I felt like the last woman on planet Earth.

Rae walked up, but I didn't see her because I was spaced out.

Rae said, "Lynne, I looked all over for you."

I said, "I didn't see you come up. Shall we leave or have a drink?"

Rae said, "You were off in la-la land. Do you need money? I don't want to start drinking hours before we're even on the plane."

I said, "My drink will be free. He can't get the machine to work." I looked at Rae and said loud enough for the bartender to hear, "I'm leaving with my daughter. Is it okay if you comp my drink and chips because the register won't work?"

He said, "This stinking thing—sure, go ahead."

I put a couple of dollars on the bar under the stem of my empty glass.

She and I left the restaurant and entered the crowd of travelers pulling their luggage. Rae asked, "How did you know that would happen?"

I said, "He wasn't real. He was a backdrop extra in my own movie, so I decided to really believe in him. I've never done that before. Now, I'm wondering if I am to be generous with the backfill people during my life

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

journey as they serve me on theirs.”

We reached our gate. Some people stood in a line. Others got up from their seats, handling their suitcases. The attendants hadn’t started calling passenger zones for loading.

I said, “I want you to be able to create the life you want. I want to show you how.”

Rae said, “Don’t you think that I know how to create my experience?”

I said, “But are you? You’ve got the husband and the kids and the work parties and 5k fundraisers. I’m saying this for your own good.”

Rae said, “I made decisions because of what I needed at the time. Now, I want something new.”

My body felt loose and open. “I’m listening.”

Rae said, “We aren’t going to Vancouver because of a mother-daughter vacation. Who goes to Vancouver for fun? I’m having an affair, and if I decide to stay, I want you to bring the news to my family.”

I said, “Way to go off script. I was starting to think you weren’t real. You’ll do your thing in Vancouver, and I will do mine. We can come together sporadically throughout the week. This is the sort of relationship I’ve always wanted with you.”

Rae pulled our boarding passes from her purse. “I flew you to Charlotte, but we aren’t going to Vancouver together. I’m sending you to Hawaii. I’m going to Canada alone.”

I reached for my ticket and said, “I feel like I’m supposed to be in Vancouver. You can’t meet this man by yourself. We women have to stick together. Who is he?”

Rae said, “Not now, Lynne. You’ve been cool my whole life. I need you to be cool today. Please stop crying.” She handed me a Kleenex from a small pack in her burgundy Aigner purse.

I dabbed the tissue under my eyes. “I’m grateful just to be a bit player in your life.”

Rae said, “I think of you as more than that.”

I said, “Really? I don’t deserve it.”

Rae said, “You’re the diverging storyline.”

We hugged, and I went to my gate after she was in the air.

I rode one plane to San Francisco, and there, boarded another to Honolulu. On both flights, I reclined as much as I could and tried to imagine the man with the mouthful of food, but I only thought of Rae.