

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

Nina Rubinstein Alonso
Seaweed Dragging Junk

Brian used to run track and sing in the Sancta Maria school choir, but these days he paints green stripes in his gel-spiked brown hair, wears ripped-knee jeans, swirly t-shirts, and plays electric guitar with his band at birthday parties. "Some day we'll hit it big, you'll see," shaking his hands, shimmying narrow hips, then goes to his day job at Gordon's Grocery. Mark, the owner, doesn't care if the guy fancies himself a would-be rock star, as long as he shows up on time.

Fourth of July is Brian's thirty-second birthday, and he's firing up the barbecue while his sons shoot hoops in the back yard. "Nice of the city to throw me a party," about fireworks later that evening. He's in cut-off jeans and a sequined tank top, putting hot dogs, burgers and buns on the grill when he turns to Dan, who's sipping a beer, "Remember that perv priest?"

"O'Malley? In yesterday's paper a kid told his parents and they called the cops. My mom's joined a protest group."

"I mean Quinn when we were maybe ten or eleven, paws all over me after choir. Therapy every week thanks to that bastard, so much for their sacred vows of chastity. Totally blanked until autumn parade last year, cheer leaders whirling batons, the choir from Sancta Maria marching in red robes, when the memory jumped up and bit me. Liam and Sean aren't joining that choir, no one's putting slimy hands on my boys. Wonder who else Quinn grabbed to jerk off. Whoa, burning," pulling buns from the flame.

Dan stands up coughing, turns away, vomits, grabs paper towels from the grill to wipe his mouth, "Sorry, feeling sick."

Brian's wife Maureen leads him to the den couch while Brian hoses down the rose bush, checks the grill didn't get splattered, glad the boys didn't see.

Memories rise like seaweed dragging garbage onto the sand, Quinn telling him to bring hymnals to the office after choir practice, brown eyes behind steel-rimmed glasses, clipped white hair, the stiff pressure of his hands.

Tells no one, goes to school, runs track, but quits church and choir, stays away even after Quinn's transferred to another parish.



Maureen looks in, "Feeling better? I'll toss your shirt in the wash, and here's one of Brian's, no sequins."

In the bathroom he splashes water on his face, pulls on the gray t-shirt, the mirror reflecting the same blue eyes as when he was eleven.

Brian's at the door. "You okay? Come on, man, we're brothers."

"What you said about Quinn."

"Pedophile bastard."

"You protect your boys, but no one protected us. After choir practice, he asked me to carry hymnals and..."

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Liam's galloping upstairs, "Sean's mean, won't give me a turn shooting hoops."

"We'll see about that," Brian says as Liam slides down the bannister, then whispers to Dan, "Tell me later, when we're alone."

Dr. Benedict listens, "Triggered memories?"

"I'd buried it, totally forgot, but couldn't talk to Brian with his wife and kids there."

The doctor points to the paperweight on his desk, a round crystal with feathery greens inside, "Suspended memory, like this?"

"Nothing pretty, more like seaweed dragging garbage junk onto the shore. They're supposed to be so far above us. Couldn't tell anyone, quit church." Dan's wiping his eyes, "The Pope's apologizing about priests abusing tribal kids, but what about the rest of us?"

Mid April there's a protest in Winton Center, people carrying signs: "Protect Innocence," "Violation of Trust." The Gazette publishes photos, "O'Malley Out!"

Dan's jogging again, muscles stiff, hard keeping up with Brian, but after a run they rest on a bench by the river. Brian listens, sighs, "It's about surviving, not blaming ourselves as it's their filthy guilt, not ours."

Ma's sewing a white rose on her green protest hat, squinting through reading glasses. Dan's going to a baseball game with Katie, but is curious whether Ma's group knows about Quinn.

She's twisting thread, trying to get it through the needle, when he says "Brian told me what happened to him, same as O'Malley, but it was Quinn."

"I recall priests being transferred to another parish."

"There are lawsuits, reporters doing research."

"Thirsty, need some water," and he goes to the kitchen, fills her blue mug.

"Here, Ma," but she's sideways in her chair, glasses crooked, needle and thread on the floor with the white rose.

Dials 911, keeps saying, "You'll be okay, Ma," hoping it's true. Calls Katie, "Ma's sick, maybe a stroke, ambulance just arrived, sorry our baseball tickets are going to waste," watches medics wrap her in a blanket, onto a stretcher, out the door.

Katie says, "It's your mom, I'll meet you at the hospital."

Pink roses are blooming by the porch, and Dan considers picking some for Katie and Ma, but too many bees. Frustrated, he gets into his van, hits reverse hard, backs into the wooden fence.

"Shouldn't have said anything, maybe pushed her over the edge, though Ma already knew about O'Malley, and I mentioned Brian, not me. There I go blaming myself again." Gets out of the van, sees the fence cracked and leaning.

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"You okay?" Connie from next door peering around the rose bush.

"Bumped the fence, but Ma's in the hospital, got to go."

Katie finds Dan sitting in the waiting room clutching a magazine he's not reading.

"I remember when dad got sick, but it's your mom, and I'm only..."

Takes her hand, first time he's touched her, "Please stay," and she does.

Weeks later, mom's out of the hospital, slowly getting better. Katie's been making dinners, and they're talking about everything. She's sad listening, but not surprised, as she's heard sickening stories before, has a few of her own.