

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

Ethel Rohan
Parched

We are sitting in the nursing home's day room, Mother skeletal inside her chair in her corner, her filmy eyes vacant, mouth hanging open. I see through the bay window another mother and daughter duo out on the street. The girl, sevenish, is wearing a red sundress and licking an ice-cream cone. The mother is pushing an old-fashioned navy carriage pram with wheels like bicycles. Mother had a similar pram for all six of us, the large model a rarity now. From somewhere close-by, a dog continues to bark, drowning out the TV in the far corner.

The nursing home is warm and cloying as always, the same fake, dry heat of hospitals. Thirsty, my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. The only option is the tap water from the bathroom, the kitchen locked until tea time. I eye the pitcher of water sitting on Mother's table, her white straw inside it. The water warm now, I imagine, mixed with Mother's saliva. I'll get something to drink when I get home.

Outside, the air shimmers naturally, the sun beating down. The mother, daughter, and pram are stopped: some problem. Drowsy, I rouse a little. The child's ice-cream has fallen off her cone and onto the concrete; she's crying. The mother's expression is pinched, her voice climbing. She looks much the same age as Mother did when I was seven. Mother would have scolded me too.

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As if aware of the commotion, that dog barks bigger. I'm considering going outside and offering to buy the girl another ice-cream when one of the caregivers breezes past, her light blue uniform too tight on her hips. We exchange scraps about the weather, how that dog won't shut up. She moves back to us, humming the tune to some song I know but can't quite name. I can't remember the caregiver's name either; there such a high turnover of staff. It comes to me: Maggie.

Maggie nods at Mother and speaks in a bright tone. "She's good today."

I swallow, looking into mother's frozen face, avoiding her fixed eyes.

Maggie hurries off, shouting at another of the residents to sit back down in her chair before she falls.

I watch Mother, no one looking out through her face.

The visiting stylist insists on cutting Mother's hair too tight, and doesn't color it anymore. Always glamorous, Mother would have hated the nun's look. She's so shrunken now even her dentures are too big, and her caved-in mouth hangs constantly, like she's crying out, her crusty tongue white with sores and bearing globs of saliva sticky as glue.

"Would you like an ice-cream?" I ask her.

She stares through me.

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I lean closer, my mouth at her ear. "Mammy? Would you like a nice cold ice-cream?"

She's more scarecrow than real.

My voice climbs. "Answer, can't you? Will I get you an ice-cream?"

I feel a sharp pain, like a screw's entering the side of my brain.

I hold Mother's face between my hands. It's like cupping a skull. "Mammy? I'm going outside to get you an ice-cream, okay?"

Maggie reappears. "Is everything all right?"

I look-up, Maggie blurred. "I want to get Mother an ice-cream, on a cone." I look around at the other residents in their various states of inertia. "I want to get us all an ice-cream."

Maggie cracks a laugh. "That'll cost you."

I feel my face darken; Maggie's smile falls.

"That'd be madness," Maggie continues. "Besides they already had ice-cream after their lunch, and there'll be more this evening after their dinner."

I'm trembling.

"Can I get you a cup of tea?" she asks.

"No, thanks."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, thanks."

I shift on the comfortless chair.

Maggie moves off. "Let me know if you need anything."

That dog still hasn't let up, berserk now. The mother, daughter, and pram have moved-off. Only the ice-cream remains, spreading over the concrete like snow.

I offer Mother water, but she won't drink. I cup my hand under her chin, holding her mouth closed. She looks more comfortable. I sing to her how she likes, embarrassed, my voice low. She yawns suddenly, her body jerking. I continue singing, my voice climbing, trying to be heard over that dog.

Susan in the opposite corner, her nose almost touching her knees from osteoporosis, shouts. "Rise it, girl."

I sing louder, stronger. Some of the other residents join in. That dog quiets at last.

Maggie reappears. My voice drops again.

"We'll never get them to shut up now," she says smiling.

A tear slips from the corner of mother's eye, and travels down the side of her face. It's likely just from the yawn, but it's something, something. I raise my voice again, singing with everything I've got.

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Born and raised in Dublin, Ireland, Ethel Rohan received her MFA in fiction from Mills College, CA. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from over eighty online and print journals, including *elimaë*; PANK; *Wigleaf*; *Storyglossia*; *Monkeybicycle*; *Word Riot*; *mud luscious*; *Staccato Fiction*; and *(So New) Necessary Fiction*. She blogs at www.straight-fromtheheartinmyhip.blogspot.com.