

## Wilderness House Literary Review 15/3

*Niamh Bagnell*

### **Fitzgerald's Park, Sunday Morning**

I buy coffee and a yellow lollipop. We head for the eye-shaped pergola by the river. There's a lean figure inside, an adult with two little ones, he's facing the water. Something familiar in his shape catches me, and then I know it's Steve. He knows I'm here most Sundays – it's a joke we share at the start of each week.

"You'll never guess where I was!"

I almost turn away, but Tom's already making towards them, with his little rain-gear-ed waddle, so I follow him up the ramp.

Steve looks glad to see me. After stilted greetings and trivial talk about the weather he crosses to my side, his very nearness makes me awkward, makes me feel too warm.

"I eh... I thought about not coming," he says thickly, after some silence, "I mean, just waiting and seeing you for the first time on Monday again, after..."

I interrupt saying "You could have waited..." I'm afraid he'll say it out loud. I'm almost on the verge of pretending I don't remember, but then, that's impossible.

The older girl approaches, a pretty one with inquisitive eyes.

"Who're you?" she asks, now my conversation with her Dad has continued beyond the usual pleasantries of park strangers.

"I'm your Daddy's friend, from work."

"Oh... well – I'm Sara and that's Julie..." she says, all business. The younger one looks up with ridiculously big brown eyes through a mass of wild ringlets – she waves a fluffy pink dinosaur at me. Sara continues her announcement "We're gonna swamp this river!" She returns to the game. I watch warily. She leans too far over the railing, and the smallies climb the benches, straining for a better shot at the swollen mass of dark water, firing twigs and pebbles; my little fella with them.

"Look," Steve says, and I notice his eyes are tired and sort of agitated, not their usual cool and laughing blue. "I'm not trying to ambush you," he lowers his voice, speaking urgently "I do care for my wife, it's just, like this is kind of something else." His hands tap quickly on the bench like they do when he's pondering something important in work, when he has just a minute to find some brilliant answer to a problem.

"Maybe we should move on?" I nod towards the playground, Tom won't leave without visiting, so the sooner we go, the sooner we can leave. The sky is heavy over us, threatening to burst.

I've been obsessing too, of course I have. It was my first work night out since joining the team. I felt completely carefree, drunkenly wild, as if I could do anything. But, as I keep telling myself, I shouldn't have. I only know him a few months and there I was, upstairs at Marketing Elaine's

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house-warming, falling into his arms. All he'd had to do was stare at me longingly for the evening, as if seeing me for the first time and couldn't quite get over what he saw.

**W**e'd left, said we'd share a cab, and then he led me through a gate that should've been locked, past the glass-glittered skate-park, over the footbridge and onto the soft grass of the river-bank. We'd sat, giggling and groping like teenagers, getting a rush from kissing and laughing – remembering what it was like to be younger under a clear and starry sky.

We start walking. His little one, Julie grabs Tom's hand to pull him along. They're the same size, but she's faster, and he protests at the speed. She releases him, shrugging. Steve walks close to me. When the older one is far ahead, he speaks again.

"I'm trying to say I have real feelings for you. I don't do this."

"You don't? No." I half laugh, "No-one does until they do."

My mind skips guiltily to James, my husband, who's done nothing much wrong, except think that nothing much could go wrong. He's at home, putting a leisurely roast together, our weekly barter – dinner made, for a few hours peace.

When we arrive at the playground Julie hands Steve her dinosaur and heads for the swings. I follow Tom the other direction, to the sand pit.

**I**'m miserable, I realise. Tired from the whole day yesterday of trying not to catch James' eye, in case he'd somehow know, not even watching the soaps as usual, in case a storyline would make me blush and he'd wonder why.

Tom wants to go under the wooden half-boat and isn't impressed I don't let him. The river has decided to join the playground, seeping up from beneath, flooding the make-believe shipwrecked scene making it perfectly real, deep pools in places. "It's all dirty, darling, ah ah."

"Ah ah duhty" he chants. Sara is above busily pushing sand down the wooden slide towards us and I weakly tell her it would be great if she stopped, then I try to tempt Tom to a discarded coffee-cup sandcastle, he keeps returning to the sand shower.

After a while Julie decides to join us. Her Dad follows, still holding the dinosaur high in one arm, like some men carry a newspaper. He looks completely innocent and unguarded as he follows her – he always seems so open. I'm sad, thinking how his wife must trust him utterly.

"Look, I don't want to make things awkward," he says.

I nod at Sara, who's watching closely from above.

"I'm sick of work talk," I say.

He sees the audience.

"I never enjoyed a project as much" he says trying to catch my eye, but

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I'm watching the kids, blocking Tom from puddles.

"Well, I like the project I have" I say.

"No you don't, you've said the acting partner is hard to work with  
....."

"Don't... please." I think of James doing a separate pot of carrots for Tom, so they're in batons and not cooked with parsnips. Of course - I do give out sometimes, doesn't everyone?

"You're just afraid." He tries again. "We'll figure it out together."

"Look," I say "This project's exciting because it's new. Two years in, it'd be no better than your current."

Julie's curly hair is sand spattered, courtesy of Sara, who at least seems bored by our conversation.

"You're wrong," he quietens. "Before any of this, y'know in the song - 'breathe underwater till the end,' that's what I was like, breathing away underwater, and the other night ... it was like finally coming up for air. I can't go back after that."

**M**aybe he's just enjoying the drama, but he sounds like he believes it, like it's the most important thing to him and he can hardly stand it. There's something about his energy that keeps me listening though I'd like to be able to stop - feels so wrong, even considering this.

I look up from a thicket of thought to find us short one child.

"Where's Sara?"

He looks around, unworried, like a disappearance is part of the routine.

"She'll turn up..." he spots her "Look - she's climbing the wall."

The grips are slippery. She can't get beyond half-way up and trudges back to us frustrated.

"Daddy, we have to go."

"When we're ready" Steve replies, and then to me. "I need an answer."

"We're going too. Tom... five minutes." Tom toddles away, giggling as if running will prolong the fun.

"Well I'm going now" says Sara, stomping towards the playground's edge. He ignores her.

"Whatever this is," he says, "We need to figure out what to do next."

I turn it over in my head and play with it awhile - us continuing this, covertly or maybe even making a life. I see Sara, sulking by the drinking fountain. Julie singing to her dinosaur.

Steve speaks softly "My Dad left us when I was her age, I got over it. Everyone was better off."

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I push away from considering it, struggle against being pulled in. We had a bit of fun. That'll have to be it.

"How can I convince you?"

"Steve," I try to wrench my eyes away, fearing the undertow, the swirling tug of him. I'll have to push to change teams in work at the next chance. "We're friends, we have families.... You better follow her."

He glances up, and Sara begins resolutely towards the museum, having seen him look.

"Don't make me follow you!" he calls, keeping a calm tone despite the boldness. He says to me "Hang on, two minutes, ok?" then follows her.

I stroll behind, with Tom and Julie.

"Thow Thow!" Tom points at the pond as we near it and bends to look for pebbles, Julie gets the gist and picks up a twig.

"Oh alright."

Steve's quietly talking with Sara up the way. I'll take the time to think of something to say, to end it, something convincing, so he really knows it's over.

I walk them down to the pond's edge, alive with Spring, fluffy Moorhen chicks skating weightlessly across lily pads. I squat beside Tom to point out the precious sight. I'm not sure if I said 'look they're walking on water', or if I just thought it, but Julie puts a foot out confidently to stride after them across the pond, dinosaur in hand.

Steve sees the flash of pink splash into the water, and he starts running, shouting that he'll get her, but I'm far nearer.

I sit, shouting at Tom to stay back and I swing both feet into the cold, feeling how deep it is, up to my thigh. She's not far in, she could almost stand up, but instead she floats.

It's eerie how still she is, water curtains her face so that she's magnified, staring up from underneath, terrified mouth open, little bits of green pond stuff floating over her cheeks. It all happens so quickly but feels like forever watching how helpless she is.

I pull her out, her coat makes her heavy but I'm well able. Water spills from her mouth, she gulps air and begins sobbing loudly. She looks tiny, ringlets all flattened. She reaches for her Dad who makes it to us in seconds.

"Thanks" he takes her without looking at me. He tenderly says "Shushh baby, let's get you home to Mama, Mama make it better."

The way he says Mama to her, laden with comfort, almost worship in his voice, causes a pang I shouldn't feel.

Sara offers a hand to help, looking anxious, like she might be blamed for all this. I hand her the soaked dinosaur. Tom watches, entranced, and when I'm fully out, my muddy silt covered runners in view, he points at them saying "Duhty, ah ah."

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Steve looks so protective now, a giant with an inconsolable child, she's buried herself in his chest, arms tight around what she can reach of his neck. His eyes look clearer and calmer than they have all morning, he looks almost normal.

Our eyes meet and we sort of nod an understanding.

"See you at work" he says, nodding once more.

He hurries away, one precious girl in arms, another spinning the fluffy dinosaur dry. A chink of light opens in the sky, far in the distance and I think the day might brighten later. We head for the car – Tom doing the "One, Two, Wee" thing with just me swinging him, and my feet squelching pond water with every step.