Among Wild Things

by John Riley

The man and his daughter sit side by side in the waiting room. It's warm late spring but the daughter wears the beige wool scarf she got for Christmas. She put it on a week ago and refuses to take it off. It's not something she chooses to go without. It took her two hours to explain why.

The father has returned from seeing the doctor. He's been episode free for over a year. The new, expensive pills are working.

It's not me I'm worried about, he said.

She nodded. A tiny woman, near retirement, the doctor was genuinely kind. He once screamed at her to please please stop talking. Words were puffing from her mouth like glittery cotton balls that vanished before he could bat them away. Let me off at the curb, he'd yelled, sitting in her office.

He answered her question. Yes, his daughter had stopped taking her meds.

Someone will be out for her in a few minutes, his doctor said. She shouldn't have to be hospitalized but a few days. You really should be gone before they come. It's best for both of you.

Now he is waiting for them to come get his daughter and while he waits she is telling him about a major revelation that will alter their lives in ways he can't imagine. There is a trace of froth on the corner of her mouth and when she stops to breathe her tongue pushes a circle against the inside of her cheeks. She has been talking for hours. The subject now is love. Before, it was how complexity is a projection of the mind. The world is really very simple. Humans complicate it.

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She's willing to confess she's been selfish in the past. He has to understand she'd been testing his love of her. Now she knows that type of love, the type she had wanted from her father, is essential. It isn't the type of love-talk Jesus throws around in the bedtime stories. She still doesn't understand why my father who is the most intelligent man she has ever known thought she would believe those bullshit stories were true. She knew he didn't believe them himself. But she forgives him for under-estimating her intelligence. He was sick then. Now they can finally see these things together. They can see the forest and the trees at the same time.

This is important stuff, she says. It means a lot to her.

She hopes he's paying attention.

When she was small and couldn't sleep he would carry her outside and walk the perimeter of the backyard of their rented house. Some nights he walked for hours before she fell asleep and became a feathery collection of measurable breaths. He continued walking. If he put her to bed she'd wake up crying. She cried more than most children. That was one of the things people noticed about her. When his legs grew too tired to walk he'd sit in a frayed picnic chair placed in the middle of the yard, well away from the spread of their neighbor's oak. He was afraid the old chair would collapse under their weight, but never thought of replacing it.

She tugs on his sleeve and frowns. He needs to listen. Recently it was discovered that a closer proximity to the soil and long nights filled with meditative wakefulness were necessary for humans to be happy. We were better off as wild things. Before artificial light. She bets he didn't know that.

The doctor's office is down a hallway illuminated by low-wattage bulbs. He hears a door open and muffled voices, and stands up.

Her eyes follow him as he rises. She continues talking. In wild times dreams were part of your day and there was no reason to separate them and can he believe that's what we call a wild state as though we are now superior—

Her face is flushed and lady-like beads of sweat shift up and down on her forehead.

He bends over and kisses the top of her head. She reaches up and squeezes his forearm with her wet hand.

It's the most important thing in the world that he realizes doors are opening faster than she can go through them and he needs to hold on or he won't be able to keep up—

“I do,” he says.

She pauses as he walks across the lobby. He thinks he sees her eyes flinch with a twinge of alarm before she begins talking again.

The doorknob is sweaty.