

Archimede Fusillo

## FEEDING THE DUCKS

Kim pulls Matthew along without regard for his size. Her hand holds him tight and conveys an urgency which, were he older, he might more accurately identify. As it is he stumbles and trips after his sister until finally she stops and turns her attention to him.

"Kim runs too fast," Matthew protests at no-one in particular.

"Matthew's too slow," Kim bites back. Then she is gone, leaving her brother to look after her as she flies at the wind.

"Too fast!" He calls at her back, but Kim seems not to hear and so when the others catch up, Matthew feels obliged to make his displeasure clear to them.

"Kim runs too fast," he sulks fitfully, to which the woman with his father responds with a cackled laugh.

Up ahead where the path along which the four of them have been walking snakes through a cover of shaggy sage bush, Kim pauses long enough to see Ruth throw her head back and laugh at the sky.

Kim screws up her face, pin-pointing her eyes the way she has so often seen her mother do. She feels the muscles around her eyes and cheeks tighten, and imagines herself shitting into Ruth's open mouth from a great height.

When she laughs the sound washes back over the others and Ruth snaps her mouth shut like a trap.

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The playground is in a hollow, so that much of the wind coming off the lake passes overhead through the skeletal limbs of trees sparse with leaf.

Kim kicks high on the swing, her hair flowing in a mad slipstream at her back. Laughter has drained from her eyes and she pushes the limits of safety with almost reckless abandon. At the vortex of her climb she lets go of her hold for a split second, long enough to feel the tempting pull of gravity which threatens to smash her to the ground. And when at the last possible instant she snatches at the chains again, her teeth clutched in solemn relief, Kim wrestles with the thought that perhaps next time she'll allow herself to drop.

What a lesson that would be to them all she thinks, as she pushes against the invisible forces at her back and her hair falls forward to hide the quick scornful glance she casts her brother.

Even as she folds her legs to allow the swing to slow down, Kim knows Ruth has read her mind and manoeuvred in to beguile Matthew.

"Who's the big strong boy, eh," she hears Ruth cry, her arms spread-eagled to catch Matthew as he leaps from the bench towards her, "our Matthew, that's who."

Kim watches Matthew flay at the air, like some newly-hatched bird, his hair a fuzz around his small plump cheeks, and pulls a face she knows from experience unnerves Matthew. But by the time Ruth looks over, Kim is running toward the slide, her heels cutting at the damp shredded bark with a ferocity not lost on either Ruth or Mark.

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It is Ruth who suggests they take turns feeding coins into the coin-operated bar-beque. It was Ruth who suggested they have lunch by the lake. It is Ruth now who holds out the coins for everyone to take.

It is Ruth whose eyes Kim holds longest when she refuses the proffered coin.

"Don't you wanna have a turn, love?", Ruth says too off-handedly so that even Mark has to work to swallow a rebuff.

"Never ever call me that," Kim hisses through lips pulled into a fierce line.

"Kim," her father chides, but it is only half-hearted and its meagre force is spent before the word is formed on his lips.

"We'll let Matt keep the fire burning, won't we, mate?" Ruth says casually, touching Mark lightly on the elbow to stay with him when he moves to follow his daughter.

Flushed with uncertainty, Mark gulps at the air noiselessly before smiling feebly at his son who just then lets fly with one of Ruth's hamburgers at a crow staring at them from a nearby rubbish bin.

"Bird eat," Matthew commands with delight, his voice scaring the scavenger who takes flight in a low sweep which takes it past Kim.

The crow's shadow moulds across Kim's face in a slow-motion parody of mute dance. Kim narrows her eyes and blinks at it, one hand raised instinctively as though in protection. "Kim," her father calls, his feet carrying him the short distance between them quickly, but already Kim has recovered and turned away, climbing the steps to the top of the slide with an ease that sits heavy in her father's heart.

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From her perch atop the slide, Kim can see clear across to the lake, its rippled water green under the low sky. Amongst the bullreeds and rushes, wood-duck, geese and water-fowl float effortlessly. Between them the debris of a late-night drinking binge bobs up and down. In it Kim remembers yet again things she has been trying so hard to suppress: angry voices yelling from behind closed doors, glasses and cutlery toppling from tables and benches, and accusations once only muted, now flung about with a liberty that frightened her even as she sought to hide under the suffocating warmth of her blankets.

Like her then the water birds now dart and weave round the obstacles, only the more reckless or careless colliding with a stray can or up-ended bottle. And like her these latter creatures startle and look about as though there were no escape. Yet when moments later the water about them settles, it is as though time had only just then begun.

In her room, with the final echoes of anger fading to a veiled quiet, Kim too had wished for time to stop. It never did, it merely passed more slowly, agonisingly so during those hours of darkness when the sobbing from her mother's bedroom counted out the night and wished in the dawn.

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"Wanna feed the ducks, Kim?"

Her father stands at the foot of the slide, arms dropped at his sides. When he speaks, his voice is unsettling, and Kim sees behind his eyes the flood of words he leaves unspoken. Out of fear or regret, she doesn't know, yet they are all there, crowded and confused, a torture only thinly veiled by a vague smile.

Feeding the ducks was something of a family ritual: Sundays after Mass, the four of them stopping off at the Hot Bread shop to buy fresh rolls which they would then take great pleasure in tossing a crumbled handful at a time to the expectant birds.



Kim senses the effort her father is making, it ebbs within her until she is almost compelled to accept his offer. But at the point where silence might be taken as compliance, she says simply: "No."

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Ruth knows how to make Matthew laugh. She invents stories and plays simple tricks with matches and a handkerchief which to Matthew appear impossible; magic, pure and simple. She holds his hand as they stroll and lets him toss bits of left-over bread at the ducks and geese who congregate along the track.

Even when Ruth threads one arm protectively through Mark's, Kim sees the calculated care Ruth takes not to alienate Matthew.

Matthew, poor gullible Matthew, Kim thinks without malice, for her brother is only three years old, more than six years her junior. What does he know about the past that could possibly colour the present?

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The length of Kim's strides are measured, keeping her far enough ahead of the others not to actively involve her in their broken attempts at conversation, yet not so far ahead that she can't turn the occasional stare upon her brother.

Matthew's high pitched laugh startles the nesting birds, and Kim can hear Ruth's cackled mirth weave in and out of Matthew's gibberish exclamations. It is then that Kim wishes Matthew would break free and run to her, the two of them daring to ignore the pleas that they return.

Alone, just the two of them, they could run back to their mother, back through the unfamiliar streets which lead to the flat their father shares with Ruth, past it without stopping until they were again standing in the hallway of the house they knew as home.

"Feed the Ducks, Kim," she hears Matthew call at her back, and turns to see Ruth hoist him skyward like some plaything, his face contorted in a confusion of fear and excitement.

Ruth knows how to make Matthew laugh.

Ruth knows how to make their father laugh. Kim has heard his laughter through the paper-thin walls of the flat as she lies feigning sleep beside her brother for whom none of this is out of the ordinary.

Yet it is not the laughter from which she retreats in the close dark, although she shuts her eyes tightly against it until sparks of light explode under her eyelids. It's the tone of her father's voice when he says, in response of Ruth's observation that Matthew is an easier child to be fond of: Kim's not a bad kid, she just finds it hard to show affection. She's like her mother in that way.

Like her mother

Like her mother

... her mother

It was all there in that one comment, the reason behind all the grief and turmoil, the reason for this need now to play-act at being two families sharing one lot of kids.

"Feed the Ducks, Kim," Kim hears her brother call again, and then their father's voice cutting across the chasm between them, "You used to love to feed the ducks, Kim. Show Matt how it's done; be a sport, love."

Kim can see him, her father, standing arms akimbo looking up at her. His shadow is cast long behind him and washes over Matthew who stands with arms flung loosely around Ruth's legs.

Kim swallows hard as her father steps forward, hands open, palms up, his face peeled back to expose the fear — or is it regret, that makes him open, then close his mouth mutely.

"We give ducks bread, Kim?" asks Matthew hopefully, and frowns when Ruth ruffles his hair.

"Kim?" Her father's voice when it comes carries a hint of vulnerability which Kim catches to hold fast forever. In the years ahead it will remain her private victory. She watches as he pats down the hair on the back of his head, a gesture reminiscent of the many pantomimes enacted when he had tried so desperately to explain to her the well-rehearsed but nonetheless feeble excuses for the separation.

Grown apart.

Different goals.

Conflicting priorities.

On and on their list had gone; cannons of despair ringing round the house even as she had gone running and crying from room to room, searching but not finding solace in the warm familiar surrounds of her bedroom.

They were words spoken in a fruitless attempt at salvaging what little familial bonds were left unsevered; words as detached from those who uttered them as Kim now found herself from the man looking up at her with anticipation.

"No ducks for Kim, daddy?" Matthew asks, as he and Ruth draw level with his father again.

"No," the man at the foot of the slide returns. "No ducks for Kim today, maybe next time."

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