

Bloody Mary

Extract from story by Heather Reid

Isolated in goal, whilst his team-mates jostle for the ball, the boy with red hair sticks his hands in his shorts and begins to rummage.

“Hey, Benny-boy, pay some fuckin attention, would yer?” shouts the coach, his jaw popping in its socket as he chews. Reluctantly the boy retrieves his hands and begins to jog between the posts, breathing deeply and knocking his fists together.

Mary is watching from the bench: not the sub’s bench but the bench beside the play park where she’s come to let Finn run off steam. She had hoped there would be other children for him to play with, other mothers to talk to, but the swings are empty, the park deserted. Beside her, the baby is asleep, a parasol angled above the pram as though it might contain some miniature geisha.

It is a warm day, unseasonably so, and, as Finn swings hand over hand from the monkey bars, she imagines his arm stretching in the heat like toffee.

“Mum, look at me!”

“Careful,” she warns, although it’s more of a disclaimer than a genuine plea for safety. A bee hovers near the pram and she waggles the handle to discourage it. The baby’s eyelids flutter and its little mouth pumps rhythmically around a dummy which in reality, slipped out some time ago and is now perched on its chest like a bright, exotic beetle.

A shout goes up from the field and the players slow-motion-jog their way back to the centre, jettisoning a cargo of snot and phlegm as they go. For a moment *everything* seems to Mary to run in slo-mo: the boys jogging, the sweat dripping, the gum-man clapping his hands above his head, the fat guy with the crew cut jabbing his finger in the direction of the other goalie mouthing ‘wanker’ as if trying to dislodge an oatcake stuck to the roof of his mouth. And then someone hits the play button and it all speeds up again, ball to foot to foot to head to chest to “Baz, here, over here.”

“Liam, here mate.”

“Och, ya wanker. See you!”

“Tommo, I’m on it.”

“Tommo! Tommo! Ach, you twat!”

And, from the sideline, “Get the ball, get the ball, get the fuckin ball!”

A boy appears beside the bench and stares unblinkingly in a three-year-old’s way.

“Hello,” says Mary. The boy says nothing; he is wearing a yellow cap and frog-faced sandals. He points mutely at Finn. “That’s Finn,” she says, encouragingly, and the boy runs to join him.

“Careful,” shouts the woman approaching the bench; she is too old to be the boy’s mother and too fat to keep up. She drops onto the seat beside Mary, wheezing heavily. “Yours?” she asks, nodding at Finn.

“That’s right.”

“A lot of work,” she says as though she’s seen his prognosis and it’s poor. She gestures towards the toddler, “He’s my daughter’s. It was girls for me, three of them. I’m not used to boys.” She stares gloomily at the child. “A lot of work.”

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