

If I'd Known You Were Coming

Kate Milliken

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With sensitive, nuanced prose, Milliken engages our empathy for intuitive individuals who are capable of remarkable resilience.

The twelve short stories in Kate Milliken's *If I'd Known You Were Coming* are stark, beautiful, and piercingly true. With a clear, haunting voice, Milliken cuts to the core of characters longing for connections.

In "The Whole World," Bill, a hand model who has built a successful career advertising dish detergents and similar products on TV, attends a pool party to celebrate the sixteenth birthday of a friend's daughter, Caroline. Bill's girlfriend, Roxanne, joins him, but their relationship is waning, and he's not sure why he invited her to this party—Roxanne soon begins flirting with "mothers and fathers alike." As Bill steps away from the group and begins chatting with Caroline near the garage, events unfold that startle everyone, perhaps Bill most of all.

"The Rental" tells the story of another lonely character also confronting difficult truths, though under very different circumstances. Meredith spends most of her days alone, working as a medical clerk from her apartment in "the safest part of the Westside that she could afford." She rarely leaves her apartment, "not so much a matter of the neighborhood, but because when she did leave, something pulled at her like a gauzy netting, keeping her from being fully aware of her surroundings." She is gradually drawn to and makes an intense connection with a neighbor in her building who is mentally challenged. The ending, a harsh confrontation with the man's caretaker, leaves Meredith reeling with the consequences of her choice.

Similarly, in "Inheritance," twenty-three-year-old Drew is "alive, yet haunting" the home his parents left him in rural Maine. Like other characters in this compelling collection, Drew is longing for connection. He puts out an ad for renters. Caroline is the first to respond and Drew—surprised that a girl near his own age responded—is quickly drawn to his new tenant. Anorexic, elusive, and searching for a mother who disappeared years ago, Caroline is even more adrift in the world than Drew is. He observes that the "iridescence beneath her skin made him think of the white wolves that emerged at the wood's edge in late winter, their eyes aglow with hunger." They grow close. Caroline leaves, then returns, only to flee again. This last time Drew "watched her run deeper into the woods ... the pale needle of her body disappearing, never looking back, never doubting that he would follow."

Milliken shapes her stories inventively, often beginning in the middle or the end and then circling back to reveal and build her narratives. Her characters typically lack critical self-awareness, yet with sensitive, nuanced prose, Milliken engages our empathy for these individuals, who are also capable of remarkable resilience and powerful flashes of insight. This accomplished, often dazzling, collection is her debut book of fiction. We hope to hear more of her clear and unflinching voice.

KRISTEN RABE (Fall 2013)

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