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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ SHORT STORIES

This Close

Jessica Francis Kane
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Jessica Francis Kane's second collection of short stories confronts identity, self-perception, and the struggle that besets the soul when we find ourselves lost in our own lives. Kane's characters are not on any grand journey toward enlightenment or seeking epiphany to sort themselves out. Their discomposure is subtler—they are bewildered, aching, and hesitant.

Of the twelve stories, nine have recurring characters. Each tale is rich enough to stand independently; they do not depend on the companion pieces that come before or the ones that follow for effect. Yet, when interwoven, their impact is more poignant.

This is true for the four stories that feature Maryanne, a single mother, and her son, Mike. We're introduced to them in "Lesson," a peculiar 156-word work of flash fiction in which Maryanne insists that 15-year-old Mike perceive her as an effective mother. "First Sale" follows, and here Mike is a five-year-old striving to bond with Maryanne, who's addled by anguish. The two are collecting items from their apartment for a yard sale, Mike is reluctant to part with his possessions; intuitively, he grasps that their removal will change who they are, negating "the time before, when the days were brighter and different and his father was home."

We next encounter Maryanne in "Double Take." Mike is gone from her life, yet when Maryanne is visited by Mike's friend, Ben, who strongly resembles Mike, the physical reminder of her lost son unleashes Maryanne's grip on her sorrow. The final story is "Night Class," another flash fiction piece in which we see Maryanne purposeful, yet affected. She's teaching copyediting, and it suits her. "She liked the chance to revise and perfect. It didn't feel like real life at all."

Three stories feature a long-married couple, John and Elizabeth, and their daughter, Hannah. Without any explanation, Elizabeth takes to her bed one day. Hannah is "baffled" by her mother's withdrawal, and John is willingly impervious. All are hampered by passivity. "Maybe this was their problem," Elizabeth relates in "The Old Beginning," "[t]hey were as aloof as cats. There wasn't a dog among them, not one person who could be sloppy, emotional, unconditionally devoted."

In "The Stand-In," Hannah and John are traveling in Jerusalem. We see Hannah observe John as gregarious and charming. This first-time realization only unsettles Hannah, leaving her with "no greater understanding of anything, of why her mother was as disengaged with the world as her father was engaged, how they tolerated the difference, and what she was supposed to do about it."

Two of the collection's most moving stories are "Evidence of Old Repairs," which tells of a family fractured by infidelity, alcoholism, and a mother's bracing need for understanding; and "Next in Line," in which a mother grieves her toddler's death and obsessively seeks out a certain reminder of "what it was like to be her mother that day."

Not much happens in Kane's assemblage of melancholic, eloquent narratives—and that's a drawback. The characters ruminate and endure, yet they don't budge. Perhaps, though, that's the point. If Kane's title can be freely interpreted, then her characters seem to be "this close" to emerging from their befuddlement.
AMY O'LOUGHLIN (February 26, 2013)

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