
FICTION | FALL 2019

Gentle Breezes

By William Cass

It was a beautiful fall afternoon, unseasonably warm. I sat waiting for my ex-wife on a bench at the entrance to a park: neutral ground. Our severely disabled/medically fragile son was at her house with his home health nurse that day; we shared joint custody and conservatorship of him, and during the twenty years since our divorce, he'd always split time between our houses.

A white SUV slowed to a stop at the curb a few feet away. A young man climbed out of the driver's seat, went to the rear, lifted the frame of a stroller out of the back, and unfolded it carefully into shape. It was so new he had to peel the plastic wrapping off the handle. He wheeled it to the passenger side, opened the back door, and his head disappeared inside for several moments. He emerged cradling a baby's car seat, making cooing sounds to the infant inside. He snapped the seat into the stroller frame as a young woman followed it outside and closed the car door. He checked the locks on the device while she fiddled with its canopy and the blanket inside; she lingered with her head under the canopy, kissing the baby. Finally, she straightened, they smiled at each other, and both blew out long breaths.

The man gripped the handle firmly and she looped a hand under the crook of his arm. They started in my direction. When they came abreast of me, the woman stopped them, took a cell phone out her pocket, and asked me, "Would you mind taking our picture?" Her gaze was full of anxious delight and hope. "It's our first outing with him."

"Of course," I said.

I took the cell phone from her. They retreated a few steps so I could get capture the three of them and grinned broadly, arm in arm. I snapped two shots. After I handed back the phone, I asked, "How old?"

"Three weeks," the man said.

"Congratulations."

They both nodded happily. She re-linked her arm in his, he pivoted the stroller, and I watched them go off up the sidewalk into the park. My ex-wife was approaching on the same sidewalk from the other direction, carrying a file folder. As she was passing them, she saw me and raised a stiff hand in greeting. I did the same. Neither of us smiled. We were meeting to sign a new Advanced Care Directive for our son. His medical condition had been declining steadily for several months. He slept now almost constantly, and for the few hours he was awake each day, his affect was laconic at best; he rarely engaged anymore with others or his environment in any sort of meaningful way. He needed oxygen around the clock, his baseline pulse was gradually decreasing, and his seizures had become more severe. Basically, he was struggling all the time, and what little quality of life he'd had seemed to be dwindling away. After a lot of difficult thought, I'd agreed to her request to change the end-of-life instructions in his directive from Full Treatment to Do Not Resuscitate, or as it was now termed, "Allow Natural Death". My agreement was as reluctant as hers had been to Full Treatment when she'd

left all those years ago. I knew at the time that she had grudgingly signed off just to move things along with our divorce; she and her lover had already purchased a house together.

As she lowered herself onto the bench next to me, I saw the couple stop in front of an old man in a derby cap playing an accordion along the sidewalk's edge, his case open at his feet for donations. The woman bent down in front of the stroller and clapped her hands to the baby while her husband rocked its handle to the melody.

"Well," my ex-wife said. She smoothed the folder in her lap, then passed it over to me. There was a pen clipped to the inside. Her expression held equal parts discomfort and relief. Like my own, her hair at the temples had become tinged with grey. I realized then that the young couple starting back up the sidewalk with their stroller was about the same age we had been when our son was born. The cadence of their steps was as jaunty as the accordion's faint music. Silently, I wished them well. I wished them and their son every good fortune. I wished them only gentle breezes in their sails.

William Cass has had over 190 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as december, Briar Cliff Review, and Zone 3. Recently, he was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at Glimmer Train and Black Hill Press, received a couple of Pushcart nominations, and won writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal. He lives in San Diego, California.

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