

Fiction

Park love

Tina Cartwright

is an author. Her novel *The Krill and the Whale* was longlisted for the 2023 Michael Gifkins Prize.

When I get to the park I spot him sprawled on a rise with his arms flung behind his head. I see the white lip of his stomach where his faded shirt has ridden up. The light shuffles the leaves, picking out patches of gold. On the paths skateboarders, cyclists, small children and dogs play dot to dot. The circle of grass in front of the rotunda bustles with people stuffing rugs and crusts into coolers and ferrying empty bottles to the bins.

I am a solitary figure wandering over the grass. Some people think being solitary is the same as being lonely, but I have often been one and seldom the other. Today I got caught up with a commitment and needed to shift this walk with my friend until late in the afternoon. I am tired and I was hoping he would say "another day". It seems strange he still wants to go. I offered to walk later even though I am exhausted, because I didn't want him to feel unwanted or unappreciated. Is it healthy to always worry for the other? Do I sacrifice myself too often for an imagined other? He might have just asked someone else to walk. I try to imagine how being more direct would change my life.

I cast a shadow over him. His head rises and he manages a lazy smile. You don't look like you're up for a walk, I say. He is enjoying lying in the grass, he says. He pats the space beside him. We chat while watching young fathers chase toddlers who lurch for freedom. Three bikes roll in formation, one large and blue for the father, medium and pink for the mother, and tiny - festooned with rainbow flags - for the child. My friend rolls toward me, a seal sunning on a rock. I do not rest back.

After our usual chat about friends, what we've been doing - writing, abysmal; music, so cool; work, unappreciated - my friend shades his eyes to look at me. I've been on a few dates, he says lightly, in the tone of the wind whisking through leaves. I just don't get it. He tells me of picnics with women, conversations, glasses of bubbles in the sun. He shares the story of the teacher who confessed she'd slept with one of her students. Did she think he'd consider it a conquest? Then there's the story of the woman who pushed him against the mildewed wall in her hallway, her hands eating at his clothing like starving goats. He demonstrates, his fingers becoming biting mouths, and I watch them, afraid he will use them to tickle me. What about you? You're an attractive woman... Why are you single?

I answer, earnest, as is my curse. I am happy in that moment, chipper. The afternoon is beautiful. I am in the park with the green, with people in moments of relaxation, of company. He rests on his elbows, head straight, staring out. Can I ask you something? Um, I say. Have you ever wanted to kiss me?

Have I ever wanted to kiss you? I repeat as though it's an interview question. I take in his wave of sandy cockatoo hair, his rumpled shirt, his air of loneliness. Is there

something I can say to ease it away? I do not want to hurt him. I like him, in that he's a kind and interesting person who does his best. Is there more?

His clear blue eyes concentrate. The air roams around us. I can see into myself. I can look inside the earth. I can separate time into this very millisecond, into before and after. I can sense where the wind will trace a path through the sky.

I've had these conversations before and done them poorly. I would like to offer something. I want to help, and to be honest. Not in a million years. I don't see you like that. If this was a film, a ball would fly between us and I would hand it back to the man who came to retrieve it. We would recognise one another from a book or record store. We would know instantly that we loved each other. But truth is not like that. The truth is this choice, this looking at one another and selecting words. The truth is that life is built of tiny moments, of questions and answers, of offerings and severance.

This man, this friend, is the only person I know who has ever worried I would write about them. Now, he has done something that I will surely write about. What is my obligation here? How can I offer warmth that will never turn to hope?

Dark clouds crowd the sky. The wind flings a chip packet between us, its belly a blinding flash. An empty Carlton Draught stubby rumbles up the path. I fold one leg over the other, feeling the press of fabric along my thigh. Before answering, before inflicting something, the moment is fragmentary and alive.

I tell a long story about when I moved to a town where I knew no one. I was lonely

and reached out to someone who was not, in any way, shape or form suitable. I tell him I have a type. Scrolling through my mind are all my other friends who want to love and be loved in a way that I am not sure is possible. I guess I would like to say something about uncut jigsaw pieces, about rummaging about in one another's lives, about smoothing edges and space. I would like to confess that I think maybe love is like art: exploratory, sincere, slow and evolving, imperfect and so very human. Don't ask me, I might say, flicking my hair over my shoulder. I know nothing at all. ●

The Cryptic

Solution next week

Liam Runnalls

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ACROSS

9. Appropriate dose tonight: a rum cocktail (5,6)
10. Executive chef discarded every second egg (1.1.1)
11. Picture of players' dinner with politician - spicy doughnut (4,5)
12. Healer roamed Iceland's interior (5)
13. Pointlessly chop ponytail for dairy company (7)
15. Trio uncovered treasure box with the most money (7)
17. Maintains innocence of legal nudity - stop ridiculing (6,3,6)
20. Marching radical hid face in embarrassment (7)
21. One French model fired and excused from duty (7)
22. Overly curious about one's ear-piercing (5)
24. Shower head with water I'll spray in fire exit (9)
26. Mick undressed by university medical department (1.1.1)
27. Alternative treatment for a tumbler to cure nut injury (11)

DOWN

1. Reasonably happy groom? (6,2)
2. Every second Algerian abandoned this city (4)
3. Way to reach up to pets coiled by large snake (10)
4. Bring in faceless coward with alternative Christian symbol (6)
5. Dictator's gold bed upset traitor (8)
6. International team dismissed a news piece (4)
7. Perhaps fix a clue about doctor's heartburn (4,6)
8. Feline from British Columbia in watercraft (6)
14. Before automobile debts were risky (10)
16. Prevent tabletop performance? (10)
18. Lennon is sued, surrounding a trivial matter (3-5)
19. Elderly eccentric inserted disc of Swiss entertainer (8)
20. Frank carried out after tinnie (6)
21. Freezing World Cup sides lost and fled to America (6)
23. Listener followed footy final for quite a while (4)
25. Forerunners of Edinburgh marathon unhappily shooed birds (4)

