

Marquette Literary Review

Spring 2012, Issue 4



Photo by Shoshauna Schmidt

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Letter from the Editor

Dear *MLR* Readers:

Before you begin what we hope will be a thoroughly enjoyable literary experience, I wanted to take a few moments to explain what you'll find in this issue of the *Marquette Literary Review*.

While reading through the submissions for this year's issue, Hannah, Bridget, and I found that most of our favorite stories and poems were about growing up, in one way or another. The characters that come alive on these pages all experience some sort of growth or gain some knowledge that essentially alters them, for better or worse.

As a relatively new venture, the *Marquette Literary Review* is still very much a child in its formative years. Feel free to look back at the past issues (available on the English Department website) to observe how the *MLR* has changed and "grown up" over the last four years, and don't forget to return next spring to see how this budding student-run, online literary magazine continues to adapt and grow.

We hope you enjoy these creative pieces. We certainly did.

Best,
Sara Patek
General Editor, Issue 4



Ring of Fire

Tierney Acott

My childhood was consumed by fire. Not in the sense that makes fancy women at dinner parties clasp their porcelain, beautifully manicured hands to their mouths, but in the sense that there was always a fire burning. At birthdays I don't think of only the thoughtful presents I received, but the growing number of flames placed in front of my face – the wick becoming blue, orange, then white. I cannot even recall the first time I ever lit a match, flicked a Zippo, burned a finger on a Bic, or anything.

Rather the first memory is of observation. I was little, not sure how young, sitting on Daddy's lap on the back of our wrap-around porch. Daddy always said our house had been built by some reverse carpetbagging pansy who thought he could recreate the same South that the good-for-nothing coward left. My older brother Michael, after the archangel in order to protect the four younger ones, played at Daddy's feet. Daddy sat in a rocking chair, and with a rumble beginning in his chest, Daddy sang bass like Johnny Cash, and lit a cigar with a Diamond Strike Anywhere match. He flicked the little wooden stick's red dipped sulfur head against the armrest at my feet, and immediately a flame burst from it. Fearlessly he moved the flame to his face and placed it against the tip of the brown cigar, and magically smoke billowed from his puffing cheeks. I watched, my big eyes refusing to blink despite the smoke around my face. I could hear the tobacco faintly crackle under the heat and Daddy pushed up his ten gallon straw hat, as it was summer and such day activities are no place for a fancy felt hat.

Daddy was a Texas man. His birth name was Clyde Wayne McMullen and his namesakes, Clyde Chestnut Barrow and John Wayne respectively, taught him not to give a damn at an early age. A trait I'm afraid may have lasted until he finally met my mother, and now resides in me. Mama was born Elizabeth, but everyone calls her Lulu, not to be confused with my own name, Lucy. Mama was born, bred, and raised in Chicago and is a Northern Yankee through and through, as Daddy says it. I guess that makes me one too, as I've been born, bred, and raised in Chicago.

I did notice the disregard in Daddy's voice when he talked of the stuck up Yankees around us, so I did the best I could to raise hell. It wasn't a terribly difficult task living in the affluent suburb that we did, the difficulty lay in avoiding the strong hand of the law, or worse, Mama and Daddy's who could give you an ass whupping that'll leave you squirming in your school seat for days. But I'd say my reckless behavior started before even school days.

If I could pinpoint an exact time, I'd say it was when Uncle Billy came to live with us. Billy was Daddy's brother-in-law. Billy's wife, my Aunt Barb, died

when we were real little and before she could bear any children. And Billy's kin wasn't too keen on the fact that he left the reservation to marry her, so he felt a bit odd about going back. And that was that.

So Billy moved in around the age that I was learning to work my way around Daddy's matchsticks, even practice smoking an occasional discarded cigarette when no one was looking. Billy took to calling me Bodaway, which means, "fire maker" in Cherokee, more often than he did to calling me Lucy. Which was fine by me because he hasn't never called any of my three brothers and comrades in arms any Cherokee names, let alone about fire. I remember one time my brothers and I painted our hounds, Bubba and Scout, and rode them bareback like Indians and Billy braided my hair like his.

Once Billy moved in, Michael, Sebastian, Jude - my brothers after the famous martyred saints - and I began living the most coveted childhood. We had a cowboy and an Indian living under one roof with a wrap-around porch. And other mamas and daddies didn't mind sending their kids over on account of Mama being a nurse. Only thing is I don't think they realized that she worked the night shift for at least a decade. So for at least a decade, the neighborhood kids would congregate around on our porch until we were ready to come out and play and Mama wouldn't see us until dinnertime due to her nocturnal sleeping.

If it was summertime, Uncle Billy would babysit while Daddy worked and Mama slept. Billy was a history teacher at the high school. He liked to tell me that he taught more than the white man's history. I always high-fived him because we were together in that neither of us could ever be a white man. I told my friend Frankie, while we were eating popsicles on our front steps, that his skin was like mine, except he had more freckles, so many that it covered everything. Sometimes instead of calling him Frankie, I'd call him Freckie. Billy later informed me that he wasn't white like me, but when I contested, Billy said I've got some sprinkling of color on account of my freckles.

But I always said Michael, Sebastian, and Jude had some explaining to do in the white man department, but Billy said it wasn't such a big deal as long as they didn't ever try to better anyone else because of it. I let them slide a couple of times when they'd tease the neighborhood boys for being jerks or pansies, like if they pushed me for taking my shirt off when building a fort in the middle of summer's heat, or the times when some of them wouldn't ride a bike on fire.

I did it. I've done it a bunch of times. We'd develop a system. When we'd notice Billy's stash of cigarettes was getting low, we'd congregate in the front yard. And as if he knew we were fixing to create mischief, Billy would get in his dusty red truck within fifteen minutes. Then I would run in the back door, down to the basement with its cement cooling my bare feet, and grab a rag before the screen door thwacked behind me. Then Michael, Sebastian, Jude, and any other kid who had the balls to do it would grab their bikes, which were littered about the property to line up.

Crawling under the porch, I'd lay my back to grab the wire hanger I lifted off the Jackson's dry cleaning delivery ages ago. Michael would watch the front screen door for any sign of Mama, and I'd attach the rag to the hook I had twisted at the end, and I'd run to Mama's van. Grinning at my comrades, I'd unscrew the

cap to the gas tank and dip the rag. When it was good and soaked, I'd nod at Jude to bring over the baseball bin's designated top that Daddy was always complaining smelled like gas. I'd pull out the rag using the hanger, while Jude held the bin underneath to protect drippings on the cement driveway, and we'd run over to the first in line. The bin was a necessary precaution for Mama's sake because I knew she worked hard and I didn't want to blow her car up. And one time I felt real bad when we went buck wild on the bikes and ate up the last quarter tank so she nearly missed work. I learned gas and aerosols were flammable on a camping trip with Daddy and my brothers when I missed my leg and sprayed bug spray into the fire, creating a makeshift flamethrower. I used up the rest of the bug spray and it was only the second day of the trip.

Jude and I would then lather up the bike tires in gasoline. Using one of Daddy's strike anywhere matches, I'd flick the driveway and ignite the tires, watching with awe as the light spread with such speed, yelling *Ride!* as loud as I could. No one was ever hurt by such a game on account of the fact that the creek yonder was just far enough that only the gas burned before the bike went swimming. Despite teaching myself to talk like news anchors on television, all my friends still say I pronounce "creek" like a hick. Us McMullens did all we could to sound like Northerners at school because in kindergarten when I said my favorite food was "Ain't nothing that's green!" Sister Kennedy kindly asked, "So you do not like vegetables?" And that's when I realized the green things that I did not like were called vegetables. Well, and that I sound like an ignorant fool talking like a Texan in Chicago.

The only time the fire ever burned my tires was the very last time I did it. I rode up our street laughing, hollering, and raising Cain with Lord knows what kind of obscenities for an eleven year old, with two flaming tires heating my legs more than the furious pumping they were doing to get to the creek in my blaze of glory.

I looked up to see Billy driving towards me; he got out of the car in the middle of the road. I leapt off of my flaming bike and ran, Billy screaming *Bodaway, I'm gonna tan your hide!* behind me until he tackled me and dragged me home by my dirt covered Espirit tank top. Mama and Daddy didn't take too kindly to the lump of hot mud, sweat, and gasoline setting on their front porch with the ruined bike splayed across the driveway like a body at an autopsy.

I considered "creating a fire" a hobby for a large portion of my life. I created fire in form of laboring over a campfire with the flint and steel Daddy gave me for my May birthday and some freshly collected tinder I'd gathered on my hands and knees in the woods, with the ground seeping and staining the crevices in my knees. Or by grabbing Sebastian and a magnifying glass to burn fall leaves using the after school sunlight, even if the smell was awful. Or that one time I lit a firework in my bedroom to see how long the wick burned, and it exploded with the power and awe of a grenade. Or when Mama's granddaddy took me and my brothers to his farm and burned the wood rotten from winter, and I watched in awe as flames bigger than me and Great Granddaddy leapt into the sky through the afternoon and warmed us at night while we danced along to a

rain dance Billy had taught us, but never worked – I reckon because we weren't true Cherokees. I could, and would, create fire in all seasons, in any condition.

It was a year or so before the *Challenger* tragedy that I became obsessed with the fire of rockets, be they model or bottle. I built model rockets through the winter. I even, God forgive me, lied to Daddy about how many rockets I'd built so that he'd buy me more fuel. Come first real thaw, I'd head out to the schoolyard baseball diamonds with Sebastian, Jude, and Michael to launch rocket after rocket, violating the personnel distance codes set up beforehand by Mama, Daddy, and Billy. I'd be so close I was practically releasing the rocket into the atmosphere with my own hand like a trapped dove of the The Holy Ghost in a religious education poster. Once I strapped three fuel cylinders onto one rocket and it exploded and incinerated the sleeve of my Lynyrd Skynyrd long sleeve tee Daddy gave me. It was the only time I was forced to stop, drop, and roll.

A couple of times we also stole my little sister's Barbies. And yes, I do have a sister. She was just more into the whole indoors thing and was the little girl Mama always wanted – playing tea with her stuffed animals, wearing dresses, and coloring in the lines. She's named after Mama's grandmamma Maggie Shea, who raised Mama on account of her Ma and Pa dying, of the cancer and cigarettes respectively, at a young age. Shea was Mama's baby for that very reason.

But I ran out of our shared room with her big haired rock star Barbie because of the fact that her hair was most likely to ignite the fastest. I then taped her to a small rocket, attached five fuel cylinders, and set her on the launch pad. Sebastian and Jude had done likewise with an old toy car, gluing in plastic army figures as passengers. I lit both missiles while Jude and Sebastian stepped back and watched. Both rockets exploded on the pad, ruining my Goonies T-shirt and spraying soot all over Sloth's face. We gathered the remnants of the car and used the lump of metal and plastic as a makeshift soccer ball, running up and down the field until dark when, against my later discretion, I let Jude put the melted Barbie, which now looked like she had scarcely survived Hiroshima, back with Shea's Barbie's. And sure enough, after Daddy gave me the hickory switch, I ran after Jude screaming that he better hope and be praying to St. Jude because he's gonna be in a desperate case when I get through with him as I was sure as hell gonna lay a hurting.



JUST IMAGININGS

Jamie Collins

The fading sunlight streaking across the snow
Is all the invitation they require
To wake and softly rise from scheming slumber.
When they land upon my creaking floor
They cackle, grinning as they shut the door.

When starlight in its chilly splendor falls
They peel up from the paintings and the pages.
Prancing sprites around my sleeping form,
They tug my still-damp hair with fingers thin,
Testing my head for ways to slip within.

They whisper to each other and to me
Of lies, tall tales, exaggerated truths
And wishes none of us could hope to grant.
I test a tongue that will not let me call
To stop this nonsense, or amplify it all.

Although they wreak their mischief and their tricks
And leach the very blood out from my brain,
I bear them no ill will for their unrest:
My brush and pen condemned them to their place
And gave them the desire to escape.

You asked me once to explain my rusting gears,
My melting masks, my ink and inked-out thoughts.
But how could I expect that you might hear
The thundering hooves that stumble through my plains,
Charging free without riders or reins?

If ever one should ask me that again,
I'll boldly lie without a second thought.
For how might I imagine mysteries
That twist their thoughts? And mine would only join!
I could not bear give up my precious noise!

The night returns; they slip down from their shelves.
Say your goodbyes and catch me while you can,

For now their dreaming ship draws up to shore.
A hand extends; I, reckless, grasp it tight
And let myself be sailed out of sight.

I'll watch you from the shimmering, tilted sea,
As the withering, wilted world sets me free.



Mariah

Chris Morales

Pull me into your
cocoa isle. Move me

like you move
the *carne*

in Abuela's stew.
Swing your red

dress, strip your salty
feet, burrow your

toes into cinnamon
sand. When you sway,

recite my last
name, *Morales*,

to your rose throat
parrot. Your wine-breath

parents meet me. Whistle
brown is beautiful.

Brown. Beautiful.



All of this would stop

Amelia Milota

All of this would stop:

five o'clock church bells

simmering pots A.M. radio
in streets sipping cups
pushing reason
impure thoughts.

Stray Tuesdays:

gather on porch steps
and try to be duplicated.

borrow tennis shoes.

look for next
best thing and later,
feed chickens
an index finger.

drink and ride bulls.

Lights

would be harnessed—
all of it would.





Jack, Avourneen

Daniel Bryne

Papa sat in his armchair,
a seven-and-seven in his hand,
a Formaldehyde frown on his face.

Johnnie told ma it was weird.
“It’s not the 19th century,
and the Dubliners aren’t singing

so he’s not gonna wake up.
At least put him in a coffin,
for Christ’s sake.”

She knew.
But she respected papa’s wishes-
to the death.

So now droves
of Byrnes, Kellys,
Goonans and Barrys
crowd the apartment on Aberdeen.

Some of the old-timers
stand over him and admire
the job the Funeral Home’s done.

“Your ma must’ve gone to McKeon’s,
he looks 35 again”
chuckles Uncle Kevin.

Open hearts and open bottles
lead to the light mood.
The laughter stands outside
a ten foot radius of ma.

Inside the circle
people share condolences.
I think ma wishes they would laugh.

Uncle Terry sticks a cigar
in pop's mouth.
"Only the best for you, Jack,
Cubans."

I wonder what papa'd think of this wake.
He always did like them.
Obits, too -
Irish Sports Pages.

I consider his face.
Ridiculous, unwrinkled with a cigar
Hanging near his chin.
Something's different -
is that a smile?



This is a stickup

Chris Morales

I can smell you on the ticket;
reminds me of the movies.
Popcorn and leather,
claw cranes and quarters.

Your red velvet ropes
on a cigarette. Shotgun
smoke me like
spaghetti Westerns.

All the cowboys
close their eyes and
all the *Bellisimas* want you
to do their makeup.

Brunette bullet go
bang-bang-bang.
When's the train gonna take
my body to Milwaukee?



952

Erin Kelly

The newspaper ad said white but it isn't white. Not snow, paper, or eggshell. It isn't even a shade of ivory, it's just plain dirty. The gutter is nonexistent so when it rains it actually does pour, drenching anyone unlucky enough to be walking in front of the house. All six girls living inside wish they could say the interior is more appealing, more habitable than the dumpster in the backyard but that would be a blatant lie.

The hallway leading into the front room would look familiar to anyone who has watched an episode of *Hoarders* on A&E. The floor is covered with shoes, 28 pairs to be exact. The coat rack on the left wall holds four items: a Dalmatian pattern fur coat, a green rain jacket, an electric orange construction vest with neon yellow reflectors, and a child size Eeyore costume. Contrary to popular belief, the mess is not the first thing people notice when entering this poor excuse for a home. When a visitor steps inside the doorway of 952 N. 16th street, he or she is greeted by Michael Jordan's piercing brown eyes and Bugs Bunny's buck-tooth smile. That's right folks, an enormous poster of the 1996 Warner Brother's classic *Space Jam* covers the wall directly across from the door. The strategic placement of the poster is in no way coincidental. It was never meant to serve as a distraction for the mess; it was simply put there because when the door opens sunlight shines like a spotlight on Jordan's pearly whites.

The living room in this house isn't so much a living area as it is an oxymoron. Six girls live in this four bedroom house which means 12 parents have verbalized their concern with, "the way things are." On a good day, the living room is clean-ish, with only a couple of dishes scattered around the room and books thrown about as if a back pack exploded the minute it made contact with the floor. This, however, is not a good day. Today is Monday which means the floors are littered with remnants from the weekend. A can opener, two Frisbees, and a life-size cutout of Joe Biden sit inside a wheelbarrow on top of a small green couch. An empty case of PBR hangs from the hook on the ceiling. The tallest in the house stands at 5 feet, 5 inches tall, leaving everyone wondering how on earth the case made it on to that hook. An aggressive dance party on Friday broke the drapes which now dangle limply over the couch creating an unfortunate glare on the television, making the re-run of *Law & Order SVU* nearly impossible to see. The light brown carpet is no longer light brown. It is now a polluted ash color making every inhabitant of this house terrified to walk around barefoot.

To say the house is never clean would be unfair. It is, sometimes. The

problem is these girls are hoarders. How six people can accumulate so much pointless shit is incomprehensible. In one corner is a white cardboard box with little black dots scattered in no apparent order; it represents one roommate's unwillingness to part with the dice she made for her Halloween costume. A picture of two bunnies in a bath with the words "Come on in, it's happy hour," hangs on the far left wall. This was purchased by the roommate who couldn't "pass up a good pun," only to realize later that there was no pun involved in the actual picture. In one corner is another roommate's tribute to the 1980's. Disney classics on VHS are neatly stacked on a set of vintage Zenith speakers. The speakers, named Zenith, the real Princess Warrior, are the only working set in the house. However, due to the psychological state of the girls living in this house and their inability to throw things away, they still have three other sets of speakers. The broken speakers are not, as worried friends and family so lovingly call them, "useless" or "garbage." They now serve as coffee tables littered with ungodly expensive textbooks, coupons for Pick N'Save, and dishes that haven't made it to the sink. Naming inanimate objects seems to be a reoccurring theme in this house. One speaker is called "Super Bass," because it was blown out blasting the song "Super Bass" by Nicki Minaj. Turns out, those speakers were not so super. The last coupling of speakers is named after the brilliant duo of the song "You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling," which naturally, was the song playing when both these speakers broke. "Righteous" and "Brothers," according to the girls of 952, lived a short, but happy life.

Each wall has a theme. The first wall a visitor sees when entering the living area is adorned with prestigious certificates awarded to each roommate, all created, signed, and authorized by another roommate. One lucky lady defeated Abraham Lincoln for "Most Patriotic." Another roommate, after a valiant attempt at dunking on a Fisher Price basketball hoop, won Honorable Mention for Most Athletic, Michael Jordan obviously took first. One roommate's boyfriend was awarded "Best at Crying About It," while "Most Babies" placed second. The wall facing east is the Marquette wall. This wall consists of one MU basketball poster. The roommate able to name a total of three players on the team wins. What that individual wins has yet to be decided. Possible prizes are a shot glass, knowledge, a crazy straw, or the honor of ripping the poster off the wall and throwing it in the garbage.

Surprisingly, the house doesn't smell all that bad. Someone is bound to be cooking something at some point in the day. That sentence could not be vaguer but with six different school and work schedules, it's hard to keep up with everyone's personal agenda. The house is never empty though and if someone is home, there is a 99.9% chance they are eating. The Susie homemaker of the house has taken up baking. Blueberry muffins, waffles, biscuits, and dumplings all have the same distinct smell of Bisquick because all the recipes stem from the back of that box. Tonight, she bakes brownies and the heavenly milk chocolate scent makes all the other roommates mouths water. One roommate emerges from her bedroom, wearing sweats and a navy blue hoodie. "Who's making

donuts?” she asks, sniffing the air around her as if looking for clues. In walks another roommate from her night class, cursing the cold bitter air outside. She complains about the way her teacher says the word “huge,” and heads for the kitchen. The other roommates filter into the room randomly with their laptops, and sit wrapped in blankets on the couch. Susie Homemaker appears holding a tray of brownies, places them on the ugliest, paisley patterned ottoman ever produced by Target, and watches her four roommates lunge for the baked goods.

Relaxing is at the top of the list tonight. Five out of the six sit in silence, too busy rejoicing in the chocolaty goodness to carry on a conversation. Then, with a single sniff, one roommate’s nose wrinkles and her reaction sets off a domino effect amongst the others. The smell of burnt popcorn lingers in the air. “I don’t think I put enough oil in the pot,” says the voice from the kitchen. Soon the room fills with a hazy smoke. It occurs to the others to open some windows which is probably the best idea considering three of the smoke detectors lay on the floor under the coffee table. They were ripped from the ceiling earlier in the semester to ensure they wouldn’t go off during a game the roommates created that involves a keg, paper, fire, and various kitchen appliances called Fire Ball.

Once the smoke clears, the six girls return to the living room with the intention of helping the dedicated detectives in New York City investigate vicious felonies and pretend they are all members of the elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit. There’s just one problem. The Wii remote is nowhere to be seen and as much as these girls have come to love their shitty, shitty house, only God knows what’s under those couch cushions and not one of them is willing to find out.





Synonymous

Amelia Milota

Three tubes
of toothpaste ago
the wood floors
in my hallway
were not mine

and I'd only
just considered
what it meant
for plants
to be potted.



Thoughts Collected on a Plane

Morgan Rossi

Its funny.

I'm not even sure that this is the right descriptive word for what I am feeling but when I look for like words in thesauruses I come across nothing of more substance.

I am here, on this airplane, sitting and listening to mixed CDs of love songs that somebody else has given to me. These have never been your words, but I imagine they could be.

As I sip my tonic water (because I am not thirsty) and ignore the loneliness that is in the seat to my right, all I can think of is you.

This happens a lot.

If it's not 'funny', this feeling sits so long it feels heavy and makes me ache.

That doesn't sound cliché at all.

I'm not sure why I'm even typing this.

Perhaps it's because I'm by myself (alone time is hard to come by these days) or because it's something to do or because I'm waiting for the movie to start: The Dilemma. That is eerily ironic.

I just want someone.

I want someone who's a balderdash player; who's well-liked and enjoys dressing up on the occasion. I want someone who recognizes that I'm allowed to be sad sometimes and understands I tend to theorize about the unfixable. I want someone who's a conversationalist, takes me seriously, and loves blasting music in the car on the highway. I want someone who is passionate about things that matter, interested in others and curious of how things become the way they are. I want someone who is up for anything, and gets it.

I want someone. But I'm not picky.

I hardly dream, but when I do, it is quite often of you. You are always present. In everything. In somber music, in impressionable books, in indie movies, in smart television, in church homilies, in late night drives, in trident citrus gum--in every other someone I meet. You exist to measure everything else.

You infect me until you affect me.

I'm not sure what happens next, but if you and I trail the trend we have been following, then we should expect nothing.

Thank you for lending me that book. I love it.



What kind of middle name is Clifford?

Hannah Fogarty

After your dad apparently, I
have such a talent
for sticking my foot in my mouth.

arms full of Tastykakes and IcyTea,
you filled my head with grass
and fireflies and the scratch
of stolen lottery tickets. *Nothing
was wrong. Nothing was wrong.*
Until the time in the dish room
you told me to chill the fuck out,
and I threw a plate against the wall.

I promised that on some nights
Milwaukee smelled like woodsmoke
too, and I could hear trains
from my apartment and
5 months doesn't change a person and
you never believed me.

On Arbor Day, on Valentine's
and whatever day it snows,
I've learned not to answer calls
from an unknown number.



Gold

Bridget Gamble

“Holy smokes,” Ilene said, smoothing the ends of her hair against her blouse in the hotel mirror. “I need a haircut like no other.”

“Gotta be someplace in Philly that cuts hair,” I said

“Maybe I’ll roam around for a place while you’re at work.”

The last time Ilene had an afternoon full of obligations was in college, over two years ago. I’d found work reporting for Crain’s Business Chicago; she walked our neighbors’ dogs on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Her parents threatened once a month in a letter to cut her off, but she stopped opening those letters after the first few came in with our bills and Sun Times. We were in-tune roommates, like members of a well-practiced circus routine. I cooked, she cleaned, I swept, she mopped, I paid, she owed. My income allowed for the flexibility.

“Here, I’ll find you a salon,” I said, pulling the phonebook into my lap.

“I’m fine,” she said, still facing the mirror. She pulled a bobby pin off the elastic band wrapped around her wrist and stuck it behind her ear.

Pay Dirt. That was their name. Their first hit, the most-played song on Los Angeles’ public radio five years ago, was an Americana song with staccato piano chords and a verse about Golden Gate Bridge suicide prevention. But in Minneapolis, where I was in school at the time and where they played their first Midwest gig, I wasn’t sure there was anyone with a nervous system warm enough to clap for them. They’d have probably never popped up on my radar if I hadn’t been assigned to review them for the Minnesota Daily.

I started feeling bad for Pay Dirt while I waited for their sound check at Varsity Theatre. I watched them shake out electrical cords, tap microphones and fiddle with amps. They’d arrived in a mini-van and wore winter coats on stage. In my empty row of my empty section of the empty auditorium, I played tic-tac-toe with myself on my yellow notepad, struggling to see my marks in the dark.

Charlie started playing the chords for “Hang On to Yourself” David Bowie. He shook his coat off his shoulders, revealing his triangular upper body and trim waist tucked into tailored jeans.

“Hi, Maggie,” he said into the mike. Somehow, under fuchsia and lime green spotlights, his eyeballs looked fluorescent, like two telescopes facing North in a meteor shower, and I stopped feeling bad for this little band fronted by a car salesman with a guitar strap.

“Thanks for the kind review,” Charlie wrote me weeks later. “We’ll be back in your neck of the woods in June and would be so grateful if you’d help us with some press.”

That became our agreement for the next five years: they came to my region every six months or so, and I put them in touch with my friends at radio

stations and free bi-weeklies for interviews and live junkets in return for a meal or a drink. At shows, I sold stickers and CDs at the merch table, taking Fridays off from work if I had to, spending weekends in Holiday Inns.

Ilene usually tagged along and lost her heart to Charlie upon meeting him for the first time, like I had. It was a universal female experience, falling in love with Charlie Goldsmith, requiring no cognition or energy. He made it too easy with the lyrics, the brown leather guitar strap branded with his last name in white rodeo poster letters, the wristwatch, the haphazard hairdo and the shaggy beard. The eyes.

Still, Charlie was nothing more than a pipe dream of Ilene's; she'd been dating Nate, a tax preparer from Evanston, since we moved to the city. He stayed at our apartment almost every weekend, pouring our skim milk into his instant coffee, and she spent holidays with his family, posing in their Christmas card photos. She never brought Nate to a Pay Dirt show, but he'd learned most of the song names off the CD I sold him.

I'd stand next to Ilene at shows, dwarfed by her five-foot-ten frame, but always had a better view. I'd ridden on the back of Charlie's father's motorcycle. My name and number were locked into each of the guys' cell phones. I'd even written a line in a song off their first album at a roadside Denny's with Charlie while the rest of the band dozed off at the table, the backs of our legs stuck to the vinyl booth in the July humidity.

"If I were a rapper, I'd want my name to be Hazy Charles," he told me outside once our bill was paid, the two of us just shadows under the orange parking lot lights.

He smiled at the cigarette in his hand before glancing down at me as I sat like a gargoyle on a concrete parking block. I watched him kneel down in front of me and push my bangs out of my eyes with his index finger, the way a kid waves brave fingers through lit candlesticks.

"Margaret," he murmured, his pupils tightly scanning mine. "Did you just wake up one day this incredible?"

The tours became more frequent every year, especially as rumors of a Grammy nod circulated. The band hired a crew to load and unload their stage equipment. Late night gas station hot dog dinners and cross-country drives gave way to groupies and Hyatt platinum memberships. I only saw Charlie onstage. But I stuck around, always in a Pay Dirt T-shirt.

"Honestly, it's best this way," Ilene said one night after Charlie blew us off at a blues bar in Chicago. "It *should* just be about the music."

I forged my consent with an eager nod, staring at my glass of Diet Coke and wishing something—anything—was mixed in.

* * *

"Maggie!" Ilene squealed into the phone. "Maggie. Maggie."

"What's going on?" I asked, standing behind a card table holding stacks of Pay Dirt CDs at Wooden Shoe Books.

"Guess who sat next to me at Great Clips?"

"You were at Great Clips?"

“I couldn’t find anything else. Whatever. Guess.”

“I don’t know,” I said, smiling at a group of passersby.

“Guess!”

“Just tell me.”

“Charlie Goldsmith.”

I stared at a bookcase till all the spines of all the hard covers made a smudged color continuum, like a third grader’s gloppy oil pastel still life.

“Really?”

“Mag, we had the greatest conversation. He said he’s seen me at so many shows and wanted to know where I actually live. Said he’s been curious for a while.”

“Interesting.”

“Then,” she said over the roar of a passing bus, “I was leaving, and he asked if I would be his date to their New Years Eve party in LA.”

“Whoa,” I said. “Did you say yes?”

“Is the sky blue?”

I let out a phony laugh, half out of shock. I could picture her floating a foot above the greasy, bubble gum-stained sidewalks of Philadelphia, too elated to even scratch at the little clips of hair left on her neck from the scissors. I could see her fair skin and hip bones, which protruded from her Levis since she started exclusively eating canned black beans, turning heads, and her failing to care. I could see the tiny bronze bobby pins dangling off the hair tie she kept around her wrist.

I went straight from Wooden Shoe to the hotel bar and watched a Penn State game, spinning my glass of Yuengling in my palm.

“D’you hear we play New Years Day?” the bartender asked me.

“I’m from Chicago,” I said flatly.

“So?”

“So.”

I heard two men bantering and a choir of women’s laughter following them. I looked up. It was Lenny and Pete, the drummer and the bassist. I held my hand to my temple.

“Holy shit,” Lenny said, shaking my shoulders from behind. “Haven’t seen you hold a beer in years.”

I looked over my shoulder to see the rest of them. “What are you guys up to?”

“Just grabbing a brew before sound check,” Lenny said, sliding onto a stool two down from me. Two girls filled the space between us, waving timidly at me.

“Where’s everyone else?” I asked.

“Maggie,” Lenny called to me, his elbows propped on the bar, hands cupping his mouth. “Bad hair day?”

“You’re OK,” I said. “Where—”

Lenny laughed. “Not me. You. Bad hair day?”

I slid my hand from my part to the tips of my hair self-consciously. “Fuck off.”

“Just fucking with you,” Lenny laughed, turning back to face the bar.

“Are you in the band?” the girl next to me asked.

I shook my head and asked the bartender to close my tab.

“The rest of the guys?” Pete finally said. “Blake’s napping. Charlie’s getting a haircut.”

I slid my credit card into my wallet. “Nap sounds good. I’ll be upstairs.”

“Wait,” Lenny said. “You’re gonna get that NPR dude out here tonight, right?”

“Whatever you want.”

* * *

I didn’t need a nap. I needed another drink, and a bomb shelter of a bar where I could avoid anyone who might stir my conscience. I dipped out the side entrance of the hotel and wandered until I found an Applebee’s, where Andrea Bocelli was playing over the shitty sound system and where I stayed until the bartender refused to serve me a seventh vodka soda.

I’d sworn off drinking at Pay Dirt shows ever since the band started gaining a following; I was guaranteed to black out every time I cracked open a beer. Ordinarily, I had too much to lose, but tonight was different. I cursed my broken sober streak as I hailed a cab. The driver made sense of my slurred version of the concert hall’s name and I slouched in the backseat, clenching fists above my thighs.

My phone vibrated in my lap. It was Ilene. I was dizzy. When the vibrations stopped, I checked my voicemail. There were six. I rested my head between my legs and stared at my shoelaces.

“Hey, I’m back in the room and just wondering where you—” Ilene. Delete.

“Mag, Charlie here. Just talked to Greg Finn from the Star Tribune—” Delete.

“Hi, it’s Nate. Can’t get a hold of Ilene. Have you—” Delete.

“Maggie, me again.” Delete.

“Mag, what’s your plan of—” Delete.

“Hey, Maggie.”

My name. Maggie. Too much of it sounds like gibberish. Maggie, Maggie Maggie.

“Maggie. My Maggie. You’re gonna make a great wife, Maggie,” my dad told me when I was seven. He was drunk and my mom wouldn’t serve him dinner. I made him a Marie Calendar macaroni and cheese and brought it to his recliner.

“You’re gonna make a great wife someday,” he said again, rubbing my shoulders with his chafed palms. “Unlike your bitch of a mother.”

* * *

“Ma’am,” said the woman working the front door of the venue. “May I see your ticket?”

I rolled my eyes and reached into my purse for my press pass. It wasn’t there. I called Charlie.

“Hey, can you let me in? I’m at the door and forgot my pass.”

“I can’t come out there, Mag, you know that.”

He sent one of the crewmembers, a burly man with a ponytail, to retrieve me. The guy asked my name and what I did for the band.

“Fucking nothing,” I said, stumbling to the merch table, where the girls from the bar earlier that afternoon were counting cash and shaking out wrinkled T-shirts. I pointed a weak finger at the girl standing closest to the register and asked who she was before wandering off to the bar without listening, and ordered two beers.

I looked up and saw Charlie and Ilene chatting on the mezzanine balcony. He was talking rabidly, leaning forward on the rail and staring at something in the distance, and her head was thrown back in laughter. I dialed his number. No answer. I dialed hers.

“You here?” Ilene asked me.

“Where’s Charlie?”

She paused. “What?”

“Send him down to the merch table, please.”

Another pause. I could hear her mumbling to him. “OK.”

The show started in forty minutes with some nameless opening act. People were already clumping around the stage, staking out their spots. I hiccupped and laughed.

“What’s up?” Charlie said, walking up behind me.

“Who the fuck are they?” I said, pointing to the merch girls once more.

“Volunteers. You weren’t here to set up.” He looked at my two open tallboys. “Are you...”

“Fired?”

“How could you be fired when you’re just—never mind.” He shook his head. “No, are you drunk?”

“Heard about New Years.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I gotta mike up.”

“Tell me about your date,” I said, following him off the floor.

“We’ll talk later.”

“Fuck later.”

“What are you doing? You can’t come back here. Maggie.”

He stood in the hallway connecting the dressing rooms backstage, blocking my way. I pawed at the black velvet curtains behind me until he lost me, until I lost myself, until I was standing on the periphery of the stage next to a compact Yamaha keyboard, the sight of which sent me into a fit of laughter. My seventh grade choir teacher used to play the same kind in the 90s. I sat down on the tiny stool in front of it and poured one of my beers on the keys as I pounded them with my fist.

A few crewmembers peeled me off the piano seat. Two of them crushed my beer cans while the others stood there, idly holding their walky-talkies. I looked over my shoulder as they rushed me off the stage, watching the front row kids watch me.

Charlie was in the hallway backstage, staring. “Do you know her?” one of the crewmembers asked him. He shook his head.

* * *

“That wasn’t even Pay Dirt’s keyboard,” Ilene said the next morning, trying to zip her suitcase on the hotel desk. “It was Moonrabbits’.”

I sat up in bed, clutching the down comforter to my chest. “Like I said, it was an accident.”

“Maggie,” she sighed.

“I’ll apologize. It’s not that big a deal.”

A wave of nausea flushed through me and I stood up to try and shake it. Ilene wouldn’t look in my direction but I studied her shoulder blades like they might speak for her.

“It’s not that big a deal, right?” I said again.

She raised her hands like she was in a stick-up. “I don’t know. But nobody’s too happy with you.”

“Ilene.”

“It’s your thing, Maggie.”

“Damn right.”

“Don’t raise your voice.”

“My thing for five years,” I said, steadily getting louder. “I’ve given up weekends, milked all my connections, taken off time from work, just for them.”

“It’s not a job, Maggie.”

“Exactly. My job is to sit in a cubicle and interview asshole real estate moguls.”

“Well, be grateful for that.” She pulled her suitcase off the bed. The tag on the handle read *BUILT TO LAST*.

I shook my head. “You don’t get it.”

“They don’t need you anymore, Maggie,” she said, spinning around to face me. “They get asked for interviews left and right. Charlie’s got more contacts than you do. He organized that entire live stream last night after you dropped the ball.”

“You don’t get it, Ilene. I’m not a New Years Eve date.”

While she stared at me, her lips parted like a drunk’s when awaiting a second stream of vomit, I stared at the freshly-snipped ends of her hair until I could feel, just in the thickness of my imagination, the paint brush feeling of them, the ease of fingers running through without knuckles tangling in knots. I’ve loved that feeling since I sat in booster seats at salons. She wore it without knowing.

“Come down when you’re ready,” she said, closing the door of our trashed hotel room behind her.



Growing

Ben Stanely

We borrow a lifestyle without permission –
rolling papers and forty ounce bottles
in the car hiding us from suburbs so we can
spend time with new money.

We have trouble with girls named Alex because they
keep switching seats and look the same in smoke,
so we crank the volume and miss Lang's kegs
because we don't read time.

There's not a future, so we don't think about it.
I don't know which Alex is in my lap.
We're not listening to that pop-forty station,
but the perfect vibe we

made ourselves, because if you stop caring about
something, you start caring about something
else, and the music is the time, and we are the
time, so what we listen

to is all we hear and it doesn't matter what
might happen – all that matters is how we
feel with a big moon making a trail in our cove
on Lake Michigan while

we pass lighters and talk bullshit that makes the
Alexandras and Alexandreas
and Alexas laugh and feel rebellious since
we've grown into concert

t-shirts and forgotten that we ever borrowed
them – but we can't recognize ourselves in
the mirror or remember why that was a thrill
if josh is selling x

and Joe is living with his mom, because we've talked
all our bullshit after the Alexes pissed
us out of their systems. I've got this weird feeling

that makes me dizzy and

I can't breathe because what's it worth if there's not a
future and the present can't cut me since
it doesn't have a point. I'm desperate
to keep us from sleeping

and finding out that we don't enjoy doing what we
liked, because then we'd be right back where we
started in Joe's backyard with a granite pipe and
no parents around to

see us cough up the scooby snacks
and laugh at how
trite it is to care so much
about apathy.



Bare Back

Morgan Rossi

Across from the bar
There's a green unmarked door
Just one hundred miles from nowhere
And all I ever wanted was
To be lost in time with you
This report of our demise
Hounds us through this vacuum
And only a day ago later
You took a wrong turn at the pay phone

We were never seen again.



Jump Rope

Sara Patek

Felicia sat on the sofa in Dr. Ryson's office, gently strumming her pointer fingers on the knees of her grey dress pants. Dr. Ryson, who looked almost too young for all the degrees framed on the crème wall behind him, sat with his legs crossed in a chair facing her. His hands were clasped together, gently resting in his lap as he watched at her. Felicia thought he should have a notepad. Psychologists always have notepads on TV.

"You know why you're here, Felicia, don't you?" His voice was calm and comforting, something they couldn't so much teach you in grad school as encourage.

She nodded, rubbing the suede of the sofa. Of course she knew why she was there.

"Just because the therapy is company-mandated doesn't mean you can't get something out of it," he said, still observing her.

"I'm fine, thanks." Felicia leaned back against the couch, relaxing as best she could.

A small smile tugged at the corner of Dr. Ryson's mouth. "Well, you're stuck with me for the full hour. Might as well use the time."

"What would you like to talk about then?" Felicia asked, crossing her legs to mirror his.

"We can start with how you found James Vander that morning." She blinked at him, and he continued, pulling a file off the desk behind him and scanning the first page. "It says here you walked into the copy room and saw him hanging from the ceiling by a jump rope with reams of paper kicked out from under him."

He looked up from the page. She was sitting up straighter, but otherwise looked unfazed. "If you already knew the answer, why ask?"

"I know what you saw, Felicia," he said, closing the file and dropping it on the coffee table between them. "I'm much more interested in how it made you feel."

"It made me feel great, like I should just start singing about cotton candy and puppies," she said, folding her arms across her chest. "How do you think it felt?"

"I have a few ideas, but it's important for you to verbalize your own emotions, especially in cases like this."

Felicia sighed deeply and ran a hand through her loose dark hair. "I guess I felt... sad."

Dr. Ryson nodded slowly. "Sad."

They'd fallen into a staring contest, but even after he'd conceded and blinked several times, he still wouldn't speak. She tried to wait him out for another minute or so, then rolled her eyes and continued. "Surprised. I was surprised to see James there, hanging like that."

"Did you know him?"

"I thought so."

"So you were friends."

"Yeah, just from the office." She shrugged, uncrossing and recrossing her legs.

"But you were surprised."

"Yes."

"That he tried to kill himself?" Dr. Ryson said, pulling on and straightening his blue striped necktie.

"Yeah," she said, noticing his gold wedding band catch the light as he patted the end of his tie. "He seemed like a stable guy, really nice. A family man. He's got a picture of his kids on his desk. Cutest little blonde girls you've even seen."

"Did you ever meet them, his family?"

"No. We were never that close."

"You could have met them in the hospital. Kate Vander has been asking about you," he said, leaning towards her slightly. "She wants to thank you for saving her husband's life."

"Do you have kids, Dr. Ryson?"

He nodded, grabbing a photo from his desk of a small redheaded boy playing with a toy airplane. He handed it over to her. "I have two-year old son, Sam, and my wife's pregnant, actually."

Felicia smiled in a distant sort of way at the photo, gingerly touching the frame. "It was his daughter's."

She handed him back the photo and cupped her hands over her knee. He put the frame back in its proper place. "What was?"

"The jump rope," she said. "It was his daughter's jump rope. It had pink Barbie handles with glittery streamers, just like the one on the ground in the picture on his desk."

"You remembered the handles from the photo?"

"They're hard to miss."

"So, it was his daughter's jump rope."

"Yep. And that's what I thought when I saw him there. That bastard tried to take his own life with his daughter's Barbie jump rope."

"You're upset."

"You're perceptive."

Dr. Ryson smiled, closing his eyes briefly. "Why does that upset you?"

"He didn't care. He didn't care about her, about either of them. He didn't care about his daughters. He didn't care about his wife. He couldn't even..."

Felicia cut herself off, inhaling deeply. "He couldn't even stay, for them."

"He probably wasn't thinking about that."

"Of course he wasn't."

"You seem a little hostile towards James."

She shook her head. "I never had a problem with him before."

"Before he tried to kill himself."

"It was selfish."

"To try taking his own life?"

"To abandon them," she said, raising her voice without thinking. "It was unbelievably selfish to not consider how it would affect them."

"How do you know he didn't?"

Felicia scoffed and grabbed one of the throw pillows from the corner of the couch. She hugged it tightly at her stomach. "He couldn't have."

"Why not?"

"Because he wasn't cruel enough to think about them and still choose himself over his family. He was better than that."

"He was depressed, Felicia. He wasn't thinking straight."

"How do you explain that to a little girl?"

He paused, frowning his brow at her. "I'm not. I'm explaining it to you."

"I think we're done here." She tossed the pillow back onto the couch and stood up, pulling at her shirt.

"They'll only make you come back." Felicia towered over him, as he was still seated in his chair. She stared down at him, meeting his eyes. "I have to clear you before they'll let you return, and I don't feel we've made quite enough progress yet."

"I'm perfectly fine. It hasn't affected my work. I'm not acting any differently. Ask anyone. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"That's part of the problem," Dr. Ryson said, rising from his seat. They stood face to face and now he had the height advantage by an inch or two, despite her red heels. "You saw a man try to hang himself, saved his life, and sat with him until the ambulance came, without even batting an eyelash."

"And?"

"There's nothing ordinary about this situation. Why do keep pretending you're not affected by it?"

"I'm not."

"Pretending or affected?"

"Neither."

"You're not coping, Felicia. You're ignoring the problem."

"I'm not." She retreated by a small step, but held his gaze.

"Then why won't you go to the hospital?"

She dropped her eyes and sat back down on the couch, but remained tight-lipped. Dr. Ryson followed her lead and returned to his chair. "Why won't you go to the hospital?"

"Why should I go? I don't know his family."

"You know James."

"I literally couldn't care less about James, not after what he tried to do."

"You don't feel bad for him? You don't pity him at all?"

"No, I really don't." She looked him in the eye and shook her head earnestly.

“You said you felt sad when you found him.”

“That wasn’t for him,” she said. “It was for the little girls who were losing a parent. For the girls who’ll never be able to look at a jump rope the same way.”

Dr. Ryson seemed to be processing what she’d said. “You seem to be fixated on children. Did something happen when you were young? Something you maybe haven’t coped with yet?”

She stared at him, wrinkling her nose. “I haven’t saved anyone else from suicide before, if that’s what you mean.”

“But that’s not what upset you. You said he abandoned them, that he didn’t consider their feelings.”

“Do you ever get bored just repeating what your clients’ say?”

“Do you feel that someone’s abandoned you?”

She began shaking her head as she looked behind him at all of those framed certificates. “Talking about how my mom left when I was seven isn’t going to change how I feel about James.”

“You don’t see any similarities between the two situations?” It almost wasn’t a question.

“My issues with Carol aren’t going to help me cope, if that’s what you’re after.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I don’t forgive her. She was my *mother*, and I don’t forgive her for what she did.” Felicia crossed her legs and folded her arms across her chest.

“Why should I care about him?”

“This was never about James for you,” Dr. Ryson clasped his hands in his lap. “It’s about those little girls. You changed things for them. You saved him, for them.”

They let the silence settle his words. She thought about them as objectively as she could and shrugged, agreeing with their sense. “Okay. I did it for them. So what?”

“You saved him for them because no one did that for you.” She was staring at her hands, feeling very small on the suede couch, and impossibly far away from him. “I’d like you to visit James and his family in the hospital. I think that will help.”

Her first instinct was to blurt out *Help with what?* But instead, she recalled him former bargaining chip. “If I go,” she said after a pause, “will you clear me to go back to work?”

He considered her proposal, then nodded. “If you go to the hospital, yes.”

* * *

Felicia walked through the corridors of St. Augustine’s. She’d gotten James’ room number from a rather snarky nurse at the desk on the first floor. Turning the corner, she spotted *RAO?* and paused in front of the door. She’d done her part, going to the hospital. She even had her parking stub to prove it. She could leave now. Technically, she’d done what she agreed to. *Coward.* The word crept into her consciousness and it was unsettling. What could she possibly be afraid of?

She knocked gently on the half opened door and peeked her head in. James sat on the hospital bed in one of those awful papery dress gowns. Felicia could still make out the faint red marks dancing around his neck. He had his arm draped around his younger daughter, the smaller one anyway, who'd squeezed in next to him on the bed. On his other side was a petite blonde woman in an oversized sweatshirt who looked as if she hadn't slept in the three days since it'd happened. The older daughter, who couldn't have been more than six or seven, was slumped into a chair at the foot of the bed. She was the first to look up.

"Felicia." James said her name with something akin to surprise, but darker.

"Felicia?" Kate repeated, looking up at the woman in the doorway. Her face lit up a little. "I'm so glad you stopped by."

Felicia nodded and made her way into the room, stopping a few paces from the edge of the bed.

"We've been wanting to thank you," Kate said. "Girls, this is the nice lady who helped Daddy after his accident."

The cute little one beamed up at Felicia. Her innocence was painful. The older girl just nodded.

"How's he doing?" Felicia asked Kate, though she was looking at James. "After the accident?"

"He's gonna be good as new!" the little one said, bouncing on the bed. She was so excited she couldn't keep still.

"He's coming home soon," the older daughter said.

"Doctors say I'll make a full recovery," James said, rubbing the little one's shoulder.

Felicia nodded, not knowing what else to say. Her eyes jumped from face to face. No one seemed to know.

"Well, I just wanted to make sure everyone was doing all right," Felicia said after a several unreasonably long moments of silence. "I don't want to bother you."

"Thanks for coming," James said. Her eyes bore through him, and she forced a small smile.

"Yeah, thank you, Felicia," Kate said, drawing her attention. "For everything."

Felicia smiled, a little more sincerely, trying to hide her discomfort. She turned to leave. For the girls, she was already gone.

"Mom," the older one said. "I'm bored. Can we go to the park for a little bit?"

"Uh, sure, Ellie," Kate said. "Did you pack some toys?"

"A few," she responded in an even tone.

"Did you find the jump rope?" The little one asked, hopping down from off the bed.

Felicia's heart skipped a beat at the word.

"Nope," Ellie said, standing up and staring at her father. "Thought we left it in Dad's car, but I couldn't find it."

Felicia didn't wait for anyone's response. Crossing the door's threshold, she turned the corner and kept on walking.



Stages

Charlie Mohl

Time of Death: call it fine *Your Best Guess*, then it's not
rocket science *Occupation:* no, you can't put *Deceased* no one
likes a smartass do you want
to do this or not you're gone either way
cooperate

please there are others waiting behind you stop
don't touch that, God they don't pay me enough for this job
Cause of Death: alright
Existentialism acceptable
we get that a lot

actually you'd be surprised you can't
begin to understand the *Implications:*



Remission

Tierney Acott

After six years we're
taking a break
so that a year from now
I can dump
and defeat
your freeloading ass.

Flesh of my flesh mutated
to feasting on my flesh.
Insatiable appetite
for my human tissue.

Like Pacman
nomming on lymph nodes
migrating along the median nerve
near my left jugular.

But Dr. Angelface jumped in
and with cut throat discipline
sliced, scooped, and dissected
for seven and a half hours,

so that I could starve my body
to overdose you with
radioactive poison.
So that I can live my life
without you
and only a slightly increased insurance premium
standing between me and my dreams.



Homewreckers

Bradley Fremgen

The front page was full of disasters. Two people had died in a car crash on the interstate. Firefighters were too late to stop a blaze on 12th Street that engulfed an office building. A man was in critical condition after falling out of a tree in his backyard. When Danielle had finished with yesterday's tragedies, she flipped to the comics. She read the obituaries next, unsure how she felt about them. The page opened to the wedding announcements, and there they were. Bill and Amanda Bennett, thirty-eight and twenty-four, respectively.

She could remember the night she'd first found out, how they'd argued for hours and hours about how young Amanda was. Bill told her that Amanda was twenty-seven. Danielle beat herself up over it later because granted, she was six years younger than Bill in the first place, and was only nineteen when they'd gotten married. They fought for months about the affair, which turned into fighting about their marriage, which turned into fighting about just about everything. The times when he'd called her "useless" and unnecessary" were still fresh in her mind. A few tears escaped her eye and rolled down her left cheek, falling onto the newspaper pages. Bryan, age twelve and Allison, age eight were mentioned. Bill's two children-- she snorted. "From a previous marriage," she read aloud. It sounded so cold when it was talking about you. The words echoed off the kitchen walls, and it fell quiet again. No one was around to hear her. She looked back down at the article. She wasn't mentioned, wouldn't be mentioned.

She turned the page again and saw the Help Wanted ads. Having been a stay-at-home mom for so many years had left her with a dusty degree up in the attic and the sense that she wouldn't be good for anything except the kind of minimum-wage jobs that come not just with the peppy uniform (complete with plastic smile), but also with the monotonous tagline of "How can I help you today?" ("Would you like fries with that?" was out of the question). But she needed a job. Those were the facts. Bill wouldn't be footing her bills any longer and soccer gear and 21-speed bikes wouldn't pay for themselves. She scanned the ads briefly, looking at several more closely. But her attention kept getting drawn back to an odd and unusual one in the middle of the page with bold lettering in all caps:

HELP WANTED
LOCAL HOTEL IS REMODELING
DEMOLISHING WORK, VERY PHYSICAL

It hadn't been much of a surprise to Danielle when she'd "caught" Bill with Amanda, because he wasn't particularly quiet or inconspicuous about it. It was almost as insulting as the actual having of an affair, being so obvious about it. She

hadn't known from the start, but she hadn't missed Bill repeatedly looking down Amanda's shirt at his office Christmas party, hadn't missed the mysterious caller who hung up whenever anyone but Bill answered, and hadn't missed the times she showed up at his office to surprise him for lunch, only to be told he'd gone to lunch early, without any of his friends. She finally caught him at lunch one day in September, kissing and planning on doing more than kissing with Amanda.

At first, everyone who heard about it said it was a shame. That they'd never expected it. That Bill and Danielle had been so great together. But these things did happen. Danielle would get pats on the back, hugs, and the usual pep talk at the gym, at church, the grocery store. People offered to cook for her. Her mother called her every day. People who'd been calling Bill a good man all his life were suddenly calling him a rotten scumbag. She couldn't deny that it had felt good at first, but soon enough it just got old, and she could tell they were just lining up to beat up on whoever was in the doghouse that week.

Eventually, although no one said it, some fault was assigned to her, or it was at least believed that she was not guiltless in the whole thing. She had never realized before that even sympathy has a drop-off point. People stopped caring, and they purposely looked the other way at the grocery store. Her mother stopped calling. She would never have let Bill divorce her, but the way she'd seen Bill watch Amanda move the few times she'd seen them together was as convincing and beautiful as it was painful. She sat through all the legal meetings determining who got what, and afterward she had the great pleasure of being judged by everyone who passed her on the sidewalk. She could feel everyone behind her in church staring at her, could hear them murmuring insults to each other, talking about what a shame it was.

The legal proceedings themselves had been hard enough. She cried at every one of them. It was a therapy session acted out in front of lawyers, airing out all your problems as if you were at a bazaar, bargaining for what used to be "our couch" or "our refrigerator." You slept with her, so I get the house. You can have that, I don't want it. Danielle was never one for possessions, but she did end up getting the house. Bill had been planning to move to another state with Amanda, supposedly even before Danielle had caught him.

Every little thing got dragged out, and the climax came when her lawyer asked about possible abuse. It was humiliating, having to tell a complete stranger that no, she had never beaten her children. When she thought about it, having to prove that she loved her children was what had really made her cry every time she went to a divorce proceeding. Every last shred of dignity had been ripped from her-- in a public courtroom, no less. Of course, Bill hadn't gotten the kids. It was her one small victory, the piece of driftwood she would cling to as the ship sank into the ocean behind her.

So now as she stared down at the newspaper ad, she couldn't help but laugh a little. Maybe this was what she needed. The money wasn't bad, but the voice in the back of her head wondered if ripping apart a hotel room in her free time would fix it all. Of course not. But Bill was getting a second honeymoon and the kids were off at summer camp, and she was due some kind of release that didn't

involve eating a pint of ice cream and falling asleep on the couch. Besides, she could use a little money. So she picked up the phone and dialed the number.

David overslept, and was now grabbing clothes randomly from the piles on the floor. He had grabbed a dress shirt and slacks before he remembered the ad had called for physical work. He grabbed a white undershirt and jeans, threw them on, rushed into the kitchen, and wolfed down a bagel. The phone rang, but he didn't have time to answer it. It stopped after the second ring. He looked over at it, shrugged, and went on eating. It rang again two minutes later as he put on his shoes, but only once. It rang twenty seconds later when he was grabbing his coat, and he pushed ignore to send it straight to voicemail. Whoever it was could leave a message if it was so damn important.

He ran down two flights of stairs and nearly tripped as he ran out the front door of his apartment building. He had to be across town in ten minutes and his car wasn't exactly reliable. It took him three pulls to get the door to open and the car stalled six times before it finally started. He'd never been good with cars. The fuel gauge showed he had less than a quarter of a tank of gas left. He'd been out of a job for nearly five weeks now, which was why he needed this hotel work so badly. It wasn't great money. He'd made more in a day or two at the many jobs he'd had than he would today, but he needed to do something. The guy had assured him of a spot when he'd called a couple weeks ago, but what if he was late? Would they give his room to someone else? The voice in the back of his head told him how pathetic this was.

Of course, he hadn't called about this hotel demolition thing just for financial reasons. He had never needed to blow off steam more than he did now, and the steady tearing apart of a hotel room was the perfect excuse. After losing his job and discovering just two days later that Virginia had been cheating on him for months, admittedly he hadn't exactly been proactive. But this would help him get back on his feet, he told himself. He picked out the last cigarette in the box, but remembered he'd planned on quitting and threw it out the window. On top of it all, his mother was still in the hospital with lung cancer. She'd smoked her entire life, so no one could say they were surprised. In fact, most of his family were so unsurprised that it was on the verge of flat out not caring. She often said he was the only one who ever came to visit her in the hospital. Even Dad didn't seem to care about her anymore, stuck at home in his easy chair watching old game shows.

The few words she was able to utter were more depressing than a sign of improvement, and even he couldn't deny that with so many tubes hooked up to so many machines, she looked like she was on her way out. Last week, she'd stared at him and asked him how he thought death felt. She gave him the favor of not asking if he believed in an afterlife, just if he thought death would be short and painless. He had stuttered for a few minutes, stumbling over ideas he'd never really come to terms with, and she smiled. "You're young, it's good that you haven't thought about death too much. Enjoy it while you can. That's what I've learned. Only now I'm stuck in this hospital bed. If I could get out of here, we'd travel the world together. Neither of us really ever got a chance for that, did we?"

As time passed and her condition worsened, their goodbyes had only gotten more terrifying and awkward. They both said “I love you” as he got ready to leave with the sense that it could very well be the last time they said it to each other. Each time he left he analyzed their conversations and realized that he had again talked about himself too much, that he’d thrown his problems on a woman who’d given birth to him, changed his diapers, raised him, the whole lot, and was now dying slowly and painfully of cancer. And all he could talk about was how terrible *his* life was. What made it worse was that she never seemed to mind, which made it feel as if she had grown to expect this sort of thing from him. He wondered what she did when he wasn’t there. She always seemed ready to fall asleep, and often did right in the middle of their conversations, and yet every time he came by, she had to be woken up, and only seemed to be more tired, despite the doctors assuring him she was probably sleeping more than anybody else in the country.

Virginia Reynolds walked out of the health clinic with her head held high, but she was sobbing in great heaves. Her hand was over her mouth, but her sobs were still clearly audible, the kind of great waves of tears where she had to draw in a big breath every time. She walked to her car, but she couldn’t seem to unlock the door, because her hands were trembling so much, and she dropped the keys on the asphalt. She turned around and sat down on the ground, leaning up against the car door, sobbing into her hands for another five minutes before she stood up again and unlocked the door. She sat in the driver’s seat without turning the car on, staring straight ahead at the brick wall in front of the car. Finally, she took her phone out of her purse. She had to tell David. It was only right to tell David. She called and hung up three times before she finally let herself do it. It went straight to voicemail.

“Listen, David, I know. . . I know you probably hate me right now, and you-you have every right to, but I need to tell you something. I just. . . came out of the doctor’s office.” She began to sob again, so every new word came between gasps and bouts of crying. “He. . . he said. . . I have. . .” New sobs broke out and she broke out into loud heaves again. David would hear all this, but she didn’t care. It took her a full minute to compose herself enough to be able to say it. “I. . . I have. . . HIV, David. I think Scott. . . Scott. . . Scott’s infected. And what with... how everything happened, I don’t know how. . . how long I’ve had it. David, I’m really sorry. I know. . . I’m a horrible person. I know that now. But you probably need to get tested. . . Because you could have it. In fact, there’s a pretty good chance. . . that you have it.” She fell silent. She didn’t know what else to say. Her voice faltered. “I’m. . . I’m really. . . sorry. David. I’m sorry. I can’t. . . say it enough. I really am.” And she hung up. She looked down at her phone, shaking from holding back tears. Time to call Scott.

David absentmindedly checked his appearance in the mirror as he drove. He needed to shave. He was actually pretty good looking when he shaved, or at least he thought so. His phone buzzed from the passenger seat. He had two new voicemails. One from Virginia. He wasn’t entirely sure whether or not he wanted

to hear it, but what confused him more was why she would be calling him now in the first place.

He pulled into the parking lot of the hotel. There was a lot of noise coming from inside the building. It sounded like a lot of people had already started. There was a fairly short woman bent over at a table near the front doors of the hotel (which looked like it had been built back in the sixties and then forgotten about entirely) where four or five people sat, some of them in suits, some of them in T-shirts and jeans under orange vests and hard hats. She finished signing something on the table and a tall, slightly overweight man with a name tag that read Aaron led her inside. "You've got room 215," David heard him saying.

"Are you here for the demolition?" a woman in a pantsuit asked. David nodded. "Good, here are some instructions, what we're looking to have done in each room and whatnot. Pretty much everything. They're looking to empty out each room. A whole new hotel. New paint, new carpet, the lot. A whole, fresher, younger look. And we'll just need you to sign this waiver form. Saying we're not liable in case you hurt yourself. Be careful in there," she said, smiling. He quickly signed the paper, barely even reading through it, and Aaron returned. The woman handed him a slip. "And your check will come in the mail in about a week." Aaron said, in a voice that suggested that he'd been doing this all morning, "Looks like you got room 216. Follow me."

David followed him up a small flight of stairs at the end of the hallway, and past a few rooms. It sounded like the woman in 215 had already started, because there was a loud crashing going on, barely distinguishable from the crashing coming from the other rooms. Aaron handed him a mouthguard, goggles, and some ear plugs. After David had put them on, he said "There's your sledgehammer. Forget the instructions. Anything in here's fair game. Good luck, be careful, and uh, have fun, I guess."

David nodded and heard the door close behind him. He swung the sledgehammer through the closet door, hitting it as hard as he could until it broke into several smaller pieces. The weight of the sledgehammer made it a much slower process, because his arms had to catch up with his eyes and his brain, which seemed to focus on what they wanted to destroy next before he could get to it. He brought the sledgehammer down on the top of the dresser and saw a crack run through it. He hit it repeatedly, watching the drawers fall out, and then broke them apart. He took to hitting the dresser from the side until it collapsed. It was exhilarating and he never wanted to stop. He laughed as he swung and felt more energy with every swing.

The momentum of destroying the dresser carried him right through the TV hutch, which unfortunately didn't have a television in it. In everything he destroyed, he saw something he hated. In the hutch was the face of his old boss, who had never liked him, and David suspected had fired him for no real reason at all. He put the sledgehammer through it, ripping it to pieces. In the desk, he saw the doctors at the hospital, who had long given up on his mother, and weren't even trying to hide it. He broke it cleanly in two with a series of swings, yelling long strings of curse words he didn't even know he knew.

He turned around and saw Virginia in the two queen beds and wondered for a split second if she'd ever cheated on him on one of these beds. No, he was certain of it, and rage overtook him and he threw the mattress to the wall and went to town on the bed frames.

He ripped paintings off the wall and broke the glass. He smashed the thermostat with one swing, sending its pieces across the room. He ran into the bathroom and took apart the toilet and the sink. He walked back out into the main room and saw that there wasn't much left to destroy. He wanted more. In frustration, he charged at the wall and buried the sledgehammer in it, yelling with satisfaction at the satisfying crunch it made. He pulled it out and realized he'd left a sizable hole in the wall. He looked through it and blinked.

He took out his mouthguard and yelled, "Sorry!"

Danielle's hand twitched as she entered the room. A quick survey revealed why they wanted to remodel. Whatever color the walls had been painted wasn't there anymore, and had been replaced with a color that could only be described as a fairly common shade of vomit. The carpet felt rough and looked like sandpaper. The ceiling was jagged, and it looked like it might cut you if you so much as touched it. And there was an odd smell she just didn't want to ask about. Against the wall near the door was a slightly used sledgehammer with a bright yellow handle. Aaron was saying something, but she wasn't paying very much attention, and it sounded like murmured nonsense to her, so she just nodded as she gripped the sledgehammer in excitement, and he walked back into the hallway. She closed the door behind him and turned to face the room, lifting the sledgehammer off the ground. Danielle was a relatively small woman, just five foot four and barely one hundred and forty pounds with arms the size of curtain rods, but she'd never found anything easier to lift.

The first thing she spotted as she turned around was one of the two beds that were taking up so much of the room, and with Bill and Amanda in mind, she gripped the mattress and threw it against the wall. She brought the sledgehammer down on the wooden bed frame with a satisfying crack as wood splintered everywhere. She turned around and did the same with the other bed, occasionally kicking pieces of wood across the room after a particularly good swing.

She opened the drawer in the night stand between what was left of the two beds and saw that the Gideon Bible was still inside. She took it out, flipped through it briefly, murmured a few verses out loud, and placed it gently by the door. She then split the hutch in two with a series of crushing swings right through the middle of it, and ripped off the wood attaching it and the bed frames to the walls and took the sledgehammer to the pieces.

The room proved to be the model of every room she'd ever been in, and everything she'd hated about each one of them came out. She hated the carpet floor, how she'd had to pick up piles of clothes and stuffed animals off similar floors when her children refused to clean their rooms. She hated the beds, never made up by her children before they headed off to school. And her own bed, too often occupied by a couple sleeping on opposite edges, a place devoid of intimacy

or even a good conversation for over a decade. The dresser, filled with clothes that refused to fit any longer as her body morphed into something even she could no longer admit seemed the least bit attractive. Every pain and sigh of despair was gathered up and placed in the objects around her. The monotony of doing laundry and washing dishes, the depressing trips to the supermarket with their elevator music, watching twenty-two other women who looked just like her and acted just like her walking down the same aisle-- it was all here. Only somehow, they'd always managed to keep up a smile as they did it. But even that became the unanswerable question of who was more insane: her for being so depressed by it all? Or the other women for their seeming inability to be unsatisfied by all this? Her entire marriage, her entire life, was gathered up in this room, mocking her. What came through now was a strong urge to do something about it.

The mouthguard Aaron had given her proved to be important, as she'd been gritting her teeth the entire time, and she probably would have cracked a tooth without it.

She was sure that they had left the television in the hutch by mistake, but it was their mistake, not hers, and she brought the sledgehammer to shoulder height. She brought it parallel to the ground as she swung it through the screen like a baseball bat with a crash of breaking glass, which gave a sense of finality that was ten times as invigorating as the sound of splintering wood. A voice in the back of her head wondered if they might have heard it and come running, but she took out her ear plugs for a second and heard that the combined noise of people destroying all the rooms on multiple floors was so deafening that one sound could not possibly be distinguished from another. For a second, she worried about structural damage, if allowing all these people to destroy their rooms at the same time might cause the building to collapse, but then she remembered the waiver she'd signed. It probably didn't matter to them.

She hefted the sledgehammer and walked into the bathroom, cracking the porcelain sink and bathtub and sending chunks skittering across the tile floor. She looked briefly in the mirror and saw a woman who was excited for the first time in years, a strong woman, a woman who was not to be messed with. She was sweating in copious amounts, there were wood chips in her hair and somehow she'd gotten a small cut on her left cheek, but Danielle felt she had never been more beautiful than she was at this moment. Adrenaline pumped through her, and finally she felt alive.

Fast running out of things to destroy, she broke everything into smaller pieces. She'd just made a piece of a drawer from the dresser fly off the walls when a sledgehammer broke through the wall where the desk had been. Someone yelled "Sorry!" through the hole, but it was muffled by the sound all around them, and muffled again as Danielle ran across the room, hitting the wall over and over again in an adrenaline rage until there was a massive hole in the wall. Through it stepped a young man, possibly in his mid-twenties, wearing a helmet, headphones, and goggles to match her own. He was covered in sweat and dust, as was she, she now realized.

He smiled at her. "Quite a rush, isn't it?" he yelled over the noise.

She found herself blushing, but yelled “Hell yeah!,” her voice breaking as she did.

“I guess I just got so into it, I didn’t want to stop.”

Before she knew it, she had walked up to him, pulled his head down to hers by his hair, and started to kiss him. She pulled away, embarrassed, but he pulled her close and kissed her back. She dropped the hammer, pulled off his helmet, and ran her fingers through his hair as she did so, and found herself sinking onto the mattress with him, kissing him almost furiously the whole time, the way she’d once done with her husband on their wedding night, she now remembered.

Remembering Bill, she felt like crying as she undressed them, but she managed to hold back the tears. They flopped down unceremoniously on the mattress next to each other when it was over, gasping with exhaustion as they watched the dust settle and move through the air more slowly, everything slowing down again until it seemed like time had stopped.

It was five minutes before either of them spoke. David was looking around the demolished room and saw the thermostat still on the wall. “You missed something,” he said, pointing and chuckling.

She looked over and smiled. Still fully naked, she walked over and picked up the sledgehammer. She hauled it up to rest on her shoulder with much more effort than it had taken before when she’d first picked it up. Gripping the handle, she got ready to swing, then stopped. She looked at the thermostat. It was so small and helpless. Just a piece of plastic. So unnecessary now. Soon there would be a newer, better thermostat in its place, a flashier one, that did its job better and made people feel better than this one did. She let the sledgehammer fall to the floor with a loud thud that made David jump. She gathered up her clothes and put them on silently. Without looking at David, she walked out the door to her car and drove home. She felt tired, but tired in a good way. A way that suggested that in the morning there would be something worth waking up for, that she, like the day, would be completely new.

David watched her. As she got dressed, he tried to think of things to say, but couldn’t think of anything. He tried to think of his car ride home, the possibility of looking again through wanted ads, of sending out a resumé and putting on a suit, of pretending he cared about any job enough to interview for it. Even sex hadn’t been unable to overcome that. She wasn’t nearly as pretty as Virginia had been, and he found himself missing her, the way she’d cared about him, the way she’d looked when she laughed, her wide, bright smile. He walked out to his car and picked up his phone. The first voice message opened with a gruff voice he’d come to hate at his visits to the hospital, Dr. Phillips. “David, I-- you need to come down to the hospital. It’s remarkable, it is. Let’s be honest, I’d given up, I really had. But we ran those new tests on your mother today, David, and, uh. . .it’s gone. The cancer. Completely gone. We can’t find a speck of it, and she’s looking about right as rain. I cannot believe it. I honestly cannot believe it. It’s a miracle. Obviously, we’ll have to run some more tests to clarify, but really, it looks like she’s cured. She should be able to go home soon enough. I’ve never seen anything like this. It is a modern miracle, I’m telling you. And I have to say, David, on a personal note, I’ve seen a lot of families give up on sick relatives, but you didn’t.

You stayed in there. Your mother says you're a remarkable young man, and I'm inclined to believe it."

He was crying as he lowered the phone. He started his car so he could drive to the hospital, and heard the computer voice on his phone still talking. He pulled out of the parking lot and lifted the phone to his ear as the second message began to play. Virginia's voice was beautiful in his ear. "Listen, David..."

