

MIDWESTERN GOTHIC

Just For Now by Sarah Terez Rosenblum

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At midnight her father, dead for five months and one week, will be packed into a brass-tipped bullet and fired from a 12 gauge rifle on a Wisconsin farm. Her mother keeps referring to the event as ‘The Shooting,’ problematic in public, like when she hollers across Walgreens, “make sure you pick up some bug spray for the shooting.”

“Find a different name for what’s happening,” she tells her mother. “Before we’re all detained by the feds.”

When her mother goes formal and starts calling it “the bullet ceremony,” as in, “They dropped off your father’s ashes for the Bullet Ceremony and there’s more than enough to fit in one bullet. Did you want us to leave some aside for you?” she surprises herself by answering, “Yes.”

She’s nowhere near Wisconsin when she’s rear-ended, hasn’t even made it past the Whole Foods on Peterson which hulks just East of the interstate onramp like a bountiful giant. She’s fifth in a line of cars idling at a red light and her first thought as her head jerks forward

then back is “Now what?” In her rearview mirror, the driver, bearded with wide-set eyes, opens his mouth. He’s probably saying No.

No is pointless, she thinks, putting her car in park. Only two-year olds believe in its power. She clicks off her radio because listening to Belinda Carlisle’s “Heaven is a Place on Earth” seems like a frivolous thing for her to have been doing during a car accident.

“How’s it looking?” She asks just as The Beard says “I am so, so sorry.”

“It’s fine.” She waves like you do when you’re on a low sodium diet and some fucker offers you salt. “We should exchange insurance info.” She sneaks a look at him, hoping she’s got this part right.

At nineteen, she bought a three hundred dollar truck which ignited on the side of the highway, but this is her first real person car. Inherited from her father, it’s both phoenix and albatross, meant to liberate her from her former, Amtrak-dependent life, but also to make frequent trips from Chicago feasible. She’s responsible for her mother now, disabled and alone. She’s already clutching the envelope her insurance card came in. Insurance cards go in glove compartments, that she knows.

“Why don’t you take a picture of mine?” The Beard holds out his card. A tattoo peaks from his T-shirt’s frayed cuff. A heart, a wolf, a bullet, all connected by vines.

“Good idea.” Around them, cars slow then accelerate.

“I was reaching for something.” The Beard adjusts his baseball cap. He just keeps shaking his head.

She snaps a photo of the card, not really seeing it. Black numbers and letters, a red insignia: three magic beans stacked. There's his name, John.

"Here's mine."

"You're supposed to detach it." He gestures at the card, bound by perforation, waiting to be severed.

"Does it really matter?" She watches him capture the image. Sweat trickles from above his right ear to the nape of his neck.

"I hate when things are my fault," John says. "And don't get me wrong, this was, but something really messed up just happened."

"What?" Maybe he's going to tell her about their accident. Maybe he's forgotten she's the one he hit.

"I was foraging for herbs in Wynamac Park," he says.

She could have made it through the first set of tolls by now. She'd promised herself something degrading from the tollway oasis; sour gummy worms or a taco bell pizza. She could be well on her way.

"Five guys tried to jump me. Big guys. One had a bat."

"That's a bad day," she glances at his car, still kissing her bumper. "You've got a Volvo. Maybe not that bad then."

"I guess it's relative?" John stops shaking his head, but slowly, as if a spring needs to wind down.

She takes a haphazard picture of the collision point, barely glancing at her phone's screen. Two tiny punctures mar her bumper. Like maybe the Volvo is a Vampire.

"What's that joke?" She asks.

“What?”

“I am the Vindshield Viper. I’ve come to Vipe your Vindows?”

“I don’t know that one.” He steps back and a taxi swerves to avoid him. Another car slows, the man inside leaning to peer through the passenger-side window.

“Women drivers,” he says. White paper bags and jumbo cups obscure his rear window.

“It was my fault not hers,” John calls as the driver accelerates.

“Do you want to come to Wisconsin?” She asks. In his rear view mirror, the man gives them the finger. A small golden oval on his car’s bumper reads “Pray.”

Before the medics hefted her father’s body onto the gurney, a police officer with a cleft chin warned her family not to watch.

“It can be hard when they leave,” he said.

At five, she’d asked her mother to please make a plan to divorce her father.

“How do you know about divorce?” her mother asked. Her response became family legend: “I know where to find any information I need.”

“What was so wrong with him?” John asks at a rest stop just west of the Wisconsin state line.

“He never beat me if that’s what you were hoping.” She regrets saying it when their eyes meet. John’s brows lift like they did when he first mentioned the men who jumped him, his expression childish, appalled.

“Santa Claus is real,” she says, fast.

“I’m Jewish,” John says, “And I’m guessing you are too.”

“Why?” She cups a hand around her nose.

At a beat-up vending machine, a Snickers bar lands in his palm.

“Did you even pay?” She asks.

“I forgot about lunch,” he says.

“It’s nine p.m.” They’d bypassed the oasis; taco pizza was meant to be eaten furtively, alone.

“Dinner too.”

“What about your herbs?” Back in the car, she stomps the gas pedal. To the east, delicate pink tendrils fragment the navy sky.

“I dropped them when those five guys came after me.” John tears open the wrapper.

“Was this before or after they started a chain of restaurants?”

“Come again?” John says.

“I said, How’d you get away?”

“I know a little krav maga.”

“My dad studied that.” In her peripheral vision, she sees him chew.

“It was years back, when I was in college.”

“What are you, twenty-five?”

“Thirty-seven,” John says.

“I’m thirty-two,” she lies.

“That’s young to lose your father.”

“My brother’s twenty six.”

“Will he be at the memorial?” John stuffs the candy bar wrapper into his front pocket.

“If his plane gets in on time. He’s a marketing strategist in San Francisco, so his time is more valuable than mine.” In her rearview mirror, a semi flashes its brights.

“Your headlights.” John reaches toward her and for a moment she thinks he means to flick them on himself.

“Did you think I’d have sex with you?”

“Pardon?” John adjusts his cap. It’s a thing he does when nervous, she knows this already. Just like she knows he wears Axe body spray, same as her brother and the cop with the cleft chin. An antiperspirant that unites men across varying degrees of hipness. She pictures a zig-zagging line, hipsters holding hands with bros.

“Is that why you agreed to go?”

“Never crossed my mind.” John’s eyes sweep her profile. She can feel them, sense where they linger.

“I’m probably too angry for sex.”

“I really am sorry about your car.”

“That’s not what I mean,” she says.

When she was sixteen her father kicked Jerry, just a puppy back then. The look their shepherd threw him was nearly human in its disillusionment. Here was the same man who had driven one-handed on the way home from the human society so he could soothe down the spiky fur at his neck. Whatever had infuriated her father that day had nothing to do with the dog. Likely he was angry at her for losing her house key or her mother for suggesting his beard needed a trim.

At twenty, when she fell in love with her psychology professor, her dad threatened to stop paying for college. Her teacher, shabby and elbow-patched, said he thought if her father met him he might change his mind.

“I’m hardly the big campus hunk he’s imagining.” He adjusted his glasses, a gesture of deliberate sheepishness she’d already begun to second-guess.

“My father knows from college teachers,” she said. “Since he is one and all.”

“Maybe this whole thing makes him feel guilty about his own impulses.”

“Or maybe you’re forty three and I’m nineteen,” she said.

“Sounds like that professor was a douche canoe.” John says from beneath his hat. He’s pulled the brim low enough to hide his eyes.

“That’s not the point.” The GPS has her circling a cornfield rimmed by turbines. “We’ve passed this twice now, right?”

“I wasn’t paying attention.” John rolls down his window like maybe if he lets the outside in it will make a new kind of sense.

“We’re going to miss it.” Another lie. Her mother would never start without her, no matter how much her brother groused. “Now it’s just searching.” She prods her iPhone’s cracked screen.

“Try turning here.” John indicates a gravel road ahead.

“Just randomly?” But she’s already turning, tiny stones spattering her windshield. She thinks of her father’s ashes then, the leftover ones her uncle hasn’t combined with gun powder. Why does she want them? They’ll be coarse, chunky with bone.

“You know any dead people?” Her stomach makes a wet noise, her empty guts grinding. John should have offered her some of his Snickers. Not that she would have accepted.

“Good question.” John cups her iPhone as if the warmth of his hands might awaken her GPS. From each side, trees reach for the car.

“Well, do you?”

“Some.” John no longer smells like deodorant. He smells like someone asleep for weeks. He smells like old leaves and decay.

“Anyone you were close to?”

“Sure.” John nods.

“Do you hate them?”

“Do you hate your father?”

“Less now than when he was alive.” He was curled on his side when she found him, face pallid, grey beard wet with bile.

“Maybe you should pull over.”

“Why?”

“Seems like it might be hard to see.” John touches her cheek then shows her his fingers, wet as if from rain.

“How long have I been crying?” She asks.

“I didn’t set a timer when you started,” John says. His fingers aren’t warm like she thought.

“This whole bullet ceremony is bullshit.” She clicks on her blinkers as if there’s anyone around to warn. As if they’re back on Peterson, not alone on the side of a rural road. A road John directed her to. Her brother’s right. She’s a fucking moron.

“Hey, what happened to your car?” She asks.

“I rear ended you.” The white’s of John’s eyes, the span of his thin flesh.

“Did you just leave it there?”

“You don’t remember?”

“I-” She stares through the fogging windshield. Through the trees, the moon shines still and cold.

John swallows. Twice. “Maybe I should drive,” he says.

The paramedics’ feet on her parents’ stairs, the hiss of the screen door. The police officer with the cleft chin caught her elbow as she sank to her knees.

“I don’t want him to go,” she said.

“Of course not,” the police officer agreed.

“You don’t understand.” With a chin like that, no way could he. He spent his weekends playing golf with his father, probably. Shared a deer stand with him each November. In the mornings they passed a thermos of coffee, at night a silver flask.

“Of course not.” Cleft chin steadies her as she stands. She’s his responsibility, but just for now.

“Open your eyes.” John steering the car down her uncle’s long driveway. Behind the barn, a bonfire flares. “Only an hour late,” John says. As soon as he cuts the motor she misses its soothing sound. Her legs are cramped from sitting. When she tries to walk her left knee gives.

“There’s a hitch in your getalong,” her father used to say. A professor who felt like a cowboy. Grandiose enough to request his ashes be fired from a bullet. A coward who let his heart stop.

“I’ll go first so I can....” She gestures, “explain you.”

“Sounds fine.” Closing the driver’s side door, John pats his leg and she thinks he’s searching for something, a cigarette maybe, or whatever he was reaching for when his car struck hers. Only when he brings his fingers to his mouth to whistle does she realize he’d been angling for attention.

“Who’s this guy?” He points at Jerry. Ears perked at the sound, he’s shambling through the tall grass to the driveway’s edge.

“He was ours.” She watches the dog. When John pats his thigh again, Jerry’s tail thumps in the dust.

“He’s big as a wolf.” John squats.

“We have to get down there.” Black against the bonfire, she sees three figures, one in a wheel chair. One with a rifle propped against his thigh.

“Start without me,” John says.

“Where’s your baseball cap?”

Without it, his hair is thick like her father’s, dark like hers but woven with grey.

“Must have left it in the car.” His eyes find hers for a second. “Your mom’ll be worried. Go.”

She’s halfway to the fire’s edge when she turns to see John. His cheek is pressed to Jerry’s flank. As she watches, he cups the dog’s great head between his hands. Her dad called Jerry’s ears satellite dishes; wide, sensitive, round.

“Look at him,” he’d say. “He’s probably tuned in to an old episode of “Lassie.” Dogs can hear things humans barely believe in. No wonder he gets so worked up.”

When her Uncle fires the rifle, sending her father skyward, Jerry will flinch, maybe run for the barn. Right now though, he’s tranquil, listening. Whatever the bearded man leans close and whispers then, only the dog knows for sure.