

It's a Quarter to Three

Maddie bought menthols by mistake. It's simply too much, and she gives herself permission to snap. Her scalded yelp is greenish white in the cab of Ron's pickup. A minty moan rises above the engine and the rain, finishing as a shriek of rage. Even at her most vulnerable and feminine, Maddie cannot bear the taste of a menthol. "Shit piss motherFUCKER!" she snarls, driving her fist into the horn. She notices too late as the cigarette burns an unsightly hole in the vinyl, defacing the Chevy logo. Maddie feels a pang of guilt but her baser feelings redouble rapidly. She stubs the butt, mashing it to particles with the heel of her hand, packing tobacco shreds into the hole where they can never be picked out. The horn wails in protest.

Maddie should be angry with herself, not the pimply kid who grabbed a pack of greens when she asked for reds. Surely he was stoned, possibly colorblind. Cursing him for a motherfucker crosses a line. It was wrong of her to take Ron's truck without asking, a guest hijacking her host's vehicle in flood conditions for a pack of smokes she'd now rather throw away. Maddie dreads her sister's wrath. Leigh-Ann is quick to take offense on behalf of her easygoing husband. She can channel their late mother like a topflight Ouija board.

Using her weekend visit as a chance to try going cold turkey had been Maddie's idea. A late-night recriminatory shitfight over a poor phone connection was not in the plan. She had only called Jason to check in, elated over her first twelve cigarette-free hours. She had expected him to be fucked up with his friends, not to *have* fucked up with a new friend.

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Three rings, pickup halfway into the fourth.

"Hey stranger," Maddie purred, "Mama's getting clean. Going nuts without you."

"The hell is this?" murmured a sleepy, petulant, female voice.

Maddie knew she had not misdialled. She had never taken a gut punch before, and surprising herself she reasoned it out coolly, philosophically. *This bitch is stone drunk. Thinks she's answered her own phone.* Maddie hung up, counted ten seconds, redialed. Another four or five rings. Jason picked up. Not cagey. Bombed. The mistake had not registered.

“Hey...” said Jason in his Everybody’s Pal voice, the tone that always got him in trouble. He sounded pleased to hear from her.

“Jason,” Maddie began, choking her voice down to steadiness, “where are you?”

“Aw, hon... I’m just a damn mess with you gone. You know that.” There was a bump on the other end of the line, someone else moving away from the phone.

A bad scene followed. Leigh-Ann did her best to soothe with love and sisterly solidarity once Maddie had flung the phone against a wall. The house was tobacco free. Maddie had even surrendered the emergency pack from her glove compartment. Leigh-Ann might have allowed her one of those, but they had been ceremonially flushed. Maddie had to suffer through low extremes of unhappiness without a fix. Leigh-Ann did her best to be supportive, but lacked the one thing her little sister needed.

Around two, Maddie came permanently awake. Five minutes later she could no longer watch the VCR clock flashing 12:00 in the dark of Leigh-Ann and Ron's cramped spare room. She chose Ron’s truck because it was in the driveway, and because he left his keys on the kitchen counter with the mail. If her detox weekend folded in disgrace, she could let others sleep at least. She did not notice the rain picking up as she left. The Marlboro Man had called her from fitful, miserable sleep. That was that. Certain biochemical forces take no shit from Mother Nature.

It is a question of control. Jason has none. Unsupervised and lonesome, he drinks. Gets blasted. Flirts. Let him drink as much as he likes without Maddie's disapproval, he could get himself hurt without much effort. Only in the absolute nightmare scenario would he go home with a stranger. He's not bad. He's a baby, needs constant watching to keep him from playing with the stove. Maddie is no pessimist. An irresponsible mistake she stands a chance of forgiving. Calculated, malicious infidelity is different. She would never make peace over that.

Rage is bitter but with a certain savory quality, like how coffee scalds the tongue. A knotted fist of grief pushes into her stomach. The feeling is like coughing with a cracked rib, the warning twinge before a back spasm. There is fear in it, a constant cringe, each moment wondering how much the next pang will hurt.

Maddie can't criticize Ron, no matter how dull she finds his trade in small engine repair, or fault Leigh-Ann's lack of imagination in marrying him. He is pliable and trusting but also hardworking, affectionate, loyal. The qualities of a wonderful hunting dog. They have two sweet kids that Maddie would like to get to know better. Without Jason around Leigh-Ann may be open to that. Jason is a show breed, sleek and pretty but crucially lacking the willpower to check his high spirits. Those qualities charm and excite Maddie. He came along when she truly needed him, when her Daddy and Momma were reeling into mutual decline. The appreciation, sex appeal and plain fun she found in Jason rescued her from family melodrama, from Leigh-Ann's well-meaning, overbearing scrutiny, from the expectation that she'd meet and marry a sensible man wholly unlike Jason.

Maddie clings to an abiding faith in the existence of an honest, intelligent, reasonably handsome man who is not a wimp, an addict, a pervert or a high-functioning psycho. She also

believes without embarrassment in demonic possession, life on Mars, and the strong possibility of mermaids, though she has never seen any of these things either.

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Answering some hostile psychic cue, the rainfall doubles in volume. The windshield looks like full buckets are being poured constantly down it. The truck's gummy response tells her the ditches are full. Water is creeping over the road. She needs to get home soon, not just to face the music but for genuine safety reasons.

There is no light to distinguish one landmark from another. The rain blots any incidental glow from houses or floodlights left on in parking lots. Maddie cannot see so much as a speed limit sign. From I-10 it is less than eight miles due south to first stoplight, a further two miles to Leigh-Ann's driveway outside Simonton. The local service station leaves the pumps running late for credit card patrons but not so much else as a working Coke machine. This is why Maddie had to drive to the interstate, where a little truckstop village keeps the lights on all night, to buy cigarettes.

In daylight the drive is perfectly dull, pasture land peppered with establishments she feels no need to stop and see. Maddie has it by heart. The semi-defunct paintball course, looking like a deserted summer camp where chainsaw killers cool their heels. Cranmer Tool & Die, where Leigh-Ann works as a part-time receptionist (a decorative fountain out front made from machine gears welded together). A quaint little plant nursery whose proprietor also sells graphic Jesus-on-the-cross pictures in homemade stained glass. Their garish red agony must keep some folks from stopping for pretty hibiscus pots. A dealer in above-ground pools (last decade's models). Painted signs for people who clean industrial pipelines and drill artesian wells. What Maddie cannot find is a lit window where she might park and ask for shelter. No homes face the road. She is not

about to open someone's pasture gate and set off across private property, hoping to find a farmhouse before the mud swallows her tires. Since her phone is broken at home, she does not think about the number of times Leigh-Ann has probably tried to call her. Jason, if he were here, might applaud this train of dumbass logic.

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A black truck startles her, drifting sideways through the curtain of rain to her left. It overtakes her with ghostly insistence, forcing her to brake or else collide. It settles into the lane ahead of her like a fat man on a barstool.

From what she can make out it is a dark midsize pickup, ten or fifteen years old. Its condition is what Daddy would call "fair-to-lightly beat to shit." This phrase earned him sour looks and cuffs on the elbow from Momma. The ritual chastisement amused him. That flash of mischief is the Daddy that Maddie misses.

It could be the little Dodge that Jason sometimes borrows from his buddy TC. Jason's Toyota is chronically in the shop with transmission cancer. TC is in many respects a socially unfit sack of shit, but he and Jason have a brotherly generosity between them that even Maddie finds touching. TC recounts depressing sexual conquests with the relish of a buck hunter listing trophies. He stares at Maddie when she wears certain shirts. In atonement he has bailed Jason out of countless scrapes, financial and otherwise, without question. Thanks to a dubious accident settlement involving spilled 7-Up at the Wal-Mart propane exchange, TC officially has more money than brainpower to spare. Could Jason be driving his loaner tonight? Is there a chance her wayward husband came out in a flood to claim her, to make amends, to piss on Leigh-Ann's front door?

No, she assures herself. The black truck is a stranger, at most an impish double. It slides left, a telltale drunk-driver lurch that flips her stomach. Time to get off the road, pronto. Taking it easy to avoid a skid, she nudges her speed to pass. She squints to confirm no oncoming lights, almost failing to see the black truck veer sharply. They almost crash but Maddie catches the brake, slipping back into place. She cannot risk the blind curve ahead in the northbound lane. The only way she could swerve is into the night and the raging floodwater.

“Fuck us both,” she mutters, and waits. The black truck centers itself over the dividing line. Maddie’s mouth tightens. If he weren’t so clearly blitzed, she’d think he was playing a game. Despite her history, Maddie has been in similar predicaments few times before, never this close to true danger. Her perverse, hopped-up guardian angel has taken its first night off. No matter how she cuts her speed, the black truck will not get safely ahead. She knows this phase of driving drunk. The mind can’t perceive things coherently but the limbic system responds to surrounding objects. The driver is aware of her without consciously knowing she is there. He creeps and drifts to keep her headlights as a reference point, like matching the speed of other cars when the posted limit is uncertain. He could slam his brakes or swerve any second and she’ll sail right into him.

The lot next to the Grab-n-Guzzle, where Maddie bought the wrong cigarettes, has a row of self-storage units converted to various commercial uses. One is a scroungy icehouse forever crowded with motorcycles and work trucks, advertising karaoke and wet t-shirt events. The slatted metal door rolls only halfway up like a busted garage, so patrons have to duck through it. Industrial picnic fans hum in place of air conditioning. Management maintains an exclusive atmosphere with stenciled block letters above the entrance, “Proper ID Required or SHOW US YOUR TITS!” This must be where the night started for Maddie’s friend in the black truck. Beers

and shots to wait out the storm. Maddie has enough years behind a bar, in front of it and sometimes on top of it to know the routine. Drives home drunk four nights a week, Lefty Frizzell blowing out the truck speakers, driver singing along to keep from crying. Not hurting anybody, especially not on rainy nights when nobody with sense would be out driving.

The black truck wavers off the center line, drifts back before Maddie can do anything. She leans on her horn. Aside from tapping its brakes twice the black truck does not react. Maddie is beyond frustration, deep into fear and fury. Logic, sense, and the evidence of her eyes reassure her that it cannot be Jason, no way, but merely entertaining the possibility makes her angry. She wonders, if it were Jason weaving in front of her, oblivious to the threat he poses, could she summon the will to run his butt off the road and teach him something about the common good. And if it's some poor old drunk she'd never meet in real life, does that change how she feels?

Jason is no tomcat. He is not mean or violent. He is only careless and horribly, horribly inconsiderate when his hands are off the controls. She's let it slide when he drives home drunk because she loves him, because she's no model of perfect behavior. She is beginning to realize her mistake. Rafting down the highway at the mercy of dangerous waters, about to wreck her harmless brother-in-law's livelihood for a pack of unsmokables, how different is she from the basic road alkie, too deluded and weak not to put herself and others in harm's way?

Maddie has loved cigarettes since the age of fifteen, the time when love is forever. She has no interest in giving them up for her health. She knows they're bad for her, but the self-important mewling of the anti-tobacco lobby only makes true smokers want to smoke more, to flaunt it, to share the joy of shortened breath with all mankind. Nothing, not a T-bone steak or a bottle of fine wine or the first cool autumn night or the world's best sex (five years ago, her second date with Jason, blasted on silver tequila during a Dwight Yoakam racetrack show), none

of these makes her want to spark up more than some public-radio wet prick whining about the dozen or so smoking sections left in America, as if they were difficult to avoid, suggesting the society that treats hard junkies with kid gloves should herd smokers into the sea like plague rats. Maddie is not politically minded, but she holds the truth of her convictions to be self-evident and then some. She has one sound, truthful motivation for wanting to quit, something she hoped to propose to Jason soon. And what's become of that prospect now? There is a difference, Maddie decides. She has her vices, but the daily risk she takes is personal. She is no public menace.

Maddie mashes the horn, cursing the monster in the dark. She punches the accelerator, bearing left with all her might. She nearly makes it. When her passenger side clips the black truck's driver door, the impact careens it billiard-style toward the right shoulder. Both trucks plane over floodwater with unpredictable wildness. Just before Maddie clears the danger zone, the black truck whips around and swats her tail to tail, the friendly fanny-pat that every cocktail waitress knows and loathes. In the heart of the spin, time goes slack and spreads out awhile.

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Leigh-Ann is the model sister, Maddie forever falling short. Not bad, but unfazed by any discipline given for common infractions like lapsed grades or broken curfews. So often was Leigh-Ann held up as the example that Maddie thought her incapable of defiance.

The exception was Frank, Leigh-Ann's first boyfriend. He was seventeen with rich parents, a beautifully restored Mustang, and (according to Daddy) a small fortune's worth of ego without a nickel's worth of pride. Nowadays Maddie finds her father's turns of phrase creeping into her speech, down to the precise wording.

Leigh-Ann was fourteen. Not for the world's best-groomed, most polite seventeen-year-old would Momma and Daddy have suffered their courtship, let alone an entitled hophead like

Frank. Leigh-Ann had long been committed to delayed gratification, honest work fairly paid, virtue as its own sweet reward. Then discovered what a heady spice parental disapproval was for young love. Maddie, still in grammar school, gathered gossip secondhand, troubled by what the neighborhood mothers whispered about her sister.

Frank totaled the Mustang and his teenage body before age eighteen. Just before winter vacation, Leigh-Ann was caught sneaking in late against Daddy's explicit order. Hearing the argument from under her blankets, little Maddie feared murder. Leigh-Ann insisted she hadn't seen Frank, had gone out to do it but had a change of heart and walked home before the rendezvous.

Daddy and Momma doubted her aggressively until a call came later, some mother afraid Leigh-Ann had been part of an awful crash caused by the late Frank and several joyriding fellow shitheads. Leigh-Ann was exonerated, mostly, but the worst had already happened. Her parents' fury over a minor infraction was so caustic that a scar formed on Leigh-Ann's heart. One time she had played the rebel daughter and the world had ended, just in time for Christmas. Afterwards, Leigh-Ann more or less accepted the straight arrow life. She found domestic contentment, the high spirits permanently strangled out of her. With big sister's eye on the ball, Maddie was glad to skate blithely on the edge for both of them. Until tonight, she's had little trouble with all the dips and sharp turns.

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Ron's truck spans the highway diagonally, fully stopped and out of immediate danger. Maddie can drive on as soon as she feels ready. The black truck's taillights point skyward like the screws on the *Titanic*, the cab half-submerged in the flooded ditch. It is impossible to tell whether the driver's door can be opened. Maddie thinks of Jason, warm and dry somewhere safe,

ignorant of the scapegoat sent in his place. The stranger is bound to need help, the sooner the better, but Maddie takes another minute to gather her thoughts. The sky growls with fresh thunder and somehow, though it seems impossible, the rain starts to come down a hell of a lot harder.