

His Chillness

When Rydell Cooper's girlfriend Lissa broke up with him on a Friday in April 2012, he reacted badly, some might say petulantly, and shouted words he would later regret, including fat and liar and big fat liar, sour inventive induced by his estimate that Lissa had cooed I love you well over a thousand times during their two-year relationship, falsehoods all.

Lissa agreed with Rydell's calculation, but not his accusation. She had loved him quite well until their twenty-third month when he unexpectedly quit his United Parcel Service job to spin signs. Spinning looked stupid and paid poorly. By failing to discuss the change in advance he had broken her trust. Loser. The word hung in the air like cold fog.

Unfair, countered Rydell. He was doing the best he could with what he had. His father didn't write monthly checks for tuition and rent, unlike hers. Besides, he had saved up so he could carve out time to rehearse with his band. She knew how important his music was.

Didn't she want him to be happy? And what about his crunchy baked apple recipe and their *Imagine Dragons* tickets? Didn't any of it matter?

The discussion ping-ponged for a couple hours and in the end Rydell failed to make his arguments stick and Lissa wouldn't budge. Their relationship was over. Done was done. She was moving on.

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The next morning, after an uncertain night, Rydell woke with a headache and went to the kitchen. Lissa was sipping tea and petting her pug Berry.

"I'm moving today," she said.

Rydell balked. "To where?"

"Nickelton. I couldn't tell you yesterday. It was too hard."

"Nickelton is a dump. Nobody lives there."

"I do," said Lissa quietly.

"That's insane," said Rydell, hardening.

"I know," said Lissa.

"Why?" asked Rydell. She didn't answer.

Rydell's mind reeled. Nickelton was an isolated world-war-two era neighborhood near the industrial section of town accessed by a narrow bridge. It was made up of tiny houses, cyclone fences, crumbling chimneys, and old men picking cigarette butts off the street. It didn't suit Lissa. She was an Ikea-West-Elm kind of girl who liked her comfort and

safety. Clearly she had been planning the break-up for weeks. Now Rydell wanted her out, wanted to throw her out. He wanted to grab her face and pinch her mouth and make it tell him why she was leaving.

Berry, upset by the discussion, jumped off Lissa's lap and waddled over to Rydell, who picked up the pup. He felt horrible, awash with hate, a deep slaking rage. He clutched Berry and stroked his head. He loved him as much as he was beginning to despise Lissa.

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Eight hours later, Rydell was back at his apartment, sitting on the lanai, munching a hot pocket, and ruing his now exorbitant rent. He had spent the day helping Lissa move to Nickeltown. Below him, late afternoon sun glanced off the swimming pool, its reflection a reminder of every sunset they had ever shared.

Rydell had known Lissa was backing away, creating space, and he had tried but failed to change the momentum, uncover the truth of her dissatisfaction. The last time they had made love, he saw her grimace slightly, a fleeting expression. When he pressed her afterward, she laughed him off, claiming gas or a bad angle, no mention of anything else. He responded casually, like usual, but the grimace was stuck in his head.

Rydell wiped tomato sauce from his lips and licked the back of his hand and noticed a bag of kibble hiding behind a tattered deck chair. Lissa had forgotten Berry's food. Dang. The pup would be starving. One more trip to Nickeltown.

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A few minutes later, Rydell was knocking on Lissa's front door. He waited and scratched at a speck of loose paint and knocked harder, yelling her name, expecting her to appear in a ponytail and curtly thank him. Nothing. Strange. She was just here.

Rydell placed the kibble against the door, phoned Lissa, and got her voicemail. As he left a message, he saw Berry walk around the side of the house, his black snout sniffing the ground. It was strange to see the pug outside, so careless of Lissa.

Rydell knelt and stroked Berry and fed him and remembered bringing him home and how Lissa had stirred grape jelly into warm milk and dribbled it into the pup's mouth. Afterward she had told everyone that it was lingonberry jam, a lie to explain the name Berry. Grape, lingonberry? Who gives a shit? Why lie about jam and jelly? It didn't make sense. Big Fat Liar. Nothing about Lissa's leaving or Nickeltown or the locked house made sense. Nothing.

Rydell cuddled Berry and kissed his head and ignored his mushy breath. On his way out, he slammed the wobbly gate and the pickets shook uncontrollably.

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For the next few weeks, Rydell struggled. He was too depressed to get out of bed. He lost his job spinning signs after which he settled into a joyless routine of pot smoking and HBO in the morning and guitar picking and masturbation in the afternoon. When friends called to invite him out, he excused himself. He was too busy composing, even though his band had fallen apart shortly after the move.

During this time, many of Rydell thoughts centered on one of Lissa's biggest complaint, which was that he lacked initiative and focus, a serious attitude. When they had first met, she had loved his laidbackness, his chillness, his fuzzy wise-cracking jokiness. Sure, sometimes it slipped over into inconsequential risky behavior and a bit of laziness, but, what the fuck, he was only twenty-three! Give him a break.

Rydell also began to fixate on feeling shut out and isolated. Enclosed spaces, such as revolving doors, began to bother him. Elevators made his mouth dry and bathroom stalls his skin crawl. The idea of Lissa living alone in Nickeltown without him added to his angst.

Depression often subverts reality and drags people into unanticipated misery, which happened to Rydell. He couldn't sleep or eat and lost weight. His enmity toward Lissa grew. He blamed her grimace for his failed band, Berry's mushroomy breath, and the swimming pool's algae. He nursed his gnawing, gnashing anger into the delusion that he had a birth defect or, worse, was a birth defect, a red flattened deformed ear, overripe and irreparable. He had seen such a deformity once and it had sickened him.

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One morning, after one of many sleepless nights, Rydell worked up the courage to drive to Nickeltown to see Berry. It had been five weeks. He hadn't heard from Lissa and figured she would be in class.

He felt nervous driving, as if he was returning to the scene of the crime. When he arrived, he parked and pulled the car door latch. The door wouldn't open. He checked the lock and tried again and began to feel anxious. Same result. He hooked his index finger over

the chrome lever, pulled several times and pushed, trying to break the seal. Nothing. He used his other hand. Nothing. He tried the opposite door. Nothing.

Rydell sat very still inside his car and the space closed in around him. He stared at Lissa's house, irrationally hoping for help. It stared back, inert, ugly, and devoid of character. He screamed and pounded his steering wheel and began to cry uncontrollably and started the engine and sped home and exited, clutching his chest and wheezing. What the fuck was going on? Lissa had turned his car into a prison cell. He was cursed. It didn't matter if it was inside or outside his head. It was real. She was erasing him from her life.

Rydell laid down on his car hood and tapped his chest and caught his breath and stared up at the sky and began to plot. He needed a solution. He needed to get better. It was going to be a long summer.

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There is something meaningful about being alone in a small familiar place, examining threads of memory, seeking answers and making connections, even if you don't know where they will lead you.

This is what Lissa thinks as she sits at home in the evening watching TV inside her Nickeltown house. It was her great grandmother's years ago and she often visited as a kid when it was in better shape, the fence straight, the yard bursting with flowers. She remembers sitting at a small kitchen table and eating blueberries and feeling a summer breeze on her face. She remembers her great grandmother's lilac-scented handkerchiefs and the hallway of sepia-toned photographs, especially the one of her great-great

grandfather in uniform, the protector. And she especially remembers her grandmother's pug, Wilma, a breed she has loved forever and her motivation for owning Berry.

Lissa knows the house is in terrible shape and although she is too busy to do much, she has tried to make it attractive and functional, appealing. Living here is a favor to her father, who owns the house and can no longer afford to pay her rent, because of unanticipated family medical expenses. He plans to fix it up so that when Nickeltown turns around he can profit. Lissa's temporary duty is to keep the dwelling from going entirely to pot.

Lissa has been worried about Rydell ever since breaking up with him. He was always so sensitive, despite his chillness. People warned that ending your first great love would be bad, especially for him, the guys feel so crushed. She feels bad too, but different, more pragmatic and less romantic. Things had run their course. Rydell wanted to focus on his music. They were never going to be together forever.

Still, she knows she made it worse by shutting down and blowing small problems out of proportion, as an excuse to leave, not lies, but half-truths at best. She was too embarrassed to tell him about the house and knew it would be too small for both of them.

She also feels bad about separating Rydell from Berry. On moving day, when he thoughtfully returned Berry's kibble, she hid in the bathroom crying, listening to her phone ring. She didn't want him to see her misery. She should have been more open.

Sometimes at night, Lissa senses her great grandmother in the house, a large woman with thick gray hair, a firm disciplinarian who knew how to take care of business. One summer afternoon years ago, Lissa had watched her remove a hornet's nest with a bat and hose. The writhing insects didn't stand a chance.

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It's mid-summer and hot in Nickeltown. Rydell is sitting inside a white panel van watching Lissa's house through binoculars. It's his new job, watching. He doesn't entirely understand it but will soon. After giving up his apartment, pawning his guitars, and exchanging his car for a vehicle Lissa doesn't know and can't curse, he is beginning to feel like his old self again, chill.

Although repulsed by the house, Rydell's goal is to become as intimate with it as he was with her body. He's making progress. He knows it is a tight six hundred square foot rectangular box with stained cupped siding and a mossy roof. Moldy aluminum windows and a rickety wood door form its face. Blotchy brown grass and dandelions fill the front yard and busted concrete along a garbage can alley the back. The ground smells like a super fund site. Exactly ten strides separate the picket fence gate from the front door on which Lissa has hung a home-sweet-home sign.

Rydell watches Lissa too, noting her clothes, moods, and likely menstrual cycles. When she left this morning, she was wearing a Rhianna tee shirt, jean leggings, and red tennis shoes, her brown hair up in a bun, her face bracketed with sunglasses. As he focuses in on her body, he locks onto its physical traits, its tender corpuscles and nerves and connective tissue, and then on its presence, its effect on him, still a mystery of the highest order. As she walks toward him, he takes in her breasts and moves up to her collarbones, lips, and hair. When she turns away, he scrutinizes her neck, back, and rear. He did so enjoy exploring her.



Sometimes, in middle of the day when she is gone, Rydell walks casually up to the living room window and taps until Berry pokes his head between the curtains and presses his wet black nose against the glass. It pains him to see the little guy trapped and alone.

He hasn't gone inside yet but will soon some evening when Lissa is gone. Through the curtains he can see an old sofa, coffee table, and green sisal rug in the living room and, further back, a chrome dish rack, wood recipe box, and Jägermeister bottle candle on the kitchen counter. The candle pleases him. It was his homemade gift to Lissa.

In the evenings, miles from Nickeltown, Rydell parks behind a strip mall to recharge his gadgets and sleep. Strangely and coincidentally, Lissa has been texting him recently, trying to make up for her bad behavior, he assumes. She isn't ready to talk but seems to enjoy the coy messaging. He enjoys letting her think that there are no hard feelings between them. When he dispatches his messages, he whispers, *I love you Lissa.*

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Rydell settles on a plan. He will bring Lissa to her knees in the most delicious way possible. He will euthanize Berry and stuff him. Then he will place the dog inside the house next to an open jar of lingonberry jam. It will be perfect, Berry's alert pose, Lissa's awareness of Rydell's touch, the verisimilitude of it all. He has considered other ideas, like boiling or freezing Berry, but how uncreative. The timing is delicious too. He won't move too quickly, so Lissa will discover Berry missing, cry, search, put up posters, and worry horribly, until Rydell reveals the final truth. It may be his chilliest idea ever. He has already bought the lingonberry jam.

His biggest concern is how to end Berry. He could slowly poison him and let the vet finish the job, but how? Bad meat? A pill? All the options hurt his heart, but the beloved dog is the best way to trigger Lissa's anguish. Besides, struggling through adversity makes you stronger, as Lissa liked to say.

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One afternoon while Rydell is snoozing in the van he hears a sharp knock. It's the police. They want to know what is he doing? He says he is working on someone's house, waiting for them to show up. The cops laugh. Look at this place. Who works on their houses? They question him and tell him to go away and say that the next time they see him he better be holding a hammer.

The incident concerns Rydell. He has been procrastinating. He stops parking in Nickeltown during daylight hours and moves forward.

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It's late summer and Lissa and her father are working on the house. The front yard is full of laurel trimmings and the door is open, so Berry can come and go. The fence has new pickets and some siding has been replaced. She is happy to see progress. It means she can move out soon.

Lissa and her father run to Home Depot for painting supplies and inside she thinks she sees Rydell at the end of an aisle holding a drill, pointing it at her. She turns to her father to mention it and when she looks back the person is gone. It must have been her imagination.

Rydell was such a goof, always horsing around. She wouldn't mind talking to him again now that some time has passed.

Lissa and her father check out and, as he prepares to exit his parking spot, a white panel van appears and blocks them in. Lissa can't make out the driver through the van's dark windows, but what a prick. He's probably on his cell phone. They wait a tic but the van won't budge. Finally, her father begins to back up and it drives away.

Back home, Lissa sees the front door ajar and her heart leaps up. Berry. She forgot about him. Luckily he rarely strays far when he gets out. How careless of her. She thought she left the door shut. She and her father search the house and yard. Nothing. They break up and scour Nickeltown, ringing doors, calling out Berry's name, but no pug. After three hours of searching, they stop looking. Lissa is a wreck. Not only has she lost her dog, she has dishonored the house of Wilma.

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A few nights days later, Rydell is inside Lissa's house, laying on her bed. He knows her patterns and she is out for the evening. He pets Berry and takes in the scent of Lissa's bedsheets and remembers trying to please her and failing. Berry yips and jumps off his chest and waddles toward a dim light in the living room as if someone is out there.

This is Rydell's fourth time inside the house, the first since taking Berry. He enjoyed watching Lissa and her father anxiously search the neighborhood and how she pounded the sidewalk in frustration. Now she knows. And soon she will know more.

The house is inhospitable, for sure, despite Lissa's efforts to warm it up, but Rydell is still drawn to it. Sometimes he catches himself staring at nothing, a floorboard or hole, searching for meaning. Fruity, metallic, and sour odors seep up from underneath the floorboard. Patches of bubbled, shredded wallpaper remind him of a tree lichen he used to see on hikes with Lissa. When the heat comes on, the air tightens.

Each time Rydell lingers longer. He knows he should hurry up, that he must hurry up, but Berry is a problem. He wishes the dog would get sick and make his job easier.

Before Rydell leaves each time, he rearranges some of Lissa's things to keep her off balance, bulletin board paper, pots and pans, her underwear drawer. Tonight he pees in the toilet and floats one of Berry's turds on top and watches it slowly dissolve.

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Rydell decides he must make one more dry run. He has held Berry for two weeks and time is running out to make a big impact. Perversely, he can't get enough of being in Lissa's ugly house, imagining the outcome, so he has made a firm appointment with the taxidermist. He must deliver Berry within a few hours of death.

The last problem Rydell needs to solve is how to pose Berry for maximum effect. The front window sill could work. Or next to the Jägermeister candle. In the closet? Or perhaps sitting on the toilet seat cover. So many options, so few pugs. He'll decide tonight.

It is 10:00 PM when Rydell parks in Nickeltown. He leaves Berry in the van and walks to Lissa's house dressed in black. He goes around back and pries open her bedroom window, his usual entry point and snakes through it. Something feels wrong. Lissa's bed is gone. He

flips on his flashlight. The room is cleared out. Nothing is left except scuffed wood floors and the wallpaper. He searches the rest of the house. It is cleared out too, except for a chair in the middle of the living room. Lissa is gone.

Rydell sits in the chair and considers his options, his mind racing. He can't believe how badly he has fucked up. He'll have to reformulate the plan. Maybe his job is done? Maybe separating her from Berry is good enough? What if she has dropped out of school and moved home to her parents? The thought of re-planning exhausts him alongside his deep sense of failure at failing to follow through.

It has been a couple nights since he last texted Lissa, so he sends a what's up message and receives a hey. He can't ask if she has moved, that would tip her off, so he keeps the exchange going by lying about how much he loves culinary school. Lissa's responses seem different, more upbeat, and to his surprise she asks if she can phone. It has been months since so he says okay and when his phone rings he feels a surge of energy and remembers the day he left the dog food.

They talk for thirty minutes about nothing and it's easy. He asks about Berry and she doesn't mention anything. Still a liar. She's probably too embarrassed. She has moved in with friends and lives closer to school. She hated Nickeltown and her great grandparent's old home. Her father made her live there.

"Oh," says Rydell, surprised. "I thought you picked the house, traded it over me."

"Oh no," says Lissa. "Things were so weird. I'm sorry. I never told you. You're right. Nickeltown is crap. Total crap."

Before they hang up, Lissa tells Rydell how much she misses his music.

Rydell is stunned, flummoxed by the new information. He opens his backpack, removes the lingonberry jam, and tests it with his pinky finger, one, two, three tastes, sweet and sour, tiny seeds coating his tongue. He takes in the empty, curtain-less room. He has given up everything, his music, his money, his interests, and wellbeing to nurse a fucked-up malformed obsession. Berry is in his van right now, a touch of rat poison away from death, laying on a soft plaid blanket in the dark, panting and confused, missing Lissa as bad as Rydell.

Jesus, I am a loser, thinks Rydell, as removes his balaclava. He stands and brushes himself off. He is glad to be leaving the horrible house and Nickeltown's blight, glad that he can abandon his plan. There is no point in going back out the bedroom window. He grabs the front door knob. It spins loosely in his hand. He tries again. More spinning. He tries again and again and an eerie feeling settles in and fear and adrenaline kick in. He won't check any other openings. He knows what he will find. He sees images, Lissa dribbling red milk into Berry's mouth, himself screaming big fat liar, his naked body on top hers, Nickeltown's doors clacking open and shut, a shabbily dressed mother grasping a child's hand, and a little girl eating blueberries, juice staining her teeth and running down her face.

He knows deep inside that he is a terrible person and that something bad is coming and that he deserves whatever it is. He hugs an imaginary guitar and sings quietly to Lissa.

Blackbird singing in the dead of night

Take these sunken eyes and learn to see

All your life

You were only waiting for this moment to be free

He finishes singing, calms his mind, presses his left hand to the living room window and slams his right fist through the pane of glass.

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A pug's wrinkled face, its most distinguishing feature, is also the source of the breed's name, *pugnus*, or fist, derived from the Latin, which Rydell remembers when he wakes up on the floor of Laura's house surrounded by broken glass. Berry is staring at him, the dog's bulging eyes a few inches from his face. Rydell sits up and feels his bleeding hand and begins to suck his knuckles. He is hurt but okay. The living room window is shattered. He has no idea how Berry got in until he sees the door ajar.

Berry yips and whines trying to get Rydell to play. The dog nudges him and he crawls to his feet and picks up his backpack and stumbles out into a yard full of lilacs, hundreds of them. The sun is coming up and he pauses to take in the sweet perfume. He is sad. It is his last visit.

He puts Berry in the house and closes the door and walks out to the sidewalk and turns right. He passes his van and his pace quickens and he heads north to Division street and the Nickeltown bridge and safe passage from hell. He does not look back. He will never look back. He is finally over Lissa.