

Dear SIXFOLD Readers,

Please consider A Cold Blue Flame, 3,500 words, for publication.

This story takes place in the fictional midwestern town of Wisner, where the blue-collar community is no stranger to hardened life and harsher winters. Minnie Dupret, a woman in her early 50's, finds herself back in her hometown, working as the line cook at the local bowling alley.

The story focuses on identity, lost hope, abandoned dreams, and self-sacrifice. Its undercurrent poses the question of contentedness and how it is found, if it can change form. The aspects and acts of letting go, finding acceptance, and honoring where others find spark are all explored in a rural, working-class town.

I hope this story speaks to you and what you are seeking.

Sincerely,
The Author

A Cold Blue Flame

First there was fire.

Minnie Dupret was the day cook at Knock 'Em Down Lanes, the fading bowling alley in Wisner. She'd been working the line for seven years. The previous cook had died or been fired, she couldn't quite remember, or maybe wasn't listening when she was told. Maybe wasn't told to begin with.

Sitting on a milk crate in the alley outside the kitchen, Minnie watched a crow hop back and forth towards a hamburger bun that had missed the dumpster. After a few beats of doing its two-step, the crow eventually took what it came for, and called it a day. Minnie leaned back against the brick, the wall radiating a cold that was built to last. She reached into her apron, sifted through pens and order tickets before pulling out the stove lighter. Two clicks and a small flame tumbled out of the barrel, met the end of a cigarette, and set it aglow. She

dropped the lighter back into her apron and took a drawn-out drag on the cigarette. Her cheeks pulled in, giving a quick glimpse at what the Minnie from 30 years ago may have looked like: taut skin and high lines that sang on their own, never needing a bronzer or a blush, the neon arrows that said, "This is where cheekbones go." As she exhaled, she looked up to a sky that threatened a snowfall – heavy and grey, and too quiet for its own good. The smoke meandered upwards, out of sight, indistinguishable from the sky itself.

The swing doors to the kitchen flew open, announcing the arrival of a woman scrawling on a notepad, her mousey-brown ponytail bouncing with every scribble of her pen. "Three burgers, the works, side of fries, side of onion rings," she said, ripping the ticket off her notepad. She slid it onto the rail, then began filling tiny paper cups with ranch and ketchup. Minnie nodded while releasing a smoke stream, flicked the cigarette into a mug that claimed "Iowa is more than corny!," then emerged from the alley. She grabbed the patties from the walk-in, peeled them apart and handed them off to the flat-top to let it have its way with them. A rogue curl fell to her face before she batted it back. A hairnet could barely contain all of Minnie's frizzed and fried hair. "Above my pay grade," it seemed to say, the overstretched mesh continuously throwing a white flag.

Tracy papered the plastic baskets, corralled them on top of a cooler to await their next stage in life.

Minnie pressed her spatula into the patties. The hiss of sizzle the first to break the silence in the kitchen.

"Russ here today?"

Tracy answered, more to the baskets than to Minnie, "Just stopped in to drop off quarters." Then after a beat, "And grab a soda."

Minnie gave a hint of smile, her lipstick showing the beginnings of crackle, and looked up to catch Tracy's eye. Tracy smirked, grabbed a fry from the batch Minnie was salting, and popped it into her mouth as she walked out through the swing doors.

"Corner!"

* * *

Knock 'Em Down opened in the late '80's and had the carpet to prove it. A town of twelve hundred, and a home to winters only nightmares are made of, Wisner had no problem keeping a bowling alley in business. It hosted leagues and tournaments, kids' birthday parties, middle school dates, occasional break-ups. The high school P.E. class even had a bowling unit each year. Minnie had been valedictorian when she graduated from that high school. She had given the speech, worn the sash, and felt a sense of re-

lief knowing her escape from Wisner was imminent. Her sights, and other four senses, for that matter, were dead-set on the siren that was New York – a city so well-versed in the art of seduction, a professional at luring fresh dreamers with little wherewithal. Minnie had a plan which involved college, which would lead to a career involving blazers, which would afford her a permanent settlement thousands of miles from her primary ties. But a plan burns fast when you pack it in a tinderbox of drained savings, douse it in years of alcohol, and let it catch a spark.

“Door!” Tracy emerged back into the kitchen, started loading up her arms and hands with the baskets Minnie had just filled.

“Some guy out there having a tantrum. Says his six-year old could make a burger faster than us.”

“Yeah? Have his kid drop off an application. Could use the help.” Minnie scraped the greasy bits from the flat-top, as Tracy dropped a ketchup cup into each basket.

“Gonna be that kinda day, I guess.” Her flannel sleeve grazed the pile of onion rings as she stabbed the order ticket.

“Isn’t it always?” Minnie flicked a piece of stray lettuce off Tracy’s wrist.

Kicking the door open with her boot, Tracy made her way out, before a quick look-back.

“Grab a beer later?”

"Yeah. I'll be the looker at the end of the bar, covered in fry oil."

* * *

Ambrosia's was one of three bars on the Main Street of Wisner. It was family-owned and operated, open for every holiday, closed only for the opening hours of hunting season. Rav ran the bar, always carrying a pencil behind his ear, always smelling of Old Spice. He was known as Papa Rav, the dad of the place, his family and family of patrons adopting one another.

As Minnie walked through the door, the flashing lights from the pinball machine bounced off her face, the reds and yellows shining bright against the snow that had settled comfortably on her shoulders. She made her way to the bar, pulled out the stool at the far end, though it was early enough that she had her pick. Bingo wouldn't start up for another few hours, and the nine-to-fivers hadn't made it to their five, just yet.

"Min," Rav nodded in her direction, then reached for a pint glass. "Preference today? Got a stout, a light, a lager."

Minnie peeled off her puffy coat, a take on a sleeping bag if the bag had no bottom. Unraveling her scarf, she answered, "Whatever's clever." She knew he'd give her the lager. And he knew she knew.

"What's the word?" Rav tossed a coaster on the bar.

"Oh, you know. Same shit, different day." Minnie took a pull of the beer before pulling off her gloves, crumpling them up and shoving them in her coat pocket.

Rav nodded as he wiped down the bottles of liquor and mixers. Minnie ignored the hardened snow clump inside her boot that had quickly taken to melting.

'Tired of just barely scraping by? Need a better way to get ahead? Wish you could finally take that dream vacation or make that life change? We're here for you! Old Gold 4 Fast Cash turns your dirty old bricks and coins into crisp tens and twenties.'

At this line, the corner tv screen showed a pile of dusty gold bricks with stink lines coming off them. Shining hundred-dollar bills started raining from the top of the screen, covering the pile of bricks completely.

'Come on down to OGFC, and let us help you finally change your life!' Here a hand poured a scoopful of gold coins into the black, where they dissipated from sight. A second hand joined the screen, shook the first one, an agreement which seemingly sparked little animated dollar bills with smiley faces to pop up and make a heart around the handshake.

"Tracy comin'?" Ah, speak of the devil." Rav grabbed another coaster, set it next to Minnie's as Tracy stomped the snow off her boots in the doorway and made her way to the bar.

"Jesus it's freezing. Ask me why I still live here, and I promise I won't have an answer." She started the unlayering process. "Like that haircut, Rav."

He nodded as he built a seven-and-seven in front of her. "Just monthly maintenance."

"It's all we can do, am I right?" Tracy clinked her glass to Minnie's pint, took a sip, skipping the straw altogether.

Minnie and Rav had graduated the same year. New York was always her plan, taking over Ambrosia's was always his. At 18, they'd sat on those same stools sharing a pizza when she told him he could do a lot better than that place. He'd said maybe running a bar was his New York. She had finished eating her way through a slice before throwing down the crust and claiming, "Bullshit."

Tracey was pulling a maraschino cherry off the drink sword, holding the sword by its tiny handle. "Russ was on his 5th soda when I handed him my drop. If I get in trouble because he was too sloshed to do math, I swear to God..."

"Think I've heard that before," Rav quietly chimed in.

"Get outta here. I'm serious." Tracy was halfway through her drink. "How're the girls, Rav? Givin' you hell?"

At this, Rav's face softened into a smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling into the well-worn lines already established. Any

grit Rav carried (and he carried some), would reliably melt down into sugar syrup when his girls were mentioned. He put the rag to rest for the moment, as if there simply wasn't enough room on the stage when his daughters were the leads. And they were always his leads.

"They're good, they're good. Lizzie's comin' home for break in a few weeks." At this, he flicked a postcard taped to the mirror behind him, the words "On, Wisconsin!" filling up the three-by-five space. "Marnie made J.V. volleyball this year. Been gettin' a little sassy with us, but you know, she's her momma's daughter." He let his own words seep in a minute before picking the rag back up, wiping circles up and down a bar that was already clean. It's the most he would say all night.

Minnie listened while keeping her eyes on the last sips of beer, which she swirled around in the glass with one hand, head resting in her palm of the other. Tracy jack-hammered the ice in her glass. Nothing but rocks.

"Man he loves those kids. I don't want any, I'll tell you that right now, I don't. But he sure makes it seem pretty okay sometimes."

"You really think he's happy, though? Been here for 50 years. Born in Wisner, probably die in Wisner. Probably while pouring a beer." Minnie swirled a now empty glass.

"You serious? I haven't met anyone who likes their life more than Rav likes his. Gives me hope."

Minnie looked up to find Tracy's eyes awaiting her own. "Hope for what?"

"I've been thinking. What do you know about Orcas Island?"

* * *

What came next was high heat.

Minnie turned on the fryer, provoking the oil to get hot and angsty. It was a Saturday in the dead of February, which meant at some point in the day, every member of the town would be making an appearance. It was only a matter of time before kids were crying and drunk leaguers were yelling at the score screen. Minnie knew the drill. Once dreaded the drill. Now disconnected from the drill entirely.

"But what would you do there?"

Tracy was filling sanitizing buckets, testing the water's temperature by dipping her hand in and out of the faucet's stream, a move that resembled the loose shaking of invisible dice.

"I mean, what do I do here, you know?" She dropped a dry rag into each bucket, watched them sink unassisted.

"It's just, it's not so easy to start all the way over, is all I'm saying. A lot can go wrong, and that wrong stuff can fuck everything up six ways from Sunday."

Tracy wrung out a rag, steam emitting high as the water dripped off below. "Well. I gotta try sometime, though, right? Gotta see what's out there. See if there's something I like." She wiped down sets of ketchup and mustard, little pairs of salt and pepper shakers. She arranged them into families; condiment parents, seasoning kids, and housed each family into identical caddies to be carried out and distributed around the alley. "There's no water here, you know? I think I might like being by the water."

Minnie felt the twinge of an old injury, a slight flare-up of pain that lived all the way down, below the bones, past the marrow, beyond the deposits. It was the kind of aching that's been looked over long enough to make one think it must've been imagined from the start, or maybe belonged to someone else entirely. But it wasn't either. It was real and living. It was every bit Minnie's. It was bright, and it was sore. It was the hottest center, frozen over, then thawed for just a moment, an ever so brief glimpse of what lived and lives. She started slicing tomatoes, then looked up at Tracy who was leaning against the cooler without an ounce of reserve. Tracy had buoyancy. Her voice. Her gait. Her skin. No bronzer for those cheekbones. Her arms crossed across her chest, earrings jingling near her chin, cheering on her jawline, she smiled at Minnie.

Laying the knife to rest, sifting through the rest of the new old ache lying and arising inside of her, Minnie said, "You're right. Gotta find what you like."

Russ pushed open the swing doors, jerking his head every which way before landing on a target.

"We've got a high school reunion, two birthday parties, and then tournament tonight, are you prepped for that?"

"We got it, Russ." Minnie slowed down her tomato slicing, a pace to hit the perfect pitch of uncomfortable.

"Tracy, use a calculator when you count out tonight, I mean it. I'm telling Doug to make sure you use one."

Tracy nodded while tying her apron around her waist.

"Oh good. Doug is gonna help."

Russ tried to chime in, throw a finger point, but Minnie grabbed the last word with ease, as she was prone to do.

"We're pretty busy back here, Russ. Gotta make sure we're prepped! Appreciate the heads-up."

Russ scoffed as he backed out, the doors swinging behind him. Tracy smirked, pulled her hair up into a ponytail, then grabbed a handful of pens and tossed them into her apron.

"Think I'm ready?"

* * *

The dishwasher whirred low, sounding as spent as everyone else in the kitchen. The final two teams of that night's tournament were in their ninth frame, finishing up. League nights were loud nights. The lead-up was always subtle; a rolling anchor-weight speeding so quickly it's quiet, only to strike, then explode. Click, bang. With little else competing for time, the alley saw team members at any hour, of any given day, bowling or not. Knock 'Em Down was their diner, their church, their living room. You spend that much time around something, you can get good at it just by breathing it in.

"Who's it down to?" Minnie asked while bleaching a cutting board.

"Same as last week - Strike it Rich and Steady Head-Pins. Randy's having a night."

Tracy was loading up a dish rack with plastic baskets, pressed the start button while her eyes glazed over, only looking up when the sound of a strike clattered over the low hum of the dishwasher, jolting her back. Back to a cramped kitchen with poor ventilation, to a bowling alley with no chance of a remodel, to a town where there was nothing new to know. She watched Minnie wrap up piles of cheese slices in plastic wrap.

Over the sound of the dishwasher's last hoorah, Tracy said,

"Rav's tonight? Think he's doing his chicken. I'm buyin." She pulled out a mess of cash from her apron pocket, evidence to support her claim.

"Save that for island living," Minnie replied, carrying her cheese packages over to the cooler. "I'll meet you there in a bit. Gonna finish up a couple things."

"You want help? I'm sure the whisky'll taste the same whether I get there now or in an hour."

"No, no, you get outta here. And leave your drop with me, I'll bring it to the office when I do my orders."

"You sure? Sounds like Doug's - "

"Doug can take one night off from being Russ' puppy. I got it." Then after a moment, "Tell Rav to set aside one of those chicken baskets for me. Tell him I'll throw a fit if he doesn't."

"He probably already knows."

"Which part?"

"Both." Tracy smiled as she pulled down her hat with mittened hands, her hair reacting with audible static. "Thanks, Min."

"See you in a bit."

* * *

The barroom was a sea of bodies and winter coats, the carpeted floor collecting old snow, tepid beer, orphaned gloves, and

drunken confessions that usually had no other place to land but the ocean floor of Ambrosia's. Minnie parted the sea, sticking her arms straight out and moving forward without taking no for an answer. She squeezed up to the bar where Tracy had been settled in, sitting amongst her own sea, one of crumpled greasy napkins scattered around her drink, letting everyone know, "here lies fried chicken." Tracy's bangs were sticking to her forehead, her forehead sticky with the sheen from alcohol and sweat and grease. She was laughing with her eyes closed when Minnie sidled in next to her.

"Min!" Tracy yelled.

Rav set down a basket of chicken and a pint of beer in front of her, giving her a little smile and nod.

"Thanks, Rav. It's a loony bin in here tonight."

"With my resident loonies front and center," he said, as he cleared all of Tracy's napkin balls. Tracy laughed again. "So it looks like our girl is leaving for greener pastures, huh?"

Minnie took a sip of the beer before answering. "Mhmm. Off she goes."

Tracy beamed, looking from Minnie to Rav. Her cheeks flushed rose.

"We're gonna miss you, Trace." Rav met her rosy look with a smile, then looked to Minnie, who was looking to her lager. Rav

waited long enough to pull Minnie's eyes up to meet his own. He saw her softness in that moment, mixed with the mix of familiar sediment, and could-have-been remnants. He held her gaze, and any packed baggage of hers she brought with it, until she was ready.

"We sure are," Minnie said as she turned to Tracy. "Me and Rav are gonna kill each other without you here to step in."

Rav smiled and nodded, lining up shot glasses for the reunion goers that had inevitably made their way over from the alley.

"Ah enough about that. Listen, I did your count, you forgot a few tips. I popped them in an envelope, lemme just stick it in your purse."

"What? Tips from who?"

"Yeah I don't know, they were left over, so I just wrapped 'em up." In one motion, Minnie shoved a sealed, thick envelope into Tracy's purse with one hand, handed her a few quarters with her other. "Now go put a song on for me. This bartender never takes my requests," she flashed a smile over to Rav.

Tracy hopped off her bar stool, whiskey-warmed to a point where she didn't question the envelope or the juke-box task. She pushed herself over to the other side of the room, her pink cheeks and sweater a perfect match.

"Looked like a hefty overage of tips she must've missed." Rav looked her in the eye.

"Eh, what the hell," she swatted an invisible fly. "Russ'll either be too drunk or hungover to figure it out."

"He'll be mad, Min."

"He's always mad. It'll be okay." And then, "She'll be okay."

The reunion slammed down their shot glasses just then, cheering something inaudible, maybe an inside joke from 20 years ago. They were clinging to each other, swaying at the end of the bar, clinging to the each others from another time, clinging to another time altogether. Minnie watched them turn glossy, turn to each other, to the each other they used to know. She rifled in her bag, grappling for her cigarettes, then turned to Rav.

"You got a light?"

* * *

Minnie stood down the block, on the gravel driveway of an empty lot. She held her shoulders to her ears, chin pinned to her chest, as she took a couple drags. The smoke left her body, venturing up and out into the black of winter, of night, of the sky's abyss. A few more drags and she tapped out the ash, sending a grey snowfall drifting to her boots. She flicked the butt into the old snow that had collected at the edge of the drive-

way, pushed her hands into her pockets, and walked into the night.

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