

## Damn That Margery Nolan!

Margery Nolan slipped on the icy sidewalk, her feet coming out from under her in a motion that pushed her legs up into the air. When her back landed, it came down hard on the frozen ground. The impact knocked her unconscious. A small crowd had gathered around Margery as she lay motionless, her Burberry scarf tucked in around her solemn and unmoving face, a look of surrender draped heavily upon her expression. A thick, down-stuffed coat contained her earnest form, extending in fat ribs of dark quilting all the way to her knees where her wool tights offered argyle diamonds southward to her rubber L.L. Beans. These were good and sensible shoes for this sort of weather, or at least the onlookers would comment so. They would say many things amongst each other. They would say she should have seen the ice patch, that she had such a smart coat, such a sincere face, sensible gloves. Some would kneel to help, though their efforts would be in vain. By the time the ambulance arrived to the corner of Main and Baird, Margery Nolan would already be dead.

Kimmy Pickard hung back in the crowd, a face peering through insulated rayon pant legs and heavy skirts. She listened to the grown-ups as they commented on the clothing of Margery Nolan, a person Kimmy had known only by name. Margery had worked at the post office, in the back sorting parcels and letters to the post office box holders, and Kimmy's dad had preferred a P.O. Box since before Kimmy was born. The post office is where Kimmy learned the name. Margery Nolan had a talent for mixing up the P.O. Box numbers when she sorted the mail, and this frustrated Kimmy's dad to no end. More times than Kimmy could count, her dad would gather up the contents of his box, sift through the letters, then announce, "Damn that Margery Nolan!" Then he'd return to the post office counter to hand in the letters for the wrong box and

ask for those that were his. As she peered between Mrs. Sackawitz's dangling grocery bags and Dr. Keitel's hanging hand clutching his flip-phone, Kimmy wondered whether her dad would be pleased to hear the news of Margery Nolan's demise.

Then Kimmy Pickard had a different thought that made her feel quite uncomfortable and entirely too grown-up. She wondered what would happen to those L.L. Beans, those very smart shoes that everyone was so keen to notice and comment on, rubber and sturdy and barely used.

At this thought, she slipped away from the crowd. It was over anyway. The ambulance drivers were done strapping Margery's already covered body to the gurney. There was nothing left to see of her, save those damn near perfect L.L. Beans protruding from the edge of the sheet. Did they use an actual sheet, Kimmy wondered as she moved up Baird Street toward the Rexall Drugstore. Just then, Elijah Jessop sidled up beside her.

"Ever seen a dead body before?" he asked.

"Scram, Lij!" Kimmy said without looking at him.

Elijah Jessop was younger than Kimmy, by two full years, and still in grade school, but because they lived on the same street and their dads were fishing buddies until last year, Elijah liked to think he and Kimmy were tight.

"Seriously. I thought she looked super creepy." Elijah mimicked the Thriller zombie dance, bent hands in the air, in a terrible Michael Jackson impersonation, and slid his foot over toward Kimmy, shimmying in closer to her. She slugged his shoulder. "Ow! What gives?"

“Listen,” Kimmy stopped walking. “By the time you get into middle school, I’ll already be an eighth grader. Don’t you get it?” She could see that her words shocked him but she didn’t care.

Elijah’s eyes winced with injury but then he stood taller, unswerving. “Jeeze. I just wanted to talk about the dead lady,” he said, crossing his arms.

“That dead lady had a name. Margery Nolan. Or didn’t you know?” Kimmy thought her tone sounded too harsh but she couldn’t seem to stop herself.

“Jesus. What crawled up your butt?” Elijah scowled and Kimmy could feel the heat of his glare. “I gotta go anyway,” he added as he leaned onto his Heelys and rolled down the sidewalk away from her.

She felt a tinge of regret watching him go. Kimmy wanted to caution Elijah not to use his Heelys on the icy sidewalks, but she caught herself. Sure, she had been hard on him but she also felt like this was a long time coming. Lately Lij had been hanging around way too much for her liking. Her dad had said so too. And besides, she wasn’t in the mood to make fun of a dead woman. And she was certain that’s what Elijah had in mind with his cutting tone. Plus, he’d brought Michael Jackson into it, and Michael Jackson—the king of pop, the musical genius that inspired everything Kimmy did creatively—hadn’t even been dead for a year. MJ was still off limits, as far as Kimmy was concerned. Anyway, Lij could never pull off a proper Thriller.

She took a deep breath and let it out as she rounded the corner at College. A window display of new shoes, mostly athletic types, New Balance, some Nikes, reminded her of those L.L. Beans, and she found herself wondering again what would become of them. What if they were her mom’s size? . . . But no. She tossed her head so that her beanie almost came off, but

she grabbed it with her sequins-covered mittened hands and tugged it back down over her ears and eyebrows, its thick, red yarn visible in her upper periphery. Beyond that, the blue clearness of a winter sky mocked her gloom. She wondered what the sky looked like outside of Vermont, if people shopped for things like New Balance and L.L. Beans in places where it wasn't so cold.

As she neared the corner across from the Rexall, she caught her breath. At the doorway of the drugstore, Miriam O'Brien stood in her pristine teal pea coat with matching leather gloves. She was patting her sleek, black hair as if she had just put her purple beret on her head and needed to ensure that each hair was in place. It was. Kimmy thought she should wait until the front door was clear so she hung back and watched Miriam. She guessed the coat was a Ralph Lauren; Kimmy had looked at one very similar in the Macy's when her family had gone to Burlington just before Christmas. The tag was shocking at two-hundred dollars, but it had been 40% off for the holidays. Still, a price like that was so completely out of Kimmy's range that even stealing something of that caliber was out of the question. Kimmy laughed at that thought; then she wondered if Miriam had stolen the coat. In her mind, she imagined a quite vivid scene: Miriam in the dressing room at Macy's with an armful of clothes, but her eye on the coat only. The rest of the clothes thrown to the floor in a pile as Miriam stripped down and put the coat on next to her skin. Then, she would layer her own clothes back over the coat, eyeing herself in the mirror to check the bulkiness of her look.

Kimmy sighed and kicked at the dirty pile of snow on the curb. Watching Miriam adjust her lapels in the reflection of the window at Rexall Drugstore, Kimmy decided that the coat couldn't possibly be stolen. Miriam's smile was too authentic, her cheeks too pink. As she turned in the opposite direction moving down the sidewalk and away from Kimmy, Miriam's swagger was a little too confident. She did not have the stride of someone who resorted to

stealing things. Still, maybe it wasn't a Ralph Lauren after all. Maybe it was just a Land's End, or even some off brand that only had the vague resemblance of something vogue. Kimmy wouldn't care if she had an off brand, but she knew that she would never have been able to get a coat like that out of Macy's while wearing it under her clothes.

She crossed to the Rexall. Her reflection in the glass doors made her smile. She was rocking her Michael Jackson replica jacket, a gift from her dad. It was not the most practical for their bitter cold snaps like a pea coat would be, but she just layered up underneath it. Besides, with all of the zippered pockets, it was practical for other things. And the pleather red matched her red beanie to perfection. The jacket made her happy, and she had been so sad since the news came that MJ had passed last June. That was also about the same time that her dad had lost his job at the mill. The last few months had been tough on everyone. When she opened the package on Christmas morning she hadn't been expecting much, but that jacket, the very same one that MJ wore in the "Beat It" video of 1982, had made her heart leap with joy.

"Dad! But how?" she had squealed, pulling the stiff, red jacket out of the tissue and holding it up above her head to admire it. The silver zippers matched its silver pleather shoulder patches.

"We got our ways, child," her dad said then winked at her, and Kimmy knew what he meant. Her stomach sank a little, but at that moment, Kimmy didn't care what the jacket had cost her family or how they got it; looking up at the red pleather in her hands, she felt so happy then. She put it on over her too-small nightgown and shoved the sleeves up mid-arm length, just like Michael Jackson wore it in the video when he stopped that gang-war with a dance fight. Then she stood up and did a toe stand letting loose an MJ style "Eee hee, hoo!" The whole

family erupted in laughter. The reflection she saw then in the doors of the Rexall Drugstore reminded her of that moment and she grinned at herself as she pulled the doors open.

Inside the Rexall, she heard the faint sounds of Muzak playing a rendition of “Nothing Compares 2 You” and Kimmy starting humming the tune as she removed her mittens and then thumbed the colorful items on the candy rack, M&Ms, Whatchamacallits, the black and yellow checkers of the Abba-Zaba. At the lone cash register, the clerk, who was also the pharmacist, a woman in her late 40s with dyed red hair and a flowered top, was talking in an animated voice to an older woman with a gray bun wearing a knit shawl and denim skirt. The two barely looked at Kimmy when she came in, but Kimmy noticed right away that the older woman had on worn, rubber L.L. Beans. Her wool socks slouched down around her shoes as if to call attention to them. Kimmy glanced down at her own shoes, a pair of Mary Janes that belonged to her mom. They were too big for Kimmy still, but she had stuffed the toes with toilet paper, so they fit alright. Aside from the scuffs and a little wear on the soles, they were in pretty good shape. Plus, they had sturdy toes, so Kimmy could do many Michael Jackson toe stands in them if her mom wasn’t around. If her mom was there, she would scold Kimmy for doing toe stands in those shoes. She would say, “Kimmy, those have to last us.” Then Kimmy would lower back down onto her heels and put her chin to her red pleather and sulk, but she knew her mom was right every time. Still, standing at the candy aisle, her mom was nowhere in sight and Kimmy was tempted to let loose with an MJ “momse momsa, ma’makusa!” and stand right up on her toes, maybe even moonwalk across the store, but she didn’t want to call attention to herself. Instead, she gave a quick MJ spin and plucked a pack of triple-A batteries off the end-cap, slipping them into her lowest zipper pocket on the red jacket.

“Can I help you?” the red haired lady asked.

Kimmy's heart dropped and she turned around to face the two women at the register. She smiled her biggest smile and reached up to her beanie, politely removing it from her head.

"No, Ma'am," Kimmy said as her blond, blunt-cut hair popped up at odd angles once freed from the beanie. "You see, Margery Nolan has just had a terrible accident up the road. They took her away in an ambulance and my mom asked me to wait up here. Is that okay? They were friends."

"Margery from the post office?" the older woman asked, creasing her brow at Kimmy and leaning forward, rocking on her L.L. Beans. A propane tank sat near her feet, not the camping size, Kimmy noticed, but the next size up, squat and white.

"Yes, Ma'am." Kimmy continued, and now she wrung the beanie in her hands with such worry. "She slipped on the ice. It was terrible."

"Heavens to Betsy," the clerk said. "I just saw Margery at Bunco on Saturday. Is she alright, yah think? Who's your mom? Maybe I know her."

Kimmy hadn't thought of this and it scrambled her thoughts. She decided on honesty as her impulsive answer. "Shawna Pickard. From Bo's Café. Everyone knows Shawna."

"Oh, sure I do." Now the clerk smiled at Kimmy seemingly forgetting all about Margery Nolan. "She gives the biggest slices of pie." Leaning in toward the older woman, she added in a conspiratorial tone, "Don't tell Bo. So what happened with Margery, hu?"

"Well, I think it was pretty bad because they pulled the sheet over her," Kimmy said, though when the ladies' eye went wide, Kimmy thought she should have kept that detail out.

"When did this happen?" The older woman asked with a voice that had wilted.

“Just now, ma’am.”

“And you say she slipped?” the pharmacist-clerk asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Then my mom asked that I wait up here. So, I’m just waiting for her, okay?” Kimmy asked again, noting how well the Margery Nolan situation fit her needs.

“Sure, hon,” Red answered. Her brow wrinkled in concern. “It’s too cold for you outside anyway in that thin jacket.”

Kimmy thought that last comment was not necessary, maybe even rude. Still, she nodded at the ladies and wandered down the greeting card aisle leaving them to discuss Margery Nolan’s fate.

Kimmy made her way to the cosmetics. Shiny tubes of lipstick and squares of pink and red blushes lined the shelves there. Kimmy picked up a “tester” lipstick and drew a red line on her hand. She blended it with her finger and squished up her face, like she was considering its hue, like she really cared whether or not the shade matched her skin tone. Still, she tried another shade, and another. The three lines of varied reds blurred into her skin like a sunburn and she longed for summer. The smell of bar-b-ques and sunblock, a warm sun instead of the cold one that hung low on the southern horizon, the sound of fireworks—all of it made her melancholy. She wanted to go back to a time before everything had become complex, a time when she could be a kid and just relax, not worry about anything, not have to do this. It wasn’t so long ago, just a few months gone, but still.

“Hey, hon” the red-haired clerk called back to her. She looked up seeing the clerk hoisting that propane tank onto her hip and heading toward the door.



Stupid, Kimmy thought. Pay attention.

“Yes?” she asked, perhaps a little too high pitched.

“I’ve gotta help Mrs. Watkins with her propane canister,” the clerk said. “Can I leave you in charge of the store? I’ll just be on the curb out front and there’s no one else here right now. Just don’t break nothing.” She waved her hand not waiting for a response and Kimmy waved back not really giving a response but feeling like luck was on her side.

As soon as she heard the bells on the door, Kimmy stuffed her beanie back on her head and sprang into action. She ran up the aisle to the feminine hygiene products and scanned the shelves for the O.B. tampons, the smallest tampon package and the most expensive. She had a hard time remembering what they looked like. Once she found them, she stuffed three boxes in her jacket, each in their own zipper pocket. Then she sprinted to the front of the store and slipped behind the register to where the cigarette cartons were kept in neat stacks. She grabbed a carton of Marlboro Reds and stuck it length-wise up the front of her jacket. Just as she turned to escape from behind the register, she heard the jingle of the bells on the door and the clerk’s voice, “turns out that Josh Clark was passing by and he—” The clerk froze at the door. “Why, you little sneak,” she said, spying Kimmy frozen behind the register.

Kimmy’s heart was racing and her face was hot, but she was, in fact, frozen. She didn’t know what to do. She had been afraid of something like this, of getting caught. She had even played the scenario out in her imagination seeing herself much braver in her mind than she felt just then. Should she run? Where would she go? The woman stood firm at the door, a floral patterned blockade, her hands now facing Kimmy, fingers splayed as if to say she would catch her if she made a break for it.

“I’m sorry,” Kimmy said, eyes locked onto the clerk’s eyes, heart beating so loud that she could hear it thrumming in her ears like a Michael Jackson song, *Billy Jean is not my lover*. . . And then, Kimmy Pickard, by no choice of her own, started to cry. She felt stupid for crying, weak even, but she couldn’t help herself. Before even a few seconds of the initial break in her emotional dam, she was overflowing with grief, snorting and wailing, the sounds came from her in loud sobs and gasps.

The clerk lowered her hands. “Listen, hon.” Her words sounded careful but still stern. “Tell me what you took and I won’t call the cops. Did you get into the register?”

Kimmy hadn’t thought of the register and this gave her pause, but she continued with her bawling. She reached her hands up under her jacket and pulled out the carton of cigarettes as she sniffled and screeched. “Please don’t tell my mom,” she wept. “I only wanted to try them. I swear, I was just curious.”

“Uh huh,” the clerk said sounding unconvinced. “You got more there. Let me see what’s in them other pockets.” As she said this, she stepped toward Kimmy and Kimmy flinched like the clerk might strike her. “Honey, I’m not gonna hit you. Now show me what else you took.” Now she extended her hand to Kimmy, taking the carton of cigarettes from her. Kimmy unzipped the pockets with the tampons, one pocket at a time, while the clerk gathered the boxes from her. “Oh, now, that’s just downright sad. You mean to tell me your mom don’t get these things for you? I wish I could let you keep these, but I can’t. You can get tampons from the school nurse. You just try, okay?”

Kimmy nodded, sniffing.

“Now listen,” the clerk continued. “Because you were stealing cigarettes, and I *am* worried about you starting smoking at such a young age, I’m gonna have to call your mom.” This news started Kimmy’s wailing up again but the clerk raised her voice over the din. “I won’t tell her about the tampons. You’re lucky, hon. If I called the cops, they’d take you to jail. This is a big offense for a kid. A carton of cigarettes is nearly seventy dollars now ‘a days. Not cheap with these state taxes. You’d be stealing from the government.” Not wanting to give the clerk a reason to bring the police in, and also not wanting to push her luck with the clerk, Kimmy took deep breaths. She gave the woman her mom’s cell phone number and had a seat on the floor by the candy aisle, as the clerk had instructed.

Within ten minutes, her mother came through the glass door, the bells jingling with menace. “Of all the stupid, stupid ideas!” Shawna Pickard was saying before she was even in the drugstore. She did not look at Kimmy but instead went straight up to the red-haired clerk extending her hand to the woman. “Thank you so much for calling me, Mary. You are a saint to not bring in the authorities, though I will say it might have done this one some good.” She gestured her ungloved hand at Kimmy sitting on the floor.

“It was nothing, Shawna. It was more the . . . *item* that she was stealing that caused me concern, is all,” Mary said. “What happened with Margery Nolan?”

“What *was* she stealing?” Kimmy’s mom asked not responding to the Margery Nolan question but finally looking to Kimmy on the floor. Kimmy’s eyes were wide at her mom trying to convey the story of Margery Nolan in her expression, but her mom’s angry glare forced her gaze away. Instead, Kimmy’s eyes went to her mom’s feet where she saw her dad’s work boots. Her heart sank seeing those old shoes on her mom’s feet. Almost at once, she imagined brand

new, or barely used L.L. Beans there, with argyle diamond tights keeping those tired waitress legs warm. She hoped the clerk did not notice her dad's work boots, too.

“Shawna, she wanted to try smoking.”

“Oh my heavens,” Shawna said, placing her bare fingers to her lips.

“I know,” Mary reached over and touched Shawna's shoulder. “Which is why I thought you should know. You should have a talk with that girl about proper health and development. I have no idea what they tell them over at that middle school.”

“Good lord,” was all Kimmy's mom could say.

“Well, I saw no reason to involve the police about a . . . *single* pack of cigarettes,” Mary said and then gave a knowing glance to Kimmy sitting on the floor. “You can get up now, Kiddo. Your mom's gonna take you home and talk with you.” Kimmy stood, adjusting her red pleather jacket. She tried to smile at the clerk, but just couldn't find the courage.

“Well, thank you again,” Shawna Pickard said, extending her hand for Mary to shake. Then she turned, put that same hand on Kimmy's back and guided her to the door. “Not a word, missy,” she hissed. The bells clanged one final time and they were gone from the drugstore and Kimmy was back on the cold but sunlit sidewalk outside.

“Just walk,” her mom said in an almost normal tone. They rounded the corner and came to the family Subaru. Shawna went to the driver's side while Kimmy got in the passenger seat. Once the doors were shut, Kimmy turned to her mom and slumped, preparing to hear what her mother had planned for this moment.

“Only a pack?!” her mom asked.

“No, it was a carton.”

“Well, she said, ‘a pack,’ didn’t she?” Her mom turned the key in the ignition and started the motor. “Last I checked, that is not a carton.”

“She didn’t want me to get in too much trouble with you. I guess a carton’s some kind of criminal offense because of how much they cost.” Kimmy leaned back and closed her eyes. “I hate this.”

“*You* hate it? *You* do?” Shawna pulled away from the curb, her hands gripping the steering wheel, blue veins rising from the back of her hands. “If it was me, and I got caught, I would go to jail; we’ve been over this. He’s gonna be pissed about the cigarettes.” She turned left. “What about the tampons?”

“She said *I* could have gone to jail, Mom. She said I was stealing from the government.”

“She wasn’t going to send you to jail, nice as she is. No tampons then?”

“No. She took those from me too. But I did have three packs.” Kimmy exhaled hard before turning to look out the window. She felt sick to her stomach.

“What was that about Margery Nolan?” her mom asked, but Kimmy was too tired to answer just yet. Instead, her eye caught on a group of kids at the high school. They were engaged in a very a cold basketball game. White puffs of steam billowed from the players as they rolled off of and dodged each other, all the while bouncing what Kimmy imagined must have been a rock hard basketball. Her head turned to stay with them as their car drove by the school. They moved in flashes of bright colors and streaks of white teeth. Kimmy imagined their

laughter and freedom. What was it to play? She almost remembered. Then she did remember something and she unzipped her lowest pocket.

“I got the batteries,” Kimmy said pulling out the triple-As and fingering the teeth of the zipper before handing the batteries to her mom.

“Well, at least his remote control will work,” her mom responded taking the batteries and pocketing them in her own, thin coat. “Listen, I’m sorry you have to do this, Kimmy.”

“I know.” Kimmy looked at her mom then and noticed she seemed older than just the summer before, weary and worn out. “Mom. I know.”

“It’s just that, your dad will be back to work soon and we’ll—” her mom stopped short and held her breath.

“I know, Mom. I can help. I’ll do better.”

Kimmy’s mom looked over at her in the passenger seat. She reached over and patted her daughter’s leg. The gesture was gentle, almost reassuring.

“Hey, Mom?” Kimmy said.

Shawna didn’t respond but instead glanced in Kimmy’s direction before looking back at the road ahead.

“I know where we can get you a good pair of L.L. Beans, and maybe a better coat too, but you’ll have to say you play Bunco.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, that thing about Margery Nolan just now?”

“Yeah?”

“I saw Margery Nolan slip on the ice earlier, even though she had on these very excellent L.L. Beans. The ambulance came and all, only they pulled the sheet over her head and—”

“She’s dead?”

“Yeah, so—”

“Kimberly Michelle Pickard!” Shawna brought the car to a complete stop in the middle of the road. She turned to Kimmy; her eyes filled with terror. “Do you mean to tell me that you would have me steal the shoes off of a dead woman?”

“Well, yeah, but. . . she’s not using them—”

“Oh my God. I told your father this was what would happen. Good Lord. Good Lord, indeed.” She closed her eyes and shook her head.

Kimmy was dumbfounded. She thought her mom would have been excited for this information, proud even that Kimmy had thought of this all on her own. And something so practical. Something so smart. Everyone said they were such smart shoes.

“I just thought . . .”

“I know what you thought,” her mom said.

Kimmy felt sick. “I’m sorry, Mom,” she said, though she wasn’t even sure why she felt sorry.

“No. I’m sorry, Kimmy.” Shawna took a breath then started the car down the road once more.

When they got home, Shawna touched Kimmy's shoulder and said, "Go wash up for dinner." Then, Shawna went into the living room and stood with her hands on her hips looking to the place where Kimmy knew her dad would be, sitting in his recliner, waiting for his remote control batteries.

As Kimmy climbed the stairs she heard her parent's muffled voices. She could make out parts of what they were saying, "Rexall Drugstore" and "batteries," and then something about the way they had been raising their daughter. She thought her mom had started to cry.

By the time Kimmy reached the top landing of the stairs, she could see the scene in the living room, her parents below her like clay figures in a diorama, her dad in the recliner with the footrest up, mom in the center of the room, head bent, shoulders shaking. Kimmy knew for certain her mom was crying when she heard the words, "This is just the last straw. The last straw."

As she went into her room, Kimmy scanned the posters of Michael Jackson along the walls. Dark, smiling eyes gleamed at her from every angle. She closed the door and slumped against it, slowly lowering herself to the carpet and shutting her eyes. Rubbing the sharp edges of the lower zippers on her red, pleather jacket, Kimmy fought the urge to cry. She thought about what it would mean to be found out and to be labeled a thief for all time in her small town. She thought of her dad's riled voice, letters flapping in his hand, saying "Damn that Margery Nolan!" She opened her eyes on his record collection of 80s and 90s pop, including every LP Michael Jackson ever produced. These stood proud in the corner by her second-hand stereo reminding her of the things they would never sell.



On her nightstand, Kimmy focused on a small frame hosting an image of Michael Jackson from 2007, in celebration of the rerelease of *Thriller*—his nose, by then, a narrow spike between comically huge eyes. His mouth had an almost clownish quality above a newly cleft chin. Beyond the frame and through the window, gray clouds had covered the winter blue sky reminding Kimmy of the morning's events. She remembered the way Miriam O'Brien's hat had framed her smiling face. She thought of Lij wheeling away on his Heelys down the slick sidewalk. Finally, the dead woman herself came into Kimmy's mind, cold and lifeless and absolutely still. So permanent and inevitable.