

4-1-2011

Late

Becca Gumhold
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr>

Recommended Citation

Gumhold, Becca (2011) "Late," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 32: No. 2, Article 62.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol32/iss2/62>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Prairie Light Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

Late

Becca Gumhold

The sweat slicking his forearms mesmerized her. The way the moon hit it so that he shone like he'd been dipped in silver. And how it washed out the angry symbols and barbed words across his flesh. It looked like Polk had run from the other end of town. If he left the minute his shift ended at Joseph's Groceries, this had to be his personal best. But even at top speed, he didn't make it before the sexton chained the gates.

After a few metal-rattling kicks, he tossed his sapper coat over the top of the iron spikes. When he hoisted himself up, his palm slipped and caught on an iron point. He hesitated for one stunned second, before slipping down to the ground, and jogging toward her with his hand in his mouth.

"Sorry I'm late," he said into his skin.

She perched on the top of a headstone, and crossed her legs.

"You still got here," she shrugged, "More or less."

His lips twitched, and the scar at the corner of his mouth widened. He nodded, and paced while his breath caught up with him. His hunched silhouette passed in front of the marble face of Annabelle Tyree, Beloved Wife & Mother's headstone. His thick eyebrows pressed together under his knit cap.

"It's been weird without you home."

"You mean it's not really a home anymore," she said.

She examined her glitter nail polish, and picked at a rough edge.

"Yeah," he said. His lips twitched again, as if they wanted to smile but had frozen in a grimace. "You always been better at words, kid."

She scraped the dirt from underneath her thumbnail.

"No, just different."

He wet his lips, and brushed an itch under his cap.

"It's those differences that make everyone beautiful," she said.

She could tell from twinkle in his gold-green eye that he caught the irony in that. His orange-brown one looked black in the shadows of the elm looming over him. He nudged his fingers under his hat again, exposing a little of his clean-shaved scalp to the moonlight.

He shook his head.

"You really believe that?"

"You don't?" she said "Isn't it that quarter 'chink' in me that first got your attention?"

"Ya said you weren't."

"You'll never know now, will you?"

The wind swept away the flake of nail polish she'd picked, and warned of a coming storm through the yellowing leaves. She closed her eyes and breathed deep, while the breeze danced up her back.

"Do you ever think about that?"

“What?” he said.

“How ridiculous you are?”

His lighter eye darkened, while she preoccupied herself with the stone underneath her. She slid her hand over its craggily surface, feeling it scratch and prick her palm.

“You’ve spent all this time wondering what you could have done different,” she said, “All this energy for something you had no control over.”

“No. I coulda done something.”

“Yet, you don’t think anything at all about how ignorant you are.”

When the wind buffeted him, he hurried back to the gate and yanked his coat down.

“Yeah, I’m stupid. I got that,” he said, pulling his arms through the holes.

“You know what I mean, Polk.”

He snorted, and pressed his tongue over his lips.

“I didn’t run my ass down here to talk about this.”

“Mouth,” she said.

He rolled his eyes and exhaled.

“I didn’t run my *butt* down here to talk about this,” he said, “Better?”

“Much,” she said, “What did you come down here for, then?”

“How am I s’posed to know? This was your idea.”

“I didn’t tell you why?” she said.

“No,” he said, “That ain’t your M.O.”

She smirked.

“What is my M.O.?”

He stopped pacing long enough to dislodge a rock from the dirt with his steel-toed oxblood boot.

“Fucking with me.”

And send her a smile, daring her to force him to correct himself. He shoved his fists in his pockets, and pulled the front of his coat closed.

“That sounds about right,” she said.

“Agreeing with me?” he said.

“There has to be a first time for everything.”

He rolled the rock under his sole.

“N a last,” he said.

“I thought we weren’t going to talk about these things.”

“You brought it up.”

“Then let’s talk about it. We can continue right where we left off, too. Let’s see, it’s all your fault, and I have no control over anything.”

She bent over to pluck a yellow leaf from the ground. The blade of it drooped, even when she twirled its stem between her fingers.

“You honestly believe that, don’t you? That, somehow, what I did is because of you.”

“Ain’t it?”

“Not everything is black and white, Polk. Not people, not this.”

“People *are* black ‘n white—”

“And somehow, you’re better than everyone else?”

“Not everyone.”

She crossed her legs, tapping the heel of a red ballet slipper against the shined front of the headstone.

“Oh? Who tops you?”

He lifted his head.

“You.”

“All that’s happened and you still think that.”

He nodded as if she’d asked a question.

“Do you remember the excuses I used to give you?” she said.

His mouth flattened.

“I don’t wanna go there.”

“We’re already there, Polk,” she said, then smiled coldly, “What was your favorite? I liked ‘I had a big lunch.’ That works. Then there’s ‘I’m not feeling too well.’ That one’s a classic. You can’t argue with that.”

“Stop.”

“You can’t be here and pretend it never happened!”

“I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

“Mm, is that so? Do you remember when you would almost be on to me, and I would touch your face. Trace your scar with my finger. Kiss just your lower lip,” she kicked her legs back and forth like a child, “Slide my hands down your chest, so that you forgot all about how when you touched mine, you could count my ribs.”

She pushed her hand under her sweater, and mouthed counting as she tapped each bone. *One. Two. Three.*

He pinched the bridge of his nose, refusing to look at her.

“But then I couldn’t hide it from you—”

“I loved you, kid. I still do,” he said.

She narrowed her eyes.

“You’re not going to cry, are you?”

His swallow clicked.

“If you think about it, it’s kind of funny. I put so much effort into hiding it from you, and it turns out you never wanted to know.”

“Ha ha,” he said, keeping his face behind his hand.

“You made it easier for me.”

“If you’d told me, I woulda. . .”

“What? Tempted me with even more of your white chocolate cheese-cake? Maybe some *bistecca tagliata*?”

She let her smile drop.

“Why are you out here, Polk? This isn’t where you belong.”

“Where do I belong?”

“Home,” she said, “And before you start, don’t give me that gallant speech about how I’m your home. You don’t sleep in me, and you don’t have a key.”

“Ya never gave me one.”

“Because I didn’t want you to have one.”

He dropped his hand back down to his side.

“You didn’t wanna tell me,” he said.

“That’s what I said.”

“Ya kept me out.”

She nodded.

“How could you have stopped anything, then?” she said.

“I couldn’t.”

He nudged the rock back into its rut.

“Doesn’t change anything,” he said.

“No, it doesn’t,” she said.

She hopped down to the soft lawn.

“Same time tomorrow?” he said.

“Adjusted for your run across town?”

The scarred corner of his mouth lifted.

“Give yourself the night off. All this guilt will kill you,” she said over her shoulder.

He nodded, and stopped to pluck a dandelion from the ground. He set it in the space where she’d sat, and used the granite to ease himself down to the grass. From here, the elm seemed impossibly large, and the circle of rocks he’d messed with disappeared.

He traced the etching of her name in that stone, and said, “Then I’d be here, where I belong.”