



Broken China

by Patrick Goggins

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She was a slip of a girl, barely twelve. Her tiny feet barely reached the floor, sitting alone on the sofa as she did. Hands folded softly on her lap, her tiny calico dress clung to her bones as she breathed softly, in and out. The morning sun had just risen but she was wide awake. It occurred to her that it was time to make the tea.

She glanced to her left. He shook his head “no.” She returned her visage and continued breathing. There he sat, legs at forty-five degrees, his scrotum forming a bag in the gusset of his chinos. The tattered cloth chair he sat in had always been “his” chair. She knew it. She got the sofa because it sat two and she could lie in it, although now her feet would crane over the edge of the arm, draped with white crocheted doilies.

The sunlight streamed in and the wind outside rushed through the oaks. An errant limb ticked against a window in the back bedroom. Tick, tick tick. It sounded like a clock randomly out of sequence. Tick. It was as if time accelerated and slowed randomly with the whims of the solar forces that drove the wind outside. How long had she been sitting there she wondered. Hours? Days?

She let out a sigh. He adjusted himself, sweat having collected between the buttocks and his sore elbow sought a more comfortable spot on the arm of the tattered chair. Tick. It was getting gray now, discolored and slumped as it was. She could only look at it. The bare wood floors were strewn with broken china, glass and paper. It was a violent mess, she imagined having to clean it up. She remembered what the room looked like when it was clean. It would glow. She remembered being happy in it, the smell of rutabaga pie drifting in as she read quietly on the sofa. Her sofa.

Tick. The minutes drifted by in silent meditation. They both stared forward, looking at it. No movement, it was more gray than anything else. The sudden thought of rutabaga pie made her stomach rumble. He heard it and shot a glance at her. Adrenaline made her hair stand on end. Piloerection. She stared forward, frozen. She felt her pulse beating against the veins in her neck. Sweat formed on her brow. Stare forward.

Slowly, his eyes softened and his glance melted into paternal approval. She was safe for now. Her breathing returned to normal, though it took about ten minutes. Tick. The sun drifted westward, now illuminating the kitchen. The winds died in the afternoon torpor. He sat, an obdurate rock of a man. Barrel chested with a manly gut, his red beard flecked with gray. The grimace on his face was sort of burnt in, like the ghost of the last image on the television screen when you turned it off. The television, a Philco, sat in the corner. Her show would be on soon but it never even occurred to her to turn it on. She sat.

The evening paper arrived with a thump on the front step, tossed up by the skinny runt of a kid with the brown front teeth. She heard his bicycle crunching over the leaves in the front lawn. The sun began its descent, leaving her with vague memories of the struggle. As the familiar drape of darkness settled in, the burning bulb behind the lace-trimmed lampshade cast warm shadows over the silent room. The struggle. She remembered how loud it was. Things breaking

and voices, loud voices seeking to climb atop one another. One reaching higher with the other getting louder. Simultaneous voices full of rancor. Voices full of sin and hate. She sighed at the thought of it. When the breaking began all she worried about was the porcelain doll in the tiny doll chair in the corner. Please don't break that. No, but there were plates, bottles, glasses. Butts and ashes strewn across the floor as the ashtray hit the wall.

The evening drifted quietly by, both in their positions, sitting and waiting. She wondered how long it would take. Even though the bulb gave it a brown-ish glint, she could tell it was still gray, and that it had gotten a bit darker. The first whiff drifted across her nostrils. She had never smelled anything like it. It smelled like acid. It made her eyes water.

He could apparently smell it too. He shifted in his seat.

The morning came and the wind picked up again. A crow called outside. She had to go, but she held it. His eyes were firmly fixed on it, as if there was no other thing. The violence was stuck on his face like lacquer. She remembered how he used to smile and even laugh sometimes. Sometimes she'd sit on his lap and watch his show while the pots rattled in the kitchen, the smell of pot roast and potatoes drifting in.

Her stomach rumbled. She couldn't hold it anymore. She glanced to her left. He closed his eyes. Can't hold it any more. The warm liquid flowed from between her legs onto the cushion of the sofa. Her sofa. She felt the warm spot spread underneath her and she felt relief. The acrid smell of the urine was much better than the smell that it made, slumped there on its chair. The leather chair that spoke of authority. It spoke of derangement. She would very much like to get rid of that chair. She imagined it out on the curb on trash day.

The sun streamed in. It had black patches now. The steps downstairs rumbled. They looked at each other, panicked. He gripped the handle of the pistol as they stared at the window on the front door. Steps. They could feel the deck rock as the weight of an adult shifted, moving upward step by step. Then the silhouette of an adult woman appeared on the white cloth curtain, trimmed in lace. Mrs. Schumacher. There was a knock on the screen door. Bap bap bap. Mrs. Schumacher was striking the frame, which rattled against the door frame loosely as she struck it. Bap bap bap.

"Hello?" she called in her missish voice, but it was like a cannon in the room. She looked at him, he looked at her. He was sweating now. He gripped the pistol as he sat there, frozen. She was waiting for him to tell her what to do, but all he did was sit there.

Soon Mrs. Schumacher left. The deck rumbled as her massive frame lumbered across the loosely nailed steps. The afternoon sun began to warm the room. The smell became powerful. It was splotchy black and gray now and swollen. She seemed to remember seeing a dead dog a few years back. Each day she passed by it got blacker and blacker until the necrophagic birds arrived and picked it clean.

Mercy. That would be mercy. The smell was thick throughout the room. They were enveloped in putrid silence. Each moment was a violent struggle against gagging or puking. She focused on trying not to think about it. Think about better times. Think about something else. Maybe she could trick herself into actually liking it. Was that sago pearls and hash? Her stomach rumbled. Her hunger

became painful.

The evening paper popped onto the front deck and soon after the front deck began to rumble again. By now, he had peed himself too and the room was ripe. Her eyes were watering it was so bad. It had purplish black patches now and there were flies in the room, coming from nowhere. Two figures appeared in the lace. This time it was a male voice that called out.

“Jones, you in there?” The screen door creaked open and a hand struck the front door itself. Bam! Bam! “Jones?” There were murmurs. “Jones, you in there? The girl in there with you?” Bam! More murmurs. It sounds like they couldn’t agree on something. “Jones?” There was urgent discussion outside. Mrs. Schumacher was apparently winning this discussion. He lifted the pistol off his lap. It wouldn’t be long now. “Jones, everything all right in there?” Then there was silence. They both stared at the lace cloth curtain, folded rhythmically on the wood rod above the window. There was about a minute of it when Schumacher murmured something to his wife. More silence. Then, slowly, they backed away from the door, their shadows fading downward against the curtain screen.

The Schumacher’s discussion became full voiced as they crunched across the leaves in the front yard. She could hear the word “police,” cops and police. It wouldn’t be long now. She could see him sweat. He was breathing deeply and fast. She sat frozen, for now unaware of the awful smell in the room. All she could do was look at that gun. He alternately gripped and ungripped it. He set it on his lap, then on the arm of the tattered chair. She felt suddenly unsafe. It lie there inert, unable to protect her. Flacid yet stiff. It hadn’t always been like that. Its last moments were spent loudly arguing. “You lazy sonofabitch!” She’d heard it so many times. This time though was the worst. There had been the occasional broken plate, and she’d even see a knife. But never a gun. How’d she get that gun? He had wrestled it from her, that much was for sure. How it ended up under her chin was something else. So loud, so confused. The shot sent her flying backwards into her chair, the chair of authority, and there it lay. Globes of skull, hair and brain, pink white and brown, were now brown and black, still stuck to the wall. The blood spray fanned out over the book case. It will take days to clean that up she thought.

Then there was the sound of a vehicle coming to a halt outside. It slowed and stopped. Two car doors opened and shut. Clump clump. Two pairs of feet crunched over the leaves. It was dark out. They looked at each other. He reached over and gripped the pistol. Steps. The deck rattled and shook the frame of the house. These were large adults, men, bigger than the Schumachers. Step step, they were silent except for the sound of their feet pushing upward. Her head began to swim. She was about to faint. It was dark out so there were no shadows on the lace curtain when the screen door opened and a heavy fist pounded on the front door. Bam! Bam!

“Mr. Jones? You in there? Open up, it’s the police.”

Bam! Bam!

“Mr. Jones, it’s the police. Open up or we’ll force the door!”

He looked at her. She was about to pass out. There was a sadness in his eyes. They murmured outside. He raised the pistol from his lap. She didn’t care anymore. It smelled too bad, her butt itched from the pee, and she was so

hungry it felt as if there was a knife in her gut.

Bam! “Mr. Jones!”

He raised the pistol and turned it, putting the barrel in his mouth.

“Mr. Jones!”

Bam! The pistol went off. Its sharp report anticipated the next knock on the door. The back of his skull flew all the way into the kitchen. The front door crashed open. She sat there, looking. The cops, wearing black uniforms and gold badges on their chest, with black hats trimmed with twisted gold cords, burst into the room, pistols out. They had wild, frightened looks in their eyes. His hand dropped back onto his lap, still somehow gripping the gun. The smell of fresh air filled the room. She gasped. The cops were yelling something but all she could do is take in deep breaths of pure fresh air. One cop had his hand on her shoulder, he was shaking her.

“Are you alright? Are you alright?” She could hear it now. Her eyes cleared and she looked the cop in the face. Of course she was alright. The look on his face changed, he looked at her curiously now. She looked at him, annoyed. What an idiot, he doesn’t know a thing. He had no idea how hard it was going to be to clean this mess up.

Patrick Goggins is a lawyer, writer, and songwriter living in Coconut Grove, FL. He has been published in the journal of the *Center for the Study of Communication and Culture* in London, and *The Applicant*, a literary magazine based in Katmandu. Ken Kesey edited and published Goggins’ essay about the Elián Gonzalez riots in Miami. Merry Prankster Ken Babbs says, “Goggins brings a little Kesey, a little Cassidy, and a lot of fun to whatever he writes.”

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