

THE CRASH

Teresa Milbrodt

Street had his choice of couches and not much else, but he was used to that. His real name was Jonathan James Streetman III, but his grandpa had gone by John, his dad went by Jim, and so he was left with Street. His grandma gave him the nickname when he was five, and since he'd spent half his life with her, Street figured this was fair.

He was returning to her house and couch because of his court date. Street had to take the bus from Denver back to the small mountain town where he'd grown up *since* he no longer had his truck, but the truck was part of the reason he was in trouble. His ex-fiancée, Madison, was suing him for back rent, which hadn't been a problem when she was his fiancée. Then it was "No big deal."

"You mow the lawn and buy half the groceries and we share everything," she said, "so I can take care of rent."

Then he broke off the engagement and backed into her car that was parked along the curb. She'd just called him an asshole, among other choice names, so the crunch had been sadly satisfying. Street figured it wasn't *that* tragic since nothing had died, but Madison was a jilted bride-to-be and the car dent didn't improve things.

Street admitted there were many things he should've done differently.

He shouldn't have driven away after denting her trunk.

He should've given her money for rent, gotten a receipt, and not assumed they were bound for happily-ever-after.

Now his truck was bound for the scrap yard since the transmission had died the week after he returned to Denver and would cost too much to repair, but he didn't mind getting rides and walking. The truck had over two hundred thousand miles on it and deserved to be laid to rest, so six months after breaking off the engagement, he returned to the scene of the crime without his accomplice.

Street's grandma met him at the gas station that was also the bus stop and drove him a mile out of town to her house. She was very active for seventy-five years old—tended to a huge flower and vegetable garden, walked every

day in the fields surrounding her house, and volunteered at the local community arts center. She'd put in a good word for him around town, and Street had arranged to resume his old jobs—maintaining the green at the golf course and cutting grass at the cemetery. They weren't too different. Both places were quiet. Both were full of old people and ghosts he could see out of the corner of his eye. Both were frequented by his late grandfather, an avid golfer, carpenter, and reformed drinker.

For years Street had alternated spending one year in Denver with his mom and one year in the small mountain town with his grandparents, wherever felt most comfortable at the time. After breaking up with Madison, Denver was the better option. Madison had lived her whole twenty-five years in that small mountain town, and half her family was there, too. A ready-made posse.

Street wanted to escape, be anonymous, make some money, and let tempers cool before the court date. He'd worked at a gas station and lived on a friend's couch, drinking beer and watching whatever game was on in the evening. His roomies were nice guys and he paid a little rent and cleaned the bathroom, but he didn't mind returning to town, court date or not.

He'd been thinking about what he left behind—a few shirts, some pants, some underwear, and two shoe boxes of full childhood toys, pictures, and other

mementos he'd left under Madison's bed. Street didn't remember what was in the boxes exactly, only that they were things that had been important to him at one time, important enough to move back and forth from his mom's apartment to his grandparents' house.

Madison had probably forgotten they were there, but Street wasn't ready to face her yet. Instead he went to the grocery store with his grandma to pick up things for dinner. He did the usual—pushed the cart while she loaded it with bread, produce, ground beef, and tomato sauce. He smiled and nodded at people he knew, which was half of everyone they saw, but nobody nodded back. Street puckered his mouth and plodded forward, watching his tennis shoes on the white tile floor. He hadn't expected a warm welcome, but he hadn't expected to be nearly invisible, condemned to the lowly caste of car-wrecking engagement-breakers.

He knew the politics of small towns, how even when people felt bad for you they couldn't show it. These towns were insular, clannish, and forced people to take sides, easily becoming the center of their own universes because there was nothing else around. He couldn't avoid people in the grocery, but they could avoid making eye contact with him.

Street wanted to make an announcement over the intercom: *There's a special on ground chuck, and I am not a jerk.* These people had known him since he was six. They'd bought his Boy Scout popcorn, marching band candy bars, prom fundraiser magazines, and attended his band concerts and high school graduation ceremony, but they would not breach their loyalty to Madison, the townie and jilted lover.

In the parking lot, Street plodded after his grandma, sure that if a SUV smacked into him, no one would care. Except for his grandma. She was making his favorite cheese-stuffed hamburgers for dinner. At least he liked her couch, and the laundry-detergent-floral-room-freshener-beef-stew scent of her house. For now he could exist as her imaginary friend since no one else in town seemed like they were able to see him.

§

That night Street walked the mile into town to the Silverhorn Bar; the only place where a few locals might admit that he existed. Street ordered a pint of the only dark beer on tap, a brew whose name he could never remember. He rested his elbows on the bar, stuck his finger in the foam, licked it off, and thought of his grandpa who'd given up drinking three years after returning

from Korea. During those three years, however, he'd spent a lot of time at this bar.

Street had been told that his grandfather had a wild side, but he never saw it. That part of his grandpa stayed tucked in a closet. Street wished his grandpa would have brought it out sometimes like old war medals, showing off his former self. It might have been dusty and embarrassing, but his grandfather was such a calm man; Street would have liked to see something...different.

He wasn't a troubled kid but could have been one, since he'd hung out at the edge of the "wrong crowd," teenagers who often got in trouble with the cops. His grandma reined him back in. She was calm, collected, and could hollow him out with a gaze. She was why he still limited himself to one beer.

Not so for Layla, the sweetly drunk middle-aged woman in the leopard print skirt who sidled up to him and asked where he'd been and how he was doing. She was a cook at a restaurant four doors down, a steakhouse frequented by families and ranchers, and she came to the bar for a pint or four every evening after work. Layla was very neat, never spilled a drop of beer, only her words slurred into slushy sentences by ten at night.

"I'm fine," said Street, giving her a real smile in return.

She kissed him on the forehead like a mother. He'd missed Layla and her sour-scented hugs. The bar felt like home as much as anywhere else ever had, since he was always coming or going, stuck in this in-between space. Maybe that's why he liked trimming golf courses and graveyards. There was a beginning, an end, and a neatness to it. The regularity was pleasant, but so were the boozy people at Silverhorn. They had personalities set by alcohol, were reliably irked, cheery, or tipsy and pouring out their deepest wine-tinged emotions.

Unlike those at the grocery, they looked him in the eye.

§

Getting back to the cemetery and sitting on the riding mower the next day was an odd comfort. The dead were disinterested in him, perched as usual atop their graves. He felt more at ease with them than with the living in the cemetery, old ladies who tended graves, removed dried flowers, tidied mementos, and had their monthly picnic. All of them—perhaps fifteen women total—were members of the Ladies Luncheon and Mourning Society. They were dedicated to maintaining the Memorial Day tradition of cemetery picnics, leaving plates of food for the dead after their monthly cemetery-cleaning sessions.

Their potlucks involved standard fare—chicken salad sandwiches, Jell-O salad with canned fruit bits, macaroni and potato salads with heavy mayonnaise dressing, and brownies. Today as they set up their card tables, the ladies cast sideways glances in his direction and pursed their cherry-painted lips. To them he was worse than the dead. They would have greeted the dead, but didn't even offer him potato salad. Street tried not to be disappointed, he hated mayonnaise-based salads, but his grandma brought him a plate of food when he was done mowing. He knew the other ladies would sniff at her disapprovingly since elderly women were among the most predictable species on earth.

Street walked over to the football team's graves to eat, the only place in the cemetery where he could find real sympathy. Eight players and a coach had died thirty years ago in a bus accident when the brakes had failed. The young men sat on their graves and nodded at Street, fully understanding his ex-girlfriend predicament because they'd had many such problems of their own while they still lived and breathed, trying to understand the mysterious ritual of dating. They all agreed, women were tricky business.

§

When Street went to Madison's house for his shoe boxes, he figured he should take a police escort, but he took his grandma instead. With her driving

him, he couldn't back down. One minute he wanted to talk with Madison, the next he thought it was an awful idea. She would bust his nose. But she might not bust his nose as badly if his grandma were there.

He still loved Madison, even if no one but his grandma believed it. He felt awful for agreeing to the engagement. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, a mutual decision, but it became less attractive the more he considered the implications. Doubts had started riddling his mind after eight weeks. He'd been in town for two years, the longest ever in one place, and his feet were itching. Literally. His heels were dry and cracked, symptomatic of the arid environment and bigger problems. He wanted to live in Denver again. Street couldn't sleep at night, dwelling on his favorite restaurants, bars, hangouts, friends he hadn't seen in months...

Over the next few days he came to the conclusion that he needed to get out. He'd be ready for marriage someday, but that prospect and the small mountain town had turned claustrophobic. Street figured it was best to end things before choosing dates and bridesmaids dresses and wedding invitations. He wished he could blame his too-hasty decision on the chemical rush of love, the brain high that came from being kissed and cuddling in bed, not that Madison would ever listen to excuses.

He didn't know what to say other than he was sorry, but no words would be adequate. If he said, *I made a mistake, let's get engaged again*, she would be suspicious. If he brought her favorite caramel-filled chocolate bars and asked if they could be friends, he would look like a cheap asshole. The only thing that could mend his life would be to dissolve the laws of physics, turn back time, and never have agreed to the engagement. But those two months of wedding-planning had been so damned *happy*. Madison had never looked so bright or cheerful, like there were tiny light bulbs in her cheeks.

§

Her face had always been lovely, but she glared at him when she opened the door to the house they'd shared. Street wrinkled his eyebrows, opened his mouth, closed it again, and let his grandma do the talking. He couldn't step inside the hallway, and waited outside while his grandma and Madison went up to the bedroom to peer under her bed.

Street always figured that if he were cast in a movie his preferred role would be a villain. Heroes tended to be boring and wussy. Villains were interesting and complex, but he didn't feel villainous or evil. He had a story no one wanted to hear—not Madison, not her family, not most of the people in town.

It was after dinner, when he said he wanted out of the engagement. He'd made his grandma's cheese-stuffed burgers, a very good and bad idea since Madison said she loved a man who could cook.

She peered at him with a little smile on her face and said, "You're kidding, right?"

Street shook his head and stared at his folded hands. This was awful to say, awful to do, but he knew not telling her was worse, even though she cried, pleaded, and begged for him to reconsider. Then she screamed and called him an asshole, told him to get out of her house and that she never wanted to see him again.

He backed out of the driveway too fast, angry at her for being so angry with him. All he'd done was tell the truth. That was why the crash was so fulfilling. She shouldn't have parked her car so close to the mailbox, anyway. He sped over Monarch Pass, careening to Denver, and called his grandma from there. She came three days later with a suitcase of his clothes. They went to lunch and he poured his thoughts on the table like shaken soda, a fizzy and confused puddle.

"I hoped if we got married, town would feel like home and I could settle down and not be restless," he said.

“What’s wrong with being restless?” his grandmother said. The question surprised him.

“You’ve stayed in one place forever and been happy,” he said.

“But not your father,” she said. “Happiness is complex. Not enough people realize that. It seems so simple, but causes too many divorces. Everyone asks that question, why can’t this thing that makes me happy make you happy, too? It’s better to have a little discomfort now than a lot of discomfort later.”

But at the moment it felt like a lot of discomfort. It didn’t help when Madison and his grandma reappeared at the door empty-handed.

“I can’t find the boxes,” she said with a shrug.

“They’re not under the bed,” said his grandmother.

“I’ll bring them to court if I find them,” said Madison, but he didn’t believe her.

§

Street’s father was kind and orbital. From the time Street was five his dad was on the road, working on sewers with special cleaning and repair equipment. It was an oddly good living because no one else wanted to do it. He sent checks monthly, came home for two days every six weeks, and then was off on a bus or train again. He liked solving problems, even ones that stank.

A few months ago, Street read a newspaper article that claimed divorce didn't hurt kids in the long run. They had to get through some difficult months, sure, but there was no lasting psychological damage. This had been decided by a bunch of psychologists who questioned a bunch of kids who had divorced parents. They hadn't asked Street for his opinion.

When Street's father left the first time, he didn't understand what was happening. His mother was very sad. His grandmother came and got him a month later and said he was coming to live with her and his grandpa for a while. Thus began his boomerang life. He talked with his dad once a week on the phone. When his dad visited Denver, he stayed at a motel. When his dad visited his grandparents, he slept on the couch. His dad brought Street postcards and pins and pencils and pens from wherever he'd traveled last.

Street often took the bus back and forth from Denver to his grandparents' house. He liked sitting alone in a crowd of people, being blessedly anonymous. An old lady on a bus would believe anything he told her about his travels, that he'd been to Seattle and San Francisco and Tampa and Tulsa with his father, a traveling salesman who home-schooled Street on the road. The old lady nodded and said that must be wonderful, seeing so many places at such a young

age. Street nodded back in agreement and almost believed the story of his new self. For a half hour on a bus, that could be his real life.

Maybe that was why his dad liked traveling. He could establish himself with new people, decide who he wanted to be, and leave them again. Maybe after a while he'd figured out who he was, or perfected the idea of who he wanted to be. This idea of creating and re-creating himself was interesting to Street, but he knew it would alarm people in small towns where identity was built on tradition. Everyone knew you, your family, your birthday, and your middle name. Sometimes they knew more about you than you did about yourself, stories your mom never bothered to tell you. Street found that closeness a bit unsettling, but he knew that to Madison, it was a comfort.

"Lots of people in town have known me since I was a baby bump," she always said. "I wouldn't trade that history for anything."

So she had a posse, and he had his grandmother.

§

On the morning of his court date, Street knew more people were looking at his grandma than at him or Madison. After he called off the engagement, his grandmother had gone over to Madison's house with cookies and been a

shoulder to cry on, all the things Street couldn't do. She was the only reason he might be given a little leeway.

Street had no defense. He would pay the back rent. He would pay the bill for the car repair and any associated fines. He would mow and mow and mow until he had raised enough money to give Madison all that she was due. Seeing her in court was more difficult than he expected. Yes, she was mad about the car and the rent, but she wouldn't have been upset if they were still engaged. Those things would have been trifles. Her eyes were steel, and it was all about the ruined wedding and words he couldn't take back.

Street bit his lower lip. Was it a crime to change your mind? Maybe he should have suffered admirably for ten years like his dad, had a kid with her, then left Madison and the child and gotten a job on the road to explain his unhappiness. Then he would have come off as an even bigger jerk. There was no way to win this game. What else was there to say? Love grew and faded. It was a plant, not a boulder. Some kinds of love blossomed for longer than others. Love could be a perennial, an annual, a tree, a rose bush, a dandelion gone to seed...

The judge read off his fine—two thousand dollars in back rent, five hundred dollars to repair the car, and seven hundred dollars for leaving the scene

of an accident. It was expensive, but less expensive than a wedding and what would have come after. It was hard for Street not to smile as he left court. Nobody would have read it the right way. The only people who understood him were football player ghosts.

§

The next day he found four golf balls while mowing the course, and a handful of loose change at the cemetery; he'd buy a coffee later. He mowed around old people, dead people, and dead people who were old. He ate the turkey sandwich his grandma had packed for his lunch and wondered how long it would take him to pay off the fine. A damn long time. But that was okay for now. He liked his grandma's couch, her company, her cooking, and he didn't know where to go after this or what he wanted. He only hoped that Madison might find those shoe boxes of memory. He needed to have his jogged, recall some snippet or idea or dream from his childhood. Maybe that would give him a direction.

Sitting on their graves, the dead people sipped cups of tea, slugged bottles of whiskey, and chided him for being human. He took another bite of his sandwich and envied the dead for two and a half seconds. They had no questions, but there were too many things about his life and himself that Street wanted

to figure out, even if figuring things out tended to be painful in one way or another.

§

Two weeks later Street was rummaging around under his old bed at his grandma's house, a bed that was now too small to fit him, when he found the shoeboxes. For a moment he sat and stared at them, remembering how he'd moved both boxes when Madison needed to store dresses from her grandma under her bed. Those huge garment boxes left no room for his mementos.

Street laid his hand on one of the dusty lids, wondering if he should open the shoeboxes or slide them back under the bed and pretend this had never happened. What was inside? He really couldn't remember and was scared to find out, but his hand flipped off the first lid before he could let himself stall any longer.

Inside he found his favorite blue plastic Pac-Man cup, a GI Joe figure, a He-Man Skeletor figure that had scared him when he was little, a plastic snake he'd won at the arcade, a Bugs Bunny Pez dispenser filled with grape Pez that was over twenty years old, and a random key he'd found walking down the sidewalk one day and kept, figuring he'd find a use for it or perhaps find the lock that it opened.

The first box made him smile, but opening the second box made him bite his lower lip. It was full of things from his dad—tie tack pins from different cities, pens from hotels, and little soaps he'd planned to take along when he went traveling with his dad. Back then Street had imagined that someday they would go on the road together, even just for the summer. He'd added three wrappers from his favorites chocolate bars to the box so his dad would remember the kinds of candy he liked.

There were postcards his dad had mailed from all over—Washington, D.C. and Chicago and Dallas and Billings and St. Louis. The messages were always the same—*I miss you. I'll be home soon. You'll see these places yourself someday.*

Street flipped through the cards, reading those words over and over. He'd see those places someday. There was nothing about his dad taking him there, but he remembered his younger self fingering these postcards, waiting, longing for his dad and the road.

He still wanted to drive, be nomadic like his father, a lifestyle that sounded so comfortable the thought made him uncomfortable. What would it be to have no one know who he was, not just on a bus but all the time? A life that was both freeing and worrisome. Perhaps that was part of the reason why his

dad had made those regular trips home, to have an anchor, to remind himself of who he was.

§

Three days later, the night before the monthly LLMS picnic, Street made chocolate chip cookies. He took a plate to Madison's house and left it on her front step along with the G.I. Joe and Skeletor figures. He left a plate on the graves of the football team members. Then he took a plate to the LLMS picnic and sat it on a card table with the rest of the food. He took a chicken salad sandwich from the tray of them and sat next to his grandmother, eating quietly until one of the ladies cleared her throat and told him the cookies were pretty good.

"You didn't buy them, did you?" she asked with more than a little hint of accusation in her voice.

"No, ma'am," he said. "I made them yesterday afternoon."

"Well, that's all right, then," she said, giving him a curt nod.

Street nodded back and took another bite of the chicken salad sandwich. Chicken salad didn't taste quite as bad as he remembered. Someday, after eating burgers and fries and other fast food delicacies for a month, he might even enjoy it. But now there was grass to mow and plans to make. As he glanced

past the cemetery gates to the road running past town, he wondered which direction he'd go when the time finally came.

Teresa Milbrodt is the author of a short story collection, *Bearded Women: Stories* (Chizine Publications), a novel, *The Patron Saint of Unattractive People* (Boxfire Press), and a flash fiction collection, *Larissa Takes Flight: Stories* (Pressgang). Her second novel, *The Unicorn Maker*, will be released by Break Away Books in spring of 2017. She is addicted to coffee, Sherman Alexie, long walks with her MP3 player, George Saunders, and frozen yogurt, in that order. Read more of her work at: <http://teresamilbrodt.com/homepage/>