



The Iowa Review

Volume 45
Issue 1 *Spring 2015*

Article 37

2015

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Recommended Citation

Price, Adam O'Fallon. "Unanswered." *The Iowa Review* 45.1 (2015): 173-176. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7613>

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Unanswered

Fred and Michael Kourik, father and son, are watching Thanksgiving Day football when the telephone rings. The ring is shrill, alarm-like. Michael straightens on the sofa and Fred shifts sideways in the puffed leather of his rocker-recliner, and for a moment both men regard the phone where it sits, on the end table between them. It is a peculiar shade of creamy light blue with the slightest hint of green—close to seafoam but not quite—an institutional color that brings to mind waiting-room forms and hospital walls. It's a big, heavy rotary, probably purchased by Fred in the early seventies, and although its exact provenance has been long since forgotten, its prominent place in Michael's childhood has not. Until he was twelve, it was the only phone in the house, and he can clearly remember the agony of waiting to use it (to organize sleepovers or vicious neighborhood games of football) as his older sister droned on and on. As a teenager, he gaped pustulantly at it while over and over dialing six of some forgotten crush's numbers, only to jam the plastic receiver buttons down on the seventh spin. And when he was twenty, home for Christmas, he received the news that his grandfather had died on it. A cordless has long since been installed in the kitchen, on which Michael's mother, Barbara, handles all household communication, but this telephone—retired with its owner, its ringer usually silenced—retains its place on the end table. At this point, its role is mostly to serve as a totem of Fred's foibles: his cheapness (thrift, according to him) and obstinacy (his iron vow never to so much as try a cell phone is a small masterpiece of petulant foggery). There is also humor to be had in its position much of the day, inches from the elbow of a man who relies entirely on his wife for company and who hasn't made or received a phone call in possibly fifteen years. A similar comic dissonance, Michael's wife, Emily, recently noted, might be achieved by placing an AK-47 by the elbow of the Dalai Lama. Now, as the phone rings again and Fred thumbs mute on the TV remote, Michael thinks of Emily, who left the house hours ago to see a movie with Barbara. This is a holiday tradition: after an early dinner, Fred and Michael settle in the living room to watch hours of football, beers growing warm beside them, and Barb and Emily go to a movie, ideally one starring Sandra Bullock, but in any case the more dimwitted and ridiculous the better, in Michael's estimation. Michael's sister usually joins them, but this

year she is pregnant and has elected to stay home for the holidays. This year, Barb and Emily—the girls, as Fred always calls them, to what Michael has before observed as mild irritation on his wife’s part—have gone to see *Les Misérables*. Going to see *Les Misérables* on Thanksgiving Day sounds to Michael like the very definition of hell on earth, an opinion he made the mistake of sharing with Emily earlier. This provoked an intense, whispery argument in the guest room, during which she asked him if it was entirely necessary for him to be a complete asshole at all times, to which he said that he was joking and that she needed to lighten up, to which she said that maybe she would lighten up if he wasn’t always being an asshole, and also that if he thought sitting in a packed theater next to his mother for three hours was her idea of a good time, he didn’t know her very well. To which he had no response, or no response that wouldn’t result in a catastrophic fight. But what he’d wanted to say was that, no, lately he didn’t feel like he knew her very well. Lately—during the last year—they have been fighting with increasing frequency and vigor. They’ve always argued, but where the arguments used to be somehow sweet, undergirded by love, they are now loudly contemptuous, with a mutual assumption of bad faith. The rancor has become more or less constant, and their life together now feels like one endless battle with truces brokered only when total destruction looms. They repeatedly approach this point, but divorce is too huge, too horrible, and so they pull back from the brink, promising to be better, to be different than they are and cannot help but be. The drive down yesterday was wretchedly typical: three hours of heavy silence following ten minutes of yelling. About what? Earlier, during the Texas-Baylor game, he attempted to piece it back together, but it was impossible. Their quarrels have a dreamy Escherian logic that resists reconstruction. Something to do with how little they visit her family, though her family lives twelve hours away, in Boston, and is, regardless of where they live, completely intolerable. Or had it started earlier, with Emily sensing his irritation at her making them late? (She had neglected, as usual, to pack her bag until just before they left, running back inside twice for her heavy jacket, her phone charger.) Or was he being oblivious to something that had passed between them the night—or week or month—before? There’s no telling. Like the Hundred Years’ War, which he teaches in his AP European History class, no matter how far back you trace the bloodshed, there’s always an antecedent. That said, one incident stands out in his mind. In September, on a Sunday, they’d clashed well into the night, and he was moving to the sofa to try to catch a few hours of sleep. He said something fatuously conciliatory—something

about how tomorrow was a new day, and everything would be all right—and as he left the room, he caught Emily’s honest reaction in the mirror. It was a look of unadulterated disgust, thankfully difficult to picture after the fact, but so pure and powerful that it burned a sort of emotional afterimage into his brain. Her face was contorted with scorn, and her eyes shone with the same black wrath he imagines when reading about, say, Roman centurions slaughtering tribesmen at Hadrian’s Wall. From time to time, he feels her making that face next to him, behind him, and he shudders. Maybe they just shouldn’t be together; surely he shouldn’t inspire anyone to look the way she did that night. He dreams of starting over with Emily, and with other women. Other women occupy, crowd, his mind. For instance, a new teacher at his school named Ms. Sharpe—Hannah—a small, quiet creature with penciled eyebrows and a penchant for corduroy jumpers; the most unassuming, unerotic presence imaginable, but still the object of his suddenly diffuse and radiant desire. He scans the cafeteria for her as he eats and reads his *Twelve Caesars*, hoping for a glance at her modest form as she shepherds in her homeroom. He finds reasons to walk by her desk during break and breathes in deeply as he passes, as though he can steal her essence into himself like some wicked, jealous djinn. It doesn’t help to know that this is just a response to his marital discord—the unlikeliness of Hannah Sharpe as the person to whom his fantasies have attached themselves only underscores how dire the situation has become. The one thing that seems to ease his mind is reading about how other people have salvaged their relationships. Time and again, husbandly testimonials and self-help manuals stress the importance of not considering divorce as an option. One e-book he surreptitiously bought, entitled *Real Wife, Real Life*, advises the reader to put aside his fantasies and “wake up every day fully committed to making the life you have chosen the best life possible.” Stop imagining, it says. Good advice, probably, but he has found it difficult to follow. He finds himself imagining now—has been imagining for some time—that his wife and mother have been in a car accident. They have been gone six hours, and outside it is raining and dark. He and his father have already had a couple of terse conversations about what was keeping the girls so long, and the three text messages he’s sent have received no reply. He and his father agreed that in all likelihood the two o’clock showing was booked up, so they bought tickets to the four-thirty, went for margaritas at Firebird Grille in the interim, and then forgot to call before the movie started. This is the most likely explanation, yet something unpleasant has hung in the air between Michael and Fred since they last talked about it, which was at

the beginning of the LSU-Arkansas game when the score was only seven–zip. Since then, LSU has scored six touchdowns, and Michael has admitted to himself what this unspoken bad thing is, which is that they both know that neither Barb nor Emily would ever forget to call if they were going to be three hours late. They are both unfailingly considerate of others (hence, Michael thinks with remorse, Emily volunteering to go to the movies in the first place). It is conceivable that one of them might have had a rare moment of thoughtlessness—Emily, especially, since she is pissed at him—but not both at the same time, and not on Thanksgiving. He knows this, and he knows his father does too, and the shared deception leaves a bad, stale taste in Michael’s mouth like the warm Budweiser he keeps sipping at. They have watched three quarters of this football game in a silent contest to see who will break and state the obvious first—that something might be, even likely is, wrong—but now the phone is ringing. His father lifts the receiver, and Michael imagines three things, more or less simultaneously: his mother’s car upside down in a smoking ditch off the inner beltway; the fringe of Hannah’s fine, brown hair down her back like a remote cliff wall, unspoiled by human touch; and Emily’s face looming in the mirror with the promise of another year spent locked in helpless combat—and some part of himself he will never forgive because he will never admit he had the thought in the first place, hopes it’s the hospital or the police calling.