

You are Your Own Very Unique Snowflake

By Sally Anne Clegg

Poppy swilled the purple liquid in her mouth and squirted it back into the cup.

“Make me see it the way you see it, then,” she said.

Richard ignored her poor table manners, continuing where he had left off. “She wants attention. It’s a cry for help.”

Poppy was hunched over the butcher-block surface of the kitchen island. She had one hand on the pink plastic cup, the other hand she raised to her ear and began twisting her index finger around inside. “I don’t buy it. If she wants something she can come ask. Otherwise, I wouldn’t worry about it another second.” She pulled her finger from her ear with a loud pop, and looked at her husband with quick pitying affectionate eyes. “You figure these things out when you have your own kids, Richard. It’s the only way to extinguish a behavior.”

Before he could respond, Poppy got off her stool and picked up her purse to leave. “I’d love to continue this, really I would,” she smirked at him, “but I have to go. It’s three thirty-eight and I have a heart surgery at four. I should be back in time for dinner.” She squashed her lips against his. “Francois is watching TV in the basement, don’t forget,” she said, then clopped across the linoleum floor and hopped quickly over Margaret’s food dish, which was positioned directly in front of the back door. One ankle buckled slightly on impact when her heels met the ground again. She halted for a moment, embarrassed, then unlocked the door and left, not once turning back towards her husband, who still sat on his stool at the island. Richard drew in his breath and coughed out a sarcastic laugh to an empty kitchen. The dishwasher changed cycles with a click and a thud.

“Cassandra? I need to talk to you Cassandra.” Richard threw his voice to the ceiling. It echoed in the entire first floor of the house, rolling between rooms, soaking into the faux-Navajo rug from Pier1, slapping against the tile accent wall in the downstairs lavatory. He smiled as it came back to his ears again. “Nicely done,” he muttered. When the sound stopped, Richard emitted another noise, this time a throaty hum, escalating in volume until he found the resonating pitch in the room. He was sure he saw the icicles outside the window tremble slightly as he did this. What he did not see was Margaret, who stood petrified in the entrance to the kitchen.

Upstairs his daughter heard her former name through the sound-extinguishing headphones clapped to her ears. She reached for the blown glass paperweight on the windowsill next to her bed, and dropped it on the floor. It fell on a pile of her clothes and failed to make a satisfactory noise. She didn’t bother to do it again. Instead, she switched to a song with heavier guitar and turned the volume up as high as it would go. Then she went back to writing in her journal.

Day five. I haven't left the second floor once. Poppy and Richard are freaking out, I think. I hear them arguing through the floor. Richard thinks it's bad that I'm missing school, but Poppy always has to go to work before they resolve anything, so it buys me time, I guess. Her new job keeps her pretty busy and out of my hair. It's lucky for me that without people like her, surgical tools might be sewn into patients' bodies slightly more often. It sucks that Richard can't get any acting jobs, or he would be out of my hair too. The solitude is helping my fragile mental health.

There was a buzzing from the pocket of her pajama pants. She pulled out the phone and looked at the screen to see who was calling. *Richard*. She opened and closed it quickly.

Also, my poetry has gotten better.

The phone began buzzing again. She reached to silence it, but felt the tightness in her stomach from hunger and answered it instead. This was the time of day when Richard usually called to see what she wanted to eat. She opened the phone and put it to her ear, but said nothing.

"Cassandra?" said Richard.

She didn't respond.

"Fine, alright, what do you want to be called today?" he said.

"The same as every day Dick, my name is Margaret."

"That's the cat's name, sweetie."

"No, asshole, it's my pen name," she said.

"Why did you have to rename yourself after the cat?"

"What do you want? Why did you call me?"

"I called to see if you would come down and talk about what to have for dinner."

"I think I'll stay up here, thanks."

"Okay," he said, and the line went quiet for a second. She was rather quick to fill the silence.

"I'd like fiddleheads."

"What?" he said.

"For dinner tonight, I want fiddleheads. You know, baby ferns. Steamed and salted."

“I just spoke to Francois, he says he wants a Pizzone.”

“What is that?”

“It’s a pizza crossed with a calzone. From Pizza Hut.”

“He’s four, Richard, he doesn’t know what he wants. Leave the fiddleheads outside my door when they’re ready, okay?” She hung up the phone. Before she put her headphones back on, she heard her stepfather below her.

“I’m making quiche, everyone,” he called out. The radiator in the living room made soft banging noises, straining to keep the cold out. The linoleum on the kitchen floor buzzed with the high hum of the television on the floor below. Richard moved towards the refrigerator. He pulled out a dozen eggs, milk, and bag of salad greens from the hydrator, and shut the door with an exaggerated backward pelvic motion which knocked most of the magnets from their places. A few photographs, bills, and pieces of Francois’ preschool artwork fell gently to the floor. Richard didn’t pick them up. Instead, he moved to the counter. A paper snowflake cutout stuck to his shoe. Francois’ teacher had written on it, in purple, “You are your own very unique snowflake.” Richard didn’t notice it. He was dropping handfuls of spinach and chopped carrot into the egg mixture when his phone rang.

“Hi Babe, it’s me,” Poppy said. In the background were other voices, scribbling sounds, wheeling sounds, a P.A. announcement. Hospital noises.

“How are you? It sounds busy,” said Richard.

“Listen,” said Poppy, “is there a dinner plan?”

“I’m making dinner now.” Richard sandwiched the phone between his shoulder and cheek, then poured the filling into a store-bought piecrust. “I think Francois saw a Pizza Hut commercial, Pop, and now all he wants to eat is —”

“Things are crazy here, Hon, I really can’t talk. I called to tell you that I won’t make it home to eat. We’ve had a couple emergency surgeries and I’m swamped— ski season, you know? I can barely hear you right now.”

“They need the medical assistants to stay, too? Can’t someone else count the surgical tools?”

“No Richard, they can’t. Don’t patronize me. Lives are on the line.”

“When will you get home?” he said.

“Not sure,” said Poppy, and she hung up. Richard continued talking to the dead line.

“What do I do about Francois, Pop? What should I do?”

Richard finished the quiche and put it in the oven. He went back to his stool at the island. The room darkened. A cloud must have covered up part of the sun. He reached for the stack of his headshots he kept in a magazine rack on the countertop. All of them were the same, and all printed with “Mammoth Lakes Regional Theatre” at the top. He assigned a feeling to each identical mustached visage, and then started signing them with a Sharpie. “Pensive,” he said. *Richard Mandelbrot*. “Cunning.” *Richard Mandelbrot*. “Wise.” *Richard Mandelbrot*. “Wry.” *Richard Mandelbrot*. This went on.

The timer on the oven beeped into his mantra about thirty minutes later. He looked up to face the sounding stove and stared at it brightly, as though it would stop on its own. Then he looked down at the pile of black and white photographs, scratching his hairline and sending a sprinkling of white skin onto his laminated face. It settled on dead gray eyes, cheeks, and lips.

Upstairs his stepdaughter heard the beeping and dropped the paperweight again. Downstairs, Richard was finally jolted from his daze, and approached the oven to remove the quiche.

Upstairs his stepdaughter heard the nightly knock and waited to hear him go down again. When he did, she went to the door and retrieved her dinner plate. On it was a large wedge of quiche, a fork, and a generous dollop of ketchup. She used to like ketchup on everything, but had cut it out of her diet of late, along with several other processed or fatty foods. She ate in bed, then set the plate on the floor and picked up her journal.

*Untitled, she wrote,
I leave the pie crust- when I diet
The stillness in the tum
Is like the stillness in a pie-
Between the crusts like husks of eaten corn-
The pies are round- I've sucked them dry
Eggbeaters whipping ovum
For that last Omelet- when the Quiche-
Be witnessed- In the room-*

“Oh gosh,” she said aloud, “This is good.”

Her phone began buzzing again. *Richard*, the screen said. She silenced it.

Richard stood and watched snow begin to fall through the kitchen window, the flakes settling in the thatches of the metal screen, building on themselves until there was only a small amount of clear space through which he could see. He reached into the pie plate and brought a handful of quiche to his mouth. The burners on the stove made quick snapping sounds, then rushing sounds, as he turned them on. Heady gas fumes rippled from the stovetop and rolled down on to the linoleum, where Richard was now curled in the fetal position under the island. The kitchen grew darker still.

His stepdaughter smelled the gas and opened her window. She continued writing until the odor was so strong it pulled on the corners of her self-satisfied smile, and she could no longer focus on her poem. In something of a panic she got out of bed, and her room, and slid down the carpeted staircase on sock shod feet.

Just then Poppy got home from work. She twisted the key in the back lock and muscled open the door with her shoulder like she always did. It hit Richard, who was crawling towards it, on the side of his head. Poppy gasped and covered her mouth with the sleeve of her coat. She turned around, hopping back over the threshold, closely followed by her daughter, who had just come down the stairs, and a bleary-eyed Richard, half dead. Margaret lay lifeless in the kitchen.

Two stood staring; the third was sprawled in the new snow that had fallen on the driveway where they had stopped. He gulped cold air and grabbed at their ankles. Poppy began to scream. Her daughter fixed her eyes on their near distant house, identical to those on either side, looking at the invisible wavering fumes venting from it.

“It’ll go up any minute now.”

“Yes. We can’t go back in. We mustn’t.”

Cassandra’s cell phone buzzed once. *I new voicemail*, the screen said. She typed her password and waited. It was Richard’s voice. She put it on speakerphone.

“I hope you know something I don’t, Margaret, though I don’t think you do. I am not worth much of anything, Margaret. Tell your mother I am sorry I was irresponsible. I have realized we have nothing new to add. Any of us.”

Poppy heaved hot sobs. She started towards the house, but Richard was wrapped around her leg, and she could only move a few inches.

Snowflakes settled and melted mockingly on three warm heads.