



The Mattie Stories

a short story zine

by Jennifer Whiteford

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*for the humans and animals of 12 Spruce St.
(past and present)*

Let Nothing You Dismay

Mattie was worried that she was becoming too critical and pessimistic. It wouldn't have normally worried her. Most of the time she worried about exactly the opposite problem. She lived in constant fear that her sunny disposition and unfailing hope would forever hinder her desire to be taken seriously. But all of a sudden it was December and, perhaps aided by her partner Mike's gross mistrust of all things Christmas, she was starting to scowl on a regular basis.

When she explained her concerns to her neighbour, Anne, she got an amusing, if not satisfying, response.

"I get like that sometimes too," said Anne, fingering the red hair that she shared with her namesake, "You know what I do?"

Mattie shook her head.

"Take a bath with candles. It works every time."

Mattie went home and looked at the bathtub. It had a ring of hair around it from when her room-mate Margaret shaved her legs and didn't rinse afterwards. There was also cat hair in it. The back of the tub didn't slope nicely or have massage jets ilike the in Anne's house. There was a window right above the tub and mold had started to grow on the sill. She'd used up the last of her good chamomile

herbal relaxation bath after the dog, Emma, had been sprayed by a skunk and they only had one can of tomato juice in the cupboard.

She didn't find the bathroom to be a harbinger of optimism.

"Do you ever make a conscious effort to think more positively?" she asked Mike that night. She'd made baked squash for dinner and they were eating it with yesterday's leftover rice and beans. Mike looked at her and stopped his fork in mid air, somewhere between his plate and his mouth.

"Like, about what?" he asked, putting the untouched fork back down on his plate. They were eating at the kitchen table, something they rarely did on nights like this, when they were both tired and happier to crash in front of the television with their plates balanced on their laps. Mike had known that something was up when Mattie had set the table. He knew that he was going to be asked questions that he wasn't necessarily prepared for.

"Like about everything," Mattie said, getting frustrated quickly, "Do you ever try to stop being critical? To start feeling more optimistic about your fellow humans?"

Mike looked thoughtful.

"I do try sometimes," he finally said, "But then some guy with a comb-over sits in front of me on the bus and it all goes to hell."

He picked up his fork again and Mattie suddenly didn't feel like asking any more questions.

The next morning, on her way to the preschool where she worked, Mattie continued to try to, as Mike would often tell her, "buck up". She looked at all the decorations hanging from street lamps and made a point to stop and look into store windows that were brightly decorated. She stood on the edge of a parking lot where Christmas trees were being sold, and waited for the holiday spirit to invade her heart like some kind of yuletide ninja. There was no invasion. Instead Mattie felt her feet getting cold and when she looked at her watch she discovered she was late for work. She started walking twice as fast as she had been previously.

It was the day they were planning to bake Christmas cookies with the kids at the preschool and, though she didn't feel the spirit moving her personally, she knew that the kids would have a fantastic time. She knew how much the annual baking day and the afternoon spent with their hands covered in icing and sprinkles meant to them. Maybe that was her problem. She knew what mattered to everyone else this time of year. She just couldn't quite figure out what mattered to her.

After work she took a plate of cookies over to her friend David who was working at his small, political bookstore two blocks away from the preschool. The bookstore was called "Emma's Books", named for Emma Goldman, the famous anarchist. David and

Mattie had shared Goldman's autobiography one year when they were tree planting together up north. David read volume one first and Mattie read volume two. Then they switched. Mattie didn't mind reading a life story backwards. Somehow it made more sense to her that way. When they came back to Ottawa after that harrowing summer of blackflies, shovel burn, and near death experiences on logging roads, David opened a bookstore and Mattie got a dog. Both were named after Emma Goldman. Both had undergone some tough times, kennel cough and two years in the red, but both had eventually come into their own and were now flourishing.

"Here," Mattie said, handing the paper plate of cookies to David, "They aren't vegan, but maybe you want some anyway." David smiled.

"Hey, Mattie. Thanks." He peeled back the cellophane and picked out a gingerbread man wearing a sloppily applied bow tie made of icing. "What brings you in?"

"No reason," Mattie said absentmindedly. She looked away from David and began thumbing through the calendars.

"I've actually been meaning to call you," David said, after a substantial silence filled only by the drone of CBC radio in the background. "I know it's not your type of thing usually, but I was wondering if you might want to come to this."

He pushed a green, photocopied page across the counter and Mattie reached over to take it.

"Homes Not Bombs," she read aloud, and then her eyes scanned the rest of the page. A demonstration, planned for December 23rd, the last working day before the holidays. People were planning to rally outside the Department of National Defence to sing songs and call for peace. They wanted money that was being spent on war efforts to be instead put towards more accessible housing. They'd alerted the police and they had permission to block the road until noon. Some people would move to the sidewalk after that so that they could avoid getting arrested. Others wouldn't. Volunteers were needed to teach songs, monitor the arrests, and serve food. Mattie looked up and smiled at David.

"So there's almost no chance of me getting arrested?" she asked.

"Next to none," David replied, "I wouldn't worry at all if I were you."

Mattie had stopped attending protests when she discovered that she wanted to teach kids. Some people had a hard time understanding this, but David was often sympathetic. He knew that she couldn't get hired anywhere as a teacher if she had a criminal record, despite how useful a charge like "Participation in a Riot" might seem for someone working in a room full of 30 children under six.

"I could teach songs," Mattie said, looking down at the flyer again. "I do it all day anyway."

"Brilliant!" David said, clapping his hands, "There's a meeting here tomorrow night at six. You can come right from work and we can eat soup before it starts."

Mattie said goodbye to David and pulled her mittens on as she walked out the door. For the time being, at least, her worries about half empty glasses of Christmas cheer had vanished in favour of more productive thoughts.

A week and a half later Mattie took the day off work so she could go to the protest. She slept in a little bit and then got up and had a shower. She put on a pair of knee socks, flowered long underwear, and borrowed Mike's blue work pants with the flannel lining. She wore Margaret's fleece jacket over her hooded sweatshirt and pulled out the thick, wooly mittens that she only ever used in times of extreme cold or when she was doing seminars about what it was like to be a child with a fine motor impairment. She put on a toque that someone, she didn't know who, had left in the house last winter, and then wiggled into her ski jacket and boots. On his way to the basement to clean out the cat litter before leaving for work, Mike squeezed her arm affectionately.

"Good luck," he said, giving her a seasonally uncharacteristic grin. "Call me if you need anything."

Downtown things were already beginning to happen. The protesters had already set up pylons to stop the flow of traffic over the bridge in front of the DND. Mattie was feeling nervous and walking slowly until she saw David galloping towards her.

"You're here!" he said, patting mittened hands on her shoulders. "Hooray!"

Mattie smiled. She could already feel the cold seeping into the tiny bit of exposed skin on her cheeks, nose and forehead. But the rest of her felt like it was buzzing with electricity. The sky was clear and blue and everyone was smiling.

"Hey everybody!" David yelled and then took off one mitten and put his fingers in his mouth to whistle. "This is Mattie! She's going to teach us some songs!" Mattie felt like she did on the first day of school. She wondered if anyone was going to listen to her. She wondered why they had any reason to. She quashed her nervousness by reminding herself that she had something to teach them.

For the next half hour all ears were on Mattie. First she explained that they were going to sing songs instead of chanting because it was more peaceful and less likely to rile up the riot cops who were already standing in front of the main entrance to the building. Then she handed out the lyric sheets she'd photocopied. She taught them the songs that she'd found and then everyone else who knew

another song got up and taught their song too. People laughed when lyrics were forgotten and then waited patiently for the person to remember. Mattie felt like one of the team.

When noon came and the police started dragging people away into paddy wagons, everyone at the protest was still singing the songs they had taught each other. During a chorus of "we shall overcome" Mattie thought she saw a tear coming down the cheek of one of the riot cops. She thought she was imagining things, but David had seen it too.

"Well," he said when she expressed her amazement, "It is Christmas."

She watched as the police lifted the remaining protesters off the sidewalk like marionettes. A few lost their toques as they were flung into the back of the paddy wagon. When the wagons had driven away Mattie picked the hats up out of the slush and put them in a bag for David to bring to the lost and found at the bookstore. The people who were there to support the arrested protesters headed off in the direction of the police station and everyone who was left, including David and Mattie, walked north towards a church where they would have lunch and talk with the others about what had gone on that morning.

Mattie's feet were numb inside her boots and so it felt good to enter the warm common room of the church. She had never gone to church as a child and so she was often made uncomfortable by the

stained glass and silence that seemed to envelope her during her rare forays into the world of religion. But this church was different. So warm and unassuming and full of kind people and free food. She began to understand a little bit of what makes people believe.

On her way home, Mattie gave money to everyone who asked her. She emptied her pockets for the Salvation Army collectors with their bells and uniforms, the kids selling chocolate covered almonds for a school fundraiser, and the homeless men and women who sat on almost every street corner. She felt much lighter walking home. Sad for the world and all its problems, but in a way that allowed for a tiny leak of hope, and peace, and good will.

When she got home she wanted to hide her glowy, Christmasy mood from Mike and Margaret, lest they tease her and break the spell. They were in front of the TV when she walked in. She took off her boots, coat, mittens, and hat and then leaned over and kissed the top of Mike's head.

"I'm going to have a bath," she called to them starting up the stairs.

A bath with candles.

Coffee and Resentment

Mattie's next door neighbour, Anne Henry, was someone to whom Mattie would never have felt socially close were it not for their domestic proximity. As it turned out though, Anne was the first person who Mattie met when she, her boyfriend Mike, and their room-mate Margaret moved into their rental two-bedroom on Maple Avenue. Anne's parents owned the house next door and, though Anne was the same age as Mattie, she still lived at home with them.

"Does it ever drive you crazy?" Mattie asked her one day. Mattie was in the backyard yanking weeds out of her vegetable bed. Anne, seated on the fence that divided their lots paused and seemed poised to deliver an appropriately ambivalent response. Instead, she shrugged her shoulders and said, "I got this book for Christmas called 'Don't Sweat the Small Stuff at Home'..."

Mattie made a face that she thought would only be witnessed by her ailing tomato plants. Anne caught sight of her grimace, though, and laughed. "I know it sounds like total cheese, but it actually helped me not get worked up about what goes on in the house. I'm able to focus on the larger picture."

"Which is?" Mattie stood up and shielded her eyes from the sun with one garden-gloved hand.

"Well, that I love them and I want to live with them all." Anne had three siblings who all also still lived in the cramped bosom of the family home. "I mean, there must be things about Mike that drive you crazy, but you're able to deal with them because you love him. The bigger picture is more important than the small things."

Mattie wasn't so sure.

One thing in particular had been bothering her lately. A small thing, sure, but one that had enormous implications. It was Mike's coffee maker.

When they'd rented the house and moved in together Mattie knew that she would have to make adjustments in the way she lived her life. She was the granola and yogurt to Mike's coffee and cigarettes. Mike had low maintenance cats as pets, she had a dog that demanded three walks a day. She made curtains out of fabric that matched their furniture. He considered a broken computer hard drive to be the perfect living room end table.

"At least you could cover it with something..." Mattie had said weakly when he'd pointed, delighted to his furnishing accomplishment. Mike dropped two old Guitar World magazines and the latest issue of Punk Planet on top of the hard drive.

"That better?"

The coffee maker was a whole different story. Mattie wasn't bothered by its appearance. It was

actually quite flashy looking, chrome with black handles and a timer that made it start automatically ten minutes before Mike's daily departure time. And she'd convinced him to switch to fair-trade organic coffee without any conflict, so what was in the coffee maker was as acceptable as any beverage that she felt compelled to refer to as "liquid crack" could be. The thing that really bothered her about the coffee maker was its capacity. It was a two cup coffee maker. Mike's shiny travel mug that he carried off to work every day held exactly two cups of coffee. The coffee maker, thought Mattie, was a sign of Mike's fear of commitment.

The strange thing was, she wasn't the kind of girl who normally thought about fear of commitment. In fact, much to her mother's dismay, she was almost anti-commitment. She was happy to live with Mike and share groceries, jokes, and a comfortable bed, but she was not sitting impatiently with her ring finger held out dreaming of white dresses and inedible fruit cakes. Still, for all of her independence, something about the coffee maker irked her in a way that she could hardly describe in reasonable terms. Mike, of course, thought she was insane.

"But you don't even drink coffee!" he said when she brought it up.

"But you got the coffee maker before you met me!"

"So what does it have to do with you anyway?"

"Listen," she'd put one hand on each of his shoulders, "hasn't every other girlfriend you've ever had been a coffee drinker?"

Mike paused and looked up at the ceiling. His inability to rapidly answer her question made Mattie even more frustrated, but she waited.

"Yes," he said finally.

"So you never wanted to share coffee with any of them? You always thought that eventually the relationship would end and therefore you should just stick to the 2 cup coffee maker because you thought you'd be a swinging bachelor forever?"

Mike looked confused. He stared at Mattie and squinted. Finally he said, "But only OLD PEOPLE have four cup coffee makers!"

Mattie paused to reflect on this statement. So it wasn't that he was afraid of commitment, she thought as the conversation ended with them scowling at each other. He was just afraid of growing up.

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Shortly after their odd argument about coffee capacity Mattie had a revelation while making the bed. She rarely made the bed, but sometimes on the weekends she would want to lie down and read and she felt unable to navigate the nest of sheets and blankets that were left there when they'd risen.

When they'd first moved in she and Mike had positioned their bed in such a way that it allowed for space on each side for a night table. It was the first time that Mattie had shared a room with anyone, let alone a bed. Mattie quickly discovered that she hated sleeping without a wall next to her. It made her feel like she was floating in space. All her life she'd had her bed against the wall. In spite of her uneasy feelings she'd left the arrangement as it was. She felt that having the bed centred in the room was the "grown-up" thing to do.

She stared at the bed for a minute while she chewed on her finger nail. Then she took the stack of library books and the lamp off of her night table and put the table itself out in the hall way. With an audience of pets who offered no help whatsoever, Mattie pushed the bed into the corner so that her side was up against the wall. She parted the curtains and placed the lamp and the library books on the wide window sill. It looked fantastic. Mattie felt her heart flutter. It was like she had rediscovered a part of herself that she'd forgotten to unpack when they'd moved into the house three years before. If she had not promised to go to the farmer's market with Anne that same morning, she would have gotten back into bed right then and there.

When Mike came home from band practice later that night Mattie was lying in bed reading a book.

"Whoa!" he said, dropping his keys on the dresser, "What happened to the bed?"

"I moved it," said Mattie, with only a quick glance up from her book.

"But I liked it in the middle of the room!"

Mattie looked at Mike over the tops of her glasses. She felt frustration flare like a campfire in her stomach. As Mike crossed the room she lay her book down on her lap and closed it, keeping one hand inside to mark the page.

"Only OLD PEOPLE have their beds in the middle of the room."

Mike didn't argue. He went downstairs to watch television and came to bed long after she'd fallen asleep.

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Mattie continued to feel bothered by the coffee maker and Mike continued to grumble when she had to crawl over him in the morning on her way to the bathroom. Mike stayed later than usual at his band practices, and Mattie pretended to be constantly engrossed in her reading whenever he arrived home at night. Sometimes they turned off the light without kissing each other, something that had been unimaginable in the earlier stages of their relationship.

Mattie didn't like it. The coffee maker and the bed against the wall seemed like such small stuff. And the small stuff was making her sweat.

Since she was now rarely in a hurry to get home, she became more relaxed about leaving work at the end of her shifts. The kids liked it better when the teachers finished whatever activity they were all in the middle of before rushing away to their own lives. One day she was playing with plastic spiders on the floor with her favourite three year old, Steven. She knew that many people would disapprove of her designation of a "favourite" child, but that was one small thing that she never allowed herself to sweat. She treated all the children with equal love and attentiveness, so what was wrong with having one child who she got along with particularly well? Having a favourite ice cream flavour doesn't mean that all other flavours are no good.

The spider game showed no sign of ending and it was getting late. Mattie looked at her watch and told Steven that it was time for her to go home. Steven, rarely so open with his feelings, grabbed Mattie's shirt front and pulled. "No! Stay!" he said with pleading eyes. Mattie was shocked and touched by such a sincere act of affection. She felt tears spring up in the corners of her eyes as she gently worked to release her shirt from his fist. She laid her spider down on the ground, kissed the top of Steven's head, and said her goodbyes. On the way home she thought about the other favourite male in her life and how she'd been missing their

easy affection during these days of fighting and grumpiness.

That night when Mike came home and found her reading under the blankets she put her book down right away and smiled at him. He smiled back. "I'm just going to go watch some TV..." he started to say. She reached over and grabbed a fistful of his t-shirt. "No," she said, with another smile, "Stay."

During the weekend that followed Mattie once again tried to drink coffee and once again declared that it was revolting. Mike would remain the only coffee drinker in the household. The coffee maker problem was soon forgotten. On Sunday morning Mike admitted that he was actually kind of getting to like having her clamber over him every morning on her way to the bathroom. The bed stayed where it was.

When Anne came by the next day with her copy of "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff at Home" Mattie thanked her but refused the loan.

"I think I've got it figured out now," she said, and asked Anne in for a cup of tea.

Boyfriends

Two days before Thanksgiving Mattie entered her house and sprained her wrist. She had been a bad mood for days and the injury didn't help matters. It was her roommate Margaret's fault, she told herself as she struggled up from the floor where she'd fallen. The boxes that she'd tripped over were Margaret's.

Margaret was in the middle of moving out.

For three years Margaret had shared the two bedroom row house on Maple Lane with Mattie and her boyfriend Mike. While many of her co-habiting friends felt that it was ridiculous for a couple to have an extra roommate, Mattie and Mike appreciated the third person for a number of reasons. Most importantly, it allowed them to afford the rent on an entire house, rather than just an apartment, and that was important given that they owned three pets between them. Mattie's dog Emma and Mike's cats Rob and Jimmy, or "The Animals" as they were fond of calling them, seemed to need acres of space in which to madly chase one another.

It wasn't just their hitherto unsuccessful quest for a new roommate that was bothering Mattie. As she shooed Jimmy off of her favourite chair and sat down with a package of frozen corn on her wrist she once again found herself thinking, "Everything was going so well, and now it's all falling apart."

Melodramatic, yes, but Mattie's frustration was genuine. In September she'd had her work shift at the preschool changed, and suddenly, instead of rushing off each morning to get there for 7:30, she was rising slowly, enjoying some time in the house to herself, before meandering off to work for ten. Sure, she was at work until six, but that just meant that Mike was responsible for dinner when he arrived home at five from his job fixing guitars in the East end of the city. At first he'd balked at the responsibility and Mattie had thought she was going to have to get her cholesterol checked because of the amount of pizza they were consuming. Slowly, though, Mike started looking at recipes, and getting the hang of it. Mattie often came home at 6 to find Mike in the kitchen, her plaid apron tied around his waist and a dish towel over his shoulder, bending over a steaming pot of soup or some adventurous Mexican dish. Mattie loved it. She was more relaxed, Mike was starting to smile more often, and she once again felt a sincere affection for him that had previously been buried under the dust of everyday life. She spent her mornings tidying the house and walking Emma, and her evenings knitting, watching television, or drinking tea in the kitchen with Margaret and occasionally her neighbour and good friend, Anne.

Mattie loved her days and nights in her house. She loved the kids she worked with at her job. She loved the autumn weather and the peaceful decay that was settling on her backyard garden. Everything was perfect. So perfect that Mattie often

felt like she was holding her breath, knocking on wood, and waiting for something to go wrong.

Then Margaret gave her two months notice. She was going to move in with her boyfriend Stanley. Stanley, Mattie knew, was a very nice man. He worked for a computer company and liked jazz music. He took Margaret out for sushi and for long drives in the country. Still, Mattie found herself blaming him for Margaret's departure. Margaret wasn't a perfect roommate, she used too much toilet paper and she never paid her bills on time, but Mattie was used to having her around. She liked having someone to have long gossipy chats with when Mike was uninterested in the details of their neighbours' lives. She liked watching television with Margaret, whose sarcasm and quick wit made making fun of the shows more entertaining than the shows themselves.

"Stupid boyfriend..." she muttered as she used her last good wrist to push herself up from the chair.

Mike returned from a friend's house to find her curled up in front of bad Saturday evening television. He looked concerned as she told him about her arm.

"I went down to the clinic on the corner and they said it's just sprained. They gave me this." She held up her wrist to display an impressive looking tensor bandage. Mike came closer, examined her arm and then, realizing that she was going to be all right, collapsed on the couch in a huff of discontent.

Mike hated holidays, all of them. He hated Christmas, Valentine's Day, all birthdays, and Easter. He also hated Thanksgiving. When Mattie had first met Mike she'd taken it personally. She felt like his not being happy on the holidays meant that he wasn't happy with her. She knew now that his grouchiness had nothing to do with her and everything to do with his immediate family. The kindest word that could be used to describe them was "dysfunctional". And they lived in Toronto, which meant that each holiday entailed two five hour bus voyages which Mike also hated. Mattie often wondered why he didn't just stop going to the functions. When asked this question Mike always held up one hand and said, "If I go for the holidays, I don't have to talk to them for the rest of the year!" He was, of course, preparing for his Thanksgiving pilgrimage. Hence the self-absorbed huffing. Mattie, who had long since discovered that a holiday without Mike was better than a holiday with Mike and his family, had been invited to spend Thanksgiving with Anne and her enormous family, all of whom shared the house next door. Mattie was satisfied with these plans, but she was a little bit nervous about meeting Anne's new boyfriend, Carlo. She mentioned this to Mike as they sat together in grumpy commiseration on the couch.

"Anne has some weird ideas about men," she told him.

He looked at her and raised one eyebrow. Mattie continued.

"She thinks guys should pay for everything, open doors, bring flowers, make all the first moves.. all that."

Mike cocked his head, "What's the harm in that?"

Mattie struggled to put her uneasy feelings into words. "Nothing... really. Just that men who actually DO all those things often have some problems."

Mike raised his eyebrows. "Such as?"

"Well, they usually feel like if they do all that traditionally male stuff that a woman should do all the traditional female stuff. You know, serve them, stuff like that."

"Whereas enlightened bohemians like myself do nothing chivalrous and expect nothing in return!" Mike said, brandishing a wicked grin. Mattie rolled her eyes.

"Right," she said leaving Mike and his smirk behind as she wandered into the kitchen in search of a snack.

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On Sunday, with Margaret's last boxes moved out and Mike well on his cranky, solo way to Toronto, Mattie found herself relieved to have the house to herself. She walked Emma, took a bath, then

dressed in a hand-knit sweater and corduroy skirt and headed over to Anne's house.

Anne's home was like no other. Anne and her three siblings all still lived in the tiny house with both parents. It was a living situation that Mattie would never seek out for herself, but that didn't stop her from enjoying the atmosphere all the same.

Anne's father, Barry, a bouncy, baldheaded man was the first to greet her at the door.

"Welcome, Mattie! Me casa, su casa and all that! Nice sweater! Make it yourself? How's the weather out there? Hasn't it been dreadful this week? I thought I'd never get to rake those leaves. Anne! Mattie's here! Come and bring her a drink! What do you want, Mattie, a coke?"

Anne's house was a dry one. They didn't need any pleasure enhancing substances.

"A Coke will be fine, Barry," she said, slipping off her shoes and laying them carefully on the cat-shaped mat in the entrance way. A moment later Anne appeared, followed by a burly, older man.

"Mattie!" she said, arms outstretched as though she hadn't seen Mattie earlier that day when she'd come by to borrow some sugar for the cranberry sauce. "This is Carlo!" Anne gestured excitedly to the man following her.

He looked at her and she looked at him and they both smiled.
continued.

Carlo reached out his hand and Mattie offered her own, expecting it to be shaken. Instead Carlo brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. Wetly. Mattie was instantly grossed out. One look at Anne's beaming face, however, caused her to overlook her own discomfort for the good of her friend. She resolved to give Sleazy Carlo the benefit of the doubt.

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"Who wants some more pumpkin pie?" Anne's mother, Helen asked the table. "Mattie?" She looked pointedly in Mattie's direction. Mattie rased her hand and shook her head.

Mattie loved pumpkin pie. But she hated Carlo. Throughout the meal she'd watched him ridicule Anne, make inappropriately sexual jokes, misuse countless words and flout what Mattie considered to be necessary rules of conventional grammar. Mattie was afraid that if she opened her mouth to eat a second piece of pie something would snap in her brain and she would wind up screaming, "WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THIS GUY?!" at the top of her lungs. Worst of all, she knew that Anne knew what she was thinking. Anne had been shooting her dirty looks whenever she'd corrected Carlo's grammar under her breath. And when Mattie asked the ill advised question, "Carlo, is English your first language?" Anne looked at her with ice in her gaze as Carlo answered with a baffled, "Yes..."

"I'd better get going," Mattie said. Sincere cries of protest came from all parties at the table except for Anne and Carlo. Anne rose from her chair and began to clear the dessert plates. Carlo stood up as well, but didn't move to collect any dishes. Mattie said her good byes and made a hasty exit. It was all she could do to not run back to the comfort of her own home.

Once safely inside she changed into her pajamas and collapsed into bed with her comforting dog by her side and the cats curled up in the laundry basket. It was only nine PM, but Mattie felt herself sliding into a relieved, well fed sleep.

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When the phone rang at 4:30 AM Mattie's eyes flew open. Emma sat up and barked.

"It's Mike!" Mattie thought immediately. "It's an emergency! Something is horribly wrong!" She leapt groggily out of bed and ran for the phone. She picked it up on the last ring.

"Hello?" she said, out of breath.

"Hey Mattie! It's Vida from next door!"

Vida was their neighbour on the opposite side from Anne and her family. She was really Mike's friend, not Mattie's. Vida was a bartender, she kept the same rock 'n roll type hours that Mike favoured. Often if Mattie woke up in the middle of the night to

find Mike not snoozing beside her, she would call over to Vida's place and have him sent home. Mattie found Vida, who always wore make-up and had really cool shoes, to be a bit intimidating.

"Hey, Vida," she responded, trying to sound both relaxed and awake, though she was neither. "What's going on?"

"Well, I just got home from work, and I thought I'd call and invite you guys over for a beer. You know, like, 'Happy Thanksgiving!'"

"Mike's in Toronto," Mattie explained, stretching one arm up over her head.

"Why don't you come over anyway?" Vida asked. Mattie was about to answer with a polite, "no thanks" but then she thought about her Thanksgiving so far. She had a busted wrist, a departing roommate, a cranky boyfriend and an angry neighbour. She didn't have much to lose. She made a quick and uncharacteristic decision.

"Sure!" she told Vida, "I'd love to!"

Five minutes later with a hooded sweatshirt over her pajama top, Mattie was comfortably installed on Vida's sofa, hearing all about the affair that Vida was having with one of Mike's coworkers.

"Wow, Vida," she said taking a long swig of beer, "I had no idea!"

"Oh, that's because it's no big deal. I mean, it's not like I want a *boyfriend* or anything!" Vida snorted and then looked concerned. "I'm sorry, Mattie. I mean, there's nothing wrong with boyfriends..."

Mattie laughed. "Don't worry, Vida. I've been pretty down on boyfriends lately myself." Vida laughed too. Mattie wondered why she'd ever been intimidated. She took another drink from her bottle and looked around the room. "This is a great apartment!" she said.

"Yeah," Vida sighed. "So great that the landlord is moving back into it next month. I'll be out on my ass if I don't find a new place to live. You don't happen to know of anywhere that's available right now, do you?"

Mattie just smiled. She finished her beer, set the bottle on the floor, and finally started feeling just a little bit thankful.

If You Could Read My Mind

"I just don't believe in it!"

Mattie tossed this sentence over her shoulder as she crouched behind the puppet theatre. It had been a wild day at the preschool and the puppets were all lying on the tile floor, their gangly limbs tangled into an indistinguishable mess. She sighed and began to untangle them.

"How can you not believe in it? You love music!" Her co-worker Daniella was busy on the other side of the room tidying up a dumped mess of plastic snakes and spiders.

"That's just it," Mattie said, straightening up and tossing the puppets into the nearby toy chest, "I love music! I don't just love *songs*."

Daniella and Mattie had been embroiled in a friendly argument about downloading music from the internet for at least a week. Daniella was a pop music fan who downloaded song after song of what Mattie considered drecky music and burned it onto her own CDs. Mattie preferred a more traditional method of music consumption. She went to the independent music store that was on the same street as her friend David's anarchist bookstore and she bought whole albums. If she could, she bought them on vinyl rather than on CD and took them home to play on her ancient, well loved turntable.

"But," Daniella continued, "What if there's only one good song on the whole album?"

"I wouldn't buy the album!" Mattie said, laughing.

Daniella was persistent. "Okay, what if there are two or three songs on an album that you like? Is that enough? Do you buy it and listen to all the mediocre songs too?"

"YES!" Mattie was effusive. "Yes I do! Because it's those mediocre songs that make the good songs so good! How do you know that a song is good unless you're comparing it to other songs that aren't as good?"

Daniella rolled her eyes. "You're crazy! Why do you have to do everything the hard way?"

Mattie laughed again. "Listen, Daniella," she pulled up a child sized chair and planted herself on it. "I only truly love one Gordon Lightfoot song." Daniella raised her eyebrows, Mattie continued. "*If You Could Read My Mind*. It's, like, pure genius. It's the saddest song ever written. I also kind of like *Sundown* and *Early Morning Rain*, but nothing is as good as *If You Could Read My Mind*. Regardless of all that I still own the whole "Gord's Gold" collection."

Daniella giggled and Mattie became more vehement. "It's on vinyl! A two record set! And I never put it on unless I'm in the mood to *hear If You Could Read My Mind*. I could easily just drop the

needle right at the beginning of the song and turn it off when the song is done, but I don't. I listen to the whole two record set, even that *Old Dan's Records* song that I totally can't stand. That way, when I get to *If You Could Read My Mind* it's the sweetest thing ever! The song just shines right out at me and all of its sadness and its genius is there. I've been waiting for it, so it sounds even better. If I just downloaded it off the internet I wouldn't have that experience. It would be just another pop song."

"I don't know, Mattie. It seems like you're forcing yourself to eat the banana peel along with the banana itself." Daniella started turning out the lights. Mattie stood up.

"And you," she said, "Are just skimming through one chapter instead of reading the entire book!"

They clomped together down the darkened staircase of the preschool, said their good byes, and then went in opposite directions through the cold and dark winter streets.

*

It had been freezing in the city for nine and a half days. Citizens were being drawn together by the cold and the universal exasperation that went with it. It was the kind of cold that made lungs hurt and fingers freeze.

Mattie and her boyfriend Mike had been fighting daily over a garment they only ever referred to as

"Megacoat". It was a parka left to Mattie by her grandmother. Something she never thought she would wear because it was bulky and beige. But when the cold snap began she put it on one morning to take her dog, Emma, to the dog park. She had been hooked ever since. The coat was so big and so warm that it was like having her own tiny, temperate ecosystem following her around. The hood was massive and lined with fur that helped block the wind and kept her nose warm. Mike teased her for her newfound devotion to Megacoat so relentlessly that eventually Mattie insisted he wear the coat when he went outside to take the garbage to the curb. He too was a fast convert. Since then they'd been caught in an intense battle over who would get to wear the coat on any given day. Mattie reasoned that it was her coat, her grandmother, and her discovery and therefore she had first dibs. Mike insisted that because he had a longer walk to work, he should be able to wear the coat, lest he freeze to death during his long hike to the guitar store. They ended up taking turns and each grumbled about it, but also recognized that sharing was the only truly viable solution.

When Mattie arrived home that evening she doffed Megacoat and left it hanging in the front hallway for Mike to put on the next morning. She could hear the clatter of spoons and the roar of the kitchen fan. Mike was making dinner. It smelled like chili. She traded her boots for the slippers that their drafty house made it necessary to wear, and ambled down the hallway to the kitchen. She paused to

watch Mike at the stove. His hair had grown long and shaggy over the colder months and he wore the same pair of flannel-lined blue work pants that he'd been wearing since November. A tea towel patterned with cats, spoons, and daisies was flung over his plaid-shirted shoulder. Mattie bit her lip and smiled. Coming home was sweeter on the cold days.

Mike was listening to Johnny Cash's greatest hits on the small tape player they kept on the top of the stove. Johnny's soothing baritone filled the kitchen along with the smell of dinner and the noise of the fan. Mike was so focused on his cooking that he didn't hear Mattie approaching.

"Hey," she said to him, just loud enough to be heard over the fan and the music. Mike jumped a bit and turned around. Mattie was shocked to see the tears that were snaking down his stubbly face.

"What's wrong?" she moved towards him, instantly concerned. Mike raised his flannel sleeve to his eyes and wiped them quickly. He sniffed and laughed quietly.

"Oh, you know. I was just thinking about Johnny Cash dying."

Mattie was confused. "But that happened months ago!"

"Yeah," said Mike, his voice breaking in the middle of the word. "But it's just so damn sad. June Carter

Cash died and then poor Johnny just couldn't hang on. And he made that great video where he's at the feast and his hands are shaking and they're showing all that old footage of him all young and playing in the prisons..." He trailed off and shook his head then sniffed again. "It's just really sad."

Mattie was a little bit taken aback. When she and Mike made the decision to move in together and consequently made the even larger commitment of merging their music collections she had been stunned to see countless Johnny Cash records among the punk and garage rock that Mike favoured. At first, she thought he'd bought the records to be ironic. She soon discovered that Mike had an almost passionate affection for Johnny Cash's music. She'd never listened to much of it herself, but she grew to like it. When Johnny died Mike drank a whole bottle of red wine and went to bed early. She didn't, however, remember ever seeing him cry. This whole crying thing was brand new.

Mike wiped his eyes again and then appeared to pull himself together. "I'm making chili!" he said, in what seemed like a conscious effort to change the subject.

"Umm hmm," Mattie said, sidling up beside him and peeking into the pot. "Smells good."

*

The next day was Sunday. Mike liked to sleep until the afternoon on Sundays, which was fine with Mattie. After she'd risen and fed the cats and the dog she was left completely up to her own devices. It was always nice to have a Sunday stretching out in front of her with no particular plans. She ate some toaster waffles for breakfast and then decided to walk down to David's bookstore, Emma's Books, to see if a novel she'd ordered had come in yet. It took effort to leave the house with the temperature still flirting with -40 C. She knew, though, that Megacoat would be hers without argument, what with Mike still snoring under the covers upstairs.

The walk to the bookstore was a quick one, but nonetheless it was a relief to be inside again when she arrived. David wasn't working but his coworker Liz, who Mattie was also friendly with, was perched on a stool behind the counter. Public radio poured from the speakers and the cinnamon smell of Liz's chai tea hung in the air. There were no other customers. The cold was still keeping people in their homes. Liz was happy to see Mattie.

"Thank God!" she exclaimed, "I was getting sooo bored I'd resorted to re-reading this!" She held up a book titled "The Natural Path to Childbirth." Liz was seven months pregnant. She had a good sense of humour about the whole situation.

The book that Mattie had ordered hadn't come in, but Mattie stayed at the store for a while anyway, sitting in an arm chair and talking to Liz. She

couldn't help but tell the story about Mike crying over Johnny Cash. She still wasn't sure what to make of it.

"He was just standing there, cooking and crying!" she said, "Don't you think that's weird?"

"That he was crying?" Liz asked. "Hell, no! I just cried three times at the grocery store this morning."

"That's different," said Mattie, laughing. "That's your hormones."

"Well," Liz said. "Maybe Mike's got some hormones of his own going on. Boys are allowed to have their freaky moments too. Just leave him alone. I'm sure he's fine."

"It just," Mattie searched for the right words. "It just made me really... depressed." She shrugged her shoulders.

"Mattie, listen," Liz said, leaning forward as best as she could. "It's been minus a million degrees for about ten years now. No one in this city is happy about that. The days are short, there's no major holidays coming up. I'm surprised I was the only one crying in the grocery store this morning."

Mattie smiled. "Thanks, Liz."

She stayed a while longer to have a cup of tea and listen to the afternoon comedy show on the radio. Both served to lighten her mood and she felt almost

all right when she put Megacoat back on and headed for home.

*

When she got home they ate leftover chili and fresh bread from the Portugese bakery that sold loaves cheap on Sundays. The heat was on but the house was still drafty. While she did the dishes Mike turned on the weather channel to check for the next day's forecast.

"Minus thirty four," he called to her over the sound of the running taps. "With the windchill." Mattie felt a shiver start in her stomach and spread to her extremities. Mike turned the TV off and sat down on the couch with a book in his lap and a plaid blanket covering his legs. Mattie finished the dishes, dried her hands, and then approached the large bookshelf that held their records and CDs. She ran her fingers along the shelf until she found the brown "Gord's Gold" album. She pulled it out and dropped the black disc onto the turntable. Mike looked up and smiled, then patted the couch beside him. She sat down and pulled half of the blanket over her own legs, then leaned her head against Mike's shoulder. Gord sang through a few songs and then Mattie's heart swelled to the opening strains of *If You Could Read My Mind*. She started to cry. She heard Mike sniffing beside her and she looked up to see tears in his eyes as well. She laughed a strangled, phlegmy laugh.

"What's *wrong* with us?" she asked, leaning closer to Mike and putting her hand on his knee. "We can't stop crying!"

"It's totally normal!" Mike said, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his hooded sweatshirt. "We're Canadians, we're nice people. We cry and we get cold. That's just what being Canadian is. It's like picking up someone's lost mitten and putting it on a fence post so they can find it when they walk by again. We just do it because we're Canadian. There's nothing wrong with us."

Mattie thought about Mike's reasoning. It made her feel a bit better, but not much. She pulled the blanket up to her chin and shivered.

"I just can't stand this damn cold," she muttered, shivering again.

"Aww, Mattie," Mike said, shaking his head. "The winter keeps us from taking the other seasons for granted. If it weren't for all this cold, how would we appreciate spring when it finally comes?"

Mattie smiled in spite of herself. The record spun and Gord sang all his other songs. She and Mike stayed huddled under the blanket, wishing for spring.

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