

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Amber Beaman  
Jimmy Gorski

**M**argaret had no makeup on and her unwashed hair laying flat on her head; she was tired, haggard even, but it was after eight in the evening and she was just running Albertson's to grab a gallon of milk and a can of chicken broth. She didn't expect to run into Jimmy Gorski.

He called her name as she was waiting behind a man buying a cheap bottle of white wine and a pomegranate. The man in front of her had flecks of dandruff on the slightly padded shoulders of his thin sweater. She stretched her neck impatiently as he chatted with the young cashier in a way that seemed to Margaret too friendly and a little creepy; she wanted to tap her foot on the tiled floor or her fingers on the belt; she was in a hurry and her daughter was waiting in the car.

It was the caffeine, she told herself—that second cup of coffee at her mother's house. Margaret felt her head spinning. Then she heard her name.

"Margaret, is that you?"

He was dirty, as if he'd just gotten off work from a construction job. It had a rainy and chilly spring. His face was clean and clean-shaven, his eyes were a tawdry brown. He'd always reminded her of a lamb.

She didn't answer at first. She couldn't—she felt as if her tongue was cemented to the bottom of her mouth. It'd been years since she'd seen Jimmy. At one point, she would have left Eddie for him. But that was all in high school, almost fifteen years ago, Margaret reminded herself. Surely Jimmy had forgotten all about that.

She stepped out of line to talk to him, even though the guy in front of her had finally finished his purchase. She didn't say much; she could think of nothing more than how horrid she must have looked and how good he smelled. She gave him her phone number and agreed to meet some time, to catch up. He gave her a half hug and what looked like a terrified smile before walking away; he still had shopping to do, he'd told her, and she seemed like she was in an awful hurry.

Jimmy didn't call her. She hated herself for caring, for waiting for his call, for putting on more make up than usual, and for being more cautious everywhere she went around town, hoping to bump into him again. But she didn't, and he didn't call, and the days passed until she had nearly forgotten about him again.

On an early Saturday morning, Margaret was up on the ladder in the kitchen, trimming the walls for paint. Her daughter, Jenny, was at Margaret's mother's—*thank God, she thought. The last thing Margaret needed was moody, pubescent Jenny stomping around the house. She heard the front screen door creak open and she thought it was her mother, coming over to drink coffee and complain about the neighbors.*

*"Come on in, Momma," Margaret called.*

*The screen door plunked shut and the footsteps came closer to the kitchen. For*

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*a brief moment fear shot through Margaret—she didn't even know who was in her house. Hadn't she just seen Dateline? No one could be trusted anymore.*

*She was concentrating on getting off the ladder, wanting to position herself closer to the drawer where the knives were, when she nearly tripped off the last step as an unfamiliar voice said, "Hey there, Margie. Reporting for duty."*

*Jimmy stood in the kitchen entrance, wearing a tool belt and carrying a heavy-looking toolbox. His belt held two different hammers, screwdrivers, a tape measure, and some other tools Margaret didn't recognize.*

*"Jimmy! Goddammit, you scared me!" She blushed. He looked startled. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry. I never swear like that. I was just so, so, stunned."*

*He later said that he had wanted it to be a surprise. Margaret felt jittery the entire time he was at her house. "I told my mom that I ran into you at the grocery store," Jimmy had explained to her. "She told me all about your new place over here by your mom's. She said it was a wreck and that you needed all the help you could get."*

*"Well, now, I don't know about that," Margaret returned.*

*She looked around the tiny trailer she'd just acquired. It was dingy, the previous owners, "friends" of her mother's, had not even cleaned when they moved out. The door in her room was falling off the hinges, the bathroom sink leaked, the back steps were rotting, the walls had holes in them, and there was a mother opossum and family that lived in the tiny shed out back.*

*"I guess maybe I need a little bit of help," Margaret said while holding her breath. "But I hate for you to have to waste your Saturday on me. I can always call my brother—." She stopped. Jimmy was looking at her so intensely that she found she could say nothing more.*

*He fixed the sink, the back steps, and taped off the kitchen walls, doors, and windows for painting before the next hour. Margaret was impressed and a little too awkward to be of much assistance so she pulled blackberry brambles growing by the mailbox. It was a cool and bright April day, and even with the physical labor, she wanted to go back in the house and drink a cup of coffee.*

*She pulled off her garden gloves and peeked at her reflection in the window to see if her hair and face were at least decent. She saw Jimmy in the living room, spackling the walls where the previous owners had had a dartboard.*

*"Hey Jimmy," she said as she walked inside. "Want some coffee?"*

*"Sure, that'd be nice," he said as he sat down the spackle and unfastened his tool belt.*

*They walked into the kitchen together, and he sat at the table as Margaret washed her hands and prepared the coffee.*

*"You're looking mighty pretty today," he said.*

*Margaret didn't know what to say. "Cookies?"*

*"Did you make them?" he asked.*

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"As a matter of fact, I did," she said.

"In that case, sure thing. So I just saw your momma walking down the road," he said.

"Did you?"

"Look like she was coming over here."

"Lord," Margaret muttered.

"Hell-oo!" her mother's voice called. The screen door banged as Ruth Louise walked into the house. "Margaret? Jimmy? Yoo-who!"

On the third Wednesday of the month, First Baptist Church served a free lasagna dinner for their church members. It was only then that Margaret could get her ex-husband, Eddie, to come to church, and it was a tradition that Margaret felt that she and her daughter could rely on. Before the divorce, the lasagna dinner had been something that Margaret looked forward to attending, but since the separation she feared the dinner, no matter how irrational she knew it was. But she hadn't spoken with Eddie in a couple of weeks and thought that he was surely working out of town, or something, and even if he was in town, the likelihood of him being at the church's dinner was slim. Eddie didn't "do" church, and for once Margaret was grateful, if not a little guilty.

She rushed Jenny along through the muddy back lot. They were a little bit late and Margaret didn't want to keep her friend Disney waiting any longer. Her polyester pants moved, almost lovingly, against her pumping thighs and calves as they hurried along. The red clay squished under her shoes, the small heels sinking into the earth like little stab wounds. Margaret could smell the scent of Jenny's hair, the apple shampoo, and Aquanet. Jenny hunched her back a little as she ran, her body gangily but not as awkward as Margaret imagined her daughter's early teen years to be. Jenny was almost beautiful, even at age fifteen, and that nearly frightened Margaret more than her divorce had. Jenny laughed as she dashed a muddy puddle, but the laugh didn't tinkle with the songs of youth like they once had; now the laugh sounded foreign, like the laugh of a stranger.

They came to the pavement, oily and shiney even on this cloudy day. They ran through the cars, old Buicks and Pontiacs and trucks—the cars of working people. Margaret felt comforted again, familiar and aware once more amongst the cars and in the wake of Jenny's laughter.

They made their way to the church's gymnasium and once they reached the buildings, they opened the doors and were greeted by an old man sitting at a table laden with blank name tags and markers. He greeted them, his smile genuine but a little tired looking. She wrote her names in her carefully practiced cursive and Jenny wrote Suzanne in bubble letters, surrounded by stars. She laughed at the persona she created.

Disney had been waiting at an empty table near the line. They greeted each other, she hugged Jenny, and they picked up their empty trays as they got in line. First they picked up their sweet teas, then their salads bowls. Jenny picked out the cherry tomatoes with a look of disgust as Disney chattered about her day at work and the drive to the church as they

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all waited for the line to move forward. The church gymnasium-turned-dining hall was bustling, almost pulsating, and Margaret's hands were sweaty.

"Margaret!"

She turned her head to the tables, quickly filling up with church members, and looked for the voice that called her. A flabby arm waved.

"Yoo-who," her mother said.

"Oh boy," Disney said only loud enough for Margaret to hear. Margaret smiled and waved to her mother.

Ruth Louise smiled as she sat down again at her table, a look of smug confidence on her face.

"Oh God," Margaret muttered.

Next to Ruth Louise sat Jimmy Gorski, wearing a black suit and a terrible checked tie. He waved shyly. Margaret felt her head swim and her heart pound heavily in her chest, but she waved back before turning again to the line and walking forward, where a woman stood waiting over the extra-large dishes for Margaret's request of meat or cheese lasagna.

"Two meat, please," she heard herself say.

"Margaret," Disney whispered. "Don't look now, but—"

"Jimmy, I know. Mother brought him."

"No," Disney hissed. "Eddie."

And there he was, Eddie, holding a tray with two plates of lasagna and an extra plate of toasted garlic bread. His hair was combed. He had parted it down the middle, gelled it to the side so that it stuck to the skin of his forehead. He was wearing a red long-sleeved dress shirt with the sleeves cut above the elbow, strings dangling from the unhemmed edges, light blue jeans with no holes, and a braided leather belt Margaret had given him many Christmases ago. He looked like he had actually tried to put himself together, and that both irritated and saddened Margaret.

To her it seemed as if the entire gymnasium had suddenly silenced, everyone aware and equally as shocked at Eddie's gall. A rushing sound, like the foamy waves she used to skip through as a child, filled her head, drowning out the voices of the other church members, the voice of Disney who had set her own tray down and was tugging at Margaret's.

"Eddie," she said in a voice of a giant, "don't you dare come over here."

He halted. His blue eyes were wide, and dark, like they always would get when he was confused. He just seemed so stupid, so innocent and moronic, that Margaret felt very suddenly that she might cry.

But she would not cry. She couldn't help him and she wouldn't let him ruin this. Church was her place. Hers, didn't he remember that?

She stood there for a second longer, still holding her tray, before she walked away. Jenny, in a move that Margaret assumed was to protect Eddie, pushed herself up from the bench where she had taken a seat next to her grandmother. She opened her mouth to call out, and even though the

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moment felt slow and predictable, she couldn't guess who Jenny was going to call out to. Disney held up her arm like a school teacher silencing a classroom and Jenny calmly obeyed, sitting down without saying a thing.

Margaret sat her try on the table. "Here you are, Jen," she said without looking at the girl. "Go ahead, you have the mission group meeting soon." She half-smiled at her mother. "Hi, Jimmy. How are you?" But she didn't wait for an answer before she walked away.

Eddie was frozen still in the place where Margaret had greeted him. She walked towards him without knowing what she was going to say. Her foot slipped on the waxed gym floor and she almost lost her balance. Her face turned very pale and then very pink and in her chest, somewhere underneath her fast beating heart, she felt something that she could only equate with a roar.

"Goddammit!" she shouted. And then she laughed, laughed without caring or wanting to stop, as a quiet river of sound rushed in her ears. She walked out of the gym and into the atrium where the old man had first greeted her. She sat in his chair, his aftershave still clinging to the air. She felt comforted by that smell even though her father had never smelled so good, never smelled like anything other than wet earth or greasy car parts. She folded her arms on the table and laid her head in the crook of her elbow, her head reeling a little, a feeling of elation surging through her.

He touched her arm softly, shyly. She started.

"Do you need a ride?"

Jimmy's eyes were a soft brown and concerned looking, like a dog's. "A ride where?" she asked.

But she didn't let him answer. Instead she pushed herself up and walked out of the same glass doors that she and Jenny had walked in moments before. She walked ahead of him, not knowing the direction of his truck, not thinking what was happening in the church, or how Jenny would get home. She heard him jogging behind her, calling her name. Once he caught up with her, he asked her some things in his quiet manner, watching his feet treading the pavement, and while she saw his mouth moving, she didn't hear anything he was saying.

Again he touched her arm.

"Margaret." He stopped. She stopped, too.

"I parked way up in the front of the church," he said. "I got here really early with Miz Ruth Louise."

"Why?" Margaret asked.

He didn't answer immediately. He seemed to be watching the cars at the stop light in the distance, almost as if he didn't hear her question, almost like they were waiting on someone else to show up. Finally he said, "She wanted to show me around. Told me all about Jenny getting baptized, just how they done it, even though Jenny's scared of water." He kicked a pebble, watched its tiny skip.

"Jenny's not scared of water," Margaret answered, turning smoothly to the direction of the front of the church, her loose dark hair fluttering slightly in the wet breeze.

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Jimmy's truck smelled like coconut air-freshener. It was spotless—the seats newly vacuumed, the windows wiped free of smudges, the public radio station humming softly as they waited for the light to turn green after they left the church parking lot. Taped on his dash were handwritten Bible verses.

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

"Jimmy, I didn't even know you were relig—" but before Margaret could finish her sentence, she choked, coughed, and though she tried, she could not stop the flow of tears from her eyes. She pulled her hands to her face, covered her hot wet cheeks, took a deep breath in, and wailed. No gentle tears, no sad, silent cries—but full, angry, heartbroken sobbing. Margaret wanted Jimmy to say something, to pull over at least and put his arms around her, to whisper with his familiar voice that it would all be all right, that he was there for her. But he remained quiet, drove quickly, speedily merged onto the interstate, weaving in and out of traffic until they reached the exit by Margaret's house.

"Do you want to stop by the Wal-mart?" he finally asked. Margaret had stopped crying by then, her almost imperceptible whimpers silenced by the hum of the radio.

"Sure," she answered.

He walked a couple of steps behind her as they made their way into the store. Though it was Wednesday night, there were people crowding the aisles. Candy, leftover from the Easter holiday, was stacked in big cardboard boxes, their prices marked down, at the entrance of the store. Margaret was tempted to pick up a bag of chocolate covered caramels—the way they melted in her mouth was a pleasure that she suddenly wanted.

Jimmy walked past her as she loitered around the boxes of cheap candy. Until that moment, Margaret hadn't noticed how short Jimmy was—no taller than 5'8", with thin arms and legs, a delicate neck and face, like an illustration in a children's book. His curly hair, his unkempt scruff, his glittery eyes—he looked more like a satyr than the Jimmy she had grown up with.

Jimmy continued walking, somewhat stiffly. Did he have a hard time walking with those hooves? Margaret could hear the click, click of his boot heels. Why was he so dressed up anyway?

In her head, the rushing sound—traffic and waves—was still there, louder than usual. On the intercom a smooth-sounding woman's voice asked or made a statement. Jim G, the voice said, your horns have just arrived in Sporting Goods.

Margaret followed him back to the Sporting Goods section. She was a few steps behind him; he was browsing the fishing lures, as if they hadn't

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just called his name over the intercom. Every now and then Margaret caught his eye, and he smiled shyly at her. He kept walking, down and up, up and down the aisles, while Margaret stood watching him. Eventually she pulled a camping chair down from the shelf, took it out of its canvas carry bag, unfolded it, and sat down.

Her head was spinning. That sound, the waves and cars driving by on a busy wet road, was getting louder. No longer could she hear the quiet mumbling of the other shoppers or their footsteps on the shiny linoleum floor.

It was sometime later when she woke up. A taste like copper, heavily metallic and dry, filled her mouth. The room was small, too clean, too quiet; she knew she was in the hospital. This, she said to herself, is exactly what it's like on TV. No one was there, waiting by her bedside, their puffy eyes creasing as they smiled when they saw her. She was alone. She closed her tired eyes and slept again.

She woke up to the television blaring the Maury Povitch show. Her mother sat in the wooden straight-backed chair next to Margaret's bed. She was working out—lifting and lowering her arms. Each was strapped with a two pound weight on each wrist.

"Momma," Margaret said. She was surprised how dry her throat was, how young her voice sounded.

Ruth Louise didn't hear her. She continued lifting her arms, this time over her head. "One. Two. Three..." she counted.

"Momma," Margaret said again.

"Oh, honey, there you are!" Her mother turned and smiled at her. Ruth Louise's face had thinned, her flabby arms somewhat more toned. She had been working out for three months, walking up and down the streets near her house, stopping just long enough to talk or gossip with the neighbors.

"What's going on?" Margaret asked.

"You don't remember?"

"No ma'am," Margaret said as she tried to lift herself out of the bed.

"Honey, no no. You just lay back. What do you need, baby girl?" her mother asked.

"Some water," she answered. "And turn that damn TV down."

Ruth Louise pushed herself up from the chair and walked to the small plastic table where the water pitcher and cups were. She had five pound weights strapped to her ankles.

"Just because you're sick doesn't mean you can talk so vulgar," Ruth Louise said.

"Why are you wearing those things?" Margaret asked.

"I gotta work out, baby girl. I'm not as young as I used to be. You should work out with me. I can get you a set of these weights. An early

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Christmas present, we'll call it. We can walk the neighborhood together. You'd be surprised what it does to the back of your calves—"

"Momma, I'm not too interested in working out right now."

"Ok, honey," Ruth Louise said. She walked over to the bed where Margaret lie and handed her the cup of water. "You need help sitting up?"

"I got it, Momma."

"Did you see these flowers over here?" her mother asked. Pink roses, probably six of them, sat in a cluster of baby's breath, all in a white vase that looked to be too small. A red ribbon was tied around the vase, a card tucked behind the bow.

"Just guess who they's from," Ruth Louise said with a smile.

"Are you going to tell me what happened, or what?" Margaret said. She didn't care about the flowers.

"Why, Margaret. You must be cranky from all those drugs the doctors had to give you. You don't need to be so snappy with your momma."

She sighed. "Mother."

"They's from Jim!" Ruth Louise exclaimed. She pulled her chair across the floor and faced it towards Margaret's bed.

"Momma, please."

"It was a nervous breakdown," her mother said in a strange voice. It was almost as if she was talking to one of her gossiping friends.

"What?" Margaret asked.

"A nervous breakdown," Ruth Louise said again. "Probably from all that stress, from the divorce, you know? They see that kind of thing happen all the time, especially among women."

"Oh," Margaret said.

"They want to keep you in the hospital for a few more days, under observation. They said that women in your situation were sometimes suicidal."

"Suicidal!" Margaret exclaimed. "I am no such thing."

"Well, honey, that's just what they said. Don't shoot the messenger."

"I didn't have a nervous breakdown," Margaret grumbled.

"They's pretty sure you did, honey." Ruth Louise picked up her weights again and started doing squats. "With the way you stormed out of church," she said, "I just knew something bad was going to happen. That's why I sent Jimmy after you. I didn't think it'd be this, of course. I thought maybe there'd be some fussing and fighting with Eddie, but definitely not this."

"Definitely not what?" Margaret asked.

"Jimmy says that you just sort of cracked up. That y'all went to Wal-marts and you started talking to yourself, mumbling really, laughing he said, real scary-like, and when he asked you if you wanted to go home, you took off running like a bat out of hell! Slipped and fell down, bumped

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your head. Nothing too serious, thank God. But that slowed you down enough for Jim to catch you. He's a small man, you know. Not that fast.

He plopped you down in the truck, cracked the windows and locked the doors, like he would do for a dog in the summer time, and called me from the pay phone. Good thing," she said, "that I never changed my number, even though I've been tempted to, with all those telemarketers calling all the dang time."

Margaret had been asleep for a full day and a half.

"The doctors had you pretty doped up," Ruth Louise said. "They were scared of what you would do when you woke up." She stopped her lunges and started lifting her arms up in the air again. "You even had restraining straps on your arms and legs, for a little while."

"What? Why?"

"Oh, they asked me and I told 'em you was a real fighter. I just did it to protect you, honey!"

Margaret looked at her wrists and feet, strapless and unbruised.

"They's taken them off you by now," Ruth Louise said. "I told them that there was just no sense in tying up my baby!"

"I'm sorry, Momma. I'm real tired. I'm going back to sleep."

"Ok, honey. You do that. I'll keep the TV down low."

"Thanks."

"I'll be here when you get back,"

Margaret nodded, allowing her heavy eyes to close, imaging her mother's strange words floating around the room like a weightless moonbeam.