

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

Christopher Allen  
**Nothing Between Us**

**I**t takes me exactly five days to erase the mindtape of Carl's voice. Since he's been commuting between Birmingham and London, we're together in London only at the weekends. Sixty hours. During the week, I pump myself full of loud, lyrical positivity. Nelly Furtado, Shakira, Robbie Williams and Reamonn Garvey, the lead singer for Reamonn. When he sings, I feel like a man wants me—and I take the knob to ten. The neighbors don't complain: my singing with Reamonn is nothing compared to my fights with Carl.

On my way to the airport to pick him up, I crank up the radio until the car is a deafening mess, then I scream all the things that make me worthy of love: "I'm smart!" I always start with *I'm smart*. "I worked my ass off to finish university. I'm an award-winning poet. One day I *will* make money with my art. I'm a good wife. I try. I do the work. I commit. I'm going to be a loving, supportive mother . . . when I have kids. I know my own—"

"Good God, Amy!" Carl throws his suitcase onto the back seat. There's mud on one of the little tires. "Turn that shit down."

I turn the radio down because it's Carl's car. "Hi, honey. Good flight?"

"Did they do it?"

"Yeah. Sort of. I'm on it." I try to sound professional because I know he likes me that way.

"What do you mean 'sort of'? Amy, they either paid the rent or they didn't."

On the radio the intro to Reamonn's "Supergirl" begins. My eyes begin to tear. I turn up the volume, but not loud enough to drown out our conversation. I try to be careful with Carl. I try. I do the work.

"Well," I say, "the man downstairs says he needs another week, but the man upstairs paid. I'm depositing it today. The money situation is fine. I printed out a statement." I nod to an envelope on the dashboard.

"Wait. Why didn't *he* deposit it? Amy, you're managing the rental properties while I'm in Birmingham. If you can't handle—"

"I can."

"You can see in her eyes that no one is her chain." This comes from Reamonn, and although Carl is speaking to me more loudly, I'm listening more to Reamonn. I edge up the volume and picture Reamonn Garvey on stage singing only to me. I picture being his wife, married to a poet . . . and not a banker who has to micromanage everything and everyone in his life.

"You *can't* handle it, Amy. Since I left, the tenants pay *whenever* the hell they want, and you're letting them. Tomorrow morning you're going upstairs and telling the man he has to deposit his rent just like everyone else. Turn the radio down." Carl reaches for the volume.

I hold my hand over the knob. "Please. I like the words to this song. The man upstairs pays his rent, Carl. It's the man downstairs who's not paying or answering his phone or—"

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Reamonn: "When you're in love, what can go wrong?"

"Amy, slow down."

"Am I speaking too fast for you?"

"Slow the bloody *car* down. Amy, you should have gotten it in writing that the tenants set up a standing order."

Reamonn: ". . . pushing her fear further along."

"Carl, our problem is not with—"

"God, would you chill! One little thing happens and you freak. You should have to live in a grown-up world with a real job and real problems, Amy. I sit across the table from managing directors and board members every day. I have to make difficult decisions every single bloody day."

And you eat your boogers.

"Why are you laughing? Amy, slow down and turn off that sodding song. Stop. Laughing."

Reamonn: "And then she'd scream in my face, tell me to leave, leave this place."

Laughing is always a bad idea. I know Carl goes mad when he thinks someone is taking the piss. I swallow hard because it's his car and his house and his tenants. Nothing belongs to me. I've learned to compromise. I'll divorce him ten times before the weekend is out, but then the right song will come on the radio, we'll laugh, Carl will admit to taking his job worries out on me, and I'll make dinner, something he likes. Veal and Brussels Sprouts. I'll cut the sprouts in half and grill them. They'll be crunchy, and he'll tell me I'm a good cook. This one compliment will erase all the cruel things he said. Or I'll convince myself that he's just giving me a hard time. I'll convince myself that the car, the house and the tenants are in some way mine. Or not. This might be the weekend when the right song never comes.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"You don't get it, Carl. The bloke downstairs set up a standing order, and he's not paying his rent. The lovely man upstairs pays in cash, but he pays his rent every month. Every month, Carl. So, Mr. Businessman, your logic is dodgy." I laugh, trying to keep it light.

"There you go, exploding at me again. Amy, the lease says they must set up a standing order, and you didn't insist on it. You're not a serious-minded person; admit it. You're too nice. You're naive."

I'm a supergirl.

Reamonn: ". . . and supergirls just fly."

"Earth to Amy! If you were one of my employees—"

"I'm not one of your employees, Carl."

"What are you anyway?"

Reamonn: "She's a supergirl. A supergirl. She's sowing seeds. She burning trees . . ."

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"Let's see," Carl says, "you're not a business person, and you're not a . . . lover . . ."

It always comes back to the fact that we're not having sex. We used to have sex . . . when he didn't criticize every move I made and I was superficial—or just human—enough to be turned on by cleanliness and a good haircut more than kindness. He used to be more careful with me.

"What are you? You're nothing. That's what you are. Nothing."

"I'm a supergirl," I whisper. Carl doesn't hear me, but I'm not talking to him anyway.

"Did you hear me?" Carl says. "You're nothing. That's exactly what you are: nothing."

*I could kill us both right now. You don't think I have it in me, but I do. What are you, anyway? If you are something pleasant when you're in Birmingham, I wish you'd stay there; because when you're here I really do feel like nothing.*

"Ooh, Amy's not talking to me. Amy's mad. Amy can't take criticism."

"I'm a supergirl," I say more loudly now. I want him to feel confused by this allusion to the lyric on the radio—a connection he would never make. He never listens to lyrics. He's more of the "good beat, you can dance to it" type.

"Sorry?" he says. "You know what your problem is? You're too sensitive. Your skin is so thin. It's like onion-paper thin. Thinner than onion paper. It's like—"

"Stop it!" I turn Reamonn down. Carl wins. "You don't understand how it hurts when you say things like I'm *nothing*. You think you're toughening me up, but it wounds, Carl. I know you don't mean it. You can't *mean* it."

"Sure I mean it. And let's not even start about how you 'wound' me."

"No one can hurt you, Carl. To be hurt, you have to have a soul."

"Oh, that's good. That's almost like poetry. Why don't you write that in one of your little poems, Amy? And get it published on an ezine somewhere for—how much?—zero dollars? Zilch. Nada. *Nothing*. Nothing, Amy. *Nothing*."

I turn the radio back up—at least I can take control of this knob. For a moment I feel as if I could regain the upper hand, but "Supergirl" is already fading into an old Madonna tune, which doesn't make me feel strong enough to argue with Carl.

"Nothing," he keeps saying because he knows he's found my thinnest place. I stare at the white lines of the road galloping towards us and try to block out his voice with Madonna's "Borderline." It's a tall order for Madonna.

And if I wrote that poem, Carl? If I searched for your inside voice—something to italicize—would I find it shamed by your cruel exterior? Would I find it self-deprecating and alone? If I held my ear up close, would I hear anything at all?

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“Amy? . . . Amy?”

There’s an underpass up ahead; a quick jerk to the left and we wouldn’t feel a thing. There’s a bridge; there’d be time enough to watch his expression turn from asshole to assless. So many trees to burn. If I drove a hundred miles an hour into one, it would split us right down the middle, leaving a hot, wide path of nothing between us.