

## Slipping Away

By Lisa Napolitan

The illness came at night, beneath clean sheets, beside the gentle hum of her husband, while the fox stole the suet off the string and the children slept. It took her always by surprise – to be so weak, to fall so easily prey. A mind collapse; a failing of the common senses. It first appeared years ago, in another lifetime really, and while the exact hour of its emergence varied, its potency never did.

You expose me  
Blister my soul  
Siphon my breath

She could smell it; not the decaying leaves of autumn carried on the wind, but the worms beneath. Most of the time, it pawed in dirt far away. Most of the time, she could walk, run, laugh. Laugh! Create, much of the time. Work. Really work. In fact, the better part of a month or two, sometimes three, it let her alone completely. She forgot it existed. Life was, if not beautiful, firm. But the illness returned, it always did and without warning, without a modicum of concern, for her; overtaking her senses, stabbing needles long and sharp into the grey matter of her mind; impacting her, bowels like lacerated fruit, the meat of soft plums fallen victim to the claws of the raven. Once inside, it discarded her name.

Beneath the sheets

I shiver. I am no more. I quake. I am no more.

...and she is back, and it is morning.

Blueberries floating

in smooth, ceramic bowls

atop the yellow gingham tablecloth spread with the palm of her hand.

The milkman will deliver more milk soon.

They won't discuss it. Sam will eye Maggie with trailing glances, but they won't discuss it. He is fed up. Really fed up and ready to leave. Will take the boys, Maggie fears, if it comes to that. To be raised by his mother.

Sam snatches his car keys off the counter, kisses the boys on the tops of their heads and turns as cereal deflates and blueberries submerge. This time, it is work that urges Sam's departure. *This* time.

Sam is at the door. Maggie, desperate, hovers beside him. Sam grabs hold of Maggie's arm, tight, leaning in, and with mouth banged hard up against Maggie's ear his words blast hot, wet; Sam's teeth scrape the cartilage of Maggie's ear. "You've lost your *fucking* mind." Inside of Maggie, vapors of the madness press beneath the sockets of her eyes. She can taste them, like turpentine sent to destroy.

“I’m so sorry, Sam. I’m so, so sorry.”

Sam is red-faced and his buffed wingtips scrape mean on the parquet floor. *My slippers are absurd.* Maggie’s slippers are absurd.

The boys, still at the kitchen counter, sit silent, eyes everywhere and nowhere, bare feet latched to barstool legs.

Through clenched teeth, Sam roars. “You need to get a *fucking* grip, or I swear I am gone. You are ruining my life. *Our* life.” The swoop of an arm references the boys who appear to have stopped breathing. They are breathing of course, just look as if they’re not. Small mouths, frozen in time. Wispy, red lashes that never blink. Tiny somethings that sit still, though the last time this happened, Jasper developed a tick. Kept twisting his neck around, fluttering his eyes. It was unnerving and the guilt Maggie felt... Maggie warned Sam, though shame gave Maggie little say.

“I suffer from something,” Maggie says.

“*You* suffer from something? Hah! I’m the one who’s suffering. We’re all suffering. Jesus!”

JASPER (age 4) slides off stool, stuffed piggy in hand; cowers under counter. Wraps arms about knees. Rocks, wails.

SEYMOUR (age 6) ducks below too, comforts Jasper. He is angry. Runs stout, blanched hand, best as he can, through thick waves of bright copper hair. Scowls at his parents.

If the illness were only something Maggie could control...

MAGGIE (imagining).

NURSE: Open wide

Pills drop in Maggie’s mouth. (*No! Not this way! I won’t be here, then. Not this way!*)

Sam exits the house. Maggie runs back to the boys, crouches beneath the counter but finds it hard to fit. She sticks arms out, hands out through the jail of bar stool legs to say *I am here*. “It’s okay,” she says. “I’ll be right back.” Hands with skin like white moths grasp back, do not wish to let go.

Sam is beside his shiny red Roadmaster, in the car, in the driver’s seat. Maggie holds the car door open and speaks at Sam’s ear, for Sam will not face her. He is freshly shaven, so freshly shaven. Smells of Brylcreem and English Leather. “I’ll do anything. Oh, please, Sam. Please. I love you. Pl-ease!” Collapsing to her knees, slippers in gravel. Sam’s hands are on the wheel. They loosen, tighten. Those little copper hairs. If his hands were to let go, they’d shake.

He is staring at Maggie now. Sympathy? Horror? “Get some fucking help, Maggie.” It is always Sam who is practical. Strong. But there is a darkening shade of green in his eyes that says to Maggie, *although I love you, I am running out of steam*. “I don’t know how many times I can tell you this.”

“I know, Sam. I know. I’m so sorry.”

“Do you? Jesus, Maggie. Do you want me to put you in that place?” The shove of a thumb over his shoulder indicates the place up over the ridge. The place Maggie has known of since she was a child and fears the most. “Is that what you want? Because that’ll be it, you know. If that’s what it comes to. That’ll be it for all of us. Christ!”

And there it is. Maggie's ribcage contracts as if the wind has been knocked out of her. "No." The word is a quick inbreath of air. "I'll fix this, Sam." She stands up, stuck gravel falling from her knees, and steps back, staggers back, fixes an errant curl near her eye. The car door shuts, slams, and Sam speeds away. The boys are at the open front door.

When Maggie was a child, she had fears. Fears of being lost, of being left behind. The fear of running out of gas, of scary creatures in the backyard. She slept with a knife under her pillow. She wondered what happened to that knife. Had she left it behind during the divorce?

During the first marriage, brief as it was, she had her first breakdown, over nothing really. Over a letter in the mail that said they were being fined for not clearing snow from the sidewalk outside their house. Plead guilty, it said, and pay the fine or appear in court. Someone could have hurt themselves, it implied, was implying, and they were responsible. *She* was responsible. When her then husband came home, he found Maggie fully dressed in an empty bathtub. Sobbing. It made no sense, her being there. And yet, there she was, shaking, inconsolable.

Years passed without event. She divorced, changed jobs, settled down with Sam. Beautiful children emerged. Then one hot, summer day they drove across a bridge - and it was a very high bridge that caused one to cross through low-lying clouds. At the wheel, Maggie panicked. White knuckled, unable to breathe, head high as a kite, by some unnamed force of will she managed to keep the wheel straight and the car moving forward.

Now these past few years, the sessions of madness, if that's what they were, were on the rise. The triggers, increasing in absurdity. Fear of the tub crashing to the floor below, fear of the basement flooding, the house being washed away in a storm, snakes breeding below the house, whole chunks of the mountain they lived on breaking off and sliding away. The only thing that broke the spells, was Sam. He spoke words of comfort, words of common sense and the spell dissipated, slowly, it would go away...

as he held Maggie in his arms,  
beneath clean white sheets,  
as the fox stole the suet,  
as the children slept.

Only Sam was tired of the spells, of the scars they left, of the arguments they caused. He was right to require Maggie seek help. And Maggie would do it. She would. She would call today. Someone. Of course, she would.

---

**Lisa Napolitan is married to a brilliant, selfless woman who supports her writing habit; they have two awesome college kids. Her work has appeared in various journals. Her short story, "Destrehan," which was published by *Into the Void*, was nominated to Best Small Fictions. She serves on the Board and Conference Committee of *Women Who Write, Inc.*, a non-profit supporting women writers at all stages of their careers. She holds a BA in Semiotics from Brown, an MFA with Distinction in Creative Writing from Hofstra and is working toward her doctorate in writing and literary studies at Drew University. She credits her brilliant mother for inspiring her as a writer. Find out more about her work at [lisanapolitan.com](http://lisanapolitan.com) and on Twitter @4amwriterlisa.**