

Moura McGovern

Pretty

“She tells a story about story-telling, a story within which are several stories, each one, in itself, about story-telling—by means of which a man is saved from death.”—Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*

She was the kind of blue-eyed, blonde-ringlet pretty that would either save her or kill her.

At eight-years old, she barely spoke. Her mother didn't speak either. The man they lived with, our protagonist's next-door neighbor, never shut up.

He paced the cracked concrete patio with a diet Pepsi in one hand, a Pall Mall in the other, cell phone jammed between ear and shoulder. He circled the blacktop parking lot that served as the centerpiece of the townhouse complex. It could have been in Any Suburb, USA, but was in fact in State College, Pennsylvania, ranked the safest small town in America. Around the blacktop, weaving between the Civics and Corollas, the man circled to the front and stalked the narrow sidewalk that lined identical front doors no one ever used. He didn't have a stick of furniture within the apartment. He spent his time outdoors, smooth-talking women on the other side of his cell. His sparse hair, dyed a coal-black that stained his skull, made him look even creepier than he sounded.

The complex—and the town itself—was a quiet place, especially in summer. Penn State University had released its 40,000 students into the wilds of the world, and so on any given summer night, the protagonist, call her Jane, sat on her stoop and watched fireflies wink and glow. In those days, it was the closest she got to sexual electricity—watching the mating ritual of a bug—and it was a source of angst, like everything else in her life then.

She had painted her stoop green, a flagrant violation of the “community covenants,” and there she petted her dog and listened to the wind make itself heard in the leaves of the towering oaks on the front lawn. The trees were the best part of the place, the things that gave the place a modicum of singularity. This was important to Jane. A dozen or so of the leaning, old giants dotted the half-acre view. She ignored the trucks, the motorcycles, the SUVs—the strip-mall world just beyond. It was a new home for her, yet regularly she called her mother in floods of dramatic tears to ask the same question, ad nauseum: “What am I doing here?”

As a want-to-be-writer, it was not lost on her to ask what any of us are doing anywhere at any time. It was not lost, but more or less useless. Her mother always answered the question in a measured, practical way: “You are going to graduate school. You are learning to teach. You are learning to write. You’ll be just fine.” Her mother had decreed it to be so, and so it would be. She believed this. And, this other feeling—the nonstop angst—there was another term for this that she had, in fact, learned in graduate school: cognitive dissonance. Yet naming it did not help. Previously she had believed that words were supposed to help. That words were the only thing that could help.

“Mom, what am I doing here?” She asked it again and again and again. No matter how many times she asked, there was one thing her mother did not say—not in a logical, even tone, not in a hysterical, angry tone.

What remained unspoken: “You are learning to live after that bastard nearly killed you.”

Her mother would never actually call someone a bastard, at least not out loud. It wouldn't be lady-like. Anyway, it was probably also an exaggeration. Jane didn't know anymore, because she was very much alive, and—indeed—she was learning.

Certainly one thing she was learning was how to live alone for the first time in her adult life, without the man she'd been with since she was a teen. She was then thirty years old. She had thought that she already knew how to live though, and she certainly had not lived up to her own expectations. She was not a mother. She was no longer a wife. Her career, which had been successful by external standards and yet had bored her to near catatonia, she had left to move to the geographic center of Pennsylvania, which was the middle of nowhere to someone like east-coast, hustle-bustle-born Jane. She wasn't even a football fan. So, she would also answer her own question: "What am I doing here?"

She always answered it in the same way: "Not much."

Instead she tried to listen to the wind in the trees. All the while, she thought: "Give me a fucking break." She was not the kind of woman who could calm her mind enough to hear messages in the wind. And, unlike her mother, she was not the kind of woman who shied from profanity.

Jane felt, however, that she had listened to enough profanity in her marriage to last several millennia. So, at the time, Jane repeatedly thought that she just wanted to be alone. It was all she wanted. Just leave me alone. It had become a mantra, a refrain, a manifesto. She had imagined herself creating great works of art, great works filled with insight and beauty that women like the one she had been—an unhappy wife, an unsatisfied worker, a woman who had become a stranger to herself, a breath away from total emptiness—these women would find her art inspiring, useful. To do this: She needed to be alone. She needed peace, quiet. She knew that wind blew in those trees, and, of course, Jane cursed and cried that she had nothing to show for all that wind, all that quiet, all that alone time. She simply didn't know how to do what she wanted to do. She wasn't even all that clear about *what* she wanted to do. She knew only that she was in fact alone. Lonely even. Lost at sea,

while landlocked in the middle of Pennsylvania without a boat in sight, Jane knew only that she wanted meaning, she wanted to matter, she wanted to love, to be loved, she wanted to make sense of things, to know something, anything, everything. Above all, she wanted *to know*. Now.

Instead she painted the stoop green.

Then, one evening, a pretty little girl pushed open the screen door and walked around the rhododendron that separated the apartments. Jane's dog, who looked like a black golden retriever, and who always grinned something silly, sat up and grinned even more. We'll call the dog Marley. Some days Marley was the only thing that got Jane through. Jane knew: Marley was a magic dog, one who had the power to heal. His silly grin did it all, could always make her smile, even when she oh-so-frequently annoyed herself. When the loneliness set in, when Jane thought she'd never write anything worth a damn, it was then that Marley made the want-to-be-writer happy with nary a single word.

So, the little girl, a wee wisp of a girl, with long, curly blonde hair, big blue eyes, a yellow cotton shirt too small and stained, bare feet, and too-short pink pants, stood in front of Jane and Marley.

Jane looked at the child.

The child looked at Marley. She clasped her hands behind her back and twisted back and forth. She bit her lip. She smiled.

"Do you want to pet him?" Jane asked.

Marley stood and shook his coat so vigorously that dust flew into the evening air. Jane wasn't much of a housekeeper, and Marley was more of a broom than the broom ever would be. After he shook, he set upon wagging his tail as vigorously as he could, smiling his toothy grin that could melt anyone. His growl though could terrify anyone too, including the man who lived next door. Jane remembered the man then and wondered what the girl was doing there, and that's when she had the thought for the first time: "She's the kind of pretty that'll either kill her or save her."

“Go ahead, you can pet him. He loves kids,” Jane said.

The little girl’s slight chin tilted the tiniest bit, but she did not move forward to pet him.

Jane stood and walked Marley towards her.

“He won’t hurt you,” Jane said.

Slowly, tentatively, the little girl reached out, and tapped-tapped the top of the dog’s head before re-clasping her hands behind her back. Marley promptly sat at the little girl’s feet. His tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth. He swept the dirt with his tail. The little girl smiled wider. Marley increased the velocity of his tail wagging and leaned his head towards her. The little girl reached out again. She began to giggle. She tapped him once again and took two steps back.

“You can pet him any time,” Jane said.

The little girl covered her grin with the hand that had petted Marley, turned, and ran back inside.

The wind rustled the thick leaves, dusk eventually dimmed the central Pennsylvania summer sky, and, when Jane turned to go inside, glad she had nearly made it through yet another night, Marley began to growl. She looked up, but didn’t see a thing. Marley continued his low growl.

Jane ran her hand along the top of his head.

“What is it boy?”

Then she smelled and saw what Marley already had. There he was: The man’s cigarette glowed in the shadow of the trees. Jane and Marley went inside, and Jane double locked the doors in the safest small town in America.

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The man had lived there for about two months before the girl and her mother had arrived. The empty house shared a wall with Jane’s and echoed relentlessly. Jane had heard him on the phone with women. “Oh, sweetie...; Oh, baby...; Oh, you know I do...” He seemed to be jobless, and he washed his black, circa-1980 Nissan Z daily until he could see his own

shirtless reflection in it. He proudly displayed as much of his five-foot, three-inch-tall self as he could. Apparently the sheen on the Z didn't mirror his sun-wrinkled and sagging skin. Jane figured he was a scam artist, some kind of gigolo who perpetrated his crimes online, because though he lived in the camp chair on the back patio, the computer monitor on the kitchen counter glowed relentlessly. Jane hoped that surely no woman could be *that* desperate, but she knew otherwise. And, as if to prove her point, then the woman and her child had arrived.

The days of summer—long, hot, and endless—wore on, and little happened. The girl and her mother were there for weeks before sheer white curtains appeared in the front window. Eventually a table showed up in the dining room. And then there were the cats. The cats bred and sprayed, and soon the smell of boiled fish hung unmoving in the late August air. Jane just breathed through her mouth, and hoped that life would turn out all right for the little girl, because the cell phone had more or less disappeared and school had begun. Though the little girl's mother never showed her face, never went to the store, never walked laps with the man, she did appear without fail twice each day, to walk the little girl back and forth to the elementary school across the street. When Jane caught her in the act, she'd nod to the girl's mother, but the woman looked down.

Jane remembered what it felt like not to be able to meet the eyes of her neighbors. She shrugged and let the little girl pet Marley when she could. Beyond that, she knew that this was one thing she didn't want to know about. She didn't want to be involved. She couldn't be involved. Even when the man grew more bold, she didn't want to know anything about what was going on over there.

One day, the man knocked on her door.

“Hey, Jane! How are you?” He called through the front screen door.

“Fine.”

“So, Jane. Do you happen to have a fax machine?”

Jane paused. Did he know that she did in fact have a fax?

“Why?”

“Well, I’ve got some business and they won’t take emails. Do you think I could use your fax machine?”

“Um, well,” Jane stalled.

Marley barked, growled. She petted him.

“I’m kind of busy,” she said. “Now’s not the best time.”

Marley lunged.

“Well, okay, thanks! Glad to know it’s here!” He hurried away.

Marley barked and barked. The good dog got a slice of cheese as a reward that night.

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Time went by, and, one day, a minivan skidded to a stop and its door slammed shut, even as the engine idled.

“Bill!” A woman shrieked. “Bill! I know everything, Bill! You’re a fraud! I know! I hired a private detective. I know your real age! I know your real name! I know you have a son as old as me! I know Bill! It’s over for you, Bill! Tell the woman I know about her too!”

The minivan door opened and slammed shut again, and Jane knew that things had just changed next door. She also knew that the little girl’s mother had witnessed the whole thing from her perch at the window upstairs. Minutes later, she saw the woman walking out beneath the trees. The woman had finally left that room. Jane saw her look up at the now-umber canopy, which was beginning to shed its beautiful glory. Jane wondered if the leaves and the tree told the woman a story she needed to hear, and she imagined that they did, even though those same trees and leaves had remained stubbornly silent for Jane.

Later, when Jane took Marley out for his evening walk, she began to cross the street when she saw the man shuffling down the lane, Pepsi in hand.

“Jane! Hey, Jane, do you have an attic?”

“An attic?”

“Yeah, you been up there lately?”

“Why?”

“I have a hot water heater in mine. Why do you suppose that is? Do you have one up there, Jane?”

“Nope.” Jane said and walked on, Marley at her side. Though the question made Jane a little nervous: She’d never actually ever been in her attic.

When they returned to the parking lot in the rapidly descending dark, Jane saw the mother and daughter about to climb into a navy-blue Toyota sedan.

Marley ran up to the girl. Though Jane and Marley avoided the man, Marley and the little girl had become regular pals as time had worn on. While her mother sheltered, the girl had played with neighborhood kids. The girl had talked. The girl had gone to school. She petted Marley eagerly now, and he sat adoringly at her feet. The girl had lost her fear entirely.

The girl’s mother opened the back door of the car.

The girl bent and wrapped her arms around Marley’s furry neck. She hugged hard once and released him. Marley wagged his tail.

“Say thank you now, Jessica,” Her mother said.

Jane realized these were the first words she’d ever heard the woman speak.

“Thank you,” Jessica said, waved, smiled, and climbed into the car.

A few minutes later, a thumping started up next door. It was the relentless thump-thump-thump of a bass set too low on a stereo with the volume too high. Jane wondered why they had left the music on, when no one was home.

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The next afternoon, the thumping of the stereo had continued without cease. Jane thought she was about to go out of her mind and thought maybe she already had when she jumped at the sound of pounding on her front door. No one used the front door. No one except the man. But this kind of pounding wasn't his style; Jane recognized the sound. She figured it was a skill taught in the police academy, and, sure enough, she opened the door to men in blue. She leaned against the doorframe and could only feel glad that they had not been summoned to her own home, as they had been in the past.

“Can I help you?” Jane asked the two officers.

“Have you seen the people next door, ma'am?”

Again she heard the voice in her head: Don't get involved.

“No,” Jane said.

“If you see them, ma'am, you need to call us. There are warrants out for their arrest.”

“I won't see them,” Jane said.

“Well, if you do see them, you need to call us. Both of them are wanted.”

Suddenly it became clear to Jane. The woman wasn't being abused. She was hiding from the police.

“What did they do?”

“You just need to know they're dangerous. Call us immediately if you see them again. Do not attempt to speak with them.”

“Believe me, I don't want to speak with them. But do you hear that?”

The bass thumped and droned, vibrating the screen door.

The men stared at her. They looked at each other.

“Could you do something about that?”

“We’re Borough police, ma’am. We can’t enter their home. But, if you call the Township police with a complaint, then we could get in. Would you do that for us? Call the Township?”

“No, I don’t want to get involved,” Jane began to shut the door.

“Ma’am. Please. These are federal convicts. There are multiple warrants.”

Jane continued to shut the door.

“Ma’am, what if there’s a dead body inside?”

Jane opened the door back up.

The taller one shrugged. “Anything is possible.”

Oh for fuck’s sake, Jane thought. I cannot believe he just said that, Jane thought. “What are they wanted for?”

“Bank robbery and identity-theft crimes, among other things.”

Jane thought of the request to use her fax machine.

The bass thumped on, mimicking the pounding in Jane’s head.

“Okay, I’ll call the police, even though they’re already here.” She rolled her eyes tried not to consider bureaucratic bullshit. All the while, the relentless bass pounded. And all the while the little voice echoed in her head: Don’t get involved.

Hours later, after the cops had swarmed through, they came by to tell her that they’d removed a cat which was left in a box in the kitchen. No dead bodies, they grinned. Just a cat. They told her the people must have left the radio on so no one would hear its cries. The cops told her not to be afraid though. They told her there was no way the fugitives would be back. Because, after all, there was hardly a stick of furniture inside the home of bank robbers in the safest town in America.

Jane didn't bother to tell the cops there never really was any furniture, just a little girl, who may or may not have had to leave her cat behind.

What if they came back? Jane thought. What if they find out I called the police? Jane thought as she shut and double locked the door in the safest small town in America.

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Early the next morning, as Jane sat in the still morning air trying to write, she heard a strange sound through the thin wall.

It was a creak. It was a groan.

Jane stopped typing.

Marley looked up.

Jane looked at Marley, and she realized what the sound was: It was the sound of an attic trap door opening.

Jane froze.

She heard the sound of the ladder being extended and thumping into place.

Jane swallowed.

She heard footsteps running down the stairs.

Jane blinked.

She heard a door open and shut.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God: He's there! Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God: He was there all along!”

Jane thought.

Next to her laptop sat the card the police had left.

Jane felt her heart race. Then the sound began again. Thump-thump-thump. The music. Back on.

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. Was he there when the cops were there? Didn’t they check the attic?!”

Jane thought.

She stared at the card. She wondered if she should pick up the phone and whisper the situation. Then she thought: “Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. What if he was in *my* attic?! Why else would he ask about my attic?! What if he is in my attic *right now*?!”

She looked at the card the policeman had left. She wondered what the walls in the attic were made of. She cursed adjoining walls. She heard voices and sirens in her head. Jane looked at the card. She held her breath. She thought about bureaucratic bullshit and the bystander who always lives next door. She held her breath, petted her dog, and then she did not move for a very long time. Don’t get involved, she thought, if she thought anything at all.

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Later that day, the landlord arrived. The thumping stopped. Then a locksmith arrived, and yet Jane didn’t relax.

She was afraid to go in the attic. But then Jane was afraid of a lot of things. She was especially afraid of getting involved.

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Eventually new neighbors moved in. Eventually Jane moved out. Eventually years went by, and occasionally the wind would sigh through the trees, and eventually Jane stopped being so afraid. Eventually she even met a man.

Beautiful tattoos inked his arms and told a story that Jane did not yet know how to read, but Jane took one look at those arms, one look at his lean, lanky body and suddenly she thought: “Oh my God. Am I pretty?”

Eventually, the man said to her, “I think we should be involved.”

And that stopped Jane cold.

The old angst returned. Because, still, Jane thought of things that she couldn't quite put words to, things she couldn't quite describe.

Jane thought of the silence of little Jessica's mother, as the woman sat each day by the window. Jane remembered her own marriage, remembered what it was like to look out a window and be afraid.

That night, the night the tattooed man said, "I think we should be involved," Jane remembered the townhouse with the adjoining walls and those people within. She still wondered if she should have gotten involved. Called the police when she first saw the little girl--the child who she thought pretty would either kill, or save. Jane wondered too sometimes if she should have become a foster mother. Or adopted a child. Or tried to talk to the woman next door. Or called the police when she heard the attic door open. Or done something. Anything. Anything at all, except sit frozen in fear.

Then, as the clock on the university's Old Main building called out the hours and the wind whipped through the trees, Jane realized she'd been wrong.

The child next door hadn't needed Jane's involvement. It wasn't pretty that would kill her. Nor was it pretty that would save her.

Jessica had a mother. A mother who might have been a criminal, but a mother who knew a way out. A mother who knew how to escape. A mother who knew when to take her daughter away in a sensible navy blue Toyota. Little Jessica had a mother who also knew something else: She knew to walk her daughter to school every day. No matter what she was afraid of. No matter why she hid. No matter what.

Jane too had a mother who had walked her to school every day. Jane too went to school every day. She looked at the stack of books on her bedside table. She listened to the sounds of distant traffic in a university town. She heard the shushing of the wind in the trees. Jane thought of the man with the stories inked into his arms.

She picked up the phone. She dialed.

“Do you think I’m pretty?” She asked him.

“Oh, Jane,” he said. “It takes a lot more than just pretty.”