



2015

Finalist - Missing Reggie

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Recommended Citation

Dempsey, Rachel W., "Finalist - Missing Reggie" (2015). *Student Creative Writing Honorees*. Paper 3.
<http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/creative/3>

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Missing Reggie

The Sunday after Reggie went missing, his mother Nadine called to ask me to lunch. I was in one of the phases where I had banished my phone to the other room, angry at it for refusing to ring, as though it was somehow the phone's fault that my boyfriend of three years had just disappeared on his way to work four days before. I had been alternating between tucking the phone inside a cupboard in the kitchen and keeping it clutched in my palm so that I couldn't miss it if it rang. I almost didn't reach it in time.

"Elizabeth," Nadine said, not bothering to identify herself. Her voice was frayed, like a car radio station that had just begun to edge out of range, which meant she was likely well into her daily ration of gin and tonics. "You haven't heard anything, have you?"

"You know everything I do, Nadine." I said. Which was basically true. We had never really gotten along, but Nadine was the first person I called when it had become clear that Reggie was gone.

"He hasn't contacted you?"

"If he did you would be the first to know." That was less true, but irrelevant. Reggie and I had last spoken Tuesday night, when I reminded him to put the laundry in the dryer before he came to bed. He had already gone when I awoke the next morning. To work, I figured, but I was wrong. No one had seen or heard from him since.

"I'd like to see you, at least," Nadine said. "Are you available for lunch?"

"Today?" I said.

"Yes, today."

Normally I would have had something to do midday on a Sunday, brunch or chores or a yoga class, but this was not a normal time. I had cancelled my reservation at Nopa when it had become clear Reggie was missing; it was somehow unseemly for the frantic girlfriend of a missing man to be seen out getting drunk on mimosas three days after he disappeared, and really, that girl wasn't much good for conversation anyway.

"All right," I said.

"Wonderful. Tadich Grill, 12:30. See you there."

* * *

The Tadich Grill is a wood-paneled great-uncle of a restaurant downtown, the kind of place with a 5:30 rush of couples who've been ordering Oysters Rockefeller there since the Summer of Love and then another rush at 9 of cat-eyed young women and their boyfriends playing *Mad Men* for the night. I wore a nice dress but didn't bother to take out my nose ring. Nadine was already seated when I arrived, a gin martini with a twist wet with condensation by her side.

“Elizabeth,” she said. She didn’t get up, just looked up from her menu and nodded.

“Hi Nadine,” I answered. She looked genuinely terrible, her eyes puffy even through thick make-up, her tastefully Botoxed face lined as deeply as the botulism would allow.

“I’ve been worried sick,” she announced as I sat down.

“Me too, Nadine,” I said

“You don’t seem very worried.”

“Well, I am.” I had come prepared for the abuse, eager for it, even. When your boyfriend of three years just doesn’t come home from work one day, stops answering his cell phone and responding to e-mails and using his credit cards and generally making any indication that he continues to exist in the world, people are kind to you. Your friends speak in hushed voices and offer to bring you meals. Your parents call you twice a day and tell you to take care of yourself and stay optimistic. Even the police are kind, because you’re a nice white girl and because there was no history of abuse and because the most likely explanation seems to be that your boyfriend has run off with another woman and would turn up eventually with his tail between his legs and newly-acquired child-support obligations. I was tired of the kindness.

Nadine just harrumphed.

I sat down in the booth across from her and picked up the menu, reading every item just so I’d have something to do with myself for a moment. The menu read like a guidebook to another era, when foods had names like people: *Clams Casino*. *Oysters Rockefeller*. *Lobster Thermidor*. Nadine flagged down the waiter to order another martini and I ordered a Manhattan, shrugging dumbly when he asked me what kind of whiskey I wanted with that.

“Nothing new from the police?” I said finally, when it became clear she wasn’t going to volunteer anything. “Has he been using his credit cards or anything?” Since I had no legal relationship with Reggie, I had to rely on Nadine for news about the police investigation. Or at least that’s what she’d told me, and I didn’t have the energy to push back.

“He hasn’t used his credit cards or ATM since Wednesday morning, but he made the maximum withdrawal from his bank account a few days before he—before Wednesday,” she said, her voice even. “And they’ve determined that his car isn’t in any of their impound lots, so it seems that it’s likely with him.” She had a way of looking towards me but not at me that I found unsettling, her gaze focused somewhere on my right cheek. Anyone other than me would have thought she was making eye contact.

“Does that mean—do they think he’s okay?” It felt like tempting fate even to ask the question. I had spent the last three days traversing a minefield inside my head, afraid to edge too close to hope for fear I would jinx it somehow, reverting instead to the kind of weird games I had played with providence as a child. Out of some strange

misunderstanding of probabilities, I used to believe that if you worried about something going wrong then it would never happen, and I went back to that now, running through images of Reggie on the MUNI tracks, floating in the bay, curled up in the trunk of someone's car in the desert like in Season One of *Breaking Bad*.

"They say there's nothing to suggest he was under duress," Nadine said.

The waiter arrived to drop off our drinks and take our orders. Pan-fried sole for me and Bay Shrimp Louie for her. Nadine was perfectly composed until the waiter left, at which point she put her hands to her face, sinking her weight into them. She made a sound that might have been a sigh or a sob. *So it's that part of the evening*, Reggie would have muttered if he had been there. It usually took more than a few sips of her second martini for Nadine's filter to begin to slip, but she had likely been drinking all morning. I braced myself for the onslaught.

She took a deep breath, her hands still shielding her eyes. "It's just so unlike him," Nadine said, looking up, right at me this time. "How could he do this to me?"

"I mean, it's not entirely out of character," I said. "He has a tendency to wander." It was true. Reggie was prone to getting distracted, ending up somewhere completely different than the place he had set out for when he walked out the door. Once he went to the grocery store for bacon and came back four hours later with a receipt for a whole pig and plans to build a roasting pit in our tiny backyard.

"I raised him better than that," she said. "He would never have done this before."

There it was. I didn't need to ask her what *before* meant.

Nadine blamed me for taking her son away from her, for turning him into one of the thousands of identical swaggering young men who were taking over her city. But the truth was I had nothing to do with it. Reggie had found the startup scene and thought he was making something new, never quite realizing that he was becoming his mother only worse, that you could call yourself a disruptor all you wanted and still have changed nothing more than branded fleeces for tuxedos and angel investors for charity work. The truth was that was that was something Nadine and I had in common: The city had taken Reggie away from me, too.

"You know, when Reggie was a boy, he got lost once," she said. "We were at the Exploratorium, and I turned my back, just for a second, to look at one of the exhibits. It was one of the ones where you have to put your eyes up to a periscope. And when I looked back, he was gone. He must have been five or six. And obviously I was just frantic. It was when the Exploratorium was still in the Palace of Fine Arts, so there were two stories and it was packed with children who looked just like him from the back. I went through the whole building and couldn't find him anywhere, and I began to worry he had been kidnapped by a pedophile or something. It was the 80s, you know. People were just starting to worry about that kind of thing."

She paused, draining her martini.

“Finally, in a complete panic, I went to the ticket counter, right at the entrance. I was going to ask them to call the police. And there he was, on a bench in the front hall, talking to an older man, happy as a little clam. He saw me and he just lit up, he was so excited to introduce me to his new friend. The man was visiting from Minnesota with his grandchildren. Reggie knew his whole biography. He had fought in World War II, in the Pacific theater. Worked as a pharmacist in Duluth. Had a golf handicap of seventeen. Reggie was like a little reporter.”

“That’s really cute,” I said. And suddenly I missed Reggie fiercely. Not the Reggie who had walked out the door on Wednesday morning, gotten in his car and driven to who-knows-where; I missed the Reggie I met in college, back when he was open and hopeful, before his first startup had failed and turned him angry, convinced him of all people that he was an underdog fighting against a hostile world; before his second startup had succeeded and made him self-satisfied, sure that he deserved his victory and eager to return to the battlefield.

“He used to care so much about *people*. A whole building full of games for children, and he just wanted to talk to some old man from the Midwest.” Nadine shook her head.

“I was going to break up with him,” I said suddenly.

Nadine looked at me like she had no idea who I was. Right at that moment, the waiter came with our plates.

“The sand dabs?” he said cheerfully.

“Here,” I mumbled. The fish smelled nauseating, and I wondered how I was going to eat even a single bite.

“And the Bay Shrimp Louie for the young lady.” The waiter placed Nadine’s plate in front of her with a flourish. She placed her hand on his wrist and said, “Another round of drinks, please. For the table.”

It was the first time I had spoken my plan to break up with Reggie out loud. It sounded wrong, like a lie or something I had heard somewhere and repeated without understanding what it meant, but in truth I had been working it over for a long time. In the weeks before he disappeared I had really started taking it seriously, beginning to mentally divide my books from his, to scroll through the Rooms for Rent section of Craigslist, to work out how much internet would cost if he stopped footing my bill. When he disappeared, it felt like a fuck you aimed directly at me. *You thought you could leave me. Nice try. Me first.*

“I imagine the police are going to want to talk to you,” she said.

I began to cry, as quietly as possible, which became harder as it became clear that I wasn’t going to be able to stop, and my nose started running and my throat began to swell. Nadine unfolded her napkin and placed it into her lap, smoothing it out carefully before she picked up her fork and began eating. She looked down at her plate, and

occasionally to either side of me, but never at me, as she worked her way mechanically through her salad. When the waiter came over to ask how we were enjoying our lunch, Nadine ignored his worried look in my direction, thanking him politely and asking him for the check and a to-go box for my untouched food.

“You should call a car,” she said to me, not ungently. I had stopped crying but still hadn’t moved, not even to scoop my uneaten food into the Styrofoam box that the waiter had brought, completely unable to decide what to do with myself next. “You can’t walk home looking like that.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said reflexively. “I should go. I’m sorry.”

I stood up and bolted out of the restaurant, half-expecting someone to follow me and drag me back in. The early afternoon sun was bright and burned my raw eyes. I headed for the BART station like a fugitive.

I was almost home when I realized I hadn’t checked my phone since before lunch. It was my longest streak while awake since Thursday by probably about one hour and fifty-five minutes. I pulled it out and right there, on the screen, were four texts from Reggie Hale.

I’m back! Forgot my keys.

Can you let me in?

My phone died.

Sorry.