

Maggie Boylan

Maggie Boylan

I

JAMES CARPENTER had just hung the gas pump back in its cradle and he had one foot in the door of his truck and here came Maggie Boylan, straight as a bullet, foul-mouthed, skinny, death-head-looking, Oxy-addled, thieving Maggie Boylan.

“Are you headed into town?” she called. “Can you give me a ride into town?”

He looked around him. He hated to turn down anyone in need of a ride, but still . . . this was Maggie Boylan. He thought, This could be a big mistake in the making.

Maggie was bundled into an oversized denim coat that must have belonged to her husband. It was a bright, late October day with a big wind and she staggered a moment as the wind gusted off the hills and down the highway. It tossed her hair into her eyes and she pulled a hand from the pocket of her coat to brush it back.

“I sure could use a ride,” she said.

James Carpenter was, in fact, headed into town. There was no way to disguise it. He had no handy lie he could use to put her off. So he told her, “I got to drop off some papers at the courthouse and I’m coming straight back.”

“That works for me,” she said. “I just got to pick up some medicine for my mother-in-law.”

Later, a friend would remind him: Maggie’s mother-in-law had died a month before, and she had no truck with Maggie when she was alive. Later, he would see how Maggie had

fooled him all along. But now, he could not see how he could turn her away.

“I got to go right now,” he said. He was on a deadline and he hoped that she would have to go back to her house to get something together. Maybe she had to get her purse or maybe some papers of her own and maybe he could dodge her that way. But then, what did Maggie Boylan have left to get together?

“I’m ready,” she said. “Let’s roll.” She pulled open the passenger-side door and launched herself into the seat even before he could get his key into the ignition. She already had her purse. It was one of these backpack purses, so he hadn’t seen it earlier. She pulled it off her shoulders and began to rummage inside. “Shit,” she said, then put her hand to her mouth. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to cuss. You wouldn’t have a lighter, would you?”

He did not.

“I should of remembered you don’t smoke. Wait just a minute while I bum me a light.” She planted her purse on the seat and jumped back onto the apron. “Don’t worry. I won’t be but half a minute.”

There was a little of everything at this crossroads station just outside the little crossroads town of Wolf Creek. Off to one side, on the other side of the grocery section and the Post Office window, beyond the tools and the laundry detergent and the quarts of oil and transmission fluid, four old men sat at their coffee as they did every morning in the restaurant section in the same restaurant booth by the front window and they watched everyone who came in for a stick of beef jerky or a bag of chips or a sandwich from the deli. They were good old men, with no harm in them, retired farmers and loggers and one old part-time farmer who had been his fourth-grade teacher.

But they talked. They watched everything and they gossiped without shame. And now the story would get around that he was seen with Maggie Boylan and that story would complicate his life even more than it was already. But done is done. Maggie had him pinned there with her backpack purse on his seat, so she was on for the ride to town.

The old men did not seem to turn—it would not be right to stare—but their eyes turned to watch Maggie leave the truck and enter the store and they watched her stalk down the grocery aisle and right up to their little table where they shrugged all four of them around. Each one kept a pouch of Red Man Chew in the pocket of his coat but not a one of them smoked. Maggie had better luck with a trucker at the counter. He gave her a cigarette and a light and she came out to the truck inhaling desperately.

“You don’t mind if I smoke in here, do you? I’ll hold it out the window.” She cranked the window down and exhaled into the open air.

“I’m so glad you could give me a ride,” she said. “My mother-in-law’s got that high blood pressure and you don’t play with that and she can’t get out on her own and she needs that medicine bad. If you hadn’t come around I don’t know what I would of done because these folks around here is all too proud to be seen with me, like they ain’t got their own shit to deal with, pardon my French, so I really do appreciate you doing this and I don’t know how I can thank you.”

All this, as he cranked and cranked the ignition which, for some reason, at this moment and under the eight eyes of the four old men, had gone deader than a hammer. No horn, no dashboard light, not a whisper from the starter. So he guessed the problem. He got out, lifted the hood, and saw right away that a white crust of corrosion covered the positive post of the battery and it had chosen this under-the-eight-eyes moment, when he was already strapped for time and Maggie Boylan was perched in his cab in front of God and everybody, to break the connection. No connection, no juice. He knew the quick fix, though. He pulled a hammer from behind the seat, came back around to the battery, and gave the cable end a tap.

Just a little tap, no sense in breaking the post, but a little tap was enough to tighten the cable end onto its post, so in a moment, he had the truck started and had pulled out onto the highway toward town.

Maggie picked up the hammer and admired it. "That's an old railroad hammer, ain't it," she said.

"My grandpa worked for the B&O."

Maggie studied the hammer a moment more. "I bet it's worth some money."

He shook his head. "Flea market, couple bucks." If Maggie thought his grandfather's hammer was worth anything, it might slip away with her when she left the truck.

"You fixed that battery pretty slick," Maggie said. She set the hammer down between them on the seat. "I was afraid we'd be stuck there till tomorrow evening."

"I wish everything in life was that easy to fix."

"Don't I know it? But I always did think you was a smart one. Even when you was still a cop and you'd have to haul my drunk ass to jail and my kids'd say you was mean and all, I'd tell them, he's just doing his job, honey, and he ain't all hateful like them others."

James Carpenter remembered something entirely different. He recalled that Maggie Boylan had cursed him with names he had never been cursed before or since, names almost Biblical in their damning power, names that seemed to have been pulled full-formed from the earth, like stones or the roots of strange weeds. She had her full weight and strength back then and fought like a wet cat right out in front of those children with their eyes dark and wide.

But that was years ago and now those children were gone to foster care. Since that time, Maggie had done a stint in Marysville and a halfway house and had come back to trade the alcohol for OxyContin and the OxyContin for crack cocaine and to trade the crack back for the Oxys and whatever else she could find. And to lose half of her body weight so that now she was a spiky little burned-out sparkler of a woman, nearly weightless, withered and hollow-eyed as if she had been thrown into a kiln and dried.

"I always said it was wrong the way they done you," she said. "You was the best cop this county ever had. And I've knowed them all."

He said nothing to this. Who could stop Maggie Boylan when she was on a roll? An ambulance passed with its red lights awirl. The wail of its siren moved up the musical scale, then down as it passed, headed toward Wolf Creek.

“That’s what I want to do,” Maggie said. “I want to be an EMT. They taught us CPR up in Marysville and I told myself, if I can ever get myself straight, I’m gonna go to school and get certified for that shit. I could save me some lives.”

He wanted to tell her to save her own life first, but he knew she was not about to listen. He knew she would continue to talk all the way into town, which she did as he drove on, checking the condition of the fields as they passed. As she talked, they passed fields marked by shattered cornstalks and the daggers of cut tobacco and barns bulging with tobacco hung to cure, some still a pale green and others gone the color of leather. There were fields stripped black by the plow and ready for winter planting and still others unplowed, unpastured, grown over with ironweed, Johnson grass, and yarrow, surrounding farmhouses gone gray and leaning ahead of the wind.

And closer to town, there were still others, pastures or cornfields just a few years ago, now landscaped level as a putting green with long lanes leading up to houses so new and excessive that it hurt his eyes just to look at them, the new houses of people with new money or the second homes or retirement homes for people from the city.

“Anyway,” Maggie said. “Everybody knows they done you wrong up there. And the ones that’s left is a bunch of suck-ass perverts, God damn them all to hell.” She did not apologize for cursing this time. “And after you just lost your wife from cancer. Double-damn them, that was low.”

James Carpenter looked out at a gray barn hung thick with curing tobacco the color of a dull flame, and he did not hear what Maggie said next.



HIS WIFE was sick for nearly a year and, for nearly a year, James Carpenter slept barely three hours a night. He went about the business of arresting drunk drivers and investigating stolen calves; he endured conferences with doctors, visits from nurses, and the indignities of home health care, all in a half-wakened, half-somnolent state, so that once the funeral was over and his daughter flew back to California, he slept for three days straight.

That made for trouble with the sheriff, but it was nothing like the trouble to come, for when he woke, he found he had developed a habit of restlessness and found himself still sleepless, alert in every cell.

At three in the insomniac morning, he walked through the rooms of his house, listening to the owls and the coyotes and thinking hard.

For the world had shifted under his feet and he was aware now of a new sense of who was wrong and who was being wronged, who was stealing and what was being stolen.

2

MAGGIE BOYLAN was a pretty girl back when she was in school. But wild. Wild enough that, at fourteen, she ran away to Nevada; at fifteen, someone had to pluck her off a railroad bridge before she jumped; at sixteen, she had her first conviction and her first child; at seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, and twenty, she had more wild times with even wilder men, a couple more children, and a rap sheet of drunk and disorderlies. There should have been a string of theft charges as well, but the only thing Maggie seemed to do well was steal, for things disappeared when she was around, things small as cigarettes and wedding rings and large as bales of hay and two-ton trucks, and she was always suspected, but never charged.

By the time James Carpenter came out of the Army and joined the county sheriff's patrol, the pretty young girl was just a memory, but the wild woman was in full force, for Maggie had the weight and muscle of a farm woman and she had the grizzle and fight of a cornered animal.

Each time Carpenter came out to the house on a call, Maggie heaped her curses on him and his partner—he knew better than to go out there alone. She fought, scratched, wrestled, and battered until they could stuff her into the backseat of a patrol car. And then, often as not, she would bang her head against the cage until her forehead bled and they would have to truss her up like an old rug and she would lay up in the cell half the night banging on the bars with a tin cup and shouting out her curses, which seemed endless in their variety and their bedrock vehemence.

Somewhere along the way, she dropped the wild men and settled on sixty acres her daddy had left her when he died. And she married a man who hoped that love would tame her. But it had not worked.

Finally, the judge sent her away for peddling amphetamines at the truck stop in Wolf Creek. She did three years in Marysville, then three months more in a halfway house, and had a tough parole officer who kept her on a short leash for another year after that. She stayed clean, Carpenter supposed, for he never had another call out to the farmhouse near the crossroads until OxyContin blew into the county like a long, ugly storm. So it started all over again.



OXYCONTIN WAS a terrible thing. It could turn a good man into a thief, a good woman into a prostitute. It could make a farm go to seed; a house go to foreclosure.

Three days after his wife died, he caught a man in his kitchen at three in the morning. You're too late, he would have told the man if he hadn't run. Her cousin had stolen the pills from her bedside before she was even cold.



HE ASKED her, "They still got your old man in jail?" They were near the place where the cedar woods gave way to the golf course at the edge of town.

Maggie looked at the end of her cigarette, decided there was one more draw in it, took that, and threw it out the window. “Yeah,” she said. “That’s another raw deal. Expired tags. That’s all they got on him, expired tags. They’ve had him for two whole months in that little shithouse of a jail. They tried to get him for running dope and they tore his car to pieces looking and couldn’t find nothing but them expired tags he was running on till his check would come in. So they took that poor man in and I don’t know how I’m gonna ever make his bail and he ain’t never smoked more’n a joint or two in his whole life, but they think just because I sold some drugs ten years ago, which he was never involved in, they still think they can find something on us, and the poor man ain’t done nothing wrong except put up with me and raise them kids when I was in the joint.”

James Carpenter had his doubts. In twenty years on the force, he had never known anyone to be held any time at all for expired tags. Rumor had doubts as well, for rumor had it that her old man took the fall for Maggie to keep her from being sent up again.

“They think because he’s married to me, they can find something on him. But what they don’t know is, I’m clean. Can you tell? Can you tell I’ve picked up weight? Seven pounds in a month. I’m off the drugs, been off for two months. Look at my eyes. See? They’re clear now. They ain’t got that cloud. Things ain’t never going to be like they was.”

James Carpenter nodded his approval. He was sure this was another one of Maggie’s lies, but he had decided it was easier to go along.

My God, my God, he wondered. What have I got myself into?



MAGGIE BOYLAN had once been a regular part of Carpenter’s work life, but in the months since he lost his job, he had seen nothing of her at all. It was strange, and a little embarrassing, to have her now in the cab of his truck when before, she had ridden behind him in a patrol car, cuffed to the backseat and cursing.

He glanced over to her ravaged face with the bones all knocking at the doors of her flesh and tried to see in her the pretty, wild girl.

But that girl was gone, as if she had never been, chased away by smoke and needles and a flood of cheap vodka.

3

“I’LL MEET you right here,” she told him in front of the drugstore. “I’ll just leave this purse right here if you don’t mind.” She pulled out her billfold and stuffed the purse under the seat. “If I ain’t on the street, I’ll be in here after these prescriptions.”

That was all well and good; he wanted to spend as little time in town as possible. Get in, get your business done, get out. That was how he liked it ever since the trouble with the job and all the assaults on his reputation. He had to check in with his lawyer and drop off some papers relating to his grievance and appeal. Fifteen minutes max, and he would be ready to head back home.

It took only ten minutes for James Carpenter to do what he had to do. But twenty minutes later, thirty minutes, forty minutes: Maggie Boylan was nowhere in sight. He checked briefly in the drugstore and did not see her there. He could have asked, but that would have meant telling the whole town he had been hanging out with Maggie Boylan and he did not want to feed the rumor mill. So he waited and fretted in the shadow of that damned courthouse.

He should have left her behind. Any normal person would have left her. But there was that purse under his seat. She had trapped him twice now with that purse. The wind shook the courthouse trees and skipped scrap paper across the courthouse lawn. He muttered around the block, talked to a couple of the old men on the benches of the courthouse square, went in for coffee at the Square Deal Grill, came back around, and saw her, leaning against the fender of his truck as if he was the one who was late.

She must have bummed another light. She held a cigarette close to her lips; tobacco smoke ran away from her in a gust. He

was ready to tell her off for leaving him to wait so long, but she stared at the sidewalk and did not raise her eyes. Bright tears streaked her guttered cheeks.

So he held his peace. She said nothing as he got in the cab and she said nothing as she pulled herself into her seat. He asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right, it's them courthouse motherfuckers. They think they rule the fucking world. Hell, they ain't even motherfuckers cause their own whorish mothers wouldn't have them."

He turned the ignition and everything was dead again.

"Oh fuck," she said. "Please get me out of this tight-ass town. I can't stand these bluenose motherfuckers with all their little sheephead smiles. Get me out of here before I kill somebody for sure."

James Carpenter looked behind the seat of the truck, but the hammer was not there. He was sure he put it back in its nest among the other tools he kept in the truck, but maybe, in his hurry at the crossroads store, he had mislaid it.

"If my old man wasn't in that jail right now, I'd blow that whole place up. I'd drop that motherfucker right around their ears, ever lying sack of shit walking those halls, just to see them buried in the rubble."

She continued to curse as he rummaged through his tools. The hammer was nowhere to be seen, so he pulled out a tire tool, which he thought a little awkward for the job. But it worked. Just a little tap, and he was able to start the truck back up.

"Yeah, I'm all right," she said. "I just want to shoot me a couple deputies." She had not stopped cursing the whole time he had tinkered with the battery and she showed no signs of stopping now. "I'd like to blow the balls off them all. If they had them, which I doubt."

Carpenter's own thoughts about the courthouse gang were not so far off from Maggie's, but he hated to stoke his resentments. "They're just doing their job, Maggie," he told her, just to remind himself.

“No they ain’t. Their job ain’t to keep me from visiting my own husband. Their job ain’t to tell me I can’t see him cause I didn’t have no ID. They know damn well who I am. And if they don’t, I’ll sure enough let them know. They let every skank and crack whore and hustling bitch in the county visit their man, but they won’t let Maggie Boylan see her man who ain’t done no harm to nobody, just too damn broke to get his tags up to date.”

“Maggie . . .”

“Which I’m sorry I was late, but they was ready real quick with those pills and I remembered it was visitor’s day and you wasn’t back yet so I thought, hell I won’t be but a minute and it’s right across the street and all. So I’m thinking I’ll just go over there and tell Gary how I been trying to get money for his bail and all, but I got his mom to cook for and to get the pills for and I ain’t had an unemployment check in over a month and I can’t get nobody to explain that to me and that big old lard can that works the front desk at the jailhouse says I can’t visit cause I had that little trip to Marysville.”

“They got their rules.”

“No they don’t. They got one set of rules for themselves and another set of rules for the likes of you and me. You know they do. They didn’t care about the rules when they searched my old man’s car to look for dope. They didn’t care about the rules when they come out to the house without a scrap of a warrant to look to see was we cooking up meth. They didn’t care about the rules when they sent me off to prison with my kids crying in the gallery. And I know they didn’t care about the rules when they set you up and fired you.”

“Maggie, they suspended me.”

“Well, we know they fired you. Don’t lie.”

“Maggie . . .”

“Everybody knows they set you up and they fired you. They knew you was on their case about county workers at the golf course and they knew you had their number about old Lard Bucket getting blow jobs from the girls in the jailhouse. They

knew you was on their case about all the little hush-up deals that go on in the county, so they set you up.”

“Maggie . . .”

“They did. Everybody knows they did.”

“Maggie . . .”

“Don’t lie. Everybody knows you never give that boy no fifty dollars just so you could ball that little cracked-out bitch of a girlfriend he’s got. He’s just a lying, snake-eyed, drug-running ex-con that’ll say anything to keep from going back to Chillicothe. He’d lie on his own mother for a nickel rock. It’s true. Don’t lie.”

“I can’t say anything.”

“I know. Because you got a court case and the lawyer’s done told you don’t talk to nobody about it. But I know. You can’t bullshit a bullshitter.”

“I can’t say anything.”

“You don’t have to. I know exactly what happened. You went down to that trailer to see that little lying cunt because you thought she could tell you something about the low-life deals going down with that courthouse gang and she set you up. Didn’t she?”

“I can’t say.”

“I could understand it if you did want to get a little off her. Old Lard Can gets his right at work. But everybody knows that’s not why you was there.”

“Maggie, I can’t say.”

“You don’t need to say nothing. I know all about it.”



YELLOW FIELDS, black fields, gray hills in the distance. Maggie talked on. “I know what you’re thinking. How does a crazy bitch like Maggie Boylan know so much about what goes on?”

Which was not exactly what he was thinking, but it was close.

“I got my ways, you see. I watch. I listen. I think for myself. I don’t just take what everybody says is gospel. All them good people that look down their noses at you, all they do is think

what somebody tells them to think. Ain't a one of them thinks for themselves. But anyway . . .”

The crossroads store was by now a half mile down the highway, but the road to Maggie's sixty acres was just ahead on the left. He turned on the blinkers to make ready.

“No,” she said. “Just take me back to Gleason's. I got to get me some baloney.”

He hoped his grimace didn't show.

“Anyway, what I was saying, don't ever go around a little lying whore like that without you got a witness. If you can't get no one else, I'll go with you. Cause they'll fry your ass ever time. You think you know these people, but you don't know them like I do. They'll sell you out for a six pack and a carton of cigarettes.”

He pulled to the edge of the lot. His first inclination was to let Maggie off there, on the highway shoulder, on the off chance no one would see her climb out of his truck. But a wave of defiance rose up in him. All his life, those old men had watched him. And all his life, he had worried over what they thought of him. Let them watch, he thought. They can think whatever they want. He pulled up bold as life by the gas pumps in front of the big restaurant window and the eight watchful eyes of the four old men who did not disguise their staring this time as Maggie stepped bold as life out of the truck.

Maggie stood a moment in the open door with her old man's coat pulled up around her ears. The wind skipped a plastic bottle across the pavement and she shivered the coat higher on her shoulders. “They'll leave you to hang,” she said. “And won't a soul stand behind you when they do.”

She reached under the seat for her purse and pulled something else out with it. “Here's your hammer you was missing.” She smiled, sweet and sly. She laid the prodigal hammer on the seat and started to pull her purse onto her shoulders.

Later, back home, after the wind died down, he would go out to clean up his battery's corroded posts and to put the hammer back in its place. He would find, on the floor of the passenger

side, the empty bag from the pharmacy. Staped to the bag, he would see the slip of paper that told what was in it. It would be none of his business to look, but he would look anyway and he would see nothing for high blood pressure and he would know then that Maggie Boylan had gotten stoned on her dead mother-in-law's Oxys right there in his truck and he, Maggie's fool, had not noticed a thing.

But at that moment, as she stood in the open door, with the big wind pulling at the wings of her coat, he felt ready to tell Maggie Boylan he would wait. He was ready to give her a ride to the house. He was ready to defy the stares and the talk. He was ready to make the big mistake.

Instead, he told her, "You take care, Maggie."

"If you ever need me for anything," she said, "you know where I am." Then she turned and walked away. The wind gusted across the lot and blew up a great column of dust and paper scrap. Maggie staggered a moment in the wind and turned to say something more. But the wind tore the words away. She staggered again and maybe it was the wind or maybe it was the Oxys. James Carpenter knew that Maggie Boylan, Oxy-addled, thieving Maggie Boylan, was wasted down to the near side of nothing. But in her oversized coat she looked slim as a girl.