

Mrs. Pomeroy's Table

It came to pass that my sister and I were sitting on the porch snapping beans when Mrs. Pomeroy ran up the street completely naked. The slapping of her feet on the pavement got our attention. She had her lips pulled back off her teeth as if she was trying to dry them out.

“OK,” said Skillet, who’s partial to understatement. It’s something her high school teachers don’t appreciate. In the Navy, where I am one of only six females on a ship of fifteen hundred, the officers like this kind of simplicity.

We were stunned by Mrs. Pomeroy’s form. You’d have to call it Olympic, especially with her being well past eighty. There she was, her arms scissoring in perfect right angles, fingers stretched out straight and her knees high-churning in a dead-on sprint. You had to give her credit.

After she passed by, Skillet and I went down into the street. Her behind was cake flour white but the rest of her was light red, as if she’d been stained in raspberry juice. We watched as she ran all the way through town, another half mile at least, before tipping off into the leaves on the side of the road going up toward Sweat’s Hill. She went down in a twirl the same way the number one goes when you’re bowling candlepin.

We were still standing in the street, blinking, when the rescue appeared over the crest of the hill, lights blazing. The EMTs hopped out like it was a practice drill and everyone had already agreed on the time and place. They put Mrs. Pomeroy on a backboard, stuffed her into the rig, and then shot back through town. If we had taken one step forward, that ambulance would have pancaked us.

“I don’t know why they’re busting,” Skillet said after the wind-rush passed.

“I hope she’s OK.”

“She’s definitely dead.”

“Definitely?”

“Yeah.”

Skillet was right. The next day we found out she’d had a brain aneurism and a cardiac embolism at the exact same time. Boom-smack.

Mrs. Pomeroy was the unelected Mayor of our town. She ran Town Meeting and if she said we needed a new fire engine or that someone couldn’t

build a gazebo, well, then, that was that. She also produced our weekly newspaper, the *Mountain Guardian*. Above every article she'd write by *Margaret Pomeroy, Senior Guardian Reporter*.

Mrs. Pomeroy was also the closest thing we had to a guardian. Skillet and I didn't have any actual memory of this, but we'd been told that the police chief found us sitting on the front step of the store. It was the first day of the new millennium—January 1, 2000. They figured out from dental exams that I was five and Skillet was one. The only thing I could tell them, apparently, was our names—Jemma and Skillet. Everyone asks how come Skillet is called Skillet and when I tell them I have no idea, they say it's the perfect name for her.

They tried to get us placements, but no wanted us both. They just wanted Skillet. She was round and easy to hold. Every time they pulled us apart, Skillet would manage to create a medical emergency and not recover until they got me. Finally, Mrs. Pomeroy said enough already and arranged for us to be in the house where we are now. It's a four-room cape with a detached garage that belongs to Mrs. Pomeroy's niece, a country-and-western singer who rarely comes to town and when she does she's in a bus the size of a houseboat that says *Country Girl Thing* across the rear. The town elders, whipped around by Mrs. Pomeroy, arranged a rotating crew of ladies—not including Mrs. Pomeroy herself—to live with us and make sure we didn't burn the house down. No one stayed for more than a month at a time so it was kind of like growing up on our own.

Our only contact with Mrs. Pomeroy was when we'd walk by her house on the way to school. No matter the time, we'd look up and there she'd be, her face framed in the second floor window, looking down on us like she expected us to throw her a salute. She carried deep, dark rings around her eyes. It was hard to imagine her not being there any more. The other question digging around for both me and Skillet was what would happen about us living in her daughter's house?

The day before Mrs. Pomeroy had her big run and died by the side of the road, I had come home for Skillet's high school graduation. Of course, the Navy was pissed because they had to send a jump-jet how many ever thousand miles out to pick me up. We were working the western garbage patch and not scheduled to make port for another three months. My tops gave me grief about leaving but the others knew a plane meant a contraband re-supply, so, really, I was a hero. After we got airborne, the ship down below looked like

a giant peanut floating in a bowl of grits. By the time the plastic gets that far out to sea, there's no color left. It's been shredded into pieces the size of clipped fingernails. Kills the fish on contact—chokes them out—if they're dumb enough to get sucked in by the swirl of all that crap.

The day I got home, I found Mrs. Bismark, Skillet's most recent caretaker, at the door with her suitcase.

"Well thank the Lord you're home, Jemma," she said. "Good luck to you!" She fast-walked down the sidewalk like she needed to get to a bathroom.

"What's with her?" I asked, dropping my duffle in the hall. Skillet stood dancer-style with one bare foot pressed against the inside of her opposite knee. Her t-shirt said REALLY? in black block capitals.

"Doesn't like my attitude." Skillet looked at me a second time. "Nice hair."

The SeaBob. A cut given to me at sea by a midshipman named Bob. I liked the way it washed and dried in ninety seconds, but it wasn't doing my overly round face any favors. Skillet has skin like a Cherokee. I'm SPF 70 at all times. Other than that, we're like Pete and Repeat.

"What's your attitude?"

"It is what it is."

"Oh, that," I said. We hugged long enough for me to feel how bone-skinny she had gotten while I was away.

Later, I asked her if she was looking forward to being done with high school. We were in the kitchen and I was trying to cook rice and beans the way they had taught us on the ship. I was having a hard time downsizing the recipe to just two people.

"Glad it's done. Our calculus teacher is sleeping with Judy Tinkum."

"Gross. Mr. Spanner?"

"Yup. Major predator."

I put the food on two plates. Even with crispy rice, the beans were wetter than I had intended. Skillet took a big bite and washed it down with apple cider.

"So who's doing something about Judy and Spanner?"

"They're not. The big thing for them is Plenty of Pride."

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a state-wide competition. If your school demonstrates the most pride—school spirit crap, not sexual orientation—they get a million dollars."

"A million? Wow. What for?"

"More parades. I don't really know. It's not my thing."

That night I went up to Skillet's room and knocked on the door to say goodnight and make sure she was OK. It seemed like there was a lot floating around.

"You good?"

She was sitting in the middle of her bed, chewing on a pencil and looking at what I thought was an American history textbook. She was big on current events. "Sure."

"Tomorrow we'll go pick up your cap and gown and all that. Maybe something for the parties?"

She looked up at me and smiled, then flicked ahead to the next page in her book.

"Thanks for coming home," she said.

I wanted to give her hug. Cross the room and sit on the bed and wrap myself around her shoulders. But I knew that was way outside my skill set and that it would feel about as comforting to her as a plastic tarp, so I just backed out and closed the door. Neither of us had ever been big on physical contact. I was starting to feel like that was a mistake.

Back in the kitchen I noticed a stack of the *Mountain Guardian* piled by the door. Mrs. Bismark must have left them. I got my coffee and sat down to catch up. Each issue has eight pages. Four are local advertisements, two are news, and one is all about the elementary school. That leaves the last page for cartoons and puzzles copied illegally from real newspapers.

The first issue I read was pretty tame. The main article was called *Surprise Visitor!* It was about the roof at the elementary school collapsing. It happened on a Sunday morning, so the place was vacant. No injuries. Nonetheless, it was a little odd because the building was only five years old. Fire chief Dinkney Perkins described it as a "structural failure of multilaterate varietal." No foul play was suspected.

Fine. But the next issue from the second week of June, two months before I arrived home, featured another breakdown. This one, titled *Gone Fishin* and featuring more than the usual number of photographs, showed how a pothole about as big as a pickup had opened up on the bridge. Our town is cut in two by the Septus River, which is little more than a swollen creek. Over the Septus is exactly one bridge and it's made of steel and cement. What happened was not just a regular cave-in. Instead, all the tar and cement and rebar were missing. It wasn't in the river either. The best photograph was of the town fathers circling the hole, looking like they were saying a prayer

before jumping.

And it continued. Week after week. The traffic light out at the highway suddenly caught fire and burned up at the end of its hook. Causes unknown. *Red Means Fire!* The bell in the church tower disconnected during Sunday chimes and tumbled out onto the church roof, creating a path of destruction before landing like an artillery shell in the middle of the Memorial Garden. *Say Your Prayers!* All ten electric poles on Pear Street snapped in the middle of the night and trapped everyone in their house until the crews could come up from the city to unhook the power and start over. *It's Lights Out on Pear.* Mrs. Pomeroy included an awfully good picture of the burn mark running up the center of the street.

And then the big one. *Our General Divided.* The general store—the only store in our town and the place where we get coffee, milk, gasoline, batteries, fly tape and, of course, the *Mountain Guardian*—is a two-story mansard with fancy shingles in lots of colors and a slate roof. It's on some kind of national historical list or whatever. According to Mrs. Pomeroy, it happened in the middle of the morning when the store was at its “busiest.” That means there were maybe five or six people sitting in there with cold coffee talking politics and weather. But still, “without so much as a pop or a groan,” the back half of the building came away from the front and toppled down over the river, “leaving many a town's person standing with mouth a-gape.”

I knew it was an old building, so the idea of a collapse wasn't crazy. But the odd thing, and you could see it so clearly in the photo spread, was that it happened as an absolutely clean break. It was like someone had come along and slit the building tip to toe with a cheese wire. Plus, the half that fell over the river didn't bust up like a shipwreck. It just landed, plunk, stretched from bank to bank as solid as the steel bridge. The windows didn't even shatter. Now, apparently, the FBI had landed with their blue jackets and black shoes and had the whole mess covered in tents and yellow tape.

At breakfast the next day—the morning before we ended up seeing Mrs. Pomeroy's final run—I asked Skillet what she thought.

“It's the tipping point. Doesn't it seem obvious?”

“No. What do you mean?”

She speared a triple forkful of pancakes and punched them into her mouth. She looked at me watching her chew.

“The tipping point is when you can't go back.”

“Go back from where?”

“We’ve fucked it all up. We’re out of balance,” she summarized, eating again.

“And now things are coming apart?”

“Pretty much.”

Having spent the last two months floating around an endless, swirling swamp of plastic—something it took us humans only ninety or so years to make—it was, in fact, not hard to appreciate her point.

“When do you get home?”

“After band. Five forty-five-ish.” She pushed away from the table, took up her bag and her trumpet case, and then came around the counter and leaned in to give me a kiss on the temple. She smelled like peppermint, maple syrup, and senior year of high school.

“Oh.”

“See you later.”

A week after Mrs. Pomeroy died they had a funeral. The whole thing was out at the cemetery. No church. Her country singer niece, Darlaine, sang that song about roll me up and smoke me when I die. It seemed kind of inappropriate and also absolutely excellent. Skillet had such a big smile on her face that she had to look down at the ground. I squeezed her elbow to keep us both from laughing. The minister said ashes to ashes and then everyone took a turn throwing dirt onto Mrs. Pomeroy’s cardboard coffin. That seemed kind of sad. I wished I’d seen her big black owl eyes one more time.

When we got home, Skillet and I started wondering about the houses—Mrs. Pomeroy’s and the one where we lived—which we understood to be owned by Darlaine. We hadn’t had a chance to talk to her after the burial because her bus got stuck in the turf at the edge of the cemetery and there was quite a bit of excitement as Darlaine hung her ample upper half out the back window and the men rushed over to help. Darlaine offered a final squeal as the bus gained traction. Then she disappeared behind the tinting and that was that.

“What do you think they are going to do with it?” Skillet asked me. I had cooked over-sized hamburgers and she was squeezing hers down to a dimension roughly matched to her mouth.

“I talked to Mrs. Bismark about that. The bank is going to put it up for auction. But I don’t know about this place. We’re going have to write to Country Girl Thing.”

“I want to check it out,” Skillet announced.

“What?”

“No one has been in there since the day she freaked.”

“The ladies were there. They must have gotten some clothes for her. Unless she was naked in that box.”

“Wow, unpleasant.” Skillet said, chewing. “Anyway, can we check it out?” It was the first flash of forward-looking excitement I had seen in her face since I had come home.

“Are you serious? We don’t have any place going in there. I don’t feel like being the next crazy thing to happen in this town.”

To Skillet’s point, it did seem like things were coming apart. We had roads and buildings breaking down, old ladies running around naked, infrastructure imploding. Plus the wider world. The Navy engaged in containing viral pollution problems and not telling people. People starting to leave both coasts because the water levels had risen much faster than predicted. And now we had a Presidential race with nineteen candidates. Lunacy. Skillet had made a chart of all their contradictory belief systems using a roll of brown paper towels taped across two walls in the living room.

“I think Mrs. Pomeroy is the key,” Skillet said, wiping down her face.

“The tipping point?”

“The fulcrum.”

“What?”

That night, I went up to her room to say goodnight. She was sitting on her bed with her legs drawn up to her chest and a book balanced on her knees.

“What are you reading?”

“Moby Dick.”

“Wow. I couldn’t pay attention that long.”

“Have you seen any big whales yet?”

“They don’t really have them any more but I’m not supposed to tell you about that. Anyway, there are definitely no fish out by the garbage patch.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. The water there is grey. Not blue. It’s unsettling.”

“Tomorrow. Mrs. Pomeroy’s,” Skillet said, folding down the corner of her page and closing the book.

“Go to sleep, you,” I said. She snapped off her light and rolled away onto her side.

I went down to the kitchen to make rice pudding.

The next evening, Skillet suggested we wear all black for our mission

to Mrs. Pomeroy's. I did my best. Dark tights and t-shirt, tae-kwon-do robe from sophomore year of high school, black loafers.

"Wow," she said, mean-girl style. She herself had situation-perfect black jeans, black sneakers, black turtleneck and a dark, dark purple hoodie.

"You know, we don't have to do this. Actually, we *shouldn't* do this."

"Come on. Before it rains."

It was past ten p.m., so the only light from our neighbors was blue TV light. Despite the low-profile clothing, we walked right down the sidewalk and up the front stairs of Mrs. Pomeroy's, crossing the police tape as if we were experienced crime scene investigators. The front door was unlocked.

Inside, the air smelled like cinnamon and old sneakers. All the furniture was 1950s or earlier and there was much too much of it. We made a silent loop of the downstairs rooms—the living room to the left, the kitchen, pantry, and mudroom in the back, the dining room on the right. Nothing.

"OK, so, are you happy now? There's nothing here except the proof that Mrs. Pomeroy should have been born in the nineteenth century. Can we go?"

"Upstairs. Those second floor windows."

"Well she's not up there now!"

"Yeah, but what is? Why was she always up there? Looking at us."

"You're making this up."

Skillet gave me a quick eye-roll and then started up the stairs, her hand sliding up the bannister as if she expected to be blown back by some great wind. I followed, putting my hand on the small of her back so I would know the exact moment she started to fall backwards.

We came to the second floor landing—a large central space off of which were doors to other rooms. The bright light we had always seen from the street was a simple, domed bulb hanging from a black cord. The light framed a large, oak table supported by two elaborately carved pedestals.

"Where are the chairs?" Skillet said.

"Imagine getting that beast up here."

Skillet went to the table and drew her finger across the wood. Then she jumped.

"Ouch!"

"What?"

"A shock. I got a shock like when you touch metal."

"But—"

"Look at this," she said, bending her face down closer to the surface of

the table.

“Be careful.”

I saw it too. There was a hairline crack down the middle of the table and we saw then that it had depth and that the top was really a lid. Skillet winced again when she put her fingers against the edge and began to lift.

“Holy shit,” she said, when she had both sides opened up like basement bulkhead doors. We each took a long breath. A glow pulled us closer.

It was our entire town in replica. Light was coming from the miniature street lamps.

“Don’t touch it!”

I had the sudden and powerful feeling that this was a test. Skillet tucked her hands into the back of her jeans.

We examined the table for some time without talking. We could see that the model began with an under-layer of sand, the sticky butterscotch kind that edges the river. The roads were strips of cut felt, but just the slightest turn of your eye made them look absolutely real. The trees seemed to be made of wire and bits of colored paper, twisted together so beautifully and tarnished just like actual bark. The season was clearly now—early June when the leaves still seem tentative and not quite ready for all the work of summer. The buildings were definitely made of clay. The siding and shutters and window framing was scratched out in exact proportion. As we got closer, twisting and squatting to examine each structure in detail, it seemed like the insides of the buildings had been recreated as well. From some, I thought I could see more blue TV light coming from around the edges of curtains. I decided to back up. I was worried I might see something move.

“This is genius,” Skillet said. Her face was enchanted. The light from the table continued to pulse.

“This is full-on creepy.” Even without touching it, I could feel the electricity. It was just like being out on the ship. You feel the juice of the engines in every single damn thing.

“Well—” Skillet crossed her arms over her flat chest and cocked her hip. “It does explain a lot.” It seemed she was beginning to see specific things on the table.

“What? What are you thinking? Do you see something?”

“You know. Everything that’s been going on.”

And then, there it was, so obvious that it was impossible we had not seen it from the start. The perfect hole on the bridge. The church bell wedged into

the grass. The charred husk of the traffic light out by the highway. Everything that had been happening to us was happening on Mrs. Pomeroy's table.

"Wow. Look at the store," Skillet said, arcing her arm tentatively over the table to direct my attention.

"What the hell?"

This building, like the actual general store, was split in two, the back half dropped down over the river, which although we knew was represented with blue cellophane like the kind you buy to wrap holiday cookies, seemed real enough that your finger would get wet if you touched it.

"I think they're in there. The FBI guys!" At this point, Skillet sucked in air and clapped her hands together, sending another charge through the room.

It was true. Over the collapsed section of the store were tiny yellow tents, perfectly pitched like the ones we'd been walking by all week. And they were lit from within—not just a constant light but the kind of flickering that happens when there are things passing by a light source. Maybe they were fruit flies? A cutout spinning around a hot bulb? How did it work?

Then, with sister synchronicity, Skillet and I looked at our house. Everything was in place, including the satellite dish and the laundry line running from the porch to the shed. But at the apex of the roof, as if drawn with fine white chalk, we saw the outline of something. A fish.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It looks like a fish. You know, the orange ones."

"A salmon?"

"Yeah. That's it. That's what that is." Skillet jammed her hands into her armpits. The drawing made it look like the salmon was arching up out of the water, stretching for something.

"Are there any others," I asked, scanning.

"I don't think so," Skillet said.

"No, wait—"

"I see it!" Skillet stepped back a pace and blew air up at the light bulb.

The only other drawing was on the roof of Mrs. Pomeroy's house, just two buildings over from our house. It looked like an acorn only smaller.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A nut. It's a nut."

"I guess. Does that make any sense?"

"Of course."

"And—?"

“Well, we don’t know. Not yet.” Skillet looked up at me, a big smile rearranging her face. She hunched her shoulders and put her hands in her pockets.

“OK.”

“But listen,” she said.

I waited a moment, looking up at the ceiling. Then it came to me. Very gentle talk-show laughter. A car commercial. A dog lapping water from a bowl. A door slamming and then the sound of a little girl crying, briefly. Then quiet again.

“Jesus,” Skillet said, “we have to take it.”

“Why?”

“Because. I think we’re supposed to. I think that’s what she wanted.”

“Mrs. Pomeroy?”

Skillet came over and locked herself to my side, squeezing.

“We’ll never get it out of here.”

“Just try.”

I don’t know why it was at all surprising, at that point in the evening, that the table lifted almost without effort off its legs and traveled down Mrs. Pomeroy’s stairs and through her front door, across the porch, onto the sidewalk, up our driveway and into our garage without so much as an ounce of strain from either Skillet or me. When the table fit perfectly—I mean, as if by design—into the loft of our shed I decided to not think about it. We left it on the floor with the lid closed. All we could hear was a little breeze, but it wasn’t clear whether that was Mrs. Pomeroy’s table or just the air outside.

Two days after we moved the table, Mrs. Pomeroy’s actual house burned down. It was after dinner. I had scorched another pan of hamburgers so we didn’t smell the other fire until the sound of all the squawking police radios drew us outside. Immediately, a crowd gathered and began gasping and cheering. Despite all the firemen and their equipment, Mrs. Pomeroy’s house came to a quick crisp and then folded in on itself. It looked like milkweed getting back in the pod.

Once the crowd and all the professionals had gone back home and there was just the wet ash smell, Skillet and I went out to the shed to check Mrs. Pomeroy’s table. Before we opened the lid, we held hands and said what we could about the importance of souls being set free and the value of respecting the random order of the universe as much as possible. This was my feeling especially. In my lifetime, I had already seen all too much evidence of people making bad choices.

We raised the lid and looked. It was perfect. Crumbles of real ash—although, it might also have been licorice—filled the space where Mrs. Pomeroy’s house had been.

“Yup.” Skillet was extremely pleased. I thought she might clap.

“Damn.”

Later, Skillet said she had felt, at the moment of opening up the lid to the table, as if someone was squeezing her aorta, holding up the blood in her heart. It was exactly the same for me.

I went to Skillet’s graduation and she got her degree. It made me happy to see her smiling in public. On the back of her gown, in black Sharpie, she’d drawn a remarkably detailed map of our town. She turned slightly to fan the crowd and got a significant cheer. The Principal saw it too. He put his hand on the microphone, leaning in closer.

“Now that, my friends, is how you show Plenty of Pride! Let’s have an extra hand for Skillet and *all* our graduating seniors!”

Before the Navy car came to pick me up, Skillet and I sat on the porch and tried to make each other feel better about being apart again.

“You’re going to get your stuff packed for college while I’m gone, right? I’ll be back in August. I’m done then.” Skillet had been accepted, full ride, to the state college an hour south. She had decided to do two online courses about signs and symbols for her summer entertainment.

“Sure. Don’t get that haircut again.” The SeaBob had already started to grow out and the result was positive.

“No. Mrs. Bismark is still going to check in on you, so try not to freak her out. No parties.”

“Oh yeah, like that’s a real risk—”

“Skillet—”

“I know, I know. Straight and narrow.”

“I’ll take you down to school and get you settled when I get back.”

“Yeah. That would be good,” she said. She drew her sneakers up onto the lip of the rocker and wrapped her arms around her bare legs. Then she asked me if I believed in God.

“That’s funny,” I said, “because I was thinking about that yesterday and realizing that I still do the whole old-guy-with-white-beard thing whenever I’m scared out at sea. You know, like, I need it to be a human person I can talk to. I don’t know, maybe that will change.”

“But, really, is that how you think the whole thing is organized?”

“No. Not really. I think it’s more like a force we can’t see. Kind of like the ocean, maybe. At least, that’s how I think of it when I’m out on the ship and the horizon happens in every direction. That’s when I think of God as a force that pushes things where they want to go. Just a nudge, that’s all.”

“But that’s huge,” she said.

“Yeah.”

Then the car pulled up and I had to go. I kissed Skillet on the top of her head. Her scalp smelled like fresh chopped celery. The cadet took my duffle and put it in the trunk. On the sidewalk, I waved to Skillet. She stood up and saluted. I gave her the finger and she laughed.

As we drove away down Peach Street, past the divided store with the FBI tape and tents and the church bell stuck in the grass, I turned around to watch Skillet hopping down off the porch and skipping over to the shed.