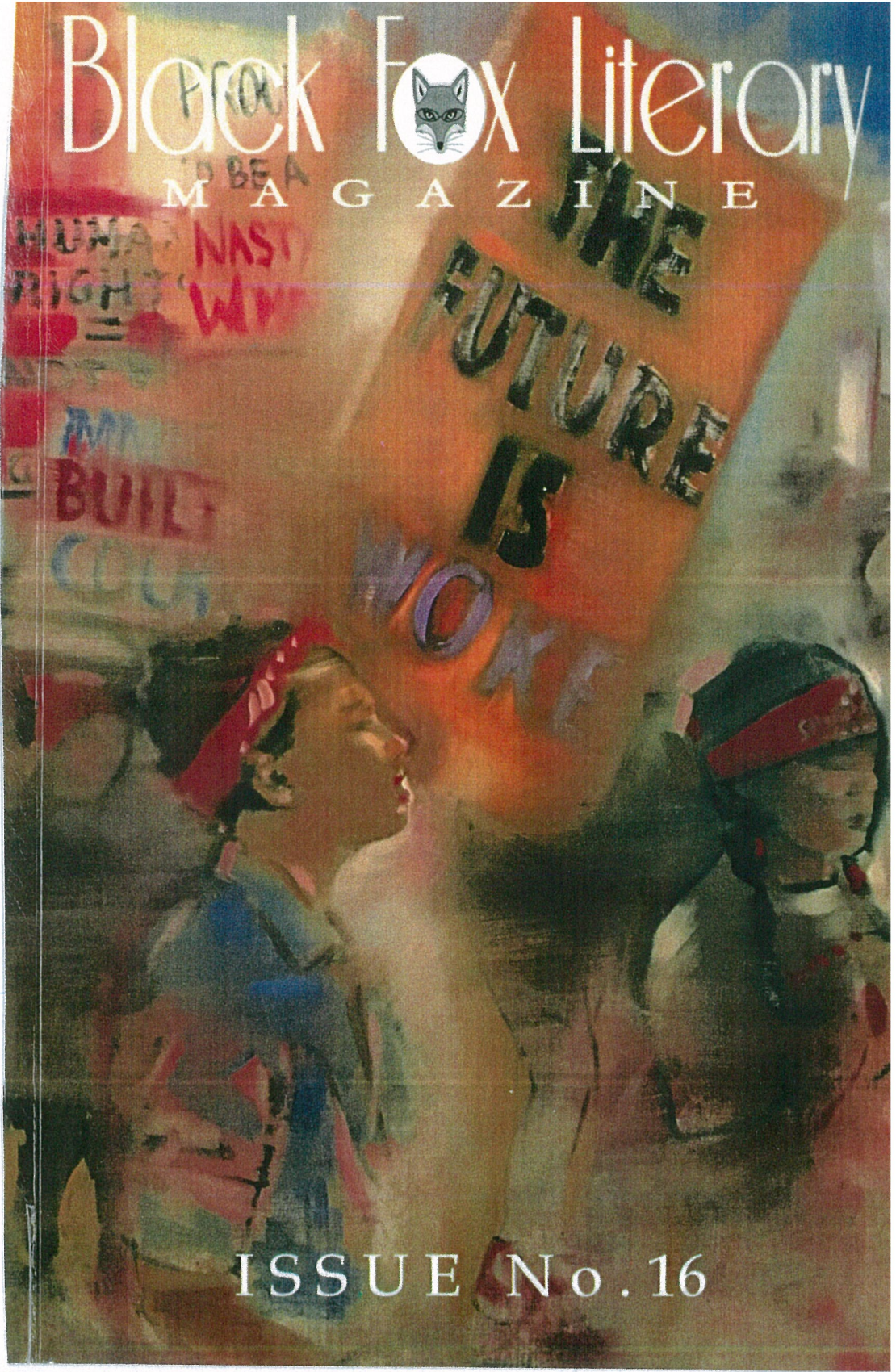


Black Fox Literary

M A G A Z I N E



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Spilled Milk
By Lisa Harris

Maddie swabbed the stainless steel counter, folded the dish towel, and surveyed her domain—coffee percolated, beans ground, mugs at the ready, chairs pushed against chrome table edges. Tucking a stray strand of red hair behind her ear, she admired the counter's gleam. Each morning was like starting over, without the stains that bespoke unruly lives. She spotted an errant jam smear next to the napkin pile and erased it with her cloth.

She glanced out the front picture window at the pewter sky, darker than usual for this time of the morning. The clouds pressed like thick blankets against the surrounding spruce trees, their pointy tops all that kept the land from suffocating. They'd be busier than usual for a Tuesday. The threat of weather always brought people in, coffee warding off the loneliness that blows in on the toe of a storm.

Plucking one of the blueberry scones from the batch Judy had dropped off earlier, still warm from the oven, she set it aside and arranged the others neatly on a platter, careful not to mess their swirled lemony glaze as she handled them. Scones with dinged frosting were always the last to go, as if their tainted dressing was a talisman of interior shortcomings.

Ting-a-ling. Ting-a-ling, the bells hanging from the front door handle jingled.

Seven years of listening to those blasted chimes hadn't changed the way she felt about them. They grated on her nerves and she'd asked Lottie a few weeks after starting work, if she could give them up. Lottie just raised her eyebrows in that 'Where'd you come from?' way she had and suggested Maddie think of coins rattling onto her palm each time the bells jingled, for nobody walked into Road's End Café without spending money.

The bells never sounded like a reward for a job well done. On the contrary, they jabbed her, reminders she hadn't mastered prior tasks: flawless iron-creased button-down shirts, *Architectural Digest's* invitation to feature her home, perfect pitch singing children.

Larry hung his jacket on one of the coat rack pegs on the wall next to the door and slid onto a counter stool. "Morning, Maddie-Girl." He eyed the bakery platter. "What did Judy bring us?"

He didn't mean any harm by the nickname, and come to think of it, being called Maddie-Girl made her feel like they were confidants even when they weren't. Pouring him a mug of coffee, she scooted the bakery platter forward, wondering if he'd act so cozy if he knew what she had done, for if the tables

were turned, she'd keep him at arms distance. Cowbirds had it right, leaving other, more responsible birds, to raise their young.

"They're blueberry." She pointed to the one with a fingerprint embedded in its icing. "I botched this one."

Sipping from a yellow mug with a smiley face on one side, he chose the damaged pastry, understanding house rules.

She chicken-scratched on his tab. Coffee was free, but he reimbursed Lottie for what he ate. Maddie wasn't sure what arrangement the siblings had, but at the end of each week she put the tab in the till's drawer and come Monday there was a fresh one with "Big Bro" written in the top margin in Lottie's loopy handwriting.

Larry took a bite. "Don't understand why folks are so persnickety about frosting." Talking with his mouth full, he waved the scone. "It's not like they're works of art."

"That's Summer People for you." She should know since she was one once.

"Sure glad summer's over."

"Isn't that the truth." Short ferry lines, empty parking spots on Main, beaches free of screaming children. From now until next year's Memorial Day she could roam the island without bumping into someone from her old circle who asked,

“When you coming back?” After seven years, they should realize she would not be returning to the mainland.

Ting-a-ling. Ting-a-ling. Her back stiffened. She wasn’t sure what to hope for—rain, which slowed the ting-a-linging but produced full pans of strategically placed containers in her living room, or the downpour to hold off until night so she could be that much closer in tips to affording new shingles.

The door snapped shut with another rattle. “Larry, there you are.” Rick stuffed a knitted cap into his jacket pocket and made a beeline toward the counter, the soles of his work boots scuffing on the black and white square floor tiles. “I’ve been calling but you don’t answer.”

Larry wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. “What bug’s boring under your skin?”

“I don’t know why you have the damn thing if you don’t answer.” Rick sat on the adjacent stool and pointed to the cell phone bulging in Larry’s shirt pocket.

Larry shrugged. “People know how to find me.” He took another sip.

“Come on, hurry up.” Rick waved at Larry’s half-eaten scone. “I’ve got an emergency.”

Larry placed the mug onto the counter. “Ain’t no such thing in the electrical business.”

“Yes, there is. Come on.” Rick slid from the stool.

Larry wagged the scone at Rick. “Call 911 if your line’s down or the power company if you’re out.” And took another bite.

That’s how she had come to Promise. She had followed his sense of humor. Northbound on I-5, she took to dogging cars with bumper stickers she liked. Kept her mind from wandering someplace she wasn’t ready to visit. His white Chevy pick-up truck’s tailgate had two which made her feel the driver was a kindred spirit: *I’m not your 911* and *Don’t follow me I’m lost*. So when he turned off the Interstate she did too. As the road became narrower and the shoulder-hugging trees wilder and taller, she began to feel like all that was left of the mad world was just her and the Chevy. She wished she had escaped the I-5’s semis flashing their lights at her to get out of their way sooner. When the Chevy banked right at the ferry sign, she tagged along. Idling in line as the attendant waved the cars ahead onto the small ferry, doubt dribbled in. Maybe she should go home. Maybe it wouldn’t happen again. It wouldn’t happen again. She’d make sure. Swiveling the steering wheel to leave the line, the attendant slapped her SUV’s hood and motioned her forward instead. But she knew she couldn’t make sure so she followed his waving arm. Hers was the last car on, the ferry attendant

barely fitting her Escalade with its two matching booster seats snug against Larry's bumper. They'd be better off without her. She would be sure then.

The rawhide string tingle-a-linged again and again. Tuesday morning Bridge Club. Sherriff Preston and Deputy John. Half of Promise Realty's sales force. Maddie poured coffee, steeped tea, pocketed tips, schlepped an overflowing self-bus bin to the dishwasher. Her body raced to keep ahead of "Maddie, another espresso," "Hon, package four muffins, I'm treatin' the girls in the office this morning," "Oh my, I'm running late (again), do me up my regular to-go," and "Hand me the *Record*, would ya?"

Knowing the most difficult task during her shift was telling customers she was out of scones or muffins or had one potpie left, soothed her. No mulling over which wall color would create harmonious feng shui in the new Capitol Hill mansion, no scheming about which after-school activities would favor admission to the exclusive kindergarten, no proper seating diagrams for Friday's dinner with the Governor to boost Steve's political career. She would have stuffed her Road's End apron in the trash years ago if she had to make decisions beyond what coffee flavor to brew.

Predictability was another thing keeping her at Road's End. Regulars came at the same time each day and ordered the

same thing. They talked about the same things too—weather, price of gas, Summer People with holes in their wallets, and the hooligans passing stupid laws down in the Capital on the mainland. “What do *those* people expect of us?” was the collective sentiment. And she agreed: what did those people on the other side of the Bay, down I-5, in the suburbs of the Capital, expect of her?

To return, head down, tail tucked, chanting *mea culpa*. To take up where she had left off: perfect wife, perfect mother, perfect...? That was the problem, chasing after someone else’s ideals, she had never discovered Maddie, and without knowing who she was, how could she know perfection?

Ting-a-ling.

Mr. Wilson grunted as he sat. Reggie, his Chesapeake Bay retriever, flopped onto the floor, his soggy fur a heady mix of seaweed and fish. Mr. Wilson let go of the bundle tucked under his arm and newspapers tumbled onto the table. He arranged the periodicals in the order he read them—*New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Chronicle*. And if it was Wednesday, when the local came out, he would slide *Promise Record* to the stack’s bottom. He spread open the *Times*’ front section.

She wondered if Steve still thought himself worldly for devouring only the *Times*’ columns. Her husband had bugged

her to read them, saying she couldn't hold her own at dinner parties otherwise. She had tried. Kept track of Susan Smith and Andrea Yates, for a mother who harmed her precious babies must be sick in the head.

She had written Susan a letter, addressed it via the South Carolina prison, asking Susan if she had felt a burning sensation before driving into the lake. Had fire raced from her toes up her legs, burning through her stomach, clutching at her heart, so Susan gunned her SUV into cooling waters to save herself and forgotten about her children strapped in the backseat? Maddie never learned, for three months later her letter had been returned, unopened.

Mr. Wilson moved the plate with the scone front and center. His wild eyebrows twitched as he nodded thanks.

"It's blueberry, your favorite." She set a fresh mug of steaming coffee next to his plate. Mr. Wilson reminded her of her grandfather, who had the same toothy smile. Of all of them, Popsie was the only one who told her he understood. He came up to see her after the brouhaha settled, after she found the beach house with the leaky roof and started working at Road's End, after she made it clear she wasn't taking the ferry back to the mainland anytime soon. He told her he didn't know how she managed to begin with. That she was brave and

selfless. She didn't feel courageous, only that she had no other choice.

Rick's boots scuffed against the floor as he headed to the door. "Remember, I'm third on your route," he shouted over his shoulder at Larry, who, from the counter stool, raised his hand in acknowledgement. Rick tugged on his rust-colored cap, glanced at the window, then at her. "Maddie, you put your pans out, didn't you?"

She nodded, the three-quarters-full coffee pot feeling heavy on her wrist. Why was it men underestimated her? She set the pot on Mr. Wilson's table. Was being quiet, a counterbalance to chaos, interpreted as being meek and malleable? If so, Steve no longer questioned her ability to act boldly.

Mr. Wilson folded the *Times*' front section and placed it to the left of his stack. "She doesn't need pans." He looked straight at Rick. "Clouds aren't doing anything but telling us they could if they wanted to, but they're choosing not to today." He unfolded the *Journal* and returned to reading.

Rick shook his head and locked eyes with her. "I'd leave the pans out."

She studied the clouds. It was hard to tell if they would turn kind or not, as the spruces didn't afford much of a view. She leaned forward, careful not to step on Reggie's tail, until

she could see a swatch of sky above the airport's grassy runway where Summer People flew in and out on their planes. She decided the clouds *could* be lifting. She trusted Mr. Wilson's inclination, for, like Popsie, he saw past the obvious to discover the truth.

"Maddie needs a husband to look after her roof," Mr. Wilson said. "Not two geezers arguing over whether or not it's going to rain, which it isn't."

Well, almost the truth.

Rick nodded. "If I was two decades younger, you know I'd ask, Maddie."

Wilson cleared his throat. "Try three. And what about the wife you already have?"

Since she had arrived, the two had tried to marry her off to every available Year-rounder. She never let on about Steve, only shook her head at their suggestions that she would be happier, or at least live under a leak-free roof, if married. Maybe their couplings figured that way, but contentment had eluded her until she landed on Promise. What would a husband do with a leaky roof? Put out different pans? Call a roofer? Steve would have asked her to take care of the problem.

They had started with happily-ever-after intentions. They'd married the day after college graduation. Steve was

bound for law school, with an eye to the governor's mansion after a stint in his father's practice. She sought non-profits, nothing confrontational which could later undermine his career, of course. Wouldn't dare work for Save the *fill in the blank* or Museum of Contemporary Art, as endangered species conservation was construed as anti-job by some and the lifestyles of artists tawdry by others. Friends of the Library was a safe resume filler for the wife of a future governor. But when she became pregnant, he insisted she resign, for if he couldn't take care of his wife and soon-to-be-born twins, why would voters think he could take care of them?

Ting-a-ling. Ting-a-ling.

A man wearing a plaid shirt and paint-splattered khaki pants stepped inside. Shivering, he rubbed his hands together. His ponytail-bound red hair swayed.

An artist wannabe, Maddie decided, spotting the shirt's designer insignia and pants' iron creases, starched edging done by professional cleaner or maid or perfect wife. The orderly paint smudges added to the premise—signs of a timid paint-by-the-numbers kit instead of a bust-a-gut Jackson Pollack installation. Promise attracted his type—people trying on personas. Being so far from the mainland, folks felt safe to peel the onions of their soul one thin stratum at a time. Sometimes it took a while to slough off the timidity of their

straight-jacketed suburban lives before they found their true self. Sometimes, one's true self was disturbing.

So as to not run into Wannabe, Rick stepped aside. "Weather changing for the worse?" He asked the man then glanced at Mr. Wilson.

Wannabe looked over his shoulder and through the glass door. "I'd say it's actually getting better."

Mr. Wilson grunted.

Ting-a-ling. Ting-a-ling. -ling. The bells clanged loudly as Rick shut the door hard behind him.

Wincing, Maddie picked up the coffee pot from Mr. Wilson's table. "Come on in." She pegged the visitor as a to-goer—scouting a cottage with north-facing light so he could ponder the tradeoffs of chipping away his outer skin while dabbling with a brush. She shooed him forward to the counter with her pot.

Reggie heaved from his throw-rug sprawl into a sitting position and growled. He was formidable asleep, and now, poised for action, with his broad head, shining rows of glistening teeth at waist height, and muscular haunches ready to spring, Maddie was glad he had taken notice of the outsider.

The man hesitated.

Maddie patted Reggie's head and spoke to the retriever, all the while looking at her new customer. "Be nice. We don't need more naysayers."

Except for the dog's low rumble, Road's End quieted. At the counter, Larry swiveled around, his jeans scratching against the stool's red Naugahyde. The Tuesday morning bridge foursome, sitting across the way from Mr. Wilson's table, folded cards to chests and watched.

"Don't mind us. We don't bite," Maddie said, and headed toward the counter.

Mr. Wilson eyed his dog. "Speak for yourself."

Reggie had licked her hand that first day, after she pushed through the door of Road's End straight from the ferry landing, still following Larry. Mr. Wilson had squished his shaggy eyebrows together as she had reached to pat the dog's head and said, "You're either impetuous or know what you want." Maddie was both.

She had wanted a neat and tidy life. No messes. No surprises. No raised voices. And her life was just that until Olivia and Jackson knocked her off-kilter. When Jackson slept, Olivia rattled the crib's railing. When Olivia nursed, Jackson demanded his diaper changed. When Jackson cried, Olivia held her breath until her cheeks burned crimson. When Olivia learned to walk, Jackson insisted he be carried. When

Jackson blew kisses, Olivia yanked the cat's tail. When Olivia drew hearts, Jackson farted.

"You'll get on a schedule, just you see," her mother had said.

"You'll figure it out, you always do," Steve had offered.

"When you've given life to them, messes and poor behavior suddenly become irresistibly dear," her mother-in-law had commented.

The plaid shirt-wearing man followed her to the counter. "This place is supposed to have the best coffee."

Maddie met Larry's gaze as she passed his stool. She hadn't heard or seen a plane land, so the trek out from the village on such an iffy day was a commitment for a cup a coffee, even if hers was superior. But then again, uncovering one's inner self required sustenance.

Placing the pot on its warmer behind the counter, she noticed the Tuesday bridge club staring, waiting for her reaction to the newcomer.

They hadn't treated her like the new kid on the block when she ting-a-linged the bells that first time. Once Reggie had licked her hand, that was that—she was one of them and there was no turning back. Reggie had never treated anyone since with the same hospitality.

“What can I get you?” she asked. No need to hamper his search for self. God knew there were plenty of others who would.

“Two shots in the dark and two straight from the cow,” the newcomer said.

A hipster from Ballard or Queen Ann, a wannabe bankrolled by a trust fund, money to burn on whatever lark he decided to pursue. How much would he be willing to forsake to become the image he saw of himself? Maddie wondered. She set four to-go cups equally spaced apart on the counter, like toy soldiers at attention, and stacked up four plastic tops at the end of the row. She’d given up quite a bit.

Reaching below, she plucked a cardboard carrier from the shelf. Four drinks would take him through a lengthy list of north-facing cottage listings.

Larry jammed his notebook into his breast pocket and picked up his phone.

The man waved his hand. “They’re for here. Not to go.”

Maddie knocked over a cup with the carrier. For here? She righted and restacked the cups, nesting one into the other, a regiment turning tail. “You heading off, Larry?”

Larry shook his head. “Not yet. Make sure that stray dog’s not giving you any trouble.”

That was their code to see if she needed help. She wanted him to stay in case the newcomer turned into a pest. But what trouble could an iron-creased ponytailed wannabe artist with a trust stir up? Still...four beverages...for here? The last thing she wanted was to listen to how hard he had it and how moving to Promise was just the ticket.

“Just pour ‘em in mugs and I’ll take them to the open table.” He nodded to the one on the other side of the counter’s end, the one closest to her. Wannabe rolled his head right. After several popping noises, he rolled it left. Shutting his eyes, he raised and lowered his shoulders twice, both times accompanied by pops. “Want to wake up from the mind-numbing drive.”

That’s where it had started. Like an addict, she had lusted for I-5’s mind-numbing high. The rhythmic click-clack of tires on pavement, ordered bedlam. Ticking by mile markers silenced Jackson’s whines and stowed Olivia’s scattered Legos. It disabled the clappers in the hand bells Olivia and Jackson ting-a-linged all day and what seemed like half the night as they sang *Jingle Bells* off-key in July. Perhaps she meant to go shopping. She had called her mother-in-law to watch the twins. It was Costco Day, after all, and she had cash in her pocket. But I-5’s anesthetizing effect kicked in by the time the Big Box appeared and she whizzed by the exit.

The hum of the Escalade's V8 soothed her. So she drove. Drove until her front bumper nudged up against the white Chevy with *I'm not your 911* plastered on its tailgate. The miles erased an endless shopping list for yet another fundraising dinner party, afternoon appointments to interview more preschool directors, the red marks around Olivia's neck.

"You sure you can handle all this?" Her hand fluttered at the four mugs she'd set on the counter, at the imaginary pile of angst, guilt, loneliness, and despair she had sloughed off, peeling layers of her pain.

Trust Fund Artist nodded, his eyes shut.

She poured coffee into the first two and added a double espresso shot to each. She filled the third with milk and started pouring into the fourth.

Ting-a-ling. Ting-a-ling. Ting-a-ling.

A woman and two small children of similar height pushed through the door. Trust Fund Artist raised and waved his left arm. The children, a boy and a girl, had dark red hair, like the man's. Like Maddie's.

Her wrist jostled and milk puddled onto the counter.

Like Olivia's and Jackson's.

The girl clutched a floppy stuffed horse.

Olivia had a horse like that. She had called it Daisy.

Milk ran over the counter's edge and dripped onto Maddie's white canvas sneakers.

"Damn." She could feel the cold liquid wetting her toes, chilling her to the core.

She had told Olivia to wait. She'd get her a glass but first she needed to clean up the cat's upchuck under the dining room table, the table where Steve had announced his run for office a fortnight prior ("Maddie, start packing, we're moving to the Governor's Mansion!"). After sanitizing the floor, her hands reeking of partly digested tuna fish and bleach, she had come into the kitchen to find the cat retching again, this time under the kitchen table (what was it about making statements at tables?), the phone ringing, Jackson using the sink's spigot as a climbing rope up to the counter, and milk cascading onto the floor. Olivia, watching her brother, taking notes for her own future expedition most likely, wasn't paying attention to filling her cup from a milk container.

The little girl plopped her stuffed horse onto Road's End's counter. "Oh-oh lady, you made a boo-boo." She slid the toy away from the puddle, away from Maddie, so the horse would be safe from endangerment.

The boy pointed to the overflowing glass. Then at his sister. "That's yours."

But they couldn't be hers. Olivia and Jackson would be twelve by now. Wouldn't they? It had been seven years.

Then the dog had started yapping and Olivia had dropped the container. Splat. Milk had sprayed across the lower cherry cabinets, Yorkie, polished plank floor, Maddie's silk blouse straight from the dry cleaner's garment bag. She was on fire. Heat singed her legs, charred her viscera, scorched her heart. She had meant to reach for the sponge, but instead seized Olivia's neck and squeezed. Staring into Olivia's eyes, all the while squeezing, both of them understanding this particular task would be successfully completed. Jackson, upon reaching Mount Sink's summit, nonchalantly grabbed hold of the far left water lever and sprayed his mother square in the face, interrupting Maddie's progress. Two days later, when she signed the lease for the house with the leaky roof, her stomach still felt twisted from the blank look on Jackson's face, as if he had expected her behavior. And her hand still ached from throttling her daughter.

"Are you all right?" Larry passed her the dishtowel.

Her platinum-haired mother-in-law had asked the same when she'd shown up on Maddie's front stoop an hour later. "Fine, just fine," Maddie had answered, pulling keys from her purse as she sidled out the door without looking

back. "I won't be long. Just need to take care of a couple of things."

With each click-clack on the highway, she had taken care of them.

For what five-year old wouldn't spill milk again?

"You sure you're up to all this?" Maddie waved the dishcloth at the four mugs sitting on the counter, the boy, the girl with the pony, the promise of a new life.

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Issue 16 Cover Art (*The Future is Woke*) by Gregg Chadwick

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