

P icture T his...

By

Donald McMann

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Donald McMann's, "Picture This," is a portrait of longing and loss – longing for what your life used to be and searching for some needed solidarity in the face of the unknown.*

What McMann does well within his story is to take the metaphor of a portrait and capture this singular, beautiful moment of memory, family, and love and juxtapose the heart wrenching knowledge that those memories of happiness are solely that – memories.

"Picture This" is a story woven as subtly as a tapestry. Stan is a decent father, but an alcoholic with enough of a problem to warrant the tensions created in his marriage with his wife, Judith. Judith who has not only left him for another woman, but with whom he is currently going through the complications that any couple faces when divorcing. He spends one more morning going over the remains of his broken marriage by looking over what he and his wife are not only selling to the new homeowners but never going to be used again to represent the love they once had. We know the motivations of the main character, we have the how and the why, as sad as they are, but the richness of this piece comes from the way in which the author is able to paint this picture about the tensions of alcoholism and the impact upon not only the life of the protagonist but how deep a divide is created by those who experience the pain of watching someone slowly slip away from you.

For anyone who has had love and lost, for anyone who knows the deep impacts of alcoholism upon the body, mind, family, and relationships, for anyone who knows that a single kernel of happiness is oftentimes the only thing that holds our memories within our hearts in the face of the snow that is always covering our tracks as we look behind, this is a story well worth reading, a portrait well worth observing.

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language...)*

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beauty.”

“My true beauty,” she laughed, “as opposed to all that false beauty I usually parade around.”

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The Final, Final Visit

Stan hadn't planned on another visit to the cottage, yet here he was. One more last time. He'd sold it the previous Tuesday. Furnished. Right down to the dishes and bedding. The new owners took it all. Twenty-seven years of accumulation. Now, it was nearly gone. Closing was in three days. He and Judith would split the proceeds just as they had when the house was sold. Splitting was what they did now.

“I'm completely unsentimental about the place,” he'd told his daughter Ruth. “It's just one more closed chapter. Closed with a big thud.” But here he was. Once more he looked up at those huge log beams, the skeleton that supported sixteen feet of open space. Once more he ran his fingers over the stone fireplace. Cold now. But he thought back to all those fires. Kids wrapped up in Hudson's Bay blankets. Adults sipping a good Malbec. Marshmallows impaled on sharp sticks. And now he stood at the window and looked out at the lake. It was choppy and gray, the same color as the sky. Ice was already forming, mini-bergs bobbing up and down in the water—building up along the shore. The place was quiet with only the sound of the wind and somewhere a branch scraping against a log wall. *I should prune that*, he thought. And then, *Nope. Those days are over. A lot of things are over.*

Stan and Ruth had gone through the place gathering up personal things—photographs, lost bathing suits found too late now. Three dusty, part bottles of Johnnie Black that Judith had apparently kept from him in the back of the utility room. Mystery solved. It hadn't been those alcoholic mice after all.

But something had brought him back. The picture. The picture of Judith, like the scotch, hidden. Kept from him.

The End

Stan and Judith had quarreled that last morning. He'd been up since 6:30. As usual. He'd made coffee. As usual. He'd made bacon and toast. As usual. Judith came down at ten to nine. Unusually late.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning."

Judith picked up a discarded section of *The Globe and Mail*. She opened it and held it up, but Stan couldn't tell whether she was reading or hiding. He got up from his chair. He poured a cup of black coffee for her and put some cold toast on a plate. He set them on the table in front of her but on his side of the open newspaper. He sat down. He stared at the paper. It was the business section. Not her usual choice. On the back was a full-color, full-page ad for an airline. Qantas? She turned the page, and in that split second when the newspaper was reduced to half its width, she saw him staring. She slammed the paper down on the table.

"What?"

"What do you mean, what?"

“Look. If I want to go out in the evening, I’m allowed. If I want to stay out really late, I will.” He watched butter from the toast begin a spreading stain on the newspaper.

“Four thirty?”

“Yes, four thirty. Or five thirty. Or the rest of my life. I don’t live under a curfew. Not yours. Not even mine. You know what? I’m done. Take your guilt-flavored coffee and your guilt-flavored, cold, dried-up toast, and shove ’em up your ass.”

“I don’t know what to say. I…”

“You never have known what to say. But take it easy on yourself.” Her voice was suddenly calm, almost gentle. “I’m done here, Stan. There’s another person. I’m fifty-three. This is my last chance. I’m not going to mess this up. I’ve already talked with a lawyer. This should be easy. We’re both grown-ups.”

“But…”

“It’s Irene, if you have to know.”

“Irene Miller? But she’s…a woman. Are you saying…?”

“Yup. That’s what I’m saying, Stan. I’ve been getting it on with another woman. And it’s great. You should have seen us last night. No. Check that. You shouldn’t have seen us. It’s so great, we’ve got plans to move in together.” She got up, strode over to the liquor cabinet, opened it, and poured some scotch into a glass. She put it down in front of Stan. Hard. A little of the golden-brown liquid splashed onto the tabletop. “Here,” she said. “You might as well get an early start today. In fact, every day. I’m officially retired as the scotch cop. A toast to me.” Stan picked up the glass. He drank.

Too Long at the Fair

It was July 1971. Hot. Sunny. The annual fair was on, and a thirteen-year-old Ruth wanted to go—with her two best friends. No parents.

“Absolutely not,” said Stan. “You’re not old enough. It’s too dangerous. You’re too young.”

Ruth pounced. “It’s a fair. It’s meant for kids. I don’t see people your age going on rides.”

Stan was derailed. Judith, whose arguments had not developed much beyond saying “no,” and then saying “no” again, but louder, was silenced. And this was only the opening round of negotiations. Before the weekend was over, Stan’s car, loaded with three young teens, one skeptical mother, and one defeated father, pulled into the fairground’s parking lot. Stan paid the admissions (another negotiating triumph for Ruth), and the terms of the bargain were reiterated: The girls would have four hours on their own, and they’d all meet back at the gate.

“Four hours,” said Stan. “Not four hours and twenty minutes. Not four hours and ten minutes. Not even four hours and one minute.”

“Oh, Dad. We’ll meet you in around four hours. Don’t worry. Have fun!” And she and her friends rushed into the crowd. Judith and Stan looked at each other. Hot. Damp with sweat. Jostled by other fairgoers. Suddenly Judith laughed—a big, hearty laugh that Stan hadn’t heard lately. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s have some fun.”

At a nearby booth Stan did his best to win Judith a large teddy bear, but it was almost as though some force was stopping that last bowling pin from falling even when Stan appeared to hit it dead center with that softball he was throwing. The operator really seemed to be pulling for

Stan too.

“That’s it, mister. It’s all in the wrists. Just cock that wrist. Unload that sucker. Aw. Thought you had her there.” Everyone was disappointed when Stan gave up after only eleven tries.

“It would have been a nuisance to carry, anyway, Slugger,” said Judith. They each had a corn dog. *I’m gonna buy some antacids on the way home*, Stan thought. They toured the Shriners’ Dream Home lottery prize and bought a book of tickets, secretly hoping not to win and face the challenges of having to oversee the move to its lot in a part of town where neither of them wanted to live, selling it once installed on its foundation, and then deciding what to do with all the furniture in case the new owners didn’t want it.

“It’s a lottery with only one loser: the guy whose ticket is drawn,” said Stan.

“Only one,” said Judith.

They laughed at the pig races and cooled down in the tent of the Dancing Waters. There were exhibit halls to tour. They began to slowly make their way back to the main entrance and Ruth and her friends. That’s when they saw his outdoor booth: *Pierre de Beaubien, Renowned Portrait Artist, pupil of Pierre Montblanc, the grandson of Jean Montblanc, whose grandfather had studied with Edward Degas*. Fiftyish. Worn. He actually sported a beret. He had sweat stains under the arms of his faded black T-shirt. And then there was the Vandyke. Gray. A little patchy. As an artist he wasn’t bad, though “portrait” might have been a little much for what he was producing. A likeness might be more accurate. He worked on paper. His medium was pastels. Fifteen dollars. Unfinished maple frame included.

“Come on,” said Stan. “His work looks good, quite convincing. He’ll capture your true

beauty.”

“My true beauty,” she laughed, “as opposed to all that false beauty I usually parade around.”

But she was convinced, and in an amazingly short time, there she was. On paper. Framed. Beautiful.

“He’s totally got you,” said Stan. “I love it. I love you.”

Judith frowned. “It took a fifteen-dollar chalk sketch to awaken your passion?” She laughed—a little. “Come on. Your turn,” she said.

But Stan said nothing. Pointed to his watch.

“Oh, come on. It doesn’t take long. Just a few minutes.”

“Can’t make them follow the rules if we don’t.” And then came the look. The Judith look. She snatched the picture from his hands.

“Gimme that thing.”

Ruth and her friends were waiting for them by the gate.

“Thought you guys were going to be late,” said Ruth. “I was looking forward to grounding you.” Ruth snatched the picture from her mother. “Mom. This looks great. I’m so glad you got that. Dad, where’s yours?”

“Ran out of time. Didn’t want to be grounded.”

“Yeah,” said Judith, “ran out of time and ran out of life. Spontaneous as a brick. And just as much fun.”

Not much was said on the way home. Stan didn’t see the picture again for another two and a half decades. Ruth was up in the master bedroom. Stan was checking out the utility room.

He'd found the hidden scotch, and as he'd turned to go, there, covered in a thick coating of dust, was Judith. He cleaned her off with a tissue. Gazed at her for a few minutes. The likeness was really remarkable. He smiled. The gray-blue eyes held him. There was just a hint of blush. Probably the heat that day. Or the artist's embellishments. He'd caught the hair—the gentle waves. The color of honey. Yes, Judith had been a beauty. Until the anger took over. He went to the kitchen, found a few sheets of leftover packing paper, and wrapped Judith.

“Dad?” Ruth called from the top of the stairs. “Are you ready? I'm ready if you are.”

“In a minute, dear.” He hesitated. He walked back to the utility room. He replaced the portrait.

The Reluctant Passenger

By the time Stan got to his car, he was cold. The late afternoon light was waning. Clouds, driven by gusts of wind, were moving fast. It smelled like snow. He opened the passenger's side rear door, set Judith carefully on the roof, and took out the down-filled jacket he always carried—just in case.

It happened then, as he pulled up the zipper. The sudden movement. Running. Darting, really. Something near the garden shed at the far end of the cottage. He stood by the car. Watching. Nothing.

“Hello,” he called, but a gust stole the word. *Damn it.* The lakeside community had had some trouble with vandalism this season. Mostly drunk kids whose skill with a spray can exceeded their gift for spelling. But not by much. He should check. He started for the shed, not knowing what, or whom, he'd find. And then he stopped. *I'm fifty-five,* he thought. *This is stupid.*

I'm stupid. He was maybe thirty paces from the shed. He didn't move. He listened. He watched. The wind paused.

“Hello. Who's—who's there?”

No answer but the sudden rustling of dried leaves. The coyote bounded out from behind the shed and ran away toward the woods and the gate. Something dangled from its mouth. A rabbit. It had been transitioning from brown to white—the camouflage coat it wouldn't need this coming winter. There was no confrontation. The coyote had dinner plans. A wave of nausea swept over Stan. He swallowed hard. Stood perfectly still. Stared at the woods. Turned, finally, and headed back to his car. It must have been something in his eye. Both eyes. The wind. The grit. Tears.

He was shivering by the time he got into the driver's seat. He started the engine, turned up the heater, and waited for warmth. He switched on the radio, and the car filled with the sound of a weather report announcing a heavy snowfall warning for the city and surrounding areas. He turned it off. When he could feel some heat, he fastened his seat belt, put the car in gear, and still with the image of that poor, dead, dangling rabbit, he started out of the driveway. His eyes were blurry with tears. He didn't see the dark sedan parked near the end of the drive. He missed it by the thickness of a coat of paint. His heart pounding, he headed home. *There will be snow tonight,* he thought. *A blanket. A thick blanket that will bury everything. Bury me.*

A Visitor in the Night

It had been a scotch night. It had certainly been a scotch night. The bottle of Johnnie Black—seriously depleted—stood on the counter, its cap lost, nowhere in sight. Stan cringed at

the sound of the electric coffee grinder. His hand shook noticeably as he spooned coffee into the basket. As the drip machine began to perform its alchemy, he drank his second glass of water, and he took his second aspirin. Unsteadily, he poured cream into the bottom of a stained mug, one of the few left to him after the division of household goods, and as soon as it was ready, he poured fresh coffee up to the three-quarter level. No point in taking chances with unsteady hands. Even looking at the coffee seemed therapeutic. Then, for the first time that morning (or was it afternoon?), he thought to look out the window. As he raised the blind, he grimaced at the bright white of the previous night's snowfall. He looked away and carried the coffee to the kitchen table and sat down. He brought the mug toward his lips. Froze. Where was Judith's portrait?

In his mind, he tried to retrace his steps. And that was it. He remembered putting the picture on the roof of the car. He didn't remember putting it in the car. He remembered blotchy white and brown fur. Trotting. Lifelessness. Limp. Dangling. Like any number of people since the invention of the closed-in car, he'd been distracted and left something he valued on the roof, and now it was lost. He thought of the snow. It would have covered everything. Judith was lost.

"Well," he said aloud. "It's futile but I'd better try." He dressed, found his winter jacket, and headed for the back door. He flung it open, and as he rushed outside, he knocked over the package that had been leaning against the house where someone was sure he would find it.

"It can't be you," he said to the package. It was still dressed in its brown packing paper. He lifted it up and brushed the snow from it. There was a white label stuck to the front. He read it.

"Believe you dropped this," it said.

There was no hint. The label was printed. Footsteps were filled in with drifted bright white snow. Tire tracks too.

“Believe you dropped this.”

THE END

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I am not a divorce lawyer. But I’m married to one. I’ve heard lots of stories about love gone wrong. Mostly, they’re grim. They present every negative emotion from regret to recrimination. What interests me, though, are those rare breakups in which some small ember of love survives the all-consuming acrimony. It’s imagining such a moment that inspired, “Picture This.”*

Snow features prominently in the story. It conceals. It’s beautiful. It’s dangerous. It’s cold. It seems to fit the physical climate. And it fits the emotional climate, too.

I’m not sure I can say who influences me stylistically. I don’t want to remind people of someone else. (OK. If you were to note that my originality brings Shakespeare to mind, that would be nice.) But ever since I first saw a quotation from the late Irish writer, William Trevor, I’ve tried to keep it in mind. In 1989, Trevor told the Paris Review that the short story is an “art of the glimpse” whose, “strength lies in what it leaves out.”

Oh, yes. And the picture. There are two of these “portraits” hanging in our home. One is of me; the other is of my dad. They were done one afternoon when the two of us went to the local summer fair. I was eleven.

AUTHOR BIO: Since 2001, I have worked as a professor in the English department of McEwan University. Before that, I worked as a communications practitioner, which involved everything from copywriting and editing to directing campaigns. I have a PhD in creative writing from the University of Wales: Trinity St. David, as well as an MFA in writing and literature from Bennington College. I studied with Jill McCorkle, Doug Bower, Maria Flook, Elizabeth Cox, and Dic Edwards. My short story “Strip Malls Can Change Your Life” appeared in the inaugural issue of the *Lampeter Review* in 2010. Other work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Alembic*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Bluestem*, *Borfski Press*, *The Delmarva Review*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Evening Street Review*, *Honest Ulsterman*, *Literary Yard*, *OxMag*, *The Penmen Review*, *S/Word*, *Santa Fe Writers Project Quarterly*, *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*, *Spadina Literary Review*, *Steam Ticket*, *Umbrella Factory Magazine*, and *Verdad*. I am happily married and the father of an adult son. In my spare time, I sing (badly) and golf (also badly).

