

Family

By Michael Haggerty

WHY WE LIKE IT: *No fireworks here, just a seamlessly written low key urban realist tonal study that touches sensitively on life inside and outside an average working class (why do we hate that word?) family. Much of the beauty resides in its unpretentious simplicity and the joy of 'commonness' that it tenderly celebrates. The bond between husband and wife is truly touching and understatement is deftly played throughout. The prose is remarkable for being unremarkable. If Richard Ford had a double Michael Haggerty would be it.*

Quote: In the dimly lit kitchen the cold November drizzle pelted against the window as the family ate in quiet contentment.

For this kind of writing, it doesn't get any better.

Family

Chester Wegrzynowski woke at 5:00 AM. It was dark. For a moment he listened to an icy November rain pelting against the bedroom window, and then he slid from his bed. The winds rattled and shook the house. Outside the big elms swayed heavily in heaping sweeps. He looked blankly toward the soft snoring of his wife Shirley stirring slightly under the covers. She would not get up until seven-thirty when she had to wake their daughter Denise and get her ready for school. Denise was in the eighth grade at PS 66. She was a shy, skinny girl with a boyish haircut and an embarrassing acne problem.

He put on his robe and slippers and shuffled slowly into the kitchen where he lit the burner and put a kettle of water on the stove. While waiting for the water to boil, he wandered

into the bathroom, switched on the light, and looked closely at his reflection in the mirror, his grey stubble and tired eyes. Chet pulled a tube of Colgate from the cabinet and began brushing his teeth. He spent a great deal of time brushing the inside and outside of each tooth. He had read somewhere that it is important to brush your tongue, so each day he choked his way through that routine. He flossed carefully and finished the whole ordeal with a large swishing of Listerine. By the time he was finished brushing, Chet felt livelier, more awake. He showered quickly, then moved back into the kitchen, pulled the steaming kettle from the stove, and made a cup of Maxwell House coffee with two heaping teaspoons of sugar and a generous portion of half and half.

As was his daily routine, Chet grabbed the newspaper wedged between the screen and the kitchen door, lit a Marlboro, and sat at the table under the soft glow of the kitchen light reading the *Courier Express*. He began with the sports page and read about the dismal season the Bills were having. He was glad Coach Saban was back, and he was happy they were giving the ball to O.J. more, but the team still couldn't rack up enough points to win very many games. They had just gotten pounded by Cleveland, and with only one more game at the old War Memorial Stadium, Chet figured maybe they'd have a better shot next year when they moved into their new stadium way out in Orchard Park. After he read the paper cover to cover, he made himself a sandwich of scrambled eggs with cheddar cheese on a toasted buttered bagel. He doused the eggs with Tabasco and threw a little iceberg lettuce on top. He ate quietly at the table while listening to the morning show on WEBR. When he finished, he washed his plate and cup in the sink and placed them in the rack to dry; then, he went back into the dark bedroom and dressed quietly for work, careful not to wake Shirley sleeping soundly in their bed.

Chet took his lunchbox from the refrigerator and headed out the door toward his job at the General Mills Factory. He counted on Shirley making his lunch the night before, usually a big bologna or ham sandwich, an apple or a pear or a banana, and something sweet like a chocolate chip cookie or a brownie. During his lunch break Chet bought a carton of milk or maybe a coffee in the employee cafeteria. He pulled the Ford from the garage and headed in the darkness toward work. He drove down Michigan Avenue, over the black steel lift bridge, onto Kelly Island, and through the gates at General Mills. Chet parked in the big lot and walked toward the employee door. He inhaled the sweet scent of grains and oats roasting, the clean smell of Cheerios wafting from the factory. Chet walked through the door and into the plant.

Inside, the plant was bright, noisy, and warm. Grain was brought by rail or ship and stored in the tall, massive grain elevators for later use. Chet's job was to manage the productivity of a crew of workers. Their job was to take an oat flour base and mix it into dough to be slowly cooked and pushed through an extruder. It was an important step in the production of cereal and flour. His crew worked methodically and diligently. The crew liked and respected Chet. They regarded him as fair and protective, a good liaison between the Union and Management.

Chet, like most of the generations of employees, enjoyed working at the factory. The monotonous humming and barking of machines, the constant predictable, methodical movement of men working, fork-lifts running, the sweet smell of soft grain wafting through the air soothed Chet. He could think of no other place he'd rather work.

Punch out for the first shift was at 4:00 PM. As was usual, much of the crew headed over to the Swannie House for a couple of after work beers. The shift change was a busy time at the Swannie House. By the time Chet and his crew arrived, the scoopers from the grain silos we

already at the bar clutching brown bottles of Genesee, Schmidt's or Schaefer beer, and knocking back tiny shots of whiskey. Bowls of peanuts and pretzels lined the bar. The bar was filled with men, smoke, loud talking, and barking laughter.

Chet squeezed into a spot at the end of the bar next to Ed *Little Egg's* Lannon, already attacking a couple of pickled eggs from the big glass jar sitting behind the bar accompanied by a handful of saltine crackers. Danny *Lump* Lukomski, Jimmy *Cigar* Sheehan, and *Rooster* Shanahan clutched their beers, filling the corner in deep conversation. Chet ordered a Genesee and overheard Lump Lukomski sharing his marriage woes with the boys.

"She don't do nothing but bitch and moan every goddamn day. I tell ya, if it were legal, I'd take a fryin' pan to her head."

"Jesus, Lump, you got that right," Jimmy Sheehan said, chomping on his cigar. "My ol' lady too. Do this, do that, what time ya comin' home? It ain't a moment's peace with her."

Chet turned from the bar and entered the circle. Rooster Shanahan lit a Winston and exhaled from the corner of his mouth. He was a big guy, half deaf, and had to bend into the circle to hear the conversation.

"My wife used to be a real peach," he said. "She's let herself go, done nothin' except gotten fatter and meaner. I tell ya, it ain't the same as it was when we first got married."

Chet took a long pull from his beer. He looked out the big window watching some of boys in his crew filing into the warm bar. He chuckled idly along with the boys wondering if

they were just talkin' to be talkin' or if they really couldn't stand the wives they married so long ago. Hell, Chet thought, these guys were no peaches either.

Little Eggs Lannon pointed a pickled egg toward the boys for emphasis, "All my wife does is complain about everything, or she gives me the silent treatment. She can go on for a long time with the silent treatment and most of the time I don't know what the hell she's pissed about. Last week she didn't talk to me for two days and then she finally told me she's getting tired of me keeping the toilet seat up!"

"I guess they're just about impossible," Lump Lukowski said.

"Women," Jimmy Sheehan sighed, "you can't live with 'em; you can't live with 'em!"

"Boy, you got that right," Rooster Shanahan agreed under a roar of laughter.

Chet ordered another beer and took a tiny shot of whiskey that Jimmy Sheehan bought for the boys in the corner. The place began thinning out. The boys were heading home to have supper with their wives and kids. He'd see them all again tomorrow and the next day and the next.

Chet walked slowly to the parking lot, got into the Ford, and drove over the bridge, past the Swannie House, and back towards his neighborhood. It was dark and that cold rain continued to pelt angrily on his windshield. The glare from street lights and a long blurry trail of red tail lights before him on the shiny streets caused him to squint as he drove. He made two stops along the way, a bakery where he purchased a half-dozen éclairs, and a flower shop.

He arrived home with his wife at the kitchen stove flipping pork chops in a cast-iron skillet. The table was set. Scalloped potatoes were in the oven and green beans simmered in a shallow pan. His daughter sat comfortably at the table waiting for dinner and thumbing through a copy of *Life* magazine. Chet handed her the bag filled with the éclairs and gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek. He moved toward his wife putting his arm around her waist. Her face flushed crimson-pink as he placed a small bouquet of six white roses into her hand. Flustered and surprised she took the roses, filled a vase with water, clipped the stems, and set them onto the center of the table.

In the dimly lit kitchen the cold November drizzle pelted against the window as the family ate in quiet contentment.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I like writing stories about my hometown, Buffalo, NY, and I like going to bars. I especially enjoy going to the many neighborhood taverns that make up this fine city. I suppose my influence for this story comes from being in this particular tavern that sits right on the waterfront next to the grain elevators and General Mills where Cheerios are made. The Swannie House is the oldest tavern in Buffalo, so I imagine that a lot of drinking and bullshitting from the workers at the factory has taken place there over the years. The story just grew from drinking in that bar.*

I'm pretty much influenced, one way or another, by every writer I've read over the years. Writers I've read in the past year or so include Lucia Berlin, Larry Brown, Donald Ray Pollack, Denis Johnson, Jim Harrison, Richard Ford, Daniel Woodrell, Annie Proulx, Grace Paley, Jim Thompson, & Richard Yates.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Michael Burns Haggerty is a novelist and short story writer who currently lives with his wife in downtown Buffalo, NY and in Wilson, NY located on the shores of Lake Ontario. Mr. Haggerty recently had Sweet Cheeks and More Stories from the Nickel City (2017). These comically dark and frighteningly real stories present the hard-hitting, determined, and flawed characters that live and die in Buffalo and Western New York. He is also the author of The Road is Open (2015). Set in 1978, it is the story of two longtime friends from Buffalo, NY who engage in a cross-country hitch-hiking adventure looking for a brother who mysteriously disappeared a few years earlier. Along the way they encounter extraordinary landscapes and meet a series of remarkable characters who represent a truthful, gritty and heart-warming portrait of America.

