

A Perfidy Trifectum

By Joanne Steel Yordanou

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I can't remember making it home. I haven't been drinking or anything. I just can't conjure the drive. Aging? Nah. Raging hormones, more like, coursing adrenaline and sweaty palms.

The car's headlights are off as I turn into our driveway and creep up to the garage, killing the engine before she'll hear it.

In the rear-view mirror, I check my steely eyes, still as blue as when I was a kid; no worse for wear. Hair needs cutting, I see, and run my hand through my dark, disheveled curls. The gray, like a stroke from a whitewash paintbrush, ices my temples. I reach for my rarely used briefcase then open the car door. I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

Walking up our path, I crack my neck then stop at the bottom of the steps. The front door looms above me and I sigh. What words should come out of my mouth to appease Lily this time? What verse to stop her barking or her white, doughy hand from coming up and slapping my face, leaving the sting of her wedding ring imprint hot on my face? I envision Lily's fists dug into her ample hips, as I tell her I had to work late again. There was a blackout in the building, so phones were dead. Yeah. I couldn't call home, my cell was dead too, or I had a flat tire—I haven't used that one yet.

As I'm mulling over this last white or black lie, our neighbour appears walking his empty garbage bins back up to his garage. So focused on rolling up the driveway in blackness, I hadn't seen Fred by the road. He calls over to me, "Hey Joe! Just getting in?"

"You know it, Fred. Had a flat tire on the 401. It was a bitch to get help."

"Really? You'd think those tow truck vultures would have been fighting over you."

"Yeah," I say, a little flat. Maybe it wasn't the best excuse. "Plus, I had to work late."

“Cute secretaries, huh? Yeah, sure you were working late!” Fred laughs, and in that instant, I can’t stand him. What the fuck does he know about work anyway, freelancing as a greeting card artist from home? Fred, the homebody. So particular about mowing his friggin’ lawn; armed with goggles, protective earmuffs, and steel-toed boots. And in those shorts Lily checks out from the window every Saturday morning— “Look how fit he is, Joe. You should get out there,” or “Look how sweet, Joe,” —when Fred walks his little ones to school.

Fred’s putting his clean, wheeled garbage bins away, as mine still sit overturned by the roadside. The streetlights amplify that deadbeat husband, Joe, has forgotten to pick them up, yet again. Had I come home ten minutes later; I would have found my old, dirty bent-out-of-shape bins in army formation against my paint-chipped garage. Do-gooder Fred. Fred and his blooming gardens, clean gutters, and shiny mailbox. Well, damn you Fred. “No. No secretaries, Fred.”

“Well, that’s a shame. Is the boss putting you through the wringer then?”

Another miss.

I contemplate answering this fruitless attempt at my truth, but perhaps Good Old Fred has delivered me the perfect line. “Yeah, something like that,” I say. My observation of Fred lingers, my simulated truth forming.

“Geez, that’s the shits, man,” he says, like he’s actually concerned.

“Tell me about it,” I say, picturing my mild-mannered boss grinning at this. He cut out early today, so I could too.

“Hey, you wanna beer in the backyard?” Fred asks. “You look as though you need to let off some steam.”

I look down at my brogues and notice one shoe untied, not tugged tight enough in my haste an hour ago, and then I look back up at Fred, unsure how to answer his invitation. I blink a

couple times. “Sorry?” I’m stalling, wondering if a quick call from Fred’s house would promote an invite for Lily. With liquor applied and Fred’s effusiveness, Lily could be subdued. Then she’ll hear my half-baked, imagined plight with Ross Boss at work, because Fred’s curiosity and meddling will get the better of him. He’ll bring it up, all right. Lily will match Fred’s sympathy, of course, and it will show up on her face—a good wife’s concern. That’s when I’ll grasp her chubby, garlicky fingers and tell her that I didn’t want to distress her, my love, as I rub my thumb over her wedding ring. Perfect.

“A beer,” Fred repeats deliberately. “Do you want to join me for a beer in the back?”

“Sure Fred, sure. That sounds great.” And just like that, Good Old Fred has provided me with some degree of freedom. I bend down to tie my lace, as Fred’s garage door closes then I walk down to retrieve our own sorry-ass bins, peeved to find papers stuck at the bottom of my blue box. I walk them back to the garage and place them neatly away, regiment-worthy, Fred-worthy. I hope Lily doesn’t come out, just yet.

“Meet you out back!” Fred calls over.

Not bothering to change out of my suit, I pick up my step and join him at his side yard, following him down his Hosta-lined pathway. Somewhere ahead, I hear water trickling as though a brook flowed nearby; one doesn’t. I notice Fred’s fresh haircut, bristling blond hairs neatly army-buzzed above his orange polo shirt and tanned neck. Chimes tinkle beneath a large tree in the corner by our yard, the maple that drops its damn leaves all over my lawn each October.

“Fred, can I use your phone to call Lily? My cell phone’s dead.”

“Sure, Joe, I have a cordless on the deck,” —which he does, right beside a tropical plant; its red blooms cascade all over the green wrought-iron table. Fred slides the screen door open and steps inside. I wonder where Debbie and the kids are.

“Lager okay?” he asks, reappearing at the door with two glasses, two tall cans. I nod.
“G’ahead, call Lily.”

I smile my thanks, place my briefcase down then pick up the cordless and dial our number, careful to keep the phone tight to my ear should Fred hear any of Lily’s blasting. She answers politely, but of course, she sees Fred’s number calling.

“Lily, it’s-me-I’m-just-next-door-having-a-beer-with-Fred,” I say, with machine gun efficiency, to not give her a chance to detonate. I look to Fred to cue him, as Lily asks me where the hell I have been and when was I gonna get my pathetic ass home, but Fred just gives me an idiotic smile. I dip my chin and raise my eyebrows at him—still nothing. I clear my throat and say something that might provoke Fred to an invitation for Lily. “I’m not sure where Deb is, hon,” I say, though Lily hasn’t asked, still holding the phone real tight to my ear, my other hand’s upturned toward Fred.

“Oh,” he says, “They’ve gone to her mother’s for the weekend.”

And? And? My hand’s like a conductor’s, gesturing for a louder chorus. And? For the love of God, Fred!

Lily’s castigating again, and my mind scrambles for something to pacify to her, but I can’t think with all the noise in my ear, so I do what I probably shouldn’t. I hold the phone up. Fred hears her screeching. He’s poured the beer into the glasses and is now handing me one, his eyes set on the barking phone. Fred’s brows rise and he just gawks at me, then he brings his glass up to clink mine and lifts it to his lips.

You God damn moron, Fred!

I return the phone to my ear just as Lily asks if I’ve heard her, if I was still on the phone. She goes on and on about me being dead on the side of the road.

“I had some problems at work, Lil,” I say, rolling my eyes and shaking my head at the complete ineptitude of Dead Head Fred. He laughs, thinking the rolled eyes are for Lily. Jackass.

Then, the line goes dead. This isn't good. She's really pissed now, and even if Fred goes over there, in his Ralph Lauren friggin' flagged shorts and drags her over here with his Freddy charm, ole Lil is steaming. She just might let loose a bit of her Lil-ness on him.

Bingo.

“She hung up,” I say, lifting the cordless again as proof. “Well, Fred, I don't think I can even finish this beer.” Then, I take a big first sip to claim it with my germs and then I cough into my left sleeve, for good measure. It's then I notice my ring, the ring, is missing from my fourth finger. I place my glass and the phone down and I stand up, thrusting my hands into my jacket pockets. Where the fuck is it?

“Hey you! Sit your butt right back down,” Fred commands. He stands up and puts his beer down on the table. “I'll go get her.”

I finally feel the ring loose in my right pant pocket and I let out a Bilbo Baggins breath of relief. “Thanks, Fred,” I say, and sit back down. Fred's already skipped off the deck, and is heading over to my house, with his tanned, hairy legs, ready to impress, de-stress my wife. The ring slips back onto its home too easily. I take another sip of beer. Fred really does have good taste in beer, I think, and I check the can: This is great beer, it announces, and it is. I let myself relax and scan Fred's manicured oasis: the concrete frog by the fake, babbling brook, goofy birdhouses everywhere, and well-placed stepping-stones to guide you to each friggin' vista that Fred wants you to gush over.

Then, I hear Fred's laughter, and then Lily's. My God, he has talent; I give him that. Then I take the position, tie loosened, head in hands, defeated shoulders, and I hear Lily come

thudding up the deck steps behind me, and there it is: I'm an old man again, back into my uncomfortable skin, battered and worn without bruising. Then, on my back, I feel a hand, rubbing then patting me, and I wonder if Lily's been into the wine.

"There, there, Joe, it can't be all that bad," says Fred. I snap my head up to find it's his hand on my back, his five o'clock GQ shadow smiling down at me, showering me in Freddy Glow.

Lily's plonked herself down on his chair opposite mine and levels her dark beady eyes upon me; her ebony hair is pinned back. She's ready for battle. "What can't be so bad?" she asks, in a rather clipped fashion, not releasing her glare.

"Old Joe here's had an awful day by the looks of things, Lily," Fred's massages my shoulders briefly. "He was just about to tell me all about it, but your doting husband wanted to make sure you were present to hear it too. Ain't that right, Joe?" Fred grabs his glass off the table and takes a mouthful of beer. There's a twinkle's in his eyes. That bastard's enjoying this. Then he steps into the house. "White or red, Lily?"

My wife finally stops glowering at me and looks to Fred. Transformed, she sweetly replies, "Oh, white please, Fred. Thank you."

I'm waiting for the mini-blast while Fred's inside, but none comes. The scowling resumes. Fred returns and hands Lily her wine in a fancy glass, crystal or something, which Lily sips more lady-like than usual and places on the table. Then Fred pulls over another chair to form a circle of inquisition around me.

I twirl the wedding band around my finger, thinking of where I'd been earlier, how I had felt a million years younger only an hour ago and then I force it out of my head, putting my mind, instead, into the false world I've created; that Fred created.

“Well, it was like this,” I say, as Fred and Lily both cross their arms.

2- Lily

When I married twenty-four years ago, I never imagined my husband—the dark, curly-headed cute guy that pursued me at university and made me fall in love with him—would turn out to be a stinkin’, lying cheat. Of course, he doesn’t believe he’s one, and that’s the sad thing. He doesn’t even know himself. I love Joe, I do, but I also know he finds other women more attractive than me, sexier than me. His manhood (or whatever the hell you call it) seems to be showing signs of stress or age. Sometimes I think he just wasn’t born with empathy. He could never fathom that he’s been tearing the heart out of my chest and stomping on it with his polished brogues...for years.

The other night, we had quite the eyebrow-raising dust-up. Him rolling up the driveway, late, with his headlights off.

As if.

I happened to be looking out the window at our empty garbage bins, the only ones left out on the street screaming, Joe’s late again.

I wait. And wait. No door opening. Nothing.

Then I hear our neighbour Fred call over to Joe. I lift the window a tad and hear Fred invite Joe over for a beer. Then Mister Deadbeat Husband retrieves our sorry garbage bins and puts them away in the garage. For once.

Then the bastard walks over to Fred’s backyard.

Fred's an okay guy. He's a novelist, but for some reason the neighbourhood thinks he writes greeting cards. First rumours stick, I guess. I can't imagine what our first rumour is. I don't even want to think about it. So, straight over to Fred's he goes. No sorry for being late. No, I'm going to Fred's Lil, do you wanna come? Just more time to avoid me, like I'm the asshole in this relationship.

I'm now fuming. I go down to the kitchen and pour myself a glass of white then peek out the side window. I see the back of Joe's head bobbing around as he's talking to Fred.

Fred then disappears into the house. I drink the last of my wine and pour myself another the return to the window just as Fred brings Joe out a beer and a glass. As I slurp at my second glass then Fred gestures at our house. Joe's head swivels as if trying to see me, but I've already stepped back into the darkness.

Next thing you know, the phone rings and it's, guess who? Joe tells me as fast as he can muster that he's 'just next door having a beer with Fred,' as if he's been there all night. I happen to know he's banging the office manager. I overheard them talking on the phone two years ago.

"Where the hell have you been?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"What?"

"What! And when are you going to get your sorry ass home?" I know everything that comes out of my mouth will be venom, and out of his mouth tonight will be lies, so it's not fair to ask him anything. It's amusing, though, how creative he gets. This time, he starts off by telling me he doesn't know where Fred's family, Deb and the kids are, even though I haven't asked.

As if.

"You know, Joe, I've been thinking about coming to your office tomorrow and having a little chat with Stephanie. I'm sure her and I will have a lot to talk about. In fact, I think Ross and

I will also have a lot to talk about, as well. Maybe about how fucking late you are from work every night!!!! And then I may or may not show Stephanie how unbelievably strong I am for a short woman and knock her teeth in! Are you listening to me? Joe? Joe? You know I'm way past thinking you're dead on the side of the road. It is WAY past that."

"I had some problems at work, Lil," he says, calm as the prayer.

Fucking asshole. I hang up and glug my wine.

Ugh! I could kill him, if he ever stayed home long enough.

I look out the window and take another swig. Joe shrugs then holds up the phone. He must have said something to Fred because now Fred's on his way over.

I place the near-finished wine glass in the fridge and turn on the kitchen light. Fred's striding over to our back patio in his cute shorts and then raps on the sliding doors. I wipe my mouth and open it.

"To what do I owe this pleasure, Fred?" Fuck, the wine is doing its work. I feel pleasant.

"Lily, why don't you join me and Joe in my backyard for a cocktail?" His invitation sounds innocent. His eyes exude kindness.

"Sure, why not." I step out into the midsummer's air and follow Fred into his chime-enchanted backyard.

Fred nudges me. "Joe's sweating it over there," he says, and laughs.

I laugh too and think good!

I'm not sure what to say to Joe, or Fred, so I keep my mouth zipped. Joe's head rests in his hands and he slumps into something that I can't imagine any woman being attracted to. I pass Joe and take the seat opposite.

Fred says something about Joe's awful day then offers me a glass of wine. I accept and look forward to the show. Joe regards me so pathetically that I scowl at him. Fred's back before you know it. He passes me a lovely crystal glass filled with golden liquid then sits beside me. I sip lady-like at the Chardonnay. We both happen to be facing Joe, who squirms, then begins.

"Well, it was like this."

I sip my wine again as delicately as I can but really want to throw it at him.

Fred starts giggling.

Joe stops, and says, "What?"

"Oh, nothing Joe. Nothing. Sorry, please go on." Fred sips his beer, but I can see we're clearly his entertainment for the night. His entertainment. Our marriage. Well, fuck that. I down my wine. "Thanks for the drink Fred. I forgot I have a pot boiling over there." And I leave.

Fred calls my name, but I'm in the house before I can say, "Fucking men!"

My pulse is throbbing. My head's spinning. Our private problems are now the laugh of the neighbourhood. First rumour and all! I refuse to cry. Instead I take my wine out of the fridge, refill it, and go upstairs. I think about packing all my stuff. Better yet, his stuff. Then come up with an even better idea: Let the neighbourhood see I've kicked his sorry ass out and throw his clothes out the front window. Let him go to her: Stiffen me Stephanie. I check the guest room window and realize his clothes would only land on the roof. Not the effect I want. No, the front door is better.

Downstairs, the sliding door opens and closes then is locked. I hear keys hit the kitchen counter. Shoes are removed, clunk, clunk, left where I will trip over them in the morning. The stairs squeak on the fifth step. I still face the road in the guest room then turn to watch him enter our bedroom, hunched over, pushing the door slowly open.

What a jerk. I sip my wine and watch as he stalls at the door.

He straightens. Looks around. "Lil?" he says quietly, and steps over toward the master ensuite.

I choose this as my moment to advance. "I want you out of here tonight."

He tips his head to the side. "Lil..."

"I mean it Joe; I want you out." I wave my arm back to the guest room. "I was just estimating how far I needed to through your stuff out the window so that it will hit the driveway and not the roof. That's how much I want you to leave. I refuse to be your doormat any longer and if you want to fuck Stephanie then go fuck Stephanie. You are no longer welcome at home."

"Lily, I'm not having an..."

"Cut the bullshit, Joe. Have a little respect for yourself and for me. Not only have you embarrassed yourself to your wife, but now the whole neighbourhood knows what an asshole you are. Have some dignity and get your shit out of here. Call Stephanie if you must. Just go." It's all I can do to keep it in. He looks as hurt as I feel. About to cry. Like I do.

"I'm sorry Lil. I'm so sorry." He begins to walk to me and that's when I snap and throw my glass at him. It narrowly misses his ear. He ducks and it lands on the carpet.

"That should have broken into a million pieces like our marriage has," I say.

"Maybe it's a sign that it hasn't."

I ponder this. "What do you want? You can't have both."

He hangs his head. "I know."

"So it's true, you are screwing her."

"No!"

“UGH!” I grab the first thing I can, a glass Murano paperweight and fling it at him. He ducks again and it goes crashing through the window.

“Get out! Get the hell out of here!” I yell at him.

“I’m going! I’m going!” He scurries to the walk-in closet.

“Go back to her, you bastard!” I throw my jewelry box at him and it hits the door trim and drops into pieces along with the jewellery. I run to the guest room and flop onto the bed, wanting so much to crawl into a hole.

3 - Fred

Every New Year’s Eve, I get a sense of falling toward the fresh annum like a clock ticking down on a game show; the inevitable, impending end to a year of should-haves and then I get to do it all over again. I write, that’s my passion. I work from home as a freelance editor, which pays the bills and explains my ever-moving imminent deadlines and my eye on the end of the year. Its late summer, and I have two novels to edit. Deb manages the flower shop that she inherited from her retired mother — “June’s Blooms.” How imaginative, but as my mother-in-law’s name is, in fact, June, I’d hardly stand a chance of suggesting a change.

We’ve lived in this house for five years and in that time, I’ve only met one couple next door though I’ve made it a personal challenge to get to know at least both next door neighbors, and the three facing us across the road. We’ve moved onto a street of ghosts who, when they do appear out of doors, they quickly jump into a car and they’re off, or they disappear to a side yard or into a garage. They raise a brief hand when I stare them down, my arm held up high. Other than that, I’ve had a beer with one neighbor, Joe next door, and I’d say that was under duress as well; him sneaking home from something or another. Joe had feigned he was having a beer with

me; an unlikely excuse as he always parks his car in the garage and didn't. His wife, Lily, would have heard the garage door open.

I take pride in keeping our property and house tidy, welcoming, and environmentally sound. I use organic products, a manual mower and enforce recycling in the household like a regimental formation call. Sunday evenings, before our children, Maggie, 4, and Danny, 7, head off to bed, I call, "Blue Box" and everyone brings their personal bin to the garage, all three, though my wife rolls her eyes like she's one of my kids.

It's my idiosyncratic control over the domestic domain. In order to keep my editing flowing, I have to have all else organized and clean. Debbie's a tidy person so falls in line with my neurosis, but our kids continue to challenge me. Not in the sense that they're disrespectful, but in the unknowing way they leave an empty toilet roll in the bathroom garbage instead of throwing it into one of the ten small blue boxes dotted around the house. I suppose I could find a place for another blue box under the bathroom cabinets, but I have only myself to collect the seven unassigned blue boxes. I refuse to do eight, nine or ten. That's just ridiculous.

The other night, the recycling truck was late and emptied our blue box while we were all at the kid's baseball practice. It ran past eight o'clock due to a previous game held over, which the coach failed to mention. When we arrived home, the kids and Deb ran into the house while I retrieved the giant blue-wheeled container by the roadside and put it away. I closed the garage and noticed my neighbor Fred rolling in. As always, I raise my arm in greeting but Fred didn't even look up. He just ran into the house as though an important call waited for him or he had to take a leak. Some weeks back, I decided to keep count on the garage wall the times my wave has gone unanswered in this neighborhood. I pick up the piece of Maggie's pink chalk again.

Tonight, I'm alone in the garden. It's my refuge, and my favorite activity next to sex is tending to my oasis. The pond's lettuce has grown unruly, so I begin to cull plants and place them in the first of the three bays of compost bins that I built in the likeness of HRH Prince Charles's Highgrove Garden aerobic and anaerobic composters, but on a much smaller scale. I don't need a royal tractor to turn my heaps in my three four-by-four squares. Chimes tinkle with a spare breeze that ruffles through my maples. The pond's waterfall trickles brown water pushing the lettuce toward me. Somewhere below, my koi wait for their meal of colour-enhancing pellets. I'd questioned the colour-enhancing when I bought this organic fish food, but the shop girl placated me with ingredients, further explaining to me what astaxanthin was. With my toxic fears assuaged, I'm now grateful my koi are both healthy and colourful. Their pond is in the shape of a hexagon, also a smaller scale Highgrove. Why not recreate the best rather than imitate the middle-class mediocrity of plastic molded kits? While Prince Charles's pond is ground-level and filled with rocks, mine is elevated with its similarly brick surround set thicker and wider so that I can sit on the ledge to feed Fergie, Harry and Peaches (abdicated Edward VIII's disputed nickname for Mrs. Simpson).

Deb and the kids have gone to June's lakeside bungalow for the weekend on Lake Huron. I have a rather large project on the go, a novel by a new author about infidelity. I find it tiresome, but Deb insists I be given the "peace and quiet" needed to finish it. I'm on the last pass and should finish by Sunday. It's Friday evening and though I might take advantage of my family being away to finish, I'd prefer to start afresh in the morning and enjoy a beer on the deck.

I pour a chilled bottle of Stella into a glass, turn on a local classical radio station then retire to the deck and my lounge; we have only two, Debbie's next door to mine in a suntrap or moon trap. Hers is the chair that the kids fight over. No one cares for the shade except me. I take

a sip and as the cold liquid slips down my esophagus, I tip my head back onto the cushion and close my eyes; my ears open to the sound of my pond, the chimes, the breeze.

Glass shatters from Joe and Lily's second floor then there's a thud on their grass. I turn toward their argument I hear above my chimes. The window had kept it private, but now the whole neighborhood can hear the Addison's at war through the broken pane.

"Get out! Get the hell out of here!" Lily shrieks at Joe.

I sit up, my relaxation disturbed. I'm at odds on what to do. Should I go inside?

"I'm going! I'm going!"

"Go back to her, you bastard!" Another crash indoors.

I find myself, beer in hand, jogging down the deck steps to the grass to see what had thudded on the grass. I veer to my bird feeder for some credible excuse to be wandering around out here and find what appears to be a blue glass paperweight the cause of the shattered window and thud. A light comes on downstairs and I scurry back to my lounge. I really should go inside. If Joe or Lily finds me out here, the embarrassment will always hang between us.

A door slams then a car engine roars to life, a second later the peel of tires. I hear a moan of frustration from above then see the drapes draw shut, denying the world of any further rumpus.

I take another swig.

The next morning, I collect the household's recycling, and take it out to the garage, so that tomorrow night my family won't have to worry about it. Then I'll begin my editing work. As my garage door closes, Joe's car rolls up his driveway.

“Morning!” I say lifting a hand, but Joe only glares at me from beneath his knitted eyebrows. I lower my hand. His foot lands on the first step to his home, he hesitates then turns to me. I smile. Next thing I know, he’s heading over and I want to scurry back into my house.

Joe walks as though bursting with steam, and the fast pace is to cool himself off.

“Morning, Fred,” he says. “I’m sorry, my mind’s preoccupied. You probably heard us last night.”

“Ah, no.” I lie.

“Lily and I had a doozy. Strangest thing. I knocked over a paperweight and it broke the window. I’m sorry if it disturbed you. Deb said you were staying home to work this weekend.” His eyes shifts to everywhere but me, until I speak.

“No, no disturbance. Everything all right?” He spoke to Deb?

“Well, you know women...”

“I guess...”

“Good morning, Fred!” We both look towards Joe’s house and Lily’s on her way over. This isn’t good. “Is Joe telling you his perfidious story?” Lily’s an English teacher and knows my line of work. She uses interesting words with me to piss Joe off.

“Um...” What to say?

“I was only apologizing for the noise, Lil.”

“Yes, we had quite the dust-up, didn’t we, moron?”

“Okay, you guys,” I say, wanting to leave immediately but then again, do I want them arguing on my driveway? “Maybe you should take this indoors.”

“Good idea, Fred,” Lily says, and marches to my front door. I expect her to turn so I can correct my meaning, but instead she walks right into my house.

“Oh, this won’t be good,” Joe says.

I look at him, suddenly angry with him too, this moron who created this shitstorm with his wife, which has now moved into my home. “Joe, what the hell?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Lily has it in her head I’m having an affair. It’s ridiculous.”

I don’t know how to respond to this other than, “And are you?”

“Well, yeah, but fuck if I’m going to fess to it. Anyway, it’s over.”

“Oh, Joe.” I realize my morning of editing has vaporized. I had hoped to complete the novel this morning and spend the rest of my day in the garden. I squint at my front door and then back at Joe. “So now what?”

He looks surprised by my inquiry. “Fuck if I know.”

I sigh, resigning myself to who I’m dealing with: The Fuck-knows guy. “All right, I’ll go in and talk to Lily. You go home. She’ll join you soon.”

Joe doesn’t respond other than to shrug his shoulders then turns and walks home. I delay until I hear his front door shut and then make my way to Lily, who I discover sitting at my kitchen table. Head down, her black locks curtain her face. She looks up with baggy bloodshot eyes and a freshet of tears renews.

I sit down. “Lily.” It’s obvious she hasn’t slept. All I can think of is that she’s better off without him.

“I’m sorry, Fred. Is he following you in?”

“No. I’m afraid not.”

“Did you hear him last night?”

Him? “Well, if I were being completely honest, I’d be surprised as to what neighbors didn’t hear you...him.”

“But,” she looks astounded and thinks better of what she’s about to say. Her mouth closes into a grimace of thought. Then, “So, where is he? Did he leave?”

“I don’t think so. I believe he’s over at your house this very moment. Perhaps you should go work it out with him.” I talk to her like I speak to Maggie when patching up a dust-up with her older brother, Danny...or her teddy. My concern has a fatherly tone.

The kitchen chair scrapes backward and she’s up. “Don’t patronize me, Fred,” Lily says, and then leaves. I peek out the kitchen window as she storms by it.

I’m not a snoop. I pour myself a coffee and do what I always do on a Saturday morning, step out to the back deck. I take a seat on my shady lounge and light up my morning constitutional cigarette. I hear them, their volume now checked. It’s like when you’re a kid eavesdropping on your parent’s arguing, a muffled pretense behind a closed door, but never muffled enough.

“You said leave, so I’m leaving.” – Joe.

“You’re going to believe everything that came out of my mouth last night?” – Lily.

I stub out my cigarette out halfway. It has done its magic.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m at my desk with another coffee and my laptop open to begin my last pass on Saint Joseph’s Perfidy. Did I mention the novel is mine?