Let the shitbirds fly

by Stephen Stark

Ann Miles Grayson sat in the kitchen of her parents' comfy country condo and watched her mother making dinner in its spiffy little kitchen.

Can I help?, she said.

Her mother's dinners always smelled like food. Never like fabulous broiled lobster with fresh egg pasta. Never like braised short ribs with rosemary and sherry. Her mother's dinners always smelled like food, like the eternally same smell of a school cafeteria at lunchtime. But her belly had done nothing but wrestle with itself all day and the last thing she felt like was eating.

Despite her offer, she actually didn't feel like helping at all. She actually felt like screaming. IT had happened. She knew this because her lawyer, the highly esteemed and mystically named Elaine S. Powers had called to say that the papers had been served. Signed for. When the call came, Robbie had been outside trying gamely to play catch with Grandpa Jack. Robbie was useless in sports, but he tried to please Grandpa Jack nearly as much as he wanted to please his father.

She had been warned that, even though she was the shall we say aggressor in this action, that the shitbirds would fly. And fly they were. Helplessness? Check. Anger? Check. Terror? Check. Grief? Check.

It may surprise you to hear me say this—, her therapist had told her while she was plotting this. Plotting that was the only word she could think of for it, in all its necessary ugliness. —It may surprise you, but you may find your feelings somewhat confused. It's a common reaction.

The therapist, whom she called Frank (he was, professionally, Dr. Kaplan, a PhD clinician), had given her one of those inscrutable smiles that were his stock-in-trade. You didn't even know if it was a smile. It was more of an eye thing than a mouth thing.

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And now it had happened. (She felt like she had put a hit out on him and now had got the word that he was outside a restaurant, in a pool of his own blood.)

The paperwork was in his hands and she couldn't possibly imagine his state of mind. It was hard not to think of him and what he was going through. She wondered if it was at all like what she was going through. Probably not.

No, sweetie, her mother said, I think I have everything under control. Would you like a glass of wine?

In actual fact, Ann wanted more than a glass of wine, she wanted to get a funnel and pour a few bottles of wine straight down her throat and get so plastered she'd have to be carried on a gurney to bed. But it hardly seemed like the thing to do around her parents.

Today had been remarkable for its uselessness. She had spent some time in the bedroom sobbing. She had spent some time running. And then she had spent some more time sobbing in the bedroom. She had spent more time sitting on the couch with her father's arms around her and his hand in her hair, his soft and eternally authoritative voice telling her it was going to be okay.

Well, yes, it would be okay, but it sure as hell didn't feel that way right now. Okay being such a relative and mutable state, anyway.

She got up and found her purse and dug through it and found her cell phone. She had some vague hope that there would be a voicemail from Robert, perhaps begging her to rethink this course of action, perhaps vowing change. Perhaps vowing to fight valiantly for her to his last breath. There was nothing.

Aside from her parents and the attorney, she had told no one that she was initiating divorce proceedings. Most of that had to do with the best friend problem, which was to say that her best friend, Bonnie, and Robert's best friend, Leo, also happened to be longtime lovers.

So, even though this was about the last thing she wanted to do, it seemed like a good time maybe too alert some of her friends.

Her mother called out that dinner was almost ready. Ann called out that she really wasn't very hungry and she needed to make some calls.

She shut the bedroom door and pecked out the number at the Accord School Bonnie would still be at the school where they both taught, doing her summer learning module, or SLM as they called them at the Accord School. Mr. O'Keefe picked up in the TRZ. TRZ was short for teacher reflection zone, although mostly people either called it the lounge, or the TRZ, but usually TRZ was ironic.

Ann said to Mr. O'Keefe, Hi Jim, it's Ann, is Bonnie around?

Oh, hi, Jim said. Sure. Hold a sec and let me see if I can find her.

Ann stared out the window. Outside she could see nothing but green, all the lovely evergreens looked like fakes. Like some giant kid's railroad diorama. It reminded her of that scene in White Christmas that Robert loved so much when the four of them, Bing and Danny and Rosemary and Vera are sitting around the table in the dining car, signing about snow, and they've got a snow white napkin and little garnishes and in close up, it looks like a snowy slope.

Her therapist had told her this was going to happen, that there might still be a sense of grief, even perhaps a certain amount of guilt. She had tried to gird herself for it, but was nothing could have prepared her for this, really. Bonnie came on the line, Hi, Annie, how's it going?

Listen, Bonnie, Ann said, I have something I need to tell you and I don't really know how to say it except to say it—and I feel really terrible about not telling you before, but I couldn't.

She, Ann, wasn't sure if she had started crying again.

What's going on, Annie?, Bonnie said. What happened? Bonnie was clearly alarmed.

I—I, today I initiated divorce proceedings against Robert. Her voice sounded wooden in her head.

There followed a long silence, and then Bonnie let out a very slow, Oh. My. God. It almost sounded like a medieval chant, the way she said it.

I didn't, you know, because of Leo, I just couldn't let anybody to know, I'm sorry I didn't tell you.

There ensued a moment during which a whole lot of words spilled out of Ann's mouth, apologies, pleading, and all sorts of other things that she was sure she wouldn't remember later.

I, I didn't know that it had gotten like that, Bonnie said. I mean...I'm so sorry.

It's just, Ann said, I got to the point where he couldn't really take it anymore. I mean I couldn't take it anymore.

I'm so sorry, Bonnie said, I just always thought of you guys, I don't know, like...

I know, Bon, I thought the same thing myself. But Robert is just.... I mean, I knew, I mean, you marry a creative person, and you know they have their own little world, but it's like..., I don't know what it's like. I just feel like I've been living alone for the last four or five years. I just can't reach him.

I'm so sorry, Annie.

Thanks, I just. She was crying again. This whole sobbing thing was something she didn't seem to be able to control.

There were silences. White spaces. Caesurae.

Are you still up in West Virginia?

Yeah. My parents are here. Robbie doesn't know yet.

Oh. Shit, Bonnie said. How—what?

I'm just going to explain that mommy and dad need to take a break. ‘Cause that's what—

Ann thought she could hear Bonnie crying.

Bonnie said—yes, it was clear that she was crying, because her voice cracked—That's good. I think. Is that what you're going to do? Take a break? Or do you really think that you'll do this? The whole—like—divorce thing?

I hope not, Ann said. But I'm just at wit's end.

So, Bonnie said, It's just kind of maybe a trial separation?

That's what I hope. I mean if Robert can get himself together. I need to be able to think. There's. I need. Time. For me. (She was thinking of song lyrics. Heartbreak and misunderstanding.)

But why—, I mean I don't get why you have to do the whole divorce thing.

Because.

Because? It seemed as though Bonnie were almost pleading.

Bon, I actually talked to him about it, separating, but I just couldn't convince him that I was serious.

Really?

I don't think. I don't know. If it could have, we, you know.

So, Bonnie said, Does Leo know?

I'm sure Robert's told him by now.

In the background on the phone, in the distance, Ann could hear other voices, laughter in a hallway. The moon had never felt so lonely.

Well, Ann said, I have a few more calls make, so, you know. Yeah.

Yeah.

I love you.

I love you, too, Bonnie said.

When she clicked off her phone, she dug an old tissue out of her purse and wiped the tears off it.

Next, she called Claire Dickens. Claire was a kindergarten teacher. Claire was also something of a libertine. Her husband, James, was some sort of high-level banker, a person who made ridiculous amounts of money and didn't seem to mind at all if Claire slept around. Ann wasn't exactly clear whether James got off on any of it, and really didn't care to know. On general principles, none of which had to do with jealousy, Ann thought sleeping around was a bad idea. Just statistically. Still, Claire was one of the most spontaneous and funny and fascinating people she'd ever met. She and Claire and Bonnie kind of made up a unit. Claire was frequently outrageous, though never in a classroom; Bonnie was a lot like Leo in certain respects. She and he were both math-heads, but she was also a pretty good artist, and one of the things she was working on these days was a set of chairs. The cool thing about the chairs was that they were not a set in any normal sense. They were ones that she and Leo had collected from yard sales and such, all different

styles, all wooden, and she had stripped each and painted it, cool little patterns of outdoor scenes with lots of color, and there was a sort of story being told from one chair to the next, but it was a narrative of color and shape—flowers and trees and animals—not of words.

So if you just met her, you might have thought she was sort of staid, which Ann actually had, years ago, like the school librarian, though the school librarian was a man, in actual fact. Ann was somewhere in between creative and outrageous, and she might have said that she was the one who was staid, which was not inaccurate, but also not quite accurate. They had their things, Bonnie had her art, Claire had her adventures. Right now, Ann wasn't sure exactly *what* she was. Yes, there was some essential Ann-ness, but part of why she was in this situation was that she had no idea where she was going or what she was doing. And this was part of the whole thing—call it a problem if you will—but she didn't so much know what she want as what she *didn't* want.

I just wanted you to know, Ann said haltingly, I served, or Robert was served with divorce papers today.

What?, was the first thing that Claire said. And then, *No shit*. Then there was a long pause before she said, Really?

Really, Ann said. A fog of weariness had come over her. Everything felt leaden.

Hold on a second, Annie, Claire said, and Ann could hear her talking to her kids.

Sorry, Claire said, We have a minor crisis over a Barney doll.

Ann laughed the kind of laugh that is just dry air.

So how's Robbie taking it?, Claire said.

He doesn't quite know yet, Ann said hesitatingly.

He doesn't *know*?

I'm planning on having a talk with him tonight, but it's a part of, I mean I don't know. Shit, Claire, I mean, there's a part of me that's not.

Not what?

Sure. I'm just not sure. She had no idea why she was saying this. It was just coming out.

Not sure of what?

I'm not sure I can do it. Maybe this is enough. I mean, it's a separation. That's all it is, now, legally. Maybe that's enough.

Enough of what?

Enough to get him to wake up, enough to get him to turn back into the Robert I married.

Annie, Claire said, as though she were going to say more, but stopped herself.

I'm just. Ann said. I mean, you *know*. How it's been.

Well, Claire said, Do you want to have coffee or something? The kids are driving me nuts.

Ann thought of it and sighed. I'm in West Virginia.

Oh, yeah, that's right.

You know what?, Ann said. Let's have coffee. Fuck it. Where do you want to meet?

Annie, you're in West Virginia.

I know, but I'm going to drive back. My parents are great, I mean, they're great, but I'm going nuts out here.

Claire said, Okay, how long will it take you?

About an hour at half, Ann said. How about Panera?

An hour and a half and Panera it is, Claire said.

Ann said, Can you call Bonnie and ask her, too? I mean, I really need to talk about this.

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Driving back to Fairfax, Ann slowed as she went through Harpers Ferry, and she thought of all the people who had lived and died and all the heartbreak that had gone by, the breath that had been absorbed and attenuated by the air, the trees, the river, and felt very small.

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Ann here: This is kind of melodramatic, don't you think? It's not inaccurate, actually, but it was more a feeling of the broad sweep of time and of history, of nothing you could do that hadn't already been

done, nothing you could feel that hadn't already been felt. It was like what you said when Duke died, that no matter how much you tried to steel yourself for grief, no matter how clearly you knew something—in his case, his death—was going to happen, it still hit you in ways you could never have predicted. It was like that. A recognition that the narrative I'd created for myself, and was busy revising as I was driving, was just that, a story I was telling myself while actual events were completely out of my control. And, given the events, it was pretty soon going to seem like *everything* was out of control.

I think I was trying to delude myself that I could control the thing while the thing was actually controlling me. The thing being grief. And going to Harpers Ferry, I had the sense that all of the bargaining and negotiation and prayer and so on was just an empty wind that had blown since Adam.

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Before she left, she had made her parents promise not to say anything to Robbie, and then got in the car and took off, too fast, buoyed by the weirdest strain of hope imaginable, which was in its way not so different from the emotional chaos she'd endured for the last six or eight months when she had concluded—an almost dreamlike cohesion of facts and feelings—that whatever it was that had once constituted ‘them' simply no longer existed. She had not felt good about ‘them' conceptually (read: them as a concept, a couple) for some time.

It had happened at first subconsciously, as such things do. A coincidence or juxtaposition almost like art. She had gone on a lunchtime visit to see Robert's father in the nursing home, and in the car before she'd got out, she'd been listening to Ryan Adams—she'd been listening to a lot of alt country and some just plain country, and reading Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy—and it was ‘Does Anybody Want to Take Me Home,' and that line, ‘I was in the twilight of my youth, not that I'm going to remember,' and he, Duke, was clearly dying. That is, everyone knew it, but now you could see it.

She came up the slowest elevator in the world (Robert's description) and down the hall to Duke's room, and the song was still playing in her head, ‘All these people in my life, they seem so in love. Well, I am not. Memorizing my shoes in a cigarette shop.'

‘They seem so in love. Well I am not.'•

• She was not, in fact, not in love. The way she personally unpacked the lyric was something like this: ‘these people in my life' were her own self and Robert, but really some platonicized or idealized version of them way back when, and then, when they were so in love, ‘so in love' meaning that they couldn't keep their hands off one another, that there was never enough time to say what pressed to be said, that there was never enough time to do all the things they wanted to do. That time apart counted as a sweet anxiety of anticipation. And of course this was a natural (normal seemed the wrong word) evolution of a relationship. The things you think you will never get enough of come to look like that empty bag of cookies you should never have eaten in one sitting. And all those things you never had time enough to say had somehow all been said. And then with a kid and a mortgage and car payments, when was there enough time to do much of anything, except go on with life? And so here she was, seeing how good it had been, and in the shadow of that memorizing her own shoes as she waited for the next thing (and she was being passive, she could admit that) to happen.

And there they were, Duke and Arlene.

It was perhaps two minutes or only two seconds, but in that elongated period of time a vivid and ineradicable and painterly tableau, Arlene prim and neat as a pin in a shaft of sunlight, her head turned and gazing out the window, her steely hair shimmering. Duke in the hospital bed, eyes closed and mouth open, his pajamas oversized and blown against his nearly skeletal frame. Skin and hair translucent.

And it was in that moment, before time was unfrozen by an invading nurse, that it all began to clarify: she was in the wrong place. Not in the wrong place in the geographical sense, as in, here at the nursing home, but in the spiritual and/or emotional sense. Her life, her narrative, unbeknownst to her except in the most elemental sense, had jumped its track. She was not who she thought she would be, nor where she had wanted to be, as nebulous as both of those concepts were.

It was not then that the mental chaos began, but it was then that the mental and/or emotional chaos revealed itself in all of its ugly reality. It was when some of the things that had floated in her subconscious, just out of finger reach, began to drift close enough to touch.

I am in the wrong place, she would think for the next few months, and she would ask herself if there was anything she could do to get herself into the right place. Anything she could do with Robert. Inertia. Regret. Helplessness. Loss.

There had been a few weeks where she imagined them just having a vacation from one another. A ‘separation' that was not separation in the legal sense, but a way for them to get out and breathe. And it seemed almost idyllic for a little while—him in an apartment, her in the house, all the windows open, and she would take care of Robbie for the most part, and they'd have dinner together at restaurants and there would be, inevitably, the way this narrative went, the return of romance to their lives. Because that;s how it had got there in the first place, them being two separate people, with two separate and compelling narratives.

She tried a few times to bring it up, but they'd usually come at bad moments, in arguments. And what she intended to say in cool and rational and convincing terms came out as a harridan's horrid screeching.

And it was when she could not find a way out of the claustrophobia that she talked to her father, the famous trial attorney, about the ramifications of legal action.

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She had not quite intended to talk to her father about it. Actually, she had probed her mother about hypothetical rough points in their marriage—of which her probings had revealed exactly none, or none that she, her mother, would admit. Jack Miles, was, of course, to a woman of her mother's era and breeding, perfect. Her mother had told her father—and his response was typical of the famous trial lawyer.

Big Jack had always liked Robert well enough. In nearly fifteen years of marriage, the two of them had gone fishing together, had played tennis and watched basketball and football games. They had compared notes about the legal argument as narrative. Jack had read his work and declared it interesting, which was a high mark. (Although for Ann, his having read Robert's work was seriously wince- and cringe-inducing, especially the sex stuff, which was clearly—as far as anyone that knew them would be concerned—about her.)

But now—because the bond between a father and a daughter is the kind of thing that's forged in eternal vigilance and love and cannot be broken even in death—he went into lawyer mode, trying to amass evidence against Robert before she put a stop to it. He was just trying to help, and this was the only way he really knew to do it.

Jack, her father, seemed to her to wear a permanently confident $500-an-hour expression of dominance, power, and authority. She was, in certain ways, terrified of him. Of disappointing him. Of course he was her father and he loved her and he was never anything but generous and loving with her. Except he tended to take an adversarial view of most everything. Every argument had to be torn apart from every angle to locate its weaknesses so that such weaknesses could be eliminated or exploited.

There is a reason, she had said more than once to Robert, to Bonnie, to herself, that I live two thousand miles from him.

In the spring, when she had been really convinced that she was going to kick Robert out, her father flew in from Chicago. He was sleek and beautiful and tanned—and for the first time she saw how Robert resembled him in a certain way. Or there was a shadow in

him that was also in Robert. They had lunch in Shirlington, and over crab cakes at the Carlisle, he grilled her.

Even the thought of divorce can come to seem the perfect cure-all, he told her. It can seem like the answer to every question. When in fact it is just another set of questions. If you are truly thinking of breaking up your family, then I will support you and Robbie in anyway I can. I will support your decision.

Why do you have to put it like that? Breaking up my family?

How would you like me to put it?

I don't know, she said, feeling sodden and lame and small. She looked at the food on her plate, and the crab cakes made her think of Robert's crab cakes. She looked at the room and its aura of splendor and she thought that so much of life is façade, a kind of theater.

Do you have any reason to believe he's been sleeping around?

Jack had a technique for saying truly scabrous things with a very pleasant, isn't-the-crab-delicious sort of expression.

Daddy, no. It's not that.

Is that part of your relationship working?

She saw a chance to make her father squirm a little, and took it. The sleeping part?

He didn't squirm. The sleeping-together part. The sex part, honey.

The sex part is excellent, she said, and it was she who was squirming.

A waitress went past and glanced at her father and then at her and shot her a you-go-girl kind of grin like she was his lover, not his daughter. She almost felt like chasing her, slapping her for the misunderstanding.

Jack Miles didn't notice.

After *The* _____ came out, she said, but then stopped. She was trying to trace the moment when he had hit the wall, the crisis, The Cataclysm. (The Cataclysm was the term she and Frank, her therapist, had coined to describe the failure of *The* _____, which term Robert himself had adopted.)

She started again: I guess if he were making money on his own writing and that was what he did, he'd have more time for me. And Robbie. It's just that now he gets up before dawn and works. Then he goes to work. Then he comes home and works. It's all he does. His idea of a vacation is staying home and writing. I've been jilted for imaginary people.

At least he works.

You're not getting it.

Everyone hits professional walls. It sounds to me as though he's trying to get around it or over it.

Don't take his side.

I'm not, honey. He reached across the table and covered her trembling hand with his own warm, firm, confident hand. I just want to make sure that what you think you want to do is what you want to do. It has the potential to get very ugly. I will be happy to make it very ugly for Robert.

I don't want that. I want Robbie to have a dad that's a dad, not a ghost who's always working.

I was always working. Still am. Did I fail you?

No.

Does he fail Robbie?

She hadn't quite expected him to reach down her throat and grab her heart and squeeze it like this, although as soon as it was happening it seemed utterly predictable.

Honestly, no. I don't know. Robbie adores him. He worships the ground he walks on.

Do you resent that?

She was near tears.

Everything is about loss, she said. It's all about loss. I'm tired of loss.

He smiled a pearly-toothed, avuncular smile, rueful in some distant way. Get used to it, honey. It gets worse.

So he had hit a professional wall. So it had been devastating. So it had been cruel. Lots of people hit professional walls. You went over them or you went around them. Robert insisted on running at it

again and again until it either broke him, or he was at last able to break it down.

She didn't care if he didn't give up his writing. She didn't *want* him to give up his writing. She just didn't want him to give up everything else. She didn't want him to give up being a husband. To give up her. But he had.

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Now, she felt like she was doing something completely out of control, driving back, which is essentially what her father, Jack Miles, famous trial attorney, had told her, furious, because she was making a serious tactical error.

Except she hadn't told anybody• because she didn't want Robert to find out, and now she had, and she really really wished that she had talked it out.

As ridiculous as it was, she had the vague idea that she would go and talk to Bonnie an aged child who spent more time in an alternate universe than the real one.

She had no way of knowing, of course, that a Robert was going to emerge—had already She was, later that evening, actually going to meet someone very much like that Robert, the one that she had married. But he wouldn't be Robert, not her Robert. He would be Bob. Bob Grayson. The other Robert.

None of which she would have believed if anyone could have actually told her.

•Anybody in this case being Bonnie and Claire.