

## Repair

By Magdalene Pugmire

*Second place: Narrative, Reflective, Expository, or Personal Writing (UNIV 111/112)*

### **The Q**

Almost every weekend I found myself at The Q with James. It's not a unique bar; every town has a dive just like it. And like every other dive, it's small and poorly lit, with pool tables on one wall and bar games on the other. Either the secondhand smoke laws haven't caught wind of the place yet or maybe no one cares, because you can find plastic black ashtrays with crushed cigarette butts lining the bar. You can practically taste the blue collar sweat, dust and smoke hanging in the air. There's a jukebox in the corner with one blown out speaker that makes everything sound fuzzy and unintelligible.

The bartenders, regulars, and the line cook that I used to smoke with thought that James and I were together. *He's my brother-in-law, I'd say, nothing but a big brother to me. My brother, brother, brother.* But I knew how he talked about me. I knew the horrible names he called me, and the implications behind them. His words fell from his lips like sharp, twisting knives. I hated him. I hated his knives and I hated the way he looked at me. He wanted me to react, to prove that I was exactly the kind of girl that he made everyone believe I was. I never did, but took small satisfaction in knowing that it infuriated him.

My husband never joined us, as he was busy spending most of his time in some other bar, with some other woman. It was a forbidden subject between us, and I was a coward.

There was a man who often sat at the end of the bar, drowning in bourbon to cleanse his sadness and his sins. Today he was sitting in my seat, although I suppose it had been his for longer than it

had been mine. He sat and watched the girl who broke his heart as she sauntered back and forth behind the bar, pouring drinks and watching him as he watched her. She tormented him, and he still wears those scars over his heart. I can still feel them at night when I rest my head on his chest, my fingers trailing through his hair and tracing the patterns tattooed into his skin. We enjoyed making small talk and measuring our misery, becoming partners in melancholy.

On the nights that he wasn't there, I drank in silence until everything tasted like sugar and ash, and words that I wished I could take back.

I think James carried me home.

### **The Apartment on Main Street**

We pretended that it was a shiny new start for us. We boxed up our things and moved deep into the Appalachian Mountains, surrounded by abandoned coal mines and the dying town build around them. There was a university, slowly sprawling through the city limits as it expanded and engulfed more of the city each year. College students poured in every semester to obliterate the town's resources before leaving it desolate again in the summer. The only surviving businesses were catered to the students; three bars, two diners, a duplex movie theater, and a handful of fast-food joints. You would call it cozy if you were only passing through. Quaint, maybe. You could see its weariness reflected in the eyes of its inhabitants, and in the overgrown brush overtaking crumbling buildings. The townspeople were either too old or too poor to move. They were stuck there, just like I was.

We were living there when we met, and it made my heart ache to find out that we were moving back.

The apartment on Main Street was small, with two bedrooms and ugly vinyl flooring that was supposed to imitate wood. I spent most of my time there isolated and alone, trying to combat the nothingness with meaningless tasks. Every day felt the same, and every day I collapsed into myself a little bit more.

He came home less and less frequently, and when he did, he brought pieces of other women with him. I could see them in the hairs on the sleeves of his shirts, the lipstick at the corners of his mouth, and in the receipts crumpled in his pocket. He wanted me to know about them, but I could never understand why. I didn't care about the pieces of them he so callously threw at me.

The loneliness was crushing. Bitter.

I left the apartment on Main Street in the middle of the night; only leaving behind the scent of cheap perfume, lacy black lingerie and long dark hair on the shower wall. None of these things belonged to me.

### **The house on West Grace Street**

The house on West Grace Street was old. The floors creaked, the radiator groaned, and the window was cracked where someone had thrown a rock through it. I lived on a hard broken couch that smelled like it was purchased for twenty-five cents at a garage sale. It probably was.

The house on West Grace Street belonged to her, and just like before, I found myself pulled back into her life.

She spent long nights dancing in the city, coming home with bruised knees and crumpled bills shoved into a bag. When we were younger, I was too afraid to tell her that I loved her, and I was even more afraid that she wouldn't love me back. But instead of love, we were now stuck together out of necessity, two broken adults just trying to do the best that we could.

I cleaned the mold out of the fridge, scrubbed the stains out of her clothing and moved her trash outside. I cooked food that neither of us ate, and held her as she cried after work. She gave me a couch to sleep on and someone to take care of. She's gone now, and I still wonder what happened to her.

In the house on West Grace Street we were stuck, losing sleep and losing sanity as we faced a bleak present and a bleaker future. We hurled accusations and painful words at each other, hoping that something would give. One day, it did. I remember everything about that day; the way her curls formed a halo around her face as she paced in circles, feeling justified in her righteous indignation. Her voice was trembling as she tried not to cry. I remember my entire body shaking in anger, and the growing pit of fear and worry I felt.

*You need to get sober.  
You need to go to therapy.  
You need to grow a spine; you're pathetic.*

*You need to stop crying about the things your father did to you, because he did them to me too.  
You need to stop using.  
You need to stop turning tricks.*

*You need to leave.  
No, please, don't make me.*

I needed her. I needed her to listen to me. But she didn't, and now she's gone.

I was exhausted.

I had ripped myself open and now I had to figure out how to stitch all of those pieces of myself back together again. The thread was delicate, and I couldn't afford to miss a single stitch. The smaller stitches were the easiest. They started out crooked and uneven as I fumbled through my every day motions. I sewed myself up in patches, relearning how to function, giving myself permission to exist.

It was difficult to punch through my seams with the rusty needle I was using. But it was the only needle I owned, so I pushed it through anyway. I am reclaiming myself, on my own terms.

I don't know when I will be repaired, or if the threads that I have sewn together will be strong enough to withstand. I still look over my shoulder expecting to see people and places that should be far behind me. I am unsure of myself, but I am able to recognize that I am not who I used to be, and I am glad. Every day, I gather a few more lost pieces of myself and thread them into my stitching. I am a patchwork quilt, each section of me evolving and changing as my stitches grow straighter and stronger.

I am in repair.

Author bio:

**Magdalene Pugmire** was a third-year student at VCU majoring in Special Education at the time of publication. She composed "Repair" in Spring 2021 for Kimberly Zicafoose's UNIV 112 class. Her research interests include ethics, access, and equity in education. She urges all survivors of domestic violence and abuse to speak out, so that their stories can be heard.