

HALF GONE

BY TIM O'BRIEN

On a balmy, sunlit afternoon in mid-summer of 1997, a Saturday, nine and a half months after her surgery, Dorothy Stier removed her shirt, removed her bra, adjusted her wig, slipped into a pair of sandals, finished off a glass of lemonade, cursed, muttered to herself—"Enough of this!"—threw open the back door, marched across the patio and down a slate sidewalk that led to the driveway at the side of the house, where her husband, Ron, a senior vice-president at Cargill, had just finished washing and waxing his two prized Volvos. "The twins," he called them. Inanely, Dorothy thought. One was an aqua-blue station wagon, the other a boxy, oversized, much gadgeted silver sedan. Since acquiring the vehicles, a few weeks back, in what he too repetitively called a "package steal," Ron had lavished upon his new automobiles a preposterous mix of time and labor and paternal love. Which struck Dorothy as perverse. The man was already father to two spiffy boys. Not twins, perhaps, but well polished and mechanically sound. And he had a wife, too. A terrific wife. A wife, for that matter, who herself had once been awfully damned sporty, a vintage Bentley amid a fleet of utilitarian S.U.V. housewives.

Dorothy was angry. Beyond anger, in fact. She had been contemplating departure. The "where" was irrelevant: Paris or Hong Kong or Duluth, maybe even the frigid streets of Winnipeg. No matter. At that particular instant, which registered in the suburban heavens at just after 2 P.M., July 19, 1997—and which found Dorothy Stier twelve tipsy strides down the cement driveway, bare to the waist, committed, pinned to the glaring present by the bewildered gaze of her gardener, Jimmy—at that radiant, savage, remotely noble moment, Dorothy feared she might vomit. Her stomach wobbled. She had been propelled down the driveway by four or five vodka

lemonades. Not quite drunk, perhaps, but she'd done her best. She lifted a hand as if to steady herself against the summer air. She nodded crisply at Jimmy, who glanced down at his hedge clipper, inspected it, and then looked back at her again. The man said nothing. Nor did Ron, whose attention was fastened on a sparkling hubcap and a pad of steel wool.

But, on the adjoining lawn, behind a low, freshly painted picket fence, Dorothy's dear friend and next-door neighbor, Fred Engelmann, a retired Marine Corps colonel, had plainly taken notice. Only a moment earlier, Fred had raised his garden hose by way of greeting. He had started to say something, to wave, but, midway, his jaw had locked into a curious smile. The hose had shifted in his hands. He was now watering his colie's doghouse.

"Freddie, darling!" cried Dorothy.

She released her grip on the air and fluttered her fingers at the man—thoughtful neighbor, confidant, domestic adviser, ex-assassin. Cheerfully, in a magnified, somewhat slurry across-the-fence voice, Dorothy cried, "Gorgeous day!"

"Roger that," Fred said.

"Wet doghouse!"

"Affirmative again," he said, and redirected the hose. Crinkles formed at the man's eyes. He had decided, apparently, to treat this with humor. "Catching rays, I guess?"

"That I am!" said Dorothy.

"Good, then. Good for you."

"Goodie for me! One second, I'll pop right over."

"Do that for sure," said Fred.

All this had consumed little more than a few moments of Saturday, July 19th. Ron had not yet turned to encounter his future. He knelt alongside the aqua-blue station wagon, his forehead puckered in concern over a scarred hubcap. Dorothy was six strides away,

closing fast. Two or three elongated heartbeats elapsed: Jimmy pruning, Fred watering, a buzzing lawnmower, a child squealing, a radio playing Wagner, the two waxed Volvos gleaming like precious stones under a flagrant summer sun.

Ron pivoted on one knee.

He began to rise, stopped, squinted up at Dorothy.

"What's this?" he said.

"A wife," said Dorothy. She was now two strides away, accelerating.

"Jesus Christ."

"Look at me," said Dorothy.

He glanced at her shins.

"Higher," she said. "Pretend I'm a Volvo."

She had braked directly in front of him, seven or eight inches away. Her smile was genuine, even dazzling in the July sunlight, but it was also a foolhardy, belligerent, challenging smile.

"Suck it up," she said. "One look."

"Honey," Ron said.

He rose to his feet, threw an arm around her.

"Come on," he said. "Inside."

"One look. Don't be afraid."

"What is this?" Ron said. "Lady Godiva? Some nude freak show?"

"Freak?"

"I didn't mean freak."

"You did. Very distinct. Freak."

"Dorth, you're drunk."

She spun out of his arms and stepped back to present a vista. Her husband's gaze shifted into the summer distance, as though seeking a more easeful angle on the world, and then, with a hiss of dismay, more or less directly, he looked at her.

"Ghastly?" she said.

"No," he said. "It makes me want to cry."

"Touch me."

"We're in a driveway, honey. It's daylight."

"Go on. Touch."

"Don't do this," he said, almost in a



whisper, as if the essential problem were one of volume. "I'm asking nice, Dorth. Let's please go inside. Fred and Jimmy, they're getting an eyeful."

"Half full," said Dorothy.

"Half full. Touché. Can we go inside?"

"You haven't looked yet."

"What the hell am I doing right now?"

"Pretending," said Dorothy.

"I'm not pretending."

"Oh, you are, you are," she said, and then she went up on her toes, extending her arms like a ballerina, and executed a twirl in the driveway. Again her stomach wobbled. It occurred to her that

the radio music was coming from the aqua-blue station wagon. She hadn't realized Ron liked Wagner. She hadn't realized, in fact, that he cared much for music.

"There," Ron said. "I've looked."

"Barely. And you haven't touched."

He frowned and said, "Stop this."

"Not in four months," she said. "It's breast cancer, Ron. It's not the flu, you can't catch it."

"I realize that."

"No lookie, no nookie."

"Lay off," he said. "I know."

Dorothy felt a gust of sickness go through her. Stupidly, she giggled. She

cupped her hands and called out across the picket fence, "One sec, Freddie!"

"Jesus," Ron said.

Fred waved a hand. Generously, the man kept his back to them, aiming his hose at a patch of giant sunflowers.

"Nice guy," said Dorothy.

"He sure is. Are we finished here?"

"I guess we are." She wanted to be held and loved, wanted to return these things, but she also wanted to notch up the hurt. She flicked her head at his shiny Volvos. "How're the twins?"

"They're good."

"Praise God. Huge load off my mind."

"You're jealous of cars?"

"Gosh, I don't even know," Dorothy said. "Am I jealous? Am I? Too tough to call. Hot cars, obviously."

Ron took a step toward the house. "I've had it. Gone. Out of here."

"Bye, then."

"I'm not begging," he said.

He didn't move.

Dorothy leaned back against the station wagon, tipped up her head, and let the sunlight strike her straight on. She was forty-nine years old. She was a Reagan Republican, mother of two, loser of a left breast, off kilter, terrified, stomach-sick, head-sick, co-chair with Fred Engelmann of the Highland Park Neighborhood Watch Committee. Also, at the moment, she was a woman in need of redefinition.

She looked at her husband. The anger was mostly gone now, replaced by a powerful, much more frightening weariness. "No sweat," she said. "Go watch a ballgame. I'm fine right here."

"Dorth, this isn't fair."

"Just go. Give me a minute."

Ron made a frustrated choking sound under his breath, then swung around, stalked up the driveway, crossed the patio, and went into the house.

For an instant Dorothy considered chasing after him. Put her shirt on, blame it on the lemonade. After all, he was a miracle of a husband. Wonderful father, wonderful partner. Reliable as a Volvo. Back in 1969, three months out of college, she had married him for his looks, which were boyish and lean and almond-eyed, a beautiful man, still drop-dead delicious even in middle age. But over twenty-eight years of marriage she'd come to appreciate him, even love him, for more substantial reasons. His good nature. His corny, old-fashioned ethics. The uncomplicated pleasure he took in providing for his family: an elegant home, expensive cars, memberships in two ritzy country clubs. True, Ron came off stiff in the personality department—"Anal Andy," the boys called him—but,

at heart, he was a virtuous, honorable, suitably solid man. And through the whole breast-cancer nightmare he was all courage and confidence, citing survival statistics, clipping articles, calling her attention to recent advances in drug therapy. His relentless, can-do solicitude had almost killed her. Always the cheerleader. Rah-rahing the oncologists, rooting for the cure, clapping his hands and saying, "Atta girl," as she puked out the chemo poisons.

Couldn't blame him, Dorothy thought. Funny thing about breasts: husbands expect two of them. "Freak" was the word. And Dorothy herself wasn't all that crazy about mirrors or pool parties or negligees. Still, it seemed a pity that she'd been robbed of a husband and a decent sex life along with the killer breast.

Dorothy gave the station wagon a slap, switched off the radio, and joined Fred in his sunflower patch. "Freddie, Freddie," she said, and kissed the man's leathery cheek. "Look, I've had a drink or two, maybe seven, probably eight, so cut me some slack." She put her hands on her hips. She hid nothing. "Amazing flowers, lovely day. How's Alice? I haven't got a shirt on."

Fred chuckled and said, "Guess you don't."

"I actually don't," said Dorothy. "Apologies."

"No need," Fred said. "Case closed. Over 'n' out."

"I'll go put a shirt on."

"No need for that, either."

Fred turned off his hose, took her by the elbow, and in his firm, courtly way escorted her into the shade of an ornate iron rose trellis. They sat on the lawn. For ten years, almost eleven, she and Fred Engelmann had been the closest of friends, trading gossip and Clinton jokes, co-purveyors of "Nuke the Liberals" bumper stickers. Together, they had joyfully maligned the modern age. They agreed upon certain bedrock principles—less is more in affairs of state, prayer in the schools, the indisputable un-Americanism of so-called affirmative action. With mutual good humor, mutual horror, they had grieved over what seemed a vast ice age of turpitude and moral amnesia. They laughed a good deal. They enjoyed each other. More than that, Fred seemed to understand Dorothy exactly as she most wanted



"If you just follow Sadie, she'll show you the way out."

to be understood. On occasion, especially after a few back-yard cocktails, it was as if the man had unlocked the code of her personal history, developed a dossier on her dreams: certain regrets and longings. Forks in the road. Missed opportunities. Years ago, as a Marine Corps colonel in Vietnam, Fred had been affiliated in some cryptic way with the Phoenix program, which, as he sketchily described it, had to do with terminal solutions. "Find 'em, fry 'em," he'd say, then his eyes would twinkle and he'd gaze at her—gaze through her—wink, and say, "Ghost work."

She'd never pressed him. But it was sometimes spooky. Nothing obvious, just that wink of his. The way he'd stare whenever she exaggerated or fibbed or put a little self-advertising spin on the world. Now, for instance. As she lay back on his lawn. As she kicked off her sandals and said, "No big deal, Freddie. Woman problems." She felt the man studying her. "The midlife follies," she said, too quickly. "My topless phase."

Fred smiled, cleared his throat, waited, kept smiling, gave her time to consider corrections and modifiers.

"I'm leaving him," she said.

"Gotcha. Ron trouble?"

Dorothy squinted at him. "Don't act like you didn't know."

"All right, I'm pinned down." His eyes were like clean, fresh water. "Maybe I noticed a couple things. One plus one. Did the math, figured out a wee bit."

"Not wee and not maybe," said Dorothy. "You notice everything. But even if I wanted to, which, for the record, I definitely do not want—and forgive me, Freddie, I'm stinko, totally lemonaded, just psycho-sicko shitfaced. Anyway, even if I actually decided to stick around, let's face it, how the heck could I? After this." She gestured at her chest. "God help the one-boobed nymphs. Down with the queen. The Highland Park crowd—me included, you included—they don't go in for risqué. Right now, I'll bet a couple hundred phones are ringing. Bet I'm on their naked-lady watch list."

"You're on mine," Fred said.

"Yeah, thanks. What about Alice?"

Fred grinned. "Put it this way, she had a peek out the window. Probably took to bed."

The man studied her chest, not coldly

or indifferently but as if concentrating on some intricate endgame. Then he sighed and said, "Lock 'n' load. Old Fred's dyin' to hear this."

"I should really go put something on."

"Negative, let 'er rip," he said.

Dorothy could think of little to say. Words came to her—grotesque, rather be dead, how could this happen?—but it all sounded so banal and ridiculous. After a few garbled sentences, she stopped and stared up at the brilliant July sky. She couldn't withhold a short giggle. "It's not all Ron's fault. I don't much like touching me, either. Hate showers. Hate bedtime."

"Oh, yes?" Fred said.

"Very true. Hate. And I don't mean this chopped-liver mess up here. Not just the breast."

"Right," he said. "You don't mean that."

Dorothy nodded. "It's worse. Like my whole life's got cancer."

"Exactly," he said.

"And I'm not—" She exhaled. "What the heck was that, Fred?"

"What was what, darlin'?"

"That word. 'Exactly,' you said."

"Did I?"

"You did. It's *my* screwed-up life—how could you know?"

Fred gave her a pained, persecuted look, as though the question were unneighborly. "Not born yesterday," he said. He grunted, satisfied. "Mind if I take off my trousers? I'm an old bastard. Nothing to worry about."

"You're not old, Freddie."

"Yeah, well, older than you'd think. Ex-leatherneck, ex-widow-maker. Hell, we're all old."

He peeled off his pants, tossed them aside, looked across the picket fence, then waved and saluted. Ron stood watching them from the patio. He seemed lost and angry. He did not salute back. After a few moments, he turned and went inside.

"Upset husband," Fred said mildly.

"Who isn't?"

"Good point. But if I was in your naked-lady shoes I'd probably trot back to the drawin' board and rethink my tactics. Not too late. Except, of course, this problem we've got here, it's not just Ron, right?" He winked at her. "Can I ask something?"

"You may."

"Yeah, right. May. Ever vote Democrat?"

Dorothy glanced up. It was not the question she'd expected. "Vote Democrat?" she said. "Maybe once."

"May I guess?"

"You may, sure," Dorothy said, "and I've got this strange feeling you can."

"Sixty-eight primary. Gene McCarthy."

"Freddie, how do you know this?"

"Sources. My ex-specialty."

"Fred!"

"Deal is, you're my best pal, my neighbor," he said, "so it's good to figure out what's what. One more question. Ever tell Ron? About—you know—the fall from grace? The pinko left-wing lapse?"

"You tell me, Freddie. Did I?"

His eyes brightened, impish. "No, sweetheart, I reckon you probably didn't. Not a bad place to start, though. Might clear the air about a whole bucketful of trouble. Second thoughts. Life cancer." Fred lay back in the grass, shading his eyes against the sun. He wore black boxer shorts, black socks, black tennis shoes. The skin on his shins and thighs looked mummified. "If it helps any—me, I was a Kennedy man. R.F.K. End the war, save the intestines."

Dorothy hunched forward, rocking, arms across her chest. She now felt the pressure of her nakedness. "I surrender," she said. "What's the point?"

"Points," Fred said lightly, "are mucho overrated. By the way, Ron's back. Patio. Binoculars."

"I can't look."

"Up to you. Anyway, about this hare-brained Clean Gene business, I'm not gonna pry. Had your reasons. Maybe that college boy you almost ran off with. The one before Ron. What's his name?"

"Billy." Dorothy felt a quick, frightened tingle go through her thoughts. "Billy," she murmured.

"Yeah, yeah. Billy. Left him in the lurch, I'd say. Cold, cold Winnipeg. Draft dodger, sure, and I don't truck with that, but even so it's gotta be tough gettin' dumped for your best friend. Good pals, weren't they? Ron and Billy? No fun. Figure it had to eat at you, too, the way you changed horses in midstream. Missed that flight to Canada. Went for handsome. Went for conservative. No-risk marriage, so to speak. And then all

these years down the road, yikes, along comes cancer, eight nodes, enough to give a gal the middle-age willies. Certain what-ifs pop up. Roads not taken. Grass-might've-been-greener poppycock."

"That was decades ago," Dorothy said.

"You bet," he said. "Yesterday, huh?"

Dorothy tightened her lips, straightened up. Recently, late at night, Dorothy had found herself reviewing history, picturing the face of Billy McMann, wondering if she'd made a terrible, cowardly, very stupid mistake three decades ago. She had chosen one man over another, one life over another, and now the cancer and the disfigurement and the shadow of a waiting grave had filled her nights with dreams of Billy, dreams of Winnipeg. She had loved Billy with her whole heart: that ponytail of his, those sharp blue eyes. But Dorothy was no flower child. She needed her comforts. She was a Goldwater babe, and proud of it, and running off to Canada with Billy McMann had never been a real option. She had made the sensible choice. Now, bare-chested and drunk and maimed, she tried to blink away Billy's face.

"I need to put something on," Dorothy said. "This instant."

"Oh, boy."

"Hand me those pants, Fred. And I don't appreciate the snooping." She covered herself with his stained chinos, tied the pant legs behind her neck. "Not funny. It's like you've been checking up on me. Had me followed or tracked or—what's the word?"

"Tailed," he said.

"That's it. And we were friends."

Fred clenched his jaw. "We are, darlin'. Can't get friendlier. Fact finding, that's probably more like it. Research, you could say."

"Whatever," Dorothy said. "Shame on you."

She began to rise, pushing hard, but it was as if her muscles had come loose from the bone. Too much lemonade, she reasoned, or too much stress, but either way she had the sensation of being fastened to the lawn by Fred Engelmann's water-clear gaze.

It was now 2:43 P.M., Saturday, July 19, 1997. Still hot, still sunny. A light breeze had come up. The two Volvos glistened in the driveway. Her boys were

ECORSE DAYS

The music of the drill press
is not music at all: steel
into steel, then the abrupt
crack of the bit and the stock
flawed. Quit or start again.

We're talking 1951,
the long summer that stretched
into October before
the autumn rains brought leaves
cascading down from the oak—

the only tree within miles—
the one thing spring greened outside
the loading dock of Leo's
Tool & Die as though to say, once
and for all, Life thrives here, too!

I heard the message and I
heard wrong. Every hour dulled there,
for every hour was the hour
just passed and the one to come
without rhythm or flavor.

What I made was what I made
the week before. We called it
money, we measured the hours
in dollars, all twenty-four
operators grinding in time.

—Philip Levine

at camp. Her gardener had vanished. Her husband was back on the patio, pacing, a very nice man. Her left breast was gone. Dorothy Stier could not move and was not sure she wanted to.

"Yeah, shame on me," Fred Engelmann said. "Old habits."

"I'm shocked and I'm hurt," said Dorothy. Even speech was an effort. "You voted for a Kennedy?"

Fred nodded unhappily. "Don't tell Alice."

"Well, I won't, but you have to explain."

"R.F.K.? The fella had this—"

"No," she said. "The spying. I mean, God, I tell you everything anyway."

"Not quite everything," he said. The man seemed gleeful, plainly enjoying himself, but there was also a patient, expectant quality in the way he regarded her. After a second, he motioned at his swimming pool. "What say we invite

Ron over? Take a dip, pry Alice out of bed, grill up some burgers? Might file off the tension."

"I'm leaving him," said Dorothy. "Maybe you didn't stumble across that little fact in your research."

"Oh, I did, I did," Fred said.

"Then you know. He won't come near me. Hideous, repulsive, freaky wife." She paused. "Is he watching?"

"Appears so, unless he's asleep behind those binoculars." Fred pulled off his shirt and tennis shoes and socks. "Come on, now, let's you and me hop in the pool. If I got this doped out right, Ron'll be showing up pronto."

"I can't move."

"Sure you can."

The man did his winking thing and took her by the wrist and helped her stand. She seemed to glide the ten or fifteen yards over to his pool.

"My pants," he said, and removed the chinos from her chest. "Expensive fuckers, no need to ruin 'em."

"Who are you?"

He chuckled and said, "Name's Freddie. U.S.M.C., retired."

The water was warm and lovely. Highland Park was a new place. Fred swam a few laps, Dorothy floated, and then the man paddled up beside her and said, "Eight nodes, that's a killer. Some gals make it. Not you, I'm afraid. I'll give it five years. Five years, two months, handful of days. Can't nail it down any tighter."

"Five?" Dorothy said.

"And two months."

"You seem sure."

"I am. Awful darn sure."

"Who are you?" she asked again.

"God? Some sort of angel?"

Fred grinned and said, "Not exactly." He looked at her for what seemed a long while. "A neighbor. In the vicinity, so to speak. Let it go at that."

Dorothy looked at the bright suburban sky. She was on her back in the middle of the pool, pleased to be wet, pleased to be floating. Her wig floated beside her.

"Now, the thing is, we're talkin' five real good years," Fred said. "Way I see it, you won't be heading for Hong Kong. Not Duluth. Not Winnipeg, either. Two super kids, one fairly rock-ribbed husband. What I'd recommend, though, is you take what you took. The comfy route. Nice house, nice cars. Not so terrible." The man started to swim away, but then turned and treaded water. "No need to feel guilty, either. That old boyfriend you're dreamin' about. Billy. He's fine. He made it, too."

"Secret sources?" said Dorothy.

"Roger that. Here comes Ron."

Dorothy Stier took a breath, went under, came up again. It was Saturday, July 19, 1997, but no longer seemed to be. Dorothy hit the water with the heel of her hand. "Five years, what a pile of bull," she said. "Stick around, Freddie. I'll make it. Wait and see."

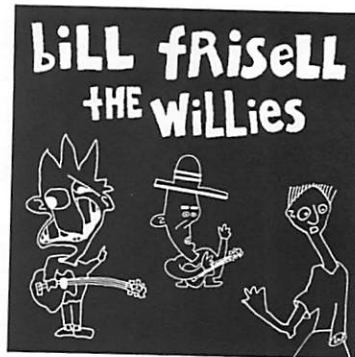
"Will do," Fred said. ♦

CONSTABULARY NOTES FROM ALL OVER
From the Amherst (Mass.) Bulletin.

9:33 a.m. A man licking the locks on doorways of apartments on North Pleasant Street was gone when police got there.

BORDERS® Words on Music

Borders Jazz expert Jessica Sendra says:
"Jazz-guitarist Bill Frisell explores rural byways with a project that takes old-time roots melodies to previously unheard destinations in the company of two very modern bluegrass players."



★★★★-

Frisell's most committed homage to country music yet...devoted to making some indelible themes in the genre sound as good as they can in their own terms, illuminated by the guitarist's unique ear for chords."

The Guardian, London

The Willies features the guitarist with Danny Barnes on banjo, pump organ, and harmonica, and Keith Lowe on bass, performing traditional bluegrass and blues tunes plus eight originals.

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