

Reading Raymond Carver’s “A Small, Good Thing” in a Halifax bar on a rainy Wednesday afternoon while watching *Ghostbusters* and listening to the bartender, who just came back from a trip to the prairies with her dog, yell her story to three drunks over aggressive mid-2000s rock.

Or, Eras.

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C H R I S P I C K R E L L

I’d just purchased a copy of Raymond Carver’s short story collection *Cathedral* from the second-hand bookstore two doors up from the pub. It was raining, but it was the kind of rain that lets you know the rain is almost over. I hadn’t planned on stopping at the pub, but as I passed, I remembered that my place was empty and took on a chill when it rained, and I decided it might be nice to sit somewhere warm in the company of others.

There was a student in the booth by the door when I entered. She had her laptop open on the table, and beside it were two textbooks, her phone and a pint of dark beer. It was an Irish pub, so probably the beer was Guinness. Maybe the student was Irish. She didn’t look up when I entered.

The bar was small and narrow, and there weren’t any windows, so when I opened the door, it let in the light. The light outside wasn’t very bright—a dead, wet grey, but still, one of the three men at the bar, the one closest to me, squinted against it when I walked in. He didn’t know me, and I must not have been worth the pain of looking, because he quickly

returned to his pint. He raised his glass to his lips, drained a mouthful of foam, then said to the bartender, “Another, Regan?”

My eyes hadn’t adjusted, and the bartender was in profile, so I couldn’t see her face. She was leaning away from the bar, her body angled against the back counter, her arms crossed over her chest. She heaved forward and refilled the man’s glass. The man’s posture was slumped, apologetic; he was young, in his early twenties, and a bit small. As she pushed his glass toward him, he said, “Thanks, Regan, I’ll tip ya as soon as I get some money. You’re the right type.”

I set my bag in an empty booth. There were only three booths, and the student was at the first one, so I chose the one in the middle. As I sat down, I saw taped to the wall a half-page sign written in polite cursive that read, “Bar service only. Thanks.” It was faded and crumpled like it had been repeatedly wetted and left to dry out on its own.

One of the three men, the one furthest from me, said, “A round of whiskey, Reagan?” She poured out three shots. The same man said, “One for you, too, love? We’re glad to have you back.” She poured a fourth. The men smiled at their glasses. They raised their shots and fired.

I went to the bar and ordered a Guinness. I’m not Irish and don’t really like Guinness, but it was an Irish pub, and I have some red in my beard. Regan smiled at me, and I smiled back, but she didn’t say anything and neither did I. I looked at the men. They looked at me. They looked grey, though it may have been that the light was bad. I nodded at them. They nodded back.

Sitting in my booth with my pint, I took *Cathedral* out of my bag. I’d recently written a story with a blind character, and a friend who’d read it told me I had to read *Cathedral*. The copy I’d purchased was old, very used, and had a picture of a peacock on the cover. I opened it to the table of contents. “Cathedral” was the last story, page 209. I began flipping. Chunks of pages came loose from their binding. I got to the end of my copy. It ended at page 207.

I looked up. The movie *Ghostbusters* was playing on a large screen, positioned such that the men at the bar couldn’t see it, only me and the student. I watched for a moment, but with no particular interest. The woman on the screen looked like Regan, and I wondered if that’s why she’d put it on.

The only other story I knew from *Cathedral* was “Where I’m Calling From,” which I liked, but I didn’t feel like reading it again. I decided on “A Small, Good Thing” because it was the next most interesting title and because it came out of the binding all in one chunk.

There was music on, too. I didn’t know the name of the song that was playing, loudly, but I recognized it; it was heavy rock from the mid-2000s, released around the time when angst went mainstream and got meaner.

The bar was warm and woody, dark, den-like; one of the men, the middle one, who was older than the other two, said, “Regan, don’t let the boss make you listen to these shitty playlists. You should get to do what you want when you’re working.”

“This is my playlist, asshole.”

The other two men laughed. The man who couldn’t tip swayed slightly on his stool. Regan laughed, too. She reached for her phone and turned the music up.

In *Ghostbusters*, a disembodied head was shooting laser beams into a man wearing a white blazer over a low-buttoned purple shirt with a big gold chain. I didn’t recognize the scene and wondered if maybe this was a *Ghostbusters* sequel.

The first paragraph of “A Small, Good Thing” is confusing: it opens inside the head of a woman who goes to a bakery in a strip mall to order a birthday cake for her son, Scotty, but it ends inside the thoughts of the baker, who seems not all that likable, but it’s not clear if *we’re* supposed to dislike him, or if his dislikableness is the projection of the woman who’s come to buy the cake. I had to reread it a few times.

Regan had the kind of voice that could be correctly described as *booming*; the kind of voice perfectly suited to being in a bar and shouting over music. She yelled, “We were somewhere on our way to Winnipeg, we had three more hours to go, it was already late, and it’s a long fucking drive to nowhere, and I was so tired I was worried I’d go off the road or hit somebody. And Scotty was yapping like crazy and just being a total shit. So we stopped.”

The second paragraph of “A Small, Good Thing” is decisively set inside the woman’s head. It focuses on how she’s hurt by the jadedness-turned-

rude-indifference put onto her by the baker. She uses the words *abrupt* and *coarse* to describe him, mentions how hairy his arms are, and goes into some detail about how fat his neck looks. We get the sense she's offended that characters like the baker exist and that they don't like her. But what *really* gets her, we feel, even if she doesn't quite admit it to herself, isn't so much that these characters exist and don't like her; it's that they wear their contempt on their floury aprons and don't even try to *hide* that they don't like her.

The light in front of the bar was dim, giving the men a washed-out, fuzzy look. In contrast, the area behind the bar was well-lit, placing Regan on an imagined stage. Her skin was perfused with a warm flush, and in that light, she looked healthy and robust.

"We had to camp," she said. "I couldn't drive another mile or I would die. I pulled down a side road and looked for a place to stop. I'd always wanted to do that, you know? Just pull over off the highway and camp wherever I was."

One of the men, the one in the middle, finished his pint and slid his glass smoothly forward. Regan filled it and pushed it back to him. She said, "There y'are, Frank."

By the top of the third page of "A Small, Good Thing," Scotty, while walking to school and sharing a bag of chips with his friend, is hit by a car. And it's his birthday. It's a pretty classic setup by Carver: "Things were like this, actually pretty good, *until...*". Interestingly, although the hit sounds bad and we wonder if maybe the driver was drunk, Scotty seems okay. He turns around and walks home and tells his mom what happened.

Regan said, "It was the prairies, or sort of the prairies, so there was lots of flat ground and tall grass, but also some trees. I found a great spot."

In *Ghostbusters*, the woman who looked like Regan was holding a child and wearing a bra that couldn't have been practical when the male character bounced into the room and flopped onto the bed. The woman put the child down and got onto the bed with him. She really did look a lot like Regan.

Regan said, "You know, after I got into bed there in my tent, I started getting really scared. There were no cars on the side road, and I didn't hear many on the highway, either." She glanced in my direction, but also

looked past me at the student. I didn't think Regan looked like the type of woman who scared easily. She was tall and muscular in a way that suggested she worked out, and I was sure all three men at the bar would like to get into bed with her, right then or in a tent or any time, and I'm certain she knew this.

"After an hour and I couldn't sleep, I decided it was too scary, so I got ready to pack up and get going. But it was so dark. And I was already in my sleeping bag. You know that feeling you get when you're comfortable, but uncomfortable, but too comfortable to get up and do anything? That's where I was. It was a total trap." The men all laughed.

After telling his mom about the accident, the birthday boy goes limp and loses consciousness. It's a sly play by Carver: he sets up an expectation, takes it away, then gives it back, but gives it back so that it's a little different from what we thought was coming. The mom, her name is Anne, though I had to go back to the first scene where she gives her name to the baker to remember that, calls the dad then calls an ambulance, and Scotty is taken to the hospital.

I wasn't very interested in what was happening with *Ghostbusters*. I wanted to turn around to look at the student, make some tiny connection, but there was no good reason for me to do that, so I didn't. The music in the background, which was so loud it was not really in the background at all, but more like it was in the co-foreground with all the other stimuli, was a popular song from that era. And, though I didn't know the name of the song or the band, I could pinpoint that track as being pretty close to the exact moment when backward ballcaps and an angry affect became an emblem.

Regan said, "So Scotty starts yapping like crazy inside the tent. It's got to be three in the morning. I have my phone with me, but who you gonna call? And what would I tell them? *That I'm three hours from Winnipeg down some side road and I'm scared?* Of what? I don't think so. But I'm thinking me and Scotty should go sleep in the car for the rest of the night. But I know I'm too big to lie down in that back seat and get any rest, so I'm kind of fighting with myself about what to do."

Dad meets Anne at the hospital. Dad is summarized by the line: "Until now, his life had gone smoothly and to his satisfaction." Perhaps a bit

on the nose, but we don't really need Dad. At no point in the story does he do anything meaningful. But, if Carver had left Dad out (*Cathedral* was released in 1983, but "A Small, Good Thing" is set, I believe, in the '70s), the story would have also been about why Anne had a kid but no husband to call when their kid was hit by a car (which, though in his other stories, Carver isn't afraid to have couples split up or raise children out of what was then called wedlock, he clearly didn't want "A Small, Good Thing" to be about that). All of which, at this point, about five pages in, worked to make me continue to ask: "What is this story about?" and to care enough to keep reading, which is about the best thing a writer can do.

At the bar, the head of the small man who couldn't tip dipped like a child nodding off. Regan saw this and said, "Jesus, Howie, at least try to keep awake when a woman's talking to ya." He pretended to slap himself in the face a couple of times and straightened up.

Scotty, the birthday boy, is unconscious at the hospital. The parents are told repeatedly by the doctors that Scotty is fine and that all his tests are normal. But he keeps not waking up, and no one knows why. Carver needs some time to pass, so we get a few stock scenes of the parents going home to shower and feed the dog while feeling conflicted about leaving their child at the hospital. I worry at this point that *this is what the story is about*, and I begin preparing myself for disappointment.

There was still nothing interesting happening in *Ghostbusters*. The lead woman, the one who looked increasingly like Regan, was featured, often, in tight jumpsuits with low necks, and I was sure by this point that this was not the original *Ghostbusters*.

The music changed to something symphonic, an aggressive cello cover of a song I almost knew. Regan said, as the angsty strings swelled to their climax, interrupting her own story, "I fucking love this song." The men all nodded.

An odd thing that happens in "A Small, Good Thing" is that a man keeps calling the house. Howard, the husband, gets the first call. A voice says, "There's a cake here that wasn't picked up." But Howard doesn't know anything about a cake. Why would he? He's just the dad, his son's been

hit by a car, and, understandably, he's not his best self. In his confusion, he's a bit abrupt and coarse with the caller (who we, as readers, know to be *the baker*, but the word *baker* is, quite deftly, not used again until after the parents figure it out, much later, so the person who is, to us, *the baker* becomes only *the caller* to Anne and Howard).

But the calls get worse. The next time, it's Anne who answers. (Anne, who *would* know about the cake, were it mentioned, never gets that word. I feel a bit stretched by this convenient coincidence, but I'm still reading, so I guess I buy it *enough*. And I realize that I've also been set up to buy it that the baker is the kind of jaded, doesn't-give-a-fuck asshole who would pull a move like that. But I also realize, somewhat pleasantly, that I still don't know what the story is about.) The caller asks Anne, "Did you forget about Scotty?" which, if you're Anne, ouch.

In *Ghostbusters* there's a werewolf. It's the same man that had the laser beams shot into his eyes, except he's really hairy now; he's loose in the city, howling like crazy and gnashing his teeth in a way we're sure means he's bloodthirsty, but also, he's wearing white pants, a loose purple shirt, white leather shoes and a gold chain, so he still looks good. He's got these overdone special-effects yellow cartoony eyes, and I'm not sure anymore if the movie *even is Ghostbusters*, since werewolves aren't, as far as I know, ghosts you can bust, because werewolves are flesh-and-blood animals like me and you, and not made of ectoplasm, like real ghosts.

The wobbly man at the bar got off his stool. Regan's eyes followed him to the stairs as though she was worried he might tip. She said to the two remaining men, "But Scotty just keeps barking like crazy. I can't stand it. Then he squats down in the corner of the tent like he's about to go, and I don't need to be cleaning up dog piss in the middle of the night, thank you very much, so I get out of my bag and unzip the door because *we're goin'.*"

Anne and Howard assume the caller is the driver of the car that hit Scotty (which is an amusing move by Carver because wow, a guy who hit-and-ran a kid, a kid that is now in the hospital in what none of the doctors are willing to call a coma, would have to be *an insanely evil person* to have set all this up and then, not being satisfied with simply probably killing their child with his car, continues to call Anne and Howard to *remind* them of it, as if they needed a reminder, as if they'd forgotten, because how could

they forget, since Scotty, in the hospital, is very clearly not waking up and the doctors are getting more and more nervous and ordering more and more tests even though they continue to say, as far as they can tell, that everything is fine and that he'll soon wake up).

“Bam!” Regan clapped her hands. All of us jumped. “Scotty’s gone like a rocket. I never seen a dog move so fast. He’s halfway to the bush and snarling like I didn’t even know he could.” The unsteady man came back from the bathroom. He sat down and took a long drink. Regan said, “I looked over to where Scotty was aiming his barks. There was some moon out, so I could see a little.” She let her voice go quiet, but the music was so loud that *quiet* still meant yelling. “In the trees not too far off, I’m sure I saw a pair of yellow eyes looking back at me.”

There’s an interlude, a bridge, in “A Small, Good Thing,” where Anne, as she’s leaving the hospital for a rest at home, accidentally walks into a waiting room while looking for the elevator. Inside, there’s a family, waiting, anxious. One of them, the teenage daughter, is smoking; Carver, by writing in the otherwise unnecessary character of a teenage girl smoking in a hospital waiting room, manages to pretty much nail the ethos of an entire generation in one move. When Anne enters, the family assumes she has news. The mother says to Anne, “Franklin, is it about Franklin?” and we learn from the woman’s husband that Franklin was stabbed at a party the night before, even though he was “Just standing there watching. Not bothering nobody.” And then the husband tells us, a bit cryptically, “But that don’t mean nothing these days.” Then he tells Anne how to get to the elevator. Anne tells them about Scotty.

Regan said, “Well, I jumped up and I just *ran*. It was like I was in a horror movie. I never moved so fast my whole life. I get to the car and get it unlocked and I’m into that back seat like lightning.”

The men lean back on their stools and look at each other, the same slightly stunned smile on each of their faces.

“But then I start worrying. I know what a wolf can do to a little sweetie like my Scotty.” Regan paused and took a drink from a glass of what looked like orange juice. Her voice was probably hoarse from all the yelling, and I bet the orange juice felt nice.

In the hospital, at last, Scotty wakes up. His parents move to the bed to console him. Then, we're told, "The boy looked at them, but without any signs of recognition." Carver won't even give these desperate parents their final goodbye; he needs to make this death maximally painful, which is interesting *because why?* To drive it home, Scotty then "scrunched up his eyes, opened his mouth and howled until he had no more air in his lungs," then he dies, his last breath escaping through clenched teeth.

"Well, I hollered for Scotty until the morning," Regan said. "Then, when the light came up and some cars started to go by and I felt safer, I got out and went to my tent, calling for him the whole time. I packed up. I kept calling. Finally, I went into the trees where I'd seen those eyes. I found his collar bit clean through. Splash of blood on the grass, patch of fur. Nothing else."

The men all began speaking at the same time, "Oh my god, oh no, Regan, I'm so sorry," they said. "Oh my god, Regan, that's awful." "Let us buy you a drink," said the man who had ordered the shots.

"Yeah, it was pretty bad, yeah, thanks, Ray," she said. She wiped a few tears from her eyes. "But he was getting old and starting to have some problems, so I guess it's okay. Fighting to save someone you love, that's not a bad way to go. God bless the little guy." She looked at the three men. "Probably better than what was coming for him."

She poured them all a shot.

"To Scotty," she said.

Howard and Anne go home and try to make sense of what's happened, which, of course, they can't. There's no sense in any of this. Then, the caller calls again. He says, "Your Scotty, I got him ready for you. Did you forget him?" Which, okay, maybe a bit much. Avoiding the word *cake* is starting to feel like a stretch. Carver's called in a fair amount of good faith thus far; his causalities are impressive and intricate but tenuous, but they hold, they must, because the only rule a writer can't break is the one that makes the reader put the book down, and I'm still reading, so I guess the game's still on.

Then, in another slightly dubious literary move, Anne and Howard finally figure out that *the caller* is *the baker*. Incensed, powered by rage, they drive down to the bakery, even though it's the middle of the night. And at last, the dots and lines connect: As readers, we've just been

handed this premise: *Morally destroyed by grief, freshly stripped of the belief in a just and caring world, the parents of a child that has, only hours before, died a senseless and meaningless (and painful; he went out howling through clenched teeth, remember) death, are provided with a righteous object for their anger and impotence*—and now here it is, the real hook: *How far will this devastated couple take their misplaced vengeance?* Immediately, I forgive Carver for his stretches because, even though that's the longest setup I've ever read, as a premise, it's pretty tight; I realize I care more about the answer to that question than I do about what happens to the characters, and that's good writing.

The movie that may-or-may-not have been *Ghostbusters* ends, and the credits come up. There are outtakes playing off to one side. We get an extended clip of the werewolf in his makeup chair, half made-up, smoking a cigarette and holding what looks to be a cinnamon bun in one hand, while in the other, he's holding what must be a script because, between puffs and bites, his lips are mouthing lines. He's wearing the same white pants, purple shirt, white loafers and gold chain he had on in the movie, but in this shot, they just look like his normal clothes. When he sees the camera is on him, he looks straight in and gives us a howl.

Anne and Howard manage to get into the bakery through the back door. Anne is potent and murderous with an anger that “makes her feel larger than herself, larger than either of these two men.” After some tricky dialogue, the baker figures out who Anne is, is unremorseful, but offers to sell her the three-day-old cake at half price, which was kind of funny. But also, sensing that *larger than herself* anger she's wielding, he picks up a rolling pin, taps it against his palm a few times and says, “No trouble.”

Anne, in a flash of clarity, realizes that the truth makes better vengeance and tells the baker that Scotty is dead. That he was hit by a car on his birthday, and that she and Howard have been sitting with him at the hospital ever since. In the silence, in the bakery, the radio is playing a country-western song. Her rage passes, transforms. Anne breaks down on the floury counter and frees the tears she'd been withholding.

In the booth behind me, the student put down her pint glass with a heavy, empty, familiar thud. I think I also heard her sigh.

The baker, remorseful after a self-reflective pause, tells Anne he's sorry, that he's not an evil man, not in the way she thinks, but that he just doesn't know how to act anymore. Maybe once, long ago, he was a different kind of human being, but now, he's forgotten. He is, he tells them, deeply sorry for their loss and what he's put them through.

At the bar, Ray, the man who'd ordered the shots, took his car keys and wallet out of his pocket and pushed them around on the bar top, but it didn't look like he was going anywhere. Frank, the man in the middle, took a long, slow drink. Howie, the one who couldn't tip, craned his neck, looked up at the screen and said flatly, "Movie's over, Regan." Regan picked up the remote and shut it off.

The baker gives Anne and Howard some coffee and hot-out-of-the oven cinnamon buns and tells them that eating is "a small, good thing in a time like this." Then, the three of them, in the warm workroom of the bakery, talk until dawn.

I put *Cathedral* in my bag and checked the time. It was after five pm, and I was starting to get hungry. As I rose from the booth, Regan and the men looked at me.

Regan said, "Sorry I was so loud. I'm a loud person. I hope I didn't disturb you too much with my story. I just got back from my trip is all, and I'm still worked up."

"No trouble," I said.

I went over to the bar. As quietly as I could, I said, "I'm sorry about Scotty. There's nothing more painful than losing someone you love."

Regan looked at me. She tilted her head to the side, and her eyes began to tear. Beside me, the men at the bar bristled protectively. I sat down on the stool.

I looked at her, I looked at the men: Howie, Frank and Ray. And me. And Regan. And we were sitting together in a bar on Wednesday.

"It isn't much," I said, "but let me buy us all a shot. A drink is a small, good thing in times like this."

The men smiled, and Regan poured out the shots. A mid-2000s ballad crooned around us. Above, the screen was black. We lifted our tiny glasses and drank. Without adding another word, I paid and turned to go.

The student was still in her booth. She was wearing headphones and looking at her phone; her books and laptop were closed, and her pint glass was empty. I tried to make eye contact as I went by, but she wouldn't look up.

Outside, the rain had stopped, but the day had passed. And the light, what light remained, was a soft, fading grey, nearly the same shade as when I'd gone in.