

C. WHITE

## *Pay Her*

**I**N THE EARLY YEARS OF MARRIAGE, it was only a trifle that sprung up, a wet and tender surprise like a mushroom, in the hot late nights after too much rye and the discombobulation brought about by guests. Cliff's hand, his mouth, his thing—scrounging for body parts and acts she had never thought of. She would push him away, giggling.

Then they got serious about making babies. Frequency, not creativity, was the thing. But by the time she had her third, she couldn't stand to be touched any which way.

She had heard the pill caused cancer, and two aunts had it, so she got a copper IUD. She became a master of the economy of breeding: avoided making new babies, and spent as little as she could on the ones she had. She trained the eldest boy to take care of the younger ones, and avoided the cost of daycare and sitters.

An uncle had left Cliff the house, one and a half stories with white vinyl siding, past the edge of the hamlet, on three acres of scrappy bush. Early on they had built an addition, and a working garage where he fixed four-wheelers, lawn mowers, small tractors. He paid for the construction with a loan; the house was collateral. The loan also covered replacing the water tank, the furnace, the knob-and-tube wiring, and eventually the septic tank too. His income from the engine shop covered the loan payments and other bills every month.

It was up to Judy to figure out groceries, using a small cash allowance he put into the old Sanka jar on top of the fridge every two weeks. Like their parents, Cliff and Judy aimed to be Friendly and Frugal. Cliff maintained McCaffrey's Kubota each year in exchange for a half

hog, butchered. Judy grew kale and potatoes; bought milk and cheese and butter in bulk from the coop and froze them. Once a month she cleaned couch-ridden Mrs. Flaherty's house of its mouse droppings and cobwebs, and washed her sticky floors, in exchange for as many barrels of apples as David and John could pick every September. The boys were tall like Judy but had their father's bulging blue eyes. The youngest, Jenny, was the quietest. She blinked at her brothers zooming over and under furniture, fallen trees, broken fences.

When the kids were all in school, she started working at the laundromat in town, fixing seams and hems and replacing buttons. She drove to work in a clunky Dodge sedan Cliff had conjured out of the grassy vehicle cemetery behind the garage. She opened her own bank account. She saved for a dental fund and nest egg for each child, and a rainy-day fund for herself. With her cheque book she paid for the children's footwear from the Sears catalogue—everything else they wore was second-hand and mended.

The job made her realize she had to solve her sleep problems. Jenny no longer woke every few hours to feed, but Cliff snored like a big brass band. His body was too large for their bed and blasted off heat like an oven. Most nights she lay half awake. Her left eye had started to twitch. She got eczema on the tops of her hands. Lost her words. Sewed a sleeve shut. Dropped and never found a customer's heirloom button.

So she started to sleep in the addition they called the mudroom, funk up with boots, dog brushes and towels, snow clothing. It wasn't insulated but she loved the cold. The couch was covered in a green and burgundy paisley that collected cool damp, but was otherwise firm, and comfortable enough. She slept soundly there. The freezer packed with hog cuts hummed next to her head like a waterfall.

In the morning her husband came into the room in his work coveralls. Put on his boots, grunting with every movement. He came to stand where her head in its brown toque poked out of the blankets. He dipped his pelvis close to her face so that the stench of diesel and sweat sunk into the heavy cotton woke her.

The sound of zipper. The rustle of hands and cloth. She opened her eyes to him jiggling in her face. "Up and at 'em," he laughed.

She stuck up her hand to block the sight of it and said, "Would you fuck off," worried that a kid would appear in the doorframe.

The year that her eldest was twelve and her youngest was six, her periods got real heavy, the eczema came back, and her headaches became a daily fact.

The house was a constant screeching melee. Arms, legs, bruises, knocked-out teeth, concussions, mud, BB guns, dirt bikes, dead squirrels, chipped plates, wasp bites, a secret pet snake, fights over

the Nintendo, ticks and worms in the dogs, and a litter of kittens—all but one of which got eaten by fishers.

Dr. Murphy ordered a pelvic ultrasound and told her she had to put her feet up. He said that chronic stress could “take back” women’s ability to read, as if it were an extra little something gifted to women by a benevolent figure.

She didn’t read anything more than *Chatelaine*, but embraced the advice. She started paying attention to flyers and coupons so she could rationalize buying pre-made meat pies, lasagnas, hash browns. She ignored Cliff’s comments. Now instead of chopping and arranging, she could sit and stare at Jenny’s pale pudgy hands pencilling out multiplication equations.

The ultrasound showed nothing, and Dr. Murphy said sometimes cysts that come and go with every cycle cause heavy bleeding. He suggested the pill instead of the IUD, but she reminded him that cancer ran in her family.

Her aunt Betty had just had a double mastectomy, for instance, and couldn’t take care of her twelve laying hens and eight beehives anymore. Judy bought them at a discount with the little she had saved from the laundromat. Betty’s equipment for extracting the honey was old and broken, so Judy dropped off the frames with a woman in Rosetta who did it in exchange for one third of the product, and this became yet another annual arrangement.

Cliff huffed and puffed when she borrowed the truck for the annual honey extraction, and for hauling the folding table and canopy for selling eggs and honey at the farmers’ market on Saturday mornings. But the Dodge was just too small. Cliff made no moves to help her trade it for a truck of her own. No matter: she knew his moods, and had her own life to keep busy with. She was good at making do.

She quit the laundromat when she realized she could start taking upholstery orders from the woman in town who ran a shop that generated so much business she had a hard time keeping up. She partitioned the mudroom, set up her Singer inherited from her grandma, and replaced the green and burgundy couch with a steel table for cutting. She enjoyed going about her day, braless, in her jeans and t-shirt, unshowered, no makeup, radio set to the honky-tonk station, only her hair fussed over so it wouldn’t stick up at the back. She kept a button-up hanging by the back door she’d throw on if anyone came to say hi. Jeff Campbell, for instance, lent Cliff his MIG welder; she shrugged on her overshirt when she saw him approaching the back door. He let the screen door rest on his clay-caked boot as he held out a ten-dollar bill. “Cathy wants two dozen if you got ‘em.”

Judy went to the kitchen and came back with two cartons and some change. "How's the ER treating her?"

He chortled. "Come over one night and she'll spin you a yarn or two."

The cold of the mudroom was pinching her fingertips on either side of the needle plate the day the radio announced that a man had burst into a university classroom in Montreal. He separated the men from the women, and shot all the women to death with a semi.

Her daughter came home from school with an ashen face. Over fish sticks and green peas, Cliff said about the killer: "Disgusting freak."

The couch gone, Judy went back to sleeping in the bedroom. Cliff was still too big and hot, but he had, while she had been sleeping apart from him for many years, developed particular habits that vaguely pleased her. He now folded his own clothes and placed them on the foot stool for the morning. After showering and before bed, he slapped hand cream onto his jowls so he smelled faintly of lemon and geranium. There was something delicate about these rituals, as if she could actually trust this large man with baby animals, foot splinters, secrets.

She found that years of sleeping on the couch had inured her body to lie sideways and still. Sleeping next to Cliff was no longer a problem until morning broke and he'd drum around at her crotch, gently grab and squeeze her throat from behind, until she'd roll out of bed to get the coffee started.

One night she was perched on the edge of the bed, clipping her toenails. He took the clippers away and set them on the nightstand.

He got on his knees, lifted her shirt, and pawed her with his boiled dry hands in a manner that reminded her of a dog trying to get in. He stood and dropped his drawstring pyjama pants. He was fragrant from a shower. She did the thing she used to do before they were married, when she couldn't get the pill because Dr. Murphy knew her parents.

He broadened his stance and tried to guide her head lower. She recalled insults referring to this act that placed it outside the realm of respectable sex.

"No," she mumbled into the wall of him.

He stroked her head. "Ain't nothing gross about it. Just got out of the shower."

"I didn't say it was gross."

He stopped stroking her head. "What's your problem then?"

She decided to shut him up, and afterwards, she had to wash her hair.

The next morning she found a cheque for eight hundred on the kitchen counter.

Although she didn't like the idea of being bought like a whore, and although that week her period was so heavy she felt like a stuck pig,

excitement nonetheless wound her up like a coil of metal ready to spring into the air.

"I saw an F-150 at Robbie's with a sale sign," she said as he licked and kissed her neck in the darkened bedroom.

He slipped her pyjama bottoms off, but she stopped him. "I'm bleeding hard."

"No matter."

"It just makes a mess."

"Get a towel."

"It doesn't feel good."

He sighed, exasperated.

She asked, "Do you think two thousand is a good deal?"

"A minivan would suit you better."

Fed up, she put the money in a bunch of 100-bills at the bank for the kids. David was the first to cash it in when he went away to college.

After graduating high school, John helped her husband with the garage but got a place on the other side of the river with his girlfriend Tanya who quickly had twins. John announced that the doctor said she had "postpartum depression," to which Judy raised her eyebrows and said, "Who doesn't."

Tanya would come over, sic the two babies on Judy regardless of the bees or chickens or the sewing, then go nap in the John's old bed upstairs.

Once Tanya and the babies showed up and announced, "There's a bunch of cop cars blocking off Highway Seven."

Word came out that Mrs. Flaherty's grandson killed his girlfriend with a shotgun then drove himself into the river and drowned. Bonnie Turpin—same age as David. She had taught John and Jenny how to swim.

Reporters descended on the town. The mayor, and everyone else, had something to say, and it usually included the phrase "Montreal Massacre."

For weeks, Judy suffered from a sensation in her stomach as if it was closing in on itself and hardening, like there were hands inside of her scrunching up her stomach into a tight aluminum-foil ball. She couldn't stop thinking about Bonnie, how her skin had been so freckled it looked dyed gold. She felt like vomiting every time her daughter left the house. At the doctor's office, after switching her 100 out, Dr. Murphy simply asked her how she was holding up, and she burst into tears. He wrote her a prescription for Prozac and said, "There's a women's group down at the second-hand store." She never went; there were loudmouths and hippies amongst them, not least that feminist town councillor angling for the NDP nomination. Another

federal election was around the corner. The Liberals were pushing for a long-gun registry so Montreal wouldn't happen again. Where their fences met the road, the husband and his pals put up signs that said "Government Back Off."

Judy felt spiritually bonded to the smell of goldenrod in early fall, the sensation of push and release when scraping the wax off the bee frames. She taught Jenny how to handle the hives and watched her in the autumn glow. There was a total intentionality and fearlessness in the girl's smooth slow motions. She did well at school. Won 4H awards. Had no insecurity or trouble about her.

To Judy's surprise, her husband had put away enough money to purchase a four-post truck lift and a welding machine without the bank's help. There was a flurry of loud and dangerous activity out back; a flatbed truck delivered the hoist but didn't place it right in the garage, and this made Cliff mad. It sat out in the weather, a glossy black skeleton, Cliff's pals coming by to look at it, till Cliff could borrow a forklift to put it in place.

When things settled down, Cliff said to Judy over dinner, "Cathy Campbell says come on by for drinks sometime."

"When did you see Cathy?"

"Today. Returned Jeff's welding machine."

"The one you borrowed, like, seven years ago?"

"More like five."

He hired John and compensated him fairly enough, so now he could deal with trucks in addition to small engines. Combined with the election, the new Landowners' Association, and the gun-control mess, this brought men and their trucks into the yard every day now. She wore her button-up regularly. She peered at these men through the back door. Cliff had started planning to go hunting with them in November, a thing he hadn't done since high school. They were tall men, short men, in-between men, but all looked firm and sun-baked. They sported a combination of friendliness towards each other and anger towards the ether. She wondered what they made their wives do in bed, how much cash they gave them, and if these things were interlinked.

One night the daughter was at a 4H conference and Cliff and Judy got into a game of euchre after dinner with her sister and brother-in-law. They were drinking Buds and tequila. In their bed later, he threw her legs up around her shoulders as if he was in a real hurry, and dove down deep.

"I don't like that," she said. "I'm not clean."

He kept at it. Then he mounted her and said, "You are now." She laughed at him.

He stood up and repositioned her on the bed. Pressed her ankles back so her hamstrings almost broke. She felt exposed and ridiculous, like a face without a nose, or a bird without a beak. He used his hands and a shuck of the hips to try yet another thing she had never done before.

She bucked, and cursed him out. He stopped.

The next day he took John in the truck and came back driving a Jetta with the boy driving the truck behind.

“What’s this for?”

“Better than the Dodge.”

“It’s smaller though.”

“So you don’t like it?”

She shrugged.

He said, “They’re all the rage these days. European.”

“It’s not a truck, Cliff.”

The Dodge retreated to the cemetery, and Judy tried to make do with the Jetta, but the spin of the wheel always felt too loose, and the give of the pedals fluctuated.

Jenny went off to study agriculture at Guelph. Judy paid her rent, Cliff covered tuition, and the rest was made up through student loans and her part-time job at a dairy research centre. She ended up marrying a cash cropper who farmed his parents’ acres near Waterloo, way on the other side of the province. Over the phone she regaled Judy with her plans to buy some dairy cows.

Around the time Jenny got pregnant, Judy started to bleed out during her periods. She was forty-seven. The border collie found her collapsed in the mudroom, the darkest imaginable red seeping from the crotch of her jeans down to the knees. By the time the husband came in to see what the dog was going on about, she was pushing herself up on her hands, taking in the smear of blood bright against the vinyl floor, the dog sniffing and whining at her ass.

She went to get her IUD taken out—a real inconvenience given that the fall fair was in two days and she had a floral bouquet and eggs to enter into the ag-hall competitions. There were the upholstery orders and the hives to deal with, too.

A young woman fresh from the University of Ottawa had taken over Dr. Murphy’s practice. “It will be faster than putting it in,” the doctor said. But there was a twist of her wrist that made Judy yelp. The doctor flashed a light into her and squinted. Then she slid out the speculum, told her to breathe deeply, took off her gloves, and washed her hands. Judy bloomed with sweat as the doctor wrote a prescription for a drug that would loosen her cervix and told her to come back the next day.

She went to the pharmacy then came home and fell asleep in bed. She woke to the sound of her husband's heavy feet downstairs and the patter of the dog's nails in need of clipping.

She realized he was standing next to her, smelling of gasoline.

"There might be frozen lasagna you can heat up for dinner," she said.

He stroked her greying hair. "You're so pretty."

"I don't feel so good. Turn the oven to 375."

He took off his pants.

"Don't go near me, I'm sore as hell, the doctor didn't get it out."

"I've always been gentle."

"No, Cliff, I'll get infected. I think I already have a fever as it is."

"Alright, alright," he said.

He turned her to lie on her front, covered her with an afghan, and he lay on his side and rubbed her hair and neck and back. She heard the night-table drawer open then close. There was a shaking of the bed, and then he put his hand under the afghan and there came a large cold wetness and the scent of lemon and geranium.

She jumped up.

"I'll *cut* you if you keep coming for my ass like that."

The room swayed. She reached out and grabbed the bedpost to keep from falling over.

She eventually reheated the lasagna herself and fell asleep in the recliner in the front room, her hatred like the pointed snout of a mouse intent on chewing and shitting through whatever was meant by the word *love*. By midnight a thimbleful of all the warning signs dropped out of her into the toilet bowl. The thermometer read 39 degrees.

She drove herself to the emergency room.

"Cliff didn't drive you?" Cathy Campbell asked.

"He's got a big day tomorrow, finishing up for the tractor pull." Then she vomited right there next to Cathy's sneakers.

Later as Cathy took her temperature through her ear, Judy said, "Sorry we've never made it over for drinks all this time."

"It's alright, those two were sore at each other for a while there anyhow."

"Which two?"

"Your Cliff and my Jeff. Some guy business."

It was Cathy who called Cliff to come get her once they got her fever under control, doped up with pain meds, the IUD out, a prescription of antibiotics ready to go. It was one in the afternoon.

"Had to stop work on Johnston's tractor to come get you."

"Where's John, then?"

"There."

"Where?"

"At the shop."

"Then what the fuck are you whining for?" Her words dragged muddily.

"Jesus. How'd you ever get so mean?"

"From having my husband try to ram me up the butt when I had a fever, maybe." He fell silent. A clarity sliced through her drugged state. She slammed the dashboard with her open hand, cupping it for maximum volume as she had learned long ago on the high school cheer team.

She likewise slammed the cab door when they got back. John looked over from the garage entrance.

She started out for the hives and called over, "You and Dad can go get my car when you're done and bring it back."

Then she felt her rage get sucked up into that particular September light that fell on the milkweed's cotton bursts, the spent thistles, and the black thorny inverted crowns of Queen Anne's lace that lined the path to her hives. But even before she reached the clearing she sensed a wrongness. And there, the hives lay tipped over, innards scattered, a few dark bees clinging stupidly to warped and mashed combs on the frames. She found a single bear print, wide and five-clawed and deep, amid the clover and thistle and rue.

She made a phone call to forfeit her fair entries then fell asleep in the recliner in the front room. She woke up sullen. The blood on her maxi pad thinned to a watery pink. Jenny called. Judy didn't tell her about any of the upsets, just let the chit-chat about the coming baby wash between them.

"I'll come down soon as you need me," she said. "I'll get all my orders cleared up. You just holler an' I'll be there."

John helped her set the hives upright the next day. He said, "When I was driving your car back yesterday, I noticed the transmission's starting to go, and the brakes are getting soft."

"Yeah, I thought something's been off."

"I don't think it's safe for the trip down to Waterloo."

"Dad can take care of that though, eh?"

"Not any time soon. vw parts cost a lot. Gotta special-order them too."

She felt a fury. "Can you make sense of why he bought me that car, then?" She was peering at the patchwork of a frame's cells, letting the bees crawl up her wrists, looking for the queen.

"I dunno, Ma," he said. He jammed his fists deep into his pockets and looked at the ground. "It's a lemon."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, it didn't work well from the start. Jeff's been trying to sell it for years. Dad fucked up his MIG welder so he bought the Jetta off him as an apology."

She forgot about the bees.

That night, while Cliff was at the fair watching the tractor pull, she put her bottle of Prozac, glass of water, magazine, reading glasses, and nail clippers on the side table next to the recliner in the living room. She stuffed her head into her old brown toque and proceeded to sleep there, regretting she ever got rid of the green and burgundy couch.

The next week was the thirty-eighth week of Jenny's pregnancy. Judy hadn't spoken to Cliff for days but she pulled on her boots and a coat and walked across the patchy brown grass to the garage. Her husband was tinkering with the underbelly of a vehicle up on the hoist. Two men perched nearby drinking from beer bottles; she didn't recognize them, didn't know who their wives were.

"Jen's baby is coming next week," she announced.

"Congratulations," said one man, and he tipped his bottle towards her.

"That soon, eh?" said the husband, switching one tool for another, slow and thoughtful.

"Can you please fix up the Jetta for me so I can drive down there?"

He paused. John Prine played in the background; the wind picked up and rustled the bush leaves. "Sure, but the parts will take a while to come in."

"Then you can lend me your truck," she said, but inwardly flinched when one of the men raised his eyebrows. "Maybe. Or maybe you can drive me into the city to catch the Greyhound."

"And when would you want me to do that?" he asked. "With all this." He gestured at the spread of machines, steel, rubber, concrete.

"Whenever."

"Whenever," he repeated while rolling his eyes.

The two men exchanged a glance and jointly suppressed a chuckle. She stormed away, whispering to herself, "Fuck the lot of yous."

That night she made dinner only for herself and ate it in her chair in front of the tv.

"None for me?" Cliff asked from the doorframe.

Her gaze did not stray from the screen. "Pretty sure you can cook. Just as sure as I don't know how to fix cars."

And here began her husband's slow romance with a remorse from which he would only stand to benefit. He made dinner the next night—sirloin steak, new potatoes, the last of the season's corn, and even some greens on the side with nasturtium blossoms scattered on top. When he wasn't looking, she rolled her eyes. He poured her wine.

"Too bad we can't afford to eat like this every night," she offered absentmindedly.

"Who says we can't?" he said.

He mustered a little speech about what was in his account. He hinted at the fact that he could very well buy her a truck of her own, much less new hives.

"Buy me a truck then. You know all my money's been for the kids and essentials," she said. He shifted in his seat in a way that made her think that he had just been bluffing about his savings; she withered. "Or give me an allowance. More than just for groceries. Way more." She was surprised that he looked at her with cautious approval.

An impression of him started to root in her mind: stupid and lumbering but acting precious and smart. She waited until his face reddened from the wine, then sat on his lap and asked, "Cliff, can you at least take a few days off and drive us down to see Jen?"

"Time is money."

She trailed her hand to his crotch and squeezed.

His eyes disappeared into his head for a second: "We can talk about it."

In bed, there was something rehearsed and high stakes about his movements, like he was trying to impress her. She let him stroke her with his terrible hands.

"We should get back to good," he simpered.

How she wanted to lay into him. Tell him that he had no business thinking he knew the meaning of good. But she just said, "Alright."

The end of the season throttled the crickets below their window. He started in on her again but with his hand and mouth. He lulled her to an edge she faintly remembered from her youth. She sleepily thought to herself he wasn't so bad. That thought changed when, with spit, and the stuff from the drawer, he did the thing he had always wanted to do, in such a matter-of-fact way that she wondered if he was merely fulfilling a mutual agreement.

He asked afterwards, "You okay?"

The next morning bright blood dropped into the toilet bowl, not from her cervix. She was sore, but on the kitchen counter was a cheque for three thousand dollars. In the memo line, her husband's chicken scratch: TRUCK.

She was struck dumb by the revelation he'd been holding out on her. She tried to motor through the Connelly curtain order but forgot to iron the hem before sewing. Jenny's baby was going to come any day now. The quickest thing to do would be to take a bus to Waterloo, and she could figure out buying a new truck later. When John came in to use the bathroom, she caught him by the shoulders and asked if

he'd take her the morning after tomorrow, and he said sure, the world won't end if he's an hour late for Cliff.

She had to winter the salvageable hives before leaving, cover and vent them. Maybe she could get John or Tanya to man the farmers' market stall while she was gone, but it was too soon to ask another favour. She wrote a list, went back to sewing, fucked up the bobbin, wrote another list.

A fresh mania disrupted her sleep. Could she pack a suitcase full of food for Jenny? Honey, preserves, jars of legumes? Half food, half diapers?

But the promise of a truck also hounded her. How many seats did she want in the cab? Soft-top or hard-top cover for the bed? She imagined taking it down to Waterloo, stuffing it with gear, taking her daughter and the grandbaby camping. She knew there was a place with cliffs, dunes, famous sunsets nearby. She enumerated her desires and considered their price. She was relieved to discover she knew exactly what she wanted.

The images formed as she stared at Cliff's broad fleshy back, speckled with age spots and skin tags. She started to view him with pity, like he was weak, vulnerable. A slave to his own desires for crudeness, and nothing to offer but his money. And this only made her want this version of him even more.