

# Oklahoma

## review

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### The Seamstress

Denny's sitting at the kitchen table, staring at a banana-yellow flier advertising a gun show in Marshalltown next weekend. When I reply, "What do I know from guns?" he glowers over the lip of his coffee cup, his head hanging from going out to the bar last night. When he looks like this in the morning, I think of a toy I played with as a kid, called Magic Face, or Magnet Beard, or something like that, where a magnet used with microscopic iron filings created a beard on a man's face. It made the guy look like one of those cartoon characters in gray and black prison stripes, who, when they died, an x-mark appeared in place of their eyes. I loved that toy so much, I played with it for hours, drawing and drawing the beard, making it as opaque as possible, and then picking up the box and jiggling it around, replacing the man's sinister expression with a fresh appearance. That damn toy always pops into my head when I see Denny like this in the mornings, and sometimes I wish I could shake him just to get that growth off his fucking face.

"What do you know from guns?" Denny mimics in a singsong voice. This is not news to him, I have told him a thousand times that I don't want to know, I don't like guns, and I don't want to hear about them. I always think our family is about two seconds away from being one of those you read about in the scroll on CNN. When the kids and I lived in Texas, it seemed like every time I turned on the TV a story appeared about a toddler getting a hold of the gun his dad kept in the pickup and shooting a sibling, or himself. Denny inches his coffee cup towards me. "Jesus, Amy. We got a cabinet full of guns down the goddamn hall. You'd think you'd learn something about them."

"Maybe I don't want to learn about them." I pick up his cup and walk to the coffeemaker to refill it.

Denny fingers the flier as I return with the fresh cup. The whiskers that mask his cheek and chin project like those iron filings against his ashen skin. "Are you trying to piss me off again?"

I sit down across from him and take a drag on my cigarette. "No."

A burst of noise comes from the living room, a Pop Tart commercial. "You guys want to turn that shit down?" Denny yells. Out of the corner of my eye I spy Shea hunting for the remote.

"Shea," I say, "Just get up and use the button on the TV." Shea glances at me and then complies. He needs a haircut. His fair hair, so much like my own, covers the top of his hunched shoulders. Shea is ten, our first-born; I had him when I was sixteen, when I was a junior in high school.

Denny stands and tosses his napkin on the table. He looks at me full in the face for the first time that morning. "I'm sorry about that." He nods at me. I stand and begin to clear the breakfast dishes, licking my lips, which feel large and puffy. They have that metallic taste, as if they are still seeping blood from the night before. "I was thinking, you know, maybe about going back to meetings."

"That'd be good." The dishes clatter as I place them in the sink.

Denny walks to the counter and picks up his wallet, and keys. "Maybe I'll try to get to one tonight," he says. I attempt to smile at him, but my bottom lip feels stretched, as if it were a balloon, ready to burst. "Come here, babies, and give your daddy a kiss goodbye," Denny yells towards living room. Shea and Mallory dash into the room. Denny whooshes Mallory up in a hug, her little curls springing like corncobs around her neck. "Who loves Daddy?" Denny asks her, and she tucks her head into his neck. "Who loves Daddy?" They laugh, and the noise throbs in tempo with my aching cheek. Denny places her in my arms and rubs Shea's head with his hand. "Be good for Gramma today."

Shea nods as Mallory slithers out of my grasp. "Let me down, Mommy!"

"Look at that." Denny smiles. "Three years old and already she pushes her mommy around." Mallory prances around his legs, grabbing his knees. Denny pries her loose and strides out the back door.

It's the first hot day of the year, early, the first day of June. Half past eight and the temperature is near eighty degrees, by evening it should be closer to ninety. It's wrong, somehow, to have the heat be hard this early in the summer and it makes me feel off, shaky. The kids' faces scrunch in the sun as I hurtle them to the van. Our neighbor, Mrs. Pearl, skirts around the corner of her house with a hose in her hand. She's wearing her standard paisley-printed smock, with matching neon-pink lipstick. "Good morning, Amy," she says, squinting. It's been raining all spring, and I've been successful in avoiding her, placating her by a wave or two.

I look down as I open the door. "Hello."

She pulls on the handle of the sprayer and starts watering the bed of petunias that line the side of her house, which runs parallel to our driveway. "Where you working today, kid?"

"The Burger Stop," I say, my back to the open door as I buckle in Mallory.

"Aren't you still at the Bridal Barn?" She hollers over the whishing of the hose.

"On the weekends." I slide the van door shut.

"They didn't take you back full time?"

"They found some girl that had a degree from Iowa to do the alterations."

"Really." Mrs. Pearl turns off the hose and shuffles towards me; her fat legs make her look as if she's walking on stilts. "A degree?"

"I don't know, my boss told me that she's some sort of textile genius." I stride around the front of the van, and open the driver's side door. "You know, worked in the costume department or something."

"Hah." She stands on the other side of the van, peering at me through the passenger side window as I get in the seat. "You taking care of yourself? You're so damn skinny it makes me think you never eat. All I ever see is you going back and forth out of your driveway."

"Got to pay the rent somehow." I slam the door and start the car. "We'll see you later." She waves as I pull out of the driveway, her mouth continuing to move in speech.

"Fuck," I say, as I start down the street.

"FUCK!" Mallory yells from her car seat. "FUCK!"

"Mallory, that's naughty," Shea says, peering at me through the rearview mirror.

I take a breath. "Mallory, that's not a word for kids. You know that."

"Daddy say FUCK! Mommy say FUCK!" Mallory giggles and Shea giggles along with her.

The sun bleeds through the car's windshield, intensifying the throb in my head. I place my hand on my forehead and my elbow on the lip of the window as I drive to my mother's apartment. "Stop it, guys," I say. The pounding under the skin behind my right cheekbone crawls up towards my eyeball.

The kids continue to taunt me. "Fuck fuck fuck!" they sing.

"I'm serious." I grit my teeth. "Shut up. Both of you. Shut up." They echo my words, this time "shut up shut up shut up." The droning of high-pitched voices stabs my eardrum, and at the next red light, I turn around. "You guys don't shut up I'm going to kick the shit out of both of you. You think I'm kidding?" I'm screaming so loud the edge of my voice strains. "Take a chance. I dare you. You got that?" They stare with ghostly blank eyes. They have the same eye color as their father, an opal so pale it is almost colorless.

My mother has on the Cartoon Network, and the kids settle to watch as I turn to leave. Mom doesn't say anything about my face, just like she doesn't say much about my life anymore. She simply returns to her perch on the lavender recliner, dressed in her blue hydrangea-print housedress. She pokes a cigarette in her mouth, picks up her romance novel, the cover and binding cracked and white from multiple uses, and begins to read.

At work, my boss, Theo, stands at the square stainless steel table in the back room, shaping cookie dough with his fingers. He glances up at me and sighs. Theo is tall and has a five o'clock shadow, like Denny. In the bright whiteness of the workroom, his bald head shines; if he tilts it at the correct angle, it could probably throw a blinding beam of light. He's been losing his hair since we were in high school. "Let's try to keep you working in back," he says. I finish the cookies, and then make burgers during the lunch rush.

By two, the restaurant is dead, and I finally get my lunch break. I go into the washed-out tile bathroom, and fish out the pregnancy test, which I purchased at Drug Town three days ago then hid at the bottom of my purse, under the Kleenex and the diaper wipes. I pee on the stick and slide it back in the box, and tuck the box in my purse. I look in the mirror to see if I notice any changes. I don't, just the same old me under the fluorescent light, complete with the black eye and split lip. I didn't feel sick with Shea or Mallory; my body chemistry never seemed to evolve. Girls I know, they'd start throwing up within a month of getting pregnant, or notice their breasts hurt, something, they peed more, but my babies grew in secret. With Shea, I cheered basketball games for three months, growing to five months pregnant, never suspecting a thing.

I exit the bathroom, step out the back door onto the loading dock, and light a cigarette. I sit against the side of the building, the stone wall so cold it feels wet against my back. I pull out the test stick. Already there are two significant red lines. My eye pulsates, fresh, as if Denny struck me right then.

When I return inside I stab at my lunch in the break room, and then Theo tells me to work the counter so my co-worker can get her lunch. He probably thinks it's slow enough, the way I look can't offend too many customers. It's quiet, just the ambient sound from the sporadic traffic seeping through the front windows. I spray and wipe the trays left over from lunch, praying the place stays dead.

After a few minutes, though, two women come in, delivering a smattering of street noise through the door. They look to be mother and daughter, the daughter about my age. They approach the counter and order salads and waters. As the older woman digs into her thick leather purse to pay, the girl looks at my face. "Hey, I know you, right?" she says, snapping gum through her pasty teeth.

I shake my head, avoiding her eyes, but she continues. "Yeah, I know you. You're from the bride store." I glance at her. The girl has long hair that shines an impossible blonde. She turns to her mother, whose streaky gray hair swirls around her head like a question mark. "This is the girl that works at the Bridal Barn."

"Oh sure," her mother says. "Oh honey, you do marvelous work. You should have seen the wedding. Amber looked amazing."

Amber, who is tanned and has a sparkly diamond wedding ring, scans me up and down. "What are you doing here? Don't you work at the Bride Barn anymore?"

"Yeah, only on the weekends," I say, my back to them as I assemble their salads. "They already have a full-time seamstress." I circle back, put their bottled waters on the tray and push it towards them. "Thanks." I say, as I pick up a rag and wipe down the counter.

The women hesitate, and the mother says, "Honey, you are an artist, an artist."

"Thanks." I return to the stack of dirty trays. I remember them in an instant. I remember kneeling at the bride's feet last year, pinning the hem of the pearly white dress, eavesdropping on the conversations they had about the reception. They fought over the food (shrimp or chicken skewers?) and that the mother couldn't find enough slate gray candles. I remember the mother telling me, *no, honey, just an inch lower, but just enough, dear, for the shoes to peek out*. I remember picturing the fiancé in my head, the perfect man with the mahogany hair and the pressed button-down shirts, the college degree. Months later, as I scanned the paper for her, like I always do with my brides, I saw them. The picture didn't show the dress, just a headshot of the bride and groom, grinning as if they'd found a secret only the two of them shared. Her husband looked exactly as I imagined, maybe even more good looking, more perfect. The opposite of Denny, clean-shaven, with the happiest smile meant just for her. I cut out the picture and put it in my portfolio, even if you can't see the dress. I figured it still counted.

I get off work after six, and drive to my mom's to pick up the kids. They're ready, side by side on the couch, like sparrows that sit on the telephone wires in the winter. We stop by the grocery store on the way home. I avoid eyes, avoid running my cart into anyone. The aisles are plump with customers, carts banging about like bumper cars. People are looking at me, I can feel them, I can feel their direct stares at my face. Now I am thinking I can feel the baby flip in my stomach. I do the math, figuring I'm five or six weeks along. I probably got pregnant right after we returned to Denny. We fill the cart, and then we approach the beer and wine department. They place it smack in the middle of the store, surely on purpose. You have to walk past it to get to the milk, or the produce, or the meat. Shea watches pokerfaced as I hesitate in front of the stacks of cases of beer. "Don't look at me like that," I say as I pick up a twelve. The kids choose their favorite frozen pizza and we get in line to pay. I had to wait until today, the first of the month, for the food stamp card to allow me to shop. I don't like this new electronic thing, because I assume that it isn't going to work and I'm going to be left hanging. But it's kind of nice to look like everyone else, using a card that swipes through a machine. I don't care what anyone says about helping the poor working mother, if you're using food stamps the people behind you in line scrutinize your purchases, frowning if you buy something special, like cheesecake or chips. Look, I want to say, I work too. I'm not what you think, I don't sit on my ass all day like some girls I know.

Denny's truck is in the driveway when we return home. I usher the kids through the back door before I enter. Denny sits at the kitchen table, empty except for the crowded ashtray and the solitary can of beer directly in front of him.

The kids immediately head into the living room, and click on the TV. After I unload the groceries out of the car I ask Denny if he still plans to go to the gun show this weekend.

"Yeah, why?" He tips the last of his beer into his mouth.

"The Bride Barn has some hours for me on Saturday," I say, putting a plate of leftover fried chicken and mashed potatoes into the microwave.

"It's fine. I can go Friday night."

"Oh, Denny." I sigh. "That'd be great." I fetch him another beer, take out his plate and set it in front of him. He finishes his meal as I put the kids' pizza in the oven.

"I remember when we first got together you'd burn everything." He tosses the napkin on the table. "Even the corn on the cob, remember that?" We both laugh, and when he smiles like that I always think about that boy I knew in high school. Back then, I wouldn't consider breathing without him right by my side. "But now, I can't complain at all."

After I finish my own dinner, I discover several empty beer cans in the sink, on top of the breakfast dishes. I realize Denny had not gone to work. When the three of us returned home from Texas, Denny's father, who most days didn't want to bother with his son's existence, had finagled Denny a job working construction in Marshalltown, and Denny went every day this spring, even though he complained that it didn't pay enough. I agreed, it didn't, six dollars an hour. Try to live on that, I always wanted to ask his boss.

I load the dishwasher, then rinse the cans, putting them in their cardboard container, and setting them out on the back deck. From the deck, I see that Mrs. Pearl, or more likely her son Michael, who lives two blocks over, has extended her petunia beds, which now snake around the back of her house. I don't remember if I've told Mrs. Pearl more that petunias are my favorite flowers, so it's nice to have them there, kind of smiling at me. She must have worked on the beds today. The sun sets over her fence, and the dusky twilight bleeds throughout the reds, whites, the velvety purples. "Lovely, lovely, lovely," I whisper. I wouldn't mind standing out here all night, despite the pain in my face and my lingering headache, and the throb in the arch of my feet. Even though I am so tired I could sleep for days, maybe a year, I'd like a chance to see the flowers disappear into the dark as the day breathes cool. I'm confident that they'll still be there, blooming in my blindness. Instead, hearing Mallory cry, I return inside, sliding the glass door behind me and pulling the curtain shut.

I give Mallory her bath and put her to bed, and change my clothes, peeling off my work uniform, shaking the stink of burgers and fries out of my hair. I find Shea and Denny in the living room, watching a reality show where the contestants vie for a job with a big shot in New York. We've watched this show before and it confuses me, how people cheat and lie, and treat each other so maliciously just to get a job. The people remind me of the first social worker I met, from Cedar Rapids, who was so determined to get me away from Denny. She actually used that word: malicious. "Don't you see it, Amy? He's malicious. He's a menace to your family," she said, her eyes shining behind her black-framed glasses. I think she was just as bad as those people on TV, like she had a goal that I wasn't aware of, a goal that didn't have anything to do with me.

I sit on the stuffed couch across from Denny, who is on the Laz-e-boy. I close my eyes against the noise. Denny provides a running dialogue throughout the show. "If I were on the show," he says, as he pulls the lever to put his feet up in the recliner, "I'd win in about two seconds." I open my eyes to notice that he has on steel-toed boots, and it flashes through my brain how annoying it is that he wears these boots in the house, even in the middle of a heat wave, but at least today, I won't have to sweep crumbs of sand and dirt from the construction site.

Shea breaks my concentration. "Maybe you should get on the show, Dad." He's on the floor, in his t-shirt and summer blue pajama pants, lying on his stomach, his lower legs in the air.

"Maybe I should. Except they wouldn't give me a chance." Denny lifts his can to me. As I get his beer, Denny continues to talk. "Because I didn't go to college." The kitchen is around the corner and he can't see me as I lean my head against the refrigerator door.

“Why not?” Shea asks. I open the door and stare at the twelve pack of beer, which is now half-empty.

“Why not?” Denny says. “Because your mom got stupid and got knocked up with you.”

I grab a beer out of the box, and slam the door, causing the contents of the refrigerator to ring like bells. I walk back around the corner to the living room. “Shea,” I say. “Time for bed.”

“Mom, it’s not even nine,” he says, looking at Denny for confirmation. Denny’s staring at the TV.

“Shea,” I snap. “Now.” Shea scrambles up, marches to the bathroom, and slams the door. I give Denny the beer and sit back on the couch. “I wish you would stop saying stuff like that to him.”

“Like what?” Denny asks, slurring his words as if he’s learning to talk.

“Like that,” I whisper, my breath hot on my tender lips. “Like he ruined your life.”

Shea opens the bathroom door and starts toward his bedroom. “Hey,” I say, and he stops, staring at me down the hallway. The bathroom light pulsates behind him. “Come give me a kiss.” Shea trudges into the living room and kisses me. His cheeks are pink-lined and downy, and I put my hands on the sides of his face, rubbing with my thumbs. “I love you.”

“Me too,” he mumbles, and he throws his arms around me. I pull him tight. He’s so little for his age, and I want to pick him up and put him on my lap, like I did when he was a baby and we lived with my mother. “Good night, Mom.” He lets go of me first, and gives Denny a hug.

I wait until the door to Shea’s room clicks shut. “Seriously, Denny.”

“What the fuck,” he says. “You want to keep the truth from him?”

“The truth?”

“You’re so fucking stupid.” He pops open the can. “You don’t realize, do you, what having that kid did to me.”

“Did to you?” I pick up a pillow and wrap my arms around it, pressing it against my abdomen.

“I could have been one of those people,” he says to the TV.

“When? When were you going to be one of those people? You barely graduated from high school.”

“I don’t need this shit.” He pulls the lever of the recliner, and bangs down the foot of the chair.

“Don’t yell at me,” I say, standing up, my feet seizing on the carpet. “I told you I wasn’t going to put up with this anymore.” He is two feet from me, his face reddening. I edge backwards into the kitchen.

Denny follows, his beer can still in hand. He corners me, my back against the curve of the whirly gig. “What’s your fucking deal, Amy? You think I want to fight with you every night?” The veins in his forehead throb, and he bares his yellow teeth like an angry dog.

“Did you go to work today?” I ask, and then cover my mouth with my hand.

He heaves the beer can towards the counter. The beer sprays over the cabinets and the floor. Then he hits me with his fist where he hit me last night. Then he strikes me again, with such brevity that I

can't begin to defend myself. I sink to the floor, and he kicks me in the stomach with those steel-toed boots, each kick timed with the syllables that spew out of his mouth. "This day isn't over yet," he says. "I will kill you." He keeps talking, but I don't hear or feel the rest because I crawl into the empty hole.

When I wake I can't gauge how long it's been. I hear the local news anchors chirping from the TV, so I assume that it's been at least an hour. The beer puddles around my shoulders, and my hair is glued to the side of my face. I pull myself up by the lip of the sink, and stumble over to the table, grabbing my purse. I need a cigarette, and I sit, smoking it. It tastes great. It may be the best cigarette I have ever smoked. I put it out with relish.

I tiptoe down the hall and open the bedroom door, and find Denny asleep in bed, his back to the door. He's still wearing his clothes and the boots. He grips a beer can in his hand and I assume that he must have stepped over me to get it out of the fridge.

In the corner is the wood baseball bat that he keeps by the bed, because I won't let him keep a loaded gun unlocked in the house. He used it when he played high school baseball. Denny's told me a million times that he wanted protection even though we live in crappy rental. It seems to me that everyone in town knows better, and even if they didn't, all they'd want are the guns and frankly, they're welcome to them.

I snatch the bat and stand at the edge of the bed, bracing my knees against the side of the mattress. I lift the bat over my head and bring it down, hard, on the back of his head. It doesn't sound like I thought it would. I thought it would echo and maybe reverberate. But the sound is more like: crunch. Denny's body jerks, but he doesn't wake. I lift the bat up and hit him, again. Again. Again. Again. Five times, total. A river of blood streams out of his nose.

Shea stands at the doorway, his eyes huge, like bull's-eyes. He asks, "Is he dead?"

I say, "I don't know." I lay the bat next to Denny and pull the wedding ring quilt I made for our wedding over Denny's head. "Shea, open the linen closet and get every blanket in there." Shea bangs open the door and climbs the shelves like a monkey, yanking blankets until they are stacked on the floor. We haul them into the room, and cover Denny, layer after layer of blankets, afghans, and quilts that I made or my mother made or that we got at Wal-Mart. "Go downstairs," I say. "Get the sleeping bags. Hurry." Shea retreats to the basement door off the kitchen; I can hear him padding down the steps. I empty out my drawers, the closet, heaving my clothes into Mallory's room. She's asleep, in her crib, her little bottom in the air. I take a moment to inhale her scent. To me, she still smells like a baby, sweet and intoxicating. Shea returns, his arms circling three sleeping bags. He helps me spread them on top of Denny.

"Mom," he says, as we stand over his father. "What if he wakes up?"

I say, "Then I'll get a gun." To prove myself, I crawl behind Denny, lifting up the blankets, and remove the wallet chain from his belt. I smooth the blankets back in their place and then taking the key, I open the gun cabinet that stands in the corner of our bedroom. I remove a Smith and Wesson .44, the one Denny carried everywhere, favored like an oldest child. Shea nods as I tuck it in my pocket.

The blankets rounded over Denny's body remind me of my last memory of my father, who died before I started the fourth grade. We never had money—he was a farmer in perpetual debt, so it figures I can recall with such clarity the one summer day he took Mom and me on a day vacation, a driving trip up to the Effigy Mounds National Park near Marquette. "See, Amy?" He pointed to the grass-covered humps nestled between thickets of trees. "A thousand years ago Indians buried their dead here and shaped these mounds into animals." I remember thinking that they looked like little hills covered with grass, and my father, standing in the hot sunlight in his overalls and white v-neck t-shirt, was playing tricks. I'm not sure I even knew what burying the dead meant, but I learned just three weeks later, after he died in a three-car accident just west of our farm.

“Come on,” I say, and guide Shea out of the room, my hand on the back of his neck, shutting the door behind us. I had turned the lock on the knob, and I double-check to make sure it is secure. We walk down the hall to the living room. I grab the remote from the table next to the recliner, and sit, pulling Shea into my lap. I hold him like a baby, as I wanted to earlier that night, his head tucked into the triangle of my elbow, his legs splayed over my upper thighs. He mutely lets me rub his hair as he stares at the TV. I flip the channels one by one, and come across the show we had been watching earlier, repeated on one of the cable channels. Shea falls asleep on my lap, but I cannot sleep, at least not until I find out what happens at the end of the show.

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