
June 2014

Cold Trial

Jason Morton
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate>



Part of the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation

Morton, Jason (2014) "Cold Trial," *The Laureate*: Vol. 4 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate/vol4/iss1/17>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Lee Honors College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Laureate by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

COLD TRIAL

Jason Morton

I'm sitting on the hood of my '77 Coupe DeVille, overlooking a deserted beach near the Atlantic Ocean. The wind is steady at 15 miles per hour. I don't hear anything but the timed crashing of waves and occasional noises from resituating myself on the car. I've been waiting here for twenty minutes, and just finished my third cigarette. I stay in this position, waiting for her, and light another.

I close my eyes, inhale that first drag, and memories flood my head. I'm in love with an American turned Canadian named Marly. I first came to this coastal Canadian town three months ago, through God's design or my own, but tonight I have to leave. She might leave with me, but I'm not quite sure. I open my eyes and look down the road; still no headlights.

Strange thoughts and conflicting emotions cloud my head like the fog that's slowly creeping across the sea. It's strange how when you leave a place, it seems like only seconds after you first arrived.

* * * * *

I wake up, the sea licking my hair. The first thing I notice isn't the sweat on my brow. It isn't the sound of the gulls in the distance, and I don't notice the bright sunlight peeking from behind puffed, white clouds. My eyebrow is twitching.

I rise, off the wet, ruddy sand, and try my damndest to remember the circumstances leading to the present moment. The empty bottle of whisky near my hand, or rather the contents I have ingested, offers little in the way of explanation. I remember seeing the sunrise, majestic in beauty over this unfamiliar harbor, then closing my eyes to sleep. But the sun's position indicates that it's still morning. I wander the beach, looking for my car in the nearby parking lots.

Upon finding it, I enter through the rear door and stretch across the giant backseat, resuming my slumber.

I awaken, for the second time of this morning, covered in sweat. My stomach is rumbling. I feel around my head,

searching for the spike driven into it that must be causing this headache. I shift in my seat, but my stomach stays in the same place. I open the rear door and rid myself of a large quantity of whisky and the remnants of food I don't remember eating. I raise my head and see a young boy, no more than four years of age. He is being led by his mother, but stops when we make eye contact. His mother turns her head, sees my condition, and pulls her son back to obedience.

"Lord, have mercy," she says in disgust. I try to rise, to explain, but stumble out of the vehicle, and land in the small pool of bile I just created.

"Shit." I take off my jacket, quite unnecessary considering it's August, and throw it in the trunk. I notice a landmark sign between the parking lot and the beach:

THE HISTORIC GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE - French Explorer Jacques Cartier Was The First European To Navigate This Gulf, On June 9, 1534. His First Encounter With Native Americans Came Later In 1534, On July 7, In Nearby Lands Which Are In What Is Now New Brunswick.

THIS SIGN ERECTED BY THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CHARLOTTETOWN, PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

"Oh yeah, Canada."

I decide that I need coffee to settle my stomach. I reach in my pocket, and find Canadian notes and coin. I get in my car, then drive down a simple, two-lane road. I see a sign that reads, "Charlottetown: 10 km." Fucking kilometers; I don't know what this means. I reach the town quickly, carefully gauging my speed as I travel. I spot a plain, olive green building with large, bay windows. On one of the windows is painted, "Millie's Cafe."

I park, and enter the cafe, the cleanest I've ever seen, approach the barista, and order a tall, black, French Roast coffee.

"Two dollars, please."

I hand her two of the gold coins in my pocket, and take a seat at a table, far away from the handful of other patrons. I begin looking at my hands, but eye the patrons covertly. I take a special notice of a tall young woman with short and messy black hair. She is wearing a long skirt that reminds me of curtains in my grandmother's house: Pale green fabric with brown and orange flowers stitched in it. She has a black t-shirt on, with something scrawled in white across her breasts. One sleeve seems shorter than the other, but that could be my hangover distorting perceptions. She catches my gaze.

I quickly resume the examination of my hands, but I already hear the footsteps coming closer to my table. I keep my eyes down and see black tennis shoes, Chuck T's, with mismatched socks coming out from inside them and covering the girl's ankles. I look up and rest my eyes on her physical features; the shirt says 'Bonjour!'

"What's wrong with your face?" this strange girl asks. Oddly enough, there is no stereotypical Canadian Accent.

"Huh?" I say, briefly dumbfounded. I brush my face, covered in the coarse hair that makes up my beard, feeling for cuts or swelling.

"You're dirty," she says, "There's a leaf in your beard . . . and sand, too!"

"Oh. . . thanks." I have nothing to say, but the desire to talk. I'm not from around here."

"Fair enough; Neither am I." There is a fair amount of one-upsmanship in her voice. "My name is Marlene." She sticks out a perfectly-crafted hand. "But don't call me that."

As I reach to shake her hand, the oddness of the statement catches up to me.

"What, uh, what should I call you then? Provided you want me to call you at all."

"Are you asking me on a date?"

"Heh, no . . . well not yet anyway. I don't . . . I don't know you."

"Hmm . . . funny. Well, judging from what you've seen, do you think you'd enjoy yourself?"

I stare around at the other patrons, hoping someone will recognize the awkwardness. 'Oh, that's just Marlene,' they'd say, and take her away. She would sit with her friends, eyes occasionally drifting to me and talking about things like leaves in beards. I look, across polished, green tables and shiny ashtrays, but they never come to take her. I keep my eyes on a potted plant near the door.

"So, what's your answer?" she persists.

"I don't . . . Yes, I suppose. Fuck it. Certainly, I'd have a damn good time. We'd paint the town red and have energy to paint it back the right color."

"You're strange."

"I'm strange?!"

"Where are you from?"

"What? Is this a normal greeting for you?"

"You said you're not from around here. I'm trying to help you associate with some people who know the town. So where did you come from? And don't try anything cute like 'from my parents.'"

"Hey now . . . now you're saying I'm stupid . . . Anyway, from Grand Rapids." She gives me an overstated confused look.

"Michigan."

"Oh, that place." She looks around, trying to remember something. She's biting her lip a little; it's fucking adorable. "Marly."

I give her an inquisitive look.

"That's what you can call me. Provided you want to call me at all. What's your name?"

"Noah, Noah Wright. And where is it that you come from?"

"Oh, all over the place. I'm American, like you. Actually, don't say that around here, they get pissed. *They're* American too."

"Why don't you have a seat? This could be interesting."

"Well, recently, I've lived in Montreal and New York. Before that, I was in Maine. But I was born and raised in Pittsburgh."

"You can't be more than 21 years old; why so much moving around?"

"Actually, I'm 24, but I move to different places to do certain things."

She's nearly five years older than me; there's something undeniably attractive about that. "Please, do elaborate."

"Well, before I moved to Maine, I decided that I wanted to be, uh, a lobster-catcher, or fisherwoman, I guess. I got a job there working on a wharf, and eventually I was catching fish and lobsters, and various other sea-creatures. But it turned out to be a pretty gross job."

"I imagine . . . gutting fish and whatnot . . ."

"No, not that. The old fisher-guys were always being, um, suggestive. I got sick of laughing it off when they said things like 'you can bait my hook,' plus, I already did what I came there to do, so I moved to Montreal."

"And what possessed you to do that?"

"I wanted to learn French."

"They do offer classes in that, you know."

"That's just it . . . I took French in high school. You know what

I learned? *Je ne parle pas francais*. That's it. So I put myself into a position where I had to learn it, and learn it I did. But by the time I had some mastery of it, I realized that some of the French speakers would be talking shit about me behind my back. I don't think they like Americans very much.

Anyway, one time, I got all mad and told one of 'em that Napoleon was a pussy. The guy started screaming at me, and I decided it was time to move again. So I went to the most American city I could think of: New York."

"Is there a gauge of American-ness in cities?"

"Oh, shut up, it was close. And I wanted to ride the subways. Actually, I wanted to *know* the subways. The routes that is. That wasn't too hard, it only took like six months. But that city is just . . . overwhelming. I had to get out. That's why I moved here."

"Wait, wait, wait . . . that's bullshit, that's not a reason. That's not something you wanted to do."

"I know . . . I hoped you wouldn't notice. See, I can't tell anyone what it is, or I'll never end up doing it."

* * * * *

I still haven't found out what that reason is. I would ask her to tell me when she was drunk: "No." Stoned: "Nuh-uh." After the passionate love we made that she unflinchingly referred to as 'fucking': "Nope."

I'm still contemplating what words to say to Marly. A clear and starry sky stretches above me, but the fog is battling to block it out. I want her to come with me. A red Honda Accord pulls into the lot, and I can tell by the enthusiastic honks that it's her.

But I only hear Felix's words from earlier echo in my mind.

* * * * *

"Noah who?"

"Shut up, Felix, you know who this is."

"The prodigal son himself, huh? I knew you'd call me eventually, you can't keep away for too long. Where the fuck are you, anyway? The Caller ID says some crazy number—Canada call—ha, you're in Canada?! Fuckin' awesome!"

"Yes, I'm in Canada. Prince Edward Island, to be more precise—Charlottetown."

"So what's going on up there?"

"Well, it's more *over* there, but not much, I guess. I met this girl, er, woman, out here and I've been staying with her for the past couple months."

"Wow, man, not taking things slow, huh? Well, good luck to you with that."

"Uh, I was calling to . . . hmm . . . well . . ."

"David, right? I feel so hurt that you weren't just calling to talk to me."

"Whatever, what, uh, what happened?"

"Don't worry about it; he's fine. When he dropped to the ground, he was pretending to be knocked out—he thought you were gonna kill him!"

"I was going to kill him. At least I got my point across, then."

"Easy, man. Him and Ryan are really pissed. They want their revenge, or something."

"Let 'em come get it; I don't care."

There's a hesitation in his voice, and I shift the phone to my other ear.

"But . . . there's something else."

"What? Are they coming to get me now?"

"Well, sort of. He pressed charges."

"What?"

"Yeah, you're inadvertently on the lam. They've got charges of assault against you and now . . . probably fleeing the scene or something too."

"Aw, fuck man. I can't believe he'd do that."

"Well, you're the one that fucked him up man . . . facial reconstruction don't come cheap."

"You gotta be kidding."

"Yeah, I am. But you did knock a few teeth out and gave him a concussion, I think." There is a long pause as he puts together his next statement. "I know this may just fuel the fire, too, but when they couldn't find you they, Dave and Ryan that is, spray-painted 'Coward' on your Mom's garage door."

"Fuckin' bitches."

"Well, I'm not sure it was them, but, I mean, who else would've really done it? Unless your mom has some vengeful clients at the hospital. Speaking of which, she's been worrying about you too. She's had to go down to be questioned a few times by the cops . . . She says she doesn't know what to think. It might be better if you come back and fess up."

I whisper "It might," but not necessarily into the telephone receiver.

"You still there, Noah?"

"Yuh-yeah, uh, I dunno. T-tell my mom I'll be there in a couple days, if you talk to her."

I don't even say goodbye. I hang up the phone, and that's the period in the last sentence in this chapter of my life. I pack my few t-shirts and jeans into a brown grocery bag

and put the bag in my car. I should just leave: No note, no long kiss goodbye; just gone. It's the easiest way. But I drive past Millie's Cafe and catch a glimpse of her, serving patrons, through the glass window. I picture confusion and tears on her face. I stop the car in front of the store. Small snowflakes start falling as I open the front door. Her face lights up when she sees me, but fades a little when she notices my expression.

"What's wrong?" she says.

"Why does something have to be wrong?" I ask.

"You left your car running, and you look like you're in a huff!"

"We need to talk."

"Yeah . . . now what's wrong?"

"Not here." I look about the place and notice the Christmas decorations that must have been put up recently. Several coffee-sipping regulars fix their eyes on me; one waves 'hello.' I try to smile, but it doesn't come out right. I wave back, to make up for it. I turn my eyes back to Marly.
"Not here."

"Well, just wait until I get home. I'll be out in an hour. Actually, I'll ask to leave early, if you want me to."

"Not at home, either. Somewhere else . . . neutral. Lawrence Beach, yes, Lawrence Beach."

"Noah. It's December—It's gonna be freezing out there."

"Bring some coffee, bring a coat; we need to talk."

I turn and walk to the exit. I feel the eyes of every person in the room following my every footstep. I close the door and deliberately turn around, and I see twenty pairs of eyes—green, brown, blue—shoot back down to whatever they were doing. I get in my car and drive to Lawrence Beach.

* * * * *

I get off the car's hood, but don't look at her car. I just silently continue to survey the empty beach. It's warmed up a bit, but it's not snowing. It's still cold. Stray sand on the pavement crunches beneath my feet as I shift my weight and turn my head.

She gets out of the car, teeth shining in a giant smile. It's almost enough to make me forget my troubles. She's wearing her patchwork jacket, seventy-odd shapes of mismatched fabric; no two pieces sharing an identifiable similarity.

"Hey, Noah-doll."

* * * * *

"What was that?" I ask.

"Noah-doll; why, do you like it?"

"Did you make that up just now?"

"Maybe I did, do you like it?"

"I like it . . . like most stuff that comes out of your mouth . . . except spit, maybe."

"How touching. . ."

I laugh, and the rain keeps pattering on the window. Marly just returned from the market, and she has her arms full of groceries. It looks like she's planning to cook breakfast. I continue to lay in her bed on my faded blue pillow.

". . . you need to learn that there's not a snappy comeback for everything," she says. "You should try just saying 'thank you,' or yes.'" There goes breakfast.

"I told you, I don't like pet names . . . they're cheesy."

". . . It just popped into my head; I had to say it."

"Okay, you can call me that, but once you break out the

'honeys' and 'dears,' I'm outta here."

"Fine. Will you help me with breakfast?"

"It's never easy with you, is it?"

"Shut up," she laughs. "Get your lazy ass up."

We've never had an argument last more than two minutes. Actually, we've never had a real 'argument.' Mainly just misunderstandings or disagreements. We're always talking. Rarely do we agree. I'd call it arguing, but it's always in good fun. No one's feelings get hurt and we don't yell. It's better than that.

"What the hell is this?" I ask, holding a red fruit-like thing.
"It looks fake."

"It's a pomegranate," she says. "I've never had one before, but I've always wanted to. I figured now's the time."

"Weird," I say, examining it closer. It has a glossy finish. The red makes its way to yellow and then there's a strange sprout at the top. I knock on it with one knuckle, and it sounds like a small pumpkin.

"I heard somewhere that the 'apple' in the Garden of Eden was more likely a pomegranate . . . You should cut it open."

I place this biblical fruit on the counter and find a decent-sized knife in the silverware drawer. I begin the incision, but red juice leaks out everywhere.

"Holy shit! Quick, get a towel!" The dark red juice is dripping to the linoleum floor of the kitchen. "I don't know where you get these ideas."

"Aren't they fun?"

I continue to cut, only now with a paper towel underneath to soak up the juice. I get it most of the way cut, and then pull the rest apart. It looks like a red and yellow beehive. There are clusters of little red kernels, each holding a tiny

seed. I eat one and it's the sweetest thing I've ever tasted. I pucker my lips.

"Is it sour?" She's digging a pan out of a bottom cupboard.

"No, it's really, really sweet, though. Do you eat the yellow stuff too?"

"Don't look at me."

I eat it, but it doesn't really taste like anything compared to the sweet little red things. "No, I think the red things are what we're going for."

"Well, get them out then. Put 'em in a bowl or something."

"There's thousands of them, though." I feel like giving up on this endeavor.

"They're not going to get themselves out, and we're not going to waste perfectly good fruit."

I grab a bowl out of the cupboard. Marly cracks five eggs and begins frying them. I wrestle with the fruit. It's defeating me. I try to pull the juice-things out, but half of them burst when I try.

"If you put it in water, they might loosen up a bit."

I mumble words that don't actually exist in English and grab a bigger bowl and fill it with water. The fruit comes apart easily now. Marly mixes in artichoke and spinach with the eggs. By the time the pomegranate is fully dissected, her creation is finished. There's white cheese on the eggs and a side of sausage. I must have missed her making toast.

"Now sprinkle a few of those on the top of the eggs."

"No way, that sounds horrible."

"Just do it. It's good."

I follow her instruction. "Wait a minute, I thought you said

you never had one of these things before.”

“Oh, yeah . . . I kinda lied. I really hate taking the kernels out though.”

“You tricked me?”

“Somebody needs to let you know you’re not as smart as you think you are. Besides, now you know how to eat a pomegranate.”

I try to be mad for a minute, but it doesn’t work. She prepares the plates and I make some coffee. We make our way to the living room, and sit on a secondhand brown couch. I start my meal and sip some coffee.

* * * * *

“I brought you coffee.” She hands me a steaming travel mug with no lid. “So, are you ready to talk now?”

“I . . . I guess. I don’t know what to say. I called Felix today.”

“Is he coming to visit? I want to meet him. He sounds interesting.”

“No, no . . . he’s not coming to visit . . . he’s not interesting either, but that’s something else altogether. He told me something . . . something’s happened at home . . . I have to . . . I have to go back.”

“Go? I guess I don’t understand. What could be so urgent?”

“I . . . I’m being brought up on charges . . . I know that sounds pretty random. The night before I left home, I . . . I kinda beat the dogshit outta this kid . . . a friend of mine. Well, not anymore, I guess.” Her face contorts in disbelief, but I continue on. “So what I told you about just leaving for ‘self-discovery’ wasn’t exactly a lie, but it wasn’t exactly the truth, either. But I need to go back, they’re harassing my mother, and the cops keep questioning her too.”

“No . . . you can’t go.”

* * * * *

"Well, I need cigarettes," I say.

Marly is fully nude, the grace of her body covered only by a worn, white sheet. I'm putting on my boots.

"You know what I mean," she says, hitting me her zebra-striped pillow.

"Actually, I was just gonna sneak out the back door and run away forever." I pull on a t-shirt that is lying casually on the ground. But, while my head is still in the shirt, I'm attacked. Marly is punching me in the stomach with the force of a fifth-grader; she is still quite nude.

"You, ungh . . . know what I, ungh . . . mean!" She is laughing, but I still can't see. I trip over something and stumble to the floor. Marly is still play-fighting me. I manage to pull the shirt all the way into its correct position. She starts kissing me with long and deep kisses, her tongue exploring my mouth like it's the sweetest candy she's ever tasted.

"Eathy, Eathy . . ." She pulls back her sensual assault. "Jeez, your gonna choke me, for God's Sake."

"No, if I choked you, it would be for my sake."

"I don't even know what to say to that . . ." I sit on the bed to catch my breath. Marly stands up and I look her up and down. Her hair has grown a bit, as hair tends to do, since the first time we met. It's a bit out-of-sorts, but almost like she planned it that way, as if she slept in a certain position all night to achieve a perfect look. She has little spots of tanned skin on her shoulders and arms, but her breasts and stomach are pale and striking. As soon as I've caught my breath, she resumes her attack. Eventually, I give up the notion of buying cigarettes anytime soon, and we spend the morning and a good part of the afternoon enjoying various aspects of each other's bodies.

I utter my first words in hours: "That's how the best sex happens, y'know?"

"What, like being attacked by a naked woman?"

"Something like that . . . Just, um, casually working your way into it, not trying at it too hard."

"You weren't trying, I was though."

"Which, I suppose you would say, is rare for a man, right?"

"Exactly . . . it all starts in the teenage years."

I glance at her, roll my eyes and turn my head away. "Alright, I can tell you've got some little nugget of wisdom you want to drop on me, so just do it."

"Fine, I think it all starts with pornography."

"Obviously."

"Don't patronize me; hear me out: It builds up the sexual aspirations of young guys so much that when they do have an outlet, they're still insatiable."

"Hey, being insatiable isn't a fault."

"Not necessarily, but let's consider what rides along with that."

"Okay, what?"

She sighs. "Don't act like you don't know." She looks at me and I shrug my shoulders. She sighs again. "Guys always want to do the crazy shit that they see in those movies; the types of things that no self-respecting female would ever do." She stares me dead in the eyes. I laugh the most uncomfortable laugh of my life.

"No, I still don't get what you're talking about . . . what's this 'pornography,' are there naked girls in it?" I pause and actually think about her statement. "Truthfully, I think that most guys probably get their techniques from it. It's probably the only reason why we feel comfortable doing anything besides missionary." I stand up and put on my shirt,

but she pulls me back down. "Just let me go buy a pack of cigarettes."

"Only if you tell me that we will be buried next to each other when we die."

"That's a bit morbid, don't you think?"

"It's not morbid; it's beautiful."

It was about time to let her in on the truth: "I love you."

As quickly as my shirt had been put on, it comes back off. "You can't just say that and expect to go to the store afterwards."

I'll never get a pack of cigarettes at this rate.

* * * * *

I light another as the wind picks up. "I want you to come with me."

"That's convenient, isn't it." It's the first time I've heard spite in her voice. "Noah, I don't have anything to fall back on . . . Anyway, I'm not going to leave with you just so you can be imprisoned, leaving me in some town that I don't want to be in. Besides, I can't just leave yet. Can't it wait?"

"No, it can't." As quickly as the spite entered her voice, detachedness enters mine. "I have to go, if you won't go with me, I'll go without you."

Her tough exterior, the hard shell of her persona, falls away and her eyes turn glassy. A tear plummets to the sand.

"I like how this is so easy for you to announce. 'Well, I'm outta here. It's been nice, but I gotta go.'"

"You think this is easy?! I've been sitting here since I saw you at work, chain smoking. I can stay here and forget responsibility and live in comfort . . . or I can go back. But when I want to go back, to see my mother or my friends, I'll

be waiting for someone with a warrant to end my good times. I'm not about to hide from something I did." I feel the stronger winds rolling in off the sea. "This all some sort of—trial for me. A cold trial on the seaside. I knew that whichever decision I made, I would be judged—you think I don't care for this, for you. But you should know that's not true. I can't help that I have to go, I just do."

"You need to know that," she says, between sobs, "once you're home, that's it. You'll be in a cell, or at least not allowed to leave the state. But even if you could, it's so hard to take that first step out the door. Why do you think I never looked back? Because I'd be trapped. You'll be trapped, too. You'll think it's so hard to get back. You'll think 'how did I ever get there to begin with?' Then you'll forget about it, about me and more importantly about us."

"How, how could I forget? I won't forget. I'll be back." I try to brush a tear from her cheek, but she pushes my hand away.

She regains her composure, and that composure begets callousness. "If that's how it has to be, then that's how it is."

There is no kiss, no embrace that can set things straight. There will be no punctuation on this last sentence of the chapter. No "The End," credits rolling, with a slow pan to a cloud-speckled sky.

She walks around to the driver's side of her car. "I hope you don't forget, Noah Wright. I can only hope you never forget."

"But I'll come back." But it's useless, she's already closed the door. The engine turns over and she keeps her eyes away from mine as she leaves the beach. I stand in that desolate parking lot and smoke two more cigarettes before I even set foot in my car. My eyes fill with tears that I try my damndest not to shed.