

The Favor

by Allison Leigh Flynn

Roger fired the Inn's bartender because he saw him steal a dinner roll from the kitchen. So he has hired a young man named Phil, with no experience, to take his place. He knows it will take some time for Phil to mesh with the rest of the staff, but is willing to have some patience because it's cheap labor. Phil practically works for free.

When Roger purchased the Inn two years ago he thought it would bring him and his wife, Margot, closer. He thought, the busier they were the better. He also understands that most people wouldn't like carrying pitchers of beer and the occasional whiskey to drunken townies. But, he is a firm believer that if a woman cannot bear children she should be serving her husband in some way. Sometimes he sits and watches Margot scurry around the bar taking orders and slapping down pints of beer and it makes him feel good. But most of the time, he just wants her to buy some new clothes, cut her ratty hair, or maybe even join one of those diet centers to lose that tire around her waist he doesn't remember marrying.

It's near closing time and it's snowing outside. Roger is sitting in the last booth near the entrance to the Inn's kitchen. He bites into his fried cod sandwich, wipes the smeared tartar from his chin, and glances up at Margot. She is carrying two pitchers of beer in each of her chubby hands and is weaving in and out of tables and swaying customers. He looks at her fat ass and feels disgusted. Roger finishes his cod and heads upstairs for the night.

The broken jukebox is playing "Free Bird" on repeat. Margot doesn't mind because the few locals remaining love Lynard Skynard. As the few stragglers leave the Inn and stumble home, she begins wiping up pools of beer on the high tops and hears Phil singing. Margot watches Phil move smoothly behind the bar. She smiles listening to his raspy voice. Phil starts mumbling the words softer and then louder until his voice starts competing with Ronnie Van Zant's. Margot blushes. She turns around; wipes her hands on her tattered apron. The dark shadows that surround his green eyes have begun to grow on her these past few days. She looks at the scar running from the top of his eyelid up through his eyebrow. She has fantasized several scenarios about his scar. She finally convinces herself it is from something dangerous and heroic. He blankly stares back at her as his dirty hands shine one of the dusty highballs.

Social situations with women were never Phil's strong suit. He looks at her full figure and tries to imagine what she must have looked like before having children. All he sees now is an old empty vessel that's been hollowed out by a ravenous husband. Phil likes her shy manner and anxious tendencies.

However, the past week with her has left him feeling annoyed. Usually by now a woman would have tried to get to know him. Margot hasn't said a word. He doesn't know what to think so he places her in the category of unattractive but still something he'd like to try anyway.

Her English features remind Phil of his first wife. He still dreams of her pale skin with splashes of freckles. Over time the same freckles that initially perked his curiosity became too much of a distraction for him, and he started losing control. He convinced himself he needed those freckles more than she did. They were his. He yearned to rub them between his fingers like soft swatches of velvet.

Margot stands by the high top tables fidgeting with her apron strings unsure of what to say. She hasn't talked to a younger man in what seems like decades but she can still recognize an awkward silence. She stares at the scar on his face.

"It's from a skiing accident, I took a pole right through my goggles," he explains while his dirty hands rub the scar.

"It doesn't look that bad, you're lucky the hair grew back," she says with hesitation.

Phil licks his thumb and starts to smooth out the hairs on his eyebrow.

"But you could use some Vitamin E to help that scar," she adds while trying to untie her apron.

Phil watches her struggle with the strings on her apron and he likes the way her lips purse together. He assumes it is something she does out of frustration. He thinks it's probably one of those little ticks that Roger only began noticing a year into their marriage. He walks slowly up to Margot and places his brown, callused hand on her forearm.

"Let me help you with that," he says looking down at the knot.

"This darned thing always gets tangled."

"My father taught me how to tie and untie square knots as a little boy. Probably the only useful thing the son of a bitch did," he chuckles.

Margot notices his perfectly white, symmetrical teeth. She thinks it's strange that he has a mouth like wealth and the body of a vagabond. Her thoughts are interrupted as her apron falls to the floor. She is embarrassed and invigorated at the same time. Phil bends down and picks up the apron off the bar floor.

"I am so sorry I startled you," he says smiling.

Watching her chest rise in shock and her face fill up with the color of a sweet rosé sends warmth into Phil's groin. In the same instant he pictures his thick hands wrapped around her wrinkly neck. He wants to feel her body beneath him fighting, squirming and then relish in her silence.

Margot grabs her apron and begins walking to the back of the bar towards the kitchen. As she reaches to shut the lights, Phil calls out to her.

“Is there any place close by to grab a haircut and a shave in the morning?”

“Oh no, no nothing will be open tomorrow since it is Sunday.”

“I didn’t even think of that...” Phil says pulling on his beard. “I wouldn’t suppose—never mind.”

Margot stands in front of the kitchen confused and filled with pity. Her eyebrows raise and eyes soften.

“I should have asked Roger for permission for you to use our bathroom before the shift,” she says softly.

“I don’t think I could have asked him for any more favors. He already hired me with no bartending experience.” He paused. “Have you ever shaved Roger?”

“No, never.” she says embarrassed.

“Have you ever shaved a man?”

“Well, my daddy used to make me when he was too drunk, but that was years ago. I was only a little girl.” She was surprised at how fast this came out of her.

“I am supposed to see my mother in the morning. She will be so upset if I look like this. I don’t know what I am going to do.”

The silence between them thickens and the snow is falling harder outside. It looks like Christmas except it is two months passed. Margot thinks this is the closest she’ll get to warmth this winter. Roger stands with his arms loosely hanging by his sides like a defeated child

“I suppose I could grab some scissors and look for a blade in the kitchen. There is some soap in the bathroom.”

“Margot, I would be forever indebted to you.” He flashes a charming smile.

Margot begins to shake. She doesn’t know why she has agreed to such a random act. She grabs a tattered bar rag that is draped over the porcelain sink. She stands in front of him and tucks it into the top of his t-shirt. He starts to relax while smelling the scent of summer in her hair. She turns around and re-ties her apron while Phil drags one of the tall bar stools into the kitchen. He sits down and leans back underneath the neon kitchen lights.

He closes his eyes, “You remember how to do this right?”

“It has been awhile.”

Margot takes a large chunk of his beard in her hand and slowly begins to cut. She can feel his warm

breath dancing across her cheeks. She takes a cooking brush, used for marinating meats, and dabs the soap and water mixture all around his jaw. Phil flinches at the cold temperature. He smiles while goose bumps cover his forearms. Margot paints the soap on his scruffy skin like a landscape.

With the knife in one hand, she slowly tilts his chin with the other. She applies the tiniest bit of pressure and begins grazing his right cheek. With every stroke she wipes the blade on her apron and tiny hairs splatter the white fabric. She moves from his right cheek to his left with stable and steady hands. Phil loves the sting he feels with every stroke of the blade.

Margot places her hand on Phil's forehead, her pointer finger touching his scar, and slowly pushes his head back further. She applies the soap to his neck. During her second stroke the blade catches and nicks Phil above his Adam's apple. Blood begins to flow down his neck and onto her hand. His eyes remain closed as his body tingles. Her hands are shaking while she places pressure on the cut. Her breathing accelerates as his adrenaline pumps. Margot listens to the silence spin around them like a tornado.

Phil hand reaches underneath her long skirt and begins to graze up her calf. An electric follows the path forged by his hand. She takes a deep breath and applies pressure to his neck. His hand reaches higher and higher and drops of sweat accumulate above his lip.

His touch is slow and filled with mystery; there is no predictability in his movements. Her mind is drenched in excitement. She doesn't even think about the dirt under his finger nails or the calluses that are lightly scraping her skin. Higher and higher his hand rises and the blood begins to fill up her face. She can feel herself becoming moist underneath her skirt. She remembers feeling this way as a young woman reading romance novels underneath the covers while Roger was passed out from one too many scotches.

Phil runs the tips of his fingers inside the waistband of Margot's underwear and she sucks in a deep breath. He can feel her body begin to fight off his touch and his desire builds. Phil stands up quickly and kicks the tall bar chair over with his leg. The noise startles Margot. Phil grabs the fat around her hips and pushes her into the stainless steel counter. A stifled moan exits her mouth. The hairs on her brow shuffle together in a look of pain. A smile spreads across Phil's mouth. His teeth that once looked inviting now look predatory and his eyes that looked tired now look dead.

As Phil slams Margot's body into the counter a milky taste seeps into her mouth from the pain. A stream of blood slides slowly from Phil's cut. She cannot make sense of the throbbing ache and yet the slight pleasure she feels from a man's hands on her curves. As his hand grabs for her ponytail she

remembers standing naked in front of the mirror as a young girl. She would take her clothes off slowly while watching her parents drive down the tree-lined driveway towards the main road. She felt embarrassed and naughty looking at her parts. It was like one day they had just appeared, ready for exploration. She had lumps and bumps and dark hair that took over. Getting married at nineteen, Roger was the only other person that had ever seen her naked. On their wedding night with drunken breath and his hand covering Margot's face, Roger's body twitched and spasmed over her.

She could tell, as Phil forcefully lowered her body to the floor, that he appreciated her curves. She felt at ease thinking someone saw her the way she wanted to be seen. God finally answered her prayers.

Beads of sweat form across Phil's forehead as he straddles Margot. The bar stool is lying on the concrete floor next to them. Margot's back aches from her body being slammed into the counter and now forced onto the unforgiving floor. Phil looks down at her and realizes she is more of a mystery than he anticipated. The last dumpy broad he took out put up a good fight. She had managed to grab a picture off her night stand and smash it across Phil's face resulting in his scar. He applauded himself for being so quick on his feet with the skiing story.

He leans down and a drop of sweat rolls off of his nose and softly falls upon Margot's cheek. She realizes he is probably nervous too. He grabs her blouse and pulls on it. Her fake pearl buttons bounce and clatter all over the floor. She smiles thinking about the naughty cover art of her forbidden books. It is just like she imagined--wild abandon.

Phil stares down at her. Her torn blouse is gaping open, revealing her cascading flesh. He is tantalized by her white skin and likes the red lines across her belly from her tight woolen skirt. Phil doesn't notice any stretch marks or excess skin around her stomach. He asks her if she has children and she shakes her head no. He is annoyed by his oversight and that no one would even miss this stupid woman. He winds up his hand and slaps her hard across the face. She doesn't yell or shutter. Her eyes are closed and her face remains expressionless.

He pulls down her skirt and underwear in a fever. Margot's eyes are still shut and half of her head is resting on the concrete floor. She doesn't know why he wants to play so rough. She cannot make sense of his sudden burst of emotion.

Margot lifts her head and watches Phil as he struggles with her underwear around her clunky winter boots. She looks at the overturned bar stool and sees the scissors lying next to it. His curly hair is still clinging to the long metallic shears. Margot's fingers reach and curl underneath one of the scissors looped handles. Phil climbs on top of her and hits her again. This time is harder; he cuts her lip. Blood

seeps into her mouth. The metallic taste makes her gag and she wishes they could move to a vacant room upstairs where at least her back wouldn't hurt so much. Margot raises the scissors up in the air.

"Hey!" Margot yells.

The fluorescent lights are buzzing above them. A pearl from Margot's shirt rolls into the stainless steel structure across from them and makes a small clanging noise. Phil is naked from the waist down and is staring at Margot as she holds one of the shears of the open scissors up to him. She slowly brings the scissors to her own neck. Phil is puzzled. She is shaking and tears are rolling down her face.

Margot slowly moves the shear an inch across her neck and blood slowly begins to flow like dark oil. "I want you too," she smiles.

Phil's stomach plummets down to his scrotum. Margot notices his expression slowly growing blank. The thick lines on his forehead are folding and contorting into different shapes as he stands up. Margot sits up and tries to cover her breasts with her ripped shirt.

"Is everything ok?" She asks in a soft voice as blood starts to flow a bit faster down her neck creating stains on her shirt.

"I'm getting the fuck outta here."

Phil stands up zips up his pants and grabs his shoes. Margot can still see the bulge in his pants. This makes her feel more at ease, he may still want her.

Phil turns to Margot and points his finger in her face. "You are fucking crazy. Fucking pig."

Phil turns around and bolts out of the Inn into the winter night air. Margot hears the door slam and the 'Closed' sign bangs against the door. She sits in silence.

She stands up as her back spasms. She reaches for a clean bar rag and holds it to her neck applying pressure. Her breathing starts to calm down and she begins to cry. She allows herself a couple minutes before going upstairs. She can't risk walking through the lobby with blood all over her so she decides on the back stairwell.

Margot climbs up the backstairs until she reaches the fourth floor where for once she hopes Roger is half in the bag. She opens the screen door slowly so it won't creak and then quietly turns the brass knob. It isn't locked which means Roger is still awake. Slowly closing the two doors behind her and tiptoeing through the dark kitchen she can see the TV flickering in the den. Roger coughs and she can hear him moving around in his recliner. She stops and hides where the den's entrance meets the hallway.

Margot pokes her head around the wall and sees Roger sprawled out in his stained undershirt,

pants unbuttoned, and whiskey in hand watching an old western. He starts sucking his teeth and making noises. Margot wishes Phil were sitting there instead. She looks at Roger and feels disgusted. She closes her eyes and thinks about Phil's eyes and teeth as they stared down at her. Chills go through her and a smile spreads across her wrinkled face. She opens her eyes and loses her balance while the floor creaks beneath her.

"Margot?" Roger yells from his recliner.

"Yes?" Margot responds while turning into the kitchen to hide her ripped clothing and dried blood on her neck.

"For Christ's sake you trying to scare me or something? I've never heard you this quiet before in my life."

"I was just going to make your late night snack but I wanted to shower first, if that is ok."

"Do what you need to do, but I want a snack. It would be better if it wasn't an hour from now."

Margot hated the smell of alcohol that sprayed off his lips. She bets Phil doesn't drink or yell at the woman he loves, and she had ruined her chances. She closes her eyes and lifts the collar of her ripped shirt and takes in his scent. The rustic sweaty aroma left a warm feeling deep in her chest..

Margot turns and peers around the wall to look at Roger again. His feet are crossed and the bottoms of his socks are stained brown from his boots. She walks quickly down the hallway and turns into the bedroom locking the door behind her. Margot stands facing the mirror. She has never seen herself so raw and beautiful before. The bedroom is dark. She watches herself strut across the room. Phil sparked some sort of revolution inside of her. She turns soft music on the clock radio and begins to run the water on for the bathtub. She turns the knob hard and the water pouring out is scalding and the whole bathroom fogs up.

She undresses and opens up the box from underneath the bed. She sees her romance novels and a lock from her father's hair she had kept after he died. Before placing her bloody clothes inside, she brings them to her flushed face and deeply inhales. Phil's scent is intoxicating and tiny sparks fly through her body and exit her toes.

Margot lies down on the cold tile bathroom floor. It feels good on her muggy skin. Tears run down her face like soft rain. The cut on her neck has hardened and left a splotch of rough dried blood. She climbs into the burning water and clenches her jaw from the heat. Her body falls softly to the bottom of the tub and her hand creeps down below. She feels like a young girl sneaking away to open up the deepest parts of her body. Roger begins knocking on the door. He is calling for her. He is waiting for his

snack. She reaches up to the newly scabbed wound on her neck and rubs away the dried layer. A tiny stream of blood flows down her neck, rising over her collarbone and then forging a path down her chest. The blood tickles the top of her hand as it drips into the water. The knocking on the door reverberates in her head and her body rises in ecstasy and trembles while she watches her darkness cloud the clean water drop by drop.

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