

SHORT STORY NIGHT



ROY

BY EMMA BINDER

Read this short story and join Neenah Public Library staff at Lion's Tail Brewing Monday, March 10th at 7:00 pm for a one-hour discussion featuring trivia, laughs, and other surprises.
21 and older.

2022 Gulf Coast Prize in Fiction: Roy

 gulfcoastmag.org/journal/35.1-winter/spring-2023/roy/

In the summer between seventh and eighth grade, my dad's brother, Uncle Roy, came to look after my sister Missy and me while our parents watched our Grandma Lori die. Lori lived in an aluminum shack down in Nebraska; she was our mom's mother, but Mom couldn't be trusted to drive herself two states southward alone. That summer, she was trapped in her brain's dark aquarium, prone to sobbing while drying dishes or seeing something bloody on TV. Over breakfast, she once glimpsed a prop plane flicker through the window in the sky, wandered out there in bare feet to look at it, and didn't return until the next morning. She needed our dad to chaperone.

Missy and I had never met Uncle Roy, but we'd seen a single photo: in it, he stood on a dirt road outside his slouch-roofed ranch house in the Upper Peninsula, wearing denim overalls and no shoes, head globed in wiry red hair. He looked nothing like our dad. To embroider the scene, Roy held a scrawny raccoon aloft in his hands like it was Simba in *The Lion King*. He and our dad only talked once a year, on Christmas, but he was the only person they could find to watch us on short notice.

We'd also heard stories: Roy drank too much, ate skinned snakes and possums. Roy, at ten years old, tried to train-hop from Iron Mountain to the Catskills to live in a hollowed-out tree. Roy had once hosted a poker game where a man got shot, but when the police arrived, they found no gun and a room full of men who claimed the bullet came through the window.

"If he starts drinking, call us," our dad said to me the day before Roy arrived. "If he brings anyone over, call us. He promised not to bring a gun, but if he does, what do you do?"

"Call you," I said.

On the day they left, Roy careened too fast into our neat gravel driveway in the North Woods, driving an old Ford Ranchero with blisters of rust on its matte black hood. It was mid-July. I could hear aluminum cans and loose tools sliding around his truck bed. By the time he pulled up, our mom was already in the car with her purse and suitcase, lying fully prostrate in the backseat.

Before our dad left the house, he bent to kiss my and Missy's foreheads. "If there was anything I could do, I'd do it," he said.

From our bedroom, Missy and I heard Roy and our dad exchange muffled words in the kitchen. Then the kitchen door slammed, and we heard our dad backing his car down the driveway. Missy and I crept out of our room. We found Roy drinking a carton of apple juice in the kitchen. He looked like he did in his photo but older: his coarse orange hair wild but

tinseled silver, his clothes faded as if leached of their color by rain. A violet scar stretched from his temple to his chin, cleaving his face like a crack in a vase. He looked at us and grinned. A tooth was missing from either side of his mouth.

“My nieces,” he said. “In living color. You two look just like your mom.”

He put down the juice and started pulling drawers in the kitchen and pantry. He rummaged through the fridge and freezer, opening jars of vinegar and bacon grease to smell what was inside. Then he started on the living room, opening desk drawers, slipping spare quarters and matchbooks in his pockets. Missy and I waited in the kitchen, listening to him scrounge through all the rooms of our house, until we finally heard him make his way to our bedroom.

I marched into the hallway and found him standing in our doorway.

“That’s our room,” I said, standing before him with my arms crossed. Missy stood behind me, watching. He turned around.

“I get it,” Roy said, slowly looking from Missy to me. “She’s the princess, and you’re the tough guy.”

Missy and I both blushed with pleasure.

That night, Roy told us he was off to find a drink, and peeled down the driveway in his Rancho. Two hours later, he marched into the kitchen with a twelve-pack of Miller, three scratch tickets, and a rifle wedged under his armpit. As soon as Missy saw the gun, she started to cry.

“Don’t worry,” Roy said. “I’ll show you how to hold it.”

“We need to eat dinner,” I said.

“Sure,” Roy said. “I know that.”

Roy cracked a beer and got cooking: hamburger helper from the pantry, fried in Crisco and Kraft steak sauce. The room bloomed with steam and the smell of fat. Missy, at eight years old, hung in the kitchen doorway, while I sat at the kitchen table, watching Roy drink two, three, four beers in the span of a half hour.

“Is it true you eat snakes?” Missy said shyly, half-hiding behind the doorway.

“I’ve been known to eat a snake or two,” he said. “But that’s not the craziest thing I’ve ate.”

He’d eaten cow tongues, he told us, shoe tongues, cattails, prison food. He’d eaten hundred-year-old pickled eggs from behind a bar shelf in Houghton. You’re lying, we said, and he shrugged, then set two bowls before us of hamburger helper that turned my stomach before I even tasted it. Roy himself didn’t eat it, just headed to the screened-in porch with a beer in

his front overalls pocket and a pouch of tobacco. Smoke wafted through the kitchen window and mingled with the overhead lamplight, at which point I realized that smoke was still curling from the stove. I got up to shut off the burner, and when I turned around, I found Missy dramatically scraping her meal into the garbage.

“When are Mom and Dad coming back?” she said, eyes glassed over with tears.

“Not until Lori dies,” I said. I squeezed her shoulder. “Come on. It’s not like Mom does much better.”

Roy wobbled back inside, garbed in cigarette smoke, and handed us each a scratch ticket. He showed us how to rub off its coating with a penny. Missy gave a yelp: she’d won twenty dollars.

“Lucky girl,” he said. “I’ll redeem that for you.” Missy handed him the ticket and he slid it into his pocket, never to be seen again.

That summer, I’d just become friends with two girls from school named Natalie Golding and Lauren Shipley. I already knew that our friendship wasn’t going to last, but I felt lucky to have friends at all. I’d been eating lunch by myself for years. They treated me like a project they’d undertaken with burdened hearts: they somberly taught me how to braid my hair at sleepovers, told me what music to listen to, sternly chided me when I said something odd. One night they dressed me up in Natalie’s clothes, since she and I were supposedly the same size: flare jeans, a tight pink shirt, and a dust-blue patent leather belt. I stood in front of them in Natalie’s room while they stared, heads cocked.

“I don’t know what it is,” Natalie said. “It’s like it doesn’t fit.” She circled me once.

“Can you stand up straighter?” Lauren said.

I pulled my broad shoulders back.

“I guess that’s better,” Natalie said. “Sort of.”

I was already expending huge amounts of energy to look and act more like a girl: tweezing the fledgling hairs between my eyebrows, shaving my legs and armpits, wearing my mom’s drugstore lipstick at school. That year, I’d finally quit wearing the loose-fitting boy’s clothes that I’d liked since I could remember. None of it felt natural, but what did? Becoming friends with Natalie and Lauren seemed like a fluke, a lucky accident that the universe would soon correct. In the meantime, I tried to learn, copying the way Natalie’s sentences curled at their ends, or how Lauren, who took year-round ballet and gymnastics lessons, walked as if led by a firm kite string.

I rode my bike to Natalie's house a few days after Roy showed up. Just that afternoon, he'd taken me and Missy into the backyard, rifle in hand, and set up a line of beer cans on a stump. It was time we learned how to shoot, he told us. My dad's instructions rang in my ears – *What do you do?* – but Roy was unlike anyone I'd ever met, and something told me that if I didn't learn everything he had to teach me, I would never get another chance.

When I got to Natalie's, I told her and Lauren about Roy and the gun. The bone-splitting sound of it. The way I sent bullets into the crowns of trees, and all Roy did was whoop, like I'd done something great. I pulled the front of my shirt down and showed them where a violet-blue bruise was already growing on my collarbone from the rifle's kickback.

"That sounds dangerous," Natalie said, glancing at Lauren.

"It totally was," I said. I felt exhilarated and strange. I plopped down on the floor of Natalie's room. "What do you guys wanna do?"

"We were going to ride bikes to the ice cream shop," Natalie said. "You can come. Unless you want to shoot people with your uncle."

I rolled my eyes and stood up. "Let's go," I said.

I bounded down the stairs and pulled on my white high-tops from the Salvation Army, then walked outside with Natalie and Lauren close behind me. Natalie's mom, Mrs. Golding, was in the yard in a visor and sunglasses, hosing the hedges.

"You girls ride safe," she said, waving as we biked down the drive.

On our way into town, Natalie and Lauren pulled ahead of me, talking in tones that I couldn't hear. Sometimes their friendship with each other seemed coded and secretive, characterized by a barrier I couldn't pass. I pedaled faster, re-playing Mrs. Golding's words: *You girls, you girls, you girls*. I always winced when I heard those words, as if bitten.

Behind them on the road, I tried to pedal faster, focusing only on the crunch of my tires against gravel and the steady pulse of my heart. Ahead of me, Natalie and Lauren erupted in laughter, like two roses blooming at the same time.

Most days Roy slept until noon or one o' clock, so Missy and I spent our mornings watching PBS in the hot living room with the windows open. Dust from the sofa seats wafted through sunlight like flour. When we got bored, we did handstands in the yard in bare feet or wandered in the woods that bordered our backyard, where a skinny creek unspooled like a piece of yarn off Torch River. These mornings, I felt like I was only waiting for Roy to get up and make my life interesting.

Then we would hear the slam of the refrigerator door, heavy boot-steps on the floorboards: Roy had sprung alive and started drinking.

First thing, he started making phone calls. He called a guy in Manistique who owed him money, then another guy who he claimed was his friend but never picked up the phone. Then he left a rambling voicemail on the machine of a woman named Daisy in the Upper Peninsula, who, we gathered, had recently left him for another man. He told Daisy's machine that he was getting his act together. When he got back to Houghton, he would light candles for her, reel in the stars, buy her gold hubcaps, whatever.

"I'm at my brother's place," he rambled into the phone. "These girls need me, honey. But I'll be back as soon as I can, my flower, my love."

Missy and I listened to him from the living room with the TV on mute. Then he readied his tackle-box and went fishing in the back-woods creek. Missy and I trailed behind him through the woods, asking him questions.

"Do you have a job?" I asked.

"I'm a purveyor of what other, lesser men call trash," he said.

"Why do you drink so much?" Missy said.

"To ease the pain of my memories."

"What's your worst memory?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!"

Downstream from Roy, we waded in the creek while he fished for brown trout. We listened to him curse and mumble and sing out-of-tune Hank Williams. I watched him thread worms on a hook with his broad, coarse hands graven in dirt. When the sun started angling slantwise through the pines and mosquitoes came out in droves, the three of us made our way back to the house, at which point Roy started drinking with a real sense of purpose.

Nights, he took off in his truck for the Blue Dog, a gravel-lot bar a few miles down the road with flickering neon in the windows. Depending on if he lost or won money playing pool, he either came back in a grand or foul mood. One late night, he brought a woman home. Tense in our side-by-side twin beds, Missy and I heard her voice through our bedroom door, shining through the dark like an axe-blade.

"Who is that?" Missy said, her voice small.

"How should I know?" I said.

Missy started to cry softly into her pillow. "I don't like him," she said.

"Shh," I said.

Music came on from the kitchen radio and the woman laughed. Glasses clinked, Roy let out a hoot, the music turned up. After not too long, we heard them stumbling into our parents' room, where through the thin walls we could hear them breathe and moan. Missy put a pillow over her head but I went on listening, trying to imagine what the woman looked like.

The sounds didn't last long. My throat was dry, heart pounding. I felt the way I did when I bought candy from the cashier named Willa at the Rhinelander Sunoco, a high school senior who had long brown hair with streaks of red, ears laddered with silver rings. I always not to look at her face, but instead watched her hands as she counted change. They were small and deft. I fell asleep thinking of coins slipping between her fingers, clattering to the counter. Her narrow hands reaching to pick them up again.

My dad phoned one night from the hospital in Nebraska where our grandmother was dying.

"How's everything up there?" he said. "Is Roy drinking?"

I thumbed a bottle of Old Crow on the counter. "No. Everything's good."

"He's not acting strange? He's feeding you?"

"Yep."

"What did you eat last night?"

I thought back to the last dinner I'd had at Natalie's house. "Casserole. And a salad with croutons."

"That doesn't sound like Roy," my dad said. "But I'll take it."

"How's Grandma?"

"Like we expected," he said. A steady beeping noise pulsed in the background. "Your mom's fine. Don't worry about her. We'll be back as soon as we can, okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"Sit tight," he said. "And look after your sister."

Roy shot and cooked a possum living under our porch steps. He rustled between couch cushions for change. He came home one evening with a burst vessel in his eye, blood stitching the cracks in his teeth, from a pool game gone sour. Some nights he stumbled inside after a night at the Blue Dog and wept into Daisy's voicemail machine.

"I'm hurting," he cried. "I've got nobody. I'm in this strange town, and these girls need me, honey, but I'm here all alone..."

The night after his pool fight, I found Roy on the screened-in porch, looking contemplative. He'd decided to stay home, he said, while his eye and his pride healed. The broken blood vessel made his right eye look livid and evil. I sank into the chair beside him and asked him to tell me about the time he ran away to the Catskills.

"You ever read that book, *My Side of the Mountain*?" he said. "No? I don't know what happens in schools anymore." He sank into his chair and took a long pull from his bottle of Old Crow. "I packed some bread and clothes and my dad's Swiss Army knife. It was easier than you might think. Early in the morning, I took off for the trainyard, and made it across state lines before the police caught me and took me home."

"Why did you do it?"

He drank again and looked out the screened window. The porch light came ablaze in his red and silver hair, dousing him in what looked like a halo. "I just didn't fit in," he said. "Not like your dad always did. I wanted to live in a different way, getting dirt in my teeth." When he looked at me, his eyes were shining. "You're a little rougher than some. You understand."

I nodded. I did, I did.

One evening, Roy drank more than usual and had an idea: we would all go to the casino together.

"You girls play slots before?" he said.

We shook our heads. Before Roy had mentioned it, I didn't even know there was a casino in Rhineland.

"Let's go," he said. He tucked a half-empty fifth of Jim Beam into the front pocket of his overalls and pulled his boots on, then stumbled out the kitchen door without tying his laces. We followed him and climbed into his truck. As he backed down the driveway, he veered to the left and drove into a lilac bush.

"Goddamn," he said, and pulled forward. "Fuckin' trees everywhere." On the second try, he made it onto the road. All the way to the casino, he drifted onto the shoulder and braked too hard at stop signs. I thought I was going to be sick. Missy burrowed her head in my armpit. But we eventually pulled into the parking lot of a huge building, as big as a hotel.

"Like riding a limousine to heaven," Roy mumbled.

We followed Roy inside, where we found a brave new world of light and sound and smoke. Slot machines made sounds like coins dropping into bright tin cans. Missy latched herself to my hip, gripping my hand so tightly I had to shake her off. Patrons sat wreathed in cigarette smoke, fixed on machines or broad, green tables with cards and dice. Roy gave us each two dollars and told us he was going to play blackjack.

“Win big,” he said, and wandered off.

Missy and I lingered for a few minutes behind a man playing slots, her head burrowed in my hip, while I studied what he did. It seemed simple enough. We sat down behind a slot machine, and had just fed it all four of our dollars when a uniformed woman walked up to us.

“Hey,” she said, squinting at us. “How old are you two?”

“I’m thirteen,” I said. “She’s eight.”

“That’s not good,” the woman said. “You here with your parents?”

“Our uncle.”

“Where’s he?”

We pointed him out. Roy sat slouched forward at the blackjack table with one overalls strap falling off his shoulder.

“Let’s get this sorted out,” she said. The three of us walked over to Roy. She tapped him on the shoulder. “Did you bring these kids in here?” she said.

Roy looked at us. “They’re my lucky stars,” he said.

“This is no place for little girls,” she said.

“Did you say little girls?” Roy stood up and stumbled. I could see the black cap of his Jim Beam poking out of the top of his overalls pocket. “This one here,” he said, pointing at me, “is the toughest guy I know.”

“Alright,” she said. “Time to go.”

“Let me finish this game.”

“Not a chance,” she said. “Get out or I’ll call the police.”

Roy raised his hands. “Hey. We’re on our way.” He pulled the Jim Beam from his overalls pocket and took a sip. “We’re on our way.”

The woman scowled. We followed Roy out of the casino, the uniformed woman walking close behind us. People stared at us, but I walked with my chest puffed out, proud as hell: *the toughest guy I know*.

Roy seemed more clearer and calmer as we drove home, as if the bright lights of the casino had shocked him into sobriety. He turned the radio on and sang along softly. Back on the dark road leading back to our parent’s house, we saw a grouse dart through his headlights.

To our surprise, Roy swerved into the right shoulder, hitting it with his right front tire, eliciting a bright shriek from Missy.

Roy pulled over to the right and asked for his work gloves from the glovebox. I handed them to him.

“Why did you do that?” I asked.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Just a little North Woods hunting.”

On the bench seat between us, Missy began to cry. “It’s dead,” she said.

“That’s right!” Roy said cheerfully. He got out of the truck. In the glare of his headlights, we watched him kneel at the front tire and stand up, holding the bloodied bird in his gloved hand. He held it by its broken neck and waggled it for us in front of the windshield. Missy let out a sob. He circled to the back of the truck, threw the grouse in the bed, and got back behind the wheel.

“It’s an ancient rivalry, girls,” he said to her. “Bird versus truck. Bird never wins.”

The next night, after helping Roy dress and quarter his grouse, I went to Natalie’s house for dinner. It had only been a week since I’d last seen Natalie and Lauren, but it could have been years; I felt older from spending time with Roy, steely and changed. When Natalie opened the door, I felt her looking long at my clothes and face before letting me inside. I followed her to the kitchen, where Lauren was sitting at the table and Natalie’s mom stood over the sink, washing pans. She looked at me and paused.

“Sophie,” her mom said, looking at my jeans. “Is that blood?”

I thumbed a rusty spot on my thigh. “Me and my uncle went hunting.”

“You need to change clothes, sweetie,” she said, frowning her brow. “I’ll go get some of Natalie’s from the dryer.”

She left the kitchen and I stood there, suddenly afraid to touch anything or sit down. Natalie and Lauren stayed sitting at the kitchen table, staring at me. They had chicken and green beans on their plates, paper towels folded into halves.

“You have a feather in your hair,” Lauren said flatly.

I rustled around and found it: a single mottled grouse feather, which I plucked from my hair and laid on the tablecloth. All three of us stared at the small brown feather. I should have felt ashamed, but I felt giddy and proud.

“I think I’m gonna go,” I said after a long beat of silence. “I have to help my uncle with something.”

I turned and walked out of Natalie's house, knowing that it was all over, just like I knew it would be.

That night, I found Roy on the screened-in porch, drinking alone and rolling a cigarette. Shiny, dried grouse blood stained the front of his overalls.

"Back so soon?" he said.

"Yeah," I said, sinking into the chair beside him. "What are we doing tomorrow?"

Roy clumsily lit his cigarette. "What do you want to hang around with an old man for?" he said. "You don't have any other friends?"

My face flushed. I suddenly felt burning mad at Roy. I got up to leave the porch and he waved me back down.

"Sit," he said. "Just teasing you."

We watched bugs circle the overhead porch light for a while.

"You looking forward to your mom and dad coming home?" he said.

"Not really," I said, thumbing the coin of blood on my jeans.

"Is that so."

"My mom cries all the time. She just sits around all day."

"Well, she's an odd woman," Roy said. "I never thought she was right for your dad."

From the dark, a howl gleamed from the woods. Roy got up, opened the screen door. The porch light seemed trapped inside his nest of hair, which he threw back at the sky as he hollered back into the dark. I could see the moon wobbling over the pines, brimful and gibbous, as if about to spill.

"You know your mom and I once made love," Roy said, wheeling back around. He let the screen door slam behind him. "She's a wild horse. I've got a porch around my heart for that woman, to this day."

I sat quietly for a moment, absorbing the idea. "Does my dad know?" I said.

"Maybe," he said, easing back into his chair. "Or maybe he's willed himself not to." He looked at me and shook his finger. "You can't help who you love, Sophie. It's your fate."

"What about Daisy?"

“Daisy?” he said, as if surprised that I knew the name. “Well, sure. A person needs company.”

As I was getting ready for bed that night, Roy’s words circled around my head: it’s your fate, it’s your fate. I thought about Willa at the Sunoco, her long fingers, the little shells of her ears. My fate.

I stood for a long time in the bathroom after brushing my teeth, staring at myself. In the two weeks that Roy had been at our house, I’d forgotten to shower more than once or shave my legs. My unbrushed hair had grown matted and thick. I looked wild. A thumbprint of dirt smeared my cheek. I felt different, full of strength and hot blood, like I would never again go back to school, wear someone else’s clothes, or pretend to be what I wasn’t.

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A few days later, the phone rang. It was our dad. Lori had finally died, he told me, and now he and our mom were on the road back from Nebraska. They would be back late that night, or early the next morning.

“Let me talk to Roy,” he said.

I peered through the kitchen window. Roy’s truck was gone, I told him.

“Well, tell him we’ll be there soon,” he said. He sounded worn thin.

I laid awake all night, buzzing with dread. At three in the morning, I heard the distinctive sound of Roy’s Ranchero pulling into the driveway, then the slam of the kitchen door, and his heavy boots stamping through the living room. Several hours later came another car and the muffled sounds of our parents talking through the window. Dawn crept forward, dousing my bedsheets in pink and white.

I crawled out of bed and shook Missy awake. We met our parents as they were walking into the kitchen, where Roy’s gun sat propped against the wall, and beer cans cluttered the table and counter. My mom looked older than she did when I last saw her, her face scribbled with pain, hair listless and greasy. Her arms felt thin as she hugged me. Then we heard a groan, and in came Roy from the living room, wearing the rumpled clothes he fell asleep in, boots still on his feet.

His face changed when he saw our mother. They stood still for a moment, apprehending each other. What passed between them was silent and electric. She stepped forward to try to slip past him on her way to her bedroom, but Roy reached to take her hand. She pushed him away.

“Don’t,” she said.

Our dad, meanwhile, seemed not to see their exchange. He was too busy staring at the state of the kitchen: the gun, the beer cans and bottles, cards and cigarettes littering the table.

“Roy,” he said, his voice quavering. “What is all this.”

Missy and I went back to our bedroom before too long. But we heard their whole fight unspooling through our window: our dad cursing out Roy, Roy howling with laughter, our dad throwing beer cans at his truck until he drove away. Cans rattling in Roy’s Rancho bed as he sped down the driveway and onto the road. His bright, unruly hair shining almost audibly through the rear truck window.

Eventually, our dad came into our room and knelt between my and Missy’s beds, where we sat with our knees pulled up to our chins. He told us that he was sorry, he should have known better; everything would go back to normal, now. But I knew that it wouldn’t, even if I never saw Roy again. I didn’t want it to. The room was thick with light. There was a spark growing inside me, calling me into a different future, like a train hurtling fast into the wilderness.