

# The Messenger

---

Volume 2009  
Issue 1 *The Messenger*, 2009

Article 41

---

2009

## Bridgeport

Madeline Gordon

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gordon, Madeline (2009) "Bridgeport," *The Messenger*: Vol. 2009: Iss. 1, Article 41.  
Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger/vol2009/iss1/41>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Messenger* by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

# Bridgeport

MADELINE GORDON

**A**t 8:50 A.M. I hear the tinkle of the bell as the door swings open on its rusty hinges. I inhale deeply to stop myself from immediately spinning around to see who it is and exhale slowly as I attempt to casually look over my shoulder, pretending to be completely engrossed in my inventory sheet. Every morning for the past year, he has pulled into the parking lot between 8:45 and 9:00 in his rusty, red Chevy pickup with his chocolate lab, Petey, in the passenger seat. Depending on the season, his outfit varies from faded blue jeans, with a dip-tin circle on the back right pocket and a plaid flannel button up to the same pair of jeans with a thick, grey wool sweater – patched at the elbows. Always on his feet is the same pair of work boots, caked with farmyard dirt and manure. We don't speak much, despite the mumbled hellos and safe topics, such as the weather and the potato harvest. Each day he buys a large black coffee with extra sugar and a box of wintergreen Tic-tac's. On Sundays, he adds local paper to his order, out of which he takes the page with the police report and the comics, before slapping it back on the counter and walking out of the door, letting it swing shut behind him.

\*\*\*

"Hey, thanks for picking me up." The dry heat of the car slapped my face, making my cheeks tingle and my ears burn, as I slid onto the cracked, leather seat, clunking my boots together outside of the door to knock off most of the snow before slamming the door behind me.

"Anytime. Here, I picked this up on the way over." I took the paper cup he passed me, careful not to let our fingers brush, and let the heat seep its way into my palms, the burn momentarily taking my mind away from the dull throbbing that had taken up permanent residence in my belly.

"Oh, uh, thanks."

"Sure. My mom always drinks tea when she is stressed. I thought it might help."

"Yeah," I stuttered, faltering for a response, dumbfounded by his shallowness. The heat in the car was suffocating. Or maybe it was just being back in that truck with him that was suffocating. I shivered despite the sweat that was beading on my forehead and took a sip of tea so that I didn't have to say anything more. I cringed at the aching sensation that filled my mouth and I struggled not to spit the scalding brown liquid all over the windshield. I swallowed instead, the burn spreading through my chest, before settling in my stomach, warming me from the inside out.

"So, uh, I found a clinic in the phone book," he ventured. "It's in Wellesley. I figure that's a safe bet since it's pretty far from here." His voice was steady, but his words clipped, as brittle as the icicles that hung from the mailbox, threatening to shatter at any minute from the tiniest disturbance.

"That's fine. Just go."

Without glancing at me, he reached forward and flicked on the radio, the Red Hot Chili Peppers relieving us of the painful silence that had descended over the cab, like the fog that precipitated on the windows, hiding us from the world outside. He rubbed the windshield with his sleeve, the plaid cotton soaking up our hot breath, and squinted as he started driving through the snow.

\*\*\*

Every Sunday, the ladies in the coffee line at the Bridgeport Baptist Church whisper gossip back and forth while fanning themselves with their hymnals and pretending like they are discussing power of the service. There is not much in our small town that escapes the wrath of those bored, menopausal mothers with too much time on their hands. When I was in ninth grade, my mother came home from church and warned me about the handsome Miller boy who lived in the once-white farmhouse on the other side of town. He was apparently too excitable for the good ladies at church to look past – a bad egg, she said. By the time I was in my junior year, the Miller boy was a legend in Bridgeport – sweeping girls off of their feet and winning every late-night, back-road car race in the county in that dinged up old pickup that he was so proud of.

One time, his father caught him with a town girl in compromising position in his truck, Dirt Derby ribbons hanging from the rear view mirror and a shotgun rack in the back, so he was shipped off to military school in Texas. At least that's what my mother told me happens to children who don't mind their parents and turn their back on God's wishes. Mr. Miller never would tell anyone who that poor, humiliated girl was, so the coffee line ladies lost interest and the Miller boy's scandal took the back burner to more interesting gossip, like the postman and the kindergarten teacher running away together.

He came back before my senior year in high school, subdued, the spark gone from his eyes, the mischievous grin, that could send any adolescent girl's heart catapulting out of her chest, broken by the lines forming around his dimples. He wore a three day old beard and deep purple shadows under his eyes. These days, they say the Miller boy is more like a shadow than a person, floating in and out of town without speaking to anyone. But I have spoken to him every day for the past year. My eyes follow the movement of his head behind the pastry case, his familiar floppy brown mop swaying back and forth between the muffins and the donuts while he fills his daily cup.

\* \* \*

We drove in silence, the weight of my conscience pressing like a brick on my chest, making my breaths come in short gasps until my head was spinning. I clutched the tea, now cold, in my left hand so that he couldn't try to hold it – not that he wanted to. He grasped the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white from the strain, or maybe it was just the cold. After about an hour, I asked him to stop because I had to use the restroom – I was peeing every five minutes these days. I bought a pack of Virginia Slims on my way out of the gas station to calm my nerves and chain smoked until my head felt as foggy as the windshield and my lungs ached more than the rock in the pit of my stomach. He just stared straight ahead and drove.

\* \* \*

As he fills his coffee, I quickly turn back to counting the cartons of Oakhurst milk on the floor behind the counter, praying he won't catch my eye. I hear his boots clunking across the tiles, and turn to face him as casually as possible, feigning oblivion to our daily routine of ignorance.

"Morning, Dan."

"Hey, Soph. Sorry about the mud," he ventures glancing at the floor. "The snow melt's creating quite a mess out there."

"Oh, don't worry about it; the floor's filthy anyways. I'm just glad it's finally turning into spring."

"No, no, the store looks great. I have been meaning to tell you, you've done a great job with the

place. We have always needed a spot like this in town. It's so nice to have a place to pick things up around here rather than having to go all the way into Wellesley."

"Yeah." My face burns as my heart starts to throb. I snatch the five he is holding out and punch the keys on the cash register with a shaking finger.

\* \* \*

"You don't have to do this unless it's what you really want." His voice snapped me back from my nicotine-induced coma, making the hair on my forearms prickle. God. I hated how he could do that to me. Just hearing his voice made my whole body vibrate with electricity until I thought I was going to puke.

"I have to, I don't have a choice."

"I can take care of you."

"You have your whole life ahead of you. What about college?"

"Well, what about you parents? They could help too. And mine. We could do this together."

"You can't be serious. Can you imagine the scandal? 'The minister's daughter gets knocked up by the town bad boy.' Jesus. The entire town would have a field day."

"Who cares what they all say? It doesn't have to be like this."

"No. It does. Please don't ask me again."

"But Sophie, I want..."

"Dan, I've made up my mind."

"But..."

"NO."

A wave of heat took over my body, sweat breaking out on my hairline and soaking through my cotton cardigan – then cold. Goose bumps tingled on the nape of my neck, sending shivers down my spine. Stars blinked across my vision and blackness started to creep in on the sides. "Dan. Stop. Stop!" The truck had barely reached the shoulder of the highway before I swung the door open, stumbling out into the cold, clammy palms on my knees, vomiting into the dirty snow bank.

\* \* \*

I slide his change across the counter to ensure our hands will not touch. I force myself not to look at him as I turn back to the inventory sheet, even though I can feel the heat of his stare on back of my head. We stand in awkward limbo, the air between us charged with unspoken words and broken memories. Petey's barks in the parking lot pierce the silence.

"Alright, well I should be going," he mumbles. "See you around, Soph."

"Bye." I do not move until the bell tinkles and the door slams behind him, and then I can finally

breathe again. I feel a well-known prickle on my forearms and look down to see goose bumps raised on my skin. The engine revs and gravel crunches under the tires as his truck pulls out of the parking lot and onto Route 9, heading out towards the farm.

\* \* \*

I stood in the snow, nausea waves washing over my entire body, shaking from either the cold or the vomiting, or both. I could see his shadow through my legs as he approached and tentatively started rubbing my back. The heaviness of his hand on me brought another bout of nausea and I lurched forward, dry heaving, feeling like my insides were being pulled up through my throat.

“Please, don’t touch me,” I moaned. He pulled his hand back as if he had been burned and stuffed it in the pocket of his jeans. I closed my eyes and focused solely on breathing the cold, cleansing winter air – in through your nose, out through your mouth. In. Out.

He walked back to the truck and returned with a Poland Spring bottle and a pack of Trident, placing them on the dirty snow bank next to me. “Are you feeling any better?”

“I guess so.” I straightened up slowly, afraid to move too quickly for fear of more sickness. I took a sip of the water. It tasted stale, probably left over from one of our summer drives to the lake. I would tell my mother that I was going to volunteer at the soup kitchen in Wellesley for the day, but instead I would walk to the high school parking lot and hop into his truck and stick my bare feet out of the window while we drove for hours – smoking cigarettes and singing along to Rascal Flatts, letting the wind whip through our hair until it was too tangled to run your hands through. I took another sip and let the tangy liquid linger in my mouth before spitting it out in the snow, the old water reminding me of the two of us, stale and bitter.

\* \* \*

Every day after the coffee exchange and the terribly stiff conversations, I listen to his engine disappear down the road until I cannot hear it any longer – only then can I finally catch my breath. Watching his tail lights blink at the stop sign always makes me cringe, bringing me back to that winter. When he left town after Christmas, people said he was never coming back – that he had grown too big for our small town and he had gotten out for good. He would travel the world with the Army and would never look back. I never said a thing.

He sent a letter in the spring, postmarked from Boston, the wobbly script on the front of the envelope smudged from the journey. I stared at the unopened envelope for three days: at the sunflower stamp peeling up at the corners, at the smeared return address, at his sloppy handwriting that I could distinguish anywhere, at my name and his on the same piece of paper. I carried it with me constantly until I had memorized every aspect of the envelope, until I knew the feel of the paper in my hands and the density of the letter inside. Then I threw it, still unopened, in the trashcan on the corner by school, unable to bring myself to hear his plea for forgiveness – unable to stomach his reasons for running away. Every once in a while I think about that envelope and his secrets that were sealed inside – the only barrier keeping me from them a bit of glue – and how different my life could have been if I had only been brave enough to open that flap.

\* \* \*

We sat in the parking lot of the clinic for forty minutes, the snow piling up on the windshield wipers in fragile little mountains until a wind gust came and whipped them away, scattering the snowflakes in every which way, turning the piles into a swirling cloud of white. We sat in silence, watching the

swirl around us, not moving, not speaking, barely breathing. My mind was as blank as the whiteness dancing and twirling around me. He looked at me every couple of minutes, nodding his head in my direction, eyes begging me to speak, but I couldn't say what he wanted to hear – so I said nothing.

“Soph, please say something.” His voice was deep and pensive, unlike his usual relaxed manner. How could we have changed so much? We would never go back to the two people we were this summer, two carefree teenagers – in love with life and in love with each other.

“I'm scared.”

“Don't be. I'm here with you and I'm not going anywhere. You don't have to be scared. If this is really what you want to do, I'll hold your hand the entire time, I promise.”

“No, I want to do this alone.”

“But Soph...” his voice faltered, cracking. “Are you sure? I mean, if that's what you really want...”

Tears boiled up in my eyes, but before I could be swayed, I grasped the door handle and pushed, flooding the cab with the frigid air. I jumped down and slammed the door behind me, stalking across the parking lot with a stiff back and shaking knees, leaving boot prints behind me in the snow drifts.

\* \* \*

