



# Wheelwoman

December 25, 2022 1  By J.R. ANGELELLA

Molly Blaze left the marriage with the only thing she brought into it—her 1987 Buick Regal Limited T-Type Turbo. Funeral black. Chrome bumpers and trim. Blood red velour pillow seats and paneling. The first thing she bought herself after college. An investment in her future. And Ritch stole it. Hid it away somewhere. To make a point about her profession. She, of course, couldn't prove it. But the only thing in her name coming out of the marriage was that Buick and the only thing unaccounted for in the division of assets.

Molly finished her cigarette on the roof of the Calvert Street Courthouse Parking Lot, leaned over the railing and flicked the butt at the courthouse below. For good measure, she chased it with spit. Car after car left the lot, signaling toward the highway. A Friday afternoon at the ass-end of April, the workers booked it out of downtown Baltimore and back to their homes. Back to their families. Ants fleeing their hill. Or returning to it. Molly couldn't tell which.

She struck her Bic and aimed the corner of her divorce documents into the flame. Damn thing caught fire fast. She set it on the ledge and watched it curl into ash.

Her phone rang. Her mid-teen stepdaughter Quinn.

"So?" Quinn asked, annoyed. *Is it done?*

"Yeah," Molly said, unfortunately. *It's done.*

Quinn said *fuck* twice, her voice weak.

"My word exactly," Molly said.

Emotion was a weakness to Molly. Self-indulgent. Something to exploit in others, not revel in. A byproduct of fear. Molly was fueled by fear, not limited by it. Quinn could cry. She had her father's DNA after all, but Molly's imprint was there too, which was why Quinn shut her tears down. Molly was proud of Quinn's strength.

"My dad there?"

"If I know your dad, he's looking for me right now. The only man ever to divorce his wife and then hunt her

down to make sure she's okay."

"You know he's probably crying."

"I'm sure he has his tissues."

"What now?" Quinn asked.

"Now things go on."

"When can I see you?"

Molly picked tobacco off her tongue and flicked it to the ground. "If I had my car, I'd say you could see me today."

"He says he didn't take it," Quinn said.

"Gotta run, baby girl," Molly said, not having it.

And Quinn hung up hard.

Molly scanned the street below and saw her ride at the corner. He was right on time. She preferred him to be early, but it was better than being late, she thought. She remembered a quote her driving instructor Gladys War, a quick-tempered grandma, said during one of Molly's six practice hours twenty-five years ago—*patience is something you admire in the driver behind you and scorn in the one ahead*. Same goes for being on-time, she thought.

The driver lowered his window, extended his arm, and aimed his thumb up. *I'm here*.

Molly smiled. He knew she was watching. Good boy, she thought. I'm always watching. I see everything. Which is why she also knew Ritch was on the roof of the parking garage behind her.

"The thing that's so appealing about a divorce," she said, sticking her phone in her purse, "is I never have to see you again." Molly turned and held out her pack of cigarettes, offering him one. "And yet here you are."

He declined, eyes dropping to the ground, small shake of the head. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"You didn't knock me down, Ritch. I'm still standing."

He didn't respond. Or look up. Just stood there. Soft. And small. Something she once found attractive, his sensitivity. But not anymore. Ritch held tears in his eyes. Always an easy crier. It made Molly angry.

"I know you hate it when I get emotional," he apologized, smashing away his tears with his palms. He reached into his pocket and retrieved tissues. Dabbed them.

Ritch always called his tears *getting emotional*.

And here she was again. At the fisher that she had been faced with for twenty years with him. The last ten married to him. A decision in how she was to respond. He was right. Molly did hate it when he got emotional. But not because he was emotional. It was because he used his tears unflinchingly. It wasn't the tears, but the conflict avoidance the tears brought with it. If he cried, he could circumvent an actual conversation and shut down whatever issue was at play. Whereas she took adversity and obstacle head-on. Like a fucking bull.

So, she had a decision—either pounce on him with fangs and all or sacrifice herself one final time and appease his weakness.

She decided to go a different way instead.

"Where's my car?" she asked, politely.

"You talk to Quinn?" he avoided.

Molly lit another cigarette. "Does *she* have my car?"

"You filled out a police report," he said. "If it turns up, they'll track it back to you and return it."

"They'll do the same thing with a body," she said. "If one turns up, and they track it back to next of kin, they'll let me know."

"Who knew getaway drivers could talk tough?"

"I'm worried that you think that was me talking tough."

"For the last time," he said. "I don't have your car, Moll."

Molly met Ritch her first day of college in a freshman seminar called *Sexual Warfare in Drama*. It was the last day of August, the first day of Fall semester. It was his eighteenth birthday, a buck forty, wet, lanky, leggy. She'd never seen anyone quite like him. Molly was twenty-five, the oldest in the class next to the middle-aged professor, a woman, who smoked a pipe before-and-after every class and swore excessively. And in a room full of twenty women, Ritch was one of only two men, the other being a 300-pound linebacker for the Division III football team—Michael Johns who asked us to call him *Jream*. She should have known when Ritch sat down next to her and spilled his frozen coffee on her that their relationship was headed toward divorce. That was the first time she saw tears in his eyes—when he lumoxed his drink and pulled out tissues to mop up the coffee.

At some point mid-semester, Molly was cast to read the role of Carol the student in David Mamet's play *Oleanna* in a class table read with Ritch reading the part of John the professor. In the climactic moment where John the professor raises the chair over his head to finally destroy Carol the student for ruining his life, Ritch cried again. He wasn't acting or moved by the text. It was because he couldn't handle hurting Molly. Not even in a play. The 18 other girls and pipe-smoking professor broke out into boisterous applause. Molly rolled her eyes. All while Jream slept slumped in the back corner of the room listening to music in his headphones.

But that was a long time ago.

"I'm not afraid of you, Moll," he said, peering over the ledge, looking down on the courthouse. "I won't be held hostage by your criminality anymore."

Molly had never heard anyone use the word *criminality* before. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I just want my fucking car back," she said.

She had never told him what she did for a living. Not when they first met. Not when they dated. Not when they got married. Not even now. She never talked about it. But he knew. How much time she spent working on her car. How much time she spent going over maps. How much time she spent running laps at the racetrack. The cash wrapped, stacked, and buried in the floorboards of the attic. The questionable friends who always waved to her from questionable cars. She could deny it all she wanted, but he knew what she did. He just didn't know the details.

"Can I drive you home?" he asked, a poor attempt at an apology.

She laughed. "I'm getting picked up. Got some nefarious shit to do. Some *criminality* to commit." Molly threw the cigarette butt to the ground like she was spiking a football and jogged down the stairwell of the garage with Ritch chasing behind her.

Ritch was dependable. Stable. Safe. He would never come for her at night. Not the way others did in her life. He would always have her back. And he did. Until he didn't.

They became friends and hung out most weekends that Fall when she wasn't working at the diner downtown, although even on those nights she could count on Ritch being a customer at the counter at some point, ordering two bacon cheeseburgers and a vanilla milkshake. They went to see movies at the theater with a Mexican restaurant in the lobby. They saw indie bands perform at the unitarian church that had been converted into an all-ages music hall.

Then Ritch dropped out of school mid-semester in the Spring of freshman year. The professor with a pipe ran into Molly outside of a lecture hall when she told her he got some girl back home pregnant. It ground Molly to dust. Not for any reason other than she couldn't picture Ritch kissing a girl, let alone having sex with one.

"God damn shit fuck shame," the professor said, puffing away on her pipe. "I liked that boy."

"I did too," Molly said.

"You *did* like him, or you *do*?"

She thought about that moment a lot. The moment she knew she loved Ritch. And she wished she could go back to that day and just skip class.

Outside the Calvert Street Courthouse Parking Lot, Molly stood in front of a candy apple red Ford150 with bigass tires, idling like a motherfucker. Tank Yuvchenko looked like a senior brewmaster behind the wheel. A barrel of a man. Big, grey-black beard. Camo everything. Wraparound sunglasses. He chewed on a Swisher Sweet cigarillo. Taylor Swift's *Red* album blared from the stereo. The ten-minute version of "All Too Well" played. He leaned out the window to Molly.

"Hey Ms. Lady," he said, in a thick, slow eastern European accent. "You're late. I was on-time."

"Tank, this is my ex-husband."

Tank smiled at Ritch who averted his eyes.

"Do you like Taylor Swift, Ritch?" Tank asked.

Ritch said nothing.

"This song speaks to me." Tank cranked the volume. Then shouted over the song. "She's singing about her heart." Then lifted his sleeve over his giant bicep, revealing an intricate tattoo of Taylor Swift wearing knight's armor, riding a unicorn, holding a guitar over her head like a sword. Pointing to his stereo, Tank said, "Song is about Jake Gyllenhaal. He still has her scarf. Give Molly her Buick back, friend. Then listen to Queen Swift. This shit will heal you."

Molly stepped into the street and opened the passenger door when Ritch followed her and slammed it shut.

"Goddammit! Would you stop a second and just talk to me," he said.

She ignored him and continued toward the back of the truck when Ritch grabbed her elbow and yanked her back.

"Stop," he said.

And she did.

"All you had to do was give me back my car," she said.

"Well," he said.

Her instinct kicked in. She shot her arm forward, before thrusting her elbow back, crushing him in the ribs. Ritch dropped to his knees, clutching his chest, gasping for air.

Then, just like Carol the student says in the last line of the *Oleanna*, Molly looked down at Ritch collapsed at her feet and she said, "yes...that's right."

Molly stepped around him and hopped up into the cab of the truck. Tank gunned it back into traffic and headed toward the highway with the rest of the ants fleeing the hill or returning to it. Molly watched Ritch grow smaller in her side mirror. But she could still see him reach into his pocket for his tissues and wipe his nose and face, knowing all along that he was crying.



Bio

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J.R. Angelella is the author of the irreverent and twisted coming-of-age novel *Zombie* (Soho Press, 2012). His award-winning short fiction has appeared in various journals, including *Hunger Mountain*, *Sou-wester*, *The Coachella Review*, and *The Southampton Review*. His original screenplays have won numerous awards, most recently at the Houston Comedy Film Festival and Baltimore Next Media Web Fest. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing & Literature from Bennington Writing Seminars. Currently, he serves as a fiction editor at Angelella Editorial and

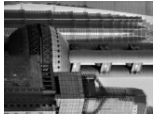
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## 1 Comment



**Bill** says:

*December 28, 2022 at 7:08 pm*

You had me until Taylor Swift... :)

Good story. Well-executed characters. Intriguing lack of information.

I thought Quinn would come back into the story.

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