



Now It's Clean
by Nina de Gramont

from *Post Road 10*

Selected by Brock Clarke, author of *An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England*, *Carrying the Torch*, *The Ordinary White Boy*, and *What We Won't Do*.

How do I love Nina de Gramont's short story Now It's Clean? Let me count the ways, or the whys. I love the way it's full of characters who can't fully get rid of each other, of the ex-spouses (one stable, one psychotic) who figuratively can't move on, and of the son (broken leg) who literally can't. I love the way a story this short can be so full--of history, of hope. I love the way 9/11 matters to the story, but as backdrop, as hangover, not as Subject. But mostly, I love the writing. For instance, these last sentences: "Kevin touched her knee. His fingers trembled, separate from his will. Their vibration like a gentle undercurrent, as good or as useless as a well-intentioned promise." A beautiful ending to a beautiful story. – BC.

Yvette's first husband needed a ride home from the psychiatric hospital in Denver.

"I'll pick him up," she told Sandra, her ex-mother-in-law. Balancing the receiver on one shoulder, she poured juice into a coffee mug. They'd just moved, all their belongings still in boxes, and she couldn't find the glasses.

“Where’s my juice?” Tim yelled.

The little-boy holler boomed easily through the walls of their ranch house, and probably those of the houses next door. Their new neighborhood, Cordry Acres, had once been a large pig farm. Architects hadn’t employed imagination or care in its conversion: each house had a similarly flimsy and flyaway construction. Yvette comforted herself by glancing out the window, which at just the right angle provided a slim view of the Flatirons.

Tim yelled again. He had broken his leg last week, their first day in the new house, and now reigned amid the unpacked crates like a heartless czar. Incredible, Yvette thought, that someone who’d been alive a scant six years – weighing just over forty pounds – could shout with such authoritative and manly force.

“Just wait,” she called back, probably blowing out Sandra’s eardrum. It was early November, 2001, and this was the fourth call she’d received from her ex-mother-in-law since the towers came down.

“Sorry,” she said, and explained about Tim’s leg.

“Oh, dear,” Sandra said. “Is it a bad break?” Tim was not Sandra’s grandchild and her voice sounded polite, the interest rote.

“No,” Yvette lied. “Minor. He’ll be up and around in no time.”

“Oh, good.” She sounded relieved not on behalf of Tim’s little leg, but for the ample excuse to return to her primary purpose. “I’d come myself, but I’ve already been out there twice. And air travel is just not fun right now. This time I want to make sure they’ll really release him, before I make the trip.”

“Fine,” Yvette said, in full sympathy with not wanting to fly from Boston to Colorado.

“You’re sure Mark won’t mind?”

Yvette didn't want to admit that Mark was no longer a consideration. At thirty-four, two failed marriages struck her as flatly pathetic. Her divorce from Kevin she'd tended to write off. Who could blame her for divorcing a schizophrenic? But now – incredulously finding herself a single mother – culpability seemed hers alone.

“Mark won't mind,” she assured Sandra. Tim bellowed from his bedroom, urgent as if on the brink of dehydration and scurvy. “But I've really got to go.”

She slammed the orange juice carton back into the refrigerator, its only company two Sam Adams and stained cartons of takeout Chinese. On the way to Tim, she nearly tripped over the stack of manuscripts waiting to be copyedited – what seemed like months of work, backed up and overdue. “Shit,” she muttered, wishing there were not an injured child in the house, so that she could scream the curse to the rafters, not to mention get her work done.

“Tim,” Yvette planned on telling her son. “I know you feel lousy, and I'm sorry about that. But being hurt is not an excuse to order me around. Being hurt is not an excuse to abandon good manners!”

She pushed open the door to his bedroom, with its bare walls and shelves. Striped shirts and pilly sweat pants teetered in stacks on top of a bureau that didn't quite fit in its new corner. There Tim lay, his flannel penguin sheets providing the room's sole decor. In Yvette's bedroom – the first she'd had to herself in years – she'd found herself unable to use any of the bedding she and her husband Mark had shared. Instead she'd dug up the damask sheets someone had given her and Kevin as a wedding gift, sufficiently recovered from the collapse of her first marriage so that the soft and faded finery was only that – comfortable material, too good to go to waste.

In Tim's bed, the enormous plaster cast created an unnatural bulge under his covers. Nearby, a small pair of crutches (Tiny Tim!) rested neatly against a Smirnoff box brimming with

picture books. Yvette had refused the expense of hiring movers, and while she'd been hauling this very box into the house, Tim entertained himself by attempting a leap from the roof of the new garage to the roof of the new house, landing on the hard concrete of the new driveway.

She handed him the mug, stroked sandy hair off his forehead, and said, "Can I get you anything else, sweetie?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact." Tim curled his forefinger over his chin. "Sesame chicken, please. And a Hershey bar with almonds."

Yvette brought him mooshi shrimp in a stale pancake, and one of her chocolate flavored calcium supplements for dessert.

The first time Sandra had called, on September thirteenth, she'd been pleased Kevin was in custody.

"All the airports are closed," she said to Yvette. "Do you mind going to check on him?"

"No, of course not."

"Mark won't mind?"

"No, Sandra. Mark won't mind."

The next morning, September fourteenth, Yvette dropped Tim off at his Waldorf school, which reopened immediately – citing the children's need for structure. She made the forty minute drive from Pearl to Denver, feeling – as she invariably did – that she was leaving an oasis, a safe and secluded valley, heading instead into the gray thick of an urban world. This sensation always disquieted her, but now especially leaving Pearl felt like an ominous and possibly dangerous mission. She felt relieved that Tim remained in its mountainous, skyscraper-free cocoon. Approaching the city, its colorless summertime steam rising along with factory-

pumped clouds, she had the illogical expectation that key landmarks – Coors Stadium or the gold dome of the Capitol Building – would suddenly be missing.

“They’re rounding up everybody whose ever caused problems,” a woman in the hospital’s entrance hall told her, after she signed in at the front desk. Yvette had nodded – accustomed to placating the paranoid. But a few minutes later, sitting with Kevin in the cafeteria, she thought that in all the years of his intermittent commitments, she’d never seen any institution so simply teeming. She glanced through the glass doors onto the terrace, which was packed with people – shoulder to shoulder. It reminded her of a commuter train platform at morning rush hour.

Out on the terrace, schizophrenics were distinguishable from social workers and family members mostly by their cigarettes. The cloud of smoke hovering above them was so dense that for a moment Yvette mistook it for a low-hanging cumulus nimbus, which any minute might open up and soak them all with rain.

Kevin himself seemed resigned to his incarceration but confident he’d be out in a few days.

“I wasn’t even doing anything,” he told Yvette. “Just running.”

In agitated phases, he often ran in the middle of the night. He’d get out of bed and go directly outside, usually in his pajamas, sometimes barefoot. It used to drive Yvette crazy, back when they were married – waking up to find him simply gone, not even a pile of shed nightclothes to provide a clue to his whereabouts. She would wander through their small apartment, calling his name, increasingly panicked as each nook answered with a dull, silent echo.

That morning at the hospital, Yvette had agreed with Kevin: he'd be released in a few days. He generally – maddeningly – was. She gave him a carton of cigarettes and squeezed his hand, always concerned about how the lack of human touch must weigh on him – the distance imposed by such a lonely illness. She wished he could stay in the hospital longer than the week-at-most they always kept him.

“Are you all right?” Kevin asked. Unmedicated, he tended to believe he had the power to heal heartbreak and injury. He pressed his hand over hers.

“You look pale,” he said, as if she were the one hospitalized. I'm worried about you.”

“I'm fine,” Yvette assured him. She didn't tell him about Mark. And neither of them said a word about hijackers, or the Pentagon, or New York City.

“You hang in there,” she said to Kevin before she left. “Call me if you need anything.”

She gave him a goodbye kiss on the cheek. In a way it was a relief – this insistent avoidance – like whitewashing disaster for the sake of a child, and being inadvertently comforted.

But walking out of the hospital – back into harmless sunlight – Yvette had felt oddly disappointed. As if she'd expected Kevin to offer some sort of solace: a hopeful if imaginary gesture of healing.

Almost two months later, he stood outside waiting for her, one hand holding a cigarette, the other stuffed in the pocket of his ill-fitting winter coat. A small, businessman's suitcase – no doubt purchased by Sandra – sat at his feet. His face was puffy, his eyes dull, and Yvette saw as he climbed into the car that the tremor had returned to his hands.

“I would have come in for you,” she said.

“I wanted to smoke. Hi Tim.”

Tim sat sideways in back, his cumbersome cast splayed out across the seat. There was no reason not to bring her son along. Tim hated being left with babysitters, and even at his worst – unmedicated and delusional – Kevin was never violent, one of the reasons committing him usually proved so difficult.

“Hi Kevin,” Tim said.

“What happened to your leg?”

“Broke it.”

“Tim jumped off the roof of the garage,” Yvette said.

“What garage?”

“We moved.”

“I did that once,” Kevin told Tim. “Jumped off a roof.”

“Really?” Tim brightened. “Did you break a bone?”

“Broke both my feet. Your mom took care of me.”

“A very particular curse must be on my head,” Yvette said.

“Is that why they put you in a mental hospital?” Tim asked.

“Don’t say *they*,” Yvette scolded, hating the word’s paranoid ring. “There is no *they*, Tim.”

“Unless you count the state,” Kevin said. “The state put me in the mental hospital because they’re frightened by any psyche that veers from the path of normalcy.” At Yvette’s frown, Kevin pulled a prescription bottle from his pocket and rattled it, as if presenting proof of

both his compliance and the conspiracy against him. “That’s the big word on television right now, isn’t it?” he said. “*Normalcy.*”

Yvette could nod with authority, now being in possession of the first tv set she’d owned in years. Mark had insisted on following the Waldorf school’s proscription on TV, despite Yvette’s pointing out that nearly every family at the school owned one.

“Anyway,” Kevin said now. “We must be back to normal, if it’s safe to release the likes of me.”

“Why,” Tim said. “Are you dangerous?”

“No,” Yvette and Kevin said together.

She let the car idle for a minute in front of Kevin’s building in Denver’s lower downtown, with its comforting red bricks and crooked sidewalks. Kevin looked up toward his window. His hand trembled on the car’s doorhandle, but he didn’t open it.

“Do you want us to come up with you?” Yvette said.

“Only if they have an elevator,” Tim yelled from the backseat. “I’m not hobbling up all those stairs.”

“It’s only two flights,” Yvette whispered. “And you don’t have to shout.”

“That’s okay,” Kevin said. “I’ll be fine.”

Still, he made no move to get out of the car. Yvette turned off the ignition.

“Hey,” she said. “Would you rather come back to Pearl with us? Have dinner? Everything’s in boxes, but we can throw something together.”

Kevin was never one to respond to an invitation with insincere hesitation. “Sure,” he

said. “If you think Mark wouldn’t mind.”

“Don’t you know?” Tim said, still yelling. “She and Mark are divorced.”

“Separated,” Yvette corrected, in another whisper.

Kevin reached over. His tremulous hand cupped the back of her head. Yvette always loved Kevin’s hand tremors. There was something so poignant and conscientious about them. When he was medicated and touched her, the pronounced shaking induced a faraway constriction in her chest: an odd thrill accompanied by a sadness, seeing him administering a duty he’d been unwilling to perform for her during their young marriage.

“You poor thing,” he said. “I’ll make you dinner.”

Yvette drove to Pearl and stopped at Whole Foods. She gave Kevin a fifty dollar bill, and she and Tim waited in the car while he bought the groceries.

From the beginning of their relationship, Kevin’s lack of normal – what turned out to be his illness – had both enchanted and repelled Yvette. Now, as he knelt in her kitchen and rooted through boxes for a frying pan, she remembered that long ago revelation, the moment she realized she couldn’t live with him forever.

He’d been in graduate school, studying Art History. In the library he grabbed a woman and started weeping, holding her in a vice grip, not releasing her no matter how she struggled.

“There was so much pain,” Kevin explained to Yvette later. “I only wanted to heal her.”

After his expulsion, Yvette went to the dean of students to plead for her husband’s readmission. It was humiliating, the man’s patronizing attitude toward her, the obvious suggestions (“Is he seeing a psychiatrist?”) and the ill-disguised pity – as if she were a cuckold,

and Kevin a hopeless case. Driving home Yvette had the sharpest, clearest realization: how this life with Kevin did not have to be *hers*. The thought of leaving – not so much leaving him, but the intense difficulties created by his mental breakdowns – felt like the purest relief. She had a vision of herself skyrocketing out of her troubles, away from her husband’s illness. It would be nearly a year before she acted. But that day she knew. Eventually she *would* act, and the realization had made her steer the car through blinding tears.

With Mark the reverse occurred. Their fights were simply their fights, the same topics, albeit with greater frequency and volume. And then one day she simply saw it, standing in their bedroom, whispering furiously in the deluded hope that Tim wouldn’t overhear. A change in Mark’s face, a lack of response. Reaching out to her husband – her sane, gainfully employed husband – and hitting an impasse so solid it might have been physical, a wall or a jolt of electricity. He simply removed her hand from his shoulder, and looked back at her with shocking distance.

“Is there someone else?” Kevin asked now, wiping out her wok with a paper towel.

“No,” Yvette said, not sure if he meant for her or Mark, but hurt at the idea either way.

“Why would you think that?”

Kevin shrugged. “It’s one of the traditional reasons.”

Yvette laughed. Kevin put down the wok and stepped forward, holding out his arms. Tim sat safely in the next room, the television turned up way too loud. She allowed Kevin to hug her.

He smelled terrible, as if he hadn’t showered for days. Another effect of the medication – a sweat so thick, soap and water couldn’t budge its odor. But she didn’t mind. His acrid scent

seemed strangely affirming, comforting proof that he lived, breathed, and perspired – continuing despite Yvette’s abandonment. At her shoulder blades, she felt his fingertips shaking like a desperately old man’s. She reminded herself that once the thought of Kevin touching another woman would have felt like the end of the world. And now she wished he might find any sort of companionship, so that he could be happy, fulfilled – at least for those first few promising glimpses.

Kevin’s chicken curry was way too spicy for Tim. Yvette heated up the last of the Chinese food while Kevin sketched dinosaurs on his cast with her colored manuscript pencils.

“Draw the towers,” Tim instructed, pointing to a free spot above his ankle. “The towers and the airplanes.”

“No,” Yvette called from the kitchen, over the beeping of the microwave. “Please don’t.”

She carried Tim’s plate and two beers into the living room, where they sat on the floor surrounded by plates and the wok-ful of curry.

“I don’t know how to draw an airplane,” Kevin said, trying to be helpful. Yvette gave Tim a sheet of printer paper, and he ignored his dinner in favor of teaching Kevin how to sketch a 747.

“My father is just a car ride away,” Tim explained, making a wobbly green triangle that vaguely resembled a wing. “Which is a good thing, because I can see him whenever I want. And I don’t have to fly.”

“That’s great,” Kevin said.

“It is,” Yvette agreed. She was not above the impulse to punish Mark through Tim, but so far had managed to resist it.

“Do you want a beer?” she asked Kevin.

“No thanks.” He drew a fighter jet in purple, which despite lines nearly as wobbly as Tim’s looked gloriously authentic. Tim turned to his meal, so pleased at his successful instruction that he forgot his original request.

When Yvette had stacked the new dishwasher fully enough to run – discovering through its motor’s depressing surge and sigh that it didn’t work – Kevin showed her the sage smudge he’d bought.

“To chase away the house’s old energy,” he said. “Get rid of all those jump-off-the-roof vibes.”

“Wonderful,” Yvette said, throwing her dishtowel aside, slightly fuzzy from both her beer and the one she’d offered Kevin. “I’m all for lifting curses.”

“Let me,” Tim yelled, when they returned to the living room. Kevin held his lighter under the smudge. Sage and butane wafted through the air in thin spirals. “Let me hold it.”

“This is a delicate ritual,” Kevin said. “It has to be performed very specifically.”

Yvette helped Tim stand up on his crutches.

“Where should we start?” Kevin asked.

“My room,” said Tim.

Kevin had received the grand, three-and-a-half-minute tour when they’d arrived. Now he walked toward Tim’s room, swaying the burning smudge in front of him as if it were a machete

cutting through jungle weeds.

“Shhh,” he cautioned, when the three of them stood together amid the boxes and flannel penguins. “Don’t say a word. You don’t want to disturb the chant flow.”

“What chant flow?” Tim asked.

“Shhh.” He held the smudge up like a torch, closed his eyes and rotated it gently through the air, probably – Yvette thought – to disguise his inability to hold it steady.

Kevin’s chant came from somewhere odd, a too-deep place in his diaphragm. Guttural and wordless, rising and falling tremulously. Tim and Yvette both started, Yvette peering carefully into Kevin’s face – relieved to see there, the trace of a smile.

“Zaba anou phol. Ama kaba ko. Ena dabu olum...”

Tim laughed, and Kevin gave a little hop – like a Hopi clown, or circus performer.

He moved about the room, the fragrant smoke swirling. His chant rose and fell like a new language – consistent but meaningful, as if he were channeling it from a higher authority. When the sage had swirled and enveloped every corner of the room – each one of Tim’s possessions – Kevin moved into the hall. Yvette followed, Tim hobbling immediately behind her, his delight apparent in the adamancy of his crutching.

In Yvette’s room the fading damask sheets rumbled across her unmade bed, and she was struck with the sense of co-ownership. She watched Kevin’s face for some sign of recognition, but he seemed concentrated and purposeful. He opened her closet and chanted, waving the smudge so that every garment would be soaked in its charred, earthy scent.

On his way back to the door, though, Kevin stopped and sat down on the bed. An abrupt, surprise sinking. Tiredness, maybe, or else the stirring of some latent homing instinct.

“Hey,” Tim said, protesting the halt of movement. Kevin ignored him, running one shaking hand over the white tumble of Yvette’s bedclothes. Tonight, crawling in to sleep, she would be inundated with sage – soaked into every stitch of wallpaper, carpet, pillows, sheets.

“Hey,” Tim said again. Kevin silenced him by handing over the smudge. Tim beamed with honor and headed back into the hallway, the smudge dangling awkwardly from his over-employed fingers, smoke following at his heels like a puppy.

“Sabu rabu kabu,” Tim chanted, trying to take over entirely.

Yvette knew she should follow her son. Instead she sat down on the bed, next to Kevin, his trembling nearness significant and ordinary. As if the smoke had in fact cleaned the sheets, despite Yvette’s not having washed them since first making up the new bed. Despite all the nights she and Kevin had clung together between them, and of course made love. All the nights Yvette had woken alone past midnight, to call Kevin’s name and search for him, returning to these sheets in fury, anxiety, bewilderment. Her life now so changed, the threads comprising the silky fabric might very well be a different molecular structure, their atoms somehow replaced in the intervening years.

Kevin’s hand trembled by her cheek, and Yvette remembered that she’d allowed a first-grader to leave the room on crutches, holding a handful of burning brush.

“We’d better stick with him,” she said.

In the dining room, Tim waved the smudge and chanted. His method, though similar to Kevin’s, was less thorough. Vague hand motions dispensed the smoke stingily. He handed the smudge back to Kevin, and they carried the ritual into the kitchen and then outside, where smoke wafted all around the garage – ridding it of that moment when little bones had fallen and

cracked. Yvette imagined her neighbors, hearing Kevin's otherworldly chants through their flimsy walls.

An airplane's engine hummed across the sky. Yvette glanced up at its blinking lights, noting briefly that the image had returned from the realm of alarming. Even Tim didn't bother pointing it out.

Kevin carried the smudge back inside, through the kitchen and into the living room. His chanting became gradually and purposefully quieter – as if he'd run out of batteries. Until finally he lay the still-burning smudge on top of the coffee table, and fell – spent – onto the couch.

Tim crutched over and collapsed, equally exhausted, beside him. “There,” Kevin said, putting his arm around Tim's shoulders. “Now it's clean.”

“Now it's clean,” Tim echoed. He let his head plop against Kevin's collarbone, inspiring the most joyful tug across his lips.

It was just this minute, Yvette realized, and not a lasting cure. She perched beside them on the arm of the sofa and ran a grateful, vaguely marital hand through the tangle of Kevin's hair. She was careful not to relax as completely as they, lest the sense of remedy lift and disappear along with the smoke. For the same reason, she didn't leave to get a plate for the smudge, but just let it burn, damaging ash already creating a permanent dark spot on the table.

“It's kind of like magic,” Tim announced.

“It is,” Yvette agreed, wanting him to believe disasters could only exist in the past tense.

Kevin touched her knee. His fingers trembled, separate from his will. Their vibration like a gentle undercurrent, as good or as useless as a well-intentioned promise.

Nina de Gramont is the author of a short story collection, *Of Cats and Men*. Her fiction has recently appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Nerve*, *The Cream City Review*, *The Canary River Review*, and *Seventeen*.