One Sweet Quarrel

Deirdre McNamer

"One sweet—and unforgettable—novel . . . [*One Sweet Quarrel*] echoes such novels as Arnold Bennett's *Old Wives' Tale* or Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, books whose families and worlds come to be almost as vivid as our own."
—Robert Houston, *New York Times Book Review*

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A NOVEL

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To My Parents:
Hugh and Patricia McNamer

To the Memory of Theirs:
Bruce and Lucie McNamer
John and Jean Owen

And to Bryan

The sergeant sang a ballad through a megaphone, turning from side to side that his voice might carry out into the skimpy crowd. He stood there bareheaded under the hot sun, in those surroundings, a pair of blue glasses over his sightless eyes and singing away.

—Damon Runyon, *New York American*,
reporting on the Dempsey-Gibbons world heavyweight
boxing championship in Shelby, Montana, July 4, 1923

I

MORNING
July 10, 1973

As she aged, Amelia Malone spent an ever larger portion of each day preparing for it. First, she drank three cups of tea in her dim, low-ceilinged kitchen, while her cat, Verdi, caught a sunbeam under the window. Then they both moved into the bedroom and Amelia stood for a long time at her mothball-scented closet, deciding what to put on. She wore a chenille bathrobe and metallic gold mules.

Amelia was quite old. Her bluish scalp was plainly visible through the last of her colorless hair. Her flesh yearned downward, resting in rolls at her belly and hips, hanging in sleepy flaps from her upper arms. Her legs were short and sticklike, and her toenails, poking through her toeless slippers, were horned and yellow.

Her eyes were the eyes of two people. One eye was brown, alert, surrounded by crinkles. The other was larger, and milky as the moon.

Once she had chosen her dress for the day—she had four—she repaired to the bathroom for a lengthy session at the sink and mirror. She inserted her teeth. She combed her curly black wiglet and anchored it to her own wisps with many bobby pins. She put on her face.

When she emerged—all this could take an hour or more—she had a vermilion mouth, stately pink circles on her cheeks, new eye-

brows, the hair, and rhinestones on her wrinkled earlobes. Often, at this point, she wore the concentrated, gathered look of a performer waiting to go on.

The rest of the job was mostly a matter of redistribution. The armorlike girdle was pulled upward, pushing flesh before it, until it was braced in place around her midsection. Now she had a bosomy pigeon silhouette. Stockings and shoes—she was gasping a little by now—brassiere, slip, and, finally, a print dress with a fluff of lace jumping from its throat. Sparkly bracelets and a good dose of Chanel No. 19. Then she had to sit awhile dabbing beads of sweat from her upper lip with a small linen handkerchief. It would be late morning, perhaps noon.

AMELIA LIVED IN A SMALL HOUSE HALFWAY UP A LONG SHALLOW hill in a little town called Shelby in northern Montana. Her house was two homesteaders' shacks that had been moved to town back in the twenties, then added to. It had a porch now and a room off the kitchen that doubled as a laundry room and music studio. The yard was bare of trees or shrubbery, and the grass was sparse and dry. A big blue Buick, almost thirty years old, waited in the driveway.

Amelia's first plan today was to drive the Buick seven blocks down the long hill to the post office, where she occasionally received something with her name on it from the Baha'is or the government, or, every month or so, from her friend in the Montana State Prison.

That's when people in Shelby saw Amelia—when she drove her huge blue car to the post office or the grocery store. She wore a hat with a small veil attached to it that shaded her eyes, and she drove in fits and starts. Almost everyone knew her. Some had taken piano or voice lessons from her when they were growing up. More recently, of course, there had been the incident with the convict on the run.

HE SMELLED LIKE OUTDOOR SMOKE, LIKE A CAMPFIRE, AND THAT'S how she knew he was there. Even before the cupboard squeaked and set her heart knocking so furiously it pinned her to the bed. Smoke first, campfire smoke on dirty clothes, and then the sound of drawers sliding open. These are my last moments, she thought, amazed.

The drawers closed. Bold feet moved across the floor toward her bedroom, then stopped. They moved away—why?—and out the back

door, and sweat broke through all her pores at once, drenching her.

Twenty minutes later, smoke poured from the sagging storage shed behind her house, and by the time the fire truck got there, two flames were licking out of the roof. Amelia clutched her yellow bathrobe and watched the shed until she realized that half a dozen neighbors, including her brother Jerry, were staring at her. She was more shocking in her unconstructed state than the fire was, or the fact of a criminal from the state prison who had left a burning cigarette or something more deliberate in her shed, then crept through her house opening drawers.

The day after the fire, she sat at her kitchen table—wigletted, toothed, dressed, made up—and picked through a large box of charred and soggy letters, newspaper clippings, narrow leather diaries, a few photographs. The box was Jerry's, and it had been in the shed, forgotten, for years. Some of the letters were in her own handwriting, her handwriting of half a century earlier. She studied it, trying to remember a time when she had lived somewhere else.

ON HER WAY TO THE POST OFFICE, SHE STOPPED AT JERRY'S TO SEE IF he wanted anything mailed. He sat watching the television news with T.T. Wilkins, a man to whom Amelia had been briefly married in the twenties.

Both men were in their eighties. Wilkins had a drooping white mustache and was asleep on his hand. Jerry was listening to Nixon, and he looked cranky. The last time Amelia had stopped by, he told her the cleaning girl had stolen a bunch of his mineral lease documents. This time, he handed her his subscription renewal to the *Oil & Gas Journal* and told her he'd be ready for the banquet at six. He went back to the TV, leaning forward a little. He had a wild shock of whitish hair, large eyes in a narrow fallen face. His skin was mottled, and his fingers were knobbed. He wore a starched white shirt and slacks and old-fashioned high-top shoes.

SHE AND THE PRISONER CORRESPONDED ABOUT THE BAHA'I FAITH. After he was captured and returned to the prison, she had refused to press burglary charges because her religious beliefs demanded forgiveness and tolerance. This had prompted the prisoner to convert to Baha'ism himself and to begin a correspondence with her. A week

before, he had written to ask her to tell the parole board about his religious sincerity. He suggested that she send the board his letters to her from the previous year. That's what she was doing today.

The prisoner's letters were the only personal mail she got as a rule, though she had also corresponded recently with a man in California who said he was a former piano student of hers. This man was named Michael Cage, and his parents still lived in Shelby. He lived in Pasadena and did something so important with the television industry that he had been invited to be the guest speaker at the banquet tonight in honor of Shelby's pioneers. He wrote to her to say that he particularly hoped she would be at the banquet because he was pegging his speech to his memories of her. You are, he said, the hook.

Amelia wrote back to say she would be most pleased to see him again. She had no idea who this person was.

FOR FORTY-ONE YEARS, THEY CLIMBED THE LONG SHALLOW HILL TO her studio, their music under their arms. The studio had a wooden floor, then a linoleum floor. A wringer washer and some drying racks stood in a corner.

An old upright piano with small gouges in the paint of the black keys. A music stand. Two folding chairs. Bare wooden walls, then plaster and calcimine, then, in the fifties, blond wood paneling. A wood stove, then gas.

In the early twenties, her name was Daisy Lou Malone, though she called herself Amelia. Then, briefly, she was Mrs. T.T. Wilkins. Then she became, in permanent ink on a courthouse paper, Amelia Malone.

Knickknacks. Samplers with quotations from the New Testament, Coué; then Kahlil Gibran, Aimee Semple McPherson, Bahá'Alláh. A small tattered Bible. A blue stoppered bottle with a faded label wrapped around it. Two shelves of phonograph records. A gramophone, then a Victrola, then a hi-fi, then a modest stereo.

In this room, listening to her students, she had held her arms close to her sides, the tips of her fingers stretched outward as if they rested on the heads of tall hounds.

When Michael Cage took piano lessons in the fifties, Amelia was still allowing her students to play for her. She hadn't taken over com-

pletely. She required a routine of scales, arpeggios, Czerny exercises. She would seem to be listening carefully, but the student she heard was never the student before her—not Michael Cage, for instance. She listened always to the perfect student trying to push through.

In the sixties, she began to play along with one hand. Then she began to scoot the pupils aside and play the piece herself, the best she could, her face pinched and rapt.

She did the same with her voice students—listened to them with an expression on her face that grew increasingly distracted, until finally she was joining in, then singing the passages herself. And not just passages, finally, but entire songs, entire arias.

Her last few students spent the full hour on folding chairs, leafing through comic books, picking their skin, while Amelia played the piano or sang to them in a wild and quavery voice.

NO MAIL. SHE MADE HER WAY CAREFULLY BACK ACROSS THE POST office vestibule to her car, which she always left running in the No Parking space closest to the door. Her heels clicked—she wore black suede pumps—and the clicks were echoed by the tongues of two girls, nine or ten years old, who marched behind her imitating her diva's prance, their hands propped like flippers on their scrawny hips.

Amelia didn't hear or see them, because she was thinking about a speech she wanted to give at the banquet. She hadn't been requested to speak, but she felt she should have some remarks ready in case Michael Cage had his version of her all wrong. What made her think about this was an item she'd seen in the *Great Falls Tribune* a few weeks earlier about an elderly man who had decided to go on a train trip without notifying his only relative, a son who lived four blocks away. After three weeks, the old man was declared missing. Two months later, disembarking from the train to return to his house, he picked up a newspaper that contained his obituary. They found him in a fatal coma, the newspaper clutched in his hand.

Amelia felt it probably wasn't the fact of the obituary that had killed him but the way they had worded it—leaving out the important things, putting in the trivial. The shock of seeing your entire life reduced to five statistics and a hobby. She didn't want that to happen tonight, so she went home to gather her thoughts and take a long

nap, hoping for the wherewithal to amplify herself if Michael Cage made it necessary. Also, her eye had begun to ache, the worthless one. It had never seemed to go entirely dead—she thought sometimes of hands beating against a wall—and she needed to give it a rest.

1

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN a hot green day around a pond of stagnant water. The high drone of mosquitoes. Steamy Minnesota air and the smell of everything overripe. Boys, five of them, in the stiff Sunday shirts, the heavy trousers and chunky boots, of their time. Small-town boys with dull, badly cut hair, their sweat pushing the smell of soap and starch into the air where it hovers like their mothers.

They stand on the rim of the brackish water, searching its buggy surface for the slow shadows of pike, of pickerel. It is the aimless time between church and the long midday meal.

A girl in a white dress comes through the trees, a huge bow in her hair, dolls in her arms. She sits herself on the grass, booted feet straight ahead, and arranges two dolls, torso to torso, so that they appear to be having a conversation in bed. One of the dolls tells the other that she has been bad and must be punished. This time, the punishment will be worse than it has been before. Legs will be pulled off. The other doll pleads for mercy in words she has used before.

One of the boys, the loudest and beefiest one, heaves himself up a tree and untangles a rope. It is tied to a branch that stretches over the waiting pond. The boys strip to their underdrawers. The girl on the grass looks up; returns to her dolls.

The boys take turns swinging from the bank on the rope, dropping with heavy splashes, flailing back to shore to do it again. Their faces, necks, and forearms are deeply colored; the rest is white.

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THE GIRL ON THE BANK IS DAISY LOU MALONE. SHE IS EIGHT YEARS old. The beefy boy is her brother Carlton, who is thirteen. One of the frailer boys, the one who seems to be studying the water, is her brother Jerome. He is ten.

JEROME HAD KNOBBY SQUARED-OFF SHOULDERS, BIG HANDS AND feet, enough height for his age. But there was something wispy about him; his reedy neck perhaps, or his large girlish eyes, which had already the squint of a person who is not surprised by pain. And he *had* suffered, Jerome had. He had nightmares in which ordinary things—the back of a person's neck, an unblinking house cat, an empty barn—became holy terrors. He had days that began with sun and oatmeal and possibility, then developed sudden holes of bleakness that he couldn't seem to leap or step around.

Sundays like this were particularly bad for Jerome, because he had to listen to the sermons of his father, the Presbyterian minister, a kind but over-innocent man who would have been shocked to know that his homilies could settle on his younger son like a vest of lead. A vest of lead, which is what Jerome's attacks of asthma felt like too. A vest with laces that tightened each time he took a breath, so that he couldn't exhale. All the old air built up, and he couldn't get it out. And then his whole body felt broken and sealed. He got on his hands and knees to breathe. A couple of times, he spent hours like that on a cold floor in the middle of the night, crouched like an animal, trying desperately to get rid of the old breath while all the tall shapes around him released air easily, sipped it in again.

IT WASN'T ALWAYS TERRIBLE FOR JEROME, NOT AT ALL. HE DID ORDInary things, had ordinary days like anyone else. He laughed and did schoolwork and played boy tricks. He had a dog named Captain. Many nights, he slept straight through. Even the asthma seemed something he might outgrow.

JEROME HATED HIS BROTHER CARLTON. NO ONE ELSE SEEMED TO know this, though Carlton might have suspected it if he cared to wonder. Carlton was a competely different manner of boy than Jerome. He didn't fear his dreams; didn't even remember most of

them. He was a stocky, auburn-haired, high-colored, round-faced boy who snored softly at night, his heavy limbs splayed. He was, in many respects, already the man he would become—a jovial bully; a red-faced hustler. A man who would never, in his prime, be prone to melancholy or scrupulosity. No, his trip wire would always be greediness; a need especially for things he could get sooner rather than later. He would always want more, and what he would want would be obvious things like clothes and money and, when they became available, an automobile. He would want the well-fed, smooth-browed look of a man who could want nothing because he had it all.

Even when he was a boy, most people didn't like Carlton very much. His parents had for him a certain respect—the wary respect of the religious for the unapologetically worldly—and they would have told you that they loved him. But they didn't particularly like him. Not at all. Maybe he knew it and that's what made him so grabby.

SEE? CARLTON IS DOING IT AGAIN. HE IS PRETENDING TO THROTTLE one of the boys, his joyless adolescent laugh barking across the water.

He releases the boy and hitches up his soaking underwear, his belly shaking a little as he does it, and looks around for his favorite victim. Jerome stands at the edge of the pond. Carlton smacks water at him with the flat of his hand.

Then, with tumultuous splashing steps, Carlton lunges at his brother and swoops him into his arms like a farmer lifting a sack of oats. He wades off the sandy shelf into the deeper water, where he can dunk him; hold him down there in the thick water for a few seconds so he'll come up sputtering and gasping and the other boys will laugh.

Carlton knew Jerome's fear of not breathing. He had seen him crouched like a dog on the floor at night. But he put that out of his mind, or perhaps he told himself that he had the job of making his little brother tough enough for the world. In truth, Jerome scared him sometimes. That desperate gasping for something so ordinary. The possibility that Jerome would die while he was gasping, and the way that made their mother love him and brush back the hair from his damp forehead, the way she would never think of brushing back the thatch of her eldest.

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CARLTON STANDS THIGH-DEEP IN THE WATER, HOLDING JEROME'S angular body to him. Jerome feels a great weariness beneath his fury. This has happened so many times before, some version of this. His role in life is to oppose Carlton in a way that entertains others.

This time, though, he begins to feel detached from his legs. They kick and flail with a vehemence that is removed from his head or heart. He is a chicken whose head on the block can seem to gaze on the body that is running away.

The boys in the middle of the pond stretch up their thin arms as Carlton wades in deeper with his prey. "Red rover, red rover, throw him on over," they chant.

Jerome dutifully begins to kick his way toward the end of this, to the dunking and the draining rage. But he is visited that moment with a vision of his father in the pulpit. He hears his father's sonorous voice. And the vision, the voice, stop his legs. They fall silent.

THE REVEREND FRANKLIN MALONE, FATHER OF CARLTON AND Jerome and Daisy Lou, was a tall, gentle man with a deep voice and the rawboned, intelligent look of a Lincoln. He was the pastor of a Presbyterian church in a wooded little town that would someday be a suburb of Saint Paul.

Shortly before the children went to the pond that day, the Reverend Franklin Malone gave a sermon on hope.

It was stifling in the white frame church, the men fidgeting in their hard collars and scratchy wool, rivulets of sweat running down their sides; the women cinched tight at the waist, swaddled with corsets, petticoats, chemises, dresses, stockings, gloves, shoes, hats like sleepy crowns.

The Reverend Malone was not fire and brimstone. He loved his flock—that would not be too strong a word—and he wanted to leave them encouraged. He quoted the Bible as he always did; mentioned Lazarus and reminded his sweltering congregation that hope is a high virtue and that the prophet says to be of good courage. It was a theme he circled back to every month or so, as if he wanted to convince himself and his listeners that their picket-fenced, end-of-the-century lives required battleground gallantry.

He always tried to finish his sermons with something less ornate than Scripture, something more friendly, something to relax his peo-