

Flop-Flip

by David Abrams

Miles was getting worse and it worried his girlfriend, Corrie. His mind skipped beats and, at some synaptic level, gave his mouth something different than his eyes took in. The identity of an object transmogrified on the tongue. The opposite of intent. Flip-flopping—or, as Miles would say, “Flop-flipping.”

Little stuff at first: mistaking their dog for a cat, attempting to start the car with a bar of soap, or using a newspaper to dry the dishes. Lately, he'd been slipping more and more: calling her by his mother's name during sex, berating his boss for lackluster quarterly profits, and, once, trying to give a cop a ticket when he, Miles, had been speeding in a school zone.

Now *this*. Miles stood in the bedroom doorway with barbecue sauce smeared across his jaw, upper lip, and throat.

He blamed it on Fallujah. “It was all those explosions, Cor,” he'd say whenever he caught himself. “All those times my skull got knocked around inside my helmet, something must have jarred loose.”

Except he didn't say “skull,” he said “feet.”

It's true, ever since he'd returned, something had been a little...*off*. The VA doctors weren't much help. “Dissociative fugue,” they called it. But, really, what practical good did that do? In this case, a label was as useless as the pills they dispensed.

She tried to resist the cliché of the shell-shocked soldier wandering through his home like a dazed stranger, but him standing there with his barbecue-sauce cheeks sure made it difficult. She wanted him to pull through this, but she had to pull herself through it, too.

The barbecue saucepot had been in her family for three decades, and had been handed down to Corrie after her parents died and her brother said he sure as hell didn't want the fugly thing. Yes, okay, it had been a family joke for thirty years—the kitschy object of derision—but Corrie at least had put it to good use, fulfilled its

original purpose by loading it with barbecue sauce and setting it on the table whenever she and Miles grilled steaks. And yes, it *did* look a little like a shaving mug and brush with the baster attached to the underside of the lid, and she supposed anyone might make the mistake if they didn't see the "BAR-B-Q" written across the front. But Miles would have had to reach into the refrigerator this morning, he would have had to make that conscious decision to grab the barbecue jar instead of his shaving mug. This was getting serious.

Oh Miles, Miles, what will I do with you?

Sitting there in bed, the blankets still holding her legs against the mattress, she looked at him leaning against the doorway, hickory-smoke flavor dripping off his chin, the pot and brush poised in each hand.

"Hey, Cor," he said softly, a twinkle in his eye. "I hate you."

Really, what choice did she have but to believe him?

