

## Magdalena Is Brighter than You Think

**Grace Spulak**

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Scrappy women are taunted by the abuses and violence of their pasts in Grace Spulak's blistering short story collection *Magdalena Is Brighter than You Think*.

In the title story, a teenage girl is haunted by her brother's ghost; she forms a law-breaking partnership with the teenage boy her grandmother fosters for the money. In "Rid of It," Marisa, while working as a retirement home cleaner during COVID-19 lockdowns, confronts the crimes she committed to protect a loved one, as well as her own continued gravitation toward spilling blood in rage.

The prose is unflinching and raw. In "The Literal," a woman at a writer's retreat remembers how "she cut and cut at her own hair with scissors, trying to remove the sticky residue of the duct tape" her rapist bound her in. Elsewhere, in an intimate, graphic retrospective on childhood abuse, a woman hiking with her estranged sister recounts how they used to gather homemade weapons against their father, who would call their mother "*stubborn, disrespectful, bitch*" and beat her until she was "green, blue, a deep purple that was almost black."

Amid the women's painful, intimate instances of introspection, the stories refuse to oversimplify. There are no perfect victims here: The women can be abrasive and irascible themselves. Despite her own experience of childhood neglect, one social worker scorns and overlooks the clear suffering of the women and children she is supposed to protect, for instance, even stealing pills from one of her case sites. Elsewhere, a woman's cruel ex-husband is given full guardianship of their children; her frustrations and pitiful attempts to submit to various literary magazines are rendered with compassion.

*Magdalena Is Brighter than You Think* is a stark short story collection that centers complicated survivors.

ISABELLA ZHOU (May / June 2026)

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