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I thought that, by watching my brother’s kids for a few weeks, something good would come of it: he’d see me as a man, stop giving me those sad smiles all the time, the ones that try hard to show happiness but really only say, “I wish I could actually trust you.” I thought that maybe I’d learn something about myself, you know? Maybe I’d change, or maybe I’d push myself to some superhuman feat, like an Olympic athlete from some under-developed nation who shocks the world—and himself—by breaking the long jump record or something.

I should have known better.

My older brother has two kids, both of them boys who have never warmed to me because I’ve never been sure how to act around them. Sometimes I try to be the cool uncle, giving them a break from their parents’ rules; I’ll fart, nudge them in the arm and chuckle; I’ll break open the M&M’s and let them get handfuls; I’ll let them jump in my backyard mud puddles whenever Brandon stops by before they all head out to Sunday dinner at his country club; a couple times, when I watched them on Friday nights so Brandon and Lisa could go out, I put on Nightmare on Elm Street on Brandon’s HD home theater and a red glow filled the room from the television’s built-in ambient lighting, as if someone had splashed the walls with buckets of blood. Brandon came home to find his kids sugar-crazy on the couch, trying to imitate the screams of dying teenagers and the slushy noise of knives ripping through flesh.

The problem, though, is that the “cool uncle” persona is tough fucking work, and I don’t have the patience to keep playing video games even when I can’t see straight, to listen to them discuss the origins of Spider-man or Batman, to pretend I’m amused when they open their mouths to show me the half-chewed remains of a bite of pizza. And at some point, my face shows it. They see that I’ve stopped smiling, that my eyes are tired, that my features suddenly look...more adult. No longer interested in them or in being part of their world.

“Just be glad you’re only an uncle,” Brandon said one night, and I still remember how he rolled his eyes as he said it. Every now and then, Brandon stops by my place on Sunday nights for prime-time football, leaving the family at home while he breaks his diet and scarfs greasy Lay’s chips and pepperoni pizza and bottles of Yuengling that he brings over, as though he hoards this junk food for these occasions alone. It was just another throwaway night, just another throwaway comment about how much responsibility it took to be a father, how much time and energy, etc., but this night Brandon kept going. “When
are you going to have your kids?” he asked, glistening with sweat at his worry lines, the wrinkle ridges that—for him, but not for me—have become the permanent geography of his round face. He went bald a few years back, also; at first, in his late twenties, his brown hair just seemed to be turning a softer yellow, but in his early thirties, it became clear that the color wasn’t changing, that the hair was actually disappearing from his scalp. We’ve always been a world apart, Brandon and me, nine years in age and living in different decades of our lives, so we’ve never shared the same mindset. And we’ve never criticized each other about our lifestyles, either. But that night, Brandon said “When are you going to have your kids?” and he spiked the comment with just enough disbelief to imply that I should’ve already had kids, or that maybe I’d never have kids. That I wasn’t fit to start a family, that I couldn’t handle what Brandon could.

“When I’m ready,” I said, “I’ll make a great father.”

“Sure,” he said, and then, as always: “Just remember. That responsibility, Cole, is the measure of a man.”

Always, these jabs. For the past six years, he’s been helping me pay the rent for the musty St. Pete duplex that I call home. He knows the sad state of my bank account, the sad state of the duplex. The faucets drip and the yellow weeds out front have grown tall and sharp, invading the cracks of the driveway, kept in check only by anthills and piles of dead pine needles. Brandon knows that I work as much as I can at Red Carpet, that I try with my house, but still he brings his lawnmower over on Sundays and gives me cash to stave off the debt I’ve accumulated. And even though I try to picture a day in my future when my life will be back under my control, I’m not sure Brandon believes that day will ever come.

*  *  *

“You want a crack at it, Cole?” my brother asked me a month ago. He’d shown up with a can of paint and some rollers, and we were supposed to take care of the raw walls of my living room, where the landlord had recently replaced the drywall after the upstairs air conditioning unit had started spurting some liquid or another, causing my entire first-floor wall to go mushy like oatmeal. One afternoon, I bumped into the wall and my shoulder sloshed through to the stud.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You want to be a parent?”

“Can’t have kids, Brandon. Told you a thousand times. Not yet.”

“How about just for a couple weeks? Be a parent for a couple weeks?”

“I’m not renting any kids, either.”

“Lisa and I are going out of the country,” Brandon said. “Paris. Our fifteenth anniversary. We wanted to do something special.”

“Fifteen years? I didn’t even realize.”
"We’ll be gone three weeks, so we need someone to watch the kids."

"You want them to stay here?" I asked.

"Come on," he said. He looked around, taking in the living room couches, both of which were on life support. They creaked when you sat down, wobbled when you stood back up. Taking one look at the couches, you knew everything you’d need to know about the rest of the place, about me. "You can stay at our place while we’re gone. In the guest room," Brandon said. "We’ll leave you some money."

Brandon works as an investment banker in St. Petersburg, and his house is filled with all the geeky tech stuff I see on commercials but can’t afford: iPod and home theater and DVD-burner. As a kid, I never knew Brandon well, saw him only when he came home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, but after Mom died, and then when Dad died only a year after I moved out and went to automotive school, Brandon appeared suddenly and frequently, saying and doing all the things that one might expect from a “big brother,” albeit years after we’d both become adults. Telling me he was worried about me, offering to help. Cash for this bill, that bill, until I wasn’t even sure if I could muster the money to sustain myself if I wanted to. Stay at your place? I asked him. Look after your kids and eat your food and watch your DVDs and not spend a dime of my own? No problem.

"Excellent," Brandon told me, hand on my shoulder. “You’ll love it.” And I didn’t know what he meant by this: I’d love the kids? I’d love being a parent? But I was just glad he didn’t go into his diatribe on manhood again, his lectures. I didn’t need Brandon to tell me what a man was; he’d had an easy life, growing up when Dad had a good job and all the paychecks didn’t go to Mom’s medical bills.

*  *  *

Brandon handed me an envelope when I got to his house, six hundred dollars in cash stuffed inside. “Should be enough for their lunch money, and twenty dollars weekly allowance for each of them,” he said. “Enough for groceries, and a pizza every now and then.” I held the envelope in my hand, looking at Brandon as he spoke of the kid’s habits and special needs, what flavor ice cream they liked, what social studies topics the two should be studying, all the while nodding, fighting the urge to break eye contact and look into the envelope, flip through those bills.

“They get an allowance?” I asked.

“That’s how I make sure they do their chores.”

“Shit. I never got an allowance.”

“Sure we did.”

“No,” I said.

“Regardless,” Brandon said, “that’s their incentive, that’s what you got over them. They don’t clean their rooms, they don’t get the money. Teach financial responsibility
“Mmm,” I said, and again I felt there was a subtext, as if he wanted me to learn something from the experience, also. “These kids have it good.”

“Better than they’ll ever know,” Brandon said and chuckled. “Well. Looks like it’s about that time. Give me a hand with the suitcases?”

“Certainly,” I said, and then I was pushing luggage into his Explorer and he was gone, out of the house, flying across the Atlantic, and it was just me and the kids.

Brandon Junior—his father just calls him “Junior”—could play Pop Warner football if he had any physical motivation. Most of the day, he sits at home and plays Nintendo; soon as I walk in the front door after work, he asks me to grab the second game controller, and usually I do. But sometimes I throw the football at him when he’s not expecting it. He needs to lose some weight before he hits high school next year, or the older kids will go crazy on him.

Matty’s the kid genius. Eleven years old, and he asks me to drive him over to the library every day. Finishes a book each night, sitting awake in bed with a flashlight even after I tell him that it’s light’s out. He’s smart for his age, but doesn’t get out much. Doesn’t talk much, either, just sits in his room and draws.

My first week at Brandon’s place, I wandered from room to room, watching TV or snacking, always disoriented by the size of the house and by how, no matter where I went, the kids seemed to appear. I walked into the guest bedroom—it’s nothing fancy, this room, just a bed, a desk, some endtables, but it’s a relief from having mold behind my walls—and I found Matty hunched over the desk in the far corner with the poster board I bought him for his History project. “What’s up?” I asked, confused why he was in here of all places. Later, he told me that his creativity is “stimulated” (he used that word) by moving around, changing spots.

“Look, Cole, look,” Matty said and wiped his runny nose with his free hand. The other hand he used to clear all his markers and colored pencils from the poster board, shoving them into the desk’s far corners. Matty had drawn what looked like a world map from the Age of Explorers. He’d probably finished coloring half the Atlantic Ocean when I walked in, and he’d sketched dragons and serpents and monsters splashing out of the water so that it looked more like Middle Earth than the real Atlantic.

“It’s nice,” I told him.

“How big is Greenland?” he asked.

“What poster board is this?”

“The one we got for my project.”

“And these markers? These pencils?” One of the pencils—light blue, what he’d been
using for the ocean—had been used and sharpened repeatedly, and now was no longer than my pinkie finger. “I bought all of this for your project? Last week, right, when you made me take you to the crafts store?”

He nodded, but I’m not sure he knew what I was getting at.

“And this isn’t your school project, is it?” I asked him. Matty’s a kid genius, sure, but he’s not exactly brimming with common sense. He knows I don’t make the same money as his father. And I didn’t tell either of the kids that their parents left an envelope of money; as far as they were concerned, I’d been handing them my money each morning for their lunch, my money for the reduced allowances I’d been paying. And as far as I was concerned, whatever was left in the envelope by the time the three weeks ended, that was mine.

I couldn’t afford to run out and buy more poster board and more markers whenever he decided to get artistic, so I snatched the poster off the desk, folded it in my hands, and walked out of the bedroom. He ran after me, pleading with me to give his poster back.

“Your poster?” I asked him. “Who paid for this?”

“You bought it,” he started. “But…”

“Who paid for this?”

Matty’s face dissolved into a mess of snot. His allergies had been acting up again and he’d become an assembly line of sickness: coughing, sneezing, wiping nose with sleeve, coughing, sneezing, wiping nose with sleeve. “You paid for it,” he said finally.

“That’s right,” I said. “That’s right.”

“Can I have it back? Please?”

“Financial responsibility,” I told him. “This poster board cost me a dollar. Not to mention the other three pieces you used this week. And those markers, and all the pencils and erasers I had to buy.”

He coughed, sneezed, wiped his nose with his sleeve.

“Go walk down the street,” I said. “Bend over and look for pennies. Everywhere. On the street, in the grass on the side of the road, in the dirt. Find me all the coins you can. If you can get me a dollar fifty, you can have your poster back.”

At that moment, after just a single week with these two boys, I knew for certain that Brandon had it all wrong, whatever he was doing. Allowances? No, this was parenting: finding suitable punishments for children, the kind where they actually learn something. The kind of stuff that’ll make them think.

As Matty slunk outside to scour the grass for coins, I imagined the conversation I’d have with my brother, were he to see what I’d just done. You can’t do that! I could hear him say, sweat breaking out in his stress wrinkles. You can’t make my son do that! How Goddamned irresponsible of you, Cole. But this was the measure of a man, right? These
kids had been coddled their whole lives, just as he had, and their every casual shrug and snicker bespoke ingratitude, entitlement. But for three weeks, I would be here. And now I started to think not of some conversation where Brandon questioned my decisions, my lifestyle, my responsibility...but instead the reunion between father and sons...Brandon stepping out of his Explorer, Matty and Brand standing tall and greeting him with the respect of a firm embrace, not the whining and the sniveling and the boyish scampering he’d probably accepted so long ago...Brandon staring at me, wondering how I’d done it. The measure of a man.

*  *  *

We had a dog when I was a kid. Brandon was off at college by then. It was a retriever named Selmon, after Lee Roy Selmon, cause my father and I watched Bucs games on Sundays and threw the football over our lawn for hours; we’d sit on the gravel driveway and toss the ball to Selmon when we got tired, and he’d dart here, there, across the road, wearing himself out as the afternoon faded to evening. Collapsing beside us and resting his head on our legs, eventually. I remember thinking that my father had that dog trained better than the Bucs’ o-line. One morning, while Dad was ironing a new pair of pants and fixing himself up for some job interview, Selmon trotted to the ironing board and bit the pants legs, yanked and pulled the pants across the room, held tight when my father tried to get them back, snarled like he wanted to fight and play. “Oh, you fucker,” Dad said in a low voice and grabbed the dog by its neck and collar, dragged it into the hallway and shoved it into the closet, where it whimpered. “You think about that,” he said. “You fucking think about that, my God.” My father walked back to his pants, which rested in a bed of dust bunnies in the room’s corner; he straightened them, took a towel to the slobber and a couple pin-prick holes in the fabric. “New pants,” he said. “New fucking pants.” He had a habit of repeating himself, throwing the word “fuck” into the second exclamation to emphasize his point. He left for his interview, and the dog stopped barking after an hour or so, falling silent in the dark closet. When my father came home, first thing he did was open that closet door, and Selmon slunk out and nestled at Dad’s legs, licked his hands as Dad ruffled the fur on his head. I don’t remember my father ever hitting the dog as he hit me, but a couple hours in the closet straightened Selmon out and transformed him back into everything that my Dad thought a good dog should be. Discipline. For all my father’s faults, at least he believed in discipline.

*  *  *

The first week, the wake-up process was difficult but exciting. Usually, after I roll out of bed, all I have to do is shower, shave, slip into my work clothes, pour coffee, and I’m off. Thirty minutes, tops. Same grind every day. But here at my brother’s house, I had to set out cereal and milk on the breakfast table, pour orange juice for Matty and Junior, make
their beds, gather their backpacks, make sure their clothes were on straight and their
hair was combed, walk them halfway to the bus stop. So many morning tasks that I was
exhausted with parenting by 9 AM. So I took mental notes, tried to figure how I could
make them do all this themselves, and by the start of the third week, they were making
their own beds, pouring their own cereal. All I had to do was give them lunch money and
make sure they were out the door in time for the bus.

“Cole, lunch costs three dollars,” Junior said to me one morning after I handed him
his money.

“Don’t get a soda today, then,” I said. “Just get some water.”

“But water’s gross.”

“It’s good for you. And you could stand to lose some weight.”

I hadn’t even realized that I’d been shorting him his lunch money by a dollar each
morning, but I realized that I was actually doing him a favor. Sometimes kids have to learn
the hard way, get their “feelings hurt.” Can’t always baby them or they’ll turn into brats.

They’ve both picked some brats for friends, though, so I guess I should give them
credit for behaving better than their friends. One of these kids, Paul, this skinny punk
who wears black and sings Eminem songs, always comes over and pushes Junior around.
Punches him in the arm. Slaps his face. Laughs about it. I’m not sure the kid knows that
Junior outweighs him by thirty pounds.

“Sock him back,” I said to Junior. “Don’t let him bully you. You see how big this kid
is?”

“My Dad told us not to get in fights,” Junior said.

“Listen. Your father’s right,” I said and put my hand on his shoulder. “But you can’t
just bend over and take it.”

“What?”

“You have to stick up for yourself. Fighting is bad. But there’s nothing wrong with
defending yourself.”

One of Matty’s friends, this kid he calls “Bucky,” came over to the house and
jumped on the couch. With his shoes on. After he’d been running around at the park,
through dirt and mud.

Take off your shoes! You think I want to sit in whatever’s on the bottom of your shoes?
You think I want to rent a fucking steam cleaner?”

Little Bucky started crying. Matty backed away from me.

“Why are you crying?” I asked. “Stop.”

He put his hands in his pockets and looked at the floor. His bottom lip trembled.

“My mom and dad said I’m not supposed to use words like that.”
“Like what?”
He looked up at me. “Fuck,” he whispered.

“Get the fuck out of here,” I said before I realized I’d said it.

In the really bad times, my father used to create different explanations why our cheap food was better than what everyone else was eating. After he paid rent and we were broke for the next two weeks, we’d eat 50-cent pot pies or pasta every night. He’d tell me that he saw something on 60 Minutes about how all the things I liked—hamburgers, pizza—caused your bones to go brittle. Mom was back from the hospital for the third time, Brandon was engaged and living two hours away, and Dad would tell me survival stories about guys in the arctic who only ate canned corn for months, and they turned out to be healthier and stronger than anyone else in the world. I nodded and said “okay” a lot; I promised myself that, if I had kids, I’d be better than this. I’d be honest, at least.

*  *  *

Three times in the first week, Brandon called from France, asking to speak to his “little boys,” and they stood in the kitchen and mumbled into the telephone, mostly answering “yes” or “no” to his questions. When prompted, they said “Love you, too,” and handed the phone back to me.

“We’ll try to call next week, but we’re traveling around,” Brandon said to me.

“No problem,” I said.

“They’re not giving you any trouble, are they?”

“Giving me trouble? Come on. Me? Come on.”

*  *  *

Sometime during the second week, I got a call from a teacher named Mrs. Krill. She asked for Mr. Sands, and I responded reflexively. It took me a moment to realize that I wasn’t the man she was calling for, but by then, I was too embarrassed to correct her and tell the story of why I was here. “Who am I?” I could’ve said. “I’m 25 and work at an airport shuttle service. I failed out of automotive school. My last girlfriend left me because she was pregnant by someone else. I make hourly, and I can’t pay my electric bill. Everyone around me is making money, getting married, but I’m so far behind in this game that I’ve gotta live in my brother’s house on the opposite end of town and watch his sons for a month. That’s me. Cole Sands. Am I the guy you’re looking for?” So I just played along, told her I was the father, acted concerned when she told me that she was worried about Junior’s interests.

“His interests?” I asked. “What’d he do?”

“Brandon hasn’t engaged in any disruptive behaviors, necessarily,” she said. “But he says and does things that disturb me.”

“Like what?”

“This really would be better to discuss in person, Mr. Sands, in a parent-teacher
conference,” Mrs. Krill said.

“Hmm. Too busy right now. Couple weeks?”

“I’d prefer to put an end to this sooner rather than later,” she said.

“Just tell me, then, and I’ll take care of whatever it is.”

“I caught him with a comic book.”

“Comic books. That’s a problem?”

“Mr. Sands,” she said. “I caught him reading a comic book during Home Room. It was bloody. Violent. Something a child shouldn’t read.”

“Well. It’s a comic book. Who else is supposed to read them?”

“I would suggest that you watch your child’s reading habits more closely.”

After the phone call, I found Junior in the TV room playing some racing game, the high-definition graphics of crashing cars blazing and spinning across the big-screen.

“Your teacher called. You collect comic books?” I asked.

“Sort of,” he said.

“What’s this ‘sort of’ shit?”

He laughed a little, one of those nervous laughs that kids give adults when they don’t know how to respond.

“Pause the game. Look at me when I talk to you,” I said, a little smile on my face just so he’d know I meant business, but I wasn’t upset. “Answer with confidence. You collect comic books or not?”

“Yeah.”

“Where do you keep them?”

“My closet.”

“Your closet?” The two share a bedroom, and their closet stretches the length of one entire wall “Does Matty know?”

“We collect them together.”

“Been here two weeks, and I never see you reading them.”

“We didn’t want you to know,” he said softly.

“Why not?”

“If it’s not football, you think it’s for girls.”

“Well,” I said and shrugged. “Football’s not a bad interest, Junior. Won’t get you in trouble with your teachers, I’ll tell you that much.”

* * *

Back in the ‘80s, most of the ABC Liquor stores in the Bay Area had small lounges in the back, past the fine wines, where you could kick back and drink what you’d bought. When my mother started getting sick, she asked my father to do the grocery shopping; he dragged me along and told me to bring a toy. Before we drove to Albertson’s, we stopped
at ABC Liquor, where my father bought a cheap bottle of something brown (to this day, I couldn’t say exactly what he drank), and spent his afternoon taking long sips and talking with a few other exhausted-looking adult men while I raced Matchbox cars around boxes of vodka bottles and cases of Bud Lite. Sometimes he let me play the video poker machine in the back. When he told someone that he’d taken his son grocery shopping, they always nodded and said things like “Oh, terrific, spending time with the boy,” but we’d be gone for three hours and come home only with a gallon of milk, crushed white bread, and a stack of frozen pot pies.

I always thought I could be a good father. My last girlfriend, Cindi, used to say that this was what she loved about me. That I listen, that I’m reasonable, that I’m physical without being cruel. Once, when we got rear-ended on I-75 heading to Sarasota, I stood in the shoulder and spent fifteen minutes with the ten year-old kid in the passenger seat of the steaming Sebring that had crunched into my back fender. The driver, the kid’s father, was so busy shaking his head and yelling into his cell phone at his wife about insurance that he didn’t realize his son was pale and trembling, staring ahead at the accordioned metal of the hood as if it would bite through the windshield and swallow him. He wasn’t injured, but when I first snapped my fingers at him and asked if he was all right, he wouldn’t look in my direction, just kept staring forward with vacant eyes; by the time his father was off the phone, me and the kid were talking Buccaneers football and I was making jokes about how the quarterback this year was so bad that he wouldn’t even make this kid’s Pee-Wee league, and the kid was laughing.

What my brother told me about being a father, that it was the measure of a man and that you had to want your kids to be better than you: I believed it. No matter what I wound up doing, I believed that, at least, and thought I was doing right.

* * *

Yesterday morning, Mrs. Krill called the home phone again, probably three minutes before I was going to head out to Red Carpet Shuttle, and again I answered it. Took me four rings before I found the portable phone; Matty left it on top of a stack of Sunday Funnies in the laundry room. He’d been saving the Sunday comic strips from the Tampa Tribune for weeks now, I guess, clipping out certain comics and pasting them in a scrapbook or something, and leaving the rest of the Funnies sitting on the floor next to the washing machine.

“Mr. Sands,” Mrs. Krill said over the phone, talking to me like we had unfinished business. “Your son never arrived in class this morning.”

“What time...” I started, the phone wedged between my shoulder and my ear, my hands working at buttoning my sleeves. The phone threatened to fall to the floor. “What time was he supposed to be there?”
“Thirty minutes ago,” she said. “Home room is over. I checked with the front office. Neither of your sons arrived at school this morning.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said. “I saw Matty and Junior leave for the bus stop.” They’d eaten their Frosted Flakes, and one of them had chased the other out the door by 7:45, ten minutes before the bus usually came.

“You saw them leave?” she asked. “Did you ensure that your children actually made it to the bus stop?”

“It’s two minutes from here. Not even a block.”

“You’re not worried?”

“Worried?” I asked. “They’re grown kids. Why would I be worried?”

“Grown kids, Mr. Sands? No one,” she said like I was a thirteen-year-old in one of her classes, “not the school, not me, not you...knows where your children are. Does that alarm you, even in the slightest?”

I switched the phone from one hand to the other and finished buttoning my sleeves. “This is great,” I said. “This is fantastic. You’re telling me my kids are skipping class?” I held the phone tighter, picturing my brother stepping from his Explorer, looking at me and speaking to me in the same accusatory tone as this teacher. Under my watch, the kids were skipping class? Measure of a man. “I try with them,” I said. “If I have to fucking miss work today...” Already, I’d been placed on probation for missing a shift weeks before.

“Mr. Sands,” Mrs. Krill said, “would you watch your language, please?”

“If you find them,” I said, “you tell me right away. You hear me?” My face was burning, and it felt like my brain was going to boil and drip out through my nose. “You fucking tell me right away.” I hung up.

After the conversation, all I could think was, “This isn’t how I would’ve raised them.” But what if these kids were trying to take advantage of their Uncle Cole? They’d behave for Brandon, but not for me? Oh, no fucking way. A day and a half until their parents returned from France...only fifty bucks left in the envelope (“Financial responsibility goes for you, too,” I could already hear Brandon saying to me). If these kids were skipping school, I was going to find them and crack the fucking whip. My last chance.

I can’t imagine what the receptionists thought when I walked into work. Not that it really mattered. Red Carpet Shuttle isn’t a shirt-and-tie sort of job; it’s an airport limo service, but the nicest vehicle we own is an old church van. Our office is sandwiched between a lawn care center and an automotive shop with an Accord sitting on blocks out front. Still, I was as frazzled as I’d ever been.

“Cole,” Laurie asked when I came in. “What’s wrong?”

“The kids,” I said.

“Your hair.”
I brushed my hands through my hair. Its shape had been determined by my position in bed the night before.

“And you’re wearing flip-flops,” she said.

“Can you cover for me a little while, Laurie?” I said. “Kids are driving me crazy.”

Still wearing sandals. Skipping work for these brats.

“Maybe you should file a missing persons report. This could be serious.”

“Not a chance,” I said. No paper trail. No way. I couldn’t call the neighborhood, couldn’t tell anyone what was going on. And I’d have to call Mrs. Krill back later in the day, make something up, tell her I’d found them even if I hadn’t.

I drove around for hours, used up a whole tank of gas. I scouted the streets like a private investigator, searching every swamp and every forest that looked to be an invitation to two young boys skipping school. Parked my car seven times to investigate. Twice I found tree forts, and three times I found rusty bicycles resting under trees, covered in months of fallen leaves. I even stopped at the kids’ bus stop, unsure when the buses returned. I only waited for a few minutes, leaning against a lamppost, my car in park. The afternoon buses had already come and gone, I guess, and there was no one around.

But something caught my eye.

A piece of white poster board on the ground, ripped in two.

I grabbed it, flipped it over. Matty’s project.

*  *  *

“Where have you been?” I asked and slammed the car door behind me. I’d just gotten home from my search. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“What do you mean?” Junior asked. Both he and Matty stood in the driveway, backpacks slung across their right shoulders, hands in pockets, standing around innocent like they’d just walked home from the bus stop, like they were waiting for me to unlock the front door.

“You made me look all over town,” I said and hurried over to the two. They backed up, like I was going to hit them. “What the fuck were you thinking?” I asked them.

“What?”

“Cole, we just got home from school,” Matty said.

“School?”

“School,” he said softly.

“You scared of something?” I asked.

“No.”

“What’d you learn today?”

He didn’t answer.

“I found your poster at the bus stop,” I said, my voice as calm as Raymond James
Stadium in Spring. “You were at school? Why didn’t you take your project?”

“I did,” he said, but he wasn’t looking at me.

“Bullshit,” I said. “Fucking bullshit. Don’t lie to me.” I grabbed him by his backpack, dragged him up the walkway, unlocked and opened the front door with one hand, shoved him inside. Junior followed behind, his hands covering his ass to protect himself from a spanking. At least he knew the drill; that much was encouraging.

“Cole,” I heard behind me. Junior’s turn to speak up. “They were going to take his comic books.”

I shot him a stare so cold it could’ve finally given Florida a winter to remember. Matty stumbled through the living room, dropped his backpack on the floor, bumped into the kitchen table. Letters and old newspapers, balanced on the edge of the table for days, fell to the floor.

“Cole,” Junior said again and grabbed his backpack from his shoulder, dropped it onto the floor. His hands were red, knuckles scraped. A dark yellow patch had formed under his right eye, the skin puffing out like a Pillsbury roll in the oven. “They said they’d take our comic books. They tore his poster. It wasn’t him.”

“Have you been fighting?” I asked. Matty scampered into the other room, sobbing. “Let me see your face.”

“Ow,” he said, backing away as I tried to touch his bruise. “No.”

“You’re fighting now, too?” I asked.

“They took his poster, Uncle Cole,” Junior said. “Ripped it in half.”

“Let me see your face.”

He stood still as I examined the bruise, a patch of skin the size of a quarter, taking on a yellow-brown tone like the iodine stain left on your forearm after you have blood taken. “They hit me,” he said. “I was just trying to fight back.”

“Let me see your hands,” I said.

He held them up slowly. Dark red blood had crusted across his fingers and under his fingernails. And his knuckles. Cuts here and there, like maybe he’d fallen onto the street and used his fist to break his fall. I wanted to get bandages then, to get an icepack. But these things were the sort of things my brother would see when he came home.

“Lying to me,” I said. “Taking advantage of me?”

“Cole,” he said.

“And you skipped school?”

“His poster was ripped,” he said. “We couldn’t go. He’d fail the class, Uncle Cole. He’d fail if we went.”

“All this, for a fucking comic book? Do you know what your father’s going to say to me?” And he kept talking, I think, squeaking out excuses like he was getting paid by the
His eyes glossed over and tears welled up. Did I see him cry then, or was it later? I gritted my teeth and held my breath and made fists and suddenly I could only think of my own father, those nights when Mom wasn’t around and we’d eat pot pies for dinner and then he’d have a few glasses of warm whiskey or bourbon or whatever, and he’d slap the back of my head if I didn’t keep quiet during the game, and I thought of my older brother, how he never saw any of this because he was starting his career, a fiancé and a college degree and then a son, two sons, a house, a new house, a home theater, and here’s some money to get you by, Cole, and his hair thinning but his suits becoming nicer and nicer, and a speech at my father’s funeral, “He deserved better than this, a longer life,” and then “Why can’t you get it together, Cole? What would Dad think?” and I thought of my brother’s soft face and all the things he’d say now, and I don’t know how long I kept this pose, growing angrier and angrier, but my head was somewhere else, and I don’t even know what snapped me back into the moment. Perhaps it was the air conditioner, clunking to life. Perhaps it was a dozen other noises. But I didn’t hear the sound of contact when I slapped Junior’s face. Or scream when I hit him again.

Junior shriveled up in the corner, and I stood over him, breathing heavy.

I did hear Matty say “you hit him,” and then the sound of my hands smacking him, too.

Comic books, I thought. That was what I focused on. Fucking comic books. This tiny envelope of money I’ve got for three weeks, and these kids get an allowance to blow on comic books? Meanwhile, I’m behind in my truck payments? And they’d probably known about the envelope all along, had probably been slipping money from the envelope...that was the only answer...that was why there was so little left...and now they’d skipped school, they’d gotten into a fight, and Brandon would come home and these would be the first things he’d hear. The money’s all gone? The kids are in trouble at school? And I picked up Matty from the floor where he’d gone fetal, scooped him up at the waist and said, “What’re you screaming for, I’m not gonna hit you,” and I was panicking cause I knew what I’d just done, so I carried him—flailing, crying about how he’d tell his father—to his closet, opened the door, asked him, is that where he kept his comic books? In there? Dumped him in like this was the planned punishment all along. Went back for Junior, who by now was standing, about to run, but I pointed, herded him into the closet, too.

And I shut the closet door on the both of them, pushed the dresser against the door. You happy in there with your comic books? I asked. Stop crying, I said. You happy? You’re sleeping with your comics tonight, is what you’re doing. Don’t bang on this door. Not a word. Not another fucking tear. Sit in here. Read your fucking comic books and think about how you got them, what they cost. My money! Not another fucking peep.

“This is parenting,” I said. “This is discipline.”
And I shut off the closet lights.

A little while later, they made a peep. “When’s dinner?” Junior asked, only loud enough that I could hear from the hallway.

I slammed my fist into the door. “I said think. Don’t talk.” But I softened, cracked the door and dropped inside a loaf of white bread and plastic jars of peanut butter and jelly.

Later, worried, I told them that I had to do what I did, that no one would listen to them anyway, or that everyone would just agree that what I’d done was right, and I stayed as I was, back against the closet door, as the house and the neighborhood settled into the stillness of late evening suburbia. Other families on the block would be finishing dinner now, scrubbing plates, watching sitcoms, occupied but awake. Maybe even wheeling out their trashcans for tomorrow morning’s pick-up or working on their cars in the driveway now that the sun was easing past the horizon and the September night was cooling.

And right at that moment, the kids’ parents were likely waiting at the gate in some Paris airport to board their flight back home. “Nobody’s going to believe you,” I told them again, but already I was re-imagining the reunion, both children running to their father, faces swollen from crying, bruises, pointing at me. “This is parenting. This is discipline,” I’d said, but I was nearly sobbing now. I was thinking where I could go. I was thinking that I could—maybe—just pack my bags, take whatever I could from the pantries, food and snacks, fill my tank and drive away from Tampa, up I-75 and away from the entire peninsula—away from my brother, my job, my duplex—and how life might be a clean slate somewhere else. Out in Texas, maybe, I could be Cole Sands, but a different Cole Sands... Mr. Sands, maybe, and my father and brother...out there, they’d never have to exist, and life could start for me. Probably, I’d never get farther than Pensacola before turning around, driving home, asking my brother if...But it was a thought.

In the morning, I moved the dresser and they came stumbling out of the closet.

“Showers,” I said. “And then you’re going to school. And you’re apologizing to Mrs. Krill. For skipping.”

They nodded, gray faces drained of emotion, afraid to say even a word to me.

Later, driving north, I’d try to compare those faces to what I remembered of my own face as a child, when I stared at myself in the mirror, eyes etched with distinct splotches of red, cheeks and lips sinking in hopelessness, and I would wonder what Brandon used to see when he came home on holidays, if he could even imagine that his children now looked the same as his younger brother had so many years ago, if he would have any idea.
Blessings and Curses, Curses and Blessings... they all run together in Anne Whitehouse’s latest book of poetry. At times the poems seem like journal entries or thoughts scribbled on a Post-It or sound bites from a news story rather than poetry. But these are the poems, the moments, caught and tagged as a blessing or curse. Whitehouse has chosen to title each poem as either a blessing or a curse, followed with a roman numeral. While this lends itself well to the book title, it strips away the color from the painting.

The book is set up like a ledger or one’s pros and cons list, but then one comes upon a poem that unearths a new speaker, a speaker very different from the writer, and the poetry suddenly comes alive with a journalistic feel. These dialogue-filled poems read like audio recordings in which the reader is able to hear the voice of the victim reporting the scene. But when Whitehouse presents a short autobiographical poem, it startles the reader back into a starkly simple state, as if the reader were listening to Whitehouse offer advice or encouragement on the other end of the phone:

When inspiration comes, attend to it.
Drop everything else. Listen carefully.
You get one chance and once chance only.
To receive the blessing,
You must be prepared to receive it.
Let yourself be its instrument.
The intention and expression are up to you. (Blessing XIII, 36)

This could very well be an English teacher speaking to her class or a coach trying to motivate the team. It’s pretty but cliché. Poems like these are jammed throughout the book as if the poet were short a few poems and needed to fill some space.

At other times one feels he or she has looked out an apartment window across the alley to another building where a stranger is standing at his or her own window in tears:

Let these curses dry up,
Light as leaves, and blow away.
The struggles are unending.
They are life itself.
They have my attention. (Curse XXIV, 111)

Such moments of brittle honesty allow the writer to touch her audience, pricking beneath the safe, stale surface of pretty poetry to a deeper, more intimate level.

The poems that have the capacity to engage the reader most are the poems that weave a meticulous spell of emotion and experience. Poems that make you feel like you’ve visited a nursing home and have stopped to listen outside a door to an intimate conversation, only hearing the one side, the victim, a lonely soul, tell his or her story. Whether the poem is reminiscing about 9/11 or it’s a holocaust survivor’s story, Whitehouse lends her voice to encapsulate the emotion, the profoundness, of each life. In Curse XI, the reader meets Tomiko, who tells what it was like to be the only one in a family to live through an atomic bombing in Japan as a thirteen year old. “Suddenly I saw a flash / like the sun / going into the ocean / bright red / but high in the sky.” It doesn’t matter if these words are the poet’s or Tomiko’s.

What matters is that the tale is told.

So stick with breaking our hearts, Whitehouse. I for one want poetry that makes me feel and see and curse out loud and then hit my knees to count my blessings.
Returning from Guitar Lessons

By Sarah Reed

Its bellowing, foreign as the songs of whales
in deep Atlantic waters
as I fumble salty fingerprints over its six strings.

I want to tread smoothly down its neck.
Slip my palms around,
like opening a man’s collar to bare skin,

and claim the arched body pressed against my thigh.

Poses classical, undaunted, trusting
that my knees will sway,
and that I’ve clipped my fingernails.

It deserves the sounds of Segovia
and the blues of Handy
that I have only muddled in fashioning

before I creak through my front door, shaking
rain from my cheap umbrella,
and rest the guitar awkwardly against the wall.
First, gather your materials:
Fabric and thread,
Newspaper clippings,
I.D. cards and name tags,
Postcards, momentos, receipts
Of the American Dream.
Spread them like gesso
Over the canvas.

Take the scissors.
Cut demigods from magazines.
Paste in the skin you want,
The thighs you prefer.
Create the icon to image yourself after.
Don’t worry about overlapping and messy edges.
Give yourself plenty of time to get it right.

Sew the pieces together -
Splattered painter’s pants
Your new skin.
Embroider golden idols around the seams.
Stitch together scraps.
Paint them like Ringgold’s heroes,
Quilted memories and shredded secrets.

Assemble your treasures:
All the keys to unknown places,
The plastic parts to things you’ve lost,
The mystery remote control.

Dine’s hammer in hand,
Nail in your guilt and self-persecution.
Buff your hang-ups with turpentine
Before displaying them on the wall.

Finally, add the mirror.
Carefully place each shattered shard
So it reflects the other pieces,
Making the collage whole.
Step back to admire your work.
Send a check to your therapist.
To the artist,
on behalf of the old violin
By Laura Eleanor Holloway

You were right, of course, to tentatively invite
the amber light to grace the grains of honeyed wood;
to spark the broken brass hinges, the matching key;
to mark the measured severed string; to cast itself
against the rosin dust reminder of *vibrato* and *tremolo*.

Your painter’s eye knew to encourage the shadows
to hide in f-holes; to bend to the music, rise
and fall across the tattered page, the battered bow,
tenacious tacks, and torn corners; to play in time-
worn pits and scores, against the wear of phantom chin.

But you, painter, were the wrong artist to pluck her
from her ancient resting place, three ecstatic strings
quivering to your touch, only to suspend her
inelegantly with brass brad and coarse twine
from the side of your upended trunk, her Tantalus bow

still against her silent back: so close,
so close.
the flowers come in the mail
with the cards, the letters expressing sympathy
for our loss, I smile
thank my husband for his kindness
call relatives to explain
I really don’t need anything
I’m doing just fine. I arrange
the cut flowers in vases
repot living plants, display the serene cards
on the coffee table and by the bed.

My husband compliments me on my strength
I reply with a smile. I am carved out of stone.

at night, I find myself talking to the missing baby
hold my hands
over my empty belly, protecting nothing.
it hurts to sleep on my stomach
only because nothing stops me from lying that way.

I shuffle through these days
find comfort in routine
turn inside myself, hold back everything
but the same, placid smile the mailman sees
every single day.
sometimes I think the real ticket
to making it
is to just live longer
than everyone around me
become

the high lama guru of some group of
starry-eyed kids, transfix them
with stories
about all the real stars I knew
I knew and outlived.
The world without honey
is a desolate place. It is
the wonderland of just milk.

One never hears here
“Honey, I’m home!”
No one appreciates a honey of a car.

People catch flies with just vinegar.
Some persons are sweet as a pear or cane
but never as honey.

Others gather the cream
but never the honey
of knowledge.

The dew in a melon
is no longer honey dew;
it is just dew.

A big attraction cannot become
a honey-trap. It may as well be
just a horseradish trap.

In the world without honey,
there are still combs
but no more honeycombs.

Even a portable outhouse
cannot possibly contain
a honey pot.

Here, Winnie the Pooh has no purpose.
One can hardly find any
Winnie the Pooh.

The world without honey is a sad place,
full of busy bodies
without busy bees.
It’s easy to believe in the cathedral
Slightly harder to believe in the Virgin’s gilt robe
But the music paints God so convincingly
It’s dangerously easy to accept it as truth

Do not enlighten me with the tune
Let me stay in the darkness of opposing beliefs
Whatever is there, I am your complete other
Loving you; choking with gratitude
Holly Day is a journalism instructor living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her husband and two children. Her most recent nonfiction books are *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, and *Walking Twin Cities*. Her poetry has most recently appeared in *Bottle*, *The MacGuffin*, and *Not One of Us*.


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The Oklahoma Review is an electronic literary magazine published through the Department of English at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma. The editorial board consists of English and Professional Writing undergraduates, as well as faculty advisors from the Departments of English and Foreign Languages & Journalism. The goal of our publication is to provide a forum for exceptional fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction in a dynamic, appealing, and accessible environment. The magazine’s only agenda is to promote the pleasures and edification derived from high-quality literature.

-The Staff

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The Oklahoma Review is a continuous publication, now in its eighth year. We publish two issues online each year, Spring and Fall. Although we accept submissions at any time, our general deadlines are as follows:

To have your work considered for the Spring issue: January 15
To have your work considered for the Fall issue: September 15

All works must be submitted electronically to The Oklahoma Review. Submissions are welcome from any serious writer working in English. We will neither consider nor return submissions sent in hard copy, even if return postage is included.

Writers may submit the following:

As many as three (3) prose pieces of 30 pages or less.
As many as five (5) poems or translations of any length.
As many as three (3) nonfiction prose pieces of 30 pages or less.
Files should be sent as e-mail attachments in either .doc or .rtf format. If an attachment is impossible, writers may submit their work in the body of their e-mail messages, noting specific format criteria when necessary.
When sending multiple submissions (e.g. five poems), please include all the work in a single file rather than five separate files.
Authors should also provide a cover paragraph with a short biography in the body of their e-mail.
Simultaneous submissions are acceptable. Please indicate in your cover letter if your work is under consideration elsewhere.

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