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What You and I Failed Through

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The Black Rose

Grand Rapids, MI

The beasts were chained together
grey leather legs and sides
cracked with weight and time

a memorial march, a mourning march
—slow moving, a silent train

walking back-to-trunk
tails in mouths
on a barren Sunday street.

In our low tent
in the middle of the woods
I lay on you
and thought of another

I couldn’t breathe—
was collapsing in that nowhere.

Through dark windows of the pub
we saw Barnum & Bailey, tent down, stakes up
lead the saddest most beautiful parade
and it almost brought me back.

But I go crazy in the fall—
snapping branches
kicking-up leaves.

It was a good day to give you away—
the day we watched the elephants
we sat on the same side of the table
took food from the same plate.
KATIE SHINKLE

couldn’t keep an erection to save his life.) All he expected since wife two was someone to eat tuna fish and tomato sandwiches and watch Celebrity Jeopardy! with, someone to plant hydrangeas with, maybe some romance, some sweet-smelling shampoo or Avon perfume once in a while.

Drink Ajax. Drink bleach. Drink Ajax mixed with bleach. Take arsenic. Take strychnine. Shoot an air bubble into your bloodstream via injection. The slushy snow drifted towards his smashed window, beginning to accumulate in clumps; he cursed Estie for dying in February; for losing the twins she was carrying; for causing his accident. He had, of course, failed to take notice of the ice on the road, failed to slow down, failed to control his vehicle. He felt the pangs of cold seep in, the heat escaping, mocking him as it left for being so stupid. It was the first time in Howard’s life he felt the world was out to get him. He remembered the question on the test at the senior center the group therapy leader—a hot young thing, mid-thirties, long legs—made him take:

121. I BELIEVE I AM BEING PLOTTED AGAINST BY THE WORLD.

He answered no because he didn’t understand the question until now. Yes he would’ve answered yesyesyes. His neck became heavy, his tongue thick. He wanted to take a nap but knew he shouldn’t since he’d hit his head so hard he was fearful of concussion. And, to top it off, he was certain he was late for the funeral. He almost looked forward to the funerals, had become accustomed to the arrangements: the flowers, the casket, the music, the bad ham sandwiches and potato salad, the photo montages, the great remembrances. It was an all-expenses-paid party for him, the arrangements: the flowers, the casket, the music, the bad ham sandwiches and potato salad, the photo montages, the great remembrances. It was an all-expenses-paid party for him, with the exception of Estie, who had very little and left him less. He took a disappointed deep breath, embraced and cradled the sharp pain above his eyebrows, deep in his skull—or was it the back of his neck, he couldn’t tell—and said,

“Jump off the Brooklyn Bridge.”

The statement lingered in the crushed automobile and made what was left of the windshield shatter. He was saddened by how old and heavy his voice sounded. He’d never been to Brooklyn; he didn’t even know what state Brooklyn belonged to. In fact, he’d never been outside of Michigan his whole life. He never saw a reason to leave. Another test question quickly lingered, gnawing at his mind:

517. I CANNOT DO ANYTHING WELL.

He thought it was a trick question at the time. Yes, he answered. Yes, I cannot do anything well. But now that he thought about it, he should’ve put no. No, I cannot do anything well. Either way, he believed it. He couldn’t even live life well.

All of his women did, though, each with her own story. The first, Svetlana, died in Lake Michigan, her foot getting caught in an abandoned dock hole that was never filled up. They were only married six months. Two years later, the second one, Joanne, only twenty-seven when cancer invaded her ovaries, her marrow. All she ever wanted was a vegetable garden and a dog—things she had before her father left her family for the rodeo, things that represented solidarity and affection. She only got her vegetable garden.

Lock yourself in a box and leave instructions for burial alive, walk in front of a train a car a Mack truck, cut your throat with a backsaw a razor blade a butcher knife. And it was the same for the last four: Carla, thirty-two, who died in a tragic plane crash that made world news; Donna, forty-three, who didn’t

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1 Svetlana, a twenty-four-year-old Russian import, adopted and raised by the Kidwood family of Hoboken, New Jersey. She was the military nurse that helped with his physical examination, determining his future with the armed forces. She was large in stature, which also included her calves, wrists, ears but she was lovely and gorgeous. She was intrigued by Howard’s history, his fantastic life of sailing around the world training elephants, dining with people like Ernest Hemingway (all of which was not the slightest bit accurate or truthful). Howard held a penchant towards covering his failures with thick, lying lies that no woman ever doubted or resisted. He, naturally, kept all personal matters and private affairs such as finances private and personal and, of course, his gorgeous physique. This is why she loved him and why, ultimately, they all loved him.

2 Joanne: she was a mopey, plain, dark-skinned woman of Cuban descent. She was thoroughly convinced that the sailboats Howard stole from the docks for daytime escapades (side note: he was caught three times stealing boats, got suspended from the yacht club and almost thrown in jail twice) belonged to his family because he was related to the Pope of Rome and received a stipend to live on. A devout Catholic, she felt it was a gift from God that this ravingly delicious man would choose to marry her, especially since sex before marriage was out of the question and she had already been divorced twice.

3 Three things happened during this time: 1) A large settlement was given to the surviving families and Howard finally thought he hit it big but 2) it ended up going to her other husband Cecil who Carla never divorced, which Howard only found out after he married the feds. 3) After these deaths (and especially this one), he began to be a suspect because how could all these women die of natural causes with the same man? He wasn’t guilty of killing, only continually failing and lying about his failures. Eventually, the attorneys, police, community left him but by that time it was too late, the speculation too insurmountable and he moved to another town, twenty minutes east, hoping for success that never manifested.

4 Donna was a spy thing, a very prominent part of this new community, a diamond in Amway, making the fat cash. She was enthralled with Howard’s slightly crooked ballroom dancing that he learned in the Basque Country, his knowledge of fine wine that he learned in Italy. She told him that he looked like what President John F. Kennedy would’ve looked like if he’d been lived long enough. This impressed her and all of her friends immensely.
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For you see, Estie was just shy of twenty-four weeks pregnant when she passed, acting as a surrogate for Tanya and Teena. Estie was thirty-one. This was Howard’s only shot at some sort of fatherhood, albeit from a distance, and he wanted to be a father more than anything. He felt Estie mined everything and he felt cheated.
wake up one day in a Super 8 in Skokie, Illinois on a business trip for Amway, just shy of nine months together; Sentrina, fifty-nine, who fell into a diabetic coma the night of their honeymoon in Traverse City and passed two days later, a record for Howard. Finally, he found Estie. Estie the survivor, the overcomer, the envoy. Estie, the one that would provide children after all these years and who would make his coffee, bleach his underwear, clean his john, wear the occasional Avon perfume. Estie, the one he'd been waiting for to make it all happen for him, now dead like the rest, almost one year to the day.

I HAVE NEVER FELT BETTER IN MY ENTIRE LIFE THAN I DO RIGHT NOW. [Y] [N]

He'd answered yes, of course. He had an alive wife with two alive babies inside her that he'd be able to hold and hug and buy teddy bears for and they'd, at least, call him by his first name, if not something close to dad. He was eating three squares a day, sleeping well, doing fine for the first time ever. Asked the same question now, he would've answered no-way-in-hell. He felt like a horrible failure.

Swallow a months worth of Angina pills with some Dixie-Doo Whiskey, hang yourself with a shower cord, volleyball net, guitar string. Howard heard crunching snow, coughs, footsteps. Boots on broken glass. A signal he would live. A signal he might make it to Estie. A hand wiped the snow from the window slowly, as to not knock any broken shards. Howard could make out red and blue lights behind the hand, the strong yellow from the front guiding the police officers, the EMT's, the on-lookers, path.

"Can you hear me? Don't move. Can you speak? Do you know who you are?"

His spine was sore, he began to doze off. "Sure" came out a little lower, a little slower than before.

"He's alive, let's get 'em outta here," he heard the middle-aged man tell the other pairs of boots on glass.

Howard had even failed at dying.

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Sentrina Carlson, the ex-wife of Reverend Marcus Carlson. Reverend Carlson left his family—his wife and his son, not hers—for a transgendered alternative lifestyle that neither she nor Howard understood. He was up for "corrective" surgery to make him Marilyn in France when she passed.

BREANNE LEJEUNE

Lakes I Won't Swim In

Long lake because too many people have died there and I'm afraid that upon gulping in I'll inhale a bit of bloated flesh detached by the far down effects of boat waves from the bodies of the children, the mother, the snowmobile drivers, that still aren't found.

Like Discovery Channel footage of the prey of sharks after they've been eaten— the water all bloody and filled with skin.

Cross Village where my friend Nikki's grandma lives on the dunes because the slimy rocks look like fish in the clear water even when I'm standing on one and know they are rocks.

With my eyes open underwater I can see forever, and am convinced they creep closer, every time I look away, like sneaky big-headed bottom feeders with their bodies beneath the sand their eyes closed, waiting to execute a sneak attack and rip my legs in opposite directions so that they can feast on my pathetically bobbing body like a strawberry filled cake that bleeds and screams.

Northbar because of the tree that floated in it during the summer of David when he pushed the thing underwater and fast at me so that I couldn't see it coming until it was near my head and scary like an alligator and it's going fast and I only just saw it and have three seconds to get away before I mysteriously disappear forever only to go beating and rolling around...