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Broken Limbs

Andre Narbonne



It is a year for broken limbs. An unseasonably warm October holds leaves to the elms on Hixon Street, to the cottonwoods, oaks and tulip trees on Mountain, the roads that map my grade two world. And then, a month too early... a hard snowfall. Heavy and wet, it snaps branches unable to hold against the inexorable weight of an illogical season. Trees fall in graceless heaps. Within a week the snow is gone and the silent fingers with their empty reproach, the amputated arms that litter Hixon and Mountain, seem improbable.

What is equally improbable, that month my father, who is dying, recovers.

Father has always been a silent man in a silent house—so much so that my early childhood exists in a quiet space in my memory as though in a closet in an abandoned hall. I believe all silence is symptomatic of ill-health, but the calm that descends over the dinner table in mid-September, a week after Father stops eating with us, has an undignified caste to it—like it belongs to the sort of illness no one discusses. When at last I ask my mother and my big sister, Jenna, where my father is, Mother replies, “He’s not well,” and Jenna agrees: “He’s in the hospital.” But even in agreement my sister looks uncomfortable.

“When’s he coming back?”

“Oh, not for...” Mother scratches her head, looks at the clock on the stove, “at least another week.”

“Maybe a month,” Jenna smiles and nods vigorously, unhappily.

I can’t know it, but they are drawing strength from protecting me. Keeping me ignorant makes things less precarious. I guess.

Father’s condition worsens. By mid-October there are fears that he will die.

“No, that’s all wrong,” they tell me at school. “Your parents are divorcing.”

“I don’t understand”

“They’re not going to be married anymore.”

“No,” I say, “My father’s sick. He’s in the hospital.”

“He’s not in the hospital. He’s in Grimsby.” Grimsby is one town over. It has a hospital.

That night at dinner I ask whether my father is in the hospital at Grimsby or whether he is in Grimsby because he isn’t going to be married anymore. The snow is blowing hard outside, obscuring the view of the yard from the window.

My mother and Jenna share a look of sorrow—they are sad for me; it’s palpable—and then my mother tells me, “Your father has left us. He’s not sick, but he doesn’t love us anymore.” My mother will remarry several years later, but on this night she can’t restrain herself. She pours misery.

Jenna says, “He still may come back.” Casting a glance at my mother but speaking to me she adds, “So we can’t be disconsolate.”

“What’s disconsolate?” I have to speak above my mother’s sobs. I am scared for her. Confused.

“We can’t cry.”

I don't cry. I'm not sad. I don't know him. I never will. Two years later, he and his new wife will move to California.

But that next morning, the morning of the broken limbs, he is still one town away and no longer at death's door. In fact he is much improved. He's checked out of the hospital into a new life. And I leave home, shocked by the sight of so much debris, the collapsed roof of my childhood. I don't know what anything means. I don't share the lexicon of adults, haven't learned to sympathize with a father who ignores me, who is lighting out for the territories along a common route.

But I might cry for those trees. I am at that age. Or I might see in them a symbol of my own alienation, the displacement that comes upon me for the first time that year, except I am too young for symbols. Even strange words like the one the older boy on Mountain calls Jenna that morning while I am building a broken-stick fortress in the school playground needs interpretation. I take it home with me. Jenna will know.

* * *

Our last real family outing was the summer before when the trees were whole: verdantly waiting. Balls Falls, Ontario, the summer of 1969...

The school sends us home that year with decals my mother irons onto blue windbreakers. Jenna and I wear the same stenciled words: **Bring Me Back Alive.**

My jacket scares me. I am five, and I'm lost in my education, terrified to learn there's a possibility of not coming home alive, of not coming home at all. What could happen?

It's Jenna who answers: "You could wander off. Get lost in the water."

There are ten years between us; she is in high school, and she tells me things: explains my world as no one else does. She is the only parent I acknowledge, the only one who attempts to bring the world to me, rather than take it away. My big, blue shirt, the one that covers me so loosely my fingers just peek out of the sleeve, is her most recent gift. “It’s freedom,” she says. It makes me look baggy, different.

The wind shifts, carrying a wordless tone of anger from somewhere in the woods. The sounds scare me.

“Water,” Jenna mumbles, trancelike. “We’re made of it, mostly, and yet it can kill us.”

I see it rushing over the falls: eternity in a wave dashing endlessly through the rocks, wave upon wave over a swollen precipice near a ledge where children dive.

Father is silent and Mother is peering through eyes heavy with defeat at other husbands. Jenna sings,

“My body lies over the ocean.

My body lies over the sea.

My body lies over the ocean.

So bring back my body to me.”

Then I join in—it’s our joke—and the fact that we are singing together in our best church voices (volume, not quality) reassures me, the horror of the voice in the woods shut out, defeated by our sharing of something too brief to be vigilant...

“Bring back, bring back,

Bring back my body to me ee ee...”

* * *

On the day of the broken trees, there are two ways I can go. I take the cold route home from school, through the graveyard where there is no break from the wind and no dead limbs above ground. It's the year that Janis Joplin dies—three weeks later. In the basement, Jenna plays the album she's just bought in Joplin's memory, *Big Brother and the Holding Company*. The basement is our domain, provided we agree to keep it clean. "Freedom Castle," Jenna calls it. There are no rules except that no one is allowed to leave prints on her records.

With a mind for geometry, she cocks an eye, looks at the spindle on the turntable through the record's spindle hole, and I say, "What's a slut?"

She spins round to face me, the record cradled carefully between her palms. "Where did you hear that word?"

"Max said you're a slut."

Jenna pulls herself up, says, "Be careful where you aim those barbs, kid. You could take somebody's feelings out."

"Why did you lie about Dad?"

She mucks with the record, spends an inordinate amount of time trying to get the record to sit centred. She is deep in thought. At last she looks at me and she seems very sad, maybe ashamed.

"Yes, I lied. I was wrong to do that. Mom said the truth would hurt you. Are you hurt?"

I shrug, but she has hurt me, and she knows that. I say, "You told me to never lie."

Jenna's head is bowed. She nods. "That's right. I won't either. A slut is a person... no, a slut is a girl... or a woman... who allows boys to put their penises inside of her."

I am astounded. "Why would she do that?"

She shrugs. "It's what sluts do."

"But why?"

"Because a slut doesn't live by other people's rules."

"But why did he say you were one?"

Already the dark is gathering meaning at the basement window. It enters my thoughts. I can't stand the darkness, but Jenna hits the light switch and says, "Because I am one."

The next year she'll give birth to a son and terminate her childhood.

"This is the voice of the dead," she says, as the stylus finds the first song.

"Bye, Bye Baby."

It is my first time.

I have heard the voice of the dying, my grandmother's last words to me as she stroked my cheek: "So blonde. So healthy. He will be something."

The voice on the record, the voice of the dead, is different—it holds no optimism. So pained. So despairing. A voice spiked with coffin nails tells me, "All is Loneliness."

I wonder if it is wrong, a sin to listen. It seems like something I should not hear, the utter desolation of the dead, no community, the hell of unrequited love.

My sister's eyes are closed. She says, "Listen, it's the voice of freedom."

