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# HOME/ SICKNESS

I know a man who lives two towns over who used to be a carpenter before he fell from the roof he was repairing. The fall was very bad. Bobby landed on his head and suffered severe trauma; it left him mentally handicapped.

After he recovered, Bobby spent most of his days wandering up and down the street in Columbia State Park, a town restored to look as it had in the California Gold Rush of 1849. There are no cars on the streets there, only horses, only buildings with iron shutters, roofs covered in sod. Bobby liked to visit the people who worked in the buildings, like my mother, who sells candies. She would give him a toffee under the counter when he came in to visit. Although slow to speak, Bobby was very friendly; the man loved to smile.

One day, the woman who owned the old-time photo studio in Columbia saw Bobby driving his little pickup truck on the windy road outside of town. She was on her bicycle, out for a ride, and caught up to him to say hello. When he saw her, he did something wrong, sped up into the turn instead of out of it maybe, and rolled the truck. It landed on top of her, killing her instantly.

Bobby felt terrible, and the woman's family felt terrible for him. He no longer thought he could go to Columbia because of what he had done, because everyone knew him, and because everyone had known the woman.

II.

I want to tell you that it was not long after I moved to the city before I began to grind the bones in my jaw down at night, clenching tightly the

muscles in my cheeks, at my temples, trying to hold on to what I could, gnashing and gnashing. When the x-rays came back, the doctor showed me how I had aged twenty-five years in only ten months, the powdery remains of my joints showing up faint, ghostlike on the film.

### III.

When I lived in San Francisco, I was the girlfriend of a Yugoslav composer who was his profoundly-autistic brother's caretaker.

### IV.

In his earlier life, my high school English teacher was a professional bull rider. I remember one week he came into the flower shop my family owned to buy a dozen marguerites for his girlfriend. At the time he had a broken arm, casted right up to his shoulder. He told me what happened, how a great blond bull had come down hard on his arm but he got right back into the shoot for a re-ride. He told me it "smarted real good."

Not five days later, Teddy Arlowe came back for more flowers. This time, though, I laid the bunch of white daisies into the curl of his second broken arm, because bull riding bulls have their own agenda, because the best ones love to take you for a real ride.

By the time I was a teenager, Teddy had left the circuit and married his sweetheart. His two young boys slept in the bunk-bed my sister and I used to sleep in, the one my family had given to his, because it was given to us in the first place.

I remember taking the bed to Teddy's house down on Finnegan Lane, on the outskirts of town. We'd put the bed whole in the back of the flower delivery van, right next to a casket spray we had to deliver afterward. Teddy's boys came bounding out of the house, so excited; they'd been sleeping on a mattress on the floor until then. The wife of Teddy Arlowe, ex-professional bull rider, stood on the porch, away from the excitement. I think she was crying.

A girl named Arla, who I sat next to in art class in high school, had a crush on him. In her junior year she was obsessed; she took three of his classes, every one he taught. She wrote their initials inside of little hearts when

she should have been painting with tempera. She giggled about him to me, chewing bubblegum, pulling pink strands of it out of her mouth as she spoke.

Teddy was in charge of the school paper, which was printed on the presses our county paper used. Every Friday, a copy of the Bullfrog Gazette would go out tucked into the center of the real newspaper. It had a wide distribution. Arla was the editor.

At the end of the year, Teddy wrote letters of appreciation to his newspaper staff. He wrote each student a few sentences about how much he liked their sense of humor, about their composure on deadline days. But to Arla, he wrote a love letter, column inch after column inch of the reasons he wanted to be with her: her dying mother, her eating disorder, his love a panacea. The letter was printed in the Gazette, distributed to everyone in the county who read the newspaper when it came out the last weekend in May, to everyone who went to my high school, to ex-bull rider Teddy Arlowe's boss.

I keep thinking about Teddy's great blond bull. I keep thinking about his wife, his youngest boy who told me in the post office last summer that a bad lady had stolen his daddy from him, his sweaty palm held in my hand, as his mother asked me if I wanted the bunk-bed back.

V.

The first time I met the brother he was in the kitchen washing only his left hand, turning the faucet on and off, on and off, his fingers stiff, waiting for the moment when it was done just right.

At his noticing of me, there, in his kitchen in the morning, he made an angry animal sound and pulled down his pants, exposing himself to me as my boyfriend and I watched. Then, I should have known what I was getting into. Even then, I could feel the muscles tighten.

VI.

It should be mentioned that this went on for two years. That it started with the clenching, the stressors. That, first, I went home to the mountains to get a haircut and ended up in the hospital, a pale shade of yellow. That three tests came back as false positives. That my tongue swelled and my throat swelled and a doctor lanced alien things growing in my mouth while I

watched. That the anesthesiologist who intubated me for the surgery also broke my jaw. That no one knew it was broken through all the other pain. Later, my tongue split open, ulcers in my mouth, bleeding. Soon, the ulcers moved to my cheeks, my gums.

## VII.

The second winter, the winter in which I was fitted for a prosthetic bite, the brother began breaking windows, and my boyfriend began breaking dates. Once, I drove to their home an hour north of San Francisco to take him to the hospital to stitch the cuts on his hands his brother had inflicted, angry for reasons we never could understand. When I got to the house I saw the void where the sliding glass doors used to be. When I got to the house, the brother was still upset and, afraid to go inside, I turned the car around and drove home.

## VIII.

I was taken to a doctor specializing in infectious diseases. When I first arrived at the office, an old house in a cow town with bedrooms converted to examining rooms, I was asked to sign a release stating that if my sickness would put the President of the United States in jeopardy, they could give my medical records to the CIA. The release also doubled as paperwork to donate my body to research should I turn out to be patient zero. The sores in my mouth burned as I wrote my name out carefully on the dotted line.

I sat quietly in a paper gown in the exam room while the doctor asked me questions I could nod yes or no to. He knew my jaw was stuck, my expression set and pained. The questions, to me, were terrifying, indicative of the awful possibility that my family had something to do with this: “Has anyone in your family had Lupus?” Yes, I write this on the yellow legal pad I carry with me everywhere. “Does anyone in your family have heart problems?” Yes. I write it out. We continue for the better part of an hour and then the doctor draws ten vials of blood from my left arm and accuses me of using dirty needles. This last part he says under his breath, bookending the statement with the phrases “your demographic” and “since you live in San Francisco.” I can’t muster the energy to tell him that I’m really from Murphys, that my

current address is born of necessity and schooling but that I don't belong there, I know that now, I belong at home. As soon as I leave the office, I start sobbing.

IX.

I am being treated prophylactically for oral ulcers, etiology unknown. The medicine is a stab in the dark, and isn't covered by Blue Cross. I take it three times daily for a year and pray.

X.

I am in bed in a Dilaudid haze when my mom calls to tell me the story, filling all the spaces in conversation so that I will not have to speak to her through clenched teeth, through a jaw muscle-stuck shut.

Rex Whittle came into the grocery store yesterday. He has dualies on his truck, bales of hay, his cowdog, in the back. He tipped his hat to my mother when he saw her. It wasn't affected; his hand just went up there, a reflex.

At weddings, his brothers, all the Whittles, in fact, dance small. They stand near each other, near their wives. They bend their knees almost imperceptibly and hold their arms at their sides. They put their thumbs up and move their hands up and down, up and down. The hands move maybe an inch, no more. When they are doing the dance, they are wearing their white cowboy hats, the ones they don't use when they are driving the cows to summer in the high sierras.

The hats, the dance, the gentleman cowboys, these are the ways we know the Whittles: Rex tipping his hat to my mother as he goes into the grocery store, my mother noticing that this morning he isn't wearing his spurs.

XI.

When I was in third grade, the bat lady came to school. Mr. Ingham told us to be as calm as we could when she arrived, she would be bringing special guests with her. She came with a speech. She came wearing black clothing, a long coat. From the front of the classroom she spoke to us quietly, timid, not meeting our eyes. She had a lot to tell us and we leaned forward to listen.

What she told us about bats was this: that they don't bite, that they eat tiny insects, that they are almost blind but have very good ears.

After the speech, she told us to sit very still. We watched as she made cooing noises while unbuttoning her coat. We did not know what to think. Then, she slowly opened the coat. We peered inside: she had brought bats. They clung to the soft lining, their wings folded under them. They made small noises while we looked at her collection, smooth and shiny and mostly quiet. She explained how they had come to her, hurt, frightened, how she had saved them, and she would save more, if we promised to call her when we needed her.

She took two from the inside of her coat, her "helper bats." These loved to be touched, these wanted to be loved. We petted them gently with two fingers. We whispered to the bat lady that the bats were beautiful, that we had never been so close.

## XII.

I am preparing a chronology of my illness to give to someone in charge, again. The chronology is saved on my computer, but every time I need to print it out I have to add new hospital visits, new physical therapy, new insurance billings. This time I am filling in the blanks I left the last time. This time I am making new ones.

Next to each recurrence of the oral ulcers over the last eighteen months, I write "etiology unknown."

## XIII.

In San Francisco, my roommate makes a new friend named Mambo Lennon who gives her foil-wrapped sugar cubes doused with LSD. For five months she keeps the sugar cubes in the freezer next to my ice cream and frozen edamame without telling me that each one contains three hits of acid, without knowing if I'll choose to add one to my coffee when I am home alone. She drops them with her ex-boyfriend on the night of Chinese New Year, and when I arrive home from the parade downtown, they are naked, writhing on my bed, in the middle of one hundred lit tea lights.

Try as I might on my legal pad, I cannot make them understand just why I do not want them on my sheets.

#### XIV.

My neighbors, two girls both named Jamie, drove me to John Muir Hospital in the middle of the night. I sat in the back seat of their car, next to their dog. No one said a word.

At the hospital, I am put in a private room, told not to leave, not even to go get a nurse, and given antibiotics, steroids, opiates for pain. My skin had erupted, gone from clear to terrible and hot, broken in twelve hours and no one at the hospital knew why. I made a list of the places I had been in the past two days on my legal pad while I waited for my family to drive the two hundred miles to get to me.

#### XV.

My roommate believes that I am unbearable: she does not understand why we cannot sell Mambo Lennon's drugs out of our apartment. She does not understand why I have to be so clean, why I do not like to see the skin of salmon sit in my Pyrex dish for days after she has eaten the fish for dinner, never mind the smell. She does not understand why I am so quiet, why I sit at the kitchen table for hours wincing as I try to eat white rice for dinner, long after the dinner is cold.

She, a nursing major, believes she understands my illness enough to know she should be terrified. She moves out of the apartment for weeks once, when I have a skin infection.

#### XVI.

His brother and I, we could not communicate well, with each other, with the world, but my boyfriend framed my problems in a way that made them seem small, fixable. I never understood how he could make those comparisons, not even on the night of the earthquake when he left for good, ducking out the door as he told me that he'd really miss the apartment.

## XVII.

The tests are, at last, conclusive: The oral ulcers are untreatable. The oral ulcers are exacerbated by stress.

These are the things the doctors tell me the oral ulcers do not like: the mugging on the train, the robbery at work, the violent and jealous brother, the way that every week they watch as I weigh groceries in my hands in the store on Church Street to see if I can carry them home.

The oral ulcers do not like acidic foods, nor do they like foods that are too basic. I know from experience that they also do not like water.

My doctors sit me down and tell me that they think it is time for me to move.

When all my things are packed in boxes and pushed to the middle of the living room, my apartment smells the way it did the first summer I lived here: new, clean, un-mine. I want to sign my name on the underside of every slat of my louvered closet door. In a month, they will repaint the walls, refinish the floors, scrub the sinks with Borax.

These are the things they'll erase.

## XVIII.

Another thing I want to tell you: Steve wrangles rattlesnakes for a living. Or, really, he milks rattlesnakes for antivenin, but the wrangling is an important part of his job, both in acquiring the snakes, and in coercing them to shoot their venom, weekly, into a sterile mason jar through a piece of cheesecloth.

In Murphys, he is revered because everyone has called him at one time or another. The rattlesnake problem is a big one in summer, when the grass is very dry and very tall and the snakes are very much everywhere, as are the people, wild as we are, hiking as we do.

In Murphys, everyone has killed a rattlesnake. In the summer we average two or three a week, with many more sightings. You should know though, that killing a snake is the last option—we would much rather place the snake into a large garbage can and put the can in the back of a pickup truck and drive it to an open field where the snake can find a new home. Sometimes, though, that's just not possible. Sometimes the snake is mean; sometimes the snake is long,

as long as you. One time, the snake was stretched out against the weather-stripping along our front door. I walked right over it before it began to rattle. Steve-the-rattlesnake-wrangler was busy and could not come to help, so I moved it away from the house using a piece of rebar stuck out the second story window while my dad, on the ground, poised with a shovel, waited to sever head from body.

The snakes we can eat; sometimes, we do, pulling skin from meat like you'd peel a banana. While the grill heats up, we bury the head out in the stand of oak trees, away from the house. For up to two days after a snake has died, the nerves along its body send impulses down its length for it to move. It is not uncommon for the body of a snake to unbury itself and slither away.

The snake-steaks writhe in their marinade.

#### XIX.

When I was younger, I would sometimes wake up in the night, the muscles in my legs burning, knotted. My mom would call it a charley-horse, give me a hot water bottle and send me back to bed.

It is that feeling in my jaw all the time, pulling from my cheeks to the space right above my ears. On days when the muscles are in great spasm, I can hear them pulse, faintly, the sound in my head unusual, evocative of the pull of a rubber band.

#### XX.

The summer I move back to Murphys I spend thinking mostly about the things I would be doing if I were still in San Francisco. While cleaning the 150-year-old carriages at my part-time job at the museum I think: I would be writing at my kitchen table, sitting in my orange chair. Waking up at five a.m. to go to my full-time job waiting tables I think: I would be looking out my big windows with the tin trim at the Pacific Ocean. I would be watching a container ship coming into port. At night, I miss the blowing fog, I miss being in my kitchen making chicken and ripe tomatoes for dinner.

I spend this summer believing I am somehow still two hundred miles west of where I have been told I should be.

XXI.

One morning last week, my mother looked out the plate glass windows of the candy shop in Columbia to see Bobby with his face pressed up against the glass, smiling.

A few moments later, the son of the woman Bobby had run over came in wearing a big, black cowboy hat. He had brought his whole family, on vacation from Alaska, to Columbia to see where his mother had lived. They bought a big bag of almond toffee.

My mother, she says that she did not see this next part, but we both know it is true: After the family left the candy store with their big bag of chocolates, they walked down the street with no cars, only horses, and saw Bobby; and the son of the woman who had owned the old-time photo studio tipped his black hat at the man who had fallen from a roof and smiled.