

about 4,200 words

“Worlds of Fun”

If there's a worse job than putting a roof on a dog food plant, I don't want to hear about it. I'd prefer to not even think about it. I lost that job because I fell off the roof, or rather through the roof, and into the dog food plant. I'm lucky to be writing this. From what they tell me, I kind of bounced off of a huge canning machine at the end of the assembly line. I could have fallen much worse. I could have fallen into one of the huge blenders that grind up whatever dead meat (chunks from slaughterhouses, roadkill and zoo animals) they had around that day.

Yes, I had been drinking. But can you blame me? Just think about the smell. It was beyond bad. You can smell that plant from blocks away, and I had been working right on top of it for weeks. The smell had been really getting to me. I had been putting some gin in my coffee every morning, just to get me out of the house. I must have overdone it that day, because when the blood test from the hospital came back, they fired me. The one thing I miss about that job is the Hooters girls. I had developed quite a rapport with those girls.

My boss, a big Irish guy named Gary, who was the site manager on the job, insisted we go to Hooters after work at least twice a week. That guy was kind of a curmudgeon. I might have shared a friendly relationship with the girls at Hooters just because they got tired of talking to him. I mean, there's only so many times you can ask a girl to sit on your lap. I used to tell him, "Dude, this is a chicken restaurant. That's not going to happen." And he would just laugh. What else could I say? He was the boss. Also, the girls knew I was married. And that I have a kid. Women love to talk about children.

Gary had this ritual of guzzling a fresh beer, wiping the foam from his mustache, and as he looked at the nearest Hooters girl, saying to us, "Fellas, this here is just a warmer-upper." He would then offer to drive us over to Baby-Dolls, a local strip joint, and to take care of the cover. The guys couldn't agree fast enough. I did my best to decline. I certainly didn't want to go. On the whole, those places disgust me. And besides, Baby-Dolls was where I met my wife Stacy. We had done our best to leave that place behind.

Stacy's stage name was Jasmine. I didn't think there was a chance in the world she would call me after I gave her my phone number one night at Baby-Dolls. She was ten years younger than I was. But she did. Stripping, or dancing as she called it, was a part time job. She was studying music at the university where she played the oboe in the orchestra. I was always curious if the control she learned while playing the oboe had anything to do with our first night together in her apartment. She had learned to sit for hours in the orchestra pit with her teeth poised close to a thin wooden reed. On our first night together, she took a solid grip with her teeth on my chin.

I enjoyed her biting me. She seemed to time the snap of her jaws to when we were both climaxing. There was a fair amount of blood. She seemed to enjoy the taste. Like a wolf,

or a dog.

But I'm a tough guy. I can really take a beating. The fall inside the dog food plant was seventy-five feet. I was lucky to careen off the canning machine and into a box of packaging material. I don't remember much. I was walking along a beam with a drill. My job was to drill down the roof panels after they were lowered in place by a crane. I heard Gary shouting at me, "Get your ass away from there!" He was on the other side of the roof, waving his arms. I looked up and saw a load of panels on the crane swinging wildly in the air. A couple weeks back they had dumped an entire load in the parking lot. If you get too many panels on one pallet, the load doesn't balance right. I turned to run, but the panels, each as big as a station wagon, were tumbling in the air toward me.

I woke up and I was suspended from a series of straps in a room here at the hospital. That was two days ago. I'm still hanging from those straps, and I have been for a week. A strange place to wake up. I was born in this hospital. This afternoon they gave me a pen and paper after I complained too loud about the crap that passes for daytime television. I started writing this. I might as well do something. The doctor said they will lower me to the bed after my pelvis sets into one piece. Of all my broken bones, my pelvis suffered the most damage, broken in two places. There hasn't been much pain. A nurse comes by every few hours and injects meds into the tubes that flow into my arms.

My Mom was here when I woke up. I was so out of it (no skull fracture, just a big concussion) that I didn't remember when I was born or the name of the president. She smiled down to me and talked slowly and helped me remember who I was.

Stacy was happy to see me alive. When she walked in the door, she was crying. She held my head in her hands, and then I started crying. We talked about how lucky I was to be

alive. She told me how worried Luke has been. Luke is our five year old son.

I didn't tell her about losing my job. I had just found out from the HR guy on the phone. He also mentioned the company insurance plan couldn't provide coverage due to the blood test. A real nice guy. Wonderful. We don't have a lot of money saved up, maybe a couple paychecks.

I'm bummed that I haven't been able to see Luke. He's the greatest kid in the history of the world. We talked today on the phone. Stacy won't bring him to the hospital until I'm looking a bit more normal. She doesn't want to scare him.

Well, I'm done. I'm so tired this pad of paper is beginning to swim out to sea. It took me all day to write this. I didn't break a single bone in my arms and hands, but they feel that way.

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The doctor said I might be able to walk again. I smiled and told him I'd give him a hug, except present circumstances didn't allow. He ignored my joke, and without a smile, he said, "Your internal injuries are healing. We're monitoring one of your kidneys, which you were damn close to losing. That was a tricky bit of surgery. The damage to your pelvis is serious, but I've seen worse. The bones are gluing themselves back together." He then gave a full medical review. I was grateful to hear it all, even though he talked in the most detached way possible. When he finished, I reached out for a hug, and he backed away. Doctors are strange like that. I wanted to ask him, "Is there a class in medical school where they amputate your soul?"

In the afternoon today, they lowered me down to the bed. That was a huge relief. Up

on those straps it seemed like the world was flowing back and forth, and I was watching from a porthole in a passing ship. My appetite has been coming back. I've been eating breakfast food (omelets, French toast, etc.) around the clock. I can order anything on the menu from the cafeteria. When I pee, it comes out as a dark and ugly liquid. It's almost like peeing Dr. Pepper.

I told Stacy about getting fired. She didn't say a word. Then I told her about the blood test. She closed her eyes and froze. When she's upset, she goes into silent mode. I could tell she was holding back. Stacy doesn't drink, and she hints all the time that I shouldn't drink as much as I do, which isn't that much, usually one or two beers with dinner. I like to drink gin in the summer. When Stacy was growing up, her parents were first class alcoholics, and she hasn't talked to them in years. "I never drink before work," I said. "It was the stench of that dog food plant. I thought it might help." That didn't change the way she was looking at me, but I'm not worried about my drinking. I know a few alcoholics, and I'm not one of them.

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Stacy and Mom brought Luke for a visit today. He ran in and tried to jump on the bed. Mom held him back. He stayed all afternoon and we talked, played checkers and thumb wrestled. There wasn't much for a five year old to do in the room. He became just as bored as I usually get. So I read to him from one of my books, a novel called *Watership Down*, which is about a band of renegade rabbits. The rabbits behave and talk just like people. He liked it. I've been doing a lot of reading. The nurse brings books from a shelf out by the desk. Luke wrote his name and drew a picture of our house on one of my casts. It felt so good to hold him again.

Mom has been bringing meals for Luke and Stacy by the house. We emptied the

checking account last week, so Mom has been giving some money to Stacy. Mom turned sixty-seven last year, and she doesn't have much in the way of retirement. Dad died fifteen years ago. Stacy said she's looking for work.

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I got out of bed and took a piss on my own today. An amazing stream of almost yellow arched away from my body, leaving me high and dry. So long, bed pan. They removed the cast on my left leg two days ago. There's a red scar on the side of the knee. My pelvis is healing way ahead of schedule. Doreen, the physical therapist, comes in twice a day for massage and exercises. She's a nice older lady. We went to the same high school. She has one boy of her own. Before Luke was born, no one told me that talking about kids would be so much fun. I can tell Doreen anything about Luke--like he loves Cheerios, but can't stand Frosted Flakes--and just saying so makes for good conversation. Her son lives in Chicago and works at a bank. I said I'd like to take Luke up to Chicago for a ballgame at Wrigley Field. She said she's been to Wrigley and I should go to a daytime game this fall. As she was talking, she was bending my leg, and my knee was screaming out in pain, but the sound was far away because I was thinking about the game in Wrigley. The sky was clear and blue, and the ivy green on the wall across the outfield.

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I decided to not even look at the hospital bill. What's the point? I could put a roof on every building in this town and I couldn't pay that bill. There's something strange about a hospital, a place that heals your body while at the same time it destroys your future.

I don't want to do the math on how many weeks or months I will work for each day in this bed. I can feel the bed sucking the future out of me.

There are clean, folded bandanas in the glove compartment of my truck. All I had to do was tie a bandana over my face, instead of having that gin, and everything would be different. I can still smell the dog food plant. Like they didn't get it scrubbed off my legs. I smell it every time they change my casts. I keep thinking about those bandanas.

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This afternoon, like most afternoons, Stacy visited with Luke after she picked him up from kindergarten. He's been doing great in school. He knows the name of every kid in his class, and he can describe them so well you can almost see them standing there. He sat on the bed, and we read more from *Watership Down*. The rabbits were out in the wild, searching for a new home. We talked about the rabbits, and just like his classmates, he remembered their names: Hazel, Fiver and Bigwig. At the slightest hint of danger in the story, he hid under the blankets. He got bored after a chapter or two and jumped down from the bed. I watched him hang in the air, his legs scissoring, and he landed cleanly on two feet. An effortless spring and landing. He then pretended to be a rabbit. As I watched him run around the room, I saw the cast on my own leg. I felt pain inside the cast, half-numbed by meds. I lay there and knew full well that his carefree movements were impossible for me.

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Stacy and I talked about money. Always a fun topic. To cover rent this month, she pawned our TV and stereo. We decided to ignore the unimportant bills.

Her job search isn't going well. She's had one offer, cleaning rooms at the Ramada. She can't exactly put "oboist" or "stripper" down on a job application. She has no work history. Her parents weren't pushing her to do anything. She discovered music in high school. The oboe is said to be the most difficult instrument to play. Not for Stacy. She was close to

being a prodigy. Her high school music teacher was in awe of her. When it was time for college, she won a scholarship. She's never had to hold down a "real" job outside of dancing. She suffered through a brief stint as a waitress at a local drive-in. She's not good at carrying out immediate tasks. And I say this as someone who's the same way. I barely finished high school. I could do all the work. I was just exceptionally bad at showing up to class.

Stacy suffers the curse of beauty. Though she bears it lightly. She knows she's good looking, but she doesn't focus on it. She accepts her good looks as an event that's always occurring around her, like the stars coming out at night. When she was working at Baby-Dolls, she moved around the room with the eyes of everyone on her, as easily as she moved her fingers on the oboe from one difficult position to the next.

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Stacy and Luke have been eating nothing but pancakes for two days. That's all there was to eat in the house. Mom didn't bring anything over this week. On the phone I asked Stacy to remember how old my Mom is. I felt guilty because my meals arrive out of the blue on trays from the cafeteria. Stacy sobbed and said, "There's no money left. Our life will never be like it was." I couldn't say anything. What was I supposed to say? Everything I wanted to say wouldn't come out.

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Phone call from Stacy. She said she found a job, but she wouldn't say where. I wonder if she's gone back to Baby-Dolls. She said she's making decent money, but beyond that, she wouldn't say a word. I called Mom and found out that Stacy has been dropping Luke at Mom's house in the evenings. Mom said that Stacy always picks him back up late, usually before midnight.

I asked Stacy to come to the hospital and talk about it. More silence.

Here I am, unable to walk, and she could be off gyrating for strangers. I want to see her. I can talk her out of this.

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Stacy never finished her music degree. In her last year of school, she was only taking a few hours. She got pregnant with Luke and we decided it would be best if she stayed home with him until he was older. She gave up her music scholarship. On some nights she took her oboe down from the bedroom closet and played for Luke and I. She performed without sheet music--Strauss, Telemann, Bach. In the living room before bed we danced as she played. Luke lay on me and fell asleep while listening. Stacy kept playing. When Luke was in bed, and the stereo was turned down low, Stacy and I danced together.

She had played for us more in the past few years--soft melodies of her own creation. When she played, she was gone from the room. She was alone with her music. But if her last oboe reed failed, then the instrument disappeared from her life. Oboe reeds aren't cheap. Months later we might be walking around town and buy the materials she used to make new reeds, and our house was again filled with her music.

I tried calling again today. No answer.

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The nurses chased me back to bed today. I've been using a walker to cruise around the hallways. I'm not supposed to put too much stress on the bolt that's holding my pelvis together. It seems like they want to keep me in the bed. The bed is a place to eat and sleep and think. I'm tired of thinking. A person can sit and think, over and over, about everything that

has gone wrong or will go wrong in life, but it doesn't help a thing.

Mom brought Luke to the hospital. We read from *Watership Down*. There was so much I wanted to tell him about the book. Like the idea if we were rabbits, we could leave, get up and go, start over on a hill somewhere. But it's not that easy for people. The world has penned us in. People can't go out and find a new home. I couldn't say that to him, so instead I asked him, "Isn't it cool that rabbits can just eat grass?" He made a face and said, "Yuuck."

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I tried writing Stacy a letter. Mom told me to do it. I used to write to Stacy all the time--little notes, telling her what she means to me. So I gave it a try. I wrote her name at the top of a piece of paper. I stared at the paper and her name all morning. I tried to think about us together, to see something there. That was as far as I got.

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Mom showed me a picture she took with her Polaroid OneStep, an instant camera. They call it the OneStep because all you do is press the button and the film pops out. The picture then develops out of the dark film, like magic, right before your eyes. The picture was taken at Worlds of Fun, a local theme park. I was at the park as a kid when they opened the place. I still can't smell fresh asphalt without thinking about being there.

There were two people in the photograph--Stacy and some guy. I've never seen the guy before. In the photo they were sitting in a car on a roller coaster. It looked like the Zambezi Zinger. The Zinger is the best ride in the entire theme park. Many people prefer the Timber Wolf, a longer and higher coaster than the Zinger, but for all out twists and turns and thrills, the Zinger can't be beat. The photo should make for an interesting topic of

conversation the next time I see Stacy.

Mom was visiting the park with her church group. She said she found Luke sitting by himself near the Steamboat Attraction. Like most five-year-olds, he loves machines. The Steamboat Attraction isn't a real boat--it's a building (surrounded by an artificial pond) made to look like an old steamboat that just steamed in from the Mississippi. Apparently, Luke had all the early symptoms of strep throat--an upset stomach and he could barely get down a drop of water. Mom scooped him up and went to find Stacy. That's when she took the picture of Stacy on the Zinger. Mom told Stacy that Luke was feeling sick and she was taking him back to her house to get some rest. Stacy didn't say a word.

On our last trip to Worlds of Fun, Luke and I played on the steamboat. We had a great time. We spent half an hour on a journey down a river without even moving. When Mom found him, he was probably looking at the boat, wondering how to get it out on a real river.

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I stopped calling Stacy. She doesn't come to the phone.

I called Mom this morning. She's been checking on Luke and he's feeling better. Stacy took him to a clinic and he was prescribed an antibiotic. Mom tried her best, but she couldn't get Stacy to talk about where she's working.

#

The afternoons in my room stretch on forever. I've lost the patience to read. My eyes refuse to stay on the page. I've been pushing myself in physical therapy. The mobility is improving in my left leg. It still hurts when I bend it too far. My right leg is broken so bad I probably won't be climbing on a roof again. I take as few of the pain pills as I can. The pain

isn't so bad. It's a motivator. It shoots up from my legs into my back and keeps me moving around the hallways on the walker.

I've got to stay out of the bed. Can I even describe the dream I have there? I'm alone in the dream, lying on a cold slab of stone. There's no sound. It's utterly dark. I could be blind, or it could be the absence of all light. I can't move. I've lost everything that means anything to me in the world. But that's not the worst part. The worst part is enjoying the darkness. Enjoying the end. The bed is not a healthy place. It's trying to vacuum me up.

I had a direct conversation with the doctor. I said, "I need to leave the hospital now. Like tomorrow." He said the best case scenario was three days. He said my kidney function was still abnormal and if I left early there was a risk of tearing internal sutures. I said, "Fine, whatever."

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I'm getting out early. Today. The doctor reviewed the lab results on my kidney function this morning, and he officially signed me out. I've got a full cast on my right leg, appointments set up for outpatient therapy, a set of crutches and a sheaf of prescriptions.

I just got off the phone with Mom. I called her to arrange the plans. She confirmed Stacy is at home this morning. Mom is going to pick up Luke and take him out for pizza around noon, which gives me a couple hours to burn until then. I'll probably cruise down to the cafeteria and get a bite to eat. I'm bored of eating in my room.

I'm going to take a taxi back to the house and surprise Stacy. We need some time alone together. I'm leaving this journal here beside the bed.

#

There's been a change of plans. I can't believe what I thought about doing. I was leaving the hospital room, and I saw the phone on the table by the bed, and I thought, "Try it one last time."

I made the call, and the phone rang and rang. Someone picked up.

I said, "Hello. Hello."

There was no answer. Luke would have said something. There was just silence.

So I said, "I'm sorry. I screwed up. I should have remembered. I know how much you hated that job. Wherever you're working now, it's okay if you're dancing." She didn't say anything, but I wasn't expecting her to. I knew what I wanted to say. "Did you know about Luke?" I said. "On that trip to Worlds of Fun, did you know he had strep throat?"

After a long pause on the line, she said, "I didn't know. He kept quiet. He wanted to go so bad."

There was another pause, and in a toneless voice, she said, "Are you coming home My quartet has a gig tonight at that fancy restaurant downtown. It'd be nice if you could watch Luke."

I'm taking this journal home with me now.

The End