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## Kindness: Two Stories

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KINDNESS:  
TWO STORIES

By

Art Middleton

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Honors

in

The Department of English

The School of Liberal Arts

Rhode Island College

2010

TABLE OF CONTENTS

*I GO THERE TOO* 1

*DID I LIVE* 19

## I Go There Too

I turn thirteen tomorrow and all I want is for my friends to get here.

I left my house to meet them and ran into Jennelle's brother downtown. He'd caught a stray black cat and was soaking it in lighter fluid.

"Hey, Red!" he shouted at me. The trees threw shadows over him. A loose telephone wire kicked in the wind.

He threw the can of fluid to the ground, took his lighter out of his pocket, and lit the belly of the cat. Its cry was horrible. It lit up quick and he dropped it, let it run wild into the street. He waved for me to come over and I bolted.

I've been sitting on this couch since, mixing up the smells of things, thinking the cat piss smell of the couch is the burning cat I ran away from.

Jennelle and Cole show up just as the sun burns out in these pink and orange trails that make the Shell station light coming on an event.

"Hey K," Jennelle says, and sits on the couch. Somebody left it here, down the rise of the train tracks in this empty area ringed in pricker bushes. Beyond them, a field of sunflowers spills out in a lumpy dress the color of mustard.

Jennelle pulls me sideways into a hug. It's rough, but I take it.

Cole picks at his pants. "Stupid things," he says.

"Where have you guys been?"

"We're five minutes late, K. Relax. Trains not even here," Cole says.

The wind kicks up. The line of mullein that follows the rails clacks together. The rail switch ticks and ticks. "I saw your brother," I say to Jennelle.

"What of it?"

“He caught a cat and was—”

“Did you get the cat away from him?” Jennelle asks. She looks me in the eyes. My face sears. The train hoots, not far off now.

“Come on,” I say, getting off the couch.

The three of us walk up the path to the tracks. I kick some ballast at Cole’s heel. He doesn’t notice. The train rounds its way along the rails towards us.

“Who’s in front?” I asks. Jennelle usually takes the front, but tonight its Cole. He steps over the rail and stands with his legs wide on one of the timber slats. Jennelle goes behind him on another slat, and I’m behind her.

The eye of the train turns the corner and singles us out. With the brightness of the light blocked by their heads in front of me they become silhouettes, cutouts. The train bleats its warning. My stomach starts to act up, curling into itself, but I stay standing in line.

We’ve been daring trains all summer. The game is to stay still as long as possible. Stay on the tracks while the train bears down. It was Jennelle’s idea the first time, and I was the last to try it. We yell at the train as it comes. Big empty hollers. Tonight I can make out things in Jennelle and Cole’s voices as they shout, secrets or stories. My throat sticks when I try and join them.

“I caught my brother jerking his thing into the sink,” Jennelle shouts.

“My dad fell down the front stairs yesterday and I couldn’t stop laughing and my ma started slapping me and I laughed harder,” Cole shouts.

I can’t urge anything out. The train gets louder and fills up all the space in my head. I think of my mother’s nightgown, so worn it falls down without her noticing it,

and how the other day her one breast fell out. How I saw the scar where her other breast used to be, zippered in a pink trail along her chest, and thought that her body was blinking at me. I want something else to hate.

The tick of the switch counts down, louder than my silence. The rails rattle so much I feel like my bones are unlocking.

Just before it takes us over, we jump off the slats, a safe distance off the tracks back near the path, and pitch stones at the cars as they rush on. The wind off the train cools my face, and tosses Jennelle's thick curls on her shoulders and Cole yells and yells. His words get lost in the noise of the train's wake.

It's August and hot and I leave a mark on everything I touch. My face, thick and pocked from the rosacea, is worse for it. I touch my fingers to my cheeks. They give off their own heat.

There's nothing going on in the sky. Some swifts puff out of the warehouse smokestacks. From here I can see the buildings that line downtown, the Shell station, the useless warehouses, and the train tracks loping off beneath the highway overpass. I can hear Cole's father swearing from their house across the street. He balances on a ladder and scoops wet leaves out of the gutter almost in time for them to get filled again.

I walk downstairs and see my mother standing at the kitchen counter wrapped in a blanket. The medicine has worn down her teeth, so when she turns to say "Happy Birthday!" I get hit with the hot mineral stink of her and make a face.

She sees my expression and pinks. “Keiran, honey, I’m sorry,” she says, and rushes to cover her mouth. I notice that part of the blanket is tucked under the plate the cake is on. Before I can say something, the motion of her arm to protect me from her breath tugs the plate forward and off the counter. The cake splays on the linoleum but the plate doesn’t break.

“Oh!” she says. Her blanket falls too, and my mother stands in her nightgown, a tube of frosting expressed in her hand, and the afternoon light runs the length of her arms and makes them look stark as candles.

I pick the blanket back up and wrap it around her bald shoulders. She shakes. I grab a towel off the door of the oven and start to pick up the cake.

“It looked great, Ma,” I say, a rib in my voice. I mean it, but my hearts not in it. I hate that I embarrassed her. The marble cake on the floor is crumbled into little hills like zebra colored dunes. Her feet are bare and threaded in blue-green veins. Her toes purple beneath the nails. “Ma, where’re your slippers?”

“Honey,” she says, but her effort is on her hands, her gait. She holds the counter and guides herself onto the stool. She bites her lower lip.

“Where’re your slippers?” I ask again. I drop the cake I’ve picked up in the garbage beneath the sink. I put the towel on the counter beside the stovetop and spot a note my father left. *Happy Birthday, Keiran! Your mother and I love you very much. Another late night, hope I’ll see you, Be Good.* No jobs in town that summer, so lucky my father could stay on in the city, what with the medical bills and all.

Knit in pastels and hard to miss, her slippers are next to the couch in the living room. On the table beside it: tissues tanned with waste, bottles of pills, the remote

control, a water glass with a red horse on it, a knot of my mother's hair suspended like a lasso in the glass.

I walk back into the kitchen and my mother is grinding her teeth. The rake of the enamel overwhelms the quiet of the kitchen.

"Sorry," she says, catching me making another face. I wish I could control it, but looking at her balding head, blistered and raw from the treatments and the dry air, I feel worse things than my face can show. I kneel down and fit on her slippers.

"It feels like my teeth are wearing old socks," she says. "I've brushed em' twice today, and still I can't get em' off." She laughs.

I ignore it, not wanting to see her smile quiver in her face, unsure of itself.

I get up. Heat in my skin pulses, itches.

I look at the floor. I pick up the plate. A ring of frosting circles the flowered design.

She reaches out a hand and places it on my arm. It's impossibly cold. "I wanted to do something special," she says.

I taste a nub of frosting off the plate to please her.

"It's good," I say. I pretend to pig out on the plate, using two hands and smothering my face with it. It frees my arm from her, and hides what the humidity is doing to my skin.

She feigns disgust, but I know she loves it. "Don't worry about the rest," she says, and motions to the floor.

I put the plate in the sink. My mother works a corner of the blanket in her hand. These days she holds things tightly, as if they were going to be stolen from her. Her knuckles go white even now.

I leave for the bathroom down the hall.

I can hear Cole's sisters outside. His father hollers at something.

The sink is clogged when I wash my face. I use the plunger and the sinkhole belches up a clump of my mother's hair. I thought with the medicine it would all fall out cleanly. The thick tangle of it makes my stomach rise.

I slowly layer on the ointment from Dr. Doykos. It leaves rings on the collars of my shirts. I push the heat back into my cheeks. Watch my mouth scrunch up in the buzzing light. I'm getting clean, picturing the roots of the rosacea buried in my face withering, but there's no proof, just the same face looking back, my eyes streaked in red, my skin the color of a brick.

My mother is in the kitchen crunching her teeth. I hear her get up and start to wash the cake pan. I wait her out.

Mornings like this, my face swollen and looking like cooked meat, she'd insist on compresses, or sitting still while she eases the crust from the corners of my eyes. She'd tell me how handsome I've become, how proud she is, how big I've grown. Tell me how even the face of the moon has marks and that's what makes it beautiful. How in the fall I look like a changeling, speckled in red leaves.

My mother's affection makes me dream of peeling my skin off.

Cole lives in the single floor house across from me next to the cow field.

Before Jennelle, we'd tramp there when the grass was high, share-swiped cigarettes, beer if we could snake one out of the plastic ringers in the fridge at the Shell station. One was enough to ruin us. We weren't bad, but we tried at it. Got caught by Cole's father skipping school one day while we walked downtown aimlessly. Cole couldn't sit comfortably for days after, and my mother had me meet with a counselor about my behavior. At school the next Monday, I snuck off to the bathroom before homeroom and hit myself across the face with a textbook until it puffed different than my skin on any given day. I pointed out the color on my cheek to Cole as if to say, *this is what fathers are made of*.

I go over, and his front yard is parched and mused in toys from his sisters. They bounce on a trampoline while his mother smokes and cuts coupons on the cement front steps. She notices me and calls back into the house, "Calamity Cole! Red's here!"

Cole shames his father by being a klutz. Simple projects, hammering the mailbox to the post, turned his thumb into a prune.

"Watch this," his sister Dina says. She's dressed in jean shorts and a pink tutu. She twirls an axe handle without a blade and parades around the rim of the trampoline.

"That's pretty good," I say. My voice croaks a little. I clap my hands.

Cole comes out. His father's rasping voice follows him with insults. As he passes his mother she spansks him playfully. He jumps forward as if she'd really walloped him.

“I gotta make some kindling,” he says, and smiles in a way that means I need to help. “Happy birthday.”

I wave to Dina. She salutes me. The other two sisters stare open mouthed at me. I turn away and follow Cole around to the back of the house.

The woodpile isn't much, but Cole groans about even the smallest load. When he raises the hatchet I spot bruises along his wrist.

“You want me to try some?” I say.

Cole shakes his head. His dad comes around. “You keeping him on the job, Red?”

“Yes, sir,” I say. I don't know why I address him this way. His size implies greatness, or it's his eyes, the guilt you feel if you look at them too long.

He walks over and fusses a hand in Cole's hair. “Gotta cut this mop, boy,” he says. Cole's expression darkens. He takes a stab at a log and misses, cutting in close to his knee.

“Watch it now,” his father says. Cole rests the hatchet on the chopping block and his father leaves.

I can hear Cole's sisters singing in the front yard. They're singing that Sophie B. Hawkins song that's always on the radio, about living inside a cage, or being a lover. The three of them sound alright.

Cole places his hand palm down on the chopping block. He looks around the yard.

“Cole,” I say. I can’t think of anything else. He looks at me and then takes in a breath and sinks the hatchet up to the knuckle of his forefinger. I close my eyes as he does it. I wish it away, but the sound of it knocks in my teeth.

I open my eyes. I see a sliver of bone in his finger peaking out like a dime buried in a bread loaf. It’s whole, but mashed into a red mess on the block. “Idiot!” he screams between sobs. They’re choked behind a face that reddens with what looks like some measure of joy.

His father runs back to us. “I just left you for a minute! What did you do?” he shouts, and grabs Cole’s wrist to see the damage. His sisters come too. They cluster behind their father.

His father lets go of his hand and then smacks the back of his head. It could have been out of love, a tease, but Cole screams, “Fuck you!” and starts to run. I follow, and in the hurry of it, I pull him towards my house, where I know my mother can help.

No working car at his house, so my mother takes us to the emergency room and back. We have to wait out the train at a cross street. The train scissors the light into bits that fall in the car. Cole watches the train and I watch his jaw tense.

We get back and my mother makes us soup. Cole’s hand is wrapped up in mummy gauze and stays on the table while we eat. It’s something too big to comment on, but I can’t ignore it.

Cole’s dad comes by to fetch him, but my mother tells him to come back a little later as Cole is still upset. I’d been confused by his tears. The way he peeled in

high tones when my mother held his hand in the waiting room. A thousand accidents, but he was never that kind to whine.

“That was delicious,” he says when he’s finished. A bit much for Campbell’s I think.

“You want some pudding?” my mother asks.

He doesn’t have to say anything before she’s clutching at her blanket and ambling over to the fridge. I toss my spoon around in my bowl. Fidget in my seat.

I look at my mother. Her bald head peaks out from beneath a scarf, her body quakes with the breeze through the kitchen window. Bending to get the pudding is a chore, her breathing comes in fits, even talking brought out a voice that couldn’t help but sound desperate. She was ravaged, but I can tell she’s worked something over Cole. He wants to please her.

“Keiran doesn’t like this brand,” she says. Some milk substitute since dairy has been too heavy for her. Cole rises to get the plastic pudding cup from her, settles back in his seat. He takes a spoonful and smiles, satisfied.

“I never said I didn’t like it,” I say.

“You said so the other day. There’s still some cake I salvaged,” she says, and points to a plate covered in aluminum foil, pitched in a tent by toothpicks.

All of it, the three of us at the table, Cole with that dumb grin and gauze swollen hand, my mother and him sharing the pudding, I can’t handle it, I squeeze out, “Do I need to go to the emergency room to get a dessert that’s not off the floor?”

She leans over the table and slaps me quick. It surprises me and stings for it.

“Watch your mouth, young man!”

I won't let tears come. I'm bigger than that.

The phone rings and its Jennelle so Cole finishes up another bite, thanks my mother, and I grudge a kiss to her cheek as an apology. I feel my insides go soft. We leave the house and the night sky wheels out its colors. The Shell station light beams and spreads.

Jennelle is the oldest of us, beats Cole by six months and won't let him forget it. Taller than us too, faster, smarter in the same classes. Why Jennelle chose us I can't say.

Jennelle lives at the edge of downtown, under the overpass to where the train tracks run across Water Street and beyond. A brick colored house, front hidden beneath a willow. She raises gerbils to sell at the pet store. Her brother lives in the basement.

We don't have to knock when we get there. Jennelle is pacing the strip of sidewalk in front of her house. Her ankle is wrapped up.

"What gives?" Cole jokes, pointing to her ankle and holding up his hand.

She pulls her sock up over the bandage. Her eyes are shot through, heavy, and she doesn't look at us directly. She wordlessly leads us forward to the train tracks. Under the overpass someone has spray painted MALLORY AND TOM over the Megadeth logo. There's something funny in that, but I can't piece it together.

"Wait up for me," I say, and step off the tracks to pee. When I get back on, I can't see them ahead or behind me.

"Guys?"

I walk the rails a short distance and then call out again. A corridor of iron ladies on the other side of the tracks strings electrical wires out into nothing.

When I get to the rail switch, they're standing tight together with their backs to me on the same timber track. "Hey," I say, and put a little frustration in my voice, but I'm happy to see them.

The train starts to come around, and Jennelle steps onto the track in front of Cole. She bends down and unwraps the bandage from her ankle. Branded in a sour pink bubble on the knob of bone is the letter L. I flinch and take a step back.

Cole notices my nervousness and pushes me, gentle enough not to hurt, but strong enough to let me know not to say anything.

"Orion," he says, and points up to the sky.

"That's a plane, jackass," Jennelle replies.

The train winds down the tracks and I can't stop looking at Jennelle's ankle. The shadow and the light from the train makes the wound move.

"My brother killed one of my hamsters with a hammer," Jennelle says. There's more but I can't hear it. I want to reach out. The distance between us seems to grow while hesitate. Too late.

I start to walk off the tracks before the train is closer than usual to jump. Cole grabs my arm with his good hand and pulls me back.

"Let go of me," I say.

"Get back on here," he says, and pulls me harder. His grip hurts. The train is getting bigger as it approaches. Jennelle is a statue on the track.

"Get back here," Cole yells at me. I trip a little on the rail but he holds on.

“Let go!” Both my feet are off the tracks and I lean towards the path. Cole holds me with his one hand, tugging me back. He raises his wrapped hand up in the air like he’s going to hit me with it. The white of it glows with the light of the train like a torch.

I don’t expect him to really let go. I fall on my back in the gravel. I watch the train come close enough to read the serial number along the lip of the carriage and I scream at them to jump. Its all one blur of motion when they jump past me, and I can see their open mouths but can’t hear them laugh as they run down the path along the train, shouting insults at the steel.

Amazed and terrified at what they’re capable of, I follow them down the tracks, but run home alone when they collapse in a pile beneath the willow in front of Jennelle’s.

I get home and my mother is asleep in front of the TV, wheezing. My father is still throwing late hours in. I go to the kitchen and grab a kitchen knife and run upstairs to my room, locking my door behind me.

I hold the kitchen knife, lame, in my hand. Posters on my wall glow in the Shell light. The death of Superman poster has a nice shine to it. Tapes on my shelf are organized alphabetically. A picture of my mother, healthy, smiling, stands on my dresser.

With the lights off I catch my reflection in the window. I feel Cole’s busted finger in my guts, his hand keeping me on the tracks, pulling me to believe that the things I hate in my face can be cut out to spare the rest of me. But I can’t make myself do anything. I don’t know how or where to begin or end.

I comb thin, empty cuts onto my forearm with the knife. They bleed simply and I spot them with my shirt until they stop. They make a radiating heat on my skin. I start to panic, thinking about my mother seeing them, what she would say, what she would do to help. I take my shirt off, spotted with blood, and walk downstairs. I go to the kitchen and take the garbage out from under the sink. I dig through, past the cake and pudding containers and soup cans, and bury my shirt at the bottom. My mother grinds her teeth in her sleep.

I go back to my room and watch Cole's house, wait for his light to come on. I pass out before I get to see it.

My cake is gone from the counter the next morning and my mother is at an appointment so I spend the afternoon alone in the house. I could spend all day loafing here, but I keep spying at Cole's through the blinds. I pick up my mother's things from around the couch. Clean up the sink. There's a coolness to things, a let up in the heat, and my face feels a little less heavy. I pick the hair off things and choke back my turning stomach. The radio is on in the kitchen, and I turn it up for myself. I poke through some comics but can't get into anything. I check myself in the mirror. The cuts on my arms are raised red lines, nothing serious, but still I change out of my short sleeve shirt for a long one. I make a promise to never look in a mirror again. Fat chance.

I can see Cole's sisters prancing around the yard in a parade for themselves. I love how absorbed they are. In what they do, how they act. I start to sing a little to the radio. The sound of my own voice shuts me up.

It's getting past four when Cole calls and I leave the house to meet him. I get nervous thinking of last night. My face itches and swells.

We walk downtown and some kids in a car bark out, "Fags!"

Unemployed men haunt the stoops and corners. I walk a little bit away from Cole. His hand is still wound up in gauze, but there's something different in his face. "What time did you get back last night?" I ask.

"The fuck you care," he says. He sounds like his dad, but I don't say it.

White tufts of fleece blown loose from the sheep shearing festival clot the branches of the willow at Jennelle's. Cole knocks. I stay on the path to her steps, and can see into the basement window. Her brother is rocking back and forth in a chair. The TV is harsh even at this distance.

Cole knocks louder and Jennelle's brother turns to look outside. He motions for us to go around back.

Jennelle is holding a gerbil in her left hand. It nibbles on one of her fingers she's dipped in peanut butter. Her socks are pulled up and hiding her ankle.

"Crazy night last night," she says. She smiles. I think she says this for me, and I'm comforted for a moment, but then notice Cole and her sharing it.

Cole pets a gerbil in the raised pen. The screen door swings and shuts, and Jennelle's brother puts Cole in a headlock.

"Hey dipshit, its your birthday, huh? Happy birthday, happy birthday," and Cole is turning red, grabbing onto the brother's arm, and Jennelle blurts out, "It's not *his* birthday, and that was yesterday." Something shakes in her voice.

Her brother tosses Cole aside and starts coming towards me. I back up and keep space. Jennelle steps between us with the gerbil still in her hand. “Don’t be a dick, Lou,” she says.

“I’m not, I’m just playin’ with them,” he responds, and fakes a lunge at me. Jennelle puts the gerbil down into the pen. It becomes just another one of them.

“Lou, leave him alone,” she says. No answer. He stays fixed on me. He doesn’t see Jennelle pick up the shears she used for cutting the mesh for the gerbil pens. She holds one arm of the scissors so that they open like a jaw.

Lou reaches out at me, and Jennelle bites into him with the shears. Its so fast: his screaming, the blood in the dirt, Jennelle grabbing my hand and Cole scrambling to his feet and the three of us running up the bank to the tracks, following the sky as it shuts like a lid.

We don’t say anything. My breathing is louder than my footfalls. My face pulses with heat, and I try to shake it off. Cole is lanky, bow-legged, and runs without disturbing the rocks along the rails.

At the switch, we go down the path and fall into the couch. It stinks of rainwater and cat piss, but we laugh as we bury into it, wrestling into a heap. The weight of them here causes my heart to skip manically in my chest.

We lay awhile and it gets hot, too hot for my long sleeves. I bunch them up above my elbows. The dark starts to come, not from the top of the sky, but from things. The distances in the woods turn off. The lightning bugs come skittering in the branches. Jennelle takes my arm.

“What’s this?” she asks.

I shrug.

“Don’t be dumb, K. What is this?” she traces the dashed lines on my forearms. She grabs on and stares at me.

“Do you know the difference,” she asks, “between us, K?” She shows that she means Cole, her, and me.

I feel outside of them, that they’ve kept something from me. I spend everyday with them, and yet always moments alone for them, things I can’t touch upon with words for fear of ruining it. What rushes into me? I get angry, but it’s not something I can say.

“You chose this, K,” Jennelle says, “but I wish you wouldn’t.”

The sunflowers bow with the night, their heads burdened with weight.

Cole gets up and walks back up to the tracks. The station signal starts to tick.

“What are you talking about?” I ask. My face heats up. From the rosacea or something else. I want to get what she says, but there’s a wall in me.

Jennelle springs off the couch and joins Cole on the tracks. I sit still on the couch. The eye of the train comes leaching through the trees. My face hurts more as my stomach knots. I think of my mother asleep on the couch. I want to be good. I want Jennelle and Cole to see in me what they know in each other. I want the train to cover me with all its weight. To go through me so I can filled up with something else. So I go there too, follow them up the embankment. They share a track, and I stand a ways behind them.

The train turns a corner and trues on our path. The light makes me squint. The world on either side of us hollows out. The only thing alive is a silver and blue-green

train, aching along the tracks, knocking its motion through my body. Cole and Jennelle, I can barely make out, are holding hands.

They look back at me, maybe doubt I'm there, and shadows toss handprints across their faces like leaves of no color. I shut my eyes and feel the train coming. The sound of it shakes the flush out of my cheeks. I open my eyes to see it steadily growing larger. It calls out its single syllable. My roasting stomach inches me to the edge of the rails. I think this is the moment, this my chance, but I turn away from it.

“Come on!” I yell. My voice tosses aside. Their lips move. They close their eyes. The Shell station light drowns in the light of the train.

I jump off the tracks and the train blurs past me.

The brakes squeal and the horn blares again. The sound echoes in the trees. I run away from the switch, ignore the pricklers that cut shallow dashes in my bare arms. Past the couch, I run on to the field of flowers. Their heavy stalks knock against me and graze my skin like pumice to cleave my face from my face.

## Did I Live

Gurney fumbles with a match in the dull light of the afternoon while Anna fusses with her make-up in the mirror. Anna's rouge is a sharp rosette on her cheek. She thins it with a handkerchief. She bites her lips to redden them.

The clapping of patrons from the lyceum alerts Gurney that the ventriloquist has finished his set. Still the jugglers to go, and a patch in Anna's train needs mending.

The candle catches. Anna's face in the mirror swells moon-full in the glass. It is July thirteenth, 1865, and Anna Swan, the giantess of Nova Scotia, is nineteen years old. The fresh tallow of the candle muscles its stink in the room.

Gurney plucks a needle from the cushion on his wrist. He threads a yellow vein into the gusset at the rise of the marten collar on Anna's gown, standing as tall as he can on the foot stool beside her to reach it.

The dress is a dark pine green. Its layers of muslin are rough on Anna's skin above the crinoline stay that widens her skirt. It gives her a rash, but its the cheapest material Gurney can work with to fit her eight-foot frame. Anna's hair tumbles in a single braid down her back, sparkled through with mica that Gurney ground from stones into her hair oil.

Children mill in from the hall. They linger in the doorway, staring at the giantess at her vanity. Her palms are bigger than their faces. One boy removes his cap.

They've been haunting the museum since morning and can tell the difference now between the gaffs and the true freaks. They spotted the elbows of the Man with No Arms poking like antlers knobs under his shirt. Noticed the glue dripping from beneath the beard of the singing lady, the heat causing her to molt.

Anna, in her composure, sitting cross-legged on the floor of her dressing room as Gurney ties off a thread, makes them hush. She spies them in the mirror, smiles broadly, and turns to welcome them. They bustle out of the threshold and retreat down the hall.

Gurney groans a tiny complaint. He hates the children who rummage through the museum alone. Too many times he's found them digging in the pockets of the vest he's left in his room, harassing poor What Is It? in his cage, or carving their initials into the legs of wax figures. They are always so taken with the waxwork of Jefferson Davis who Barnum's displayed in a woman's gown. Gurney has caught them sculpting genitals beneath the dress on more than one occasion.

In his frustration, he loses the needle. He eyes the feet of fabric pooled on the hardwood. He stumbles down the footstool to find it, but Anna collects him to her with one great hand.

"See, Gurney? The little ones only want a peek. No harm, none at all! A flick of my skirt and they're gone! See, Gurney?"

Anna pecks Gurney's cheek to calm him and turns back to the mirror. The smudge of her rouge hides his blush.

An hour before her performance, and in his pocket, the gift Gurney has made for Anna wears its shape into the fabric of his trousers.

Gurney is twenty and made.

At home in Virginia, his father bound him to a tree and burned his skin in filleted grooves to market him to traveling dime shows. "Salmon Boy," his father proclaimed. Gurney's arms were burned pink to the muscle. The grooves in his neck were not unlike gills.

In 1862 he was picked up and brought to Coney Island. Gurney's physical appearance kept him indoors after the shows. He hoarded affection from the twin contortionists who pitied his scars. He learned how to repair the egg colored tulle of their veils when their routines left them cramped and rigid. Other performers took to him for his skills, but none could pay him. Late hours buried in chiffon kept him from sleep. His skin leathered as it healed, and the condition of his making became more apparent as the ulcerated burns that marked his neck, chest, and arms darkened. His performance suffered. The barkers took down his board. He entered the museum a week later, at age eighteen, following a lead that they were in need of a tailor.

Picture the bricks golden as bread loaves and the tapestries hung from the windows. Paintings of jungle beasts tamed by whips and gilded bits. Busts of famous men carved in stone. From poles on the roof, flags of all nations whipped idly in the New York wind. A hot air balloon tethered to the roof. Its fabric stretched to bursting. A crowd teemed on the blocks outside. Wild sounds out of the windows, a lion, an elephant, the voices of people from distant lands singing in their native tongues. In bold red letters bordered in gold, on the border of Broadway and Anne, see:  
**BARNUM'S AMERICAN MUSEUM.**

A band played, dramatic enough for a coronation, but sour enough to drive Gurney inside to escape it. He had to pay the twenty-five cent admission even though he was applying for work. The man who met him was not Barnum, but was stunning just the same, nothing like the boardwalk barkers at Coney Island. He brought Gurney through the twisting halls. Their pace caused the amusements to blur. The stairs to the basement ached beneath their footfalls.

In the engine-room, fresh air steamed to the fans to cool the aquarium where two white whales wrestled for space in the dark. Their bodies glowed pearlescent in the murk. The tank spanned an entire wall, 58 feet wide beneath the city block of the building above. Gurney's voice caught in his throat. The whales twisted in the water, their mouths set in such a way that they appeared to be smiling.

“You must be the new boy.”

The voice came out of the dark, and Gurney turned to look down the room. An impossibly tall woman with her skirts collected in her hands walked between two columns slick with paraffin. Her hair was piled upon her head, restrained by a band. Her eyebrows were raised and welcoming.

“A pleasure! My name is Anna,” she said. She curtsied, a maneuver that came off to Gurney as maudlin given her stature. “They tell me you could work wonders with this thing.”

She teased a corner of her dress between her fingers. Gurney reached out to touch it. He fixed his stare at the worn sutures the previous tailor had absently repaired. At his full height, he was just below her ribs. The way her stomach pushed with her breathing told him her corset was set a little too tight, perhaps too low. The

sleeves of her dress were wide enough for him to climb inside. He inspected her dress, and Anna took in his. The burns on his neck peaked out from behind a high collar. His hands were scalloped and raw. He could feel her looking at him. A chill thrilled through him.

“I have,” he began to say, not looking the giantess in the face. She interrupted him by pulling him into her side. His ear pushed against her dress, and he could hear her heart beating in her stomach.

“This is the one, this is the one!” she exclaimed.

Gurney let himself to be held.

The heat has drawn runnels down the make-up on Anna’s forehead. She licks a finger and blends the powder along her hairline.

“Much better,” she says, “much better. Did you see the other night?”

Gurney has never missed a performance. He joins Anna’s close friend, Living Skeleton, down right of the stage of the lyceum every night, behind the heavy curtain that smells of meat.

He nods, clenches needles between his teeth.

“I kept the rogue too close to the lamp all afternoon and when it came time to perform it leaked down my cheek. During the monologue no less! Nutt’s face is still in my mind!”

Anna and the Commodore Nutt have been performing scenes from *Macbeth* for the recent show. They’re followed by Dr. Flower, who lectures on What Is It? in his cage. The phrenologist is traveling for the month, an engagement in London that

Barnum organized though the phrenologist believes he's been summoned by the scientific societies on his own merit.

“Nothing lost, nothing lost. What is it? Too taken by your needlework, Gurney. I could paint my face purple and I don't know if they'd notice,” Anna says, ruffles her dress, and smiles in the mirror. Gurney treasures it in a sideways glance at her expression.

Anna refuses to be simply an attraction. Won't take money so patrons can inspect her parts, and makes enough a week to not need to. Her modesty keeps her chaste in her performances. She lectures on giant fables from different cultures. Draws upon contemporary scientific inquiry into the probable causes of her condition, and is bold enough to draw attention to the goiter beneath her chin, an abnormality she explains away with a discussion of the humors.

A knock on the lintel, “Anna, you ready, love?”

Though the Commodore addresses everyone this way, Gurney still falters in his patchwork and pricks his thumb. The Commodore steps up the footstool, yet remains only as tall as Gurney's knees. He shakes Gurney's free hand. Living Skeleton follows him in, his cane aids his quaking legs.

“Hello Nutt, Isaac,” Anna calls. She glows in the company of her friends, and rushes to finish her make-up.

The Commodore admires Gurney's work and pats him on the side. “Never better, G!” The volume of the museum, the nature of its embellishments, keeps everyone yelling. Every simple statement is addressed as a revelation.

Shadows bowl in the sunken spots in Isaac, the Living Skeleton's, face. He wears a sadness in his features that Gurney feels like tiny paws digging in his intestines. With effort, he unbuttons his coat and shirt. He takes his shirt out of his waistband, and shows Gurney the broken snaps on his suspenders. "Effie let me down a little rough," he says, his voice as thin as his body.

Anna responds before Gurney can. "That poor girl doesn't know her own strength! Marrying you everyday, you'd think she'd get it by now! Isaac," she cooed. Gurney moved past the Commodore and set to fixing Isaac's snaps.

The crowd claps as the juggler finishes. Vaughn comes from down the hall to collect the giantess. She takes the Commodore up in one hand, and gathers the billowing fabric of her gown in the other.

"Wish me luck, gentlemen," she calls. Gurney slips with a needle and sticks Isaac just above his hip. Living Skeleton is so tired he doesn't react.

Gurney shares quarters with Isaac in a room off the lyceum. The walls are pasted with handbills from former shows and a window offers a view of the turrets of Astor House. The museum is open fifteen hours a day. He gets four meals and each enough for two of him. At first, being on the floor above the menagerie bothered him, but he has come to love even the dumb chatter of the macaws in their cages.

Isaac sleeps on the floor in a tumult of pillows. Gurney repairs the wears in Isaac's suits where his bones have rubbed the fabric raw. He refills the small cask of milk that Isaac keeps around his neck.

Gurney is returned to his father in his dreams. The silence in his father's face as he marked him. In these terrors he sweats, bawls, wets the bed. Isaac, even in his weakness, does not let Gurney suffer for it, and often crawls into bed with him. At first, Gurney would thrash in his arms, bruising the thin man. He has come to rely on these embraces to calm him into sleep.

Isaac is the only person who has seen the currycomb Gurney has been making for Anna. He worries she will be offended by its shape, thinking he considers her an animal. He has rehearsed his defense about the grace of horses, her hair wild and unbridled like beautiful horses. It's not perfect. Gurney has never been good with words. He struggles with the sentiments he can't name.

The comb is made from a gleaming knuckle of whalebone and carved with a scene from what Gurney pictures is the view from Anna's home in the woods. He has spent months etching the scene, collecting pieces from her recollections and recording them in the bone. Tiny piles of dust from the scrimshaw powder the floor with the flakes from Isaac's dry skin.

There are to be no relations between the performers and the workers unless they perform their civil duties in public. Gurney loathes the lights of the stage, and prefers the anonymity of the dressing room. He fears the exposure his act will bring. In a fantasy he harbors privately, he lives beneath her train, and teases her with kisses in the dark of its folds. Anna believes in the greatness of love, the romance of poetry, the rightness of chastity, the power of stars. Gurney loves how proud she carries her head. How she has made peace with all the attention on her difference.

Isaac, close enough to Anna to know, has pushed Gurney to present the comb to her this evening. It rests close enough to his genitals to excite them. He has had to constantly adjust himself to keep from offending her. A small price.

The tiny Commodore wears his dark blue naval uniform and stands in Anna's open hand. He recites his lines in the largest voice he can command.

*Had I but died an hour before this chance...the audience in the front row wiggles horns into their ears...I had lived a blessed time...the limelights sizzle beneath his voice...for from this instant there's nothing serious in mortality...the horrible bleating horns of the band on the roof garden compete with him...all is but toys.*

The limelight is darkened on Anna's face as Nutt pantomimes and conjures four characters in rapid succession. When the light comes back to her face, it ignites a stutter in Gurney's heart.

Gurney leaves as the play culminates in the awkward fighting scenes in which Nutt parry's an invisible Macduff. He carefully pulls Isaac onto his back and brings him to their room. He settles him onto his pillows.

"For sleep," Gurney says. He picks a piece of horehound from his pocket and places it in Isaac's mouth. Isaac sucks on the candy.

"Tonight, boy," Isaac says, and removes his top hat. He lets his eyes close.

The brocades of the curtains outside the window, which give the impression that one is inside the building while standing on the street, flutter and furl. He presses

his ear to the wall and imagines that he can hear whale song through the floors, but considers it could be the building breathing.

Full of novelty and humor, the first time Barnum spoke to Gurney was in palindromes and riddles while he took potential investors through the museum. “This, gentlemen, is our *divine* tailor! G, he’s called. Tell me boy, never odd or even?” His large face was flush with color beneath the parts of his hair.

“Pardon, sir?”

“Never odd or even? Lewd did I live & evil I did dwell! Madam in Eden, I’m Adam!” he laughed with abandon. He cuffed Gurney by his right ear and threw his cap from his head. Thin patches of hair licked the burns on his skull.

“Sorry, boy, sorry,” he said. He stooped and returned Gurney’s hat to him before leaving the room. The crowd of investors lingered for a moment and stared at his wounded pate.

“Poor boy,” he heard Barnum explaining, “born of a salmon in the Confederacy!”

Dr. Flower has finished, and the museum is dimming its lights. Already the crowds have thinned, following the signs painted with THIS WAY TO THE EGRESS, only to find themselves back outside, a barker exclaiming, “feel duped? Tell your friends about the Egress and trick them too!”

The steam in the basement has condensed above the engine and rusted the blades of the fan. They stop now, and the steam has nowhere to go. Pressure builds till it bursts.

The pop is soft enough beneath the spectacles of the museum that no one notices. A fire begins slowly, and catches on the paraffin of the columns where it rushes up the wood and along the floor. The heat comes fast and the water in the tanks begins to boil.

Gurney makes his way to Anna's dressing room. He knocks twice before he enters, and finds Anna in tears at the vanity.

"Gurney, the men tonight," she is stumbling with her words, "so horrible. Even their faces, mean enough to skin a cat."

Gurney's hand is in his pocket. He worries the large comb. He sees himself in the mirror and is embarrassed for his clothes, and the way the comb has lightened the fabric of pants where its kept, enough that the hill of pines is nearly apparent in it.

"Vaughn was outback with the lighting girl, and these men in the front row kept hollering through my lines. Gurney, the cruelest things."

"They're just men, Anna. Nothing more than that."

Gurney averts his eyes. He considers himself. Nothing more than a man either.

Anna faces him. Her face has been wiped clean, and the color of her skin without the powder is soft and rich. "Poor Nutt. They called him horrible things. He's gone up to his room to brood, I suspect. Where is Isaac? We should go to him."

Gurney understood that when she said this she meant Isaac and her. He held the comb in his pocket tight enough to break it. His speech clamored silently in his chest. *Anna, I have never met someone quite like you,* and stupid, stupid, he bites his tongue and mumbles, "I'll fetch Isaac. You go on."

The fire is boiling the whales alive, and their skin is sloughing off like rind. The first floor is leaking smoke at the joints of the boards. Fire licks at boot heels, and the crowds begin to rush madly for the exits. The wax works droop and sluggishly lose their features. The lions in their cages prance on their paws. Workers are running the halls and ushering children outside. In the din of the fire, they break the glass cases on the dioramas, cases of historical artifacts, and pocket what they can. One employee works his key into the cages. The birds in all their fantastic hues dot the night sky like planets loosed from an orrery. Their sounds are frightening but fiercely alive.

A vulture perches on a lamppost on Nassau Street. Children waste no time trying to pick it off with paving stones.

The fire brigade arrives. The six buttons on their coats glint. The police whistle the crowd away from the building. The fire reaches the second floor.

Gurney, lost in thought, has just watched Isaac leave the room. He lies on his mattress and reads the handbill on his ceiling. Esquimaux hold spears in their hands, but even in the etching Gurney can make out the paint on their faces that marked their heritage.

What love is worth the loss that it could cause? Gurney places the currycomb beneath his mattress. The curtains out his windows curl from the flames from the floor below. The smell is overwhelming, and Gurney realizes what is happening. His first thought is Anna.

The animals come rushing out of the museum and the police shoot them in the street. An alligator slowly crawling to the exit has cut its stomach on the glass of its tank, and bleeds its entrails along the entrance.

Birds, beasts, wild aggregates of animals frozen in taxidermy, fly from the windows and limp on the pavement.

Gurney pushes past people running from the lyceum. The heat irritates his skin. He is terrified of the flames. Something greater still urges him to the stairs.

Anna is screaming when he comes to the door. He fears the fire has somehow gotten there before him. In the room, Isaac and Nutt are in Anna's arms, loose as dolls. Her screams thunder in Gurney's bones. Isaac is pale and unconscious. Nutt slaps his face with his small hand.

"Anna," Gurney approaches her hesitantly, "Anna, let them go, dear."

The eyes of the giantess are burning lamps. She reaches out with one arm to grab at Gurney, but he avoids her. "Anna, please, let them go."

The smoke is coming into the room and suffocating Gurney's vision. He reaches out and places his hand in Anna's. He grips it tenderly, confidently. "You must let them go, we need to leave this room."

Anna softens. Isaac crumples to the floor like tinder sticks. Nutt falls to his side, and Gurney picks Isaac up onto his shoulder and takes Nutt's hand. The giantess approaches the aperture of the window and calls out for help.

On the street below, the fire brigade can't control the flames. A man points to the body of the giantess leaning out of the window. The brigade wheel a loft derrick from the building next door, and start to swing the derrick into the wall to widen the space so she might escape. Eight men hobble up the derrick to attack the bricks, while two enter the room and tie a tackle around Anna's waist.

Though the men yell for them to go back down the stairs, Gurney, Isaac, and Nutt statue in the room. Anna's tears bubble down her face.

"Gurney," she says, and he stiffens. "Take them out of here, please, please," and the men yelling, and the fire wailing, and the blare of an elephant pocked in gunshot takes off down Broadway.

"Gurney," and he goes out the door. He is sure he can take the two men outside and get back to help Anna. Down the blackened stairs, flames threaten to catch at his pant legs. The weight of Isaac is slighter now, unnoticeable. Nutt crowds the tight hold of Gurney's vest. The Commodore's tiny build kneads the burns on Gurney's chest in a way that makes him feel as if his heart is being delivered like the sun to the earth.

Out the Egress, he lays Isaac down on a bed of burnt brocade and rests his head back to give him some milk. Isaac thanks him by swallowing. "Take care of him, I'll be back," Gurney says.

On the street beneath Anna's window, the crowd watches eighteen men guide the block and tackle that holds the giantess in its claw. The fringe of her dress is dashed in flames, and the crinoline stay is illumined like veins of lightning. The wind kills the flames, and the tatters loose in the air.

Gurney does not arrive to see her lowered and embraced by children, or hear the claps of the crowd at her survival. He does not hear her calling out the names for her friends, or see them hobble towards her, or Isaac fall asleep in her arms as soon as she holds him.

Gurney is not there the following year, when Anna is feted by Queen Victoria, and marries a giant from Kentucky. Or the year after, when the first of her stillborn babies is buried outside her new home in Seville, Ohio.

Gurney charges the stairs possessed with the desire to steward her to this future. This fit is what causes him to lose his step.

The maw of the museum ushers him back through the years.

Gurney as a boy chopping wood in the yard. The wind tossing in the Virginia pines. His father asking him to follow him. The slanting light off his shoulders. No trace of doubt in Gurney's features. The comfort of knowing one's place in the world. The little graces that follow. And Anna, Anna, Anna.