

## Möbius

Fred heaved himself out of the hole he'd cut from the slick, red clay. Crawling over the side twinged his back and put an almost unbearable pressure on his creaky right knee but he persisted. Panting, he dragged the corpse over to the grave and gently rolled her in.

She landed on her side, and he was grateful he had wrapped her in an old tarp. Now he didn't have to see her dead, white eyes or the horrible, unnatural angle of her neck. His back protesting more stridently with every heave, he covered her in soil still damp and heavy with recent rain. He took a small break every now and again to mop his shining pate and lean against his shovel. Once she was given back to the Earth, he marked her final resting place with an old boot worn through at the heel.

"Rest in peace." He always wished he could say more, but additional words escaped him. He turned and hobbled past a row of objects lined up like garbage at a rummage sale. One labored footfall at a time, he passed a tire, a terracotta pot, a hideous lamp missing its shade, and an empty wine bottle. A huge stone boulder, ringed with flower pots capped the end of the row, presiding like a king over its fellows. His fingers brushed it as he walked by, on his way home at last.

His house rested atop a hill, surrounded on all sides by hills larger still, each covered in a fur of pine forest. He had wanted to buy farmland in the next county over, but Estelle had taken one look at the ramshackle old farmhouse and fallen in love. And he was never a man who could deny his wife anything, not if she really had her heart set on it.

So he'd grown to love their new home too, loved the drafty bathroom, loved bathing in well water and reading via the light of the generator. He even loved their isolation. But mostly, he loved Estelle, who had shone with happiness, radiant as any sunflower in her big gardening hat and dirt-washed gloves.

His path took him up the hill and next to the lip of a deep ravine. Large rocks protruded from the side like headstones and a small creek ran at the bottom swollen with rain water. "Beautiful day today,

Estelle,” Fred said, pausing a moment to raise his wrinkled face to the watery sun. It was pushing its fragile way from behind a thick curtain of gray clouds, not strong enough yet to offer much warmth. “All your flowers will be blooming once this drizzle lets up. Still, would be nice if I didn’t have to be out in it fixing that damn fence. Hole big enough to drive a Cadillac through.”

Fred shed his outer layers like a snake shucking it’s skin, coat on a peg and boots toppled across the welcome mat. He cut through the sitting room, past the two armchairs in front of the useless television and into the little, yellow kitchen. The cupboards yielded up their secrets: Estelle’s apricot preserves, spam, and canned vegetables, leafy lettuce heads, soft skinned tomatoes, and cucumbers as long as his forearm. In the fridge sulked some fish caught from the pond not far from the house, cleaned, filleted and waiting to be fried as well as almost a dozen eggs stolen from his cantankerous chickens. “I know I should be grateful, Estelle, but what I wouldn’t give for a nice slice of white bread or one of your snickerdoodles,” Fred said, rueful, pulling down some canned chicken and the fixings for a salad.

Making their way to town had been such a chore they had always bought in bulk, purchasing huge pallets of toilet paper and gallon cans of green beans big as basketballs. The pantry was loaded with dusty cans and boxes of pasta. One day soon he wouldn’t be able to work in the garden or manipulate the reel on his fishing rod, so he tried to eat fresh as much as possible to save the reserves for later. It wasn’t always easy though. There was only so much fish and veg a man could eat before he started longing for a smokey rack of ribs or a lasagna. God, how he missed cheese!

Repast complete, Fred rinsed his bowl and fork in the cold well water that came rushing from the spigot over the sink. He rinsed his cutting board and the large wood-handled knife he’d used to chop his vegetables into uneven pieces. Estelle had always called his cooking “rustic” even when he’d had luxuries like butter to work with, but Fred supposed he was feeding himself well enough.

He turned off the water and listened for one endless moment to the echoing silence pricked only by the far away grumble of the generator. When Estelle had first passed, the silence was impossible. In the

quiet, ghostly echoes of her laughter pushed in on him until he'd shouted just to relieve the awful pressure. But now, he'd gotten used to the hollow ring of a world devoid of chatter and giggles and offkey Elvis.

Even if he could bear silence now, he couldn't stand idleness, so Fred stooped, ignoring the twitch in his back, and pulled the feather duster out from under the kitchen sink. He made his way slowly around the living room, gently moving aside picture frames -- Estelle at the church bake sale, the pair of them at Myrtle Beach on their honeymoon--to wipe away the empty spaces left behind. He moved to their bedroom. There were two nightstands. One held a cup for his teeth and the Bible, and the other had a pair of glasses and a book with a bookmark still holding a page that would never be turned to again. He dutifully flitted the duster over both.

As soon as Fred entered the guest room he was dripped on. "Darn," he griped, wiping a hand over his face to catch the water there. He turned his eyes heavenward to see a spot, brown as a tea stain, spreading on his ceiling. "Dammit!" This house had been Estelle's pride and joy. She'd be devastated to see what he'd let become of it.

It wasn't raining now, but that would change soon enough. It was the wet season, who knew how long the deluge would last and then what would happen, wood rot, mold. If the damage spread, there could be a cave in and with his failing body there was no way he could fix it. He could barely stand the thought. Estelle's home with the roof stoved in, leaves and critters and water pouring in to ruin her grandmother's white, lace bedspread and the carpets she'd ordered special from Duluth. It couldn't be allowed.

Fred hurried to the garage, grabbed a faded plastic bucket, and stumped his way back inside. He liberated an old rag from the washroom and mopped up the puddle forming on the floor. The bucket went under the leak, each drip thumping against the bottom like a drumbeat.

On went his overcoat and muddy galoshes. "It's one of those days, Estelle!" he called up to the roiling sky. His ladder was in the shed, but upon searching for his other tools he realized he'd left them out by the broken fence. He'd been fixing it when that wanderer had come up and spooked him. With all the excitement he'd left everything there, his gloves, pliers, hammer. "God--" If Estelle were here, she'd scold him. "God Bless America! GD! DAMN!"

The tools were right where he'd left them, curled up next to a spool of fencing wire in his wheelbarrow. He grabbed the chipped wooden handles and made his painful way back to the house. Fred was very focused on navigating the wheels over the small hillocks of grass that grew atop the ravine, so perhaps that's why he didn't notice. The tools were jostling against the metal basin and making a scraping, discordant racket, so perhaps that was why he didn't notice. He was still cataloging all the work he had to complete before his task was done, so maybe that was why.

Whatever the reason, he didn't notice the thing until it was right on him. A man, or what was once a man, in filthy coveralls, with milked over eyes and teeth brown and broken. Fred's head jerked up to take in the creature's terrible face. It shambled toward him determinedly, only a few feet away, howling as it dragged itself over the wet ground. Fred's bowels turned to water.

He startled, stumbled back, and the ravine's soft embankment gave way beneath him. For one agonizing moment, he felt the sickening lurch of weightlessness. He tumbled like laundry in a dryer, heels over head, the gray sky flashing like lightning as momentum slammed him into ground hard as granite again and again. Helpless to stop his descent, his limbs flailed uselessly until he rebounded off the knife edge of a huge boulder. Something snapped with a sound sharp as a gunshot.

The pain was incredible.

More pain than a human body should be able to withstand. Fred found himself flat on his back, ears full of cotton, white misting the edges of his vision. He flopped like a netted fish, trying to move, trying to sit up, but that movement jarred something jagged and splintered in his leg and he screamed like

he never knew he could scream. Through the throbbing, a realization stole upon him, as unwelcome and incontrovertible as death: the wanderer had tumbled down after him.

It was picking itself up at the bottom of the long muddy swath their descent had cut down the side of the hill. It moaned through its open maw, air screaming through its rotten lungs. Frantically, Fred cast around for a weapon-- a stone, even a stick-- but there was nothing but grass and mud within reach of his hands.

He thought of Estelle the night he met her, twirling in her red and white dress. Thought of the dancehall lights shining in her hair like stars. He saw her smile and the deep, fathomless blue of her eyes. His own, he closed. Wherever she was, she was waiting for him.

It had been days and nights without counting. Anna had escaped the conflagration of the city out into the boonies with Ben. They'd survived together, slept in their car, kept off the highways, ate metal flavored slop cold from the can when they were too close to Them to start a fire. Ben, Ben, Ben. Big smile, silly laugh, hair curling up under the rim of his cap like sheep's wool. All of him gone forever. Hollowed out. Eaten.

Even when they'd been hungry and cold, snatching sleep in filthy gas stations and houses rusted with gore -- everywhere too quiet, filled past the brim with corpses and death-- they'd had each other to live for. Now she pushed on for no other reason than she had to.

She'd avoided cities and towns, but soon she'd have no choice, not with a single can of creamed corn and a canteen of chalky water comprising the entirety of her food stores. It occupied most of her waking thoughts: where to find food. Where did animals go? How could she catch one? Could she eat those berries? Would a pet store have snacks by the register that no one had thought to burgle?

The fence, when she came to it, surprised her. A portion had been knocked down and pressed into the mud like a ramp. Nonsensically, she thought, *should I walk the plank?*

It didn't *look* like the fence had succumbed to a swarm, and the hills resounded with nothing but birdsong. She eyed the fence one way then the other. It disappeared into the distance as far as she could see in either direction. Through, then.

She climbed the surprisingly steep hill, her ragged Converse digging deep grooves into the loam with every step, passing an old wheelbarrow and a row of oddities laid in a line. *Did somebody go nuts out here or what?* Eventually, she found herself face to edifice with a lovely little house perched atop the hill like a bird in a nest. Its flower beds were overgrown with wilting begonias and daffodils ringed several of the sturdy trees in the yard. Despite the bucolic setting there were no signs of life, no smoke curling from the chimney nor curtains fluttering nor any sign that anyone was about at all. The house radiated a cold and abandoned air.

One hand covering her belly, the other gripping the hatchet that had once been his, she took a single, deep breath. Forward she went, sprightly, light catching in her hair like starshine.