

Incarcerated Hearts

Rodney Heidecker sat in the back seat of his dad's graphite grey Ford F-350, holding an icepack to the side of his head, and wincing through the stabbing pain in his ribs. His dad drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he exhaled through his nose, creating a slight whistle as the air passed through his untrimmed nose hairs.

"Ya know," his dad said as he shook his head at the line of cars waiting to enter the school parking lot, "I just don't understand why I have to go to these stupid things with ya'll."

"Because everyone expects you to be there with me," his mom said as she quickly powdered her cheekbones with a large brush, "and it just wouldn't look right if you weren't there."

Two girls from the cheerleading squad stood on the sidewalk near the entrance, dressed to the nines in school spirited emerald green and winter white. They held a large white poster-board sign that announced in large glittery green letters: "Welcome to the Mountainside High School Talent Show."

The turn signal clicked its metronomic beat, counting the seconds of silence as his dad wrenched his hands on the steering wheel. "Christ, do ya think I care what these yuppy assholes think of me? They don't give a shit about you, me, or him." He jabbed a thumb back at Rodney and gave him a quick glare in the rear view mirror.

Rodney's face twisted into a grimace as the truck came to an abrupt stop in a parking spot. His mom closed her compact, slid it into her purse and snapped it shut. She

looped her arm through her purse straps and gave his dad a look that clearly said, *suck it up, you're going*.

Rodney's dad met her look, and held it as he grabbed the half empty beer can from the cup holder. He tipped it back, gulping loudly as he finished it off with a loud burp. He crushed the can with one hand, and threw it over his shoulder, nearly hitting Rodney in the forehead. "Fine, I'll go to this stupid pony show of bullshit, but I'm not cheering for any of these jackasses." He opened his door, letting it swing wide and tap the door of the car next to them.

Rodney threw the icepack on to the neighboring seat and opened his door carefully. He inhaled; filling his lungs with painful air and held it in as he slid out of the truck. He landed with a sharp stab that pushed the air from his lungs. He leaned against the seat, taking shallow breaths and slowly exhaling the pain away. He closed the door and saw his mom standing in front of the side mirror putting on a thick, dusky rose lip gloss. She made several kissing gestures as she returned the lip gloss to her purse. Satisfied with her appearance, she turned around and looked at him.

"Oh god," she said as she slumped like a puppet with its strings cut. "Why do you do this to me? I buy you nice clothes and then you wear this crap."

Rodney looked down at his old blue jeans and black, wrinkly shirt that he had pulled from the laundry hamper. He shrugged as his mom fussed with his long, almond-blond hair. She flipped it back over his shoulder and brushed his side bangs back behind his ears with her fingers. She leaned back and looked at him again, but the hopeless expression on her face did not change.

Rodney looked past his mom's scorn and saw his dad standing in the middle of the parking lot, smoking a cigarillo and watching a group of senior girls walk by. "Christ, come on!" his dad said, "What are you two doing?"

His mom balled her fists, thrust her arms down at her sides, and turned to face his dad. "God damn it Bill! We're coming!" She turned back around and grabbed Rodney's face, "You're gonna do a good job tonight, right?"

He nodded as he tried to pull away.

She squeezed harder, digging her gaudy nails into his cheeks, "I don't need you pulling any bullshit that draws negative attention to us. You're god damned lucky they're even letting you do this again, so keep the lights on the performers and don't do anything stupid. Got it?" Her eyebrows were arched far into her curled bangs, and her eyes were open wide, staring into his as though she were trying to hypnotize his soul.

The last time he manned the stage lights, he had purposely switched on the strobe lights during a pivotal scene in Julius Caesar. This not only wrecked the play, but caused a few minor injuries involving wooden swords and stage props.

He nodded again, but she held his gaze for a few more heartbeats—searching for any sign of deceit. Once satisfied, she let go and looked in the mirror one last time.

His dad threw his arms in the air, "Christ, come on Sandy! Nothing in that mirror is gonna fix the way you look!"

"Screw you Bill!"

Rodney watched his mom walk in her ridiculous heels, looking like a drunken hooker with every step. His dad muttered something under his breath and flicked the butt

of the cigarillo at her—nearly hitting one of her shoes.

“For Christ’s sake Bill!” she shouted as she dodged the cigarillo and rolled her ankle.

Rodney put his hands in his pockets and followed behind at a slow, disinterested pace. He watched his feet create long shadows as the sun set behind him. He looked at his lanky shadow, hating the way it looked, but wishing he could be the shadow instead of who he was. He imagined himself letting the shadow take him away, as if he had melted into the world of shadows—disappearing altogether.

His day dream was shattered as a loud truck raced up the parking lot to where he was walking on the sidewalk.

“Hey guys, it’s Heinydicker!”

Rodney looked up to see a group of boys whooping and hollering as they partied in the back of the mud caked truck. The driver slowed down, letting the truck coast next to him as he walked. The burly jock at the wheel was grinning at him, as if he knew something Rodney didn’t. He had his one free arm wrapped around the shoulders of two pretty blond girls Rodney had never seen before. Rodney made eye contact with the one in the middle, and instantly averted his eyes to the ground.

“Hey gay-wad!” the driver shouted over the rumbling motor, “ya gonna give us a cool light show tonight, or are ya gonna be busy watching the boys on stage?” The boys in the back burst into renewed laughter as they gave each other high-fives and banged the roof of the truck.

Rodney kept looking down, doing his best to ignore them, and waited for the truck

to run out of road. The driver revved the engine, trying to get Rodney to look over at him. Rodney knew better, but found he couldn't resist the urge to see what they were doing. Rodney looked up in time to see the driver pull his arm from around the girls and flip him off, "Queer!"

The guys in the back grabbed fast food bags, empty energy drink cans, and whatever else they could find to throw at him. The truck turned away and sped down the parking lot, leaving a trail of garbage in its wake. They were still shouting as Rodney came to the stairs leading to the auditorium.

His dad stood at the auditorium door laughing as Rodney walked towards him. "It's yer own fault they treat ya like that. I told ya that sensitive bullshit you do is gonna bite ya in the ass."

Rodney walked past him; ducking just in time as his dad went to slap the back of his head. He looked through the open doors leading to the main floor of the theater. He could see his mom talking to five disinterested women, and trying hard to be the life of the conversation.

Rodney made his way to the stage door that was further down the hall from the main entrance. He held his ribs and eased his way through the crowded hallway. As he cleared the throng of people, four senior girls came down the hall, dressed like they were going to an award show.

The girl in the lead looked over at him and put her nose up. "Looser," she said as the other girls laughed and walked away.

Laura, a girl that had once been his friend back before the world had turned

against him, walked in their wake. He knew that she wasn't like them, but there was no way for her to show it without falling into the cruelty pit with him. She gave him a thin lipped smile that was more for sympathy than anything else. She had been the girl that welcomed him to the new school when he moved to town, and was his first true friend. But the pressures of school life took her away from him, and now she was just a silent witness.

He crossed the hall, opened the stage door, and escaped into the small stairwell. He shut the door behind him and leaned against it. He closed his eyes, took in controlled breaths, and focused on denying all his hurts while trying not to cry. He shook with frustration and slammed his fists against the door.

“Rodney?” Mrs. Martin said as she peered around the corner from the top of the stairs. “Rodney, the show is about to start, we need you to get the lights going.”

Rodney nodded to her as he swallowed his anger. He went up the stairs and looked across the stage where a line of students stood waiting for their turn to show their various talents. He noticed that Sherri Dean was first in line, anxiously waiting to go out and show everyone that she could dance—despite the rumor that her true talents were better suited for the casting couch of some porn company.

He walked around a cluster of old rope rigging and pulled out a wooden stool from underneath the lighting control board. He picked up the manila folder that was taped to the stool and sat down. The lighting schedule for every student's routine was paper-clipped to the front of the folder. Colored dots lined the margin next to the name of each student, designating their desired light color for their routine.

He flipped on the main row of lights and Mrs. Martin walked out on the stage.



As the last student neared the end of his violin solo, Rodney took out the picture he had placed in the folder the day before. He held it behind his back as he walked over to Mrs. Martin and tapped her on the shoulder, “Mrs. Martin?”

She jumped and turned, “Yes?”

“May I join the talent show?” he asked.

“Oh,” she said, failing to hide her surprise. “I was unaware you were interested in something like this.”

He stood there waiting as she struggled with the idea of letting him go out on the stage. He could tell she wanted to tell him no as her eyes darted around as she thought of how to tell him, but she also knew that it could come back to bite her in the ass if she didn’t let him go. He had placed her in a hard position, and the pressure was chipping away at her resolve.

The internal battle ended as she threw her hands up in defeat, “Okay, you can go on after Derrick gets done. What are you gonna do?” she said as she turned back to the stage and prepared to go out.

“A...I guess you can call it spoken word,” Rodney said.

Mrs. Martin looked at him confused, “I don’t know what that is but oh well.”

Derrick finished and the crowd cheered as he took a series of bows.

Mrs. Martin walked out on stage like a beauty queen; clapping her hands with the crowd as Derrick walked off. “Wonderful job Derrick that was lovely!” she said as the crowd’s applause softened and died out. “I am pleased to announce that there is a last minute addition to the show. Everyone put your hands together for Rodney Heidecker!” She said this as cheerily as ever; but her pretend smile soon faltered as the crowd remained silent.

Rodney came out on the stage holding the microphone in his sweaty hand, while the other hand held the picture behind his back. He eyed the crowd, pinpointing where the majority of the parents were sitting, and found his mom in the crowd. His dad was sitting next to her with an intense scowl on his face. He then eyed his class; motivating himself to go on as he looked at each of their self-righteous faces.

One of the boys from the truck stood up and booed. The whole crowd started to laugh, and Rodney’s cheeks grew hot. He raised the picture of his third grade class up to the crowd. The poem he had been rehearsing in his mind for over two years fell out of him. The rhythmic pulse of the words pulled him from line to line.

“This toddler throws a stone, ham-fisted, but accurate, with rippling affect upon the waters that gave birth to the ugly duckling, that dreams of flight, yet yearns so secretly, to fall and smash upon the rocks.”

With one hand, he crumpled up the picture and threw it at the boy who had booed. His ribs were inflamed, but the pain receded to the back of his mind as he eyed the group of shocked students.

“Those children hurl torments, bird-brained, but earnest, crippling the character

yet to bloom within the too shy child, that craves friendship, but wants so badly, to free his claustrophobic soul. These teens catapult torture, second-natured, yet meticulous, while traumatizing the fragile psyche that has faded within the fugitive, that runs from hurts, and searches frantically, for a place that will end it all.”

The passion and anger roiled in him. Hot tears fell from his eyes, falling away like the emotional walls he had built around himself for most of his life. He shifted his gaze to look at where all the parents were sitting. He looked right at his mom—horror had taken control of her face and had warped it into a hideous mess of makeup. His dad was standing next to her, fists clenched at his sides and his face twisted with anger.

“The adults deliver demands, stone-blind, and uninvolved, with detrimental influence upon their browbeaten progeny, who are convinced they’ve been born without beauty, and ask sincerely, *who will free our incarcerated hearts?*”

He dropped the microphone with a loud thump and crackle. Staring at his dad, he pulled his shirt up over his head and threw it at him. He straightened and looked out at them all, allowing everyone to see the dark purple bruises on his rib cage.

Gasps rose up around his parents, but the majority of the student body sat still, silent as death—unable to face their own ugliness on display.

Rodney turned to leave but noticed Laura standing at the edge of the crowd. Her tear brimmed eyes focusing on the bright red scars and greenish-yellow bruises that spread across his ribs and back. He turned away to avoid her seeing him watch her and walked off the stage, smiling for the first time in forever as the stage lights illuminated his father’s talents for abuse.