

## The Brace

I sat in the lounge chair in the front yard in the shade of a tree. It was a big old tree that stood way over me. There was a breeze. I remember a breeze. I don't remember smelling anything, but the old lady came out of the house with my sleeve pinched between her thumbnail and the nail of her index finger. I should've smelt something.

"What is this?" she asked and held it about shoulder high. It was a white sleeve I'd been wearing on my ankle to support a strain.

"What's it look like. It's a brace," I answered her. From my vantage point, it was framed along with her between my two feet. I had them raised up over my head to drain the water.

She brought the now off-white item to her nose and sniffed deeply, something I never would've done. Now she held it away from her. "It stinks," she said.

"I know it does. Momma's supposed to wash it out, but she don't really. She thinks it's unwashable, even though I've told her. I put it in the hamper. She just takes it out and drops it on the floor."

"And you're still wearing it?" she asked. She made a conscious effort to allow it to connect to as little of her as possible. But the desire, I guess, to make her presentation outweighed disgust.

"Of course," I said. "It's a brace."

"If that's so," she touted, "why aren't you wearing it today?"

"I feel better today. It's not a day to day thing with me. Like your Lupus, whatever it is comes and goes."

“It’s not like my Lupus!” she said, frowning. “Don’t compare anything to my Lupus!”

“Alright, someone else’s Lupus then. But today I’m fine. Yesterday was different.”

She said, “Well this is going in the trash.” She ambled about in a circle. She got around by ambling, wasn’t capable anymore of just turning. She presented that as well, her outcry for respect. So there was this hobble to her as she took three steps to the trashcan and dropped it in. I watched it hang on the rim of the can where the wind swept it from her height. Then it leached off the edge into the can.

“Ha!” I said, “You nearly missed!”

“I don’t miss!” she spat back. “I know the day Momma brought you home. I could see it, how you slouched. I knew I’d be pickin up after you every goddam minute.”

“Keep you busy, do I?”

“You and Momma both,” she replied. She was staring at the can, still with her back turned, like she’d tossed in the both of us instead of it. “I just wish it, sometimes. I just wish you’d go and find your own. Meander.”

“Who do you think this is?” I challenged her. “This is Momma’s place. Now mine too. You have no say in it. Not unless you drag me out this chair.”

“I don’t have to,” she replied. “You drug yourself into it. No one needs a cyst like you, but a cyst, it knows it don’t belong. You’ll drag yourself away once I’ve had enough of your kind. Once you hunger and sweat.”

I laughed, “Who, me or Momma? We come in pairs, you know. You fight with me, you fight with her. She doesn’t love you. She don’t care what you think of me.”

“Momma don’t love you neither,” the old woman shouted, “Momma loves only herself and maybe not even her. Momma’s busy. She’s got things to do. People to take care of.”

“Momma’s sweet on me or I wouldn’t be here. She convalesces me. She took me in her bed.”

“It’s not like you’re the only man she’s ever brought back here.” The old woman circumnavigated the front yard again and inched over to the house. It had a porch. These houses where they live always have porches. There was a rocking chair, but if you sat on it, it looked like it’d probably fall to sticks. The whole house was in need of a coat of paint, but I was no painter, couldn’t raise my arms sufficiently.

“I’m the current man,” I said, “I don’t see no competition.”

“The competition’s the invisible man,” she said. “The one above. The place you’ll never go nor never see. You’ll be damned!”

“I’ve seen it,” I said. “It’s not such a heavenly place.”

The old woman emptied herself back into the house. I struggled a bit to stand beside the lounge chair, ambled to the trash. I didn’t care anymore if they could see how I walked. I walked exactly that way, positioned so to intensify the sympathy. That had brought Momma’s desire into focus, that way she saw me. And I noticed her seeing.

Down in the garbage, it had landed on something viscous. I pinched it and knew at that point I’d have to clean it for myself. Up till now, with my socks on and my shoes on over it, it didn’t smell so bad. But now it stank. Now it was wet. I reached down into the trash to fish it out,

but I just couldn't think to touch it anymore. I couldn't touch it, smell it, and Momma wanted none of it either.

In the lounge chair I waited for Momma to come home. I watched the shadows of the trees lengthen and fade into shade. Momma came home and smiled at me.

"Could you wash my brace, please? Your mother threw it in the trash and now it stinks!"

"In time," she said. "Do your feet still hurt?"

"I'm wishing they were someone else's feet," I said.

"You were born with them," she said, "I was born with mine too." She went in the house and didn't come back out. It got completely dark and turned cold. Then I got up, tried the doorknob. I always thought about it. "Maybe one day," I'd think, "she might lock it." It was unlocked, but when I went inside, I was careful. A lot of creaks in that old plank floor, and until I got to the bed, I didn't want her waking up and hearing. I pulled the covers back, lowered myself in and tried thinking. "Maybe this night or tomorrow. Which would be better for me to touch her?" Under the circumstance, a man has a duty, but what that duty is...Is it ever more than to just himself? Is it something said, something communicated? In the dark, with my eyes coming now to see her smiling, I couldn't get past how I was scared. It wasn't her, not her body either, but the place. Like with the whole thing, if you saw it through an icicle, the whole place might wrap around, and Momma would be in every corner, every crack in the floor. And I'd be just me, a transient. Where did I belong if Momma kicked me out? I'd freeze! With her away, I felt the house a little more mine. The old lady didn't matter. But now Momma was here. This place was different shared, and it occurred to me she (Momma) might just think that necessary. She might just hold some thought I might be responsible for here and us both. I continued to see her. I

thought, “Is it possible, really? Can you smile in your sleep? Or is it something unbelievable, the notion or place, or that I’m here? Is it just only me I’d ever really...worry?” I worried.

In the morning, I woke and smelled pancakes. Maybe better should just be thankful, instead of argumentative. There’s no way to protect from Momma, what she might do with me. The more bets I hedge with cutesy gifts or praise, the more I look worthless, someone she don’t want. Best then to act comfortable, even if you act rude. Women respect confidence in a man, I thought. They’re animals, all over you, when you show fear. But a lazy son of a bitch is ok long as he’s proud of his dotage.

I ate breakfast, hobbled to the lounge chair, put my feet up. I was still there sitting when the old lady came out.

“Are you still there sitting? You’re like a scarecrow! Maybe I should light a fire under you!”

I didn’t say anything. I was grinning. Then I remembered the tree and looked way up over me, saw it still there, swaying, its green leaves catching the breeze. “I’m like that tree,” I thought, “firmly rooted, going nowhere, not today, maybe a little shaken, but ok. I can’t hear that old lady, and Momma’s off to work soon. Who needs a brace when I’ve got a lounge chair?”

Momma came out dressed for work. Her smile seemed to spread from her face to the rest of her. “You’ll be here when I get back?”

“Yes Ma’am,” I said. I called her such when she asked direct questions.

“If I’m home early, I’ll find you still in that chair?”

“Yes Ma’am,” I said. I felt a chill. The breeze was there, but now chilly, like deep shade.

“It’s been good to have you,” Momma said, “a good man to come home to.”

“It’s good to be had,” I said. “Thanks Momma.”

“Thank you,” she said. I said nothing more, didn’t want her to repeat herself, thanking me, like yesterday. “Well I’m off,” she said. I was looking at the tree again until she left. I expected at some point to see a bird there, but hadn’t seen one all week. So I listened, listened for the birds. Had they taken up residence elsewhere? Was it the wind pushed them on? I couldn’t think it me scared them off. Or not the smell of tincture from the sores. I wished myself away, then I slept. I dreamt of birds. I dreamt I was a bird until I woke.

## II.

I thought about what they might tell each other, the old woman and Momma. I knew they were connected, both in body and mind. They must share some opinion of me. It seemed one or the other of them might argue for or against me. The old woman was a good bet not to be in favor. But Momma, what did she want? Would she fade in her approval? I wasn’t comfortable anymore with the situation. But convincing Momma of anything might be risky to interpret. If I did something on my own behalf, how might she react?

I felt like sex might be a way to reach out to her. At least that would be less violent than other ways, like with the old lady. Over several days, I pushed the argument, flowers, etc. But her demeanor stayed the same, which left me where I’d been pretty much before I tried, except a little weaker, and confused. I’d used her money to buy them, the flowers, maybe should have gathered them myself. I didn’t think ahead to the point where she would ask me. The amount I paid, that I thought I’d just keep secret. But it became an issue when the source of money

couldn't be established outside hers. Lying to her might be grounds for dismissal. I didn't want the old lady to witness that.

I needed to present myself as useful, at least in some short term. I knew, in the back, they had a shed, but I'd never been inside. This was different about Momma's place. A lot of places here paid no attention to the outside, let it grow out and wore foot trails back and forth to the road. From the road, it was a mile or so to town. They had carts, animal drawn, or they drove jalopies, stocked up on necessities and returned home every month or so. They'd bury vegetables in the basement so they wouldn't rot.

Momma hadn't said anything, but I noticed they talked, briefly at first, then for longer almost half days, and when they thought I wasn't listening. If, by accident, they discovered me, they paused, and at that time I'd be very much aware of my breathing and their not saying. I'd go so far as to feel my pulse. It became increasingly difficult. That was a phrase the old woman used herself. And I didn't want to. I didn't want to bring their language into my thoughts. At first, I thought, "It's theirs. They're thinking it, saying it. They have a peace with it since nothing comes back to me." But I realized it did come back to me, the interruption in our pleasures, the intensity of mind when we addressed each other, Momma and myself, and Momma and her. We were rivals now, me and the old lady. There's all kinds of ways people talk about this, but they all mean the same thing. My status was on the ropes.

What could I do to win back Momma's affection? The first would be to investigate the shed and see was there something I could constructively use. But I tried the door and it was locked! I went back inside, wondering where she might have the key. I had access to the bedroom, so I started looking there. With Momma at work, I could be a little bolder, but the old lady sniffed about, always, even if her eyes were failing her. I pulled Momma's dresser drawers

open, slowly, and heard them scrape wood to wood, a kind of rumble you know just by hearing. If I pushed something aside to look beneath, I put it back. It was hard to know just how thorough Momma was with her things' appearance. But where was the key? I finished the dresser, went to her nightstand. Then I heard behind me, the old woman cackling away and turned and saw her covering her mouth with her hands. "You fool!" she said, "You fool!"

"What are you looking at?" I managed.

"Who needs to look?" she snapped back. "Thieving again! You think another bouquet will buy her?"

I told her, "I'm not purchasing, not stealing neither. Momma's no concern for me. It's you and your meddling."

She laughed again. "Go on," she said, "demonstrate for her how much you love her."

"Goddam you!" I shouted. "This is my goddam room. Get the fuck out!" I took a step toward her and she loudly shut the door. I heard her padding away, but not like she was running. There was a knowingness to her resonating in the planks. "I can't live like this," I said out loud. "The hell you can't!" she hollered back. How she heard, I couldn't say, but now I'd vocalized it, couldn't take it back. "You'll dream of me," I thought I heard her tell me, not in that angry wish it off voice, but softly, the way you whisper something precious and in need of telling, like a secret. Did I imagine it?

I sat on the bed, then fell backward, looking at the ceiling. Some plastering needed doing, and then, obviously, paint to match. But the last time I'd tried something like that it dropped on the floor while I was gone, hardened, and I had to pry it off with a knife. The house was falling apart. No way to stop it just with one patch!



I went outside to see did the shed have another way in.

In the back, I saw something dug underneath, some type of burrow. I reached down under to see if I could feel up inside, and something bit me. I pulled back my hand and saw on my palm and on the back of my hand, both sides punctured, almost as with a knife, but they didn't match, top and bottom a bit offset. I was kneeling behind the shed, digging in my pocket for handkerchief. It growled and snorted at me from the hole. I got up and went inside, looked for water to clean the wound, or some alcohol. The old woman saw me bleeding and said, "You found Ralph!"

"What? What's Ralph?"

"Ralph out back."

"Is it some kind of dog?"

"We don't know," she said. "It's always been there."

I asked her, "Why didn't you tell me?" and she said, pointedly, "What's there to tell? You want to know about Ralph, you have to ask."

"Has he ever bitten anyone before?"

"Oh, many times. He bites."

"Christ! Why didn't you warn me?"

She laughed again, "It don't matter. I warn them. They all get bit."

### III.

My hand was turning colors and Momma was coming home soon. That something in the back of the house – Ralph – it had left the burrow, making snorting noises by the corner of the house closest to me. I was in the lounge chair, and the old woman, she came out of the house holding the brace. “Here,” she said, “I cleaned this for you.” She threw it in my lap.

“I can’t use it,” I said. “I can’t put it on. My hand.”

“You’d better use it,” she said. “Momma’s coming home soon. And Ralph, once he gets a taste, he gets hungry.”

My hand was swollen, yellow, black and blue. My feet were sore, and my ankle, it might double over if I ran. I thought how Momma might be happy if I stayed. But whatever kept Ralph away for so long had brought him out now. And whatever he was, was not the kind of thing you’d hold a conversation with. But my hand was beginning to think for me. I could see an end to this. I could see the sleeve. Which foot did I wear it on two days ago? I began to believe, if I waited patiently, all would be well so long as Momma would arrive. Momma knew, must have known about Ralph, must have hid him from me. I thought I could just win her sympathy again, and even if they had to cut off my arm, there’d be places for me, places in the home. And the old woman, she wouldn’t bother me now. I could use this as a strength! If I healed, if I was crippled, the experience itself! I fell asleep, and when I woke, I thought I heard Momma, Momma calling for Ralph.

End.