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SURROGATE

Dan Stintzi

EMMONS FOUND THE BODY BY THE RIVERBANK. HE SPOTTED

it by the color of the coat, a dark green against the white and gray of the snow and ice. There was warmth buried somewhere deep below the skin. He lifted the body, untangled its foot from the bars of a rusted fence, and carried it over his shoulder, trudging back through his old bootprints. Inside, he set the body upright against the tree that had grown inside his home. The tree was dead now. Emmons tried to make the body speak again but it would not.

From his bedroom, he took the spare coats he had collected during the raids and piled them across the body until only the face was visible. He had seen the face move days before; he had seen it chew and breathe. But the cold had changed the body's appearance. Now the eyes were bruises, the mouth an open sore. The heat he had felt was gone. The boy was dead. He went out to find the mother.

The mother's name was Stena. She lived on the city's edge in a ruined schoolhouse. She hid knives in the old desks. She cracked stones and made chalk, wrote words and numbers on the blackboard. In this way, she had taught the boy to read. She had lived with Emmons some time ago but then the boy arrived and everything changed.

In the schoolhouse, Stena sat beside a fire pulling the skin off a rabbit. The tiny fibers that held the skin to the muscle would not separate so she weaved a knife sideways along the meat.

"I have something I need to show you," he said.

"I thought you weren't talking to me," she said.

"It's important."

“I’m in the middle of something here.” The knife tore through the last thread and the skin came loose.

He was momentarily sidetracked by the scene, thinking about himself as the rabbit, wondering if his skin could be removed in the same way, all at once with a single strong tug. She drove a pointed stick through the meat and held it over the fire.

“I have bad news,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Spit it out,” she said.

He told her. The fire cast new shapes on her face. Her eyes were black, orange, then black again. He went to comfort her with his hands but the place where she had been was empty. She was three buttons up on her parka, the hood over her head. Her face was gone. He followed her out the door and into the cold.

She did not take steps; she kicked through the snow with Emmons just behind her. His breath came in shallow waves. His heart felt too big inside his chest.

From the outside, Emmons’s house looked as abandoned as the buildings that surrounded it. The windows had melted; the gutters were filled with ash. Stena knew how to access the crawl space hidden on the back side of the house, through the body of a hollowed-out minivan, past a washing machine on rollers, under the porch, into a tunnel of chiseled out foundation ending in a foot of half-frozen water slicked across the basement floor.

Up the stairs, in the room with the dead tree, Stena saw the body, which had somehow slumped over in Emmons’s absence. She fell to the floor and cried into the moldy rug. The noise she made

reminded him of a pheasant he had seen shot out of the air . . . not dead, screaming a bird scream, doing one-winged loop-de-loops—earthbound spirals—until it pranged headfirst into the trunk of a tree and fell silent.

During the time when they had shared this home, he had, as a kind of protest, made a point of ignoring the boy. It was Stena who decided they would offer him shelter. Now he straightened the child upright against the tree and used his thumb to close his dead eyes. The body had thawed while he was gone. The skin was a fish's skin. The color of it was gray and blue.

Stena had rolled over. She was staring up at the ceiling. The hood of her parka made her head seem engorged, grotesque.

“Where did you find him?”

He told her. She started making the shot pheasant sound again. He said: “What business did he have being down there?”

“I believed in him having freedom. I wish that he didn't go to the river but that was his choice and he made it.”

The kid was dead and his eyes were closed, but Emmons still had the sensation of being watched. Stena stayed on her back. He followed her eyes and saw the snowy light through the holes in the ceiling. The light made him blink repeatedly.

“I need you to do me a favor,” Stena said.

“No.”

“You have to at least listen.”

“I sure as hell do not. You lost the opportunity to ask me for favors when you left for that schoolhouse.”

“My moving is irrelevant to the favor. My son is dead for Christ’s sake.”

“That is not your son.”

“Oh, fuck you.” She rolled back over and screamed at the floor.

“You keep that up and they’ll find us.”

The rug muffled her voice. “Those freaks gave up on me and you a long time ago.”

The boy’s body slumped sideways again. Snow began to fall through the holes in the ceiling. The light coming through the holes illuminated the sideways body like something in a painting.

Painting was a word that struck Emmons as strange sounding. He had forgotten what it meant, but the light, the body, the colorful coats all piled together, they moved his mind back in time and the meaning returned. Things fell out of use and were forgotten. He could not remember all the things that had gone away.

“If I come back will you do this for me?” she asked.

“No,” he said, feeling uncertain. He returned the body to the sitting position.

“I’ll kill myself.”

“That’s not fair.”

“You think this is fair?” Still face down, she stretched out her arm and pointed toward the boy.

“Why can’t you go?”

“I’m grieving. I have to go through a process.”

The body slumped over again, dust jetting out of the coat pile in different directions.

“This whole place must be crooked,” he said. He chose to leave the body as it was.

“Consider me moved back in. I never should have left in the first place.” Her voice sounded like it was coming from a different room. “I hate the way I’ve treated you,” she said. “Sometimes I think that I’m separate from my brain. I do things and I’m not sure why I did them. I’m not always sure who does the deciding.”

He stayed silent and stacked logs, heavy and damp, in the pit he’d carved out of the floorboards. He snapped kindling and made a pyramid beneath the logs. He lit the fire and stood there breathing smoke.

“I was hoping we could be a family,” she said.

“I know,” he told her. Smoke curled in the black part of his eyes.

“I’m serious about killing myself.”

“I know,” he said.

She flipped back over and brought her knees to her chest. She hugged herself and became a ball.

“You understand what you are asking me to do?”

“I love you,” she said. “I’ve always loved you.”

“I won’t be the same when I come back.”

“I loved you the first moment I saw you. You were with that band of raiders.”

“I remember.”

“You were dragging bodies to be burned. You gave me clean water. I thought: this man is a protector.”

“Who knows what will happen to the boy. There’s no guarantee

that it'll work. You've heard the stories.”

“I can't live like this. Talk to the Surrogate. See what it can do. Please.”

The fire hissed. White bubbles, like the saliva of a rabid animal, boiled on the cut edge of a log. Stena lay upright and rigid. He could not look at her. The damp logs refused to fully burn. The fire wavered and let off weak heat.

“I love you too,” he said.

Stena smiled.

OUT IN THE city, the snow was so thick Emmons was practically swimming. He followed back roads between the rubble of the old hospital, beside toppled smokestacks, weaving past homes reduced to steel and foundation. The route through the outskirts was impassable. The river had not frozen fully and the bridge was out again. That left the path through the city. He would have to pass the settlement, and possibly engage with and possibly maim or murder at least some of its inhabitants. He brought with him a hunting rifle he believed could still fire and a revolver he was sure could not. He had not seen the locals in years. He had heard the noises they made, but he had not seen them. The noises were difficult to classify. They came to him at night, in half-dreams, bounced off the city's ruins, carried over the empty fields, over the snow. The sound was human—labored and sundry—rising up in unison like a chorus, but it was rigid too, mechanical, the noise an engine might make if it had a mouth and the desire to sing.

Emmons saw the settlement in the distance. The walls were

made of wood; sharpened spears, aimed out at the road, jutted from the stockades. The settlement was built in the carcass of some ruined structure. Smoke rose in black plumes from the settlement's center. The afternoon sky looked flat and hollow. It was a gray piece of paper that could be torn through. The smoke had a flavor that made Emmons's stomach bubble.

He followed the old road through the ruins, through the snow, until he came along a cleared path. He followed the path, climbing over concrete and metal, winding through the burnt out car frames, the piles of frozen garbage. He saw a purple hand in one of the piles, an unblinking eye in another. The ice never melted so the bodies never broke down. He sent his mind searching for memories of the days when bodies were piled up on street corners, when cars were left to rust on highways and sidewalks, but he came back empty. His brain had been strip-mined long ago, those old nightmares replaced with white space.

He arrived outside the settlement where a man in a camouflage jacket sat hunched on a metal folding chair beside the settlement's gate. Across from the gate was a series of wooden sawhorses placed in a line blocking the path forward. The man looked up and gripped the shotgun in his lap. Metal rivers ran in crisscross stitches across his face skin. The rivers were mercury colored, they flowed and rippled as if windblown. The man's eyes were black orbs. His left leg was made of metal.

Emmons wondered if this was a normal way for people to look. He could not remember. He stuck the rifle in the crook of his

shoulder and took shuffling steps, walking parallel to the settlement's gate, moving toward the barricade.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." The man spoke, his words slow and slurred like a drunk's. "Let's de-escalate there, comrade. Let's go back to square one."

"I don't want trouble," Emmons said looking down the barrel of the rifle. It had been so long since he had talked to anyone other than Stena and the boy. "All I want is to pass through."

"Of course. Of course. I get it." The man's teeth were too white, whiter than the snow. The strange lines on his face shimmered and bent when he spoke. Emmons saw the silver lines on the man's neck and hands. "All I need from you is a little information and then boom, that's it, you're on the road again."

Emmons did not speak. He did not lower the gun.

"Like for instance, where are you coming from? Why are you using a path that is not your path? Where is your family? Do they have all of their arms and legs?"

"I come from far away . . . the bridge is out," Emmons said and then tried to remember the other questions. "I have no family."

Behind the man with black eyes, through the slats of the gate, Emmons saw vague shadows moving slowly. He could see a fire. He noticed then that the man's breath was not visible.

"I'm afraid I'm going to need a little more than that. We have certain protocols here. We've realized, after a lot of trial and error, that in order to make any real progress certain sacrifices must be made. We've become a much more open and honest people. We

make known our intentions.” He straightened his back against the chair. He shifted the shotgun in Emmons’s direction.

“I have a home three miles southeast. I live alone. No family.”

“That must be hard,” the man said, turning his mouth down in a way that struck Emmons as genuine. “Tell me about your plans for the future. Where is it that you are going?”

Emmons could not think of a lie quickly enough so he told the truth. “I’m on a pilgrimage. I need to speak to the Surrogate.”

“I like the look of your torso,” said the man with black eyes. The mercury rivers twisted subtly.

“What?” said Emmons.

“I didn’t say anything,” said the man with black eyes.

“I’m not sure that’s right.”

“A pilgrim? Why didn’t you say so before? We make exceptions for the penitent. Believers have the blessing of the Great Body. You may proceed.”

The man with black eyes rose from his chair and used his hips to shift the sawhorse blocking the path. He gestured for Emmons to pass.

“Do not be afraid,” the man said. “The god we serve is not like those that came before.” His metal leg spun and twisted when he stepped. It was made of no metal Emmons had ever seen.

The man saw Emmons staring at the leg. He said: “If your right leg causes you to sin, cut it off and give it to me. I will eat the leg. I will take the leg into myself and give new life to the many-legged.”

Emmons did not know how to respond. He walked past the man

and the barricade.

“That’s the good word, my man. That’s the truth.”

“Thank you for your help,” Emmons said.

The man smiled his too-white teeth. The silver rivers on his face had stilled. Emmons turned and left him there, but he saw himself go . . . felt his body reflected in the black eyes as he worked his way up the path, toward the factory, toward his blessing . . . growing smaller and smaller in the man’s eyes until he crossed the horizon and disappeared into the far-off white.

WHEN EVERYTHING ELSE had crumbled, the factory remained. The walls were black, the windows long gone, but the structure had held, house-sized snowdrifts butting up to the second story, icicles like tree trunks hanging from the eaves. The white print on the brick had been stripped away by wind and time but the outline of the logo remained, the ghost of an animal that no longer existed. He remembered what they called places like this, he couldn’t forget the word. Slaughterhouse, he thought and considered for some amount of time the character of that old place-namer. You knew what you were getting, he thought, at the slaughterhouse.

Emmons entered through a hole in the wall. The space smelled like rust and old blood. Crooked shafts of light fell through the broken windows, through the holes in the roof, giving shape to the hooks and chains, the decomposed rubber hoses, the metal grates where the blood had once run off. Emmons remembered an old cathedral he had visited as a child. He remembered the vaulted ceilings and colored glass, the way the air felt inside. His fingers

twisted around the wooden barrel of the rifle.

He did not know what he was looking for. He assumed it would be obvious when he found it. Behind his eyes, he saw the boy's body in the snow . . . the green jacket, the wire wrapped around his boot. He descended into the factory. The air grew warm. There were too many rooms.

He walked through thick strips of plastic into a new place. The ceiling here was gone. It was in pieces on the floor. The room was lit up like high noon. Metal troughs lined the walls; the bright sparking across the surface made Emmons squint. In the room's center, he saw a swarm of insects spinning in a dense cloud. Their wings made no noise. They spun and spun around one another, made a loose sphere that breathed like a lung. He crossed a wall of shadow. He moved into the light and saw that the bugs were too large to be bugs. He remembered too that all the bugs in the world were dead. The spinning objects were spherical: little round bulbs. He thought of the black eyes of the man at the barricade. The spheres were silver. They spun so fast as to create the appearance of a solid object. The swarm did not respond to his presence. It continued its indifferent spinning. Moving closer, Emmons was dwarfed by the thing. It was him that was the insect.

Below the swarm, just beside the troughs, was a body, naked and upside down, the face submerged in a pool of water. The body had belonged to a man and it was missing parts of itself, chunks of skin had been carved out, digits removed. He heard Stena's sobbing in the part of his memory responsible for the storage of sound. He

waited for an indeterminable amount of time and when the swarm did not respond to his presences, he spoke.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do here,” he said. The swarm swarmed. He felt the air following the spheres in invisible cyclones.

“My son is dead.” He tried to trace the swarm’s movement with his eyes. Had it changed somehow?

“I want him to be not dead anymore.”

Dull lights blinked inside the spheres. They glowed like distant stars. Emmons turned and saw that the body from the floor was standing beside him. It was covered with those same silver scars that he had seen on the barricade guard. The body blinked. Emmons saw that it was missing the left side of its head. The space was filled with silver light. The other gaps in the body, the removed flesh and bone, had been replaced with liquid metal. The thing was made whole. God is a machine, Emmons thought.

“Remove your jacket,” the body said. Its voice was wet and empty. “Roll up your sleeve.”

Emmons did as he was told. The body was the Surrogate, he realized then. What had he expected? He could not remember.

“Arm,” said the body. It gestured with its own rotten limb, raising its right arm straight out from its chest.

Emmons raised his right arm. He looked up at the swarm . . . it was the color of a sunset now, deep red, crossed with streaks of gold. The body opened its mouth in a smile. It had no teeth. There was something silver in its throat.

Below his elbow, Emmons’s arm began to burn. He went to touch

the burning skin and found that he could not move. He was clinched in a great, unseen embrace. The hairs on his arm cracked and smoldered. An ash-colored smudge formed a ring around his forearm, the sensation becoming unpleasant. The smudge gained depth, moved inward, further into the skin, pressing and pressing until the black gave way to red and the blood fell in twin lines onto the concrete. An invisible blade passed through the arm in halting increments, separating tendons, passing through the bone as if it were made of snow. Emmons saw colors inside himself that he did not know were there. There was more movement beneath the skin than he would have imagined, a great amount of writhing. The limb hung separate from his body, suspended in the air. He had forgotten how to scream. Blood pumped in thick, heartbeat pulses out of the stump until the Surrogate whispered something unintelligible and the wound scabbed over in an instant.

The Surrogate snatched the limb out of the air and lifted it to the swarm. “We appreciate your contribution,” it said. “The Great Body grows larger.” Swooping down, the red spheres congealed across the severed limb and when they separated, pulled back to the larger mass, the arm was gone.

Emmons inspected the stump. His fingers were far away. His vision was tinted and hazy; the light behind the ceiling had taken on a new aura. It had weight that pushed down. It flattened out the whole world.

The Surrogate approached. It would give him what he needed for the boy to live again. He had made his offering, now came the blessing.

It limped when it walked. The silver lines on its body had turned red, in time with the swarm. It looked as if the body was in the process of separating from itself, as if the light contained within was trying to escape. Now face-to-face, the Surrogate raised a hand, held a finger, pointed up, against its cheek. It pulled at the bottom lid.

It was then that Emmons left himself . . . floated far enough away that he could not hear the sounds that his own mouth made. He drifted off through the ceiling up so high he saw the ruined city covered in white, the concrete skeleton buried beneath. The scab on his stump cracked and began to spurt blood and he found himself back in his body.

The Surrogate pulled down the skin of its face.

“Eye,” was all it said.

IT WAS DARK now. Emmons found the path back through the city. His face was wet with blood or tears, he could not tell which. In his jacket pocket was a silver sphere the size of a walnut. Every few steps he would reach into the pocket to make sure the sphere was still there. He wished the eye and arm had been taken from opposite sides. As it was now, he felt unbalanced.

The clouds parted above him. The moonlight made the icicles glow. He thought of water freezing as it dripped, of rivers and lakes solid enough to walk across. He pictured the boy’s snow-covered jacket, the barbed wire glinting in the sun. What was he thinking when he froze to death? Emmons wondered. *Please help*, was probably what it was. *If only there was someone who could help*.

After that, the night turned static-colored and liquid. The ground

moved beneath his feet. The wind licked the crevice where his eye had been. It felt like being tickled from the inside. He left blotches of red in the snow as he stumbled his way back to the house. Time slithered away.

When he arrived back in his home, having forgotten for a moment what he had gone to do and why he had done it, he found Stena curled up in the coats, her body wrapped around the boy. Emmons tried not to wake her as he pried open the child's mouth and, using two fingers, pressed the silver sphere down his throat until only a dull gray half-moon was visible behind the tongue. When it was done, he let the body fall limp again and fit his own back against the trunk of the dead tree. Stena lay beside him. He put his hand on her shoulder and looked down at the stump where his arm had been. It was purple and bleeding. The side of his skull thumped with pressure; something watery drained down past the corner of his mouth.

The fire pit smoldered. There was very little light left. Stena grumbled, rolled her body off the child and put her head on Emmons's thigh. Deep inside her hair, white specks—tiny creatures—moved across her scalp in jittery, stop-start motion. He felt the warmth of her skin through her clothing. She smelled like a graveyard. He loved her in a way that was painful.

She whispered to him. He could barely hear her.

"I knew you could do it," she said. "The Great Body makes old things new again."

"I don't understand," he said. The room was glowing.

“He’s waking up,” she said. The room was so bright he couldn’t see. “I love you.”

He should have never let her go to the schoolhouse. They should have been a family the first time. Now things would be different. He fell asleep with his hands in her hair.

When he awoke the boy was tending the fire. Tiny sparks burst from the embers and gave off smoke. The silver lines on the boy’s face burned orange in the firelight. The coat pile was covered in fresh blood. Emmons could only feel half his face. His brain tried to see through his missing eye.

How long had he slept? Months? Years? Had he been resurrected from the dead? Had the earth been renewed?

The sun was up. He saw the light through the boarded-up windows. On the floor behind the boy was a lump of skin and hair and fabric. The hair was coated in dried blood. The skin was bruised and lined with small cuts.

The boy turned from the fire and spoke. “I didn’t want to wake you,” he said slowly. “But I’m afraid something’s not quite right. I don’t feel well.” Emmons saw the hint of silver in the back of his mouth as he spoke. “Mother doesn’t feel well either.”

He was too weak to move, so he listened. He noticed that his arm was missing. He felt unable to keep his balance against the tree. His body was slipping and he knew that he would soon fall.

“I need you to do me a favor,” the boy said.

