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A HAUNTING IN THE TASTE OF GRAY

By Daniel Roy

In death I cling to Mom as she drifts through life.

I remember the truck that ended me three weeks before my seventeenth birthday. We both lay in the intermingled liquids of our lives, the heat of the asphalt in August pressing against my shattered skull. When the first responders lifted me with a wet sound, I was already gone.

Mom was gone too, for a while. They brought her back in the ambulance.

Her last word to me was my name. Isabel. I followed its echoes to that place behind my mother's eyes where I shone the brightest, as my dying mind collapsed upon itself back in my own broken skull.

For weeks she was comatose. She dreamed of my father before he came back war-weary and broken. She dreamed of painting. And she dreamed of me, smiling, alive.

I watched her from inside her head. I stood at the very edge of her vision, begging her to live again.

When she finally regained consciousness, all we both saw through her eyes was a dull gray darkness. Her sight was gone.

She drifted back to the land of the living. She healed. She forgot the dreams and my whispers. But she lived, and that life I had begged her to rejoin had driven her away from me.

It was death all over again, in a way.

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Mom and I feel the cylindrical coolness of the device on her palm: the diameter of a pen, and about a quarter of the length. From behind her face I watch as she struggles to conjure its image in her mind's eye. These days the pictures are getting duller, the colors all blending into the gray that swallowed her sight.

Ever since the accident, I sit in that gray behind her eyes. I haunt her dreams and her days, missing her so close I can feel the open wound of her loss of me.

"It's a tiny camera, Sylvia," says the Doctor Madiath. He repeats her name like she's a child. "You put it on your glasses. Here, may I?"

He takes the glasses from her head so he can fiddle with them. Her discomfort echoes around me; she hates when the sunglasses come off. She thinks back to the blind people she saw before the accident, and she pictures herself staring into nothingness, like she's trying to remember a time before pain.

He makes a soft sound to warn her as he returns the glasses. We sense a weight dragging them down, but barely.

"And this, you put on your tongue." Size of a stamp, square, thick as a lollipop. The plastic, warmed by his hands, gives off a faint trace of disinfectant. A thin wire wrapped in

isolating rubber trails from it. "The tongue is the most sensitive part of the body," he says. "Go ahead, try it."

She brings the piece to her lips and places it in the center of her tongue, the wire running out of the corner of her mouth. We taste the plastic of the sensor. The part that rests against her tongue is irregular, rough, like the surface of a metal strainer.

"Here, lemme..." The doctor plugs the wire into her eyeglass camera. "There's a little switch right here--" He lifts her fingers, places it to the side of the camera, where she feels a knob. "When you're ready, Sylvia."

She nods, flicks the switch.

Her tongue comes alive, as if she took a sip of mineral water and let it fizz in her mouth. Neither of us can make rhyme nor reason of it; it is random static in sensory form, the snow of a dead television translated into tongue language.

"It'll take a while for your brain to make sense of it, Sylvia," says the doctor. I can tell Mom's irritation at his tone by the way her muscles pull her brows down into a furrow. "Your brain is a pattern-matching computer. It'll learn eventually."

"Here," says Doctor Madiath, "I'll show you some pictures."

We hear the flick of a page. Static pricks her tongue.

Another. Static.

We can't see anything. It's like trying to make sense of a mouthful of Coke. He might as well be teaching Mom Mandarin by reading ancient Chinese poetry.

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I can tell Mom hates her blindness because I hate it too. I hate that she's trapped in the eternal gray, but more than that, I hate that it boiled her down to the bones of her existence.

I wanted her to live, but not like this.

She used to be a painter. She painted me for my twelfth birthday, in splashes of warm colors, and I understood for the first time why she called me pretty.

She used to ride her bike to her barista job downtown until the first November snows. She said she was doing her part to save the planet, but I knew money was short.

She used to dream of owning a summer house so we could live there, just the two of us, without care for the world beyond the lake.

Now she is not even a mother anymore. All she is to anyone else is her blindness and her grief. Her pain makes me scream in the empty halls of her mind. During the day she hears nothing, deafened by the noise of living. At night, it wakes her up with a start.

Her heart beats still, but the blindness took her life away.

Sometimes she whispers my name like a prayer. Isabel. At those times it's like she breathes right through me. It reminds me of when I was ten and she sang me to sleep.

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Week after week she returns with me to Doctor Madiath's office. He shows us colored cardboard, bringing them so close to her face that it reflects her breath back at her. Mom sits in his office, hunched in her chair with her mouth furrowed around the wire, tasting wave after wave of static.

I whisper the answers to her, and when I'm wrong we laugh together with her mouth.

These days we laugh a lot less because I give her the right answers. She speaks like she's just guessing, but her brain is starting to make sense of the chaos of her tongue.

Her own breath washes over her face. The storm on her tongue wanes, like someone turning down the knob on a dial.

White, I whisper.

White, she says.

"Yes, Sylvia!" says Doctor Madiath. His voice cracks with excitement.

The sensation returns in full force, a sip straight out of a newly-opened fizzy drink.

Black.

Mom's heart beats faster. We can almost see.

A rounder, fuller sensation, like the bubbles are drawing tiny circles on her tongue.

Green.

Sharper, spikier. Red.

Doctor Madiath's fingers close around hers, squeezing her hand. His laughter booms around his office. Mom's face crinkles up, her eyes narrow. We share a smile with her lips.

Out of the fog emerges a new pattern. The static curves on her tongue like snow in a squall. Her brain picks up the signal and we see. We see with her tongue, right in front of her.

Red. Round.

A ball, she says. A red basketball. I don't even have to tell her.

The doctor doesn't say anything, but we taste the movement.

He is nodding his head.

#

Mom has been utterly alone since the truck took her sight and me. Alone with her grief of me, alone in the gray. When she walks we can hear the people on the streets, but without her eyes they are just the echoes of distant rivers in the dark.

Now we see them with her tongue. They form shapes in her mind, and to us they are giant medusas of static electricity, dancing in her mouth. She walks the streets of the city with me, adrift in liquid life, gliding among the amorphous shapes of strangers as they part before her. She's a tuna slicing through the depths, jellyfish bowing out of her way.

And then, for the first time since the empty rooms of her mind, she sees me.

I drift along with her, just at the corner of her perception. We are two lionesses, marching shoulder to shoulder, making the gazelles scamper. She smiles, pushing her tongue into her palate to steady the little stamp.

I stay next to her all the way home. She tries to talk to me. I answer back, and although she hears the echoes in the rooms of her mind, she must think she is making up my words.

But then, she can taste me, and what is a little haunting compared to loneliness? It's half a life, at least.

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"These things happen," says the doctor. "It's a matter of calibration. We'll get it adjusted."

He fiddles with her camera, his hands near her face. He unplugs the wire: darkness. Mom doesn't need the rubber stamp on her tongue, but she leaves it there anyway. Sometimes she keeps it at the corner of her mouth when she eats, fizzing against her cheek. I understand; taking it out would be as unnatural as taking out her eyes to sleep.

The doctor walks away, and we hear his fingers click against keyboard keys. He returns, plugs the wire back. There's a brief electrostatic discharge on Mom's tongue, the metallic taste of a 9-volt battery. We see again, but in her mind's eye--her mind's tongue--the room has dimmed. There's a static veil across her mind, like we're peering at the world through a bed sheet. We taste the gray.

"Do you see Isabel now?" he asks. He doesn't even try to hide his contempt for the very idea of me. Mom flinches at it.

She angles her head and looks right through me with that blind woman's stare I know she hates. Our shared longing clenches her heart.

She shouldn't have told Doctor Madiath about me. She was so happy for us, she didn't think he'd do anything about it. Doctor Madiath didn't let it go even when she tried to lie.

"Electronic voice phenomenon," says the doctor. "Some people listen to television static and swear they hear the voices of the dead."

"It's just pattern recognition," the doctor says.

"Looking for something that isn't there," he says.

Like seeing shapes in the clouds, Mom says, skeptical.

What she doesn't say is that she can sense me still. I saw her eyes flick towards me, like a sliver of remembered dreaming. I hover there, at the edge of knowing. Her impossible daughter, drowning in the static of the world.

The doctor has never seen the taste of ghosts. He cannot understand.

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For a while she clings to the knowledge of me, but our immediacy begins to fade. With her renewed solitude comes the darkness; not of sight but of mind, like that veil across the taste of her vision. For the second time in her broken life we lose each other. I sit in silence in the seat of her heart, and I share the pain that squeezes emotion out of her until all that's left is a hard pit of longing.

Some days she doesn't get out of bed at all.

She talks to me but she doesn't hear the answers. She searches for me at the edge of her vision. When she can't find me, she spits out the plastic stamp, and sits in the darkness of my absence.

One morning, she drifts awake and for the first time she stops looking for me at the corner of her mind's eye. I know she doubts she ever saw me.

Electronic voice phenomenon.

She must think there is no one for her. No one to follow her through the struggle just to live. No one to carry her through the hard times.

It's like death all over again, for both of us.

But as surely as she suspects this is the truth, I know she can never accept it. She screams my name but all she hears are the echoes of her voice off the walls of her living room.

In her mind I see her begging the doctor to return the sensitivity setting to the original. She imagines herself clinging to his arm, sees the impassive face.

We both know it cannot work. The doctor never trusted her, and now he thinks she's mad.

Instead she complains about headaches. She bumps into things in his office, turns her face too much to the left when he speaks. She gives him that blind woman's stare.

"You're developing a resistance to the stimulus," says the doctor.

"Let me make an adjustment," he says.

He engulfs her field of taste, unplugs the camera. Mom waits in darkness. Tap-tap-tap.

I picture him an ugly shade of sour.

He returns the wire, and we see again. I am there, hidden in the noise.

Not enough!

Over the course of the next two weeks, Mom returns to Doctor Madiath's office.

Sometimes she complains about ghosts. Sometimes she bumps into things. She makes sure there is no pattern.

"Click the bottom left to adjust sensitivity," says the doctor, one day. He doesn't call her by her name anymore.

"Right now you're at sixty percent," he says. "We never thought you'd need to adjust this on a daily basis, just once every few weeks. That's why I didn't let you make the adjustment yourself before."

I can tell he doesn't like giving her control.

"Never go above seventy-five," he says.

Back home, she cranks it up to eighty-five.

The world around her is radiant with colors. The angles are sharp, tickling the nerve endings in contact with that postage stamp. Her taste buds burn like flowers in drought. We can taste colors so bright that they make her narrow her blind eyes.

And I am there. I smile at her, a chromatic angel floating on the skin of the world.

I see myself through her tongue. Beautiful. Impossible. I taste like I looked in her painting.

We speak. She welcomes me back, not knowing I never left. We say many things besides, secret things that can only be whispered.

A brief moment of blindness, and the stamp throbs against her tongue. One hundred percent.

She can almost touch me with the tip of her tongue. I blind and burn her, a sun of the outmost depths. I whisper to her in colors and patterns.

My electric light engulfs her apartment, so she steps out into the street outside. Everywhere, the world teems with the shimmering lights of a ghost world. The colors dance in patterns too complex to comprehend, on the heads of the electrostatic pins that stab into her tongue. They blanket the world until it is reduced to a shadow under her feet. The trees, the street, people: they are but oil slicks floating on the surface of an ocean deeper than the world.

I missed you so much, she tells me. You left with the best part of me, she says. Her tears roll in her mouth, their salty conductivity throwing rainbow arabesques across her tongue.

She tries to embrace me, but her fingers go through the light.

All I want is for you to live, I tell her.

This is not a life, Mom says. If you can't live, then how can I?

A car comes down the road, the waves of ghostly colors breaking on its prow. She sees it at the edge of her tongue, and her hands tighten with a deadly yearning.

I realize what she wants, what I must do, and how much it will hurt.

I tell her I do not exist.

She gasps. That's not true, she says. But doubt has drained the impulse to jump from her mind. The car rolls by, swallowed by the vastness.

Stare into television static long enough and you will discern shapes, I say. If you miss someone enough, you will eventually see their face.

I am the echo of your own mind, I say.

She cries, her tongue burning with the salt of her tears.

With a zap, the battery of her camera shorts. The smell of ozone fills her nose. The ghostly ocean fades.

I fade with it, into the gray from whence I came.

I love you but I am gone, she imagines me saying, as the gray swallows her once more.

#

It takes three weeks for her to use the tongue camera again. She wears it at a low setting, too low for ghosts. She still speaks to her daughter in her mind, with that part of herself that grew into her daughter.

After six months she paints again, in wide, chromatic swathes that she can taste clearly. It makes her happy and sad at once. She paints the taste of her daughter as she never was, that impossible ghost borne out of longing and pain.

Doctor Madiath finds them beautiful, but he cannot recognize the shapes. He says they look like oil slicks in the shapes of moving flowers.

These days Mom even smiles. Not without pain, though. Not yet.

And I, I lurk beyond the edge of her tongue, staying out of the flavors of the world.

She will be with me later, but now she lives. Without me, one day at a time.

It's death, in a way. But it's also life.