

Rise. You can. Rise. The therapist raises her own arms, lowers them, then back up. A snake charmer, trying to get the coiled, curled up mother to emerge.

But she is a flame, my mother is, with her red hair that has been cut short, shorn, I guess, streaked with white. The flame—my mom—quivers and shakes as if in a wind. Her arms reach up to the heavens, her waist and feet still part of the ground.

Ahh! she screams. Ahh! Ahhhh! I can't—

Rise, you can, rise! The therapist's arms now stand straight up, wiggle, twitch. Her hips gyrate. Her eyes stop on me, near the door, against the padded walls.

No, I can't. My mother begins to wilt, or maybe deflate.

Rise! the therapist shouts. She grabs my mother around the waist, pulls at her, but my mother flops over, a scarecrow now. She pulls at her still, then slips and my mother's body slumps to the ground.

I can't stop drinking! she screams.

She twists over on the ground, onto her belly, calls out, Save me! God, help me! Please. Her collapse complete, she lies inert, her head on the floor, buried in her hands, looks up, towards the door, me. She smiles. My son, she says. Sammy.

I crawl to her, to my mother's outstretched arms, into her wide wide world.

Three months from this day, she will call me drunk. On the other end, I will collapse onto the floor, the words stuck inside me. On the phone, I will nod to the slur and blur of words. Three weeks, again. Five months next time. My mother is a reminder that my love means nothing—has no power—in this world.

"Oh honey, you came. What about school?—your classes? That other teacher you were seeing?"

I cradle her head, rock her body. She trembles.

"Sara? Oh, that ended. A while ago. It's okay. I'm here now."

"I've lost everyone," my mom says. "And everything."

Me. Mom. What about me? Why do I get subsumed under the category of everyone? You lost me. Why can't you say it?

"I know, Mom. I know."



The hippie therapist who fanned my mother as a flame says it's time for a role-playing game. The other families sit around us, an audience.

I am back in my childhood. My mother plays the alcoholic mother. I'm the perfect son. Creative casting. Our family is too small, now, for the play though, so we have to recruit outside the family for a teacher, a brother.

Who gets to be the hero of this tale, I wonder. I raised my brother, made his meals, did his laundry, got him to school—and escaped with a promise that I would wait for him. He stayed with my mother, stopped her from drinking drain cleaner, cleaned her up, got her up each morning to get to work. Made sure she ended up in bed. I thought it heroic to leave; he, to stay, even commuted to Penn State to be with her. His freshman year he overdosed and died.

Recover that.

My dead brother rises in the form of a twenty-year-old drug addict, an actor from New York City, Matt. The wall-punching skeleton. He waves hello, long, bony fingers. He has AIDS. School will be played today by the hippie therapist. And that empty space, that will be your father. Got it. Let's do it.

Back and forth, I am to go, responding to each demand, to the mother with her outstretched arms, then to school, asking about my mother, my home, but I show them an invisible report card—look: A, A, A—what could possibly be wrong, back to my brother, who tells me I'm not his father and I scream at him, actually scream at him that I wouldn't want to be and then my mother, her whispering, slurring, baby, baby ...

It all rushes back, like water, the imagery is of such moments, waves, floods, emotions washing over you. But it isn't like water. It's like mud. Like dirt. Being buried alive. Covered in it.

Or not. Something else. A wind-up toy, a marionette, hands, legs, head, body, heart, with invisible strings all leading back to her, to Mom, to home.

Like that, the mother cradled in my arms disappears, replaced by this one, this spirit that haunts me, possesses me, winds me up, buries me. Playing pretend. Is pretending today to be drunk—or sober?

All wound-up, the room smaller, the walls closing in as I've been swallowed, about to be digested, mashed.

Okay, stop, the therapist says. Everything does. I bend over, hands on knees, crouch down, a frog about to spring.

What did you notice? the therapist asks the circles of families.

His smile, Matt the actor says. He smiled the whole time. Even when he was screaming at his brother. An amazing feat.

Yes. Yes. Why do you think that was?

RANDALL BROWN

## A Myth of Recovery

SHE CALLS ME ON MOTHER'S DAY, DRUNK.

I told you, I say, I'm not talking to you anymore when you're drinking.

I'm not drinking right now, she says. I'm talking to you.

I hang up.

Robert Frost said, You don't have to deserve your mother's love. My mother once told me she loved drinking more than anything in the world—couldn't imagine life without it. Sometimes I hear her voice on the other line at the oddest times. Five in the morning. Two-thirty in the afternoon. Midnight. You need help, I tell her. I know, she says. Get it, I say. I will, she says. And that's that. I haven't seen her for seven, eight years, since I left for college

Imagine that. Imagine my life without my mother. No more creating a myth of her, an entire childhood keeping her hidden from friends, girlfriends with talks of conferences she needed to attend for jobs she never had or lost, relatives staying at my house, illnesses she contracted overseas. But it isn't over. Danielle, Mel, Sara asked about her, sensed the lie, thought it showed some rottenness at my core. What's she really like, they want to know.

I guess. Sweet? Angry? Confused? Salt of the earth? A madwoman? No, really, they say, as if I'm purposely playing a game.

I don't know.

Well, maybe you need to find out. Recover her.

That same night, I get a call from my mom's boyfriend; he's an alcoholic, too. Sam, he says, I got a proposition for you. Your mother will go to rehab if you promise to come see her.

Yeah, okay, I tell him, if she goes, I'll come.

She goes.

Three weeks later, I'm on the drive home to Pennsylvania, a faraway land, farms, and Happy Valley, Penn State. That's where she's gone—know I'm close when Def Leppard comes on the radio. Narrow roads that wind as the creek that it mirrors, quick ups and downs I'm no longer used to so I'm seasick, past the Spruce Creek Cemetery, retching, a blur of grey stones, my brother.

Chattern Clinic, smack dab in the middle of the nothingness of corn, soybeans. A horse and buggy emerges out of the morning fog—with Quiet Riot pumping “Cum on Feel The Noize” from my radio as soundtrack. Home, a drug I kicked, but here it returns, with all its surreal power. I wave to an Amish family. They don't blink, don't move. As if I am the ghost.

Inside, trying to follow the directions of the information desk, I walk, almost jog really, an odd sense of urgency, surrounded by the echo of footsteps in the emptiness of this building, of rehab, towards that door, the door of dreams, as if the door moves and I am stuck, unable to move towards, away from it, anywhere.

There it is, a black-lettered sign, chipped away at the corners, FAMILY THERAPY. The door opens into a gym room of blue wrestling pads, on the floor and on the walls. In tiny clumps of three or four, in a circle, sit the families, huddled together as if in a backyard football game, drawing plays in the dirt. A skeleton punches a pillow; tiny white feathers swirl around, but that isn't enough, so he hits the padded wall, as if to punch straight through it, as if he could fill it with fist-size holes. Punch. Punch. Silent, his hits against the pads, as if he were hitting air.

There should be no circle around my mother—easy to find—but I cannot see her anywhere.

And then I do. She's a crescent; a curled-up mother lies on the floor in the fetal position. You are your soul, the woman above her says. This woman is dressed in a brown paper bag with big orange beads dangling from her neck, wrists, ears. A flower in her hair.

My mother plays her inner spirit, near death, burning out. She's withered. Ruddy. Off her arms, which have begun to lift ever so slowly, hang loose folds of skin. Molting, this dance, this incipient rise into the air. The arms fall back to the ground.

Live, the therapist says to her.

I can't, she whispers, still, so very still, on the ground, my mother, an infant curled up.

My God. I sink, too, then, to the ground.

Live, Live, Rise. You are alive.

I can't, my mother tells her.

She can't, I yell inside. She can't. Can't you see?

A cover, Matt says. He looks away at the blue, padded walls. Nothing can be wrong if he's smiling.

No wonder people punch the walls. Tricked into this trap, thinking it would be all about my mother, her recovery, but no, now it's something else, something I want no part of.



My mother has to meet with her private therapist. It's after lunch. I'm to return in a few hours, then leave the next day—and then another week, maybe two, and she can go home. Screw that.

I decide to drive to Spruce Creek, twenty minutes or so away.

Yo, wait. Matt runs up to me as I open my car door. Where you going?

A cemetery, I say. Not too much fun.

Matt pulls up his pant leg, reaches into his sock, pulls out a joint. Will this help?

Jesus. Rehab, huh?

He wiggles the joint. Well?

Let's go, I tell him.



How happy I am that it is Matt who splits the joint in two, avoiding the awkwardness of the request, the mention of AIDS.

We smoke our joints on my brother's grave, in memoriam, and I realize, even before this moment, maybe in the car ride, maybe in the moment Matt said *Yo* that I will use him not to return to my mother—even though I haven't gotten high since college.

Willows, maples turn gold, then green, in spring. I didn't know that until I read Frost. But here they are, surrounding the cemetery, golden buds breaking open. And then the green of corn stalks.

On the smooth, cool rock of the headstone, I lean, hoping for some connection, something, for this brother I raised. *No bed of roses, living with you*, he would say, if he were best man at my wedding. *I remember that grounder game we used to play, invisible men running to bases, the ball bouncing all over the yard into the air, he's coming home, here he comes, the throw has to be perfect, but that's it. Other than that he wished me dead, my big brother did.* If there were a wedding. If he were alive. He might say all that.

You didn't kill your brother, Matt says, sometime later in our conversation.

Okay.

On a boulder, overlooking the creek, we sit.

I once got a blowjob on this rock, I tell Matt. Skipped Chemistry for it.

Ah yes, he says. The good ole days. What did you get—detention?

I don't remember, I say. I throw a rock into the creek. Kerplunk.

Now, a life sentence, Matt says. Seems hardly worth it anymore.

Matt's rock lands in the creek. It's all that time, he says. That's what kills you. All that time you'll never get back.

I look at him, at his wasting away. His long face and drooping eyes, the chin coming to a point. What if he were my brother, reborn, here to face me? What then? Like talking to a ghost, Matt is, death rattling in his voice. Should kick him off the rock, watch him tumble toward the water. Is that how you save the dead?

It's a disease, Matt says to me. It's not like you think it's either the beer or this person. It's just the beer. That's all.

So what is it that they want from me? With all her heart my mother loves me. I have never doubted my mother's love. Ever.

Man, Matt says, this feels so great. He leans back on the rock, up through the golden trees and golden sun. You've got to come back, dude. Rescue me again.

I've got this murmur-like thing in my heart, a flutter from a valve when it opens, as if there were a bird in my rib cage fighting to get out. The wings flap, beat against my chest. Matt will die. My mom will be drunk. Again and again. I hate my heart, its inherent weakness. I hate that I cannot bear what others learn to live with. It's me. Not them. They've no will. It is I who get the dilemma of choice.

Time to go back, I say.

I'm not trying to fuck you, Matt says.

I know. I know. I just want to go. Now.



That evening, I find my mother at services. Reverend Bob—the placard announces—and the Twelve Steps to God. Stairway to Heaven. Bob's a reed of a man with a long pointy beard and the voice of an auctioneer. "It's a beast, and you are in its belly, the belly of the beast, the belly of the beast!" Key word here—belly of the beast. My mother yawns, looks around, sees me, comes over.

Your smile, she says. It's been wiped away. She touches my cheek. As an infant, the myth of my family goes, she let no one else touch me.

Chronic earaches, I had. She stayed up night after night, rocking me on the green vinyl Lazy Boy, reading Dr. Seuss, here, there, everywhere she was. And then poof!

This weekend was for you too, she says. But away you went. Again.

I wanted to hurt her, exact some revenge, or maybe forget her, or who knows. But nothing works, just leaves a fog and an ache. What's left, mom? What can I do?

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My mother and I lie together on the floor curled up, two flames.

I don't want to rise. Pretend I can't hear the therapist, just want to lie here.

I know, honey, my mother says. I know you hate this stuff. You always have.

I look out, from the ground, everyone appearing as giants. Matt. Scowls at me. I guess I should have explained, tried to explain that I inherited a weakness and, like my mother, I lose people. What is my bottle? Maybe my stance against them. That's all I got. I'll have nothing to do with you people who hurt me. As if that were something.

The rattle of bones, that's all I could hear when he talked.

Sammy?

Yeah, mom.

We're going to rise now. Put on a show for the people, okay?

Sure, mom.

And I do. She beams at me, my mother does. My hands flicker, in, out, fingers of flame. I pretend I'm at a Grateful Dead show, tripping or something. I start out small, crouched, then very gradually, rise up, hands, fingers wisps of flame, smoke, and then, at the end, I raise my arms over my head.

Oh honey, my mother says. That was wonderful.

I bow to the smattering of applause. My son, she says, arms pointing at me as if she were a game show model. My son.

She stood back, still the whole time, watching me ignite. Her face and jaw clenched, a fist, pounding at herself. It is I, isn't it? The baby in her lap, the I as I might have or should have been. That's what my mother sees, looking at me, this loss, this damage her drinking has inflicted upon the world. Such pain, anger, hatred, more pain, and so she drinks again, is that it?

No, it's just an excuse. All of it. Just to drink. Right? Isn't it? Her guilt. Here, there. Either way, missing or found, I am an excuse, a reminder of something unrecoverable.

My mom puts her arm around me. I don't like its weight. I don't.

It is the lifestyle I miss, my mother says, sometime later, sitting there, watching the other children of addicts and alcoholics act out their scenes. Matt and his mother are waves, washing over each other; about to crash down upon the floor, Matt flashes me the finger. A fitting end to the weekend.

Really, I say to my mother. The lifestyle you miss.

You know. The bars. Music. Late nights. Some smoke. The lifestyle.

Yeah, mom. Over and under, around and around, more like dolphins than waves, Matt and his mother swim toward each other, away, rise, fall again.

I think I could live without beer, my mother says, if I could just keep that. Everything connected to it.

I think I have to go now, mom. Okay?



She walks with me outside. The sun is shining, scoo-be-doop-scoop-scoop. She opens her arms and I step into them. If only I could hold onto such moments, I would be okay, you know, pressed against my mother's chest, belly, stopping her inevitable fall and she returning me to the myth of childhood, where no one else can hold me, rocking me back and forth, Sam I am.

Inside somewhere, Matt rises; his mother collapses over him, crushes him perhaps, and the bones crack and turn to dust.