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LOVE AND MONO

I was convalescing on a cot under the red oak in our backyard when I asked for a story.

Mom seemed surprised by my request. “Really?” she said. “You sure, Revie?”

This was late in the summer before my eighth grade year. There was a cool breeze that smelled like it had come through a mile of clean laundry and she had just returned from the house with a blanket to drape over my legs. I think we both knew a story might not be the best idea. If Dad had been around, I wouldn’t have asked her. But he was gone, off at practice with his high school golf team, and I was laid up on a cot while mono beat my ass into the ground.

If you’ve never had mono, it might help to imagine all your blood replaced with forty-weight motor oil. Blinking wears you out. The simplest tasks become Herculean. Like eating: all that knife-cutting and fork-lifting, the endless chewing, it’s exhausting just to think about, you don’t know how anyone does it. In two horizontal weeks, I had lost enough weight to walk clean out of my shoes. Not that I was doing much walking. In fact, if there had been a magic cure-all pill on the back deck, I could not have summoned the energy to walk over and get it.

But there was an upside.

Take away the tedium, the bedsores, the crippling fatigue, and what’s left was a kind of tranquility. There was no real pain to speak of. All my responsibilities had been lifted away and replaced with a small bell, always within reach. Mono was languor, ennui, malaise, it was how I always imagined being French.

I took baths. I began to ask for sandwiches without crust. I was a child again.

I said, “How about something from Holyghost?”

When I was younger, Mom made up Bible stories. She had the Lost Episodes of Jesus Christ. She had the Thirteenth Apostle, about Justus, the guy who lost the vote to replace Judas. But my favorite ones were about Holyghost, which she pronounced as one quick word, like Superman.

Holyghost had my sympathies. He was the original third wheel. He was always left out of the real action by the other two, followed by promises of next time, next time, don't worry, your time is coming, come on now, don't be like that, of course you're important to us, we didn't forget about you, I said you could get the next one, didn't I?

I imagined God and Jesus as overworked, stressed-out, while Holyghost sat by his phone, trying to look busy.

"Oh great," sighs Jesus. "Here comes another batch of Lord's Prayers. Haven't heard that one before. Delete, delete, delete. I wish they didn't take me so literally. When I told them that one, I just meant, like, this is one example."

God says, "Tell me about it."

Holyghost lysols his phone quietly.

As a boy I imagined I was the only one in the world praying to Holyghost. I asked if he could read minds. I asked if he would tell me the day I would die. I said, "Holyghost, protect me."

I lay on my bedroom floor and listened for his voice in the distant wail of trains. I put my hand on an old alphabet puzzle and waited for Holyghost to move the pieces around like a ouija board. While Mom played records and Dad watched the television down in his workroom, I stared at the patterns the passing headlights made on my wall.

"If your dad asks," Mom said, "we were talking about your future or something, got it?"

"I'll tell him we were having The Talk," I said. "That'll keep him from asking any questions."

Before she left us four years earlier, Mom loved stories, games, anything to do with imagination. A particular favorite was Charades, which sometimes ended in weeping. She transcribed made-for-tv movies for us to perform as dinner theater, reading the lines over half-frozen/half-broiling Hungryman platters. There were a thousand ways these games could fall apart, and near the end we saw all of them. She took things too far, she got stuck in character, she brandished dangerous props, and finally, when she was swallowed by her imagination, she fled to California for a life in the movies.

It had been four years when she came back that summer, but time alone couldn't account for how she appeared to have changed. Out were

the cocktail parties and kaffeeklatches she used to stage with Dad and me; in were casseroles, culottes, *Reader's Digest*. Her hair, which used to look like Barbara Eden from *I Dream of Jeannie*, was now a little brown bowl. She used coupons at the grocery store, though she handed them to the checkout girl as though they were an incomprehensible pile of foreign currency, *here, you count it out and tell me what it's worth*.

She said, "Remember Juke? Al Djukic, the sales guy?"

I started to nod, but I hesitated. I knew her characters like other kids remembered Pinocchio or the Big Bad Wolf. But in that moment I realized I was pulling Pandora's Box out of storage. Telling this story, there was a chance that all the madness would come rushing out on bats' wings.

But in the end, I had mono and I could get anything I wanted, so I nodded. I said, "I know Juke."

"So Juke is working late, copying a proposal for the boss when the copier jams. It's a bad one, deep in the machine. He sticks his hand inside, deeper and deeper, searching for the mangled scrap of paper, until he's in up to his armpit. Just as he's about to pull out and reassess the situation, he feels something flutter against his fingertips, so he gives one big last shove. There's a groan of bending metal and something clamps onto his hand.

"Juke tries to wrench his hand free, but that sucker is *in* there. Like it's trapped in a steel mouth. He chuckles to keep himself from panicking, then makes a fist and rattles the whole machine, but it doesn't budge. He tries to make it small and sneak it out. He coaxes it, talking in a soft voice. He kicks the machine, but not too hard; he's in enough trouble at work without damaging the copier.

"With his free hand, Juke drags over a footstool and sits down to think. The copy room's hot as hell and he's sweating pretty good now. He remembers a guy in Ottawa who got himself into a similar situation with a vending machine, but he can't remember how the guy got out of it. Or if he did. Now that he thinks about it, the vending machine may have fallen over and crushed him. But getting crushed isn't what Juke's worried about. He's a little worried about his hand, and what'll happen if he has to go to the bathroom, but mostly he's worried about his job.

His sales numbers are in the toilet. His boss provides him with constant updates on the thinness of his particular ice. ‘Crack, crack,’ he says, the a-hole. ‘Danger, no swimming,’ he says. If Juke’s sitting here in the morning sans proposal with his hand plunged into a machine that costs more than his car, he’s history. In a spasm of desperation, Juke looks up to the acoustical tile where there is a water stain that vaguely resembles the profile of Abraham Lincoln. He says, ‘I could use a little help here, Lord. Or Abe. Whoever’s available. A miracle would be nice, but I’ll take a sign, whatever you got.’ He sprinkles in some language that God likes. He says, ‘Showest thine mercy upon mine hand, and upon mine job. Amen.’ Then, feeling a little silly, he closes his eyes to give the miracle a chance to work.

“When he hears the fluorescent bulb flicker and buzz, he opens his eyes. He looks around, but nothing has changed. His hand, still stuck, is going numb. He moans a little,” and here she moaned, an oddly comforting sound, “and leans up against the machine to rest. And that’s when the copier starts up again.”

I have a picture of my mom at a pool party from when I was two years old. She is in the center of the picture, a little blurred, her mouth a wide circle of lipstick, arms spread like a bird. People on both sides of the picture are bent in various poses of hilarity. My father is in the background with a smoky, amused look on his face.

In her telling, she is giving a one-woman play of an episode of *The Love Boat*.

But this was not the reason she would bring out the picture, nor why I’ve hung onto it for so many years.

The picture was Mom’s prop to tell the story of The Miracle. “You fell into the pool,” she would tell me. “You drowned, Revie. Your father rescued you.”

Tears would come down her face and she would embarrass me with terms like *resurrected* and *we almost lost you*.

In Dad’s version, which he only told when I begged and begged, and then with clear discomfort, he said I awoke from a nap in a bin of towels and toddled over to plop into the shallow end of the pool. He said he didn’t realize I had gone in until some woman screamed.

Here he would add: Sorry about that.

Everyone jumped into the pool at once, he said, it was impossible to say who picked me up from the bottom, where I was laying calmly, “eyes wide open, bubbles coming up in a stream. We slapped you on the back a few times and you kind of puked and started bawling.”

Here he’d stop and look thoughtful for a second. It was his pattern to end a story with a re-cap or a moral or a reassurance. “So you were fine.”

I still bring out this picture sometimes to hear their stories and to remember perfectly who my parents were when I was young.

They became different people the summer Mom came home. Dad was as strange and unrecognizable as her. Where he had always been distant, he became attentive to the point of suffocation. He skipped golf practice to be around her, essentially turning the high school team over to assistant coach Fredline, who was fine with ballwashing and disciplinary matters, but swung a club like a lumberjack. Every day Dad gave me a dollar to go down to Sherwood Pool so he could have her all to himself.

Then I got mono.

“Juke feels a sudden crushing pain when the machine starts up and then he feels nothing. He jerks on his arm to see if anything’s been severed, but it’s still stuck. Copies begin dropping in his lap. Juke picks one up. It’s a picture of his hand.

“Well, that is just perfect,” Mom said. “Juke looks up at the sign that says NO PERSONAL COPYING and has to laugh. Just freaking perfect. The machine keeps dropping copies of his hand into his lap until Juke gets the sense that he’s waving himself goodbye.”

I snorted and turned to look at her. She was sitting on the ground, kneading the grass with her toes. I wondered what she would be doing if I didn’t have mono, if I was off at the pool, or riding bikes, or shooting roman candles at my friends. Probably continuing their second honeymoon, as Dad called it. I felt a squirm of pleasure at having her all to myself, even as I recognized this as the feeling of a child, a baby.

“By this point,” she said, “his hand isn’t looking so hot. The fingers are going every which way and it looks squished pretty good. *Great*, he says to the box of tax documents 1986. *Shit on me*, he says to the

microwave rimmed with exploded raviolis. By now Juke is pretty sure he's going to come out of this room jobless and handless and probably responsible for the cost of a new copier. It's only a matter of time before he becomes a humiliating paragraph in newspapers around the world, the man who needed the Jaws of Life to rescue him from a Xerox machine.

"But then," she said, pausing until I rolled my head to the side to look at her, "miracle of miracles, he sees the copies of his hand taking on different shapes."

She held a finger up as a car came around the corner, both of us waiting to hear if it would pull into our driveway. If it was Dad, the story was over.

The car accelerated down the street with a whoosh. She lowered her finger.

"On one copy," she said, "he sees a thumbs-up. On the next one, it's the okay sign. Then he's giving himself the bird. Pretty soon he's laughing his weary ass off in there, it's so ridiculous, until he relaxes to the point where the hand falls right out of the machine. 'Oh!' he shouts. It's white as a dead guy's hand, it's swollen and floppy like a rubber glove filled with jello, but he manages to complete the proposal with the other hand before dropping all his personal copies into the dumpster and driving himself to the emergency room, thanking God for automatic transmission."

She stopped there, like it was the end of the story, but I knew it wasn't. I knew she was teasing me, wanting me to ask what else happened. This was an old habit of hers. Someone would tell a joke, a story, and she would listen eagerly and when it was finished she would say *And then what happened?*

The question was jarring to most people, but it never stopped her from asking. She wanted to know what was left out or held back. She believed there was always one more secret to tease out of a story, if you only asked.

One day that summer I was on my cot in the kitchen watching *What's Happening Now?* on the portable TV when Dad walked in dressed in a crisp white shirt.

"You look nice," I said accusingly, looking around for Mom.

“We’re going out,” he said brightly, opening the refrigerator for a jar of green olives. He popped two into his mouth and seemed to be dancing to a piece of music in his head until he looked at me. “Not for long, though,” he said, his tone now sober, almost apologetic. “Just a little bit. For dinner. We’ll bring you back something.”

Mom came out in a dress and heels that clicked. She seemed to be having trouble clasping her necklace. Either that or she was going through contortions to avoid eye contact with me. Just a moment before, she had been out here doing crossword. I thought she had gone to the bathroom.

I sat up with great effort, more effort, to be honest, than necessary. “Oh, you don’t have to,” I said to Dad about his offer to bring something back. “I’ll just make a sandwich. I can’t taste much of anything, anyway. Heh heh.”

Mom looked at me nervously, then turned toward Dad. “Can you help me with this, Tim?”

I went to the cupboard and pulled out the bread. I found the ham and mayo in the fridge, then laid my head on my arms on the counter and waited for her to notice.

I admit I did it to make her feel guilty. I admit I took full advantage. I admit I was greedy for her. But she played into it too. I think both of us were trying to make up for lost years. No wonder it didn’t last.

She helped me back to my cot and made my sandwich before changing out of her dress. I heard Dad from the bedroom saying, “No, hey, it’s all right. No problem here,” but he sat around glowering in his good clothes all night.

“Okay,” I said finally, after we had grinned at each other a long moment. “I give. And then what happens?”

She acted reluctant, but her eyes were shining. She said, “Well . . .” and waited until I said *Mmmmmmm*. Then she laughed and kicked her feet in the grass.

“So. The doctor’s holding the x-rays up to the light and Juke’s telling him the story, but the doctor stops him. He says, ‘Look, son, I don’t mean to call you a liar, but why don’t you tell me what really happened?’ And Juke’s like, ‘What do you mean?’ The doctor says, ‘Son, your hand

is pulverized. Your bones are gravel. There's simply no way you could have made all those hand-signs."

She paused a beat to let it hit me.

I said, "You mean?"

"That's right," she said. "The hand of Holyghost. And the kicker? The next day, when Juke went into work and opened his drawer? He found a single copy of the hand, giving him the thumbs-up."

Now she smiled like it was over, a triumph of a story, everything revealed at the right moment. I had to smile back to keep from bursting.

A few weeks later, after I couldn't pretend any longer that I couldn't walk or make sandwiches without growing faint, she left. The last I saw of her, she was backing down the driveway in her brown station wagon, calling out the window how sorry she was for making such trouble, all she did was smear the pain around, while I stood on the porch believing that something was going to stop her in her tracks and make her come rushing back. I whispered, "Holyghost."

That story ended up doing more harm to me than to her.

She did stop, as it turned out. A line of cars came around the corner and held her up. She turned her head and lowered her visor, I guess so we wouldn't see her crying. A weak black line of mascara appeared on her cheek, I could tell that much. The falling sun illuminated the car and I could see her chin wasn't trembling like mine, it was set and fierce and beautiful in a way I had never noticed before. The cars kept coming and the moment stretched on until it seemed like time had slipped into neutral, the way it had when I lay under the oak and imagined this as a life, the cot, the mono, the attentive mother with no secrets left to shake out. It was a rare, expansive moment, one that is possible only in a summer of youth or infirmity, and even then, only until there's a break in traffic, and then it's gone.