



The Mulberry

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Up I go, thinking of every life touching mine that has crossed this land. Stair after stair, I climb, feeling the wind that couldn't destroy me. My breaths are rapid, blood whooshes in my ears, and as the sun's orange rays melt the horizon, what was once carnage becomes beautiful.

image info

THE FADED AMERICAN FLAG IN FRONT OF THE facility whipped back and forth, its grommets clanging against the paint-layered pole in a rapid staccato. The air was thick enough to drink and seemed to press me firmly into the ground, even as the wind tossed my hair in so many directions that it knotted. My reflection in the dusty glass of the lobby windows looked more sallow than usual, tinged by the green of the sky. Sirens sounded in the distance.

I darted back into the building, running past the patients I'd evacuated from their rooms with no destination in mind. As they covered their ears in pain, the old brick building began to vibrate and rip loose from its foundation. I turned in circles as winds tore through the corridors, prying the generic framed art loose from the walls. One of the pictures slammed into my back and shattered, and someone grabbed me by the arm and jerked me to the floor as though I was a child. It felt foolish and wrong to root myself to one spot when something was trying to kill me. My leg muscles tightened and coiled as I readied myself to spring back onto my feet. I needed to run, run, run. My arm grabber held me firmly in place, preventing escape. We sat huddled in strange afternoon darkness as though the sun had suddenly dropped from the sky without a moon coming out to replace it. The screaming winds penetrated my ears and airway,

building pressure so great that my flesh felt it would begin to stretch and tear. My heartbeat was replaced by the reverberation of a bomb blast. I tried to take a gasping breath, wondering if my organs had been squeezed to mush. I couldn't draw air. My chest walls were being crushed together, and I wasn't strong enough to pull them apart.

I'd never liked to be pinned or squeezed. Some part of me seemed to know it would be a recurring event. Suffocation sneak attacks were a specialty of my much larger sister. She liked to try to smother me during Nickelodeon's *Pinwheel* or *Mr. Wizard*. She'd grab my scrawny four-year-old legs and fold them over me, pinning my knees to my shoulders. She'd plant herself on top of me, my bones digging into the orange shag carpet of our living room, forcing my neck into a sharp bend that cut off my airway. Fear would shoot through me as spots danced before my eyes. Release came only after I went silent. I never doubted that would be the way I would die.

When financial turmoil forced the short sell of my childhood home a few years later, my parents moved us into a dingy little apartment in the neighboring town of Carthage that lacked the space and convenience for uninterrupted suffocation. Gingerbread Victorians nestled in rows of groomed maples lined the streets where lazy traffic flowed toward the town square like spokes on a wheel. Carthage was an oddity in poor, rural southwestern Missouri, as it was saturated with old railroad and mining wealth. Its schools were filled with children bearing surnames of industry. My mother's family had resided in the area since the flood of 1927 forced them to leave Trumann,

Arkansas. They settled in a tiny house on High Street near the railroad tracks that crossed through the north side of town that served as a boundary between the white and black communities. Grandma Annie was a midwife to her neighbors, black and white. Her gray eyes saw folks in need, not color. Those who knew her well spoke for years of her uncanny knack of knowing things, like some sort of Welsh witch. Perhaps tragedy had simply sharpened her instincts.

Carthage's segregation persisted into my adulthood, though the white-eschewed parks, schools, and cemeteries had shifted from African-American patrons to Latinx. I suppose some white folk wait to welcome one race into their fold until they get a new one to mistreat. It would be fair to say, however, that being poor in Carthage was just as undesirable. Other kids would laugh at our apartment, my hand-me-down clothing, and loved to ask my phone number in front of a large group. They'd gasp and giggle at the idea that someone couldn't afford something as ordinary as a telephone.

The physical changes of puberty brought forth a parade of boys who liked my appearance but didn't want to be seen with a poor kid. They sensed my ability to go silent and began pulling me into the boys' bathroom or cornering me in the library to try to touch me or make me put my hands on them. They would be blatant in their abuse, going so far as to ask sexual questions as I stood behind the podium in speech class. Tears would fill my eyes, yet no adults intervened, and it wasn't long before some of the male teachers sniffed out the vulnerability. From the age of thirteen I was called a slut, yet when my drama teacher pulled me into the shadows backstage to ask me if I spit or swallowed, I didn't know what

he meant. When he'd thrust his tongue into his cheek and make an accompanying hand gesture, I'd laugh, though I was sure it was something dirty. Depending on how afraid I was, I'd vacillate between telling jokes and freezing.

As the winds passed, my chest wall moved again, but the air was light and insubstantial as though I was in the Tetons rather than Joplin. Dizzy and numb, I rose to my feet to walk past the fearful faces of the living, not feeling my own tears until they dripped from my chin onto my chest. Curtains that normally surrounded beds of the ailing dangled upside down from the tops of the walls, where they'd been sucked under the roof when the winds had lifted it from the building. Most of my brain was still screaming at me to run, but the rest of it remembered the responsibility to the patients. As water flooded corridor floors from broken pipes and the air smelled of smoke, the need to evacuate became urgent. I tossed Sharpies from a scattered nurse's station to the staff that was unfrozen, telling them to write names and diagnoses on every left arm they could find. I marked the arms of people old enough to not only remember the second World War, but who also fought in it, pushing from my mind how abhorrently similar it felt to the method of identification in Auschwitz. I kept marking though, fearful for patients that I knew would soon be displaced. What I didn't realize was that the widespread catastrophic damage would be so severe that patients would be dispersed across six states in the Midwest, never to be seen or heard from again.

The faded, dancing flag was missing, as was the pole, I noticed as I stepped outside. Hoping for help, I looked for lights pulling

into what was once a full parking lot. The vehicles that had lined it neatly that morning were missing. Some were overturned in the grass, others were wrapped around trees like twist ties on bread bags. The residential neighborhood that had, over time, popped up around the perimeter of the medical district was reduced to piles of wood and brick, one home indiscernible from another. Inverse to the visual chaos, the city was silent. There were no sirens or screams. Rooted to the pavement, I quickly looked past a small heap of clothing in the street that I'd later learn was part of a child that would join thousands of other parts in makeshift morgue tents outside of the epicenter. My eyes fell onto the neighboring hospital that housed the room where my Aunt Irene's body had hung limply against its door as she took her final breath. It also housed the room where, as a single mother, I had delivered the son of a man who named me "stupid bitch" and delivered slaps for dissent before I left him. In its walls, beneath crucifixes above beds, lives of suffering and sadness ended, while new life took a first gasping breath with the determination of change behind it. Black smoke rose rapidly from the building that would soon be demolished, the land eventually cleared to become a walking park.

Slowly, the silence shifted into muffled moans and weak cries for help. People covered in blood caked with drywall dust shuffled into the parking lot. For a few moments, the lobby was still, even as I helped the first few inside and tried to make them comfortable. Soon though, I was surrounded. Hands reached for me, clutching the fabric of my stained top. Voices begged for me to make pain go away. I still see their faces, hear their voices as I try to sleep. They encircle me at night as I fill with

shame: the elderly man in the white and blue plaid shirt with a little notepad still in its pocket clawing at his chest as his heart gave out from shock; the sobbing boy with sandy hair who held my hand as I lied that he would be okay, though I knew his back was broken; the white-haired woman with a torn red kaftan tangled around her body carried in on metal fencing, screaming in agony; the wide-eyed pregnant mother in premature labor who I cradled to the floor as she hysterically screamed for someone to find her toddler. As they visit me, I think back to our moment. I remember how I didn't want to be with them. I didn't want to share their grief. How I repeated in my mind over and over that I just wanted to go home. We stare at one another each night, and I hope they don't know me as well as I've come to know them.

The husband of the screaming pregnant woman eventually found us and fought me off as he grabbed his wife to go desperately look for their missing son. I chased them as they shot out the door toward the parking lot, yelling after them that she was in labor. They moved quickly out of sight, and I suddenly stopped, freezing to the pavement. Just beyond the smoke plumes billowing from the burning hospital stood the naked tree. Its limbs jutted out into vulgar directions before ending in splintered points. Had we not been old friends, I would have never known it to be a mulberry. Aside from the jagged pieces of metal that had pierced its trunk, its exposed, debarked flesh was smooth and sanded as though it was a carving whittled by some old man on a front porch rather than a living tree rooted firmly in the ground. I took a step toward it. I was drawn to the mulberry in the way that geodetic north is direction from the heavens rather than the magnetic grab of a

jerking compass needle. I could not think of what lay beneath the piles of crumbling brick and shattered glass. I could not let myself see what parts and pieces littered the street. The rigidity of my neck muscles forced my head into a tremor as they struggled to keep my face forward. My father's voice shoved past the countless others to dominate my cerebrum.

"You shouldn't have let him in the house in the first place," it rebuked.

"But it was cold outside," I whispered to no one.

"Let me in," he said as he pushed his face through the space between the door and its jamb.

"I'm not supposed to have anyone over," I said.

"C'mon, it's snowing. I won't stay long. I drove in this to come see you," he pushed, nudging my reluctance over to an inconvenience.

Afraid to disappoint, I slid the chain off. He shoved the door open, letting it smack the wall. The spring door stop complained with a vibrating boing as he moved toward me.

"Don't I get a hug?"

"I'm not much of a hugger," I stepped back, laughing.

"Oh c'mon, don't you like me?"

"I barely know you."

This was true. We attended the same school and had briefly worked together at a depressing fast food job, but rarely spoke. He was the sort of boy who was repellent to me. His round face often snide and smirking, hurling insults at anyone in range. A boy with questionable hygiene who burned rubber in the school parking lot and picked fights with the vulnerable for attention. He was one of many who had randomly landed on my

doorstep, though I rarely shared my address with other kids out of embarrassment. He just happened to be the first who managed to do it when both of my parents were gone.

"Let's go watch some TV," he directed, herding me away from the door.

"My dad will be home soon, and he'll kill me," I lied. He wouldn't be home for hours.

"Just a few minutes. C'mon," he said, pushing me from the dining room.

I tried to swallow the dry lump in my throat as I stared down at the threadbare pea green carpet that lined the hallway as I walked toward the living room. Spotting Dad's recliner by the sliding glass door, I darted toward it, feeling clever that I'd chosen the only seat for one.

"Oh, cool, your parents smoke," he slid the lopsided clay ashtray with my brother's name etched in the bottom across the coffee table and pulled a Marlboro box from his coat pocket.

"I'm gonna smoke, too, if that's cool," he said, taking a second drag from his already lit cigarette. He leaned back on our dated floral print couch and spread his arms wide across the top of the cushions, smashing them out of shape. Nodding, I clicked through channels to look busy. As bright pop music and overly exuberant voices from commercials rang out from the TV, I carefully kept my face forward. The blander I was, the quicker he'd leave. I leaned my head back against the maroon Naugahyde back of the recliner and cooled my sweaty hands on the puffy faux leather arms. Minutes ticked by beneath the glass dome of my grandfather's perpetually warm anniversary clock that sat on the VCR. The gold-plated pendulum balls merrily rotated in an endless loop as time slowly chipped away.

I felt something firm and cottony on my left arm. In my periphery, I saw him pushing the front of himself against me. I moved my arm, not turning my head to look at him, feeling that if I acknowledged what was happening, he would continue it and it would be real. He took the remote from my hand and tossed it on to the couch behind him. I sat paralyzed. Words formed in my brain, but I couldn't push them through my gritted teeth.

"Look at me," he coaxed, taking my chin in his hand to turn my head toward him. I stiffened at his touch and turned my face away to look out the glass door.

"Hey, don't be like that," he softly crooned.

I slid my hand away from him, but he caught it and jerked it toward him, his fingers digging into my wrist. He held my hand into place on him, moving against me in time with the clock's pendulum. The tighter he held my hand against him, the more rigid I became, partially in hopes he would lose motivation, but mostly because I was still frozen. Recognizing that my lack of pliability wouldn't give him much pleasure, he suddenly dropped my hand. I took advantage of the moment, stuffing my hands beneath my thighs to sit on them.

He moved to stand in front of me, trying to force me to acknowledge him. I kept my face turned toward the glass door that led to a small outdoor cement pad. I fixed my gaze upon the elderly mulberry tree that stood just beyond the fence surrounding the pad. Its long heavy branches reached over the fence to drop berries onto the cement, staining it purple. "Pop! Goes the Weasel," absurdly sprang to mind as my breaths shifted into a short and ragged pattern. I felt his weight upon me as he climbed onto the recliner. He straddled my lap, pinning my arms to my sides with his legs. His full body weight

painfully upon me, this pin was worse than any suffocation sneak attack by my sister.

As I heard the sharp hiss of the rapid descent of a zipper, my mind began to hum.

“All around the mulberry bush,” it sang as he wriggled his legs up the chair arms to position himself closer to my face.

“The monkey chased the weasel.”

The branch that hung closest to the window swayed in a slight breeze, the serrated edges of its heart-shaped leaves trembling. A dark berry hit the cement with a soft plop, the tree offering its ripe fruit. I continued to hum, unable to remember the next line as he wheezed on top of me. The less I spoke, the less I moved, the more difficult it became to do anything at all.

Nausea shot up in waves from a solid clump of fear in my stomach. I wanted to disappear into the leathery folds of the chair that smelled of my Dad’s VO5 hair emollient, but I was held. I wanted to drown, but there was no water. I sat confined, giving him nothing, yet allowing him to take everything. As warmth spread slowly down my chest onto my shirt, gluing it to me, I felt strangely relieved. His weight suddenly lifted from my numb legs, and the prick of needles spread over the bottoms of my feet.

“Pop! Goes the Weasel,” I thought as my eyes traced the curved veins of the mulberry’s leaves.

Sweat slowly crawled down a wet trail on my back. The humidity had rebounded, the air quickly growing heavy and swampy. Vibrations from the rhythmic pounding of the feet of three men running side-by-side past me forced my sweat from a crawl into a rapid descent. The middle man, his face blank and white, was missing his left leg. Blood was spurting from

the torn flesh with every heartbeat as happens with arterial hemorrhage. They ran past me toward the hospital, not stopping as I screamed he was dying and needed a tourniquet. He would be gone before they made it down the block. Maybe I had whispered instead of screamed, like in a dream where every cry for help comes out in silent puffs of air. I wondered if the mulberry had watched on as I again lost my voice.

As I heard the men’s cries in the distance, I remained still. Seeing everything, absorbing nothing. Each piece of my new world hit me like a thrown pebble, leaving a small bruise before bouncing off to return to the ground. None of it penetrated, sliding around on my surface like the fluid of a boy that pins girls to chairs. People moved around me, some running to dig through piles of nearby rubble to find the sources of buried screams. Voices frantically called out to one another. Some of them spoke to me, and I may have replied with numb nods. I no longer remember.

The naked mulberry stood, jagged points shooting up from its base, surrounded by downed sycamore and ash. Stripped bare, it had no more fruit to offer, its crowning leaves and pliant young branches carried away with the wind. White flesh peeked out at me from its debarked trunk, showing parts of itself normally hidden beneath the ridged and furrowed layers that formed over time. I imagined it as a sapling, gentle hands carefully arranging its roots in the dirt. Perhaps it had a less tender beginning, sprouting from a seed left to germinate after a hasty plunk onto the ground. An accidental life, apologetic for taking root in a spot meant for someone else. And yet, it was a life that persisted, growing despite the acidic humus smothering its roots.

If you ask me things now, like when I left the disaster site or how I got home, I couldn’t give you an answer. Memories have blurred into singular moments carried out in slow motion with facial expressions and words carrying a pricking acuity when recalled. They are surrounded by vague and muted slides akin to looking at pictures taken on a stranger’s vacation developed from underexposed film. Dark, unrecognizable figures move without purpose in a lightless world. I do remember, hours after the tornado, standing in the center of my kitchen in wet, filthy clothes. If I kept them tightly together, my feet fit perfectly on one of the slate blue tiles. I stared at the space between the grout and my muddy shoes. How vulgar it seemed in its clean emptiness. Beyond that moment, the opaque obscurity stretched into months, eventually smothering any clearly defined memories. My brain was dull and gelatinous, neurons firing only to perform necessary actions to keep others from worrying. My children grew, but I couldn’t reach through the fog to pull Holden’s lost tooth, Julian’s beginning kindergarten, or Evyn’s first steps to mind. My heartbeat became distant as though it was buried beneath piles of brick. I’d wake up in panic attacks, sure that it had ceased to beat. A band tightened around my rib cage as though someone was tightening a garrote, one turn a day. I waited for the moment I would finally suffocate.

It never came. Years passed, and I adapted, eventually shifting into a woman who didn’t want to die pinned down and powerless. Because nothing else felt right, I began to run. Each pounding step upon the pavement was an exercise of excavation, shifting bricks from my chest one by one until I could finally feel the beat of my heart again. It hammered against

my sternum as I, no longer bound, found myself running for miles without stopping. The wind washed my sweaty skin clean as day after day, I stretched my legs into a long stride, power and strength surging through my muscles. Prickling sensations traveled across my skin, not from the weight of another upon me, but from being freely alive.

I sometimes run through the walking park that replaced the battered hospital. They’ve built concrete stairs into the hillside that lead up to a pavilion surrounded by beds of white and red impatiens. It’s a strangely quiet place that overlooks the city that once was. This morning, I pull into the parking lot at dawn. After stretching, I lean against the warm metal of my car to count the forty-eight steps, wondering if those who live in my memories will join me at the top.

“Hi folks,” I say, placing my foot on the first step.

Up I go, thinking of every life touching mine that has crossed this land. Stair after stair, I climb, feeling the wind that couldn’t destroy me. My breaths are rapid, blood whooshes in my ears, and as the sun’s orange rays melt the horizon, what was once carnage becomes beautiful.

“We made it,” I wheeze, leaping onto the top step.

Light is spilling over from the hillside onto town below. Much of it is unfamiliar now, new structures rising up from the wind-flattened earth, but I think, in the distance, I see an old friend. Fresh bark layers conceal the bare white flesh of its trunk, and once jagged points have been rounded by time. New limbs, spindly and tentative, are budding and verdant. I raise my hand, and the mulberry’s leaves wave in return. ❖