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MICHELLE BROOKS

The Ceiling or the Floor

As an undergraduate in a modern dance class, I had to watch my rapist perform a solo dance number to the sound of dolphins crying. He himself was portraying a dying dolphin, and the idea, if you will, was that the other dolphins were trying to save him but he could only save himself and he did not and instead screamed the last minute of the performance, a minute being a very long time under such circumstances. This is the kind of bizarre scenario that people mean when they say *You can't make this shit up* or *It's a small world after all*. The other students gazed in a state of shock and/or awe and wondered if they were witnessing genius or lunacy. Most of the students in the class had chosen to work in groups for the final, dancing to painful medleys off of tapes like *The Very Best of Kenny G*. I had signed up for the modern dance class because it would fulfill my physical education requirement, and I thought it might be fun in that Martha Graham/Twyla Tharp sort of way. As they say, it's a free country, and my rapist must have thought the same thing.

My mother referred to my rapist, a man she never knew raped me, as *the politician*. *He acts*, she said, *as if he's running for office*. *If there was a baby around, he'd kiss it before dropping it on its head*. I knew my mother was right, even then. She knew things, like when I was about to dump someone, and she'd start to enjoy that person, the way you cheer up when an annoying guest edges toward the door. I watched her with great interest, if only to predict what I was going to do next.

One person knew about my rape *before* it happened. My rapist bragged about his plan to a mutual friend, a shy, timid man who thought he might be kidding. Or so he says. We're still friends, this man and I. We never talk about what happened. My friend has a dog whom he calls Dog, and Dog can do one trick: roll over and play dead. I once spent the night at his and his sister's house in the guest room. Sister had decorated the guest room with unicorns and clowns. Outside the door, Dog slept. She looked like she did when

she played dead. But I knew she wasn't dead. My friend refers to me in written correspondence as Girl. *That is some fucked up creepy shit, Girl.* I once bought this man a present, a tiny little Grow Your Own Witch! that would expand to six hundred times her size if you put her in water. Even so, she'd still be pretty tiny. He once bought me a T-shirt with a stick figure on it, holding a bloody knife. The caption read, *I hate waking up.* I hid the T-shirt in my basement in a small room with a bunch of other clothes I no longer wore.

When I was a teenager, I used to go to a haunted house in an old army barracks on a decommissioned army base on the edge of west Texas. Edgemeade, a residential dumping ground for "disturbed" adolescents—a term that could mean anything from mildly touched to convicted of criminal behavior—sponsored the house, their primary fundraiser for the year. The locals called it "retards with fake chainsaws." The chainsaws were real, though. They just didn't have a blade.

By the summer of the rape, my romantic relationship with the soon-to-be rapist was grinding to a halt in that *I'm bored, there's got to be more to life than this, you weren't who I thought you were* kind of way, a job that was winding down with only a few more weeks left. It was the bittersweet summer between my junior and senior years of high school, that time when a restless fever begins to spike. The man who raped me attended the same college I planned to attend and was back in the old hometown for the summer, doing nothing while I lifeguarded at a public pool on a decommissioned army base, right near the haunted house. For one hour a day, the Edgemeade kids got to swim in the pool for free, and you could hear them running down the street a mile away. The nearby but not too nearby college was the only game in town for me, given my dreary financial situation. Even so, I knew *he* wasn't the only game in town—I wanted to be free. But before our inevitable collapse, he broke into my parents' house with my one pair of pantyhose over his head, fed our German shepherd a Gainsburger to ensure her silence, stole some electrical tape out of my dad's garage and attacked me as I stepped out of the bathroom after taking a shower. I did not know it was him until it was over, and he pulled the tape off my mouth. What didn't get used in the attack was thoughtfully returned to my dad's garage where it

stayed until it was all gone, and he bought another roll. They have a saying in Texas that you can use duct tape to fix anything.

A few years after the rape, I bought a pistol and loaded it with hollow-tipped bullets. My then-husband sewed a purse for it, and I kept it under my bed, safety off. We lived in an apartment named after a tree, and the walls were so thin at The Maple you could feel the wind blow through them. From time to time, a roach would drop from the ceiling onto my head, sending me into a panic. Once a cop broke down a locked door with a mere push of his hip. When my husband was gone, I carried the gun around with me in the apartment, all two rooms of it, and laid it on the back of the toilet whenever I took a bath. Showers, for all intents and purposes, were out. Shower people don't understand this preference for lying around in your own filth. They think you can wash everything off of yourself if you scrub hard enough.

I started seeing a therapist at the college who gave me to her supervisor. *I'm a little out of my league*, she said. *I mostly just help students who can't manage time*. Her supervisor said things like, *I don't see taking your gun to the bathroom as a problem*. I looked at him with a *get real* expression as my mind flashed ahead to years and years of relaxing bubble baths with a loaded pistol in plain view. *Do you have any Valium?* I asked. *I can't prescribe anything*, he said. *I'm not that kind of doctor*.

So what was your childhood like? he asked. He was, unfortunately, *that* kind of a doctor. What could I do? I'd already paid for the session. When I was a child, I used to play a game with my stuffed animals, the same ones for which I would write the occasional suicide notes, notes that said things like *Chatty Cathy has grown tired of life*, or *Mr. Teddy Bear no longer wishes to live on this earth*. The game consisted of you pretending you were paralyzed and on a Stryker frame, a torturous device used in the '70s to stabilize injured patients and prevent bedsores. If this was your fate, you'd be sandwiched between strips of canvas and flipped every few hours. The only choice in this game was whether you'd want to look at the ceiling or the floor. The stuffed animal was my nurse. I'd pretend to think hard about my

decision—after all, I'd be there for a long time. But I knew what I would choose. The floor. Always.

For years after the rape, the world became my own personal Tailhook, a never-ending gauntlet like the one that some of the female Naval officers experienced during an annual conference where they were thrown down, stripped, and attacked in one particular hallway of the Las Vegas Hilton. Warnings that I had ignored for years rang in my head, all the tips to fend off attackers—too little, too late, but still, I tried. I carried mace, carried handfuls of gravel to throw, carried lemon juice to squirt in their eyes. All the books said to aim for the weak spots, the windows to the soul. I suppose the idea is that you can't hurt what you can't see. All my energy went into not being alone. I never was, of course. I had a little bit of death around my eyes from all the anxiety and bloody red circles under them from rubbing them so hard. That drew men to me, all that brokenness. My godmother used to say, *You'll have to beat the men off with sticks when you get older*. I'm sure this wasn't exactly what she had in mind. I lived in a loft apartment in my mind, a high-rise where no one could touch me, the perfect panic room, no windows, no doors. No matter where I was, I was loathe to part with a loft, any loft, my loft.

I saw two movies at the theater with my rapist: *Fatal Attraction* and *The Accused*. What can I say? In a small town with only one screen, you have to see whatever is playing. You don't get a choice.

A record played during the attack, my favorite Paul Simon record, *One Trick Pony*. I put it on after work while he hid in the house, unbeknownst to me. I still love the music. The record played long after he left as I tried to reconstruct myself. The duct tape had left a large angry red mark around my mouth. My parents would be home soon! In those days, I did not wear makeup and neither did my mother. I searched the house for something and found some of her under-eye concealer, the thick, pasty kind in a color that used to be described as nude. I lifted the wand out of its holder and started to work. Since I had such a dark tan, I looked a little white around the gills. *It was late in the evening*, Paul sang, *and all the girls sat around the stoops*. I did not cry. Everyone knows crying ruins your makeup.

The last time I saw him, I was in the parking lot of Voertman's, a bookstore near the college we had both attended. My ex-husband had worked there for a time, as had another boyfriend who hanged himself that year. The owner had been a closeted gay man who had a penchant for hiring beautiful boys to work in the store. My rapist looked scrawny and pale in the harsh Texas light. He was not a beautiful boy; he was a piece of shit, an early love, my nemesis, the reason I couldn't sleep at night for years. The last present he ever gave me I still had—a book of Bob Dylan's song lyrics. *We always did feel the same, we just saw it from a different point of view...* In a few months, I'd be gone, far from Texas, far from him. But I didn't care about him and hadn't for years. The bigger question was, would I be able to get away from myself? I began to understand how the really scary movies always implanted the terrible thing inside you. *So how are you?* he asked. *I'm moving to Detroit,* I said. We looked at each other for a long time, all the years and friends between us, before I walked to my car. *Hey, Michelle,* he yelled out. *Be careful. That's a dangerous city.*

My mother wasn't big on children's books. *Read what's here,* she'd say. *Or nothing.* She did enjoy telling one fairy tale, though, the story of Bluebeard and his seven wives that he murders. The tale begins with his room full of dead wives, a new wife who has a key. She cannot contain her curiosity so he must kill her. In my mother's version, her brothers do not come to save her. *Everyone has that room,* my mother told me. *Only a fool would look into it. Nobody can save you once something happens.* These were the years of Ted Bundy, and I looked like all his victims—pale skin, black straight hair. Later I realized that Bundy had worked at a rape crisis center. The things you learn!

My mother sometimes picked up hitchhikers. One time she picked up a man. He wore a black trench coat and hobbled around on crutches. When he got into the car, she realized he wasn't really hurt. *Nothing was wrong with him,* she said. Nothing happened to her, but she never picked up anyone again. Sometimes he rides with me, his coat in a ball in the back seat.

Every now and then I think about that dance class from years ago, sitting on the floor, surrounded mostly by women and the one ass-wipe on the dance floor, twirling like a dervish to portray his death as a dolphin. I read an article once about how swimming with dolphins could help heal you from sexual abuse and assault. Something about the water and their beauty and empathy. I've never had an affinity for animals of any kind so I can't say if it would have worked for me. My dance had been scheduled for the next day. I chose to go it alone and perform to a brief snippet of a jazz tune that Alice Coltrane had composed to honor her husband John. The room would fill with the music I would listen to as I wrote for many years to come. I did not know that then, of course. The future, once a glimmering plain, had become one foot in front of the other, the way it is for so many people, forty years in the desert looking for the promised land. I could not know that my mind would return to me after years of enemy occupation. What I did know is this: I clapped at the end like everyone else, not because I had enjoyed it, but because it was over.