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Harlequin's Daughter

Abby Swanson

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I can no longer tell which of you young girls consider yourselves pretty. Some of you are tall but many are quite short. Some of you are thin, but the girls with the happiest faces are a little thicker around the middle. I suppose none of you cares about being attractive to me, but I see how you cling tighter to the arm of the vacant eyed man beside you when I catch you looking at me. And I see something in your eyes, is it pity? I do not need your pity, I have plenty of my own. It might be fear, and that I will let you have. Cling tighter pretty girls, but especially you chubby, happy girls. He will not save you.

The hair on the back of my head is deeply matted and when I wipe my mouth I can feel dried tears scrape the back of my hand, though I don't remember crying. The hands that carry my bags have been cracked and bleeding for months. They are dark with dirt and sticky with booze and the fingernails are broken off at half length from digging in the frozen ground. I have no mirror, but I imagine my face to look just like my hands, except with two dark balls peering out from between blunt and crusted lashes.

I am not homeless, as they say. I have a bed and a wooden chair and a stack of two milk crates with a board across them that I use as a table. I keep them in a small house near the river, on the end of a street that has no street lights. And I am not starving, as the people who drop nickels and dimes, but mostly pennies in front of me seem to think. I just have a hard time with reality. I succeed fairly well in blurring the present; but the past refuses to fade. I used to teach at the University of Montana. I taught Art History and Mythological Theory. Mythological Theory examines the structure and origins of myths and hypothesizes as to which myths are based on fact. I used to argue with my colleagues about that.

"Myth," they would say, "is by definition, untrue." But "people are not that imaginative," I always would say. "The ideas came from somewhere." My favorite creature was Harlequin, the

trickster. I found a print of Cezanne's Harlequin at a garage sale the summer before my first year of college. In the painting, he stands erect, with a sword or baton under one arm. The red and black diamond printed clothes are the only comical thing about him, he looks for all the world like a somber teenager. I hung him in a place of prominence in every office I occupied. I still have it; though I wished to burn it, or sell it with the house, I did not dare. So different from Picasso's Harlequin, and so different from the silly jesters people associate him with today. My daughter, Annabelle called him "the clown." Yet, he is always the trickster, and I hear tinkling bells in the distance when I say his name.

In the mornings, sometimes, when it is still too cold for the swarms of mosquitoes that seem to rise straight from the mud, I go to the bank of the river and hunker down in the squelching earth. On the table in my house I have a small olive jar that is half filled with bits of mica. They drift downstream and get caught in the swirling eddy underneath the overpass. I dig the shards out of the mud and let the cold water pull the debris from the mica's sparkling surface. The whisper thin layers cling together so precariously that I dare not brush away any dirt by hand. Water is at once stronger and more gentle than I. One day, a behemoth earthquake will hit, or my neighbors will discover my body because they just can't stand the smell anymore and my house will get bulldozed because my stench won't come out of the walls. I know when this happens I won't be there to see it, but it brings me joy to think that the heavy shaking of the house will vibrate the mica into a fine silver dust that will billow out of the olive jar like a mushroom cloud when the roof falls down around it.

Today, the river is dark and cold and a glob of fish guts twirls in my eddy. I toss it aside and sink my fingers into the deep grey/green mud; probing for anything solid that has gotten trapped by the swirling waters. There is nothing there, except for a few bones from some small animal which I toss beside the fish guts. I walk along the edge of the river, pulling my feet out of the mud that tries to suck me back with every step. As I step onto the firmer dirt of the path that leads toward home a flash of red and black poking up from the mud catches my eye and I turn back. I do not have to

dig It out to know what it is. All that I can see above the mud are two tiny legs, each smaller than my pinkie and painted with red and black diamonds. I spent hours carving him from an old piece of raw hardwood that I found in my attic and I recognize him in an instant. It is the trickster. I carved him, once, for Annabelle. She was four years old.

I stand under the huge oak tree across the street from my old house clutching the muddy bit of black and red wood tight in my hand. I used to watch the leaves of this tree twist in the wind while I washed dishes. There are two girls, probably younger than ten, but who can tell, playing in my driveway. They are laughing as they ride their red wagon down the driveway's sloping curve. I sit down in the grass and lean against the tree; I watch them a little but mostly I just watch the house.

When I wake up it is colder, and almost dark. The girls are gone; probably inside my house, where all the lights are on. I sold the house fully furnished, but the couches I can see through the picture windows aren't mine. What was wrong with my couches? I wonder what this family did with them. They probably sold them to some frat boys at a yard sale. I imagine the soft cushions full of broken springs. There are probably stains of beer and college sluts caked onto the upholstery.

When I get back to the street that I now call home it is dark but not quiet. My shuffling feet slip unnoticed past the homes of my neighbors; the people who live on this street are all hiding from something or trying to forget themselves so we recognize each other as comrades and leave each other be. We are all here for the same reason; the suburban neighborhoods with their neighborhood watch, their block parties and their book clubs refuse to ignore the dark festering people who stink up their block. We hide here to shelter our rotting lives for we are the ones who do not want to be cured.

I taught classes in Mythological Theory around the idea that some myths are based on reality, while some are just based on other myths. I taught those children that Harlequin is real; that though he is not extremely intelligent he is agile, clever and a friend of the devil, which makes him vengeful.

Paul Cezanne was painting in the park near his house on a spring day, when rain clouds started to gather. Normally he would have run home across the park, but he wrote later in a letter that suddenly he did not know where he was. He ran through the park as it started to rain, searching for some familiar landmark to turn him homeward, but everything was foreign to him. And, he wrote, he began to hear laughter as he ran, and flashes of red and black tumbled around his periphery. He caught a chill that day, a chill he would eventually die from, and most of his friends said he had gone mad. But he wrote in his journal that he was being punished, for rendering such a disarmingly sad and human version of Harlequin. I taught all of this, and I thought I understood it.

Arrogance made me carve the wooden Harlequin standing straight, with arms crossed. He gazes off in to the distance (not an artistic choice, my whittling skills lack control) and there is not a hint of the acrobat in him. He looks like just a man, a serious thoughtful man who happens to be wearing a silly costume. I hear tinkling bells as I look at him now, but it might just be ice as a pour myself a drink.

I knew that one day I would be proven right, that Harlequin would show himself to me and all of my work would be vindicated. And so I felt blessed the day that Harlequin finally came to me. I was at the park with Annabelle, and she was playing with her “little clown” in the sand while I sat on the bench grading papers. The bench creaked and flexed and I looked up and saw a tall and slightly pudgy man, with a feminine face tiptoeing along the top of the bench. He had black and red diamonds tattooed over his whole body like clothes. His groin was smooth like a Ken doll. He pantomimed that I should be quiet, holding a white kid glove-like finger up to his mouth and I giggled and nodded. He cartwheeled in to the woods, and I followed, without a second thought. Under the trees, he disappeared. I looked for a few minutes, quietly and then, not finding him, I started to call his name. Of course there was no answer. Harlequin does not come to those who call him.

It took so long for me to remember Annabelle. She vanished from my mind at my first sight of the trickster and not until I had

given up on finding him, did I remember her again. As I ran toward the playground, I saw the scene in my mind and had no doubt of its truth. Harlequin danced on his toes around her, mirage-like bells winking in and out. I saw her pudgy arms reaching up to grab the flopping corners of his hat and I thought that I might make it in time. But when I got back to the playground, she was gone, along with her doll. I screamed her name, and ran around the park. The other mothers remembered her soft curls and checked dress when I described her, but no one noticed her disappearance. Two days later, they found her body caught in an eddy underneath an overpass. I made the red and black dress for her because I thought the fabric was clever, but it just seemed cruel clinging so brightly to her blue legs on the dull steel table at the morgue. They never found the Harlequin doll.

Now he sits on my table next to the jar of mica, and I have poured him a drink in a thimble and I sit, drinking mine, hearing bells, or ice, or several hundred screen doors slamming at once. I have washed the mud from him and though some of his paint has chipped you can still see that he is covered with red and black diamonds and that he has no penis, just a lump where it should be. One thing is different about him now; his arms are no longer crossed. He is looking right at me, with a hint of a smile, and one finger, pure white, is pressed to his lips.