

Splinter Off

by Apryl Lee

When we lived in the attic we were make-believe.

The attic was an illegal apartment we rented from an old couple who lived downstairs. We lived poor. Ate noodles and fresh fruit, used the payphone down at the deli, did laundry with dish-soap, taught ourselves French. We worked as needed.

Late at night, we'd walk. He'd hold my hand.

The neighborhood was turning over, so nights before bulk-trash pick-up were full of treasures. I remember down on Woodlawn, a lonely orthopedic cane poked out of the top of a garbage can. Out with the old and so on.

I up lit a cigarette, and he kicked one of the boxes lining the curb, a junk processional of the recently deceased. *Life* magazines, candy tins, wigs, a pink ceramic cat. He pulled a Peter Frampton album from the bottom box. I took the cat. She had green, skyward-gazing eyes, long lashes. She was prim and disapproving.

He dug through a collection of abridged books, the classics. Perfume bottles tumbled and broke. Tart fragrances filled the street. We walked.

As we passed by that iron-gated mausoleum at the mouth of the cemetery, he said, "I'd love to break your heart."

I asked him, "Pourquoi?"

"Don't you want to feel pain like that?" He flicked a cigarette into the graveyard. "Desperate, crushing heartbreak?"

"Merci ... non," I said.

"I should do you that favor."

At dawn we made love under the covers, then shared a cigarette. Downstairs, there was coughing and someone flushed the toilet. I rested my hand on the soft place where his body narrowed, just before the bone of his hip. I could feel his pulse, and I asked, "What if they're us down there?"

"Us in forty years?"

"No, now. What if downstairs is a universe where we're seventy?"

The coughing continued. "Well, then, which universe is true?" he asked.

"Which do you think?"

He said, "Theirs."

The pink ceramic cat sat on the floor beside our bed, her eyes peering up at me. I laced my fingers between his and went to sleep. I dreamt I never woke up.

But I did, the next afternoon. We shuffled to the kitchen where I asked him, "The usual?" I made a pot of coffee and sliced the last apple.

We huddled on the couch touching toes and reading. His toenails tickled my foot, and I screamed. "Tais-toi..." He shushed me. "Quiet in the library."

We played barbershop. I trimmed his hair with cuticle scissors. Then, we rolled new cigarettes from the old, snuffed-out ones in the ashtray, racing to see who could make the most. He won.

After our French lesson, I blew smoke out the window at the maple, its leaves rusted and old. "It's fall already." I asked him how long ago it was that the leaves were green.

He said something about how marking the passage of time was irrelevant and impossible. "Le temps est l'amour," he said, and I thought I was living in a French film.

I took coffee grounds and painted the maple naked, leaves gone, so I wouldn't be surprised when it happened. I thought of becoming a real person, one who woke in the morning, worked a job, sat in traffic, went to bed. I told him, "We need to clean in here."

He agreed, but we did not dust or mop.

He dropped the needle on the Frampton record, and we made love on the floor, pretending it was 1977. After, we sprawled, naked, our legs twisted together, sunlight waltzing through the maple leaves across our stomachs. I closed my eyes and listened to the

nonsense-noise of the television downstairs fusing with Frampton's talk-box guitar, still in 1977.

If it were our universe, I thought, I would have remembered the point where it fractured and skewed off to create them downstairs. It would have been something colossal that splintered time like a rock cracking thin ice. Spidery fissures blooming off in all directions. A fucking huge occurrence. But, nothing of consequence came to mind, and I panicked. I felt tenuous, whispered, "I love you."

He kissed my eyelid.

I decided I would dress, and go out to buy apples. He told me he'd come for the walk. I asked, "With or without pants?"

"Which do you think?"

But, we didn't dress, and we didn't go anywhere, because the minivan pulled into the driveway, and Lillian, our landlady, shopping bags in hand, Virginia Slim in mouth, entered downstairs to find her husband dead.

Of course, that day we didn't know he was dead.

I think about him dead all the time, and I imagine him dead as I'd often seen him alive. Reclined in his chair beneath a painting of two yellow ducks, scotch and soda sweating onto the TV tray beside him, afternoon ESPN blaring, his arms hanging limp, head slumped, spit and bile sliding from his mouth, leaking.

Once, when I brought him our rent, he pointed up the ducks. "She painted that. Supposed to be us." One duck was in the pond, swimming, content. The other was on the bank with a vacant expression, "*Coin-coin!*" scrawled in thick, black paint by its beak. "Looks nothing like us," he said. "And why it says *coin, coin*, I haven't the foggiest."

"It's French, " I said, "for *quack-quack*." After that, I just slipped the rent under the door.

We were right over him, just a foot of insulation and floorboard between us when he died. But, again, we had no idea he had died. All we heard was Lillian beneath us, bellowing over the sound of the television, like a gut-shot animal.

This, the yelling, wasn't unusual. Everyday, she shouted about his drinking, about her drinking, about their laziness. She'd accuse him of trying to kill her, scream in her gravelly voice, "You want me dead!" Scott never said a word. He'd just leave the house; take a drive. She'd quiet down when he left.

That day, however, the car stayed, the hollering continued. I said, "That's odd."

He said, "Let's investigate."

We tracked the sounds of Lillian from room to room. We were detectives, rogue archeologists, big-game hunters following Lillian's muffled yowling. We keep quiet, assuming different whispering characters, as she cried his name, frantic-sounding, crisscrossing from bathroom to kitchen to living room until she stopped below our bedroom.

We dropped to our bellies, pressed our ears to the floor, and listened to Lillian's sobs. They sounded as though they were being yanked from deep inside her. Each one filled me with a wobbly energy, something like love or terror.

We held hands, our faces close together. I could smell his breath, like sour milk.

I could not remember a time without him.

Low, afternoon sun breathed through the blinds, streaking across the floor. Lillian was slowing. I wanted to howl with her to know what it felt like, to see if I even could, but it was too late. She was silent. We could hear a baseball game on the television, a crack of a bat, a crowd roar.

It was their universe down there.

I felt thin, fragile. The pink cat was side-eyeing me. I said, "Something's wrong."

He said, "Je sais."

We would come to learn that Lillian died from handfuls of pain pills. What we had heard was her labor for death.

We were still naked. "What's going to happen to us without them?" I asked.

He squeezed my hand. "I guess we'll disappear."

"Do it," I said. I wanted our universe to be a real one, and I asked him, in French, to break my heart.

