

Legs Unwilling

by Caleb J. Ross

Summer bakes the metal playground slide to ripples. Still, kids line up. Sadists, all of them. Lucky enough to choose pain. Max feels it every breath, unwanted.

Max was a painful birth, breech, with legs unwilling. He cried, a good sign, but the sound only fell, like a deflating balloon's stale air. The limp curve of his mouth framed the weak breath. He met monitors and clamps within that first exhale. I asked the doctor, *is he as bad as we thought?* The doctor moved too quickly to answer.

These years later on the playground, kids impatient for the slide climb his chair and harness, pretend he's a chained monster. They mistake his twitches and ticks for smiles. His seizures for laughs. And his costume—a stained and stressed denim lion made by his grandmother, before she moved three states away to a place with a worse climate—allows just such a misunderstanding.

I knew he wouldn't be the same as others: I had no morning sickness; he moved little; family didn't bother with gifts. When I gave him a name, my mother asked why. *Because I want to name something, Mom.* I wasn't meant to live either. Parents named me Tammie because that's what the nurse's name was. I had *Max* picked out for years. I tried learning from my own birth.

But he kept breathing. Doctors didn't understand it. Even I hadn't a clue. A mother should know her child's language. I've since resolved to basic interpretation: is he satisfied or no? Only lately, I've been asking the same question of myself.

Twelve children were abducted from this park last year. Thirty-four in the region. I live ninety miles away, but I pray the drive was worth it. We missed our monthly angiography for this trip. The doctors should be noticing our absence right about now.

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A man with sharp-parted hair and pressed slacks takes the empty end of my bench. He offers popcorn. I accept and toss kernels to the ground for birds. He offers part of his sandwich, and that I accept

for myself. He wears a predator's cliché overcoat, but doesn't stink the way I'd thought they should.

"He looks so precious in that lion outfit. My boy was Spiderman for Halloween." He extracts a wallet from his pocket, shows pictures of a boy who knows how to smile.

This man doesn't want my child. "He doesn't know what Halloween is," I say. "The fur is the only texture that doesn't make him bleed."

The man folds his wallet and rewraps his sandwich. "What's wrong with him?"

"Are you going to take him or not?"

"What? Why would I take him?"

"The coat. The hair. I thought you were shopping."

The man pockets his sandwich and leaves to an empty bench across the park. He sits, but keeps an eye tuned my way.

Max's father was probably the frat boy who fucked me on a dare. I remember his loose jaw, the way it flapped, guided by so much alcohol. Max has the same way about him. They share eyes, too, always spinning and barely open. After, he hi-fived his roommates, and I went back to the bar, unsatisfied. But the glow had already been planted.

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Hours later, when Max and I are the only souls left, after the sun has arched overhead to hover at the horizon and cast long shadows out of the monkey bars and the deserted swing-set, a second man claims my bench. "Great evening, huh?" He sits close, despite the open seats all around. He smells of cat piss and sweat. His long coat looks well-used. Birds escape.

"It still might be," I say, optimistic of this new stranger, offering a few left-over corn kernels from the bench. "For the birds."

"For the birds, indeed," he says. And eventually notices my offered popcorn and laughs. "Of course, 'for the birds,'" and he takes a few pieces.

He points to Max, hanging in his harness, moved only by sporadic breezes. "That your boy?"

I nod.

"I had a similar situation once. Some complications with surgeries ultimately killed him. But he was a drain, to tell you the truth. I don't mind saying it." He eyes Max, defiant against the sun's sharp reflections.

I squint, but still see envy in this potential taker. "I'd do anything for Max. No amount of money could keep him away from me."

He turns from the sun, my way, shakes his head slowly. "I'm sorry. I wasn't meaning to imply anything with your situation."

"I mean, if something happened to him, I'd give any amount to have him back."

The man's eyes widen. "Of course." He tosses a greasy kernel to the ground, no birds in sight.

"Your boy doesn't move much, does he?" The man steers my gaze toward Max and comments that he looks too still to be breathing.

"He gets tired easy," I say.

The stranger hefts a few kernels further than the last, almost all the way to Max.

"Do you want him?" I scan the park's borders on the ruse of a stiff neck, searching for a van.

He creases his brow, ponders. "Do I envy your position, you mean? No, definitely not. I respect your fight, though." He throws the rest of his kernels. Some ting against the metal framework of Max's harness. Some bounce against his skin. He doesn't twitch.

No van. The sun dips lower, stretches the shadows long and thin along the ground. Max's silhouette creeps, edging my toes. "Your boy was a drain, huh?"

Out of kernels, the man reaches for a wood chip. "There was nothing left of my wife and I with him around. Max. His name was Max, too. It took both of us, two lives, to keep his one life going. Half-life, really. It sounds terrible, but that's the truth. I wondered how babies like him are even born."

"A kid like him makes it tough to believe Darwin, for sure," I say.

"You're religious?"

"I can't really believe in God either, can I?"

"I know exactly what you mean." He tosses the woodchip at Max, sighs when my boy doesn't respond.

"He's tired," I say. I check the man's profile against the dying light. His initially rigid features have softened, and even the stink has settled among the natural ambience. "I'll be honest. I was hoping you were a kidnapper."

The man smiles. "I am."

A bird lands within drooling distance of Max. My boy doesn't respond. His shadow blankets my entire foot, creeping to my knee. I shift away from the shadow, but can't shake the dark completely. "Did you take all twelve of them?"

He frowns. "Only five," and stands, wincing as his joints pop and echo against bench's metal back.

"None of them paid enough for you to stop?"

"I don't do it for the ransom." He buttons his coat, scratches his cheek. "I don't think of me as a selfish person. I imagine that nobody comes to a park with a known streak of kidnappings at this time of the evening—especially alone—without secretly hoping."

As the man turns from me, his stink resurfaces. I speak without breathing: "I don't—"

"Do me a favor and wait a half hour or so to call the police. Tell them you couldn't find a phone."

Already, and I don't dismiss the relief, I wonder what to do with his clamps and tubes and pills and van attachments; it's my space now. "What will you do with him?"

"I take him off your shoulders." The man approaches Max's harness, doesn't check for brakes on the wheels, and begins pushing him toward a dim parking lot. "Say 'goodbye' Max." Max only rocks to the pavement's pebbles and imperfections.

His shadow leaves with him. I whisper my own 'goodbye,' and sacrifice a single heartbeat for his absence.

