

The Palisades

by Trent England

On my way home, I stopped by where they were keeping him, huddled in a cylinder, and there in the dark I stood and let my eyes adjust.

Still, he must have heard me coming down the turning earth where the leaves sunk in the mud, where rocks and sand and street salt leaked in from the neighborhood, because he stopped his rustling. When I stood closer, I got my first look, and then he worked up a wad inside him.

There was enough of his face to confirm that he was a man. But rarely ever was it a woman. These are not the caffeinated men of barbaric lore.

Behind the apparatus he was silent and shaking, leaning against his walls, the slim prison allowing him no room to crouch. There was no room for him to even sit down and die like a dog.

“What was your favorite movie when you were growing up?”

When they move an offender to the rows behind their houses, they always use closet rods for prison bars. Up and down, I saw scratch marks and tooth prints. There was blood on his hands and his face from where he tried to dig away and bite at the bars.

“What was it? Must have been, seeing you're my age, must have been a Sumner film. Something from our era.”

I wanted him to spit now that I knew he had hawked it up from his nasal cavity, or his throat, or from the sewage of his belly.

“What was it?” I asked him.

They had transferred him from the puzzle of highways, under the network of concrete. He was there for a period of time before they thought it best to keep him out here in the basement of nature.

I wanted to reach out and feel for a beard. I wanted to know was there a beard there. I wanted to know if the man they were keeping had the stones to even grow a beard.

The next day I stood in the hallway of a school my daughter attended, strings of children following around me. Pink and blue lined papers tacked to the wall flapped in the wind from an open door, where children ran from the outside and into the school like tributaries finding assigned seats.

A teenage boy with long black hair answered a phone and then said to me, "She'll see you now."

The principal greeted me and moved a stack of files from the chair that faced her desk. She placed them against the wall, grunting in the process, and I could see the outline of her spine through her clothing. She looked like she had long ago walked away from the practice of eating.

"Can we get you anything?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Because," she said, "we have everything. We even got one of those espresso machines now."

"No espresso, thanks."

The boy with the long hair came in, and asked her if I wanted anything.

"Are you sure? We have loose-leaf teas now. Before, we only had the bags." He tucked his hair behind his ears, and nodded toward her. "Tracy even made sure it's always served in teacups on those little plates."

I saw public service announcement posters about peer pressure, about drugs, about running without sound. To my left at the wall, a poster encouraging children to read hung low where a tack had come out.

Her mother came over to the house on the weekend. I worried she would ask about the rows, about why Kay's backyard and the backyards of her peers were now lined with barbed wire and why the palisades had been raised five feet.

She sat down on the couch next to me and asked what I was watching.

I said, "This old western."

She asked what it was called.

I said, "I just switched to the western channel."

She asked me who was the good guy and who was the bad guy. She asked if anyone had been shot yet, and if any horses had fallen over dead.

I said, "I just turned to this. And I'm not entirely positive this is a western, and that this is even the western channel."

She asked if such a thing even existed.

I said, "I don't know. Two men dueled, though. There definitely was a duel and the only Mexican in the movie just died. You know how they take ten steps and then shoot? Well, someone cheated."

In the morning, I visited him again when the fog settled thick over the muddied plain of his dying place. This is where they decided to keep him and this is where they wanted him to expire.

"Did you know that when I was a kid, I wanted a grotto of my own?"

I felt the cold and wet dirt seep through my denim. I already had envisioned the new grass stain on the seat. I crossed my legs, Indian-style, in a district that still allowed the phrase Indian-style.

"Crazy thing. Crazy thing for a kid to want. Right there in the middle of the house, too. I wanted the walls torn down. I wanted the hook-weave floors pulled up for sterile white wood panels. Then the house, all of it, it would all of it look like one studio."

I heard his kneecaps and the skin covering his knee and the membrane over the bone all fight for a spot in the apparatus, so he could bend out from it, and be allowed at least to crouch. I knew he was wanting just to lie down with dignity.

"Then in the middle of the house, then, right there in the middle, a grotto."

I picked at the grass in front of me, tying blades together and tossing them astray.

"Was it Andy Warhol who had a grotto in his studio?"

His back, I heard his back hit the wall inside, and I thought of the principal at my daughter's school. I am of the breed of man who

desires to hear a spine snap, and who in the same breath would collapse in a puddle of tears and snot.

“It wasn't Warhol, was it?”

Standing there like a caveman, like leftover evolution, his face was soft, and even then when I least wanted it, he was exhibiting the behavior of a remorseful man. He was exhibiting the behavior of a remorseful man who was eager to escape in order to repeat his crimes.

I crouched, ready to tip over and bow and kiss the earth had my religion accommodated such a function. He exhaled, no longer allowing himself gray areas. I don't know for certain, but had I been accused of leaving my mission and landmarking on my own, I would have had the same urge to either break down and admit my wrongs, or pioneer another way to escape and kill.

I said, looking up from playing with the grass: “Was it Elio Chez?”

