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Magnifier of Trifles

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Magnifier of Trifles

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MAGNIFIER OF TRIFLES

BEN WINSTON

The cushion on the couch in Dr. Conter's office swallows my hips and waist and starts digesting. The room is white with a wooden bookcase to one side of the door, a heavy desk to the other, and a couch with a big window behind it facing the exit. Two chairs are turned toward the couch—one has a tall back and is upholstered in not-quite-ripe-raspberry red, the other is wooden and looks a lot less expensive and a lot less comfortable. I lean back and let the couch taste my shoulders and arms.

Conter walks in and shuts the door behind him, dropping a *Hi, there* through his wide smile.

"Hi."

He walks towards the couch and lowers himself into the second chair, scooting his rear around on the seat to find the divot, the ass-shaped dent designed to give his body a false sense of comfort. He's wearing a gray sweater pulled over a yellow dress shirt buttoned so tightly his head looks like a tied-off balloon. His neck is red where the shirt collar squeezes, his eyes bug out like an insect's.

"So, how you been doin'?"

He nods at the cuts on my hands, scabbing and leaking pus. He opens a manila folder, glancing over his notes from last session, and clicks his pen on. The corners of his mouth reach for his earlobes in a welcoming smile that invites me to dive, dive, dive.

"Well, let's see."

I reach for the top of my head with both hands and pull my hair in opposite directions until the skin splits down the part line, and the two halves of my skull pull away from each other. When I've left enough clearance, I pat down my tousled hair, pull the sticky gray matter out and drop it on the floor at his feet like a heavy suitcase.

Kchunk.

Conter nods and takes notes while I trace the sparks and signals with my fingertip from the temporal and occipital lobes, up through the frontal and down deep to the medulla oblongata, the roadmap of a thought misconstrued, a not-so-equal, severely opposite reaction.

"Mmhmm," he says. "Mmhmm."

I pull and tug at the folds looking for a misfire. A tight nerve bundle holding serotonin hostage. A rogue fiber taunting the medulla, encouraging an adrenaline flood. A slice of gray matter, of myself, who insists on making Me my own worst enemy, who pins me beneath a boulder in the ocean the doctor calls Depression, Clinical. Digging through the fissures, I'm a bounty

hunter, ready to yank out the target and watch it wriggle and die on the soft green carpet until it's nothing more than a pile of limp noodles.

"Mmhmm. Mmhmm."

I'm digging and pulling out slabs of tissue, putting them to the side for later. A snide comment from my history teacher, a handful to my right. Bad conversations with Gab, a towering pile to my left. I carve out a handful of the soft spaghetti from deep in the prefrontal cortex and show Conter how the synapses flood here and here although they shouldn't, sliding neurobiology off my tongue like drool from a gland deep in my head where tenth-grade biology and countless internet articles swell and yearn to seep. There should be a neurotransmitter flood over there, not here. Or better yet, no flooding at all, just a vast and quiet desert between my ears. I could deal with a heavy head full of sand if it meant my brain would leave itself alone.

"Mmhmm," he says, and there's a sticky film covering my skin from fingertips to elbows like I've just helped give birth. Pieces of gray matter are scattered across the floor, and a damp splotch stains the carpet where the surgery was performed. I sit back into the couch, letting it swallow me again and suck my tired arms dry.

"Mmhmm. Okay." Conter jots down one last note. Clicks his pen off. Readjusts in his chair. Looks up and smiles. "It sounds like you need something to do with your hands."

"My hands?"

"Yes. You see," he says, "we need to find a way to make this"--drawing circles in the air around the juicy mess on his floor-- "not lead to this"--drawing the circles now around my tattered hands. "Maybe if you had something you could play with, you could calm these urges when they arise. Something not sharp. A smooth rock, perhaps."

"Hmm. What about a toy car?"

"A toy car. That could work," he says, and looks down to make a note in the folder. Over his shoulder, I see a framed photograph hanging behind his desk of two young girls in white bonnets and brown frocks, an artistic piece probably taken at a renaissance fair. One girl is kneeling, looking down at her simple shoe-buckle, lost in her own head. The other looks at me from the corner of her eye, her body turning from me, a silent giggle creeping out from her tight lips.

*

The car is a vibrant red Corvette, and I keep it in my right pocket with my pencils and lunch money. I dig for it and pull it out to show Gab.

"What is it?"

"It's a Vette. I thought you loved Vettes."

She grabs the vehicle from me and examines it, turning it over in her small hands. Nodding downwards towards the car, the crest of her head

barely passes my chest. Her dark eyes are focused through thin slits in her long face, her delicate fingers toying with the chrome wheels, the pristine finish, feeling the rumble of the V8 under the hood, the warm leather interior against her skin.

"It's ugly," she says. "I like old Corvettes. The new ones are hideous. She tosses the car back to me. "Why are you keeping it in your pocket?"

"Doctor's orders."

Turning to meet my eyes, she looks perplexed. "Doctor's orders?"

"Yeah. He says I might cut less if I have something to play with."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

She scoffs and turns away. "That's ridiculous."

I squeeze the vehicle in my hand, letting the plastic wheels dig deep tire tracks in my palm. "Thanks, babe. I love you, too."

She rolls her eyes. "Oh, shut up," she says, and leans in to kiss my lips as I run my thumb hard over the car's cool hood.

*

Folded lunch tables lean against one another in the corners of the dark cafeteria. Streamers hang down from the ceiling, looping through the metal grid holding up off-white tiles. Strings of lights curl around support beams. In the dark, it's hard to see the multicolored stains on the walls and floor from hundreds of hours of high school lunch periods.

I'm standing around with a group of guys waiting for Gab. People trickling into the dark room from the bright hallway are accosted by the deejay's bass-y mix, and I'm discreetly glancing towards the door for her four times a minute.

The word of the day is suave, and all the guys I'm standing with know it. We ditched our wrinkled band tees after school for something a little classier. I'm wearing a white tee with a plaid short-sleeve dress shirt overtop, unbuttoned, and dark jeans. We're trying to look cool, and since the key to cool is disinterest, we stand in a circle and shoot-the-shit, ignoring the girls sauntering by in tall heels and short skirts.

"I wish we had a hacky sack," someone says.

I silently agree, then remember the Vette in my pocket. It's served me well these past few weeks, giving me a tactile object to work my aggressions out instead of routinely sacrificing a pound of my own flesh. The oil from my fingers combined with my constant rubbing has faded the finish on the hood from a rich red to a softer pink, and the wheels have lost their chrome shine.

I pull the car out of my pocket and start juggling it like a soccer ball. I kick it off towards the other side of the circle where it gets kicked once, then hits the ground.

“Well, it’s not the best hack, but it works,” I say, and pick it up to start again.

I kick the car straight up to my eye level, and watch as the G-Forces throw the passengers mercilessly against the windows and doors. Skulls crack and bones crunch as the car drops from eye level, spinning wildly like a dreidel towards my foot. It glides past the toe, hitting the ground with a plastic-like slap, and my foot comes down heavy on top of it.

As I reach down to pick up the wreckage, Gab peeks in from the hallway and sees our group. She’s wearing a short, bouncy black skirt and a halter top, and her eyes peer sensually through the long, dark bangs hanging lightly over her face. The top isn’t cotton, nor is it really fabric; instead, caution tape wraps her torso from just under her armpits to just above her naval, squeezing her already small breasts flat against her body, making her look more like she’s eleven and budding than sixteen and fully formed. She pushes herself through the retro beads into the cafeteria and gallops towards us. I smirk and get ready to swoop her up in a big hug.

She runs up behind one of our friends and jumps on his back, smiling and laughing. She’s hanging onto him, pressing her body against his, her skirt bouncing and riding up. In my head, she breathes heavy into his ear, reaches around and presses her delicate hand against the fly of his pants, feeling for his growth. She drops off his back and goes to the next guy, sticking her tongue down his throat, grabbing his hand and placing it on her chest. To the next, she’s bouncing her skirt up, showing him her smooth backside, inviting him to touch and squeeze and pull her close.

She meets me last with a quick peck. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Wanna dance?” she says, and leads me towards the crowd formed around the deejay, full of kids rubbing against each other in time with the music.

“Yeah. Sure.” I grip the Vette, soaking up the coolness through my fingertips. I run my thumb over the car’s hood and can feel structural damage. The roof is caved in and crumpled flat against the seats inside. I peer in through the missing side windows and see the passengers broken and bleeding and dead, dead.

*

I’m sitting in history class and my whole body is tense, my skin stretched tight over muscle and bone. I’m rocking back and forth in my chair, my legs bouncing like a jackhammer. I feel like my heart is about to explode out of my chest, like my skin might tear off in long strips like a snake’s, and I’m holding myself together with my arms over opposite shoulders.

“You’ve got a photographic memory, Mr. Winston?”

I look up and meet the teacher's eyes. He's an aging Vietnam Vet, a prune-y withered replica of the young soldier he once was.

"No?"

"Well, you better take some of this down then, huh?"

I rock harder in my seat, the thumping in my ears the echo of my heart beating relentlessly against my ribcage. I want to slam my head into the desk, or jump out the second story window behind me and fall to the hard asphalt below, or flip the table over and throw my chair right at the wrinkled corpse of a teacher telling me to get my shit together. I bite down hard on nothing and squeeze my shoulders.

Gab sits across the room, passing notes with a friend. In my head, the notes are about a guy she's met, how he was an incredible figure who just appeared and gathered her up, kissed her strong and had her in the bathroom. She's giggling about it, about me not knowing, about me being the emotional support while she gallivants off seeking sexual solace elsewhere.

She catches my eye and sees me rocking, holding my chest. She mouths, "Are you okay?"

I nod and drop my gaze so she can't push the subject. I reach in my pocket for the car, for the sweet feeling of cool metal beneath my fingertips.

I pull the vehicle out and squeeze it. The sharp corners where the roof has collapsed dig into my palm. The innocent passengers inside, their bodies now in rigor mortis, are a breeding ground for maggots. I squeeze harder and the larvae trickle out, dancing through my grip and nibbling my tight flesh.

Crack.

The plastic windshield, which managed to keep its structural integrity through the fatal accident, starts to give way. Opening my hand, I see the thin fracture stretch diagonally across the plastic. My thumb traces the crack then engages it in a thumb war until the shield snaps softly like a rib, and I feel the leather and bodies beneath the thin plastic. I push and push until a whiteness creeps up from the pressure point, around my thumb, and settles under my nail. The windshield moans, moans, moans, then pops.

The two halves jutting out of the car at different angles, I slip the corner of my finger into the fissure and pull until one lets go, hops off the freshly mangled bodies and clatters on the desktop. I pick it up and squeeze its sharp corners between two fingertips, admiring my destructive work. I pry the other half out of the car and push the wreck to the side, its contents now fully exposed to the elements, and inspect how the two halves fit together.

I look over at Gab, and she's talking to one of the guys in the class. She's laughing. She's having fun. She smiles and shoves him flirtatiously.

I pick up both shards, looking for the sharpest edge. The bodies in the Vette pull their torn and broken arms over their bubbling eyes so

they can't watch me take the plastic and push it into my hand, shaking and breathing hard, hoping, hoping for blood, blood.

*

The office of the school psychologist has no hungry couch, just a stiff green chair that I'm trying to get comfortable in. The doctor's following my hand as I move it around, trying to evade her eyes.

"What happened?"

"I dunno."

"How'd you do it?"

"A car."

"A what?"

I pull the trashed Vette out of my pocket and show her. She reaches for it and plucks it out of my hand delicately, like a grenade's pin. "It had a plastic windshield," I say.

She looks hurt, as if I had done this to personally upset her, this woman who I barely know, this stranger with a framed degree on the wall by the desk. She holds the car by its two back wheels, looking above and below, assessing the accident.

She puts the wreck down on her desk far out of my reach, gives me a stern look and says, "Can you be safe until your appointment this afternoon?"

"I hope so," I say.

"That's not good enough. You need to guarantee me you can be safe, or I'm gonna have to call the hospital."

A warm feeling swells in my chest that's equal parts fear and interest. I imagine a doctor, mid-thirties, in a white lab coat, holding a silver clipboard, staring me down, shaking his head. Then I picture myself sitting up in a hospital bed, my hand wrapped up like a boxing glove in gauze. At the foot of the bed, a cop perched on a bench, watching carefully, making sure I don't do anything stupid. He's been around the block, he's seen this kind of thing before and it's sad sad sad, but he can't help chuckling to himself, thinking, *A car? A Vette? Now that's a new one.*

Lost in my head, I wonder what Gab would say. Would she visit? Would she cry? I think of her standing by my bedside, tears welling up, yelling at me, asking why I can't trust her, demanding to know why I keep reading into every interaction she has with another guy. And my mother, she's there in the sterile room, squeezing my good hand between both of hers. I look at her and she smiles, trying to be strong, and I wonder if she's thinking of herself and of her own mother, the three of us tragic victims of overthinking, tied together across generations by blood.

I look across the heavy desk at the school psychologist, and I wonder

how far gone I am, how deep I need to dig just to hold on.

"Yeah," I say, "I think I can do it."

"You think?"

"I can. I can be safe."

She leans forward. "Are you sure?"

I'm not but I say, "Yes."

Leaning back, she opens a drawer and pulls a Ziplock bag from her desk. Opens it, drops the wreck inside, zips it shut. Hands it across the desk to me like it's criminal evidence.

"I'm trusting you. Do you understand me?"

I grab the bag from her hand and peer in at the car.

"Yeah," I whisper, "I understand."

She lets me go, and I leave the office thinking how much self-harm it would take to merit a hospital visit. I thumb the car through the plastic bag with my torn hand, gazing at the soft finish and the empty, blood-soaked interior, wondering where the bodies went.