

A MOMENTARY
FLASH OF ROGER

& Another Story

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of Roger

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Bryce Bortree

B. A. Presse

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Ceelie

Ceelie is seven and they just found out Jim was touching her. The first thing I asked was when it started and Dad said hush, which is his way of making up for my not having a grandma if you ask me. I wanted to know though. My seventh grade health class just edged into sexual education and I curl tight around my desk during while everyone chortles at our penises. When I shift in class, uncomfortable, I feel the press of my penis against my pants. I don't find the thing very amusing at all.

After school this year, I can start taking an after Ceelie is seven and they just found out Jim was touching her. The first thing I asked was when it started and Dad said hush, which is his way of making up for my not having a grandma if you ask me. I wanted to know though. My seventh grade health class just edged into sexual education and I curl tight around my desk during while everyone chortles at our penises. I don't find the thing very amusing at all. That's not something the little cousin, the smaller boy says out loud, that other people are being cruel.

After school this year, I can start taking an after school sport and I'm doing wrestling. This seems illogical, I know. Wrestling is all about the weights and measures of a body. There is much clinging involved. Our coach is a high school physics teacher so he mentions fulcrums and pulleys at practice. I picture it like a machine: the pulls and pushes of what I want and what the other guy wants and all of it feels so heavy at times. But there is nothing like the quick steady heartbeat of a man who knows that he can't

get unpinned. I am the smallest guy on the team right now and I have to wrestle the ones that are bigger and maybe have been doing it longer. Their pulleys need less but I am ready.

I was four when Mom left which is unusual because I always hear about dads leaving now. We have a picture of her in the living room. Dad doesn't sit in front of it on rainy days or anything like you'd expect him to, he just quietly polishes it when he's doing the dusting around the place. I think there is something strange about that, his not paying any extra attention to it. It draws the eye the way he doesn't care even though he's clearly the one who loved her more. Dad's always been aware that he has a son living with him as a single parent, that our trailer has wheels on it, that there are surely a few questions directed towards us. I don't pay much attention to it but he does. We are two bachelors in a pod he says sometimes, and I nod my head like I

know what he means. I think he means we are peas, or perhaps of a feather.

My cousins Ceelie and Jim lived with their mom who

is my aunt. Their dad died, which isn't weird because it happens all the time in the movies. He was maybe a war hero or something. I mean, I don't know because I was so little when it happened and Jim was maybe nine. Now Ceelie lives with two women and my aunt has Jim with her still and they go see a man and talk about what happens. It's bullshit, Jim says, mouth mean and small. Ceelie's lying. Only Ceelie flinches when anyone touches her. Only she is the one who my dad would always ask when we got into trouble: Who did it, Ceelie? What really happened? Ceelie's off with those women who we don't know right now but she still goes to the same school. It seems promising that she will be able to come home soon, they say. Dad doesn't tell me who they is though.

I was seven when my father told me that Sodom and Gomorrah deserved to be burned down. There had been a deal with God didn't I see? But there are kids there, I said. I was a kid myself. They hadn't done anything wrong. Anyone under five living there was corrupted, he said. Five is when your values grow.

Like a garden I guessed, all the carrots nodding politely to each other. That is a lot to hold in your head when you are seven. You twist it and turn it like a key or a lock or a rock just slightly too large to skip with one hand. There is a thing that is too big about a statement like that. There is a course set for you before five that you have no hand in but that's your parents working hard to make you not steal or not break or not hurt. It seems impossible. This is what I think of when my seventh grade history teacher says, Manifest destiny.

They come and ask me about Ceelie. Turns out they are two people a man and a woman, both in suits. What was Ceelie like? She was like spun gold from Rumpelstiltskin, always fair haired and sticking out. Only the story didn't say the hair was built so fine. I spent some nights with Ceelie and Jim didn't I while Dad was working or looking for work? Yeah. Did I ever see anything happen? No. We mostly sat around and Jim would bully us about homework, which Ceelie had of the doing-some-coloring sort and I had some reading and math. Did they ever spend time alone without me?

Well, yeah. There was always chores time upstairs I said. I feel stupid saying it. What was I thinking, believing that my aunt wouldn't let me upstairs. Didn't I care enough. Only they don't ask me that. Did I ever have Jim do anything to me? I tell them about how when we were younger we would go hunting for salamanders in my back yard. He would wait for me to name one before he'd start squishing it,slow under a rock limb by limb. I always wanted them to cry out, I said. Right before the woman cut me off. That's not the kind of information we're looking for, she said. I think it should be. There's something about the way he found the perfect rock to crush them that seems like it matters more than they think. The way he left them alive twitching and mouths open like they wanted to scream.

It doesn't make sense that Ceelie is the one who has to leave while Jim stays at home. It doesn't make sense that she is learning to have a new family, two nice women who are in love, according to some of their neighbors. Aunt Lisa is over at our house telling Dad

this and she laughs deep in her throat when she says Lesbians. Like they could understand having children.

My manifest destiny is to have people leave me. It did start before I was five years old and that means this is my life now. I practice being okay with it. Dad leaves me in the house alone for an hour between when wrestling practice lets out and he gets home, which is just barely legal for thirteen. When he drops me off at the bus stop in the morning I notice what it feels like to be left by watching his back recede. It feels like practice.

Aunt Lisa is leaving Jim alone after school. Dad doesn't like that. Jim should have someone to talk to about everything that's been going on, Dad says. I crack my knuckles and think about how much blood weighs. It must weigh on a lot to Dad. The difference must be that I have my mother in me, with her always moving away making me float off too. I'm always wanting to be away from this argument and examination from the neighbors. Mostly I want to learn how to

take Jim down and crush him from the knees on up.
Fulcrums are on my mind.

I've never understood what it's like to have a sibling. Dad says that I'm an old soul, probably because I can talk with the guys who work with him at the factory and because I can always say something that makes them laugh. Months go by and then Dad said how Jim is doing better and Ceelie is coming home soon. I ask why we can't just decide not to be related to Aunt Lisa anymore. Dad looks at me slow and sad for a few long minutes before he finishes up reading the newspaper. He is going to bed I am sure, back bent like a sapling turned into a homemade catapult. He is almost to the breaking point I can tell.

Then again Jim doesn't know what it's like to have a sibling either.

Ceelie will of course be seeing someone, Aunt Lisa

says when she is dropping her off at our house for after school. She and Dad went in on getting a babysitter for Ceelie and me even though I'm eight years older than her, and all Jim is doing is working after at the gas station until Aunt Lisa picks him up. Now Dave, my dad says, just be nice to Ceelie for a while. I don't know what he means. I'm always nice to Ceelie. Jim and I used to scrap it out but there is something about her big eyes that reminds me of a kitten we got one Christmas until Dad was allergic to it after a couple of hours. We had to return the kitten. Besides, after practice I have only that hour of the babysitter trying to talk to me. She's nice enough but I guess we always have to whisper.

During wrestling I made a kid pass out the other day but he was a good foot taller than me and that should count for something. Mom was built short and solid, even in the picture, because Dad and Aunt Lisa are all long and lean. I wish I had some more length to me for the leverage but all I have is the uniform that stretches across me squarely and Dad in the audience way too tall and cheering like a deer running in slow motion eyes

wide open. I want to peel away from him and family but I wave at the end. I never had a pet, so I guess I never learned how to let something go.

Dad brought Ceelie to a tournament match. Her hair stood out like always. She started crying when a guy got my lower lip hard and packed me down in my own blood. I flipped onto him and pressed down as evenly as I could let go as soon as the whistle sounded and I was bleeding solidly onto the ground below me. Everyone acted like it was a new thing for Ceelie to be crying but after I mopped myself up I let her check out how red my nose was and made her giggle. She's always been like that, I explained to my dad, she's just quiet, but Aunt Lisa sighed like this had caused an irreparable leak in her system. Ceelie seemed fine to me but our school lost the tournament.

Sometimes I think about hurting Jim for hours. Not particular ways, just the general hurt that can be caused when someone fights someone who doesn't know how to

fight. I want to learn mixed martial arts, I tell Dad. At night I dream about man after man coming before me with their fists up to protect their face as I beat them into the ground but every practice I end up pummeled anyway.

I think about those summers back behind my house a lot, how long and quiet the afternoons could seem behind the house down along the creek. Ceelie was either four or five the last time Jim hurt a salamander in front of me because I threw a rock at his head and after he ran away crying I turned to the salamander squished and twitching in the dirt. Ceelie watched me quite seriously as I found a bigger rock and stared down at the little body. I hope she was five and not four and not still learning because I laid that stone down on top of him and pushed down on his body and let gravity take him away. A perfect pin. I tell Ceelie, voice quiet, that sometimes they deserve to be put out of their misery.

A Momentary Flash of Roger

When I got home from a wedding photo shoot, I found Roger poring over print outs he'd made off of a camera card he'd borrowed from me. He had a magnifying glass out and everything, and there seemed to be hundreds of images all over the room. Pictures of every object we had in the house, from different angles, in slightly different lighting. I stepped out and made a call on my phone to his brother Michael who lived two streets over.

I went back inside and made myself a cup of hot cocoa and sat next to Roger.

"Christine," he said as he looked up at me. He smiled.

I put my hand on his. “Hey, baby.”

He straightened up the picture he was working on, looked down at it. “I’m in a pretty bad way, aren’t I?”

I didn’t say anything back.

The momentary flash of Roger disappeared quickly. He turned back to the pictures. “I’m sure there’s something in here,” he said. “There has to be, because I keep breaking your stuff. Maybe a crack in the system of the universe somewhere over our house.” He matched up two pictures of our wine glasses. “I don’t want to keep hurting you,” he said. “I think there must be something out to get me.” Rubbing at his face, he looked very much like pictures of him from when he was a child: large eyes, serious smile, an innate certainty about the world carried in the crane of his head forward from his shoulders.

Michael was knocking on the backdoor within half an hour. He was Roger’s business shade: shorter, stockier, with a suit that cut across the

shoulders sharply. His clothes made him certain, not something deep within himself. “Christine, we have to stop meeting like this.” From another man, it could have been a come-on. From Michael, it was a demand. “Where is he and what’s he doing now, super-gluing your stuff to the ceiling again?”

“Nothing dangerous.” Roger hadn’t fully secured some of the knives to the kitchen that day four months ago. “Just a lot of pictures. I think we may be able to talk him in.”

Michael waltzed through the door. “Well of course we’ll be able to, the man is crazy, not unreasonable.” He went through the kitchen to where Roger was seated in the den. “What’s up, old chap?”

Roger shuffled a few pictures around, and then picked five up in a fan shape. “We’re not British and I don’t like you. Christine, you may want to reconsider your bet. I have a straight flush.” He laid down five objects from an ex-boyfriend of mine: tenor sax, old-fashioned lantern, figurine of Aphrodite, figurine of Apollo, chunk of wood I used to keep the laundry room open because I hate locked doors. His grin: gotcha.

“You made a bet with him in this condition?” Some

days it felt like Michael was waiting for me to join Roger. The look he was giving me was mostly appraising but also willing to make a quick decision about my mental state.

I stood by the older brother, feeling twitchy. “Roger, Michael and I want to talk to you.”

Roger declined to turn around and pay attention to me. “Do I have a problem? Should I just... put the pictures down?”

“You know what’s wrong.” Michael puffed up as he was speaking to the back of Roger’s head. “We care about you.”

“You know how I feel about lying, Michael.” Roger went to a stool of mine and knocked on the top very seriously. He cocked his head toward the seat and waited.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Michael had a satisfied set to his posture, as he taunted his younger brother. Roger was five years old, wrongly accused of Michael’s thievery or painful adventure and pissed off about it. I wanted

to send them to their rooms, but left to his own devices Roger was apt to do more than finger paint for pleasure.

“I dislike lying. I never believe nor do I believe a lie and I think the effort is a waste of time.” Roger’s food had once been forgotten in a restaurant and he would have tipped her two cents every time we went back if I didn’t pull a consistent late bathroom stay and slip her a fiver. Michael would doubtlessly pay for this at some point in the future, probably when he wanted an investment from Roger and me.

“Well, whatever the case, we need to get you into the loony bin. You done gone crazy again.” Michael picked up a few pictures that were particularly zoomed in. “And quickly, I have better things to do than babysit you.”

I took the picture back. “Roger, they probably just need to adjust your medication.”

“Darling, they probably are working on a hit-or-miss basis on an imperfect system using poorly tested pharmaceuticals.” Roger turned to my clock on the kitchen wall and knocked on it very seriously. Just a few ticks of a response. “And I’m not in the mood, I’m close to something here.”

“Close to killing yourself and taking us all with you?” Michael had not mastered the stage whisper. I question the laws that require a family member to submit into a mental institution. Families seem to lead a person to the institution in the first place.

“Roger, will we get you to Marion’s in my car or do we have to call the ambulance?” I asked. I went to the hook with the keys pre-emptively. “We can bring your pictures and you can explain it to Doc.”

“Maybe.” He went to knock on the wood the hooks were attached to. I handed him his jacket.

“Now. Michael, bring the pictures. I’m going to grab Roger’s medications while he yells at you for touching his stuff.”

“You do enjoy rewarding me, don’t you Christine?” Michael began picking up the pictures out of order and smirked at Roger’s face as he went ripe with rage.

Roger was watching the new receptionist sign him in to the office. She looked up and backed her chair off two inches when she saw him staring.

“Can I help you?”

“You have lovely hair.” Roger, crazy or saner, could activate muscles near his eyes that made them crinkle very attractively. “You must spend a lot of time on it.”

“Don’t psych her out,” I said to him. “Your hair is lovely,” to her. She looked ready to bring out an extra set of in-patient papers if I started looking dangerous.

Roger was determinedly bringing out the pictures and arranging them in the waiting room. Michael and I sat on either side of him, Michael thumbing through his cell phone for ESPN updates. I considered hobbies that I should take up, with our tri-yearly visits to these waiting rooms. Maybe macramé. It was an hour until Doc made it out to see us.

Doc had been raised in small town Minnesota, had attended med school in Chicago, had fallen in love with his current wife two wives and a husband (hers) ago, thought that Roger was especially good company on downers, but he was more safe on anti-psychotics. Doc was nice enough and very patient with Roger and had been brought in on the case when everyone realized that Roger was a particularly good manipulator, for all that no lying business.

Doc smiled at us patiently over his desk. “So, how are we today?”

Michael smiled. “I’m fantastic!”

Roger glared at him.

“I’m doing all right,” I said loudly, to calm my partner down.

“I’ve been better. I’m close to a breakthrough and I’m sitting here talking to this lot.” Roger’s arms were crossed as he said this.

Doc leaned back in his chair. “What’s your breakthrough, Roger?”

“I’ve almost figured out why Christine is always having her heart broken.” He pulled out the pictures. “And her chairs, stools, various knick knacks, etc.” He pointed to an overview of the living room. “See? Her objects are circled in red here. They’re unevenly balanced, they have poor spirit, they don’t have enough room to breathe. With her permission, I can fix all of our problems.”

“Can we hurry this up?” Michael seemed spurred on by the darkening sky past Doc’s back. “I have things to do.”

I had three hundred pictures to look through, decide on, edit, post those images on my blog, questions

to respond to, appointments to book, and food to make. And a house to clean. And bills to pay. But it's a good thing we weren't going to be holding Michael back from his important fantasy football league for long.

Doc ignored Michael's rudeness. "Well, Roger, I think you should stay with us for a night. We seem to need to adjust your medication a bit."

I tried to hide my disappointment. I didn't want to have to leave Roger again. Last time he'd had to stay, Doc had offered me melatonin and a Valium. When I had refused, he slipped them into the pocket of my coat. They helped. Then again, the last stay had been a solid week.

"How badly do I need to stay?"

Doc considered the ceiling. "It's not a necessity at the moment, but I don't look forward to the future if you're left to your business."

Roger glared, put together the pictures in a very specific pattern, and then looked at me. "I'll be home soon. With a new cocktail meant to balance out my brain."

"I know." I leaned in to kiss him. "Thank you."

Doc had him sign the in-patient papers and then

Michael and I stood to leave. An orderly was waiting at the door. Before Michael and I made it out the door I turned and said to Roger's back, "I love you." I've been saying it for years and haven't expected anything in return. I try to not break my own heart too badly when I don't have to. I am a good girlfriend, lover, partner. I expect nothing in return. The door was closing the last time I looked back.

Mona's my best friend in the suburb that Roger and I moved to when I started making a little more money taking pictures. She's a sweetheart, owns her own fabric shop in town, and she's bulbous with pregnancy at the moment. Her parents named her Monalisa and she's been fighting with life since then. Her theory is that there's a big question out there for everyone.

"I mean, his whole family's smart, right? His mother was crazy too."

"I figured that's why he never said it back." I thumbed my finger across some reassuring cotton. "He's never had to say it. I figured he loved me in his own way. Obscurely, maybe. But he's having an

episode over me. Maybe this is proof, you know. That he cares”

Mona considered me. “That’s been your question though. After, ‘Can I love a crazy man’ it’s been ‘can he love me back?’” She smiled happily. “I guess you’re on to the next question, girl. You move fast.”

I shook my head. “I think he’s worse than ever. Someday he’s not going to come out.” I stood to help Mona move a new box of heavy materials. “But he’s never had an episode about someone else before. That has to mean something.”

“You think he’s saying he loves you and that makes him crazier than ever?” Mona carefully moved some silk across the room. “You guys sure have something going there.”

“Maybe my life is my big question, Mona. You ever think about that?”

She smiled at me. “Maybe this is your answer. You’ve put up with a lot. Maybe you’re going to be happy, again.”

Back home, small and sprawled, I began putting my belongings back around the house, speckled like constellations in the stuff that is Roger’s and that’s ours. It’s true, my belongings tend to be the ones that

Roger pushes against when he has a break. His little sister told me he used to do the same thing to her. Anything he didn't own was gone in the tornado of whatever happened in his head. I didn't blame him, since he had no reason to be sentimentally attached to my belongings.

I hated the thought of hurting myself more, but I couldn't help but consider that he had had a break over something involving me. That was probably worse for me in the long run. If I asked him outright, am I hurting you? Am I making you feel worse? he'd tell me, no matter how much the answer hurt. I like that he is honest with me, more than I would like an easy relationship. I like that he requires the truth of me, since that's something I'm used to getting in photographs.

I didn't have another photo-shoot for a until tomorrow before his visiting hours. There was no point in trying to see Roger before he'd been in group or had started an adjustment regimen for his medication, but I would go anyway. I turned back to the photos that I'd taken earlier today, as the night stayed obstinately black. The couple looked as happy as they'd been in person. Their edits were basic,

with a few deepening shadows and bringing out the blues that were evident in their church. I was just barely two years older than they, with a business of my own and a few mentions in magazines, especially bridal magazines. Roger had compulsively framed everything I'd ever gotten published, from the small newspapers when we first began dating to the banners for an upscale New York wedding. He put them up in my workroom when I wasn't around and the clustered frames had started making me nervous. They were surely getting too large and bulky for the walls.

My photography had gotten better since I'd been with Roger. His insistence on honesty meant that I couldn't take a picture that didn't show the quirks and the flaws. Even the rare glamour shot that I was hired for had the tooth gap front and center. I liked making clients laugh, usually with a story of Roger and I trying to vacation. He considered that a part of a normal life and a happy relationship, so even though we'd both rather stay snug in bed, we'd occasionally try to fly to Europe and return with a variety of vegetables that Roger wanted to cook in the states, to see if the way the water circled the

drain made a large difference on the taste. (It did not.) Everything from a dirty room to a flight that was delayed got a rise from Roger, who would very seriously argue with whoever he was talking to whether they could help the weather or not.

I uploaded the happy, normal couple to my website and linked them to it after doing the majority of edits on their favorite shots. There were a few more I'd get to in the morning that I had found particularly endearing, one where he was catching her falling from a pew, another where she was chastising him spilling some holy water. I sent her a specific e-mail with notes on my usual rates for boudoir photography, if she was interested in having something special for her beau. A sort of gentleman's pornography, which is something honest that no one wanted to hear even if it was true. I went to our bed, alone, and dreamt about nothing.

There is a part of me that feels unfair for enjoying the solitude on some days when Roger is at the hospital. Sure, he's unhappy and far too accustomed to talking to the orderlies there, and sure, we've been

together long enough that I still make breakfast for two most of the time. But there's something about watching all of our stuff grouped together that felt comforting and as though we were together even while he was apart. I liked making up lies about myself and telling them to an imaginary acquaintance.

"Yes, I do enjoy waterskiing. Well, my parents stayed together and that's just made me want to make a home. No, I'm consistently happy. Happier than I've ever been, probably."

Roger's mother was a liar, but Roger still had a picture of her over the oven. She wrote a memoir from a seventy six year old perspective of herself right before she died at forty-two. The publishing house almost published it as nonfiction under a pseudonym. Instead, her real name was put on a book of fiction with the same content. Her compulsions were the opposite of Roger's. But he loved her in his own way, the way you have to love your mother almost metaphysically. Every mother becomes a metaphor, and he knows that somewhere in there. I once tried to tell Roger that he was lying to me by not telling me about how he felt about his mother and families before we moved in together. The response from him: "I

didn't want you to run away." So achingly honest that I wanted to cradle him even though I was furious.

After my pancakes, I got into my car and drove to engagement photo shoot an hour outside of town. I showed up at and realized that my camera card is missing. This must have been Roger and I knew it. I hadn't even thought of how he had taken pictures of all my stuff. I didn't lie to the woman who was getting married in six months. "It was my own fault. Is there a store nearby?" It took me an extra twenty minutes to get there and back but the couple was patient and too in love to care too much. They spent time together, both happy to yell directions to me through the phone.

The shoot itself was outside of their house in a garden that she had cultivated for five years. The woman spent a lot of time being taken care of by the man, both of them deciding on shots and trying to make the other laugh while I was snapping pictures. There were a few shots where they were arguing about who made the decisions in the relationship, him with his arms crossed and standing imposingly over her and she pointing determinedly at the fence where they were considering sitting. I asked them what

they were looking forward to the most.

Her face as she looked at him as he answered me was soft and still. “I want to spend the rest of my life with this woman.”

His face was patient and so very strong. “I want to have a family. I want to be happy. I want to grow old together.”

They both laughed and said variations on, “We’re such a cliché” which never bothered me.

Later that second day when he was in the hospital, I was allowed to see Roger. I wore his favorite shirt of mine and brought a change of clothes and his own deodorant, so that he’d feel more like himself while getting back into his own headspace.

He smiled softly when I got into his room. He was sitting at the end of his bed, probably occupied with staring off into space and making the nurses feel nervous. He’s a beautiful man, even unshaved, even in his small hospital gown. I love to take pictures of him, the cheekbones that were made for soft flash and his large lips.

“Chris-tine,” he said, like in the song. I sat down next to him and pressed into the line of his shoulder. “How have you been?”

I didn't answer. We fought a lot about whether this was lying or not when we first began dating. I decided it wasn't if he was reading my mind as he seemed to.

"I'm sorry, love." He was fuzzy, the medication taking a slow adaption time into his blood stream.

I guessed that he was on something new to lessen the paranoia. "They say I can come back home for a while but that I'll have to be back to see how the transition is going every two days. I'll only go back if you want me to."

I began tracing along the tendons in his wrist. "Of course I want you to. Maybe this will be it. What helps."

Roger went deep into his own head after that, and I knew he wouldn't be back for a while, but I spent some time memorizing the hard blocks and planes of light on his face. We were not any cliché I had heard of, no fallen apples or feathered birds. But we were in the geometry of that light on his face, that I showed up that day. We were something as true as the skeletons that Roger refused to leave in our closets. That meant something, I was thinking. I was sure of it. Then an orderly came and said sorry he was so

sorry but I had to go. I thought about wanting to spend the rest of my life with Roger, the happy couple that we could be, and knew that he would hear the honesty in them too clearly and wouldn't be close enough to listen. So I left.

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