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The Taste of Salt

by Jon Vreeland

Silence. Then...Crunching of gravel under my black beat-up Chuck Taylors. What are they looking at? What do they see while locked in a casket—mahogany, black, white, or whatever colors the mourners chose—buried under six feet of the earth's soil, a layer of green for the topping? I wonder if their eyes ever adjust to the dark, or are feasted on by all the critters which reside with the body...

The wind's gentle serenade breaks the silence. I stop at the first row of bodies resting in an almost analogous slumber, and, on my hands and knees, I struggled to read the inscription on the black marble gravestone with silver sparkles—a perfect match to the night sky. Carmen Nieves, Beloved Mother and Daughter, 1902-1983. I could almost hear her breathing. Her heart-beat rattling the diamonds placed on her chest. Her dress made of silk. Scarlet like her lips. Another perfect match. There is nothing like a stroll through the graveyard on a warm winter night.

It was so romantic this romance with death. I thought about the time my number one lover and I held hands, Heroin and yours truly, plodding along the shores of Huntington Beach. I hadn't seen my mistress lately—the ever so sensual Crystal Meth—paranoia was her best quality and no help to my long suffered insomnia. I did not miss her—although Crystal had saved my life a number of times when she re-started my heart; a shot of Crystal to the neck, a shot my mother would even support. But sadly, I was perfectly content with the one who often lead me into the dark quarry of an overdose. Commonly, both of my lovers would borrow blood from wherever possible, infect it with their toxins so deleterious, and re-gift it to yours truly. My eyes closed. And on that day my number one and I made love, but my mistress was nowhere to be found, unable to start my heart due to her absence. Who cares? My skin stained red. White. Blue. How patriotic death can be...

It felt like nothing at first, but this overdose was the same as walking through the woods with a strange feeling I was being followed. Every time I looked back nobody was there. I could hear breathing. I could hear laughing. I tried to run but my legs felt like rubber—weights tied to my feet. There were footsteps...quickly getting louder. The laughter furious, like a witch gone mad, spitting on the wrath of God. The clouds infiltrated the night sky, smothering the moon and the stars, fog appeared out of nowhere, oozing from the dirt floor of the forest. I was blind. My legs growing weaker. It was gaining on me. Closer...faster...louder. I fell to the ground and started crawling as fast as I could. The fog felt like ice. The dirt was numbing my hands as if it were icy snow. The weights on my feet were pulling my now paralyzed legs underground. My nails scratching at the ice cold dirt, trying to stay above ground...tearing at the dirt until my entire finger nails were buried underground, leaving me with blood painted nails. I was screaming. The laughter got louder. Cacophony only the Devil would deem gorgeous and pure. Finally, the ground had disappeared from my hands. I was lying on my stomach at the edge of a cliff, looking over the edge, wondering if I could fly. I tried to pulling myself to my feet but was still paralyzed....Then, something bit my neck until I woke up....

I jolted straight up with the needle still dangling from my neck. The tears rolled down their faces while they stood over me like they were looking down a well checking for snakes before they lowered themselves in. I could taste the salt of tears in my mouth. My brain worked overtime trying to remember what happened. Nothing came to mind. More salt, more light, more voices. My eyes fluttered as someone squeezed my hand and kissed my cheek over and over. Now my lips...More salt, but not my own.

I heard her speak while I looked around to see where I was. More salt. Mine, hers, and the taste was not of the sea. My vision coming back until I saw her. Wiping my neck with a red Kleenex, cleaning up the demise that rolled down my dying skin; and with no sigh of relief, and no remorse from me or my artificial lovers, our night continued, and our so-called life staggered on. Holding hands in a dim and desolate place.

Day after day, night after night, I walked aimlessly with no purpose, no direction. A broken spirit, a withering soul. My addiction was living death, purgatory—no Heaven and no Hell. Just me and my artificial lovers. The number one, so viscosly dressed in black. And occasional visits from my mistress, Crystal, the one dressed in white. This deadly love triangle provided a surfeit of wickedness camouflaged as love. I awaited my death but I was already dead—the joke was on them, they were beating a dead horse.

I trampled over thousands upon thousands of dead bodies in the Carpentaria cemetery that night. It was a beautiful starlit night and it was oh so beautiful. Not the thought of the decaying cadavers. The skeletons arrayed for the masquerade or ball in imposing attire. Nor the shadows dancing by the light of the moon, hand in hand, ethereal shadows perpetually in love, but the letters and numbers gilded on their gravestones; a fleeting summary of their lives. Name, beloved mother, beloved daughter, son, father, birthday. The gravestones paint a picture, showing they had people who cared, and ultimately, people who mourned their absence—even if they were infected with the disease of addiction. That was the beauty I saw. People who led fervent lives, with perseverance, valor, and a lust for life that would make Iggy Pop smile.

Today, my lover, my mistress, the triangle, are gone. Vanished into thin air, but only from my eyes. Sometimes they visit my dreams uninvited. Longing for my kiss, my touch, my fixation. Serenading me so maliciously. Waiting for my return. Abolishing my resurrection, bringing an invitation to, once again, dance with the dead. But I would rather walk through the dark night holding God's hand with thousands of well-dressed corpses smiling at the silhouettes who continue to dance to the beautiful music. So hypnotic. So real. They are not dead. They never died. Their life has just begun. Spirits and souls in another world. The better world God intends for us. The world where guardian angels hover over our shoulders, camouflaged by thin air, and sometimes human flesh. Protecting us from demons and the devil himself. A world where death does not exist.

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Dawn to Dusk

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by Molly Gaines

The only light was shining from the moon and a singular streetlight, which could barely be made out through the trees in the distance. Gravel crunched so loudly under my feet that it seemed deafening, and the only other sound was the constant hum of cicadas that created a suffocating blanket of white noise. As I made my way through the pitch black I wondered how somewhere so close to campus, within feet of a main building and so many students, could seem so all encompassing and desolate. I figured it was a figment of my imagination and that I was just manifesting an invisible threat and adding to my own anxiety. I told myself that the trail had been designed to inspire peaceful thoughts, provoke tranquil feelings and as a convenient cut-through to the back parking lot. These logical thoughts helped to push some of my uneasiness aside and I tried to focus on that as I continued my walk along the trail.

Winding paths lined with sectioned logs and surrounded by collapsed and rotting vegetation lead to several small clearings. Placed strategically inside of the clearings are several stone structures with surrounding pieces of wood. As I passed each clustered area, the purpose of the structures perplexed me. The wood stumps and make-shift benches were placed around the stones as if they were tables. I got the impression that they would not make an ideal table because of the uneven surface, short height, and lack of leg space underneath. Did they have another purpose and why were they such an odd shape? Did we not have anything better to dedicate our funding to? Just as I was delving into the rabbit hole that my preoccupied mind can turn in to, I heard an unfamiliar noise coming from the opposite end of the trail. Before my mind could register the noise as being out of place, an odd thought popped into my mind. Those structures look exactly like altars. The kind you see in horror movies that are used to make the sacrificial offerings, human sacrificial offerings. I scoffed at the idea and thought the only thing being sacrificed was my tuition money.

I realized that the strange noise had continued and I was still unable to place it. The noise sounded something like a horse, decked out in bells, dragging a lame leg, but softer. Jingle, jingle, clip, clop, dragggggg. Clip, clop, jingle, dragggggg. My breath got caught in my throat as I started to mentally list the reasons why no one else should be on the trail at that time of night. The cicadas had fallen silent and the sound of them was replaced by my heart beating wildly in my chest. My upper lip began to sweat and I could hear the blood rush through my ears as the sound grew closer, louder. The realization that I may be in actual, real life danger froze me in my tracks.

I considered running back the way I had come. I thought about pulling out my penknife and trying to put up a fight. I had already imagined a million gruesome ways in which this creature had ended my life, and it seemed like an eternity before I was able to move again. Just as the noise reached me and began to round the corner, I threw up my arms and started to frantically swing them in the darkness. "Officer report back," crackled from a radio and a stunned security guard, with a broken leg and crutches, stared wide-eyed at me. The keys on his belt jingled, as he nervously adjusted his belt.

I let out a yelp of surprise and maniacal laugh that echoed off the trees and into the night. He seemed to be as surprised as I was and without missing a beat he said "Hey! The trail is only open from dawn to dusk. It's not safe to walk through here after that." I managed to croak out a thank you and wobbly continued to my car. As I stepped out of the tree line and into the clearing of the parking lot, I shook my head at my own stupid paranoia. I could feel my cheeks burning and the cold sharp sting of my sweat-soaked shirt. I glanced down into my purse to grab my keys and that's when I felt the bright white pain of something crashing into my skull. I only remember that the already dark night faded away completely, into nothing.

When I wake the pain from my head is so horrendous that I can feel myself begin to vomit. I open my eyes and the agony increases tenfold. All I can see are stars blinking against the ink of the sky and I force myself to think coherently. Where am I? What has happened? How long have I been here? I cannot remember details and manage to lose consciousness again. When I come to, I struggle to put together a series of events. The sound, the security guard and his broken leg, then what? I need to establish my surroundings. I sap all of my strength to lift my neck up and look around. The place seems familiar and strange at the same time. There are stone structures and wooden seats exactly like the trail on campus but we seem to be in an underground chamber or cave. There are candles and lanterns lit and I am chained to one of the stone structures. Around my stone, carved into the dirt, is some type of drawing and words in a language that I can't understand. This stone doesn't seem entirely different than the others except the thick covering of blood on the top. A deep, sinking feeling takes over me and the last thing I hear is the jingle of keys.

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The Cost of Stamps

by Austina Davis

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"Jenna?" It was the lady from the voicemails I hadn't been returning for weeks.

"This is Jenna."

"Jenna, it's Tammy, your dad's girlfriend." My dad, she means Johnathan. I hate when people call him my dad. At best he's a shitty excuse for a father figure. What does she keep calling me for? I hadn't seen or heard from him in over ten years.

"Oh, hi Tammy. Sorry I haven't gotten back to you, I've just been really busy," busy avoiding her. "How's it going?"

"Not too well, Jenna. Your dad," her voice cracks for a moment and instantly sews itself back together. "He's not doing too well."

"What's going on?" I try to sound concerned but it comes out flat.

Kidney problems. She explains the last two years in terms of diagnoses and doctors appointments. I don't feel anything. I imagine this was the way Johnathan felt the first time he saw me. He was staring back at me from across a table of lawyers. My mom had dragged me to some court hearing with her. I don't remember much about that day, just that there was a round table and this guy with pompous eyes looking my way trying to decide if he felt anything, wondering why he didn't.

When we left, I asked my mom who he was. She simply answered, "That was your dad."

I thought I would have recognized him, felt his presence or something. I thought his voice might be hardwired in my brain somewhere. I tried to recall what it sounded like the Father's Day my mom made me call him. I was uncomfortable with the whole thing. Even at ten years old I could smell the manipulation; I knew I was being used as a pawn.

Tammy, who was now on the phone talking about dialysis machines and end-stage renal disease, picked up the phone that day. My mom had told me about her years ago through jealous, hurt filled words. "She can't have kids, that's why Johnathan is with her. He never wanted any."

I was ten that year and when he answered I gave a rehearsed, "Happy Father's Day." He asked who I was and my mother replied.

My memories get interrupted by the voice on the other line-"we're just not sure how much longer he's going to make it. And he's been asking to see you Jenna."

"I'm sorry, he wants to see me?" If he wanted to see me so bad, why hadn't he? Was his impending death the only reason he would want to? Obviously, everyone tries to make amends in the end.

My half-sister had already been there. Tammy rambled on. Of course she had, he still talked to her. Some part of him had always wanted some part of her. I on the other hand wasn't really wanted from the start. I told people I was a love child, never bothering to tell them my mom was the only one in love. He assumed because he was cheating on her that, naturally, she was too and that I wasn't his from the very beginning. I was two when the paternity tests came back and he finally gave me the rights to his name. That was the only thing I had in common with Johnathan.

"I'll try to make it up this weekend if I can."

"I'm not sure if he'll make it through the weekend, Jenna. It would be so good for him to see you. Really I would try to come tomorrow or the next day and bring some pictures? You know for the wake." The words drop a pit in my stomach.

"You really think he's not gonna make it through the weekend?"

"I've been trying to reach you for weeks. It's okay though, busy schedule I understand, and we all know Johnathan's no good in the communication department."

"I'll see what I can do."

I hang up the phone and walk to the kitchen to pour myself a whiskey. Gray is filtering through the early evening sky as my hand shakes while I strike a match to light my cigarette. I let my mind wrap around the smoke surrounding my face and try to feel something for me. Johnathan was dying, is going to die. I can't make the distinction between his death and our relationship now. I don't know how to feel anything for him anymore.

I didn't feel for him when I was younger, not until that day in the court room where I saw him and realized he didn't want anything to do with me. That was the first time I felt hurt by his existence and his refusal to acknowledge mine. It was a few years after that we met for the first time. I was confused why after fifteen years he would all of a sudden decide to meet me. My mom cleared that up. "We agreed if he would just see you, he didn't have to pay child support."

When I did finally meet him, I pretended not to be bothered by his absence in my childhood. I tried not to ask him about the past because I was scared of his answers. Instead we would talk about my schoolwork mostly. Neither of us brought up the past on those bi-weekly lunch dates. We would stretch conversations paper thin and he would take me home; I got a card in the mail from him about once a month just to say hi. If he missed picking me up one week, I would get an extra card and some cash. He didn't really ask much of me, no intrusive questions like my mom, no prying around about boys or my friends, didn't judge any decision I was making. He even admitted to me that he had no room to give me advice. I appreciated his honesty and distance.

I make my way through my first drink and hold the last sip in my mouth. I let the whiskey sit until the peppery notes numb my pallet and I swallow the warmth down. I go to my closet and pull out my photo albums.

I pour them on the ground and wave them out. I look through half the pile before I find a picture with both of us in it. We're at my homecoming game. I try to ignore the mirror image our profiles create. I see myself in him and him in myself. Our Minnie Mouse noses tipped to the night air. I catch a hint of smile caught between our dark brown eyes. He drove four hours one way to come see me cheer that night. I forgot that I was actually happy to see him. That was the last trip he made before he couldn't make the drive anymore because of his back problems.

His back problems eventually became a familiar excuse. He had lied to the courts when I was younger about his so called "disability" to avoid paying child support. My mom would spend hours driving around town with a disposable camera trying to catch him working for himself. From time to time she would get a blurry picture of him mowing lawns, nothing the courts would take over his doctor's note though. It was on one of those trips I mistook him for my younger brother's dad.

He strutted up to the window and talked up my mom. They laughed a bit and I looked out the window towards the setting sun. The sky transformed from pink to orange to star kissed dusk by the time we drove away. It was the court house all over again when I asked her why Aiden's dad was over at the Scarberrie's. She handed me a tissue and turned the radio up to muffle out my crying.

I stayed at Sabrina's that night, one of those late night slumber parties after we were too old for dolls, but too young to drive. That night Heather found a way to cry about her dad for hours, which eventually became routine. He had left the year before and took a little piece of her heart with him. She blamed him for every mistake she was making in her life; why she loved Roberto even though he cheated on her with Becky Sanders, why she was flunking math, why she had an eating disorder. You could see the pity in our friend's eyes; all their parents were still together. I never wanted that sort of sympathy, never wanted anyone to blame any one of my short comings on the lack of relationship I had with my father.

I went back to looking at the picture, lost in the dominance his features played in my face. I had searched for years for any trace of myself in my mother; it wasn't there. A few months after the photo, when I turned eighteen and Johnathan was no longer legally financially responsible for me, he faded away. His transition out of my life was almost seamless. I was busy starting my freshman year of college and didn't have time to talk to anyone. That's where he saw the opportunity to drop me. I didn't really notice his absence until the cards stopped coming. Just like that, things were back to the way they had been before I had met him.

My mom ran into him a couple years after he stopped talking to me and I guess he still remembered me. Remembered enough to agree with my mom that I was wasting my life not being a doctor or a lawyer, that's what she said anyway.

I sat for an hour sifting through the photos. At the end of my search I found two photos of Johnathan and me and one of him and my mom. There were hundreds of memories surround at my feet. Half of them were friends and a handful were childhood photos I stole from my mom, but only three of them were of Johnathan. I grabbed the address Tammy had given me earlier and headed out the door.

I stopped at CVS and grabbed a sorry for your loss card. I stuck the photos and \$75 inside before I dropped it in the mailbox.