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Household Incidence

Abstract

It started in June when I watched my 6-year-old brother fall off the branch of the big oak tree in front of our house. The garden hose, tied around his waist for safety, slipped down his bony body and dropped him head-first, 15 feet, into the grass. He died just as the ambulance arrived, brain separated from spine. My family told me it wasn't my fault, that I called the ambulance as soon as I could. We hugged each other. We wept. I triple wrapped each of my toes with rubber bands so tight they turned deep blue. I put my socks on. I never untied. My toes fell off and I placed them in a Ziplock bag and labeled it "penance" with a red sharpie. I put the bag in the ice compartment of the fridge-freezer combo I bought with money from my nursing home job. I filled the fronts of my shoes with extra socks to soak the blood until it coagulated, until it scabbed over...

Cover Page Footnote

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Household Incidence

Fiction by Ryan Bollenbach

It started in June when I watched my 6-year-old brother fall off the branch of the big oak tree in front of our house. The garden hose, tied around his waist for safety, slipped down his bony body and dropped him head-first, 15 feet, into the grass. He died just as the ambulance arrived, brain separated from spine. My family told me it wasn't my fault, that I called the ambulance as soon as I could. We hugged each other. We wept. I triple wrapped each of my toes with rubber bands so tight they turned deep blue. I put my socks on. I never untied. My toes fell off and I placed them in a Ziplock bag and labeled it "penance" with a red sharpie. I put the bag in the ice compartment of the fridge-freezer combo I bought with money from my nursing home job. I filled the fronts of my shoes with extra socks to soak the blood until it coagulated, until it scabbed over.

Then dad lit himself on fire. He was grillmaster for the community picnic. He used PVC glue as starter fluid. My older brother and I watched as the first bit of fire flicked onto his shirt. He tried to pat it out. He looked like Hulk Hogan slapping his pumped up chest. We laughed, then the flame streamed across the glue on his body into the glue bottle. The bottle exploded. Fire engulfed him. His skin lit up the bottom of the pavilion roof like a sparkler. We were too shocked to move until we smelled his singing flesh. We called the firemen, threw him on the ground, then rolled him like they taught us in elementary school. Guilt ran into our lymph nodes because we took

so long to react, so for the next week we got high or drunk to sleep. After a month of visits to the hospital, PBRs for lunch, and Oxycontin for dinner, the doctor said dad was finally ready to leave, but he would have that light white netting etched into his skin forever.

Dad could see our guilt. He bought us a trampoline, but we found no comfort in polymers or metal. We needed scars. We needed cookie cutters so we bought them, cutters in the shape of an eight, and PVC glue. We locked ourselves in our room, laid down on the carpet, and pushed the cookie cutters hard into our chests so the glue wouldn't leak through the sides. We struck matches and lit the adhesive. Our burnt flesh peeled like snakes shedding skin. We imagined families living inside our blisters like little skin tents. We drank our dad's whiskey and stopped wearing shirts. We reminisced about ditching school and breaking our arm falling off the fence after getting drunk behind the classroom trailer. We wondered if the little families were drowning in our pus.

Two weeks later mom cut her right arm off with her circular saw. The cut was just above her elbow. She was watching my brother, dad, and I jumping on the trampoline while she cut lumber to make herself a canoe. She wanted to be under the mango trees. It was the only place she felt safe. We wrapped the bloodied end with butcher paper and put her arm in the fridge in hopes they might reattach it at the hospital. She got to stay in the same room dad did, was even assigned the same doctor. He told us that she would be okay, but he would never be able to reattach her arm. The doctor had some premium prosthetics to sell, he assured us, but because of our recent medical expenses all we could afford for mom was an aluminum hook. The doctor told us to be more careful.

As a family, we decided to curb this bad luck once and for all. Medical debt wouldn't stop us. Our mom took the grindstone from her shed and sharpened three of the four iron rods the trampoline sat on. It took two weeks to get them sharp as steak knives, but Mom was proud when she was done.

On Independence Day we barbecued our severed arms in the front yard. We ate our own sweet meat, skewered on our hooks, and drank warm beers together. We leaned back in lawn chairs to watch the fireworks. We traded stories about my little brother until the early morning when the boom of bottle rockets and roman candles subsided.

At 3 a.m., a drunk man drove by the front of our house, missed the stop sign, and swerved and hit Cleo, the neighbor's family dog. He didn't stop, but he did slow to make sure it wasn't a human. As soon as he saw Cleo's corpse, he accelerated hard. He swerved into a telephone pole 30 feet out.

We looked at each other and knew. We ran to him. Dad picked his door lock with his hook, ripped him from his seat, and tossed him face first onto the ground. We kicked him in the stomach and smashed his fingers with the heels of our shoes. His bones sounded like popcorn cracking. He screamed hollow apologies, which made it worse. Mom started. She cut off the sleeve of her shirt and stuffed it into his mouth. With her hook, she ripped the back of his shirt open and carved a jagged circle into his skin. My brother and I shaped a center in the circle, jagged, but narrowing on parallel ends, a snake swallowing its tail. Dad slowly and carefully shaved the scales of the snake's body until enough blood pooled on his back to catch the streetlight and glisten. The man passed out from the pain so, together, we picked him from the ground with our hooks and put the shirt on his back. We placed him in the driver's seat.

Ryan Bollenbach is the poetry editor for the *Black Warrior Review*. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Quarterly West*, *The Ampersand Review*, *inter|rupture*, and elsewhere. Find him on Twitter at [@SilentAsIAm](https://twitter.com/SilentAsIAm).