

*Editor's
Choice*

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WAYS AND MEANS

Fiction

I am in an elevator with a fat man. We are going up and I am looking down at the floor, a cheap parquet in need of urethane. The tongues of his Nike Airs have been removed and his ankles are lost to the thick flesh forced into those voiceless shoes. When the doors part he steps aside, offering a quiet smile, and I am struck by his high, decent style. He walks behind me down the winding hall, his breath is loud and struggles like some used-up dog. His pants scrape, sand paper between tremendous, dimpled thighs; his feet pound the floor in offbeat percussion to his labored stride.

We enter the same office; Dr. Singer welcomes us and calls him Paul. For two years Dr. Singer has been my shrink, every Tuesday from two until three. Last week I told him he had done well, for six months now no hospital, no IVs, no feeding tubes in me. He said the laurels are for my crown and referred me to this group therapy.

There are five more patients in the room; two, like me, are skeletal with disease. There are three, like Paul, corpulent, overblown balloons. I count the circled chairs and come to eight, and then complain there must be some mistake, this mixing up of cats with dogs. Dr. Singer adjusts the wire rims resting on his nose, runs fingers through his aged, white hair, "Leslie, we all walk down a road." He gestures to an open chair for me.

I take my place between one girl fat, the other thin. I cross my arms and wrap my two legs into one for safety and for warmth. I look out the window to the ripe and budding tree. I know that oak from my hours here from two 'til three. Some days it speaks to me.

In Singer's circle we talk of vomiting and starving and hiding food and shame. Candace cries about the seat belt extension on her flight from Nashville to LA. The bulimic worries over dental bills for bleeding gums and rotting teeth. I talk of the pills I take to speed me up, the food I make and give away, of running in the dark. Marla is pissed to be obese and blames it on her genes. The biggest man of all speaks of children's stares, his folded skin and parts difficult to clean. The girl skinnier than me has gained two pounds, up from 83. Paul says he is smart and has done well but has never kissed a girl.

Dr. Singer recalls the ancient alchemy between the spirit world and matter, the ying and yang, the night and day, the body and the soul. He says the journey into each full life must pass through some dark hour. He speaks of Dorothy on yellow bricks passing through the forest, chasing monkeys, beating trees and drowning the wicked sister. He believes our hardest hours and deepest fears, if we can walk into them, prove to be our medicine and ticket back to Kansas.

"It's been ten years since I crossed my legs," says Marla. She glares at me.

I draw my legs beneath my chair. Marla is fatter than Paul, dressed in loud paisley with hoops in her ears that I can stick my arm right through.

"It's been ten years since I last ate cake." This is all I say.

"What? Did you people hear that?" Hot red blotches swathe Marla's pickled neck, she hisses and seethes. Her short arms flap, like some lame bird, wildly in the air.

She looks around the silent group for support and sympathy then, mouth agape, she squints her eyes and lands her stare on Dr. Singer.

He raises his hands as if to pray and rests his chin upon them. He looks at Marla, then at me and slightly tilts his head.

Marla arches in her chair, spits at me and then begins to howl. She grabs her neck, "Eat this you starving little cunt. Pathetic, anorexic bitch."

Marla is the large walrus at the aquarium barking on the rocks. I want to buy dead minnows to feed her and shut her up.

"You think I'm some enormous cake made with pounds of lard. You're so wrong. I'm smaller than you. I'm the size of an ant."

Dr. Singer passes Marla tissues. She dabs her eyes, honks her nose and hacks back her phlegm. Candace asks for one as well, she pinches her nose to hold her tears. I uncross my legs, shift my weight; the bulimic picks her nails; the man with folded skin is lost, snoring in his chair. The one who weighs less than me gives the sleeping guy a nudge. He rouses mumbling an apology, blaming narcolepsy.

Dr. Singer says to him, "You must stay present to the work."

"People take pleasure in crushing ants," Marla says.

"It's true," says Candace, "I step without remorse."

"I've stirred their hills with sticks," the bulimic says.

"I've heard of Buddhist monks," Paul says, "that carry little brooms, to sweep the street before each step because they value ants."

Dr. Singer nods and smiles.

"Give her a broom," Marla says, her eyes dead upon me.

I say, "I'm sorry. I meant no harm. But I haven't eaten cake."

The bulimic asks about my birthdays.

I list my lies of being full or having already eaten, feigning allergies, illnesses, claiming diabetes. The list is legion, my ways and means, of avoiding food and celebration.

"How sad," says Paul, "Cake is part of life. If I have three wishes come to me, one will buy you cake."

His wish floats in the air boxed in white with ribbons hanging down. Now my oak is thick with green. It stirs the air, I feel its wafts; the box drifts in my direction.

"Cake consumes my days," Candace says. The bulimic nods her head.

Cake blocks the fattest man of all from life's finer things: good jobs, good times, good sex.

Paul's wish does not go, but hovers by my head. I am sitting on my hands.

There are voices back and forth.

"No one wishes cake for me." Marla shakes.

“You don’t need cake. You need to lose some weight.”
“All you do is whine.”
“I saw on TV, some guy lost weight, eating only Subways.”
“I hate you people. You all are mean.”
“I want to circle back to Leslie,” Dr. Singer says.
I look out the window to the yellowed, burning oak.
“Leslie?”
“Something’s gone,” I say.
“What’s gone?” Dr. Singer says.
A leaf? A forest? A life? A pound or nine? A wish, a ruby slipper?
I shrug. “I’m not sure I ever caught its name but I do know that I miss it.”
That is all I have to say.

Marla rocks and moans and cannot speak for coughing at the floor. She might vomit on her feet but all she does is drool.
Dr. Singer stands before her and lifts her back to sitting.
“You let them hurt me,” she says to him, “I hate you most of all.”
He is talking of her opportunity this hour, of choices she might make.
“I want a wish to make me pretty.”
That is all Marla has to say.

The box is resting in my lap.
I unwrap myself, walk to Paul, and kiss him on the lips.
“You are fine,” I say to him.
The girl skinner than me whispers, “Oh my God.” The fattest man drops his jaw. The bulimic blushes. Marla whispers, “Slut.” Dr. Singer asks me to collect myself and insists I find my chair.
I have heard of sacred prostitutes that worked the ancient temple. They welcomed strangers in the night and introduced them to the heavens. They gave themselves not to men or to the world but to the Wholly Other. In their corners, in the night, they brought the spirit world to matter.
“Whatever,” I say to Dr. Singer.

It nears time to go. Dr. Singer invites us all to breathe: to take in love and release self hate, to draw in life and let go of death. I take in the bare, wintering oak. It feels good to hold a tree inside of me. I hear it whisper, “We’ll make it to spring.”

I am in the elevator with Paul. We are riding down and I look up into the mirrored ceiling. From above I cannot see his shoes. The doors part and we exit into the late afternoon sun as reggae beats happily from some bar down the block. We walk side by side to my car.
“Thank you,” he says, “You have no idea.”
I kiss Paul again, this time long and hard and I lift my arms like branches. In this moment, in this now, there is alchemy in matter.