

Senseless

a story
by Michael Descy

I dread the night. The cold. The scrape of my boyfriend's fingers on my skin, his chapped lips brushing against my forehead as he tucks me in. It's not his fault. I tell him that, but how can this small truth matter? Steve still suffers. I still suffer. I was so in love with him and all that was smashed to atoms in those ten minutes he wasn't even there. Now for nineteen hours a day I'm not even there. I am a ghost. I am a vessel for what little of my sister is left.

Her rage is a searchlight slicing through the darkness inside me. Its hard light accentuates certain features; my whole life is film-noir. I look at my face in the mirror and can see her staring back in shock and in wonder. Moreover, I can see myself, panting and sweat-slicked and shaking, black pupils wide and searching. I can see myself reaching for something—a bottle, a doorknob, a gun. Reaching for something I can't see.

It shouldn't be like this I used to be good I should just go on and live on and break out and live free and alone somewhere I should just walk out and keep going even if I starve its better and safer than this I've been through the worst of it what's left a trucker a drug lord some street thug I'm not afraid I've been through too much it all seems too much I can't look at him but where should I go which direction will take me away if I walk to far I'll end up back here again maybe its me maybe he's right it's the same wherever I'll go he'll kill me he'll tell what I've done he'll crush in her heart he'll crush in my skull and I'm all to blame I've lost I've lost I'm lost he's last on my list and I'm lost and I'm dying to get out of this cage to claw through these walls to tear through his chest and rip out his heart and bite into his neck and to dismember that slimy repulsive thing that dangles down there only then only then only then can I shatter these walls the walls of this house of this room of my teetering heart my ravaged insides my poisoned body my polluted self I will be free of this shit I'll be free of this shit I'll be free I'll be free I'll be free

And I'm back to myself, heart ringing like a telephone lodged in my throat. This is not me speaking in my sleep. This is no memory. I am panicked, coming down some sort of rush, some sort of drug-induced lunacy. Dry as a leaf, I am a forest ready to burn.

My sheets, though, are soaked—I hope it's cold sweat—and I drag myself to the shower and just stand there under the faucet, still in my pajamas, letting them soak through, letting the water beat her spirit out of me, hoping it will wash away her pain. I feel naked here. Cold and naked. My soaked-through pajamas cling to me lecherously and I have to peel them off to feel warm again.

I worry about the stirrings in my stomach. The doctor swears it's just nerves, maybe too much caffeine. The tests keep coming back negative, but I swear I feel it kicking. All day I feel it climbing my intestines like a staircase, pulling itself to its feet by its tiny fingers curled around my esophagus. At night, I feel her digging down, drilling through, pulling out.

I want it out of me. I do, I do, I do. I've been trying to remember what it feels like to be intact. I need to remember what it means to be in love, to feel safe, to feel secure. I should feel empty now but I'm filled to the brim.

The face of my alarm clock glows dully, a cat's eye staring blindly across the room. It winks the minutes in my direction. It's so late it's early. My stomach grumbles like a three-year-old in need of a nap. My head throbs; I tear through my cabinets, but I've got nothing that cures just that. I improvise. So well in fact that I drift to the floor like a sheet of paper. My mind thuds into the past.

"Don't think I'm faking it," I told him, the "counselor" at my bedside. The shrink who never bothered to get an advanced degree. "I'm not, you know. She's inside me, writhing like a worm, teeming like a virus."

"Really?" he asked me. "How's your sister like a virus?" I could hear the hard drive in his head clicking, calculating my insanity bit by bit.

The crisp hospital sheets chafed against my legs. My brain swelled with her poison. The neurons popped like pimples—I could hear them burst, spreading her disease. The IV dripped and I couldn't stop it.

"I'm afraid she's going to take over."

He nodded. "Uh-huh."

“I talk in my sleep, you know. Does that make me crazy?”

“No.”

“Last night I was rambling so loud I woke myself up.” I stopped and looked at him. “How long have I been here?” I asked.

“Three days, Sarah. With all you’ve been through, I bet it feels like longer.”

I wasn’t sure what it felt like. Maybe it was clean and scratchy like those sheets. Maybe it was as hot and wet and sticky as the gash in my forehead. My blood moved through my veins as slowly as the geriatrics ambled down the hall. My eyes fell on his two manicured hands. They were folded in his lap.

“Don’t you have a pad or anything?” I asked.

He shrugged. I might as well have been talking to a coat rack.

“You were close to your sister,” he said.

“That’s a statement, not a question.”

“Were you close?”

“Not as close as we are now.” I watched him sitting there, cross-legged, absently polishing his perfect thumbnail like a pearl.

Why must every answer be a dare? I was sick of this game. “Look, dickhead,” I wanted to say, “I didn’t *mean* to jump my car over that curb. I didn’t *realize* the drainage ditch was only ten feet deep. My car was totaled and all I got is this gaping head wound. I should be wearing that on a fucking T-shirt.”

My eyeballs throbbed.

If only that prick could hear it like I’m hearing it now, nine months later.

Steve screams. A siren wails. I’m lifted off the floor, lifted out of myself. I’m jounced about. An alarm clock drones on, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep.

Fuck you Jesus Jesus Jesus nothing is right nothing is good here my cunt is bleeding my thighs are burning I am hurt I am charred my head throbs there is a man on top of me ghasly bulk hairy belly ass and legs thrusting inside scraping me out burning tobacco smelling shithead asshole motherfucker daughterfucker creep make it stop go away fuck it stop that hurt I cry and I cry and I beg and I scream and there’s a cloth in my mouth and a cock in my cunt and his sweat

in my eyes and I'm dead and I'm dead and I'm dead fuck fuck fuck you I can't cry enough to make it stop to free my hands my arms to close my legs forced open forced wide he grunts like a pig he slaps me it hurts damn it hurts I don't enjoy it he doesn't enjoy me I don't bring him pleasure I'm not good enough I don't do enough I am no child of his I am no child no more why can he cure me lift me kill me he kisses my forehead presses a hand hard against my mouth spits his sticky gunk all over me slaps my face and leaves me in bed leaves me like a vulture bored with its corpse and I am all alone yet less alone than before and I crawl into the shower ooze into the tub and can't get clean enough the water's hot enough my skin is lobster red my two lips are black and blue my four lips are purple I cry and I cry and don't know why I'm so low and why no one warned and why my mom loves him and why my sister didn't warn me and who is to blame when I am to blame when I deserve this when I drive him to his crime a crime I committed without even knowing what a fucker he is what a fucker he is what a fucker he deserves to die they all deserve to die I should die too I'm not good enough I'm not good enough

The shudders stop. And my heart starts beating once again. The monitor there blips in chorus with it. I find myself back in that same hospital room, knowing it's almost one year later and nothing has changed. My head throbs. It's tightly wound with gauze—I must have smashed it—and my boyfriend Steve stares at me aghast, as if he can hear what's going on in this fucked-up head of mine. I am not free. I'm tied to machines, to oxygen tubes forced into my nostrils, needles protruding from my banged up wrists. Some dripping stuff in the IV calms me down but my head is a fury. I see Steve leaning forward. "Sarah," he whispers. Nothing more. He kisses my wound and once again I'm under, dreaming my own life as reality TV. The past comes back like a commercial break.

The girl standing on the coffee table was a wick, dyed hair burning bright on top. Her mother, once much the same, slumped down into the couch cushions, blood oozing from the nine-millimeter hole in her temple. The man beside her—tied down on that same couch, sagging and bleeding on that same couch where his wife sagged and bled—he wept like a child—like a child missing three fingers and two toes.

"See how you like it—having your life torn right out of you!" The man struggled with the pair of blood-soaked panties stuffed down his throat. "Huh? What's that, you sick fuck?"

His eyes bugged out at her. Through the gag he whimpered. At this point, bravery was not his thing. Not at all. So his daughter shot off another toe.

The front door opened behind her. The gun swung toward it. The young girl's slight body followed. And I, Sarah, the older sister, stood there, framed by the door. It was three days till Thanksgiving—homecoming at my old high school—and very early. Our eyes locked.

I'm seeing all this through someone else's eyes.

"Sarah?" It's Steve, rocking my shoulder. Or my arm. It's hard to tell. "Are you awake?"

Some sort of noise dribbles out of me.

He leans over, threads his fingers through my hair, and his eyes plunge into mine. "I thought you were trying to say something," he says. "Things'll be all right now, don't worry."

I raise my head. The IV drips and I don't want to go back to sleep again but I really can't help it. I try to say his name, but my head just sinks into the pillow, and I'm back in my parents' house, watching the other me once again.

When I entered that doorway, I didn't run away. I charged, arms extended, my scream trailing three seconds behind me. Megan's finger tightened around the trigger. The charge burned her hand; the bullet tore through my shoulder. Megan leapt off the coffee table; I fell on my face.

"I don't hate you, Sarah," Megan said. She turned back to the couch and glared at our father. "See, father? Spared her. You, on the other hand..." She went over to the couch once more, pausing to look at the family portrait that hung above it.

I woke up five seconds, maybe five minutes, later. Blood seeped from my shoulder; the pain deranged me. I curled up, hands over my ears, as if the whole world were screaming, as if anything in my house was louder than my father's sobs and the alarm clock beep-beep-beeping upstairs. I couldn't shut my eyes tight enough. Watching myself like this right now, I still can't.

"Stop it," I groaned. Pushing the words through my sobs was like shoving clay through a strainer. "What happened?"

Megan didn't seem to notice. She crouched near the couch, cradling her mother's head, rocking the body back and forth. She hummed a song our mother used to sing at bedtime.

“Talk to me, Megan,” I begged just after cogency returned. Megan just kept humming that damned lullaby. The alarm clock upstairs beeped metronomically. “Please, Megan. Why?”

“You don’t speak,” Megan answered, still tending to her mother. Our father slouched next to her, unconscious, his suit coat trembling with every little breath. “I have the gun. You don’t speak.”

“Why the...what the...?” Confusion coats me like pollen. I’ve been muttering for over half an hour. I see myself in the bed, the white sheets, the bars on both sides. I’ve sweated myself dry. Right now I am no part of myself; I am dust and cobweb floating down to earth.

I've been trying so hard but it keeps kicking me it keeps knocking on the inside of my belly like its someone's fucking front door like I'm a can in the gutter I can't stop it I can't do much just avoid getting sicker and avoid getting well and I'm not sure what I want it's just nothing more like this stop it stop it stop fight this off squelch this broken glass bleeding burning down thing inside me on top all around me stop it sister stop it now

Green eyes fixed on my father, rapier tips. “Now you, daddy. Daddy dearest. Daddy a little too dear. You fucker.”

“What are you saying?” I pleaded. “He can’t hear you. Not after what you’ve done to him!”

The girl looked at me askance and fired the gun at the opposite wall. A mirror across the room shattered, obliterating my reflection.

“It’s your fault, really,” Megan said. “I mean, he’s sick. He couldn’t fucking help it. Just like I couldn’t help hemorrhaging in the middle of fucking statistics. I’ll give you a fucking statistic.” She spread her arms toward her parents. “You think this is bloody?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You wouldn’t,” she answered, her voice an icicle drilling into my back. “This is your fault, too, you know.”

I looked at our father, at the panties in his mouth. It isn’t his blood, I realized; it’s Megan’s. A chemical burn erupted through my teeth. I bit the vomit back like I did my tears.

I pulled myself to my knees and I held out my arms, fingers open wide. Tears of a different kind start to pour down my cheeks. “Please, sis. I don’t care whose fault it is. It’s too late for that now. Put the gun down. *Please*. I don’t want to hurt you.” I looked up at my sister, standing before me, purple socks pulled taut over her ankles, gun floating in her fingers.

Then the hand trembled. The jaw dropped, tremored even. The gun fell to her side. I moved toward my silent sister, hoping a tender gaze might pry open those knife-edge eyes.

But the gun rose once more. Megan pointed it to her head.

At that point, I screamed, scrambled to my feet, and leapt toward her. But when my bleary eyes caught my sister once more, Megan winked—unsmiling, she *winked*—fixed me in her sights, and fired.

I dropped just in time. The family portrait above the couch suffered the wound for me. Megan vaulted up the stairs, and darted to the other end of the hallway. I scrambled after. I hobbled up the steps, stumbling over the top stair.

It’s getting clearer. The dripping slows, everyday sounds—the chatter of the nurses, the footfalls down the hallway—filter out once again. My eyes creak open, give birth to light. A social worker is writing down everything I say, but I’m not listening. I’ve heard this story. I’ve told it. My mind wanders to almost a year ago, the first time I was stuck in a room like this. Steve saw me through it that time, too. He left only to sleep and to get me real food. I tried to tell him I felt dizzy then, that the dreams were starting, that where my innocence once was my sister crept in. He said I was dehydrated. To him, dryness was the cause of every ailment. He got me a soda and while I drank it, held my hand in both of his.

“The best revenge,” he told me, “is a normal life.”

As if normal could ever accommodate me.

For a little while thereafter, Steve became so normal it was downright weird. Everything in his life, from his telemarketing job to his Old Navy wardrobe was strictly C-level effort. Sex, when we had it, was the same one-act play every time. His routine didn’t bore me; it didn’t lull me into security as he’d hoped. It scared me. My parents had been normal—suspiciously normal—until I left home. And my sister...

Eventually it had to stop. We were washing dishes after one of our sit-down meals. I was at the sink, up to my elbows in suds. He was talking about getting married.

“Look, buddy,” I told him, “right now you’re driving me nuts. You want us to be some little cookie-cutter couple. You’re turning us into my parents and look how that turned out!”

“I am nothing like your father.”

“You didn’t know him!”

“*You* didn’t know him, Sarah!” he shouted. Then he got really quiet. “Enough.” He came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. “I just want to be here for you.”

“I need you to be *there*.” I shrugged off his hands and pointed toward the living room. Dishwater wormed down my arms and dripped to the floor. “Not here. I can’t take *here* right now. It’s too close. Far too...”

“I know it’s hard for you.” Steve frowned at me, swaying forward but inching away. “But don’t you remember how it used to be?” I stared at him. He flung the towel to his feet. “For crissakes, Sarah, we went to high school together, we stuck it through four years at separate colleges, we can get *through* this. We were great together and will be again, I swear to you. We just need to work this out. I’ll take some time, but—”

I blew up at him. “How much time, Steve? How much of this can you stand? I’m never going to be your happy little wife. And it’s never going to be like it used to be. Can you stand not touching me? Not being so close to me? Not caring so goddamn much for me like I’m a fucking princess? Not handling me like a Faberge egg? I don’t think you can.”

“I’ll try harder, Sarah. I love you, you know, and that our love is stronger than your pain. I’ll prove it to you. It’ll just take time.”

I couldn’t tell when it happened, but my eyes were wetter than my hands. “I’m a desert inside,” I said, and found myself in his embrace, his arms draped around me like a shawl.

“I want to take care of you,” he said. It must have been five minutes later.

“I need to take care of myself,” I told him. He backed away and stood there as if he were made of wood. I thought he was going to cry. “This won’t change things.”

But it did, and now that the dawn is breaking and I lay broken on this white bed, he loves me even more.

Getting up extra early time to clean time to shine time to slip out of this house before it’s light time to jump from the loft on the cold hardened ground time to walk to school with my lunch and my bag have a smoke maybe too I smashed my dad’s models pocketed the glue keep

busy at school painting cleaning stealing never going home I tried to sleep there one time janitor found me dad came and smacked me up good before dragging me home I tried it again and again getting beaten each time it wasn't always like this not nearly not nearly I don't understand but I can't change it now but I try still I try the night has a wonderful scent but nothing like my mornings punch me in the stomach this time daddy kick me again and again I dreamt my neck snapping my body breaking like a wave over a rock and being part of something once more

It's morning now and Steve is back. Steve keeps coming back. Like it matters. Like I matter. I wanted him so much at one time. But now I don't want anything. I've dropped out. I don't hate myself. I don't hate the world. I just can't face either one right now.

Steve smiles softly at me. Each ring around his eyes told of another hour of grief.

"I knew you would pull through," he tells me.

"You should go now," I whisper. My face flares. "Now that I'm better."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, please, go."

He waits for a second—he always does this.

"Thank you," I say. And he leaves me.

He left me only once before. It was a few months ago, a few months after I drove myself into that too-shallow gulch. Steve had been tending to me like a mama cat to her kitten. I tried to be good for his sake, but I could never be sick enough to cure, or cured enough to be well again.

Steve just came over one night and started collecting his things. I was watching McNeil-Lehrer on PBS. I never turned toward him. Eventually he stopped and stood in front of the screen.

"I told you I wouldn't leave you," Steve said to me. "And I wasn't lying. I meant those things, Sarah."

I asked for a beer.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Yes," I replied, "and I'd like a beer."

He said none were left. His head dropped. “Nothing’s left, Sarah. I have sacrificed myself for you. Whatever it was inside you that I cherished has dried up. *You* have left *me*,” he went on, “and I can’t do this—I can’t be this—any more.”

So I told him goodbye. He collected his toothbrush and his goldfish bowl and left. I got up and found a Heineken in the back of my fridge and found myself single once again. Suddenly the room felt larger but I didn’t feel any smaller. I spread out on the couch and waited for Charlie Rose to come on.

He’s stopped coming for me in my room or my other places he stopped chasing me when I run he knows I’ll come back but still he has stopped and I’m waiting for the crush waiting for the pain so I’m high in the morning and I’m high all the night and I’ve got ants on my skin and a snake in my gut and I’m tired and I’m tired though constantly waking all through the day just dropping and surfacing face blank like a mirror in a darkened room dark eyes staring out like a dead china doll I know I see myself sometimes in class when I’m bored and I’m bored all the time it’s all pointless a lie a dirty sham there’s nothing true in it nothing good in it nothing that can’t be taken away that can’t be stolen and smashed I started mopping the floor at the school each night so I can sleep in the janitor’s closet that’s our deal I mop dreamily and stand on my toes I’m so light I take my time there’s nowhere to go now no nowhere I need

A nurse comes in to check on me. Her smile is thin, her eyes tired. She asks me if Steve is my husband; small talk, like we met at a garden party. I tell her no. She fluffs my pillow, opens the blinds to let in the light, writes something down on my chart, and shuffles off. I could have told her more.

Steve came back a few weeks ago and said he wanted to work things out. It had been months since the night he’d left me. We hadn’t spoken. He came to my door and said he remembered his promise to me to keep me safe. It was his promise to himself—it had little to do with me—but I didn’t press him on it. I let him in. We sat down in the kitchen and his words kept coming, his shaky voice became a dead baby’s rattle wiggling in my skull. I could feel my stomach twitching.

“You’ve lost weight,” he said, his voice wavering between attraction and disgust.

“I’ve lost more than that.” My voice was a specter.

“I want to take us back to how it was when we first started.”

“Steve, I don’t think— Why do you keep trying?”

“Because I can fix this, baby. I’ve read practically every book in the store about post-traumatic stress, about rape, about trauma, about suicide, about all you’ve been through. It’s taken me months, but I think I understand you better now. I can understand your pain.”

“Maybe you can. But nothing will fix this.”

He slid his chair right up against mine, leaned toward me and cradled the back of my head with his hands. I could feel my sister’s fingers beneath his, clawing at the base of my neck, clutching, sharp nails penetrating, reaching my brainstem, scratching my medulla oblongata like a mosquito bite. My head felt hot and swollen like I’d just drunk a bottle of wine. Maybe I had drunk a bottle of wine. Maybe two.

Steve leaned over and pressed his lips to my forehead, just briefly, then got and left me alone to decide. As I watched him step away, that cinder inside my chest did something I thought it no longer could. It melted.

It isn't fair the others are cruel the doctors the therapists the bastards won't believe don't believe won't even fucking test give me the benefit of the doubt my father's a saint my father's a hero the liar the liars the lie the lie the lie the whole world's against me my whole world's an earthquake crumbling city after city rolling across the landscape like an unfurling carpet nothing is left nothing was there to begin with it isn't easy and I don't know what's going on inside me I bled only five times so far and now it's stopped and I'm scared and if the doctors won't listen then the nurses won't believe me and my friends they'd disown me the ones I have left I am not ready I am not begun my skin feels like plastic wrap or like hugging a cactus there's no in between there's nothing I need there's nothing for me that's not poison that's not lemon or green like the puke in my sink and I've learned to scrub every morning and I spray and I sprits and no one can see or can smell or can feel it but me

Megan stood by the window at the other end of the hall. “Come closer.” She wagged a finger. “Come on, come closer: feel what pain feels like.”

I hesitated, losing blood and losing balance. I slumped into a bookcase just to keep on my feet.

“You protected me once,” Megan spat, “just by being here. Then you walked out, and Mom walked out, and Dad walked right fucking in. You think that’s fair?”

“He *raped* you?” My jaw trembled.

“Oh, it wasn’t bad. Not the second time, not all the others. The first was quite a how-do-you-do. But after that...it felt like revenge.”

“Revenge?”

“On you. On Mom.”

“What did we do?”

“Ignore me. Detest me. You let this happen. *She* let this happen.”

“Bullshit.”

“You think I didn’t know that he loved you more, even as he was loving me? He loved you because he couldn’t *have* you. You know that, don’t you? Don’t think yourself special. Mom just didn’t watch me as close as you. Didn’t care, the bitch. I bet she was getting more out of the deal herself.”

I couldn’t stop crying. “I’m going to come closer.”

“I *will* shoot you.”

“No you won’t.”

“I already have.”

“You’re out of bullets.”

“There’s one left.”

I inched around the corner. Megan clamped her teeth over the gun barrel. Her eyes were dead. She had no fear. Neither did I. Megan shook her head, but I inched ever closer. Twenty feet divided up, then fifteen, then ten. I stretched my arms out again, a model of resilience.

But Megan yanked the gun from between her teeth, aimed it at my head, and wrapped her finger around the trigger. I panicked. I tore a vase from the hallway shelf and chucked it at the gun. But I threw too hard. The vase landed squarely in my sister’s face. She stumbled, fell backward into the window. She dropped the gun; it misfired as it hit the floor; a bullet grazed my temple. The window glass shattered then splashed around her like a waterfall—Megan fell through, fell all the way down to the driveway. Her head cracked on the cement like a watermelon dropped from a truck. I hobbled to the exit wound in my house and saw my sister’s

body. The neighbors crowded around it. There were no tears left. The alarm clock kept beeping. I heard it. Our father's suit coat still tremored. I felt it on my skin.

And I reached for something. That thing I couldn't see. The gun, the gun, my sister-spirit's outstretched hands, the glass. The glass. I picked it up and cut, fast and deep. The agony drained down my hands, dripped onto the floor. But I didn't bleed it all out of me. Steve caught me that time too, and dragged me to the ambulance.

Steve is back with me now, back in this hospital room, nursing me with well-timed crackers and ginger ale. His devotion flickers in my pupils like the doctor's little flashlight. He never really left after all. He insists he's going to take me home in a couple days. A home he'll share with me once again, he promises. Until I'm better. Until the war is over inside me. I decide to let him stay.

"She planned on dying that day," I tell him, one last time, to be sure he understands me. "My sister's heart was like a dead moth that's fallen to the floor—weightless and dark, to touch it was to make it dust. Her heart was that fragile. And now that we share hearts, so is mine."