

CRAIG DAVIDSON

Medium Tough

The needle: 21 gauge, 1.5 inches. A hogsticker. I'd liberated it from the thoracic care unit—they stock cannulas for emergency chest decompression, hammer one of those big-bore pins between the fourth and fifth intercostal to vent compacted air and blood. The contents of the syringe run as follows: 1 cc of Equipoise, a veterinary drug injected into cattle to render them fat and juicy, plus an additional 2 ccs of Testosterone Cypionate—i.e., roughly twenty times the testosterone a man my size produces in a week. I've never been one for half-measures.

I tried hormone replacement therapy. Creams, patches, gels, slow-release subdermal pellets sunk into my flanks. My hormones are flatlined. The doc gawped at my T-levels and said: "Sure you weren't born a woman, Jasper?" We're old pals; he can joke. But HRT is the bailiwick of geriatric dynamos and middle-aged graspers. Plus you're rubbing that goo on your hands so the "T" can seep in—problematic, seeing as I handle loads of babies. Skin-to-skin transference, yeah? Good Dr. Railsback lays hands on little Janie Sue Macintosh and next she's growing a beard.

Shortly I'd be pumping the stuff into my rear end. A fine pin-cushion. But the sciatic nerve radiates from your hips—if the needle raked the nerve stem, I'd be doing the noodle-legged cha-cha. And if I dumped the stuff directly into a vein, it'd slam me into cardiac collapse. But fortune favors the brave, so tallyho.

I pierced the skin, aspirated, saw only the thinnest thread of blood, and bottomed the plunger. *Yeeeeessss*—there's the heatseeker.

I slipped the needle into a sharps bin and located the blister pack of capsules. *Fludara*. An anti-metastatic; it attacks the RNA, rots the

helix, and kills the spread. The label read: *Avoid inhaling the dust from a broken caplet*. The urge to crack one and snort it up my nose was awesomely powerful. I swallowed two, then two more. My tongue flitted absently around my mouth; its nodules rasped against my incisors, but they were too dense to burst. My name went out on the PA. *Dr. Railsback to pediatrics . . .*

The vulcanized orthotic spacer on my left shoe made a jazzy *dunka-dunka-dunk* on the hospital tiles. Up to the fifth floor. The air in the NICU was heavy with pheromones: aliphatic acids, which waft from the pores of women who've just delivered. A distinctive scent. An undertone of caramelized sugar.

"Are we prepped?" I asked the nurse, Sandy, who herself smelled of cherry sanitizer. She nodded with remote calmness. Sandy was the one you wanted intubating a preemie with a blocked airway.

"OR 5, Dr. Railsback. Dr. Beverly's finishing up with an epidural."

I prepped in a deep-basined metal sink. Shirtless—a quirk, but you really can't be too clean with surgery. One hand washed the other. The right: huge, thick-knuckled, bones lashed by a meshwork of heavy ligatures. The left: long and bony like the hand of Nosferatu, metacarpals projecting beneath the thinnest stretching of skin—the bones in a bat's wing. The right arm: a bowling-pin-like forearm roped with freaky striations, a grapefruit-bulge of biceps. The left, a pair of sticks jointed at the elbow.

There's a line where the two halves of my body intersect. It begins to the left of my throat, centers itself between the points where my collarbones meet, cleaves the breastplate and ribcage, then snakes to the left down my abdominals and carves right again before finishing at my groin. To the right: densely-muscled, proportionate. To the left: austere devastation. The line of demarcation is plain: the vascular round of my right pectoral dips into a trough where it meets my breastbone and fails to rise again, in a flat expanse so devoid of muscle that every thump of my heart shivers the flesh. The ribs on my right are banded by stout tendons. The left stick out like the spars of an unfinished boat.

My left side still *works*. The muscle, what there is, flexes. The nerve clusters fire. My left foot is 2.12 inches shorter than my right, and my left arm 2.84 inches shorter than its mate—I had a colleague

take the precise measurements. My face is unaffected. Should you see me walking down the street in trousers and long sleeves, you would not notice much amiss. Were we carnally acquainted, however, you might wonder if I'd not been born so much as *fused* from separate selves. During maiden intimacies it's my habit to disrobe slowly, explaining things. An educational striptease.

Dr. Beverly waited in the OR. Our patient lay on the surgical table. Wracked with tremors—brainstem release phenomena. Isla, pronounced *Eye-la*. Beverly set her on the digital scale. 3.55 pounds.

"I'll start on inhalants," he said. "Nitro to speed the uptake, then something with a slower wash-in. You looking for total bodily torpor?"

"I'll be inside her head, Bev. Can't have her squirming."

"Run with a quarter milligram of hydromorphone, but if she reverts to a pattern fetal circulation we'll risk acute hypoxemia."

Hypoxemia: CO₂ chewing black holes into Isla's brain. Beverly painted a mercurochrome square on her back and located the L3 caudal space between her spinal discs. The epidural catheter—a shiny segmented tapeworm—pierced the flesh in the square's center. The girl's eyes, set in wrinkled webs of flesh, did not open.

Bev slipped a tiny mask over Isla's face, pumped in nitro to open her bloodpaths. He switched the drip to isoflurane, a powerful analgesic. Isla's chest shuddered. Infant breathing patterns can be random. You had to ignore it. The No. 12 scalpel rested in my left hand, classic pencil grip.

In med school the question had been: "Is Jasper Railsback surgeon material?" I wasn't the prototypical specimen, but I did possess the physical basics and the intangibles: force of will, self-confidence. Plus there was the matter of my hands . . .

True surgeons, or "blades" as we're known, are defined by our hands. Look at our fingers: willowy and tapered, seemingly possessed of an extra joint. A concert pianist's hands. A surgeon must possess extraordinary dexterity and be steady in the cut. You could eke by as an orthopaedic surgeon with so-so digits—that's basically meatball surgery. But if you go blundering around in an infant's skull, things die. In school we'd practiced on bananas. Draw a dotted line on the skin, carve out the "lesion" using the slide cut technique. I'd bought bananas by the bushel—green specimens first, working my way up

to speckly-black ones. While my fellow students were exceeding the bursting strength threshold and slicing into the banana “meat,” my dynamite left was popping out perfect plugs.

My right is a bricklayer’s hand. It can be taught blunt-force tasks. But I can feel music through my left hand. The right is my hammer. The left, an instrument of God.

I began at the supraorbital node, five centimeters above Isla’s nasal shelf. One must remember that an infant’s bones are porous or, in some cases, nonexistent. Soft heads, flabby gizzards. In many ways they are only token humans. The scalpel bisected the fontanel. I avoided the cortical veins running bluely under the skin and checked the incision before hitting the transverse sinuses. A brief freshet of arterial blood. A lateral incision bisected the first: an ‘X.’ I tweezed back the flesh, pinning the flaps down.

“Suction.”

Sandy removed the occluding blood with a vacuum wand. Isla’s brain shone within its encasement of cerebrospinal jelly. I searched for what I’d seen on the ultrasound: a tumor developing within the runnelled folds. A teratoma, as they’re known: a congenital defect composed of foreign tissue such as muscle, hair, or even teeth. Teratomas were rare; normally I’m looking for cortical dysplasia—a mutation of the brain cells—or pre-epileptic markers.

“That’s a lot of blood,” said Beverly.

“Coagulant, then, Bev.”

He said: “Getting close to peak toxicity already, Jazz.”

“Suction.”

I switched to the harmonic scalpel; it’d coagulate any severed vessels. Sandy slipped a pair of magnifying spectacles over my eyes; Isla’s brain expanded in intimate detail. Spread the hemispheres with a pair of forceps; they pierced the cerebrospinal sac soundlessly. Oxygen licked at the pink loaves of her brain, tinting the surface cells grey. I snipped nerve clusters, avoiding the corpus callosum, spreading the spheres until I could make out the Vein of Galen.

There’s an instant in any procedure where you understand that you hold everything. The God Moment. Each surgeon feels it differently. For me this was a moment of awesome, near-paralyzing love. For the child beneath my blade, for its life and its capacity to do great things—or if not great, then productive, *valuable*.

“Light, Sandy.”

She illuminated the cranial vault. Below the hub of the angular gyrus sat a foreign mass: off-white, oddly ribbed, crushed between the thalamic folds.

“I’m titrating up,” Beverly said. “But I can’t hold this level for long. She’s nearing catatonic shock. Sandy, give me four and a half ccs of plasma replacement.”

She handed Beverly a syringe with a tablespoon of cystalloid plasma 3:1. I reached in with the forceps. The metal brushed Isla’s olfactory bulb; her nostrils dilated involuntarily. I gripped the foreign mass. Teased it out.

“What in God’s . . .”

A tiny, stunted foot. My forceps gripped its big toe. I grasped its neighbor and pulled gently. The toe released from the medullar fold with an audible *plik!* The entire foot came out slick with glia—brain glue, essentially. No calf, no knee. Just a disembodied foot, no bigger than a vitamin lozenge.

“Parasitic twin,” I said. “Consumed in utero.”

“Signs and wonders,” said Beverly.

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Two nights later I busted a poor guy’s arm. Classic greenstick. Radius and ulna bones. Three percussive *pops* as the flexor and brachii muscles unshackled from their moorings. Then the first of two wet, fibrous snaps: the ulna, which sounded like a pistol fired into wet sand. There’s something madness-inducing about the sound of breaking bone. A rip in the fabric of things, a glimpse into a vast realm of polar whiteness. Sounds silly, I know . . . In the operating theater I break bones *purposefully*: incise with a #5 scalpel, slit the silverskin-like fascia, spread the overlapping musculature, and split the bone with a surgical chisel called an osteotome. A controlled break, but still: always that glimpse.

But this happened at the Ontario Arm Wrestling Association’s Arm Melter event, the semifinals of which were held in the basement of the K of C Hall on North Street. Low popcorn ceiling, steel cistern of rotgut. A passel of old Knights with pale suety faces slapping down dime bets on the Crown and Anchor wheel. A pair

of padded arm-wrestling tables set up on the warped parquet. The type of crowd you'd expect when roller derby passes through town.

I'd been arm-wrestling for years. My right arm—the *gorilla*, I like to call it—is the perfect weapon: a grapefruit bulge of biceps, bowling-pin forearm, vicegrip fingers. The battering ram to my left hand's lockpick set.

My opponent was your standard Barbell Billy: fireplug-squat, vein-riven biceps jutting from a sheer wife-beater. He stuck his arm out as if he was *giving* me the damn thing. I only pull right-handed. I'm a specialist—plus, you know, the left is my moneymaker. Can't let one of these big goons crush my livelihood.

The ref cinched our hands with a leather thong to keep us gripped. When he said "Go!" the guy hit hard sideways, head down and snorting. Technique? Forget it! I fixed my elbow on the pad and let my shoulder absorb his thrusts; I felt the joint straining, idly concerned that he'd pop the humerus knob out of its cup of bone and destroy that fragile arrangement, but it held and I was able to hook his wrist, get my knuckles pointed skyward, and gradually peel his wrist backwards—which was when his forearm went kerflooey.

The shockwave juddered through my body, dissipating into the skeletal muscle. But my veins were blitzed on adrenaline; I kept trying to pin his wrist. The guy wasn't aware of the trauma he'd sustained: the signals weren't routing through the proper synapses, so his body kept fighting. Twin tusks of white where the bone had shorn through. He stared at his assways-hanging arm and gave a quizzical half-laugh, as if his arm was a riddle I'd unceremoniously solved.

There was something terribly intimate to that moment. Your instinct is to pull back, give the man space to bleed—but we're strapped together, right?

"I'm a doctor," I told him. Pointlessly.

He hiccupped in shock. I elevated his arm. We were still lashed together so I looked like a ref holding up a boxer's hand post-victory. One of the Knights humped into the kitchen. He came back with paper towels in one hand and a roll of aluminum foil in the other.

"This is all we got," he said. "We do Friday Fish Fries, not busted arms."

Afterward everyone gathered outside in the cooling night. The guy sat on the steps, arm mummified in bloody paper towels. His wife showed up.

“What the hell did you do to yourself?” she said.

Everybody laughed. That was how women were around here—you do something idiotic, something *male*, your lady gives you both barrels.

The last light of day—briefly intensified as it slipped below the curve of the earth—softened through the roadside firs, a blade-edge of light limning the car’s contours and turning the woman’s face a mellow gold. I thought about the coming hours: the two of them under the stark halogens of the ER, the bone-setter’s tray, the crisp *snik!* as the carpals locked back in place, dissolvable sutures, coagulant and pain meds. Maybe she’d drive him home to their small, clean house, and by then she may’ve softened, forgiving him for the bizarre things men do. She’d lead him to the bedroom as she might a child—he’d have a goofy Oxycodone smile—settle him into bed, and work her body against his with concerned control. Hell, I’d suffer a broken arm for that. I’d suffer a dozen.

A Knight came over. Red fez cocked on his skull at a jaunty angle, face like a bowl of knuckles.

“One hell of an arm you’ve got, son. Too bad they aren’t a matching pair.”

His face shattered in laughter. The old prick.

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“State your name for the record.”

“Dr. Jasper Railsback.”

“Place your right hand on the Bible and repeat after me: I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth . . .”

Niagara Regional Courthouse. Youth Services Court. Three pew-like benches. Penny Tolliver, a Children’s Aid Society worker, the only spectator. One Crown attorney, one for the defense. The object of discussion: a ten-year-old boy with slight facial malformations. I sat in the witness box, having been summoned by the Crown.

“You operated on this boy shortly after he was born, Dr. Railsback—is that correct?”

“It is.”

“Explain the nature of the operation—what did it address?”

“The boy’s mother is a methhead.”

“Objection,” the defense council said. “Irrelevant.”

The judge cocked her head at me. “Sustained.”

“I operated on the boy, Randall, because his mother suffered a placental abruption. She suffered this because she smoked methamphetamine for the duration of her pregnancy.”

“Objection. Conjectural.”

“Sustained. Dr. Railsback . . .”

I returned the judge’s look evenly. “Due to the placental abruption, the boy was delivered early. He exhibited tremors, sleeplessness, and muscle spasms, which are symptoms consistent with infant narcotic withdrawal.”

“*Objection*. Conjectural.”

“Overruled. Could these be symptoms of other conditions, Doctor?”

“It’s doubtlessly possible. Due to his being delivered early, Randall’s brain was not properly formed. He suffers from lissencephaly—*smooth brain*. His lacks the normal folds and grooves. The most common side effect is severely retarded motor skills. My procedure split the corpus callosum, severing the hemispheres in hopes of addressing those issues.”

The Crown said: “Was it a success?”

“Most children with lissencephaly die before they turn two. If you’re asking if the operation *cured* Randall, then no.”

Crown: “Doctor, you mentioned his mother’s substance abuse.”

Defense, tiredly: “Objection, your honor. What bearing?”

“I’ll allow it.”

“In your experience, Doctor, what are the—”

I said: “My mother was a juicehead.”

Crown: “I’m sorry?”

“You must understand: a mother will never have more direct physical contact with her child. What she eats, the baby eats. What she drinks or smokes or inhales. They share the same blood. The fetus’s circulatory system is patched into hers. My mother was—*is* an alcoholic. My father, too, though that has less bearing.”

The defense rose. “Your honor, what bearing does *any* of this have—?”

“Yes, Dr. Railsback,” the judge said. “Where are you going with this?”

I rolled up one sleeve, then the other. Lay my bare arms on the witness box. The judge eyed them with interest. We're all rubber-neckers, deep down.

"My mother drank enough to float a coal ship while I was inside her. What people fail to grasp is how *sensitive* it is. A billion chemical reactions. A trillion tiny hurdles to clear. What happened to me was hormonal. A hormone is a key, you see: our cells are locked doors. If you've got the right key to fit the lock, the door opens. Well, one side of my body is all locked doors."

The judge said: "And this was a result of . . . ?"

"Of my mother pickling me in the womb. And listen, I've . . . *surmounted*. I'm a surgeon. A healer of men! But there's that line where love and basic concern butt up against weakness and addiction."

"Your Honor, could we please—"

"This being a custody case," I spoke over the defense attorney, "my opinion on a personal and professional level is that anyone who falls on the wrong side of that line ought to forfeit their child. Simple math."

Afterward I stood on the courthouse steps in the ashy evening light. Penny Tolliver stepped out with Randall. The boy's facial features were consistent with lissencephalics: the thin lips, temple indentations. His arm was wrapped around Penny's thigh, his head vibrating on the swell of her pregnant stomach.

"Thanks," she said simply.

"No prob, Pen. Part of the job."

I knelt before the boy. His left eye was foggy with cataracts.

"You grow funny," I told him. "That's what a girl in elementary school once said to *me*. Greta Hillson with the golden curls. What a jerk, huh? But you know, she was right. I grew funny. But guess what, Randall? It's okay to grow a little funny."

Literal truth? Truth is twisty. The boy pressed his face into Penny's belly.

"Can I see you tonight?" she said.

"My door's always open."

~

I left Penny sleeping while I got up to medicate. My bare feet slipped across the hardwood to the window overlooking the city.

The Falls rumbled ceaselessly down the streetlit thoroughfares, into Cataract City's pocketed dark: the sound of earthbound thunder. Clifton Hill shone like a strip of tinsel. Tonight at honeymoon haunts with names like Lover's Nest Lodge and Linked Hearts Inn, couples would bed down on motel sheets with the texture of spun glass. I liked the idea—that people I did not know, strangers I'd never meet, were happy and in love in the city of my birth.

To the south I could make out the oxidized metal roof of my old elementary school. In grade six Ernie Torrens busted my left arm. Yanked it between the bars of the bike rack, held me there as I squirmed. Took just one good kick. Ernie was a pig-ugly, brutish creature—fingers constantly stained Popsicle-orange. Nowadays he's a grease monkey at the Mister Lube on Stone Road; he stands in the pit, eyes webbed in grease-smearred flab, as my Volvo's chassis blots out his sun.

As I'd sat on the crinkly butcher paper with a doctor setting my arm bones, I knew I'd have to act. Lie down too many times—make a habit of showing your soft belly—and you forfeited the spine it takes to get up. I brought a tube of airplane glue to school and ran a thick bead around the toilet seat Ernie always sat on just before recess. His confused bellowings were auditory honey to me. He tore skin off his backside trying to stand. The firefighters were called, but before they arrived the janitor attempted to loosen the bond with some manner of chemical solvent; it reacted with the glue, scalloping Ernie's thighs with a first-degree heat rash. The firemen unscrewed the seat from the bowl and led him out to the truck. Ernie didn't get a chance to wipe.

We were both summoned to the principal's office. Ernie glared at me, eyes reflecting dull, smokeless hate. I whispered: "You're strong, but I'm smart. I'll hurt you worse."

Ernie laid off, but others hadn't. My childhood was a procession of bowl-cut, feeble-minded tormentors who earned harsh, quixotic reprisals. Eventually the message disseminated among our city's bully population: *Don't bother with Jasper. Seek easier meat.* But it was a message writ in blood, as much mine as theirs. The hospital's staff psychologist had once asked, during my mandatory annual appointment, if the years of bullying had compelled me to make one side of myself as powerful as possible.

“Look at Ziggy Freud over here,” I’d said. “You’ve pinned my id to the wall.”

I turned from the window, headed into the kitchen. I always medicated on the polished granite of the butcher block—clean and sanitary like the OR. My pills were in the fruit bowl. I popped four Novaldex, an anti-estrogen med, two Proviron, two Fludara.

I cracked open the fridge, found the pre-mix of HCG behind the cocktail olives. I was unwrapping an insulin needle when Penny came in. The harvest moon fell through the east-facing window to gloss the swell of her stomach.

“What’s that?”

I said, “Truth serum.”

“Oh?” she said. “You’ll tell me all your secrets?”

“It’s Human Chorionic Gonadotropin,” I said. “Testosterone regulator.”

“I love when you talk shop, Jazz.”

“It’s derived from the urine of pregnant women. I take 250 ius weekly, spread out in 50 iu doses. The synthetic testosterone I inject converts into estrogen. *Aromatizes* is the word.”

“I like the sound of that. Aromatize.”

“Gotta take my meds so I don’t get gynomastica. Buildup of breast tissue, yeah? Otherwise I’d develop a lush set of man-cans. Except I’d only get one, on my right side.”

Penny cupped her own breasts. “Mine are huge.”

“They’ll get bigger. Wait until your milk drops.”

She took the needle. “Where do you want it?”

“Deltoid. Medial head.”

She swabbed my shoulder with rubbing alcohol, jabbed the needle.

“It could be yours, Jazz.”

“Pen, please.”

“What?”

“You may as well be fucking a eunuch. I’ve been playing silly buggers with my body chemistry and I still produce barely enough testosterone to put hair on my nuts. Plus I was tested. You know that.”

“You say so, but—”

“My swimmers are not viable, Pen. Mutation levels sky-high. Two-headed swimmers. Or no heads at all.”

Put my sperm under an electron microscope and you'd see platoon on platoon of headless, legless, useless soldiers. Sometimes an image hits at the instant of release: a flood of broken-limbed bodies and horribly mutated forms sheeting over an austere landscape. Unmuscled arms and sightless eyes and corkscrewed appendages divorced from their husbanding bodies—no connectivity, no purity of form. A tidal stew of sexless, mismatched parts.

If I've somehow been robbed, karmically speaking . . . well, then only if considered in juxtaposition to normal people, the average life possibilities. But I've never been normal. Not one moment of my life. The word "miraculous" has tagged too many of my life-markers. Since birth, every second of my existence has been borrowed against fate. We're all on extinction vectors anyway; some vectors are simply more acute than others.

"It only takes one," Penny said. "You'd make a good dad." Her fingers traced her belly. Her bellybutton had popped out. "Anyway, I could lose it."

"Don't talk that way, Pen."

I'd met her when she'd lost the first one. Then later, when the second one passed. A third survived a few days. Gastroschisis: born with its organs outside its body. I never got a chance to operate. It would've taken an act of God anyway.

"You'd make a good dad," she said again.

I plucked an orange from the fruit bowl, squeezed it convulsively. The rind ruptured, spilling juice down my forearm. A funny trick I pulled out at parties—I'd get drunk, pulp a whole sack of them. The Juicer.

"You know who else'd make a good dad, Pen? Your husband."

"Cruel."

Why dispute it?

~

The Arm Wars Classic Finals took place in the parking lot of the Americana Motor Lodge, a hop-skip from the fleshpits at the ass-end of Stanley Avenue. The night was humid. I felt the high-hat beat of my heart where my throat met my jaw.

I'd been training on a jury-rigged pulley system in my garage: one end of the cable was attached to a U-handle, the other to a milk crate. I'd loaded the crate with weight plates, gripped the handle, and pinned it down. I worked out after my graveyard shifts at the NICU, inching my way to nearly 300 pounds and only quitting when my wrist made poppy-grindy noises.

I bought a Labatt's Blue from an old Mexican selling them out of a picnic cooler, and scanned the contestants. Everybody was wearing yellow T-shirts that read, *I'M PULLING FOR YOU*. I milled with the crowd, relishing the tightening sensation inside my chest: a thousand disparate threads pulled from each muscle group, gathering toward a singular purpose.

My opponent was a cask-bellied brute in a John Deere cap. He set his elbow on the pad, tendons protruding from his neck. Didn't matter if a guy had sweeping back muscles or a striated chest—arm-wrestling required a specific kind of strength, concentrated in the wrist and fingers, the biceps and shoulders. I had that. Beyond that I had a grinding, golem-like power to demoralize my opponents.

I dusted my hands with chalk. We locked up. The guy grooved deep into the webbing between my thumb and fingers, trying to pre-emptively break the plane of my arm—if he could peel back the wrist and come over the top, the match was won.

I disengaged, shaking my arm out. The adrenaline was jacked into me now—that familiar ozone tang at the back of my throat. We locked up. The grip was pure. Spectators clustered round. The ref straightened our wrists.

“Go!”

My opponent pulled hard, sank in the hook, dropped his thumb, and came over in a smooth, quick move. My arm bent back. The cartilage in my shoulders shrieked. My hand was two inches from the pad, but it held. The big bastard torqued his shoulder, bearing down, screaming: “Reeeeeagh!”

I hissed between my teeth, popped my opponent's thumb, and broke the hook. My biceps were spiderwebbed with veins, flushed pink with pressure. I jerked my arm in a series of hard upward pops, each one budging the guy's arm. I shifted instinctively, slipping my thumb over his first knuckle and finding my own hook,

bearing down with ceaseless pressure. This was my element: the slow and steady grind. The big man's wrist folded back, steel gone out of it. His shoulder gave out next. His whole body went from a power posture to a crumbling one. I worked steadily, inching him down . . .

A comber of teeth-splitting coldness broke over me, something awful happening in my chest, as if each organ was unlocking itself from my body. The big guy folded his wrist back over and cranked my arm back. I let out a pitiful yelp.

"Winner," the ref said, holding up the big man's hand.

I wiped spittle off my chin. "Good pull," I told him.

Ten seconds later I was humping across the road, squinting against the glare of onrushing headlights, over the crushed gravel of the breakdown lane to The Sundowner. I tipped the tuxedoed bouncer and settled into a seat on Pervert's Row.

The girl on stage had rudely chopped dark hair and lean, articulate limbs that seemed to swivel on finely tuned servos. She had an android's aura: a futuristic pleasure model—all ballistic rubber, frictionless nylon, and silicon grease. As she rode the brass pole, her expression was one part boredom mingled with two parts existential despair. When the song ended she stepped off the stage and took the chair next to mine. Her hand fell on the baguette of flesh and bone that was my left thigh.

"Buy a gal a drink?"

The waitress took my twenty and returned with a glass of water for the girl.

"Pricey agua," I said.

"It's from a glacier."

"I don't normally come to places like this."

"Nobody ever does, man."

She asked if I'd like to have sex. I said yes without giving it much thought. She disappeared behind the tinselly curtain and came back in a tracksuit. The night sky was freckled with clear, cold stars. We walked to the Double Diamond motel, past its leaf-strewn swimming pool hemmed by a waist-high chainlink.

Her room was small and neat and smelled of carpet freshener. She threw herself on the bed in a childlike way: her butt hit the mattress, bouncing her up. She sloughed her sweatshirt off in a manner

some might've found simply unpretentious but to me seemed sloppy and careless.

"Three hundred bucks," she said.

"For what?"

She explained what it would buy. Seemed reasonable enough.

I said: "What do we do now?"

"Do you need a refresher on the birds and bees? You can tell me what to do if you'd like."

"Just give me the usual."

"Ah. A traditionalist."

She gripped my hips. Unbuttoned my pants, slid them down.

"Your legs . . ."

She seemed fascinated rather than horrified—either that, or she was the consummate pro's pro. I slid my shirt up to show her my stomach.

"You're like that all the way up?"

"To my neck, yes."

She fished her hand through the fly of my boxers. Her touch was dry but gentle. "Feels like the standard apparatus."

A fragile voice said: "Mom . . ."

The boy had stepped through a door that connected to the adjacent room. At first sight I understood he'd been dealt a common genetic indignity. His chest had that telltale shrunken quality. The girl snatched up her top and went to him. I pulled up my trousers.

"What's wrong?" she asked the boy, who was perhaps six.

"Thirsty."

She gave me a tight smile and held up one finger—*give me a minute*.

"Take your time," I said. "In fact, I could use some water myself."

I walked into the next room, which clearly they shared. Open suitcases, the smell of cough syrup and body butter. In the bathroom I unpacked two motel glasses from their paper wraps. I smiled at my reflection. Blood climbed the chinks of my teeth. I swished water around my mouth, spat it red-tinged down the drain.

The boy rubbed sleep-crust out of his eyes and accepted the glass. He drank, coughed a little, breathed heavily.

"CF?" I asked his mother.

"How can you tell?"

“I’m a children’s physician. Saw the medicine bottles on the nightstand.”

Cystic fibrosis. A gene mutation. Hallmark symptoms: poor growth, low muscle tone, high incidence of infertility. The boy and I were practically brothers.

“Show him,” she said to me.

I sipped water, regarding her over the glass’s rim.

“Please.”

I peeled off my shirt, flexed my right biceps. A single ticket to the gun show.

The boy said: “Are you sick?”

“Aaron. That’s not nice to ask.”

“Yes. I’m sick.”

“You’re not going to die, are you?”

“Aaron.”

“Not right here in front of you. I’ll hold on a bit longer, I promise. Do you know where I was tonight, Aaron? An arm-wrestling contest.”

The boy said: “Did you win?”

“Not this time, but I’ve won before. Here, I’ll show you how.”

I had him sit on one side of a small table while I sat on the other.

“Lay your arm on the table.”

Obediently, he did so.

“Let’s work on your form, Aaron. Your butt’s stuck way out for starters; scoot up, get closer. Now your arm’s too straight. Bend your elbow, get your hand closer to your chin.” I gripped his hand. The bones bird-like. “Now you’ve got all the leverage and I’ve got none. Technique is what evens the odds. It doesn’t matter how strong or fast your opponent is if you’ve got him beat on technique.”

I wanted to tell him: *Life is all technique. The world is full of us, Aaron. The mildly broken, the factory recalls and misfit toys. And we must work a lot harder. Out-hustle, out-think . . . out-technique.*

“Now if your opponent cranks your arm, don’t panic. You can rest with your hand nearly pinned—the shoulder joint will prop you up.” I pushed his arm gently backwards, demonstrating. “Feels stable, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Let your opponent exhaust himself, right? Then it’s your turn. Concentrate on rotating your hand, pointing your knuckles at the sky. Try it, okay?”

The boy turned his hand over, peeling my wrist back.

“See? Now *you’re* in control. And your opponent wants to quit. So make him.”

The boy bent my arm back. “You let me win,” he said.

“I did. But I’m an adult and I’ve been doing this a long time.”

His mother tucked him back in bed. She cocked her head at the neighboring room and said, “Still want to . . . ?”

“It’s okay.”

I reached for my wallet. She trapped my hand in my pocket. We stood in the gauzy half-light. My cellphone chimed. Code Blue at the hospital. So I hotfooted it back to the strip club and got into one of the taxis queued there. It wended down Stanley Ave, through pools of streetlit incandescence. I dialed the NICU, got Sandy on the line.

“Premature birth,” she said. “Signs of IVH.”

Intraventricular hemorrhage. Excessive pressure on the preemie’s skull causes blood vessels to burst.

The cab dropped me at the ER. I shouldered through the swinging doors, moving fast, blitzed with adrenaline—the only hormone I produce in adult human allotments.—stripped off my shirt in the prep area, and lathered with carbolic soap. A short hallway connected the prep area to the main surgical suite. The route took me past a series of glass-fronted rooms. In the final one, I saw Penny. I got only a flash of the delivery room—the blood, Penny’s husband gripping her hand—before stepping into the surgical suite.

Penny’s baby lay on the operating table. It—*he*, a boy—was covered in cottage-cheese-like vernix; his cheeks were feathered with lanugo hair. Dr. Beverly had strapped a mask over his mouth and nose.

“I’ve got him on a low dose of desflurane,” Beverly said. “There’s not a lot of brain activity.”

The buildup of blood may’ve been screwing with the neurological rhythms. I selected the thinnest cannula, its gauge just wide enough to let the platelets out single-file. The procedure was tricky: pierce the fontanel and thread between the hemispheres into the

ventricle shafts. Release the blood and bleed off the pressure without forfeiting too much cerebrospinal fluid—otherwise the unprotected brain would bounce against the skullcase, killing motor function and the acute senses. Purely a “feel” operation—the equivalent of searching for water with a dowsing rod.

I positioned the needle in the center of the fontanel “diamond,” the four corners where the skullbone had yet to join. The tip dimpled the skin and slid in without resistance. I crouched, training my gaze tightly. It always amazes me just how wonderful a newborn baby smells. Their skin so unlined. The world hasn’t yet laid its marks on them.

“He’s spasming, Bev,” I said. “You’ve got to stabilize.”

The rubber hose feeding into the baby’s mask was kinked. Gingerly, Beverly straightened it.

“Dr. Railsback?” Sandy’s voice: distant, tinny. “You okay?”

The slope of the child’s nose . . . The fingers of my left hand tightened ever so slightly around the needle’s shaft. The fast-twitch fibers vibrated like overturned piano wires. It only takes one. Jesus. Signs and wonders.

“Jazz, pressure’s building.”

I unscrewed the stent-clamp. A pressurized stream of blood jetted out. I willed myself to calm down—*begged* my body to do as it was told.

“Pressure’s climbing,” Beverly said. “We’re getting spikes on the EEG.”

I pulled the needle back half an inch, adjusted the angle, and re-inserted. I’d be flirting with the pituitary gland.

We are all children of eggs. Old Ashanti proverb. And yes, we start that way. Flawless at conception. But consider all the ways it can go wrong: a defect within the zygotic membrane, a erroneous replication in the DNA chain, a chromosomal hitch, a slight mis-expression of a critical peptide . . . imperfections so tiny that the strongest electron magnification reveals but a shadow of it. They are unmeasurable in the truest sense; too often we measure them the wrong way, and they take on the weight of fate. The progenitor’s sins passed down the bloodline. Such flaws are pearl-like: a body shapes itself around that tiny speck of grit. The pure mathematics of a healthy body and mind are staggering.

“We’re black-spotting,” Bev said. “We’re going dark in there . . .”

I gave the cannula the gentlest half-twist, hunting for the pocket. The steel slipped effortlessly through the folds, through storms of neurons snapping between those awakening synapses but going dark now, dimming . . . slowing now, going dark . . .

You’ve got to be tough for contingency’s sake. My mother was tanked to the gills when she told me this. She had left a stove element on and I’d touched it. My right hand still bears the concentric scar. She pressed ice to the burn cavalierly, never setting down the jelly jar in her free hand. *You’re only medium tough, kiddo,* she’d told me. *Right in that meaty part of the curve.*

There was weakness inside me. Some nights I felt it as a discrete entity, shifting and ungrippable. It was nothing I could seek out or eradicate—as much part of me as my organs and flesh, inseparable from whatever goodness of character or strength of will I might possess. I am simply not built to true. And my witching-hour fear is that this inborn weakness—marrow-borne and incurable—will find its deepest groove at the worst possible instant.

I bloodhounded that phantom pressure, grappling with my own rising terror that found its outlet through my fingertips—*be still* for God’s sake, please—the needle’s tip inching through the dark forever inside the boy’s skull as one pure, clean thought blitzed through my own furied brainpan:

O my son my boy my son my baby baby boy—