

Intended for Harm

Prologue

A glint of light catches on the metal's edge as he turns the lightweight blade in his hand. He squints, pauses. Underlying his thoughts, machines whirr and hum, stirring like dormant creatures waking after a winter slumber—reflective of his buried emotions, so long ignored, feelings so disconnected they too rumble incoherently.

His sense of hearing is unusually heightened. The room pulses and takes on a life of its own; a clock ticking becomes a rhythmic heartbeat, causing surges of perspiration to trickle down the sides of his neck, soaking the cotton shirt as he stands, hesitates, holds the object up to study its smooth surface, finely polished, noticeably sharp.

He'd never before considered how small and innocuous this thing felt in the palm of his hand. Yet so capable of slicing through flesh with precision, severing blood vessels, separating muscles from bone, tissue from tendons, all with the slight pressure one might use in peeling an apple.

Hardly innocuous, though. For, even a surgeon's scalpel must tear open flesh and draw blood before it can do a healing work.

Pain precedes healing. This truth has taken a lifetime to learn.

The Great Physician cannot heal until the incision is made and what is putrid and pustulant collides with air and water until thoroughly cleansed. There is a wash of relief that follows such ablution, and the soul thus rid of a lifetime's burden of contamination becomes keenly aware of a glorious sense of freedom.

He can taste it; he is that close.

A glance at the clock tells him it is almost time. Soon will come the culmination of his story, the point to which all the variant, divergent paths of his life have unknowingly led him. All the hurtful, agonizing moments he thought were intended for harm God actually intended for good, for the saving of life. But how could he have known? When immersed in pain, there is only pain.

But pain is also necessary for healing, he tells himself. No one can foresee the end from the beginning. You only know it hurts. Healing, so long in coming, always receded on the horizon, dropping farther and farther back, like a wavering mirage, teasing with its promise of life-giving water. He thinks, We are all thirsting wanderers, desperate for a drop of soothing water to cool our tongues as we aimlessly traverse this earthly hell. There is no alternate route.

The highway of holiness is a toll road.

He feels as if he has roamed the wilderness his entire life, clueless, directionless, exhausted. Depleted not just in body but in spirit, yearning for a word that might lift him above his circumstances and whisk him away from his life. He never would have considered he was on the path he was meant to travel. Never considered that the barren desert of silence and separation would serve as balm for his soul. Or most importantly, that it would take his old bones to the last place he expected: the far-off promised land—the proverbial land flowing with milk and honey. The land of reconciliation and restoration.

Never, he mumbles quietly.

He hears the sound of car doors slamming, voices overlapping. The air is charged as if an electrical summer storm has just blown in. The hairs on his neck stand alert.

His sons.

He sets down the tool he is gripping; he forgot he still had it in hand. He lays it tenderly alongside his finished sculpture. The eagle's eyes are now void of judgment; they stare out vacantly, almost as if listening too.

Finished—after all this time. He cannot fathom the import of his accomplishment. Not yet.

Exuberant voices—like a choir of angels singing—rises in volume. His sons are coming around the house toward the garage. His knees buckle as he tries to stand. He collapses back onto his stool. He listens intently, sifting through the sounds, his attention riveted in anticipation of the one voice that will both break and mend his heart.

A line from one of Leah's poems drifts into his head. He had memorized them all long ago, to where they fastened like barnacles onto his limbs and sinews, grown crusty and impermeable with age, knotting his joints with arthritic poignancy.

I am a foreigner in this wet desert of twisted coral and pulsating sponge

Where Creole wrasses swarm in neon blue,

Each movement of my hand makes them dart in dance.

I conduct a ballet on the edge of the precipice.

He feels a smile inch up his face. That is how he sees her still, dancing on the edge of a knife—a knife so much like the one he just now set down.

The kind that cuts both ways.

Joey's voice shouts in his head, startling him, sounding as clear as the day he uttered the words.

“Daddy, what are you making?” Joey clambered into Jake’s lap, wiggling to make a depression in the linen apron, a makeshift nest to hold him. Jake lifted his glasses off his nose, balanced them on his head. He turned to his six-year-old son.

“A bird—an eagle, with outstretched wings.”

Joey chortled, and his laughter thumped in waves against Jake’s chest. “It doesn’t look like a bird. It looks like a hunk of wood.”

“Well, it’s not finished. You have to envision it. See—these will be the wings. And here’s the beak.” He stroked his son’s silky curls, shimmering red in the waning afternoon light.

Autumn—he remembers it was autumn, the ground carpeted with golden leaves from the birches in their backyard. A scant nod to the end of summer and the onset of winter, what color he could snatch in fragments. He shakes his head. They never satisfied—those pretenses of seasons, seasons heralded in Los Angeles by the rotating holiday displays in the department stores. In Colorado, you didn’t need crepe-paper turkeys in bright orange and brown to remind you that Thanksgiving was a dinner away. Mountain air, redolent of fall tumbling down from the towering peaks dusted with early snow, delineated the days. You drank long and deep from such a draught there; you didn’t have to check the calendar.

“What’s this?”

“Careful! It’s sharp—you’ll hurt yourself.” Jake removed the gouge from delicate fingers and held it at arm’s length.

“Like a knife?”

“Yes, but different. See—there’s a channel here that digs out the wood. You take the gouge and lay it against the surface, like this.”

He sensed Joey’s concentrated gaze as he slid the tool across the grain of mahogany. A twist of aromatic wood spilled from the gouge and dropped to the grass in a delicate pirouette.

“Wow, that’s neat; can I try it?”

“You’re too young. Your hand might slip and you’d cut yourself.”

“I wouldn’t!”

Now he knows Joey probably was right. But at that moment in time, he wasn’t paying attention. He didn’t consider his son’s unusual gift as having anything to do with his hands. His own life—so cluttered and distracting—muddled everything teeming under the surface to where the shape of life became unrecognizable. Where he looked but never saw. His son was a blur, a skew of light that struck the eyes and caused you to squint. The kind of glare that cast a long shadow on everything in proximity.

“Anything that’s sharp can cut, can cause pain.”

Joey’s face turned perplexed. “But sometimes you have to hurt someone for healing to come, right? Like when I scrape my knee and you have to put on that stinky yellow stuff.” His voice dropped, forcing Jake to lean closer to hear. “Sometimes you even have to die to allow someone else to live.”

A chill skipped across the back of Jake’s neck. “What made you say that?”

Joey didn’t answer. He only shook his head and looked at the sky, his gaze following something flying afar off.

What did he mean? Jake wonders. If only he had asked his son to explain. Would that have made a difference, prevented the inevitable? Why hadn't the tremor in Joey's voice set off an alarm? He chided himself. It was too late, far too late for recriminations, for what ifs and if onlys. But still . . . He wished he had stopped, laid a hand on Joey's shoulder, and asked, "What do you mean? Who has to die?" A tear splashed onto his cheek, containing that one tiny wish. He wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"Promise me you won't tell Mommy about this bird. It's to be a surprise."

Joey lifted his head and met his father's eyes; his irises darkened as if a sudden storm had blown in. "But you won't get it done in time."

"In time for what?"

He's sure he remembers Joey hesitating. At the time, Jake didn't think anything of it. Maybe Joey was nervous about the baby. Or perhaps he had picked up tension from listening to his parents' hushed conversations of late, Jake's worry over Rachel's health. After all, none of his other children had been as intuitive and sensitive as Joey. Joey listened; he noticed everything. It was by his light that Jake saw everything else clearly.

"Just in time, is all . . ." Without another word, Joey leapt out of Jake's lap and ran across the yard, scattering piles of leaves as he made for the house, leaves that floated silently back to the ground, drawn by the gravity of slumber and decay. Jake yawned; when had he last slept? His neck ached from leaning over the workbench these few hours. He rubbed a knot on his shoulder.

The screen door slapped twice and Jake lost sight of his son. He settled back in his chair and looked around. Rachel's garden—with its towering hollyhocks and trailing vines—loomed large over him, entangling him in thought, sedating him with the fragrance

of lilac and gardenia. Trumpet flowers hung like heavy fruit, tinged vibrant yellow, spilling trapped sunlight into the verdant enclosure.

He lifts his tired head and remembers the prodigious greenery, the potency of life bursting from the earth, escaping over fences. How everything her hands touched became infused with vitality. Perhaps it was that very effluence of her spirit into her garden and her family that fatally drained the life from her soul. Pouring herself out like a drink offering to ensure the flourishing of her world. His world. Theirs . . .

Jake loosed a sigh and picked up his woodworking tool. He turned the piece of wood first one way, and then another. With firm pressure, he pressed the tool against the grain of the wood, imagining the flesh of his eagle, Rachel's eagle, coming to life under his touch. He thought of Michelangelo chipping stone to release the completed form of David encased in marble. The wood felt like butter as he dug deeper, coaxing the creature to life, envisioning feathers, the way they layered over skin and hugged the sides of the bird's face.

The gouge snagged and jumped from the wood to his left hand, carving a notch in the soft place between his thumb and pointer finger. Jake cried out as crimson blood gushed. How could such a tiny cut bleed so much? He pressed a clean rag against the cut, then froze. Blood had dripped onto the eagle's unformed head; red rivulets slid down its face like tears.

Before he could explore the unsettling feeling this sight gave him, noise erupted from the house. He heard Rachel's voice, her tone meant to calm Simon. Followed, as expected, by defiant shouting.

Jake shifted on his stool. The rare sense of peace he had been enjoying this Sunday afternoon detonated in a flash of harsh sound. She needed to rest, not get upset, not in her condition.

Anger flared as Jake's mind looped through recent arguments. Anger at Rachel's stubborn faith, at her dissembling explanations in the early months of her pregnancy. And he, mouthing words in the vacuum of space, opinions sucked out of his mouth unheeded. He snorted. He may as well be mute since everyone around him was apparently deaf.

He set the carving down on the small outdoor table and packed up the few tools he'd laid out. After snapping the latch on the box, he strode toward the house. The eagle continued crying bloody tears with no one to witness.

He didn't realize, not until many days later, that he hadn't bothered to wipe the blood off the carving. For years, as that piece of wood sat unfinished, those saturated red stains glared out at him, beneath unformed eyes that watched him stumble through his life, that silently laughed in judgment from a dusty cobwebbed shelf. Perhaps, he wonders, that was really why he never finished carving it. He would not touch metal to that wood for nearly thirty years, not until life had dug a deep enough groove into his heart to puncture the wellspring and free his captive spirit drowning inside. Not until now.

It is time.

His sojourn through the wilderness is over. He turns his head toward the door. Tears fill the pools of his eyes, but through the distortion of his watery lenses he can make out the distinctive shape approaching him, carried on a bier of jubilant voices. A mirage materializing in the heat waves of time.

He fears his heart will break.

Joseph, my Joseph . . .