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Residue

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Abstract

Residue is a flash fiction piece, exploring loss, specifically the loss of the protagonist's sons and his teeth. To write this piece, I read a large number of anthologized flash fiction pieces written by contemporary authors including David Foster Wallace, Lydia Davis, Tobias Wolff, and George Saunders with the intent of understanding and reproducing their takes on the flash fiction form while adding my own nuances. For purposes of characterization and setting, I also researched logging done on the land of what is now Algonquin Park in Ontario. My research and writing show that flash fiction functions most effectively when the writing focuses on a moment in characters' lives which do not define those lives but without which those lives could not be effectively detailed or described.

He drags his feet coming out of the cabin. The others started out an hour ago. They have the felling saws with them. He is hungover.

The sun is still low. The sundogs are with it. He sees them often this time of year. They remind him of his two sons, playing by his side. This morning they also remind him of the two teeth he pulled last night.

The teeth needed pulling for weeks. They put off a rank odor, and instead of sitting in his mouth it felt like they were boring down into him, which finally set him to the task. He ripped a strip of cloth from the bottom of a shirt. He boiled the cloth to clean it and set it aside to cool while he started drinking. He had traded unguents and a walnut-handled skinning knife for whiskey. He drank until he felt muddled. Then he went at the teeth with pliers.

After prying the teeth out, he set them aside, jamming the cloth in his mouth and clenching on it while sucking whiskey through his incisors. His jaw ached and the alcohol burned even when he was drunk, but it was better than having the teeth in.

The one picture he had of the boys was lost a month ago when a warm spell hit. He had been driving horses, logs in tow, over the frozen lake surface, but the ice was too thin, and with the deep hollow inhale of a shattered ice sheet, he and the horses went under. The other loggers tied off rope to tree stumps on the lake's edge, throwing the ends to him, and he pulled himself out, shivering and chocking with cold. The horses drowned. When he was given back his clothes

after being warmed by the fire, the picture that had been in his overall's pocket wasn't more than white wilted paper.

He kneels on the tramped down mixture of mud, shavings, and pine needles, drawing on memories.

He used to take his sons to play tag at the park. They ran down the gravel paths, hopping off to circle benches and the oak trees planted there. Their legs moved quickly for how short they were, and he tagged them back with lunges or in the moments they felt daring and tried sneak behind him. When the sun started to sink, he brought the game up the hill, where the boys tired quickly. As they started to slow, he scooped them up on his shoulders to take them home. They told him this was cheating, but he said it was getting to be time for dinner, and they realized, hands on their stomachs, that they were getting hungry. Outside of the park, he put them down, and they walked together the rest of the way.

But there came a day two years ago when he brought them by their aunt's house and left them there. He had started drinking more after the boys' mother had died of pneumonia. He could have stopped, but he wouldn't. He would black out, and to him it was like being in the abyss with her. But the boys told him he started hurting them when he was piss-drunk gone, that they'd try to hoist him up and he'd swing at them as he stumbled. He started finding himself still in the kitchen come morning, laid out on the floor or slouched across the table. They had the bruises to prove that they had tried to help him, so he wrote to their aunt and made a proposition.

He sends money out to her when he gets back from logging season, but he won't ever go and see them. They'd ask him to stay, thinking he'd be ready. They'd tell him to remarry, thinking that he'd want to. They'd tell him they love him, and he would listen to that phrase and repeat it back to them. He would feel it on his tongue. It would have weight and volume to it, a tangible

thing. He couldn't burn that bridge if he tried, but he couldn't stand to cross it either. He'll hold to the hope it rots and falls to pieces with old age.

Still on his knee, he inhales deeply and bites his lip. He pulls his hands through his hair, and it sticks to them in spots. He holds his palms in front of his face to look at them. They are calloused and thick, red with cuts and black with grease and dotted with dirt where sap got on them and won't come off. He is a unwitting hoarder of motes and modicums, detritus of the forest, but the two sundogs are there reminding him that he cannot hold on to his own bone and blood—in his teeth on a table, rotted and black, in his sons somewhere without him, to remain without him.

He puts his hands on his thighs and screams, bending at the waist until his sternum is atop his hands, until all the air is gone from his lungs. After, he kneels there panting. Cold air dips into the holes in his mouth. The scream ascends to the sky as mist.

He rises and goes inside the cabin. He leaves it minutes later with his boots on, the cloth clamped in his mouth, what's left of the whiskey in his hand. The sundogs are nearly gone, the sun rising above where they will follow. He heads out to the area the men are clearing lumber. He's over an hour late, and they won't care what back home is keeping him when he has a job to do there. They will ask him what the screaming was over, and he will tell them it was damn open wounds.