

Domisylum

a short story by BRIAN BUCKBEE



SYLVIA DE SWAAN

And then there's the paranoia.

My crib, I'm sure, was too small and unsafe. A normal-sized child could easily have stuffed his head between the railings. Only my giant, oversized head saved me. I remember the countless hours I spent lying on my back, unable to roll over onto my stomach, staring at the asbestos-laden ceiling, watching the particles sifting down through my "Songbirds of the Central Midwest" mobile and down, down, down my throat and into my lungs. My parents, I'm sure, picked the crib out of somebody's trash. The mobile was probably a gift from some thoughtless distant relative who didn't realize that I was terrified of the Midwest, and of the particular songbirds that dwell there. They looked like German aircraft circling above me. The only thing that gave me comfort in the room was the night light plugged into the outlet. It was a banana, or a moon, with a smile on its face and light shooting out its nose.

My parents, Paul and Bonnie, are so proud of their early poverty. They like to think that they raised themselves up by their bootstraps. But it's not like we're swimming in it now. The house we live in, I'm sure, could collapse at any minute (termites), and we'd be buried alive. Our only hope would be our German shepherd, Rex. But he'd probably run over to the park and swim in the fountain while we bled to death in our urine-soaked nightclothes. Bugs (centipedes) would sit on our eyeballs while Rex bit at the waterspouts. How tragic it would be for Rex when he came back and found our bodies eaten away (rats) and then had to live with my sister in her immaculate apartment and listen to her humping her stupid boyfriend.

My father, Paul, could get us out of this rathole.

"It's no rathole!" he is always telling me.

This story previously appeared in the Threepenny Review.

“Then why do I have to sleep in the basement?”

“Because you’re twenty-eight years old!”

This is his answer to everything. He thinks my condition is optional. “You’re not sick,” Paul tells me. “You’re a bum.” Sometimes I think about leaving home and living on the streets just to teach him a lesson. The streets, however, are no place for a guy like me (rats *and* bugs). Paul is not a large man. He wears black plastic glasses and is clumsy with tasks that other people perform with ease. I see him lose his balance sometimes when he is walking up the stairs. And whenever he carries a plate of food across the room, the food is at risk of sliding off. Meals with gravy are especially harrowing to watch. Sometimes, when Paul is shuffling around, I am convinced I could tip him over just by nudging him. It would be satisfying, but, boy, then he’d have my ass in a sling.

I think Paul is waiting for me to leave this house (by casket) before he buys another one. He must have money socked away after all these years as parts manager at that place where he works. Bonnie used to work, too, as a nurse in a hospital. But she was bringing home more than a paycheck (Ebola), and I asked her very nicely to quit, which she did, though now I am her only patient and am forced to live with the constant threat of sponge baths and spoon-feedings of puréed vegetables. When we hear the blender, Rex and I make ourselves scarce.

I hate the blender. The garbage disposal, too. I sure could do without that thing! The day the men came and put it in was the worst day of my life. All I can think about is getting my hand stuck in there. Why would my hand be in there? Maybe I’d be retrieving a dropped biscuit. Maybe I’d be passing by and my hand would slip down there just as the disposal was turned on. The truth is I sort of want to put my hand down there. I must have been hypnotized when I was little.

“You’re going to learn the hard way,” Paul warned me one time when he caught me looking down the drain with a flashlight.

“I can’t see anything!” I said, frustrated.

“They’re miniature beavers,” he said, looking over my shoulder. “They’re afraid of the light.”

“Really?”

Nothing would please Paul more than for me to learn such a painful lesson (amputation). Bonnie would hate me for making such a bloody mess, and I’d have to get a hook, and then I’d never find work in my field.

One time I made the mistake of moving out of the house. I’d thrown a bowl of beef stroganoff out the window (parsley), and Paul had given me a lesson on *diplomacy*. So when he told me I should get my own apartment, instead of crying, “No way!” I decided to be diplomatic. I said that I’d agree to move, but only under the condition that my new apartment have a spiral staircase, a bathroom with two sinks, a fireplace that you could light by turning on a switch, and a Southwestern motif.

Paul came home three nights later and told me to pack my bags.

I never made it to my apartment, though. Paul drove me out of town, beaming and humming oldies. At a stop sign, I

exited the vehicle and darted into a wooded lot.

How long was I in the woods? It’s impossible to say. A week? Ten days? Several hours? My progress was slow (quicksand), and I was followed, I’m sure, by Paul’s minions from the parts department. When I got back home, Bonnie had converted my bedroom into a sewing room. She’d never sewn a thing in her life! I began to throw her sewing supplies out the window, but before I got very far I found a pincushion that looked strikingly like a chubby man-child — it had many, many pins in it — so I left the rest as it was and set up housekeeping in the basement, where they’d put my things. Paul did not appear happy when he came home later that night: no beaming, no oldies. Rex and I, however, had a hell of a reunion.

Their mistake was not throwing my stuff in the trash. They know that now, and I know that they know, so I never ride anywhere with Paul, even though he’s always asking, always hopeful. Rex, I am sorry to say, *does* go with him. He’s stupid that way. Our first dog, Cody, made that mistake one too many times, and my sister and I never saw him again.

My medication, I believe, is optional. They say you are supposed to take it regularly, but of course they say that: it means more dough for them. Why don’t I take my medicine? Because I don’t want to walk through life like a zombie. I love Rex, but I don’t want to act like him, wandering from room to room without knowing why. Paul and Bonnie would love for me to take my medicine. I’m easier to control when I take it, they say, and I’m more fun. But I’m afraid I’ll wake up one day to discover I have a potted plant resting on my head and several years have passed. So I am careful about what I take and when. For instance, I will never take medicine if I know my sister is coming by. Bonnie tries to slip it in my food, but I am onto her. The applesauce gives her away. Suddenly, it’s applesauce all the time, applesauce with everything, even with spaghetti and pizza. Applesauce has become my enemy. I slip Rex my applesauce while Paul and Bonnie are distracted by *Wheel of Fortune*. He has never been so well-behaved.

One evening, a couple of hours after dinner, I came up from my “bedroom” and found Paul in the kitchen standing over Rex. He was crying and vulnerable to being tipped over. “He’s dead!” he bellowed.

I took a good swing with my foot and kicked Rex, hard, and he staggered noiselessly, but not unhappily, to his feet and moved into the next room.

As a nurse, Bonnie once knew how to trick people into taking their meds. The sudden appearance of the applesauce is a sign of decline on her part. She is inept as a nurse and has a pear-shaped body. She scuttles around the house like a bottom-heavy child’s toy and appears nearly impossible to tip over. I look nothing like her. I look nothing like either of my parents, yet they refuse to admit that I’m adopted, even when taped to a chair. The truth is, I’m not very interested in my real parents, except that they may have a bigger house and, I’m sure, a prettier daughter.

Just because I am a bit “psychotic” doesn’t mean that I don’t have urges. Yet my sister still refuses to put out. She says she

is tired of my asking every time I see her. I tell her that if she came around more often, I wouldn't have to ask so much.

"For instance," I say to her, "if you came by every week —" she comes by once a month — "I'd only ask you every other time I see you."

"Then you'd be asking me twice as much," she says.

"No," I point out, correctly, "I'd only be asking you *half* as much."

She works in a bank and is not very smart. While Bonnie is harassing her about some "boy" named Jimmy, I switch dinner plates with my sister. She has said before that she doesn't remember much of her weekends at home. She should be grateful to me for that and should thank me by letting me put a long object (bowling trophy) in her cookie. If I could find my pills, I'd slip them into her applesauce, and then maybe I'd get to have sex with her. So far, the closest I've ever come to having sex is sticking a peanut-butter cracker on my poker and letting Rex lick it off. Rex is a fine-looking animal. He has a thick coat and can fetch the daily paper, but not the Sunday.

Bonnie is plotting to kill me (dismemberment). I keep hiding the trash bags. "Where are the trash bags?" she is incessantly asking.

"How should I know?" I say.

"For Christ's sake, I can't keep throwing your father's money away on trash bags."

"Well, without trash bags," I point out, "you really can't throw it away."

That's when she'll make a threatening comment, pivot like a ball in a socket, and wobble out of the room.

I don't like trash bags. Back when I used to ride in the car with Paul, I'd see them on the side of the highway. I knew what was in them.

"A body wouldn't fit in a garbage bag," he'd say.

"A torso would," I'd say. And it would. Even a hefty man-boy torso.

"You make me crazy," Bonnie says to me one day, still not having found the trash bags.

"You shouldn't make light of my people's condition," I tell her. "Didn't you see *Cuckoo's Nest*?" — the greatest movie of all time.

"Why don't you just tell me where they are?"

"Why don't you just use paper bags?"

"Because the grease [blood] soaks right through."

In an attempt to kill two birds with one stone, I've jammed the trash bags down the garbage disposal.

Bonnie leans against the doorjamb. For now, she's given up. "You've really been brushing Rex a lot lately," she says.

"Yeah."

"He looks great."

I give old Rex the once-over. "He sure does," I say.

"He'll look nice for our guests," she says, and retreats into the kitchen.

"Guests?" I say to the empty room.

Paul has confessed to thinking that my condition, though

diagnosed and documented by some of the finest professionals our medical community has to offer, is just an excuse for being lazy. "You're as sane as a songbird," he says.

"I keep seeing things," I tell Paul. "Horrible things."

"It's all in your head," he says.

Exactly.

"You give up on everything," he says. "You always have."

I haven't given up on the sexual pursuit of my sister, I think to myself. But there are other things I have given up on. Like ice-skating, for instance (frostbite *and* amputation). Ice-skating is basically signing up for death. You could fall through a crack in the ice, or a skate blade could slice right across your jugular.

"You just *have* to be different," Paul said to me the first time I refused to go skating with the family. I was maybe fourteen.

"I don't want to get my fingers chopped off," I said.

Paul promised that my fingers would be safe.

"But can you say the same for my jugular?" I asked.

They left me at home. On the way out the door, my sister, then ten, punched me with her ring pop.

Now my doctor asks me, "Is ice-skating more exciting because you can't do it?"

"I get chills watching it on TV," I tell him. "I can't tear my eyes away. It's like watching a train wreck." (Don't get me started.)

"Perhaps," my doctor suggests, "you create a fear of skating just to make the world a more interesting place."

"But, Doc, the jugular," I say, holding my throat.

"Maybe you create a dangerous world because the real one bores you." He raises his big Indian eyebrows, the way he does when he thinks he's made a good point.

If I thought about it, this could go a long way toward explaining my fascination with my sister

(end of excerpt)