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### ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

#### "Desperate"

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I woke up that morning bleeding from my head. No, I really did. The pillow was soaked almost all the way through, with my blood. It was a shocking sight I have to say. I couldn't understand how it was possible to bleed that much from my head without dying. Maybe I had died already, I thought, and was sitting up in my bed looking at a blood-soaked pillow in a scene from a skit up in Heaven. Or Hell. I'm not going to fight anyone on where I end up. I figure they know what they're doing. Who they're damning and who they're absolving.

I hadn't died. My hair was matted in the back, and my fingers returned with red, glassy goo on their tips. I smelled them, my fingers, which I think is just a natural human instinct, although I'm not sure why. The blood smelled all right. Like mine. I don't know what someone else's might smell like, and if I did, and it did smell like someone else's, then what? I got up and went into the bathroom, knelt down in front of the tub and turned the water on. Let it run for a bit to get the temperature right. I suddenly had no idea how an open wound would respond to cold or hot water. Or water at all. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had an open wound, much less one on my head. In fact, I don't think I ever had.

I let the water run over the back of my head, leaning far enough over so that none of it would dribble down my back. I didn't want to touch the place again, where the wound was, and so I just let the water run over it, my hands gripped onto the side of the tub. My eyes were closed at first, and when I opened them after a few minutes the entire tub was filled with brick red, soapy, dark water. It filled up fast since the drain was clogged. Was always clogged, no matter how much Liquid Plumber or Drano I put down there. Soon there was about an inch of the stuff -a combination of my blood, my leave-in conditioner, and the smoke and dirt from last night.

It was hard to tell if I'd rinsed it all out, but I was tired of leaning over and my head hurt, so I turned the water off and grabbed a towel from behind me. Careful not to press too tightly on the wound, and not really having any idea just how big or deep or serious it was, I wrapped the towel loosely around my head, still leaning over. When I stood up it felt like I might throw up, and it occurred to me at that point how angry my mother would be if I went ahead and died without telling her. I could call her, I thought, but the clock over the stove on my way back to the bedroom said 4:30 AM. She would be asleep, and dying or not, who makes phone calls, or answers them for that matter, at 4:30 in the morning other than cops and firemen?

I sat back down on my bed, breathing in and out. I knew it was important to do that. The blood-soaked pillow was still there. I peeled off the slipcover and the bare pillow itself looked like a little chubby rutabaga, with a gunshot wound. Ruined. I gathered up both the bare pillow and its failed sheathe and brought them into the kitchen, where I pulled a black plastic garbage bag from underneath the refrigerator in which to dispose them. On the way back to my room this time I noticed the arm of my favorite shirt sticking out from beneath the couch. As I bent over to reach for it, the lower part of my abdomen coiled in alarming pain. Even lower than my abdomen. Again I breathed in and out, because I knew that was important to do, and then went down for the shirt again.

The towel unraveled and fell down damp and gracelessly onto my shoulders as I took the shirt arm up into my hands. Stiff by now, the area around the neck was completely soaked with blood. Mostly, I was disappointed that my favorite shirt

was ruined, but then I reached up to feel my neck, which I'd been careful not to get wet when leaning over in the tub, and again my fingertips came back red. I had not discerned a wound on my neck. The blood must've just run from the main head wound, the one I still hadn't directly touched to palpably survey the damage.

I put the shirt in the same garbage bag with the pillow and its cover, and continued back into my room, again sitting on the bed, only this time looking around me, looking for more evidence, spots, splashes, weapons. I thought about watching some TV, but then remembered the time and couldn't bear to subject myself to whatever might be on at that hour. Nearly satisfied that I wasn't dying just then, I fluffed up the remaining pillow like a long-benched rookie, and lay down.

Seemed like days before I woke again, but only an hour had passed. It wasn't my idea to wake up, either. Streaks of white light, hands, legs, lips, anger and force flashing like an atom bomb made it impossible for me to keep my eyes shut, much less for me to sleep. I didn't sit up this time, although did check to see if the back of my head was still bleeding, without actually touching where, at this point I could only assume, the wound was. It wasn't. I stared at the ceiling for a while, wondering why I was meant to end this way. Who decided this? And anyway, who cared?

I never sleep on my back. Always on one side or the other, although I preferred my left. Now on my back, every part of me ached, but it seemed like the only tolerable position. Slowly, contemplatively, I brought one hand up to rest on my belly, leaving the other stretched down around the outside of my thigh. It couldn't hurt to explore, right? My fingers stretched toward the coarse crinkle of hair at my pubic line, and then on deeper toward the familiar softening, fleshy want between my legs. My middle finger pulled while the others held fast, and I was startled by how quickly my muscles convulsed. Inside the dark, behind my eyelids, I saw him. His hard hand tearing through my hair, grabbing at the roots, jerking my head back up against something sharp, dull, unforgiving. It didn't knock me out, because I remember him then lifting me off of or away from whatever it was that had drove itself dogged and maddeningly in toward my skull, and then putting me somewhere else, for better positioning I can only assume.

He didn't rip anything. Apart from the blood-soaked favorite shirt, the pants I'd had on were hastily removed, crumpled and intact, that is to say, the legs, zipper, and button were where they'd been when I bought them, on the floor next to my bed. But my bra was missing. He must have been very good. Very skilled. To do his business without tearing any of my clothes, while making off with my bra. Unless it was over near the couch, where I'd found my shirt. I went back in to look.

No bra. I figured since I was up, I'd sit on the couch for a while. See how that felt. Still a little nauseous, and rubbery in the thighs, I curled up and hoped for a miracle. That being, that I hadn't drunk so much that I'd let some guy rape me, that I could somehow account for the gash in the back of my head to people who love me without telling them how it really got there, and that I'd be able to replace my favorite shirt.

#### **WHAT DOES YOUR ART MEAN TO YOU?**

I started writing short stories as a way of coming to terms with my sister's rape that occurred almost 25 years ago. I was 11 at the time, she was 14. And although I remember my parents rushing out in a panic one night, calling from a police station to tell me that everything would be alright, and later coming home with my sister, bruises pulsating off her face in fresh, angry hues of purple, blue and yellow, I didn't understand what had really happened.

My sister didn't talk about the rape for 10 years. I pieced together what I could as I grew older, knowing to never ask her directly, or to bring it up with either of my parents. A friend had been with her, a neighbor, who told me what he could before going silent with shame and heartbreak. My brother moved away that year after graduating from high school, without knowing too much himself about what had happened to our sister. Even if he had known the details, I think he would have refused to believe it.

We never really got along as teenagers, my sister and I. I thought she was reckless and smoked too much pot, and she thought I was stuck-up and cared too much about what other people thought. We struggled like mad to like each other, for

the sake of our parents and because we shared a bedroom, which made for miserable circumstances when we were fighting. She dropped out of high school twice, I graduated in good standing. I went on to college, she would never go. I traveled across country and abroad, she never left New Hampshire.

By the time I was in my second year at college, she was living in a small cabin on the border of Canada with a drunk, abusive husband and handicapped twin boys. That summer I got a job as a waitress at a resort hotel not far from where she was living. Having cultivated my status oriented snobbery even more so in college, I was loath to get in touch with her. I also didn't really think she'd care whether or not I made the effort. However, my mother convinced me that she would care, and in fact, that it was a really good time to have a visit with her.

I remember walking into my sister's home and thinking it looked like complete white trash squalor. There were dogs and cats and dirty pampers and unscrapped dishes and overflowing garbage, almost everywhere. But my mother was right, my sister was happy to see me. She cleared a place on the couch for us to sit while the babies napped, and began to tell me about that night.

That was 15 years ago, and still, as an adult today, I cannot believe that my sister is so alive, smiling so beautifully, laughing her relentlessly infectious cackle, mothering her handicapped, though now strong twin boys, free of physical abuse, madly in love, riding horses again, and painting, which she stopped doing after the rape.

The details of what happened to her that night are unfathomable to me, and so the only way I've been able to try to understand, because I owe that to her, is to explore the subject through writing. It has taken me several years to find a compatible genre for this exploration, and as many to separate myself more clearly from the subject. Having rested on the genre of short fiction, each story I begin branches off into variants of sexual encounters, usually dangerous, violent, or dark, but always beyond the protagonist's control.

And so, what my art means to me is empathy, emotional knowledge, and the possibility for redemption, growth, and forgiveness.

**WHAT PRACTICAL STEPS HAVE YOU ALREADY TAKEN IN THE PURSUIT OF YOUR ART?**

**DO YOU HAVE A PARTICULAR GOAL OR PROJECT WHICH YOU ARE PURSUING IN YOUR ART AT THE PRESENT MOMENT?**

**DO YOU HAVE A PARTICULAR GOAL OR PROJECT WHICH YOU WOULD LIKE TO PURSUE AS AN AROHO GIFT OF FREEDOM RECIPIENT?**

**WHAT SPECIFICALLY WOULD YOU REQUEST FROM AROHO TO HELP YOU ACHIEVE THIS GOAL OR PROJECT? [EXCERPT]**

The obvious answer to the first part of this question is that I've always kept my day job. My parents are both artists and growing up, my brother, my sister, and I went without a lot. But we were always happy; house rich, penny poor. And we always understood and appreciated the value of art. We also grew up thinking that art was pretty much synonymous with having no money, which to me more so than to my siblings, meant having no stuff. From a very young age, I liked stuff. I liked clothes and fashion and makeup and books and movies and magazines and eating out (if only at the local variety store in town). So I got a job when I was 13 and never stopped working.

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