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"Damage"

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Damage

DEREK NIKITAS

DONALD REMEMBERS NOTHING about that accident in his youth. He knows what happened because they had repeated the story over and over and over until it stuck—his mother, his brother, the doctors. You were ten, they told him, playing in the snowbank under the awning. All his life the story recited: how the stalactite icicle three feet long, tapered to a needle point in the warm breeze, broke loose from the gutter and plummeted into his head, stabbing through his toque and his skull, into his brain.

For twenty-one years, Donald has lived with this damage. Now he's alone in a second-story studio apartment above the Webster Funeral Home. Sometimes he imagines a spirit might drift out of a body downstairs and float up through the hardwood floor on its way to heaven, bobbing momentarily in front of the TV set like a lost balloon. But as far as he knows it has never happened.

The injury damaged his long-term retention, and memory became difficult. But he still recalls his mother before her death last year, upright in the hospital bed with her sheets smooth against her scaly skin, her eyes swollen half shut, the leatherbound Bible spread open against her chest. Two tubes immersed in the soft inside of her elbow leaked bruises and bubbles under her flesh. The dialysis machine beside the bed hummed as it filtered toxins out of her blood.

"Let me—" she said, and reached out her fingers.

He leaned forward and her fingers pressed through the prickles of his brush cut, tracing the raised scar on his scalp.

In his memory their voices are distant and tinny:

"Your brain—is strong," she said through her breath. "Just like anybody else—God knows—good and strong—He knows." Her eyes closed, one palm flat on his head, the other on the Bible, as if she had some power to conduct all those lessons and psalms into his mind. "Don't ever think an awful thought, Donald—don't—"

"I won't," he told her.

"Don't. Awful thoughts—that's what sin is. Just like anybody else. An awful thought will come true—you don't want that."

In another memory he rode his bicycle just a few blocks to Hammersport College for an evening of Silver Eagle hockey. Dusk, with the pale blue glow of campus safety lights. He locked his bike on the rack. Just behind him, a brick wall, tall as his head.

From nowhere a doe galloped past, graceful, then rushed into a narrow walkway through the brick wall, into an outdoor courtyard. The doe paced in the courtyard, snorting bursts of cloudy heat from her nostrils. She whipped her snout against the glass panes opposite the wall. On the inside, just inches away, people gathered and gawked at her struggle. She spread glistening streaks of mucus on the glass. Already she'd forgotten the narrow walkway, her entrance and exit.

Donald watched. His breath gusted in tandem with the doe's, his muscles twitched with her every lurch. He wanted her to think, to be calm for just a moment, and she would find her escape.

The doe leaped over the brick wall. She arched through the air like a flying reindeer, everything stretched—her legs, her soft belly, her neck. But she couldn't have anticipated the bike rack on the other side. The horizontal bar gouged into her neck. Her strangled gasp was almost human, and a trail of phlegm spurted through the air. She curled into the squeeze between the rack and the wall. Her limp head was held upright by the vertical bars.

Alone in the silent snowfall with this death, Donald fell to his knees, blind-sided with grief of the intensity he might have felt at his mother's death, if he could remember.

Of course he understands his mother is dead. Constant reminders. And, in a photo album on the shelf, there are photographs of the important events since then. Pictures outside his mother's wake at the Webster Funeral Home. The Websters, old church friends of his mother's, offered him the upstairs apartment in exchange for work maintaining the grounds and the flowers in the greenhouse out back.

Pictures of his brother Timber's wedding. Pictures of Timber and his wife Madeline moving into the old house at 215 South Ave. Donald had lived there his whole life—the same house that dropped the icicle into his head. But he hasn't stepped back inside since he moved to the apartment. Timber and Madeline are going to have a baby soon, and Donald's old bedroom will be the nursery.

These photographs seem stolen from someone else's life. He doesn't want to look at them. Almost too much, seeing his own face grinning from an unrecognizable world.

He still remembers the potluck dinner at the United Methodist Church, two weeks ago. He ate cold starchy noodles off a styrofoam plate. The pastor called numbers off the winning stub and Donald stood, elated and embarrassed, and his ticket was confirmed and everyone clapped. The grand prize: a full-color, wide-screen Panasonic with built-in VCR. He couldn't believe the miracle—the numbers, the same exact numbers, and in God's house!

Last night, Donald watched the TV from his easy chair. A *Dateline* special report about stalkers who are driven to kill their victims, with dramatization footage of shiny black shoes sneaking along a sidewalk and then a real-life stalker in his orange prison garb explaining how obsessions push everything else out of your head, filling it up, until something must be relieved. He prods his own head with his fingers, wrists cuffed together.

Timber installed the television, showed him all about the remote control—power, volume, channels. Donald needs Timber's help sometimes. He and Madeline have come to visit Sunday afternoons since the TV installation, for Buffalo Bills football. Last week and now today. Before they arrive at noon he disinfects the toilet, sweeps the floor, wipes dust off the TV screen. When they get there, Timber slides his six-pack of Miller High Life in the refrigerator, taking one, twisting it open. He steps into the living room.

Timber's real name is Tim, but his old fraternity brothers nicknamed him Timber. At a college party once he drank too much, passed out, broke a wooden coffee table with his barrel chest. Timber. He still goes to the gym three times a week, pumping that chest of his, like he plans to make a living pulverizing tables. Donald is big like his brother, but not from weightlifting. Mainly from takeout food.

For Donald, Madeline has brought some leftovers in Tupperware; she helps him warm gelatinous chicken and dumplings in a pot on the stove. Her thick orange hair seems to bounce even when she stands still. Freckles on her arms and her face and anywhere else Donald has seen.

"You're not showing yet," he tells her.

"Donald—" She holds her fingers to her mouth. Fingernails painted aqua. "Donald—remember I told you about the miscarriage. Several months ago."

A quick fever spreads to his limbs. His soul wants to fall out, away from this terrible moment he has created. He tries to remember the miscarriage; his neurons send shocks along the network, searching connections and interlocks.

Madeline's palm touches his cheek. "It's okay," she says. Pink ridges in her white-glossed lips. "You forgot is all."

Later, during halftime, Timber mentions the black box. Four empty Miller High Lifes sit on the coffee table, a fifth in his hand. Madeline's on the couch. She wears a skirt, her bare legs cross over the armrest, and the thin black straps from her pumps lace up her ankles. Donald tries not to look.

"All right now, Donny, listen carefully," Timber says. He stands blocking the television. "I got this old frat brother over in Oswego. He makes these little black boxes. What do you call—"

"Descrambling units," Madeline says.

"Yeah," says Timber. "Anyways, me and Maddy just have that shitty black-and-white, so I was thinking I'd mention this black box to you, you know, in case you want in on it." He takes a chug of his beer; the bottle pops off his lips. "It's a hundred bucks. What do you say?"

"How many channels?" Donald asks. He's eating the chicken and dumplings off a TV tray.

"Over a hundred. All the premium channels. All the satellite channels. ESPN one, two, three, who knows how many. Pay-per-view channels, nudie channels—now come on, Donny. Halftime's almost over."

"I don't know if I have a hundred dollars."

"You do too," says Timber. "I seen your bank statement."

"Don't push him," Madeline says.

Timber points a finger at her. "Don't worry, I know he wants it."

"You forgot to mention it's *illegal*," says Madeline.

Timber says, "It's not illegal."

"It's stealing!" She pulls her knees against her chest. Donald has caught himself looking at her again. They speak, again, as if Donald has left the room. This frequent sense of his own absence is comforting because he won't be held accountable, but frightening because they're always arguing when it happens.

"Didn't I just say he had to pay a hundred bucks?" says Timber.

"All right," Donald says, "order the box." Dumplings fill his cheeks and he shouldn't have spoken, but he doesn't want Madeline—anyone—to get angry and leave. They're both glaring at him as if he's broken something they cherished. Madeline looks down at the paisley pattern in the couch. A smile twitches into Timber's mouth.

An image of stargazers enters Donald's mind, in the greenhouse out back, blooming in clay pots. "I know," he says. "Send the black

box to your house. When it comes, I'll pretend—I'll bring a flower delivery to Madeline and I'll pick up the box."

"What's the point of that?" Timber asks.

No point, no reason, other than Madeline looks at him again and he can't see her disappointment anymore. "For safety—" he answers.

"Safety? What the hell—" Timber says.

"I think it's an excellent plan," Madeline says.

Donald writes a check to the Oswego frat brother; Timber tells him he'll wait two weeks for the box. He waits and mows the lawn and tends the greenhouse. Late at night, he rides his bike through the lamp-lit streets downtown, over the canal bridge, the grates humming under his bicycle tires, to the north side of town where houses and businesses dwindle into the woods. New structures have been built, old ones demolished, but he accepts these changes on faith—just the slight vertigo of expecting one scene and finding another.

He stops at All Nite Video, a place he doesn't remember. Inside, he peruses the pre-viewed tapes and decides to buy one called *Rupert's Brain*, if only because he hasn't used his VCR; something must tide him over before cable.

At home he watches. *Rupert's Brain* is a black-and-white 50's drive-in movie. Rupert is some kind of deranged criminal, docile now from a lobotomy. A mad scientist wears a lab coat and stethoscope, creates a brain machine, experiments on Rupert.

"Human beings only use ten percent of their brain capacity," says the scientist, sticking suction cups with wires to Rupert's forehead. "But soon you will use much more!" The machine blinks a single light like an eye, repairs Rupert's damage, awakens dormant neurons and strange secret places in his brain. Now, Rupert can make objects move with his mind. He makes a steamroller flatten one woman because she wouldn't love the mad scientist. His mind is so awake that his eyes glow in the dark. But the doctor cannot keep control. Rupert has grown too intelligent. He forces the mad scientist into his own brain machine; the wires are like snakes whipping in the air, striking into the scientist's head. The machine cooks his brain; smoke billows out of his ears. But Rupert's brain is too strong—terrible headaches, too much, exploding out of his nostrils, glowing chunks of gray matter.

With Sunday morning comes the urge again to see the old house. Still a week too early to bring the stargazers to Madeline; he has no excuse to visit. Timber doesn't want him around the old house because Donald shouldn't be so attached to his mother, to the house.

Better that he forgets, Timber said. Better not to dredge up bad memories. Timber had some argument about this, with Madeline. To make the arguing stop, Donald promised not to come by the house.

But he has broken his promise. Several days a month, he rides along the sidewalk on South Avenue, passing slowly, just to look at the white siding and the green shutters. His old bedroom is on the second floor, now the nursery, waiting for the baby. He just wants to close his eyes and remember the inside. He just wants to be certain he hasn't forgotten, that whole rooms haven't disappeared from his head.

No one knows about his secret visits. Each time, afterwards, a sickening guilt overtakes him. He is obsessed like the stalker in the orange jumpsuit on *Dateline*. He wants to stop his awful wishing to see inside, his yearning just to get in there one more time, but he can't.

On his way to church today he takes an unusual route, finds himself riding his bike all the way down North Avenue until it turns into South Avenue, praying for the strength to turn back. He passes a row of bushes and the old house comes into view. He stops the bike, balancing on his tiptoes, hands gripping tight on the handle breaks.

"Donald?"

He's been reckless. He hasn't looked first, hasn't seen Madeline in the front yard lying in her bikini on a chaise lounge. She stands, holding a dripping glass of lemonade, almost naked. Even the bikini straps hang off her shoulders, looping under her armpits. Below, the bright green swimsuit tucks against her sex like fluorescent lipstick. He can't help looking there.

"Donald?" Madeline says again. She pulls a strap over her shoulder, lifting one breast slightly. He has never seen her in the yard before, never seen Timber there, or anyone. His indiscretions scatter like glass—every stealthy visit to this house, everything he ever imagined about Madeline, even those shameful things he's forgotten. He pushes the sidewalk with his toes, lurching the bike forward, and the front wheel wobbles along as he slaps his feet against the pedals, pumping, forcing the chain through its jerky rotation.

He arrives late for church, filmed with sweat, gasping. He slides into the pew, far back where no one can see him. The pastor speaks, but Donald doesn't hear. He clasps his moist hands together and prays for forgiveness, knowing he doesn't deserve it, praying to God and his mother together because the two have fused in his mind. His

clearest memory of her is the dialysis tubes running into her arm, the bruises and blisters. Every other memory is failing, even her face.

Madeline will hate him and call him a pervert. She will tell Timber and Timber will break his bones for what he's done and seen and thought. Timber will refuse to give him the black box. But Donald wants the box more than anything now. He wants more channels with more people and more stories and more news. Always something to watch, and he'll never need to walk by the old house again. But he doesn't deserve it, he doesn't even deserve to be in God's house. He leaves the church after five minutes of worship, rides his bicycle back to the apartment.

Timber's truck is parked in the funeral home lot. His gun rack and two rifles are secured in the cab window. At least Timber hasn't decided to shoot him, yet. Donald paces on the porch, imagining lies he could tell, sickened by all of them. His soul wants to leave him, sick of this ugly body and this damaged mind. His hands quake, but his soul insists—go see your brother, pray for forgiveness, pray he won't injure you. Nothing signals the moment his soul wins, except a strange calm, and his legs begin leading him up the stairs.

Six empty beer bottles are in the kitchen sink and Timber's in the living room. He has pushed the TV from the wall, crouched behind it, disconnecting and reconnecting wires like a switchboard operator.

"Hey, Chief," says Timber. "Got the box early. The friggin' Bills are blacked out on the local channel. But if I get this thing juiced up in time we can catch the game out of Boston."

"The box?" Donald asked.

"You remember the damn box, don't you?"

"Yes, but I was supposed to—"

"Guy brought it over last night so I figured I'd come by."

"What about Madeline's flowers?" He drops into his easy chair.

"I'm sure she'll get over the flowers," Timber says and grabs the remote off the coffee table, begins a jaunt through the channels.

"A miracle," says Timber. Donald wants not to agree. He doesn't deserve such a miracle, such relief. But Donald feels Timber's elation too, even more, since this is *his* cable and *his* prize television, and ours is a forgiving God. The whole living word pulsates into his apartment on those hundred channels.

Donald notices two suitcases propped under the coffee table, one of them overflowing with socks and underwear. Then the phone rings.

Timber says, "If that's my wife, tell her I ain't talking."

Donald picks up on the second ring.

"Is that asshole over there, Donald?" Madeline says over the line. "I don't want to talk to him, I just want to know if he's there."

"Yes," Donald says.

"Is it her?" asks Timber. "Tell her to go to hell."

"I just want to say one thing, Donny," Madeline says. "You listen carefully. That shithead is no good. If I were you, I wouldn't let him stay there. I'd kick his ass out on the street."

"I can't—" Donald begins.

"Why did you ride off this morning?" she asks.

Donald cannot speak.

"Listen, you want to come by this house? You come by and fuck what your brother says. I'm going to my parents—you can pack up your stuff and come back here. I'll leave the front door unlocked. Let *him* live in the morgue."

"It's a funeral home. I can't. Mom gave the house to Tim—"

"Just hang up on her, Don," Timber says.

"I can't—"

"It's too bad, Donald," says Madeline. "I can get out of here, but you have to be related to that—I'm sorry—it's just—"

Timber yanks the phone out of Donald's hand, slaps it back on the cradle. "It's easy," Timber says, takes a swig of beer.

"I'm sorry—" Donald says.

"What are you apologizing for? This is me and Maddy and some bullshit doesn't concern you."

"She said she was leaving."

"She's full of words."

"Is she mad at me?" Donald asks.

"You? What the hell are you—just never mind about it, Donny. It'll blow over. We'll just have fun right now—drink a little, watch the game, maybe later go play some pool. Just forget about it."

Donald fears Madeline's stargazers have wilted. He suspects he has given them too much water, too much Miracle Grow, left them in a draft. The single red eye on the black box stares at him, blinking as Timber flips channels, like the mind machine from *Rupert's Brain*.

"I have to go," Donald says. He rushes through the kitchen, fumbling down the stairs, across the parking lot, past Timber's truck with the two rifles he uses for hunting. Timber wanted to take Donald hunting once, but another argument ensued with Madeline,

always about Donald. If not for him they wouldn't argue or leave each other.

In the hot plastic greenhouse he finds Madeline's stargazers, healthy and stiff, but he can't look at them long, for fear one sideward glance, one awful thought, will shed the petals to the floor. He's made Madeline hate his brother with one look, one disgusting thought.

Through a torn flap in the milky white plastic walls, he notices a Greater Rochester Cable truck idling in the street out front. Four men, all dressed in the same blue outfits—two standing on the sidewalk with hands on their hips, a third pulling tools out of the back of the truck, a fourth climbing the telephone pole, already halfway. Donald rushes out of the greenhouse, heads toward the porch, trying not to glance at the two men on the sidewalk.

"Afternoon," one says. Donald walks into the shrubbery, struggles with branches, hurries into his doorway. In the apartment, he finds Timber sprawled on the couch. Donald crouches under the window, gasping, peering over the sill. The cable man has reached the top of the telephone pole; he pulls some tool off his belt, something Donald is sure will discover the illegal box, something that will send a signal to detonate his television.

"They're outside!" Donald screams. "Unplug the box!"

Timber aims the remote control at him and pushes buttons.

Donald crawls across the floor, scuffing his knees on the wood, pushes the TV away from the wall, begins yanking at wires. The room fills with a burst of static.

Timber massages his own face. "Jesus, Donny. You can't get caught. Not unless they walk in your living room and see it."

Donald rips all the plugs out of the surge protector and the static dies. He scrambles back to the window, presses his forehead against the glass. The two men on the sidewalk squint up in Donald's direction, shielding their eyes from the sun. The cable man sits in his harness at the top of the pole. They will blow up his TV anyway, his whole apartment; this is his punishment. Donald pushes his head harder against the glass, hears a crack. He still holds a tangle of sheared copper wires in one hand. A second of roaring silence, and a hurried prayer, garbled, tumbles through Donald's mind and emerges, malformed, as one undeniable thought—he wants the cable man to fall.

And then the man on the pole yanks back his arms; tiny stars sprinkle with the noise of shimmering electricity, like tossing dozens

of lit sparklers. He slips like fluid out of his belt, falling, flipping once, bouncing against the pole, his hard-hat deflecting away. He smacks against the curb. Nothing moves—not his legs on the street, not his head on the sidewalk.

“What the hell’d you do that for?” Timber complains, his voice so real and present it startles Donald. Donald collapses with his back against the windowsill, sees Timber sitting upright rubbing his face again, and the black box is a mess of exposed parts on the living room floor.

“They weren’t going to catch us,” Timber says.

“He fell, the man on the pole—”

“What man? What are you talking about?”

“The cable man, on the telephone pole—”

“He fell off the telephone pole? Just now?” Timber wobbles beside the coffee table, steps toward the window. He crouches near Donald and looks out the window. Donald looks into the darkness of his palms pressed against his face.

“Jesus Christ, look at that,” Timber says. “That’s got to be painful. I don’t think that bastard’s getting up.”

“I did it,” Donald says through his hands.

“What are you talking—shit, I think I see some blood coming out of his mouth. Looks like that one guy’s calling on a cell phone.”

He doesn’t want to cry in front of Timber, but his throat clenches. There are tears, and he snuffles back snot.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“I did it, Timber.” Donald reveals his hot, contorted face.

“Jesus, Donald, you’re leaking all over the place.” Timber heads into the kitchen. On the floor beside his easy chair, Donald finds the cover box for *Rupert’s Brain*, smeared with potato chip grease.

Timber comes back with a roll of paper towels, hands it to Donald. Donald swipes the entire roll under his nose.

“People can do things—just with their mind,” Donald says.

“I guess some can,” Timber says. “Mainly women.”

“I hurt that cable man.”

“With your mind?”

“Yes,” says Donald.

“Not with *your* mind, bro.”

Donald shows Timber the box for *Rupert’s Brain*. Timber turns the box over, holds it far enough away for his drunk eyes to focus.

“See?” asks Donald.

Timber tosses the box on the coffee table. “That’s a movie.”

"I know, but Mom told me that sinful thoughts can come true—" "Ma was a little wacky toward the end. We just got to get out of here—go play pool or something. We haven't played pool in a while."

"I don't want to," says Donald.

"What you don't want is to be around when all those police cars and ambulances show up. We don't need to hear that shit."

"We only use ten percent of our brains. The rest is a mystery, and people who have damage, they can—"

Timber slaps his bottle on the coffee table. "You know I don't want to hear about this, Donny. I already had one argument today. I don't need this shit."

"But people with damage—"

"Shut up!" Timber kicks the coffee table and the bottle falls over. The only noises are the trickling beer foaming on the floor and the distant whirl of an emergency vehicle siren.

Timber prods his head with his fingers, watching the spilled liquid spread. His voice comes choked, barely a whisper. "I'm sorry, Donny. Every day I'm sorry, but I still don't need people making me feel like a criminal, not even you. I was seven fucking years old. I would take it back if I could, you know that."

"Timber—" Donald says. He doesn't want to hear about those dead parts of his memory. They are stories, over and over, they are just words. Donald takes everything on faith, but he doesn't deserve to have faith, not after what he's done. He wants no memories and no stories.

But Timber speaks anyway: "No one saw, you know. If I'd of kept my mouth shut, no one would know I threw the snowball. But I admitted it, I took responsibility, even though it was an accident. I didn't think—I mean it's just one of those things, you know—I just thought you'd jump out of the way when the icicle fell. Just one of those stupid little things you do when you're a kid."

Sirens blare just outside of the window, their red lights flashing across Timber's face. "I got to take a piss," he says. "Then we'll get out, play some pool." Donald watches Timber slip into the bathroom and close the door.

Donald finds himself running again, down the stairs, past the chaos of flashing lights and squawking police scanners and the stretcher and people looking at him, but he continues running down the sidewalk, leaving them far behind. A muscle cramp splits through

his stomach, but he runs down Monroe Street, across the intersection at the canal bridge without looking, ignoring his pain because he doesn't want to believe this is real, none of this. He refuses to put any more faith in his eyes and his memories and the stories he's told. What twisted sort of reality is this, when in a few words his bother can reorder everything he knows about, when Timber can lie and take the blame for what only God can be responsible?

He hurries down North Avenue into South, his lungs and his knee joints full of glass, and his sneakers thump heavy on the sidewalk. Too much to have faith in. When Donald must choose, he chooses his God that never changes, the Book that is never rewritten—not this life, where truth is fickle and hollow.

He stumbles up the front steps of the old house and he rushes into the cool, dark home that is only a distant memory, up the staircase creaking under his footfalls, down the hallway, throwing open the door to his old room he hasn't seen in he can't remember how long.

Someone has painted the sky on the ceiling—pastel blue and fluffy clouds. The baby's nursery, of course, but no crib, no hanging mobile, no changing table, nothing—just the smell of disinfectant and a freshly vacuumed carpet. A deer glares at him from across the room; a mounted buck head with antlers like the first forking pathways of some vast network. Wasn't there something about a deer he has forgotten?

Donald steps forward and drops into the smooth carpet. He's been too hasty. If he can just stay in his room, he'll be all right. If he can just wait here for his mother to come home from dialysis, then she will tell him the truth and this world will not overwhelm him anymore.

He gazes up at the cloud-painted ceiling, the buck head with its neck stretched out above him, imagining he's lying on a forest floor and this buck is alive, and his mind is safe from sin. He lies still, but his soul rages through the maze of neurons, searching for its escape route. He could end like Rupert, yes—his soul could come crashing out of his nostrils, shooting into the blue sky above him, trailing puffy bits of brain that would spread through the clouds, become the clouds, and drift off in the breeze. All these memories floating away, until nothing but pale blue heaven remains.