Tanya Perkins

The Nature of Breakage

It is a fact that Connie was my friend right to the end or perhaps I should say, despite the end. I think of her that way even today. Because it is also a fact that friendships are complicated, female ones in particular. We are never free from the shadows that prowl underneath that surface when least expected.

For instance, I remember showing a newspaper headline to Connie over lunch one day as a joke--"Fourth Severed Foot Washes Ashore in British Columbia, Deepening Mystery"--even though I knew better, even though I knew how the article would provoke her revulsion mixed with annoyance. Maybe that's why I did it.

"Ssss," she said when she saw it, like a tire deflating. "Horrible." But she got out her reading glasses anyway, and let her Cup O'Noodles cool.

I had already read it twice, out of professional interest. Loss has been my business for a while now, ever since I started working at Lost and Found at Vancouver International Airport. But I think the fascination goes back further, back to when I was little, crouching amongst dust bunnies behind the couch, snapping my crayons in two for the thrill of the breakage. It was a controlled kind of severance, safe-scary, like a goblin muzzled and leashed. That was how I felt reading about the foot--a dozen crayons' worth of breakage there.

Connie worked with me at Lost and Found. She was in charge of customer claims while I shepherded the lost. All day long, I stuck little UPC tags on jackets, iPods, sunglasses, stuffed frogs, travel mugs, earrings, shoes, paperbacks, you name it, anything that weighed less than seven kilos. Bigger items like a box or case or backpack were handled by Security, who came in with bulletproof vests and sniffing dogs. Food we were supposed to toss, no exceptions. Occasionally Connie would sneak a jar of caviar or brandy-soaked figs home in her bag, but only if the seal was unbroken. Unbroken was critical.

Before I started there, I never imagined how much stuff could go astray, all of it meaning something to somebody somewhere. And as I logged a toy or a battered bestseller into the department database, I tried to picture the moment of disconnection, when the traveler's attention was diverted and the scarf-water bottle-reading glasses fell away, the doors closed, the flight boarded. I liked to imagine it, the release, the instant of severance, when the crayon snapped and the plane's wheels cleaved from the tarmac. The instant when the foot cleaved from the body.

That's from the newspaper. "There is no indication of trauma where the foot cleaved from the body," says the RCMP.

But I don't believe it, not now. Now, as I handle each book, leather glove, or umbrella, I'm aware of the trauma of loss. It sears the tips of my fingers until the whorls are unreadable. I smell it like a hound through the plastic wrap. I'm finally an expert.

"I can't read any more," Connie had said, handing back the paper. "Gives me the willies."

According to the paper, the first foot had washed up on the west shore of Jedidiah Island in the Strait of Georgia, just off B.C.'s coast--a harbinger of feet to come. Within a few weeks, a second foot appeared on a Gabriola Island beach and a third tumbled up onto the rocky margin of Valdez Island. All right feet in black socks and Reeboks. The fourth was a leftie that came ashore on Kirkland Island two nights later.

"It's more frustrating than gruesome," I said to Connie. We were on our lunch break in the airport staff room and she was already on her feet, edging to the door. "What I want to know is did any of them form a pair? And how could a foot and nothing else make it ashore?"

I lingered over the paper after she left. I remember thinking that maybe they weren't corpses. Perhaps one, or more, of the lost feet's owners were still alive, hobbling through life, dreaming of shoes that came in pairs. Dreaming of a reunion.

Bill Jenkins was one of the few things over seven kilos that turned up at Lost and Found. He and his business partner were supposed to fly to Minnesota for a pyrotechnics convention but they had become separated in the labyrinthine airport. Bill thought Lost and Found might be able to page his partner.

"Sorry," I said. "You guys don't have cell phones?"

He slapped his boarding pass against his thigh. "I didn't think we could use them in the airport."

"Oh, sure," I said. "It's only if you're on the plane during take off that you can't. Screws up the cockpit talk or something." I watched him pull out his phone and make a call, and thought how good-looking he was. Tall and sandy-haired, with one of those Old-West style drooping mustaches and wire glasses that slipped down his nose. I remember at one point I reached over and pushed them up, an impulsive gesture that took me as much by surprise as it did him.

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"We're taking a trip," I say to Noble.

"Where?" He's reading a *Transformers* comic, crouched on the floor over the heat register, like a cat. Blowing air ruffles his dark hair. His crutches lie beside him.

"Nebraska. Ever heard of it?" I'm sitting near him on the floor, folding laundry.

Noble looks up from his book, his gold eyes blank as a wall.

"You like animals, don't you?" I persist. "Wait till you see the zoo they have there." Maybe I should have said Legoland instead. He's crazy over legos.

But he pulls back inside himself again, inside the fantastic tale he's reading, inside the fantastic acid of his own mind. He's eight on the outside but on the inside, Noble is a malignant forty-five.

I pack the car with essentials: blankets, jumper cables, pretzels, juice boxes, a single change of clothing for me. I stuff all of Noble's clothes--t-shirts, jeans, Spiderman undies, faded jammies---into a single 32-gallon garbage bag, my hands tingling with the fantasy of decorating each with a little UPC tag. The bag is twist-tied at the top, for ease of transferal. His folding crutches won't fit. They go in another bag.

Over supper, I tell him that we're leaving in the morning.

"I'm not," he says, tipping over his glass of milk.

"Try me," I reply and ignore the spreading white. Little drips hit the floor. I remember my former peace, when milk was something other people bought.

Before I go to bed, I remember to stick his prescriptions into my purse, baclofen and ibuprofen, prescribed by his doctor for the joint aches that started up right after the accident. My only real leather purse--a beige Dooney and Burke--was a splurge from the airport's annual Lost and Found auction two years ago. One of the first things Noble did when he came to live with me was to color it with red and black markers. Indelible ones. I tell myself it's taken on an exotic, beatnik air.

It's hard to scream at a kid with cerebral palsy. Hard, but not impossible.

*

Bill Jenkins took me bowling on our first date. Between sets, he told me about the ball mill he used to grind powder chemicals to an indescribable fineness.

"You need be careful with metal powders," he said, his glasses perched on the end of his nose. "If there's residue left over from a previous milling, it'll react with the next chemical."

"What happens then?" I asked. We were sharing pizza from the snack bar. The oozing cheese scorched the roof of my mouth and, later, the skin peeled off so that I tasted myself for days afterward.

"Pyrophoric episode," he said.

"So what's a pyra--"

"Pyrophoric." He reached over and ate the crust I had left on my paper plate. "Spontaneous combustion. The prettiest pop you ever saw. When I first started, years ago, I got sloppy with some magnesium and just about lit my hair on fire. When it was all over, these fine purpley shards were sticking to my face and arms. Didn't penetrate the skin, thank God, just clung like magnetic fur."

"Weird," I said. "Did you keep them?"

Bill grinned. "Scraped them off and stuck them in a little jar. Wanna see? They're back at my apartment."

"I'd love to," I said, reaching over to push up his glasses.

Before I left his place, much later, I snuck some of the fine shards into a baggie I found in Bill's tidy kitchen and took them home. They were so pretty, like the bristles of some exotic anemone. I can't remember what happened to them. Maybe I tossed them in a drawer.

*

I wrestle Noble into the car at five a.m. His curses penetrate the darkness; my neighbor's lights flash on briefly. Spastic diplegia, a form of cerebral palsy, has rendered Noble's legs less than reliable but his hands, with their sharp little nails, are just fine. He might only hobble but he can scratch like a champion. The side of my face burns but I don't hit back. Let the record show.

I can't keep a seatbelt on him and drive at the same time. At least, the childproof automatic lock keeps him from spilling onto the highway. I see him in the mirror, a knot of fury, and when he lunges over the seat at me, the ballpoint pen in his hand scrapes the side of my face just below my temple, at the edge of my cheek. I'm doing sixty and thank God the other lane is empty because I swerve once, twice, and then skid to a halt on the choppy gravel shoulder.

Despite the rocky landing, Noble steadily pens black lines all over the back of the front seat's grey upholstery. I snatch the pen away, then check my face in the rearview mirror. There's a pink flush, a line of ink, but that's it. No blood, only pain.

"Are you crazy? We could have been killed!" Danger over, my heart rattles painfully. I turn in my seat to face him. Eighteen-wheelers thunder by, and the car stirs like a leaf.

"What's the problem, huh? Every kid loves going on a road trip. I know I did when I was your age."

He folds his arms.

"Look, Noble. You got no choice here. Pull one more stunt like that and I'll drop you off at the next police station. Got it?"

He blows air at me through a juice box straw.

After hours of driving through mountains, through land that is only a footnote to an interminable sky, we spend the night in Pocatello. There, I dream of sliding Noble into a plastic baggie. I toss the baggie into a deep drawer but when I open it back up, he's not there. Instead, I see him high overhead, softly asleep, cupped in the palm of God.

*

A little while after I met Bill, Connie won a week at an all-inclusive resort in Monterrico, Guatemala. She was the eighth person to call the radio station and correctly identify the song played by Blue Man Group at the end of their Berlin show as "I Feel Love."

"Lucky bitch," I told her, smacking a UPC sticker on a cosmetic bag.

"Maybe my luck'll hold and I'll meet a hot new man down there. How's things with your lost love, anyway?" That's what she called Bill, my "lost love," referring, I imagine, to how we met. At first, Connie had flirted with him half-jokingly whenever he came by to pick me up. She only quit after I threatened to steal New Brunswick from her set of Canadiana teaspoons. It had taken her two years to collect twelve and she was still hunting for Nunavut.

"Great," I said. "Just great."

And I wasn't kidding. We clicked like two halves of a new seatbelt. Bill emailed me dirty limericks and bought me my own bowling ball. He even took me to see romantic movies and brought out kleenex at the right parts.

He was very serious about pyrotechnics. Bill and his partner, Mike, made the best commercial fireworks around, which they sold all over North America, sometimes even Europe. And when he started explaining fireworks to me, I was hooked. Fancy aerial pyrotechnics--the kind you see on Canada Day or New Year's Eve--use multibreak shells, tubes filled with smaller tubes filled, in turn, with gunpowder and stars. Stars were the pellets of copper chloride or magnesium or whatever chemical you needed for a certain color. You placed them inside the tubes in just the right sequence for the design you wanted painted across the sky. The bursting charge got the whole thing going, severing gunpowder from tube from star in perfect, flaming order. I realized then that fireworks just might be the ultimate in breakage.

That's what I said to Bill. We were at his place, watching a DVD of a private wedding he'd done pyrotechnics for a month earlier.

"Hmm," he replied, stroking his mustache. "The ultimate in combustion is more like it." A few minutes later, he clutched my arm and said, "See that? How that serpentine turned yellow at the end?" He stopped the action and played it again. "Right...there! It was supposed to be a bright orange fade-out. Shoot! It always turns out different from how you thought it would be."

But I wasn't listening. I was too enraptured by the fireworks, the way the air erupted and a brilliant pattern of light unfolded like a chrysanthemum across the dark sky. It was crayon after crayon all over again, breaking apart in instants of glory.

*

Connie had come back from Guatemala tanned and sporting a whole lot of silver jewelry. I picked her up at the airport and helped lug her suitcases up to her third floor apartment. She brought me a heavy bracelet hung with turquoise and a crocheted worry doll the size of my thumb.

"It's Mayan," she said. We were sitting on the floor of her bedroom, surrounded by her open suitcases. Her bed took up most of the space, the rest of which was crammed with wobbly furniture, fringed lamps and a fluffy pink chair with wire legs. A framed picture of the two of us at a company dinner two years earlier beamed out from one wall, just beneath an oval mirror.

She'd brought a bottle of wine from the kitchen and poured it for us while I examined the worry doll.

"Are you sure this is a real doll? There's no arms or legs. It looks more like a Barbie bowling pin."

"Sure it's got arms and legs," she said, taking it from me. "See? Right there. You tell it all your problems then leave it somewhere, and it keeps them all for you."

"You mean I lose it on purpose?"

"Along with all your worries. You're always obsessing over how things get lost or break. Now you have something worthwhile to lose."

Her words came to me later, much later, when things fell apart in a spew of light and ash. But at the time, my mind was filled with the excitement of her return and the jewelry she'd brought back and the people she'd met, which came out that night as we drank wine, like pennies from a winning slot machine.

She clasped my hand in both of hers and said, "Something wonderful happened."

"You met someone?"

Connie nodded. "I'm going to do you a great honor in the months to come. If everything works out, of course." Then she shook her head, her dark hair swinging. "You're going to be so excited. I know it."

"It's a new guy, right? C'mon, Connie, spill."

She shook her head again. "I can't talk about it yet. It's too soon. But you'll be the first to know, I promise!"

"Are you pregnant?"

But she just laughed and laughed.

*

Noble's coming made me think I could lift myself above the wreckage of what brought him to me in the first place. Well, the fact is I was wrong. Being wrong wasn't so terrible. What was worse was finding out how provincial law made guardianships like those driveways embedded with puncture strips--once you were in, it was tough to back out, short of being arrested for abuse. Connie had made me a gift, albeit an unusual one, and I'd accepted. I never thought ahead about returning her gift until later, when the numbness thawed a little and the great cold wound inside me started to weep. It was around that time that the *Globe and Mail* carried a story about the foolish goings on down in the States, at the Nebraska State Legislature. It seems that well-meaning lawmakers, concerned about newborns abandoned in dumpsters, passed a bill allowing children to be left at state hospitals without risk of prosecution to parents. Oddly, the legislators never defined the word "child" or wrote age limits into the statue.

Of course, I know he'll be okay.

"Eggs or pancakes?" I ask him at the IHOP the next morning, ignoring the glances he attracts. Even without his splayed gait and shiny crutches, we're an odd pair--me, carrot-haired, stout, and him, dark, Guatemalan

"Piece-a-shit," Noble says and tips over his water glass.

"Pancakes it is," I reply. Water skims over the edge of the table and drips onto my Reeboks. I trace a route with my finger--north to Ogden, Utah, then east through Wyoming. Sidney, Nebraska by bedtime, easy. I would find a hospital there.

"How about a coloring book, mom?" The waitress says. She sops up the wet, whisks away the mess and brings fresh water in what seems to be two seconds flat.

"I'm not his mother," I say or, actually, that was what I was *about* to say. Before I can get the words out, Noble bounces up and down in his seat, slapping his small, brown hands on the table rhythmically.

"Coloring book, mom! Coloring book!"

I glance up at the waitress, who smirks and shrugs her shoulders. We both know he's mocking one of us.

"We'll take one to go," I say anyway, and rub my cheek where the scratches have softened over night to a gentle swelling.

"*Mom*," Noble says, grimacing.

*

One night Bill took me to a dessert bar, where everything was made with fancy liquors. He said the desserts gave him ideas for new fireworks.

"I can't stomach much of what they make," he admitted, "but the designs are inspirational." We shared a parfait made with banana ice cream and blue Curacao, layered with peppermint. Before I took a bite, he snapped shots of it with his phone.

"Listen," he said, snapping his phone closed. "I'm going to Seattle next weekend to pick up some chemicals that can't be shipped. Got to bring them across in person." As he spoke, he took a knife and slid it into the bright parfait. He began to stir, blending the ice cream and liqueurs into a thin green slurry. A strand of pink peppermint clung to the sides of the glass like fairy blood.

"Great," I said. "We can go up the Space Needle."

Bill sighed and set the knife down. He rubbed my hands between his, as if they were cold. "Mike's coming this time, sugar. We got a ton of stuff to do. We'll plan for another time, okay?"

"Okay," I muttered. I started to pull my hands away but he held on.

"Besides," he said. "I'll be driving back in a car packed with flammables. You don't want to ride in that."

*

A few miles outside of Laramie, I pull off at a rest stop. The weather was holding nicely, cold but clear and dry. After the lush green of British Columbia, Wyoming's thirteen tones of beige took getting used to, but I could see how it would grow on a person, given time. Noble and I sat in the sun and ate vending machine sandwiches, washed down with cans of Coke.

"Why don't we drink Coke at your house?" he asks. Out of the blue.

"Milk's better for you," I say. I break a single baclofen tablet in half and slip it between his lips, steeling myself for the inevitable struggle. To my surprise, he gulps it down with a mouthful of pop.

"Why?"

"The medicine helps your legs work better," I explain, getting out my sunglasses.

"No! I mean, why is milk better?" Minutes before, I had struggled him into his too-big parka, and now he nearly disappears inside it, lying on his back on the dead grass, gazing up at the blue, blue sky.

I pause--why is milk better anyway? "Calcium," I say. "It helps your bones grow strong. Also, protein, which your body needs."

He waggles his feet in their dirty white sneakers. "My feet are too big."

"No," I say. "They're just right."

"You only say that because you have to."

"Why do I have to?"

He stretches his neck back to look at me upside down, his black hair splaying across the grass. "You know." And he reaches back and pats my leg gently.

Getting him back into the car is another matter. When it's time to hit the road, he bashes me across the back with one of this crutches. It catches me off guard and I stumble and scrape one knee on the pavement. This is the way it is with Noble--periods of peace interspersed with the kind of pyrophoric episodes that I imagine Bill's ball mill had produced when things went bad. A blaze of white light that burns away eyebrows.

The spectacle attracts the attention of a short, grey-haired man just coming back from the restrooms.

"C'mon, son," the man says, draping an arm around Noble's small shoulders. "Don't give your mom a hard time."

"She's not my mom!" Noble says, shrugging off the man's arm.

"I'm his guardian," I say quickly.

"All the more reason to do what she says," the man replies, winking at me. He leans down to speak into Noble's ear. "You're a lucky boy to have such a nice lady looking after you. C'mon now, do what you're told."

Noble hesitates, then hobbles to the open car door.

"Thank you," I say, my back to the car.

The man chuckles and pats my arm. "My wife and I raised seven. You're just gettin' your feet wet."

*

Three months after getting back from Guatemala, Connie finally spilled.

"His name's Noble," she told me. "I gave him that name. He didn't have one when I found him." It was a Friday, after work. I remember she poured us each a glass of zinfandel, to go with the devilled eggs she'd made. We were in her messy living room; in order to sit down, I had to dump a heap of laundry that was occupying an armchair. Outside, a fine rain had started, like steel needles.

"No name?"

"No one bothered to name him. He was a--what's the word--a throw-away kid, that's it. Always lived on the street, no memory of parents, brothers, nothing. I found him begging for quetzals on a Monterrico street corner, licking hamburger wrappers thrown away by tourists. Can you imagine?"

"No," I said. "I can't."

"Crippled kids down there are treated like dogs, worse than dogs. But I found him! Like he was waiting for me. Wait till you see him, you'll just love him."

Connie leaned over to me, one dark strand of hair falling into her wine, her eyes brimming, her breath hot as sulfur. "I'm going to be a mother, can you believe it? And I have something very important to tell you."

At some point in the evening, after we finished her zinfandel and the merlot that I'd brought, after the eggs and an unclaimed box of truffles I'd filched from work, Connie got out a bottle of Zaya Gran Reserva rum, a gift from the Guatemala City attorney she'd hired to finalize the adoption papers. Connie's own baby pictures were strewn across the carpet; she'd been recounting an inventory of loss--lost baby teeth, missing hair clippings, forgotten birthdays, absent parents. She would never tell me the full story of her childhood but I'd gleaned enough to know that it was rough. I think she saw Noble as a way of replacing that which had gone astray.

But the rum tasted of rawhide, befuddling all that followed--Connie's announcement that I was to be Noble's godmother and my reply, framed as a bad joke that I struggled to remember. It came to me later, after riding the bus home in the frozen dark, after throwing up behind my neighbor's barberry bushes, after unwrapping the small gift Connie left at my workstation Monday morning, which was a wee pillbox shaped like a high-heeled shoe, all pink and yellow enamel, with tiny glass jewels.

I remembered my joke, then, but it was painfully lame--*finally, something over seven kilos!*

*

In Sidney, Nebraska, eighteen-wheelers down-shift through barren streets where loss has been accumulating for decades. I know instantly there's no hospital among these voids. A slow leak has developed in one of the tires so I pull into a service station atop a small hill, the town of Sidney laid out like a checkerboard all around. The sky is convulsing into shades of violet, and growing cold, cold. My plan, which at first seemed to be so brilliant and justifiable, is beginning to fray around the edges.

Noble is asleep. The service station has a convenience store and an air pump. I crouch by the tire and unscrew the valve stem cap with stiff fingers. I fiddle with the pressure gauge, drop it once, twice, then the stem cap rolls under a stunted yew. As the afternoon empties into the loneliest of twilights, everything takes longer, my fingers become dirtied, graying with cold. Every breath chills.

Finally, I head for the store to use the bathroom. I leave Noble in the car, still sleeping soundly. Warm water and soap on my hands calms me, a little. I buy beef jerky, chocolate milk, apples for when Noble wakes up. I toss in a pack of Warheads for good measure.

There's a fat stack of *U.S Today* piled by the register but I'm not so interested in headlines anymore. I've turned sour on them. Still, one that floats near the bottom of the first page catches my eye, defying explanation: "Discovery of Fifth Foot Off B.C. Coast Ignites New Fears."

"Pretty creepy, huh?" The clerk says, nodding toward the paper in my hand. "Some headline." He's heavy-set and leaden-eyed but he smiles, like we're sharing a joke.

With all that had happened to me, I had forgotten the year-old mystery of the severed feet, but the story's leapt to life again, breaching borders and making American headlines with its eerie recurrence. An ongoing investigation, the paper says, with a breakthrough expected any day.

But I'm not fooled; my gut tells me the RCMP will probably never figure it out or, more likely, will solve it years from now, when no one's looking and nobody cares. I might be starting to understand the nature of breakage from the news that sells papers, news about severances of all kinds. Bill's explosion was that sort of headline, the way he hit black ice and slammed into the concrete meridian on I-5, just north of Seattle, in an instant of endless severance, all his fabulous chemicals chuffing into whirlwinds of yellow and white, blackening the pavement with smooth lava that spreads to clot my own auricles and ventricles. Two lives lost, the newspaper had said. At first, I thought the second death was Mike's but I was wrong, again.

You're always obsessing over how things get lost or break. Now you have something worthwhile to lose.

I left the paper on the counter and lugged the loaded plastic bag out to the car and sling it in the front seat. I'm half-way into the driver's seat before I realize that the back passenger's door is ajar.

Noble is gone. His crutches, his too-big parka, his torn comics, all gone.

*

Of course, I looked for him. I'm still sick with the momentous irony of it, even now. Because that was the reason I'd driven to Nebraska in the first place. The moment of release carefully planned to occur in a brilliantly lit hospital lobby. I thought I could control the break-away instant, when he would disappear from sight down a hallway, or a nurse would say to me, "You're free to go," and I would feel the draft of a sliding door closing behind me, the snap of retribution satisfying as a fresh crayon.

Yet--I scanned the parking lot for his figure, then ran down the hill to Sidney's main road, sliding on loose gravel all the way until my feet give way and the hardness of the road pounds the air out of me. This wasn't how it was supposed to be, the pavement stretching in both directions, empty as a open hand, grey with frost. I searched the ditches and scrabbled down the deadened hill that sloped away from the road. I called and called. I ran around in circles and screamed his name until the police finally came.

But that's the nature of breakage, that's what I finally learned. You never know when it's coming. You never know what form it will take. That moment, that instant of severance when your heart falls away can't be pinned down. Not ever.