**A Little Less Blue**

Chad V. Broughman

It was a brisk April night, the week before my 11th birthday, when the flashlight slipped from my hand and tunked across several timber planks before I could snatch it up. I sat there at my desk, holding my breath, waiting. Sure enough, Pa barged in, flipped on the light and boomed, “What the hell’s going on?” He stepped to me, ripped the journal from my hand. I lunged for it, but he lifted it overhead, scowled until I drew back. I had written a poem about an Italian boy, Giovanni, at my school. He was a virtual punching bag. Not because he was dark complected but rather swarthy with sharp blue eyes. The kids called him a “Siamese mutant” and hissed whenever he was near. He always walked sort of bent, as if readying for someone to pounce on him. And they usually did.

As he recited my work, Pa paced, the wood creaking under his heft. A low gritty tone: “Soft brown skin, a tender heart––” He stopped, looked at me hard, as if I was a dog that just pissed on the rug. My lungs swelled against my ribcage. “Eyes big and round, a newborn deer.” Pa’s jowls went taut, his face set like a bull’s. He continued treading back and forth. It felt like I was watching from far away, a thousand years gone by. I wondered if this is how Giovanni felt in the hallways, and my heart hurt even more, that I could never bring myself to defend him. At least I drew a line by not participating, I always comforted myself.

Pa calmly lay the notebook on my bed, turned to the window. For a moment, he stared at the moon, yellow-white glow flooding the space between us. Then he made his way to the door. I wanted to scream out, to say sorry. But I didn’t know why he was mad exactly. Seemed there was more to it than me staying up past bedtime. Didn’t matter anyway, he was already gone.

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A drizzly, gray morning followed. All quiet, except some intermittent bird chatter. I slid into my place at the breakfast table, a straight-backed oak chair, opposite Pa’s seat at the head. Per custom, my mother and I waited for him before eating. I dared not even touch my juice. Eventually, he sauntered in, kissed my mother on the forehead and sat with a thud. “Good morning, family.” Neither of us replied. From the small glass jar, he scooped out some orange marmalade, smeared it across his made-to-order toast––slightly burnt, no crusts. Only then did Ma and I start to eat, too. The silverware clanked, tinny and awkward.

“Someone’s birthday is coming,” she said. The unease was greater than usual. Her voice was mild, fragile. “You hoping for a new bow? Or a––”

“Nah.” Pa cut in. Then he bit through half the toast, chomping like a mad dog, gummy preserves squeezing out the side of his mouth. “He’d rather have a Barbie playhouse. Right, boy?”

“Charles?” Ma’s face twisted like she’d been given an unsolvable riddle.

“Or an Easy Bake oven? How’d that be?”

“Charles!”

I’d never left the table unexcused. But I darted to my room and threw myself on the floor, tears poured like water from a pitcher. Through the walls, I heard Pa crackling and Ma begging him to hush. I could only make out the words that his big voice landed on, like “shame” and “rhymes” and “queer.” I didn’t know what queer meant, only that it had to do with writing poems. And that it made me fall out of Pa’s favor. After I heard the rumble of his Chevy fading away, I wiped a sleeve across my face, tiptoed back downstairs. Ma was arched over the sink, clenching its sides as if it might escape. I crept out the back door––journal tucked inside my belt––and scrambled to the shed in search of a float, any float would do. My nerves rattled like a baby’s toy, not knowing when I’d hear the Chevy’s roll again. I scooped up Pa’s fishing creel and jaunted through the backyard, down the slope to Mill’s Creek. Amid the morning mist, I managed to light a match, then set fire to my poems. I lay the wicker basket into the swell, the spring currents swallowing my voice whole.

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After my verses had vanished, all was well again. Pa even asked me to go fishing. “Perch are biting hard,” he said. “What d’ya say? Mill’s Creek?” He ruffled my hair. From the shed, I heard him shout, “Honey, where’s my creel?” There was a strange satisfaction, knowing he was searching for something that just wasn’t there.

And I remember how Mr. Bellows called on me, like he did when no one else would talk, asking my thoughts about a line from Emily Dickinson. I’d read her collected works more times than I could count––my teacher knew that, as he’d given it to me. His intentions were good, always wanting to challenge our thoughts and beliefs. I desperately wanted to take his bait. Instead, I heard myself say, “Sorry, sir. I don’t understand.” The lie curdled in my mouth. I kept my eyes cast down, riding out the clumsy silence. When the bell rang, I walked with some guys to Civics class. Giovanni was heading the other way, toward the gym. They started purring at him, making scratching motions with clawed hands. And I joined in. It was a muffled meow at first, but then my chest pulled in every direction. Shame shot up my throat, the sourness stinging my tongue. A loud snarl burst free, and I flinched at him. Predator to prey. Though the dusky boy stayed hunched, we still glimpsed one another. His eyes were empty, and as they iced over, a little less blue.

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Looking back now, I know Giovanni’s cloudy eyes were merely reflecting my own.