**Pulled Apart**

Mackenzie Thomas

 You ever get the feeling of being pulled apart by life?

 This would have been when I was seventeen.  I was a junior at a tiny little high school in Michigan.  My family was poor, due to a series of bad financial decisions, my mother’s migraines which stopped her from working, and my father having left us, and with him, our only real income.  Being the oldest son and with no other options, I got a job as a machinist in an industrial factory, making railroad parts. In addition, obviously I was in high school, doing the best I could.  I was also in college at the time. I was in the flagship early college program on that side of the state, the first of its kind, and I was in the first class of students. So not only did I have my family and my school watching, but I also had the weight of the expectations of the entire side of the state keeping a close eye on me.

 My day would start at 7, getting up and going to high school, coasting through and trying not to fall asleep, then at around 12, I’d go to college, in classes that in hindsight I wasn’t prepared for, but I had no other option, as I was honestly not smart enough to get enough scholarships to pay for college, and clearly my family was in no position to pay.  So I’d stay in college until about 5, then book it over to the machining plant. I’d work until 10 or 11 on weekdays, putting parts on a press, sending them through and watching them get ground down, pulling them out and throwing them on a table, desperately sanding them down before putting them in a box, hopefully just in time to take the next set off. On weekends, when I didn’t work, I’d deal with homework and family.

One of the clearest memories I have of that time was the smell of machine oil.  Nauseatingly sweet. My clothes reeked of it. It got so bad that eventually my skin actually became stained with it—my hair as well—until it was in almost every part of my life, constantly reminding me that I had work soon. If I’m honest, I still hate that fucking smell.

Since my dad wasn’t around, I had to try and be there as much as I could for my little brother and sister, taking them to school and events when I could, making sure their homework was done, cooking them diner.  In retrospect, I was more of a dad than a brother.

Well, one night, I cracked.  I was at work and got a notification that an assignment that I had done had failed, then I was told by my boss I was training some new guy on my machine, who I knew was meant to replace me.  After I trained him, I got a message on my phone that the internet at our home was shut off again, meaning I couldn’t do homework there and that I would have to get in my car and sit outside of the library to leech off the wifi.  Also, just to throw fuel on the fire, my sister was pissed at me for trying to stay on top of her grades, and my little brother thought she was going to be drinking herself stupid that night at a party.

And I don’t know what happened.  Something kinda just broke I guess.  I remember reading that text, and then I was in my car, driving down the freeway way too fast.  I slowed down and pulled over into a McDonald’s parking lot. I just sat in my car for a minute, listening to the silence.  And then, for some reason, I screamed. I screamed, and I screamed, and I screamed. I started punching everything I could. I cracked the plexiglass over my gauges, put a dent in my ceiling, nearly ripped my steering wheel off.

To say I was a mess is, admittedly, a bit of an understatement. I actually slept in the parking lot that night: no music, no radio, just the silence inside my car.

It's such a strange feeling—to know that you have failed.  To know that even after putting everything you have into something, that it doesn’t matter.

When I woke up around noon, I drove to the Newaygo river, still silent.  My phone was full of messages and missed calls, but I really could have cared less, and could barely spare an “I’m fine.” text to my mom.  When I got there, I drove down to the edge, sat on the hood of my car, pulled out my old fishing rod, and started fishing. Totally numb to the world.  It was mid-November, so I wasn’t expecting anything. I can’t even remember why I went there in the first place.

What I can remember was the bite.

It nearly tore the pole out of my hands, and I quickly set the hook.  It fought hard, and for the duration of it, of that battle between us, there was nothing else.  And I mean nothing.

No college. No work. No family. No fear. No pain.

When I finally won, I reeled it to the side of the bank and quickly pulled my line up, and I was shocked to see a 10-inch rainbow trout, its beautiful silver, pink, and blue scales shining in the grey November light.  From experience, I judged that the thing had fought harder than something twice its size, to the point that my triceps were a bit sore. It shouldn’t have been able to do that. It shouldn’t have had to work that hard just to live.  On any other day, I would have kept that fish and brought it home for dinner. Maybe I should have. And yet, I unhooked it and gently slid it back into the water, and watched it slowly swim away.