



PRINTER'S DEVIL REVIEW

Christine Gentry. *The Tidal Pool & the Sea.*
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Christine Gentry

The Tidal Pool and the Sea

JUNE 28, 1979

The discordant sound of clanging dishes, flirting waitresses, and complaining coworkers dulls his mind as he watches the sweat lazily bead and slide down the beer bottle. He's drinking slowly on purpose; he sure as hell doesn't want to go home. Tracy has been on a rampage since he stumbled in late Tuesday night. Why it matters to her what time he gets home is a complete mystery. Isn't that one of the few *good* things about being separated? Something about the kids, it being hard enough on them already. But she was the one waking them up. Who knows. Doesn't matter anyway. He winces at the memory of his lumbering riposte: informing her of a date he had set up for Saturday night with Marcy. Marcy McKeenan. He said her whole name just to drag out the effect.

A purposeful swig of beer. He holds it in his mouth. A sharp elbow pulls him from his thoughts. "Hey, that one over there's pretty cute, huh?" He follows Dale's bony finger across the room to a group of girls drinking and laughing at the far table. There's no question to which one he's referring. She is cute. She throws her head back in a loud laugh. Her legs are crossed, revealing just enough thigh to make his insides stir. He swallows his beer. Why not?

"I'ma ask her to dance."

"Like hell you are. That girl ain't gonna dance with your ugly ass."

"Betcha she will."

"Well, go on then. The next round'll be on you, I guess."

This set of nine flash fiction pieces makes up part of the author's larger project, a fictionalized memoir of her father's life. The section entitled "May 9, 1973," was previously published in *Word Riot* in January 2009.

He puts the beer down and wipes the condensation into his hair. As he stands up, he realizes that he isn't nervous at all. Not excited either, really. Detached. Maybe there is something to having nothing to lose. He tucks the back of his shirt in and walks toward the table. Dale is whooping and hollering behind him, telling all the other guys to watch.

She sees him coming. He is unaffected by the blatant crown-to-toe assessment her eyes make as he approaches. He arrives at the table and the other girls giggle and shush each other. He looks only at her, straight at her. One of them kicks her foot. She takes a slow sip from her straw, looking up at him through her eyelashes. The others wait, open-mouthed, for him to say something.

“Hello.”

“Hi.”

“I'll give ya a nickel if you'll dance with me.”

The smile starts in her eyes. She bites her bottom lip to keep from looking too pleased, but the corners of her mouth have already given her away. “Alright, stranger.”

He reaches out to help her up. Soft fingertips in a calloused palm. She puts her weight into his hand. She isn't even finished standing when he decides to tell Marcy McKeenan she can forget Saturday night.

December 16, 1988

The alarm clock crashes into his dream. He had been sitting in that tweed chair in Mr. Clarkson's office, only in the dream it had swallowed him in its itchy earth tones, his outstretched fingers barely reaching the armrests. Clarkson had been yelling at him—his finger stabbing the air between them with every syllable—when suddenly he began to shout, “BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!”

When consciousness finally finds him, he has time to chuckle at the fading memory of the dream before the nausea takes hold. It is a familiar feeling, the stomach turning in on itself. It is as if the organ is trying desperately to escape a body it sees as a sinking ship. There are so many things that will go wrong today, all of which he will be blamed for, but none of which he can control.

He slowly sits up and swings his legs over the side of the bed. His feet settle on the chilly, threadbare carpet of the floor. He puts his face in his hands and lets the weight of his head rest there for a second. Pam rolls over, covering her head with the tattered blanket, groaning in protest to the continued squawking of the alarm. He lifts his head and looks at the lumpy, squirming image of her cocooned body in the blue glow of the neighbor's floodlight coming through the blinds. He reaches out to the alarm, trying to choke down the unjustified bitterness he feels at the fact that she doesn't have to get up in the dark.

He takes a deep breath when he steps out the front door and the cold air makes his lungs ache. Dawn is a faint glow on the horizon. Maybe he'll take Hannah and Dylan to that old field tomorrow and cut down a Christmas tree; they always get a kick out of picking just the right one. Pam will give him a hard time because it's private property, but she'll deal with it because they can't afford to buy one and she knows it. She'll bounce the baby on her hip and give him that look as he drags it in the house with two giggling, pine-needle-covered children in tow, but he knows an hour later she'll be helping the kids unpack homemade ornaments made out of popsicle sticks and glitter glue. He watches the fog of his breath dissipate before walking to the car.

January 12, 1979

It is not the gun that catches Tracy's attention. Naked, still as a stone beside him on the couch. It is the pillowcase he has over his head. One of Matty's: faded pink cotton with a rainbow and butterflies on it, threadbare in the middle from his little head's rubbing in the night and his sister's head's rubbing before it.

“What the hell are you doing?” Trenchant, staccato.

But he is numb to that now. What does it matter? He moves only slightly, tilting his head toward the doorway to see her silhouette through the shroud. The lamplight winks on the barrel of the gun. She gasps and his body tightens, his fists clench. By the time her hand reaches her mouth, he has lost his chance.

April 17, 1975

The sudden call crackles loudly from the PA, startling him so much that he loses his footing. The rubber sole of his boot keeps him from sliding off the side of the plane's engine casing. The wrench falls twenty feet and lands on the concrete floor with a loud metallic clang that echoes from the tin walls of the hangar. *Shit*. Oil-slick hands search for grooves. Black-rimmed fingernails, hardened by years of abuse, haul the weight of his body back to safety. He lies there for a minute, hot face on cool metal. Heavy breaths form a faint trail of water droplets. A gust from the industrial fan catches the sweat on his back and an army of small hairs stand on end. These calls are the worst part of his post.

He sees the crash site from more than a mile away. He fantasizes that it was the pilot's last breath that streaked the sky, forming a spiral of black smoke as it left his broken body. The stench of burning rubber enters the car through the vents. His stomach turns. He shuts the air conditioner off; he would rather be hot than endure that smell before he has to. As usual, he is the first one on the scene. Medics don't bother rushing to crashes like this anymore.

He parks upwind and takes a deep breath before opening the door. The smell still hits him hard, even after two years. This one is really bad. The plane is completely destroyed; the only immediately identifiable parts are a burning tire and half of a twisted propeller, planted in the ground like a warped, sickly tree. He finds a boot, still laced and eerily unscathed. As he places it in a bag, he pictures a pretty wife receiving the phone call in the morning. A lucky 100 lire coin, ambiguous pieces of flesh. By the time he finds a jawbone, he has given names to both of the imagined children.

May 9, 1973

My dearest Sung-Mi, he begins to write. The pen stops, almost of its own accord, on the comma. The ink begins to bleed. He watches the small circle of blue slowly spread, seizing upon each tiny fiber of the paper like a proliferating virus. He stares for a long time without blinking. Finally, shaking his head, he rips the paper off the pad, crushes it into a tiny ball, and places it on the desk. He covers his eyes with the heels of his palms, pressing into them until fireflies flash behind his lids. "What the hell've you got yourself into," he hisses through his teeth. His arms fall heavily to the wood as he tries to blink away the residual illusions of light.

Pen meets paper again. Fast and messy, a desperate attempt to make thoughts words without having to dwell on their consequences. *Sung-Mi, its been 2 months since that plane took me away from you and brought me back home. I'm sorry if its seemed like an eternity. I had alot of thinking to do. I told you I would let you know when I had it all figured out. Its been real hard for me, and you should know that.*

A continuous flow of images flicker uncontrollably in his mind: the porcelain dunes of her waist, the sericeous taste of her shoulder blades, her eyes like wet olives.

I should of stayed, dammit. I should of stayed there with you. But you know I got a wife. I got two little kids. You know that. I can't go leaving them, no matter what you and I had. I'm a good man, Sung-Mi. Anyway, I'm sure trying to be.

He hears something fall in the kitchen. Tracy snaps, "Now pick it up, Matty. Pick it up! Look at the mess you made!" Matty whimpers something indecipherable. The pen picks up speed.

My wife, she don't know about you. I think its best to keep it that way. I hope you understand why you won't be hearing from me again. Please don't ever try to contact me. Lets leave it be.

He immediately folds the letter and stuffs it into the addressed, overly-stamped envelope he has kept in his wallet for weeks. No use reading it over. Too late to change his mind. He grabs a jacket and heads for the front door.

Tracy calls from the kitchen, "Hey, where you going?"
"For a walk," he curtly replies without looking back.

He stands in front of the mailbox for the better part of half an hour, trying to force himself to just reach out and open it. Finally, he puts the letter in and slams the door. His knees give out. He sinks to the sidewalk, fingers still gripping the handle and one arm across his gut, where love and obligation wage a bloody, visceral war.

September 12, 1966

He watches her perfect, yellow ponytail swish back and forth as she bounces to the bathroom. How is Jeanie Clark, the prettiest girl in school, at Lou's pizza parlor right now with *him*? He is painfully aware of the pimple that appeared this morning, a mercenary of his deepest insecurities. He checks to make sure Jeanie isn't on her way back, dips two fingers in his water, and tries flattening his cowlick to hide the blemish's screaming message: that he isn't good enough for her.

He hears the bathroom door swing open and turns to watch her walk back. She smiles; his cheeks burn. Then, when she passes a table of guys he had been far too distracted to notice, someone reaches out and cups her behind. She whirls around—more surprised than scared—and slaps the hand away. The guys all laugh and caw obscenities.

A fast, boiling anger flushes his ears and locks his jaw. He gets up so quickly that his thighs catch the edge of the table, and its legs screech an alarm. Suddenly, he is at their table. He doesn't remember walking over. He doesn't remember Jeanie's frightened plea to "just let it go." he realizes that she is holding his hand when he uses the other one to swipe the asshole's plate off his table. It crashes to the floor and breaks the newborn silence of the parlor.

"Get up."

The guy is just drunk enough to slightly delay the realization that the broken mess on the floor is his plate. And that the 5'9" high school kid flaring his nostrils is talking to him. And that his friends are all goading him to respond. "The hell you say?"

"I said get up. Let's go outside. Now." He stomps out the front door, the tinny jingle of the bell muffling Jeanie's nervous implorations.

Outside, he untucks his shirt and rolls his sleeves. Though his reputation as the youngest of three truculent boys has spared him more than a few fights, he still has enough experience to know what to do, even if most of that experience came from the very brothers by whose notoriety he was saved. The drunk guy stumbles out with a slice of pizza in his hand, a nonverbal claim as to the innocuous and annoying nature of this interruption.

“Leave the kid alone, Frank,” someone calls out from the small crowd. “Just let ‘em both go home.”

“I’ma let ‘em go. I just wanna talk, that’s all,” Frank says through a mouthful of pizza. He lifts a finger to request time to finish the bite. The boy waits, following an unspoken and instinctual rule. Frank turns around to throw the slice away, but before his hands reach the trashcan, he drops the pizza and whips back around to sucker punch the boy in the eye.

A flash of light and a white-hot pain temporarily blind him. When his eyes open, their focus falls on the huge ring on Frank’s hand: pulling away in slow motion, dripping a jagged line of red onto the pavement. A warm, sticky stream floods his vision.

Suddenly, his hands are on Frank’s ears, slippery with blood. He doesn’t remember knocking him down. He doesn’t know how long it has been. He yanks the limp head up and down, skull hitting curb with the deep, sickening sound of a watermelon about to split. Somewhere, Jeanie is screaming: “You’re gonna kill him, Jesus!” It feels like fifty hands are clawing at his back. Still, he continues. Finally, someone hooks an arm around his neck and drags him off, choking and sputtering.

Regaining his footing, he smears a mixture of foreign blood and his own across his face in an attempt to clear his eyes. Frank’s body lies lifeless and crumpled on the curb. Now, he is afraid. Frank’s friends rush to his side. Someone shouts, “Lou just called the cops!”

His eyes search for Jeanie. She stands away from the crowd, her face a ghostly white canvas for a mouth frozen in horror. He grabs her hand to run; it lies spiritless and stiff in his. They dash across the street to the safety and shadows of the maze of alleyways he knows by heart. Her arm remains taut as she staggers after him in the dark, and he wonders whether she will try to break free. Her whimpers become the soundtrack to his racing mind.

March 2, 1996

An intense, quiet anger has been dammed up for a while now, held in with sandbags of resentment that ache and groan, threatening to give way.

He can feel the bitterness; it has latched onto the muscles in his shoulders with dull, tiny claws. He usually tries to loosen its grip with the numb noise of the television, but on days like today—when he comes home after eleven and a half hours of getting blamed for other people’s mistakes—he allows it to penetrate his veins and pour out of his mouth.

He enters the house with heavy steps. Pam is folding laundry in the living room, watching a made-for-TV movie with Hannah. They mumble their hellos to him, too distracted to ask how his day was. Dylan and Mark do not even look up when he finds them playing in their room, surrounded by more cars and action figures than they could possibly have time to use.

He stalks around the house, soaking up every offense. He hates that he works all day and comes home to a wreck. Wash the goddamn dishes, Pam. Is that too much to ask? Instead of cleaning up after the dog, who continues to use the dining room as a backup toilet, the kids hop over the mess to get to the computer. Today, these mounting frustrations break the tenuous dam, and his words rush forth with diluvial force.

“Who’s throwing paper towels on the dog piss in here and leaving it for someone else to clean up? I guess that’s my job, huh? Is that why it’s left in here?” He knows his voice is carrying to every corner of the house. He does not wait for a reply. “I guess no one’s gonna fess up to that one, right? Look at this kitchen! It looks like a bomb blew up in here! I mean, what the hell is this?” He scoops up a piece of paper from the floor. There is no need to figure out what it is; he just needs a name, a target. He stomps to the living room. “HANNAH! Come pick your crap up off this floor!”

His daughter stares at him from the couch, jaw set and eyes slit. “That’s not my *crap*. That’s my report card. And if you’d bothered to read it before it fell off the fridge, you would have seen that I made all As.”

Hot shame trickles down his forehead, triggering an immediate defense. “Oh, I don’t give you enough praise? What, you need a freakin’ PARADE every week?”

Hannah bolts up from the couch and whisks past him, snatching the paper, tears of anger in her eyes. He hears the trashcan lid open and shut; her door slams moments later. He grits his teeth so hard it feels as if they might shatter. He looks up at Pam; a cold, hard stare is molded into her face. Bitterness strengthens its hold. The claws dig in deep.

September 15, 1987

He sets the drain plug down on the ground beside him and wipes his filthy hand on his pants. An inquisitive breeze finds him under the car, cooling the sweat beaded on the back of his neck. He is watching the pan slowly fill with oil, hypnotically iridescent in the sunlight, when the trance is interrupted by the sharp, unmistakable sound of Hannah screaming.

He sidewinds out from underneath the car so quickly that when he cuts his arm on a piece of metal, he does not notice. He finds Hannah crying in the backyard, rolling on the lawn and clutching her arm. Pam is leaning over her, frantically asking what happened. A rivulet of blood has snaked through the hairs on his arm and is now dripping bright red from his fingertips onto the emerald blades of grass. He sees Dylan standing by the clothesline pole, looking sheepishly guilty next to the large rubber ball they had pulled out of the lake the weekend before.

He bends down, scoops up his daughter, and gently carries her inside the house. In the living room, he sits on the threadbare recliner and perches her fragile body on the knee of his dirty pant leg. A crimson smear mars the ruffles on her favorite shirt, and at first he thinks that she is the one bleeding. But when he lifts up her sleeve, he sees nothing there. Between sobs, she keeps repeating, “Daddy, it hurts; it hurts, Daddy.”

“I know. Show me where.”

She points to her shoulder and winces—“Ow, Daddy, ow!”—when he raises her arm to look. And as he holds her wrist—tiny, soft, and birdlike—between his index finger and thumb, his mind leaves him.

A young child—her smooth, tanned face streaked with mud and tears—cries in front of a group of straw houses huddled in the clearing of a foreign jungle. The warm air is wet, heavy, and still. Her mother kneels down beside her, changing the bloody bandages on the stump where her arm used to be. Someone says, “Poor gook. V.C. cut it off when they found out she took an American inoculation.” He stomps his cigarette out in the dirt and keeps walking...

Hannah is crying on the floor when he finds himself again, standing tense, his jaw and fists clenched. She must have fallen from his lap.

Pam enters the room from the hallway. “I just called Judy; she thinks it might be broken. We should take her to the hospital.”

“It’s not broken, Pam. She’s just being a baby. It looks fine to me.”

He storms out of the room, brushing past Dylan, who has been quietly awaiting his punishment on the couch. Through the slammed door, he hears Pam’s attempts to soothe Hannah’s increasingly pained cries. And with every blink, his eyelids net more memories from an endless sea.

March 13, 1972

He throws his head back, letting the shot slide down the warm trail left by at least five others; he can no longer remember. His returning chin dips lower than it should, and the room takes a second to catch up with his line of vision.

A blurred silhouette approaches from the other side of the room. He squints and recognizes Johnson, the new boy at the barracks, when the kid gets close enough to slam a cold beer down on the table beside him. “Eat, drink, and be merry, motherfucker,” Johnson says, clinking his own beer against the newly stationed gift and then taking a long swig before adding, “Tomorrow we die,” and stumbling back to the bar.

Through slow blinks, he watches tiny pieces of ice on the side of the bottle slither and collide into one another, clinging to the glass before joining forces in smooth, liquid channels. He is suddenly filled with a childlike sense of awe at how easily water changes forms, how easily it escapes.

He bends forward to grab the beer with a breathy grunt, and the lifted bottle takes with it a piece of paper. When he breaks the condensational hold, his deployment letter once again takes shape, and he remembers that he had brought it with him. There had been talk of getting drunk, dragging an empty oil drum out to the runway tarmac, lighting one letter, and then throwing them all in. It would be a futile and stupid rebellion, and they all knew it, but it would be nice to watch something burn.

He stands too quickly and his legs wobble as he calls across the room, “Hey! Johnson!” He waits for the boy to give an upward nod. “C’mon, le’s go.”

On the side of the runway, his motorcycle shudders beneath them. Johnson grabs on to the sides of his jacket and they both lean forward. He opens the throttle and they rush into the darkness and wind. As they pick up speed, his eyes water and sting, so he closes them. Turning his face to the moon, he lifts his hands, waiting to fly. 🌑