

GRAY

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A Novel
by

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Introduction

I wanted out. I wanted to be somewhere else, somewhere far away from the pine paneling, the summer heat, and the sticky humidity gluing my back to the Naugahyde easy chair. I needed to escape the sense of entrapment – the fear of stepping beyond the front door and confronting what I was – what my fifteen years and countless strangers had made of me.

Was it the droning laughter of the *I Love Lucy* rerun that caused it, or was it the ticking of the cuckoo clock? Clocks. There were so many clocks. So many sounds: Bird calls, silver balls falling and rolling down a track on the hour or half hour or minute as far as I could tell. The house echoed with chimes and alarms and cuckoos, each struggling to get the last word. The TV never changed, but the clocks marked time's inexorable forward march at a frustratingly measured pace – too fast to curtail events and not fast enough to transport me to some other place. Perhaps, everyone else was marching. Time, for me, had stopped.

I couldn't picture an easy escape. We sat together, my family and I, staring at our one television set, all watching the same show but each in a separate world. My mother's teased bouffant remained intact as she used her nightgown sleeve to wipe beads of sweat from her brow while rolling my sister's hair. My father ignored my brother's whining as he clipped his nails over a trashcan now

sprinkled with unpopped corn kernels and salt. My dog nudged my leg, but even her persistent attempts at cuddling with me were uncomfortable and uncomfortable. My mind wandered momentarily and then began to race as the sense of fear and isolation yielded insidiously to a quiet and desperate anger. I tried to stop them, but my eyes lifted to the gun rack above the TV on the wall. I could describe in detail my mother's knick-knacks and recount the dates of my father's teaching and Lion's Club awards crowding the bottom shelf, hiding what I knew to be boxes of ammunition. But I couldn't really say whether the weapons were rifles or shotguns. Hunting had mercifully ended as I finally professed my revulsion at killing defenseless animals. Like I had actually killed anything. Not even a dove.

Human beings at that moment seemed less helpless than animals and infinitely less innocent. Human adults had control over me – control over my mind and my body, and at every turn I was thrust further into a world I knew instinctively I needed to escape. My soul ached, but I didn't know it. I had learned to block out my personal hell and stave off any appearance of outer destruction. But at moments like this – my eyes and mind riveted on the guns – the ashes of any remaining inner hope were sucked into the vacuum of an overwhelming black hole.

No one sensed it. Well, my mother, perhaps, when she asked me if I was all right or if I wanted to talk about anything or if something was wrong when I

slept, thrown across the foot of my bed as randomly as the dog's chewed and grass-stained blanket in the middle of the day. She assured me that I could talk about anything I wanted to whenever I wanted to. But I knew she didn't – wouldn't – understand. No one would. So I shook my head dismissively and withdrew more deeply than before. I didn't know how to assign blame for what I had become. All I did know as I stared at those guns, forever on the wall, was that my pain and anger needed some kind of release. I could imagine the weight of the gun in my hands. I could picture the frightened, confused faces borne out of unconditional love as my arms vacillated between taking careful aim and blindly lashing out. I was fifteen and didn't know guns, and didn't know myself, and couldn't be sure of my target. All I knew was that I'd been badly hurt and somebody was going to pay.

But after nearly a lifetime, the only person who ever really paid was me.

1 CANVAS

“More than anything we love you,” they say (the seven-pound reality more weighty than the dream of blue eyes and lyrical gurgle).

“More than anyone we’ll protect you,” they promise (with every waking sound a rush of fear, a cautious observation).

“More than anyone you can dream,” they whisper (powdered fragility cradled -- altaroffered -- on star-lit backyard quilts).

In this pristine ephemera, the soul might forego its lesser journey and aspire sooner to heaven, if it only knew . . .

2 SKETCH

Too young to know of roads diverging in yellow woods, his life takes form as they make their marks, like red ink or gold stars on a composition. With trusting belief (good/bad, right/wrong, black/white) they sketch the contours of wishful possibility.

Too soon at eleven to know how to resist, he tries to please. But the man comes at night to erase their work – the more persuasive artist – fashioning abstractions of normal forms. He sells his work to strangers whose bodies share in rearranging the carefully composed lines (a human palimpsest). The child shakes uncontrollably (a blur) then yields to the new design. The contours matter little, but each penetration etches a permanent line on his soul, like an epitaph cut in marble.

3 TONALITY

“Be yourself,” they say as he assumes iridescent camouflage, all energy devoted to blending in. Then, desperate escapes in oblivious sleep.

“We just don’t understand you,” they lament, but how could they? He views himself as a particularly difficult word, understood primarily by its context (perhaps in a foreign language).

4 DIMENSION

Adulthood affords a certain strength, a certain independence – indeed, a certain perspective.

As his body develops volume and mass, the shapes and contours of his musculature catch the light, lending depth and dimension.

Body and intellect, passion and soul -- moving through space and time, the sketch takes form, almost sculptural in its effect. But like the moon in its orbit, he deftly navigates his universe to ensure the hiding of his dark side.

5 CHIAROSCURO

So damningly baroque:

Always the carefully rendered expression, engaging features, constant awareness of revealing angles and colors of light.

Always the perfect gesture, the appropriate word, indeed, the sincerest intention: All these in perfect focus but more than balanced by the ambiguity of murky shadows and clouded obsession.

And no matter how compelling his intense presence, always the speculations and incongruities spill enigmatically beyond the edges of the canvas.

6 GLAZES

Layers of time and nuance color and soften passion and commitment just as layers of frost confuse the fundamental differences between green grass and dried weeds.

He discovers (both suddenly and inevitably) reflected layers of ghosts in the mirror, each competing for passage to the other side, each vying for preeminence, each a transparent mask. He recognizes in these conflicting (conflicted) images both a remote anguish and a certain desultory beauty.

7 PERCEPTIONS

What matters?

Which details of line or shape or texture, light or shadow render a picture complete? And is it ever truly finished? Or does it have a life of its own, requiring a viewer, an outsider, to share its experience.

How vainly does he scramble the details or juxtapose diverse images if no two people will ever view them in the same way? What before seemed so vital and clear shifts insidiously to a dulled suffusion. The spectrum of events, in the end, mixes subtractively to an absence of color and finally, to an absence of light.

But on the other hand . . .