

One

SIMPLE GIFTS

a novel by

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I know a cat who has leukemia. He bleeds out his nose and ass. He's losing his fur and he doesn't give a fuck if he lives or dies. He doesn't think in stages. He lives for the next catnip or nap.

If I ever die, which I hope I do a lot of the time, I'm going to come back as a cat. At twelve and three quarter years old, I'm fucked up most of the day thinking about death.

I play a pretty wicked cello, but instead of going to Carnegie Hall, I'm probably heading toward juvie hall. My mom's had a shit fit over my madness, my sister breathes slightly more than a corpse, and my dad's run away to sell snake oil somewhere in the Midwest.

I'm not the typical teenager who dreams of being John McEnroe. I don't have to. I already have his temper. So don't ask me my whole life story. It's no more interesting than watching a hemorrhoid grow. Like most New Yorkers, you're probably pretty pushy, and too damn nosey. With all your chutzpah, you'll eventually find out what you want to know about me. I'll spare you the hassle. Here's the important stuff:

BORN: Leopold "Leo" Ampudia

HEALTH: Haven't hit full blown puberty yet, but I feel as ancient and as crusty as a mummy. I also don't smell any better.

INTELLIGENCE: Soothsayer aptitude, but too many head problems to skip seventh grade. Classified as gifted underachiever who is 'dominant non-conformant.'

FAVORITE SMOKES: Anything menthol.

FAVORITE SPORT: Fencing. Not good with balls or nets, but preference for anything to do with medieval and swords.

TV SHOW MOST WATCHED: Any of the classics. I'm a rerun junkie: *I love Lucy*, *The Honeymooners*, *Happy Days*, *Addams Family*, *Batman*, *Gilligan's Island*, *Twilight Zone*,

CAREER ASPIRATIONS: Doubt I'll make it to adulthood.

The only other tidbits you need to know is that my grandparents grew up in a long-lost world when Benny Goodman could be heard playing from a radio at the corner candy store. My parent's generation were the last of the chain smokers who woke the world in the morning with their coughing and who got stoned at cocktail parties. As for me, I've got no problem yelling "fuck" across the cafeteria lunch table or stuffing my ears with toilet paper during choir.

I'm a third generation Ampudia and for almost a century we have lived in Brownstone Brooklyn. We pride ourselves on our long noses, red hair and up until last year, longevity. Now our longevity is in doubt. My f-ing twin sister, Ella, had to ruin everything by going ahead and getting bone cancer six months ago. The doc chopped off everything below her right knee.

Hell! It was the fourth of July! Couldn't she have waited until after the fireworks? If you haven't guessed it, she has no more painted toenails. They used to be filled in like a coloring book. No more plie at the ballet bar either. I once dressed up as the Nutcracker. Now, she's the one who's broken. No more bones, muscles, veins, nerves—all gone. The only thing left is her stump of a leg and our crummy lives.

Mom used to be a teacup-sized trophy wife. Now, she lies in bed with a permanent migraine unable to deal with me. Dad can't deal so he ducks tornadoes and twisters to peddle cheap liquid vitamins for longevity. Brown shit in a bottle if you ask me. Yet it's better than his last job where he got put in the slammer for milking the company's money into his own piggy bank. In the meantime, I've been dumped in the

care of Dr. Suskin, my shrink. She writes me shit loads of Ritalin. Says it's supposed to calm me, make me more focused. What I've actually got is an anxiety disorder. I'm not supposed to know this, but like most teenagers I'm pretty sneaky. When she wasn't looking, I peered at her notes—"Leopold Ampudia suffers from a severe anxiety disorder caused by parents abandoning him due to their efforts to save his dying sister."

That about sums up my life. So don't ask me any fucking more.

I peer out Dr. Suskin's office window. A plastic doll hangs from a tree's branch. It's one of those feed and poop dolls, but I don't play with it that way. Last session, I threw it out the window. I was trying to see if it would live or die before hitting the sidewalk. Obviously, I don't throw much better than a Metz outfielder.

Dr. Suskin lets me do anything I want as long as I don't break the furniture. This rule doesn't apply to the torn cushions ripped off her couch. Mom would have a heart attack if she saw Dr. Suskin's desk. It would take a truck to remove the shit loads of toys on top.

Right below the doll, on the sidewalk where I originally wanted it to land, is a discarded tire. I feel like curling up inside it and disappearing. If I'm lucky, someone will mistake me for part of a car, attach me to its frame, and let me roll down Flatbush Avenue until the black speed is drained out of its rubber. Instead, the tire disappears under a pile of ashen slush dumped by a snowplow. It's as cold as a pair of pointed tits outside, and for once I'm glad that I'm inside Dr. Suskin's office. The radiator next to me knocks out steam. The pounding in my head has the same rhythm.

"What are you looking at Leo?"

Dr. Suskin is always trying to get inside my head like a pervert who tries to get inside someone's pants. My head is my private world. Most days I don't want to share with others. I glance at some birds on the frozen telephone wire. This scares me.

I turn to Dr. Suskin. "We've got to save them."

"Save who, Leo?" Dr. Suskin rubs the pock marks on her face and neck. She could look like a junkie except that she wears a black wool dress and pearls. "Who's in trouble?"

"The birds."

Dr. Suskin gets off her chair and moves next to me. "What are the birds doing, Leo?"

"They're dying."

“Why?” Dr. Suskin’s voice strains to understand me. No one can understand me. I’m too weird.

I peel a piece of lead paint off the window sill that resembles the state of California.

“Why are the bird’s dying?” Dr. Suskin’s voice is annoying. She can be persistent like Mom.

I glare at the birds. I want to reach out and rescue them. “The wire’s dangerous.”

“What else is dangerous?”

“Me.”

Dr. Suskin sinks into the bean bag chair behind me. She pats the one next to her. “Come, sit down, Leo. You can’t hurt anyone, not even your sister.”

I turn and let my burning eyes pierce Dr. Suskin, trying to sear her flesh. I don’t like it when she speaks about my sister. “You’re annoying.”

“Why do you say that? Does someone tell you you’re annoying?”

“My parents.”

“Is that true? Are you annoying, Leo?”

“Shut up or I’ll flush you down the toilet.” I almost feel like laughing. It’s a relief to tell an adult to go to hell and not get in trouble for it.

“How’s your sister?”

“Perfect.”

“She’s not perfect, Leo. She’s got cancer.”

Even though Ella was born at the same time as me (I’m fourteen minutes older to be exact), she’s ten times smarter, knows calculus, and rarely goes to school. Except for the leg she had chopped off, she’s the luckiest girl I know. Every time she cries, another stuffed animal sails her way. Ella-the-perfect does nothing wrong.

I brush back my hair despite my lack of it. I shaved it a few months ago in solidarity for Ella. “My parents never yell at her. They scream at me.”

Dr. Suskin leans forward. “Ella’s intelligence is as rare as her cancer. The reason your parents never yell at her is because—”

“—She’s dying. I wish I was dead. Then maybe I’d get some attention!”

“Your mom says you never yell at your sister. You only yell at her and your dad. Why’s that?”

I shrug my shoulders. My sister's a porcelain vase before it drops. She's so delicate. I'm afraid of hurting her. If she dies, it could be my fault.

Dr. Suskin gets off the couch. She's shaped like a pear from behind—big ass, small waist, almost no shoulders, and a pin for a head. She pulls down a game from the bookshelf. "Do you want to play Clue?"

I study the game's cover. There's a bald man smoking a cigar and a woman screaming. I shake my head and sink back into the bean bag chair.

"Why not?"

"That cigar looks like a bomb." I point to the screaming woman on the cover. "She's crazy, like she's committing suicide."

I peer back at the birds and imagine their heads splitting open, maggots wiggling out of their flesh. Acid sizzles from their eyes and melts the telephone wire into a black liquid. This is as scary as the recurring dream I have most nights. I am riding an elevator and it stops. The doors open between floors and a strong wind blows me to my death. My parents do nothing to save me.

"What else are you afraid of, Leo?"

I don't answer Dr. Suskin. If my life was a fairy tale, I'd be called Prince Leopold Ampudia. But it's not. The truth is my life is a horror and my name should be EVIL. The kids in my seventh grade class call me "Leo the loser." Except Max, he's my best friend. But even he abandoned me when he moved to Canada with his family last month.

It starts to flurry. The fresh snow appears lovely like confetti at a party. I want to go outside, and grab a big gob and fling it toward the sky. I want to roll snowballs into snowmen with Ella. If she could only muster up the strength, it would give her waves of giggles and sighs of pleasure. It was only yesterday that I believed there was nothing under her skin but a fairy's light. If you cut her, she would sparkle. But now she has no foot to stub or knee to skin. It's gone. I'm scared that one day she will be entirely gone.

Dr. Suskin calls my name a few times, but I don't answer. Her voice has an eerie edge as if a spaceship is landing. "Leo, where are you? What planet are you on?"

I turn around and smirk at her. Sometimes she can be okay. I notice her big tits. They're wide and long like the submarine sandwiches at the deli. That's probably why Dad has the hots for her. When he's around Dr. Suskin, he acts like my classmates with their first hard-ons. A big fuckin' jerk if you ask me.

"Where do you want to be, Leo?"

"Canada." It's the first time I answer Dr. Suskin confidently.

"Why?"

"Because Max is there."

"But you used to always fight with him."

"No I didn't."

Dr. Suskin doesn't argue with me. She knows I have a difficult time getting along with most people. She changes the subject. "Have you done anything with your dad lately? Your mom said he may take you skiing."

I shake my head. Dad thinks skiing is an extravagant way to break a leg. I go back to looking at the birds.

Dr. Suskin takes a few notes and looks up. "Your mom says you're not washing your hands again."

"Yes, I do! I always wash my hands!" I stomp my feet, cracking a plastic spinning top from some stupid game.

"Don't lie Leo. You know Ella has a low immune system. The chemo depresses it. One germ and she can get a serious infection. Washing your hands is really important to your mom. Can't you do that one thing for her?"

"Why should I? She loves Ella much more than me." I get really scared, feeling my anger form tears in the back of my eyes. I don't want to cry. Once it starts, it'll be a flood. "She does everything for Ella, nothing for me!"

Dr. Suskin's tone becomes soft and sweet like the flowers on her blouse. "Your mom loves you just as much as Ella. But Ella needs your mom more now. Don't worry, Leo, Ella will get better." Dr. Suskin pauses. It's one of those scary moments of silence. "And if she doesn't, then we'll work through it."

Dr. Suskin writes me another prescription for Ritalin. I glance at the script. She's increased the dosage from 30 mg to 35 mg. At school, I'm the biggest Ritalin dealer. Who needs the Colombian drug lords when I've got Dr. Suskin.

Outside Dr. Suskin's office, I duck my head underneath the telephone wires even though the birds are four stories above me. I take my last menthol and crush the pack in my palm. I've only been smoking a few months, but I can exhale a thin line through my nose and talk at the same time as if I've been doing this for years. My throat is sore from smoking almost a pack a day. Yet it's better than chewing on my fingers and nails

like an obvious nut job. I file past a block of brownstones. The buildings consist of an army of red bricks against my small size. Set high on their stoops, they starve off the late afternoon sun.

A garbage truck chugs up the block. A voice bellows from inside. "How'm I doing?"

I turn around quickly, anxious to catch a glimpse of Mayor Koch inside. He's not afraid to ask anyone if he's screwing up. That's what I like about the mayor—he'll ask any old Joe Schmo, including me, for an opinion. From a loudspeaker mounted on top, a recording of the mayor repeats his mantra. I give the truck the finger, realizing the mayor's not really inside.

I walk up to the Grand Army Plaza toward the Public Library. At the edge of the horizon, the East River shines like a piece of glass in front of the World Trade Center. Down Seventh Avenue and onto Berkeley Street, I stop in front of my brownstone. It's thin and narrow like an antique book. My favorite part of the building is the Gothic stonework and bay windows. We have a turret that's raised above the other roofs, making it look like a cool castle. But the outside still has the same cruddy reddish-brown look as the other brownstones on our block. Our brownstone has been in Mom's family for generations. Scads of babies popped from bellies while sickness shuffled through the hallways. During the past century, there is almost nothing that hasn't happened inside this old house.

Ella waits in the parlor window, wrapped in the curtains as if the velvet fabric is a magnificent gown. As usual, she has been home all day with a low immune system that keeps her away from school. Lucky kid.

Our cat, Puss in Boots, wears a baby doll's dress. He meows at the window, begging to get out of his ridiculous outfit. I worry about my hamster, Merlin. If Puss in Boots hasn't eaten him for lunch, then Mom usually threatens to stuff him down the garbage disposal if I don't keep his cage clean. This morning I was smart. I didn't leave Merlin in his cage. I left him curled up in my sneaker in the back of my closet.

I jiggle the front door, relieved that it's unlocked from when I left this morning. I haven't told Mom that I lost the key. Our front door is massive, weighing a ton. I didn't think trees could grow this big. Inside things are less impressive. Most of the time fever and pain persist. Anger and tears plaster the place like nasty wallpaper.

I kick my boots off in the hallway underneath a table with fake flowers. I miss the real ones. I remember when we used to visit my father's aunt in Westchester. She had a huge garden next to the Hudson River. Ella had two good legs back then. We'd squat on the ground and trim the sunflowers. By August, the flowers would be in full bloom, over a hundred in a row.

Ella hobbles over to me on her crutches. Her face is like those sunflowers that look up into the sky. Her smile and big blue eyes pour from the center, much like the petals. How can she be so happy when she's so sick?

"Where's Mom?" I ask.

"In bed," she whispers.

I peer down the hallway. The lights are off and the door to her bedroom is closed. As usual, she must have one of her migraines.

"Wanna play cards?" Ella takes a step closer to me. The rubber on the tips of her crutches suck the wooden floor.

"Not really."

Ella's face drops. Tiny and light as I am tall and pink from the winter's wind, we no longer look like twins. Our priest says angels watch over Ella. I think the angel that visited her must have been impaired or her magic wand was out-of-order. Bald and missing a limb, Ella resembles what girls her age do when they outgrow and dismember their Barbie dolls. Yet when she sees me, she smiles as if she's been granted a wish. For some insane reason, my presence makes her feel good, right down to the bone, even those she is missing.

Ella rubs her forehead, which appears bigger with no hair. My dad says Ella's head is so big since she's got such a large brain. I've got the same forehead, but the kids in school don't call me intelligent. They call me "bonehead" instead.

My cello sits in its case in the hallway. Again, I've become too lazy to lug it to school. I'm failing orchestra among other things.

"I'll do your homework if you'll play with me."

I let my backpack slide off my shoulders. It drops to the floor with a thunk.
"Deal."

In the kitchen, I make myself a peanut butter and banana sandwich. I leave black fingerprints on the white bread. Ella completes my math with her computer-like brain

and conjugates my French verbs like a real Parisian. “*Fini!*” She closes my French book with a smile. She must be really sick to enjoy doing my homework.

We play Masterpiece, Ella’s favorite board game where she pretends to be a wealthy art collector. In real life, Ella’s an art history buff. This is the closest she’ll get to a museum, unable to be around crowds of people. She asks for a menthol and pretends to smoke it like an Upper East Side snob. I wonder which could kill her faster, tobacco or being inside the Met with a zillion snot-nosed school children on a rainy day.

We spend the rest of our time watching the flurries outside the window. I tell Ella how I want to walk through the white universe with my bare feet. I want to walk backwards and remember when I was three. I used to have all these imaginary friends. I could make myself invisible and not worry.

Mom’s bedroom door opens. Before she can walk down the hallway, her hatchet mouth is already at work. “Leo, wash your hands!”

I slip into the powder room off the foyer and run the water in the sink, making sure Mom can hear it. I sing “Happy Birthday” in my head twice and then turn the faucet off without getting my hands wet.

“Did you wash them?” Mom yells from the kitchen.

“I did it!”

I walk into the kitchen where Mom presses her fingers into her temples. Lines from sleep crisscross the right side of her face. She gingerly rolls her head in her hands as if it’s a broken puzzle that she’s trying to keep intact. “Leo, do me a favor. Go pick up Ella’s medicine at the hospital.”

“Ma, I’m tired.”

“Please, Leo. I’ve got a sick headache. The hospital’s going to close in an hour. She’s only got one chemo pill left.”

“Why can’t Dad do it?”

“He’s in Boise. How do you expect him to pick it up when he’s two thousand miles away?” Mom glares at my hands. “Leo! You didn’t wash your hands. Wash them now!” She grabs my wrists and pulls me toward the kitchen sink.

Bitch. If she wasn’t my mom, I’d buy a gun and pump two bullets in her chest. But I know better. I’m not going to show her that I’m crazy like her. I struggle while the hot water burns me. My fingers feel like silverware in the dishwasher. She has a

bloodhound nose for my dirty hands, but can't even smell the frigin' cigarette smoke in my mouth.

Mom throws me a towel. It lands next to Ella's stump. She's slumped over the kitchen chair like a sleeping cat, having lost all her energy from when I first came home. I bend down and pick up the dishtowel. My hand brushes against her skull. It's soft like a white sponge. The holes are still there where each strand of hair fell out. At least it's winter now and she wears a hat when she goes out. I hate when people stare at her. They give her this sad look that reminds me how crummy our lives are.

Mom hands me a check. "This should cover Ella's drugs." She digs in her purse for some bills. "Take a taxi to the pharmacy. It's on the first floor of the hospital. And don't dawdle. Come right back home. I don't like sending you out when it's dark, but my head is killing me."

I grab the money and don't complain. The lines in Mom's forehead, which are more like deep fissures, worries me. No matter how much I hate her, sometimes I'm afraid that she could die along with Ella. I know I have the power to kill her, and it scares me. She gets her migraines from me. Someday, I'm going to stress her out so much she'll pop a vessel. Her only son is a walking germ, doesn't give a fuck about school, and is "Leo the Loser." That's enough to give any mom a stroke or an aneurism.

Mom takes a few pills with some water. Soon, she'll drift off into another drug-induced sleep. Maybe then, she'll dream about how it used to be.

Our relationship wasn't always so horrible. There was a time before Ella's cancer when I was a loving son and she was a *Leave it to Beaver* mom. She wasn't exactly June Cleaver, but she did wear an apron and loved to cook every day. In our basement, she ran a catering company where she took orders and did the sautéing and roasting. Mom's specialty was meat. She was known for preparing wild game – particularly ostrich, elk and buffalo. She had a dedicated clientele, many chefs from downtown Manhattan who came over the bridge to purchase sautéed Bambi, and her forest friends.

When I was four, Mom took me to an ostrich farm. We showed up just as the owner was in the process of chopping off the heads. Two other workers held the ostrich until its nervous system quieted down and, wham! Down came the hatchet on the jugular. Usually, I had the energy of an insect with twenty legs, but from then on I stopped moving and clung to Mom. I only stopped screaming once she buried my head

into her fleshy stomach. The men loaded up the dead ostrich into a wheelbarrow and pushed it toward a picnic table where they began to gut the bird. First, they cut off the legs and the wings. Then, they plucked the feathers, and finally pulled off the skin. I hated the killing part, but I edged closer to the men as I found the insides of the ostrich fascinating. Mom took my hand and put it with hers into the body of the cavity. It was still very warm from being recently alive. Together, we scraped the lungs from the ribcage and dug out the kidneys with our fingernails. I was most surprised to see the early stages of the eggs, little yokes of various sizes, tucked away inside the body. That was eight years ago, but I keep thinking back to those tiny yokes and what could have been.

My adventures with animals didn't end there. Two years ago, Dad and I went quail hunting. We brought all the high-tech gear from L.L. Bean and trekked to Vermont. I even got to miss a week of school. Being two city slickers, we never caught anything except the Vermont cold. On the way back home, we dirtied our rifles in the ground to make it look good, and brought four quails from a butcher for Mom to stuff and cook. It was the world's greatest lie. Those were the days. Back then, I loved Mom, Dad, and they loved me.

Yet a few years later, the destruction between my parents and me began: "Wash your hands; You're lazy; Quiet! Ella's sleeping; I haven't got time. Can't you see Ella's not feeling well." Soon after Ella's diagnosis, my parents became paranoid. They worried not only that Ella was going to die, but I would also be cursed. They whispered if I should get tested for bone cancer. Could it be hereditary since I was Ella's twin? Why was Ella stricken and I wasn't? They wouldn't even let me cross the street without holding my hand. Finally, Mom got so overwhelmed with Ella, that she couldn't possibly keep track of me. She went from hovering over me to forgetting about me. In the meantime, Dad fights off the family curse and continuously downs vitamin shots, swearing that he's going to live past one hundred.

I slip outside into the bruising cold. The hospital pharmacy seems as far away as Alaska. The sun has gone down and the bums who meander past our block blend into the night. I don't bother hailing a taxi into Manhattan like I'm told, but pocket the money and enter the subway station at Grand Army Plaza. I'll need the extra cash since eventually I'm going to head up north and visit Max in Canada.

I drop a slug into the turnstile. Max and I used to make these coins in metal shop and sell them for half the price of a token. Closer to the platform, a never-ending stench of warm urine thaws my frozen cheeks. On the train, I squirm my way into a seat and stare at the hoards of feet. As the train rattles through the tunnels into Manhattan, the briefcase and wingtips eventually disappear into the safety and warmth of their brownstones and downtown lofts. A group of dykes sit across from me. I know they are butches because I once researched them in the bookstore. I was supposed to be buying a biography for school, but instead I read *Wet: True Lesbian Sex Stories*. Twelve pages of colored photos, over one hundred illustrations, no wonder these dykes have “just fuck me” on the brain. At the same time, I found a lot of the pictures gross. I would never put my mouth to their lips down there. Coming out of their pussies was gunk that ran thick like Elmer’s glue and spread like oobleck slime. Even Dr. Seuss could not concoct such gummy, sticky shit from their hairy holes.

I try an experiment and stare them down, curious to know if they can feel the heat in my male eyes. They ignore me and move off the train when it stops at West 14th Street. A speak-no-English Chinese man and I are the only ones left in the empty subway car. With no bodies to press against and cushion me, I feel every piece of metal in the car as it rumbles through the tunnel. A bum rams the door open from the connecting subway car. He sports a green trash bag dress with matching Hefty shoes. I imagine there’s an entire colony of mole people living in the subway tunnels. He scares me like a giant rat who’s come out of his hole. He drags his heavy trash bag feet the way a rodent drags its heavy tail. I try not to stare at him, but I can feel him walking straight toward me. I hold my breath and my wallet, checking for Mom’s check and my cash for Canada. I glance at the speak-no-English Chinese man. I pray that he’s stronger than his MSG and will rescue me. He does nothing.

The trash bag bum stands right over me. I’m repulsed by his green plastic dress that touches my legs. He’s a thousand times smellier than any dump. He speaks, but makes no sense. His tongue is swollen as if it’ll crack his jaw.

He grabs the red emergency lever above my head, and yanks down. An alarm goes off.

“Hey, don’t do that!” My voice surprises me. I’ve never been brave in my life. I shy away from super hero status except in comic books.

The Chinese man screams in gibberish and waves his hands like kitchen knives. The train slows to an abrupt stop in the middle of the dark tunnel.

The train conductor and what appears to be an undercover cop rush through the connecting doors from the car in front of us.

“What happened?” The cop puts on a pair of blue rubber gloves and pads down the man inside the trash bag.

“#@*!#*^@!#>,” says the Chinese man with a mouthful of words I can’t understand.

The cop and the conductor ignore me. I say a few Hail Mary’s in my head, grateful for once that I’m not blamed for everything that goes wrong.

The conductor leaves and moments later the train starts to move.

At the next stop, I exit the train along with the undercover cop, and the trash bag man whose wrists are bound in handcuffs that resemble plastic garbage ties. On the platform, the escalator is broken so I climb the steel stairs out of the underground. I curse my potato-eating ancestors who built the subway many skyscrapers deep into the earth. On the sidewalk, I jostle for space where the New York air has never felt so good in my heavy lungs. I bite my menthols open and enjoy a smoke as I walk toward York Avenue. It’ll be the last cigarette I smoke until I get to Memorial Sloane Kettering. The sign outside will remind me that it’s the leading cancer center in the world.

At the hospital entrance, I study the window of the gift shop. This is the only place that I like in this massive building. There’s a whole bunch of furry teddy bears and stuffed bunny rabbits in the window along with some cool looking comic books. I walk inside and admire a huge pink jewelry box.

“Can I see this?” I ask the lady behind the counter. Her upper lip is so fat it could flip over and touch her nose.

She smiles like mostly everyone that works here. Except that I know this lady along with her coworkers are fakes. How can you be happy in a place where the easiest way out is the morgue?

The lady wiggles her nose, but she doesn’t have too much room next to her fat lip. She puts the jewelry box on the counter and opens the lid where a pretty ballerina spins slowly to the music. “For someone special?”

“My sister, she’s got cancer.”

"You must be a good brother." She gives me her smile again, but this time her eyes are sad.

"How much?"

"Fifty-nine, ninety-nine."

I shake my head. "That's a lot of money."

"The teddy bears are only twenty-five and they are just as cute," she says.

I keep staring at the ballerina. Before Ella got half her leg chopped off, she danced one Christmas season in the Nutcracker. "I'll take it."

I empty my pockets and spill everything onto the countertop. I've got a twenty dollar bill for the taxi, a check for forty dollars made out to the hospital, half a block of cello rosin, some matches, and an insurance card.

The sales clerk takes my check and the twenty dollar bill. "You're a few dollars short on tax, but I'll let it go. Would you like this wrapped?"

"Yes, please." I smile, knowing Ella will love this.

She wraps it in flowered paper and puts it in a large shopping bag. Outside the gift shop, I feel a sharp pain in my appendix as if someone got me with voodoo. I realize that I've made a humongous mistake. Like a nicotine fit, I have just satisfied my impulse to make my sister happy, but now I have no money to buy her chemo drugs. I feel as anxious as any relative in the surgical waiting room upstairs. Mom and Dad are right. My brain must be empty.

I glance at the clock on the wall. Five minutes until the pharmacy closes.

Fuck!

I rush through the hallway like a screaming ambulance and push myself past the pharmacy door. Breathless, I crash into the counter. "I'm here to pick up my sister's drugs."

"Her name," says the man behind the counter.

"Ella Ampudia."

The man retrieves a white bag full of her medicines. "Forty dollars co-pay."

"Can you bill us?"

He peers up from his glasses. "We don't bill. We take all major insurances."

I hand him our insurance card. He studies it just for a moment. "This is fine, but you owe a forty dollar co-pay. We accept cash, credit card, or check."

"I don't have it. I spent my money on a jewelry box with a ballerina for my sister." I hold up the shopping bag for proof.

"That's nice of you, son, but you'll still have to pay. Do you want me to call your parents? Maybe they can give me a credit card over the telephone?"

Shit, no. I'll be dead before those with cancer if my parents find out what I did.

I eye the white bag full of Ella's medicine on the counter. It's tempting me like my favorite candy of long ago. Gobstoppers, no Fun Dip! I can't control my impulse. My eyes feel like they are on springs and will pop out of my head.

Fuck it. My arms are gangly and long for twelve and three quarters. My fingers are sticky and quick. Perfect for stealing, I grab the bag, and run faster than Puss in Boots when he sees a mouse.

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