

From *The Sin Eater & Other Stories*
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Published by Queen's Ferry Press 2013

The Boy

I'm dumping drawers of utensils into boxes. I enjoy the dangerous way they clatter, the way the pronged fork sticks out, the thermometer's bared needle. So much crap. Spatulas, basters, pie servers. I wonder whose stuff this is, who I was that needed such things. For a year now I have lived on convenience foods, five-minute showers, plastic bags for traveling. I have lived in one corner of this house, like a spider, a water bug.

I stop and stare at a takeout menu from a restaurant that's been out of business for years. I haven't brushed my teeth in days, or combed my hair. I've been wearing the same jeans for a week, so soft they feel damp and flap at my ankles. Moving is a no man's land. You are neither here nor there, and everyone has forgotten you because they believe you are too busy to be concerned with living.

There's a dog barking outside. It's been barking for a few minutes. I kick aside the box I've been packing and walk to the front door.

In the street, beyond the azalea bushes, the dog is acting crazy, leaping and barking at something out of sight.

"Hey dog, what's going on?"

That's when I see the little boy, about six or seven years old. He's

standing and holding a backpack with one hand. The dog snarls and leaps, but bounces back as though he's been stopped by an invisible shield.

"Don't move," I yell, and run back inside, thinking I'll need a jacket or something in case the dog attacks me. Inside, though, I realize my jacket is packed.

I run back outside, calling, "Here I am, here I am," but the boy is gone. The dog is gone. In the bushes there is a horrific stench, as if something big, bigger than a squirrel or a chipmunk, has died. I look. There is nothing. There's no sign of the boy or the dog.

I've packed the lamps, so I work by the few overheads, one in the kitchen, one in the dining room. They're so bright they make everything seem shallow, including my own shadow, thin and sharp beside me. As I finish packing each room, I push everything against the wall, furniture, stacks of boxes, rolled rugs. It looks like I'm having a dance. As if I'm planning a party where it will be standing room only.

I sleep on a mattress on the living room floor and look at the brown boxes filled with my things. I'm tempted to just throw them all away while I can't see what's inside.

Barking wakes me. The same hysterical bark. I crawl to the window and look out. The dog is standing at the break in the azalea bushes, barking its head off. The boy, with his backpack, is sitting on the lawn.

"Hey," I call out softly, in case I'm imagining him. He turns his head and looks up at the window. A delicate face, a bowl shape of dark hair.

"Hey," he says back.

"Stay there." I stand slowly, keeping my eye on him as long as I can. I throw the front door open and peer through the screen. The dog, startled, stops barking. The boy waits for me.

I step out on the front porch. The dog resumes its barking, short, sharp yelps. I walk down the creaky porch steps and the boy stands up. There's a warm breeze.

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The stench hits me. It's so overpowering, thick, and alive that I almost fall; it smells like rotting fish, like heat, shit, death. I gasp and put my hands over my nose. The boy watches me.

"The dog is following me," he says sadly, "because I stink."

I step onto the grass and my vision shifts inward, the house, the sky, the bushes, the night stars disappear as the tunnel grows black and wide. My legs go soft. I am falling.

When I awake, it's cold. The bluish light of dawn is over the neighborhood. I am soaked with dew. I'm freezing. My face has been in the grass. I sit up. The boy and the dog are gone.

Inside, I have to rummage through several boxes to find a sweater. I strip off my clothes and pull it on. I wrap myself in the sheet and blanket and sit on the mattress. I can't stop shivering.

Hallucinating and passing out in the grass seem to be clear examples of ways in which I am inappropriate about life. I count twenty other reasons why I am a failure. I count four reasons why it is stupid to sell the house. I wish for simple worries: weight, getting toilet paper in the house, what to cook for dinner. I think about people who read flyers during the holidays, looking for perfect gifts. I think about people who drive two extra miles for cheaper aspirin. I wish I were like them.

I lie down and stare at the room. There are knots of dust and hair on the floor. The sight of them, all that's left of my history in the house, makes me shudder.

I'm out back, in the small garage, cleaning the years of accumulated junk into garbage bags. Coffee cans full of odd screws and nails and unidentifiable bits of metal. Old clothes, a bicycle with rotten tires. All the photo albums are out here. I discover them and toss them in a bag. After a few minutes, I pull them back out and flip through them.

I look so ruddy. And innocent. We're on bicycles. Or swimming. My hair long for a few years, or short. A party in the backyard, which looks great in the pictures but is now tall with weeds and sticks that

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have fallen from the oak trees during storms. I'm smiling in the pictures. It's a hollow feeling, to see myself smiling and know I wasn't happy. I wish I could be fooled.

I smell him first and then the dog whines. The dog is in the doorway of the garage. He wags his tail. He's a mangy dog, a brown mutt with orange splotches. The boy is behind me, sitting on an old sawhorse that once belonged to my father-in-law.

The boy says, "Don't faint, please."

I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth to block out the smell.

"Who are you?" I ask nasally.

"I'm afraid of that dog," he says. "He's following me because of this smell and I don't know what to do."

"What *is* that smell?" I peer at him. He looks fairly clean; there's no obvious reason he should smell.

"I don't know," the boy says. He looks at the dog and swings his legs. After a moment he stops swinging them, looks back at me, and says intently, "but I'm *afraid*."

"Maybe there's something in your backpack that smells?"

He climbs down and brings the pack over to me.

"It's just my schoolwork," he says. "Here's my math homework, here's my spelling. I drew this picture during art hour and this is my special tiger eraser." The paper is the same children have always used, with its large dotted lines. The math is subtraction. The boy is not good at this. The spelling words are done carefully and correctly: door, queen, walk, think, coat, apple. The drawing is outlined in pencil, colored in with crayon. There is a house, two blue trees, some bushes. A green dog.

"Whose house is this?"

"My house."

"Is that your dog?" I point to the dog at the door. He's not barking, I notice. He wags his tail, once, when we look at him.

"No, not him. That's my dog, there." He points to the picture.

"Oh. I see. Is he really green?"

He looks at me and giggles. "No." He giggles again.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Your voice sounds funny.”

“It’s ’cause I’m holding my nose, mister.” I look at him. His eyes are a bright brown under his bangs. A rosy mouth, pointy chin. He’s amazingly sweet. Somebody must be looking for him, I think. If he’s real. “So, tell me.” I walk over and put the photo albums back into the garbage bag. “Why don’t you go home?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Can’t you smell me?” I’ve upset him. He shakes the paper with the house drawing at the dog. “I stink! I stink! This dog won’t let me!”

“Have you tried to wash?”

“I want to wash,” says the boy, his eyes filling with tears, “but I can’t go hoooooome.” He lets the paper drift to the floor, drops the bag, and stands crying. The dog barks.

I let my tongue off the roof of my mouth for a second and there it is: a bloating smell, vomit and blood and rotting fur. I clamp my nose shut with two fingers, my stomach heaving.

The dog’s barking bounces off the walls of the garage.

I say, “What if I let you wash in my tub?” The boy is hunched over, his face wet with tears. He looks up at me and blinks.

“What about the dog?” he asks.

“What about it?”

“Can he come?”

Everywhere he touches, he leaves yellow stains. From his fingertips, a dust, like pollen. Small finger lines on the back of my hand, on the door where he’s held it open for the dog.

We walk through the half-empty house. The dog follows us. I lift the boy and carry him up the stairs. He is slightly clammy from crying. I can feel his small palm on my back. The dog’s nails click on the floors behind us.

In the bathroom, I turn on the faucet. The old shower curtain has already been torn off and thrown away. There is shampoo and a bar of soap. The boy and the dog stand watching the steam rise.

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I notice the afternoon sun flickering in the window, blocking out maple shadows on the wall. Afternoon sun, my favorite. I feel good for the first time in months.

I ask the boy, "Do you need help getting undressed?"

"No," he says. He sets his backpack down on the black-and-white tile floor. He takes off his sneakers, his pants, his shirt. He stands in his small white underwear and white socks.

"Are you shy? Do you want me to leave?"

"No!" he says. His eyes are wide. "That water looks so hot! Will it burn me?"

I laugh. "It's not so hot; besides, it has to be warm enough to get that smell off, right?"

"Right." He removes his socks, slowly, peeling them off and dropping them in balls on the floor. He stares again at the water. "What if I slip and fall when I'm getting in?"

"I'll help you."

He takes off his underwear and waits in the middle of the bathroom, uncertain. He's so small I can't believe he's human. Twig arms, tiny dot nipples. His skin is so thin and pale I can almost see through to the slender bones, the bean of his heart.

He holds out his hands, smiling vaguely. I pick him up, his arms so fragile I feel as if I could pop them off, and lower him, two small feet first, into the tub.

He shrieks lightly, blinking at his feet.

After a minute, he sits down. Yellow, bright as Easter egg dye, floods into the water. The dog barks. I assume the smell is worse when the boy is wet.

He squeals with delight: "It's warm!"

I lather up the bar of soap and begin on his back, the twin scapulas like miniature fins. He splashes his hands, dark yellow streaks spilling from his fingertips. I scrub with my hands: his back, his arms, his neck, his chest, his feet. I get his hair damp, scooping water up the back of his neck. He giggles and hunches his shoulders. My palms turn a deep yellow. I dab shampoo on his scalp and scrub with my nails.

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“Ouch,” he says mildly. He makes up a song, a string of sounds that pleases him.

I rinse his hair with an old plastic cup from under the sink, pouring water over his head and pushing it away from his face with my hands. He sings. He looks like a wet little animal with his hair slicked back, his pointed pink scalp. I feel a huge affection for him.

“Stay here,” I say. “I’ve got to find some towels.”

He adds “okay” to his string of song sounds. The dog watches, unmoving as I step over him.

I open the laundry closet, pleased to find I haven’t yet packed the towels. With a start, I realize I’m not holding my tongue to the roof of my mouth anymore. I’m breathing normally. I laugh.

I’m walking back across the hall when I realize his singing has stopped.

In the bathroom, the tub is full of clean, clear water. I set the towels down on the toilet seat. I reach out and touch the soap, which is dry.

I’m sitting on a kitchen chair, crying and talking to myself. The tears that stream from my eyes feel good and hot on my cheeks. I let my words run together into a wail. I’m so upset. I say this aloud and it soothes me. “I’m so upset! I’m so upset!” I pinch the fabric of my jeans. Sometimes I moan with my mouth open, which sounds bottomlessly sad, and satisfies me.

Eventually, I stop. I wipe my eyes with paper napkins from the chicken place where I got my dinner a few nights ago. On the napkins, there are garish, bulbous red letters. I stare blankly at the design and then blow my nose on a napkin. I toss another at the garbage and miss.

“You have bad aim,” he says.

I turn around. He’s standing in the kitchen doorway. His hair is wet and combed to one side. He’s wearing one of my T-shirts, which reaches to his knees. The dog moves past him and lies down under the table. I can’t smell anything but shampoo.

“You’re supposed to be in the tub!”

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He shrugs. "I'm hungry," he says.

All I've left out is peanut butter and bread. I take the jar of peanut butter, the half loaf of bread, and a knife over to the table. He pulls out the other chair and sits down, just his head showing above the tabletop. I spread a slice for him.

"Not too much, please," he says. He's looking at me strangely. Glancing and then looking away. I realize he is trying to be polite and not stare.

"What?" I ask him.

"Nothing," he says. He accepts the peanut butter bread and sniffs. "I like this peanut butter. I don't like the crunchy kind that pokes you in the mouth."

"Nope, me neither."

He looks up at me as he chews. I smile at him. He finishes his bite and swallows. He looks at me again and says, "Were you crying?"

I put my hand to my face. I'm sure it's all blotchy and red and pitiful-looking. I nod my head yes.

"Why were you crying?"

"I feel like I'm going crazy."

"*You?*" He's so shocked by this he points a finger at me to be sure he understands what I mean.

I can't help but laugh, he makes me feel so much better. He laughs, too, his mouth open. He has peanut butter bread smashed inside his cheeks. It makes me laugh harder. I spin a finger next to my head to show how crazy I am. We laugh more. He chews and kicks his foot rhythmically under the table.

"If you're crazy," he announces, "then I'm crazy, too." He reaches for the jar, begins spreading another slice. He gets peanut butter on his thumb and licks it off. I look over at him, his face shiny and scrubbed. The dog snuffles under the table, rolls onto its side, stretches its legs out, and sighs.

"You're a good person," I say.

His mouth is full, but he says, "Me, too."

"I said *you* were a good person."

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"I thought you meant you," he says. His hair is beginning to dry. He looks sleepy. I start to feel sleepy, too. It gets dark earlier in the fall.

"Are you going home after this?" I ask. I glance at him to see how he feels about it.

He thinks, still chewing. "I'd better," he says.

"What about the dog?"

"He'd better come home, too."

"Won't that upset your dog?"

"He is my dog."

"I thought you said he wasn't!"

"Well, not when he's acting like *that*, he's not my dog." We laugh. He chews again and looks just like any kid, any normal kid who has been having a sad time and now feels better.

I ask him, "So you aren't afraid anymore?"

He looks at me and shakes his head no. He says, "I won't be afraid anymore."

"You don't just have to say that because you think it's what I want to hear."

"No," he says. "I don't."

He finishes his bread. I reach over and touch his rosy ear. He giggles. The dog gets up and walks to the hall. It stops and looks back.

I walk them to my front door. My old front door. I open it and let them out onto the porch. I call goodbye and close the door. If they're going to vanish I don't want to see it.

After they're gone I feel awake again. I walk out to the garage and begin piling everything I see into garbage bags or the sagging boxes that have been sitting for years. When they're full, I drag them from the cold dark of the garage down to the curb. I hardly pause to pick up the things I drop, leaning and scooping them up on my next trip in or out.

Back inside the house I pack the linen closet. The only boxes left are small and I stuff them with washcloths, towels, and sheets. When I bought these things I was a different woman, somewhat hard and

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narrow, dreams lined up like clothes on hangers. The boxes are too full, but I tape the flaps shut over the humps and shove them into the bedroom across the hall. I don't want any of it, but I suspect—I know—that at some point I will. Or someone will.

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