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(DOUBLEDAY)

Wabi

By Mitch Berman

In Portland, Oregon, where it doesn't rain several dozen days a year, people know the odds and leave their windshield wipers on when they park their cars, and deep puddles rarely form on streets planned and planed for wetness, and the rain, as if in deference to engineering and expectation, never falls in sheets and torrents, but takes the form of a constant drizzle barely thicker than a mist, a drizzle that, falling through the air, pastelizes the colors of the buildings, and that having fallen, grays out and darkens those colors; in Portland, landlocked Portland, connected by a river to the sky, a very thin young man with an electric guitar in a hard-shell case walked in the gutter of Yamhill Street to even out his height advantage over the young woman beside him.

A voice so high it was more a whistle than a voice came faintly through the drizzle: "Bass-tarss!"

Billy and Melissa turned the corner and the source of the sound opened up to them: three bald male figures, one of them with an arm extended toward an old black man who was falling away from the arm, toppling lock-kneed as stiffly as a Douglas Fir. The upturned hand of the old black man, falling, and the downturned hand of the young white man, felling him, were almost touching, suspended in a release that seemed a caress or a caress that seemed a release, each lingering on the moment of contact before giving the other back to the other's world.

It was a long block, and sight and sound were very slightly out of sync: Billy and Melissa saw the old man fall against a metal trash can a split-second before they heard the clatter, saw him open his mouth, like a clown in a silent movie, before his voice rang out thinly: " ... young ... bastards!"

"Skinheads," said Melissa. Bottom-heavy in spit-polished military boots and baggy camouflage pants, they wore khaki jackets with swastika shoulder patches. One had WHITE & PROUD stenciled across his back like the name of an athletic team.

"Watch the Strat?" said Billy, setting the guitar case at Melissa's feet.

To Melissa, who had never lost the thick-limbed, bowlegged swagger of the child athlete, Billy had always looked twiggish, kitelike; but now, as he ran away from her toward the skinheads, toward the unknown, toward the future, his orange nylon shell flew open, and the slivers of his legs beneath it seemed no more substantial than a butterfly's body between its giant wings, tiny, careening, willy-nilly, buffeted by chance. Billy's shout came back at her inarticulately down the long block.

The white-and-proud skinhead was kneeling before the old man, who was on his hands and knees and whose long jaw, lengthened by a scraggly white beard, opened longer. The youth tilted his stubbly head and parted his lips as if to give the old man a kiss or a bite on the face.

Melissa saw Billy grab the skinhead's collar from behind and yank him backward, heard herself murmur Billy's name, and heard in her murmur a warning,

inaudible as all such warnings always are; heard in her own voice, it seemed to her later, a voice that was not her voice and an awareness of all that would happen next.

The skinhead, seated on the sidewalk where Billy had pulled him, drawled in a tone that did not seem entirely unfriendly, "You don't know what side you're on." He embraced Billy's legs, and Billy folded down.

Melissa got herself in the middle without knowing how. A fist among all those fists caught her on the jaw, and she staggered under the impact of the punch and of the fact that it was the first time since her tomboy days that anyone had punched her, and when, in the months to come, she would remember what happened next, she would remember that it had happened at a great distance from the place where she stood, too much in shock even to rub her jaw: at that distance, an old man crabbed off sideways on all fours and a young man she knew was standing up, waving his arms to fend off blows from three others, then falling, falling slowly, his arms moving closer to him until they covered his head, until he was down and rolling, until he stopped rolling and there were boots, only boots now, that kicked him. The asphalt heaved up against Billy's chest; the asphalt, which had been expecting rain, drank down Billy's tears. He could not remember the last time physical pain had made him cry.

Melissa found herself at a phone booth saying "Ambulance" until a voice answered, "ambulance" when asked what service she needed, "ambulance" when asked where she was. The ambulance that swept up silently — there wasn't enough traffic to need a siren — to the phone booth on 5th Street and Yamhill was running its wipers.

"Poor kid," said a paramedic.

"No," said Melissa, because it was what she could say.

"Lay down," urged the paramedic, bearing down on her shoulders with his hands. "Your eggs are a little scrambled, that's all. Everything's gonna be all right."

Melissa lay on the stretcher, and the stretcher started moving across the rain-darkened concrete, and there was a bump, and the ambulance started moving across the rain-darkened asphalt. She ran two fingers over the guitar case that lay beside her, leaving tire tracks on its wet black pebbled skin. She wished she could throw it into reverse, reel it all back, back past the ambulance and the voice in the phone, past the old man and the skinheads, past the run and past the rain; she wished the band had played another encore and she had closed up the club a few minutes later. She'd kept Billy's guitar for him. Melissa sat up and said: "*It isn't me!*"

Melissa was treated for cuts and bruises and discharged from James G. Blaine Memorial Hospital after a night of observation. Billy remained in a coma for the rest of that weekend and the entire month of April. Prisoners and municipal employees X'd days off their calendars, praying for vacation or release; Melissa sat beside Billy's bed in a molded purple plastic chair and read to him until she grew inured to Muzak and cherry-scented antiseptic; nurses took Billy's pulse on day shift, night shift, graveyard shift; Billy's mother appeared, asked her son a battery of questions, then rehearsed, over his inert form, her farewell speech to Billy's father, which speech treated in some detail her twin discoveries of yeast sensitivity and crystal technology, as well as certain imperfections in her relationship with Billy's father, among them the lack of "normal sex" for six years and three months, and she summed up these imperfections with the Japanese word *wabi*, explaining that in Zen Buddhism, the key to understanding life's true perfection lay in such apparent imperfections, in such *wabi*, and after saying all this, Billy's mother came no more; Billy's father, struggling with several mighty confusions that the delivery by Billy's mother of her farewell speech did nothing to alleviate, did not come at all; the coarse red hair on Billy's head, oblivious to mother and father and even to the life or death of Billy himself, continued growing out from a crew cut, and in growing, simply and without comment marked the passage of time, the way a metronome will click indifferently for music or for mayhem; technicians dollied in an

electroencephalograph and razored patches out of Billy's hair and fixed electrodes to his glossy bluish scalp and tweaked his pale facial skin to make the stylus twitch and jag across tractor-fed computer paper, and the skin stayed pink long after the technicians had gone; Melissa put headphones over Billy's ears and played him tapes of Hendrix and Santana; Billy began to dream, and the doctors wrote *REMs* on the chart that hung at the foot of his bed, wrote it without knowing whether Billy was dreaming of rain or shine, whether he was hearing Hendrix or Muzak or nothing at all, whether his windshield wipers were on or off; and an intravenous unit dispensed clear foodstuff into Billy's bloodstream, dripped, and dripped, and dripped, like a metronome, like a rain.

Melissa was getting to the end of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when Billy interrupted her. "What did you say?" he asked, quite distinctly.

"Billy?" Melissa leaned over him and took his hand.

"Yes?" Billy frowned, his eyes still closed. "What did you say?"

"When I was reading to you?"

"No," Billy said slowly. "Before that. You said, 'Skinheads.' You were afraid. But I want to tell you something." His eyes came open, resting on Melissa. "Don't worry. They're cowards." He closed his eyes again. "That was what I wanted to tell you."

When Billy awoke Melissa discovered that he did not know her name. The doctors shined lights in Billy's eyes, CAT-scanned and EEG'd him and beat on his joints with red rubber hammers, and wrote on the chart, "Organic damage to L hemisphere. Aphasia & amnesia, mod.-severe — prognosis unclear. Reflexes & sensorium intact."

Billy's father, of whom Melissa had heard only rumor, carried insurance that paid for Billy's private room. Each morning he sent a floral arrangement so perfect it did not look real. The handwriting on the florist's card was not a man's.

Melissa tried to teach Billy the difference between gladioli, chrysanthemums and daffodils. When Billy called them "those plants," Melissa bought him *The Little Golden Book of Flowers*. Billy had not forgotten how to read, but he stopped every few lines to jab a word with his thumb.

Melissa would lean in beside him and say, "Sound it out."

A psychologist gave Billy the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and Sternberg's Memory-Scanning Procedure and told him, "Your *retrograde* amnesia is wearing off — you'll begin to recall more and more from before the accident — but your *anterograde* amnesia will make it hard to retain anything that happens from now on. So I'm going to ask you to write down everything that happens to you. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes," said Billy.

"Otherwise," the psychologist said with a grin, "you might forget where you parked your car."

"Do I have a car?" said Billy.

Billy would sit erect, the back of his bed cranked as far forward as it would go, playing on his unamplified Stratocaster solos that wandered from song to song, key to key, era to era; solos that climbed toward crescendos only to find their ladders pulled out from under them, solos like stories written in disappearing ink, solos like columns of figures that did not add up but that continued adding, adding. Sitting so straight, with some of his hair still spiky and some of it starting to lie down over the shaven patches, Billy looked wet and quizzical, like a newborn chick.

Each afternoon he was wheelchaired upstairs to play with blocks and walk up and back between two rails that looked like a gymnastic apparatus. Every evening, before her shift at the club, Melissa spoiled Billy's apperite for the hospital dinner with smuggled foods: most, like raisins and pistachios, Billy could now recognize

immediately; some he still seemed to taste for the first time. A Hershey's bar made him close his eyes and frown slightly as he ate.

"This one is my favorite," he announced, as he had several times before. "What's it called?"

"Sound it out," Melissa told him.

"Choc-o-late." He said it with a long *a*.

Billy logged every new flavor, every new idea, every doctor, nurse and visitor in red, yellow and blue five-by-eight spiral notepads, each of which he'd titled BILLY'S BRAIN. For Melissa, guiding him through his discoveries was something like raising an outsized child. It had occurred to her — first as an abstraction, then colorized by altruistic overtones, and finally with plain desire — that whatever Billy's experience with women before the injury, he had now recovered his virginity. She liked to wipe him down with a wet washcloth, and smell his skin.

Billy's father came after dinner on the eve of Billy's release from Blaine Memorial. He stood beside the bed in high-heeled pumps, a long floral cotton dress, and subdued quantities of lipstick, eyeshadow and blush. Billy's father had breasts.

"Dad?" said Billy.

"I realize this comes as a shock," said Billy's father in the same deep, assured voice-over voice that used to say, "Customer Service," when Billy had telephoned the Oregon Mutual Savings Bank, the same voice that had always called Billy "son" and Billy's mother "your mother," the same voice that had, long before, explained sex to Billy in clinical and terrifying detail.

"Where's Mom?" Billy asked.

"Your mother's gone to Idaho," Billy's father told him. "She left me and went to Idaho."

Billy reached to the nightstand for his blue notepad and set it on the tongue-shaped table that had been wheeled over his midsection for dinner. "Mom's in ... " he murmured as he wrote.

"I-D-A-H-O," said his father.

Billy looked up. "That's bad."

"Your mother wouldn't say so." Billy's father half smiled. "Your mother would call it *wabi*. May I sit down?"

"Uh-huh." Billy's face was in his notepad.

"Thank you, son," said his father, pulling up the purple chair. "Isn't your girlfriend here tonight?"

"Melissa," said Billy. Marking his place with a thumb, he flipped pages until he came to the heading *M*, and ran his finger down the side. "Melissa," he said again.

"Melissa," his father agreed.

"What day is it?" Billy asked.

"Wednesday," said his father.

"Every night except Monday," Billy read slowly, "Melissa works at Club 666, where they have live rock music and serve alco — alcoholic bev — bever — "

"Beverages," said his father.

"You've been there?" Billy asked.

"Billy ... " said his father. "I would have come sooner, but I had to go to Colorado for the operation. And afterward I didn't want to upset you with the way I look. How are you feeling?"

"I'm not sure," said Billy. "They say my memory is messed up, but I can't tell — I can't remember anything to compare it with."

"I wish somebody would wipe out *my* memory," Billy's father said quietly. "Then I'd know myself only as a woman."

"That's how *I* look at you," said Billy.

Billy's father rose halfway out of his chair and kissed Billy on the cheek and forehead. "Thank you. God! Thank you for that." He was clenching Billy so tightly that the bed creaked with his sobs.

"You're crying, Dad," said Billy.

"That's nothing new for me," said his father, subsiding into the chair and dabbing at his eyes with the napkin from Billy's dinner. "I just used to hide it from you."

"Your chest feels kind of funny," Billy said.

"Saline implants," said Billy's father. "They make an incision beneath the armpit" — he traced it with a French-manicured fingernail — "and then they slip a kind of water-balloon into the subcutaneous envelope over the pectoralis muscle."

Billy was looking at the remains of his dinner, the picture that fluttered silently across the television screen, the painting of a sad clown on the wall. Finally he reached over to the nightstand and lifted the lid from the box of See's chocolates. "Do you want a — ? Would you like one of these?"

"Oh, no thank you, son," said his father.

Billy picked up the remote control and turned the television off. "What about your job?"

"I quit," said his father. "I'm temping."

Billy pushed the heels of his hands against the edge of the table and his fingers groped the air. "What did they — what did they do with — "

"The surgeon didn't cut my penis off," his father said in an equanimous tone, as if describing something that had been done to someone else. "He reformed the penile tissue into a vaginal tunnel. It's like turning a finger of a glove inside out. I still have sexual sensitivity, though not the reproductive capacity. He also gave me a cervix with an os. I'll be able to fool the gynecologist." He leaned over Billy. "You're taking notes again?"

"I have to." Billy read over what he'd written. "Did it hurt?"

"Not the operation itself," said his father. "I was under a general anesthetic. But I'm still tender."

The sad clown looked at Billy for a while. "When did you get it done?"

"On April twelfth," said his father.

Billy stared back opaquely.

"Today is the ninth of May," said his father.

Billy flipped back a page in his notepad. "What's *wabi*?"

His father took a deep breath and crossed his legs with the soft sigh of pantyhose. "According to your mother, the seemingly flawed thing can be perfect — if it has the perfect flaw. *Wabi* is this state of true perfection." He watched the eraser on Billy's pencil doodle figure-8's in the air. "Your mother told me a story — "

"A true story?" Billy asked.

"If it's not," said his father, "that would only give the story its own *wabi*. Are you sure you want to write it all down?"

"Yes," said Billy. "Should I put it under W for *wabi* or M for *Mom*?"

"M," said Billy's father.

In capital letters neatly centered on the page, Billy wrote, *MOM'S STORY*.

"A Japanese nobleman wanted to impress a wise old sage," his father began, "so he went out and purchased the rarest and most beautiful tea service money could buy. He had the sage over for tea, but the sage said nothing about his tea service. The nobleman smashed the expensive tea service to bits and thought no more about it. A ragpicker found the pieces in the nobleman's garbage. Every night, by the light of a candle, he sifted through the fragments and glued the tea service together again. In six weeks the ragpicker was finished, and he invited the sage for tea. After the tea ceremony, the sage told the ragpicker, 'I have seen this tea service before. Only now has it truly attained the quality of *wabi*.'"

Billy stacked the empty dishes in front of him, then unstacked them. "Is that why Mom's gone?"

"I don't know," said Billy's father. "But I was forced to think about a lot of things when your mother left me. I made many decisions in just a few days. Maybe too many."

"Yeah," said Billy.

"Be that as it may," said his father, "there are some decisions you can't go back on. Like one very important decision your mother and I made twenty-three years ago."

"C'mon, Dad." Billy's legs were squirming under the sheet.

"Twenty-three years ago," his father rolled on, "your mother and I decided to have a child. God blessed us with a wonderful baby boy." He seized Billy's hand and began kissing it. "And I *thank* God, because despite everything that happened between your mother and me in the next twenty-three years, and despite all her talk of *wabi*, and despite the fact that she's left me — "

He was sobbing, and Billy cried too, perhaps for his father, perhaps for himself, perhaps because he cried easily now, or perhaps simply because human beings have a tendency to mirror the facial expressions of others near them. A nurse came into the doorway, saw them, and left.

"May I have a tissue?" Billy's father asked.

Billy passed him the box from the nightstand, and his father blew his nose with a resounding honk. Billy remembered that noise, and another, *aSHAsha!*, which was his father's sneeze. It always surprised Billy to stumble across something he remembered.

"I want you to come home and live with me," his father told him. "Your mother kept your room just the way you left it. The house is too big now that she's gone." He watched Billy for a time. "Well?"

"I don't know," said Billy. He had just noticed that his father had left lipstick all over the back of his left hand. Billy didn't want to wipe it off in front of him, and his hand began to tingle, then to itch, then to crawl with itches like a hundred bugs were on it. He couldn't wait for his father to leave the room.

When Melissa came in, Billy was flipping through the pages of his blue notepad. Slowly, reading, he told her, "My father was here to see me."

"I know," said Melissa.

There was a silence, and Billy said into it, "My father is a woman."

"I know," Melissa said again, sitting at the edge of the bed and stroking his forehead. "Dr. Hansen told me about him."

"Her," Billy corrected. "Because, y'know, any man with a vagina and breasts out to here *deserves* to be called a woman."

Melissa smiled. "That's true."

"My father is my mother," said Billy.

It was raining, but the drops were so fine that from across the room Billy and Melissa could not hear them hit the window, could not even see them, knew it was raining only because the mist beaded up occasionally and ran down the glass. In most places rain is an event, noticed and remarked, but in Portland it is, like time or gravity, a thing assumed. Time and gravity and rain cut canyons in the earth, change the shape of a mountain as easily as a thumb smudges a newspaper's text. They are the agencies of erosion, and their operation is as gradual, as inevitable, as gentle and as brutal as forgetting.

"You know something?" said Billy. "If I want to know what happened to me, I have to pick up my notes and *read* about it." Billy closed his notepad. "At the end of the day, I feel like I haven't done anything."

Melissa arose, drew the gauzy curtains around the bed, came inside them and kissed Billy on the lips. Billy raised neither a protest nor a hand of assistance as Melissa stripped the bedding and hospital gown from him, stepped out of her Levi's and her underpants: passive and pliable, he simply allowed her to do as she wished. He knew she meant him no harm.

Billy told Melissa his dream: "I'm swimming in salt water, warm and pale and so clear I can see all the way to the bottom. Something's shiny down there, so I dive, and the water presses in on my face, cooler and cooler. It's coins, ancient gold coins, each one with a different face that I know from long ago. If I can take them with me I'll never forget anything again.

"I grab two handfuls of coins and push off from the bottom, but now I'm losing my breath and I can't swim with my hands full, and I start sinking down.

"So I have to let go, and the gold coins drift back across my face and I start to rise through the water. I'm deeper than I thought. I don't know if I'll reach the air before I drown, but I can see a light spilling across the surface, and it gets smaller and stronger as I rise. It's the sun, brighter than any coin."

He took Melissa's hand, pressed it between his chin and collarbone, and forgot about it. "The ocean will always be there," Billy said. "I can always go back down and touch anything I want, I can know it, I can have it. I just can't keep it."

He reached for the buzzer.

After a minute the nurse's voice came from the intercom. "Yes, Billy?"

"Is it too late to get some ice cream?" Billy asked.

The nurse laughed. "What flavor do you want?"

Billy asked Melissa, "What's that one I like?"