

## First Place

### Grades Eleven /Twelve

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#### Everything but Wings

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by Madeleine Bradford

I have something wrapped around my spine.

I am not sure if it is friendly. I think it may have tried to talk to me once or twice, but only in growling noises, which were not speech so much as sound, patternless and primal. And I am the only one who seems to hear them, so I suppose it's natural that I am the only one bothered by this.

It is heavy, this thing, and it has curled-wire scales that poke up under my skin, making little patterns that look lovely but hurt like hell. Its heart- if it has a heart- may well be located in the thrum just between my shoulder blades, which sounds a bit like a rubber band being twanged back and forth. My doctors say that this sound is just my heartbeat echoing, but I do not believe them, because heartbeats cannot echo- reason being, the ribcage is crammed with stuff. Lungs, memories, organs, blood, fears and faults and all of the things that we like to pretend are secret, even though they're not.

Day by day, the thing grows heavier. I walk bowed, now. My friends all joke that I'm old before my time, ha ha, and this is what comes of not getting exercise, and perhaps I need a cane? It would not have to be a *normal* cane, they hasten to reassure me. It could be an interesting one. With dragons on.

"No, thank you," I say, very politely, "I'm just fine."

They are not convinced. They take me to see doctors, who examine the marks and ask me if I have ever been struck by lightning, and then prescribe various medications, which I cannot bring myself to use. The pills stare at me from their sickly yellow bottles, accusations of weakness.

You are so stupid, their silence tells me. You are so stupid, because you will not let anyone actually help you get rid of this thing. You are so stupid, because you are not only too afraid to try, but you don't actually want to be rid of it, secretly. You are so stupid, because you think that you're lonely, and you are stupid also because you think that you don't mind.

I start to wrap the pills in tissues and throw them one by one away in the garbage. It makes me feel better, in a way- like I am accomplishing *something*, even if it is the exact opposite of what I'm meant to accomplish. Perhaps I hope that someone will notice that the pills are dwindling, and think, my, she finally buckled down! What perseverance! What an Inspiring Story that girl has! Though of course no one notices, because no one else checks the number of pills so obsessively. Into the garbage they go, cocooned tightly in little wads of white tissue, until at last I have mummified the final pill, and the pattern on my back is still growing.

I try yoga. The only thing this does for me is make me feel rather foolish.

I try dieting, but it doesn't work, because I break my diet in two days, thinking that perhaps it is this very focus on weight that is dissolving our societies and in any case I miss cake.

I try homeopathic remedies, which taste like rust and linger on everything eaten afterwards. I try to convince myself that they make a difference, but I know that they do not.

Finally, my friends give in.

All right, they say.

It's just your odd condition, they say.

We'll write a book about you someday, they say. When we're all rich and famous.

And so I go back to cake and band-aids. I put all of my yoga books into a box, and leave it on the library steps, feeling like a mother abandoning an unwanted child- a failure of nature, in some inexplicable and undeniable way. Yoga cures everyone *else*, I think. Why didn't it work on me?

"I know what will take your mind off of things," One of my friends- Lia- says, her eye shadow so caked-on that I have a feeling you could peel it off and find the exactly shape of her eyes, "There's a circus in town."

"It could be fun," she says.

"You should go," she says.

"What the hell," I say, shrugging. It isn't as if I have anything better to do.

The thing that I always forget at this stage, though, is how much I hate circuses themselves. The idea is fine, distant and full of the promise of masks and suitably vintage creepiness and interesting colors and unhealthy food, but up close these things look so much less *real* than they do in the mind. That's what nightmares are, though, of course- things so down-in-the-blood true that

they seem to be obviously false. It's our mind's method of self-defense- filtering out all of the truly terrible as 'fantasy', as well as most of the truly good. The terrible can be fascinating, of course, but I'm not so sure anyone really thinks that they personally *deserve* the good, and for that reason it is hidden so much deeper than you might expect.

I go through the maze, the nasty, vomit-inducing roller coaster, the vomiting itself, and then hot dogs on sticks, covered in cornmeal. I am just about to leave, with a sore stomach and disillusioned, bitter feeling welling satisfyingly in my temples when I hear someone call my name.

"Cordelia, wait, please."

I hesitate. Surely they don't mean *me*. That voice does not belong to any of my friends. It reminds me of the way a child sounds, after she has cried herself out, and has no more energy left to smooth her words back into grammatically correct sentences. I mean, the voice used grammar, well enough- but there is the same feeling to it.

It reminds me of me.

"Cordelia," the voice comes from next to me, and I find myself looking at a woman in a bird mask, faded red feathers tickling the air around her face. "Come back to the tent of horrors, will you? I think you have a problem that a friend of mine might be able to sort out."

"What problem?" I ask, thinking of the taste of my own spit, and how I really should never eat things after vomiting (or go to circuses) ever, ever again- practical, inglorious, every-day things to be thinking about, especially right before something so very odd happens. But I don't know it is going to happen, so I go right on thinking them.

"The one," she says, "That's curled around your spine."

"Ah," I say, wondering if I had perhaps drunk anything unusual while I was in the food tent. "That one."

"Yes," she says.

I am about to turn away from this madwoman in her beaked mask, leave this circus and any hope of fixing my back here to rot forever in my memory, when I make the mistake of looking at her eyes.

There is an obvious struggle in them. I cannot fathom what she's trying to decide, but I try to, anyway, because the one plain thing about this is that she is struggling over *me*. She is wondering if she can trust *me*, wondering if she should have come here, to lead me to whatever it is she wants

to lead me to. She might be wondering if I can handle it, or even if I'm worth it. And suddenly, seeing the scales tipping back and forth inside her skull, I want to be worth it.

“Okay,” I say, quickly, before I can change my mind again. Her smile softens.

She leads me back through the tents, navigating sideways that I didn't even know existed, walking between crimsons and greens and occasionally over types of paving I don't remember seeing on the wide parking lot in which the circus is set- cobblestones and brick-ways and, at one point, a dirt path leading directly through a tent, which has a flourishing jungle inside of it, green and glowing- then back out into the stale city air.

The tent we are headed for seems no different, and when we reach it I am not even sure this is the one I ought to enter. I glance at her, and she nods encouragingly. I realize I do not even know her name.

“Go on, Cordelia,” she says.

Inside of the tent there is a small grey room, that looks paradoxically cramped, considering the gaudy exterior. I suppose it might be possible that all of the gold paint and bright colors had made the tent seem larger than it was, like a bird fluffing up its plumage to appear frightening, but I do not think so. Another woman, of undeterminable age, walks in. She is wearing no mask, and a plain black dress, with her dark hair coiled around her head like a crown. She is carrying a wooden box.

“This is the patient, then, I take it?” she asks, and her voice is warm and rich, but for some reason I trust it infinitely less than I do the rasping woman. The rasping woman nods, silently.

“You may go, darling,” the woman with dark hair flicks her fingers negligently, and at the ends of them I can now see that her nails taper into claws- talons, really- and her fingers are too long and too thin.

The rasping woman bites her lip, and gives me one last glance before she leaves, but I cannot tell what she is trying to say. Or trying not to say.

“Now,” the woman with dark hair smiles like she has a marvelous secret, “Let's sit down, shall we? You take the bench.”

And indeed, there is a bench in the middle of the room- a wide one, made of decidedly unfriendly looking wooden planks, as harsh as concrete and stained the color of cold rain. It is long enough to be the base of a bed-frame, and shaped just enough like a coffin to worry me. I lay down anyway. It will make no difference if she kills me- the thing around my spine has been doing that for

some time anyway, I am sure of it. Nearly sure. Almost exactly positive.

“Hmm.” Claws scrape and brush against my skin as she peels my shirt away from my back. Goosebumps shoot all over me, and I can feel acid mumbling in the pit of my stomach. “I see.”

She turns back, and looks at me with much more serious eyes- bright green, I cannot help but notice. The green of EXIT signs. “I think I see the problem here. You have a shadow wedged up under your skin, and around your lumbar vertebrae.”

Lumbar vertebrae. It sounds ominous.

“Do I need surgery?” I ask- not nervous, exactly, but not calm either- and she surprises me, flashing a mouth full of sharp teeth as she smiles.

“Heavens, no.” she says. “Have you ever had a splinter?”

“Of course,” I say.

“This will be almost just like that.” she says, and she smiles again.

Almost, I think. Almost, as in nearly, but not quite.

“What’s the difference?” I ask.

“Shadows are slightly larger than splinters.” She opens her wooden box, and takes out a pair of tweezers as small as eyelashes. “Close your eyes,” she says. “This won’t hurt a bit.”

I can actually feel her reaching the tweezers into a pore of my skin, and I can feel the snag, when they catch on one of the curled-wire scales of the shadow, like my breath is being pulled backwards on a hook, out of my chest.

“Ah,” I hear her say again, and I imagine her smile. It is terribly grotesque, in my mind- I find I cannot picture it exactly, but keep warping the edges into something of a death rictus.

The process of tugging the shadow out of me is excruciatingly slow. It is all wound up in me, she explains- like a tapeworm, in that it was thin and ribboning and miles and miles long, but not like a tapeworm, in that it is perfectly harmless other than for the fact that it would eventually have killed me.

When she tells me to open my eyes, the shadow is pooled in a tumble of a glossy ribbon-like substance beside me. There is a wetness to the wood around it, as if water has been poured on the bench. When I ask what it was, the dark-haired woman shrugs.

“Blood,” she says, dispassionately, “Yours. Some blood was necessary.”

She does not say why, or, I think, a bit morbidly, for whom.

The scales of the shadow, that had been so sharp against my skin, are limp and sorry-looking, like flowers after a wedding. Picked, and discarded as easily as crumpled napkins. Somehow betrayed. For a moment, I wonder if I have done the wrong thing, taking that shadow out of me.

“Will it die?” I ask.

“It’s dead,” She says, wiping her hands off with a striped towel. Streaks of red follow her fingers. “And you should probably leave, now.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because,” she says, “You have a reason to. And because you can.”

For a moment, I feel a twinge of pity for her. And then she reaches out, prodding the limp side of the shadow none-too-gently with her fingernail, her face curving into a smile that isn’t a rictus, but rather something gentle and kind, and, remembering the look on her face when she said, ‘it’s already dead’, my pity goes out like a light. It is as if she is talking to the carcass, almost- saying, *‘you and me both, kid.’*

Fine, I think. *Fine*. If you’re so determined to think of yourself as dead, if you’re so determined to pity yourself into nonexistence, fine. There is nothing stopping you except for a flap of cloth.

But sometimes that’s enough.

“So?” The rasping woman asks, waiting for me outside the tent. She is not wringing her hands, not exactly, but they are twitching, as if she wants to wring them but hasn’t quite the nerve. She is clearly trying to convince herself not to worry. Why would she worry about me? I’m only a person. But, it occurs to me, maybe that’s the point.

“It was a shadow,” I say. My own hands are shaking. I lace them together, and watch as the joints of my fingers whitened with pressure.

She sighs, in- what? Disappointment? Relief?

“I thought it might be,” is all she says. “You see them a lot, here. In the city.”

I look again at her eyes, which look back at me from over her plastic beak, black as vacuums. The feathers of her bird-mask twitch in the barely-there breeze. I remember the other woman,

locked inside the tent, inside her own heart, inside her own mind, with nothing but a dead shadow for company.

“Would you like to have dinner with me?” I ask.

“Okay,” she says, and she smiles.

“You’re very brave, you know,” she says. We walk away from the circus, and it seems to me as if the city air is no longer stale, but tastes of secrets bleeding out and sunlight rushing in.

“Maybe,” I say, but I don’t clarify whether I’m answering her statement or just stating the word, as in, Maybe...

Maybe I will learn how to play the violin, or dance a waltz in the middle of the street, or bake a thousand cakes. Maybe I will smile at strangers. Maybe I will admit everything that shadow kept curled inside of me, and empty my ribcage of all of it’s insubstantial cargo. Maybe I will write it down, becoming lighter and lighter with every word until at last I am a hollow person, my bones honeycombed, my blood effervescent, my every hair curling like the legs of a brittle star, trying to fill itself with sun.

