

LITTLE IVORY FINGERS

by Sid Branca, 2010

(A young woman is standing behind a kitchen counter. Behind her are piles of clutter, cabinets stuffed full of miscellaneous objects. On the counter is a silver mixing bowl full of water, two glass jars, and a roll of black vinyl electrical tape.

While speaking the following section of text, she tapes one of the jars to her hand. Then she tapes the other jar to the other hand. She then tapes both her arms bent at the elbow. She takes pauses in the monologue to tear the tape with her teeth.)

I don't know how old I am. I'm small, barely taller than the sink I'm standing at, in the downstairs bathroom of my parents' house. My little brother isn't born yet, as far as I can tell. Resting on the sink is a doll that looks like a mermaid. If you hold her down under the water she changes color, pink to purple to blue. I am filling a glass jar up with water to put my mermaid in. The sound of the glass clanking against the porcelain is the sound of a ship at sea.

I'm not wearing a life vest. I'm on a sailboat in the bay. I am falling overboard into a group of jellyfish, getting stung and stung and stung while the adults lower themselves down into the water, their eyes wide.

It's remarkable, really, how quickly something can go from whole to broken.

There was an arc of smooth, round glass between my small hands, and then suddenly there were long, crystal splinters, terrible nailed fingers looking to lace themselves with mine.

My blood mixed with the water in swirls. The next thing I remember is a waiting room. My parents must have been there, they must have heard the scream I don't recall existing, they must have worried and comforted and driven to the doctor. But in my memories I am alone, the scar pulsing on the middle finger of my left hand.

(She takes a moment to appreciate the condition she has brought herself to. She tries to convince the audience to come up and put water in her cups. She tries to get water in the cups herself. She spits in the cups. Finally she sticks her head straight into the bowl of water and drinks from it like a dog. She comes up holding a necklace in her teeth; it is her mother's. She places it on the counter, and takes off the tape and cups during the following.)

If my mother were not married, her couch would have been empty these last ten, fifteen years. If babies did not need food, my mother would be sitting at a piano in a dimly-lit bar, her sticky heart all over the keys, grimed under her fingernails. Her voice would be wrapping itself around the foreheads of unmet men, seeping through door frames, leaving a trail of fresh-caught fish and deep-sea pearls in the dust of the hallway. If babies did not need doctors my mother would have crawled inside that piano's polished sides and lived there, whole unto herself. My mother's hands would be coated in ivory. For babies she boxed up those hands. But there are days when no one is in the living

room, or when no one is trying to sleep, when she plays beautifully.

(She comes out from behind the counter and begins to slow-dance with no-one. She begins to hum to herself. She begins to sing "Fa una canzona" by Orazio Vecchi.)

*Fa una canzona senza note nere
Se mai bramasti la mia grazia havere
Falla d'un tuonó ch'invita al dormire,
Dolcemente, dolcemente facendo la finire.*

(She comes out of a daze. She looks at the audience, embarrassed. She straightens herself up and returns behind the counter. She fishes around in the piles of stuff for a moment, and comes back with a large, tattered, old book held together with a rubber band. During this next section she sits on the counter, puts on the necklace, starts leafing through the book.)

My mother's bedroom has an east-facing window. She used to hang white sheets from the slanted ceiling around her bed and the light would pour through them. There were always too many objects in her small room, spilling out of the closet, covering the dresser, stuffed into all the strangely angled corners. I remember being a small child-- her bed was huge, a ship with giant billowing sails-- and going into her room alone to explore. There were beautiful old pieces of jewelry, tear-drops of moonstone wrapped in aging wires, resting on silk scarves. And there were books. Dozens of them, all over the house, paperbacks from my mother's youth. The smell of old paper has always comforted me.

My favorite book was falling apart, held together with a rubber band, loose pages stuffed into it. In a book like this, when you do something kind for a stranger, an old woman or a giant snake, you aren't robbed, or bitten, or rendered slowly bitter, dried out and desperate. No. You get blessed. You cry tears of silver and pearl. Golden pomegranate seeds fall from your hair. You plunge your hungry hands into a basin of water and they come up filled with wriggling, fresh-caught fish. You never starve. And even when you find yourself blind, your hands cut off, carrying your children through the dark woods, you know that there will be justice. You know that you will be healed. Jealous sisters and evil queens will be punished. Fruit-bearing trees will lean down to you, let you pluck their apples with your bared teeth. And a day will come when you are forced to plunge your helpless arms into freezing water to save your children, and all your gifts will be returned to you.

My mother is writing her memoirs now, stories that are old but passionate, and I picture her like Lavinia, holding a twig between her stumps and scratching names in the dirt. I see myself as a baby, foundering in the water. I see myself as an old woman, standing on the banks, urging our heroine on. "I cannot save them," Lavinia says. "Plunge your stumps into the water," I say. I am an infant in the water, caterwauling. Everyone is waiting, we are holding our breath.

(A long pause. Then she opens to a section of the book, and begins to read. "The Happy Man's Shirt" from Italo Calvino's collection of Italian Folktales, from the Harcourt English translation of 1980.)

A king had an only son that he thought the world of. But this prince was always unhappy. He would spend days on end at his window staring into space.

"What on earth do you lack?" asked the king. "What's wrong with you?"

"I don't even know myself, Father."

"Are you in love? If there's a particular girl you fancy, yell me, and I'll arrange for you to marry her, no matter whether she's the daughter of the most powerful king on earth or the poorest peasant girl alive!"

"No, Father, I'm not in love."

The king tried in every way imaginable to cheer him up, but theaters, balls, concerts, and singing were all useless, and day by day the rosy hue drained from the prince's face.

The king issued a decree, and from every corner of the earth came the most learned philosophers, doctors, and professors. The king showed them the prince and asked for their advice. The wise men withdrew to think, then return to the king. "Majesty, we have given the matter close thought and we have studied the stars. Here's what you must do. Look for a happy man, a man who's happy through and through, and exchange your son's shirt for his."

That same day the king sent ambassadors to all parts of the world in search of the happy man.

A priest was taken to the king. "Are you happy?" asked the king.

"Yes, indeed, Majesty."

"Fine. How would you like to be my bishop?"

"Oh, Majesty, if only it were so!"

"Away with you! Get out of my sight! I'm seeking a man who's happy just as he is, not one who's trying to better his lot."

Thus the search resumed, and before long the king was told about a neighboring king, who everybody said was a truly happy man. He had a wife as good as she was beautiful and a whole slew of children. He had conquered all his enemies, and his country was at peace. Again hopeful, the king immediately sent ambassadors to him to ask for his shirt.

The neighboring king received the ambassadors and said, "Yes, indeed, I have everything anybody could possibly want. But at the same time I worry because I'll have to die one day and leave it all. I can't sleep at night for worrying about that!" The ambassadors thought it wiser to go home without this man's shirt.

At his wit's end, the king went hunting. He fired at a hare but only wounded it, and the hare scampered away on three legs. The king pursued it, leaving the hunting party far behind him. Out in the open field he heard a man singing a refrain.

The king stopped in his tracks. "Whoever sings like that is bound to be happy!" The song lead him into a vineyard, where he found a young man singing and pruning the vines.

"Good day, Majesty," said the youth. "So early and already out in the country?"

"Bless you! Would you like me to take you to the capital? You will be my friend."

"Much obliged, Majesty, but I wouldn't even consider it. I wouldn't even change places with the Pope."

"Why not? Such a fine young man like you..."

"No, no, I tell you. I'm content with just what I have and want nothing more."

"A happy man at last!" thought the king. "Listen, young man. Do me a favor."

"With all my heart, Majesty, if I can."

"Wait just a minute, said the king, who, unable to contain his any longer, ran to get his retinue. "Come with me! My son is saved! My son is saved!" And he took them to the young man. "My dear lad," he began, "I'll give you whatever you want! But give me... give me..."

"What, Majesty?"

"My son is dying! Only you can save him. Come here!"

The king grabbed him and started unbuttoning the youth's jacket. All of a sudden he stopped, and his arms fell to his sides.

The happy man wore no shirt.

(She closes the book.)

That one has always been my favorite. It was published in the New Yorker when the translation first came out, and my mother read it over a glass of wine in her tiny New York apartment years before I was born.

(She invites an audience member or two to sit up with her and drink jars of wine. They chit-chat, they slow dance to kitschy Italian American music, and eventually she invites them to return to their seats.)

In a back upstairs room of the Bibliotheque Polonais in Paris, there is a plaster cast of one of Frederyk Chopin's hands. We shuffled into the room, a dead-end afterthought to the life of Adam Mickiewicz, national poet of both Poland and Lithuania, despite a life lived mainly in Paris. Herbs from his grave surround his death mask under glass, housemate to Chopin's.

Their faces look loose, sloppy, mouths falling open, infinitely old and inarticulate. But that hand. That hand. It looks like it could come alive at any moment, crawl up your body and suck your blood through its white fingernails. It is a small hand, like a child's.

Walk from the Bibliotheque past Notre Dame, at night. It's not far. In my journal I wrote that I felt the other side, the less famous, the less photographed side of Notre Dame was far more beautiful. I can't remember what it looks like.

Across from Notre Dame there is a large old building with a sign reading Hotel Dieu-- Hotel of God. It is a hospital. When my mother came down with a case of amnesia she stayed there for a night.

My father called me from their hotel. Imagine his Oklahoma accent and his hatred of telephones. "Samantha," he said, "I think your mother's had a stroke." For the life of me, I don't know why I didn't take a cab. Sprinting in a panic from one train to another through the station at Chatelet, the idea did not occur to me. The first thing I saw when I arrived was my younger brother, standing on the sidewalk beside the ambulance, tears in his eyes. He had the chicken pox for the second time, and had just failed 8th grade French.

I spent the next few hours translating between my delirious mother, who could make no new memories, and a number of charming but frustrated French nurses.

Un AVC-- un accident vasculaire cérébral-- is a stroke. This is not what happened. L'ictus amnésique is transient global amnesia. While able to recall their own name, recognize their loved ones, tell you the year or the President, the patient can make no new memories. My mother's mind was an insect in amber: forever hanging up the phone with my father, forever sitting on the bed to look out the window, forever about to speak to my brother in the other room.

And this sometimes just happens.

I was horrified. I had been taught not to believe in the events of soap operas. How could I behave like a rational human being in a world where people can, out of nowhere, lose the ability to remember anything new? If this could happen, then I could be the secret heiress to some esoteric throne. Or pregnant. Or dead. She snapped out of it in the middle of a spinal tap. The euphoric woman with a mind like an etch-a-sketch was replaced by the full onslaught of fury that can only come from an Italian woman raised in the Tri-State area.

The next day my brother stayed with her at God's Hotel while my father and I walked back to their place in le Marais to get some of my mother's things. We walked along Rue du Temple, admiring beautiful handbags in shop windows and the beautiful women admiring the beautiful handbags. My father shot footage of a miniature greyhound in a leather jacket, and I told him about my travels of the weeks prior. Never in my life could I remember

seeing him sober, in a strange city, so relaxed. I realized then, on that walk, what he must have been like as a young man, how my mother could have loved him. It was on another of these walks that my brother suggested that we stop to buy my mother a balloon in the shape of a heart. Parallel narcissists, it took a 14 year-old boy to shake us to compassion.

(A long pause, and then a shift in music. Lo-fi guitars. Text spoken in a whisper amplified by a megaphone while slowly, slowly, slowly traversing the room, navigating around chairs and other obstacles.)

I had a dream about you last night. You. We were walking through a field of tomatoes and corn and kept reaching our hands into the rustling sounds of vegetation and bringing bits of red and gold to our lips. You asked me about the bruises on my knees, and I said I didn't remember. You asked me about the scar on my left hand, and I said I didn't remember.

We take an elevator to the roof of a tall building. I am convinced you are the devil. My entire family is there, loud music is playing, the boys are all dancing and hitting each other. My grandfather, my mother's father, is menacing my brother with a bread knife. My grandfather always ate the heel of the bread; he said it made his teeth strong. He turns to me and there is a knife in my hand too. Both ends are sharp, my hands are bleeding. We fight. I want to draw blood. I feel no malice, but an absolute need to prove myself. There is a pause. He looks me in the eyes and speaks without speaking, with a voice I had not heard clearly since early childhood, "most of us have given up on being fucked or forgiven."

The sensation of waking up is like the sound of batteries hitting the bathroom floor, the shower running, the smell of fake strawberries all around. I wake up convinced that all my hair has fallen out. That everyone is dead. That I'm in my parents' house and my mother is making Earl Grey because she knows that, no matter what happens, I will be angry and she will offer me black tea. I wake up and don't know what city I am in. I don't know what the nearest body of water is, but I want to find it, I want to sink to the bottom of something deep and dark and stay there.

Somewhere in time I am four years old, huddled in the darkness of a sweat lodge made of young trees and animal skins. Someone is chanting, and water hisses over the stones.

Somewhere in time my great-great-grandfather, Vinnie, is trapped in a coal mine in Pennsylvania. His wife, Catherine, is waiting at home. The Antico kids are running around the yard. He does not come home. He does not come home. He is in the belly of the earth, in the heat and in the dark.

I am sitting on the floor of a swimming pool in Easthampton. I am jumping in without a life vest. I am taking a piss in the Long Island Sound. I am standing at the shore of Lake Michigan in winter, blocks of concrete covered in ice.

On a train late at night I looked over a stranger's shoulder and read what he had written.

"It goes without saying," it said, "that this debate over memory is fruitless."

(She exits.)

(END)