

king worm

Daniel Shoultz

Glendale Community College

Third Place, Short Story

GOD I HATE PUDDING, tapioca, fudge, and vanilla. Almost as much as I hate white walls and toxic psychiatry and the broken birds who sing the saddest songs. I'm not crazy...I'm not crazy...I'm not crazy. Three times, three times is good but four is always better. I'm not crazy.

Scrub the floor now. Small toothbrush, perfect for the job, every inch, every speck. The grout is always brown cause germs have cities there, filthy dangerous cities. Scrub them harshly, every bristle an atom bomb, every fleck of spittle a holocaust.

The world needs order. Three inches of grout, ten million germs, two hundred scrubs. Three inches of grout, ten million germs, two hundred scrubs. Three inches of grout, ten million germs, two hundred scrubs. One...two...three...four. The Dirty Thought always lurks, a murmur only ritual can kill. Fifty-seven tiles done one hundred and thirty nine to go.

Anne where have you gone? My hand slows for a fraction of a second and darkness creeps like thick fog. Damn germs, damn dirty tricks. A strange knife stabs a tender breast...once...twice...three times. Pale perfect skin punctured savagely with vicious brutality, Auburn hair obscenely alive, "Is this your wife, Mr. Owens," mangled face, dead ice chip eyes like two puddles of jelly, cold sterile room, harsh light reflecting off polished metal. "Is this your wife, Mr. Owens?" Is this your wife, Tom? Is this your Anne, Mr. Owens? I miss you baby, but your not gone are you? No you're right here. Fucking germs, they get into everything, must keep cleaning.

I can feel them crawling on my eyebrows again but that's impossible, I pulled the last of them out two weeks seven hours and thirty minutes ago, there were three hundred and fifty eight of them, all dirty. I wish I had a knife, or better yet my mother.

Footsteps in the hall, twenty-one from desk to door. Tick-tock says the clock forty-five plus ten times. I'm fascinated by the perpetual energy of the second hand as it arcs its inevitable path through the bigger lazier hands. Nazis and their stupid questions, "How does that make you feel, Tom?" They always ask. "Why don't you just give me the purple pill and get the fuck out of my face." I always answer.

Purple Pills are Nazi poison, but I'm Tom The Magician, never catch me swallowing that shit. Twenty-five days, three pills a day, seventy-five doses of poison. Thirty in a hole I made in my mattress and forty-five hidden behind the air-conditioner vent. Tom's a clever nut. "You see Thomas, this is what we call Palming. The best magic is the easiest. People want to believe what their eyes tell them, not what's true. Always remember, misdirection and presentation." Thanks, Uncle Joe, I always knew my eyes were full of shit.

Knock...knock...knock. Only three times but better than two. If only they have the pretense of respect I can accept that. "Come in," I say not meaning it. The door opens casting clinical hospital fluorescence across my tiny cell of a room, and just for a second, I see King Dirty chuckle threateningly in his brown grout palace. "I'll get you one of these days," I say, shaking my toothbrush like a gun.

"Who are you talking to Tom," says Dr. Sanchez "Is the King back?" She walks in and plops herself down on a small wooden backed chair. God she is beautiful. Long dark brown hair that smells like flowers and soap, pink freshly scrubbed skin, healthy chocolate brown eyes, she's so clean I could marry her.

"So what if he is Doc," I Palm my mangled Toothbrush and using my vanishing trick I slap my hands together and slip it up my sleeve. Now come the prodding and the questions and the dark thoughts. "You here to fix me? Or do you just want to point your finger and study me like some kinda fuckin' rat?" I rub my eyes with the backs of my hands. Thirty-two hours since The Dirty Dream, I must not sleep yet. I want to touch her skin; it's the loveliest thing in this filthy place. She is the best Nazi. Maybe she isn't one, maybe she is really my friend, yeah, and maybe I'm the Queen of England. I crawl over to the Westside of Groutland and put my back in the corner hugging my knees to my chest. "What do you want Sanchez?" I say, exhausted and scared.

She claps her slender, flawless hands together softly and smiles sadly. "I always like it when you do one of your tricks Tom. How are you feeling?" She pulls a blue pen out of the breast pocket of her white doctors coat and prepares to take notes on a small clipboard she's brought with her. "Scale of one to ten?" She asks pleasantly.

"Eleven, Doc," I begin to rock slightly "I feel peachy keen, top of the world, like a million bucks." I say and smile from ear to ear. "Hey, do you think if I wasn't in the Puzzle Factory I could get your phone number?" I can feel tile on my bare feet and through the thin fabric of my worn pajamas. I try not to sit on the grout.

She smiles and it makes me want to cry. "There is something I need to discuss with you Tom, but first I want you to understand that this was not our decision. If you would like me to come back later when you are calmer I wou..."

"Just spit it out, Doc. I really don't have time for the psychological shit right now. Ok?" Fear begins to gnaw at my guts as the tiles of my room begin to move almost imperceptibly.

Neatly plucked eyebrows arch in concern as a red tongue slips between perfectly white teeth and moistens crimson lips nervously. "Your sister has decided to end your stay with us." She says and crosses her pretty legs. "She says she can't afford it any longer and that you are to be sent to the State Ward."

I can feel the world begin to slip and bend in that horrible and chaotic way. The Worms are coming for me fast and furious. The Grout begins to split and writhe, tilting and whirling, regardless of physics. "No, you can't do this," I latch onto her navy blue pant leg, her pants smell of fabric softener and laundry soap, neatly pressed and perfectly creased. "We were making progress Doc, I could feel it. Please let me stay. I promise whatever I did to make you angry I wont do it again. I can't go out there...please..."

I can see a tear welling up in one of her big brown eyes, "I'm sorry Tom. It's out of my hands. For what it's worth I think you have an excellent prognosis." She strokes my shaved head, trying to comfort me, not knowing the demons are on their way.

I cling to her leg like a drunk clinging to a toilet bowl. I wish my mother were here she would put the world in time out. Mother's love is a blanket, a suit of armor, a place to

sleep. Margaret The Terrible is coming to take me away; Margaret The Stingy is trying to kill me because life is too expensive. A wave of cold air strikes my back sending shivers of fear rippling through my soul. "Please...please...please..." I'm sobbing now with my blood shot eyes closed tight and buried deep in the rough sterile fabric of her pants. I can hear the King laughing again only this time it sounds like Anne. "You'd better call Big Ben. It's going to be real bad this time," I whisper hoarsely. One...two...three.

TWO DAYS LATER: "I'm the man in the box. Stirring in my shit. Won't you come and save me. Save me," I sing. I think I've been singing this for at least ten hours. I know for a fact that I've repeated this chorus two thousand four hundred and seventy three times. However long it takes to do that. Demerol has a way of playing fast and loose with time. I can feel the leather straps around my arms and legs and am immensely comforted by it. This room is even smaller than mine and everything is soft.

It is a cool soothing blue color slightly faded. Both the walls and the floor are this color, while the bed I am strapped to is gray and oddly mundane except for the cushioned leather straps, which of course are brown and smell like a new car. The light is dim but bright enough to banish all shadows, a fact that I am extremely grateful for. The whole place is very soothing; I wish I could stay here forever.

Except for the dreams that come like fevers. Faces crushed against the minds eye like bugs on a windshield, and always a growing sense of wrongness. My stomach knows and King, well, that fucker knows everything. How could Mom let the Ice Princess take me away? I just talked to her five minutes ago, or maybe it was five days ago, either way she said she loved me. Where is my Toothbrush...I need it...I need it...I need it. One...two...three...four.

"Tom, are you awake?" says a voice in the mist.

"No, go away please." I say to no one in particular. "It's time to get up. You have a visitor."

"That's nice but I'm crazy," I say, knowing that this should explain everything. "Come on, Tom. You're not crazy, just eccentric. You have to get up your sister wants to see you."

Vague memories hover beneath my eyelids like vultures waiting for the right moment to strike, but for now the stomach aches and the Worms are silent specters. It feels good to be pissed instead of scared. I don't even look at the grout once as I stride to do battle with my selfish bitch of a sister. The meeting room is clean and empty. Today is Sunday, July 15th, it is three thirty in the afternoon. There are four circular wooden tables in the large airy room. They are approximately five feet apart and five feet in diameter, very neat. Around each table there are four chairs made out of the same orange plastic that adorns classrooms everywhere. In one of these chairs sits a frigid ice cube of a woman, my fucking sister.

She is all angles and scowls. Her face is forever pursed like she is sucking on a piece of lemon. Frightfully thin, she looks like a suited triangle. Tightly coiled black hair, and cold blue eyes like polished diamonds. She smells of mouthwash and cheap perfume. Money had long ago killed the woman she could have been. "Hello Margaret," I say, purposefully scraping a chair away from the table and slouching into it.

"Hello Thomas," she says, frowning and obviously staring at my naked eyebrows "you look good." She folds her skeletal hands together and places them carefully on the table in front of her.

"Do I? I think I look fucking nuts but thanks anyways."

"Would you mind not cursing like a common thug. Your too educated for that."

"I'm crazy, remember? I can talk any goddamn way I please. Now, why don't you tell me exactly what it is you want little sister. Then you can go back to being the Ice Princess and I can go back to being Crazy Tom. Whadda you say?"

"Fine," she says, and pulls out a small brief case she has concealed under the table, "I want you to sign these papers authorizing your release to the State Ward."

"I'm not going to do that." I prop my feet up on the table and lean back in my chair.

She looks at my feet then glares at me hatefully. "I can force you to go. There is not a court in the land that would find you competent. I can get power of attorney and then I don't need you to sign."

"Is that a threat, Margaret? I think you would be quite surprised by my periodic moments of lucidity. Like right now for example. You and I both know that even as crazy as I am, I'm still smarter than you. You may have lost respect for me little sister but don't ever make the mistake of thinking I'm defenseless." I smile at her calmly. God I feel good. Total control, I know exactly what I'm doing. That old feeling of strength was coming back again, washing away the uncertainties and firmly rooting me to here and now.

She scowls even harder and I can tell she wants to slap my feet off the table but is too scared to try it. "I have already arranged it You are to be transferred tomorrow at seven in the morning," she says and starts shoving papers back into her brief case. "By the way Mother is dead, goodbye Thomas." She walks out of the room briskly without looking back.

THAT NIGHT: "How? How did she die?" Scrubbing...scrubbing...scrubbing. Stop shaking. I know they're here, on the floor, in the walls, UNDER MY FUCKING SKIN. Don't scream, they'll put me back on the Demerol, don't scream cause the only ones who cared are dead, don't scream cause if I do I won't ever stop. I want to claw my eyes out I want to peel my skin off and boil it. Everything is so terribly disgusting. "You are my Sunshine my only Sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray, you'll never know dear how much I love you, so please don't take my Sunshine away." You have to come back and sing to me again, Mom.

I'm on suicide watch tonight for the first time in the last six months and twelve days. Big Ben is standing outside my door looking in approximately every fifteen minutes; actually, it's been seventeen minutes and forty-two seconds since the last checkup. They think I'm gonna kill myself but that's stupid because I'm already dead. Now I just want to lie down next to Anne, and we can become nothing together. Maybe my Mom will be there with her, and King Worm, and we can all sit down at a grand table like civilized creatures, and I can do magic tricks for them. My Mom loves my tricks and Anne always laughs and says, "That's my Houdini. How's about makin' some money appear, oh Great and Powerful Wizard." Oh God do I miss her. Oh God do I miss her...Oh god!

"Tom?" Footsteps...heel toe...heel toe...heel toe, a woman because it's too loud for a man, Sanchez because she thinks she cares. "Tom, I've requested that your room be searched. I have seen your tricks, and we just want to make sure you don't have anything rash planned, OK?" She just shaved her legs today. I can smell the faint odor of some feminine shave gel and her legs are smooth and shiny beneath her chocolate colored knee-length skirt.

Play it cool, Tom. Don't scream. Focus on the damn germs, whoever has this room tomorrow, will thank me. "Go ahead Doc, hey and when your finished maybe I could take you down the street and buy you a cup of Coffee." Har...har...har.

"You're such a little flirt," she smiles and instructs Big Ben to search the room, "Is there anything you want to talk to me about Tom?"

I want to tell her that monsters are real. I want to tell her that she's beautiful and smart and that she should find a new career. Mostly I want to tell her that I'm sorry, all my reasons have been used up, and it's time for me to go. I look at her now and I see once and for all that I was wrong; she's an angel not a torturer. Swallowing the lump that has snuck into my throat I say, "I'm sorry that I've been such an ass to you. I promise I won't be ever again." I smile and wink as a tear slips its way down my cheek.

"Don't be silly, Tom. In a few weeks you'll be back to your same ol' antics and I'll be back to pretending I'm annoyed," she hugs herself against the chill of the air conditioner and taps her foot worriedly, "then we can get back to the business of helping you."

I hear what she's saying but it sounds like she's a great distance from me, as though were standing on opposite ends of a vast tunnel. Just keep scrubbing for fucks sake. One...two...three...four.

"Doc, I think you'd better have a look at this," Ben has my mattress flipped over and he's holding out a handful of purple sleep, "Had 'em buried in his mattress," he says proudly. He scoops the rest of them out and spends twenty seconds counting to thirty. "Looks like thirty of 'em Doc."

"I'm not mad at you and I'm not going to put you in restraints but you have to swear to me that you won't make me regret it. Promise me, OK?" She kneels down and looks me in the eye. Sweet minty breath brushes warmly across my face and a faint odor of vanilla clings to her skin.

"I promise." Is all I can manage to choke out. I'm a terrible prick but a great Magician. I'm about to make myself disappear. Shit...I want to scratch so bad I'm trembling.

"Come on Ben lets get him a new mattress from 103, it's empty now." She's wearing her hair in a tight bun today. It looks great. "We'll be right back, OK? Then you and I are going to have a nice long talk."

"It's a date," I smile and it feels like a scream, "I'm just gonna finish cleaning." Scrubbing...scrubbing...scrubbing. "Misdirection and Presentation," I say after they have gone. One...two...three...four...five.

