

FICTION

ANTHONY DE SA

Reason to Blame

“YOU ... UGLY GIRL,” HE roars as he stumbles in.

I hear him from my bedroom. I jackknife my body, pivot, then swing my pink stump that ends just below the knee, from under the covers. My good leg dangles over the edge of the bed. I reach for my wooden leg, the one I have already outgrown, that rests on the floor next to my chamber pot. My hands blur as they weave the leather straps and secure the metal brace to my thigh—the moulded cup meets the hardened flesh where my leg should have been.

I meet him at the front door. He loses his balance and holds onto the wall. It's not enough. Like always, I'm there to direct the running fall toward his bedroom where he flops onto his bed. I grab his coat and knead him like dough before the momentum has built to flip him over onto his back. He smells: beer, stale piss, the spice of tobacco in damp wool, the comfort of chicken pot-pie, traces of which are still evident on his stubbly chin and cardigan. I take off his shoes and threadbare socks before hoisting his legs up onto his mattress and pulling the covers under his chin. There is sadness in his eyes—maybe it's loss or confusion—I'm not quite sure which. He can't look at me for very long. His eyes always glaze over, shift above my forehead to meet the cracks in the ceiling that spread like tangled roots. He traces them with his eyes. Some creep down his bedroom walls where they taper and disappear under the wooden floor.

“Tank ... da Lord you'm won't be runnin away like ...” He cups my face with his big hand and brushes my lips with his sausage-like thumb. “... you're me ... me sweet ugly girl. With a wooden leg ta boot.”

He smiles when he whispers these words, breathes out his judgment—his comfort. His body now relaxes, his weight moulding itself to the mattress as he sinks into a drunken sleep, mouth wide open. I can smell metal rising from his insides.

I turn the taps on in the kitchen before returning to my few remaining hours of warm sleep. The gush of water splatters against the cement basin. *Why does he do this to himself... to me?* I find the empty Javex bottle under the sink. It's the duty I resent the most. I grab the wooden spatula, hidden in the cabinet under the sink and kneel before his sleeping lump. I pull back the covers and undo his zipper and close my eyes. With the spatula, I fish for his small penis, untangle it from its nest of pubic hair, and direct it into the neck of the jug. *I can do this part with my eyes closed. Isn't that something that children taunt?* A good couple of taps on the hollow plastic jug always wakes him just enough to hear the running water. It's all that's needed—the hot cloudy pee trickles, then gurgles into the bottle.

I was seven when my mother left us. I don't know why she left. At first I thought it was me, or more her disappointment in giving birth to me—did my *imperfection* have anything to do with her leaving? Was it all too much for her? Growing up I wanted to know—I wanted a reason to blame. Father never made much sense when he tried to explain. And in his lame drunken attempts, deep down I knew *he* was that reason.

I don't know how it was that my mother found herself plucked from teaching English at St. Mary's High School in St. John's and dropped into "this barren heath"; that's what she called the place where we lived that had no name; it was too far from Trinity to be called anything. But this was the place where she gave birth to me, alone. And as the years passed I began to notice the sadness in her eyes. Maybe she wanted a reason to blame also. I still don't know. But, whatever father tried to do to reassure her was never enough and I too began to notice that whenever he spoke to her, or tried to change his tone to please her, a soothing everything-will-be-okay tone, his eyes darted with fear.

Every night I'd go to sleep and try to remember what it was like: the yearly trip on my birthday to St. John's to be fitted for a new leg, Ma's cooking smells, the hours she spent teaching me to read, "education is freedom," she'd say, the sheltie she had left behind called Lear, the feel of pearls around my neck. My mother had bought the strand of almost-pink pearls at Kresge's in Toronto—that's what the box said. She sent them to me on my tenth birthday along with a note:

Dear Pepsi,

Please don't be angry. I just couldn't any longer. I needed to breathe.

It wasn't even signed and it was all she ever sent me. I don't even know what my mother's signature looks like but I'm certain her "L" for Linda is looped both on the top and bottom, big loops.

Now, the house smells of suffocating damp—of mould and yellowing mildew, sorry attempts at stews, and charred meat.

Shortly after receiving my pearls, Lear didn't see where father had thrown the stick or where it had landed. He ran then disappeared over the cliff. One echoing yelp moved in echoing ripples across the ocean air. I ran to the edge but stopped and saw his body smashed and crooked against the shore rocks.

When I turned sixteen I made a trip to St. John's. I brought my pearls with me, stupidly hoping to sell them. I thought I could get enough money to get my hair done at a salon and maybe buy a pretty dress. The lady at the pawnshop sat there in her stool behind the counter looking up at a small black and white television. She saw me from the corner of her eye and pretended not to notice but then, with an irritated reluctance gave a pathetic sigh. I laid the pearls gently on top of the glass display. She bit one of the pearls with her greying teeth and showed me its plastic core, dropped the string of pearls back on the counter, clickety-click, all the while looking up at her television and resumed tapping her fingers on the glass counter to the singing sensation "our pet" Juliette on "The Juliette Show" which aired every Saturday night. She had her beautiful voice and perky smile. I brushed my oily thin hair with my hands, bunched the miserable wisps behind my head and held them tightly in place with a red elastic band. I snatched the pearls from her bird-like tapping claws, clasped the strand around my neck and limped out.

The lady had made a mistake. They were real. My mother gave them to me



Life continued to humiliate me.

I prayed during that stormy bus ride home; prayed to all the saints in heaven. "Please Jesus, give me a new leg—flesh and bone." I always waited at this point. I'd look down to see if I could feel the tingling growth, because that's how I imagined it, a ticklish tingling.

"Dear Lord, please give me a man—a family to take care of. And Lord, help me father, he doesn't know how to be."

That very next morning my prayers were finally answered. Like every other day, I went down to the shore to meet my father. When I saw him rowing in toward the shallows, I saw that he'd brought me a gift richer than a new leg or real pearls—he brought me Manuel. I remember looking up

to that pale sky that always visits after a storm—I looked up at the heavens and gave Him thanks.

He was so weak. His eyelids fluttered when I lifted his head to give him some water. It dribbled down the corners of his mouth, trickled down his chin and neck. I liked when this happened. I liked taking care of him. I liked to feed him, to comb his fine blond hair when he slept, to slip father's best socks onto his long white feet. I enjoyed laying the hot towel on top of his face; letting his pores open and his stubble soften, before carefully shaving in the direction of his growth. He always opened his eyes for this—those cool blue eyes.

“Ssshhhhh. It'll be all right. Pepsi's here. Shhhhhh.”

I can't do that any longer. Now strong, he is aware of what has happened, what he has lost. I can no longer look at him as he sleeps. I miss tracing his features with my fingers: his eyebrows, the paper-thin skin of his eyelids, the bridge of his nose, his plump lips. There was an excitement in daring to flutter my lips over his as he slept.

“Plucked outta da water, me boy.”

My father says this all the time, making himself into a hero, bigger than he could ever be. Manuel always smiles at this, his beautiful smile. He is pleased to have been spared and thankful to my father for being there and pulling him up from the depths. I too look to my father with warm thanks.

Manuel's growing strength allows him to help around the house: chopping firewood, preparing food, and even cleaning the small cabin. He is very good at helping father skin the animals that he has hunted and trapped: deer and wolves. Manuel has even made the job easier by driving some large rusty hooks into the trunk of the old maple out back. He ties the legs of the dead animal together with rope and hoists the carcass onto a hook. The animal's body stretches and drapes toward the ground before Manuel's sharp knife cuts into its flesh, thinly separating the hide from that milky membrane that encases the meat. I gaze out the window to see him work. Every so often he looks at the window, he tries to catch me looking at him. Over the years, I've developed good reflexes, the ability to sense when someone is staring, leering at me with questions and judgments swirling in their heads. I always turn away in time and won't let him enjoy the effect he has on me. But all this is not lost on my father.

“You'm better watch yourself, young lady,” he says as I hold my stare out the kitchen window; my father wants me to look at him.

“Dat man's not for ya. He's a good strong man—needs a good woman ta make him a life.”

“He’s for me Da. I prayed for him. He’s de answer,” I whisper.

I don’t know if it is fear that I see in my father’s eyes or mocking disbelief.

“You stupid girl ... dair is no answer.” He shakes his head as he walks out the front door.

His words flame up through my head. I don’t know exactly how I feel—boxed in, trapped, unable to breathe.

Is this how she felt?

Manuel comes in to wash his bloodied hands. Duty takes over. I get close to him and help him scrub his hands. I don’t look at him, I can’t. As he lets me scour his hands with a brush, my father’s words wash away with the blood and grime. They swirl in the basin and lose themselves in the drain. He lets me clean under his nails. I sense him looking at me as he tries to smell my hair, moves closer to my body’s warmth. He doesn’t seem to care about my crooked leg. I know. These thoughts seem to also get washed down the pipes, cleansed. At this stolen moment, I am certain Manuel is my beginning.



It has been over a month now and Manuel is complaining about feeling pain in his back.

“I no tink I go, Androo,” Manuel says.

I trip over my own leg clearing the table. They both look at me.

“Well ... guess ya should rest up a while longer.” He is speaking to Manuel but follows me with his eyes, tries to lock his eyes with mine, to warn me.

I go into my room, try to choke the butterflies. I feel like I’m going to be sick. My father pauses outside my bedroom window. I busy myself with folding the laundry, never looking out at him. His shadow moves away on its long walk to Trinity, via crooked roads, toward his favourite pub.

It isn’t long before I hear the rap on my door and the muffled call, “Pepsi?”

I love the way he says it, the way my name sounds through the door. I wait for him to call me again.

“Pepsi,” he says louder.

“Come in,” and as quickly as the words roll off my tongue, I want to grab at the floating letters and shove them back safely into my mouth.

“Pepsi, hurt?” as he walks in.

I know he is speaking of my leg, the mortar that is now too big for a brace made for a fourteen-year-old. He has caught me rubbing ointment around my hardened stump. I quickly place it into its moulded cup as if ready for the next day's pounding and grinding. I move the blanket over my leg. I am caught looking into his eyes and I notice that he has moved next to me. His hand is lost under the blanket, working its way along my leg, touching my brace—a tangling of warm wood and cold metal. I get tense. He doesn't flinch, just looks at me with pleading eyes. He continues to drag the back of his hand down over the wooden shin. Then his hand flips over and his fingertips continue up my leg, traversing the stainless steel bridgework, up, up toward my hip. All the while he looks at me, holds me in his stare with a certainty. I close my eyes. I'm not frightened, but every part of my body comes alive, my senses so alive that I'm convinced I feel the touch of his fingers on my brace. I recoil.

"Manuel . . ."

He knows. He moves his hand down again and wedges his finger between the wooden leg and the worn stump and lets it nestle there. I tug the hem of my skirt, try to cover my shame. I fuss with my hair and stretch both sides of my sweater across my hips, hugging myself.

"It ain't ya, Manuel." I say.

There is no disappointment in his eyes. I leave him and try hard not to hobble out of the room. Once out, I knock my head against my own bedroom door and think of how stupid I must have looked for trying hard not to limp.

"I won't run away," I say to myself in a whisper and walk back into my room.



He asks me to mail the letters he has written, all postmarked to Sao Miguel, Açores. They are addressed to Maria Theresa da Conceição Rebelo. I know she is his mother. I wonder what she must be thinking now. I wonder if she knows; has she received word yet that he was lost at sea? A mother needs to know. I know this more than anyone but I hold on to them just until . . . I'm certain he loves me.

My father told me we had to keep quiet about this or they would send him to some farm in Ontario to work. I said nothing to no one, afraid he'd be sent away. I'd send the letters when I was certain he was stronger.

"Fishermen need ta live by da sea, don't dey Manuel?"

“Yes, Androo,” he says with his thick accent, and he smiles and nods.

I am prepared to do anything to keep him happy, as I know I only can. But as the days pass, my father notices how we look at each other as if in a world he is not invited. He keeps his eyes on me, watches my every move with his furrowed brow.



The day begins filled with the joy and promise that only Christmas can bring a family. I am up early to get everything done just right: the chicken is stuffed, the dough is pounded into plump balls and allowed to rise in the kitchen’s heat. I happily work with the visions of Manuel dancing in my head—not sugar plum fairies. I imagine I am in my own little house, not my father’s. Children are playing around the tinselled tree, a girl about six and a boy who looks like his father, three. They’re trying to peek at their presents. Manuel is outside making sure the animals are all fed and warm for the night. I’m cooking up a wonderful meal, stuffing and roast potatoes and making that cod dish that he was fond of as a boy—it reminds him of home. He walks in, throws his boy high into the air and catches the giggling copy of himself in his arms

“Pepsi!” Father’s gruff voice stabs my thoughts.

“Wher d’ya leave me pants?” shouting from his room.

“Day were reekin of screech, soiled to da grain. So I wash’d em.”

I look straight at him in the doorway of his bedroom, look at his skin that resembles the streaky redness of crabmeat. I have been growing bolder as the weeks pass, saying things I have always wanted to say, showing the strength I knew I had inside. Manuel walks in from his room, with his clean-shaven round face, pale blue eyes and close-mouthed smile. He turns away when he realizes he has walked into something. My eyes do not leave my father’s. I will not let him win. He can’t say anything for the longest time, just stares at me sharply. I turn my back to truss the bird, willing him to go away and leave me alone—leave us alone.

“Dat’s what it’s about, Manuel. Mark me words. Ya give dem every-tink day could ever ask for ... only to have em walk on ya like de dirt dey tink ya are.”

“Da, I didn’t”

“Don’t you ‘Da’ me. Respect!” he sputters. “It’s all I’ve ever asked of ya in dis house. Respect!” He struggles to put on his coat, then goes out and slams the front door.

If I have been getting bolder, my father has been getting shorter, more intolerant of the seedling taking root under his roof.

Manuel is now recklessly behind me, kissing my neck. He too has grown careless and bold. He slips his hand under the neckline of my dress, holds the weight of my smallish breasts in his hand and rubs my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. I close my eyes. All this I am learning to be comfortable with. When he turns my face to kiss me, I no longer feel awkward. When he touches me, all of me, my wooden leg turns to flesh—it feels his fingers and calloused hands.

“Manuel,” I plead, half-giggling, “let me finish.”

He knows I don't want him to stop. As I bend to open the oven door, he comes from behind, begins to rub himself against me. I half-expect it, welcome it. As I straighten myself I can feel his penis fitting snugly in the crook of my cheeks. I can feel the power of what I have done to him.

I feel Father is watching fragments, snippets of this scene through a keyhole or window. I imagine he is waiting for just the right moment before walking in on us. We have been growing purposely careless, hoping it will be easier to ease my father into an understanding of what has happened.

Father has been gone a long time. Christmas supper has been ready for a while now and I insist we sit. But Manuel says he will go look for him. It is already dark when they arrive. Both are drunk; Manuel drags my father over his shoulder like a bullfighter with his cape. They are well enough to eat as they drop into their chairs and pull themselves up to the table. Everything is cold, the candles have burned down to almost nothing. I think it's best to smooth things over by pretending nothing has happened.

“Da, will ya cut da bird?” I ask.

“Why don't ya ask da man of da house?” he slurs.

His words are filled with bitterness. I pretend not to let them hurt me. I am about to say something until Father breaks in:

“I have a gift for ya, Manuel.”

I twist my hair with my finger. My eyes dart around the room. *Something is not right. Father, please don't embarrass me; please don't do this to me.*

“Da”

“Shush!” He pounds the table with his knotted fist.

“Dis is still mc house ... and I want ta say sometng.”

He looks straight at me, narrows his eyes at me as if daring me to challenge.

“Manuel. We have taken ya in and treated ya like family.”

Manuel lowers his head.

“You well know no man coulduv dun more for ya. It’s time ya made plans.”

With these words he half stumbles towards the Christmas tree and falls to the floor. He clumsily searches for the gift he has for Manuel. He crawls back up to the table with his smug grin and the loosely wrapped gift. The present is wrapped in the brown paper used to wrap meat at the butcher’s. There are smeared traces of blood on the parchment, bound with a green elastic band.

He flings the packet across the table as he takes his seat.

“Tank you, Androo.” Manuel is unsure of the offering.

“I bless by you ... and Pepsi. Tank you.”

He begins to slowly unravel the package and in a split second, like the last thread that clings to an unravelling hem, the letters slip out of his hand and fan themselves on the table, some on his lap and the floor. I don’t understand until it comes to me, and then I can’t swallow. Manuel looks at me with a numb expression and holds up one of the letters, one of the many stowed in the box under my bed.

The room begins to spin; I see the grin on my father’s face, disappointment on Manuel’s, the perfectly browned chicken sitting in the middle of the set table. I get up from the table, then trip over my lifeless leg. I cannot look at them. I look at the kitchen door and drag myself the rest of the way into the dark mouth of my room. I sit with my back pushing my bedroom door shut, reach up to turn the lock, only to hear the din of Manuel’s silence over my father’s laughter.



My father and I don’t speak much, now that Manuel is gone. It isn’t until the end of January that we are settled into our familiar roles once again. But things are not the same.

“Pepsi love, I couldn’t lose ya.”

He wants me to look at him—to acknowledge that I understand his fear. I remain distant, walk into my room and close the door to the noises in my head. The noises never go away, they just scrape the bone and pinch the inside of my head like an army of ants with giant pincers digging into my brain, working and devouring at a dizzying pace. I want to run away, I want quiet.

Later that night I can see his figure piercing the darkness outside, then stumble and fall next to the large maple. No doubt he is drunk again. I wrap a black shawl over my head and around my shoulders. I trudge

through the crunch of snow as a mix of duty and strength and resolve take hold. My head is clearing in the crisp air, the ants fading away. But there is a heaviness across my chest. The cold air jams into my lungs and a sudden gust pushes the air further in until I feel I can't breathe. When I reach him I can feel energy surging through me, pumping through my veins. I lift him like a feather, as I somehow knew I could. I can see the bloodied bark of the maple where Manuel had skinned so many animals. I place my forehead against his wool coat, against his chest, and dig my crooked leg into the snow to buttress his weight. I look at his black-ringed eyes, his grizzled beard, the balls of snow clinging to his dark, unruly hair.

"Uggh ... uggh ... ugly girl," he manages to sputter.

I can smell his pee as I breathe in the cold winter air. Something washes over me and the decision is made in an instant. I am strong; strong enough to ram my head into his chest, forcing him into a backward stumble against the blood-stained bark and its welcoming hooks. There is a hollow thud. He does not make a sound. I stand back and see him through the puffs of smoke that I breathe out. His woollen jacket snags and tears as he slumps against the trunk. He slips down just enough before his sagging weight is caught and held by other hooks. His head lolls for a second or two, chin to his chest. I want him to look at me, to ask for forgiveness. He is too drunk to save himself. I just stand in the snow, breathing quietly. The noises in my head are gone and the howling wind is left. I turn from him and drag myself back into the warm house alone, bar the door from the storm and all things outside. I move to the kitchen sink and lean my weight on my elbow. I run my hands under warm water. I can see him through the window. Outside, the snow is settling over his hair, clumping inside the creases of his jacket. The white flakes continue to swirl and rest on him. Soon he will be covered—buried under a thick blanket of snow.