



ABC CLARION

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Summers in Ohio

by Nicole Cheng

Ohio summers are crazy, even for a place “in the middle of nowhere.” However, I never partook in any of this. Instead, my summers were rote, with seemingly exciting events that honestly, never did interest me. I went through the motions of “having fun” and making the most of my summer, but it didn’t make a difference. There was nothing really going on, and how could anything genuine exist during a summer in Ohio?

And this left me with no distractions from reality. I guess part of the reason things are like this is that my nana died a couple of summers ago, when I was six years old. I’m thirty-six now, and what pains me is that still, I have not told my story. No one knows what happened. None of my therapists understand why I had a breakdown. No one knows why I, a happy little child, ended up being institutionalized in a psych ward.

I’m not crazy. I’m not. I’m just grieving, like I have been for the past thirty years. When my nana passed, my parents didn’t even tell me. They didn’t think I could take it. Instead, they just pretended she never existed.

They thought I wouldn’t notice that we stopped making weekly trips to her house across town. They thought I was too young to realize, or that my frivolous, youthful mind would quickly dismiss my memories of my nana as simply remnants of my flying imagination.

But I knew. I knew that I was dropped off at my neighbor’s house for a day while my parents left the house dressed in black from head to toe because they were saying goodbye to Nana. They never let me bid her farewell. But I knew they didn’t want me to be in pain, and I didn’t want them to be in pain by seeing me grieve, especially after they tried so hard to shield me from it. So I pretended to be oblivious. I pretended not to hear my mother crying in her room and then quickly dry her tears when I walked into

her room.

So I went through my grieving process as a six-year-old alone. Alone. And that leaves scars you wouldn’t imagine. I guess that’s what I get for being too selfless, that by taking on the challenge of hiding my knowledge of the situation would save my parents the trouble of babying me. I was in over my head. I took on more than I could handle. But by the time I had realized, it was too late. There was no turning back.

Ohio. I blame it on Ohio. I didn’t have an escape. Word travels fast in a place like this, so I couldn’t confide in anyone. I was swallowed in my own thoughts; I

was consumed by the darkness that was growing in me. I learned how to put on a facade of the norm and pretend that everything was great. And I did this for so long that I began to actually believe that this was normal -- that this misery was somehow great. Of course, these small-town, giddy people around me were too naive to question my happiness, because there was apparently nothing for me to be unhappy about.

I grew up with too much weight on my shoulders. I thought I could be a martyr and “sacrifice” myself. But I later recognized that this helped absolutely nothing and no one. I

thought I would help my family, by not burdening them with my emotional issues, but in the end, my parents had to support me through decades of institutional care and attention.

I guess what I need to get across is the fact that the depression that I had gone through during my early years was not just a phase. It was not me thirsting for attention. It was me breaking down after hiding it for so much of my youth. Every doctor and professional was looking for the wrong things when I was examined. I am not psychotic. I am not a sociopath. I am sad.

They wonder why I am not improving. They think I can’t

hear them behind the thin walls while they talk about me outside of my ward room. You’re treating me for the wrong things. The medicine they give me to calm my anxiety just makes me lethargic and apathetic. On days when they increase my doses, I have trouble distinguishing reality and the concoctions of my buzzed brain.

And after three decades, I am exactly where I was when I was six years old, sitting in my bed, staring out the window at the barren, funereal atmosphere of the Ohioan summer. I was destined for more, but instead, here I am: stuck, and apparently, insane.

Down in the Dumps

by Alena Zhang

The street light cast a yellow sheen behind Bert’s apartment building, magnifying the shadows of the fruit flies that hovered aimlessly in the air. He strolled toward the end of the alleyway, swatting them away with a tense hand and lugging a garbage bag in his other. Underneath the fluorescence, his skin looked even more orange than usual.

Plastic wrappers rustled faintly nearby, and squinting in the dim night, Bert anxiously scanned the black asphalt for the scurries of a rat. There was no movement in sight. It couldn’t have been another person - no one else in the neighborhood would be out this late. Yet the sounds of crunching continued to crackle in Bert’s ears. He turned around, and still nothing. His eyes darted around, scrutinizing every corner of the darkness. Bert quickened his pace until he approached the dumpster, complete with the sight of vomit-green paint rusting off its edges.

“There’s a box of Chips Ahoy, the ninth one tonight. I wonder why he hasn’t been eating as much. Maybe on a diet?” Oscar thought, sorting through the trash. He uttered an “Owe!” and shifted around as a sharp piece of metal pricked his foot: it must

have been a reject from Bert’s paper clip collection.

Bert’s body went stiff. The noise was coming from inside the dumpster. He leaned in closer, straining to listen for the sound. Shaking his head, Bert turned away and paced in circles.

He imagined the bacteria-ridden trash inside — a mutant could have spawned from that stew of junk. As the stench assaulted him, he pinched his nose, braced himself for his possible demise, and raised the dumpster lid.

Underneath the dingy street light, half-submerged in this despicable waste can, surfaced the outline of Bert’s shaggy-haired neighbor. Clumps of wavy, greenish-black hair cascaded down his forehead and swept just above his brown eyebrows. He stood frozen, holding the paper clip in his hand.

“What in the world are you doing in there, Oscar?”

Oscar looked down, and his eyes widened as he realized what he was holding.

“Is that mine? I’ve been looking for it all week!” Bert raised his voice, clenching his fists.

Oscar started to open his mouth to explain, but stopped himself at the sight of Bert’s

expression. It resembled a countenance from his childhood, one of a pastry chef. He and his father had been out behind a bakery, the one that his classmates - the rich ones - loved to talk about. They thought the manager had closed up shop for the night. As they swam through a sticky sea of eggshells and leftover icing, they had been suddenly exposed by glaring white lights and the horrified grimace of the pastry chef. Oscar had peeked his eyes out and squinted as he adjusted to the brightness. He remembered seeing his father lower his head in shame. A low, rumbling voice had rippled through the air: “Sir, I’m going to need to ask you to come out of there.”

“You see, I was just looking for my wallet — I — I thought I lost —” his father stuttered in search of a plausible alibi. Oscar stared at his father, puzzled: he never had a wallet to begin with. They were searching for that night’s dinner.

“Sir.” The pastry chef was growing impatient.

“I’m... I’m so sorry, son. I don’t know how I can ever live with myself after this. I’ll be back soon,” Oscar’s dad had told him.

Bert shook his head in frustration. “Well, are you going

to explain yourself? You’re holding my paper clip, a grown man inside a garbage can, for God’s sake!” He paced around in several circles before stopping in front of the dumpster again, where Oscar’s head peeked out of the trash. Fruit flies swarmed Bert’s vision, and he violently swatted them away. His trash bag slumped onto the asphalt beside the dumpster with a muffled thud.

Oscar’s head remained low. His hair shielded his eyes from Bert’s patronizing look, and he avoided the bright beam that seemed to flood his vision. Filling his lungs with the familiar aroma of sulfur, his lips turned upward into an ever-so-slight smile with the memory of his father.

“And now you’re grinning like you’ve gone mad. A disgrace to our community. You need a therapist” Bert stormed away, his abandoned trash bag staining the dim street with a splotch of purple.

Oscar brought down the lid and ducked back into the darkness, where not even the moonlight could tiptoe itself in. He assured himself, “A dumpster was where Dad disappeared, and this is where he’ll come back to me.”

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