

“Heart Stone”

My father kept his heart in the fridge. It was in a crumpled brown bag, pushed against the hard plastic wall in back left corner of the shelf above the crisper. He tried to hide it from us by fully stocking the fridge, keeping it behind large pieces of Tupperware full of old lasagna and chicken, sauce bottles with some of their contents crusted on the outside of the glass, and several colorful cartons of milk and juice.

We cooked with him every night. He would put my older brother in charge of cutting the meat and vegetables into neat slices with a heavy knife. He would put me in charge of oiling the pots and pans. I pulled out each pot from the bottom shelf with both hands and cradled it in my lap while rubbing a stick of butter on the bottom. Then, when I was proud of my work, I raised the prepared pot high above my head to place it gently on the grey granite counter.

My father put the pans over the fire, adding ingredients and stirring the food with precise mechanical motions.

We ate in silence. As my brother collected the plates, my father would look at me and in a deep flat voice say "It's time for bed, buddy," scooping me up with one arm. My head fit neatly against his silent chest. I never heard anything. I imagined a void beneath his taut muscle and bone where his heart should have been.

Sometimes it was a wet dark, like the inside of a cave, and sometimes it was the kind of dark that crumbles between your fingers like ash. And then sometimes I pressed my head against him extra hard and thought that would be enough for his chest to collapse, exposing the void. But his flesh was too firm and it refused to cave in.

One night, well after he put me to sleep, I snuck out of my room and down the wooden staircase into the dark. The kitchen was silent, and the fridge, across from an open window, huddled against the wall. Its surface was rough and fragile, like an egg. I pulled the wooden fridge handle with my weight and the sharp white light from inside spilled out into the black. I reached behind the bright red Tupperware with salad and chicken leftovers and grabbed the small brown paper bag.

I thought the heart might be beating, like my heart did, but when I held it against my chest, it was still and cold. I hurried back up the stairs and into my room, keeping the heart warm with my arms. Safe, underneath my blue covers printed with astronauts and rockets and planets and comets, I pulled it out of the bag. It was heavy and smooth, like a polished red stone. I rolled it over to my pillow, and then I lay down next to it, pulling the covers over us so we were both warm.

I woke up in the hazy morning light to a terrible musty stench. The heart had softened: the O of the cut arteries had gone limp and its chambers had sunken in. There was a large dark stain underneath it, coloring the sky fabric a brownish purple. Then, I heard a scream, booming, from the bottom of the stairs. Terrified, I clutched the heart in front of me and it was limp in my hands, like a rag doll. Then I heard glass, shattering like the sound of sudden rain. I walked out to the top of the stairs. The wooden furniture was broken and strewn about, there were several torn beams from the stair railing, and, in the middle of it all, my father sat with his legs in a V. He clutched bright red blankets and towels against his open chest; they sagged and stained his arms and the floor beneath him. He breathed heavily, his now yellow eyes catching mine as I slowly walked down the stairs, and, when I was on the last

step, his arms dropped around him and the blankets fell. A spurt of blood gushed out of his mouth and chest. And there was the cavity, a long gash down the still torso, a split seam in the skin with wild black hairs like cut threads, and I offered it back his heart.