



Starfish

Randi Triant

Emerging Writer Fiction Contest Award

When Davis finally comes home, two hours late, from the lab where he works, he's carrying two mayonnaise jars. Neither jar has any mayonnaise. One jar holds what I assume is a starfish – though Davis corrects me and tells me there are many types of starfish, this one's a sea star. *Phataria*, he says slowly, raising up the two jars in the air as if he's conjuring spirits. Whatever it is, it's missing a leg, which I gather is the finger-like writhing thing in the other jar that he's holding.

"For you," my husband says proudly and holds both jars out. My hands are full at the moment; I'm salvaging what I can of an overcooked stir fry, trying to separate the flaccid broccoli from the congealed soy sauce bok choy chicken cashew nut mess that I move from one ramp of the wok to the other as if I'm sifting for gold. I'm a chef at a French restaurant that caters to our town's college faculty, but lately in my own kitchen I can't make toast without burning it.

Davis puts the twin jars down on the counter right next to me. "That happened in the lab," he says, nodding at the amputated limb. "I guess I should've known better."

Davis often brings home life's dalliances: a blind turtle, a scorpion that in captivity began to sting itself. They reinforce what Davis and I already believe: that no one knows what surprises life has in store for us. Just like me, Davis lost someone dear to him, his older brother who had drowned during a fishing trip with a recipe for disaster: too many men on too small a boat, the life jackets locked behind a rusty padlock in a cubbyhole on board. Only Davis responded differently than I had after both my parents had died when I was a child; he believed life could be headlocked and wrestled to the mat if you were strong and boisterous enough about it. It was the Darwin in him coming through.

In the pan, the bok choy sticks to the chicken nubs as if it's seaweed strangling some shells in low tide. I start plopping out dinner into two Chinese bowls. The dinner's lost but I'm going to stick with the Asian motif I've chosen for the night. I've had enough surprises for one month; I want things to go according to plan. I'm even dressed in the kimono I took years before from my grandmother's closet after she died. She'd found it, still smelling of cheap perfume, in my grandfather's luggage after a business trip and afterwards, she'd worn it every day for exactly one hour before showering. My grandfather couldn't really object, considering. "She's mine now," my grandmother had told me, running her hand down the

sleeve as she hung up the kimono in her closet.

“If you put them in a jar, a leg usually breaks off,” Davis continues, matter-of-factly.

This startles me enough that I actually look at him, at his face, something I’ve been avoiding for the past month to maintain a sense of equilibrium. If I don’t look at him I can pretend that I’m not married to him, that I don’t really live with him. That he’s just *passing through*. A friend of a friend in town for the night. This is better than looking at him and seeing him for what he is: the bastard who’s been sleeping with a friend of a friend for almost four weeks. He doesn’t know that I know. He doesn’t know that I couldn’t tell you if he shaved this morning; I can go up to a week without a glance above his collar. I look full-on then, and when I feel the familiar acid reflux of anger I start the not-looking all over again. Like a child blotting out a cartoon face with a magic marker, I close my eyes when we have sex. But it’s getting weird lately; some nights, as he rocks on top of me, I start to imagine that I’m Her: dirty blond, shoulder length hair, the body of a Russian gymnast, though she was born in and has never once left this upstate college town. One night, I heard myself urgently whispering in his ear, “Is this what you want? Is this what you want?” And when he replied, “Yes, yes,” I pushed him away hard and ran for the bathroom so he couldn’t see me cry.

A few minutes later, he spoke quietly through the bathroom door, “Jillian, talk to me.” Immediately, I was taken back to when we’d started seeing each other. When he’d walk me home from the restaurant at one in the morning. When it felt like we were the only two people alive in the dark night. When he’d say, “So tell me *everything*. Talk to me about the world of cooking.” He’d listen to my trivial stories about running out of veal, or who was bonking whom on the wait staff as if I were telling him about a new scientific discovery that would save thousands of lives.

I know I shouldn’t, but I’ve decided to stay with Davis. My grandparents raised me after my parents died one after another from cancer, as if it’d been communicable. You learn two things when you’re young and everything in your life is so swiftly and completely snatched away: keep quiet and don’t draw any attention. Davis, though, believes you can scare away misfortune and tragedy with exuberance and a zest for living. I pictured life as a thing, not an event. A leather clad bully, who with a flick of her right wrist, snaps a bullwhip now and then.

I look at Davis now; he *has* shaved. My husband isn’t that good looking--his eyes, for one thing, are too close together--but he acts like he is. I’m prettier than I give myself credit for, willowy and dark. “You’re a flamenco dancer, not a chef,” Davis had said the first time we met. He had a boatload of faculty friends to the restaurant for a celebratory dinner celebrating, in fact, nothing. He asked to meet the chef. The next night he was outside waiting for me after we closed.

“We don’t know *why* the leg breaks off,” he continues on about his phataria. “Just that one of the tube feet (*tube feet?*) mutinies and starts to twist itself from its own body. Like it can’t get away fast enough.” Davis frowns. “The whole time the rest of it just lies there, watching.”

“How long will it take to die?” I ask. The independently minded *tube foot* is contracting and moving like an inchworm now. It’s like watching a kid learn how to ride a two-wheeler. You want to help it along, give it a push, scream out go.

“Oh, they’ll both live,” Davis says. “But you’re missing the point.”

“What?” I say, preoccupied now: the amputated leg has stopped moving so much; it’s

calming down, getting used to being on its own.

“*The point is,*” Davis says, “that we don’t understand *why* they do it.” He clinks the jar with his fingernail. The amputated leg ignores him. “Sorry, guy,” he says, bending over and peering into the jar on the counter.

“We better eat before dinner gets cold,” he suggests, standing upright, and then lifting both dinner bowls, walks down the hallway toward the dining room.

As soon as he leaves, I go back to watching the two jars of mayonnaise. Both inhabitants seem peaceful now, almost happy with the separation. It’s as if they were never one.

“This is so good, babe,” Davis yells from the dining room. I look around the kitchen, at the pistachio linoleum, at the walls the color of wet sand that Davis said we would paint this summer together. I grab the jar with the tube foot. By the back stairs, I unhook Davis’ ice storm parka from the wall, and slide into that and a pair of slush boots that make me think of Scottish moors. Unlike Davis’s fling, I had been out in the world pre-Davis; I know how to make a goddamn crême brulee that melts before you can swallow it for God’s sakes, although I realize now that no longer matters.

It’s cold out and the ground is early winter wet, and the parka will hide the fact that I have a kimono on. I grab the keys to Davis’ pickup. He looks ludicrous driving it, what with the prior owner’s bumperstickers supporting the right to bear arms still firmly affixed to the rear window. Anyone meeting Davis for the first time can see that the only arms he’ll ever touch are made of flesh and blood. But Davis insists on blending in, as if he’s in a third world country and wants to be indoctrinated into the tribe. He always wants to *belong*; it’s one of the things that attracted me to him in the first place. When the back door clicks behind me, I hear him shouting to hurry, that my food is getting cold.

~ ~ ~

It isn’t hard to find her. There’s only one movie theater in town and the one time I’d met her six weeks ago when we were all at the *friend’s* house for a party and I could still look at my husband’s face, she’d mentioned that she sold tickets in the booth out front. We talked that night, she and I, about being the only two people at the party who didn’t have a college degree. About being in the service industry. She actually called it that. I thought she was bright and young and far too hopeful. I imagined that I would’ve been just like her at her age if only fate had cast a blinder eye to my existence.

The streets are full of brown, icy mush. Many of the houses are lit only by the bluish tinge of a television on. They’re not energy conscious, these people; they’re just tight with their money. Whenever I go down these streets I can’t believe that I’m here. It’s a far cry from the four star cooking school I went to in Manhattan. I chose to come here simply because two fellow students were starting Ché Louis and in a place like this I’d come into contact with a limited number of people. It seemed, at the time, like the smartest decision I had ever made.

When I get to her theater, only two people, a middle-aged balding man and his mother, are standing in front of the glass booth she sits in. The mother is stooped over, permanently, and she’s shouting “Just the two tickets. I don’t want any of that.” She yells this through the round porthole where you say what movie you want as if speaking into a tunnel. The old woman shoves back a coupon that entitles her to a free soda with a box of popcorn. “I don’t want any of that crap,” she says louder. There’s something vaguely pornographic about the hole that everyone yells into. I wonder how many times Davis has spoken through that hole.

She doesn’t see me until the mother and son walk away. Even through the thick glass I

think I see that she's startled, as if I've caught her stealing from the till. She looks smaller in the booth than I remember, or maybe it's the fact that she has a ski jacket on that's a size too small-- it could fit a kindergartner--and she's wearing those gloves with the fingers cut off. At the party, she'd had an easy, constant smile on her face and it'd struck me that the worst thing that had happened to her so far was boredom. Her parents, I was sure, had instilled in her some cockamamie idea that she could do anything she wanted if she'd only put her mind to it. She'd been waiting for someone like Davis to blow into her world, freshly pressed PhD in hand, exuding a false air of stability, grinning at his luck at landing at a college which is small enough to make him look important. I'd waited for the same thing, I suppose. "I'm having a party this Friday, why don't you come? It'll be fun," our mutual friend probably had told her, and this girl, who looks like she's sixteen but is probably twenty, had seen it as a bridge instead of the cement wall it will eventually turn out to be. I realize I'm only about five years older than her. I look down at the jar in my hands--fuck Davis, I think, it's a goddamn starfish. I don't care what he calls it.

"Welcome to the Towne Cinema," she says. Her voice, mic-less, sounds as if it's coming from a long way off. For a moment, I think I've been wrong about surprising her; it seems she doesn't recognize me at all. But then she slips a red ticket stub to me through the money slot. I haven't given her any money. "Enjoy the show," she says, not looking at me. Before I can answer, she swivels her chair around and disappears through the funeral curtains behind her.

What had I expected to do once I saw her? Show her the starfish leg and say, See? See what you've done? I'm not sure what I came here to do exactly but I don't want to go home, not yet. I haven't come this far to see her and then go home and eat my cold dinner. I can't spend another night not looking at my husband's face. Before this month I'd loved that face, too close eyes and all. In the frigid air, my bare legs have started to get that red scaliness that homeless drunks have. My toes can't feel the rubber they're encased in. I go in.

The theater is half-full though it's only showing old westerns this week. What is it that makes people want to hold onto the past? I slide into the center of the empty back row, which is smack against a wall. There's a grate to the left of my head and it's blowing out hot furnaced air. By the time the trailers end, I start to warm up; I unzip the parka. I rest the mayonnaise jar on my lap against the armrest as if it's a box of Jujubees. Five minutes into the show, one of the back double doors opens and then closes with that pfut pfut sound you hear every time someone needs the bathroom. Without turning my head, I know who it is. She sits down next to me as I pretend to be engrossed in the movie in which everyone, ranch hands and saloonkeeper alike, speak out of sync. It's so disconcerting to watch, the disembodied voices followed by lips moving, that I look away. I don't want to be here anymore. This town is an embarrassment; they can't even get the damn movie running right. What am I doing here? I'm sitting next to a woman who is having sex with my husband on a regular basis but somehow that idea isn't fully getting through. The idea of it is so shocking, so painful, that without my actually having walked in on them in the act, a blanket of numbness and tepid disbelief still protects me. "You have to come live with us now," my grandmother told me in a hospital hallway where they sanitized the smell of life vacating the premises with gallons of cheap pine disinfectant. "Okay," I said, and let her take my hand and lead me out of that horrible place, without once looking back. Three days later, I asked her when my parents were coming to take me home.

Something catches the corner of my eye and I see the girl's half-gloved fingers worrying

the top of her kneecap, pinching the tight jeans material again and again. Without thinking, I grab her hand and hold it still. I hadn't intended on touching her, only talking to her, maybe. I hadn't known what I'd even say to her. But now I've done it; I've gone and touched her. I can't exactly just let go, can I? I simply wanted to see her again. No, I wanted her to see *me* again, to know who it is that's cooking him Asian stir fry while she's doing the same exact things with him in bed that I've done. My grip tightens on her hand. The mutual friend had said she was a great skier; our town is only thirty minutes away from a mountain that much of the time is a napoleon of two inches of real snow covered by two feet of fake manufactured frosting. Maybe her technique on the slopes is different from mine, but it's still skiing, it's still fucking going down a mountain, no matter how you do it. The end result is the same, isn't it? She has this frightened look on her face now that's eerily lit by the flickering movie. She knows she's made a big mistake here. Maybe she thought she could derail me with the movie. If she put her mind to it, like her parents told her, she'd fix everything. Maybe she's Catholic and has been waiting for just this sort of punishment. Maybe she thinks that because I work at Ché Louis that I have one of those French open marriages she's heard about. I doubt it. Maybe she's dumber than I thought. Maybe she's as startled as I am that this is happening. She tries to move her hand a bit so I grab it even tighter. I want her to see that there's a person waiting at home, sitting on the cold linoleum on those nights when she is telling Davis how smart he is, or how boring her life is next to his. I squeeze her hand again. I want her to see that there is one person who knows that Davis isn't that smart and that our life is every bit as boring as hers, but it's my life and I'll decide when I no longer want it.

"Please. You're hurting me," she whispers in the dark. My hand is a death grip, my filed fingernails digging into her gloved palm.

Suddenly the film shuts off with a pop and we're plunged into darkness and then there's a whirl and it's on again and everything's fixed, the cowboys are saying their words right, the saloonkeeper is laughing. Everything's as it should be. It's so sudden, like an accident in which you walk away from a steaming car with it's front bashed in and the tires blown out. I'm so sorry, you say, even if it's not your fault. I'm so sorry. I pull my hand away. She flexes her fingers several times without a word.

We sit and watch the movie for a few moments. We barely move, Karen—I can say her name now—Karen and I barely move, yet we're so aware of each other: I know she's listening to my rapid breathing as she knows I can see a few of her stray hairs lifting gently from the air from the heat duct. I stand up. She lets me leave first, lets me squeeze in front of her knees, lets me go down the aisle, out the doors, pfut pfut, and on into the night. For a moment, when I passed in front of her knees I imagined I felt her fingers graze my fingers as if they were running across wind chimes. The slightest breeze and then, nothing.

In another year I'll leave Davis, not because of Karen, because of someone else. There'll be a line of someone else. A line of young women whom Davis will try to save. But this night I don't know that yet. Neither does Karen. This night we think we know so much, and as it turns out, we know so very little. I walk out into the dark parking lot, my grandmother's kimono against my body, cold and slippery like snake skin, and I'm clutching a mayonnaise jar with a starfish leg and I'm thinking of Karen and my grandmother and me and where it all fits. At my grandmother's funeral I was surrounded by recent friends of hers, mostly women whom I had never met. My grandfather had died six months before. I stood at my grandmother's gravesite with these strangers, silenced by the knowledge that something

bigger than our lives had happened, something that would connect us for a moment or two, but never again. A connection that we only slightly understood at that time. The sort of connection that, years later, would make me run as fast as I could to a cold pickup truck, jump in, and turn the heater on full blast.