

***To This Day* by Shane Koyczan (KOY-zan)**

When I was a kid, I used to think that pork chops and karate chops were the same thing. I thought they were both pork chops. My grandmother thought it was cute, and because they were my favorite, she let me keep doing it. Not really a big deal.

One day, before I realized fat kids are not designed to climb trees, I fell out of a tree and bruised the right side of my body. I didn't want to tell my grandmother because I was scared I'd get in trouble for playing somewhere I shouldn't have been. The gym teacher noticed the bruise, and I got sent to the principal's office. From there, I was sent to another small room with a really nice lady who asked me all kinds of questions about my life at home. I saw no reason to lie. As far as I was concerned, life was pretty good. I told her, whenever I'm sad, my grandmother gives me karate chops.

This led to a full-scale investigation, and I was removed from the house for three days, until they finally decided to ask how I got the bruises. News of this silly little story quickly spread through the school, and I earned my first nickname: Porkchop. To this day, I hate pork chops.

I'm not the only kid who grew up this way, surrounded by people who used to say that rhyme about sticks and stones, as if broken bones hurt more than the names we got called, and we got called them all. So we grew up believing no one would ever fall in love with us, that we'd be lonely forever, that we'd never meet someone to make us feel like the sun was something they built for us in their toolshed. So broken heartstrings bled the blues, and we tried to empty ourselves so we'd feel nothing. Don't tell me that hurts less than a broken bone, that an ingrown life is something surgeons can cut away, that there's no way for it to metastasize; it does.

She was eight years old, our first day of grade three when she got called ugly. We both got moved to the back of class so we would stop getting bombarded by spitballs. But the school halls were a battleground. We found ourselves outnumbered day after wretched day. We used to stay inside for recess, because outside was worse. Outside, we'd have to rehearse running away, or learn to stay still like statues, giving no clues that

we were there. In grade five, they taped a sign to the front of her desk that read, "Beware of dog."

To this day, despite a loving husband, she doesn't think she's beautiful, because of a birthmark that takes up a little less than half her face. Kids used to say, "She looks like a wrong answer that someone tried to erase, but couldn't quite get the job done." And they'll never understand that she's raising two kids whose definition of beauty begins with the word "Mom," because they see her heart before they see her skin, because she's only ever always been amazing.

He was a broken branch grafted onto a different family tree, adopted, not because his parents opted for a different destiny. He was three when he became a mixed drink of one part left alone and two parts tragedy, started therapy in eighth grade, had a personality made up of tests and pills, lived like the uphill were mountains and the downhill were cliffs, four-fifths suicidal, a tidal wave of antidepressants, and an adolescent being called "Popper," one part because of the pills, 99 parts because of the cruelty. He tried to kill himself in grade 10 when a kid who could still go home to Mom and Dad had the audacity to tell him, "Get over it." As if depression is something that could be remedied by any of the contents found in a first-aid kit.

To this day, he is a stick of TNT lit from both ends, could describe to you in detail the way the sky bends in the moment before it's about to fall, and despite an army of friends who all call him an inspiration, he remains a conversation piece between people who can't understand sometimes being drug-free has less to do with addiction and more to do with sanity.

We weren't the only kids who grew up this way. To this day, kids are still being called names. The classics were "Hey, stupid," "Hey, spaz." Seems like every school has an arsenal of names getting updated every year. And if a kid breaks in a school and no one around chooses to hear, do they make a sound? Are they just background noise from a soundtrack stuck on repeat, when people say things like, "Kids can be cruel."

Every school was a big top circus tent, and the pecking order went from acrobats to lion tamers, from clowns to carnies, all of these miles ahead of

who we were. We were freaks — lobster-claw boys and bearded ladies, oddities juggling depression and loneliness, playing solitaire, spin the bottle, trying to kiss the wounded parts of ourselves and heal, but at night, while the others slept, we kept walking the tightrope. It was practice, and yes, some of us fell.

But I want to tell them that all of this is just debris left over when we finally decide to smash all the things we thought we used to be, and if you can't see anything beautiful about yourself, get a better mirror, look a little closer, stare a little longer, because there's something inside you that made you keep trying despite everyone who told you to quit. You built a cast around your broken heart and signed it yourself, "They were wrong." Because maybe you didn't belong to a group or a clique. Maybe they decided to pick you last for basketball or everything. Maybe you used to bring bruises and broken teeth to show-and-tell, but never told, because how can you hold your ground if everyone around you wants to bury you beneath it? You have to believe that they were wrong. They have to be wrong. Why else would we still be here?

We grew up learning to cheer on the underdog because we see ourselves in them. We stem from a root planted in the belief that we are not what we were called. We are not abandoned cars stalled out and sitting empty on some highway, and if in some way we are, don't worry. We only got out to walk and get gas. We are graduating members from the class of We Made It, not the faded echoes of voices crying out, "Names will never hurt me." Of course they did.

But our lives will only ever always continue to be a balancing act that has less to do with pain and more to do with beauty.