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Fiction
Approx. 1,500 words

When You Hear This Sound

At that time nobody had died.

Durant survived the plane crash on the water—that was the start. Then, he kept surviving, relentlessly, despite his best efforts, despite his dreams. It became a curse. He had a knack for falling.

He tried to forget the sensation of plummeting, of those stretched few seconds when his body would anticipate the hurt to come, clench, then break, of the packed earth swooping up to embrace him, his mama's caked black arms, reaching out from the grave, of blood in his mouth.

He tried to forget, but the falling didn't want to be forgotten. It enjoyed curling around his ankles like a biting wind, shuddering cold teeth up his spine. He'd been tinged with a little death, a leaching of color beneath his fingernails. He smelled sweet when he wore the scent of near death—a cocktail of fear and adrenaline and not-fear and precision honing. So he was reminded of what he'd escaped from over the years, from the time he was barely eight, reminded again and again. Reminded that he did not die, not then, not yet, not now, this time.

To the goddess of the gap between heaven and earth, he was an anomaly and precious. A precocious little thousand-year bloom. He was—
Enduring. Hers, beautiful.

Each scar made him more enchanting in her mothering eyes. So she kept marking him, her little bloom, reminding him, rearing him in the only way she knew: through suffering, through regret, a slipping through split fingers, a million chance occurrences linked to form the chains of fate, a sea of swallowed tears.

I won't let you wilt on me this time, she would sigh, soft breaths forming the prevailing winds.

"You're unlucky to be so loved." His coworker Kendrick laughed. "What's so bad about a free trip to Cabo to meet her parents, aside from, you know, meeting the parents?"

"You forget, Durant doesn't like to travel," Smitty said. Smitty was from another department in the building, but they shared a lab together. They got along well enough but behind his back Durant and Kendrick called him Hobbit. Smitty tossed them each a bottle of water and lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat dripping from his brow. His belly was freckled and splotched with hairy curls. "Sure could use a breeze every then and now."

Soccer wasn't Smitty's best sport. The three of them played together during lunch hour because they'd spent enough time withered under phosphorescent lights, glaring at computer screens to eat hunched in the company's decades-dated excuse for a cafeteria.

"So explain to me again why you're flying separate?"

At twenty-three, he tumbled off a second story balcony and landed on a picket fence. Drinking. And before that he put his face through a glass door pane. Horseplay. In his early thirties, he drove his car off a cliff. Unfortunately-timed blowjob.

He survived a second plane crash. A single-engined Piperjet flying through the Rockies under poor conditions. He was on vacation with a friend who'd been piloting for years. Just three weeks earlier he'd broken his ankle in a paragliding accident. Really, he should have known better by then.

At twelve he'd already fallen through the roof of a home under construction while his friends who'd dared him watched from the up-churned red clay of the front yard, mouths agape but soundless. Delinquency.

Eight. He was eight when it started. And by the end of it, that was—until now, he'd buried as many. Three in the plane crash, including the pilot; the girl in the car he'd met that night at a party; the couple, the only two of 700-plus BASE jumps that Bridge Day, unlucky enough to get caught in his downward spiral; his great aunt Doreen who'd punctured a lung tumbling from the lowest rung of a ladder—maybe that one wasn't so much his fault except that he'd told her he was too busy to take down the Christmas decorations that day. And most recently there was the black bear that had climbed the phone pole outside his apartment's bathroom window. He'd been brushing his teeth. He'd opened the window and let the cold air blast him in the face. He shared a moment with the bear, looked deep into her black eyes. A spark had passed between them.

Durant was traveling separate quite simply because he didn't want his fiancée to number the ninth.

After he survived the Bridge Day tragedy in West Virginia, a local reporter published an article featuring him in the Charleston Gazette. Some of his past plummets were dredged up. To avoid sensationalizing, they titled it: THE BOY WITH BROKEN WINGS. Most of their

facts were straight, but he'd turned down the interview so it was only natural for rampant speculation to ensue. There were accusations that he'd left that poor girl in the car crash to die. In the end he was banned from the mountain state.

Durant didn't care. He was busy crawling the peaks of the Absaroka Range. The air was so pure it burned his lungs. He felt like he could fall in love. *A fall from here should do the trick*, he'd thought, dreamily.

That was before he'd met Imogene.

Imogene was a goddess with those long legs that stretched to heaven. To be more specific, she'd become a Theravada Buddhist nun at just nineteen. She had a house full of adopted strays—five cats, three dogs, two bunnies, a pig, and a parakeet, six mice, and a nest of baby squirrels she was currently nursing with a puppy bottle. She was a very grounded woman.

She was an on-call pediatrician for a small, private clinic, and didn't give a damn about kernel compiling or bash scripting.

"You know what I think?" she asked him.

This was the first time they met. They were in line at a locally owned, fair trade and organic focused coffee shop. Her eyes were rich and dark and mystical. The background noise of the frothing machine was highly romantic.

"No," he'd said. "But I think I'd like to."

In THE BOY WITH BROKEN WINGS it was speculated that Durant was addicted to hospitalization. Why else would he keep ending up there? All in all, he endured fairly well, but that wasn't to say he hadn't experienced his share of the wreckage. Aside from the body count, the emotional losses, he'd snapped his left femur in three places, his right in two

places three times, he'd chipped his collar bone once, cracked his skull, displaced both shoulders, herniated a disc, and hair-line fractured one knee-cap. His body was full of knobby spurs. And then there were the scars, little beige secrets hidden away behind long-sleeved shirts and dress slacks. If scars could tell a story, his body would have been a newspaper.

Imogene had said, "I want to read every last one," and kissing the top of his shoulder, she ran her fingertips down his back as if sifting Braille.

Outside the bedroom door, her babies whined for her. They were always whining, even now, whining as they sank deeper into the living room floor.

After Imogene's funeral, he scheduled an appointment with a specialist. The hypnotist's office was painted a bright azure, all four walls slathered in it. The carpet was a sandy color and looked scratchy.

"I don't want this to be some lulling beach scene," Durant sighed. "I know how your kind works. No relaxing vacation imagery, no sound machine. I just need a simple ending. Get it?"

The hypnotist said, "I get it. Just sign this liability form right here and here. And here."

Under the hypnosis, Durant's subconscious starts a narration. It unfolds something like this: When you fall for the first time, he explains, your brain can't process the sensory overload. It would have been, he says, a very peaceful death, the first time. Everything is still. There's a soft whistling, but it's not alarming. Your body doesn't think to tense—the

cringing doesn't come until later, not until the next time. I used to go mountain climbing. (It seems so stupid to him now.)

I used to be fearless.

The hypnotist said, "When you hear this sound, your breathing will continue to deepen and slow, your heart rate will slow, slow, slow. Your breathing and your heart rate will slow and slow and stop."

And there's the sound of a chime. It sounds like the signal of the seatbelt light on the airplane.

He's on the airplane and it's falling very quickly now. It rockets toward the earth, when he hears this sound, the chime of the fasten seatbelt warning. But he doesn't fasten his seatbelt. His breathing is very slow. His pulse doesn't speed. His body doesn't brace. There's the chime, chime, chime. Fasten your seatbelt. Don't be alarmed, folks. It's just like the first time, he thinks. The space around him feels hollow and still like a slumbering lake. Durant is utterly calm as he slips under the water and into the cold darkness where his mother is waiting.