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TERRIBLE BLUE

The pure blue sky peals in Barton's ears like a single note from a church organ, harsh and unrelenting enough to shatter the thick glass of the picture window of his second-story apartment. On days like this, traumatic tinnitus accompanies the sunlight, but it also brightens the front half of his living room, and silhouettes the heads of his two children, Ellie and Carl, who are sitting across from him.

In the one-bedroom walk-up Barton has occupied since he and Sharon separated, all the furniture is rented, except for the grey La-Z-Boy, which catches halfway towards the reclining position. It has always caught, and for this reason Sharon never used it; she parted with it for the same reason she parted with him; it was not—how did she put it?—*fixable*. Sitting is as tortuous for Barton as standing: just below his right hip socket, re-jiggered with titanium and plastic, the femur is graced by a half-dozen metal screws; the reconstructed pelvis has fewer—but longer—screws, poorly positioned for sitting. Reclining in the half-bent La-Z-Boy provides the relief that traditional chairs and flat beds cannot. He coaxes the unfolding parts past the catch, and listens to the sky.

Facing him in the rented couch, his children sit, legs dangling and nervously kicking, waiting for him to begin the promised story time. Ellie is four, with Sharon's curly blonde hair, which she is twirling with the forefinger of her left hand, a habit she picked up from her mother. She has a hopeful expression on her face. The sulky

expression belongs to Carl, who is seven, and although he has Barton's long eyebrows and brown eyes, his skin is darker, more naturally tan—like Sharon's. In most of the photos from Basrah of Barton and his platoon buddies, everyone is shirtless but Barton.

The couch the children are sitting on is long, clad in slick, sticky orange vinyl, and has thin cushions that do not give. There are no rugs or lamps in the room. There is no desk, no other chairs, no bureau; only the TV stand upon which a flat-screen RCA sits. The ceiling fixture in the kitchen behind Barton is on, but neither its dim radiance nor the natural sunshine reaches him, and he remains in shadow. It has been several minutes since Barton turned off the TV—still warm—but two hours since Sharon dropped them off. Barton is unaware of the passage of time, having given up on watches and clocks months ago, when Sharon took lawful custody of the children.

When his kids arrived, Sharon had stayed in the car, had waved them onward through the rolled-down passenger side window, had made Carl promise to remind their father that this visit, unlike the previous ones, had to be short. Barton had opened the door before they were halfway up the stairs; each child had given him a quick hug as they entered, and ignored the box Barton pointed out was to be used for storytime today. As he rushed towards the TV, Carl had squawked something about having to go back soon, and before Barton could reposition himself into the recliner, both Ellie and Carl were seated on the sweaty couch, with their faces slightly tilted, two masks of contentment bathed in the screen's glow. After a while Ellie lost interest and had laid her head sideways, which is when she first discovered the bag.

They are as unaware as Barton how the allotted time has long since passed.

—When are you going to tell us a story, daddy? asks Ellie.

—Soon, sweetie, says Barton. I'm thinking.

—Why'd you turn the TV off? says Carl. It's a complaint, not a question.

—I want you guys look at the stuff in the box I brought out, says Barton.

—What's in the bag? asks Ellie.

Between the couch and the La-Z-Boy Barton has placed a topless 10"x10" cardboard box, full of photographs and memorabilia. Under the belly of the La-Z-Boy is a small brown paper bag, the kind Barton once used for his children's school lunches, which he had not meant for either of the children to see. Ellie has been eyeing the paper bag since the TV was turned off, and has ignored the box. Barton understands this—because the box is open, and the paper bag is not. Because she is so young, the possibility that mysteries could unfold to reveal horror or disappointment has never occurred to her. She whispers to Carl, who bends over to take a look. Unimpressed, he sits up again, legs still kicking nervously, and picks at the palm of his right hand with the fingers of his left, ignoring both objects.

—OK, then. Daddy's going to start storytime, says Barton.

—Mom's gonna be mad, snarks Carl.

Ellie claps and sits up. Carl rolls his eyes.

—Why do you do that? says Carl. Why do you say *daddy* like you were somebody else? It's weird.

Ellie sits still.

—It's not weird at all, says Barton. You know, it's like when your mom says *your dad this* and *your dad that* when she's telling her stories about me. Or when she talked to Ellie about Carl, and says, *Your brother is in the doghouse, young lady!*

Ellie and Carl look at each other and smile.

—Funny, right? Barton continues. Not funny ha ha, because it's not. The thing is, we don't ever want to think badly of the people we love. She's really mad at Carl, but doesn't want to be. So she says *your brother* instead of his name.

—So does that mean you're mad at yourself? says Carl, and he is onto something there, thinks Barton. He considers responding to his son, but Carl's smirk puts him off.

Ellie looks at Carl because she knows he's just being a jerk. Her father does not seem mad at himself at all. She is content to wait for what she hopes will be a funny story, or several funny stories.

—What kind of stories today, daddy? asks Ellie.

—Well that's what the box is for, guys, says Barton. The stories go with the pictures in the box. I have a story for every picture in the box. All you have to do is pick one, or two, or more.

—What about the bag? asks Carl. Is there a story about the bag?

Barton is angry with himself for not having hidden the bag. He had placed it there so he wouldn't have to get up again.

—No. The bag is for something else. It's for later. Ignore the bag. Why don't you both look through the pictures, OK? Pick one and I'll tell you a story about it. Any picture, any one you choose, there's a story.

Ellie gets off the couch and kneels on the floor in front of the box. She and Barton are both startled when the phone—a single landline resting on the kitchen counter behind Barton, rings. Its annoying, traditional trill bleats again and again, punctuating the muscular tone of the sky, with its lingering reminder of St. Basil's on Ashland Ave. where Barton, when he was Carl's age, imagined God lived. Having given up on religion as a rebellious teenager, as soon as he could reason his way out of believing in a higher power, Barton nonetheless lamented having—in retrospect, and for his children—given up on faith too easily. And then, after his injuries, and the horror of the explosion which he could never unsee, trying to build up a faith, to speak and act as if he believed, to go back into a church for some kind of relief—seemed like a cheap grab for the brass ring on

an old carousel. Only the organ music had legitimacy for him, a sound that had stirred in him as a child something close to belief.

Carl pops off the couch after several rings, but Barton waves him back like a traffic cop and Carl stands, mute, until the ringing stops. He returns to his seat with a sour look on his face.

The box itself is one of the stories Barton might tell, the bottom half of an abandoned puzzle box that once contained 1000 picture pieces of an apple orchard. It was the puzzle Sharon brought to his bedside in the hospital the day after his first operation eight years ago; the puzzle she came back day-after-day to piece together while he writhed in pain, or slept, or talked when he felt strong enough to share a little about that horrible day, the day that broke his life into pieces that didn't seem to fit together anymore. The actual puzzle pieces are long gone, tossed in the trash and burned along with many of Barton's personal items—civilian clothing, including underwear; army fatigues and assorted memorabilia from Iraq like the colorful scarves and wraps he had collected before his tour ended, and then given to Sharon as presents; cards from Sharon he had once cherished, posters of his favorite heavy metal bands. The box now contains the remaining photographs of his and Sharon's past: some courtship and pre-courtship; some from his childhood; some shots of his army buddies. All the pictures Sharon didn't care about, left scattered around their old house like a debris field following an explosion.

Carl slips off the couch and joins Ellie; Ellie has been examining individual pictures before setting each one aside; Carl begins fingering through the pictures half-heartedly. After only a few seconds, Ellie returns to the couch and sits back slumped-shouldered.

—I don't like those pictures, she says.

Carl stares at one for a long time before showing it to Barton.

—Skinny as a rail when I was in the army, says Barton. Hard to believe, eh?

Carl shows Ellie the picture but she finds it uninspiring: a rare picture of a shirtless and sunburned Barton with his three Basrah bunkmates, in front of a pock-marked humvee, taken the cloudless morning of the day the IED turned the lower halves of Lakeman and Donaldson into spaghetti, blew into red dust the bone and muscle of both Carrick's hands to above the wrist, snapped Barton's right femur like a wishbone, and shattered his hip.

—This is what I looked like when your mother and I met, Ellie. Which is what my first story is about.

—This isn't a make up story? asks Ellie.

—Did you handle rocket launchers and stuff like that? asks Carl.

He snatches the picture from Carl and sets it on the floor to one side of the box.

—This isn't a war story Carl, says Barton. It's a love story.

—Like a fairy tale, I guess, says Carl to Ellie. He means to sound irritated, but Ellie seems pleased.

—Except it really happened, says Barton. Do you remember where I met your mom?

—The hospital, says Carl.

Ellie nods—her default mode of communicating. She nods yes to everything, which is why she spends so much time sitting on the toilet looking at the ceiling and then straining to get off. Carl smiles; pleased for having got the answer right.

—Anyways, I proposed to your mother only a week after we met. Who does that? Right? That hardly ever happens, even in the movies. Your mom said no that first time. I'm sure she told you that. But to be fair she didn't really believe I was going to keep my leg, did she? Everybody thought I was gonna lose it. Even me! What was I thinking, huh?

Barton leans over the box and sorts through the pictures. He finds the one he's looking for quickly. It is a picture of Sharon, at his bedside in the VA Hospital, taken with a disposable camera she had bought at the corner drugstore which she had been using to document her assignment as Milieu Therapist in the Psychiatric Wing of the Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center in North Chicago.

—Here's the picture I took of your mother just before I asked her the second time. You remember, the same one that used to be on the table in the entryway to the house, only smaller. Isn't she beautiful? I proposed and even though she said no that first time, she thought it was charming and romantic. She kept coming, and I kept asking her. She kept saying no. Everyone—and I mean everyone—thought it was crazy I kept asking. But then later—months later!—she said yes. Of course by then I was walking. But only because every minute of every day I pictured myself walking down the aisle with her.

—This is a dumb story, says Carl. Ellie punches him in the arm.

—I like it, she says. Carl lies down on his stomach.

—You're dumb, says Carl. Ellie makes a face. The face is the same one she uses to show how icky certain foods, like spinach and raspberries, make her feel. Barton ignores or does not notice her reactions. Carl has crawled closer to the La-Z-Boy and extends his right arm underneath the portion holding up Barton's legs.

—Carl! No! yells Barton.

Carl flinches, and retreats, like a squirrel sensing danger, back towards the couch.

—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to raise my voice, says Barton.

Carl presses his back against the lower part of the couch. Ellie scoots sideways next to him. Their feet extend to either side of the box.

—I'm not mad, continues Barton. Well, no, that's not true. I want to be honest with you guys. I *was* mad so obviously it's silly to say I wasn't, right? But I'm already over it, see?

Barton twists onto his left side and feels for the bag with his left hand. When he finds it, he gives it a tiny push backwards towards the kitchen, further away from the children. With the paper bag out of reach, Barton leans forward in the La-Z-Boy, letting his legs drape over the sides. He rummages through the pile of photos in the box again and picks out another, larger picture. Ellie twists her body down and sideways, straining to look under the La-Z-Boy. Her brother elbows her, and she sits up.

—This one is of my brother and I getting our Scout badges for swimming at the summer camp. The thing there was, I swam across the lake without the boat. You're supposed to have the boat next to you when you do it. Half a mile. I thought maybe they wouldn't give me the badge, but there were like a dozen witnesses on shore, so they had to. But hey, Ellie, you're learning to swim now, right? And I'm so proud of you! Carl's a great swimmer already, aren't you Carl. Right buddy?

—That's not really a story, says Ellie. Her hands nervously make and unmake fists.

—Well, I'm not done yet, says Barton.

Carl, not yet recovered from Barton's outburst, has folded his arms tightly across his chest. Barton nervously searches through the pile of photos again. He finds a group of photographs paper-clipped together, and holds out his hand so that both children can see without moving from their positions on the floor.

—The top one is you in the baby carrier, Carl. No, wait, that's not you, it's Ellie! Mommy loved that carrier because it was so soft and you were facing her. Did she ever

tell you about the time I put you in it and then rode my bike all along the lakefront? I figured she did! Boy, was she mad!

—She said it was dumb, says Carl.

—Stop saying *dumb*! blurts Ellie. She brings her clenched hands up to her cheeks.

—Look at these, Ellie, Barton continues. He holds the paper-clipped photos in front of Ellie, who plucks them from Barton's extended hand. She looks at the top one and smiles, having recognized herself. Carl grabs the pile from her and pulls the top one off, which Ellie snatches back. He stares at the next photo.

—Ahhh, that's Uncle Jeff, says Barton. From when the two of us were in college. Best man at our wedding. Doesn't even look like him, does it? All those Christmases, eh? I know, your mom told you he's not your real uncle. Uncle George and Uncle Christopher are your real uncles, but you can still call him Uncle Jeff. He loves you guys almost as much as I do.

Carl discards that one, revealing a third photo, and old black and white Polaroid.

—*That* is one I'm *really* proud of, Barton proclaims. Taken by my pal Donovan when I was in high school and my parents were gone for the weekend. Bet you didn't know I was a gymnast. That's me doing a handstand right at the ridgeline of the roof. It was even higher up than it looks. That roof was steep!

That the photo is a Polaroid is significant. It is the positive, peeled apart from the negative, separated from himself, his past no longer a part of him. This he feels viscerally, as if the tearing away stretched and severed nerves and tissue like the IED did to the upper and lower halves of Lakeman and Donaldson.

—Next to me is Danny Zawiki and next to him is Gene Lowenk, continues Barton. It took guts. A neighbor called the cops. I got grounded for like a month!

—Pretty cool, Dad, says Carl.

—I can do a headstand, says Ellie. She puts her forehead down on the floor between her hands. Her legs start to rise up and she falls to the side, landing on the box and knocking several photos out.

—Sorry daddy, I can do it, she says, pouting. She remains sitting.

—Yes, I know you can sweetie, says Barton. You don't have to do one. I know you can do a headstand.

The phone begins ringing again. Carl and Ellie glance back and forth between the phone and their father. Barton talks over it, because it reminds him of time, his unseen enemy, which he must try to ignore. Every tick of the clock since Sharon left has been like a jab of pain, a piece of shrapnel tearing into his skin, through muscle and bone; that she ever loved him, that she bore his children, now serves only to intensify the realization that his recovery from Basrah was never more than a slow descent into hell. Only the old memories escape the torture of time. They float above the misery.

—Maybe it's mom, says Carl.

—It doesn't matter, says Barton.

Carl turns his attention to the next photo, well worn and faded. The phone finally stops ringing. He and Ellie both wiggle their way back onto the couch.

—OK, now here's a story! Barton exclaims, the energy in his voice startling the children. That was my first ever bike. It had the brakes where you just back-pedal, not like today where the brakes are on the handlebars. It was a hand-me-down from my brother. My dad painted it blue and made it a birthday present. First thing I did was race it down the Cattanio's driveway like all the guys did. His driveway made a u-turn and right at the u part there was like a ten-foot drop-off into a creek. You'd race your bike towards the edge, and then slam the brakes hard as hell to make the longest skid mark you could. The idea was to get your rear tire skid mark to end as close to the edge as

possible. Rusty Wiggins had the record. Twenty-two feet and seven inches and the rubber streak stopped just three inches from the edge. Anyways, I pedaled hard—you had to have a lot of speed—and I stood up on those pedals and pushed down with all my might and—crack—the chain broke!

Ellie is startled by the way Barton spears the word *crack* and pauses before *the chain broke*. She inches closer to her brother.

—What happened? asks Ellie.

—My feet came off the pedals and my butt slipped off the seat—boy did that *hurt*— and I sailed—*sailed*—off the edge and landed all the way on the other side of the creek! My mom had a heart attack when she saw me!

Both Carl and Ellie appear to know what *heart attack* means, because Carl rolls his eyes, and Ellie stiffens all her joints and shouts out:

—Mommy?

The phone starts ringing again. Barton ignores it, because he must calm Ellie down.

—No, not *your* mom, Ellie. *My* mom. The Grandma you never met, says Barton.

Carl squeezes both of Ellie's hands between his.

—And it's just an expression. It means my mom was really scared and worried, adds Barton. He begins laughing. Carl and Ellie press against each other, shoulder-to-shoulder.

—You shouldn't laugh, says Carl. It's not funny.

—I shouldn't. You're right. But I'm only laughing because I lived! That's what happens when you cheat death, kids. You laugh. I could've been killed. And then I wouldn't have met your mommy and you wouldn't have been born. That's why I'm laughing. I've cheated death more than once, you see?

—You shouldn't cheat, says Ellie.

Barton notices the tears slipping down both Ellie's cheeks.

—Ellie, don't cry. That's not why I told the story. I thought you'd think it was funny, how daddy's done a lot of silly things.

—It's not! says Ellie. It's *not* funny! The anger holds her tears in place.

—It's not fun...nee. It's cur...ray...zee, whispers Carl. Ellie slams a fist into Carl's shoulder.

Ellie wipes her wet cheeks. Carl manages a weak smile.

The doorbell rings, a series of ding-dongs, startling Ellie and Carl again. Carl begins to rise, but Barton waves him back down as he himself disengages from the La-Z-boy.

—You said it wasn't mom, Carl mutters. This wasn't any fun, anyway. C'mon, Ellie. He grabs Ellie's hand and yanks her towards the door.

—We don't know it's her, Carl, says Barton. He limps towards the door, blocking their way.

—I want to go, says Ellie.

Carl lets go of Ellie's hand and runs the other way, towards the large picture window that offers a view of the street below.

—Carl! Get away from the window! Barton snaps. His voice is like sandpaper in the children's ears. They freeze. Barton steps towards the window but is not nimble enough to avoid the corner of the couch, which he trips over, falling to the floor.

—Ah-ah-ah! he utters loudly through clenched teeth.

Ellie screams.

—Dad, are you OK? says Carl. Do you need help?

Barton lays still; his children approach slowly, one on each side of him. Ellie is crying again. Slowly he shifts weight so his dysfunctional hip is off the floor and he sits up.

—I'm sorry, says Ellie. He holds out his arms and embraces her. Carl slips away, back to the window.

—No, no, no, no, says Barton. Nothing to be sorry about, Ellie. I'm the one that's sorry. For the worst storytime ever! Can you please just give me a few more minutes? Please?

—There's people standing out front, says Carl, matter-of-factly. Ellie pulls away before Barton can react. She joins her brother at the window, presses her face against the glass, and returns quickly.

—Uh-huh, she says when she returns, allowing Barton to enfold her again. And mommy's car.

—And a police car, says Carl. Ellie nods her head in agreement. She releases herself from his embrace and grasps his hands in hers, tugging at them.

—Come look, daddy, beckons Ellie.

Barton, standing unsteadily, looks at his children, who are looking out the window. He is certain of what Sharon has convinced them: how she got the short end of the stick all these years; how miserable she had become living with a man who used physical pain to feed his misery. They must know, or sense, Barton thinks, that their mother is unhappy in an angry way, while he is unhappy in a just plain sad way.

He moves towards the edge of the window, so he is not visible to anyone outside. He tilts his head in an attempt to sightline the front door, to see who has been ringing the bell. Ellie keeps her face pinned to the glass. Carl stares at his father the way children might stare at a pile of delicately balanced wooden blocks on the verge of collapsing,

afraid that even the slightest touch will bring about the very event they were hoping to avoid. The look is enough to make Barton sigh—a deep, huge, total breath kind of sigh. He walks back to the center of the room and motions to the children by waving his arms in sweeping circles.

—See, Dad? says Carl, understanding that the pantomime is an invitation to return to the couch. I told you!

Ellie runs back and looks for the picture she had been holding before all the noises started. She finds it on the couch, sticking out between two cushions, and holds it like she was reading a menu. The two children sit politely still, legs mute, waiting.

The doorbell ding-dong-ing stops, and is replaced by loud, rhythmic *thwumps* coming from the building entrance at the base of the stairs. They rattle the double-hungs on the side of the Barton's apartment, each impact a hammer-strike between his eyebrows.

—OK. I guess time's up, eh? Why don't you both come here and get a big hug, says Barton, his voice cracking.

The anguished expression on Barton's face vanishes when Ellie and Carl, one on each side, embrace him. Their arms surround his waist, his strong arms fold over their shoulders. He releases them when he feels their grip loosen.

—There we go, he says softly. Mmmm-mmm! If it's OK with you guys, I'm going to go right back to my chair. Why don't you take the box with you? Lots of great pictures in there. No? That's all right. I don't mind. Man, but that banging is annoying! I don't think that's your mom knocking, though—ha!

Ellie and Carl gather in front of the apartment door that opens to the flight of stairs leading down to the building entrance. They wait, feet shuffling and fingers twitching, for Barton's approving nod. The specter of his wife—a ghost image—appears

between the children and himself, holding a large timepiece, the kind train conductors used to pull out of their vests in the prior century.

—Fuck you! whispers Barton aloud, easing back into the La-Z-Boy. The apparition dissolves as he makes several painful readjustments.

Ellie and Carl understand their father is not referring to them, because he is facing the window. They see a pretty picture frame filled with pure, welcoming blue, exquisite and smooth, while the single note in Barton's head has raged into a crescendo played by all the instruments in the orchestra, the lingering final note of a symphony.

—Sorry about the cussword, Ellie, says Barton, his voice rising above the note. Just talking to myself. Never mind. Go ahead, then. I'll just blow you a kiss from here. G'bye, honey. See ya later, big guy. You go on down now and be with your mom. Be with her. She loves you. Be with her. Go on now, Carl. The door'll close when you leave OK? It'll lock automatic. I'll be fine. Go!

Ellie and Carl open the door hurriedly and run down the stairs; Ellie holds her arms above her head as she bounces down the steps, and Barton smiles when he notices that she is clutching the photograph in her right hand, the one of her as an infant in his carrier. It is the past, floating above the misery, in his child's tiny hand. The door slowly closes, cutting off his view; Barton is startled when it slams shut behind them, the spring lock snapping into place. The banging stops.

Barton bends over and stretches under the La-Z-Boy for the paper bag. He holds the bag in his lap for several seconds before reaching in.

Although he cannot see down to ground level from this position, he can see the tops of a few trees and the cloudless sky. The blue feels more intense, deep and resonant. For his children, it is the blue of innocence and peace and endless possibilities. For

Barton, it is the blue of the day of the IED outside Basrah, when a spray of red dotted, then covered, then stained and altered forever Barton's perception of the sky.

When he closes his eyes, the terrible blue sky diminished in volume, and he pictures Ellie smiling, eager to show Sharon daddy's photograph. *I was a good father*, he tells himself.

He does not see his children climbing into their mother's van, gliding noiselessly past the empty police car. He cannot see the men leaving the ground floor entrance, dragging the portable battering ram. What is important is they all will be far away when he puts an end to the nightmare that had become as solid and fixed as the cement and stone and brick of the apartment building that encases him, as tormenting as the anguished, never-ending sound of the terrible blue sky.

It would take the force of an explosion to free him.