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Alexis Harris
Taylor University

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The Fall of Adam

By: Alexis Harris

As a kid, Ma said I would run and jump at the sky. I always believed I could touch it or bounce up into it. I guess you could say I had a restless imagination. Sometimes I'd stuff mud in a bowl and set it outside in the sun. I told Ma it was 'baking'. When it was finished 'baking,' I would take the grass and leaves I'd collected and dust them on the top. Ma said I called them sprinkles. She tells me how I rode my bike up, down, and around the old gravel drive a hundred times a day. She says I was excellent at building Legos and that I loved to run with Martin, my old dog.

Ma tells me a lot of stories about things I did when I was little. I don't remember much of it though... I just can't fathom the idea of feeling alive. All sensation is numb from my neck down. Sometimes it feels like something is tingling to life, but I am still broken. In every story Ma told, she made me sound free and joyful. But I'm caged. How could I be that free? How could I have ever been that free? I'm confined to a coffin with the same measurements as my skin. No movement, no life, is allowed for me. It's even too hard to speak, so none of my thoughts can be justified in open air. I don't know if I've spoken in years. I am damned to be nothing more than an issue and a void until it all ends.

Ma says the accident happened when I was fifteen. I think she's lying. Sometimes I think she fibs to give me more hope that I had a life before it happened, but I don't blame her for telling me lies. I know she just wants me to be as happy as I can be. But she doesn't know how incapable I am of feeling happy.

The doctors say it was the fall that paralyzed me. They say it stole my memories, too. They say I hit my spine and head on the same root; though, I don't know how that's physically possible. If you ask me, the fall wasn't what damned me. I damned myself. Some form of me around the age of fifteen climbed a tree hoping to touch that tall sky, and he failed. My own imagination pulled me down harder than gravity. So, the doctors can say what they please, but I know I didn't deserve to be normal when I couldn't let childish dreams go.

So, every day now consisted of the same activities. Ma got home from her shift at the hospital around 6:30am. She dismissed the night nurse after she checked on me through the small

crack between the door and the frame. Ma thought she was being quiet, but in all actuality, it was like having a wrecking ball slam through the kitchen. I'm used to the noise now, and I fell asleep for at least a few more hours before she trudged towards my room. Ma woke me up at 9:30am every single day. She used all her strength and lifted my helpless, dangling body out of bed and sat me in my chair. My eyes always darted away from the clock near my bed. I already knew it was 9:30am, but I didn't want to know the day. I didn't want to know how long it had been since the accident. Hell was hard enough without having a clock to remind you it's eternal.

I tried to focus on Ma's face as she strapped the buckle across my lap. Sometimes I expected her to look different or change overnight, but she always looked tired and too skinny. I could tell she gave up on dying her hair because every day the roots were showing a darker brown than the rest, the lines under her eyes had turned into wrinkling bags, and her thin lips were set into a bored, dazed line. Nevertheless, Ma's eyes were the same. They always looked tough and wise. I think that's what I liked most about Ma. She didn't shy away from a challenge, no matter how taxing it was.

After her average mumbled good morning, Ma would begin to wheel me from my drab monotone tan bedroom into the dim lit, narrow hallway. We trudged forward until my chair got caught on little strings of tan, matted carpet that should have been torn up. It was repulsing to look at. If all I got were my eyes, I'd much rather see tile or wood.

"Freaking carpet." Ma huffed as she lightly rocked my chair loose. I think I almost fell forward because at some point I saw that her arm was wrapped around my shoulders. I couldn't feel her arm.

When the chair was free from the carpet, we turned into the bathroom, which was just as ugly as usual. The whole room was drenched in a bright, white light, which seemed to be heightened as it hit the baby blue countertops and chipped gold fixtures. Ma began to brush my teeth swiftly. I could feel it happening, but I didn't do anything to help until I gagged on toothpaste as it slipped down my throat. Though, even then, I welcomed the sensation. She proceeded to grab the water that was waiting in a cup and pour it down my throat so I could breathe again. The rest of the routine wasn't as life threatening as she combed my stringy brown hair away from my eyes revealing the bright blue color that made me sick. Just like Mom, I looked older. My nose and face had become long, and my skin looked tired. I looked like I had

experienced everything, yet I knew the things my face didn't reveal. I knew the broken bits and the naive parts of that still lingered under my ruptured core.

Reaching in front of me, Ma grabbed a wet rag and ran it over my face. She then doused me with a body spray I never particularly liked. To me, it smelled like trees and onions, which wasn't an appealing combination. I never huffed or protested during the bathroom routine. It just didn't feel worth an argument. The longer I had to stare at the bathroom, the more I was convinced I was dead.

After the torturous five minutes in the bathroom, I was wheeled into the living room. It was a fitting name because I hardly ever left this room, this room was my life. Ma wheeled me to my usual spot, the left corner near the old blue recliner and a window that overlooked the drive and the big oak tree. She turned on her favorite morning show "The Talk" and delivered the blue bowl holding my mushy brown breakfast. I don't know what food it is, but I liked to assume it was oatmeal. It was also the only thing that slid down my throat easily. Ma fed me as she intently watched "The Talk" but every once in a while, she will try to make conversation.

She would say things like, "Adam, you're so lucky! Some guys who come in from a fall are brain dead!"

Every time she said this, it was like a punch in the gut. She didn't know how much I wished the fall had left me brain dead. Nevertheless, she would tell a story like this every day. I don't think Ma realized it but she told me these things not to make me feel better, but to give herself some satisfaction and peace. Life could have been worse for us, for her, and she liked to remind herself of that.

After she finished feeding me, Ma gave me an onslaught of medication. I didn't know what they prevented or helped, but there's always ten pills. Two small white ones, three green ones, a lavender one, and four blue pills, that varied in shape and size. My body always tried to reject them as Ma dropped them into the back of my throat. I felt each pill pinball around until the water forced it down deeper into my broken core. Sometimes I wished Ma would forget my medication. My body didn't want them anyway, but Ma ignored my gags and coughs as she launched the next one into my body.

From that moment on, I just sat.

My days didn't vary much unless Ma called my state appointed tutor, Sherri. After the state of Alabama said my health was "too taxing" on the teachers at Hoover High School, I was homebound. Though, Sherri was only allowed to come when I was having a "good day" which actually meant wherever Ma could handle her. She was a nice woman and a great teacher, but she had the largest southern personality I could ever remember witnessing. Alabama had a lot of southern personality, too. Though, Ma didn't hate her for her southern disposition. No, Ma loathed her for her relationship with my Pa. It was a weird dynamic, knowing she was my Pa's fiancé, but I still liked her most of the time. Sherri was the only person who still tried to believe I could think and produce quality knowledge. Nobody else in my family or in my town thought of me as a brain, just a broken body. Sherri saw past that and tried to help. I liked that.

So, Sherri would show up at noon at least twice a week when Ma was in a moderate mood. Today was a lucky day because Ma called last minute, and Sherri was completely free. I would gladly try to learn if it meant escaping the persecution of watching "The Talk" for another minute. About when the blond host started crying, there was a loud knock on the door. Sherri let herself in with a swiftness I used to have.

"GOOOOOOD MORNINGGG!" She said as if she were calling a pig.

Ma and I both sat there, not responding. My reason was justified and Ma, well, she would say it was justified. Sherri gave Ma a sweet southern belle smile and wave. Ma held up her coffee cup, middle finger slipping up behind. Sherri didn't see, I did.

She bounced her way toward me. I tried to smile, I don't know if it worked. My gaze slipped to the matted carpet, feeling ashamed for trying something I knew I couldn't really accomplish. Her yellow shoes danced into my vision, contrasting drastically with the tan and dark stains near her feet. I knew why Pa liked her. She was vibrant and alive. Pa always liked people who could go and live. After the accident, that wasn't me.

"Adam!" Sherri smiled, her drawl pulled on my name, "So good to see you!" She knew I couldn't respond, so she turned to Ma, "How has he been?"

Ma's gaze stayed on the TV as she pridefully sipped her coffee and looked disinterested, "Fine. Normal."

I could have laughed at the idea of being normal. Just the word resonated wrong in my brain. Nothing about my life or me was normal and never would be. I had no friends- the state wouldn't let me attend a real high school- I didn't have a real life. I think Ma understood that, but she wanted to piss Sherri off.

“Do you feel good?” Sherri asked. I knew she was hoping I'd respond, but talking took a lot of work and focus. I didn't feel like wasting my effort on a “yea” moment.

“Well, play teacher for as long as you'd like. I'm going to nap.” Ma said.

Sherri didn't look twice.

Not waiting for my answer any longer, Sherri got up and wheeled me towards the kitchen. She had a louder step than Ma. Even on the carpet you could hear a slight thud as her shoe hit the floor. The kitchen looked similar to everything else in the house – old. The crème lument countertops blended with the tan cabinets and white walls. The fixtures were a gold finish that had half worn into a brassy brown after years of neglect. I looked away from the broken parts of the home and looked at the large oak table that we approached.

Sherri always parked me at the closest end and then started to sort through all the supplies she brought for the day. We mostly went over English and Social studies because Math and Science weren't really of interest to me. I liked words. Ma said I wanted to be a writer before the accident. Now? I didn't think that was possible. Speaking was a challenge. I would tell myself to say a sentence out loud, and the message would either be received or completely lost, or just garbled. Talking also gave me a headache, and I didn't want to be numb and in pain. That just felt stupid.

“I brought some new stories for us to look over today and some words with grammar rules.” Sherri smiled. “The fun stuff!”

I did like the sound of that. Sherri dove right into the lesson, slowly reading aloud a story from the New Yorker. It was good. She read slow so I could follow along. I tried to memorize the words and the way they looked on the page. They looked like they were meant to be published one day with each word perfectly placed. Sherri kept reading until the end. She looked over at me and smiled. I don't know if she expected me to respond or not. Answer was, she

didn't. She started to talk about the way the author addressed human condition by referencing a hot dog vendor and how death wasn't the best option. I wasn't sure how she got to that conclusion. Sometimes I wanted to retort to what she was saying because, for some, death was a better option, and hot dog vendors didn't represent the human condition. Nevertheless, I let her continue. Though, I wish I had used my one moment of strength to speak because she connected the story to change.

“Change is so good, Adam.” She smiled. “Change makes people better, and stronger, and wiser, and happier, and all sorts of stuff. I mean, if I hadn't met Max where would I be?” She paused, “Sorry, Adam. That's unprofessional. He's your Pa. I always just connect him to things then I can't stop myself and you're just so easy to talk to!”

Everything she said hurt. Sometimes I wondered how much my fall hurt and then she talks like that and I realized, the fall didn't hurt. She could say what she liked about change being “good” but I hated when she talked about Pa. He was never here. Pa came once a month, maybe twice if he was feeling obligated and he'd sit and stare at the TV, argue with Ma, and do the insurance claims. So, I couldn't agree with Sherri. Change wasn't good if I couldn't try out for the high school football team like Pa had trained me to do. Change wasn't good if I learned information three times slower than the average person. Change wasn't good if I was so “easy to talk to” but struggled to respond. Change wasn't good if it meant life was a series of unfelt sensations. Change didn't make me stronger, it made me weak.

Sherri would never know what I just thought. She stared blankly back at me with no intention of wanting to know. That's the thing about people with voices, they think they know everything because they can say it. There was nothing wrong with Sherri besides her tendency to talk. I couldn't yell that at her because it would come out in stuttered phrases that break and fracture until people ignored me and laughed. I was a broken man so how could my brain not be broken too? That's what everyone else thought. For the first time since meeting Sherri, I think she believed what everyone else thought too.

“Well, on the topic of your Pa, he is comin' tonight. I know its sudden but he will be here 'round six!” she said, “He is really happy to see you. I tell him all about your progress, and well, he's proud.”

That was a lie. I don't think Sherri had lied to me before. Why would she lie now? Pa had never once said he was proud of me. He'd never say it after the accident either. Pa would only say "the boy's broken" and trudge out of the room. Sherri broke my thoughts with a list of words I looked at but didn't really pay attention too. It all happened to fast.

Sherri finished the lesson early. I think she could tell I didn't care. She wheeled me back to my corner and my chair jostled into the marks that were engrained into the carpet.

"Good job today and have a good time tonight, Adam." She stood and walked to where Ma groggily glared at her, "Karren. Max wanted me to tell you he'll be here tonight to be with Adam."

Ma's face didn't change, "Can't he call and tell me that he's coming?"

Sherri straightened her back, "Well I am here so I am telling you, Karren. He didn't need to call."

"I don't really like little girls telling me what to do, but while we're at it, how's the man whore doing?" Ma's facial expression didn't change but her eye's danced in delight. She really reveled in pissing Sherri off and honestly, it was kind of entertaining.

"Now Karren, I really don't appreciate that. I understand you have issues with me but that is flat out rude! And with your boy sitting rig-" Ma raised her pointer finger.

"Honey, look. I know you're young and you 'love' my ex-husband but let's be honest, neither me or Adam really like Max. So, I can say what I please." Ma turned to the TV, "And don't come in here playing victim in my house again."

Sherri's face was red, "My Lord, Karren! Have some class." Sherri started walking to the door, "I understand why Max divorced you." Sherri opened the door and walked out, she didn't turn and smile like usual, she just slammed the door and walked out.

Ma snickered, "Me too, hon'."

At six sharp, there was a rapping on the door. We didn't get up to answer it. Mom didn't care and only the risen Christ Jesus telling me to rise and go forth, could get me walking to open the door.

After a moment's pause Pa walked in. He looked different every time I saw him. His hair was showing flecks of silver, his eyes were drawn and tired, his skin was more tanned than usual, but his eyes were still a gentile blue that reminded me of the sky. Pa wore his usual pin stripe blue and white dress shirt, tucked into his freshly ironed black slacks that were tied together with his black leather belt and sleek dress shoes. He walked in looking out of place in our drab, monotone home. Everything about Pa screamed high class whereas Ma and I belted, average.

I always thought of things I would say to him when he came over. I'd rehearse it in my head a hundred times over and built up my courage but when I saw him, I went blank. He just stood there, looking normal, not like Satan's minion but like a man. He looked so normal and I realized I couldn't tear him apart, he was Pa.

"Max. I cannot tell you how happy I am to have you in my lovely home." Ma said.

Pa rolled his eyes, "Save it, Karren. Also, while we're on the note of sarcasm, would you mind being easier on Sherri? She is trying."

I knew Pa had said the wrong thing when Ma leaned forward, "Am I making everything hard? Really Max? Spend some time listening to miss Bama perfect speak like she's a princess and shake her little Roll tide pom-poms in every one's face. It's not easy and someone's gotta teach her how to grow up? I mean she's like twenty, right?"

Pa looked bored, "She's thirty-three Karren. And I really don't feel like arguing right now, I had a long day at work."

"Then why are you here?" Ma asked.

This would be the perfect time for him to say "to see my son" or "because I wanted to." I waited for him to speak but he reached in his back pocket and grabbed his iPhone. I knew it wasn't just to be. Some part of me hoped he'd still say it. He started to walk towards me and he smiled that familiar smile that made me feel a little safer.

"Hi, bud." He said, "You look like you're doing well."

My heart sank. I knew why he was here. I wanted to scream and kick him.

“I’m gonna do some insurance stuff, is that all good?” He kept smiling but I didn’t feel any better.

Pa opened his Medicare app and typed in some numbers. He asked Ma if I’d had any seizures or choking fits, she said no but she looked like she wanted to kill him. He went through the expense log and turned to me.

“You’re really darn expensive kid. I should’ve cut that freaking tree down before you got big enough to climb it! Ha!” He stood up, still looking at his phone. I wanted to cry. I hadn’t cried since the accident.

“Today...September 17th, 2017,” Pa mumbled under his breath before he turned to Ma, “Karren what was the date of the accident?”

“July 15th, 2011.” Ma said as she studied my face. I studied her eyes. They looked strong. Pa nodded and mumbled again, “Birthday...” he looked up, “Big 21 coming up soon bud! Ha!”

My stomach sank. It had been six years since the accident. I had been trapped for six years in this body. I was still doing high school academics, memorizing words I couldn’t use, with no friends, a family that didn’t care, no life, I had nothing. I felt numb. For the first time since the accident my brain felt sensationless and heavy. I wasn’t angry or sad or hopeful or morbid, I was numb for the first time from my toes to my brain.

Pa pulled his camera up on his phone, “Give me a handsome smile, Adam!”

He took pictures of my condition every few months. Three of my face, four from each side, a front view, a back view, and a picture of me in my chair for pity points. I felt like a car getting appraised after a bad accident and I could hear the catch line in my head, “Snap n’ Save!”

Pa took the final picture and submitted them to the company. He smiled, I didn’t feel safe. I didn’t feel anything. For the first time today, I shifted my eyes outside at the old oak tree, I studied the exposed roots, and I tried to remember what life was like out there. I tried to remember what running felt like, and leaping and rolling and grabbing. I thought about it until

my head was spinning. My brain was completely numb and trapped in this body, but I could at least try to remember a life without a shitty ending.

I'll never be sure that what happened next was real, but for a split second, something in my body resuscitate. Small wildfire sprouted along my left arm. I wasn't sure what was happening until a heavy burden was lifted off my limb. The dead weight that had been resting on the armrest cushion for over six years had vanished.

For a split second, I realized my arm had twitched. I scanned Ma and Pa's faces, neither had noticed.

I didn't say anything.