

Mississippi Pearl

Some of you might remember my sister, Kelly Holmsted. At fourteen, she made the papers when she pried open an American pearly freshwater mussel from Lake Pepin and pulled out a perfect white sphere nearly the size of a cherry; the largest Mississippi pearl ever found. A dealer offered her five thousand dollars for it, but she refused. He offered seven thousand, and again, she refused.

“Think of the tuition it would cover,” our father said.

“You can save it for your wedding,” Mom said. “Think of the honeymoon you could have. You could fly somewhere.”

I was only eight at the time, and the answer seemed simple. “I’ve got marbles bigger than that,” I said. “Take the money.”

But Kelly wouldn’t part with it. She brushed a lock of light auburn hair from her eyes. “How can I sell something so beautiful? So perfect?”

She kept the pearl secure in a small black velvet pouch attached to a silver necklace Mom had given her for her thirteenth birthday. Although the chain never left her neck, she often lifted

the pouch from her deepening cleavage and carefully plucked the pearl from its folds to feel the cool, smooth hardness in the palm of her hand. She'd stare at it, mouth slightly parted, eyes filled with the pearl's reflection. I'd have to shout to get her attention.

She let me hold it only once, watching my every move, as if I might try to steal it if she so much as blinked. I tossed it in the air just to see how it felt to catch something so valuable.

She nearly choked on her own gasp. "You're done," she said and pried the pearl from my sweaty palm.

But as careful as she was, vigilant to a fault, she lost it only five weeks later.

She stood outside the screen door crying, both hands pressed against the wire mesh, her khaki shorts and white blouse muddied and soaked with rain. Several of her fingernails were broken, and her forearms and knees were scraped and bleeding. "It's gone," she said through the screen.

Mom hesitated only a moment, looking her daughter over and swallowing back a look of anguish that frightened me. She yanked open the door and took Kelly's hand. "Oh, honey -- what happened?"

My big sister didn't seem so big anymore as she stepped across the threshold and collapsed into Mom's arms. Dad and I watched stupidly while she bawled, until Mom finally coaxed her into the bathroom and shut the door. Running bath water muffled any words that were said.

Later, this is what Mom told me;

Kelly dropped the pearl while walking home. A rush of rainwater swept it into the gutter and washed it down a storm-drain. Kelly bloodied her skin by lying on gravel and broken glass trying to reach through the rusty grate for it. And she's very upset about it, Michael, so don't

you dare bring it up to her. Understand?

I nodded. I'd wanted to ask about the small bruises on Kelly's neck, but Mom's eyes insisted that the subject was closed.

And it was.

But that was over thirty years ago.

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It's early March and I'm ready for winter to be over, especially after the white-knuckle drive to my parents' new house on Lake Krenshaw. I'm surprised at how big the place is, surprised they could afford a lake home like this, but I guess that's what you get for being thrifty your whole life. My wife Corinne and daughter Amanda are home with the flu, and a big part of me wishes I stayed with them. But Kelly's visiting from Nebraska, and it's rare that I get to see her.

Mom's got peppermint tea on. Dad and I munch on homemade chocolate chip cookies. Kelly's husband Bruce stands at the bay window scratching his neck and draining a glass of bourbon.

"Nice view," he says, staring at the snow swirling in the darkness.

His sarcasm grows more pronounced with each drink that slides past his well-oiled tongue. I've only been here thirty minutes, and I'm already sick to death of him. But instead of giving into the urge to tell him to shut the hell up, I ignore him and divert my parents' attention.

"Am I crazy, or does anyone else recall a junked up Cadillac sitting out on Lake Pepin when I was a kid? Folks took bets on when it would fall through the ice?"

“You’re crazy,” Dad says around a mouthful of cookie.

“I remember that,” says Mom. “You’d buy a ticket and write down the date and time you thought it would fall through the ice. Sure I remember that.”

“You think a car could still drive out there?” Kelly asks.

Bruce grimaces. “Are you nuts? You’d fall through in a second.” He swirls the melting ice in his glass. “I could use another drink, Kel.”

Her shaking is worse than ever. It’s mainly her head, and we’d feared Parkinson’s, but her doctor insists it’s just stress.

She starts to stand, but I wave her down. “I’ll get it.” I pour his drink and set it on the table with a loud thunk.

Stress.

“Russian Park,” Dad says.

My mind back-pedals. “What?”

“That’s where they put the cars in at. Russian Park. Drained the oil and gas so they wouldn’t leak. Attached a chain to the axle so once they broke through they could winch them back in.”

Cars on the ice. Back to that again.

“They stopped doing it once kids started spray-painting cuss words on the exterior. Ken Olson said they found used condoms in the seats. Remember Ken Olson?” he asks.

Mom nods. Her and Dad’s hair have turned the same shade of silver, and it’s already hard to remember it any other way.

Bruce finishes his drink with a loud slurp and comes back for another.

When I arrived that day, the ice out on Lake Krenshaw looked rippled and distressed.

The fishing shanties had been hauled off, except for one that broke through two weeks ago and refroze half in and half out of the lake.

“I bet you could drive out there,” Kelly says. “As cold as it’s been lately.”

“Take the goddamn truck out there and try it, then,” Bruce says. “But when you break through the ice, I’m going after the truck before I try saving your sorry ass.”

“Bruce,” Kelly says. It’s just the one word, but we all catch the inflection she gives it.

Bruce’s eyes harden. He’s a piece of work, all right; a blustering, unkempt, alcohol slurping piece of work. “What?”

Kelly ignores him. The shaking of her head seems like an attempt to hold in her anger.

But Bruce won’t let it go. His lips twitch. “What?”

Kelly nods at his drink. “Take it easy.”

He grunts and pours himself another.

The intensity of Dad’s breathing increases through his nose. Mom searches the cupboard and pulls down a container of Tylenol, pops two in her mouth and follows it with a swig of tea.

“Enough, already,” Kelly says.

“Enough what?”

All five-foot-three of Kelly stands and grabs the drink from his hand. She dumps the contents into the sink. “Stop embarrassing me.”

Bruce grabs another glass, slams it on the counter and fills it to the top. “Me embarrass you?”

Funny thing is, now I want a stiff drink. I want to numb the shit I’m hearing. I want to make it easier to deal with this stress.

Huh -- stress.

Listen, stress is driving behind a semi spewing slush on your windshield. Stress is your baby burning with fever. What makes Kelly's head shake, doctor, isn't stress.

"Bruce," Kelly says.

"What?"

How many times have I imagined my arm uncoiling like a snake, my fist connecting with the bridge of Bruce's nose, the feel of his cartilage and bone crumbling beneath my knuckles?

"Bruce!"

How many times?

But tonight, his hand flies out. Connects with Kelly's cheek and nose. Makes a sound so awful, the sound of skin hitting skin, and damn it, I could sure use a drink, I could sure use permission to cover my ears, close my eyes and chant "nah nah nah" loud enough to take away that sound, that sickening sound that no one should ever have to hear.

Kelly's face turns bright red. Blood trickles from her nose. Her eyes grow wide and wet.

The rage, the anger I feel, immobilizes me. I look at my mother. My father. Mom's frozen, too. Dad says, "Hey," and starts to stand, but he stops. Frozen. It's so foreign to us. So unreal. See, this isn't our world, this isn't our life.

We sit and watch like deer caught in headlights. Why can't I speak? Why can't I do something?

Then Mom, God bless her, rolls her shoulders back, sears Bruce with her eyes, and says, "We do not hit in this house." In her voice are forty-some years of teaching crowded elementary school classrooms.

Bruce grunts, grabs a pack of Camels off the kitchen counter and walks out the front door into the cold, slamming the door behind him. We let out a collective breath.

Stress, huh?

Mom wets a washcloth and hands it to Kelly. Dad drops onto the sofa. His eyes find refuge in a basketball game. Kelly wipes the blood off her nose and tears from the corners of her eyes. Mom takes the washcloth from her and rinses it out in the sink. I wonder if Dad sees the game, or does he still see Bruce's hand striking his daughter?

"C'mon, Kel," I finally say. "Let's go watch the snow."

I take her hand and lead her out to the screened-in porch beneath the deck out back. Wicker furniture stands covered and stacked against the walls. Cold wind blows through the screens and stirs up the smell of freshly stained wood. I feel light-headed and hollow. "How often does he hit you?" I ask.

Her trembling stops for a moment. Her eyes fix on the lake, on the dark pools of water forming on top of the ice. "He's slapped me a few times," she says. "When I've done something dumb."

I stare at her. Crumble inside as her head starts shaking again. "God, Kelly. You're not dumb."

She wipes at her eyes with the heel of her hand. "Gotta be dumb to still be with him, don't I?"

"You can't live like this." The words come out in ragged syllables, and I almost choke on them. "You've got to leave him."

The snow and wind stops as if someone's flipped a switch and the moon appears as a dirty talc haze behind emaciated clouds.

Kelly's cheeks are streaked with the trails of hot tears.

"Kelly? Look at me."

She looks, her lips pressed tightly together, breath forced slowly in and out through her nose. Then she looks out at the lake. I follow her eyes. The ice is covered with dirty slush and deepening pools of black water.

I put my hand on her shoulder. "Come stay with us."

She smiles, her eyes still on the ice, head trembling. Then the smile disappears, and she says quietly, "I don't think Bruce would handle that very well." She turns away. "I better go check on him. Make sure he hasn't passed out in the snow."

Inside, Mom is sitting with her elbows propped on the dining room table, the backs of her hands supporting her chin. She looks her sixty-four years and then some. Why is it in times of distress that a person's age really shows? I gently rub her back.

"It's hard to watch that," she says.

"I know."

"I don't know what to do." She rubs her forehead with the palm of her hand.

"We'll think of something," I say. An empty promise, I know.

Dad's never been one to hold back tears, whether from a movie or a beautiful song or news of a dying child. Tonight is no different. He dabs at his eyes with the handkerchief he keeps in his pocket. I lean over the back of the couch and hug him. "Love you, Dad."

"Love you, too, Mike."

"We'll think of something," I say again. He's worn Old Spice for as long as I can remember, and the familiar smell fills my nostrils as I kiss the top of his head.

"I'll kill the bastard," he says.

"We'll think of something," I whisper.

I decide to check on Kelly. It's been fifteen minutes, and she still hasn't come in. I find

her out front, sitting on the bed of her pick-up truck, legs swinging over the edge like a little girl. For a moment, I think she's shivering from the cold, but the thought, the wish, quickly leaves, and I realize it's just the shaking. Bruce lies on his side next to Kelly, a thick green blanket covering him. For just a moment, I wonder if she's killed him, but then I hear a loud, muffled snore.

"Remember that pearl?" Kelly asks without looking up.

The question catches me off guard. "The pearl?"

She watches Bruce, listens to his drunken snoring. "I lied about losing it," she says. "I never dropped it. It never fell down a sewer drain."

It's strange how snow can look like stars drifting down from the heavens, stars you've been told your whole life are massive balls of gas and fire. Then they land on your skin, merely pin-pricks of cold.

"But Mom said –"

"I know what she said."

"You came home crying. You were all scraped up."

Her eyes shine. She rubs her hand over Bruce's thigh, an act of affection I can't reconcile. "You remember Carl Johanson?"

At first I don't, but then I do. He used to carry packs of Juicy Fruit on him, and when he'd come over, he'd always toss me a pack. "Sure."

"We were making out in the woods behind Jenson's orchard. You know? But – I didn't – I didn't want him to..."

She stops swinging her legs and becomes still.

"Want him to what?" I ask. Then I get it. "Oh." Then I get it some more. "Oh. Jesus."

She leans forward and puts her face in her hands. Her body heaves with sobs. It still hurts to hear someone cry. I put my arm around her. "I'm so sorry. Kelly. Jesus."

"I swallowed it," she says, her voice cracking.

"Swallowed it?"

"The pearl." She looks up. Her eyes are wet polished agates. "I'd never had something so beautiful, and after he left -- I needed something beautiful inside of me."

The entire sky falls in growing white flakes. It melts as soon as it touches us and turns our hair to cold wet straw.

"It went down easily," she says. "I was down on the ground, you know? Rotten apples all around, and sticks poking my arms and knees. I'd never felt so dirty."

She puts her head on my shoulder. "It went down so easily," she says again. "I wanted it to stay inside of me, to dissolve, but it never did. Isn't that strange? Shouldn't it dissolve? So every few days I swallowed it again." She looks down at her husband. "He's never seen it."

Maybe it's the darkness, the cold, the hypnotic swirl of snow. Maybe all we need is some light. Some warmth. "Come inside," I say. "It's too cold out here."

"You go ahead. I won't be long."

The way she says it...

Bruce is dead to the world, his tender white throat bare to the elements. I watch Kelly, look in her eyes. Try to see past them into the workings of her mind.

She chuckles. "I'm too damn tired to take an axe to the son of a bitch," she says.

I lean over and hug her tightly. "Okay," I say.

As I go inside, the snow grows heavy and wet, hesitating toward rain. Dad dozes on the

couch with the basketball game droning on. I see a strip of light beneath the bathroom door, and hear the slosh of water; Mom's only vice -- her nightly bath.

I don't look forward to the drive home. With this weather and the way the roads are, it will take at least an hour. I consider spending the night, but with Corinne and Amanda sick, I should get home and be there for them in the morning. Pretty lousy of me to have left them. I envision Amanda crawling into bed with Corinne, their feverish bodies dampening the sheets, communicating their misery to each other through fits of coughing. But damn it, it's so rare that I see Kelly anymore.

Of course, I wish Bruce had never laid a hand on Kelly. I wish he'd never insulted her or berated her or ignored all of her birthdays. I wish he'd never met my sister. I wish he'd never been born. But I also wish that Mom and Dad hadn't seen him hit her. I wish they could remain ignorant of Kelly's situation and go to sleep believing their children live happy lives. They shouldn't have to spend their golden years worrying about us. I kiss Dad lightly on the forehead, careful not to wake him, then don my coat and gloves. I decide not to disturb Mom, either. I jot a note saying I'll call them in the morning. Maybe we can figure out what to do then. I head out into the cold, damp night, looking for Kelly to say goodbye.

As I walk out to the driveway, I notice two things simultaneously.

One, Kelly's pick-up truck is gone, and two, there's an envelope tucked beneath one of the windshield wipers of my SUV. When I pull it from beneath the wiper and feel the hard lump between my fingers, my heart lodges in my throat. I take off a glove and pull out a smooth, round bead, something I've held only once before.

The largest Mississippi pearl ever found.

Kelly's pearl.

I see her jagged handwriting on the back of a gas receipt that flutters from the envelope like a dead leaf to the ground. I pick it up.

For you, it says. I don't need it anymore. Love you, little bro.

Kelly.

I try to swallow my heart back into place. Tire tracks veer off the driveway and cross the lawn to the back of the house. I don't think to go inside and wake up Mom and Dad. I don't think to call 911. I only think to run.

My leather shoes soak through as they splash through the slush of tire tracks. The snow has turned to rain, and the rain feels like cold bullets on the back of my neck. The tracks continue across the back lawn to the lake.

I hear ice pop and groan. Catch a whiff of exhaust. Two bright red eyes in the distance grow slowly smaller. Tail lights. Their glow briefly illuminates the half-sunk shanty less than a hundred yards out. Even at that distance, the crunch of tires on dirty ice is audible over the crackle of icy rain.

I try to scream Kelly's name, but there's nothing in me, no air. I struggle to fill my lungs, to suck oxygen from the rain-drenched atmosphere. My throat burns.

If the ice can hold a pick-up truck, it can hold me.

I step out onto the ice. Slip and fall. But I find my voice.

"Kelly!"

I rise, soaked and freezing, and force myself to run again.

"Kelly!"

Brake lights glow fiercely as the truck stops. A figure sits up slowly in the truck bed. In the hellish reflection of red light, I recognize Bruce's sodden shape.

My foot breaks through the ice and the freezing black water feels like sharp fingernails digging into my shin.

I've never felt so desperate, so helpless. This can't be happening. This isn't real, is it? I have to save her.

I pull my leg from the hole and limp forward.

Bruce falls off the pick-up bed and lays immobile, face up on the ice. I see the back of Kelly's head silhouetted against the glow of the dashboard. She sits in the driver's seat completely still. Even her shaking has stopped.

I stumble, slide, lurch and run. The truck is thirty yards away. "Get out," I yell. The pearl is hard and cold against my thigh, pressing through the wet pocket of my jeans.

Kelly's head turns slightly.

"Please," I whimper.

I hear a click. A truck door opening. But it opens only an inch. I hear a loud groan, pitiful, awful, and at first I think it's Bruce regaining consciousness. Kelly must hear it, too, because the truck door clicks again, and I realize Kelly's shut herself back in. The groan grows louder, inhuman, and I stop as I realize it's not coming from Bruce. It's the ice.

With a sharp crack, the walls of the half-sunk shanty split and collapse. Its mass rises, shifts, then disappears from the surface. Kelly's eyes shine briefly in the rearview mirror, two glistening pearls infinitely more perfect and pure than the thing in my pocket. She lifts her hand and waves to me, slowly. Then with a dull splintering noise I'll never forget, a noise I still hear when everything else is silent, the truck jerks forward and down. Bruce rolls in after it and disappears.

I stop running, and when I scream, it doesn't even sound like me. The blood in my veins

feels like slivers of hot glass. I'm frozen in place. I have to help her. I can't help her. That's Kelly, that's my sister. Oh God Kelly what did you do, what were you thinking, why did you drive out onto the ice?

Swim. Kelly, swim. Get out of the truck and swim.

Maybe she's swimming to the surface. Maybe right now she's swimming to the surface and she's going to get out and she's going to be okay. I can still see the faint glow of tail and brake lights beneath the surface. Maybe she's --

I hear something, like birch-wood popping in a hot fire. I realize it's the ice cracking beneath me. The entire surface swells as if the lake is breathing.

I don't know what to do. What can I do?

Oh God, Kelly.

I find myself slowly backing up.

The tail lights fade beneath the heaving ice.

I want to lie down. Curl up in a ball and suck my thumb. I fear my body will never stop trembling. My fingers are raw and stiff. What can I do?

I keep backing up. Why can't I stop? Why can't I force myself forward? Why can't I save my sister? I keep backing up until the ice stops moving, until the black and gray horizon becomes still.

What can I do?

I slide the pearl out from the cold wet folds of my pocket. I kiss it. Hold it up against the hazy glow of an emerging moon. It's almost a perfect match.

The rain stops. What can I do?

Sometimes we all need something pure and perfect within us.

So this is what I do.

I tilt back my head, open my mouth and let the pearl drop.

I try to hold onto the memory of Kelly's rare smile and perfect jewel eyes as it slides easily down my throat.