

HOURGLASS

BY

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**THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL
PRIZE IN FICTION**

He bit her finger almost clean off. Not the whole thing, just the top part, right below the nail. Tooth marks in the bone, that's what the nurses said. It was her ring finger. Left hand. That part was probably a coincidence though. He bit it while he was dying. Jessie's not mad about it. Hard to be mad at someone for what they did while they were dying. I'm mad though. Not about the biting, just the dying.

My brother Miles had the biggest heart in the whole world. Bigger than a giraffe's, and they're famous for how big their hearts are because they need to pump the blood all the way up those long necks. I've learned there are mysteries most everywhere. There's at least a hundred mysteries left squirming in the mud whenever the tide pulls out, and that's just at Isamiles Rocks. One of the greatest mysteries of them all though, and one the scientists and religious people would never even think to study, is how the biggest heart in the whole world could also be a broken heart. No, not broken like that. Jessie never would have let that happen. Broken like an engine. Like your favorite cup.

We don't talk about mom and dad. That's a rule. But I'll just say one thing: they left and never came back. Miles was fourteen. I was nine. How two people crummy and selfish as them could have made my brother and his bigger than a giraffe's heart is another one of the mysteries. It doesn't add up. The only part that makes any sense is the broken part. But I don't like thinking of my parents as having any of themselves in my brother's heart. Or mine either, come to think of it. But there I've gone breaking the rule even more.

We're lucky we lived near the sea, that's all I know. Shoot, we might've starved otherwise. Miss Kepler was generous enough to let us stay in one of her apartments for close to nothing, but that doesn't mean the apartment came with any food. Miles would take me down to Isamiles Rocks before they were even named that. We'd ride the Number 16 bus all the way until it turns around by the factories.

"Izzy, watch. See how the seagulls drop the shells from the sky to

get to the food inside?"

"Yeah."

"Well you're hungry, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Good enough for a pretty white bird like that it must be good enough for us."

Those first few months after we were on our own we ate mussels for dinner every night besides free dinner on Sundays at the Community Center. That was before Miles started working at Mayer's Market and could get us discounted groceries.

We didn't drop the shells from the sky like the birds do, we steamed 'em up, ate them with melted butter from the packets I'd slip into the sides of my boots during free dinner on Sundays. Miles showed me if you get a book that tells you when the tide is low it's as good as a restaurant menu, but free.

"You know what they call this place?"

"No."

"They call it Belcher's Break. Now that's not a very pretty name is it?"

"No."

"But it sure is a pretty place, don't you think?"

"Yeah."

"I think we should give it a new name. How about Izzy's Rocks?"

"But what about you? Why not Miles' Rocks?"

"No, that don't quite have the ring to it. I got it! Seeing as you and me are the only ones who seem to like it here, why don't we combine our names and call it Isamiles Rocks?"

Boy I showed him every last crooked tooth when he said that.

I'm no doctor, and honestly I never cared to know the nitty gritty, but it was something to do with a flap, or maybe a tube. Something pinched, too small. I don't know.

"Ticking time bomb," the doctors said.

"Be lucky to live past his teenage years."

Jessie once said they would have fixed a rich kid with the same problem. It makes me too mad to even think about it. So mad I could drop all the doctors in the world from the sky like the birds do with the shells. Crack 'em right open and see what the devil looks like without his mask on. I know it isn't their fault though, that's the trouble, nobody needs to take the blame 'cause they spread it all around so thin you can't even trace it back. One big invisible devil stretched all around this world like saran wrap on the leftovers.

I thought of Miles' life like an hourglass. You know those glass things full of sand? They look like they have on a belt too tight and are all skinny in the middle, and you flip 'em upside-down to let the sand pour through the skinny part? Like the one Mr. Tate has on his desk in the science room. Anyway, I'd lie in bed at night wondering how much sand Miles had left. Just a pinch or a whole big bunch? I guess we all have an hourglass attached to our lives, but it was different with Miles. I only have to worry about my sand running out if I get run over by a bus or something. Used to keep me up at night worrying about my brother's sand and wondering if there wasn't some way to sneak some more in there.

I wanted to hate Jessie when Miles first brought her around. She was so pretty and sweet I just wanted to knock the wind right out of her. But then I saw her toes. On each toenail she had painted these little skeletons, like the Day of the Dead ones they pin up all over school after Halloween. And she painted bright flowers coming through the eye sockets of the skulls, and skeletons riding bikes and skeletons climbing up ladders made of bones. They were all so small and intricate I thought she ought to be famous for it.

I didn't know how to keep my grubby hands nice enough to deserve it, but she painted my fingernails anyway with a whole different set of bones and skeletons and chili peppers and blue and red and yellow flowers. It took her a whole afternoon and she asked me all about

myself while she did it. Jessie was fine by me after that.

Plus I could tell how much she loved Miles, even after he told her he was a ticking time bomb and couldn't run or play any sports. Jessie's the smartest girl I ever met for loving my brother the way she did.

"Billy Mark called me fat and ugly! You need to beat him up!" That's what I told Miles one day.

"Billy Mark? You mean that fat and ugly kid?"

"Yeah! You gotta do something, Miles. You gotta beat him up!"

"Well I ain't gonna do that, little star." Little star, that's what Miles always called me. I thought nicknames were supposed to simplify things, but little star has one more syllable than Izzy does and is a whole extra word longer. Another mystery.

"Why not? You can't let him get away with it!"

"I promise you, little star, he ain't getting away with it. As sure as I am that you are not fat or ugly, I'm sure that Billy Mark has had a rough go. You ever met his older brothers? They're like junkyard dogs been using that boy as a chew toy all his life. You may as well ask me to pour blue paint into the sky."

Miles had the biggest heart in the whole world.

It was two days before his twentieth birthday and I was so excited for him to prove those doctors wrong by getting past his teenage years. Maybe he'd live as long as a normal person if he could just get finished being a teenager already.

Jessie came over and made a lasagna. She was wearing a pink skirt and I remember having to question everything I had ever thought in my life when I caught myself wishing I had one just like it. We all sat down to eat in our small living room, me on the floor and Miles and Jessie on the couch.

"You know what I think we should all do tomorrow?" It was Miles that asked it.

"What?" I said through a mouthful of lasagna.

"I'd like to do something real special with my two favorite ladies,"

he said, flashing one of his famous twinkling smiles that looked sweeter than a stack of pancakes all covered in maple syrup with a big lump of butter sliding across the top like a runaway shopping cart. "Well, seeing that tomorrow's a Saturday, and the weather's been so fine."

But then he stopped talking and got this bunched up look on his face like he was expecting milk but got orange juice instead.

And then everything got about as awful as things can ever get.

Miles threw his plate up into the air acting like he had gotten struck by a bolt of lightning. Jessie reached out to grab his arm but he was up in a flash, twirling around the living room like a human tornado ripping the blinds off the window and slamming a hand through the cheap wall making it pour white dust like it was a bag of flour. Jessie was twirling around with him trying to tame him like a bull. I never moved, just sat cross-legged with that same mouthful of food, my eyes wide as the sky feeling the wind of the twister and afraid I might get kicked but I never could move.

And then he was down, on his back, his face was red in some spots, white in others, and the worst part was he looked scared. That's when he bit Jessie's finger. Left his proposal etched into her bone. His girl forever. And I never moved. And Jessie screamed but not because of the blood running down her hand. She pounded on his broken chest. Breathed into his mouth that was full of her own blood. She screamed. Pounded. Screamed again. The last grain of sand slipped through the glass shoot and there wasn't any amount of screaming and pounding Jessie could do to flip it back over again. Miles looked like he was sleeping with his eyes open. I never moved. Just looked away. Saw a flat lasagna noodle come unstuck from the ceiling and fall to the carpet like the birds dropping the shells to get to the food inside.

Next day I took the Number 16 down to Isamiles Rocks because I felt pretty sure that's where Miles wanted to take his two favorite ladies but never had the chance to say so. Jessie stayed behind because there were details to sort out, but she told me not to worry about that stuff. Plus she had that busted finger and an even worse busted heart. Not like

an engine this time though, but it wasn't Miles' fault. He never woulda done it on purpose. Most people say they'd die for someone they love, but it wasn't like that with my brother. He would have lived for us if he could have. Lived forever if we asked him to.

I scampered down to the little beach between the rocks that are all purple and shiny with mussels, and boy it didn't take more than one glance at those rocks and that big blue ocean before it felt like someone grabbed ahold of my own heart and gave it a good squeeze. Wringed me out from the inside like a dishcloth holding all the tears in this world. Miles would have laughed.

"Why you bringing all that salt water to the ocean, little star?"

Like pouring blue paint into the sky, he woulda said.