

A Falling Whale

by Tony Bonds

The primer-red station wagon crushes through the concrete median, destroying it like a sandcastle, and tumbles across five lanes of highway. Time slows. Katharine flings the wheel left, then right, but there is no traction. She is wrapped in a colorless veil of rain. Out the windshield she watches the grinning moon and the treetop-stubbed horizon roll over in summersaults. It is an outer-space kind of weightlessness.

She reminds herself this is what she wants. To go out in a car accident.

She wanted to be a marine biologist when she was a girl, she thinks. Now she was twenty-six years old and still hadn't seen the Pacific Ocean. Still hadn't done a lot of things. Why was there so much time to think? Twenty-six and childless.

Taste of gin and cigarettes.

Gravity returning.

Blinding headlights in the rain-spattered windshield. Long thin trails as they spin away, like comets sewing their stardust.



Katharine opened her eyes and saw the night sky. Stars shot through the Milky Way like summer rain. She was on the roof of her family's house in the country, where she grew up. The prickly shingles pressed into the back of her legs and shoulders. Her head rested on a soft belly of another person.

“What do they look like to you, Kat?” said her father. The muscles tensed in his abdomen when he spoke. She was six all over again. This was the first meteor shower she had ever seen.

“They look like raindrops on a window, coming from all different directions,” she said. That’s what she’d said the first time around, too.

“I can see that,” said her father.

“What do you think they look like?” she asked him.

“I’m with you. Raindrops.”

“You can’t steal my answer.”

His face was taut and perhaps tan, though it was hard to tell in the moonlight. He was still young. “It’s like someone up there is writing a message in the sky, but the words won’t stick.”

Katharine strained her eyes to see the words, as she had when she was young. But now, a full grown woman (in mind if not body), Katharine experienced the situation differently. “I remember why you seemed so down,” she said, “It was a year after Mom left us. To the day.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s it,” he said.

“And we knew she would never come back.”

“Your mama was real sick.”

For a moment the stars were still. Then a streak. Then three.

“Your funeral was nice,” she told him.

“Oh. Big turnout?” he said.

“As big as you’d expect, considering the circumstances.”

“I always wanted a big funeral.”

“I wouldn’t say it was small. It was about medium.”

“Well that’s alright.”

His calloused hand rested on Katharine’s head. Dawn was just beginning to break.



The spell of the dream is broken by the aseptic smell of hospital air. At the foot of her bed, a woman and a man in white coats congeal into focus. They are examining a clipboard.

“Transfusion first, then surgery,” says the man. He has a dark beard and sunken, tired eyes.

“O.R., fifteen minutes?” says the nurse with purple spots of acne on her cheeks.

“Wait. Anesthesia. She’s awake.” They are both looking at Katharine.

“Am I hurt?” she asks.

The doctor frowns at the clipboard.

Katharine scratches the side of her head. To her horror, she feels the skin of her bare scalp, smooth and cool. Her finger traces a prickly scab from her temple to her ear.

“Don’t touch those stitches, ma’am,” the nurse urges.

“Perhaps now would be a good time,” says the doctor to the nurse. “Katharine, there’s someone who’s been waiting for you to wake up. Do you feel like talking?”

“I guess. Who is it?”

The doctor nods to the woman, who quickly leaves the room. “If you feel suddenly tired or if your vision blurs just push this button,” he says, indicating a red button at the head of the bed, “and someone will come to assist you.”

After the doctor is gone another man comes into the room. He is wearing blue jeans and a green corduroy sports coat with elbows patches. His hair is curly and flame-red and his smile is slightly crooked. He grins and stares at her for an awkward moment.

“Do I know you?” she says.

His grin turns into a smile. Then his smile fades. “Quinton,” he says.

“Quinton,” she says. The fluorescent lights burn her eyes. “Quinton.”

“The doctor said you might not remember some things.” He took her hand and held it. “What is the last thing you remember?”

Katharine thought. It should have come immediately, but for some reason it took some time to recall. “My father’s funeral.”

“Your father’s funeral was a month ago,” said Quinton. He squeezed her hand briefly.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” she asked. “Barging in here. I remember my own father’s funeral, okay. It was yesterday. Or the day before maybe.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry. Do you remember anything about us?”

“Us? I don’t even know you!”

Although Quinton’s mouth flashes a smile, he seems on the verge of tears. “We’ve been dating for a month. Since just before your father died.”

“Liar. Who are you?”

He squeezes her hand again, more firmly this time. “We dated in junior high, remember that?”

His face now seems vaguely familiar. Katharine does remember. The first relationship of her life had been with a boy who was tall, mysterious, and as debonair as a fourteen-year-old boy could be. She had convinced herself that they would marry, have

five kids, two boys and three girls, and retire in a small cottage on a remote island of Hawaii. But when the boy turned the crosshairs of his smoldering libido to the early-bloomers in the pep-squad, Katharine's heart broke. Quinton had been her rebound.

She remembered his gentleness, and his soft spot for animals. They dated for maybe three months. Then she broke it off with him. It was shortly after he told her his parents were getting divorced. For some reason, this information made Katharine uneasy. A few days later she told him that they were better as friends. So that's how they left it. Until recently, apparently.

Katherine blurts, "What's happened? Why am I in the hospital? Why do I have a scar on my head?"

"You were stumbling and slurring your words pretty bad at the New Year's party. We went together. You disappeared at some point, then I realized you'd taken the car."

"New Years is still weeks away."

Quinton takes a breath. "No, today is January first."

Katharine catches a very brief whiff of gin.

"You don't remember?" Quinton asked.

She shook her head.

"You were drinking martinis all night, and shots. You said you wanted very badly to get drunk."

Katharine remembers that feeling. Maybe because she's felt it so many times. Her father's recent death made her want drink. But why? Because the abusive son of a bitch was dead? She had seen him only a few times a year since she was fifteen, when child protective services put her with a foster family. Over the past eleven years, she saw him

more in her dreams than she had in real life. But his death had an unexpected effect on her: she missed him.

“I could have stopped you but I wasn’t fast enough,” Quinton says, his face now all contorted. He wipes his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket. “So I borrowed a car and went looking for you. I found your car flipped in the middle of the highway.”

Katharine’s palms go to her head, it feels like nails are being pressed into her temples.

“Oh Jesus. What’s wrong?” Quinton says. “Should I get the doctor?”

Katharine’s feet tingle, so do her fingertips. The fluorescent lights darken. She reaches an arm behind her head and with a cold fingertip she searches blindly for the help button.



Her father wore a greasy jump suit and slouched in a recliner, watching the small TV on the floor in front of him. Katharine remembered this. This happened long after her previous dream. She was now thirteen or fourteen years old.

The only things surrounding them were the naked white walls, wooden floors, the antique confederate table in the kitchen, and a few books lying around. No other tables. Her mother had taken most of the furniture after the divorce, and even after many years her father had never bothered to replace it. The only chair was the man's recliner.

“So why did you do it?” asked Katharine.

"Had to," he said. The flickering blue light deepened the creases of his face.

"Katie, why don't you get Daddy a beer? And do your homework before you go to bed."

"I don't want to live through this again."

"Me neither," said her father.

"I hated it when you were drunk."

He blinked rapidly at the TV, then his blinks became slower and slower until his eyes did not open again. His head fell, he was asleep.

Katharine remembered clearly how the rest of this evening went: she would get stumped on her English homework, she would ask him softly for help but he would be asleep. She would shake him, try to wake him up. And after a while he would wake up but his eyes would look feral, the whites bloody. He would say "Jeannie, Jeannie is that you baby?" But then he would appear to realize that the little girl in front of him was not the wife who had left him so that she could die alone. So he would punch her in the ear. As the hot blood trickled into her cupped hands, he would stomp into his bedroom where he made no attempt to muffle his screams and wails.

But in this dream, this time around, her father did not punch her. He simply lounged in his chair, eyes still closed. The only sound was the drone of the late night infomercial. Katharine sat on the floor and watched him. Without opening his eyes he drew in a long breath and said: "I guess I deserved a small funeral."

"What did you expect? You certainly weren't perfect."

"I got what I deserved," he mumbled.

"It seemed like you'd been getting better in the last few years."

"I just learned how to pretend better."

Katharine watched her father's belly rise and then fall. "Well, when people die the way you did, other people take it personally."

“People shouldn’t.” His eyes were still closed. He looked asleep. “I ever tell you about the time, back when I was a kid in the orphanage, how I found a boy who’d hung himself with a belt from the top of a bunk bed?”

“I think I remember. Wasn’t he your friend?”

“Red, that’s what we called him on account of his hair. I found his body. His ass was barely up off the floor. I remember thinking: that’s commitment. If a guy goes and hangs himself from a ceiling fan, there’s no turning back after he’s kicked the chair away. But Red, if he’d have changed his mind, decided to back out, all he had to do was stand up. But he didn’t. It was like he wanted everyone to know just how bad he wanted to go out.”

“And you’re saying that you wanted it, too?” said Katharine.

“Yes, I wanted it. But I didn’t have that kind of will power. I jumped off the house, quick and easy,” he said. “Are you angry?”

Katharine snapped, “Yes.”

Her father briefly opened one eye to peek at the TV, as if to make sure it was still on. Then he sniffed and readjusted himself in the chair. “Make sure you finish your homework.”



After breakfast Katharine throws up.

“Nausea is completely normal after major surgery.” The woman in the white coat pats Katharine’s back. “You’re healing very nicely. Before you know it you’ll be just fine.” The pockmarked woman is younger than Katharine and she is trying to act motherly. Her

hands touch Katharine all over and it's making her nervous. She elbows the nurse off her with a few well placed jabs.

"I think she wants some space," says Quinton from a chair in the corner. The nurse looks at him and raises both palms in surrender. "Fine," she says, and leaves the room.

Quinton looks more grim than he did yesterday. Purple pools are fixed under his eyes and his slouch is more pronounced. Katharine wipes her cracked lips with her gown.

"How do you feel," asks Quinton, standing.

"I feel like shit," she says. Her voice sounds like it's coming from a dead throat.

"The doctors have got this guy they want you to talk to. A shrink."

"Why would I want to talk to a shrink?"

"It might be good if you do," he says. Katharine sees the tension in his body. She considers what circumstances would warrant a psychiatrist. Had she lost a limb too? She couldn't feel much below her waist, but she is able to see her toes. A little blurry, but all of them are accounted for. "Why?" she says.

Quinton looks at the doorway. A man in khakis and a polo shirt knocks on the open door. "Knock, knock," he says.

The man introduces himself as Lee.

"Why are you here?" she asks.

"Well, I'm a psychiatrist and I want to talk to you about a couple of things."

"What are your credentials?"

Lee looks at Quinton and laughs. "I've got, let's see, I've got an MD, a master's degree in psychology, and a bachelor's in medicine. I've been a hospital psychiatrist for

many years.” He stands by the side of the bed and a waft of tangy cologne comes with him. He puts his hand on Katharine’s shoulder. “You’re in good hands, ma’am.”

“I don’t think she wants to be touched,” says Quinton.

Lee smiles again. His teeth are unnaturally large like wooden teeth. He puts his hands in his pockets and his smile disappears.

“Miss Black, I can see that you’re a straightforward woman so I’m going to be direct. You were banged up pretty bad in that accident.”

“I can see that,” she says.

“Your car rolled into oncoming traffic. You’re lucky nobody else was injured.”

“They needed a man with degrees to figure that?”

Lee sighs. “You had a lot of cuts. And you’re going to live. But your reproductive organs were severely damaged.”

Katharine smirks, she doesn’t know why.

“You’ll never be able to have children,” Lee continues. “There is always adoption, of course. There are many fine agencies in the city...”

Lee’s voice becomes muted. Everything becomes suddenly quiet, as if she’s slid into a tub of water. Before she can settle her mind on a single thought, she feels hot tears on her face and neck.

Quinton rushes to her side, though not daring to touch her.

“Well,” Lee raises his eyebrows and rubs the back of his neck, “I’ll let you guys be alone. When you’re ready to talk about it, just call for me.”

Katharine looks at Quinton. She bares her teeth like a dog does, gnashing them at Quinton. She knows it's childish, she feels absurd. But she can't help herself. Besides, the

situation is absurd. She is a dinosaur now—she is the last of a dying breed. Her genes will soon become extinct.

Quinton wants to hug her, she can tell.

Katharine smears her tears away with a sleeve. “I want you to leave.”

He nods dutifully. “I’ll be in the waiting room.”

“No, I want you to *leave*. Leave me alone. I don’t want you here.”

Quinton does not move. Katharine flashes her teeth again, this time she inhales sharply and seethes like a tyrannosaurus.

“Do you really?” he pleads.

Bile crawls up her throat, she’s ready to spew fire.

“Goddamnit are you deaf? LEAVE!” She swats at him, slaps him, scratches his face, until he’s out of arm’s reach. Her arms continue swatting at the air as he backs out of the room.



Katharine sat at the antique kitchen table in their country house. She was maybe five, younger than in any of her previous dreams. The table was a relic from the civil war with three ornately carved, feather-textured legs shaped like eagle’s feet at the bottom, talons and all. Her father sat across from her. Sunlight fell through the window above the sink and colored his eyes a brilliant blue while he stared at a closed book on the table in front of him. It was an engineering textbook. Her father had been studying to get his bachelor’s in the field; General Motors paid workers a little more if they had a degree. Usually her father would be nursing a cup of hot coffee while his finger traced the lines of words down the page of the book.

But today, there was no coffee, and the book was closed.

"Where's Mom?" said Katharine.

Her father made no movement. He was committed the closed book.

In front of her at the table was a bowl of soggy Cheerios. Cereal was the only meal her father knew how to prepare.

"This was the worst day of my life," said Katharine.

Light in the kitchen was fading unnaturally fast. The sun fell from the sky like a bomb and shadows crawled up the walls.

When it was dark her father looked up from his book. She could only see his vague outline. "You're mother's left," he said.

"Why?" said Katharine.

"She wrote this for you." A white envelope on the table was suddenly illuminated as if by a spotlight. On it: *Katharine*.

"I kept that note. I still have it," she said.

"Some note," her father said. "She should have stayed."

"I could say the same to you."

"Don't start."

"It was selfish of you," she said. "And you knew it was selfish but you did it anyway."

"Doesn't mean I don't care about you. I just had to do it. You understand because you've felt the same way, haven't you?"

Katharine felt like a ticking bomb. Her voice was grave. "You shouldn't have left a note. You could have done it and everyone would have thought it was an accident."

“Was that your plan, too? To kill yourself in a car wreck and make it look like an accident?”

Katharine looked at her soggy Cheerios. Then at the dark window above the sink. Was that her plan? The idea of it resonated in her: detestable, but eerily familiar.

“Can’t argue with the facts, Kat,” he said.

“I like to be called Katharine.”

“You’re a little girl. You’re my Kit-Kat. You can be a Katharine later.” He tapped a finger on the spot-lighted envelope her mother had left. “Open it.”

It became harder to breath. She slowly tore at the top of the envelope and unfolded the letter. It was filled with small cursive writing, but the words were indiscernible. Originally, her father had read her the note since she was just learning to read. So now, again, he recited the words that Katharine couldn’t see. He spoke briefly, and emphasized phrases like “It’s not your fault,” and “I’m sorry I put you through this,” and his voice quieted when he read, “I have cancer. That’s why I’m leaving, so I don’t put you through the hell that I am in. You will be happier without me there, believe me. I’ll love you forever. I hope that someday you’ll please please please forgive me. Love, Mom.”

After Katharine heard these words she felt the anger as if for the first time. Her cheeks throbbed with heat and her tight, tiny fists were clenched, a volcano erupted inside her. She knew that soon she would tear through the house, destroying whatever her small hands could touch: she would throw plates, smash picture frames on the shelves, crash her head through a sheetrock wall and wake up much later in the hospital.

But for now, the impulse to destroy the world subsided. There was sunlight coming through the kitchen window again. Still at the table, Katharine took a deep breath.

“Did it hurt?” she asked.

“You mean jumping off the roof?” he said.

“Yes. That.”

“No, it didn’t hurt. When you land on your head you die instantly. At least I did.”

Shadows scurried across the floor and shrank away into the corners and everything was bright and colorful again.



When Katharine sees the blue sky beyond the doors of the hospital she holds in a deep breath. After being held prisoner for more than a month, she is ready to go home.

Quinton had never come back. Not that she wanted him too. But at times she caught herself watching the doorway, anticipating his curly, red shocks of hair in her doorway.

Katharine rides the city bus home to her one-bedroom apartment. In the hallway leading to her door, she fumbles with keys to unlock the mailbox. It’s not as packed as she might have expected.

Several notices on her door inform her that rent is past-due.

She flips the light switch, nothing happens. The electricity must have been disconnected. In the kitchen, the dirty dishes have developed a black, fuzzy layer. She opens the refrigerator, it is empty except for a bag containing the last few slices of room-temperature bread. She drops the bread in the toaster but it pops back out. No power. She dumps a mountain of mail onto the confederate kitchen table with eagle-talon feet. Most of the envelopes are stamped: **PAST-DUE, OVERDUE, FINAL WARNING, NOTICE OF TERMINATION.**

Much of it is junk mail: pizza ads, jewelry ads, weekly specials at grocery stores.

Katharine usually never gave a second thought to junk mail, but now she finds herself reading an ad for an adoption agency with the words, *We're Licensed!* across the top. A color photo of an orphan catches her eye. He is fair skinned and has bright red, curly hair. He has a crooked, young Ron Howard kind of face.

It reminds her of Quinton.

Was it cruel, what she said to him at the hospital?

She is an orphan now, like the crooked-faced kid. And she is alone.

On the corkboard next to the table, she sees two post-it notes. One says *Quinton*, followed by a phone number. The other says, *Dinner with Quinton, Friday @ 8*. They are both written in her spidery handwriting. Proof that he wasn't lying, that he had come back into her life.

But the question nagged at her—was she happy with him? Their relationship obviously wasn't enough to keep her from sailing her car across oncoming highway traffic. Then again, she'd been broken a long time. How could she expect one relationship to fix that?

Taking small bites of bread, she riffles through the rest of her mail. Junk, junk, bill, junk, notice of termination.

Her apartment makes her feel sick. If someone were to die in here, how long would it be before the landlords checked in? Her eyes go back to the corkboard. She snatches the paper with Quinton's number and holds it in her hand. Then with both hands, pressing the paper between her palms. It makes her feel less alone, somehow, to hold the paper like that.

She lies on her bed, on top of the covers. Within a minute she is asleep, her hands still clasped tightly together.



Katharine recognized the Armor-All smell of her father's old pickup, the blue and silver Ford with the tan vinyl interior. She was very young, four, maybe. She sat in between her father and her mother. "God damn this fog," said her father. They were driving on the highway, returning from a family camping trip in the state park. Katharine felt caked dirt in the lines of her elbows and eyelids. It was humid and the skin on the back of her legs stuck to the vinyl seat.

"It's what you get for wanting to come back a day late," her mother droned. Her voice was vaguely familiar, but distant and muted, as if she were talking behind a pane of glass. Katharine leaned forward, trying to get a look at her face. Her mother turned her head away even more, toward the wall of fog sweeping past her window.

"Well Kat had a good time, didn't you pumkin?" said her father.

"Sure did," she said. "Did I call you Daddy when I was four?"

"I think you did. You said 'Sure did, Daddy,'" he said. "And then you put your hand on my knee."

Katharine began to feel the giddy sense of joy that came with being four years old. She patted her father's knee and let go a laugh. She felt the hardened dirt that had caked on her face crack in the lines of her smile.

Her father seemed in good spirits too, better than Katharine could ever remember. He loved the outdoors, and his passion for it spilled over into every lonely corner of his

world. Her mother did not share his zeal but she managed to feign it for her daughter's sake. Up to a point. That's was how it was in their family.

Katharine had never forgotten this fog. The sun was setting and the fog was hued a rich amber, dense as smoke.

"Creepy isn't it?" said her father as the truck crept along the road. Katharine couldn't even tell if they were moving.

"I still have nightmares of fog," she said.

Her father's mouth hung open. He leaned forward until his head was over the steering wheel.

"God almighty," he said.

Falling through the amber clouds was a black, colossal, utterly soundless thing. It fell from directly overhead, casting long lines of shadow into the fog. Katharine's chest and belly slammed against the seatbelt and the truck's tires screamed. As the dark thing descended, Katharine saw that it was a whale. Nothing was quite clear because of the fog, but she could make out the shape, and she knew a whale when she saw one. Her father threw the gear shift into reverse and the truck crawled backwards into the fog.

It struck the ground in stages: the head landed and smoke erupted, then the body doubled over itself, then the whole thing seemed to sink into the ground. The shock wave made Katharine's teeth hurt. By this time there was so much smoke mixed in with the fog that she could not see if the whale continued to writhe.

Her father stopped backing up and leapt out of the truck, disappearing into the swirling smoke and fog.

"Where did it come from, Mom? Do you remember?" said Katharine.

The back of her mother's head was mute. Katharine leaned forward to get a look at her mother's face, but the woman turned her head further away. Katharine knew she would not be able to see her face because she could not remember her mother's face. She hated being photographed, and her father kept all pictures of her mother under lock and key in fear that Katharine might damage them. Now she couldn't remember anything about her mother, not even in her dreams.

"I wanted it to be a whale," said Katharine, "because that would have been something special. And it would have been just for us."

Her father ran back to the car. "Semi fell off the overpass. We've got to get to a phone. Driver's hurt."

Katharine remembered what came next: they would call for help and the fire engines would show up and men would scrape the wreckage from the road. The ambulances would search, briefly, for what was left of the truck driver. The policemen would talk with her father and he would recount the story to them over and over. Katharine would drift off into a light sleep in her father's arms, and late in the evening he would lay her on the seat of the pickup and he would drive the family home.

But now, before her father drove to find help, Katharine got out of the truck. Her father said, "Go ahead."

Her faceless mother got out of the car. Arm in arm, they followed behind her.

Katharine walked breathlessly through the wet fog until she saw it, the marble-black eye of the massive blue whale. It was so big she couldn't see all of it. It was the kind of big that a person couldn't take in all at once. The creature had ridges all down its side. It raised its side fin and let it flap back to the earth. She touched the whale's rubbery throat and a sense of finality came over her: after years of waiting, she finally got to see the whale.

It belonged to her, to her family. It was something that nobody in the world would ever know about except her mother, her father, and her.