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CRACKS IN THE WORLD

Sometimes, I still dream of flying.

I'm high over the subdivision, Westbrook laid out like a railway model, winding stripes of gray between poured-plastic trees. The breeze has a bite to it, cool on my face and legs, and I fancy I can feel wisps of low-hanging clouds pulled through my fingers as I glide.

I can see the old public school, Westbrook Elementary, with its tarred roof and surrounding green yard. I want to see flames flickering from the sky above it. I want to feel that rush of warm air that I imagine might greet me as I approach, the sense of foreboding, the fear that starts my heart beating faster.

But that's just wishful thinking.

Three years ago, I was in a battle. I fought an evil magician with the fates of a good many people in his hands. For the sake of those people, I made a sacrifice. I gave up a gift that could have made me powerful enough to have anything on earth I wanted.

Three years, and I hadn't stopped either thinking about it, or about chastising myself for the decision I had made. I still had the scar from one of my more violent confrontations with the Burnt Man (one of which I actually had very little memory), and I still had the ring which had once belonged to Arabella, the Burnt Man's daughter. Hunt had pulled it off her dead finger and given it to me, his idea of a trophy for the victor, I guess. The scar I carried in a long white streak from my shoulder to my elbow, and the ring, with its huge ruby, sat in a safe-deposit box in my bank, wrapped in red velvet, my token. It hummed when I picked it up with the echo of a power now lost to me. I would never sell the ring, even though it was painful to have it in my possession. It was all I had left of an adventure that had affected so many people in Westbrook, and of which only two of us here had any memory.

I've had time over those three years to think a lot about what had happened. I wished— no, I guess I don't wish none of it had happened. Everyone wants to be a little different, don't they? a little special? Even if no one else knew what I had found myself capable of down there in the catacombs, I did. But I still wasn't sure if all that was going to be a benefit to me in the future. In a way, at sixteen, I was already living in the past like someone whose great acts are done and gone, a memory. How could the rest of my life approach what I'd experienced by thirteen?

And now, I dream of flying and while I dream, I squeeze my eyes tighter, hoping to return to a place I'd desperately tried to escape at the time. It's perverse, isn't it?

Hitting sixteen, still, was a bit of a benchmark for me. It was, for one thing, the year I knew for sure I would never be any taller than I already was. I hadn't grown an inch through all of fifteen, and I was finally willing to accept that five feet, two inches was it.

The great outer world was starting to impose more and more on my little reality. I spent more time going into the big city. There was hardly any excuse not to. Westbrook is only ten minutes by GO-train to the end of the subway line, and nothing goes on here in the 'burbs. I was watching more television this year as well, reading less, caring less about school, and looking for ways to fill my time.

In the past, there was never a problem. When I was thirteen, I didn't have much in the way of

friends, but my imagination was better company. I think that after Char disrupted my life, everything I could imagine sort of paled in comparison. Now, heading into grade eleven, I had a brain stuffed full of useless facts I'd gathered through my non-interactive reading years and an apathetic outlook. Nothing interested me.

After—the 'incident', I'll call it—I went on medication for severe depression and for a hard-to-shake lung infection. I got very sick, and lost a lot of weight. Maybe that's what stopped me growing at five foot two. Eventually, they weaned me off the medication, which was kind of like turning my head inside out with a toasting fork. No one told me you could get addicted to penicillin. I hallucinated a lot, and went through attacks of paranoia. I was fun to deal with at school, as you can imagine. None of this was very good for my standing with my peers.

It didn't help that none of them remembered I'd saved their lives. All of them, Scott, Aaron, Jason. My little friend Peter had found a family, I guessed, and disappeared. Hunt and I had talked about that, when I was promising to try to forget everything myself as well.

We had been sitting on the bluff overlooking Char's ruined domain, his subterranean palace flooded, his lineage extinguished. The sun has set and the sky was black. In the distance, Toronto glowed like a forest fire on the horizon. Moonlight was all we had to see by, silver and sad. Tamblin, Hunt's brother, was passed out at our feet. Loss of blood will do that.

And Hunt gave me some instructions. For the good of all those involved, he promised. Neither Peter nor his new parents would have any idea what he'd been through in those deep, subterranean caverns, and I was under oath not to try and find him. I would have liked to talk to Jason about all of it, about how strange and unnatural I still felt, but I'd promised not to. The promise was binding because I agreed with Hunt. There was no need, even if Jason or the others had flashes of memory, to put them through the trauma they'd experienced for a second time. They should be able, because I couldn't, to forget. No need for all of us to be psychotic.

I'd been finding it very hard to grow up, after the incident. I couldn't seem to fit with anything around me. It had been bad enough before. I mean, angst goes hand in glove with teenage years. That's what I've read, and it seems come out by experience.

I couldn't get my mind on anything I was supposed to. School—who cared? Boys and sex—no urge in that direction at all. Partly because, well, screwed up as I was, who would have me? Friends—who would want me? And how could I make them understand what made me tick when I was forbidden to talk about it? I stayed aloof in all situations. I tried to let the world have as little effect on me as a water-strider had on a lake. If I could have disappeared completely into a carpet or a forest, I would have done it.

In the summer, I had two problems. I had to stay away from the house as much as possible—I'll explain that later. And I needed money for school supplies. So, what do you do during the summer, when you're underweight, insecure from a couple of years of paranoid delusions, and still (need I say it?) a geek? What everyone does, when they need money and have no qualifications: they go to work in the fast food business.

I worked at the local McD's for the whole summer, and that's where life started impinging on my sensibilities. Against my own better judgment, I developed this sort of crush on a guy my own age who was almost always working the same shifts. I'll call it a crush, but I don't think that's exactly the right term. I couldn't have cared less about kissing him or anything. I just thought he was interesting and I wanted to talk to him. I thought I might be able to relate to him, without Char's presence looming as it always did when I tried to say anything to Jason, or Aaron.

But this guy, he was openly contemptuous of me, and I just got more and more pathetic and awkward around him. I spent most of my time at work trying to avoid him, so I wouldn't do anything to add to his poor impression of me. The rest of my time I spent trying to find some way to stop thinking

about him, and to stop being so rough on myself over my own unruly feelings.

Then something happened to put the shoe on the other foot, I guess. More crappy karma. My boss, a guy more than twenty years older than me, invited me into his office in the middle of my shift and told me point-blank that he wanted to sleep with me, and in no fancier language than that. I told him that, although I would be seventeen in a few of months, I had no interest in having sexual relations with him or anyone else. He told me he didn't believe me, and tried this repugnant tactic on me, saying the latest statistics are that one hundred percent (or so near as to make no difference) of all teenage girls have sex before their seventeenth birthdays, and it is in fact not healthy to abstain any longer. I was disgusted, as you can imagine.

The next steps were very simple. I put in a request for transfer the same day, and it was granted thankfully fast. I only had one shift scheduled before my transfer to the other store, and on that day I played sick. I started working at a new McD's, further away from my house, but I didn't tell my mother that the change had happened at my request. My first introduction to sex hadn't been hand-holding in a movie theater, or a shy kiss on the porch after a date. Me, who'd never had a date. I'd been propositioned. I knew it shouldn't be a big deal, but it made me feel filthy and I hated it. Somehow, I thought it had to be my fault, that I was tainted from my experiences and a normal adolescence was forever beyond me. It was like having the first drug you were offered be crack cocaine, instead of pot or booze.

And I had no one to talk to about it. To return to what I said earlier about wanting to be out of the house as much as possible: my relationship with my mother is terrible, has been since the events of three years ago. It has been hard to trust her. The magic, or whatever, that I used to erase all memory of the Burnt Man from the minds of those who knew about him has had another effect on my mother. She's the other person I meant when I said two of us had some memory of what happened back then. I guess I couldn't erase everything for her like I did for everyone else; I couldn't purge her mind completely of things like that her house was almost burned down, or that I had been kidnapped. She worried almost constantly, about the memories that wouldn't connect, and especially about Nick, my father. He had left town as soon as the incident was over, because it was easier for me to erase the entire trip to Canada from his mind than it would have been to pick and choose. Without Damon's manipulation, he was not aware of any great urge to track down his only offspring, and, as far as he was concerned, the re-awakening of his feelings for my mother had never happened.

And she was thoroughly over-protective, in a way she had never been before the incident. The only reason I could think of to explain it was that she still remembered, at some level, the stress of losing me the last time.

So. In much the same fashion as always, I was tip-toeing around my house, keeping everything about myself to myself. The closeness that had developed briefly between my mother and myself during the incident had disappeared after.

I settled in for a long, painful adolescence. I read a lot of books, the same as before, drew some pictures that I never liked too much, and made no friends. I had no interest in getting close to anyone, especially after that summer at McD's. I felt, irrationally but unmoveably, that the reason my manager had come on to me was because I had dared to have a crush, a punishment for giving in to feelings. If I was cheerful sometimes, it felt like a lie. I was lonely, and the question of what I was lonely for sometimes made me nervous. I couldn't help remembering the feel of the Burnt Man's mind, pressing against my own, and his whispers as he indicated his realm and the empty throne by his side, "This could all be yours. . ."

Given the choice again, I don't know what I'd do.

The first person I saw the very first day of grade eleven, or at least the first person I noticed, was Scott Saunders. I don't know why I should have been so surprised to see him unchanged by the summer but he was, same curly dark blond hair and long body, a gait that bordered on the lumbering, eminently recognizable. I followed him from the parking lot into the main building, to the boards where our names would be posted alongside our home room numbers.

I said "Hi," as I checked my classroom number, and he indicated he'd heard with a little nod. He seemed particularly smug and I felt snubbed. It wasn't like he was one of the big heart-throb football players or anything. In their way, the group he belonged to was just as outcast from the popular crowd as I am. There's nothing like getting dissed by someone far down the social ladder to really make you feel unworthy of anyone's notice.

There wasn't anything to do in the half-hour before class, so I sat down with my back to the wall, and took out a book to read. I'd made a brown paper cover for it—one of the works of Aleister Crowley—and I figured it was better to have everyone think I was reading dirty books than something weird and occult. Some things are deviant yet acceptable. Others make people nervous, and I seemed to do that easily enough without pressing the issue.

Our school is called John Diefenbaker, and that gets shortened more often to "Dief", or to just "J.D.", like the whiskey. Almost everyone who used to go to Westbrook Elementary ended up at Dief, so I've been seeing the same faces nearly all my life. It's funny how that can be true, and I can still say I don't have a real friend in the lot. Jason and I were friends once, pretty good ones, and I got along well with Aaron Scribner too, but that was in the part of the past neither of them remembers. And besides, what I had with them was intensity, because we were all in danger and helping each other out. We didn't have history, and I think that might be more important in the long run. I've never really been able to imagine how I'd get to know either of them again.

I looked up after a couple of pages. Scott was still standing by the board, wandering back and forth. The hall was crowded, mostly grade nines, I guessed from the conversation. I was kicked and tripped over, and stepped on numerous times, but Scott stayed and so did I. I was curious to know who he was waiting for. Spying was the only way I had of keeping in touch, pitiful though it sounds.

The first bell rang, and the school song started, giving me about five minutes to walk the one short corridor to my home room, which was actually my second period class, just to make matters confusing. This was for the benefit of anyone with a first period spare. My actual first period class was drafting, the only thing I was really looking forward to this year. Home room was Grade Twelve history, and I wasn't excited about that at all. I stood, and was about to go to class when. . .

. . . When Scott's companions arrived. Old home week at the Psych-Me-Out ranch. I hadn't seen Jason Lawson since before the summer. He was tan and nervous. He had always been very tall, even in grade eight, but now he was filling out a bit and looked very athletic. I don't know why I was surprised that Jason and Scott were still hanging around together.

The other two were girls, Rae Kennie and Suzanne something. Rae was a star volleyball player, popular and pretty. Suzanne had arrived from another school the year before. I knew very little about

either of them, except that it annoyed me to see Scott and Jason with them. Somehow over the summer they'd moved up on the social ladder. Probably about the same time I was being hit on by a horrible older man with tobacco and sweat hanging around him.

I was too far away to hear their exchange, but whatever was said got Scott as agitated as Jason. Suzanne opened her gym-bag and handed Scott an old, large book. He slipped it into his own bag, and the four of them disappeared toward their new classrooms. I felt a tingle that was far too much like the feeling of my powers that were gone forever, and I was almost in tears when I reached my home room. Seeing them was like looking in a window at a party that someone forgot to invite you to. I walked a little faster.

I had finally got the hang of Dief this year, I thought. The school had been built in three stages, and it was like each successive architect hadn't bothered to even look at what had come before when planning the expansions. There were staircases to nowhere, and blind corridors turning unexpectedly into walls, and steps leading up just to go back down without even the excuse of a room or intersecting hallway. I hated it, and it gave me the creeps. People got lost all the time, although never permanently. But this year, I thought I had old Dief pretty much in hand. Maybe I was just cocky because my home room class was in a room significantly close to the main entrance and easy to find.

The layout of the school had given me enormous problems for the first couple of months of grade nine. There were three wings, each constructed in a completely different era of the school's history. The oldest, the middle section, was a blocky rectangular edifice on three levels. The tech floor at the bottom was like a dungeon, half-sunk so that the windows were level with the grass outside.

The other two wings were constructed about five years apart. Each had two stories, but neither building lined up in any way with the old school. The more modern annex had low ceilings and narrow halls, and the other was built like a labyrinth with twisting passages and odd-shaped rooms. There were staircases everywhere, most only half-flights, and, as I've said, I hated the whole place passionately.

The only sort-of nice part of the school was the gymnasium, big and modern, with skylights and a gallery—but damned if Maggie Stuart was going to be caught dead in there. I was not in the least bit athletically inclined. I thought the compulsory phys. ed. class in grade nine had been almost enough to kill me.

My classroom was full of grade twelve students, and not a single one that I knew. I slid into the only seat left in the room just as *O Canada* began over the P.A. The teacher motioned for us to stand, and I did, with a crash the volume of a 747 at liftoff. The contents of my bag scattered up and down the aisle, and one of my paintbrushes was still rolling, up towards the front of the room.

I hardly noticed the kindly grade twelve girl who helped me collect my things and shovel my books back into the knapsack. All I knew was that the whole class was laughing—at me.

I zipped the case just as the national anthem finished and slid back into my desk, color rising in my cheeks.

The morning dragged by. This being the first day of school, we were to have an auditorium in the morning, and run through an entire schedule in fifteen minute long periods after lunch. There was a pep rally on the football field planned for the latter part of the afternoon. We would be out an hour early, which was more a tease than anything else. Another year in school. Don't think about it, Maggie, I told myself, and concentrated instead on filling out all the first-day-of-school paperwork.

When we had been given our timetables, the grades nine to eleven assembly was announced. I was the only grade eleven in the classroom, so I had to stand, explain, and excuse myself. I was in the hall before I realized I had forgotten my knapsack inside, and returned for it. I could hardly look any stupider than I already did. On a first-impression scale of one to ten, I rated a minus fifteen.

The auditorium, in the oldest part of the school, was another detrimental feature as far as being an

asset for functions was concerned, although I had a special relationship with it personally that I'll get to later. The stage in the auditorium had always confused me. It was convex, like someone had started with a nice, rectangular stage and cut a scoop out of the middle of it, for the orchestra we'd never had, I guessed. It was a completely useless shape for any kind of play to be performed on it, because center stage was so far back from the audience. Maybe that's why Westbrook High had never in twenty years put on a school show.

Now, the auditorium was full of students. I sat as far back as I could and stuck my knapsack under my seat. It was too dark to read, so I dozed instead. Mr. Philps, a.k.a. the Mouse, called for attention, twice, and the auditorium began.

The assembly lasted forty-five minutes, and we were returned 'to the work of period one,' which for me meant sitting by myself in an empty classroom for the duration of the top grade's assembly.

Finally, the grade twelves returned, and we were released for lunch. I was the first one out the door. I would have given almost anything for a look at that book Scott and Jason had been passing around.