Hackles

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Like fungal conks creviced in a tree trunk, fluted bone fragments lodged themselves between C-1 and C-2, C-4 and C-5 in Matt Snell's neck. When Dr. Patty's long purple fingernail tapped the x-ray on her tiny tablet, Matt, the product of a devout Presbyterian union, shrank backwards, threatened by the intimacy of her millennial digit touching his mature skeletal image.

They're not really spurs, you know," Dr. Patty told him, "they're more like little scalloped bits growing on your vertebrae—as if your body is trying to repair itself by growing extra armor."

"Armor?" He quizzed the doctor, "Where's the battle?"

"It's the body's way of trying to repair damage to the spine…" The doctor, her floral-scented talcum assaulting Matt, who recognized it as the very same cloying sweetness that drifted from the bathroom after one of his daughters had showered, went on, "think of it as fortification."

"Fortification?" He challenged, "Why do I need fortification?"

From the comfort of a plushy chair, Matt had been crafting software for Silicon Valley start-ups for decades.

She gave him a pitying look.

“To counteract the damage of normal deterioration, perhaps.”

He felt ancient.

Matt worked from his childhood home--a former hunting cabin converted to a charming single-family residence in 1945. The tiny house centered itself on a cleared level lot of modest proportions, the land having once been one of many flowered shelves that interspersed the folds of a hilly, forested region.

When Matt was a toddler, the cadaverous old woman who ran Linglestown’s Historical Society discovered the significance of the Snell property and its surroundings (a band of fierce immigrant Scotsmen had destroyed the last survivors of a native American tribe there). She was awarded a medal by the governor for getting the acreage designated a protected historical site, disappointing many local developers and grandfathering the Snell home as it existed, forbidding the addition of any living space.

There, in that cozy, spare home sequestered among slopes and meadows, Matt grew accustomed to order. The forces of nature worked noiselessly and efficiently, showering columns of towering pines with soft white snow in the depths of winter, sprouting carpets of rudbekia, wild violet, and Queen Anne’s Lace in the early spring.

It could be said that Matt was shaped by the cooperating forces of his physical environment in which each plot of earth was its own self-contained oasis. The pines did not meander downward into the meadows; the flowers did not invade the forests where they might choke the trunks of trees. It was a remarkably peaceful atmosphere that Matt perhaps came to expect in all facets of life. Conflict was not part of his

world. At home, his parents, as did he, understood their roles and boundaries, and life there, remarkably or not, mirrored the same environmental equilibrium the boy and later the man found in this rural paradise.

Matt and Donna settled into the home after their wedding (Matt's parents having ventured forth to that septuagenarian retreat, Miami Beach). The fact that the house held one bathroom did not seem a matter of great concern—it was a relatively spacious bathroom—and after all, there were only two of them.

At first, not much changed: a few cosmetics popped up on the previously bare counters of the bathroom where there'd been nothing but an ivory pool of sink poured into an expanse of sparkling granite.

It was not until half a dozen colorful bottles of nail polish and a pink Lady Bic electric razor joined the cosmetics lining the backsplash a week or so later that Matt, congenitally fastidious in matters of order and simplicity, first felt the twinges in his neck. His own modest parents kept their lotions and pills, Band Aids and razors safely stowed in neat rows behind cabinet doors.

Still, Donna's recent contributions to the bathroom amounted to nothing alarming and Matt found that if he was cautious in averting his gaze from the growing colony of feminine products, the uncomfortable sensations along the uppermost region of his cervical vertebrae all but disappeared.

The laundry room, though, was another thing altogether. Lace-layered panties and bras in shiny pastel fabrics hung without shame next to dangling pantyhose from a clothesline newly strung across the room, creating a tawdry effect reminiscent of a washerwoman's workplace.

Matt had never laid eyes on his mother's underwear.

One day, when slapped in the face by a wet garment dangling overhead, Matt decided to have a word.

“Honey,” he ventured, leaning over Donna’s shoulder as she stirred Bolognese on the cooktop, “can we talk about the laundry room?”

When he suggested that perhaps there was a more efficient way to manage things, Donna stared at him blankly.

“I only meant that if you wore, you know, cotton things—things that go into the dryer--”

A trill of laughter.

“Oh Matt, honey,” she cupped his chin in her warm hand, kissing him in a way that made him feel foolish rather than loved.

She returned to her Bolognese as though the exchange had never taken place.

And with those quick gestures, he saw how things were going to be from then on. He’d been reduced to an object of ridicule. There was no room, not the smallest opening, for negotiation. A pattern that would impose itself on their marriage, on their day-to-day life, had been resolutely established. He mentally wrung his hands.

What had been the state of Donna’s modest condo? He could not recall. Surely, if it had been a chaotic, disordered swirl such as the one Matt now found himself immersed in, a warning would have sounded.

Then again, there was her calm manner and careful demeanor, the way she pursued every gesture with deliberateness, every act or effort given her full attention: an integration of mind and body, a full and complete engagement with the matter before her. Was this not a sign of order? If so, how could one with an orderly mind live in such a disorderly environment?

Was it simply that had there been more hours in the day Donna would have found time to dry the garments on a delicate setting and fold them into the depths of a basket, carried the lingerie upstairs to be tucked into drawers?

Matt tried to convince himself that this was the case.

But the dismissive manner in which she'd met his inquiry remained stuck somewhere in his neck.

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Twin girls arrived ten months later, and the line of silk, nylon, and lace festooning the tiny laundry room was now joined by onesies and midget t-shirts in shades of Easter eggs.

Over the years, the garments grew in quantity, size, and variety, until where there had once been perhaps half a dozen undergarments gracing the clothesline strung across the room, there were now as many as 18 to 24 garments of various proportions—some of which featured Care Bears and Scooby-do.

Later, as the girls reached pubescence, other intimate garments appeared in alarming shades: black, red, purple. Silk blouses and glittery tees draped drying racks that covered a table once used for folding.

Even worse was the appearance of some of these garments on the forms of his little girls, who'd begun to look like saucy tarts.

"Do you think that's appropriate attire for school?" He'd asked from the breakfast table as Marnie and Renny sauntered past, black bra straps boldly escaping the borders of racerback tees on which provocative messages were emblazoned.

Each glanced at him with a smile of mild amusement and continued to the door.

By the time the girls entered high school, the twinges in Matt's neck had become as steady as a boy's worst nemesis, his cranky companion throughout most of his days. He nibbled on ibuprofen and rubbed arnica gel into the shouting region above his shoulders.

The bathroom was now further transformed by a palpable infusion of estrogen-saturated ether. The counter bloomed hair dryers and curling irons tied up in an unnerving tangle of cords; crinkly-wrapped tampons rolled, unashamed, across open shelving secured to the wall above for the additional accommodation of toiletries; lipsticks, lotions, facials, foundations, powders scattered themselves randomly amid metal trees of earrings, bracelets, necklaces.

Matt felt himself sliding down the rock-studded side of an ever-steepening cliff. He reached for holds with desperate fingers, legs dangling over an abyss, Donna and the girls gazing at him from a higher plateau.

Why did no one throw him a lifeline?

Matt's twinges rolled into cloying pain so severe that he sought relief in twice-weekly therapeutic massages added to his growing regimen of over-the-counter medications, ointments, and creams.

When both girls began to commute to the local university, small dials of pink and blue birth control pills joined the chaotic bathroom mélange, sealing Matt's distress.

His widowed mother, returned from Miami, joined the household that year, taking up residence on the cramped second floor in the tiny suite of bed and sitting room that had previously held Matt's office so that he now worked from the dining room table. A Diaper Genie, gathering place for Gram's sodden Depends, joined the bathroom jumble, standing like a ripe sentry between the laden countertops and the toilet.

Matt's misery exploded over the next four years in a constant barrage of shooting pains and a radiating burning sensation.

It was when he found himself unable to turn his neck in either direction or raise his arms 45 degrees that he was forced to call on Dr. Patty who'd inherited the practice from her father, a childhood classmate of Matt's. Armed with cortisone shots and Tramadol, he could move again. But, beaten down as he was by the weeks of unrelenting suffering, Matt developed what he believed to be a sudden case of Tourette's Syndrome; specifically, he began to attach an offensive suffix to the ends of certain nouns. The white-haired lady who sold lattes and muffins at the Roastery on the square became the "coffee-bitch;"' the slight Asian woman who hiked up his rural driveway to deliver mail six days a week was suddenly known as the "mail-bitch."

"Not Tourette's," Dr. Patty corrected him, "but definitely on the spectrum."

And she slipped him the business card of a psychiatrist, who saw him the next day and prescribed anti-anxiety meds.

The women he knew by name escaped Matt's curse. His family puzzled over just what it was that prompted him to utter the insult. They knew Matt now had two states of being: contorted by agony when he tried to treat his condition with stoicism or mesmerized by a comforting mix of drugs and alcohol. They found that just as they could ignore his occasional remarks about their fashion choices or what he called the calamitous situations in bath and laundry, they could ignore his unpleasant new habit, allowing it to become swallowed up by the forgettable substance of Matt's discourse.

Until they couldn't.

He felt them edging away. He couldn't help himself. It slipped out before he knew what he was saying. No, that's not true. In fact, it didn't so much as slip out as it propelled itself from between his lips with a force hinting at violence and with the spouting of the invective came a temporary cessation of his pain.

On a perfect day, Donna found she could spend as many as 15 hours away from Matt between a daytime toiling over financial statements at work and a nighttime of horseback riding at the local barn where her palomino was boarded.

Marnie, the oldest of his daughters by two minutes, avoided Matt by retreating to her room until it was time to leave the house for her 12-9 shift at Lane Bryant and scurrying back to that private space with a fragrant McDonalds sack of burgers and fries on her return.

Only Renny, the younger, between jobs and home all day, was subjected to her father's odd behavior in large doses. She alone challenged Matt, calling him names: misogynist, pig.

"Your dad is in great pain," Renny's grandmother scolded the girl, "he says that terrible word because he can't control himself; he has no power over his own suffering."

"He takes pills and drinks vodka, Gram; he's not in pain."

"He doesn't know what he's saying when he's all doped up."

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In May of that year, Matt spotted Jack on a website—a dark-faced pup with a luxurious black and gold coat and four white paws like matched socks, a mug shot gaze into the camera: an astonishingly long, elegant jaw full of sharp white interlocking teeth. He wanted that boy. There was a dog, Lina, in the

house, but she had been rescued by Donna from the parking lot between Hoover's Funeral Parlor and the Eagle Bar and Grill and was devoted to the girls.

She had no use for Matt.

He bought the shepherd pup from a backyard breeder in Shamokin for three-hundred dollars. Shamokin, a town broken by the one-two punch common in that part of the country: first the railroads died and then the coal mines shut down. Besides Dave's Shepherd Farm, a cluster of sagging Main Street houses sheltering seniors and junkies stood their ground. That was about it for Shamokin. The puppy weighed eight pounds, which would have been a clue to anybody who knew shepherds that the dog was either much younger than the eight weeks claimed by the breeder or half-starved. Matt didn't know much about shepherds except that they were said to be completely loyal. Around Lina, who outweighed Jack by ten pounds, the pup kept a wary distance.

Around the women, he was mildly disdainful—except for Matt's mother, toward whom he showed an immediate and violent animosity.

Gram lurched to the breakfast table bent over her walker on the first morning after Jack's arrival. The pup, who was reclining nearby, rose with fury. He sneered, baring his slick teeth, a guttural growl emitting from the depths of his chest.

Like underground missiles preparing for deployment, iron-stiff tufts of fur shot up from the back of the little monster's neck.

"I'm not scared of you, kid," she said, turning her white face on the animal like a full moon.

Jack watched her with narrowed eyes, his puppy muscles taut and rippling in a threatening manner beneath a heaving coat.

Lina skittered into the room fanning her tail and hunkered down next to Gram, who slipped a bit of buttered toast into the mutt's mouth.

If anyone had been paying attention, it might have been noticed that Jack studied that morning ritual with a malevolent glare. He appeared to be storing the memory some place deep where other bitter recollections were plunged—nightmarish reminders of having been yanked away from the warm underbelly of his mother while the others, all girl puppies, remained snugly fastened there.

Breeder Dave's little daughter had wanted Jack for her own.

For his first few weeks of life, Jack spent his days shivering on a rug next to the girl's bed. Within a week, she'd grown tired of feeding him and taking him out to pee. "He's going back to the yard," Dave grunted when he smelled the urine in her room, and Jack, now the definite runt, was tossed out, reunited with his sisters, who'd outgrown him and turned peevish whenever Jack nosed into their path.

Matt's dad once told him there were theories about what makes a runt: the weakest pup couldn't latch on to his mother's teat; the one in the middle of the womb where nutrition was scarce is underweight at birth. But the truth was, Jack was smaller because he was fed what the girl gave him when she remembered to give him anything at all.

In Breeder Dave's house, he had survived mostly on condensed milk from the fridge--milk watered down to stretch a bit farther. By the time he was dropped back among his siblings, Jack's mother didn't seem to recall who he was and the possessive girl pups crammed together in a forbidding furry cordon, blocking his path to the food bowl.

Like a vengeful bullied teenager, Jack chowed down and bulked up at the Snells', running endless loops across and around the front yard to the edges of bordering forests.

By September, Donna found even more opportunities for horseback riding when she joined a group of horsewomen on weekend trail-riding trips to places like Clarion and Marienville.

“Off with the horse-bitches again, then?” Matt inquired when she departed on Friday nights.

Marnie had moved out, sharing a place in Harrisburg with her boyfriend, a stringy, good-humored kid who worked for the governor. Renny quietly slipped out one day. Six months later, a photograph of the girl arrived in the mail. She was standing on a San Antonio tarmac dressed in Air Force blues.

That Fall, Jack outweighed Lina four-fold and the little mutt started keeping to her own far corner of the living room, her liquid brown eyes roving over Jack with caution. She waited for that hulk to shuffle off and doze so she could get a shot at the food bowl in the laundry room now and again.

One day when Gram heaved herself into a chair at the breakfast table, Jack sidled up to her, intercepting Lina’s bit of toast.

“What’s wrong, Lina? Don’t you like toast anymore?” She asked the pet cowering in the corner.

Gram raised herself on to the walker and rolled over to Lina, Jack close on her trail. When she reached down to Lina with a crust, Jack’s neck fur rose in a quivering ridge. He pounced, knocking Gram to the floor, slashing her pale arm before devouring the crushed edge of toast. Lina whimpered and scurried up the stairs, taking cover beneath Gram’s bed.

“Elderly patients on Warfarin must stay clear of clawed pets,” Dr. Patty remarked as she sutured the wound.

On Christmas day, Donna stayed home largely because the horse barn was closed for the holidays. She made a rib roast, mashed potatoes, three bean salad, and roasted root vegetables. They all drank a bit of Merlot and, after dinner, sat around the fire with a bottle of Courvoisier. Jack, who weighed in at 120 now,

was stretched out on the hearth and Lina, who was down to eleven pounds, sat by Donna, eyeing the bully by the fire.

Nearby, Gram had been following the closed captioning on *Jeopardy* for at least fifteen minutes. Matt turned to his wife and lowered his voice to a near whisper.

“Remember when we talked about selling the house and traveling the country in an RV?” Matt popped a couple of trammies and Xanax tablets, noting Donna looked more like 35 than 57 while he looked every bit of sixty.

Stroking Lina, Donna’s icy stare briefly but decisively cut through the haze of alcohol and pills.

Matt glanced at his mother whose startled expression could not be escaped. She directed her attention back to Alex Trebek.

“Don’t need good hearing to understand that look,” Gram murmured.

In the middle of the night, Lina, who’d gone some time without a meal, mistook the rhythmic rise and fall of Jack’s hide for deep sleep, and crept toward the food bowl. By the time the hapless, emaciated girl reached the kitchen, Jack, neck fur standing erect as an open blade, had leapt across the room and sunk his teeth into her hide, shaking her from side to side like a wet rag.

Donna was first down the stairs at the sound of the canine melee. The more fiercely she tried to pull Lina out of Jack’s grasp, the more she stretched the gaping hole in the ravaged dog’s side. Matt appeared, grabbing a cast iron skillet from the cooktop and nailed Jack on the head. The dog fell back in a heap of unconsciousness.

At the vet's, Donna held Lina in her arms while the pentobarbital made its way through the dying dog's bloodstream.

"One little, two little, three little Indians…four little…" Matt's mother sang under her breath, standing next to Matt on the back porch, watching Donna's Toyota drag the horse trailer, packed with her belongings, down the driveway at dawn.

"We'll have to make some changes, Gram," Matt said over breakfast, keeping his eyes on his oatmeal, "probably move closer to town."

But he knew they weren't going to any kind of normal neighborhood—not with Jack.

Gram didn't say a word.

As suddenly as it had begun, Matt's vocal tic disappeared.

Maybe it was because slamming so many pills with vodka chasers had rendered him speechless and blurry. The house went to hell when the housekeeper refused to come back, but Matt was too far gone into his semi-conscious state to notice. (Word had gotten around town about Lina's violent demise.) He remained coherent enough to work from home. As long as nobody asked for video conferencing, he could get by.

No longer allowed to stalk freely about the house, Jack seethed alone in the locked garage unless Matt had him muzzled and out front on a leash. Gram spent long solitary hours in her sitting room upstairs.

"I feel like I'm in a Charlotte Bronte novel," Gram shouted to be heard over the dog's angry barking while she and Matt sat through a 30-minute infomercial for a CD collection of the best Country music, Matt too far in the bag to flip to another channel.

The next day, Matt had gone out for more vodka and bread. On his return from the store, as the car nosed up to the garage door, Matt clicked off the motor and listened. The silence spelled doom—Jack was not in the garage.

Matt left the car in the driveway and let himself into the garage by a side door.

The interior door of the garage that led into the little entryway between laundry room and kitchen was ajar. Matt paused on the threshold, pressing the sack of booze and bread to his pounding chest. The big clock in the family room kept its beat and another, faster ticking sound reached him from the kitchen. He pushed the door open wider and stepped through.

Jack paused in his staccato licking of the pooled blood—a gruesome arch hugging Gram's downturned head. He gave Matt a bland look before returning to his meal.

There came a procession of visitors: first, the police with their creaking leather belts weighed down by guns; then, the coroner, a man who smelled of cologne and wore a black suit. Finally, an hour after the others were gone and he'd watched the funeral director's van inch down the road and up to the highway, The Humane Society man showed up with a warrant to take Jack into custody.

But by the time he'd arrived, Matt was standing over a mound of freshly turned soil, leaning on a shovel with one hand, pressing the back of the other hand into his sweat-stained forehead.

"Done," he told the driver, who waved and headed out.

Jack, clenching a lone bottle of nail polish remover between fanged incisors, crept into view and loped up to Matt, who grabbed the chemical and tossed it into the woods. His heart leaden with a new grief, Matt stared at the dirt-covered cache of left-behind underwear and toiletries.

Ten years on, from the gleaming window of his pop-up, Matt gazed at Jack, who reclined beneath the setting sun's golden mantle. Jack, his gray-lashed flanks glowing in the rich light of the day's demise, stared across the pitted desert, to the hazy ribbon of ridge rising against a pink-hued sky. Only once did a hint of violence corrupt Matt's hard-won peace in the small desert town of Claunch, New Mexico: a visiting cousin of the local grocer, a widow in her late sixties who'd called the numbers at Friday night's bingo, appeared below the steps of Matt's camper bearing a pecan pie early one Saturday morning.

When Matt spotted the woman, her red-glossed mouth twitching in anticipation, his smooth vertebrae, now completely shorn of the unwanted bony bits, ached sharply like the ghostly leg pain of a double amputee.

"It's the bingo bitch, Jack," he muttered, opening the door a crack with his foot, releasing the shepherd, who bared his teeth and crept down the camper's steps toward the startled lady until she slowly backed up and turned, darting to her car.

As the motor roared to life, Matt's pain dissolved. Jack ambled up the steps and swished through the door, pushing it all the way open to invite a sunny morning vista inside. He nosed Matt's thigh, his brown eyes cast upward with the coyness of a debutante. Matt embraced the gentle animal with both arms and buried his face deep into the untroubled fur of the canine's graceful neck.