

TWENTY-FOUR PIES

© by Brett Gadbois

I don't know what's been going on lately. I feel like one of those Picasso paintings where my nose is sideways, my eyes are on one side of my head and my mouth is bent and crooked where my cheek should be.

Maybe it's the stress of Christmas. The shopping for doodads, writing cards to people I don't see or speak to anymore. Eating too much chocolate and nuts at work, drinking too much.

Maybe it's the pressure and ridiculous deadlines at work. "The work is winding down for the year and so is the budget so why don't you just finish this up for me and by the way I'm on vacation for the next two weeks...."

Maybe it's the ghosts of Christmas past. The memories of my father standing next to a blue spruce in his paper-thin santa suit speaking in a thick, German accent and handing out presents to my brothers and me before he slips off into the snowy sub-zero Minnesota night.

Maybe it's the rain here. The low hanging clouds and weeks of murky drizzle. The days shortening down to a sliver of light in the middle of the day between puffy, steel wool clouds.

Maybe it's that I don't know how I got here, naked in my clothes. Lost. Middle-aged. Divorced for the second time. Beginning an exercise regimen so I'm not such a goddamn flabby lump.

It's a sunny day though. Praise be to the parting clouds, the sun gods, the fates, solar flares, my parents bringing me into this world—whoever and whatever is responsible.

I've taken my boy down to the sound—Puget Sound. He's five. I'm collecting rocks and putting them in my weathered, green backpack. They're smooth and blue grey like the sky here most of the time. I find some the color of rust and almonds too, something to warm up my palate. I'm building a rock walkway around my Japanese-style deck. It's simple and brings me happiness. That and watching my boy scamper over the rocks. He's trying to pick barnacles off washed-up deadfall and huge rocks festooned with seaweed. He wants my help with the sharp, stubborn creatures. He's been studying the volcanos lately and when I hand him a few shards of the tiny mollusks he says, "That's Mt. Rainier, that's Olympus Mons, that's Mt. Saint Helens."

"Olympus Mons?" I ask.

"It's the volcano on Mars," he replies.

"As big as Texas," I say.

"Yeah," he says, "it's the biggest volcano in the solar system."

He puts the barnacles in a row on a great, slippery fallen maple with waves lapping at its limbs and studies their different sizes. Then he's off to look for planets. Size is important, so is roundness. Mercury is smaller than Venus and Venus is smaller than Jupiter. He puts them in a row, these rocks he finds, the proper distance from the sun. "Pluto is a tiny, dark world," he says gravely, nodding his head.

The tide is low. We wander past a cement boat ramp leading into the water. "Look Sam," I say, "look at all these tires."

Next to creosote-soaked fallen telephone poles and gnarled, washed-up douglas fir roots is a row of tires. They must have been a dock or a bulkhead at one time in their life. There is a rusted metal bar in the center of it that runs the length of the monster. The bulkheaded tires are taller than Sam. He scoops up a double handful of wet sand and clambers on top of the tires. Carefully forming the sand into a mound he says, "Look, I made a pie for you."

I bend over, take a few imaginary bites and say, "Mmmm, that's good, what kind is it?"

"Strawberry flavor," he says. "Now you make a pie for me."

I make him one. "What is it?" he wants to know. "Blueberry," I say, as we bend over it and chow down together.

This is how we go—back and forth leaning over the bald tires, sampling each others cooking. I put broken stick candles and shells on top of the mounds and we blow out the candles. "We have to take the out candles to eat them," he cautions. "You're right about that," I say, "we don't want to get burnt."

I make him a lemon meringue, boston creme, and a chocolate pie. We make single pies, double pies and even seven in a row on one of the tires. We take turns, he and I, forming the sand into small hills. He jumps up on the tires and kneels, savoring them with me.

I turn and look at the sound. The sun is strong and water calm with gentle waves lapping the shore. I hear Sam singing something I've never heard before, happy as a lark leaping from tire to tire.

That's when it happens. The sun melts into the sky and water and I melt with it, dissolving in a ball of light and radiant heat. I've been worried about everything. Small things and great things. The woman I'm seeing. Her separated husband and their imminent divorce. My struggling artist brother in New York, and my struggling musician brother in Czechoslovakia. I'm worried about deadlines, how tired I am these days and my place in the universe. I've even developed a twitch in my right eye that jerks my eyebrow from time to time like I'm a fish with a hook in its gill.

The sun is singing wordlessly. My boy is radiating. The tires hear his footsteps and the smooth rocks beneath my feet hear mine. The waves are smiling and salmon are gliding wordlessly through the blue-grey depths. Crabs pick their way over rocks underwater past fronds of kelp rippling 'neath the waves. Dogs are barking in the distance and I hear the faint sandy whirr of tires on asphalt. We're breathing, Sam and I with the sun and melting waves. Sam calls to me. It's my turn to make another pie. We're making twenty-four he informs me. "Don't smush any of them," he cautions. "I won't," I say and count the number of tires with the sneaking suspicion that there are twenty-four of them. There are. "Almost done," he says, putting the finishing touches on a double blueberry pie. I bend over and we eat together, father and son. I see the side of his brown eye, the smooth slope of his cheek and the red curls nearly blond in the sunlight. I'm in love, head over heels. My second divorce is dust dancing in the sunlight. My troubles have taken flight like tufted sparrows. My life has cracked open. My heart is a puddle like a broken egg yolk. My tears are gone, deadlines dead. Calender pages shriveled and ashen. I'm not worried about what I couldn't give my ex-wife on Christmas Eve, how I couldn't step up to the plate, be a man, a good provider, and cherish her the way she wanted me to.

For a moment I'm not a failure. My voice is the sky, a perfect blue and my eyes have no motes in them. My home is the earth and my son is breathing, breathing, breathing. I've heard the cries of the world and they are my own, my son's, my ex-wives's, my lover's, brother's and my parent's fighting in the middle of the night. My coal miner grandfather has come to visit in a starched white shirt and straw hat. He's complaining about his lungs, then smiling, saying, "it's OK, it's gonna be OK." My grandmother's hands are on the piano and she's playing ragtime. My aunt is sitting beside her, singing along in a green and white striped dress. The saints have stopped walking, put their fingers to their lips and said, "Shhhh, listen to this. Listen to these sparrows, jays, and pine boughs combing the breeze with fine, fine needles. Listen to the tender waves lapping at the shore. See the way the sun curls up on them like the edge of a fallen leaf. Feel the way your bones are working, wrapped in muscles and your blood tirelessly pumping, rippling and coursing through veins to your nose, eyes, fingertips and feet. Feel this hovering sun the saints tell me. Get this one for now and for all time until you've got it and don't need to get it anymore.

"We're done," Sam says, smiling, kneeling on a tire with worn treads, his blue jean knees inches from another blueberry masterpiece. "We did it, that's twenty-four pies."

"OK," I say.

"Now let's smush 'em," he says, laughing.

"Alright," I say, and we do. He starts at one end and I start in the middle pushing the mounds

of sand off the tires, letting the shattered shells and sand return to the beach. He's faster than me. He leap-frogs past me and finishes before I do.

"We did it," he says, "time to go home."

"We did," I say, scooping him up in my arms. He wraps himself around me like a monkey and I squeeze my treasure. "I know we did."