

# Psyche's Advocate

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*Crissa-Jean Chappell*

Biscayne Bay is a ribbon threading my stained glass window. Shin-deep in muck, I believe the bay is prettier that way, winding a path through painted palm trees and seagulls pumping W-shaped wings. Sun-stripped beer cans float in a wreath of foam. Tawny sawgrass fields waft like water in the wind. A mottled blue land crab, big as my fist, scuttles sideways over plastic six-pack rings. These things I do not recall from girlhood walks.

St. Claire watches me roll cylinders of note paper, slender as drinking straws, and stuff them in Coke bottles. My sister knows that the bottles contain bad dreams. She says a psychic named Norm taught her this trick. Those troubled by nightmares should write their fears on paper, sign both sides and burn it. Because I'm uncomfortable with matches, I baptize my nightmares in the bay. St. Claire furrows her brow, mumbling that the trick only works before midnight on the summer solstice.

Cuban boys, crab-hunting with sea-green nets, hoot as I fling bottles out to Chicken Key. I pray the nightmares won't resurface. Last June, I rescued a bottle snarled in fishing wire, bobbing against the barnacle-crusting chimney that rises at low-tide. Trembling, I popped the cork and read, "I'm floating in a casket like the Lady of Shalott," scrawled in my own craggy penmanship. It wasn't the watery casket that I found appalling. It was the fact that nobody had bothered to bury me.

Walking home, I filch a ballpoint pen from St. Claire's pocket and sign my wrist, Helena Ruth. My sister says by breakfast it will rub off. As a child, she never sketched her name in beach sand and bathroom mirror steam. She never even signed that ceramic ashtray or coaster or whatever it was in kindergarten. Just slashed her initials, C. R., which could belong to anyone. I wonder how my sister grew older than myself. Mama used to mash her hand on Claire's head, pleading, "Promise you won't grow! Why grow when you are just the right size?" Now I have shrunk, despite the decade between us.

"So what did you dream last night?" St. Claire asks.

"Mind your own beeswax."

She rears back, pursing her lips. "That naughty?"

"Why, yes," I want to say, "Yes, it was."

St. Claire whistles, "I'll Be Loving You Always." She does not realize that my incubus cannot be bottled and tossed in the bay. This morning he will finally have a face. He will learn that my eyes crease like pleats in a piecrust and specks that are not freckles dust my knuckles. It matters little to me what he looks like. I have never heard his voice or felt his touch. Yet I know more of him than Howie, whose sole love letter St. Claire shredded and hurled in the compost heap. Thirty-two years later she confessed her guilt. "Who cares?" I shrugged. "Howie's probably married. I bet his hands still smell of Fleer's bubblegum."

Royal Palm Drive seems the same as when I wore burlap shorts dappled with winged mailboxes. Frowning, I believe my hair also seems the same, though threaded with gray. A French braid staples my head in taut crisscrossing bobby pins. When Mama permed my hair, I hacked off the stinking ringlets with sewing scissors. Mama hollered, "You look like a skinny, freckle-faced boy." She called me "Carrots and Milk" and said, "At least you got your father's giraffe eyelashes." Fishing my key out from under the welcome mat, I wonder if giraffes have eyelashes.

More important than looks, I inherited Daddy's Dade County pine house and adjoining fruit stand. Bougainvillea glows against the flaking white-washed cedar siding. Mullioned windows mirror picnic tables. A snack bag crumples against the porch. I spot wire plant-holders grasping at nothing and grit my teeth.

This is St. Claire's responsibility, the confusion outside. But Daddy's house and all its gentle glitches are mine. What a time we had after Hurricane Andrew: beds molded to rugs which molded to hardwood floors. Bleached spots I painted with strong coffee. Cat urination stains remain blackened and blotchy. In the bathroom, I pounded gashes into plaster and smashed insulation board with my sledgehammer. I like to think that I'm returning Daddy's house to its original state, except for central air-conditioning.

While St. Claire rattles cupboards, I tiptoe into her bedroom. The dresser bears five different mascara tubes in various shades of kohl. Compacts gape like startled clams. Tortoiseshell combs clogged with hair and sticky residue jut from a German beer mug. Muratti 2000 cartons, harlequin glasses, vitamin C gum, Fantasy Five tickets wrinkled from the wash...crazy as Claire's mojo hoodoo. With my finger, I smudge Cinnabrick lippgloss on my cheekbones. That's enough. I crack open the slatted closet, fling aside skinny ski-style trousers and jingle hangers. Finally, I settle on a creamy pantsuit so creased it resembles a relief map. Maybe the suit will flatten if I toss it in the dryer with a damp face cloth. I lean against the windowpane, catching the crunch of high heels in gravel. A man's voice barks, "Hurry up, sweet."

"Sweet," he said. "Will my incubus call me 'sweet'?"

"What's his name?" St. Claire asks.

I drop the coat hanger which clangs on the tiled floor. His name is Leonard. It reminds me of my favorite word, "learned."

"Well?" Claire hikes her wispy eyebrows.

"This is absurd," I say, shrugging out of the silky fabric.

"Don't take it off. You look good," she chides. "Grab the curling iron. I'll fix your hair." St. Claire pricks her frenzy of ringlets with a plastic fork. "So you do have a lover. About time," she twitters. "What do you and Romeo talk about? Building foreclosures? Respired saws?"

"Reciprocal," I correct, batting aside her makeshift comb. "Reciprocal saws."

"You have really pretty eyes, Helena. You should play them up."

Behind the windowpane, a man's voice barks again. "Sweet," he said. Sweet.

I spin around. "Will you help me?" I ask Little Sister. "Please?"

St. Claire nods and swipes a shadow-smudged Q-tip from the dresser.

"Sit down," she says. Her soft strokes tickle my eyelids. "It feels like I'm putting on a lot but I'm not," she assures her twitching canvas. "So where did you meet this guy? At the sock hop?"

I met Leonard through his writing, not stuffed in scented envelopes, but etched in the picnic table outside. Sitting under the sausage tree, scanning the *Sunday Herald*, I spied a carnal macrocosm under my elbows. With each turn of the page, I paused to peek, my cheeks flaming: Phallic idols festooned a child's finger-tracing. Homosexual euphemisms sealed crude pledges of perpetual lust. No donation proved too clumsy for the picnic table's exhibition. Each was accepted with barbarous civility so much as the art remained anonymous.

Leonard broke the rules. He carved his signature in a leafy doodle's veins. Such defiance prompted an ink-stained assault. Beneath cracking Liquid Paper lumps and Swastikas scraped with a ruler's edge, his bold-faced L deepened. Leonard made a Louvre of that picnic table, sculpting the arch of a squirrel's haunches, hubcap whorls and teens he had noticed near the vending machine; flawless down to the horseshoe groove amid nose and upper lip. As Leonard's work corkscrewed down the table legs, I longed to send a message of my own, to ask why he drew such things. Snaking my hand under the *Herald*, I sketched a single word, "Why?"

I stood back, hands on my hips, and thought, "Not bad for a novice." Now all I had to do is wait.

Days passed and Leonard ceased to write. Rubbed with skin grease and soda stains, his doodles disappeared. Apple peels plastered the table's surface in mottled shades of yellowish-brown. "Please," I wrote again and again. "Answer,

please," and still no response. I couldn't bear his silence. I drifted to another seat, a circular stone table near the sidewalk, and studied what Claire calls, "Scotch Movies": joggers, their sweatshirts soaked in cumulus stains, teenage couples draped over benches. A girl's meaty fist swallowed her boyfriend's middle finger. She yanked backward. He stumbled, catching her jacket for balance.

"Let go!" he hollered, "Let go of me!"

They skulked away holding hands and staring in opposite directions. I wondered, "Could Leonard be little more than a child? A gifted recluse? A felon? A female?"

"Helena?" my sister called. "Will you help me?" St. Claire, armed with a soapy bucket, bent over the picnic table, rubbing furiously. "Unbelievable," she quipped. "McCalls said soda water would work and lo and behold it does."

I wrenched the bucket from her grip and it slipped, sloshing my blouse, gushing a tidal wave of greasy rainbow-hued bubbles and bloated paper towels across the picnic table. I ran my fingertips over bleary phrases. The final smudges resembled "Good" or "God" or maybe "Good-bye."

"What's wrong with you?" St. Claire demanded.

I never learned to talk. That's what's wrong.

St. Claire snorted. "I can't figure you out." She flounced off, bristling. I examined the table, its moist mahogany tones deepening like a varnish. Tree rings came to mind as I traced the stubborn scratches, fairly visible under a curtain of froth. "Daddy," I murmured, "You taught me how to measure with a level before I could speak. Why didn't you ever teach me how to talk?"

I left the picnic table and turned toward the house. A shopkeeper's bell jingled as I opened the door and heard the Weather Channel's drone. Forecasters with hair the texture and color of steel wool described low pressure systems in secretive tones. I riffled *Reader's Digest* magazines, copies so stale I had memorized the creases. Still, the contents remained a mystery. I only read the vocabulary page. In the kitchen cupboard where silverware should be, I found my sledgehammer. By the time St. Claire shrugged into her nightie, I had demolished a quarter of the fireplace hearth.

"Helena, what the hell are you doing!" she shrieked. Her glance darted over the old flowered bedsheet I had flung over the hearth as protection from flying shards. Bits of shattered brick topped the floors, shelves, and even the sink. Dirty slivers as small and jagged as teeth nested in my hair. "Ugly bricks. I always wanted marble," I said. Then, yearning for stiff cotton sheets, I sought my bed and burrowed under the covers. I fell asleep before St. Claire changed the channel to CNN.

"Feeling tired?" she wanted to know the next morning.

"Yes," I longed to say. "Tired of watching tornados mangle countries I'll never see. Sick of *Reader's Digests* and teenaged couples holding hands."

"Hmm?" my sister said, addressing the blender. It grated with a chunky metallic sound I could almost taste. With Claire, it's a ritual. The morning after the hurricane, she lit a can of Sterno and warmed her weight-gaining concoction in a glass jelly jar. "After this I've got more graffiti to erase," St. Claire said. She flossed her teeth with an Instant Breakfast packet. "Stupid kids. I swear the stuff sprouts overnight."

"Let me," I said, prying the Brillo pad from her fist. St. Claire never saw me mash it in my apron. Nor did she see me pouring over the picnic table. A. J. still loved C. J. forever and Casey sucked four-letter words. But there, beneath "Why?" were the etchings of, "WHY NOT?"

Why not, indeed. What I should have asked was, "How?"

So began our ping-pong match of words. Leonard wrote, "WHO?"

I echoed with, "Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?"

The following Sunday he wrote, "WHAT?" and I scribbled, "What is it to grow old?"

But our match ended the morning he wrote, "WHEN?" and I asked, "When can we meet?"

"FIRST YOU MUST TELL ME WHO YOU ARE."

Spilling childhood secrets was easier than I anticipated. In fact, it was fun. Leonard learned that my second toe stretches a centimeter past my first and that I cannot sleep unless the classical station signs-off with Our National anthem. I told little lies about a girl who nailed pigs' teeth to a pecan tree in Clarke County, Georgia. The tree slopes over Uncle Bender's garden but the girl was St. Claire.

"HELENA," he wrote. "TRACE YOUR HAND ON THE TABLE. WHEN WE MEET, I'LL KNOW YOU IN THE DARK."

I wondered what exactly this implied. Splaying my left hand wide enough to outline with a Bic pen but not so wide that it resembled an elephant ear, I believed Leonard would laugh. The pen wobbled between thumb and index finger and skittered over the table's gum-caked grooves. I retraced certain sections near my blunted fingernails, scorning the final result. Leonard would worship fine hands, their half-moon nails polished like mother-of-pearl buttons. That simian claw belonged to someone else, not me, not—

"Helena," Claire says, tapping my head. She drops her lipstick on the dresser. "Will you tell me where you met this man or not?"

"Not," I say, rising.

"Wait! I haven't defined your eyes yet!"

"Whatever you did is fine," I say, wondering just how one "defines" an eye. "I'm going outside."

"Tell Romeo I said hi," Claire calls. "And don't slop on my silk suit."

St. Claire should mind the cash register. Customers have already arrived, plucking eyes from swollen potatoes, stroking the waxy crook of an eggplant. Cool air wafts from an overhead fan, displacing the smell of oil diffusers. Sea sponges dangle from ceiling beams. "Have a penny? Leave a penny," reads the styrofoam cup on the counter. "Need a penny? Take a penny." I loathe the verdant tinge to those coins and the kids who pour them in their pockets. They would filch from the collection plate at mass.

My sister claims to be Catholic. I'm not so sure about that. She cleans her thumbnails with my rosary. Father Santos would not care for the Tarot cards St. Claire reads for her customers. Laminated acupuncture guides, slick with thumbprints, crowd the ceramic Holy Mother on the cash register. Father Santos probably would not care for those either.

I snap a stick of chalk in half and scribble on the blackboard, "Today's specials: baklava, apple burritos, and couscous." On a whim, I sign my name, hoping that Leonard might see. The chalk squeaks. No one notices. Not the pinched woman squinting under a Panama hat, inspecting the soy milk. She whirls, swinging an infant strapped in a papoose-style backpack. The baby teeters her lightbulb-shaped head (surely it's a she for her tiny lobes are pierced) and gurgles, "La-dee!"

"La-dee yourself," I say, plucking my sleeve from her clasp. When she smiles, flashing smooth rubber-pink gums, she resembles the face on Gerber baby food jars. She juts out her tongue, curled like a U, and trickles graham cracker crumbs. I hoist my broom from a rain barrel. The handle, smothered in price tags, feels warm and waxy. Half the bristles have broken but my sister won't buy another.

St. Claire yells, "Would you like to put that away, Helena?"

No, I would not like to put that away. St. Claire opens her mouth but I no longer hear her. That's a little trick I've learned, tuning people out. As long as I nod every so often, why speak when no one listens? Whisk, whisk. The checkered tiles remind me of a ballroom. "May I have this dance?" I whisper. The broom curtsies. Ta-dum, ta-dum. I shuffle my feet and bump into a magazine rack. *The Joy of Juicing* flops on the floor, tumbling cartons of carob candy and nicotine-free cigarettes.

"Bravo," someone cracks.

The young man scowls with his eyes, not simply his lips. He slumps over the picnic table, whittling a Washington apple. His dark, large-knuckled fingers move deftly, shearing the skin in one continuous curl. At least I think it's an apple, sallow like the ivory keys on Mama's "B" Bosendorfer. I watch him raise the moist, bald fruit to his nose, inhaling the fragrance before he bites.

"Excuse me?" I say. "Is this seat taken?"

Head lowered, he does not respond. I study the wire-rimmed glasses, the M.C. Escher tie, the jacket that seems formal on him. Stubble shadows his wedge of chin. His hair rests at jaw-length, sculpted into S-curls with gel. I search for gray and find none. A clean fragrance rises from his hair, the smell of unperfumed shampoo. He sweeps his gaze over cartons of fruit, mazed with flies. If Leonard guesses my age, he shows no sign. The apple shucked, he turns his attention to the table, screwing staple-sized holes. He cracks his gum when I glance at him.

"Sorey," Leonard says. It sounds like a Canadian accent. "I'm waiting for someone."

"Oh. Well, maybe I could just sit here for a minute."

Leonard squints as if trying to solve some complex puzzle. In his lap he hides a hibiscus blossom, most likely plucked from our neighbor's bush. I realize that Leonard doesn't recognize me. Perhaps he is playing a game? In the condensation of his water glass, I trace a wobbly heart.

"Pretty flower," I venture. "For a lady friend?"

"Yup," he says.

"What does she look like? Maybe I can help."

"I don't know what she looks like," Leonard says. "She won't know me, either." He swings his lanky limbs over the bench, preparing to flee.

"Don't go!" I snatch his shirttail, half-yanking it out of his pants. "You forgot your knife."

Slack-jawed and annoyed, Leonard slips the knife into his back pocket. "Look, just leave me alone. I told you I'm waiting for someone."

"And she's waiting for you, Leonard."

He stares, sloe-eyed. "How do you know my name? No, wait--you're..."

I shake my head yes.

Leonard shakes his head no. "No," he says aloud. "You can't be her. No, wait. Let's see if it fits." He guides my hand to the identical tracing. The ring-finger is circled with a crude, felt-tip band, so fresh it smears a stain on my skin. Leonard's doing, no doubt. He seems unimpressed. "I didn't think so," he says. Relief washes across his features. His widow's peak shines as do his cheekbones, steep enough to balance saucers.

"What are you saying? It's a perfect match! I drew it myself." I stare at my hangnail stubs.

"The fingernails are much longer. The hand's larger too," he adds.

"That's because I re-traced it so many times. Because I made a mistake." Because Leonard is trying to slip away.

"It might be her hands," he says.

"Whose hands?"

"Hers. See that lady in the long, denim skirt? They look like her hands. Slender. Pale. Or his," he says. "That fat man over there. I bet his hands smell like cigars. You can always tell a person by her hands. Young hands. Pretty hands. Female hands groping for change, choked with pearls and perfumed with Laura Ashely Number One."

"Or scarred with an artist's callous," I say.

"I'm no artist," Leonard says. "I have to look at stuff to sketch it. Nothing comes straight from my head." He pushes something small and white across the table: characters penned on a paper napkin, an entire metropolis sketched over the words, RECYCLED PAPER. "Why do we do this?" he asks.

"Do what?"

"This," he says, illuminating his capital L. "Are we reaffirming our existence? Trying to make some statement? Or simply saying, 'I was here. I'm not alone.' It begins in grade school with desks. Then telephone booths and bathroom stalls. Sometimes junk stays there for years and I wonder, 'Who is Frank and does he still care for Arlene? Whatever happened to The Lizard King?' And artwork! Geometric doodles drive me crazy, trying to figure out which end is up. I find myself spiffening every portrait, correcting noses and mouths, whatever needs attention."

Leonard crunches his apple. "You don't understand a word I'm saying." He dunks his napkin into his water glass, poking it under ice cubes. Ink figures swell like bloated corpses, the cityscape a ragged streak of blue, a doomed Atlantis.

"What is it, Leonard? What's wrong? What did I do?" I stroke the inside of his wrist. Smooth, supple, like an old wallet. I seek the hook where neck meets shoulder. Leonard's apple toddles and rolls off the table.

"Please, Helena," he whispers, no longer pretending. "Let go."

I push past him and plunge across the concourse, weaving around Pinecrest girls in pleated skirts, sipping Italian ices, pulling on Cokes. I skid on something slippery, flail for balance, and catch the apple crate that topples over. Bruised apples bounce on the ground. I gawk at the ground. Shredded peels curled like apostrophes litter the pavement. I look back, a fatal mistake, and find Leonard contemplating his filthy apple.

The screen-door springs and slams with a sound not unlike a slap. St. Claire, bent over the blender, shouts a greeting as I collapse on the couch. "Somebody gorgeous thinks you're gorgeous," she says. "I can tell by his stare. What's the matter? Don't you like him?"

"I do. That's the problem."

"I don't get it."

"He doesn't care for me, Claire. He cares for someone altogether different."



St. Claire groans. Drawing back the curtain, she peeks at the picnic table, frowns at the filthy apple, shrugs at the shriveled hibiscus.

I ransacked the shelves of handmade soap: jojoba, ylang ylang, and Farmer's Friend hand salve, intending to sandpaper the surface and wipe it down with Murphey's Oil. The scratches will not succumb to soda water. I trace the cloudy outline of a Cheshire Cat, his grimace saluting each triangle ear. Capital letters boast the merits of Texan cows and a cravat-shaped worm dervishes down a table leg. Leonard's Louvre. I kiss my fingertip and touch it to the table's stippled surface.

Tracing paper and number two pencils. That's all I need. I smooth the paper flat, shading lightly with a pencil's edge. Flimsy as a Kleenex tissue, the paper soaks in Leonard's carvings. Then I begin to write. I sign both sides, slip the paper in a plastic milk jug and snap on the cap. St. Claire doesn't know that the jug contains good dreams. I stroll, whistling a Sousa march, trailing my fingers in tree-limbs heavy with Key limes. Biscayne Bay is a ribbon threading my stained-glass window. Shin-deep in muck, I believe the bay is prettier this way, winding a path through red mangrove roots, lapping stony seeds that St. Claire says drift all the way to Ireland. Warm air rushes at my face. I pitch the plastic jug into the water. It floats, then bobs out to sea, a christening wave pushing it back to me. ■