Storylandia

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Cover: Photo by Jennifer Wilson
Make Me Disappear

By Jennifer Wilson
Make Me Disappear

_The brave dies perhaps two thousand deaths if he’s intelligent. He simply doesn't mention them._

~Ernest Hemingway

1

The pocketknife had been a gift on her fourteenth birthday.

Mabel had longed for one ever since her foster brother John—an eagle scout with a sash full of badges—had received his own. She had been fascinated with the various tools that he could pull from it, from a corkscrew to a tiny screwdriver to diverse blades, and had watched with envy each time he brought it forth from his pocket, slicing through tape-encased packages with practiced ease and carving rough animals from raw blocks of wood.

Her current foster mother, Karen (her own mother had abandoned her many long years before to a meth and petty theft habit), had rolled her eyes at the gift, saying that there was no reason for a girl to have a pocketknife at all, but John had wanted her to
have it and his will had prevailed.

“She’ll probably cut her own nose off, for God’s sake,” Karen said.

“I’ll teach her to use it properly, Mom,” John answered, patting Mabel on the shoulder.

And he had, showing her how to open and close it so that it didn’t snap on her fingers, and instructing her to always point the blades away from herself. She had imagined that she would use her knife in the same way John used his, but in the end the only things she seemed capable of carving were sticks into sharpened points and her initials in the bark of the ancient live oak tree in the back yard. Still, she carried the knife with her everywhere, the weight of it in her pocket giving her a sense of security and protection—from what she did not know, exactly.

“I’ll be going away to college in a few weeks,” John said to her as they sat on the back porch in the late afternoon sunshine of a warm summer day. “I just want you to know that if you ever need me, just call, okay? I’ll only be two hours away.”

“Okay,” Mabel said, leaning into him for a hug. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too, little sis.”

When the day had come for him to leave, Karen had sobbed loudly and dramatically, and her foster father, Gary, was withdrawn and silent. The remaining week of summer passed slowly, and she spent it in solitude, vaguely dreading the coming school year. She was an average student, feeling unmotivated to do more than the bare minimum, and
most subjects simply didn’t hold her interest. Friends were hard to come by, as she didn’t seem to fit in to any particular group at school, so the anticipation of seeing friendly faces again was, by and large, nonexistenent.

She was not a particularly unhappy girl, however, though prone to bouts of ennui and melancholy. Being content in her aloneness and unused to any surfeit of attention, she spent much of her time outside, exploring the middle-class suburb of Tulsa she inhabited and communing with nature. She enjoyed reading and visited the library frequently, finding friends in the books she read and comfort in the knowledge that she was not so very unique as it seemed sometimes.

It was a sunny October Friday, the day John died. A texting teen swerved across the line on the road as he was coming home from college for a visit and the impact killed him instantly. Mabel would always remember the day; how the leaves were just beginning to change on the pear trees that lined the sidewalk, the sky clear and blue as she walked home from school.

She heard Karen’s wailing before she reached the path that led to the front door, a high-pitched keening that raised the hair on the back of her neck and begged her to run in the other direction rather than discover the reason for such a noise. Against her instincts, she turned the knob on the front door with a trembling hand and was met by Gary, his face ashen and grim as he told her the news.
The tears didn’t come then.

Nor did they come later, when she viewed John’s body in the casket at the funeral. It didn’t look like him anyway, stiffly posed and oddly-hued. Karen sat slumped in the pew of the church, heavily tranquilized so as to not make the scene any worse than it was. Gary, broken and silent, shook hands with family and friends. John was popular and well liked, and the procession took a long, wearying time.

Home was no refuge. The people kept coming, bringing pie and cake and casseroles that no one wanted to eat—more food than could possibly be consumed by anyone with an appetite. It fell to Mabel to open the door and greet the mourners, as Karen had taken to her bed and Gary was usually in a drunken stupor by three in the afternoon. She did her best to make conversation, but the forced words fell from her mouth woodenly. She didn’t know what to say anyway.

The weeks passed. Karen did not get out of bed and refused to eat. Gary called the paramedics and they came, ambulance wailing, and took her away, strapped to a stretcher. Mabel didn’t cry then either. Instead, she cleaned the house obsessively, vacuuming and dusting, washing dishes and clearing away the take-out boxes that littered the living room.

One night, a month after her world fell apart, with Gary passed out on the couch and Karen in the hospital again, being tube-fed the will to live, Mabel sat on the back porch where she and John had talked so often about their plans for their individual futures.
Pulling her pocketknife from her pants, she carefully opened the blade and viewed it with a detached thoughtfulness. She slid it gently over her arm, watching as it scraped the fine hairs neatly off her skin, tracing it over the blue veins that stood out in stark contrast to the pale ivory of her complexion.

The emptiness welled up within her chest, threatening to choke her, and she lifted her face to the sky, full of stars twinkling with indifference. Her grief seemed to fill the universe, spiraling out from her soul and sweeping across the expanse. She felt she might be suffocating from the pressure building within her, longing for a release she did not know how to give.

Again and again she caressed her arm with the knife, each time pressing incrementally harder, rocking slightly as she sat on the concrete stoop, desperate to feel something besides darkness and relentless waves of nothing. Her mind was a mass of confusion.

_You’re not human at all_. The thoughts came unbidden. _Everyone can tell, you’re a fake. Fake! Where are your tears, Mabel? You’re heartless, that’s what you are. John loved you but you have no heart. Fake!_

She shook her head violently, trying to suppress the voice.

She pressed harder.

Suddenly and silently, the blade carved a tidy line along her forearm, a thin ribbon of crimson springing up from the skin. Mabel made a small noise of surprise and stared at the wound, breathing hard.
The ribbon became a trickle that ran down her arm and onto the stoop in thick, heavy drips. The puddle glistened darkly in the moonlight.

Swiftly—before reason could protest—she slid the knife over and over in parallel tracks along her skin, panting and stifling the urge to cry out until the pain rose up and eclipsed the deep nothingness for a brief, delirious moment. Dropping the pocketknife with a clatter, she clasped her arm to her body, feeling the blood soak warm into her shirt, feeling the throb of the injury, weeping with shock and horror and untold relief.

2

She couldn’t stay with Karen and Gary any longer. Her social worker told her they were simply too unstable following the death of their son. The state was concerned with the well-being of Mabel Banner, and thought she’d be better off elsewhere.

Mabel didn’t want to go. It wasn’t that she was terribly attached to Gary or Karen—they were fourth in a string of fosters since she had entered the system—but their house had been home to John, and for that reason alone she wanted to stay. She knew, however, that this mattered little to the state, and so she didn’t bother to argue. She sat on the bed in John’s room, surrounded by his medals and awards, and tried to say good-bye.

“I hope you’re happy wherever you are,” she said into the empty air. “I’ll always miss you.”
Her new mother’s name was Gail Thomas, a heavy-set and intimidating woman, and she insisted that Mabel call her *Mom*. The house was shabby and ill-kept, but she had been a foster mother for decades, and was well-trusted by the state. Mabel was one of four children in the house, and the eldest. Gail smiled ingratiatingly to the social worker and spoke in an unctuous voice. Mabel was uneasy, but no one asked her opinion, and so she kept it to herself.

The other children were nine, seven, and four. All girls, by the names of Latisha, Vanessa, and Tabitha. They were sweet and friendly and innocent, and Mabel liked them for that. None of the little girls seemed to feel uncomfortable around Gail, and indeed, she appeared to treat them well in spite of the sparse furnishings and shared beds.

Dinner was macaroni and cheese from the ubiquitous blue boxes, and Gail let Mabel fix it by herself.

“I’m sure you like to be helpful, at your age,” she said, and it was not a question or a request, Mabel thought, but a thinly-veiled command. Still, it wasn’t that she minded doing it. Gail sat on the front porch in a sagging overstuffed couch and smoked while Mabel drained the pasta and added the butter and milk and powdered cheese. The little girls waited expectantly with bowls at the ready. When it was done and they had eaten, she put the dishes in the sink and rinsed them. Gail came in then, and suggested that she load the dishwasher. Mabel obliged, and the other girls helped her, so it didn’t take long. Later that
night, she sat on the porch by herself and contemplated her surroundings.

The small clapboard house was one of many rentals that lined the street, most of them in the same state of mild disrepair as it was, with lawns full of crabgrass, weeds and broken toys. Mabel thought back to Karen and Gary’s wellkept ranch home, to the upscale middle school she had attended, and a pang struck her heart. Gail came out and sat down heavily next to her.

“I expect a lot, but I hope you won’t make a fuss about it,” she said. “You seem to be a good girl so far, and I don’t want any trouble.”

This seemed an unnecessary thing to say, and it was said none too gently. Mabel felt the full impact of the words and could only agree that she wouldn’t be any trouble. When had she ever been any trouble? She kept her head down and worked as hard as she could. She was a good girl, her greatest flaw being a deep and abiding cynicism that resided in her heart. She looked at Gail, at her rough hands and stained blouse, and was not comforted. There was something about the woman that was singularly unnerving.

The little girls fought briefly over who Mabel would sleep with, but Gail swiftly put an end to it by matching her up with the youngest, Tabitha. That night, as the smaller girls drifted off to sleep, Mabel lay awake for a long time. She could hear Gail in the living room, watching reality TV and talking on the phone. Snatches of the conversation drifted into the room. *I’m telling you, Marcus, this is the one,* she was
saying. We’ll test it out, go slowly, and then build the business from there. [Something unintelligible. Then,] I know, I know. But I have a good feeling about this. She’s a pretty one. Looks older than she is, but it shouldn’t be a problem.

Mabel rolled over and shut her eyes. She didn’t know what Gail was talking about, but it didn’t concern her. If there was one thing she had never been called before, it was pretty.

~~~End of sample pages~~~

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Jennifer Wilson lives in Texas with her husband and seven of her thirteen children. When she is not negotiating peace treaties between the warring factions residing beneath her roof, she enjoys writing and playing the banjo. Occasionally she hides in the closet and drinks whiskey while contemplating the meaning of the universe. She has published four books of poetry and two novels, blogs at crazyreal.net.
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Mabel Banner, age fifteen, is a girl on the run. Escaping a dark and tumultuous life in the foster care system in Oklahoma, she runs to Key West, where she becomes first mate on board the sailboat Stella Luna, with the amiable Jake Ennis as captain. In Florida she forges a new life with a new name and tries to forget the circumstances that brought her there. But can Mabel keep her past a secret from Jake? Will the authorities looking for her eventually catch up? And mostly, will she ever have a chance at a normal life? Mabel finds that no matter how hard she tries, she can't outrun the ghosts that haunt her dreams and the feeling that, eventually, everything she has fought so hard to gain will slip out from between her fingers like the sugar white sand of a Gulf Coast beach.