

Living with a Spike in Your Brain

Allen, the probationary butcher, has a steel spike lodged in his brain. You could say it was a memorable accident. Or an accident of memory. Either way he can't get past it. And this doesn't bode well for his continued employment.

This thing is lodged. Taken up residence. Housed in his skull. Camped. Parked where he won't forget, where he can't even forget long enough to finish the ground chuck order for the day. This spike is punched into his head—sort of like the red-eyed Washington Monument perforating his cerebral city, all the streets of the basal ganglia rerouted, sent roundabout other monuments of memory. It has changed the way everything looks in his head. Sure there's the dull lump built for his butcher parents—a knot of tangled nerves, wrapped like a twine ball, and rigid with glimpses of inappropriate knife-use. His toddler hands carving a roasted chicken, Mother watching him jab and slip in silence. Father picking at his teeth with the point, trimming toenails with the blade. He's telling Allen about the importance of hygiene; then she's asking Allen to scrape the dead skin from her soles with a serrated Kitchen King. And let's not forget the vast gap of nerves, the major brain renovation from the missing fingertip he sacrificed to the Cuisinart, or the crevasses linked to infrequent but lasting *educational* experiences with carcasses. But nothing compares to the reach and sting of his spike. A terrible accident of memory. A child's eyes. And everyone still notices.

Allen wears tall hats that sit awkwardly on his head. Sometimes for a joke he will stand in the corner of the butcher shop with a messy beef-apron hanging from his spike, covering his silly face. When his supervisor asks with concern in her voice, Allen tells her not to worry. He is pretending to be a coatrack.

When he curls up to sleep at night in his shag-carpet studio apartment, Allen straps a pillow to his head with an old belt. And of course showering requires a plastic bag for protection. Tomorrow his mother will call and ask about the job. She will remind Allen that he is a third-generation butcher, descended from a long line of ancient Scottish meat cutters.

The problem is this: occasionally at work Allen is plagued by persistent and distracting daydreams where he wears an array of normal hats—maybe one of those tight-fitting bicycle hats, or a corduroy cap—something with style that still accommodates his spike. He wears a motorcycle helmet, a Yankees cap, a pork-pie hat, and he carries his spike in his hand for show-and-tell. It's kindergarten. It's timeless. And the spike is not a memory, but just an object—something external to him, something he can hold in his hand and control. Or it's just an image on paper, simple pictures of him wearing a baseball cap at the rodeo, watching a monkey riding a dog—something he can leave at home in a drawer. But this steel spike of memory. This corrosive remnant. It's enough to linger. Dodge City Days. That's your setting. The dust and sweet stink of manure. The pack of nervous sheep—spray painted with red X's and O's. His mother and father still together—but just barely. Boot Hill Cemetery with the namesake boots protruding from the earth. His picture taken too with a wooden Indian and his little brother. Allen's father reaching for his mother's hand—and she is yanking it away and shoving it in her pocket. This is before the cowboys fall. This is just hours before his father leaves the motel, and Allen hears nothing of it but angry tires squealing into traffic. His father leaves for a beer and never comes back. This is before his mother drags Allen to the rodeo anyway and leaves him in the bleachers, alone with the animals.

And later that night—with the big lights still burning and the smell of popcorn lingering in the air—Allen wanders the rodeo grounds, kicking an aluminum can. Under the bleachers he finds a noisy teenage girl cutting on her arm, carving into the meat with inefficient strokes. She

uses a bad knife, dull and limp, a Swiss Army blade any self-respecting butcher would throw away. Allen notices how hard she has to press the blade into her skin. He can't get over this spike, the way this image impales his consciousness, shoving aside the pictures of the Cowboy Monkey riding a sheepdog, nudging over the noise of his father's leaving. She wears pedal pushers and an aqua green tube top that matches her eyeliner. She has a large red zit on her chin. Her blood is all over her knees, messy and disorderly. It's hard to control these images. She yells at Allen, tells him to go away, leave her alone. "Fuck off," she says—so he turns around, kicks his can back into the crowds and never tells a soul what he has seen. He can't get past the spike. Out in the dirt, pushed on by the waves of applause, the Cowboy Monkey rides the black sheepdog. Smiling in chaps and spurs, waving his hat to the crowd, he gallops across the Kansas dirt—that fancy monkey still bouncing back and forth in the ether of Allen's lonely butcher's brain.