

TIN MAN

By Laura Petersen

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A unnerving story of a mentally challenged man and how he maintains his fragile grip on reality (if not sanity) through the use of a metal detector, an instrument that shines both as symbol of hope and beacon of the future. We like the way the author gets inside the character's head and the penetrating sense of claustrophobic alienation that is always closing in on him. A richly pathetic (as in pathos) tale on a difficult subject handled with impressive skill. Quote: 'The thing in the lump scurries deeper. He closes his eyes and jabs the gauze in. He pushes it deeper as the rubbing alcohol drips down his face, biting into the place where he cut himself shaving that morning. "Take that, you fucker!" He screams at his reflection in the mirror.'*

Tin Man

He sweeps the wand over the sand, hoping for some morsel, some hidden delight to expose itself. So far, nothing.

"There's a lot of sand. I could be here all day." He shivers with pleasure knowing that his work will never, ever be done.

He works hard and long, sweeping the wand over the sand, trying not to retrace his steps by paying attention to his footprints.

"I hate backtracking," he says to the waves curling on the shore at a distance and the gulls as they fly overhead, going who knows where.

It's gray today. Quite gray and quite still. The sea is calm, for a change. That's good. When it's calm, and not raining or blowing wind so hard it stings the eyes, tourists come to visit. Tourists bring pockets with treasures in them that get spilled on the sand. And that's where Boyd comes in.

Boyd. A memory about his naming shames him. He keeps his head down even though it's too early for tourists. Only the gulls can see his tears.

They didn't want him. That's what his mother said when he was ten. "We didn't want you, but you wanted life. So you happened and now we're locked down with you. We do our best."

Boyd props the wand against his leg and raises his head. He pulls his dirty shirttail out of his pants to swipe at his nose, and then he uses it on the sweat from his tender, sunburned forehead. He pushes his right arm into the wand's brace, turns up the switch under the word GOLD, and continues the hunt – not to lose himself or run away from the memories, but to keep moving, keep the rhythm flowing.

He doesn't know what brings the bad memories on, but he's compelled to push through despite the pain. It's a choice he makes every time the memories push at him—relive rather than expel.

A treacherous shiver wrenches the metal detector from his hands. He stoops to pick it up, knees bent and legs spread so his belly has room to sag between them.

He looks at the tips of his sneakers. They're the kind with Velcro tabs.

“I can't remember the last time I wore shoes that tied.”

He sweeps the beach (swing left, swing right, swing left, swing right), and remembers how Mother always went on talking like his feelings didn't matter.

As Boyd listens to the cracks and beeps the metal detector makes, he no longer sees the sand or the gulls—he sees the cigarettes she carried with her tucked in a small flowery purse with a metal clasp.

First thing, with a cigarette already lit and drooping from her fat lips, she would drop the purse on the yellow Formica table (SMACK) next to her begrimed yellow coffee cup. She fiddled with the closure on the purse, closing and opening it while she talked and puffed (snip-SNAP, snip-SNAP, snip-SNAP). Her far-too-short pink quilted robe hung open.

Boyd concentrated on the enormous orange curlers bobbing on her head. He imagined shooting paper airplanes through them.

“When you popped out of me like you owned the world, your father laughed like hell and called you ‘Boy.’ It stuck until we had to send you to school. That's when he added the ‘d’ at the end for the damn paperwork. Clever, your father. He may be a drunk, but he's not stupid.”

Boyd slumped in his too-tight gray and blue plaid shirt, his cereal clotting in a bowl.

“Or maybe he is!” She slapped the table with both hands. Boyd jumped, then slouched into his chair while she brayed on and on.

That's how she was. She hurt his feelings, drank coffee, smoked cigarettes, and showed off her floppy tits.

Boyd swings the wand left and right, left and right.

“And this is how you end up. You burn inside for what's the right thing to do.”

A gull sweeps over his head.

“Fly somewhere else.” He drops his wand and flails his arms at the long-since-flown-away gull. Now he has to bend over to pick the detector up again. And all this is giving him a headache.

“Too much pressure on my noggin.”

Sometimes, Boyd wishes he had ex-ray vision so he could see the sleeping treasures where they lay. But then, he’s also glad he can’t. There’s enormous pleasure in looking for something when you don’t know what that something is, or if it even exists. He could go forever—wand in hand, trowel at his belt loop, gulls around his head, memories of Mother.

“I’d see too much with ex-ray eyes, anyway.” He grunts and hoists the wand above the sand when he sees a piece of driftwood shaped like a woman’s hand. Even the fingernails are there like someone planned it. Nature is sneaky—she makes fun of you.

The wand could be trusted. It tells Boyd where to go and what to see. It’s best when

he minds the wand. When he uses his eyes it always ends badly. Like that time by the swing set where the little girls played. Bare legs pumping the air. Hair like finely spun webs caught in the sun. The pumping rhythm ...

He’d never do that again. It wasn’t safe to leave the house without his wand.

The skyline brightens while Boyd examines the dial on his wand. It alerts him to something unseen as he passes it back and forth in a nice rhythm that soothes rather than incites. His head feels bad and this helps. The pulsing tone from the dial is grating on the ears and nerves, but that’s how life is. It grinds.

He stops and kneels on the cool, malleable sand. Kneeling isn’t the best thing for his knees, but the trowel is an easy reach from his belt, and he has to dig. Sometimes, it’s a false alarm and he gets worthless iron bits or burned aluminum cans. But that’s why he likes it. He knows something is buried there, its worth to be determined.

Boyd sinks the trowel into the sand, pushing through the dry, to the dry-wet, semi-resistant protective crust and down into the firm wetness.

All good things wait in the wet.

He sees a roundness that leads him to believe he’s discovered a coin, but he hopes it’s a ring. A true gold ring could bring him enough income to lay off his other less enjoyable endeavors—collecting cans and panhandling. He feels that he’s earning his keep in this lousy world. The disability checks and food stamps only go so far.

Boyd thinks about his tiny, drab apartment and how he might decorate a little if the ring is valuable. Maybe a throw rug or some new pillows?

He drops the object when something else catches his eye. The bright pulsing light at the edge of his vision reminds him that he left without taking his migraine medication—again.

Boyd breathes hard. Using the metal detector as a crutch to haul himself back on his feet, he looks down at the ball of sand he dug up.

Swiping his sand-sugared hands on his pants, he says, “I have to go home now.”

The pulses dart in and out of his left eye as if someone tiny with an even tinnier flashlight were spelunking in the darkness there. He feels them crawling on the surface of his eyeball and running spikes with ropes.

The pain that follows the flashes is on its way. The object is still trapped in a glop of gritty wet sand, so he yanks a plastic grocery bag out of his pocket and winces as he bends to retrieve it. Like a man picking up after his dog.

The thought makes him shudder with disgust.

“I would never pick up a dog’s shit.”

The old, rusted-out, blue Volvo sits in the parking lot. Gulls, attracted to the smells pulsating from the car, sit on the hood preening themselves and, of course, shitting on everything.

Boyd sweats while he walks through soft mounds of dry sand to his car. The wand across his shoulders has no opinions. He turns purple when he sees the gulls.

“Get the fuck off my fucking property!”

He swings the wand around his head. The gulls flap, shrieking into the sky and sail off high above the breakers.

The exertion costs him. He brings the wand to his chest, then down to the baking asphalt, like a weightlifter finishing a set of overhead thrusts. Bent in two, the flashes overwhelm him. The gulls sound far away now. He imagines them shitting over the waves.

His vision clears while he’s on his knees next to the Volvo. A minivan pulls into the parking space next to his. The sliding door swooshes open and kids of all sizes pour out like rats fleeing the nest. One boy stops to study Boyd.

“You praying, mister?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Just wondering why you’re on the ground. You got a bellyache? What’s that thing you got there?” He points at the metal detector with his dirty finger.

Boyd doesn't answer. The kid shrugs and runs toward the waves with the rest of his vermin.

Boyd doesn't remember driving home. He's eating ice cream straight from the freezer with his elbows propped inside and a spoon buried up to the handle in the container. His favorite is strawberry, but for some reason he can't remember, the last he bought was mint chocolate chip. The cold burn of the mint on his lips, teeth and tongue enrobe his head in a different pain.

"My head's a mint chocolate chip." He pays for laughing at himself with another blinding strike to the center of his brain—where the lizard lives.

"Why didn't I take my pills? Wait ... did I?"

He tosses ice cream container and spoon into the freezer next to a tidy stack of frozen dinners with unappetizing names like, "Meat and Potato Lover's Medley," and "Country Style Chicken with Corn Muff-et."

In the bathroom, he reaches for the brown bottle with the white cap he leaves near the sink. He shakes it.

"A mad man's maraca."

Though he knows it's going to hurt like a sumabitch, he laughs anyway and pain like shattering glass embeds itself above his eyes.

"I forgot again." His voice sounds pitiable and shallow to his ears. In fact, he sounds like he's about ten—snot-filled and puny and surrounded in the permanent haze of his mother's smoke.

Boyd tiptoes with the pills in one hand and a wet towel held to his forehead with the other toward the sofa. He hisses through clenched teeth as his treads push vibrations up his spine and into his brainpan.

The Venetian blinds are closed.

"Thank Christ."

He sinks into the cushions and loose back pillows, still holding the pills and towel.

A sing-songy kid's voice mocks him from the opposite corner of the room. "Stop your dawdle! Get the top off the bottle!"

Boyd shivers while it taunts him again. "You know kids are the only ones who can open that shit. Toss it here."

Boyd's fingers are slick with sweat as he struggles to twist and push at the same time. "Damn voice will go away when I take my pills."

“Look up, if you know what’s good for you.”

He jumps at the terrible closeness of the wet whisper in his ear and drops the bottle. It clatters under the coffee table smothered in self-help books. Despite the rancid pain,

he whips his head around, now certain he’s had a break in—some kid, playing games.

“Maybe it’s that brat from the beach today.”

They all taunt him and call him names like “Metal Dork,” “Wand Wizard,” or “Tin Man.” Though he rather likes that last one; the L. Frank Baum book is his favorite. But the only reason the little turds know the story is through watching the terrible movies made over the years. He bets not one of them has picked up a book except to use it as a prop for a video game console—or to bludgeon a younger sibling.

“Nothing’s there.” A great fatigue washes over him, forcing him to lie back. He’ll deal with the pills later when he’s had some rest so the voice will stop. His headache fights like a flame on a candle pursued by the wind, and he sinks into the only relief he’s had for endless hours.

He wakes to a darkened room and an even worse headache.

“I’ve made a mistake, that’s all.”

In a fog of pain, he turns the wand that’s been lying next to him on the floor upside down so its circular detecting end is against his forehead.

“I can find it in here and eradicate it.”

He presses his forehead into the loop until his neck aches.

“Got to get it out.”

Gnashing his teeth and bearing down, he grunts as the signal that tells him he’s found something goes off.

Boyd’s vision grows black and speckled as he runs drunken zigzags to the bathroom, dragging the metal detector behind him like a giant child with a pull toy.

“Gotta see it!”

He faces the mirror and holds the wand to his forehead again. The signal hurts, pushing through his ears and into the soft tissue. He turns his head back and forth, listening for the strongest hit.

“There!”

Boyd props the detector against the toilet and leans into the mirror. It's a red bump the size of a quarter. It looks familiar and like it's got sand on it.

"Didn't I dig this up at the beach today?"

He pokes at it with his pinky fingernail. It darts away from his touch causing him to jump.

"Holy shit!"

Pain crackles through his head. The lump pulsates like a heart. He whimpers and leans toward the mirror.

"It is the treasure I found today. How the hell did it get stuck in my head?"

The lump throbs as he opens the medicine cabinet behind the mirror.

"I must have fallen on it when I passed out. Where are the tweezers when you need them?" He rummages until he sees them poking out from behind a box of gauze.

"Got you!"

Boyd had bad acne once. "My tweezing skills are worthy of a degree in medicine. I'll fix this bastard."

He closes the cabinet door and leans into the mirror with both elbows propped against the glass. Something shiny and metallic is peering out at him from the red, sandy lump. He shudders and drops the tweezers in the sink.

"It's hatching!" Nonplussed, he moves in for a cautious look.

"If you're what I think you are ..." not taking his eyes off it, he feels for the tweezers in the sink, but the thing slips back down inside the lump—like an evil shrinking violet.

"You little shit." He hisses as the pain rips through his head. "I'll flush you out!"

Back inside the cabinet, he grabs the bottle of rubbing alcohol and the gauze. It digs deeper into his forehead. "You can run, but you can't hide."

He slams the cabinet shut, blows out a nerve-steadying breath, uncaps the alcohol, rips into the gauze and slops a generous amount on it. The biting fumes make his eyes water. He sets the bottle on the back of the toilet.

Boyd brings the sopping gauze up to his forehead, bracing himself for the sting. "It won't be long now."

The thing in the lump scurries deeper. He closes his eyes and jabs the gauze in. He pushes it deeper as the rubbing alcohol drips down his face, biting into the place where he cut himself shaving that morning.

“Take that, you fucker!” He screams at his reflection in the mirror.

The burrowing stops under the alcohol’s burn.

“Back to the tweezers.” His hand shakes as he brings the tweezers up to the lump. “I don’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

This time, there’s no movement or digging. He gets a braveness boost and goes in for the kill, stabbing the tool into the lump and pushing in as far as he can go—which is farther than he ever thought possible.

“Hey, man. Where’d you get that ring? It looks heavy.” The man in dress slacks and matching tie drops some change in Boyd’s open guitar case.

“Earned it fighting in Nam. Same place I earned this.” He moves his strumming hand off the guitar and flicks the black patch over his left eye. The ring sparkles on his hand.

The man frowns and laughs. “They handed out rings for bravery in Vietnam?”

Boyd puts the guitar across his lap and squints up at him with his good eye. “Sir, they didn’t hand nothing out in Vietnam.” He picks up the guitar again, dismissing the shirt and tie. “Thank you for your fine patronage.”

The man looks down as if to reconsider his donation, then turns and walks away.

Boyd waits until he can’t see the man on the long sidewalk before he begins playing “Levon” again.

“Why don’t they ever walk away from me on my blind side?”

He thinks about the irony—trading tourists with treasure for pantywaists with coins. “Idiots. They throw away rare coins and don’t even know it.”

He plucks the strings, hits a bad chord, hears a coin drop, and turns his head to give a thankful nod.

The sun hits him in his good eye as a woman with a wiener dog on a leash stops at the curb. She watches Boyd play as he watches the dog hunch up to take a shit on the sidewalk. Somehow knowing the dog is finished, the woman fusses with a plastic bag to pick up after it. She leaves a shit stain behind and Boyd plays while it bakes in the sun.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *As a child, I watched old grandpas waving metal detectors under the jungle gym. There was more than one old man sometimes. It made me wonder about their private lives. As a big fan of buried treasure myself, I was also intrigued by the metal detectors. Stranger Danger kept me from pestering them with a battery of whippersnapper questions. Then I grew up and got a metal detector of my own, hoping to sate my curiosity. My first find was a tiny metal fighter jet on the beach (that was cool), but mostly I got hits on bits of aluminum cans and other metal garbage. And I once skimmed a playground to give the kids' imaginations some room to grow. I found a quarter under the jungle gym.*

I write about characters who experience the uncanny in their everyday lives. My writing is influenced by Daniel Woodrell, Flannery O'Connor, Shirley Jackson—and love him or hate him—Stephen King.

BIO: *Laura L. Petersen is an emerging writer who grew up in the fog along the Pacific coast where she practiced writing before she could actually write by making up plays. She has published a short story, "Minor Wives' Tales" on Wanderings Magazine, and two poems on Red River Review. She has a day job writing for THE MAN without an accompanying byline, but it pays the bills. Laura earned her MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, WA.*