

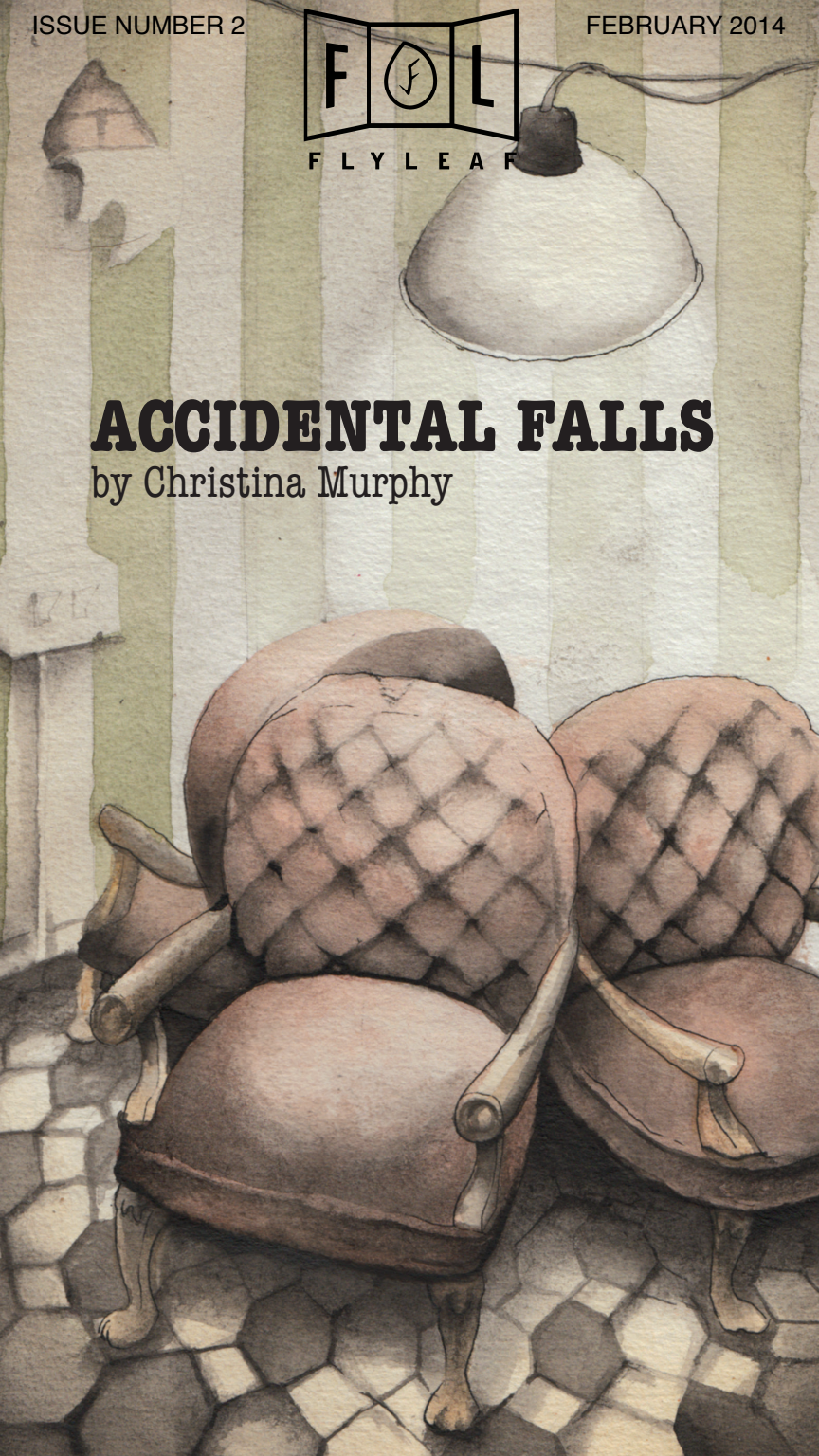
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ACCIDENTAL FALLS

by Christina Murphy



My mother, returning with a bottle of wine borrowed from a neighbor for the party at which people drank more than she expected, tripped over a piece of broken pavement, fell onto the sidewalk, and took a chunk of skin off her palms. The bottle shattered. My mother, a hysteric by nature, screamed and cried and drew a crowd—my father chief among them, who discovered that a shard of the green bottle glass had imbedded itself in the center of my mother's forehead. He removed it gingerly, telling her it was all right, she was not hurt. This was no comfort to my mother, who was fixated on that she could have been blinded. This was my mother's world, the could-have-been of multiple horrors and outcomes. He helped her to her feet. She was still crying as the crowd gathered round, giving her comfort with the one platitude she claimed as her own—how awful that this should happen to her.

I was on our front steps, watching, a ten year-old aware of my mother's high-strung nature, my father's inability to be enough to keep her calm, and my own sense of curiosity as to whether the glass shard would leave a scar on my mother's beautiful forehead and thus make my father's life and mine an endless nightmare of the horrible things that one could never get over in life, because, after all, the wounds were there forever, were they not?

And she was right about that. My father did not succeed in removing all the glass, and a sliver buried deep in her forehead soon festered and swelled into a marble-sized knot that required the expertise of a doctor to excise. Five stitches and a two-week dose of antibiotics, and soon the swelling disappeared and the wound healed, but left in its wake a noticeable indentation and a small white scar.

For my mother, this was devastating—a deep tragedy. It was the loss of her beauty, which was no longer perfect

but marred. When she looked in the mirror, the scar was all she saw. And she was convinced that it was all anyone else saw, too. Not her high cheekbones, her full lips, or her autumn brown eyes. Not the striking tone and glow of her olive skin with its burnished softness. Not any of it. Just the indentation and the scar.

There was no consoling my mother. There was no comfort, no hope, in telling her it was a tiny imperfection, barely noticeable. To my mother, it became the world.

And gradually, in her anguish over her loss of perfection, my father and I drifted from her sight and from her world. We were no help in assuaging her sadness,. Instead, we served only as reminders of the past. Soon we became symbols of everything she resented for ruining her life.

And so it went on like this—she moving farther away, and my father and I drawing closer together. In time, I became immersed in my own world of dreams and fantasies, and my father sought release in his job as an accountant. He found in his columns of numbers and graphs a new love that filled his soul and countered my mother's disdain.

What my mother did with her days was unknown to us. Sometimes she was home, but mostly she was gone. In her absence, my father and I ate meals together—breakfasts at fast food places that created fluffy yellow scrambled eggs from egg substitutes, lunches of sandwich meats on grocery store bread made soft and pliant by added chemicals, and pot pies for our dinners. We did not talk much during these meals and never mentioned my mother. She came and went very much like a moth drawn to the light in the darkness and withdrawing in silence during the daylight.

It was not until years had gone by that we learned she

had spent many of her days with a friend of my father's, who lived only two streets away. He read to her during the days and evenings. This part, my father and I had the hardest time understanding. We expected an affair, perhaps even a friendship, but the sharing of books made no sense to either of us.

My mother had never expressed any interest in reading. Her focus was on fashion; clothing and jewelry had always been her passion. And travel—she would have gone anywhere around the world given the chance and perhaps never come back if finances permitted. But books and ideas, were not, as she might say, her cup of tea.

It was the letters that affected my father and me the most. My father's friend had the tenderness to touch my mother's small, delicate scar—even to kiss it sweetly in those moments when she was most sad at the loss of her fine beauty that had brought her so much pleasure and constant male attention in life. Apparently, he understood something my father and I did not—the longing for the touch, the kiss, that made my mother feel whole once more and desirable. We had only words to offer, and words were not enough. My father's friend would sit next to my mother on the couch, put his arm around her to draw her near, and read to her. Poetry was her favorite. Poems were short, and after each poem, she would receive a gentle, delicate kiss on her forehead, the man's lips finding ways to say everything my father and I could not. The tenderness was touching, and it made my father feel empty. Eventually it made my father feel bitter, and soon he was as consumed with his bitterness as my mother was with her scar. I was in the middle and lost. There was no room for me inside his bitterness or her sense of how tragically life had treated her. The times I was home, I was mostly alone. I ate potpies by myself and wondered where my father went in the days

and evenings that my mother was with my father's friend. It became unimportant for me to be at home because nothing I had to offer mattered. My words were ineffective, just as my offers to listen were dismissed as irrelevant.

From his diary and a handful of notes I found after my father's death, I learned that he had gone to listen to music in those times he no longer wished to be home. Jazz—the coolness, the unpredictability, the freedom, and the wonder. It had all captivated him and lifted his spirits beyond the heavy weight of my mother's isolation. He no longer needed her and did not care that she no longer needed him.

I would like to believe that the high call of a trumpet or the low wail of a saxophone against the wild or gentle rhythms of a piano set my father's world right. Nothing I could say ever did. His loss was too extreme. But I am at peace with that, knowing that I did what I could, even if I did not understand all that was expected, but not really needed, from me. Each of us, in our own way, failed ourselves and failed each other. Or so my father's last entry in his diary said, and I believe him.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHRISTINA MURPHY'S stories have appeared in a range of journals and anthologies, including *A Cappella Zoo*, *PANK*, *Word Riot*, *Spilling Ink Review*, and *The Last Word: A Collection of Fiction*. Her fiction has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and was the winner of the 2011 Andre Dubus Award for Short Fiction.

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FRANCESCO ORAZZINI is an Italian satirical author. His work in the visual arts comprises illustration and animation, and has appeared at the Biennial of Contemporary Art of Dakar (2010), the Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome (2010), and in worldwide film festivals such as L.E.S. Film Festival of New York, Golden Orchid Film Festival of Philadelphia, Toluca Film Festival of Mexico, and many more. In New York City, he worked as a studio assistant for Nancy Lorenz, international painter-designer (Guggenheim Fellow). His work recently appeared on Juxtapoz's online magazine of art and culture. He lives in Mexico City, working as a freelancer.