

The Borde Syndrome

by River Adams

On Friday in the 21st century, Camille Borde woke up to find that her finger had fallen off.

She'd been dreaming that she was chasing a chicken in a large water-filled tank, wading through it waist-deep as the chicken splashed and made hideous screeching noises. Then the bird turned around and lunged and bit into her pinky finger with its beak, and, panicked, maddened, trying to shake the monster off, Camille woke up.

She lay in a fog, letting the unpleasantness dissipate under heavy eyelids, until Damien groaned next to her, and she reached over and silenced the alarm. He had another half hour of sleep. She had to make pancakes for him and the boys, do a shift at the flower shop, then cook dinner and get ready for tonight's outing. Damien called it a "work party." Camille thought the phrase was an oxymoron, in which both words ruined each other. And her mood.

She sighed, threw off the comforter, and sat up, squinting at the night light and shivering, feeling for her slippers and robe in a swimmer's motion. It was then that she became aware of something askew about her right hand, an oddity she couldn't see in the dark—nothing particular, just a strange, unbalanced sensation and tingling, and when she rubbed her palm on the sheet, the side of it felt rough, like a peeling calus. There was a foreign object digging into her thigh, so she slipped her hand under and pulled out a small item that felt most akin to a boiled stick. Or a piece of chicken foot. Momentarily the memory of the dream flooded her with nausea.

Camille turned on the side lamp and inspected the thin, shriveled pinky finger, bloodlessly broken off at the base. Around the

matching place, to which the finger used to be attached, her skin looked thickened and dry, curling inward into the hole, and it seemed to her she could make out a bit of grayish muscle and a white dot of the bone in the opening.

She placed the thing carefully on the night stand, briefly relieved to stop touching its dead, cooling surface, then reached back and shook her husband awake.

"Muffin bear!"

"Mmm." The bed rocked, and Damien climbed down to sit next to her on the edge of the bed, yawning and rubbing his face awake. "Still early, Cammi, you all right?"

"I don't know," she said. "Look."

He took her hand into his, and his eyebrows slid up into a teepee on his forehead. "Wow," he said. "That's . . . You'd better call Dr. Struts, I think."

"Yeah." She brushed the area around her missing finger, cautious as though it could burst or bite or wither off from one additional touch. It was numb near the wound and tingly outward, and she remembered now that her pinky had had pins and needles in it for weeks, but who paid attention to such trifles? "I guess it's cereal today for you guys," she said.

"It's okay, honey, you get better." Damien planted a loud, life-affirming kiss on her temple—mmmwah!—and plopped into the bathroom, shouting from there, "We are gritty men, who shall overcome!"

* * *

For Camille Raynaud, Minneapolis was as far from home as it was different: cold winters, hot dishes, heavy boots. Barely anyone ever touched each other through all those layers. But she was young. Upon moving here from New

Orleans on a scholarship to University of Minnesota, with gusto she decided to be different, too, and embraced the life of parkas and shoveling for daily cardio, protracted good-byes and long vowels. She studied anthropology and planned for graduate school followed by a career in the field: recording ceremonies of hidden tribes, learning obscure languages, taking part in funerals and exorcisms, describing dying traditions in her award-winning books and films, and coming home amazed and exhausted and crusted-over and head-spun, bumping shoulders with her doctoral fellows.

She didn't finish her BA by a single semester. On the first day of her senior year, volunteering as orientation counselor, she was paired with a dashing business major Damien Borde, and two months later they were in love and hopelessly pregnant.

Friends at home fretted when she returned to gather up her room and make the move permanent. They showed up in droves to drag her out to her favorite sandwich shop for the daily talk-over-each-other gumbo ya-ya sessions, and, crowding three sidewalk tables pushed together, interrogated over po'boys:

"Where you at?"

"You sure about this?"

"Come home," her parents begged. "We'll help you with the baby, and you can finish school."

Camille wiped her eyes. "Didn't you tell me you'd rather have a genius grandchild than a MacArthur genius grant? At least now I won't die of some weird parasite in Benin."

She meant to finish her degree once Charlie got older, maybe teach, or become an editor for a social sciences publisher. But Charlie was sickly the first few years, then Eli came along, and by the time she could take a breath again, it was too late to do CPR on a past life. And now the boys were twelve and seven, and Camille was mostly a mom, though she had started working part time at a flower shop two years before, arranging preordered bouquets, just to keep sane.

"Nobody's plans work out anyway," she'd said to her parents on Eli's fifth birthday. "Plans are stupid. You of all people should know that. My children are a gift of life. It's better than a plan."

They didn't argue.

Damien did well for the family. He had landed a job with a national insurance giant right out of college; he was bright and inclined to obsessive compulsiveness, and had been promoted twice. Tonight the company was holding its regional winter holiday party. It would be a fancier affair than Camille liked, requiring a hairdo and extra time spent on make-up, but Damien was angling for a position in high-risk underwriting, and he'd gotten the idea that his wife's looking done up and proper in front of the boss could help him seal the deal.

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Over the phone, Dr. Struts's receptionist did not sound impressed. Camille heard her dictating to herself: "Finger . . . fell off. When did this happen?"

"Uh, during the night, I guess."

". . . the night. Are you bleeding? Are you in severe pain?" She seemed to be checking off a list.

"Well, no, but . . . You know. My finger fell off."

"You betcha."

The keyboard was making its universally bureaucratic clicking sound on the other end of the line, the way that pages had rustled in the last century. In the centuries before, Camille thought, it must have been the clippity-clop of passing hoofbeats that could make you feel so helpless and bored at the same time. She imagined herself in a ditch on the side of a road, holding up her four-fingered hand, as the receptionist rode by on a black stallion, *clip-clop*, and nodded condescendingly from on high: "You betcha."

What is her name? Sherry? Cherry? The receptionist never introduced herself when she picked up the phone (though she might have

done initially), and Camille was embarrassed to ask.

The clicking stopped, and Maybe-Cherry came back online, same impeccable customer service voice. "The doctor doesn't have anything today, but I can put you in for tomorrow at 12:15."

"Okay," Camille said. "Thank you."

"You betcha. If it becomes an emergency, please go to the emergency room."

You betcha, Camille thought, hanging up.

She covered the wound with a kind of papier-mâché of band-aids, which looked like a toxic mushroom, and drove to work, but flower arrangement wasn't going well. She was guarding her right hand, the band-aid mushroom got wet from the bouquets, and she kept lifting it up to look underneath, poking random spots on her hands and feet to check for numbness, and more or less spending the time fussing over her limbs. After three hours, the owner chased her out to "rest up."

"I'm sorry, Tatiana," Camille said at the door. "It's just my finger fell off this morning."

"I hate when that happens." Tatiana was a kind, curvy, and boisterous Salvadoran, whose first reaction to anyone's trouble was to commiserate. She sighed with a hiss. "Wait, what?"

Camille proffered her disfigured appendage.

"Uffda, querida," Tatiana drawled with newfound respect for Camille's mental disarray. "Shouldn't you be in surgery or something?"

"Well . . ." Camille envisioned the boiled stick on her night table. "I don't think it's attachable."

Tatiana acquired an air of inspiration. "Hey! When the gang shot my little cousin's thumb off, they sewed his toe in its place!" For several seconds they stood, staring at each other, Camille's hand on the door handle, then Tatiana deflated. "It looks a little freaky, but it works."

The parking lot was slush. Camille stepped gingerly, one foot at a time, and swatted away the image of her hand with a toe where the pinky should be, sticking out short and meaty,

with tiny black hairs and a pink underside. It curls around a whisk, a flower stem, unbends to brush Eli's cheek; he shies away and pouts in his seven-year-old manner—*Eww, Mom, it's your toe hand!* She shuddered. No, thanks. She'd rather live nine-fingered.

* * *

She told Damien she was willing to go to the work party. She'd wear gloves, which they could stuff with tissues. But when he tried to fit her hand into a glove, something in her other fingers crunched, and they both jumped back.

"The boss will want to shake your hand, for sure," Damien said. "Maybe I'd better tell him you got pneumonia."

He left, and she fed the kids a store-bought rotisserie chicken (she didn't want to risk cooking), and climbed into bed. Charlie was told to tuck Eli in by nine and not to bother her unless someone was choking.

Camille was exhausted. Her hand felt as if, with one good shake, her fingers would rain down like withered leaves from a branch. A semi-circle of wrinkled, flaking skin was spreading out from the wound. The back of her hand had changed color from its usual rich, deep brown to a grayish-brown of dry dirt, and on the palm, the same area was now sickly white.

She dozed off cradling her arm but kept bobbing at the shallow end, drifting off and waking, thinking what kind of bug she could have picked up that made her fingers start shedding like clumps of hair off a mangy dog. Eventually she fell asleep and dreamt that Dr. Struts with Cherry-Sherry's face smiled and broke off her arm at the shoulder, then reached for her other arm, and Camille cried out, "No, don't!" but Dr. Cherry-Sherry leaned over to her right ear and filled it with blaring, unbearable clucking.

Camille woke up startled, sat up, and turned on the light. The clock read 4:03 a.m. She held up her hands, anxious, but the nine fingers were still attached, though several more had begun to shrivel and felt so brittle she

wouldn't chance bending them. She exhaled, mixing fear and relief, then saw it on the pillow: her flattened, desiccated right ear. A C-shaped limp thing of badly wrapped cartilage. *Is this how it'll be now?* she thought. *Me, leaving parts of myself behind every morning, till there's nothing left?*

* * *

In the heart of New Orleans, Camille grew up steeped in the brew of Catholicism and Voodoo. In her world, house steps were swept with brick dust to ward off evil, and blessed palm leaves reigned over the doors. Icons of saints mixed with loa figurines, crosses mingled with bottles of hot sauce on Voodoo altars, and ancestors were such a part of daily life that death didn't seem an awful lot more than a change of address, from house to crypt. These were not even things she'd been taught. These were the particles of tradition that filled the city's air, an effortless suspension of faith and imagery that stuck to the skin like heat or the smell of oysters.

Camille's family called itself Catholic, though after Meme had died, they hardly ever went to church. They did, however, have a candle-studded ancestor altar on the fireplace mantle. Meme assembled it after David had died of leukemia (Camille was seven), and her parents kept it going once Meme had joined the dead.

If someone had asked what religion she was, Camille would have hesitated to answer, but no one ever asked. She prided herself on being a modern and reasonable person above all. Her parents were both teachers, who wouldn't do silly hoodoo things like carry salt in their pockets to keep spirits away, and Voodoo wasn't practiced much, in any case, outside of tourist-frequented shops in the French Quarter, so, when she went to college all the way across country, Camille easily left both her religions behind. Or she thought she had.

It only happened a few times while she was at U of M, then more and more often after the wedding and the babies: now and again she

would sneak furtively into an early Mass at Immaculate Conception, by the flower shop, sit in the back and walk out after the Eucharist. She didn't tell her husband about it, nor her parents, and for no reason she could formulate. She just didn't know what to tell them. It wasn't the same at those proper upper-midwestern services. Too tame. Too quiet. And she couldn't explain what it was she'd left behind in her color-brimming, rowdy world that was now missing.

She began to stream videos of New Orleans: zydeco-filled fais-do-dos; merry, sweaty crowds passing a good time in the rues; beignets, grillades, and jambalayas. Every week or two she video-chatted with her parents, the fireplace in the background, and surreptitiously she glanced past them, peered between their faces to see what the altar looked like week to week. The photographs on it stayed the same (Meme, Paw, Aunt Amelie, David), but the offerings changed, and every so often Camille would bring it up, trying to sound nonchalant, pointing out a toy dinosaur David would have liked or Meme's favorite honeysuckle. Then, after they hung up, every time she cried.

She didn't know why she thought of all that now, sitting up in her bed, glaring at what used to be her ear lined up next to the pinky on the night stand, except there was a distant ringing in her head, and just then it reminded her of the church bells that would soon wake up a city a thousand miles away. She imagined their sounds, popping like soap bubbles over palm trees and bayous, above sleepy ranch homes and filigreed balconies in the French Quarter, and the longing for home overwhelmed her. With the reality-bending urgency of a hungry infant, she wanted the warm air of her childhood, its humid haze and blurred boundaries and magic and myth that swallowed mysteries whole and pacified them. Its syncretism—that's what her textbooks called it: syncretism, when disparate things bleed together and rub together and become a new thing, like gumbo. Religions. Peoples. Words. She wanted Meme and she wanted God, and she wanted to wake up from this gray

nightmare.

Did somebody put a gris-gris on me? she thought. That sounded ridiculous. *Stop it*, she thought. *You're an almost educated woman*, Camille Raynaud.

* * *

By noon, three more fingers had come off, both her feet were numb, and Camille felt achy and breakable all over. Damien drove her to Dr. Struts's office and helped her through doors and into chairs, holding her gently around the waist.

Dr. Struts took a look at Camille's hands and put on gloves. He had round eyes on a round head atop a long, thin neck, like an ostrich in a white coat. "That's quite a rash, Mrs. Borde." He smiled a kindly Big Bird smile. "Let me see your feet, dear."

As careful as Damien was pulling off her boots and socks, Camille left two toes inside them.

"So. Four fingers, two toes, and an ear so far? Anybody else in the family sick?"

"I'm scared," she said into the doctor's smiling round face and felt a hot tear run down into her mouth. Her voice came out hoarse; her tongue felt dry and unwieldy.

Dr. Struts patted her cautiously on the shoulder. "I'm gonna give you some cream, and we'll do some blood work, okay? And I'll let you know what comes out, and then we'll know how to make you feel better. Don't you worry, dear."

"Thank you, Doctor," Damien said.

"You betcha."

On the drive home they were quiet. Camille watched the neighborhood pass by and counted the tears that followed one by one down her neck, wetting the collar of her cardigan. She had a sense she'd forgotten something, and that it would save her if only she remembered. And that it would kill her if she didn't.

"Honey bunch?" Damien glanced over to see if she was awake. "I think maybe the kids should stay with my folks for a few days, don't you?"

On the other side of the car window, as in another world, the neighbor scooped after her schnoodle. The dog waited, bored, while the girl kept dropping his poop back into the snow.

"What are you going to tell them?" Camille asked.

"How about you got the flu? We don't want to announce to the whole neighborhood that you've got parts falling off, do we?"

She closed her eyes, which dislodged another tear. Down the neck, into the cardigan.

* * *

The email pinged twenty-four hours later. Camille heard Damien's footfalls and the creaking of the chair next to her bed. She cracked her eyelids. The curtains had been pulled shut, since even the murky light of a Northern winter afternoon hurt her eyes. Every remaining part of her ached. She had barely moved since the morning, when a trip to the bathroom had left her with one foot and one arm off to the elbow. Lying here in the induced twilight of the bedroom, taking slow breaths, she could visualize herself turning into a mummy—an image from some movie she only dimly recalled—and she wanted to whisper prayers and invocations but couldn't recall those either, and her jaw was stiff, and her tongue, cumbersome.

"It's the Medi-portal," Damien said. "Finally!" He typed into the computer he was holding in his lap, *clippity-clop*. "Here it is, provider letter from Dr. Struts." He was reading out loud as he scanned the text. "Dear Mrs. Borde, yada-yada, you complained of . . . here. Your lab results are normal. Please continue with previous therapy."

They glowered, Damien at the screen, Camille at Damien through her watering, burning slits.

"What previous therapy?" Damien asked the computer. "Is he freaking kidding?"

"Damien . . ." The grinding in her jaw was nauseating.

Damien had shoved the laptop onto the nightstand and begun to pace back and forth to

the window. "Ridiculous! Tests are 'normal,' so we're done? What about the fact you're falling apart?"

"Damien . . ."

He stopped, then plopped back on the chair. He hadn't touched her since morning, afraid that any disturbance would disarticulate yet another body part. "It's okay, honey bunch," he said, and caressed the corner of the blanket. "We'll figure this out, I promise."

Camille turned her heavy tongue behind desiccated lips. "Damien, find me . . . a traiteur."

"What?" He took a second start. "Traiteur, as in, faith healer?" He bent down over her. "This isn't New Orleans, Cammi. I don't even know if they exist here. What we need's a good doctor."

"Please, Damien." She was scraping her palate, her tongue like sandpaper. "I think I am dying."

"That's it." The chair screeched decisively on the floor. "I'm calling an ambulance."

* * *

Camille saw the chicken on the day Meme took her to pray to Papa Ghede. Camille was seven and did not understand the point of Voodoo rituals with any more nuance than she did chemotherapy or blood transfusions she watched David receive at the hospital, but she liked the rituals better. Meme had taken her before, and she adored the drums and the dancing and the swishing, color-bursting dresses about the women's rolling hips, and sometimes somebody did something really funny.

David had been diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia two years earlier, when he was ten and Camille was five. Her recollections of it all, and of him, would always remain blurry and haloed, as if she looked at that time through tear-filled eyes. She remembered her mother, sunk onto a chair nearest the still-open door, her purse fallen at her feet, droning through her hands, "It's the bad kind. It's the bad kind." Meme pressed Mommy's head into her belly, but Mommy swayed back and forth,

repeating this one phrase like an incantation, and Daddy stood in the middle of the hallway like he was lost, with his hands hanging, and watched, and Camille and David watched them from inside the fireplace. Never lit, it was their favorite nook to fit into together, and Mommy forever chased them out: *What is it with you two cave-dwellers?*

"What's the bad kind?" Camille asked.

"You won't understand, muskrat," he said. "Want to play checkers?"

She remembered David's bruises, and how hot and sleepy he was getting, and a traiteuse who came home with Meme the first time he began to cough in that terrifying way, as if something were tearing inside him. The traiteuse was a tall, flowing woman with straw-colored hair, and she put her hands on David's chest and whispered something that wasn't real words while Meme and Mommy argued in the kitchen over a bottle of dark liquid called "creeping spot-flower." Camille figured out only that Meme wanted David to have it and Mommy didn't, and that the traiteuse didn't want any money. David got better that time, and she came again, and he got better again, and then he didn't.

Camille did not remember donating bone marrow because the doctors had put her to sleep. They told her they would do it and that she shouldn't be afraid, and Mommy explained to her that the transplant would make David better. Camille wanted to believe her, of course, because she always believed her, except Mommy choked a little and cried when she said it, the same way she choked and cried whenever she said "intractable." Camille had heard that word several times, and every time Daddy had to catch Mommy in his arms.

She remembered making drawings for David and taping them to the outside of the glass of his clean room. "You should draw something happy," Daddy said, and Meme said: "Draw whatever Spirit moves you." She drew a fireplace and, inside it, a muskrat and a dinosaur playing checkers. David was so tiny and still

and alone in his clean room that Camille kept forgetting why she couldn't go to him. They'd explained it, but it didn't seem to make sense, because why would she give him something bad when she loved him? She only wanted to give him a drawing and maybe half of her cookie. So she kept forgetting and asking again, until Daddy snapped at her, and Mommy said, "Stop it, Henri. She's just saying what we're feeling. It's too late for this anyway, and he needs me more now than sterile isolation."

Camille had never heard them sound like that. Muffled, like they were echoes. And they cursed.

"We lost the goddamn transplant gamble," Daddy said. "It endangered her for nothing, and it's killing him."

"We had to try," Mommy said. "We had to try." And she stroked the glass of the clean room.

Meme found Camille under the chairs in the far corner of the hospital hallway, pulled her out, and wiped the tears, snot, and dust off her face. "I know you're scared, ma puce, but please don't ever hide from us," she asked.

"But it's my fault!" Camille had the hiccups from sobbing. "Mommy said the transplant is a piece of me they put inside David to make him better, but now he's worse. I gave him a bad piece!"

It was then that Meme took her to pray to Papa Ghede. There were people milling about a cramped house, sprucing up an altar and crowding it with candles, coffee, cigars, and thick fancy bottles, and putting small bowls of water in front of it on the floor.

"These are my friends," Meme said. "They will help us pray for David to our ancestors, and to loa Papa Ghede." She nodded at the miniature skeleton on a hanger, in a top hat and shades, with a cigar in his teeth and an apple in his hand. With his bones loosely connected by wire, he seemed to be dancing, and Camille thought, if anyone could cheer David up, this clown definitely could.

"He's funny!" she declared and pointed to

the character's sunglasses, which had only one lens.

"Shush, no-no! Have respect!" Meme folded down her grandchild's irreverent finger. "Papa Ghede is the patron of death. And children." She smoothed Camille's hair, and her voice choked like Mommy's. "He leads us to the other side, but never before our time, you understand? And no human can change that time, no matter what we do. He will watch over David, in this world and the next."

Camille's mind wandered during the prayers. She recognized some prayers from church, others were new, and she giggled to herself when the chorus of voices chanted "Legbe, ma cher, I'm knocking, open the gates!" because nobody was knocking. And when they chanted "Ghede, ma cher," she thought, if he was the lord of death and Meme said to have respect, how come they called him "my dear." She thought of the clapping game she played with the girls on her street: *Cher ma cher get my share*. Then it was over, and the adults spilled out to the back yard, and Meme said there would be a meal to honor the loa and celebrate life. Camille was hungry and exhausted, so she nestled in a corner at first, dozing off, but when she heard clucking from the corner of the yard, she squeezed through the wall of grown-up legs hoping to see the chicken.

She still didn't see well at first. In the center of the circle, a woman and a man performed some machinations and blocked the view. Camille made out a large stone, a bowl, some herbs, and they were doing something with these things and with the hen the man was holding, and then he stepped forward, gripping the bird's head, and with a big kitchen knife cut the chicken's throat. It didn't struggle, only made a nauseous, slow grinding noise. Its blood flowed over the stone, and sound and movement swelled from the crowd, and the man began to say, "Thank you for the gift of life—" but Camille didn't hear any more. She shut her eyes as tight as they would shut, opened her mouth, and screamed.

* * *

"Honey, your parents are about to board." Damien put away his phone and sat by the bed in Camille's isolation room, rustling his protective gown.

The doctors didn't know what she had, so they protected from everything they could think of. And they treated for everything they could name: intravenous steroids for allergy and autoimmune disease, antibiotics and antifungals for infection, vasodilators and statins for peripheral vascular disease. "Clearly, you have something else," one of the doctors said this morning, after separating a gray log that used to be her upper arm from her shoulder. It looked like a furrowed branch of an old willow tree. A thing. Her last limb. "We're still running some tests," he said and adjusted her oxygen line with a blue gloved hand.

In the deep night she'd caught Damien weeping into his mask. She made a move to put a hand on his head, but there was nothing where her hand had been. "I should bring the kids," he said. "It's time for them to know."

"Na . . ." She could barely move her brick of a tongue. "Don . . . wan . . . see me luk . . . iss."

She thought of explanations Damien could offer the boys for the disappearance of their mother, a closed-casket funeral after a four-day flu. Anything would be better than a limbless torso on a hospital bed and a face of willow bark. The stuff of nightmares. Thank you for the gift of life.

"Damien," she called, but it came out "Eh . . ."

"What is it, my love?"

"I need a chicken. Could you bring me a chicken?"

"What is it, Camille? Are you in pain?"

"Bring me a chicken!" she tried to shout. "I have to say I'm sorry! Can't you hear me?" All her mouth let out was a hoarse moan.

There was commotion, and Damien yelled "She's choking!" and a white shiny head loomed over her, she couldn't breathe, and then

the weight lifted. A clang of dead flesh against basin. A woman's melodic voice said matter-of-factly, "The tongue has separated." A wild gush of a howl, and Damien tore out of the room, stomping.

Camille registered it all through a thickening haze. Time began to slow and swirl around her, and the happenings of the ICU washed over her as happenings do before you fall asleep, distantly and without leaving a trace on her consciousness. Somewhere the drums began to beat, and a choir sang "It Is Well With My Soul." Then the bells rang to Mass over New Orleans.

A voice materialized near her head, sweet and strenuously peppy, like sucking candy. "Hello, Mrs. Borde, I'm one of your doctors. I'm sorry you're not feeling well, but let's hope we can help you real soon. Now, your case is a little unusual, so do you mind if we publish it? I just need to ask you a few more questions."

Cher ma cher chicken share, Camille thought, and smiled inside her brain. "Have respect, ma puce," Meme said, and ran her hand down Camille's brittle hair. She bent down low and kissed Camille on the forehead. Her eyes were black-and-orange event horizons.

The door of the isolation room whooshed open and closed, and a gust from someone's gown touched Camille's face. A new voice, muffled by a mask, said, "We need you now, are you done?"

"I haven't started."

"There's a patient in the ER, just presented with spontaneous amputation of a digit. Hurry up."

They whooshed out. The smell of rum and cigars wafted in to Camille, and she thought, *Who is smoking in a hospital?* ▲▼▲