

Chris McCreary

Kid Cyclone & The Birdman of Avalon

The boy's mother is wringing her hands.

Dear Sharon, the boy writes, I guess you know by now that I quit taking the medication.

The stepfather is standing in the middle of the mother's bedroom, staring down at the antique metal bird cage that lies smashed on the carpet. "What have you done?" he half-asks over and over again. There are tiny green and yellow feathers everywhere, bloody footprints across the carpet. "What's wrong with you, you sick little freak?" he finally asks, almost as an afterthought.

Dear Sharon, the boy writes, I hope you can forgive me.

When he closes his eyes, the boy sees his stepfather molt into a greasy, predatory bird, its wings fluttering absentmindedly as it perches on the headboard of the mother's bed. Its long, twisted beak pecks at her lips as she twists in fitful sleep. The boy wakes from these dreams drenched in cold sweat.

Other nights, the boy and his mother are sitting in the breakfast nook. She's slathering strawberry jam onto the boy's toast as the stepfather shuffles into the room, cinching his tie around his pudgy neck before snatching a slice of toast from the boy's trembling hand. Before the bread can reach the stepfather's smirking mouth, he falls to his knees, drops the toast, begins to wretch uncontrollably. The boy and his mother rise horrified from their chairs just as the stepfather tilts his head back, jawbones unhinging to send dozens of birds pouring forth from his gaping maw: his pet parakeets, yes, but also pigeons, flamingos, toucans, robins, and ravens, all silent flapping wings as they rush past the boy's face, their tiny claws rending the flesh of his cheeks even as he flails about, blindly groping for the sleeve of his mother's nightgown. He wakes with his sheets wrapped tightly around his legs, his face is covered in tiny scratches, traces of blood beneath his fingernails.

Dear Sharon, he writes, I mean, you realize I can't call you "Mom" anymore, right? Not since the day Carl moved in. You know, I had a mom once, and she was married to my dad. Remember Dad? I didn't think so. But I do.

Or his stepfather could be a mild-mannered aviary veterinarian named Carl with a fondness for Burger King value meals and unwinding in front of reality TV, and the boy's secret identity might be none other than Kid Cyclone, who has the ability to sweep up anything – birds, people, flat-screen TVs - in the gale-force winds of his fury. The stepfather is perhaps dressing for work as Kid Cyclone strides into the mother's bedroom. The chubby bald man pleads for mercy but is blown through the French window with a flick of the Kid's wrist, glass slashing his hands and face as he plummets two stories to the lawn. From below, the stepfather cries out for help, yet Kid Cyclone's mother still sleeps soundly, her light-blue nightgown tight across her body. Just as Kid Cyclone slides

between the sheets of her bed, the boy wakes confused to feel that he's wet the bed, then quickly wads the damp pajamas and sheets and stuffs them all deep in the back of his closet.

Three mornings a week, the boy sees a counselor named Dr. Menken. She wears sleek silver jewelry and keeps a bowl of dollar-store candies on her desk. The candies, the boy notices, have melted into a single sugary mass that he stares at while Dr. Menken talks at him. Dr. Menken practices tough love. "It can be perfectly normal for a boy to escape into fantasy after the death of a loved one," Dr. Menken says, "but I'm starting to think you're hiding behind this. I think you know exactly what you're doing, trying to get attention from your mom by lashing out at your stepfather. Besides," she goes on, "any self-respecting superhero would be ashamed of what you've done."

"I never said I wanted to be a *superhero*," the boy replies. "I just said I want to have super powers. There's a big difference."

Or the boy's counselor's name is Seth, and Seth wants to be the boy's friend, talks to the boy about how he used to run varsity track back in high school but how all of the girls only liked football players and so he couldn't get a date to the prom. When Seth gets serious, he leans forward and says things like, "Tell me about these dreams you keep having. I mean, you know that I worry about you, little dude."

Seth asks, "So what exactly would a thirteen-year-old dude do with superpowers, anyway?"

Seth asks, “Are you still keeping the journal like I asked?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, can I see?”

“No,” the boy says, “you can’t see.”

Dear Sharon, the boy writes, how much have you spent sending me to therapy, anyway? Well, I hope it's at least making you feel a little less guilty for screwing me up so much.

Dear Sharon, Do you know that I can hear you two at night? Is this how you try to forget about Dad? Couldn't you just get an eating disorder or read romance novels or something? You two are disgusting.

In the breakfast nook, the boy’s stepfather is talking to him, his fat earnest face etched with sincerity over his plate of scrambled eggs. The stepfather’s lips are moving, his forehead is frowning, but all the boy hears is the sound of wind whistling, and he’s imagining what it would be like to be inside a cyclone, at the center of so much reckless force.

The boy is sitting outside of Dr. Menken’s office just after his session. His mother is inside now, writing the check and getting her surreptitious report. “You should know he’s been having the dream again,” Dr. Menken stage whispers to Sharon. “The one where Carl attacks you, but he steps in to save you by murdering Carl.” He pictures his mother handing over the check with a trembling hand.

“So I think I wanna be Superman this Halloween,” the boy says. He’s in his father’s workshop, sitting on the hood of his dad’s car, watching him tinker with a lawnmower engine. His dad is whistling a meandering tune that the boy thinks he half-recognizes from a commercial jingle or TV theme song. “I don’t want to be a Power Ranger again.”

“Superman?” His dad turns. “I’ll bet a dozen other kids in Avalon will show up as Superman, and besides, Superman is totally lame.”

“Lame? He’s the strongest superhero.” The boy loves these moments of faux-sparring with his dad, seeing where the conversation will take them.

. “He’s lame because he doesn’t even have to try every time he saves the world, and if you’re pretty much invincible, what’s the point, anyway? You know who’s really cool? The guys like Batman, they’re pretty much regular people who can’t fly over buildings or shoot heat vision out of their eyes and all of that hokum. They’ve got brains and training, and they’ve got gadgets.”

“Yeah,” the boy says, almost convinced.

“Yeah,” his dad continues, “that’s part of why I became an engineer. Trying to build my own utility belt when I was a kid.”

“Can you teach me how to build gadgets?” the boy asks.

“Yeah, sure,” the dad says, shooting him a sideways grin, “but first you need to learn the basics.” And over the next few months, the boy and his dad will build a birdhouse for the backyard, which will be a Mother’s Day gift, and a Pinewood Derby racer, which will win a blue ribbon in a race at a local community center.

“Hey,” Seth says. Usually at this point in the session he’d be leaning back in his chair, sweat stains in the shape of crescents under each arm, but today he’s hunched forward across the desk, getting his tense face as close as possible to the boy’s. “You’ve got to talk to me, buddy. This is some serious shit, dude. Why’d you do that to his birds?”

The boy can’t sleep, so he sneaks down to his dad’s basement workshop around midnight, the one room in the house that doesn’t show the stepfather’s presence at all. The boy smokes a joint, fires up his father’s drill, and bores holes in the workbench until he finally gets sleepy. “Bullseye,” the boy says to himself with each hole he drills.

“If you think about it,” the boy says to Seth, “a drill bit is like a miniature cyclone. It’s just displacing space and air. Except, OK, there’s no hollow center. But still, same basic idea.”

The boy’s mother tightens her hands on the steering wheel. “You’ve got to listen to the doctor, sweetie,” she says. “She’s trying to help you.” A pause. “She’s helping you, right?”

Dear Sharon, the boy writes, Did you really think grounding me would solve anything? I mean, I was in trouble for stuff I did in the house when you guys weren't home, so why would you punish me by making me stay in the house by myself even more? Sometimes you're even stupider than I usually think.

The house is silent, the boy's mother and stepfather are both at work. The boy is rummaging through his dad's cluttered workroom yet again. In the back of a storage cabinet, he finds a stash of dirty magazines and, behind a fire extinguisher and bicycle pump, his dad's home-made dart gun.

The boy is Ritalin and Lexapro and then Wellbutrin until he smashes a plate when his stepfather asks for more potato salad. After that, he is Celexa and Lithium and Paxil in no certain order, and after that, he begins to lose track. Whenever he starts taking the latest of Sharon's medications, he can hear the whistling sound getting louder, vibrating at a higher pitch for a few days until it finally levels off a bit. "It's about finding the right combination," she tells him over and over again. "It's not an exact science, and there's got to be some trial and error." After a few months, the boy stops taking any of the pills and starts hoarding them in the back of his locker at school, where he trades them to a guy named Ray for comic book money or dime bags of pot, which is the only thing that makes the whistling go away, the only thing that helps him sleep.

The boy falls asleep surrounded by a stack of comics –*Final Crisis*, *Blackest Night*, *Batman R.I.P.* – and dreams of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of birds swirling around him like a tornado. He eventually reaches into the vortex, begins grabbing the tiny animals one by one, and starts snapping their limbs, bit by bit, one at a time, until the wind is, finally, calm. Then he dreams of a campfire far beyond Avalon, of pulling his stepfather's pets from a spit, then feasting on the meat beneath their breasts.

"What kind of gadgets did you build when you were my age?" the boy asks his dad, which is the same question he's asked each day now for months. This time, for some reason, the boy's father does more than just grin

and shake his head in response. Instead, he leans back on his stool, takes a sip of his lukewarm beer, and begins to hold forth on grappling hooks made out of fishing line and wire coat hangers, which he'd use to grab onto girls' sweaters, and a modified water pistol, which he'd used to shoot diluted acid onto the back of an older bully's jeans, leaving him half-naked and mildly burned by lunch period. Later, sitting in his dad's silent workshop, the boy would remember his dad's mischievous smile as he relived these adventures.

Dear Sharon, Thanks for not letting Carl take over dad's workshop. I can say that, at least. Maybe it's not even being considerate – maybe you've just never thought about the basement at all since Carl moved in – but it's good that at least some part of the house doesn't smell like bird crap.

“I probably shouldn't even be showing you this,” his dad says after a moment of hesitation, “but I still tinker around sometimes.” From beneath the workbench, he pulls out a foot-long metal cylinder attached to a blunt piece of lumber with some sort of trigger mechanism grafted to its underside. “It's a dart gun, but not for those little suction-cup darts you shoot. It's for those kind of darts,” he says, gesturing to a battered dartboard hanging on the back of the workshop door. “Once or twice a week after work, the guys and I go to have a beer and play some darts at Vito's – the place down the road from the plant? – but I'm not any good, and the guys always crack jokes about it.” He's rummaging around in drawers crammed with extra bolts, Allen wrenches, rolls of duct tape. “So I built this as a joke, to show up one day and just take a shot at the dart board, but it actually turned out pretty well. It's basically powered by a really high-powered rubber band, and I tweaked the darts so that they had these thicker, sharper nails in them instead of just the tiny point they'd usually have. Not much of a range, but this set-up has a

punch. You definitely don't want to be on the receiving end of one of these things. The guys at the bar thought it was pretty funny."

The boy's dad chuckles to himself, then looks thoughtful. "Here," he says, handing the dart gun to the boy. "Cock it like this." The boy's hand finds the trigger, his father guiding his aim toward the target. "Your mom would kill me if she saw you doing this, but what the heck. Let it rip," the dad says, then, a moment later, "Bullseye," even as the dart is whistling to its target. Two days later, the boy's dad dies in a car accident on his way home from Vito's after work.

"There was nothing you could do," Seth says, "you weren't even there. You know that, right? You can't beat yourself up over it."

"I don't blame myself," the boy says. "I hardly even remember anything about it."

"What do you remember?"

"Well, I was in my room doing my homework when the phone rang, and a couple of minutes later, mom came in and told me."

"How did she tell you? I mean, did she try to sugarcoat it?"

"I dunno. After a minute, all I could hear was this humming in my head."

"Like the whistling?" Seth asks. "That's where it whistling started?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I don't think so." The boy is irritated. "Who cares what the noise is, anyway?"

"You know I still love you best," the mother says, her voice cloying in its need. She's sitting on the corner of his bed, wearing the light-blue nightgown that the stepfather gave her for her birthday. "You know that, right,

sweetie?” He nods dismissively, knowing that in a moment she’ll be closing her bedroom door and crawling between the sheets with his puffy, bloated stepfather.

Dr. Menken says, “Tell me how the medications are working. Are you still getting any side effects? Are you still hearing things?”

“What things?” the boy asks.

“You know,” she presses, “the whistling.”

“Yeah,” the boy says, “I guess.”

She leans in. “Tell me about this whistling. Is it like a train whistle? A police whistle?” The boy shrugs. He knows but will not tell her the whistling isn’t a *whistle* – a tin whistle or train whistle or whatever she’s talking about – but the swirling winds of a coming storm.

When the boy opens the door to the workshop, he finds his stepfather sitting on his dad’s stool. “What’s this?” he asks. He’s holding several of the dad’s old magazines – a *Hustler*, a couple of *Playboys* - that he’s pulled from under the workbench. Maybe he’s yelling at the boy. Maybe he’s blushing. “We can talk about these later, but right now there’s a lot of other stuff I found that’s the real problem,” he says. Then there’s dead air. “We worry about you, you know,” almost as an afterthought. Lined up on the dad’s workbench are the bong the boy had hidden in an old toolbox, the bag of pills that he’d stashed inside a blown-out tire, the tight roll of \$20 bills he’d tucked in a box of nails. On top of the stack of his dad’s magazines is a *Victoria’s Secret* catalog the boy stole from his mother’s nightstand the night before and snuck into the basement. The stepfather is still talking about the boy’s mother’s feelings and the consequences of all of the things he’s found in the workshop and the fact that he’s going

to have to call the police, but the boy is staring at the woman on the cover and listening to the whistling that's filling his brain. *Angel*, it says, and along with a tiny black g-string and diamond-studded bra, the woman is wearing a pair of exquisite white wings.

“What’s wrong?” Seth pleads. “Why won’t you talk to me? This is your last chance. After this, it can only get worse.”

“You won’t be seeing Seth anymore,” Dr. Menken says. “You had him wrapped around your little finger, but I know better. I’ve met a dozen kids like you, and I know exactly what kind of a liar you are.”

Dear Sharon, the boy starts to write.

The stepfather is down on one knee in the mother’s bedroom. He is holding what’s left of his favorite parakeet, its blood smeared across his palms, more blood congealing on the deep, beige carpet. The boy never bothered to put the drill away, and it still sits on the carpet, its extension cord still snaking to the socket in the wall beside the mother’s dresser. He’s sitting on his mother’s bed watching his stepfather, thinking of how he couldn’t even hear the birds over the hum of the drill’s motor.

“Tell me about Kid Cyclone,” says Seth. “I mean, what kind of powers would this guy have?”

“Well,” the boy starts, “he could control the wind. That’s obvious. But I’m trying to refine the particulars of it. Maybe it’s just not practical.”

“Practical?” Seth asks. “There’s nothing practical about dreaming up superpowers. It’s just for fun, right?”

“But I’m talking about in real life. For real,” the boy says. “Think about it: what does the wind do? It knocks things over. It moves quickly, maybe acts unpredictably. With the right tools, a person can do that, right?”

“This is my dad’s workshop,” the boy says, his voice rising. “You need to get out.” He knows it sounds like a childish shriek with none of the menace he actually intends. He should’ve hidden everything better, expected this intrusion. He’s mad at himself, yes, but he’s especially mad at this fat man sitting on his dad’s stool.

“Or what?” the stepfather demands, his face red with fury. “Is Kid Cyclone going to show up? I don’t have any more pets for him to murder with a drill, and you know what, Kid Cyclone, I’m the Goddamn Birdman of Avalon, and it’s about time the Birdman taught you a lesson.”

“You want your nemesis to be a beautiful woman in spandex, right? Or at least a demented criminal mastermind, you know?”

“I guess so,” says Seth, looking skeptical.

“Me, I got a dumpy middle-aged vet who drives a SAAB.”

“I’m not sure,” Seth says, “that referring to your stepfather as your nemesis is the best approach.” The boy can tell he’s barely suppressing a chuckle.

The boy is remembering how his father designed these darts, sat smoothing their plastic feathers as he held them up for the boy to study. “I only made two of them,” his dad had said, “but they’re pretty sturdy. You just have to be careful with these things. They’re no joke.”

*Dear Sharon, You can think what you want about me, but I knew it wouldn't kill him. I just wanted him to get off that stool.
No hard feelings? Maybe even tell him I say "hi." Tell him to keep an eye out for me.*

“After what you did to my birds,” the stepfather says, rising and moving toward the boy. “I was ready to be done.” The boy watches the sweat pool on the stepfather’s brow, seethes with anger. “I tried to treat you like a son,” the stepfather starts to say, but before he can finish that sentence the boy is on him, and everything becomes a blur - his teeth snatching at the stepfather’s bewildered face, the force of the stepfather’s girth as they tumble together onto the floor, all of the boy’s belongings clattering to the ground around them. And then the boy is in the center, the eye of the storm, and he can see his stepfather gasping for breath as he struggles to stand, seemingly lurching toward the boy in slow motion. The boy sees his father’s dart gun, understands how quickly he can grasp it, cock it, bring the barrel up toward his stepfather’s point-blank face. “Bullseye,” the boy thinks as his stepfather’s eyes open wide and the synthetic feathers take to the air.