

RED BY EVAN CHEADLE

Shining red and perfectly round, it splashes onto the dark wooden floorboards. A single crimson drop, followed by more, then more. I scream. The shrill siren of my cries evokes response from the neighborhood dogs. I fall to my knees, then onto my elbows. What is happening? Why are my insides coming out? Am I going to die? My sister's face turns white.

"I'm sorry," she says, but her apology is lost in my high-pitched death rattle. My parents rush down the stairs to see what awful fate has befallen their second born. I'm on the ground holding my leaking face and screaming at the top of my lungs. *I'm going to die. I am dying.* My brains and my guts and all my tiny insides are spilling onto the floor. My mother's gentle reassurances mean nothing. My father looks relieved, not worried. Doesn't he know I'm dying? "You're fine," Coos my mother as she holds my head in her lap. She grabs my nose with tissue paper and plugs up the hole through which my very life was escaping. I lie gasping as my mother counts slowly to sixty. "...56, 57, 58, 59... There. You're okay, see?" She pulls the red tissue away from my face and smiles warmly. I snort a red, metallic-tasting part of my insides back to where it belongs. Was that my heart? A lung? Shaking and wet-eyed I bring my red hands to my face. The leak has been plugged, the hole in the dam sealed. Somehow I am alive.

"No need to cry over a nosebleed, son," my father chuckles, shaking his head. That man must be made of steel to endure such hell. My mother pats my head and washes my face and brings me an ice cream sandwich. Neapolitan.

Wise healer, I owe you my life.

My sister stares at the floor, tracing circles in the dust with her finger. "I'm sorry, Evan."

I kick her in the leg, and the game is on again.