

I should be delighted that Ingrid came to Melanie's rescue, but all I can hear is "your girl's problems." Is that the talk of the town now?

The young cop—his name tag reads Officer Durez—smirks and says, "You know, sir, we can't give a kid a pass on something like this more than once."

I'd love to wipe that look off his face. But he's thirty years younger than me and wearing a badge. I'm going to defer to the better part of valor.

I turn to Ted Coover. "Thanks, Ted. I'll handle it."

The look on Ted's face says, *Phil, what the fuck are you doing, trying to raise a mentally ill, drug-abusing girl? At your age?*

I hope mine says, *You're six months past due on last winter's boat storage, asshole. And I haven't made a peep because I know about your wife's MS. And because that's the kind of town we are here.*

When the police leave, all I can say is, "Leather?"

Melanie crumples, defeated for the first time in the weeks she's been here. She sobs and chokes and makes horrible, injured-animal noises. But what shakes me isn't the sound as much as the shape of her mouth, which, through my own tears, distorts into a gaping hole in her multi-pierced face. What is it I'm seeing?

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When I was Melanie's age, I lived in a small industrial city in northern Michigan. One summer, I caught a black bass in our fetid local river behind the graphite factory. Coming from water that generally produced nothing but stunted bullheads and puny perch, the game fish was a rarity and a trophy worth mounting. My family couldn't afford taxidermy, of course. So I cut the fish's head off and set it out to dry in the summer sun, high on the roof to keep the rats off it. When the flies and maggots had done their jobs and nothing remained except the desiccated skin stretched over the skull beneath, I brought it down and varnished it, coat after coat, until it glowed like a live, wet fish again. Then I glued glass marbles into the empty eye sockets and painted them with glossy model airplane enamel: yellow rings around big black pupils.

I mounted the bass head on a wooden plaque and proudly hung it on my bedroom wall, and the fish glared out at the room with those bulging painted eyes, its mouth

gaping in silent laughter. The sun-hardened tongue pointed like an accusing finger, saying, "Look what you've done to me!" And I began to see it for what it was: the face of madness, something I feared more than anything in the world.

* * *

Melanie is laughing again. Too hard. Too loud. Tears demolish her makeup. Her eyes are frantic. I must look just as bad, because she yelps, "Pop! Are you all right?"

"Jesus, Mel, I'm trying here, honey. I'm not good at this, but I'm trying."

"Me too," she laughs. "I'm not good at this either!"

I gather her into a hug, her cold ear metal pressed against my neck. Through the wild strands of her very blue hair, I see her spinning wheel, her little wooden bench, her basket of yarn under our living room window, looking like an illustration of another time, another world.

Her phone rings and she pulls away and sniffs, "I've got to take this," and slips down the hall to her room, murmuring into the phone and leaving me standing there alone once more.

Outside the window, the roofer's truck backs down the driveway. The Lost Bay police cruiser remains parked out front. Officers Coover and Durez are filling out their report. And, on some level, it comforts me to know that they are doing everything they can to keep this town the kind of place I hope it still is.

Richard Chiappone is the author of three collections of stories and/or essays. His short pieces have appeared in national magazines, including *Gray's Sporting Journal*, *Playboy*, the *Sun*, and in literary magazines, including the *Missouri Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Sou'wester*, *ZYZZYVA*, and others. Chiappone teaches in the MFA program at University of Alaska Anchorage, and lives in Homer, Alaska.

CHARLES SCHMIDT

Sea Fog, 2015
Oil on canvas, 18 x 32 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST