

It was probably Two-something. Half-past or Forty-Five /quarter 'tilish. But again, that was a probably because no timer meant no matter and he would have to just imagine the *Ding-Ding-Done* sound. (*Ding-Ding*—August overcooked again.) The sun, forgetting, broke its yolk and spilled a mess of orange across the sky. The air dipped down and soaked it up dry, the Heat-Soaked Air burning bubbles like a sponge microwaved. The creatures broiled into a stupor so they abandoned slow searches for shade. Dazed crickets coated their chirps in sauna sweat. Squirrels overslept in maple fire bundles. Fat, overripe apples dropped from the arms of tired tree mothers to roast in the gnarls of rooty bowls. Withered weed sprouts bent back towards the cracked clay crust and pollen dust caramelized in the stick of grass and brick and red thorn bush. The heat came from underground and the earth opened like an oven projecting its boiling contents.

Propped outside against the crusted brick pillar, a painted scarecrow with a wicked bag-face and knotted straw hair counted the extended exhales and slow-shifting shadows swaying over the front lawn. The careful stitches that pulled his threaded mouth inward and pushed the two small billows out to a top and a bottom together, curved in an obligatory semi-smirk. It wasn't a grin, (it was too hot for that, but not a particular kind of frown either), just a mouth, stagnant-ed. He didn't need a nose. His two inky button eyes slit out to the lawn to watch a Stranger just arriving into view: a fat bird, a sparrow. Rather unwelcomed and unprepared. The Stranger sparrow intruded with too many feathers for the weather, reckless like a tourist tracking brass into a private stillness. It broke the semi-consciousness of sleep and

sun. Whirled up the ashes as it stepped on singe and dream. Then, without a song sang, it danced, each hop-landing producing a shrill tweet out of order like a malfunctioning metronome. *One. Two. Three. Four-hop. Five, Six, Seven. Stop. Side-step. Eight, Nine. Stop. Pick at the ground. Hop. Hop. Yell. Leg-twitch, neck-twist. Peep, peep. Stop.* It was so loud as it bounced on the burns. The scarecrow was the first to notice this one creature unaware, or perhaps *unimpressed*, with the world's convection. He was curious, (and they shared black bead eyes), so he calculated the hops of the Stranger sparrow. A few feet away, underneath the shade of a faded jeep, a thin feline shifted. Too, she noticed. Began planning her pounce. Her pupils were buried diamonds in her mustard eyes, the ancient cataracts reflecting the bird's hop and shuffle in the milked yellow shadows. She protruded her emaciated shoulders forward. Twitched her flea-bitten ears. She waited. Watched. Cooled as the bird skipped closer. *One and Two. Three. Four.* The bird tapped its left leg twice. Twitched its neck to left, then right. *Five-Six, Seven. Stop. Side step, Eight. Nine. Stop. Shudder. Another. Stop.* It picked at the ground, *Ten*, and hopped again. Bolder. Brasher. The scarecrow peered still balanced on its wooden stake tip kissing the cement.

Meanwhile, August blinked. Of course this September was too hot. It'd been too hot all summer. Real fall would come soon? August sprawled on the all-weather loveseat with sticky toes pushing bright yellow cement, watching the scarecrow watch the cat watch the bird. The shining teal plastic objected to his spinal region reaching any sort of semi-comfortable position so August tried to focus again on the show on the lawn. Instead, the loveseat's plastic sunk and stuck to his new alien skin, clinging them

together like a sweaty secret. He decided he could hate that too. There, he Hated Two Things. That wasn't that many. Maybe Three: This September could be Thing Three.

A new smooth waxiness grew between the bandages and exposed sections of his now scarred but hairless legs. His new skins like an orange peel's outside, all smooth and porous but making your hands smell if you touched for too long. Biting at his hospital bracelet, still unable to rip it off, he sighed as the plastic cut into his wrists. He checked to see if it made the kind of mark it felt like, pink-ish line over the previous cuts from the painkiller wean. Check. He added it to the list of little laughable souvenirs of that sudden blip in the system. (Black Ash Fingernails, Singed Arm/Leg/Head Hair, Carcass Tongue. Empty Eardrums, Bruised-Bubble Eyes.) Check. Check. Check. CHECK. CH-E-CK. Indeed. He had indefinitely become a wrapped combination of healing angles and scabs.

The sun flushed his baby-skin cheeks. A new, slight breeze ticked his nose and he sneezed before he could tell his brain to catch it. Breathing with an o-mouth, he took another sip from his aluminum bottle. His top teeth clinked the metal of the lip of the bottle and the warmed water slunk down his throat like a heavy slippery snake. He was supposed to stay hydrated, they said. Yes. Even if he had a toad sitting on his tonsils. It wasn't their fault that he had stopped viewing the world from the inside looking out. That he tripped over something raised up and hidden and tumbled inward until he was stuck intersected with what he couldn't understand. No one wanted to be wedged within the sticky cell insides of their own head. He knew that. But now, *now*, his thoughts staggered over broken neurons and

transmitters and disconnected wavelengths of dream and reality. There were hotter walls in there with locks and codes that he had no more energy to decipher.

The fire had scorched up that too.

Taking another swig of the bottle, August let his senses fall behind his tongue with the warmed water snake. He swallowed them all whole, stared out back into the yard to watch the show again: The robin hopped twice more then looked up at nothing. The bird jerked its head to the left, then to the right, twitching its feathers again and again, then puttering about with its beak. Beyond, the little cat stayed in her place by the fire. What exactly was she was waiting for? The spotlight widened. The sun floated. The cat stalked. The scarecrow leaned. August lied.

Suddenly, as if someone had whispered the bird the plot, it hopped vertical and twitched its neck towards the cat, staring directly at its predator. There was a good level of heightened fright, followed by an anxious quiver and a ready-for-action stance. Admirable. Still, useless; the bird was just a squat pathetic thing. It shook again and stood its ground, tilting its head with inquiry of the whole situation.

Like a very serious dare, injected by a new level of confidence, a new arrogance inflated the bird: *Catch me if you can, dear stupid cat.* The dance continued, the hops and stalks and sidestepping rhythm.

Nobody blinked. The robin hopped to left, and then right. August could hear it sing:

*Catch me.*

Hop-hop-hop.

*You won't. You want but you won't.*

Hop-de-hop-side-up-hop.

*You senseless bastard alley cat.*

Still, the cat did not move. The bird stared. Stopped. Bored and superior, it continued its breakfast hunt for tiny baking insects. August wanted her to slink closer, to catch the sparrow and eat it whole. To make a scene and obstruct the cooking and the intrusion but the cat stayed looking like a spider. No fresh fat sparrow. August hadn't even had solid food in a month. Yellow hospital tapioca did not count. Jessie would never have to eat yellow hospital tapioca in the burn ward. Jessie was probably eating strawberry sorbet and cheesecake, chilled. Lemonade on the side in the sky. Jessie was Thing Number Two.

The memory was hollowed out now but the moment had been so full, so ripe. Jessie and August had sat on the velvet cushions in the Elm House cellar and it had been almost impossible for him to find Jessie's eyes amid the flickering candlewicks. The little green orbs finally showed themselves hovering in the warm tangerine light opposite his shadow. Legs crossed, the cool wall against his triceps with the night moving around them. August jumped but tried to hide it when Jessie's words scattered the quiet. "Will this ever change... this whole, like. Place?" he'd said low with the cement floors. He could hear Jessie shaking his head as he held it in his hands. August waited to let the question fall around him like a blanket up and over. It settled somewhere around his feet and into his lap as he blinked back what his answer should be. His hips creaked the floorboards when he adjusted to get comfortable. One of the barn

owls hooted in the empty space. His dark lashes fell for a few seconds, floating open when he heard the pillow slide followed by two tumbled bumps at the wall as Jessie kicked off his sneakers.

“How about you explain it to me once you figure it out,” his words curling around August’s neck suddenly strangling. It wasn’t a question at all. The anger was back. *Shit. Shit-shit.* Why didn’t he say something? Jessie spit more fire.

“I mean really, August? Will you stop being such a *fucking pussy? Jesus Christ.* It’s like you really are the girl,” he purred then cackled. A Fuck-You-August-Cackle.

“Pretty, pussy August. Afraid of the world’s promise. Ha.” Jessie sung, his eyes split and August saw the inferno underneath. A Fuck-You-August-Inferno. Burn with me or for me. No. He couldn’t tonight so he was a coward, yeah, probably. Pathetic. Pitiful. Whatever. Whatever! Jessie couldn’t force it and no matter how hard he tried August wouldn’t advertise this to the Uninterested. Why did everyone else have to be invited to watch critically, immediately? Bullshit. Those people didn’t matter. Those people had nothing to do with them and, vice versa, they with those people. August just couldn’t explain it right to him.

“Seriously? You’re joking. You have to be joking. That’s not the point!” Jessie yelled at the dusted window facing the fields. His freckles vibrated in the low cellar lights. The paintings behind him angled off the wall and grabbed at his shadows. He said made a sound when he swallowed, a kind-of-cough-

sniff, then nothing for a while. August felt the air on top of his head. “What do you want me to do, then?”

he asked.

Jessie rolled his eyes so the whites glowed. Said nothing.

August tried again, “I can. I mean, I’ll do it. If that’s really what you want,” but it came out too feeble.

Pathetic again! *Ding!* Jessie spit back more Fire Words. Hot Soup Words. Disgusting Words. I-Hate-You

Words. He shut his eyes and swallowed his tongue for a while after that. It all replayed in August’s head

like a glass merry-go-round. Around and around but too fragile to stop. Finally, Jessie stopped pacing and

stood by the windows, speaking out to the trees or crow or whatever it was that was still up and awake out

there. “You really are a piece-a-work, you know that, August? I mean. *Shit.*” He coughed then mumbled

softly, “Never mind. I’m sorry...I’m stopping.” Jessie turned and looked over at the dark-haired boy

sitting Indian-style like a child waiting for the Duck-Goose-tap. Jessie walked by but respected the

distance, laying back down next to the wall with the pale paper and gold leafing.

“And I’m not mad. I’m just... I thought...you know. It’s fine, though. No more thinking. Let’s get some

sleep,” he said and tossed to his side.

“Besides, it’s always going to be up to you,” he finished. August could breathe out again. Later, they both

fell asleep and the chunk of space that set off the thoughts and crafted the fire couldn’t be determined. A

flame? From who? From where? No one? He had ideas.

“August. You can tell us how it happened. It’s in there. You can tell us,” The new, nice audience wanted to know what could happen between two good boys in an old cabin basement. Unfortunately, those certain conversations had a terrible tendency to twist and project. They became a fragmented slideshow of captured images cut from the original film, extracted for a special show with a much different plot line. In this scene, August received an altered script with misinterpreted subtitles. The film roll ripped apart in a locked private room. When he tried to talk now, the slivers he thought he’d tucked away inside his better organs would set off his brain like a catalyst with moments and colors and windows of time. He was always too careless. One actor had disappeared. A shared scene had become a solo. The spectators had gloved hands and thick clipboards and cold stethoscope and too many facts. They didn’t believe in duets.

“August?”

“Did you light it on fire on purpose? Did Jessie?”

“Did you see anybody else there? A stranger? Someone?”

“August?”

“August?”

“AUGUST?”

It had been Settled. These things couldn’t be forced. August would tell everyone and Jessie would be there. But just not yet because tomorrow would be better and he was right: they should get some sleep.



Dreams had come fast that night, colored tree houses, banana peels falling in cascades. Ripe papayas and fat mangos, plump pineapples and punch bowls with floating wet fruit. A sweet shadow on a blue wall.

But the pleasant dreams had started to crumble and smoke, turning to strange piles of pulp and dust and mush that crunched and seeped. A crackle had ripped open August's eyes and he woke up to the dusty chandelier of the golden ceiling crashing into a thousand glittering ants along the spitting floorboards.

There was fire at his feet and the plaster, the paintings, the pillows, were firebombs exploding, exposing the black skeletons and homes of termites dead inside everything. The shadows stampeded the floor, thrown by flames, caught by the falling walls. August was stuck to the floor and couldn't find Jessie.

Black smoke filled his lungs. He couldn't hold anything in. He realized then that he would die there, still not knowing how or how long he'd been left there sleeping in fire.

Somehow voices yelled from another universe and August was lifted from his spot, his elbow ripping from the floor. His ears clapped to the shrieks of windows shattering. Glass shards speckled his shins like rhinestones on embellished jeans. Red, wet jeans. All kinds of diamonds on his legs. Winking. Glittering. Red. Red. Red. *It's okay*, he yelled to Jessie.

*It's Okay, It's Okay, It's Okay.*

But August couldn't yell loud enough because his voice wasn't working. He tried harder but his throat had a coal in it. There were embers alive in his tonsils, engulfing his tongue and pounding into his stomach, one by one. Syllable by syllable. They swallowed the sounds he tried to scream out and he felt

his skin peeling away and a stranger's thick sleeves covering his face, cutting away the fat smoke.

August's eyes saw only white and he decided they had blown out of their sockets like the electrical wiring. Strings dangled like spider legs on his forehead, clumps of dark fragments of webs. He hoped the stranger would drop him in water. "We're almost there!" he remembered that voice yelling in front of him.

"We're almost there! Hold on kid! Stay-with-me!" *Stay-with-me. STAY. WITH. ME.* But August fell asleep again and drifted off into more fire and his skin burning from the inside out. The floating, the breathing, the ovens, the smoke, the sirens, the apologies. The smoke, the smoke, the smoke. The screaming, the sirens, the bubbles, and pink sheets of skin torn as tissue paper on white hospital sheets. His mother's makeup forging black river routes down her eye bags to her collarbones. Her cold ringed hands perched on the bed beside his bandaged abdomen. The dreams of the mangos and firebombs and bugs and a tall boy with freckled skin and green eyes that twisted ruby red and white and a woman with a nametag shutting the curtain again.

August took another swallow from his water bottle and looked back out into the lawn. There was the little cat now in the center, sitting squat with something in her mouth. He craned his neck like he wasn't supposed to, squinted against the sun to get a better look: a fluff of grey and brown feathers, some floating off into the breeze towards the porch. Roses and pinks and other wet colors spill out from its dinner onto the pokes brown pretending to be grass. The little spider cat chomped on the bird's insides.

Dishes next door sang with ceramics voices and a television upstairs yelled in opposition. The school bus down the corner heaved in steaming fumes and groaned heavier with every stop and go. Potato bugs fried themselves accidentally on mulch mold. Roasted crickets chirped in half-hearted confusion. The white dandelions twisted skeletal. The sun seeped into the air and circulated sideways. The show flattened then sunk in like a fallen soufflé. August and the scarecrow, fastened to their shade, dismissed the Underground Cook.



