

Reboot

The ceiling fan is a sort of sarcasm in the wake of the summer heat. My borrowed side of the bed is soaked with a desperate scent, somewhere between the prey and the starving. I open and close my eyes, keep time against the whirl of the blades. I'm still here.

The Orioles lost again tonight, but they'll turn it around. Carson is not at the top of his late night game, but no one is willing to admit it yet. Time will run its course; we're all guilty of phoning it in a bit, getting comfortable. Even me. I've lingered too long. That was never the plan. It strikes me that the plan has gotten away from me.

The baby isn't even close to sleeping through the night, but she rests with him during the days, so she does okay. She only leaves the house every now and again to cash the checks that come in the post and pick up a few groceries and cartons of smokes. She's got herself a makeshift routine, a pretend future. We both know it's more complicated than that, that there's something being left unsaid. I might hold the cards, but she's not as simple as she looks. I know that much.

Some guy squawked across the AM the other day, something about how we only use two percent of our brains, the rest a busy mystery. I have to think, then, somewhere in that vast 98 percent that she doesn't understand, a synapse is firing, a small flare that, just for a second here and there, exposes the cracks in the cave wall where the shadows dance.

The baby keeps crying, but I couldn't have slept anyway. I can feel her watching me, pale blue eyes already memories, though she is barely twenty. They're pleading with

me to go to him, to justify her choice, but I won't budge. I won't even fake sleep. I track an arm of the fan until she sighs, throws on a robe, glides out of the room. I reach down into my jeans crumpled on the floor, pull out a pack of smokes. I sit up and light one, blowing blue-black smoke back up at the fan, creating entropy; I never used to smoke before I got here—had seen too much of the damage it did—but it seems alright now.

I told her from the start that I had to get used to the kid thing. It's not that I didn't like kids, I said, but I needed to get comfortable with the idea. I told her that I traveled a lot, and the settled life, from apple to zed, was a new gig for me. I told her that the only thing I've kept with me for last decade of my life was an old corduroy jacket. She wrinkled her nose at that. It's funny the things you remember, the things that get unintended reactions.

I told her that I had a rough childhood myself, that it got pretty dark there. I told her about trusting people I was supposed to trust, and learning things before my time, and the trigger of a quick touch, a kind of paw. I never got too specific, but I think she read between the lines.

Inhale. Taste. Exhale. Everything is all perfectly wrong. The strangest parts are the inversions, how I never feel dirtier than when I tell her the truth about myself. The honesty feels like a betrayal, like dipping a knife in poison, like fixing the game.

The lies are easy, distant. Storytelling. I told her I am a muralist, painting landscapes on foyer walls for bankers and lawyers. I told her I started as a house-painter outside Chicago, once had a German Shepherd named Finnegan, liked tofu, didn't mind disco as much as most guys and only drank on high holidays and special occasions. I first spun all this in a ratty little nightclub outside Richmond, told her she was a special

occasion, and not a word of it was true. Twenty minutes later, we were dancing. Two hours later, I was in her living room, trying to hide the shake of my hand, a line about to be crossed. Or crossed back. *The* line. It was already getting muddy, even then.

The baby stayed at her sister's house that night. Their mother had died of emphysema in early March of the previous year, and the girls had cashed in on a little life insurance policy. Of the two, the older, Janet, had thought ahead, bought the smallest house in one of the nicer suburbs around. Julie, though, caught quick fire until she caught pregnant from a series of interludes with a guy named Eddie, another kid from the neighborhood with plans bigger than his brain. His thirst for fortune and glory collided with his ignorance of the world at some point, and the chain reaction led him straight to a job drilling for oil off the coast of Alaska for six-month stints. The work was hard, but there were empty promises of profit-sharing, and stupid kids from small towns rarely catch the sneer with which such promises are made; rich people have big plans, too, only they don't involve the help or their knocked-up girls.

I know all of this, the whole back story, without her ever uttering his name. I know every secret she keeps. I know everything.

I know what she tastes like.

I hear neither mother nor child through the paper-thin walls of this rented dive, paid for monthly with whatever's left between cigarettes, diapers and fifths of Old Crow. They're probably curled up on the couch, his mouth at her breast—I feel the most confused sort of jealousy, something next to jealousy. I doze.

These days, waking is always a shock. There is something different about the light here that I still haven't gotten used to. Something long, something clean. I sit on the edge of the bed and smoke a lonely cigarette before tossing on my pants.

I thrust myself through a t-shirt and step out into the hallway. Julie and the boy are just as I thought they would be, stretched out across the lime-green couch, her robe undone and a thin web of drool connecting the infant's lips to the nipple they were latched around. She stirs as I walk by, her eyes flutter. I whisper that I will be back. She takes the promise because it's all I give.

I start up the Triumph; I bought it off the old man across the street. It had belonged to his son, Darren, who died in the jungle years ago, somewhere in Cambodia. I think he was so relieved to have it all taken away—the machine and the memory—that he didn't question how I knew that the motorcycle was just sitting in his garage, covered up. Just like I remembered.

I pull up to a High's and grab a Coke and a pack of Marlboros. Then off to the post office, where the woman eyes me as I try to buy a stamp with two quarters. I touch my head, feign a hangover; I dig through my pocket and count out pennies until she grabs thirteen cents. Off in a corner, I attach the stamp to a standard-sized envelope carrying a letter that, in many ways, hasn't even been written yet.

We go on this way for weeks. Me grabbing Cokes and packs of Marlboros, her grabbing me in the night—a poor substitute for comfort, but a substitute nonetheless. A stint. I offer nothing but familiarity and she takes it quietly. I know I'm losing sight of the edges. I came here for a cure, or at least an endgame, but it has dragged on into something else, something that makes what is further down the line irrelevant, or perhaps

even strangely, sadly perfect. I've fallen into old patterns, become unstuck, a toothless snake gumming its own tail. I've escaped right back into my chains.

The baby just stares at me like he's staring down a line. We never touch. I never hold him. He never reaches for me. We are of one mind on this point.

The world at large leaves me well enough alone, too. That's not to say that the people around here like me, or what I'm doing, but they look the other way. Janet tends to turn her nose up—she took one look at me that first morning after and barely hid her disgust as she pictured the things her little slut sister had let me do to her. Her nostrils flared when Julie kissed her baby with my liquor-tinged spit still in her mouth.

Nobody else really wants to harp on the fact I am a stranger in another man's bed—a man off in the middle of nowhere naively trying to build a better life for his newborn son and young, pretty wife. Some blurry nights, after the bottle has grown light in my hand, and after the ballgame's announcers have signed off from the radio, when my grip on my place has become even more tenuous than usual, I wonder if this is all just playing out in my head, a self-contained reality. Or if she is from the future, too—that maybe she's gotten ahead of me again, pushing all the buttons, pulling all the strings.

She's naked, just beyond the reach of my smoke rings. The baby's been napping during the middle of the day, when no one's around, and we fucked with the shades drawn tight. The only light burns from my Marlboro, and from where I sit, propped up on a lumpy pillow, I can almost mistake her for something worthy of all the other mistakes I have already made.

Inhale. Taste. Exhale. I might have put too much faith in chivalry. I sent my letter almost two months ago. I knew it would take some time; he told me long ago, in a

conversation that hasn't happened yet, that mail was only delivered once a week on the *big* rigs. That's how he would say it, too—emphasis on *big*. Olympian. As if the East Coast oil rigs his fat, lazy ass squandered his thirties and forties on were poor imitations of something he never quite had, even when he did: the myth of the uncharted wild.

There has been no response, and as a queer summer has limped into a total fall, I wonder if that is not for the best, if no news is good news. If he is now free. No showdown, no fireworks, the universe restarting not with a bang, but with a gentle, unseen shutting of a door.

If Eddie Stinson never looks back, is it enough to change the world? I'm still here, though, and she's still there and this is what it is.

My mind begins to wander even further out to the edges: What if I was here all along? What if this has happened, will happen—what if there is no difference between the prey and the predator? You made me, but I made you first. I watch my shadow drift over her. I can end this now; I should have already weeks, months ago, in the years to come, somewhere on down the line.

My blood roars through my head, my chest. I think I might be awake and crying in the next room. I'm completely here. There. Outside, it is 1982. Inside, it is 2017. Whenever I am, it's always too early, always too fucking late.

I climb on top of her. Her eyes flutter, and she pushes me, irritated. My hands grab at her neck and she knows. She knows. There's a flicker of fear and then it's gone, just the slow burn of resentment in its wake. She closes her eyes, purses her lips for a kiss she knows isn't coming.

I know she wants this as badly as I do, but the bedroom door bursts open and I am staring into the barrel of a shotgun held by my father, a kid about ten years younger than me. There is a naked man on top of his naked wife and no other dots in the image need to be connected for him to squeeze the trigger.

The room flashes and cracks. By the time I first register the pain in the space between my shoulder and my chest, my body is already halfway through a complete spin—another flash, another crack, and I scream, more pain exploding in the same general real estate, this time closer to my neck.

Julie mouths the name, “Eddie,” but neither of us can hear her.

“Dad! Don’t shoot!” My voice a register higher than normal, adolescent, a scared boy in his mother’s bedroom. Everything wrong. I clear my throat—dry, so dry. “Don’t shoot.”

A blank stare behind the barrel. “What?”

I hold up my left arm, the one not currently painted in the bloom my own blood. “You got my letter.”

As if in a daze, the man pulls a crumpled piece of paper from the pocket of his corduroy jacket. He shakes it in his hand like he’s calling a dog.

I nod toward the letter, let my arm drop. “I’ve been hearing you brag about that rig for thirty years. I knew right where you were.”

I fling a bloody finger toward my mother. There’s a hitch in my breath. “That bitch will spend a lifetime making a fool out of you. She will fuck strangers and friends right under your nose. Your own son . . .” My voice cracks. “I was just a kid . . . she was my mom . . .” I can feel tears pushing out from my eyes, beading on my face.

“And each time, you’ll turn away, drop your head like a fucking vulture, and shuffle into another room.”

I can hear myself screaming in the next room, awakened by the gunshots. I think I’m going into shock. My right hand is shaking like mad and I drop it, along with my shoulders, my body falling forward. I catch myself and lean back against the wall.

Eddie points the gun at his wife. “I don’t understand . . . I love you . . . I loved you so much.” There are small flickers in his eyes, and I can see that he’s tearing up, too.

“And I love you, Ed.” Julie starts to crawl on all fours across the bed. “I—”

He cocks the gun. “No!”

“He seduced me! Used me. You just left me here, Ed, all alone . . .”

“Shut up!”

I laugh something thick, ugly. “See how it’s all your fault?”

Eddie turns. “You want me to shoot her?”

Without hesitation: “Yes.”

“I can’t.”

This has to happen now, or it’s not going to happen. My blood is soaking into the shag, so nothing could have really changed yet. Since. “Give me the gun.”

My father is staring at my mother, a couple of stupid, white-trash kids playing house. He turns the gun back on me, his eyes not leaving hers, and everything becomes clear. This is what happened. This is what always happened. He won’t kill her. She doesn’t die and the world doesn’t reboot. This moment, right now, is what will bind them together for the rest of their days. They’ll never sell this house, and its stains will live and die with them.

I look at my mother, still young and pretty, and I realize that the parade of men to come will be nothing more than her sad attempt to recapture the only man she ever loved, the man that felt like home.

My father will stay as a sort of makeshift penance, mostly because he'll never be sure who was the accomplice, who was the mastermind, who was the mark.

I realize all this while my insides leak into the threads of the carpet. Everything's cockeyed and fitful. I think I can see down the line. I stare at my legs, already numb, and nod to no one in particular. I try to focus on the jacket my father is wearing, the trenches cut across the corduroy, a means of escape.

He raises the barrel one last time, the spell breaks; I remember that I'm naked, territory marked by my mother's scent. "Like a newborn," I whisper, right before he pulls the trigger, changes the world.