

Milk

The Beach Boys were singing *Wouldn't It Be Nice* and Patty was mesmerized by the first flakes of snow sifting down from a sky dead as a bruise. She contemplated the great irony of hearing this song right now, as the ground and the sky hardened and here she was alone, and then there was Lionel going through the refrigerator before he sighed and turned to mumble something about being out of milk. All he ate anymore was cereal. He had used the last of the milk. He wished he could drive so he could go buy some more.

The snow was coming. It was supposed to be a long storm. He sat down and pushed the sleeves of his burlap pullover up over his wrists. He padded his pockets and set his hands on the table. He took one of Patty's cigarettes even though they weren't menthol.

"How're you going to get through the storm without cigarettes?" Patty took her pack and lit one. When her son didn't say anything, she continued. "How is Allison. I hear you playing that song--"

"The Elvis Costello song?" He said this like she was interrupting him. "It's been almost a week."

"You seem like you're on the phone quite a bit. Have you been talking?"

He shrugged. "A couple of times."

"So where is she?" She knew she wouldn't get a direct answer. Patty felt like she might have deserved something considering Allison had lived with them for nearly a month and the woman was twenty-two to her own son's seventeen years. "You miss her."

"Do you miss dad?" He reached across the table, took her coffee cup and tipped it so he could see what was inside.

"Of course I do. But he wasn't around much anyway."

“Still though.” He brought his sleeves back down over his hands, crossed his arms and shuddered. “You guys were married for a long time.”

Patty shrugged. She was tough. “It was time.” She reached out, brought her arm to her son’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

He turned so she could see his face. He was trying to smile, or trying not to smile which made him twitch. “We’re going to be snowed in here.”

“We should get milk,” Patty said. “Get your coat.”

The van reluctantly shook to life and idled like it might fall to pieces. While they waited or it to warm up, Lionel burrowed into a Flak jacket. Patty would have offered him something if it would have helped.

“Are you and Allison in a fight?”

Lionel didn’t answer until the silence was worse than privacy. “It’s not like that, mom.”

Patty drove slowly. The snow was beginning to stick. “What’s it like then?”

He sighed. “You wouldn’t understand.”

For a moment, she might believe this was a normal conversation. “You asked me about dad. There were others. I knew boys when I was your age.”

“Not like this I don’t think. It’s more than that.”

Patty eased the van to a stop. Traffic was light even though it was touching on dusk. Headlights made torches in the smudged windows. “Tell me what it is like then. Just do that much for me.”

“Tell you about what? About what is like?”

“You’re situation,” Patty said.

“I need cigarettes, mom. You mind stopping at the Hess?”

Whips of snows lapped up from the street. Patty needed cigarettes too. “Will you talk to me?”

“About what?” He was agitated but lucid, present, captive.

“About you. I want to know about you.”

“What do you want to know?”

Patty pulled into the gas station. “I want to know what is going on with you. Anything.”

Lionel sat still. He seemed to be focused on the store. “They sell milk in here. We don’t need to go to the grocery store.”

It was cold but Patty rolled down the window and lit a cigarette. She had resolved not to move the car until her son had allowed her something.

When he returned with a fistful of packs of Kools in his fist and nothing else, she could see his skin was glazed with sweat and he was biting his lip.

“Where’s the milk?” Patty asked.

“Mom, I need you to drive me into the city.”

“Is Allison in the city?”

“Yeah, but...” He hammered one out on the back on the back of his hand. “Yeah, she is.”

“Am I driving you to her?”

“Mom, I’m sick.” He drew his jacket closer around himself.

“You don’t look well,” Patty said. “We should get home.”

“There’s nothing at home that will help mom.”

“Go grab some milk. We have plenty of cereal and anything else at home.”

He sighed and twisted his body toward the window. He removed his hand and traced some shapes in the fog on the glass. “I don’t need cereal. I need...”

She wouldn’t let this be implied. There was always a secrecy, an understated sort of language that was underwritten into anything concerning this. Now, he’d have to talk, to explain. “Go ahead.”

“I’m a junkie mom.” He nearly managed to turn toward her. “I’m a junkie and I’m sick.”

Patty stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray and rolled up the window. Now that she had heard the words, not the cryptic whispers on the phone or the muddled conspiracy that stepped outside or down the basement. It was less potent, less volatile.

“But you knew that.” He rolled down the window all the way. “You just wanted to hear me say it. Are you happy now?”

“Happy?” She stopped in more haste than she should have. “What mother wouldn’t be? I’ve got a son who’s sick with something, some sort of sickness I can’t cure. You should be happy because school will be cancelled and instead you’re worried about getting drugs.”

“You can take me to the city so I can get well. Mom, that’s what I need.”

“You need to stay away from the city. That’s what made you sick to begin with.”

The car wasn't moving which seemed to stir something in Lionel. He couldn't keep still. "That's got nothing to do with it. It doesn't matter how or why. *Now* is what matters. I can't handle it right *now*. I'm not strong enough."

"Is there a time when you could? What do you need?"

"I don't know. Rehab maybe. I don't know. What is there? There's got to be something right? I just need more time."

Patty was driving south. She wasn't sure where yet. "More time for what?"

"Just more time. In the spring. I will start over. I'll sign up for the GED, get that landscaping job back when it's back in season."

"You want to go see Allison."

He sighed which was might have seemed like an answer.

Patty drove. Her son smoked. Every so often he would say something. His breath was fogging the side windows.

She passed the turn onto their road. Traffic was slowing. There were gum wrappers and rotted leaves on the floor. Patty pushed them with her toes. "I'm not doing what you want. That's not what I'm doing."

Snow tumbled and rolled in the headlights. "It's not a big deal mom. It's just the way things happened."

"Like getting kicked out of school. Like getting arrested?" She could have gone on but didn't.

"Did you ever want to do anything mom? I mean, other than being a mom?"

Patty reached for a cigarette. Her arm hung there for a minute. "When I was your age you mean?"

"Any age, I guess."

She could have told him about nearly being a nurse, about dropping out of school pregnant with his sister, but didn't. "After a certain age what you want doesn't matter anymore. It's what you need. It's what you have to do that matters."

He was finished smoking and rolled up the window. His voice was calm and distant. "What age does that happen?"

She shrugged. "You find that out. Sooner or later."

"So you never thought about running away from all of this?"

"Is that what you're planning on doing? That's what your sister did. I expect everyone wants to or does. Some people find something but most people, most people..."

Something rolled under the car, a thick branch, a dead possum. "Most people?" He said.

"I didn't mean most people. But some people find things they might not like."

"Like Karen?"

"Karen found out that she wasn't cut out for college and had bad taste in men." Patty laughed a little and gathered herself. "You know, you could go to college. You're smart enough. You start at community college. Get good grades. Move forward. I went to junior college."

"Not for me either. I never liked school either."

“What do you like, Lionel?” Patty was driving toward the freeway. The bluffs ahead were being developed and were lit like it was a ski resort up on the hill and she imagined living there. “What do you want to do?”

He moved around in his seat until he put a foot up on the dashboard. “I’m not sure. What is there?”

“Anything. There is a whole world out there.” But from here there was only the freeway that seemed narrow and tight and close truck tires that sounded like paper being shredded. She was waiting for her son to say something, for a feeling to come to her to tell her that what she was doing was wrong.

Her son wasn’t moving. He was staring out the window at the snow in slim grey streaks. She wondered what he was thinking about but wouldn’t ask. He was at that age that he needed to see her. She was older sure, but she had some college, seemed like a nice girl. “Allison is doing well?”

“She’s okay.” He began rustling around. “She’s alright. She lives with a couple people. It’s safer to live with people.”

“Safer?” Of course it was. All the city was to Patty anymore was a series of horrifying headlines and political promises. When he didn’t respond, she said. “You love her. I understand.”

He slid a cigarette out, opened the window and put it back in its pack.

“How’d you meet?” She knew she’d asked before but couldn’t remember exactly.

He didn’t answer at first. He must have been thinking about it. “How do people usually meet, I guess? It was at a party. Some guys apartment.”

“Some older guys apartment? Older than her?”

She could feel him turn on her. “I approached her. It was me. All of it. All me.”

“Where are her parents?”

“How should I know?”

“People talk about things like that.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not feeling well.”

“Considering what I’m doing for you, you could give me an answer of some kind.”

“They’re up in Pennsylvania. I haven’t met them. I don’t think she talks to them much anymore.”

“Why not?”

He sighed. “Irreconcilable differences I guess. They’re not cool like you mom?”

This took the air from Patty. She took a breath. “How am I cool?”

“You don’t get on me. You...care.”

“Maybe I should have. Maybe I should have tried harder.”

“You try and keep us apart it would just make us closer. You know that.”

There was a bruised lip of gaseous light that hung over the city. As they pulled off, the streetlights seemed dim, strained. The snow was thick and hung like gauze. A man pulled a wheelbarrow through the intersection dragging a car battery inside and a couple bottles of beer.

Patty couldn’t remember the last time she had come into the city. Sometime back to see The Orioles or The Colts or to go the Inner Harbor or Fort McHenry.

Her son was playing with the radio dial until he got frustrated and turned it off. He told her it would be another mile until they needed to turn and shifted in his seat. He kept moving his arms inside his jacket until he lit a cigarette.

This was where her son went. He was directing her. This is where his love was. "When will you come home?" She managed to say, following his directions.

"I don't know mom. Wouldn't be easier if I just stayed down here for a while?"

"Be easier for who? For you?"

"For everyone. It would be easier."

"Not easier for me. It wouldn't be easier for me."

"You wouldn't have to make trips like this anymore. I feel terrible asking you to do this." He said.

Hopefully, there wouldn't be trips like this anymore. That's what she wanted to say but the words didn't come. Instead, something came out, something sentimental and optimistic and she remembered the elections and talk about crime but now everything was quiet, lulled. And she found herself warmed by it. "I want to say hi to Allison. I'd like to see the place where I've taken you."

"Mom, don't be ridiculous."

"What's ridiculous about that?"

"It's her place mom. It's her-"

"She's been to my house. She took my son. I deserve something."

He tapped his fingers on the arm of his jacket. "Don't be like this. Please don't be-"

"Uncool." Patty thought about being young. She thought about being young and thinking about being older and wondered about that distance from here to there and back again. "I'm supposed to be cool. Is this what's cool?"

"You can't just-"

"I can drop you off here."

"But you wouldn't." He flicked his cigarette out the window and nearly smiled to her.

"This has nothing to do with being cool or anything like that. I'm your goddamned mother and you're my son. I know why I'm dropping you off here and I am trying to come to terms of some kind. I'm trying to..."

"You're doing what you have to. You're doing what's best."

There was a hardware store downstairs with empty yellow margarine cups on the sill of the barred window and signs written in magic marker. They across the street in front of a library with a crack down the door that had been taped and repaired until it was a white, puttied scar.

They sat for a moment. "Is it really so bad?" Patty said. "Or is it just your privacy? Because you know that's gone. You only have so many secrets."

"I have one," he said. "I have that."

"Love isn't a secret. It's universal. Where we live, down here. It's the same everywhere."

"There's different kinds."

"Because you know so much?"

"Because I know some things. I know some things pretty well." He didn't lift his head, even when a man came by searching inside the car and Patty found herself staring back at him.

"Let me understand then." Patty took one of her son's cigarettes and lit it.

It was hard to tell what he was thinking about. He just sat there, his mouth parted slightly, his tongue lolling as if he might say something. His body had stopped moving. "Don't lock the doors," he said. "There's nothing in here worth taking."

There was a vestibule that smelled like chlorine and a staircase that led upstairs. The paint was peeling. The banister was nicked and gauged. There was a draft coming in from somewhere.

Lionel walked ahead and stopped at the door. He rested his hand on the doorknob for a moment like he was contemplating knocking before he twisted the knob and pushed the door open.

It occurred to Patty that he had assumed that she would do this. She wondered if they even had been out of milk or cigarettes. She had never seen him call Allison to tell her that they were coming. There was never any question.

A narrow hallway split into a darkened kitchen to the right and a room lit with Christmas lights to the left where cinnamon incense was burning and music Patty didn't recognize was playing at a low volume. A sitcom was playing on the television with the volume muted. Allison and another couple were huddled on a couch and trying to tidy the coffee table before Lionel told them not to worry.

"Hello, Allison," Patty waved from the doorway, unsure of what else to do. The other couple must have been Allison's age, college dropouts from up north, he with a layer of facial growth and she with beaded jewelry and loose-fitting clothes. They greeted Patty with voices that creaked like wood about to buckle under the weight of water.

Allison dutifully greeted her and asked Lionel if she could speak to him in the other room. He made a half-turn to her that might have been some sort of apology before following her down another hallway, leaving her alone with the other couple who both lit cigarettes and acted as though they were

following whatever was playing out on the television. There, on the table in front of them, was the evidence. She'd seen it but hadn't around the house; the foil, spoon, cord, candles and even a bag of unused needles. "So, you guys are friends with my son?" Was what she came up with to say.

The boy seemed like he might say something before the girl patted his shoulder and said. "We're Allison's roommates. We live here. Please sit."

There was a recliner on the other end of the coffee table that Patty took a seat in at her host's suggestion. She enjoyed their awkwardness, their inability to understand. She would wait to speak.

"You live up in the county, right?" The girl said. "Is the snow pretty bad up there yet?"

"I'd say it's worse down here actually," Patty said. And then, knowing that these two had grown up nowhere near where they told people they lived, "Where are you two from?"

"Um, I'm from Pennsylvania. He's from Florida."

"Art School?" Patty asked.

"How'd you know?" The boy said.

Patty nodded to the easel in the corner, to the sheet once used as a drop-cloth, to the doodled-over sketch pads used as counter-surfaces or stool-tops.

"Him not me," the girl said. "I just live here."

"I thought maybe college for Lionel but he doesn't seem to be leaning that way," Patty said realizing the absurdity of her statement already.

"He's very smart." The girl rolled up the sleeve of her blouse. She reached for a bag of potato chips on the table, took one out and put it into her mouth,

“Yes,” Patty said. “That’s what teachers used to say. But he doesn’t apply himself.” She allowed her eyes to drift from the chips to the two kids, not much older than Lionel, who, undoubtedly, had parents somewhere who had no idea that this is what their children were doing.

They nodded. The boy squirmed.

Patty could hear her son squabbling, spliced with bouts of silence before there was a stretch of further silence. After a few minutes, someone turned up the volume on the television so that they could focus on something. And then, the girl too, excused herself, saying that she would see what had happened to Lionel and Allison.

“Why do you do it?” Patty said to the boy, nearly attaching her son’s name.

“Do what?”

Patty took the bag of new needles in her hand and waved it.

“It feels good.”

“What does ‘good’ feel like?”

He contemplated this for a moment before he spoke. “Like completion. Like being complete.” He seemed satisfied until he added. “If only for a little while.”

Patty thought about that. She thought about her daughter who would be married to a man she would inevitably hate. She thought about her own husband, their father, off on the road somewhere selling something, stuck in a dying business wondering how he arrived where he was. And herself and her empty house at the end of the street at the corner of the county. She thought about the furnace that grumbled, about the unwashed dishes, the mildewed grout, the knock-kneed porch, the leaking bathtub, the squirrels in the walls, all of the sounds of everything familiar.

Wouldn't it be nice, she thought and smiled. A song gets caught in your head until it becomes some sort of soundtrack, a mocking rhythm of the superfluous machinations of the day that always unfolds too soon into the next and the endless redundancy of it all. "I want to do it," she said finally when nothing had happened. "I want you to put it in one of these things and put it in me." She realized how they might have sounded intimate and might have cringed but she knew that this boy might, that he might be her only chance and that someone would have to reappear at some point.

"Um, I don't think so. That's not a good idea."

"You people are young. You have lives, bodies that work well, time and choices ahead of you. I've made my choices. I've had my time. So why the hell not? Do you want money?" She began going through her purse.

"No, it's not the money. It's just that--"

"I'm nobody's mom. I'm just someone who dropped by." She found a twenty dollar bill in her wallet.

"I...It's not a good idea"

She threw the twenty on the table, picked up the tiny baggie and flicked it. "I'll just have to do it myself."

"Are you being serious?"

She leaned toward him. "I just drove my son down here for this. If I don't deserve to find out what it's like then who does?"

He seemed to think about this for a moment. He was killing time, possibly, hoping for someone else to return. When no one did, he took up a CD case. "Sniff some," he said. "Everyone starts by sniffing some."

"Oh, give me a break. I'll do it myself. She reached over for spoon and took a lighter from her purse. "I've seen Lionel do it." She lied.

"Okay, Okay. But you do it yourself. I'll load it so you don't do too much but you've got to do it yourself. You shoot it yourself." He turned down the television as if he hadn't done this a hundred times before. She studied him and didn't ask questions. She imagined him painting, doing as he was intended, if he ever was this focused and what his own mother might think but it didn't matter because in those moments, she did not see him so much as her own son.

By the time he was finished, handed her the chord and, using both hands, passed over the eye-dropper sized needle, she supposed, she was one or any of them. "It's good stuff," he said. "Allie only gets good stuff."

It was as easy as giving a tetanus shot. Nothing more than a pinch. There was a feeling like gliding slowly toward something, the television, distant and heavy, a burden like the nausea in orbit around her. And everything was so close and distant and after, only moments, after a fevered moment, there was Lionel, on the far side of the couch, swaying like a top-heavy tree moving away from her, from...but it wasn't Allison, it was only the other girl who rejoined the boy on the couch.

It seemed as though she were at a dance and he was a distant suitor approaching from the other end of the room that had a dissipating warmth. She was trying to hold herself upright but knew she was slouched, something she had corrected in her formative years. What had ever happened to her own mother and her as a child? And who was this anyway? Who was this pausing at the television as if he knew the people there, as if this sitcom were so very familiar?

A cigarette was cupped in his hand like the wind was blowing and, there she was, framed in the doorway all the way back there, his Allison, distant as those people on television and Patty knew what had happened and began to gather herself, put her purse back together, gain her balance, and lead the way back down the hallway, cooler with every step, back down the stairs, into the chlorinated vestibule, as cold as bone and there they paused to zip their jackets. "Did you get what you came here for?" Patty said.

Lionel nodded. "I guess I did."

"Good," she said. "Hopefully you got enough for the both of us."