

“The body starts to digest itself. Blood vessels disintegrate. The skin is like unpolished marble. But that’s just the molecular death. So much more to come after that. The inside of the body erupts, producing blisters like little molten knots and then the flies come. They lay hundreds of eggs that hatch in a day and feed and molt and grow. The maggots are fat and eating fast, so it gets very hot there in the body—”

“That’s seriously gross,” Marcia interrupted, eyeing her three spring rolls like they might be filled with maggots. I know better than to talk about my job at a party, but people ask questions. People like questions but they don’t like answers. She set her party plate on a glass table and scratched her nose with a powder blue fingernail. Marcia had bright green eyes with large irises like a Disney princess. She wore a fur-trimmed sweater over a black glittery dress and silver heels that seemed to be abusing her feet to a considerable degree, a fact I discerned by the odd way she walked over to me and the strange angle her toes were forced to make.

“I need a smoke,” she said, surveying the room with bored contempt. “These people are the worst,” she whispered conspiratorially in my ear.

“They’re just politicians and oil men,” I said. “They’ll die too someday.” Marcia looked at me like I had just told her the nuclear codes and she was contemplating what to do with the portentous information. She fumbled for cigarettes in her gigantic purse and then cursed because she couldn’t find her lighter. A clique of aides in purposefully ugly Christmas sweaters briefly shot her a look and then went back to their conversation about the benefits of frozen yogurt consumption as opposed to ice cream. It seemed an inappropriate conversation considering the weather. They were all wearing sensible shoes, which seemed like a better choice than Marcia

had made since cocktail parties require long periods of standing. It was actually my first time at a cocktail party, but this was the image of them I had gleaned from movies and TV.

“Why’d they even invite you here?” asked Marcia before downing her champagne.

“My brother did. He’s a senator,” I said.

“Which one is he?” I pointed him out among a group of men in nice jackets who appeared to be conversing about some kind of youth sporting event because one of them said, “that boy can run.” My brother gesticulated. A blaze was going in the stone monstrosity I suppose would be called a fireplace but was more like a fire cavern. Another group of four men stood near the fire. Clearly, they had just come from somewhere warm and were uncomfortable in the new snowy environment. They all had tans and obscenely white teeth—about 128 teeth in total. I found it offensive to humanity to see such white teeth when we all know they’re just going to fall out when you die, and whitening hurts the enamel.

“It’s fucking cold in here,” said Marcia.

“Stand near the fire,” I said.

“You trying to get rid of me?”

“These spring rolls are pretty good,” I said, trying to change the subject because I was, in fact, trying to get rid of her and people tend to find that rude. She had this habit of sniffing that I found quite annoying. She leaned her head toward mine. I jerked a little because I thought maybe the sniffing was due to a sickness she carried.

“I’ve got a little blow. That should warm us up,” she whispered.

“No, thank you. I’m definitely not interested,” I said resolutely. I’d seen two movies where people do blow. One was called Blow and the other was called Scarface. I think they might have been about the same guy, but I’m not sure. Anyway, there was mucho death involved

and that's a lot of mess to deal with. Since I'm in the bio clean up business, I tend to think about these things. Marcia, not picking up on the surety of my tone, winked at me and whispered "later." Some awful music started, and my eardrums became unceremoniously flooded with a smooth jazz rendition of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. We are what we consume, that's what I believe. I didn't want smooth jazz to be the last thing I heard before my heart decided to explode or something. Any of us could go at any time. We've got to be careful what we let into our bodies. No cocaine, no bad versions of Rudolph, no tooth bleach. I decided to follow Marcia outside for her cigarette despite my dislike of secondhand smoke, just to get away from the music. Humans are often forced to choose between the lesser of two evils.

Marcia and I stood outside on the balcony overlooking a snow-covered field with twenty-three ugly black trees like charred skeletons against the sky. The white driveway was packed with black SUVs like the outside world was set to grayscale. The world inside was all brown, red, and the orange of tanned skin—the color scheme of an oil field accident.

Marcia realized she still didn't have a lighter and went inside. I watched her through the glass as she borrowed one from a bald guy in cowboy boots who winked at her four times. She returned flushed and closed the door with a sultry bump of her hip.

"So, you make a lot of money doing your cleaning thing?" asked Marcia.

"I'm comfortable," I said. She rolled her eyes. The stately mahogany door to the balcony swung open, and my brother stood there with a big smile on his face.

"I see you've met Marcia," he said. "You're looking lovely tonight, dear." Marcia laughed and pretended not to care about the compliment. "Just trying to butter you up, so you'll vote for me in the upcoming election," he said.

"What's your pitch?"

“Jobs, jobs, jobs,” he said. “What else matters?”

“Amen to that,” she said, and they clinked glasses. Sleepiness walloped me like an ocean wave, and I bid adieu to Marcia and my brother.

“See you at Outlaw’s tomorrow night,” said my brother. “Let’s make sure mom doesn’t get too drunk this time,” he added in a whisper.



Thirteen shotguns decorated the walls. A buffalo face stared down at me and I felt an odd sense of my consciousness being transported inside the stuffed relic. My eyes darted to another table as if directed by the all-seeing buffalo god. It was Marcia sitting across from a mystery man. She wore a tight dress and the man was in a suit made of an itchy-looking material that transferred a phantom itchiness to my skin. A dead deer peered right over Marcia’s head, and the man’s face bore an uncanny resemblance to the dead deer. Marcia got up and headed toward the bathroom. She winked at me as she passed our table, the sound of her thin heels disrupting the monotone din and drawing the restaurant’s attention her way.

“There’s this probiotic supplement that prevents Alzheimer’s. I ordered some on Amazon,” my mother was saying to the table. “I can’t imagine a worse way to go.”

“Well, I have some good news,” said my brother. Not one to venture even for a moment into unpleasant conversation territory, he took a massive swig of his microbrew IPA and continued: “We’re getting married.” My mother smiled and checked her reflection in the framed photo of a western outlaw hanging on the wall. My father grunted. He wasn’t much for words. My brother’s girlfriend, Valerie, pulled out her red leather wallet and unzipped the change pocket.

“I put the ring in here because I didn’t want you to know until he told you,” she said.

“That’s great, you two,” said my mother while my father attacked his steak. A look of utter horror on Valerie’s face. She began repeating the word “no” over and over. She said it thirty-seven times.

“Where’d you have it last?” I said. I felt pretty sorry for Valerie in that moment. She’d had a rough upbringing and owning something nice like that ring probably meant a lot. I didn’t want her to start crying. Sometimes when other people start crying, I start to cry. I have no idea why it happens. My therapist says I’m just highly sensitive, but I told her I work in bio clean up, and would a highly sensitive person really be able to do that job? Valerie was shaking. My brother’s face was as mean as the outlaw on the wall.

“I had it in my wallet last, that’s where I had it,” Valerie sobbed.

“Was it an expensive ring?” my father asked, stringing together the most words we had gotten from him all night. My brother nodded and abruptly jammed his steak knife into his steak—a move I was not expecting. He got up and headed out into the white evening. Valerie and I watched the snow dust his shoulders and hair through the window. I turned my attention to the waitress standing in the dark hallway, discussing something with a man I knew to be an immigrant from somewhere in Africa. We even had African people hearing about our oil boom. The waitress pointed to a receipt in her hand. The African man shrugged and said something that made her laugh.

“Everything tasting good, folks?” said the waitress after emerging from the hallway. She was of quite large build, and the stretchiness of her button up shirt was definitely being utilized by her breasts and stomach.

“I could eat five more of these steaks, sweetheart,” said my father, and he winked at her. Six winks in two days. Marcia click clacked across the wood. She’d been gone for eleven minutes in the bathroom.

“Supposed to snow hard tonight,” said the waitress. Valerie was inconsolable. The waitress stood in front of the table waiting for a response to her statement about the weather, but all she received was a giant guttural sob from Valerie. The waitress, whom I realized knew Valerie, walked to Valerie’s side and whispered something in her ear. Valerie got up from the table and the waitress led her down the dark hallway. My mother issued me a robotic goodbye and my father gave me a sheepish smile. It was his way of apologizing for the fact that my mother didn’t like me and my mental health issues very much. She believed a mind should be controlled by its owner, the way a cat or dog owner controls an animal. I tried to tell her that cats cannot be controlled, so maybe my mind is more like a cat, but she hadn’t been listening.

I got into my pickup in the Outlaw’s parking lot and cranked up the heat. My icy windows would need to be scraped, but I just wanted to feel warm inside the cocoon of my car for a minute. I was trying not to think about the whole situation, about Valerie’s anxiety, about my father’s ambivalence toward everything, about my brother’s anger. But I couldn’t escape because there was Valerie parked next to me, crying into her fur scarf. Valerie’s crying was inaudible through the windows but watching someone cry silently was somehow sadder. Before I could tell myself that Valerie needed alone time, that Valerie thought I was weird, that I would say something to upset her even more, I was rapping on her car window. She jerked back like my cousin when he was shocked by an electric fence once. The window crept down.

“What?”

“I can try to help you find it,” I blurted out. It was the only thing I could think to say.

She whimpered and put on some cherry Chapstick. “Okay.”

We drove to Jimmy’s Tavern, the last place she remembered having it. The bouncer was a guy I’d gone to High School with. I was bullied sometimes, but he’d always been nice to me. The man was a consummate artist, once showing me his sketchbook of comic strips—amusing fight sequences, men on motorcycles, men zooming around in fast cars, men setting sail with only the vast ocean ahead of them, even though he’d never seen the ocean.

“Still drawing?” I asked. He nodded and let himself smile a little.

Inside, I didn’t see anyone else I knew. The town was filled with outsiders, but I didn’t care much. People said they brought drugs and crime and prostitution and all that, but it wasn’t like the people who complained were so perfect themselves. We all just end up born somewhere, having to make money, and hopefully finding some way to cope like Danny with his comics.

Valerie went up to the bar and ordered a margarita. I started asking random customers if they’d seen a ring lying around. “An expensive one?” said a man with blackened hands.

“Uh, no,” I said.

“Haven’t seen it,” he said.

Valerie was standing by the fire drinking her margarita. She looked around, bending to peer under chairs, lifting the disgusting carpet.

“This is where I was sitting,” she said when I approached.

“It’s probably been pawned,” I said.

“I feel like it’s here,” she said. “I can sense these things. Bit of a gift.”

“Watch my drink,” she said and walked up to an old man at the bar. He was scraggly to say the least, with most of his teeth missing and eyes as red as the Coors sign on the wall. I wondered why Valerie was talking to him; the man didn’t seem like the sort of person she’d

associate with. He pointed to a young woman next to the pool table who was playfully smacking the arm of a beefy man with neck tattoos. Valerie marched up to the young woman and a heated conversation ensued. The young woman's knuckles whitened around the pool cue. The old man from the bar hobbled over on his one real leg and one prosthetic one. The man with the neck tattoos puffed his chest and chugged his beer. He seemed excited about a potential altercation. The old man walked over to the neck tattoo man and whispered something in his ear. The neck tattoo man said something to Valerie. Valerie smiled and hurried back to me.

“You were right. Pawn shop on Main.”

“How'd you know that old man?” I asked.

“It's my dad,” she said. “Bet he was the one who pawned it.”

The pawn shop was closed for some reason. But we could see the ring right there in between the bars on the windows, next to a well-loved guitar, an engraved knife, and another buffalo head that also tugged at my psyche like a god and stared down at me as if trying to tell me something. Valerie began banging on the door, but if someone was inside, they didn't feel like doing business.

“You know where it is now. Come back in the morning,” I said.

“Fuck. I can fucking see it.” She stared at it with the sort of longing I'd never really had for anything.



I'll admit, the bio clean up business was not something I was necessarily dying to get into. I was unemployed because my counting problem made work at the grocery store difficult. My therapist said the counting was my way of feeling like I had control. But numbers can tell a person a lot. For example, if I said “a bunch” of oil gets transported through the new pipeline



every day, it wouldn't impact you as much as if I said the pipeline has been transporting 500,000 barrels of crude oil a day. My brother likes numbers too. He's always using them in his speeches: "the pipeline project created 10,000 jobs, landowners received \$189 million in easement payments and the county received \$55 million in property taxes."

I was watching a reporter talk to my brother on the local news when the call came in. The boss wanted me and Larry to head to a clean up site near an oil well just south of the city. "Blowout," was all my boss had said. I knew I'd have to rouse Larry from his hangover. He was a heavy drinker, and his drinking had only worsened since he got the job cleaning up dead bodies.

I don't really like talking about that day. I certainly don't talk about it with Larry. I heard Larry got punched hard by someone at a bar when he was drunk and tried to talk about how the safety protocols weren't followed.

Spaghetti hung from charred hands when we got to the site, but it was skin, not spaghetti. A hundred feet away, we found the crisp torso of a different man.

After that, I started experiencing strange things—waking up in the night to find the bed soaking from my sweat, downing large quantities of liquor, needing to wear gloves all the time because I couldn't look at my own hands without thinking the skin was slipping off.

"Just move on. Making money always get a little messy," my brother said to me before we started decorating the Christmas tree.



It was late and I was eating microwavable mac and cheese. For some reason it tasted best if you cooked it for four minutes and thirty-seven seconds. I didn't hear the knock at first because I was watching a documentary about aliens on my laptop. Eventually I answered the

door and there was Marcia chewing a piece of gum. She reminded me of Cher with her long black hair and slinky dress.

“Remember me?” she said. I told her I did remember her and invited her in. Her dress had twenty-two stars on it. She asked to use the bathroom and was gone for six minutes. The counting had gotten worse since the oil field clean up. When Marcia re-entered the room, she told me to sit down and started hunting for something in my kitchen. When I didn’t sit down, she rolled her eyes and said, “Just go. Sit, sit, sit. In the living room. I’ll be in in a sec.” Marcia emerged from the kitchen holding a nearly empty handle of vodka. “Is this all you have?” she said incredulously.

“I don’t drink much,” I said, which was a lie. She sat practically on top of me and immediately began kissing my neck. I shrieked and pushed her off. The push sent her head right into the corner of my coffee table and her hand was red with blood when she removed it from her head. I apologized and ran to the kitchen for a towel and some ice. When I got back, she was crying.

“Your brother sent me here,” she said. “He gave me some money to cheer you up, but if you’re not interested, I can just leave.” I told her to stay at least until the bleeding stopped.



The mobile home park was on the corner of Oil Avenue and Energy Street. The area’s street namers weren’t really ones for creativity. We’d been sent there by the county for a decomp clean up. I surveyed the RV park while I waited for Larry to urinate behind some drooping trees. Between the two nearby RVs, were some dog turds, garbage, and exposed wire resting on the snow. A man at the far end of the park in a Carhart jacket was cutting plywood on a pair of sawhorses, his saw oddly in rhythm with a cawing crow.

“She was staying at Randy’s place. He went back home cause of his mom’s obesity. Mom can’t even get out of bed on her own,” a trailer park resident was telling me. I didn’t really want the details about how the decomposing woman came to be staying at the trailer we’d been sent to clean. It was best for the dead person to remain as anonymous as possible. “This kind of thing doesn’t happen that often around here,” said the man, motioning to the trailer where the woman was found sixteen days after her overdose. “Gotta finish this laundry,” he said, holding up a pillowcase of scrunched clothing.

Larry emerged from behind the trees and we put on all our gear before entering the yard of the trailer in question through a fence made from shipping pallets. I accidentally knocked the wreath off the trailer door and while I was hanging it back up I saw, through the gap in the blinds, shoes attached to legs—Marcia’s shoes. I told Larry I thought I had food poisoning and to have the boss send someone else.



That was three years ago. Today, palm trees ruffle in the breeze around my apartment complex. I was experiencing a lot of sunburns at first because I came from such a cold place, but now my skin looks like it was made for Florida weather. Neons and pastels make regular appearances in my wardrobe. But I still think about the accident and Marcia all the time. My brain is a cat doing what it wants, I suppose. My co-worker wants to go up to the oil fields. He heard people make good money up there. I told him, “The more money, the more mess.” Our conversation got me down and I half felt the urge to jump from the window down to the sand-colored concrete by the Mickey Mouse-shaped pool. But then I thought of the men who would have to clean it up.