

Burn Unit

Henryk's forgotten his teeth again. As he shuffles into the apartment, Raj can't help but cringe at the sight. He considers saying something, but the pink hole of Henryk's open mouth turns his stomach so he lets it slide.

"So this sucker is really hooked up to the station?" Henryk taps the phone, which Raj has placed in the middle of the room; the centerpiece of their night. Raj can hear it on the Common now, the rumblings of average people handed an excuse to do things repressed the rest of the year.

"It's a direct line," Raj moves to the window. Outside, a group of girls are draped in various postures in the gazebo. Raj has seen them before, this group, and knows they'll need watching.

"I have two questions," Henryk rustles in the cloth grocery sack he'd dragged downstairs. "The first—what's the difference between this phone hookup thing and 911? Number two, when do we start drinking?"

Raj turns to see him holding up tequila, the worm inside momentarily taking the form of Henryk's tongue.

"I thought Gloria had you locked off the stuff?" Raj accuses.

"Gloria is upstairs and I'm not."

"We need to stay alert, Henryk. That's the whole purpose of this."

"Right, right. But this is the kind of tequila that lights you up," Henryk shakes the bottle. "It gives the world a glow. It makes you *think* in body parts you didn't know were capable of thinking."

“The difference is the police will know who’s calling,” Raj says.

“What?”

“The line you just asked about. The police will know it’s us and that it’s critical.”

“Critical?” Henryk tilts his head. The way his skin follows his movement makes Raj think of time, the way it flashes and stutters at moments that can’t be anticipated. “Is that what’s expected tonight, really?”

“It’s Halloween in Salem,” Raj looks back out the window. “See those girls? That’s where we look for the expectations.”

“A group of girls, right.” Henryk sighs. “I’m going to have a nip if you don’t mind.”

Raj steps toward him. “Did you know that in 2002, fifty-seven percent of released female prisoners were back in jail within three years of getting out?”

“2002?” Henryk’s face scrunches again. “What...”

“Thirty-nine point nine percent of them were re-convicted within three years. And seventeen point three percent of them went back with a new sentence.”

Raj takes a deep breath and nods at the bottle. Looking relieved, Henryk hands it over, then leans back into his bag and pulls out an old-fashioned radio.

“Maybe a little polka will calm you down. There’s a station that plays it nonstop. Polka for any time, any mood.”

“Keep it at a manageable volume,” Raj tilts the bottle back and is immediately pulled down by the warmth. He returns to the window with a tingling beneath his eyeballs. There’s been a shift in the girls, the laziness of their formation transformed into an arc of anticipation.

“Girls do bad things to each other.” He speaks without taking his eyes off the pack, their forms hovering in the loopy shadows of the structure. “They’re different than men. I’ve seen it.”

He turns to find Henryk shaking his feet spastically, electrified by the tequila or polka, Raj can't tell.

“Is that why you're like what you're like?” Henryk holds out the tequila but Raj is frozen. Henryk has never acknowledged Raj's preference for men, and Raj isn't sure if that's what's happening now. Outside a hoot of undetermined origin gets his attention back. He needs to focus.

“Are you talking about the Burn Unit? Is that where you've seen these bad things girls do?” Henryk is persistent, one of those people who never lets silence lie.

“Why would I be talking about that?”

“Because if I worked in a place like that I'd have to talk about it,” Henryk says. “Seems unhealthy not to.”

What Raj could tell Henryk is the spectacle of skin peeled away, revealing the depths of the person beneath. He could talk about how the pain is transferable to most of the nurses but somehow not him. What he can't talk about is the beauty he finds in the victims, the sculpted skin of patients like some lost desert of dreams.

“I think we need to do something about these girls,” he says.

“What are they doing?” Henryk snorts. “It doesn't look like they're doing anything.”

On the exterior Henryk is right, but Raj can see beneath it. He's able to feel what will play out if he doesn't stop it, how they will pick out one and change her status by humiliation. While sure of this, Raj has yet to hone in on the details or how to derail them.

The girls have moved into the light on the path and Raj can see now that they've already picked the one. He can also see she's unaware of this development. She's skinny and tattooed, a contrast to the beefier girls huffing in their cigarettes and army boots.

Behind him the polka statics out, replaced by a tinny voice. They both lean toward it to listen, the girls momentarily demoted to background information. It's an Amber Alert; a boy taken, the estranged father the suspect. When the polka comes back, Henryk inexplicably turns it up and then talks too loudly over it.

"That's not far from here," he yelps. "We should do something!"

"What are we going to do about an Amber Alert?" Raj asks. "Whoever has the kid is not going to come here on the busiest night of the year. They're going to hightail it out of Salem."

"It's not whoever," Henryk persists. "They just said it was the father who took the boy."

"It's better than a stranger."

"It's never better than a stranger," Henryk is uncharacteristically accusing. "Why don't you look up some criminal facts on fathers who kidnap their kids and then kill them."

"What about mothers?" Raj asks. "They've been known to kill a child or two."

"What's your beef with the ladies, Raj?" Henryk snorts.

"I don't have a beef, as you crudely put it. I've just seen a thing or two."

"You keep saying that. Tell me one."

Raj grabs the bottle roughly from him.

"OK, here's one. My mom screwed her sister's husband and then didn't tell me he was my father until high school."

Henryk laughs, thinking it a joke, and the saliva-filled bark thumps in Raj's chest. The sound gives him the sudden urge to be old, to have filled the allotment of his time and be close to having it done. Then Henryk notices his face.

"Are you serious?"

"I don't know if I'm serious. It's what happened though."

“It always goes back to the mother, doesn’t it?” Henryk says. “Any issues, blamed on them. It kind of makes me feel bad for them.”

“Who?”

“The mothers.”

“Mother fuckers is more like it.”

Henryk laughs again and Raj joins him, eager to be done with the conversation. Out in the open, his mother’s crime feels different, like a balloon that’s just out of his reach. He takes another mouthful of tequila.

“Forget the not drinking,” he says. “You’re right about this stuff. I’m feeling a few extra limbs already.”

“What if we could catch that guy tonight?” Henryk chokes down his last laugh. “Now that would be something.”

“Let’s just focus on what we can focus on.” Reminded of the girls, Raj’s nerves skip and he moves to the window. They’re where he left them but he can see now the target has been clued in to her new position. Honing in, Raj notices the snake for the first time; a thick scarf around the leader’s neck. In her hand is a cage, too small for the snake. A noise from under the floor makes him jump.

Raj spins around to see if Henryk has noticed but his feet are moving again, his eyes somewhere else. Raj feels a burn of something like anger toward the old man.

“You don’t have any teeth in,” he says. “How can you not notice something like that?”

Henryk focuses on him. “What?”

The polka is too loud. Raj moves to the radio and turns it down. His fingers still on the dial, it’s as if he summoned up the voice. An update of the Amber Alert, the emphasis is on the

precariousness of the situation. The longer it goes without interference, the higher the stakes; just like the girls outside.

“We should turn on the TV,” Henryk says.

“What for?”

“We need to see,” Henryk persists. “We can’t help if we don’t see what the boy looks like.”

“The kid isn’t going to walk by the window tonight,” Raj answers. “And we’re not going out to find him. We need to stay near the line.”

“How did you get this shindig all set up anyway?”

“My friend who’s a cop,” Raj answers, even though he’d already explained at the last two condo association meetings. “It’s a high alert night. It’s more likely a civilian will stop a crime tonight than the cops.”

“What kind of friend?” Henryk narrows his eyes casually and Raj can now tell that his earlier question about Raj’s status—a.k.a, whether he’s gay—was what he thought. *A friend who wants to jam his parts in places not designed for jamming* is what he wants to say just to see Henryk’s mouth fall open.

“Did you hear that noise?” He asks instead.

“Yes, noise, I hear noise,” Henryk is easily taken off track. “It sounds like the party has started out there.”

“Not there, the basement,” Raj checks the window to find the girls have shifted to another spot under a lamppost. The leader has her bulky arm wrapped around the skinny one’s chest, a hold of both courting and destruction.

“There was a thud down there. I’m worried that one of the girls may have broken in,” Raj continues. “That outside door to the basement is a piece of flimsy crapshit and it wouldn’t take much to get in.”

“Girls, girls, girls,” Henryk snickers again. “I think you have a fixation.”

Raj is losing his patience. “No wonder Gloria keeps the juice from you.”

“Gloria likes my juice just fine,” Henryk leers.

Raj cringes and moves to the door. “I’m going down to check it out,” he calls over his shoulder. “Keep an eye on that pack.”

The hallway is dim and Raj runs his hand along the wall to steady himself. Pulling the basement door open, he pauses at the top. Raj has never minded basements, hasn’t been afraid of the demons, real or imaginary, that people insist on putting beneath the ground. It’s the stuff above that’s always been the problem for him.

He starts down. At the bottom of the stairs, the storage cages come into view. His own, almost empty, is next to Henryk and Gloria’s towering junk. Raj remembers Gloria’s indignant complaint at one of the condo association meetings that their cage was two-square feet smaller than the rest. The thought makes him want to open their cage and rip something up.

Then he sees movement at the end of the row, half inside the cage, a leg lifted out like a ballerina.

“Hello, Jae.”

The leg descends in a calculated dance, the rest of Jae coming into view. There is no startle, no surprise in her body. Raj takes a step in her direction to see if the neutrality of her expression changes, but she remains beautiful in a way that scratches something inside.

“You told me you were working tonight, Jae.”

She shrugs, looking back into the cage for whatever she was digging for. “You know I work at home, Raj.”

“It doesn’t look like you’re working.”

“What are you, the condo police?” The harshness of her laugh doesn’t match her body.

“Yes, we’re hooked up directly to the police upstairs. If I remember, when I brought this up for the building’s sake, it was brushed off by everyone.”

“Henryk is there.”

“Everyone should be there,” Raj persists. “This is a critical night.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, Raj, what could possibly happen?”

“Things happen all the time, Jae,” he answers. “Just because you refuse to see them doesn’t mean they don’t happen.”

“A-ha!” Jae floats back up and out of the cage holding up a long white robe.

“Where is David?” Raj persists. “Is he at work?”

“Has anyone ever told you to lighten up, Raj?” She locks the door to their cage and then holds the gauzy robe up to her body, peering down at herself.

“Or is he pretending to work, like you, to get out of the responsibility we all have?”

Jae walks toward him and stops just short. She smells of fresh grass and the unexpectedness of it momentarily soothes him.

“Of course he’s working. It’s a big night in the ER. People out doing stupid people tricks in costumes.”

She brushes past him and although the contact is light it’s as if she’s shoulder checked him. He turns to watch her go up the stairs. At the top she turns around, answering a question he didn’t ask.

“Cleopatra,” she cinches the robe at her waist with an arm. “Wig, eyes, and belt. Not everything has to be hard, Raj.”

He waits until he knows she’s in her condo and heads up. Back in his place, Henryk is glued to the television. On the screen is a shot of the Amber Alert boy followed by the father, both slight with big surprised eyes.

“He doesn’t look like a killer to me,” Raj comments.

Henryk holds out the tequila to him. “Ghouls are never obvious, are they? I mean, that’s a cliché...things not being what they look like. Is cliché the right word I’m looking for?”

Raj doesn’t have the energy to get into it. “Seems like you already have the kid killed off.”

“What are we doing here?” Henryk asks. His question implying something too big to answer, Raj returns to the window.

Outside it’s happening. In the short reprieve to the basement, he’s lost his grip on the situation. The girls have the skinny one down, circled around her with animal instinct, one pinning her arms, another her legs. The leader yanks the girl’s pants down, exposing discordantly generic underwear. One of the pack hands over the cage. Raj can’t see exactly what’s pulled out but is struck immediately with the knowledge of what it is.

As the girls shuffle their feet and laugh, the mouse is slipped into the skinny one’s underwear and trapped. Raj can’t see the girl’s face from this angle, can’t tell from her body how she’s reacting. But he can feel that mouse as if it’s inside him, finding a route for breath, thinking only of a way to get out. He yanks the curtain shut and turns to Henryk, who’s leaning toward the screen as if he wants to dive in.

“I need to go do something.”

Henryk doesn't respond as he walks out. In the hall, Raj flicks the light on and starts up the stairs. The noise from outside amplifies as he climbs, knocking in his ears by the time he gets to Jae and David's door. She answers the door looking as he'd left her except the eyes; painted catlike, thick black lines now extend to her temples.

"Twice in one night, Raj?" She asks. "The spirits really are out tonight."

"Can I come in for a minute?"

"Is this official condo association business?" She's looking past him at the hall wallpaper.

"Everything is business when it comes to the association."

"The last time this happened you reported us for leaky windows," Jae cocks her head, as if trying to decipher a pattern on the wall. "I'm not sure how you even knew they were *leaky* but I hope you're not thinking of doing anything like that."

Raj makes an attempt at a smile. "I'm not thinking of doing anything like that."

"OK," she sighs. "But I really am trying to finish some work before David comes home and we go to a party." Jae opens the door in grudging acceptance and starts back toward the kitchen. Raj follows, the sudden change of light making him shake as he enters the space. On the table is a spray of papers, a mug, and a half dry tea bag. The sounds of the Common are muffled by the distance.

"I wanted to apologize," Raj tries to push down the fragility in his voice.

"For what?" Noticing the tea bag, Jae scoops it up and crumples it in her palm.

"I understand that everyone doesn't feel the same urgency I do when it comes to our home," Raj stumbles. "Sometimes it comes across in a way that's not what I mean."

“Urgency?” Jae turns her back to start a burner, the tick of gas pinging in Raj’s throat. She moves the kettle to the burner that’s on. “How is it possible to feel urgency when it comes to a house?”

She grabs the mug off the table and Raj can see the smudge of a lip mark. Without rinsing it, she tosses the wrinkled tea bag back in. Raj’s mouth is watering in a way he doesn’t understand.

“You’re not listening to me.”

“What do you mean I’m not listening?” Jae sticks her finger deep into the mug. “How can you say that when I’m mirroring what you’re saying? You say urgency, I say urgency.”

“You don’t listen.”

“Listen, Raj,” her eyes narrow. “Whatever it is you’re doing, I think it’s better if you go back downstairs and do it.”

She turns her back again and Raj finds himself next to her at the stove without being aware of moving. Shifting the kettle, the flame rears at the sudden exposure to air before settling. Her hand is cool and hard and he holds it a moment before pulling it over the flame. The sound of the mug cracking against the floor enables him to move it closer, deeper, and it’s only her fingers he sees.

She’s devoid of noise, like the skinny girl outside: both unable to protect themselves vocally even when it’s critical. Raj looks then to her face to find that Jae sees him for the first time. Yes, she *sees* him finally, with her cat eyes that aren’t watering as they should be. And then looking back to the stove, there is her flesh, molding into shapes that hadn’t existed a moment before, bubbling with possibilities she can’t see now but may eventually.

Raj drops her hand abruptly and leaves without looking back. In the hall someone has turned the upstairs light off and he descends in the semi-darkness. He pauses for a moment before entering his place, studying Henryk's profile. It is then he remembers, something in the angle of Henryk's nose lurching the vision to the forefront of his mind.

It was a dream. At least that's what he always thought it was.

His mother slapping him so hard his tooth has come out. Picking it up he'd stared at it, his palm crinkling around it like saran wrap, protecting it. And then it came again, her hand like a whip, cracking open his jaw. His teeth had starting falling, one by one, out of his mouth. A classic dream; the one psychologists had a field day interpreting.

Now, from this perspective, Raj isn't sure it was meant for analysis.

One last image flashes into his view. Bite marks on his mother's arm, brown and vicious, the pattern of them a path heading nowhere.

Henryk spots him in the doorway then. "You're not going to believe this!" He jigs his feet again. "They caught him, just like that. Those Amber Announcements really do work. Caught him right here in Salem 'mister he'd never show his face here on the busiest night of the year.'"

"So he didn't kill his kid?"

"No, he didn't kill him," Henryk is indignant. "He's the father. What's wrong with you?"

Raj moves to the window and pulls back the curtain. The girls are gone.

"And the best part is he'd dressed his son like a girl," Henryk snorts behind him. "What a costume, right? But someone recognized the father. They really do work, these things."

Raj turns away from the window, looking for the tequila. It's nowhere in sight.

“That could have been us,” Henryk continues, sobering somewhat. “I told you it could have been us.”

“It should have been us,” Raj answers.

Henryk raises an imaginary glass toward Raj. “Now you’re talking.”

Raj can feel it coming before he sees it. But he doesn’t turn again toward the window. When the red lights enter the room, he goes to the door, Henryk’s head lolling to follow his movement.

“What’s going on now?” He sucks at his gums. “Is something happening?”

Without answering Raj steps into the hall.

“Oh, I get it,” Henryk slurs. “It’s your police friend, coming to get his hookup here. Hookup, get it?”

As Raj turns away, Henryk’s bark of a laugh matches the beat in his temples. Moving to its pulse, Raj exits the building and heads in the direction of the light.

END