

## UNTITLED

The yellowing paper goes back into my pocket while a wave of dizziness sweeps through me. I need to move, so I walk to Dorignac's Grocery, abandoning this lawn chair. More than likely, it was not for me anyhow.

Scan the parking lot before I slip into the air conditioning. Nothing there but the blocky silver cars of young mothers who are shopping before their children are released from summer camp. None of the cars is the one I seek.

The mothers, on the other hand, line up in the florescent aisles, contemplating healthier cereals and Merlot prices with slender, toned arms and furrowed brows that make them all even finer.

I fall in love with all of them. And somewhere in their practiced gaits, they slip, a moment of accidental spontaneity — a sidelong glance at a cute stocker or the fortuitous brush of the swell of a breast that brings a secret, confident smile — that proves they once held the capacity for love as well.

But, as I walk down toward the island celebrating the new Abita Strawberry brew, I notice myself in a mirror. As suspected, my eyes are disheveled and my hair is wild. Look away. Food items lined up like soldiers.

Rows of canned beans have the dull sterility of silverware in a college apartment drawer. Up the aisle, to the produce section. Catch my reflection again, slightly, an apparition painted on the glass protecting the acid free orange juice she'd buy me to quell my gastrointestinal reflux.

My hands fiddle with the yellowing paper in my pocket and brush against the ring in my jacket pocket as I think about the blocky silver car.

It could be anywhere. Far more likely for it to be in Gentilly or even Covington at the moment. There is, of course, the off chance it is in Austin or Houston or, if things went as awry as I'm suspecting they did, Atlanta.

"Sir, where did you get that," a Dorignac's employee stops mopping and nods at my Styrofoam cup. This could end poorly.

“At work.”

“Where do you work?”

“Well, nowhere. I quit.”

“What? When? You have coffee.”

“I poured this, then I quit.”

“Well, you can’t just bring it in here. I’m sorry.”

It’s just as well. The car is not here, and the mothers do not love me.

The sun sears my eyes and highlights the unraveling inseam of my suit pants. I stumble a few buildings over to the PJs Coffees and Teas to sew my pants in one of the large wooden lawn chairs facing Veterans Highway.

It starts before I've completely lowered my torn body into the chair. A sun-wrinkled ex-dancer, it would seem, fingers a blue pack of American Spirit cigarettes and speaks.

"That ain't from here, sugah," she emphasizes the "sug" until she coughs out the "ah." My eyes widen. She props the box on an arm of her chair so I'll notice her choice but doesn't take her eyes off my coffee cup.

"I know."

"You lookin' for sumethin'?"

My eyes drift from the road to her, and I notice her individuality as FRENCHMAN STREET sign broach on her velvet mock camisole. Her years almost crush me. But does she possess a bit of clairvoyance?

"Yes."

"Ain't out there," she nods to the street, which is bending and waving in the heat waves.

Scan highway for the car but the air is disorienting as if viewed through a piece of quartz. I shut my eyes to sate the vertigo.

With eyes shut, this is what I see: On the spidered paint of a windowsill I can still see the half-empty, warm bottle of Red Stripe and the pathetic casing of a wrinkled, used condom, which reminds of the time one broke. I never told her. In the bathroom, peeling off the sickly latex, I realized the moisture on the tip was more than just Emily ... it was my own. Split-second decision, knowing her Catholic upbringing would never allow for Plan B, as it was then called, I decided to keep her innocence in tact. Her bliss was hers. My world was dark.

I wonder if there are conversational slips of “we” when speaking of our humid months. Every day we have been apart, I’ve grown closer to her. But now, that must end. I can’t be bothered with this now. My neck’s sizzling. I must move. But I’ll fall in love. Every time I move, I fall in love. My love is as stationary or as fluid as my body. I open my eyes.

“Sugah, why you sittin’ here?”

I glance over at the older woman and long to grasp her withering hand that seems so far from home and to let her guide me back to her small shotgun house where we would probably smoke cheap marijuana and American Spirit cigarettes and drink Earl Grey tea while Nick Drake drifts from old wooden speakers that also serve as end tables.

Instead I say nothing.

“Cigarette,” the stranger chuckles.

"No. Yes. No. Where is it?"

She points at her blue box.

“Not the cigarettes.”

"Where is what?"

"Never mind. I have to go."

Foot catches the bottom step, and my body sprawls out like a fire blanket tossed on an open flame. Roasting pavement immediately boils the right side of my unshaven face, wide chest and aching groin. The ring box pushes into my breast with the force of a rubber slug. I check for the yellowing paper, glance up for the blocky silver car (please, not like this!), but the coast is clear.

During the stagger to the neutral ground, sweat pools in my socks, so I sit in the grass to take them off. I leave them on a bus stop bench.

A police officer in the distance glances over his blue shoulder at me, and I smile unnervously. No Valium pill bottle is in my pocket, no loose Vicodin rattling around with my change. Those days are over. Those were for after she left.

I do wonder where I would be if she hadn't. I doubt I'd be wandering the neutral ground in search of a blocky silver car, but I also doubt I'd feel nearly as much love as I do now.

The officer approaches and speaks in an Arabi accent that somehow drifted across the river and wants to know where iddit dat I work. I tell him across the lake, in Eden Isle, by Slidell, assuming he won't know the area. My assumption is incorrect. He asks what iddit dat I do on da' lake. I tell him I actually just live in Eden Isle, that I'm one of those who ran for the large houses in the faroff land, that I actually work in Pearl River in wildlife management and that I'm in town only to find a certain type of blue heron that lives on this side of the lake. I don't know why I lie. I don't know why I don't mention the blocky silver car. A man is nothing without a job. Without a job or a woman, to this Arabi police officer, he may as well not exist.

Eyeing the gym across the highway, I tell him I was just trying to cross over to it. So I do, bidding him farewell. He lumbers his hulk of a body back to a cruiser and speeds off to the next bit of small talk that will give his job some perceived meaning.

In the parking lot, I pause.

Recently single twentysomethings, all female, climb out of blocky silver cars. They're wearing soccer shorts and their ex-boyfriends' college t-shirts, vowing to "show them" by drenching the logos in the perfumed sweat of elliptical machine absolution.

The single girls stare only at the sliding gym door as they walk. None look anywhere else. They are prepared, well-oiled machines, no longer softly cuddling in bed with whimpered giggles and pleased sighs, with fruity Popsicles shared with the *sweetest boys on Earth*, with carnival-won stuffed unicorns and downy sheets featuring high thread counts. In fact, if they see another person inside the building at which they stare, each will only desire to defeat, destroy and humiliate the other.

Whatever temporary lull of peace existed is now gone, in this building.

My longing is tinged with a sallow dullness like the gelatinous pounding of a wine hangover that brings melancholy understanding.

As I'm distracted from the rows of blocky silver cars by long, tanned legs, plump with newly-acquired muscle and swishing back and forth, offering excuse for the luscious swell of lonely calves, I flex my own arm but feel nothing.

What am I doing here?

I'm not sure of the answer but trying to figure that out is too much. Instead I try to decide how I'd spend my evening if that choice existed. If I could do whatever my pattering heart desired. If I didn't have to find the car. I yearn to jog in the nighttime darkness of Pontiff Playground in Metairie Park and watch a tennis ball thwack between a man and his lady, bright lights of the court highlighting it. The bullcroaks of tree frogs in heat and the symphony of swampy crickets buzzing through the oaks, adding a soundtrack to the private game. Oh, how I long to put this car business behind me. What if things went wrong? What if things got so wicked, it's out in Mission Viejo or El Paso. After my run, I want to meet with some old friends — if any remain — and have false adventures, stories that only exist to us — The pizza guy has taken two hours. Will he ever come! — but there is much left to do, and the distant thunder has me worried.

Exhausted and tattered, I lay on the grass in the neutral ground to watch the cars fly by, geometric silver blurs. I close my eyes, remember last night.

In the two hours of sleep I had, I drifted ...

Under the low florescent lights of Wal-Mart out in River Ridge with my mother on our weekly trip to the store. I push a cart toward towering rows of color-striped socks on sale for .99 a pair. As my mother flicks her fingers through a set of blouses for sizes, I see Em. She's with her mother, who is flicking her dark fingers through jeans for sizes.

Em looks up and begins walking over. I prepare myself for the idiot wind to blow through the already drafty warehouse. She doesn't walk up confidently. Glances at the linoleum, hands knotted behind her back. All the distorted images of her as something evil slip away, her reality existing again. What have I done?

I meet her halfway between our mothers as the PA system squawks "Ice spill in on aisle 5. Ice spill on aisle 5."

She pigeons her left toe in, the turquoise collar of her Asics almost facing me.

"Thomas," she must find my shoes fascinating.

"Emily," I almost whisper.

"Tommy."

"Em."

"I need to talk to you, Tommy."

Our mothers have noticed us and cautiously eye each other, wondering what treaties have been signed and where their alliances should lie.

"Not here," I wink. "Meet me in Produce. Five minutes."

She laughs our private laugh, and I wonder who else has heard it in the past year, who else refers to it as "our private laugh."

Next to the peaches, her leg pigeoning, my hands kneading.

“Tommy,” her eyes bounce. I just count bananas.

“Yeah, Em?” twenty two, twenty three, twenty four.

“I wanted to call you for ... so long. I’ve missed you so much. But you said leave you alone.”

“You left me by myself,” I tremble and divide the bananas by bunches. “I was so ... terrified.”

“I’m back. I’m back now, Tom. Can’t you tell? Can I see you?”

It hangs there like a ripening plum.

“I can’t just be here ...”

“No, Tom,” her voice is a ghost. “I love you.”

As my hands wrap her shoulders, I remember sliding my tingling fingers down her arms. That gentle coolness in the languid heat that would end in a half-drunken Coors Light or sweet tea. Motherfucker. I’m no longer counting brown specks on the bananas but lost in the specks in her eyes, which I used to be able to draw on command. She leans in, breath stale but warm and I feel my instincts take control of my body head leaning in so close eyes closing but as they do I notice the peaches have grown soft and caved in and the bananas have turned black with rot and our lips are so close they might be touching they might not I can’t tell anymore and

I, of course, woke to the stench of bourbon and sweat.

You have a problem when you can’t differentiate dreams from reality any longer, they say.

Find that car, Tommy.

You haven’t crossed her kaleidoscope mind.

You have to understand this.

Painfully open my eyes. My face is scalding from the sun, and my head is swimming with hunger and dehydration, so I walk into a Subway on the other side of Dorignac's grocery, and in the line before me are two people. An old man, apparently deaf, keeps asking for "eryting but da hallow-peen-ya peppahs" even though he's yet to order a sandwich.

Behind him is a cute but weathered young mother with a mousy nose and two toddlers running about at her feet.

"The cold cut combo, that's one of the five dollar ones, right?"

"Yeah lady. I done told ya. All dem on that board dere are five."

"What's on it? Turkey and ham?"

"No, it says it right there. Bologna and ... somethin'"

With a sigh, she turns to one of her kids.

"Is that OK?"

"No, I want meat!"

"Bologna *is* ... never mind. Ham?"

"No, meat!"

"Look," she turns back to the exasperated sandwich artist, "Can I just have turkey?"

The worker looks confused, still holding a wax-paper-enclosed deck of meat in the air.

"I don't care if it's not five dollars. I just don't care. And please put American cheese on half. Only half."

Two medical reps stride in. One immediately starts complaining as he rubs his overly worked-out chin in disgust of "eryting but da hallow-peen-ya peppahs," and the other sighs, heaving her fake breasts clad in a small vest like weapons, burlap socks filled



with stones. I begin ordering a sandwich when someone seated nearby finishes a phone call.

“I love you,” she says to the receiver.

I check my back pocket, but of course my wallet is gone. Nothing but the yellowing paper.

Smile at the tired mother, sitting while her children munch away and lost in the oblivion of momentary silence, happier than either of us will ever be again.

I leave.

Walk into a gas station, hoping to slip a stray hot dog roasting on its metal wheel into my suit pocket. Instead they are hidden behind the counter, made only by the gas station workers. Turning to leave, I eye an early-thirties woman, pretty in a worked over sense, purchasing a tear package of two Tylenol PM (slipped in pantsuit pocket), a small bottle of Chardonnay and a blue package of American Spirit cigarettes.

To take one of those pills with her ...

Instead, the ring in my pocket catches my attention. I need money ...

Em again pigeoned her left foot nervously inward and took a long drag from the smoke taken out of my roommate’s blue box of American Spirit cigarettes. Smiling cautiously, the engagement ring in my pocket all the heavier in the orange Louisiana heat, I softly spoke.

“I’d never expect you to smoke.”

She smiled, lost in a world predating mine.

“Oh, I don’t know,” sheepish. “I picked it up in France,” with that slight soft “a.”

Distant thunder. Enormous sun. Lethargic heat. Blanketing humidity. Another Louisiana summer.

A drag of her cigarette breathed me in.

I'll pawn the ring and live on that for a while.

Now to find a pawn shop. I reel about, looking for one, dreaming of the day I will reminisce on this one — oh my, I was so unhappy back then, such an angry young man, roaming, looking for cars, so silly, so strange — but the only thing age has taught me was how little I know. And here, down Veterans Highway comes a truck that seems to be slowing down. I think it is — yes! It is Adam, a friend.

On second thought though, I glance down, I don't wish to be found in this state. Try to duck into the enclave of a bus stop, but he pulls up and motions curiously for me to sit passenger. Reluctantly, I do.

"Tommy, You look awful."

"Long night last night, got a little lost."

"OK ... Have you eaten today?"

"Not quite."

"You need to eat. Are you *drunk*?"

"No."

"You reek of bourbon. Well. And coffee."

"The bourbon is from last night. I haven't had time to sleep. The coffee is from this morning."

"Haven't had time to sleep?"

"I've been busy."

"You seem sick, Tommy."

"I know."

"You need to eat. Mama made red beans. That's where I'm headed, for lunch. Please come."

It occurs to me that it is Monday, and our traditions are all I have left. Red beans it is.

"Fine, I'll eat."

As I shovel red beans and rice into my maw, attacking the ham hock with a knife, his question freezes my blood more than the air conditioning.

"How is Laura?" he says, and I am confused for a moment. I'm lost because I naturally assume he means Em. But no one mentions her any longer.

"Oh. She's ... well, I suppose."

"Well, good."

But the elephant in the room is too large. The silverware clatters on the table.

"Look, do you know where it is?"

"Where what is?"

"You know what. The car."

"What car? Who's car?"

"The blocky silver car."

"They're all blocky silver cars," he chuckles sadly to himself. "Are you asking where *she* is?"

"What? No."

"Her car?"

"You know what car I mean."

"So you *are* looking for her. What about Laura? She want you seeing her?"

"Laura was just a night. Anyway, I'm only looking for the car."

"You aren't the type to fuck and forget."

"I'm becoming the type."

"Why?"

*The car! The car! The car!*

"Just look around."

"Some people can fuck and forget; some people can't. This doesn't really change."

"OK."

"Why are you looking for the car?"

"I need something in it?"

"What?"

"It doesn't matter."

"What?"

"Something of mine."

"What are you going on about? You're sick."

"Don't you understand?"

He looks at me quizzically, unsure whether to laugh, cry or lock me up.

"You need help. You're sick."

"Yeah, you mentioned."

As I feared, I've said too much. He doesn't understand, so I grin unsteadily — ha! ha! a joke! Now, a gambit. If he knows how deeply I still hurt, regardless of my sneaky drinks and whiskey smiles, he will know I am about to lie. I suspect he doesn't.

"You got the extra truck, right?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Can I take it home? My car is still in the Marigny."

He looks at the pot of beans, then at me, then back at the beans.

"Sure. Just, Tommy ..."

"Yes?"

"Get some sleep. You're sick."

"A good night's rest is all I need. Thank you."

"Be careful."

I'll tell no one else of my hunt.

I leave his swamp cottage, out of place here in Lakeview, and I take a wrong turn off Canal and all the blocky silver cars melt away, the paper in my pocket loses all relevance. I am in the jungle. Gothic fear takes hold, smothers and blinds like a pillow pressed on my face. Poverty overwhelms me. The churches stuck on the cornered like tourniquets are beacons of a forgotten hope, for the poor as well as the rich. The world melts into a bitter grit.

Finally, I find and take the I-10 to Old Metairie, lost in the lane markers as they blur together. The road curves here, so I too curve. The phantom of her hand brushes my thigh in remembrance. The road and thus car straighten out. A few red taillights dot the ashen highway. It is growing dark as the Metairie Road/City Park Ave. exit approaches, which I follow until I've just passed St. Catherine of Siena. The memories take hold with the phantom hand.

When we'd look into the New Year's crowd in Jackson Square, she would find nothing more fascinating than the 3,000 eyes seeing the same thing 3,000 slightly different ways. I found nothing more boring.

She said I was too much for her to take.

"Emily," I tiredly pleaded. "I can be less."

"I know," large brown eyes widened and a frightened but resolved child was silhouetted in the doorway. "And that's why you're too much."

Snap back to. Because there, in the parking lot of broken shells, is the blocky silver car I've been seeking. The NEW ORLEANS: CON ORGULLO VIVIMOS AQUI sticker sloppily thrown on the bumper with a humorous smile. I remember, but I don't know who put it there. Right next to Sal's SnoBall stand on Helios Avenue and Metairie Road. It is so obvious, though I can't put my finger on why.

I approach the stand from behind, suit damp from sweat and hanging limply. The back door is locked but the wood is thin. My second kick further splinters the cracked robin's egg blue paint and the lock gives with a loud CRACK.

Inside is a sixteen-year-old girl wearing a Dominican High School uniform — white blouse and checkered green skirt — caught between pouring a refreshing red apple

snobball and fearful shock at my unexpected arrival. Her glances to her backpack reveal no understanding.

The red apple syrup overflows the shaved ice. She continues pouring. She's staring. Silent.

Past rainbow rows of colored bottles, out the serving window, I see families — children and adults — gathered on the lumberjack wooden stump seats the stand is known for, mulling, separated into preconceived groups but pleased to have been offered a group at all.

One girl sits alone, also dressed in a Dominican High School uniform. I wonder if she is friends with the scared girl in front of me.

I step in further and close the door.

Imagine them gossiping at lunch about this girl's boyfriend who keeps trying to maneuver her hand to his inseam while they sit in the backseat of his blocky silver car in the Country Day football field parking lot. The self-conscious giggling. The confused understanding. The call of the wild.

The bottles of syrup glow in the dying sunlight, casting a disco ball of colors on the walls. I read the names and listen to the approaching thunder. It forces from me a sigh of relief, the distant thunder. It reminds me the summer will end. They all do. And as much as they seem the same, they are all different.

*Pink Squirrel. Grape. Batman.*

“What are you doing?” she whispers.

*Nectar Supreme. Strawberry. Robin.*

“Huh?”

*Almond. Chocolate. Ninja Turtle.*

“What are you doing? What do you want?” Louder.

*Wedding cake.*

“I,” I slump down. I begin to cry. It escalates quickly. There are so many cars. I am heaving. So many stickers. My whole body retches and shakes like an ill man's. That's the wrong car.

What I seek is not here.

The wedding cake bottle shines a dull cream and is half-empty.

“I don’t know,” I say slowly, now sitting on the dusty ground, pants ripping further. “I don’t know.”

“Who are you? What are you doing?”

I look up feebly. “I can be less,” I had said so long ago. I pull the yellowing paper from my pocket. CERTIFICATION OF BIRTH followed by my mother’s rushed scribble.

I hold it out and drop it. We both study the paper with frozen stares as the spilled syrup slowly soaks through it, spreading along the spiraling words, turning the yellowing paper bright red, rushing like water out a broken levee into a defenseless neighborhood, running the ink of my mother’s signature into meaningless glop.

I look up.

I close my eyes.

I weep.

I do not fall in love.

THE END.