

## Ache

They said it'd be this hard slog—writing, I mean—, this uphill battle. But I thought, *No, I don't want it to be that way, this calculated enterprise of cleverness*. I just want you to see this side of me, a side I can't see, this ache.

I want you to judge me.

I did something stupid recently. Not out of character really—I chase away these impulses all the time—but definitely stupid. What made it especially reckless was that it happened at my local liquor store, which is in a run-down strip mall my friends and family frequent, just three miles from my house.

(My house, by the way: three bedrooms, two and a half baths, two car garage. I pull into its long or short—depending on the season—shadow between five and six most nights. While I'm at it, me: middle-class, American male. Pays his taxes, talks about sports when he's supposed to.)

A diversion is necessary here in the form of, oddly enough, a story about Walmart. One day while dressed quite nicely—a tie and a belt and shiny shoes—I stopped at Walmart. As I walked its linoleum aisles, customers stared—I was by far the fanciest among them. I am, and I say it only for its pertinence, an attractive and fit man of 33. And this particular store is 30 miles from the nearest city, which is barely a city, so my outfit gave me the swagger of a man who may (but didn't) have money and connections. I looked important, not of their kind (though I lived five miles away).

Many women gave me longing looks. It happened so often I actually thought, *I could clean up in here*. It would have been easy pickings, but I'm not that kind of guy. Still, as they stood next to

their cargo shorted boyfriends, with their eyes pleading, *Take me with you, get me out of this ridiculous town, I'll do anything*, I'll admit I considered at least seeing how easy it would be.

I had the feeling once, the feeling that another person can give you the life you want. I wanted an apartment badly but couldn't afford it. It was perched at the end of a pier, practically in the water, in a town on the coast of New England. It was a studio, far from fancy, but exactly where I wanted to be. The landlord was a tall, mild-mannered man in his late forties or early fifties, who owned the kayak shop below the apartment. I asked if he could lower the rent a bit. No, he couldn't really do that, he could maybe take \$50 off. That wouldn't help and what's worse is the rent was cheap—cheaper than I expected and just plain cheap. I couldn't swing it. This modest, kind of shitty place was out of my reach.

Life's a game and I didn't have the tokens.

Coming down the steps of the apartment, I thought: *No wonder the young girl in New York fucks the older guy. He has access.*

You lack one kind of resource, use another. There's more than one way to get what you want. A crossroads reached. Would this guy, who lacked a clear heterosexual quality, lower the rent if I jerked him off? Or if I jerked him off every Friday at 7? Or would I have to do more? I wasn't willing to actually *do* anything. But he quite literally held the key to the life I wanted. That's when I understood how broke and stuck I was; I saw myself on the socio-economic ladder, many rungs lower than I wished.

But the liquor store. In I walk, on the Fourth of July, to grab some wine. In she walks wearing high-waisted very short shorts. But I felt her before I saw her. She stood next to me, eyeing some wine. I had that electric sense one gets maybe a dozen times in one's life, and it was

vibrating on my right arm. Her presence affected my skin, my nervous system. I turned to look: a brunette, tan, petite, maybe 5'2", had to be at least 21 but looked younger. She was turned sideways so I was viewing the profile of her fantastic, shapely, bubble butt. Small to not-quite-medium sized, nothing to excite an Atlanta strip club, though its patrons would have to admit, *Girl's cute.*

In line, she stood in front of me. With her back to me, proprieties were set aside and I stared, I ogled. Her ass floated there, defying gravity. It was astounding. Her flesh—tanned somehow an equal brown and gold—was firm and flawless.

I don't mean to imply she was a goddess. She'd blend in on any college campus, but her body full of life overwhelmed me in its contrast to the ugliness and mundanity of the surroundings: the strip mall, the dusty bottles of liquor, the middle-aged cashier, the suburbs, all with their implied resignation. I ached, yes, in a sexual way, but in an ethereal way to: rejoicing at her existence, lamenting the space between us, mourning her eventual decline and mine. The ache is pleasant and not pleasant at the same time. Sometimes it starts somewhere in my center and permeates out to my limbs, and I close my eyes and savor it. Music usually causes that kind of ache. Other times it hits me directly in my chest and stays there: ecstasy and sadness pushing against each other.

I'd had quite a few of these electric moments in my younger years, but only one before like this. I was almost shaking. I deemed the feeling mutual. Only a handwritten note perfumed and signed with a kiss would've been more blatant than the silent messages she was sending me. When you know a girl wants you to make a move you just know.

I have a wife, I should add. That doesn't preclude me from having attractions but it should certainly preclude me from acting on them. And it always had. But this day it didn't.

All I can say in my defense is I felt like an accessory in my wife's life: worn and loved when needed, kept somewhere dark when not. I'd felt this way in flashes before, but recent events made it clear and pushed me past a point of justifying her. I was beginning to believe she was a narcissist. Maybe I was looking for an out. I don't know. I apologize for being vague, but you have to understand I would need a thousand pages to get you to where I was that day. Sourcing marital discord is archeology. It's layered under years of hurt and blame and resentment.

She paid for her two cases of beer and that was to be that. But she lingered. She pushed her beer to the edge of the counter, neatly and slowly arranged her cash and receipt into her wallet, returned the wallet to her purse, slung the purse over her shoulder, and by the time all that was done my one bottle of wine was purchased.

With a struggle, she heaved her two cases up, then moved to the exit. I put my arm over her head and held the door for her. *Thank you*, she smiled. *Let's trade*, I said and held out my wine. She took it without hesitation, *Sure, I'm right over here*.

She popped the trunk, I put the beer in and then she stepped close, maybe to say *thank you*. With a single, hard pound of my heart and a tightness in my chest, I said before even bothering or caring to think about it, *You feel that don't you? Whatever it is between us? I want to kiss you so bad right now I can hardly take it*.

*Then kiss me*. She was so familiar with me, not *to* me, *with* me. She seemed to trust me for no reason at all.

I put my hands on either side of her face and I kissed her like I loved her and lost her and found her again.

It was creation, explosion, energy condensed and released.

We looked into each other's eyes for a long time, longer than I'd looked into anyone's eyes in years. Then we exchanged names and phone numbers and she left.

I deleted the number as soon as I was in my car. My wife was still my wife, narcissist or not. This girl could call me but I was betting on her age she wouldn't. When you're young these weird moments of possibility and wonder aren't so rare; she'd lose interest or forget.

That evening my wife and I and our two children attended a Fourth of July party at my sister's. She planned quite an evening—live band, games, pulled pork, and potato salad. My story, melodramatic as it already is, turns operatic, even a bit sitcom-esque, at this point.

Walking up my sister's sidewalk, carrying two cases of beer, was the girl from the liquor store. My wife put her hand on my arm, *Look at her, you should help her, she's too little to be carrying that.*

*Let me get that for you,* I said. I felt the blood drain from my face, I whispered, *I have a wife, please act like you don't know me. Sorry.*

*I know,* she said.

We went straight through to the backyard to set the drinks down. My wife lingered in the house. *You know? How do you know?*

She had a playful twinkle in her eye, in spite of how serious I was. *I work with your sister*, she looked up at me from her 5'2" as cute as she possibly could, *I'm friends with her on Facebook*. She put her hand on my arm, got on her tiptoes, let her mouth touch my ear, and whispered, *I've been lusting after photos of you for months*.

So I could have her if I wanted her. I could slash my throat. I could break a window, pinch my annoying mother-in-law, take my clothes off, fuck the potato salad.

Once in New York City, I was walking alone in Chinatown. I hadn't been to Chinatown since high school when my friends and I went for knock-off watches. Its dirty streets weren't worth a visit and I'd avoided it as an adult. But this was a strange trip to New York—the first time I'd spent the night away since I became a father 15 months before. Fatherhood had so far been mere survival. For fifteen months I'd thought only practical thoughts: we need more money, we need more sleep, I need more sex. It was harder than everyone said it would be.

I separated from my friends and wandered in a trance from 57th Street down to Canal. It was July and hot and when I got to Chinatown the smell of exotic foods, the sight of colorful signs, the sound of languages I couldn't understand reanimated me. Vendors were selling fruits I'd never seen, whole coconuts with straws sticking out the top, and live frogs and strange fish in tubs of water on the sidewalk. Characters in the shadows peddled illegal goods, street gamblers darted their eyes on the lookout for cops. I was exhilarated by the unfamiliar and illicit.

I walked past a massage parlor, then another and another. Finally, I stopped in front of a run-down building and opened the door. A flight of stairs led up. I expected them to creak under my weight—maybe they did—but all I could hear was the thud, thud, thud of my beating heart.