

Cup-O-Noodle

I'm chilled on Ma's couch watching *The Real Prostitutes of Larimer County* when I hear her charm bracelets clinking up the stairs, so I hurry and yeet my empty JuiceBoxXxes out the window, since she gets pissed when I'm drinking during the day. I mean, it's like six o'clock already, and I'm only a few deep, but still. You don't know my ma. I quick flip to Discovery Channel to make like I'm learning about cheetahs or jolly old ancient Egypt, only instead of 31 I punch 34, a Menopause Network original movie about feminine cancer, so straight up Ma knows I'm lying.

"Like you were watching *Dying Housewives*."

I push Power so the screen blinks black. When I go to get up, I catch myself on the couch.

"You drunk already?"

"Just taking a break from YrFlix." I reach under the couch, where I thought I put my YrFlix callbook, but it's gone. "I sold like six today."

YrFlix is this job thing Ma signed me up for where I call and convince people to get premium movie channels on their phone. For ten bucks? As if that'll even put a dent in it when Ma's still fighting the insurance company to cover what they said.

"Six?" Ma says.

"Hells yeah," I say.

"Six is a lot. Especially for someone who left the call sheet crumpled in the sewer grate outside." She whips out my YrFlix callbook from her purse. The paper is wet with maybe leaf parts. I guess I dropped it last night? Who knows? I was pretty wrecked.

"Dang, Ma! What the hell did you do to my YrFlix?" I act all surprised and shit.

“Don’t even. You been watching TV and drinking beer all day.” She opens the window and shows how she found an empty JuiceBoxXx which I attempted seriously to yeet but unfortunately it encountered resistance via the fire escape.

“It ain’t beer,” I say, but Ma only stares back with this blank look like she doesn’t understand words, like the Viking in that credit card commercial who keeps paying high interest rates and then kills his accountant with an axe.

She goes to recycle my empty, her charm bracelets clanging, clovers and horseshoes like a damn box of cereal. It’s not like they’re going to magically fix her unfixable shit.

“It ain’t even six o’ clock, and you’ve drunk how many beers?” she says.

“Can’t you read or what? It says right here on the box: *Tennessee. Moonshine. Fruit. Drink.*”

“I ain’t even angry,” she says, which means disappointed, which is worse. “You know it’s the first of the month?”

“So?”

She smacks the side of her head to show I’m stupid. “So: rent. Where else we gonna go?”

Since I know she’s right, that only makes me madder. “If you can’t not be a bitch to me, then maybe I’ll leave and then good luck, with nobody to listen to your stupid-ass stories about fat-ass truck drivers hitting on you for having only one tit at work in the tollbooth, and no one to borrow DD’s car to drive you to Mother of Mercy for your follow-up scans, did you ever think about that?”

“Get out,” says.

I stand there.

“Out!”

Somehow the Foreman Juicer gets knocked hard into the wall. Not like I meant to.

I go to Gas City thinking to maybe get more JuiceBoxXxes, but I only have like sixty cents,

so I zonk there in the parking lot for a minute, staring by the dumpster behind the Steak & Lube, where those always same dudes play dominoes and smoke hookah. That one beggar guy is out, the one who uses a Styrofoam bowl from a Cup-O-Noodle for his money cup, and he's jingling it all like, "Help a brother out, sir," so I give him my only sixty cents. My breath is steam and alls I have on is my hoodie so I'm fucking cold and maybe I should just go back and beg Ma please forgive me, but DD rescues me by texting do I want to smoke dope. So I go to her place, and we hit the bowl and watch *Final Countdown* and screw around doing oral and toys and butt stuff.

Afterwards, we're laying on her futon and there's a different shitass cancer movie on Menopause Network. I say to DD I could make a better movie holding the camera between my butt cheeks. DD smacks me and keeps watching. I roll my face into the pillow and pretend like I'm not thinking about Ma, then peek and watch DD watching the movie until she's like, "What?"

"Nothing. Can you change it?"

"Quit looking at me."

There's nothing else to do so I watch the shitass movie anyway. After a while it gets less shitass. See, this girl Janie is trying to get into a classy dancing school, but she can't concentrate on practice because her mom is in the hospital. They kind of screwed up those details by showing the mom going bald before she even *knew* she had cancer, but really why it happens is from chemo, trust me. Then comes the big tryout, but turns out the surgeons missed a little part of the mom's brain tumor at the margin, which means edge, basically, so the mom falls unconscious in the supermarket and hits her head on a can of beans and gets ambulated to the ER, but Janie still has to audition right after, so she totally biffs on this hella-difficult signature jump/spin/splits move. She runs off crying. Then more crying, 'cause her mom dies, and it's real sad, but after the funeral Janie tells the truth to the mean school admissions guy and he turns nice and gets Janie a second chance and she nails her signature move and the judges stand hollering and clapping and give her a full scholarship

and she goes, “That one’s for you, Mom!”

Then the credits are rolling, only I can’t read them good, ‘cause I must have gotten some dirt in my eye or something.

“Are you crying?” DD asks.

“No,” I say, “I must have gotten some dirt in my eye or something.”

DD hugs me and soon I *am* crying. Which is stupid, I know. Because it’s not like they didn’t find it in time. They did. They cut it out. All of it, they said. Including the margins. They said they think they got all of it, including the margins, they’re pretty sure. So why can’t I do nothing but flop against DD like a gutted fish?

DD and I don’t really talk about real stuff. She says let’s smoke another bowl and do rebates. How rebates works is you go to Wal-Mart and buy a digital camera or whatever, then us Kinko’s special printer to copy the bar code onto real-looking cardboard. You do the mail-in form but still return the camera for your money back. DD’s a genius at stuff like that. She also does Craigslist Ads, gift certificates, OnlyFans. Maybe if I was a go-getter like DD, I could actually help Ma out with cash sometimes, instead of just being a fuck-up at YrFlix.

While we fill out the paperwork, we watch *Double-Trouble Vaycay*, the one where they make like you’re going on a getaway ski trip to Aspen with your girlfriend, only when you get there-- surprise!--they invited your wife, too, and all three of you get locked inside this cabin together. Or sometimes it’s whitewater rafting.

It gets late and DD goes to brush her teeth. She doesn’t like me staying over, ‘cause it’s not like that for us, but I pretend I passed out watching TV, because what else am I supposed to do, go home?

Only I can’t sleep. Because: thoughts. Also the dope we smoked is giving me the weirds. When I finally go to walk home, the sky is glowed up like in that commercial for Arizona Internet

University where the watercolors on the horizon say, “Yes you CAN!”

“Except can I?” I say to nobody.

I peer in the dark windows of Gas City at the aisles of cereal and soup cans and car oil. The whole place is shut down and nobody’s around, not even the beggar guy with the Styrofoam Cup-O-Noodle bowl. In back are dumpsters barfing out rubble and rusty spark plugs and syringes. I find a chunk of cinder block and close the dumpster lid and climb it toward the high windows. I’m gazing over the aisles of infinite Pringles and Little Debbie’s like some avenging angel—but not like those cheesy angels in Menopause Network Original Movies who swoop down from heaven to cure dying moms of cancer, ‘cause that bullshit is not how life works—more like a badass fallen angel of the type prone to breaking-and-entering a Gas City. I think how happy Ma’s face would look if I came home with fat stacks. I imagine stacks so fat that the phone calls go away. Plus maybe I could snag some free JuiceBoxXxes in there, why not?

I take off my hoodie and wrap it over the cinderblock to make it quieter. I tap the concrete soft on the glass, then pull back to aim for real. I smash that shit so hard, but the window hardly even spiders in the middle and no hole. My wrist kills. It must be that special kind of glass.

Then headlights are coming, so I run. Just move and don’t think and my brain is sizzling all the way home. Our stairwell smells like cat pee, and grit crusts the soles of my shoes. If that little bitch Chester sneaked back in here, I’m gonna yeet his ass out the window.

I flip on Home Shopping to see what time it is. Six-thirty AM. Usually Ma sits drinking powdered coffee and reading *Soap Opera Digest* before she goes to the tollbooth. But now the whole apartment is dark, except for the TV glow casting shadows from the clawed feet of the sofa.

“Ma?” I call. I go to the bedroom, knock. “Ma?”

I check the bathroom, the back hallway where my cot fits in the corner, even the closet. I dig through the junk mail piled on the table, the pills on her nightstand, trying to see if her bus pass is

still around, but all I find is food wrappers and clipped coupons and losing Lotto stubs.

“Ma! Where are you?”

I look under the bed, under the sink—stupid places where she’d never fit. I pull open the shower curtain, head tweaked away so I won’t be looking if she’s in there naked and/or dead and sliced up in pieces. But she’s nowhere.

I skid out to the sidewalk. The parked cars look deserted, like everyone locked up and walked away and gave up for good. A bus comes, the No. 6, only there isn’t Ma or anyone else at the bus stop, so the driver burns by without even slowing. Inside are yellow lights glowing over the passengers—bag ladies in head scarves, a gorgeous college girl with box braids, an old man with oxygen tubes running to his nose—on their way to work or school or whatever they have going on in their lives. Flash then gone, quick as changing the channel.

Fuck it, I go back inside.

I check the empty JuiceBoxXxes in the trash to see if maybe there’s some that have a sip left and find one I can slurp on the straw a little. Home shopping is still on TV, this guy selling a ninja sword—fifty-nine bucks for a two ninety-nine value—and he smacks it on the table to show how strong it is, only the sword tip breaks and flies off and fucks him right in the chest and he falls to the floor. Normally I’d be tweaking out laughing seeing this, but I’m not. Since the camera guy is the one who has to carry the sword guy off to find a doctor, the video gets frozen zoomed in on the broken blade and you can tell the screen is just going to stay like that because no one is around to make it go to commercial or anything.

I turn off the TV. The house is creepy quiet.

I don’t know what to do, so I don’t. I sit listening. Waiting, I guess, to hear footsteps coming up the stairs or the clink of bracelet charms, desperate as change in a beggar’s bowl.