

## *FRUITS*

### WHEREVER

First thing I did as we stepped out of the hotel is I scoped for the mountains I couldn't see in the dark last night. Jan was like, "My God, those apricots in there." They were bad and Jan knew it. I knew it too but didn't want to create a gripe cycle so I told her about how they were only just apricots, which she didn't like. She was nuts for fruits but not for 'justs' and 'onlys' regarding them.

We were sleeping at a hotel because we didn't know where to camp around this town. It was our first stop on our way to 'wherever, anywhere but here. Let's just go and camp and get outta the city. We need to see something new.' 'Like some mountains,' I added. We didn't consider camping anywhere when we arrived 'wherever,' another 'here' was because where would that be? Was it allowed? What was the weather like at night and the out-of-doors creatures? And what kind of people would that make us? Plus, we drove nine hours before deciding where we were was 'anywhere' enough. It was this pink, neon sign on a dark main street in a town we didn't see the name of that caught our attention, calmed our arguing and we parked.

The continental breakfast was at the Mayer Hotel. The name got Jan to begin rhyming it with "yayer" and soon everything was this, "yayer." It was a boring thing to repeat and after awhile we'd decided as a team to hate boring and not do it anymore. We were trying to stay on the same team about it.

Jan was on vacation. I just didn't work.

### BANANAS

Jan was angry that day.

Why can't they find ripe fruit for us? I think we've reached a point as a society where we can feed good people good fruit and know when it's ready to eat.

Society is a failure, I thought. There are too many of us and we are mostly in our own heads and whining and gloating about everything. We are oblivious and thrust into unprecedented oblivions. Our successes could in a hundred ways turn out to be future catastrophic failures or even greater successes but it won't matter to our dead brains when we're extinct.

Thank God they had bananas, Jan said.

Everyone knows what a ripe banana looks like, I said.

Any animal knows when a food is ripe, she said. People neglect their senses.

I took Jan's statement as a truth.

## DOGS ALL OVER

There were so many dogs in the town. Everyone was walking a dog. I figured that was how they knew which of them were tourists, by which ones were walking the dogs. I didn't say this to Jan because I figured she'd grow bored by my reasoning out things that didn't need reasoning out.. I said that I wished I had a dog but that was an irresponsible thing for an unemployed not-anything to do.

I wasn't getting down on myself by thinking I'm a not-anything, I'm just not. I'm used to it. It doesn't bother me. I know I should just be a guy working a physical job and maybe involving myself with the community when I'm not working but I was on vacation

with Jan and it didn't matter at that moment. Jan was paying for the trip and she was not rich and probably didn't want a dog, I don't know, I didn't ask.

We bought coffees and sat with them on a bench. There was the echo of something hard being hit hard by something else. So many dogs, Jan said. I didn't respond because we were getting back into dogs which needed to be accepted at this point as a natural part of our environment and needn't be discussed further.

She asked about why I wasn't talking and I just left it at that.

## ROBOTS

I wasn't sure if Jan was enjoying herself until the coffee kicked into our brains and made conversation happen. I still didn't know if she was enjoying herself, but there were words and stimulation in the air.

This coffee is much better than the hotel's, I said.

Why can't they just make the food taste good at a hotel?

They call it free and continental so they don't have to worry about how good it is. If anyone complains they just say, "Hey, whoa, it's free. It's continental."

Do you love me?

Yeah, I do. Do you love me?

Jan just looked at me like I was nuts. Then she looked down at her coffee like she felt bad and said,

What, I don't show it?

No. You do.

You felt like you had to ask me that? You know I do.

You asked me first.

Because I felt like I had to ask you.

I don't show it?

Name one way you've shown it.

I'm here.

Maybe.

How, maybe? I'm fucking here with you. On this vacation?

Don't get upset.

How am I upset?

I want you to show me you love me. I want you to do something where I'm like, he loves me.

Like what?

You have to come up with it.

But I'm just, like, I don't know what to do right now so I just say it. I love you. See?

Nevermind. Yayer. I'm bored. Are you bored?

Suddenly, and for no good reason, while I was shaking my head to appear bewildered even though I was just annoyed, Jan perked up and asked,

Okay. What are we going to do if the robots turn on us?

There were a few things I didn't understand or like about Jan and the things I didn't like had a lot to do with how I didn't understand her.

Kill them.

How?

Kill them.

How?

Anyway we want. We can be violent about it. We can use heavy artillery when fighting against robots.

I'm not confident about it. Your strategy is gross and unjust.

Jan had learned not be too confident in my abilities. I didn't get a lot done. She asked,

What's that?

What's what?

She pointed to a grassy area in front of an old bank or courthouse and I saw the tree slowly tipping over and heard it cracking and popping loudly. She said,

Whoa. It's just slowly tipping over. Michael.

Should we do something?

Shout something. It could land on a dog.

What do I shout?

A stern...something.

A TREE IS FALLING.

And I stood and pointed and held onto my hat like I was trying to keep it from blowing away or like I was panicked and didn't know what to do but to grab onto something like my hat.

Some people looked over and just watched it. We weren't the only ones wondering what to do. It was a huge tree with fruit on it. It was in front of a building and it was going to fall into the street. I tried to conjure a hypothetical visualization of the event in my mind like as to whether or not it would hit the building on the other side of the street. It could.

It fell faster. It didn't hit the other building but it knocked an awning off. All of the dogs were barking. People were grasping their hats and pointing. It was a scene.

## LAMENT

Jan and I crept leisurely to the tree with the rest of the town. People driving in cars got out of them. Some kept their engines running like the removal of a massive tree in the road was some simple task. I boosted Jan on top of it in the middle of the street and she sat there and looked around.

Yayer, she said.

I know, I said. I was tired of saying it.

I looked up at Jan. Something in the tree made a sound and we watched a chipmunk together. This tree had not been trimmed in some time. Jan didn't know where to look, it was a cute thing she did. I didn't know Jan that well, but I loved her. She just kept looking around from the tree, to the townsfolk, to me. This may or may not have been a good reason to love someone. Then she crawled over a little and tore violently a piece of fruit off the tree. She bit into it and, mouth full, said,

Oh, fuck.

I smiled big. Jan liked the apple.

## APPLES ON A TREE

How do you shut these dogs up, Jan asked me from atop the tree. She was shaking a branch and crap was falling out of it; some apples and some other crap. This was an old tree, she said.

It seems like it was a good enough tree, too, I said.

It worked as a tree.

And it has apples and everything. Stop shaking it like that, there's stuff flying everywhere.

She giggled.

Not like a regular tree, I said. That grows nothing.

What kind of tree grows nothing?

I don't know. I was joking, I guess.

You sometimes behave like that.

Like what?

Like a tree that grows nothing.

I didn't know how to respond or what to do so I crossed my arms and looked at all of the people and dogs. I saw a man facing away from the scene leaning on an axe and hanging out by the stump eating entire apples in three bites.

Who's that guy, I asked Jan.

That's the guy. She slid down. Shit, I've got sap all over.

Not all over, all over.

Will you help me?

She was tripping over branches, so I grabbed her hand and she sarcastically thanked me. The guy was turning and walking away. No one was paying attention to him, they were all eyes on the tree and yelling at their dogs who would not shut the fuck up for anything. The dogs were upset about the tree or maybe they wanted to chase some squirrels around, eat some apples, pee on the tree. I don't know.

Jan explained to me how she wanted to follow the man. She used a sneaky, adventurous manner of speed-speak to compel me. I felt weird about it, like maybe there

was something else to do. The tree had fallen. There was no way to repair a fallen tree this old and chopped down. Following the guy wouldn't fix anything.

I asked in a kind of whisper, Should we?

Oh, yeah, come on.

She was moving. I followed.

What if he just goes home?

I want to know why he did it.

Are we going to ask him?

Maybe we won't have to.

Jan and I were both socially awkward and didn't enjoy chit-chat with strangers. Well, Jan did sometimes but not with guys with axes I wouldn't think.

#### A FOLLOWING SCENE

We were off of the main street, which meant we were on a gravel road. This was the country minus mountains and we were leaving main street comfort behind. I was getting excited and thought if nothing else maybe Jan and I would have excitable sex in a field at some point that day. Maybe sooner.

The guy, he was just walking down the middle of the road with the axe handle resting on his shoulder like he was just going about life, so what. We snuck along the side, dashing behind one tree after another. The trees were becoming thin and turning into a field.

I asked Jan, Now what?

What?



How are we going to hide in a damned field?

Don't yell at me!

I'm whispering!

You're whisper-yelling. We should just walk behind him on the road. Like, whatever, we're just walking down a road.

We won't have dogs so he'll know we're tourists.

Just pretend you've never heard of a tree falling.

If there's a confrontation.

Right. If there's a confrontation.

I hoped not. He was just strolling, not even looking back like, who cares if I just chopped a tree down into the middle of the road? I wonder which movies are on TV.

## GRAVEL

We kept quite a distance, Jan and I. We walked lightly and pointed at things in the manner of tourists. If he turned around we agreed to just look about at the hillside like we were admiring nature in a serene, lackadaisical way. Just beauty and the earth and shit, no big deal. We're just people being calm about our lives and admiring what's around us, don't worry about it.

I thought these things so I would be prepared but he never turned around. We didn't speak but we were holding sweaty hands and our eyes squinted ahead.

## AN OLD BLUE TRUCK

Oh great, I whispered, an old truck.

So?

What are we going to do if that's his truck and he just hops in and drives away?

Go back to the Mayer, I guess.

Really?

Stop walking.

The man with the axe made his hand into a gun and pointed it at the passenger seat of the truck. His hand was attached to a thick bare arm busting out of a deep blue flannel. He jerked the gun back toward himself suddenly and, depending where one able-eared body was placed around the truck out there in the country, a whistle or wheezing sound came out of the truck. Where Jan and I were, it sounded like both. She said,

He's passing the truck.

It's not his truck. Who's in the truck? A friend? Is he going to talk to us? Kill us? Should we turn back?

I was asking myself these questions, I guessed, Jan was silent. I glanced over at the opened window. There was a man in the truck bird calling with filthy hands cupped over his mouth. He took those hands down and rolled his head on his neck over to look at us. His eyes were bulging and caked-over with beige frosting, his skin a swath of used oil rag. He was shirtless. He didn't smile but stared at us vacantly. I met his gaze or just looked where his gaze was directed and received a deep shiver like my brain was nipping at my spine. I looked at Jan but Jan was squinting down the road.

Did you see that old man in the truck, I asked her. He was looking at us.

So what, she said, not taking her eyes off the back of the man with the axe, and I thought, that's maybe true.

I had decided I loved Jan when she was intense and I liked to pretend I was intense when I was with her. But I didn't like how she was so intense she couldn't even notice a bad sign. I looked back and the old blue truck was facing a different direction. There was no license plate anywhere.

Curiosity is going to kill us, I said.

So's anything, she said.

### INEVITABLE DARKNESS

We were quiet. I was panicked and needed a mother's comfort. I looked over at Jan every second or so, desiring eye contact and if I was lucky, a smile. She never looked over, eyes fierce on the dude. Hours passed and I thought about those hours in minutes, which made them very long hours. There were a lot of trees and sometimes not any. I figured maybe Jan was more resolute than I, so I decided not to bring time up for awhile. Then, after awhile, I did:

Hey. Jan. You know, it's going to get dark.

Yes.

Jeez. He just will not stop walking or anything. Do you think he knows we're behind him?

Probably.

Do you think it's a trap, maybe?

No.

You sure seem sure about it.

Jan gave me a look I didn't want. It was a look I didn't think was meant to turn me on.

I said, Jeez. Things are getting dark. It's just...I mean it's going to get dark and-and you know it will take us just as many hours to get back. At this rate we'll get back and it will be dark, maybe cold.

Please shut up. Things are happening for a reason and you're ruining it.

The axe man stopped suddenly. We looked around like tourists look around but he never turned, he just cocked his head. He cocked it the other way, left then right, although it could have been the other way around, although, it might have been one way twice. Then the axe man continued walking. Jan followed. I followed.

I said, I wish, at least, we had sweaters.

NOT BRAVE

I had kind of had it. Jan was in a trance but I was hungry as a mother. I was convinced this axe guy was just having a good time with us. Jan sensed this with a widening smirk or I pretended she did. I was pissed. Smirking away. She and this dude could go chop infinite trees into trafficked streets like suckers. I said I was hungry and Jan ignored me and that was it. I stopped walking.

I said. I'M HUNGRY, JAN.

My voice sounded awkward and weak but loud and like it was echoing off every tree. Jan turned and glared at me for a moment and then turned back. My voice did not halt the axe guy's saunter.

I repeated, I'm really hungry.

Just fucking come on.

I closed my eyes to breathe and relax some. I felt like chucking a rock at the guy, grabbing Jan and running, but I'm not brave. I dragged my feet, rolled my eyes into space and joined Jan again in our sneak when the axe man stopped walking.

We didn't point everywhere like tourists this time. This time we watched him, ready to just deal with anything. We were simply going to have to. He walked over to a tree and we saw the side view of him; an axe guy at any angle. He unraveled a fire hose from his pants and urinated serenely. He piled it back in. He chose a pear from a tree, smelled and bit into it. He gathered a flannel shirtful of pears and walked into this meadow area without as many trees and sat down facing away from us. Jan walked over to him while I, giving in to my pension for flight, found a tree to hide behind.

#### NOT A BARTLETT

I watched Jan and the axe guy from behind my tree and felt shame. There they were, Jan and the axe guy talking and eating pears like old-fashioned friends on an outing at dusk. It was about dusk. And there I was, watching them behind a tree, afraid to emerge because they would both know I had been hiding and afraid like a kitten and they would judge me my entire approach.

I'm not sure at that point if I didn't understand Jan's motivation. She was sure taking her time about it. I had hoped they would wrap something up and he would be on his way while Jan skipped back to me with a kiss and a pear and we would wander back to Mayer Yayer, not a big deal. "He was just kinda quirky," she would explain to me, "You should have said hello. Although I do adore and am turned on by your fear of a true man."

But what I really figured was that he would rape her and she would like it. It might not even be rape she would like it so much. And I would have to watch and cover because I knew about what I had in me and saving Jan from an axe guy was not in there.

Jan pointed at me while the axe guy waved and laughed. I was infuriated with Jan but knew it would be absurd to stay hiding now, while they made fun. I am only stubborn until I make things worse, and then I give in. I walked up casually and sat with them and asked what was for dinner, casually.

Jan said, mouth full, Pears.

Oh, what kind?

They ain't bartletts, the axe man proclaimed and guffawed himself to the laugh bank.

He was a real chunk of meat up close. Jan looked from me to the guy, back and forth, the entire time sitting there but when she looked at the axe guy she was alight.

## RUGGED INTERIORS

So, we were walking on the dirt road again back toward town to a house and the house was this axe guy's house. Phil was six and a half feet tall and had the sort of build that hurled bricks would bounce off of. He talked, blathered I mean, about fruit and nature and living off the land and basically everything Jan loved. Munching frantically on pears, I kept dwelling on what Jan wanted from him and I figured she thought they were soul mates and this was all predestined and whatever happened now was out of anyone's hands.

I felt weak in the world.

I remained fairly silent, intimidated by Phil and frustrated we were going to his house where Jan would leave me in the middle of the night to curl up with the sweet, macho

lumberjack. I would be going home alone to no job and no girlfriend while these two shacked up, the petite hippie girl and her burly axe guy. Fruit everywhere.

While we walked, Phil told us the fascinating tale of why he cut down the tree. I was tired of imagining Jan and Phil's bright future, so I listened to the deepest voice in any and all mountainless wilderness blather-

I was on my way back from town after watching a flick and saw the thing, the fuckin' tree. I mean, I knew it was there before, but this time it beckoned at me. The apples were so ripe, I could smell their sweetness from twenty feet away, I swear to the seas I could smell 'em in the fuckin' cinema. Like, when fruit is ripe, like these pears, I become goddamned incensed. I kept lookin' at the people with their dumb mutts wandering every which-way doing who the fuck cares what and I felt enraged they were ignoring the goddamned succulence hanging over their heads. Hittin' up the Dairy Queen instead. Drinkin' lemonade and watching their mutts shit on the sidewalk. The flick I saw was romantic as shit and sweet as Sunday fuckin' morning and I felt inspired so I bought a fresh axe and spent a good four hours chopping at the goddamn thing, swear to anything under the sun I chopped four hours straight, completely immersed in my determination. No one noticed a goddamn thing. I doubt any of them even tried an apple. I just took off after that because I remembered these pears were priming to be so absolutely fucking ripe today.

That was it. A baloney movie and overactive determination inspired him to become enraged and chop a tree into the middle of the road, almost violently injuring people and pups. Jan didn't care. Jan watched him talk with both dew and stars in her eyes. Jan looked at me occasionally but my dark mood was in full effect. She was saying things like:

That's beautiful.

I agree. That's beautiful.

How lovely and impulsive.

They were perfect apples. Probably the best I've eaten.

The squirrels were cute. I wanted to name them.

I laughed sinisterly after awhile because I was jealous and because she was making me jealous. The laugh came off awkward and mean and created tension so no one said anything until we arrived at the house, which of course, was a cabin.

Phil said breathily, You're welcome to stay in the garage for the night. Just don't make yourselves at home, this ain't a fuckin' shelter. Kiddin' with you, I love company. Do either of you enjoy whiskey?

Jan said yes, though I knew she preferred tequila.

I said, I thought you liked tequila, Jan.

I do, Michael. Also, I like whiskey.

Smooth as butter, that Jan. She was sensing my frustration and paying no mind. I'd have died for a heart attack.

I also might have some ecstasy, he said and Jan nodded eagerly, purposefully avoiding my glare.

## SURFACES

Phil's cabin was rustic on the inside with surprisingly modern touches. The kitchen, particularly, was stainless steel on most every surface, a freshly waxed wooden floor. Copper pots hung above a stainless steel island, in front of a stainless steel stove next to a stainless steel refrigerator and on the other side of the stove atop a counter, stainless steel, sat a stainless steel microwave equipped with each of the latest buttons.



Phil grabbed a bottle of Jim Beam from the fridge, took a swig and passed it to my girlfriend.

I said, to say something, So, you keep your whiskey in the fridge. That's interesting.

I like it cold, what's wrong with you? Why would you judge me like that about something like where I keep my whiskey? Do you really find that interesting?

Um. Not really.

I don't like goddamn Jack Daniels, if that's the issue.

No, there's no issue. I was just commenting.

Jan shook her head at my misery and swigged, eyes glued to Phil who was rolling his eyes at her about me. I'd never seen Jan drink like she actually wanted to drink. She passed me the bottle and I passed it to Phil without taking any, to show restraint. Phil told me to be a man and I said I couldn't because I wasn't and then he said,

Jesus' mother, dude. Be somebody. Little girl, you need anything? You want an ecstasy pill?

Sure, Phil, sounds fun. Hey, who was that guy in the blue truck?

No idea but he's there all the time and he's fuckin' blind as shit and crazy as a headless cock. I like to make a face at him or flip him off sometimes. He's a pretty chill dude, I guess.

That's hilarious.

Oh, I know it. My daddy didn't asphyxiate himself before leaving me a solid sense of the humor of existence. You fuckers want to watch TV or what?

Jan agreed to this for us.

His living room contained a plasma flat screen and one leather couch. A lovely old grandfather clock sat next to it. That's about all I noticed. Jan asked about the clock as we sunk into the couch.

Phil said (sucking on the bottle and flipping the TV to a sports network), It tells the time. Makes a bunch of racket on the hour. My mom owned it. Inherited it from some relative. Grew up with it. Got used to it. You nerds like MTV?

We don't have a TV at home. Michael is against it. He's kind of a hipster.

No TV? Fuck, what do you do every evening? I watched this show last night, Leeches it was called, about these goddamn trust fund rich kids who go out to Minnesota in the summertime and let leeches onto whichever body part, dependent on a digital spinning wheel with a variety of body parts illustrated...and I'm tellin' you they let these leeches onto parts of their bodies that I, for one, know I wouldn't want leeches suckling on. Shit. Then these goddamn kids with these fucking leeches attached to them go into restaurants nude and cause a ruckus getting drunk and doing coke. Folk scream, call 911. Hilarious, I love it. I was laughin' like the devil. You don't like TV, bro?

I just...I grew up with it on all of the time. I'm taking a break, permanently.

Wow, very impressive, how very fuckin' noble of you. I'm kidding, you're alright, bro. It's never been better though. TV? Shit. Say, you dorks like pears, right? There's an Asian orchard a few miles from here we oughtta go have a look at in the morning. They'll be ripe as shit. The fella who owns the orchard is a dick but we could kick his ass. I'm fuckin' pissed I'm so out of whiskey, now. Wasn't expecting you two. Fuck it, I'll grab some other shit.

BRUISED

I started drinking once the vodka and Percocet came out to play because whatever. We watched as things on the TV became funnier the more we drank. It wasn't too bad. We howled at some poor people chasing rabbits. We guffawed into next week as a celebrity had a penis shoved in her face in front of her great grandparents. I was incredibly witty, bantering with the show's characters and got a lot of laughs from both Phil and Jan. Jan even looked at me a few times.

Jan ended up having sex with Phil, the act I feared so much passing by with a few whimpers and paddling sounds from his bedroom followed by annoyed drunken voices complaining about erections, condoms and lubrication. She stayed sleeping with him that night. It didn't really matter even though I loved her, I didn't know her that well.

While it happened I sat on the guest bed and listened and shrugged a lot. None of it bothered me then, I still think of it as a really fun night. The next day Jan and I went back to the town and drove home in silence. She apologized but I said I didn't care because I had taken more percocets that morning. She went away and never came back.

Jan and I were new and we didn't really understand what to do. We thought we were visiting mountains, or we had talked about it at home but I didn't see one mountain on that trip. Maybe we had driven to the top of the world. I don't know.