

Marlon was disgusted. For the third night in a row, his brother J.B. had slept in the garage. He found him in there in the morning, cracking open the door first timidly, then throwing it open the rest of the way and torpedoing the dark womb of the garage with a blast of what he hoped to be hangover-inducing light. J.B. barely stirred. Even the sound of the baby screaming failed to rouse him.

J.B. clenched and unclenched his right fist, battling some manner of dreamland boogeyman, or maybe just paresthesia. The electric heater clicked, whirred, oscillated back and forth against his knees. His legs looked like string cheese.

Their mother had long ago converted the garage into a second living room, to keep the smell of cigarettes from clinging to her drapes. It was outfitted with a flat screen TV, three leather recliners from Goodwill, and an absurdly ugly embroidered couch. Kitschy, guitar-shaped ashtrays overflowed with butts. One wall was filled with their late father's tools. Another was packed to the ceiling with discarded appliances. The garage door itself was decorated with familial art - each panel assigned to a different family member. Marlon's was a chessboard with the word 'THINK' stenciled across it. J.B. had never gotten around to making one. Of course he hadn't.

His brother was asleep with his jaw hanging open. The snores rattled in his throat like the grating of metal across a

tarmac. The baby went on wailing from her crib, hysterical, demanding that someone cork her mouth with a nipple, and growing increasingly irate when no one did.

Marlon left the door hanging open and came in. He sat down and watched. The rules of younger brotherhood prevented him from kicking J.B. in the shins, which is what he wanted to do. That would be staging a coup. He had to employ a measure of tact, or J.B. would only wake up long enough to snort another line of lotus and retreat to his cozy delirium.

"J.B.?" he said. The question mark was important. A question mark was an invitation, an exclamation point was a subpoena. "Can you wake up now, please?"

J.B. muttered something unintelligible, smacked his lips, and resumed snoring. Gingerly, Marlon leaned over and plucked up the vial of purple powder from the fold-out table between them. He lifted it into a stream of light and studied it, eyebrows furrowed. There must be something truly miraculous inside. A genie, a paradise, seventy-two virgins. Maybe J.B.'s dead wife. Whatever the allure, it held him hostage for as many hours as he could go without soiling himself. By the smell of him, maybe not even then.

NBC Nightly News cited lotus as the most popular new synthetic drug on the market. According to Lester Holt, it was sweeping through the high schools, trailer parks, and suburbs

indiscriminately, leaving a swath of drooling catatonics in its wake. The name was poached from the lotophagi of Greek mythology, whom Odysseus discovered languishing in their own filth, high out of their minds. It began as a legal drug sold by head shops and gas stations. Then, as these things go, it was quickly reclassified as Schedule I when kids started turning up dead. Like that mattered. Whatever shadowy cabal of chemists was making the stuff, all they had to do was swap a few molecular compounds and repackage it under a new name. Each name more derivative than the last. Boysenberry, Grape Soda, Royal Silk, Bad Barney, Lucid Dream, Rip Van Winkle's Revenge, Kaleidoscope, Harold and the Purple Crayon. It was like those cartoons where they try to plug a leaky pipe with one finger, only to see a geyser erupt from the other end.

Marlon had found a website called Erowid that chronicled the experiences of various drugs. One user described lotus as 'the most complete hallucinogen ever made. Makes LSD look like a little bitch, lol. With acid, shrooms, ayahuasca and such, you get some visuals and some aural hallucinations, but mostly it's your thoughts that go batshit. Lotus, on the other hand, knocks your fucking brains out. You wake up in Neverland. Your own personal utopia. And you have total autonomous control over it.'

The long-term side effects, according to Wikipedia, included 'memory loss, slurred speech, impairment of motor functions, liver damage, renal failure, acute hypoxia, death'. Their father would have been mortified. He'd died on the toilet, pants tangled around his boots, three bottles of Jameson discarded in the sink and an empty tube of pills swaying back and forth on the tiles. That's how a real man should meet his end, in his view. None of this newfangled synthetic bullshit, with its colors bright enough to shame a dildo. It was J.B. who'd found him like that. He claimed to have felt nothing at all at the time. Marlon had cried off and on for months.

But he was fairly certain that if J.B. died from a lotus overdose, he would be making a daily pilgrimage to the graveyard to piss on his tombstone.

The baby's cries were growing hoarse.

"J.B.?" Marlon tried again. This time he shook the armchair a little. "The baby is crying, man. She's really crying bad." If J.B.'s wife had not, like their father, gone the way of the dinosaurs, she would probably be dousing him in cold water or slapping him in the face. Marlon tried to muster his rage. But every scenario he pictured ended with his face on the garage floor, cheek pressed against an oil stain, J.B.'s knee in his neck.

Finally, J.B. woke up. He lifted his head with the reluctance of a flood victim, his body trapped under a fallen tree. He squinted behind his glasses. Glanced at Marlon, befuddled. "Hmm?"

"The baby, man. She's starving. I tried to give her the bottle but she just kept spitting it out."

"Oh," he said. His head sank back against the chair cushion, propelled by a long and labored sigh. Then he caught sight of the vial of lotus in Marlon's hand and his bloodshot eyes popped open. His baby was in trouble, alright. "Give me that," he barked.

Marlon jerked it away, his raised arm cutting into the panel of light from the doorway and casting the garage in chiaroscuro: Marlon in the light, J.B. in the dark. It was perhaps a little too on the nose, but it reinforced the clamor of fear now buzzing in his ear like a stink bug. Impending violence had a way of sharpening the lines. "Hey, hold on. I will, okay? I will. But first you gotta give Maggie some formula. She won't let me feed her."

For a moment, J.B. only stared. Though he hadn't moved, his glasses shimmered. If this had been a horror movie (of the campy variety that J.B. and Marlon had watched together as kids), it might have been the reflection of a ghost darting past. Whose ghost, though? There were so many.

"Fine," he said. The way he pried himself loose from the chair, you'd think he was sown into it. He ran a hand over his balding scalp. Shook his legs loose of sleepy cobwebs. He stumbled out of the garage, shielding his eyes from the punishing glare of sunlight in the kitchen. A moment later, the crash of plates as he dug around in the sink for a formula bottle. Marlon breathed for the first time in several minutes.

"Where's the fucking Similac?" J.B. shouted. Marlon could tell by his tone that Maggie's shrieks had finally penetrated the soup-thick fog of drugs. J.B. cursed several more times, rapid-fire, fuckfuckfuck. He broke a glass and cursed some more.

"I already made a bottle for her," Marlon said. He was turning the vial of lotus back and forth in the light. He enjoyed the way its purple granules tumbled over one another like sugar crystals. "It's by her crib. On the diaper rack."

"Oh," J.B. said. To Maggie he yelled, "Alright, alright! I'm coming! Jesus!"

Marlon opened the vial and tapped some of the lotus into his palm. He thought about snorting it, tempered only by the sheer hypocrisy of the impulse. But why shouldn't he get his own paradise? He wasn't the one with a baby, or a receding hairline, or a litany of calls from debt collectors. He wasn't the one who'd taken out a second mortgage on their mother's

house after dumping her in a nursing home, their father's body not yet three weeks cold in the ground. He'd never done a single reckless thing his entire life. J.B. always hogged that particular spotlight.

His eyes flicked upward to the garage door panel he'd painted in a chessboard pattern. The red word 'THINK' glared at him accusingly. The neat line of chess pieces he'd drawn at the top affected the posture of a firing squad.

He swallowed, realizing his pulse had skyrocketed.

"You better not be messing with my shit!" J.B. called from the other room. Marlon nearly pissed himself. He overturned his palm and dumped the powder on the floor, then wiped his hand clean on his jeans. Screwed the vial shut and put it where he'd found it. His heart was jackhammering.

It was good, he told himself. It was good he hadn't snorted that.

If he had, he would never win custody of his niece.