

Potential Susan

Susan was in the dish room when she noticed the back fat. It was pinched in her waistband like dough in twine. She untied her apron and pulled out her pad. *Maritza*, she wrote. *We've had a good run. My tables are clear. My uniform is in the break room. You won't ever see me again.*

Alfredo's wasn't the worst job she'd had, despite the weight gain. She liked waiting tables. She enjoyed the different Susans that pulled up to each one: cheery Susan, sultry Susan, and now—goodbye Susan. Above all else, Susan knew when it was time to leave. She imagined her life was like a getaway. From what, she was unsure, but she knew that she could never stop driving. "I notice that in this fantasy, you never run out of gas," her shrink had once told her. She'd told him he was missing the point.

She pinned her note on the bulletin board. She hopped in her boyfriend's SUV and peeled out of the parking lot. His acoustic bass guitar slammed into the door, cracking and moaning. She couldn't help but blame him for everything.

For the past two years, she'd tried to accept that it wasn't possible to love someone without also wanting to murder them, but last night during dinner, her boyfriend went puddle-eyed and said, Where have you been going after work, and she had said, Pardon me for missing my curfew, and he'd said, I'm worried about us Susan; and that was when she realized that she didn't really love him but just wanted to murder him.

She crossed the New Hampshire border. There was nothing stopping her from throwing his bass off a cliff, nothing stopping her from driving his car off a cliff. She took sharp turns. The bass walloped from side to side. One of its strings snapped. For a moment, she thought that her brake lines had gone. She pulled over and threw the bass in the trunk.

Her phone rang. "I'm told you've quit another job," her boyfriend said

"Who squealed?"

"Is this fun for you Susan?"

"It's a change."

"Why don't you just stop now, wherever you are, skip the shit, and come home?"

"Everything I do is for a reason, babe. You understand."

"I get it," he said. "If you'd picture my head, you'll notice I have one. You'll also notice that it's not up my ass. I'll give you a week this time. I'll give you a week to find your head."

"You think I'll find it?"

"Just don't come back here with him."

She parked at the Texaco downtown, pump two, same as always. Charlie was waiting on the median, smoking in one of his peacoats. Susan liked peacoats. She liked Charlie in peacoats, even if it was spring. A year back he'd left one behind in her bedroom.

"What are you hiding?" her boyfriend had said, seeing her sprawled at the end of their bed, shrouded in that thick, charcoal wool.

"What do you think I'm hiding?" she'd responded.

She unlocked the car, and Charlie hopped in.

"You still with what's his name?" he asked.

Susan paused. She tapped her fingers on the dashboard. She started the car.

"You look hot," he said. "Don't know if that changes anything."

Years ago, he'd moved here from San Francisco. She didn't see how it made sense. They'd met online. She didn't see how it made any sense to follow her.

“Where are we going?” He asked.

“San Francisco,” she joked.

He found a beer can on the floor and spat tobacco inside it, *plip*. “So we’ll be a while then?”

“There are options, plenty of options. She pinched her hip. “Anywhere but here.”

She felt her heart pacing around her chest. He was staring at her. She reached in the glove compartment and grabbed her cigarettes.

“Hey,” Charlie said. “Let’s play a game. Each of us will say something about the other that makes us hornier than God. I’ll go first. You’ve had that pack of Parliaments since college. You know that I know this, yet you pretend you’re a smoker every time I come around. It’s pathetic, and it makes me wanna rip off your apron and fuck you on the hood of your car. Now you go.”

Her phone rang. “Please tell me he’s joking.” It was her sister, Aimee. “You blocked off both of his phones? I hope to god he leaves you this time.”

“You don’t know how romance works,” Susan said.

“I know how you work,” Aimee said. “And so does he.”

Susan hung up. No one ever understood. You didn’t need to know someone in order to love them. In fact, nothing could be less exciting.

“You’re boring me,” Charlie said. “Pull into the reservoir.”

She wasn’t looking at him. She was looking at his neck. It was ashy and red, like an Indian Sunburn. He’d lost weight. He was mostly skin.

“Snap out of it,” he said. “I’m going swimming.”

She thought she was looking at the water, but she was looking at him, again. Little him, bony and pale as ever, slithering out of his peacoat and diving into the water. She went to the trunk and grabbed the bass. It was warm and humid.

A cop knocked on the window. “What are you doing, ma’am?” The window was cracked open. She could feel the breeze of his breath.

“There’s a junkie down there,” she pointed at the water.

Charlie came back dripping, escorted by the cop. He tossed his coat in the back and sat down in the front. “You didn’t miss much,” he said. “Lots of dead turtles.”

“Did you kill them?”

“Don’t ask.”

“I used to have turtles,” she said.

“Did I murder those too?”

“Suicide. Both of them. They do it all the time actually. They’re the only animal that can suffer depression. It’s a virus I think. They can walk into water and wait the thirty minutes until their turtle breathing stops.”

“Great story about life,” he said. “I love how it changes ‘My turtles chose death over me’ into ‘I want Charlie to fuck me on death’s door.’”

“Look at this asshole,” she said, gesturing to the patrol car. The cop hadn’t left.

“Maybe he wants to watch us screw.”

“Can’t hear you. I’m in my shell.” She wrapped the pea coat over her head. From inside, she heard a shuffling.

He was hiding the drugs.

The girl at the front desk of the motel looked just like Susan, only gaunter. Gently, Susan took the keys.

“Am I that skeletal?” she asked Charlie.

“How should I put this?” He closed the door behind him. “I like how you look.”

The motel walls were cracked. The windows were cracked. The lamp buzzed like a cricket. Her whole life, the men that kissed her, and the cracks in their lips, the present Susan, the former Susan that was lounging on her boyfriend’s stomach paunch, all of it had begun with restlessness. She fooled no one anymore, least of which herself. Some nights she forced herself to sleep. It never stuck though.

In bed, she tried less than normal. Her war on his advances was half-hearted. She knew that he wanted it. She knew that deep down she wanted it too. They tried just enough that he came.

“Do you know the worst thing about being an addict?” he said to the bathroom door. It was cracked open. She was in there, dry-heaving.

“It’s that you never stop being an addict.” He flicked his bag of H.

“Leave.” She echoed over the toilet bowl. “Just leave.”

Face cracks and floor cracks and cracks down the yellow line pavement. Every year the water sank into the ground and froze and spilled up onto the surface. It was the world’s worst earthquake. She had driven this stretch of highway all her life with her eyes closed. It was practically the way home. She saw things she knew weren’t there. She wanted to close her eyes again.

She broke down a mile before the border. Her cell phone was dead. She grabbed Charlie's peacoat, tossed it on the hood of the car, and sat on it. She grabbed the bass and plucked it. The D string snapped up into her eye.

She waited there, legs crossed, and screaming. She was Susan.