

Muddy Mouth

He audits her body, the eyes climbing like feet up a ladder. The lighting in the elevator is crass and intrusive, blanching her exposed skin and siphoning away the generosity of shadows. What remains is the startling frankness of age. There, embedded in the scoured, languid textures of her face, features slipping down from the skull like eggs down a pan, is her evidence, the decades that she spent searching. There is history in the lines that have been carved, cut, and that have paved their deep and incongruous ways. There is also the tired, fallow interest to create any more.

There is an elder bruise on her right elbow, now only a champagne splash. There's another one under the brink of her chin, an infant bruise that stains the bone in black, a little oil that has spilled. He imagines her disrobed with wounds tracked over her gaunt geography like mud tracked across the carpet. They remind him of the soft spots on spoiling fruit. As a boy, he'd look for them to insert a finger, to feel that infinitesimal snap when penetrating the delicate, rotting skin. If he created too many holes, he couldn't stomach the fruit.

A drop slips from her eye; it does not build nor break but dives off the balcony of lashes as if pushed by fire. She blinks, but is too late to capture this bulb of water before it splashes across the slope of her cheek. The skin beneath her swollen, irreversibly dimming eyes stack like raw, bleeding meat pounded into slender uncooked planks, crooked stairwells leading up to those visual reels spinning in holes.

“It’s not me.” She says, “It takes more than that to make me cry.” The corners of her mouth flutter with enough effort to qualify as a smile. She removes a balled piece of tissue from her pocket and sponges up the iridescent mess.

He believes her.

The day’s events are posted above the control panel. There was Fitness & Fun in the Community Room at 9am. A coffee klatch in the bistro at 10. Trips to the Fred Meyer on Glisan at 66th Avenue run from 1130am to 1pm. There’s a matinee in the chapel at 2. Free Tai Chi classes in the courtyard at 3. A Root Beer Float Social at 5 in the plaza station. And Mystery Radio Hour in the Mt. Hood Lobby at 7.

Tomorrow, another list will stir their bones to recycle paralyzed worlds like little novelty globes for that brief snowfall. The goal here is not far off from a school or a church lock-in: to delay sleep. Stay up as long as you can and be the last to close your eyes. These Senior Living Communities, he has noticed, evoke in their names—Shaded Grove, Warm Meadows, Silent Hill—the remote vistas an animal would drag its terminal wounds to die alone and be slowly picked over until returned to the earth.

The elevator opens and spills them onto the second floor. She kicks out a leg, sharply mobilizing into an agility that astonishes him. Her slim olive corduroys and a pearly blouse swallow her soluble frame despite the apparel’s austerity. She is a head on a stick with a deep, postural slump. A large fishing lewar with a receding white perm and buoyant curls to mask the sheen of her pate. Baldness dotes her head like shingles missing from a roof. The head bobs up and down at the end of her spine, as if pulled curved by a hungry fish under the water. Both of her arms lift from the flat planes at their sides and assemble into right angles. She dips cadaverous hands above a rocking gait that

meanders somewhere between a metronome and an animated scarecrow. She tunnels forward, swimming, scooping then discarding handfuls of air.

He stays as close as he can. His broad toes flirt with her nimble heels. His eyes volley from the back of her head to the tops of his feet. But it hardly matters now; his hands are already full. He consolidates her grocery bags along the perch of one of his arms so the other arm can remain free. The effort he has made increases the risk he intended to reduce. The distance that she has already gained makes a free arm to center her gravity should she lose hers, useless. She is already out of reach.

His job is many things here. Right now, it is to escort her to her room with her groceries then return to the parking lot to safely escort another resident. Tonight, maybe he will roll the film projector or set up the booth for the raffle, or be a resident's partner for dance lessons, or decorate the cafeteria for the Senior Prom this weekend.

The tiered end table outside of her room is identical to the ones outside of all the rooms. The residents are encouraged to describe themselves in three objects or less. A population that is inching towards the status of centenarians interchanges their histories on a few panels of metal and polished wood.

Before she unlocks her door, she remembers the glass bowl on her top panel. She inserts a few fingers and shuffles the caramels to renew their appeal to her neighbors and their guests. After her hand returns her eyes remain on the dish. He swears her lips count the candies to determine if she has had a taker since she's been gone. This is a number that she manages and covets. Below the candy dish is a potted fuchsia plant and, in the base panel, a halved agate geode.

The strength in his back and shoulders soften. The weight of her food for this week is not significant but has been prolonged in his arms. The lock at his elbows loosens, shooting small aching currents along both sapped forelimbs. His hands weld fingers to build a cradle at his stomach. This woman so quick on her rigid legs lacks the dexterity to single out the right key to let them inside. She finally cajoles the lock, passing through her darkened confines like a child down a well.

He's already forgotten her name but looks at the door while angling it shut with his toes. The room number is branded into the wood. But the nameplate slips right out: Hennie Wooldridge.

Hennie removes her gray pea coat, then her gray felt hat. She taps the single feather at the top to make sure it is still there. "Yep."

He places the bags on the countertops. The pain in his arms reach a climax before slowly disappearing. He can smell the bread, the coffee, and the oranges now that he doesn't have to think of rest.

Hennie reaches her seat, but she waits. She takes a good, long look. A truce between ancient foes. She summons a hand to take one of the chair's arms. The engagement is specific and uncertain. Her tongue splits cracked lips flecked with dried flesh scales eager to be peeled like scabs. She starts her orbit in slow, fragile pivots. Her feet never leave the floor. The other hand swings too wide at first for the other arm of the chair. She continues to blindly swat the emptiness until grazing it, finding it, grasping it. She sinks until she has passed the threshold from which her strength could successfully reverse course—until she must let go and be dropped.

She takes a halting breath and keeps it, preserves its buoyancy and hope. Both arms shake, spreading from hands to elbows to shoulders. They are little aimless legs down a hill scrambling without the child's consent, at the helm of a body now at their mercy. They finally lift and she falls, the chair netting her plunge. She subtly yelps in a petite falsetto squeal that shares the little bit of pleasure that she has earned with the little bit of pain that she has made. Then she waits, musing over the outcome until it is safe to accept this moment, smiling. She is happy that she wasn't fooled this time.

"Mohair," she notes, massaging the arms, scratching behind its ears, the seat a saddle on this wild animal she's broken.

Then she's gone.

Those busied hands wind down, out of the coal and fire that brought them life. The familiar confines of old leisure disappear. She is banished from this chair and living room onto the drain again. There she settles, raking frightened, alert fingers over the serrated remains of the memory, or the thought, or the reason that was just taken from her. The world is infinite and uncharted now. But it is still there, much as she also lingers. The moment she has lost has not yet passed. It is the residue across her lips, the sediment between her teeth, and the sand in her eyes.

Tiny circuits behind the curtain power a series of reflexes. Back up life after the lights have gone out, like an encroaching seizure's warning aura. She blinks in blank gawks, coupled and uninsured. The bulb of her personality is a dimmed grain amid her eyes' dark swells. Her mouth, slackened dumbfounded, masticates on the apparition of food. Her feet knead the floor and lack rhythm. She waits and watches unintentionally.

These opportunities to communicate that which she distinctly chooses to share arrive as readily as they flee, shaming both her audience and her enthusiasm.

“Mrs. Wooldridge?”

Minutes pass inside the seconds that he has waited for her to come back to him. His patience starts to thin towards an intervention.

But she does return; however, it is less of a return than a continuation, a single-minded automaton whose light flickers and limbs flutter back to life, reanimated to pursue a delayed protocol.

Hennie did not sit to rest but to show and tell. She bends over until her head is in a vice between her knees. She gathers her will behind a few fingers that build behind one shoe. Her tongue snakes from her mouth again, wetting the thin strain of hair underneath. A red-tinged nose has been worn raw from monitoring a mild cold with, one could assume, tin foil instead of tissue paper. She sighs at the shoe’s unfastening, like a good drink of water, no longer parched for strength.

Hennie’s shoe is Velcro and she just wanted to show him how it worked. “Dress shoes,” she says. “Imagine that.”

There is cat fur in the hooks.

Barbara is a Waldron stubby; Waldron Island has one dock, but no ferry service, or an infiltration of feral cats. Or tourists. The cat shrewdly observes from the floor a few feet opposite Hennie, sitting on her limbs like a brooding hen a clutch of eggs. She has, apparently, ventured down from the prized afghan bedding on the treasure chest housing the ancient diaries penned by Hennie’s mother. A copious discharge mucks up the corners of her eyes, inflamed, a bacterial pollution that matts her lashes stuck at half-

mast. Hennie notes her pet's amusing shoe fetish while pinching free fingerfulls of Barbie's hair only to drop them complacently onto the carpet with like color fibers that camouflage the mess.

She says, "We get along just fine." The cat looks at the tall, black stranger in the apartment. "It's okay," Hennie says. "She's just giving you the one-over."

She now wishes to return to her feet but does not wish to be helped. When she is finally up, her reach extends into the future of her next objective.

He watches with barbed sympathy. He has neglected his responsibility and she has misunderstood this as friendship. The duplicity that incubates behind his pleasant demeanor, kindly biding time for the plausible farewell, deteriorates. Her meandering tour of her room could persist into an expansive quilt given the few trivial threads she's woven. He remains silent, however, fuming towards the next piece of junk she will undoubtedly imbue with life. If he were to judge by the wealth of decorative kitsch, the possibilities are still dreadfully infinite. He cannot bring himself to stop her just yet, and in this cowardice, burdens her with the responsibility of not knowing better.

He imagines the home from where she was displaced. And the strangers that trawled the rooms, the halls, disemboweling her estate, scavenging the ripe viscera of her legacy until it was made a skeleton. Her family chokes all viable space for display here in this twilight dorm room on the second floor at the edge of her life, but seldom make footprints on the carpet. He fantasizes about taking her away, back to underneath that old familiar roof, barren or infused with new life, it doesn't matter; he would get her to her feet until she finally stumbled and broke her neck.

She reaches out, early, towards her next exhibition. Distended veins stack like orgies of worms atop her hand, a dried creek bed exposing its ugly, writhing bowels. Outstretched, it is a grappling hook moving at an interminably slow trajectory. Gradually, it drops as an arcade-vending claw, seizing the first of two grossly misshapen rocks on the console table bookended by vases. One vase holds brittle cattails and the other a single purple hydrangea. The rock in her hands is now offered to enter his, a sacrament, her communion. Her mouth keeps wide, fixed. She waits until he is looking at her hands so she can watch his face. The rock shrinks inside of his palms; they are large, dark and woven in fingers, a wooden bowl of antiquity. The size of the rock does not account for its weight, a far denser object than he expected. His hands are not prepared, dipping sharply, the surprise noted across his eyes, his cheeks, his forehead.

She is pleased with her magic.

They're concretions, she says. Mineral deposits fill the porosity like glue to give them their heft and character, feeding them a personality. She thinks the first one looks like a snow cone and the second like a bloom of jellyfish. Everyone sees something else, like the way we shape clouds on our backs, except for these you can take home. This close to him, she detects the acrid, metallic film of cigarette smoke across his lips. But she cannot smell his agitation for another.

Her late husband was a scientist, a chemist, and a rock hound. They traveled in a red truck with a canopy to Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, and the mountains of central Oregon. They were regular muddy mouths. She pretends to discover a rock, licks her fingers to clean it, then spitting out the mud she has created between her teeth with the

dirt and the saliva. But Hennie can't swing the sledgehammer anymore to get that good agate.

“We had a 17” inch saw in the basement,” she says. “And a rock tumbler. I'd sometimes have to shake a pickle jar of black obsidian when he didn't hear me come downstairs with lunch. The fruit room could have stored up to twelve-dozen quart jars in case food ever stopped coming into town. We kept a bag of oil and grease absorbent right next to a bag of kidney beans. And Botswana in a shoebox. Coffee tins of grit. Lubricant in a gin bottle. A room for his science. I can still remember that there was a red locomotive departing from Vermont on the calendar during July, 1993.”

By the end of her tale, she has seamlessly transitioned into the kitchen—and onto lunch. Her palm looms above the skillet, assessing the building heat, her fingertips subtly punching the air. There are already two plates with four pieces of bread between them and another plate of pre-sliced cheese stacked liked old newspapers. She extracts a knife from the drawer and begins dressing each side of the bread with corpulent portions of butter from the open dish. They melt, disappearing across the seeded planes like an ice cube glides thin down the body warmed under the sun.

“I can't stay to eat.” He says, “The others are waiting. I'm sorry, Mrs. Wooldridge, but I gotta go. Maybe next time.”

Hennie puts down the knife, the butter, and the bread then taps the origami pterodactyl that has been strung on the slender bough of the drying rack to fly briefly above the kitchen sink. She stares at the snow outside. The monthly rent, she says, includes the one bedroom, a deck, and storage space. And Barbara. “Breakfast and lunch are up to me,” she says. “But that's easy.”

She fishes him out a piece of leopard jasper from the cookie jar. She lifts her arm and recreates the flow of lava. Her face syncs to his, blossoming in eyes and teeth. She asks exuberantly if he was the same gentleman from the ballroom at the New Year's Eve party downstairs who danced with her for three songs until the ball dropped.

He tells her that it was not him.

She is happy.

“I knew I recognized you from somewhere.”

THE END