

Lost in the Supermarket

Ivan sat in the tepid bathwater, watching all of the bacteria fucking happily around him. “Great, more things getting laid more often than I am,” he whispered to himself. He couldn’t stop thinking about sex—ambivalent towards wanting more and not wanting any for fear that it was all he might be good for. From his lukewarm wonderland he could hear his dog, Rudie, slobbering away at the bathroom door and his record player scratching out the same two words from the song that played last, *guaranteed personality, guaranteed personality, guaranteed personality...* he could change it, he thought, but that would require leaving his safety net of former filth. “Ever notice how you never really feel clean after a bath?” He recalled asking her, what felt like eons ago. “It’s odd, baths are a form of baptism, but I never feel reborn after emerging from one—instead only reminded of my grime and sins.” He remembered her silence, studying her feet instead of his eyes as he divulged to her the only truths known to him.

When Ivan dipped his toe in the water, it was near-scalding, but he didn’t retreat. He submerged below the lava and prayed he’d pass out. Lucid bath dreams were always Ivan’s favorite form of escapism. Unfortunately, that seemed to be yet another task he had failed, as he laid submerged, but conscious, all too aware of his thoughts and his surroundings. And now, as the water turned cool, it was finally time for him to return to the land of the somewhat living. *Guaranteed personality, guaranteed personality...*

Rudie was happy to see that Ivan was still alive. His big, dumb dog face beared a sloppy, drool-bearing grin at Ivan as he walked past him and into the kitchen. Rudie waddled along happily after him. “Sometimes it seems like you really love me,” Ivan said, kneeling to the floor, “but mostly I’m just a machine that feeds you—I know.” He pet Rudie on his big, stupid head, “it’s ok, boy. I feel the same way about myself.” Ivan opened the kitchen pantry. Bare. The fridge. Empty. “How do I let things fall into dire straits so often?” Ivan wondered aloud. It’s as if he can never be satiated—only famished or gluttonous. The worst thing about paying so little attention to his needs was that it meant there could only be one solution: actually having to leave his apartment. The idea of any form of possible social interaction that didn’t end in sex absolutely frightened Ivan. He briefly contemplated returning to his messy bedroom to retreat under the covers and just wish for everything to appear when he awoke, but even he had *some* sense of reality. Frozen pizzas were the only cure to this awful quandary.

Ivan hopped in his forest green 1997 Toyota Tercel and headed off to Food Village, his usual grocer. It’s a shithole, to put it simply but, most importantly, it’s impossibly out of the way from pretty much everyone Ivan knew or had some sort of social acquaintanceship with. This meant he could usually shop in peace without having to deal with long lines, small, annoying children whose grubby hands would reach out and touch everything, and the glare of former flames and past one night stands buying diapers for the shitty kids they’ve had with new loves. Shopping for food shouldn’t be as stressful as it was for Ivan—but then again, as Ivan often reminded himself, it’s just the path his life has chosen to lead itself down. Food Village was for listless weirdoes who avoid eye contact as they feed their munchies at 2:00 AM. Ivan’s kind of people—people who didn’t want anything to do with him.

As he drove up to the parking lot, he was immediately punched in the gut with a sense of uneasiness. There were barely any cars in the lot—but that wasn’t so out of the ordinary. Food Village was dark, darker than usual. Ivan crept up as close to the entrance as he could without leaving his car. There was a board of health notice taped the door—looks like Ivan wasn’t the only one surrounded by filth. He immediately felt a sense of camaraderie with the dirty building as he accepted his fate and ventured further into Hell.

STOP AND BUY SUPER SUPER MARKET blinked its intrusive, obnoxious neon lights at Ivan from a mile away. A Vegas fucking strip for people looking for produce, attracting coupon clippers and bulk-buyers like flies to shit. “Get in. Get pizza. Get Nibbles ‘N’ Bits. Get the fuck out.” Ivan repeated this mantra over and over to himself as he entered into his nightmare. The Super Super Market was the mega church of food. Normally, he’d get a hard-on by all the options of over-indulgence, but Ivan had two things to buy, enough money to only really afford one, and a meter inside his brain counting down the seconds until his inevitable nervous breakdown. He’d need a map to navigate this foodstuffs labyrinth, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to *ask* where anything was. He knew that the frozen foods were on the—forgive the pun—*polar* opposite end of the store. If he ran as fast as possible, he figured he could make it there, possibly find the dog food somewhere in between, and make it out alive in less than five minutes.

And so Ivan ran, and ran and ran, getting the side-eye from other asshole patrons who’d never understand his particular brand of torture. The aisles blurred into one another, and Ivan realized that at the end of each aisle just began another one that he would never be able to navigate unless he ran up and down each one individually until he found the pet food. The potentiality of this taking way longer than five minutes ate away at his subconscious, and so he ran faster, and faster and faster until he found the Nibbles ‘N’ Bits.

Ivan found them. Ivan found a lot of them, *all over the floor*. In his manic search, he ran headfirst into another patron holding her own box of dog food. Someone who was racing down the aisles just like he had been. Someone who was so intent on getting out and feeding the only thing she cares for in life she couldn’t be bothered to pay attention to any other living beings in her circumference. “Fucking asshole,” Ivan thought, as she muttered the same exact words under her breath. Ivan looked up and met her gaze. And then his world collapsed around him, splintering off into pieces and emotions strewn all across the floor just like those Nibbles ‘N’ Bits.

It’s a weird thing when haven’t seen or spoken to your ex-wife in three years and then you’re suddenly forced into a social situation with her. They were young and, frankly, had no business being married in the first place. But it felt right at the time. A lot of things feel *right* at some point in time that don’t mean they’ll be right forever. Janie loved Ivan because they had so much in common. Janie left Ivan because he reflected all of the ugly things about her personality she tried to hide. Ivan hated Janie because she made me him aware of how ugly his personality really was. Ivan loved Janie because she was smart enough to leave him. It had been three long years of silence and avoidance, yet there they were: the same two assholes they had always been. Ivan wanted to tell Janie how much he missed her. How much she fucked with his head. How miserable he was without her. How it’s all her fault that he can only fuck women he meets, but not make any sort of personal connection beyond that. How he has slept with so many women that he’s lost count, but still can’t get her out of his head. *How he’s really, truly doing just fine without her.*

But they didn’t say anything. She called him a fucking asshole and walked away, just the way it had ended before. Ivan’s five minutes were almost up: his nervous breakdown was ripping its way out of his brain, out of his skull, all across the over-stocked shelves and shiny floor of the Super Super Market Hell. Ivan ran again. He made it to the frozen pizza aisle—not the frozen pizza freezer, the frozen pizza *aisle*. Rows and rows of every variety of cold pizzas imaginable. That was something else Ivan hated about this

place: He was forced to make decisions. He couldn't just grab the only option they had—he had to deliberate over price and brand and toppings and ingredients and... and...

Ivan's five minutes were up. He was lost among the pizzas. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted to vomit.

But instead, Ivan just quietly opened the freezer door and climbed in. His lucid lava dreams never came, so maybe a little brain freeze would make him feel reborn. When he thawed, maybe all of his problems would be solved. Maybe he'd finally be a new person, a better person, even. Or no one would ever find him until some stupid little kid would rub his grubby hands all over his frozen, purple body and the stupid, shitty little kid's mom—another ex, probably—would look at Ivan in disgust, call him a *fucking asshole* under her breath and walk away knowing for certain, once and for all, that she'd made the right decision.

Maybe they'd have him as a special and mark him down 50%. Maybe there'd be a coupon with his face on it: *Guaranteed personality*. Maybe another hapless soul would wonder by, purchase him and eat him whole, confused and scared by all of the frozen pizza options surrounding him. Maybe he'd disintegrate into pieces, only to be found much later and ground up into dog food. Maybe he'd exist happily inside Rudie's big, dumb stomach, floating among the bacteria like the filth in his bath.

His bath.

Rudie.

Ivan suddenly remembered his sole purpose of embarking on this dreadful journey: to provide for the only thing in his life that hadn't yet left him. Ivan had someone waiting for him at home. He had a reason to leave. He pushed against the freezer door in an attempt to break free from his icy shell, but it wouldn't budge. He tried screaming, but no one could hear him behind the heavy, apparently soundproof doors. How many others had suffered this same fate? How often did the Super Super Market need to drown out the screams of people locked inside the freezers? He shuddered at the thought of going out in a popular way at a mass-market chain and, more determined than ever, tried to free himself. He took a deep, cold breath and lunged at the door, knocking it open and collapsing to the floor. He turned over on his back just in time to see a frozen Mama Sofia pizza box come flying at his face. He stumbled onto his feet, grabbed the pizza, shoved it under his arm and took off.

Running toward the exit, he grabbed a bag of frozen peas and applied them to his black eye. Stumbling down the infamous pet food aisle once more, he scooped up the remains of the scattered Nibbles 'N' Bits into his shirt. And then Ivan ran, and ran and ran, skirting supermarket security, narrowly passing familiar, disgusted faces, avoiding eye contact with former friends whose fates lead them to illustrious careers as cashiers and baggers. He made it out alive—broken, bruised and worse for the wear, but still amongst the living. Whether this was a success or yet another failure remained to be seen.

When Ivan got home, he emptied his shirt onto the torn hardwood floor of his studio apartment, and proceeded to unload his two new items into the freezer. Things weren't whole yet, but not empty, either. In his peripheral vision he could see Rudie sniffing away at the Nibbles 'N' Bits on the floor, but not devouring them as he usually does. Rudie instead shuffled over to his master and sat at his feet. Staring up at him with that dumb, drooly smile, he plopped over onto his back and waited patiently for

an affectionate belly-rub from Ivan. "Maybe you do..." Ivan started to say, as he obliged and gave Rudie what he wanted. Ivan was ready to escape again, though this time not for long.

A bath might not renew him, but it would cure his frostbite.