

Ex-con

A mockingbird's shrill staccato cuts open Joe's dreams and he wakes up wrapped in a goose down comforter. If he were to roll over to see a naked woman's back rising and falling with the slow breaths of sleep, it might be the greatest thing to ever happen to him in his life. But it's just him and the first hints of dawn; the sun has on a thick linen dress that goes all the way down to her ankles. The flickering security light in the backyard floods the room with its intermittent glow.

After a shower and some fried eggs Seth takes them south along I-71, driving slowly over the pitted asphalt through a slush of ice and grease. Joe looks up into the face of the Great American Tower and its metallic glint provokes a throbbing in his temples.

They pull up to a squat brick building located between a strip mall and an ochre three-story home with roof shingles curled up like dead skin. Four white pillars support the portico hanging over the building's entrance, where the plate glass reads "Fisher Insurance Co."

They walk into a taupe interior of cubicles and thin carpet. Motivational posters line the walls advocating "Strength" and "Persistence." The desks are covered with the standard white collar flotsam of coffee mugs, manila folders, framed family photos. It all smells like the bottom of a Styrofoam cup. "Hung over and I still made it fifteen minutes early." Seth takes Joe into his office and gestures for him to take a seat.

"So."

Joe says nothing, just sits slouched in his chair eyeing the frayed cuffs of his jeans as his left boot sways from side to side.

"You want to work for me."

“That’s the plan.”

“Selling insurance?”

“What else?” Joe says flatly, feeling a speech coming on.

Seth exhales in that horse-snort way of his and Joe grits his teeth in recognition. He grips the vinyl armrest until it squeaks beneath his fingertips.

“I built this from nothing. And you show up after close to seven years and expect what, a 401k?”

“Seven years is what I’m saying. I wasn’t on it in there. I’m ready.”

“Do you remember what it was like before you went away? We went along with your bullshit over and over. I’m going to start my own business. I think I’ve found Jesus. I need some money to settle down with this one or that one or the other one. And we believed it. You probably thought on this inside. But you got to prove it to me.”

His brother, telling him the way things were. Like he was some kind of National Merit Scholar coming out of high school, primed to play the world’s game and jump through all the hoops. Truth was, he went around for years playing the bass for a country western cover band, did his fair share of carousing and skirt chasing, leaning in on lonely women in dive bars all over the state, spinning tales about being a *musician*, praying to Jesus for a bad decision. Then Ellie came along and he got a job in this racket, after which he fell ass-*backwards* into money when her daddy died, started up his own agency, raking it in ever since.

“Can you tell me what a deductible is? A premium?”

“Can’t be that hard,” Joe says.

“So that’s a no, then. You’ve got to realize, you spent all those years when people figure out how they’re gonna eat doing whatever it is that you did, and now you’ve got a hell of a game of catch-up on your hands. I don’t know if I can hold your hand the whole way.”

“Tell me what you want to tell me.”

Seth takes a pen out of the holder and clicks it once, twice, three times. “Best case scenario, I’m gonna bring you on nice and slow. And I mean *slow*. I’m not trying to get burned, I remember everything a little too clearly. But *first* sign of that old Joseph? Mister Joe ‘I do whatever I want whenever I *please*’ Fisher? We are done, brother. I love you, and I hope you amount to some kind of thing, but it won’t be selling policies on my brand.”

He takes a book off a shelf and places it on the desk. On the cover is a photograph of two hands shaking in front of a white backdrop. It’s titled: *How to Be an Extreme Producer*.

“Read this. Know it frontwards and backwards.” He takes out a stack of flyers. Bold black type on mustard yellow. INSURE YOUR FUTURE, DON’T WAIT. Seth with his dumb grin looking flush in a brown wool suit and paisley tie.

“You’re going to pass these around Westwood.”

Joe looks at him like he’s been asked to clean a bus station bathroom.

“Get some high school kid to do that.”

Seth pinches the bridge of his nose and says, “Listen, I don’t have time to teach a crash course in insurance sales at the drop of a hat. I got to go out and earn, just like everybody else. What’d you expect to do in the meantime? Trade mutual funds? Broker mergers?”

Joe thinks about that, turns it over in his head looking for an angle he can use to come back at him, but he has to admit that his brother is right. The anger, always right there, just below the surface, and he’s tired of it.

“Well shit,” he says. “I’ll pass them out, if that’s really all you got.”

“All right then.”

Seth puts the flyers into a backpack he pulls out from underneath his desk. He keeps a straight face as he hands it over, but there’s a smile in his eyes that makes Joe want to violate his parole.

He’s almost out the door when Seth says, “Wait a minute.”

Joe turns around to see his brother holding a ten dollar bill.

“You’re gonna wanna eat.”

It’s like Joe remembers. Clifton’s Diner is now Titan Auto Parts, the marquee lights of the electric blue sign replaced by cast aluminum letters drilled into the brick, and the hardware store on Ferguson is boarded up and covered in concert flyers and church programs, but if he squints his eyes there is not much else to distinguish this stretch of Glenway from the one he knew, when he was gunning around street corners listening to Doc Holliday in his black Pontiac Trans Am.

He walks north towards Crookshank, past the parking lot of the Casa Loma Flea Market. The sidewalk is damp with melted snow. He passes the vacant studio of a portrait photographer gone bust, some dusty subjects still beaming though the steel accordion security gate.

Gas station, liquor store, Applebee’s, Mason Lodge. Nail salon, Office Depot, drug store, barber shop. He slips flyers underneath windshield wipers, shoves them into doorframe cracks, hands them to passersby, mothers and fathers coming out of Kroger’s carrying plastic bags taut with food, or else on their way to make transactions at the bank, shoulders hunched as they look him up and down before slipping back into the current of their day.

His hands redden from the cold. He stops at a dimly lit diner with dark wood paneling for a cup of coffee and some chicken fried steak, before moving onto streets filled with white ash trees, American flags strung up on porches. The shutters are open on the homes but most of the blinds are drawn, the doors and windows trimmed in white paint. A spindly network of power lines traces over everything, the telephone poles looking fragile in the midday sun, like a stiff breeze might take out the whole grid.

The hours wear on and a sinus headache throbs behind his eyes, while each new step sends a little pang through the soles of his boots. It's been a while since he's spent this much time outdoors, not since he helped tear down the south wall of the prison infirmary, three years ago this June. His looks haven't gone as much as they might of, but inside he's worn, sometimes waking up with a stiffness to his joints like he'd spent the night slamming into defensive ends. He forgets at times, his ink black hair as full as it ever was, a smoothness to his features you wouldn't expect given where he's been. But time and hard living have taken their toll, a flight of stairs a wind sprint, always one jerky twist away from pulling a muscle in his back.

The shadows stretch thin in the afternoon light and he starts to think about the night ahead, about Ty's eyes following him around the room and Ellie asking probing questions over plates of lemon chicken. He makes a right on Blue Haven Terrace onto a heavily wooded stretch of red brick homes, three or four trees planted in every yard, their branches stark and empty. A few houses down he sees a woman peering underneath the hood of her car, her hair tied up with rubber bands, wearing a puffy green jacket and torn jeans. Her skin's a light brown, a little Shawnee maybe. He sloshes through the puddles towards her.

"I don't want what you're selling."

"I'm not selling."

She doesn't look up, intent on the engine. The car's a white, weather-beaten Toyota Corolla, with takeout containers and paper bags strewn all over the backseat.

"Battery dead?" says Joe.

"Lights work, so no."

"But the car won't start."

She ignores him as she feels the radiator hoses for heat.

"Maybe the thermostat?"

"Just replaced it and had the fans fixed six months ago."

She looks up at him with hard dark eyes that say you better not waste her time. She has thin lips, the top one a little fuller than the bottom, and wisps of black hair come out her hasty bun. She's pretty in a distant way, like someone in an old photograph. But she's right here.

"Are you a mechanic?" she says, looking at the stack of flyers in his hand.

"I know cars some."

She looks him over, taking his measure. "Two minutes, but then you have to go back to passing out cell phone plans or whatever it is."

"I work for an insurance company."

Joe sees a father and son struggling to get a new TV out of the Suburban across the street. The father's not wearing a jacket but he doesn't seem to mind the cold. His thick forearms are covered with burns. They have an odd glow in the late afternoon light. For a moment Joe wonders what happened, if there was a car accident or if the man got them while he was at work. He turns back to find the woman standing arms akimbo, head inclined at an impatient angle.

"What happens when you turn the key in the ignition?"

"It sounds like it's cranking over but then nothing happens."

“Did you check for fire?”

“What?”

“The spark plugs.”

“Not yet.”

He scratches a spot behind his ear and thinks it over. Something tells him he should be heading back, that his brother won't like waiting an extra twenty minutes before getting home to Ty and Ellie.

“Why don't you try and start it?”

She gives him an *Excuse me?* look but does it anyway, and she moves nice, arms swinging graceful by her sides, a bit of a swagger to her, like a dancer. He puts the flyers in the backpack and leans underneath the hood.

“Ready?” she says.

“Let her rip.”

As he pulls the coil off the plug a white hot shock burns through him and he jumps up, startled. The back of his hand catches the edge of the upper radiator hose clamp, slicing open a four inch gash just below his knuckles. Thick drops of blood fall on the alternator and serpentine belt before he pulls his hand back to check the damage in the light.

“What happened?” she says.

“God damn it.”

She comes around and looks down at his hand, and at the rust-colored streams forming on the driveway.

“Well,” he says. The pain hasn't hit yet, the nerves lagging a little behind. “Got a jolt. But there's spark, so, there's that.”

She looks down at the cement and puts a hand over her eyes. “You can’t be. . .” she says.

“I, uh, got somebody I can call.”

“Come on.” She brushes past him on the way to the front door. “Hurry up.”

He follows her, trailing blood up the walkway and onto the front stoop before she puts up a hand: *Wait here*. She comes back with a lime green bath towel, dingy and spotted with bleach. “It’s clean,” she says. Joe wraps up his hand and steps over the doorsill. It’s dark inside, the windows sealed with thick flower print curtains. A full trash bag sits in a corner of the kitchen where a cloud of fruit flies hovers near the opening. He follows her into the living room, tracking damp footprints over the wood floor.

“Wait until the bleeding stops, and then you have to go,” she says, turning her back to him.

“Where you going?”

“Make a phone call. Oh and if you steal anything I’ll shoot you.”

She leaves him there, blood soaking through the terrycloth, and he takes a look around. A small bookshelf sits against the wall, displaying her taste in true crime and biography: *Bitter Blood, Love You to Death, Brown Eyed Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times of Chuck Berry*. Pictures of her when she was younger hang throughout the room. In a bronze frame is one of her and a slim olive-skinned man, his arm is around her firm brown shoulders, both of them not quite smiling. He’s got a mane of curly brown hair that falls over his eyes, hers is bleached blonde, black roots showing at the top. The sky behind them is darkening into pink layers cut with cloud.

Next to it is a photo of her draped over a man wearing a black cowboy hat. He’s got the kind of posture that’s looking for a fight, with a denim shirt unbuttoned to his stomach. She’s

younger here than in the other one, wearing a little piece of red checked cloth you might be tempted to call a shirt, the tail tied in a knot so far up her waist that you could see the spaces between her ribs. Musicians, both of the bastards, he'd bet anything. And then it hits him, that first dreamboat's Jimmy Hall, the front man for Wet Willie, he saw them perform at the Hamilton County Fair the summer of '78, and Christ, that's Rickey Medlocke, of Blackfoot, they toured with Axe in '81 and he'd seen them three times, maybe four, in smoke filled rooms where nothing was on tap and the floorboards smelled like whiskey.

"You might want to elevate that," she says.

He turns to find her flipping her phone shut and slipping it into her front pocket. She hangs her jacket on a coatrack, revealing a beige top embroidered with purple leaves.

"You knew Jimmy Hall," he says. Her eyes break away at the mention of his name, looking through to her backyard full of crushed soda cans and empty flower pots. They find his again soon enough, and he feels something restless in them, like the clock is ticking on her interest.

"A bit."

"And Rickey Medlocke."

"You could say that."

He whistles, runs a finger down the edge of the frame. "Who are these others? You must have been at a concert like every night."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," he says. Her eyes dart toward the blood-stained towel. He's still bleeding a little but his hand feels more or less fine.

"Just say it."

“What?”

“The G-word.”

“Groupie?”

“Ding ding.”

“Come on, I saw Blackfoot perform like five times. And Wet Willie, forget about it. Brownsville Station, Molly Hatchett, The Marshall Tucker Band. One time I got so drunk I climbed onstage and tried to kiss Cassie Gaines. Got the shit kicked out of me, you better believe it.”

She laughs something harsh and scratchy, and he has a hard time imagining the sound coming out of the young girl in the photo with the two-tone platinum hair.

“You thought that was gonna work?”

“I didn’t have anything to lose. It was over in Hamilton. I don’t know anyone in Hamilton.”

She likes that, he can tell. A light flashes through her in spite of herself, and it reminds him of a couple he saw walking down the street while his brother was driving him to the county courthouse, three weeks before his sentence hearing. They were servers at some corporate chain, wearing grease-stained shirts with the ties undone, walking slow as could be, smiles on their faces that made people stop and stare. He never forgot the girl’s pink nail polish, that sweaty blonde hair which made him want to put his foot through the dash.

“Bleeding stop?”

“Just about.”

He unwraps it enough to see and it’s like he thought: a shallow cut that’ll heal just fine on its own.

She walks to the kitchen and reaches inside a cabinet to grab some bandages and rubbing alcohol. The hem of her top lifts just enough from the waistline of her jeans to show the birthmark on her lower back, and he wants to know every inch of its brown oval shape, until that splotch of milky coffee is as clear in his mind as the icy burn of an Ohio winter, the opening bars of *Kickstart My Heart*. She takes a casserole dish off the counter and sets the box and bottle down on the tile.

“Do it yourself,” she says.

As the warm water hits his skin he looks through a gap in the pine fence at a pile of cinder blocks in her neighbor’s backyard. “What’s a guy your age doing passing out flyers anyway?” she says. “Able-bodied. Got half a brain. You can’t get a job working construction? Maybe wait tables or something. That’s got to be better than walking around in this chill.”

“The truth,” he says, blotting his hand with a paper towel. “I just got released from prison.”

“No shit.” She leans a hip onto the countertop, interested. “Where at?”

“Toledo.”

“Toledo Correctional? I had an uncle pass through there. Ralph Birchall. Maybe you knew each other.”

“Never met him.”

He pours some rubbing alcohol on his hand and winces, sucks some air through his teeth.

“How long you been out?”

“Couple days.”

She lets out that hoarse laugh again, and it sounds wrong, like the beams holding up what's left of her youth are going to splinter at any second. "Sorry I wasn't laughing at, you know. It's just, how does it feel? To be out in the world again."

He thinks about it, says, "It's strange. Coming out of R & D wearing those clothes you brought in. You spend all that time trying to be in the mix, all the politics and drama. Holding things down, looking after your rep. It all feels so important. And suddenly it doesn't mean a damn thing. But more than anything I just can't believe it."

He peels the cover off a bandage and sticks it on the back of his hand. For a few seconds they listen to drops of water hit the bottom of the sink.

"Looks like you're all set," she says.

"What do you do anyway?"

"I tend bar over by the stadium. Knock Back Nat's. Maybe come by sometime."

As they walk to the front door he picks up on something easy between them that's not all in his head. He looks for holes, testing its integrity, thinking maybe he's only feeling what he wants to feel, but in the end he can't deny that it's there.

He says, "You ever see that movie, *Bobbie Jo and the Outlaw*?"

"The one where she quits being a carhop so she can run off with that guy?"

"You look like that actress, what's her name."

"Aw, how sweet."

"You're a smart ass."

"Quit bein a girl."

Right then he decides to do a foolish thing and kisses her. Her hands rest on his shoulders, his arms slide around her waist, and he thinks maybe the universe is sending him

some bliss after thousands of nights of lying on that state-issue twin mattress, wondering how this moment would feel. For a second he sees the dead-eyed stares of murderers gone for life with nothing to lose, remembers how it all smelled like sweat and cold metal and Simple Green. He hears the freaks calling him sweetie and the squeak of the porters' mop bucket wheels, the other prisoners cackling like hyenas in the middle of the night, the sound of sliding cell doors slamming shut. He thinks of the things he had to do to survive; how maybe if he gets brave enough he'll tell them to a woman so he can release their grip on his soul. But then he extends a giant FUCK YOU to Toledo and its forty-five acres of gray brick and barbed wire. He's outside now and he can feel nothing and everything, and what else could you do but kiss the pretty girl standing right there in front of you? To hope that she'll take you someplace new?

But in the end she pushes him away, shaking her head, No.

"Whoa, I have a man."

"Right, sorry."

"Hey," she says, and she's the one who looks sorry. "I meant what I said, all right?"

Knock Back Nat's. Ask for Leah."

"Sure. Joe."

"Goodbye Joe."

Joe gets an earful from Seth, but on the way back he tells him the story and Seth just smiles. When he's done his brother turns on some grating talk radio, blowhards debating the existence of WMDs, and they spend the rest of the drive in silence.

That night, after dinner, Joe has a dream. He's in Leah's kitchen and they're giving each other little kisses, and her laugh is different, young and clear-sounding. She's got on a white

cotton dress that hangs on her too loose, but when she undoes the belt tie and unbuttons herself to her waist, he wants to pick her up and carry her to bed, to say something dumb about how pretty she is, to hold her close and fall asleep, to fuck her until he forgets who he is. She walks toward the bedroom, taking a moment to let her dress fall to the floor, stepping out of it like some spritely thing, turning back to look at him with a sly smile, as in: *I will consent to let you have me, to give you a night to keep you warm past tomorrow, past next Tuesday, past presidential terms and mortgage crises, beyond the next fiery rounds of explosions in countries we only know by name.* They step into her bedroom and he holds her, nibbles her ears, kisses her neck, runs his lips down to her feet and all the way back to her abdomen, inhales her like that last fall night before it hurts to go outside.

When he wakes up he's covered in a thin layer of sweat. He pulls on his jeans and walks downstairs to get a Rolling Rock out of the fridge. He opens the bottle with a Bic lighter he finds on the counter, then chugs about half of it in three gulps.

Pinned above the ice dispenser is a picture of Seth, Ellie and Ty. The boy's just finished with some pee wee football; his face is damp with sweat and grit, grass stains on his shins and knees. He doesn't look shy, but ready to come bursting out the gate, the world bright with possibility, his parents on either side of him grinning so wide you'd think the tops of their heads would pop clean off. And together the three of them look, well, there's no other word for it: happy.

Outside he hears a heavy thump followed by the clink of broken glass. He looks out the garden window above the sink and finds nothing but a coiled rubber hose, a muted suburban night. He walks out front and sees a coyote nosing around in the garbage. The animal pauses to

lick his chops and they exchange a look. Hot vapors escape from the coyote's mouth and float up towards the sky.

Before Joe knows what's happening the bottle flies out of his hand and explodes at the coyote's feet. The coyote runs off, paws padding silently over the street. Joe sees him flash under a streetlight a block out but then he makes a sharp turn into some bushes and he's gone.