

Fireflies

“That smoke shuts ‘em right up, doesn’t it?” observed Ronny as he kicked the door shut on his orange Datsun b210. Balancing himself between two cat carriers, he walked through the propped-up garage door toward the old picnic table where Tony was hunched over a stretched-out, unconscious Siamese cat. Tony was scraping a men’s disposable razor through some soapy fur on the cat’s neck, snapping his wrist to shake loose wet clumps of hair after each quick pull.

Tony paused to suck a drag from the cigarette in his left hand, carefully pinched between the index finger and thumb. “That it does, my friend.” Tony exhaled. “That it does.” Ronny passed behind Tony and walked a few more paces to the back wall of the shack. He slid the two carriers into the gap in the second row. The cats peered through the carriers’ metal grated doors into the smoky room, wide-eyed.

Stacked in two rows of two, the dusty purple and beige crates were arranged face-out for easy access. To the left, the yellowed sand of the fenced litter pen was lumpy under the scatter of brown and rust-colored feces on its surface. Four cats were visible inside, one yanking its nails free from the pen’s screen door. The white mini freezer to the right sat under a beat-up boombox playing Lynyrd Skynyrd through its one working speaker. A pile of pizza boxes, litter boxes, fast food bags, and assorted refuse sat heaped against the wall. An open box of blue rubber weather balloons lay on its side in the middle

of the room, a dented tank of helium lay next to it. The word "syringes" was scrawled in black marker on the lid of the open tackle box on the table next to Tony and the motionless cat.

"It's bag time, baby," Ronny said walking over to the table. He leaned over the cat's head and pointed to a dime-sized pool of blood on its neck where Tony had nicked its pink skin. "If I was on as much ketamine as you are right now, I'd probably be jumping around busting light bulbs out of their sockets with my stupid head."

Tony looked up briefly from swabbing the skin with an alcohol-soaked cotton ball. "You can shut up now." Ronny clapped his hands together once and chuckled. "Here, restrain this bitch," Tony continued. Ronny turned the cat on its back, grabbed its front legs and started probing the base of the neck with his thumb. Tony muttered as he dug through the tackle box. He assembled three 20ml syringes and arranged them on a paper towel. "Now where are my three-way taps?"

"Be a simple kind of man," Ronny sang along with the radio. Tony twisted the cat's head to the side and inserted a catheter into the throbbing jugular.

"Prepare to be bored out of your skull for the next half hour," Tony announced as the barrel of the first syringe slowly began to fill with blood.

"Speak for yourself," Ronny replied. "I'm blimpin' out right about now." He motioned toward the weather balloons with his head as he pulled a rubber band out of

the tackle box and wrapped it around the cat's extended front legs.

"Like hell, you are." Tony glared at Ronny. "We're doing this right this time. No more wasted blood and no more new cats."

"Aw man. Pull your panties out of your butt, Mom."

"Get a bag ready, dickhead - one that says 'Utah Medical Products' on it." Tony checked the clock on the boombox. 7:38 PM. Six bags will take three, maybe four hours. After this one, six cats left; that should be enough if something goes wrong. He looked down at the half-full syringe, cracked a half smile and nodded. "I'm paying off my fucking guitar tomorrow."

"This award was so unexpected," Sheldon announced too loudly into the microphone. "Whoops." He jerked his head back a few inches then timidly re-extended it to a safer range. "Obviously, I'm not used to giving speeches like this."

The dining room of photographers, historians, and distinguished guests waited politely, enjoying their desserts and tea seated at round, linen-draped tables. He could see a few sympathetic smiles glimmering from the tables in the front.

"But thank you so very much," he resumed. "This whole experience has just been

so wonderful. This is my first time in London and, obviously, to the Natural History Museum. You all have been so kind and such gracious hosts. I will definitely come back to London again, I can assure you.”

Sheldon looked down at the white 3x5 card cradled in his hands. The small bullet points he wrote for himself were hard to read under the bright spotlight. The shine from the copper medallion they placed around his neck, now resting on his lavender paisley necktie, was hard to look past as well.

“So,” he began after a deep breath. “A little bit about me and my background: I’m not a professional photographer, as you might have guessed. I actually work as a fish counter at the Bonneville Dam on the beautiful Columbia River in Oregon. I sit in front of an underwater window by the fish ladder and count all the salmon and steelhead that swim by, as best I can. Several of the species are endangered so the government wants to keep track of how the different seasonal runs are doing. I know it sounds so boring but I love the fish and I like *to* fish and get outdoors whenever I can. When I’m not camping or hiking or counting fish, I like to sing in the choir at our Unitarian church.” Sheldon paused a beat then deeply intoned: “I am a baritone.”

A wave of well intentioned laughter filled the hall and Sheldon smiled under his blushing cheeks. He turned and nodded to the stage manager who projected the words “Special Commendation Award” above the stage on a large screen followed by Sheldon’s

photograph titled "Fireflies." He could hear approving murmurs and a few gasps. The card in his hands started to feel moist around the edges. After *Choir*, the next bullet was *Perseids*.

"C'mon, Tony. Let's take a fucking break already." Ronny set the second bag of blood on the shelf in the freezer and slammed the door closed. "I wanna eat some of that fucking pizza."

Tony took the cigarette out from behind his ear and tucked it into the corner of his mouth. 8:31 PM. "Yeah," he mumbled and fired up his lighter. Ronny clapped his hands and jogged to his car. He returned with a grease stained pizza box, a spool of nylon rope, and two cans of Coors Light. He set the box on the edge of the picnic table and flipped a beer to Tony.

"Dickhead," Tony said, setting the can on the table. He lightly cracked the top letting a hiss and a spray of foam escape. He looked into the weathered shack, now amber from the bare, unbroken light bulb on the wall. All four crates were occupied: two cats were getting anaesthetized and two were recovering. He walked over to the litter pen and grabbed the smoke can. Two cats were sitting by the pen door yowling in turn. Although

they weren't supposed to eat for several hours before going under, Tony figured they hadn't eaten for a couple of days now. He flipped the switch to get the smoker heating. *Bee Z Smoker* was emblazoned along the can's base next to a Honey Nut Cheerios-looking bee cartoon.

In the center of the room, Ronny pulled one of the weather balloons out of the box with the hand that wasn't holding a pizza slice. Tony shook his head when their eyes met but he kept watching as Ronny clenched his pizza in his teeth and used both hands to simultaneously hold the balloon's stem around the nozzle and open the valve on the helium tank.

"You are a crazy son of a bitch," Tony muttered before turning back to the litter pen. The smoker's built-in fan had kicked in so he opened the aperture and pumped several gray clouds onto the cats. "Now shut the hell up already."

He heard Ronny ask into a cat carrier, "You ready for yo' blimp ride?" Tony glanced over to the clock again. Ronny had tied an inflated balloon to the picnic table, letting the slack rope make a small pile on the ground. The remaining daylight gave the balloon a greenish hue.

"I'm going to start shaving the next one," Tony told Ronny as he walked over to the crates. He unlocked one of the ground-level doors, reached in and pulled out a limp black cat. The tips of its ears and tail were white. Ronny followed suit and opened the carrier

stacked above it. The groggy siamese had propped itself up on its widely spread front legs.

Ronny pulled it out and carried it over to the loose rope under the floating balloon.

Quickly fashioning a buntline hitch - over, around, under, then through - about the shoulders of the Siamese, he untethered and released the cat-balloon into the air. He pushed it out through the garage door and watched the cat rise about 15 feet. Ronny clapped his hands together and shouted, "Booyah!"

"My photography skills are uneven, to put it politely," Sheldon said. He paused to pantomime the balancing act of a scale, raising and lowering his small hands under the long sleeves of his periwinkle dress shirt. "I've gleaned some techniques from magazines and blogs. I can do a few things in Photoshop. And I have a quote prosumer unquote camera - a Canon Digital Rebel t3i - and a pretty good tripod. I haven't invested much in different lenses because I don't really know how to use them." The silence of the audience made the temperature rise in Sheldon's cheeks again. He twisted around to face the projection of his picture.

"One of the things I'd been wanting to learn -"

The stage manager gestured urgently to get Sheldon's attention, redirecting him to face the microphone.

"Oh, sorry!" Sheldon spun back around and began again, loudly. "One of the things I'd been wanting to learn was how to do long exposures. I wanted to make those great pictures of exploding fireworks or a city at night with colored lines made by car headlights. Well, you probably all remember the last Perseids meteor shower. I was so excited to get away from the buildings and street lights. Try to capture a few white tailed meteors with my tripod a timer." He turned to check-in with the stage manager and got a *please continue* nod in return.

"So, it's about 11 PM and I'm out in the Washougal woods - no lights out there, for sure - and I'm taking my pictures with my timer and my remote control when I see a building suddenly start on fire not a half mile away. Naturally, I wasn't expecting to see a building out there, let alone a fire. So, I didn't really know what to do. But, it dawned on me that I could stay where I was and just use my 75-300 millimeter zoom to see what was going on. Keep a safe distance but see if anybody needed any help or anything.

Once I got the lenses switched out and pulled the camera off the tripod - and mind you I'm moving pretty quickly now because I'm pretty rattled at this point - I start looking through the camera and the first thing I noticed was that there were these big balloons floating over there." Sheldon held a surprised expression and waved his hands to make large circles in several directions. "And I thought: what in God's name is going on over there?"

“Fucking let’s go,” Tony called out from the picnic table. Ronny hurried back and grabbed the black cat’s legs, pulling it onto its back. “No,” said Tony. “You be the bleeder this time.”

“Aw, fuck. How am I supposed to finish my beer?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “When you switch out syringes, fucking pound it.” Ronny nodded at the idea and mouthed “fuck yeah” as he untangled a fresh catheter tube from the tackle box.

Two vials in, a ZZTop song chugged out of the boombox. “*A how, how, how, how!*” Tony and Ronny sang in unison.

“God, I cannot wait to give Shauna these last fucking bags and get my fucking Gibson,” Tony said bobbing his head to the beat.

“I know, brother. I know,” Ronny replied. “It’s cool that she lent you the money and it’s her fucking eBay account and all. But, it’s a *signed* Gibson SG. Angus fucking Young, bro.”

“Fuck! It’s driving me fucking nuts, Ronny.”

“You don’t fucking hold out on something like that from your brother until you get

your precious fucking money or your fucking cat blood or whatever it fucking is," Ronny continued. "She *knows* you love Angus. It's a fucking bitch move, man. I mean, she's your sister and everything but it's a bitch move, man. It has to be said."

Tony shook his head and attached a clipper to the catheter while Ronny switched to the third syringe.

"Hey, what the fuck bag is that?" Tony asked gesturing at the table with his head. Careful not to stop filling, Ronny picked up the bag in his teeth and craned his neck to let Tony inspect it. "It's not Utah. We can't use it. "

"Aw, shit."

"These other bags don't have CDPA in them. The blood clots and Shauna will shit herself. Just throw all those bags away, dickhead. We don't need them anymore anyway."

"Cool," confirmed Ronny.

The 3x5 card was a softening wad in Sheldon's left hand but he didn't need it anymore. The guests at the table closest to the stage - the woman with the chunky necklace and the freckled, ponytail man - reluctantly returned his stares. He had zeroed in on them right away and spoke primarily at them throughout his acceptance speech, losing

sight of the rest of the room.

“Then, of course,” Sheldon continued, raising both arms toward the screen. “I saw this: Hanging from these - what I read later to be - weather balloons, were cats.

Inexplicably, there were cats floating around this burning cabin in the middle of the woods. I think I took the first picture purely by accident. Then, I tried to capture as much of the scene as I could before finally high-tailing it out of there. I was so startled I just grabbed up my chair, my tripod, and ran back to my car. Naturally, I called the police and gave them the best directions I could. They actually flew out a helicopter.

A couple of days later, I read about the fire in the newspaper. They think it was some kind of crazy cat lady who was running a drug house out in the woods. It was just pure luck that I happened to be in the right place at the right time with a camera.”

Sheldon paused and looked around. He could make out the green Exit sign above the doors at the back of the room. “Thank you,” he exhaled with a deep bow. The chunky necklace lady looked to the ponytail man who immediately initiated a polite round of applause.

With the blood of the fifth cat bagged, Tony emptied the contents of the freezer

into a Coleman cooler half-filled with dry ice. He set the cooler into the back of the Datsun and lit a cigarette. Ronny wasted no time tying knots around the remaining cats and alighting them from different spots outside the shack. He watched them float as he wiped his hands on his jeans.

“This place fucking stinks,” he announced grabbing the tackle box and carrying it to the car.

“No shit,” Tony replied. “You can keep your tank if you want but I’m torching this dump.”

“Shit yes I’m keeping it.” They walked together into the shack and each grabbed an end of the metal cylinder.

“It’s nine hours to Oakland, if we don’t pooty-coot around,” Tony said. “Shauna can have her blood, I can get my guitar, and we can finally get the fuck out of there. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life cleaning lice off of snakes, driving all over the goddamn place delivering exotic pets to fuckin’ rich people. ‘Oh, only type *AB* feline blood products from the Pacific Northwest for my Fifi’ - bullshit. I’m done.”

“Fuck yeah, bro,” Ronny replied. They eased the helium into the car and shut the hatchback tightly. Tony grabbed two bottles of rubbing alcohol, walked into the shack and started soaking the garbage pile. Ronny watched as the fading shapes of two balloons gently collided overhead. Outlined before the black trees, their payloads hung slumped

like overripe sunflowers.