

## Banks of the Ohio

He asked her to promise she'd be his. Told her they'd always be happy together. Then, Willow changed the station.

"Hey," I said, "I like that song."

"Stan, he drowns her in the river."

"I know that. So?"

"So that's violence against women."

"Oh geez, Wil—its an *old* song, not some media fad that turns teenagers into psychopaths. That's just the kind of stuff that *happened* back then."

"And still does," my wife responded, and I knew this was a losing battle. I redoubled my focus on the asphalt in front of us, watched the center line unfurling, the exhaust pipes of trailer trucks—just kept driving, enjoying the sphincteral view.

"Did I upset you?" Willow asked.

"Not at all," I lied. "You pick the music."

A minute later the silence between us mellowed into warm horns, upticking reverb, vapid choruses of *sha-na-nas* and *doobie-dos*. Motown hits—swelled up and safe-sounding, just like Willow's romanticized notion of living in the city. Within a month, I thought, she'll also be sorry that we've moved.

I deserved some kind of world's-best-husband award, I thought, for going along with this. I was happy, after all, in our three-bedroom suburban house on Hayseed Drive. Should just be relaxing, loving life, now that the kids had grown up and moved out. Yet here we were, moving sight-unseen into some dingy downtown apartment building just so Willow could start what she

called a "dream job" at some ultra-liberal art foundation whose mission was something like *to lift up the creative expression of non-binary voices*. As best as I could tell, that meant lesbians.

It was an hours' drive to the city, with nothing to look at but grey sky, crimped green hills, and tractor trailers. I've always respected that about the Interstate—how it takes you from one place to another without bothering to show you anything interesting, as if it knows that you never really wanted to leave.

The song changed, and I recognized the voice of Michael Jackson.

"Now this guy," I told Willow—"this guy was a pervert."

She sighed.

"It was complicated, Stan."

"Was it? What's so 'complicated' about messing around with little children?"

"I don't want to talk about this," she said. I squinted at the road, knowing I'd won this time, but *I* wasn't about to change the song. *I* wasn't like that.

We passed more and more signs for the city, then the treeline broke. Subdivisions crowded the highway, separated by razor-strips of loblolly forest. Then the highway rose, crossed some train tracks, and descended towards rows and rows of peeling clapboard houses.

My new neighbors—great. At least we'd still have all our nice furniture. It would even be all laid out for us when we'd arrive at the apartment. I'd included a blueprint and detailed instructions for the movers.

Skyscrapers emerged and I swirled off the highway, turned from one to another trash-strewn street, just as GPS suggested. We passed boarded up storefronts, razor-wired parking lots, and brick walls blazed with graffiti. How could Willow possibly think that all this was glamorous? She was basically gawking with admiration.

*Our* block, of course, was the worst of all of them: sooty, wide-shouldered, dominated on one side by some sort of chained-off overpass containing shopping carts, old mattresses, and other telltale signs of the homeless.

"We're about to live in a historic building," Willow gushed, "that used to be a hotel. The realtor's website says it was based on an ancient Roman bathhouse."

"Oooh, ancient Romans. The very paragon of ethical purity."

"Jesus, Stan. I really wish you'd let it rest."

We got out of the car and I stared up at our supposedly-historic monstrosity of an apartment building: four stories, wider than tall, a rust-colored block of granite stained with teardrops of anger and neglect. Willow reached into her handbag and fumbled for the Realtor's business card, on which she'd scrawled down the keycode. She handed it to me and immediately became distracted by her phone.

"Oh," she said, "I totally forgot. I actually have to go into the office—like, right now—for my welcome luncheon."

"...you do?"

"Yeah," she said. "It should only take an hour or so, I think. Then I can come right back." She reached out, held my hand, and gave it a fast squeeze—her way of apologizing, though only for not helping me carry our last few bags in. Realistically, something *I* would've done anyway. I squeezed back, though I didn't want to.

"The movers left the key under the mat," Willow said as I hoisted two heavy duffel bags to the threshold and punched in the keycode.

"I know."

Inside, alone, I ascended up a windowless stairwell. The grit and must were overwhelming. Living here will feel like being a tuberculosis patient, I thought, or maybe a prisoner in the Tower of London. Even though *I'd* put our kids through college, and *my* salary had paid for the night classes that enabled my wife to pursue her so-called "calling" in the first place. So much for so-called "virtues", like loyalty and patience. I reached the top floor and nearly tripped over the top step. Here was our apartment.

It's number, 4B, was announced by peeling silver decals on an olive slab of door. Below I found the welcome mat: vomit-yellow, wiry like an urchin. It prickled my hand as I reached beneath it to extract the key. I clanked it into the slot, twisted hard on the doorknob, and pushed myself in.

Inside it was almost completely dark. Were there any windows in this place? There seemed to be high ceilings and hardwood floors; I knew from the blueprints that it was an open plan. I pulled the door closed and groped around for a light switch, which I finally found above a marble countertop in what must've been the kitchen. I flicked it on. Jaundiced light beamed down from the ceiling. I saw:

a splintered wooden table. A floral print armchair. an ugly cubist rug.

None of this furniture was ours.

"Those cut-rate *fuckers!*" I yelled to the ceiling. Had the movers delivered to the wrong unit? Unlikely—they'd probably just made off with our nice stuff and replaced it with this thrift store shit. I should've known better than to hire some thinly-reviewed company from the city.

I turned back towards the kitchen, because at least that room looked decent. I unloaded groceries from the tote bags, stocked them in the cupboards, seething. Had I purchased moving insurance? If not, which type of lawyer was most appropriate to call?

"Excuse me," a voice behind me said.

Not Willow's.

I wrenched around and saw—a woman, standing behind the ugly splintered table. She was curly-haired, bronze-cheeked, middle aged, and had impeccable posture. Her hands were folded casually over an acorn-colored briefcase.

"Excuse me... what the hell are you doing in my house?"

"Performing an intake," she replied. "I'm your therapist. From the city."

"My what now?"

"Your city-assigned therapist, to whom you're entitled under C.B. 5776, the New Neighbors Program."

"I don't want a goddamned therapist," I told her.

"That's not my problem. You *could* file a grievance, I guess, but it probably isn't worth it. You can't just cancel because you don't like me."

"Who are you, the fucking gas company?"

Her face crimped into a smile.

"You don't like the city, do you? Let's unpack that."

"No," I said, "I'm not telling you shit about how I feel."

"Your loss, then. Clause 7 of the aforementioned act requires us to perform psychological triage on all incoming residents within the municipal boundaries. Your taxes at work... though since you just moved here, technically other people's."

"Psychoanalyze my wife, then. She's the crazy one."

"Conflict of interest. Also, not necessary. Willow opted out by signing on with one of our public-private partners through the Alternative Solutions program."

"What the fuck?"

"I know you're upset," the woman said, "And I also know that none of this is your furniture." She released her arm from its briefcase, swept it gently around the apartment. "Do you think that could be contributing to your frustration?"

"Gee, why don't you tell me, Doc?"

"I'm not a doctor." She said, then tapped her fingers on the table. "Sit."

"I'm not falling for that."

"Fine, whatever. I'm not paid well enough to force you. Did you enjoy the drive here, at least?"

"Some of it."

"What part? Listening to music? *Old* music, perhaps?"

"The fuck—are you making fun of me?"

"No, no. I'm not. I love old songs, too. Especially ones about murder."

"Look—I don't know if Willow put you up to this or what, but I don't believe you're actually from the city. Also, I don't need any therapy. I'm a *good* guy. I've never been anything but faithful to my wife and family."

"Way to go," she said, "but I don't care."

"You don't."

"Nope, I don't. *You* don't care, I don't care. But know that your taxes will pay me roughly six dollars per minute." She raised her right elbow, rubbed thumb against middle finger. "So do you want to talk about your feelings, or no?"

"No," I repeated. Then I heard footfalls, a gait that sounded like Willow's, echoing up the vaulted stairway towards the apartment.

The door burst open and there she was.

"Stan!" She noticed the therapist—"oh."

She squinted and flattened her eyebrows, like she does when she's confused.

"I'm glad you're doing a therapy session, Stan, but do you have to do it here? There was a change in plans, and Brooke and Laurie, my coworkers, are coming over here for lunch."

"Hold on a second," I started, but the therapist cut me off.

"No problem, we can find another room." She turned and drifted across the ratty yellow carpet, beckoned me to follow her through a back door that I hadn't previously noticed.

"Wil—" I pleaded—"Are you serious? This is my home, too. You can't just... displace me."

"Just go have your session," she responded. "The girls and I will be here when you get back."

What could I do? I followed; pushed the back door open and discovered that I wasn't actually on a stairwell, as I'd expected. Instead, I was midway across a dim-lit wooden balcony—below me, it seemed, was a void. I curled my neck in both directions: the walkway extended, in each, for about twenty yards before hitting a corner and receding in shadow.

Where was the therapist?

There was no trace of her—only doorways lining the balcony, all drab and clumsy and olive-painted like mine. Were all of them apartments? I crept right, averting my eyes from the railing. My footsteps howled.

After three closed doors, the fourth was propped open. Inside I discovered: an empty room. Grey-upholstered, streaked through a single blinds-drawn window with slivers of daylight. In the corner, behind a conference table, was a hump of leather. *My* hump of leather.

*My fucking Ottoman.*

I wasn't seeing things; that was definitely *my* Ottoman, the one *I'd* purchased for *my* family. It had the telltale scuffmarks on its heels, left by the poorly-disciplined Doberman pinscher whose presence I'd briefly tolerated back when Willow had decided to foster a dog.

I'd get *this* back, at least. I squatted in front of it, ringed my fingers under its edges, and pulled up.

It wouldn't budge.

I tried again, harder—nothing. As if the ten-pound footrest suddenly weighed a ton. Then a phone rang from the room's far corner, and I knew exactly who it was.

"Is this some kind of joke?" I asked.

"I don't joke," said the therapist. "This is just how we do things. Clause 7(c), for your reference. You'll find me further down the hallway. Try the next room."

I slammed the receiver and left. The next room was likewise unlocked, and identical to the one I'd just visited. Instead of the Ottoman, though, it contained two of Willow's lamps and our four-post, ebony-lacquered king-sized bed.

"What the fuck is going on?" I asked this room's phone.

"Hmm," pissy male anger. Boring."

"Why *wouldn't* I be angry? I never liked the city in the first place, and now I'm stuck in this weird flea-sack of a building. Someone—probably you—has been fucking with all my stuff, and my wife has her new friends over right now; they're probably lesbians, and they're *probably* all talking behind my back about how bottled-up or evasive or whatever I am."

"Oh, *now* he talks."

"Fuck that attitude—aren't you supposed to be supportive or something?"



"Look, if *you* had my job, maybe you could tell me how to do it. But you don't, and you don't even seem to be that interested in it. So calm down, and keep checking rooms."

In the next room was our sofa. In the next, my desk. Then came our dining table, coffee table, and matching Amish nightstands. All in identical, starchy-carpeted conference rooms, all completely unmovable. Soon I'd lost track of how many doors I'd opened. Then, the therapist stopped calling.

A square has four corners; at some point during my progression down the balcony, I realized I'd turned at least five or six. What *was* this building? A dungeon, like the one that guy in the Poe story gets thrown into and has to grope around the walls of, feeling for recesses and protrusions, just to get a sense of its shape and size? That place was pitch dark, though—I at least had enough light to see what was directly ahead of me, which was always just the next identical room.

Until eventually it wasn't. Instead it was a metal fire exit door, propped open and revealing a well-lit stairwell. It beckoned me forward. There was no up, apparently. Only down.

The walls of the staircase were exposed cinderblock, and its light was a buzzing, sickly fluorescence. There was a dankness to it, and it stunk like a subway. Completely without those fisheye mirrors. Was someone waiting to mug me at the next landing?

Not this one, or the next. The stairs were in sets of twelve—I started counting. I descended five, six, seven sets; my footsteps rang behind me as I rounded each landing. This building was only four stories tall, right? So by now I must be underground, deep in the basement. After eight the landings ended and I reached the bottom: a huge room with high stone ceilings, buttered in yellow light.

I glanced in all directions: no muggers, no therapist. Just piles and piles of old furniture.

Splintered end tables. Ugly lamps. Broken appliances, dirt-caked tchotchkes, spring-stripped sofas and art deco armchairs. Way more crap than Willow would be able to drag home from thrift stores in her entire lifetime. All worthless, I decided. But the therapist had said to keep on looking.

So I turned to the nearest pile and started digging through the small stuff: pots and pans, toasters, plastic utensils, colanders. Stacks of jigsaw puzzles and board games, spiral-bound cookbooks and cheap oil paintings of Parisian gardens, dressed-up children, or boats on water. All of it was moveable; nothing was anchored to anything else, or to the floor. I flung open the wardrobes, unfolded the bedframes, and rifled through the splintering desks and bureaus. I twisted every handle, pulled out every drawer. I stared down every stain and blemish, remembering each instance of our kids spilling or breaking something and every time Willow had brought home some old, junky item to prove that we could live simply and I'd hauled it down to the basement, later, after she'd forgotten about it. Was that where I was: the one big basement, where all things unloved and forgotten go? I felt exoskeletal, divorced from my actions as I kept digging, digging, delving and upturning, muttering over and over that I *never put my foot down, never put my foot down* as if preparing to explain to a jury how the one thing I've feared most, through all of it, was breaking Willow's heart.

I could still escape that, though. I could still tread water, could still dodge the answer should Willow ever ask the question: *did you really want to move to the city?* I was down here with the old furniture. No one cared what I thought.

All of a sudden, I panicked. I shoved aside the big items and started collecting: clock radios, coffee grinders, yellowed pillows, a framed Christmas photo of someone else's family. I shoveled as much as possible into my arms, not bothering to examine any of it. What was the point? The stuff I *really* wanted was up there, in the boardrooms. The stuff down *here* was free, though, and the stuff up there was not.

I filled my arms and waddled back to the staircase. Electric plugs trailed and bounced behind me; I stumbled, dice spilled out from a board game and clanked across the floor. My hips buckled, my forearms were strained, but I knew I could always shift my weight, always make the adjustment, always keep going.

Mounted the steps, I heard water dripping. *From the goddamned ceiling*, I thought. No doubt some disgusting city sewage, sifted into this dungeon through a fissure in the sidewalk. Gradually, the sound amplified; its *drip-drip* sluiced to a steady trickle, then a murmur, then the rushing static of a stream. I crooked my head upwards, imagined a tiny window through which I could see my new, dingy apartment, a miniature version of my wife, a miniature therapist, several strange, miniature city lesbians. What were they discussing up there? Feelings? Social responsibility in music? Non-binary art? I thrust my face back downwards, towards the heaping load of trinkets in my arms, hoping to find just one thing to contribute—something that could be recycled, rehashed, passed on. Something that, like a folk song, is worth changing, adjusting, and reshaping over the course of decades or even centuries. Something bending always towards a place of love.

My load, though, was slipping. The light went out; the steps behind me were erased, one by one, under an advancing tide of water. I lurched to outrun it—but now it was I who couldn't move. The water slithered into my shoes, soaked through my trousers, surged above my waist to

my chest and shoulders. My treasures scattered, floated off from my arms, as my heart filled with the warm drone of dial tones. There was no receiver to pick up, no number to dial. I knew, without asking, that this was the Ohio, and it was me who'd been pushed in.