

Night Walk

I rise quietly to keep from waking Carmen and find my pants and shoes in the dark. On the landing, the air is cold and dewy. A truck out on the freeway growls through the night. I creak down the metal steps to the lane, not sure which way to go.

The sky is full of stars and a layer of thin cloud, making it brighter out here than in the trailer. Dust from the adjacent fields is sprinkled over the asphalt like brown sugar. My neighbor's Tercel, which hasn't moved in months, is coated with it. Down the way, there's light in a window, another insomniac. I turn right, at random, and the motion sensor on the back wall of the rec room flickers alive. Further along, under the child molester's blue Acura, a tan cat is sitting like a Sphinx, watching me.

In five hours I have a job interview for a warehouse spot at the Amazon fulfillment center in Tracy and my mind is spinning.

When I was thirteen I came home from school and found my father's truck in the carport. He was a driver for a linen supply company and wasn't supposed to be home until six. When I entered the apartment he was standing in the living room, still in his work uniform. The television and stereo were off and the curtains were closed. He was an intimidating dude with a droopy mustache like Jesse Ventura. When my older brother Anthony or I messed up, he slapped our faces. Sometimes, he knocked us down and dared us to get back up. When our mother screamed at him to stop, he smirked. The smirk meant the stuff he was doing was nothing, the minimum needed to keep two boys in line. He liked to remind us that his own father had whipped him with a stick, had opened wounds. The documentation was all over his back and shoulders.

When I took a step toward the hall, trying to get around him, he said, "Your mother's real sick." I was so relieved, I almost laughed. This wasn't even news. My mother had been sick for weeks. She had a nasty cough and needed to sleep in the afternoon. She couldn't eat and was losing weight. I assumed he was just telling me to keep it quiet, to go play outside and leave her alone. But their bedroom door was open and I could see the bed. "Where is she?"

"Hospital."

"Just for an appointment or to stay?"

"Stay."

I went to my room and lay down, stared at the ceiling. After ten minutes, I heard my father go outside and start his truck. He had more deliveries to make.

When Anthony got home—he should have been in high school but he had a full-time job grinding paint at Boulevard Auto Body—he told me our mother had lung cancer.

She'd smoked a pack a day, sometimes more, from the time she was a teenager, and we knew it would eventually catch up with her. But she was barely forty.

"Is she going to die?"

Anthony shrugged.

That Saturday, my father took us to see her. She'd only had one radiation treatment and was just starting chemo but she already looked older, more frail. The skin around her mouth was wrinkled. She kept closing her eyes. We told her we were okay. We couldn't wait for her to get better and come home. We were going to bake her a cake.

She tried to smile.

Nobody was crying so I didn't cry either.

At home, my father didn't talk about her. My brother followed his lead. Everyone made their own meals, did their own laundry. My mother's absence was like a hole in the middle of the living room that we stepped around to keep from falling in.

On our visits, we pretended not to notice her bare scalp, her sunken cheeks, and said the things we'd already said. "We miss you. We can't wait for you to come home."

A month after she'd been admitted, the doctors walked us into the hall. The cancer was all through her body now. She had maybe another day or two, possibly just hours. Even then my father stayed quiet. He nodded, scratched the back of his head. I knew better than to start bawling in front of him.

The next day, walking home after school, the tears came. I lifted my collar over my face, trying to hide, but that just made them come harder. I ran down a drainage ditch, followed it to a

gravelly wash with old shopping carts. I cried until I heard some boys in the distance, laughing and breaking bottles with rocks.

It's so quiet out, my footsteps sound loud enough to wake people up. They make a faint echo off cars and walls. The park is a jumble of older pull-alongs and newer mobile homes, faded turquoise aluminum siding and cream-colored cement board. The spaces are small, so things are crammed in at angles, cars tight against porches and nosed onto patches of gravel. I want it to be bigger, more open, but it's my best option. If I were out on the city streets, scowling around at three in the morning, I'd get stopped and questioned. I wouldn't blame anybody. I'd stop me too.

It's good to work my legs, to let the heat in my body escape into the air. With every lap around our row, I feel less anxious. The motion sensor seems tired of me. Every time it clicks on, it's like, *Oh, you again*. The cat wants to know how I keep leaving in one direction and returning from another.

Not long after my mother died, I got into my first fight. A kid was making fun of me for a stain on my shirt. My father hadn't figured out that I needed new clothes, and I didn't know how to remove taco juice. But in my mind the kid was laughing because my mother was dead. When I got him on the ground, I bounced his head against the concrete until some other kids pulled me off.

The vice-principal called my father in to tell him I'd been suspended. She sensed that my father didn't care. "I hope you understand how serious this is."

My father smirked. "Right. Got it."

A few weeks later, I punched a kid for hitting me with a rubber band—he wasn't even aiming at me; he was aiming at his friend and missed.

My father smirked his way through another meeting. On the drive home, he interrupted the silence. "I don't care what that lady says. Somebody hits you, you hit 'em back."

I kept fighting. When I got somebody on the ground, I kicked their ribs, their head. If nobody pulled me off, I kicked until I got tired. Eventually, I was expelled.

By the time I got my first job, at Burger King, I'd been in maybe ten fights. For some people, that's not that many, but I'd convinced myself that I was hardcore. I kept my hair buzzed like the dudes in MMA. I bragged about my temper, how I could go off over nothing. Nobody doubted me. I had scars on my knuckles and one across the bridge of my nose. One of my ears was bigger than the other.

If some homeless guy was acting up, yelling for food he didn't pay for, or some high-school kids were squirting ketchup in the dining room, or somebody was getting nasty at the register, my co-workers called for me. I came out glaring, rolling my shoulders, pushing my chin from side to side to stretch my neck. I walked up close like a psycho. My eyes did the talking. *I love fighting. I love it like money.*

Dudes collected their things and left. Who wants to lose a tooth over French fries?

I lasted for almost a year, until I got called up to deal with a guy yelling at Tiburcia, one of the older ladies who worked the register. He was saying she fucked up his order. He'd already eaten most of his food, but he wanted his money back. He was throwing ice from the soda machine.

To me, he looked like a punk frat boy showing off for his girlfriend. I jumped the counter and pushed him. Up close, I saw I was wrong. I'd seen his eyes before. They stared back at me when I looked in the mirror.

He giggled.

"What are you laughing at, fool?"

I didn't even see him swing. He clocked me so hard everything sounded as though I'd gone under water. He caught me again on the way down.

I knew before I touched my face that I was gushing. People screamed.

The dude and his girlfriend ran out the door. A customer chased him and took pictures of his car but didn't get the plate. It took half an hour for the cops to show up.

When I got home, my father saw me and whistled. "Ooooh. Got you good."

I waited until he was done with his inspection and walked past him to the bathroom.

He called after me. "Stop pouting. You're all right."

I couldn't move my mouth. In the mirror, half my nose was normal and the other half looked like purple cauliflower. I texted the manager that I quit.

I lay in bed for three days, my face covered in aloe vera. My father never even checked in on me. I saw that he was more than just strict or shut off. There was something wrong with him. The stuff that had happened to him when he was a kid had fucked him up. I told myself I would be different.

I got a job at Manfred's Steakhouse, bussing tables. I met Carmen the first night I worked. She was two years out of high school, still living at home with her parents and her little brother. For the first few shifts, we kept it professional. I called her "ma'am."

One night she smiled. "You need to stop calling me that. I'm not the boss."

"Oh, I thought you were in charge here."

She laughed. "You're crazy."

Later, when it got slow, I caught her looking at me. She asked about my nose.

I knew better than to talk about fighting, that she was a different kind of person. "This? I tripped."

"Uh huh. I got a cousin like you. He's in jail."

"You're hurting my feelings."

"Oh, you have feelings?"

"Yes. But only for certain people."

She blushed. "You need to get back to work before you get me in trouble."

We went to dinner and watched *Deadpool 2*. I took her to see Snoop Dogg at the Stockton Arena. The first time I kissed her, I almost cried.

When I told her the truth about my nose, she asked, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you fight?"

I shrugged. To try to answer for real felt dangerous.

She pulled my head down against her chest. "Okay. But it needs to stop."

She was finishing the dental hygienist program at Delta. When she quit Manfred's to work for Dr. Vasquez, the place got boring. I was barely clearing ten an hour. I asked the manager if I could start waiting tables. He said he didn't think I was ready for customer service.

After Carmen and I moved into the park, we learned about the child molester. Theodore Percival Milman. He's on the predator website. *Sexual contact with a minor under fourteen*. The website doesn't say boy or girl, or how many times.

He works graveyards, no one knows where. Once or twice, in the evening, walking the trash to the dumpster, I've seen a light on in his trailer, heard him moving around. But I've never seen him in person. I like to think he's hiding because he's sorry, or afraid. Most people think he's

playing a waiting game. In this part of the park, there's only two families with kids, and the kids stay close. When they're outside, somebody's with them.

Once I got Carmen pregnant, I started to think about him more. I knew it was too soon to worry, that it would be a while before our son was old enough to be...I don't know how to say it...*attractive*. But I also knew it wasn't a good idea to stick around here for too long.

Hoping to start saving for a better place, I got a job in the warehouse at Fresh Harvest. I liked most of the guys I worked with, but I couldn't handle this dude, Ray. He was on the same level as me, another loader, and slow as hell. Late from lunch, late from breaks, always running his mouth. He could take an hour to off-load one truck. If a driver complained, he went slower. Even when it was a hundred out and the refrigeration was working overtime, he stood around, yakking about some trip he took with his motorcycle buddies. Steve, the warehouse manager, came out of his office. Steve couldn't yell at Ray the way he yelled at the rest of us because Ray's wife is the owner's niece. "How we doing, Ray?"

"We're good. About ten more minutes." Ray went back to yakking.

Steve got this pained look, fought back what he really wanted to say, and returned to his office. When the temperature alarm went off and triggered the back-up system, Steve came out again and clapped a couple times. "All right. Let's see if we can't finish this one." He waved for the rest of us to drop what we were doing and come help.

I told Ray to hurry the fuck up.

Ray looked shocked, confused. "What's your fucking problem?"

"Dude, move! The flats have *juice* running down the sides."

"Hey, Steve, you want to get this little bitch away from me before he gets hurt?"

When we moved in together, Carmen made me promise I wouldn't fight anymore. But I couldn't help myself. I punched Ray in the jaw. When he swung back, I hit him again and he dropped. The other guys broke it up and walked me out to my truck.

At home that afternoon, I got texts:

Nice swing, bro. LOL. About fucking time.

Just making sure you're all right. BTW, I fucking LOVED seeing dude get popped.

The Mexicans and Salvadorians stayed quiet. They had wives and kids, mouths to feed.

I left messages for Steve, apologizing.

He called back to tell me I was fired. "I hate to do it," he said. "You worked hard. It wasn't my decision."

"Dude is lazy," I said. "He costs the place money."

There was a long pause. "I've got no comment on that. I'm going to wish you good luck."

When I told Carmen, she wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't let me in the bedroom. We have a couch from Goodwill but it's small, so I slept on the floor. In the morning, I went to the door and put my head against it. "I'm sorry, baby."

"Is that how you're going to punish our child?"

"No, baby. Never." I wanted so badly to convince her, but I couldn't even convince myself. When the pressure built, the only way I knew how to release it was to punch someone.

"If you hit my child, I'll leave. You need to understand that."

"I do, baby. I won't."

"Stop calling me *baby*."

Two weeks later, I got a notice in the mail. Ray was pressing charges. When I called the public defender, the lady gave me two options. Plead guilty to misdemeanor simple battery and take probation or go to trial for assault. If I was convicted at trial, I'd serve time.

As part of my probation, I had to take anger management. My counselor, Larry, is a recovering alcoholic and a former Golden Gloves boxer. When he was younger, his friend accidentally spilled a beer on him and he snapped. He broke his friend's orbital bone with a right cross, made him legally blind in that eye.

These days Larry is all about stepping away. *Breathe now, talk later. Walk it until you drop it.*

"I'll try."

When he thought I was starting to buy in, he told me he'd call his connection at the fulfillment center. "But there's going to be bullshit there too. They're going to work your ass to the bone. Make no mistake, your supervisor will be a little Napoleon motherfucker with your name on a clipboard. What are you going to do when he starts barking?"

I shrugged.

"Come on, man. You've got to find the serenity."

I'm starting to sweat. Dusty Tercel, blue Acura, cat, lighted window, dumpster. Dusty Tercel, blue Acura.... I can see my breath. My eyes water and snot is running. But my mind is still spinning.

Off in the distance, the morning commute is picking up. Some people drive hours—Oakland, San Jose, Mountain View. Day after day, bumper to bumper. I'd be lucky to last a week. I only have to drive for thirty minutes and I'm worried.

I remind myself of the things Larry told me to say. *I have good transportation. I can work any shift, any time. I'm in a committed relationship and have a child on the way.*

"If they ask about the battery conviction, don't lie. Tell them you're embarrassed about it, ashamed. It's okay to be honest."

Dusty Tercel, blue Acura....

Out in the fields, some coyotes start up. The cat hunches low and turns tail. Far to the east, a stretch of ridge is touched with silver. The hum of traffic is louder, steadier. Through trailer windows, I hear talk radio, the whistle of a kettle. A neighbor on the back side of our row is sitting in his car, idling the engine. I nod.

He keeps his eyes on me.

At the dusty Tercel, I cut right and climb the steps. The trailer is warm and quiet. In the bedroom, Carmen is snoring softly.

She wakes up, sees me standing there, already dressed, and checks the time on her phone. "Is everything all right?"

Her voice in the morning, husky from sleep, sounds like my mother's.

I sit on the edge of the bed and find her hand. "Can I tell you something?"

She looks nervous. "Okay."

"I'm scared."

She pulls me down on the bed and wraps her arms around me. Normally, she has answers, knows the solution. Her silence tells me this is something she can't fix. All she can do is hold me. In five weeks the baby will be here. I need to figure things out on my own.

I remember a night when I was very young, lying with my mother on the couch while she watched one of her cop shows. Tucked under her arm, I felt safe. It was past my bedtime but I sensed that if I kept still and didn't fuss, she would let me stay.

I start crying.

Carmen holds me tighter, puts a hand on my cheek.

The tears come harder.

"It's okay. You're okay."

I make crazy pitiful sounds like an animal. I cry until my eyes hurt and my throat is dry. My hands are shaking.

Carmen whispers that she loves me and cradles my head.

I take some tissue from the nightstand and wipe my face. I've never cried like that in front of anyone. A little embarrassed, I make a small sound, a laugh.

As much as she can, Carmen understands. She gives me a sad little smile.

I lay for a while with my eyes closed, trying to calm down. When I open them, there is sunlight on the curtain. I have to be in Tracy in forty-five minutes.

My mind is still spinning and my life is still my life. There will be more bad days and nights. But for now the smile is enough.

I give Carmen a kiss, climb from the bed and find my keys.