

## Hells That People Make

I got tense, stayed tense over my yawning future. I'd been cut from Single A ball after a season and a half, then started a dumb job selling water. I listened to smart radio in the car to compensate, and heard about breast milk theory, fascinating travel, and whale songs. I heard about a natural gas deposit underneath a town in Pennsylvania that was accidentally set fire to years before. The natural gas, still lit, would burn until it ran out of itself, and decades would pass with a real life hell underfoot. All the people from the town quailed and jetted. They left hot dirt and the smoke drifting out of storm drains.

Getting cut had me out of sorts. Confidence sapped, the dream quashed, the next step a trembling one. Still, I'd managed success for months at the water gig. When I'd told my dad I was drafted to the minors he said, "Yeah, but what are you going to do for a living?" When I told my dad I got cut he said, "Get a job and make yourself indispensable. That's the ticket."

Clients thought my minor league past was fancy, but they didn't know I was only a middle-relief sidearm lefty that blew some big games when the scouts were out. Now I woke dreadful every morning. I'd grown suspicious of sleep, as if my slack body and dark head were onto something I wasn't, but I managed to shake it before getting out the door.

Then I had an afternoon appointment in the suburbs and pulled into a half-swank subdivision with a golf course in the middle of it. The guard was asleep in his shack. I took the first right, and on the left side of the street in front of a two-story brick job were shrub topiaries. An elephant rested its foot on a saguaro cactus, neither expressing a manner of misplacement. Matching giraffes flanked the front door. A tall and menacing Mickey Mouse with no face stretched out his hand. Unsettled, I kept driving. There was a pattern in the houses. One was

brick built, and the next laid over with siding, then brick and siding again and on and on. All the houses were a shade of earth. There was a sand colored joint with white shutters getting shingled by immigrants. I turned two corners deeper into the repeat of building materials and paint shades and saw another sand colored joint with white shutters getting shingled by immigrants. A feeling chased through my gut, one of my nerves gone rotten, and I was thinking about the kind of hells that people make.

I pulled into the driveway for my appointment and slammed the car in park. The yard was clipped and hedged precisely. I wanted to do something nasty, as if to get back at a person or thing, but I couldn't figure who or what I was mad at. I chewed my thumbnail and looked out the windshield over the house's roof at wispy clouds like cat scratches. I stretched my hands and shook my head hard enough to pop my cheeks. I grabbed my duffle bag stitched with the company's logo and headed for the door.

Inside there was spare and modern decoration and gorgeous and bored Ronnie, mother of three across the table from me and my artisanal water sourced from a local spring. She propped her head on her right hand. Her long and dark hair reached the tabletop, and she held her left hand out in front of her, stared lazily at the carat diamond ring on her thin finger. She asked, "Well, how does this work? Do you have samples?"

For clarity, women had never before been an issue. I was every bit the cocksure ball player until I was no longer a ball player. I could fake it for the job, fall into my old rhythms of charm because money depended on it. But I'd been such a sad sack during post-league life, so whipped by losing the dream, that encouraging a woman to sleep with me, or hold my hand, or hold a conversation about something outside of hydration was bad odds. And Ronnie had dark, smart eyes that lit me up and a way about her that said she was living just as shitty as I was. I

read them as saying she could fill something in me. I wanted to be all smiles and big pecker for her, to sling my duffle bag onto the table, pour her a taste of tasteless water and ask her to consider please the mineral content and subtle play of calcium against iron. Then to feel her long hair brush my face with her above me and looking into me. But I had such a dragging feeling that day that what I had burning in me already for Ronnie couldn't muster the bluster. I poured her a shot of water and in utter defeat said what I'd wanted to say since I started the job.

"It's just water."

She stared at me a long beat, her face registering nothing until she surprised me with an honest laugh. She said, "Sold."

Suspect, I said, "I'm not that good at my job."

"No. I just hear mostly nonsense all the time. Candor is good."

She glanced at me for a second and raised one corner of her mouth then looked away. Just a touch of a smile. I felt like I'd won something.

She twirled the bottle of water on the table. "So, what?" she asked. "Am I just buying bottles?"

"No. We've got cooler setups and monthly packages for delivery and replacement and a bunch of other...stuff."

She stood up and said, "I'll take whatever is expensive." Then she headed for the kitchen, and I heard tinkling glass, and she came back with a bottle of vodka. She said, "To celebrate."

I just stared at her.

She said, "All the money you'll make off me."

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Ronnie started pouring bought water down the drain. That got me over there a few times a month, and we'd get wobbly on her liquor because she was trying out day drinking now that the last of her kids was in school full-time, and for the first time in twelve years Ronnie didn't have a little one at her ankles, and for the first time in thirty years she was completely alone with herself for long stretches, and she wasn't sure who herself was. We'd gab at the kitchen table. I was a puddle of melted me around her, I had it so bad. One time she put her hand on her knee, and I wished I was a knee. She told me a story once.

"Every year we go to Gulf Shores," she said.

"I've been there," I told her.

She flipped her hand. "Who hasn't?" She poured herself another shot and said, "I buy a new pair of sunglasses every year when we get down there. Before we do anything, I buy cheap sunglasses. I've got every pair stashed away in a box for memories or whatever, and I took the box out and looked through them yesterday."

She let her hands fall on the table and rattle our vodka then kept on. "Every year I tell myself that who I am on each vacation is governed by those stupid sunglasses. Pink means I'll be girly or something. Frilly means I'll be carefree. Then I lay the fuckers out all together, and they're all the exact same. Thick arms, round lenses, same exact frames."

She put her head on the table and let her arms dangle down to her legs. She sighed and said, "I mean, some of them have little silver things tacked on the corners." She sighed again. "It's mostly just the colors that are different."

I looked at her heaped in her chair. I said, "I don't see how this is a crisis."

She popped up, hair flying, hands flying. “It’s absolutely a crisis.” She looked out the window and said, “Just say you understand.”

I told her about what I heard on the radio that day about a drive-by elephant shooting at a circus in Tupelo. Bored kids in a ratty truck rattled off a .38 and struck a big sweet animal in the neck. They said the elephant was fine. They compared small caliber pistols to bee stings.

It made me think about my dad. How he got bird crazy for his mid-life crisis and strung up gourds for purple martins. He had a high time of it until the starlings chased his little martins away, so he woke up before sunup every morning and carried a shotgun to the yard and waited on the starlings to start flying before he crushed their flitting bodies with bird shot. One time I went with him just to be around him. He said, “At work they ask why I smell like gunpowder every morning.”

He raised his gun, led a starling about to alight, and pulled the trigger. The bird folded up and dove to the dirt. He cleared his throat and said, “It’s the only time of day that’s worthwhile.”

I thought but didn’t say, This is some horror movie shit, Dad. I sat down, looked at birds on the ground and asked, “This?”

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A couple months into mine and Ronnie’s thing and I was rippled with confusion and feelings. Anytime I was away from her I felt like a sure enough dope. But shit, man, when I was with her. It felt like college ball, when I was better than everybody.

One day I yanked two jugs of water from my trunk and carried them on my shoulders, curled in my arms. I bee-bopped to the front door and swatted the kick plate with my foot. There

were plants everywhere while I waited. Green things were squared off. Pink flowers nodded at my feet. I heard clicking footsteps and ginned up my best smile as the door swung open. A man stood there, trim in a tailored suit, short and blond hair balding a bit, but one of those dudes that looks best with some age on him. He had a great, big watch. He looked me up and down. I kept smiling, and instinct made me flex my biceps. I recognized him from the pictures around the house.

He asked, "Water guy?"

And nothing more, I sadly thought, but said instead, "Yes, sir. Good morning."

He looked me up and down again. "Awful familiar kick you gave the door."

My smile dissolved. "Excuse me?" I asked.

He shook his head and brushed his pant leg. "Damn expensive water you got."

I smiled again and said, "Aww, now. I'm cutting you a deal."

He shook his watch free of his cuff and checked the time. "I'm late," he said. "Ronnie will help you." Then he turned toward the door and shouted, "I'm gone." There was no answer for him. He shouted again into the house. Ronnie's voice came back with one word. "Yeah."

He closed his eyes and breathed deep, grinned without teeth and said, "All right." He hustled past me down the walkway and clicked open his shining BMW then scooted down the street.

I slid through the open door and found my girl scrambling eggs. She looked up at me, and instinct made me flex my biceps.

"You want eggs?" she asked.

I said, “No, thanks,” as I put the water down beside her cooler. I sat at the kitchen table, our friendship easy enough that neither of us talked until she finished cooking her breakfast, sat down and took a few bites. She said, “He’s pretty square, huh.”

I shrugged. “He seems okay.”

She raised her eyebrows while she chewed then swallowed. She said, “He’s very okay.” She looked up at something on the wall and said, “He’s been wearing visors lately. And our middle kid. She’s chubby, so he drops hints about her dieting.” She shook her head and set back to eating.

I got bold because I had to in this slim window. I asked, “Do you love him still?”

She squinted at me. “I do. My family, too.”

“Well.”

“Well, what?”

I went to the kitchen, got her vodka from the cabinet and myself a glass. I came back, poured a tall shot and drank it.

My heart made noise in my ears, and I tapped my fingers. I asked, “You think he’d mind you sporting around with a younger man?”

She actually laughed at me. She wiped her mouth and said, “There’s no sporting here.”

I nodded my head and looked out the window. “We’re just friends, right?”

“Yes,” she said. “Friends. Don’t make this a thing.”

“I’m not making this a thing.”

She said, “I need a friend right now. Everybody I know just talks about school districts.”

I watched a squirrel out the window and said, “I need a friend, too.”

We settled into a foggy silence and started drinking. I made some jokes to clear the air, and soon enough we were back to good enough, and soon after we were thrashed.

She said, "I got married too young."

"How young?"

"Eighteen," she said and hiccupped. "Kid one at nineteen."

"Jesus," I told her.

Later I said, "I've got no prospects. Just a silly job and suburb life one day if I'm lucky. Baseball on the TV."

She smiled and spread her arms out to encompass her furniture and pre-fab home and immaculate landscaping and the whole neighborhood.

I said, "Bird murder." I sighed real big and said, "I miss the game. It's hard to get amped about water."

Later I carried her to the couch and put a blanket on her. She said, "I got to sober up. I got to pick kids up."

I brought her some water because I was good for little else and said, "It's only eleven."

"I always wanted to burgle someplace," she said.

"You've got everything in the world, and we need to stop drinking so much."

She said, "I'm serious. I don't know myself at all. I've never been in a clutch situation."

I didn't get to tell her that I had bad history with high stakes because she drifted off, and I stood there like a clown and watched her sleep.

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One day an old lady wanted to kick me out of her house, but her manners overrode. Still-drunk me spilled water on her carpet. I told her it wouldn't stain anything. I'd become ineffectual. I couldn't stay away from Ronnie like I should have, but my early jubilation was just gone and replaced with a sick ache for scraps of attention.

When I walked outside the old lady's house, the sun shocked me like a bomb. I squinted, and across the suburban street a shit-eating grin was waxing his Porsche. He saw me suffering in the light and waved. "Hot today," he said.

I smiled, wavered, wound-up, and sidearmed my keys into my car door. They popped against the metal and left pocks of chipped paint. He stared at me like a goof. I picked the keys up, opened my car, and left.

I drove off though the neighborhood, found the main road with a wide ditch separating the one ways. Ugly ducks with red splotches on their faces lazed around in the shadeless heat. These weren't the pretty ducks in the ponds in the park. These were ditch ducks, and I wanted to sit with them and have them nip breadcrumbs from my palm.

On the radio a man with a soft voice was talking about Robert E. Lee's surrendering the South. He said Lee dressed in his best grays, red sash, white gloves, and long sword. He rode his horse named Traveller out past the front lines waving a white flag, then Lee alone met Grant and his covey of generals in Appomattox. They were all gentlemanly, and Lee signed the papers. I pictured my father on the horse when the radio man said Lee rode back to his men, and they were gathered along the road cheering him like he'd won the whole damn thing. I pulled over and sobbed for ten minutes thinking about relief.

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Ronnie had said she wanted to burgle, and I'm not one to argue. She'd brought it up drunk, and I left it alone. She brought it up again, so we planned a caper.

"I don't want to steal anything," she said. "I just want to look around and see if I can do it."

"Sure, great, yeah."

"Ever since I was a kid, I always thought, cat burglar, that's it for me," she said.

"No explanation needed."

"We're not going to get caught," she said.

"I'm not the one with things to lose, buddy."

We watched the grass grow in the morning sun. I asked, "What if I didn't do this?"

She looked askance at me, stubbed out her first-ever cigarette and threw it behind a bush.

"That would hurt my feelings."

I nodded my head back and forth and waved some of her drifted smoke from the air.

There were leaves in the yard now. I said, "I used to chew tobacco. That's what we did in baseball."

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I pulled up to a street corner under a wash of streetlight, and Ronnie drifted out from behind an oak tree. On the drive over radio was discussing the fat politician that got his stomach stapled and whether or not it was political maneuvering and what message that sent to Americans at large and curiosity over whether he'll keep the weight off and what changes may be reflected in

his wardrobe. It was such nonsense that I almost screamed at the radio. There were more important matters. I was dying in love.

Ronnie got in and directed me a couple of turns. She said, "I've been casing this joint."

We were dressed all in black and parked in a shadow down the street from a taupe split-level only a few blocks away from Ronnie's. I was a stiff knot of nerves, had driven the car like my arms were sticks. I expected to splinter to pieces when I got out. I asked, "Can't we go home and concern ourselves with small things to get through the day? What if somebody wakes up in there?"

She turned toward me and quietly slipped a ski mask over her face then smiled through the mouth opening. Before she bailed out the car, she took the glove off her hand, then the glove off my hand, and put our naked skin together so that I could feel what I'd dreamed of feeling and feel that jail may be worth it. She leaned in close enough that I could see her lips put together the words, "Don't be scared."

My lower back tingled. Then she dropped my hand and left the car. No time to think about it, so off I went, too. We threaded through many shadows, skulking outside the glowing orbs of streetlights. Approaching the house, we bent over low and ran up the driveway. The wooden gate keeping people like us out the backyard was locked.

Out of breath and whispering, Ronnie said, "Give me a lift."

I said, "This is so dumb."

"Bottom of the ninth," she said.

"What?" I asked.

"Bottom of the ninth. Come on."

I bent down and let her step into my hand. After her, I heaved myself over and we hid behind an oleander. There were ill tended shrubs like mottled balls of play-dough and banana trees with mostly dead leaves bobbing in a corner. Ronnie made army hand motions that said, Quiet, Down, Crawl, Follow me. On our bellies, we eased toward the back door until a neighbor's motion light flickered to life on the other side of the fence. I just about levitated, made a screaming face but no sound. Ronnie slapped my arm and put a finger over her lips. I grabbed her gloved hand and whispered, "I'm scared to death."

She put a hand over her mouth and trembled head to foot. Confused, I watched her riot quietly until the light went off. She allowed herself a few chirps of laughter then she stood up casually. The light came back on, but she didn't care. She walked to the door and unlocked it with a key out her pocket. She turned the kitchen lights on, and I kept still in the dirt, eyes wide, a couple sugar ants crawling over my face.

I stood up, brushed the dirt off me and walked in. Ronnie had her head in the china cabinet. She still had her ski mask on. She looked back at me and smiled.

"Goddamn keys?" I asked.

She smiled again and said, "I knew these guys were out of town. I found the key under a flower pot up front last night when I checked the place out."

"What kind of joke is this?" I asked.

She took off her mask and looked genuinely confused that I questioned her. "You don't dive into crime without soft practice," she said. "And I don't really like these people. They've got a mean kid."

I sat down at the table and flipped my hands and said, "Well, of course."

I looked around the kitchen that was eerily similar to Ronnie's, same color shades, a few pieces of the same salon art and sconces hanging on the walls. She saw me looking and asked, "What do you think about this kitchen?"

I said, too loud, "This kitchen fucking sucks."

She looked around, thoughtful, considering. She said, "It really does."

I folded my arms and rocked back and forth in my chair. "What now?" I asked.

She turned to me and shrugged. "Snoop some, I guess."

We walked quietly through the house together, room to room, picking up things and showing them to the other. She found a cabinet with eight jugs of bleach in it. I found a baseball bat behind a bedside table. She found a half-pack of cigarettes behind the canned vegetables in a high cupboard. We found three sips of whiskey left in a bottle in the garage. We drank it at the kitchen table and lingered over the new flavor, ate an apple from the fruit basket, rearranged the houseplants, did the few dishes left in the sink, sank into the sofa, talked in different voices.

Before we left Ronnie checked herself in a mirror by the back door. She said, "I've got this same damn mirror at my house."

I watched her fluff her hair and imagined her husband watching her do the same thing from a corner of the house he bought for her, thought about her kids' hands on her ankles.

I asked her, "Why me?"

She didn't even look away from the mirror, didn't take her eyes off her hands in her hair. She said, "You're safe and you're sweet."

"Safe?"

"Yeah. Safe."

I sat there, dead in the middle of our crime spree, and almost said that they called me back to the farm league, and I was leaving tomorrow for Phoenix or Tampa or wherever. I almost said nothing and just left. But I what I did was ask her like a brat, “Do you think you look any different in this one?”

End