

Blood Buzz

He came stumbling through the open bedroom door and bumped the door farther open with his shoulder. He navigated the ceaseless tumbling world of shadows and feints of light that filled the inside of the inside of his shirt.

He was raising it above his head, and trying to get it off, but he had gotten stuck, arms angled upward, and in that quiet all he heard through half-open windows was the pulsing of crickets and the hushed roar of traffic on a distant highway.

He slammed his hip into the corner of what he guessed was his dresser and muttered Shit in a slurred, stretched way, and only the edge of his martini-mixed mind noticed.

His wife moaned awake, enveloped in a cradle of shadows on the bed. "What're you doing?" she asked.

"Mmmmputting on a show."

"A show."

"Uh-huh."

A pause. "It's almost one in the morning, Matt."

"Surprise show, Karen."

She turned over and her words came muffled and slow as she descended the silver rings back into dreams. "Water," she added.

"What?" he asked, and pushed his elbows around inside his shirt, the cross-stitching of thin thread filtering in the wash of moonlight that ran radiant along the wainscotted walls.

Matt twisted more and his ankles crossed, and he dropped with a "Wha—" as he toppled his 6'4" lanky frame and thudded on the hardwood. He laid there for a moment before he remembered to say, "Ow."

There was a rustling of sheets and pillows, a few springs creaking within the bed as weight moved over it.

"Matt."

He was surrounded by his shirt and had by now dropped the hope of escape, his breathing slow and calm and his thoughts, the few of them there were among the murk, thinned to almost nothing. Sleep sidled up beside him. It seemed kind.

There came a pinch at his shirt, near his nose. "You awake in there?" his wife asked.

"Technically."

"For much longer?"

"Threeeeeee-two minutes."

He heard her roll off the bed and then her feet were beside his head. She teased and tugged the shirt and finally peeled it off over his wrists. She was then standing there with his inside-out black T-shirt which she tossed on the quilt.

She took him by the elbow and led him out into the hall and into the kitchen. Tall arched windows, a tiny chandelier, wooden stools no one used at a bar no one remembered asking for.

His wife plopped him on a chair at a glass table and soon had placed a forty-ounce bottle of water infused with berry-tasting vitamins and pantothenic acid and niacin.

He drank half of it and stopped to breathe. Then he drank more. She pulled down the hem of her white T-shirt and sat on the chair opposite and pulled one flanneled knee up to her chest and laced her fingers about her shin. "Is this about Brian?" she asked.

Matt lifted his water off the bamboo coaster, revealing a dragonfly imprint, and sipped and put the bottle down, concealing the dragonfly. "Everybody looooooves magicians," he said.

"Come on."

"Nope, everybody loves 'em. They claim they don't, that it's all fake, and magicians are annoying, but you get one guy like Brian at a dinner party telling people the card they chose, and every last one of 'em wants to suck his magic dick."

"I doubt it's that magical."

"He probably has vanishing semen. Won't ever get a girl pregnant."

"His wife and daughter might refute that."

"Anyway, when's the last time I made someone smile? At work, I mean."

"Your boss—"

"Someone I didn't just make a bunch of money for. I make them a bunch of money, they like me. I don't make them money, they don't like me. That's not... a thing."

She adjusted herself in her seat and tapped her pink fingernail on the glass table then told him to stand up.

"I might fall over," he said.

"You'll get up." She was now standing and walking out of the room, down the hall.

"NOW," she called.

Matt stared at the water and mumbled, "You heard her," and chugged and rose and went into the foyer. His wife had already pulled her sweatshirt on, and now tossed him one of his.

She went back down the hall and he called after her and asked where she'd gone. She reappeared holding the water bottle, full again, and handed it to him and pulled open the front door and stepped in the very last leanings of moonlight.

She went around the side of the house, to a white-picketed fence that was smashed through. The garden beyond it was chewed into ruts and graffitied by tire

tracks, dotted by vast showerings of soil, flowers wrenched twisting from their beds, splinters of the fence still lying among grassblades.

She went to a stone bench that had blueed over time and crouched and looked at him as she slid her hands under it. He walked over and crouched beside her and through the shifting axes and fluctuations of gravity (he was still drunk-ish), they righted the bench and sat on it.

She looked at the split wooden beam of the porch, jagged pieces poking out, where her car had rammed into it, a drunken mistake. She rubbed her knuckles and looked at him and said, "You remember that?"

"It was three days ago."

"Seeing Jenny just threw me so far off."

"Well, yeah, she made millions and you married me."

"Not the point."

"Which one's not the point?"

His wife stared pensively at the wall. "What did Brian say about my scarf?" she asked.

"When?"

"Tonight, when we got there."

"He said you were courageous for wearing it, why?"

"Asshole magicians."

“What’s wrong with—”

“Really?”

“No, I’m very aware of why that compliment is offensive.”

Matt rose off the bench and staggered through the back door and returned with a full martini in hand. Karen groaned subtly. He picked his way over the torn-up yard and resettled on the bench and sipped and asked, “We send Isla to Sharon’s or Shannon’s tonight? Or Jennifer’s.”

“Sha...nnon,” Karen said.

“You don’t know, either.”

“We’ll find out when whoever-it-is calls to let us know that our child stole another car.”

“Isla’s seven years old.”

“She stole a car.”

“She took keys—”

“Stole keys.”

Matt took a breath. “She stole keys and stole our car out of our very own driveway and took it on a mammoth joyride to the nearest Stop sign. Where she sat and waited patiently until a cop asked her why she was sitting so patiently, to which she responded, ‘Because the sign still says to stop’. It was adorable, not concerning.”

His wife's face fell forward into her hands and she spoke muffled words into the huddle of shadows in her palms. "Brian inferred all kinds of shit about our parenting after that one, too."

"Inferred or implied?"

"Which one makes him a bigger asshole?"

Matt drained the remainder of his martini and set the glass down with a clink that cut its small sound from the moonlight. He rose and his balance slid off-center, and he placed his knee against the bench to steady himself. She raised her head and turned to him.

"Are we in a rut?" she asked.

"Oh, no doubt."

"Just making sure."

Matt smiled a weak smile. His vision blurred and stationary objects had begun slipping from their station to duplicate in weaker form the objects from whence they came, and to seize the axis of the world and send it spinning with a great heave that threw star-shapes from their places, myths and legends disassembling and scattering across the black.

"Idea," he said.

"You mean you have an idea or you need one?"

"Have," he said. "Small idea. Itty bitty idea."

"A drunk downplaying an explosion. This should be fun."

"Not an explo-..." Matt trailed off, "...actually..."

"Oh God, what're you thinking?"

He shook himself from the reverie. "Member how we got out of our first rut?"

"What was the first rut?"

"Not sure. But remember Tommy Chu's?"

She continued slinging a cold unchanging stare over her shoulder at him.

"Tommy Chu's," she repeated.

"Yes."

"When we were sophomores in college."

"I was thinking of the second day after graduation. That one."

Her smile shot out. She hurried out of the garden, around the house. He followed her and waited. She disappeared inside and emerged, thumbing her silver-beaded purse strap onto her shoulder as she extracted keys.

The headlights winked. Their SUV unlocked, the sedan that destroyed the yard still in the shop. "Where's the nearest gas station?" she asked, as they got in.

"Mmm," Matt said, and then pointed in both directions with crossed arms, and looked at her. "What? I'm technically correct."

"And technically wrong."

"Metaphor for life."

"No, it isn't."

"Is to me."

"You've climbed down Alky Mountain but you're still really enjoying the Buzzed Base Camp."

"Friendly people here."

They went to a gas station and filled a red plastic gas container with a yellow nozzle, and filled another, then placed them in the trunk of their SUV. She pulled out onto the highway. "He's just down here, right?" she asked.

"Off Veranda, Ave, yeah," he said. "Quarter of a mile."

"If his mailbox is still pink and glittery..."

She zoomed down through the dark as real bats flew up from below the rim of the world and streaked soundlessly overhead and vanished behind the fuzzy arms of pines.

She turned onto Veranda and drove until the headlights struck a pale pink mailbox with glitter all down the wooden pole.

They switched off their headlights and hustled around through the side yard, where they stopped, and she splashed the gasoline in a specific pattern and he stood watch near the back door, able to angle a view inside, just enough to glimpse the family huddled on a couch. Including one specific person.

"They see us?" Karen asked.

“No,” Matt said. “But it looks like we sent Isla to Jennifer’s house. Which is also, of course, Brian’s house. I think they’re watching *Up*. Wait—what’s that Pixar movie where they go inside the girl’s head?”

“*Inside Out*,” Karen said, and her head fell forward, resting against the heel of her hand. The air smelled like dew on grass, like summer midnight. She lifted her head and swiped a hand through her hair and said, “Fuck it. If Isla asks, if she even finds out it was us, we did this as a joke that adults like playing on other adults.”

“That lie’s gonna unravel after question two.”

“Then we’ll distract her before she reaches question two. Talk about car theft, she’ll love that. You wanna light this lawn on fire or not?”

“It was my idea,” Matt said.

She finished sprinkling out the last of the gas. He took out a box of matches purchased from the gas station and flicked the flame into life with his thumbnail, and then tossed the match tumbling onto the grass. The gasoline hit. The fire spread. It was mere seconds before the fire had chewed up the grass and left huge burning letters:

TA-DA

Matt and Karen had already gotten back into the SUV and turned around and sped back up the road. Karen’s phone rang. She held it up to show Matt. “Brian, Dad of Jennifer.”

“Hope we didn’t traumatize her.”

“Jennifer?”

“No, Isla,” Matt said. “Jennifer has a magician as a father, she’s already traumatized.”

Karen let the call go to voicemail. They drove, and talked, and her hands that had felt inside them the first stabs of arthritis wheeled and dove and flexed as she reran what they’d just done, depicting the upward rush of flame from cool grass, the swirls of smoke, the fire-fluttering *TA-DA* burned across the lawn of a man who lived a life of misdirection and trickery and slow reveals.

“Still feel we’re in a rut?” she asked.

“Not particularly.”