

Nixon's Dead

Focused on Myoko's thin lips and slight overbite, Cole clawed at the linoleum searching for the towel he kept beside the futon. There was a heavy snowstorm two days ago, the end of May, and the snow melted in a few hours but the floor was freezing, sent goosebumps up his arm and shrank his nipples. His eyes wandered from Myoko's lips, to her dimpled earlobe, to the guy being shot in the head with *Holiday in Cambodia* written below him. The twin tigers jumping over Dali's naked wife. A Doonesbury cartoon. He'd covered the walls and most of the ceiling with posters, newspaper clippings, pages ripped from magazines and postcards. A box elder bug landed on his arm. Its legs and feelers tickled as it crawled down his bicep. He flicked it off with his bandaged hand—his broken pinky was held straight with a metal brace and wrapped with a bandage that twisted all the way up his forearm. The towel was under his khakis, stiff and crunchy, hadn't been washed in weeks. He wiped his groin and handed it to Myoko.

“This place is too small,” she said. She scrunched the towel between her thighs.

“It's cozy,” he said. He didn't need a lot of room, didn't want it, preferred it this way. And he didn't have to deal with neighbors. His shack was in a grass field, his closest neighbor over thirty yards away. But mainly he'd rented it to be closer to Myoko and it was the only place he could afford. Only a couple blocks away, she still lived with her parents.

“It's dusty and smells like mold,” she said.

He sniffed the air, smelled cream cheese. “All I smell is us.”

"I hate our smell." She stared over her shoulder at her reflection on the TV screen.

"Do you like my ass?"

"I love your ass."

"Do I have the best ass in the world?" She spanked her right ass cheek.

"It's not a competition," he said.

"I want the best ass."

"You've got the best ass."

She curled in a ball with her head on his belly. "I'm hungry."

"Me too." The fridge on the far wall growled like it was alive. Sometimes Cole yelled at it. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and ran his wet fingers through Myoko's hair, rough and crunchy like dry grass. The bleach made it worse. He rubbed a strand of his own hair in comparison, softer and finer, Asian hair was what she called it, straight and black. She'd made him cut it off and donate it to little girls with Leukemia, but he was growing it out again. His bangs were just long enough to slick behind his ears.

"I should move in with you," she said.

"You just said it was too small."

"We'll move somewhere else." She stood up and rubbed the towel between her legs. She'd plucked out all her pubic hair and made him trim his own. He got a little hard watching her rub herself. She caught him staring and smiled. He looked away, looked under the sleeping bag he'd nailed over the window and saw thick yellow clouds swirl in the sky.

"I don't want to move again," he said.

She playfully slapped his face with the wet towel before dropping it on the floor. She grabbed her panties and shivered when she stepped on the linoleum, then ran on her tiptoes to the bathroom. It was on the other side of the room next to the fridge. She left the door open.

Cole wiped his nose and cheek on the bedspread. His stereo flashed eleven-thirty. He kept it on the flimsy metal bookcase beside his futon along with all his CDs. The few books he owned were scattered on the floor, most of them paperback sci-fi.

“When do you have to be back?” He yelled over the growl of the fridge. It burped and went silent and he felt like he'd won an argument.

“Six,” she yelled back at him.

“It think it's six now.”

“I've got a few minutes.”

He grabbed his boxers off the floor, covered in pictures of Daffy Duck kissing Bugs Bunny in drag. Myoko had given them to him for Valentine's Day. Bugs Bunny was in a tight red dress and yellow wig. Cole kicked his legs in the air and slid on the boxers, and then he turned on the TV with his big toe. The thirty-inch Magnavox sat on an aluminum tray table and wobbled as he flipped through the channels with his toe. Nixon had died over a month ago and the media was still mourning him on nearly every channel.

“Do you go door to door?” he said.

“Sometimes,” she said. She flushed the toilet and came out of the bathroom wearing panties. “I usually work the phones.”

“Telemarketers are assholes.”

"I'm not selling anything." She turned off the TV and pulled the bed sheet over her legs. "We take donations."

"How much does it pay?" He found the remote under a collection of Kafka's short stories and turned the TV back on. Myoko gave him a look, narrowed her already narrow eyes, and he muted it.

"I don't do it for the money." She rubbed her left breast. It was slightly larger than her right. It was his favorite, just large enough that he couldn't cup the whole thing with one hand. He practically ignored the other one, only fondled it when she said it was lonely.

"Why do you do it?" he said.

"Rub my shoulders." She turned her back to him.

"I can only do it with one hand." He ran his fingers up her spine and fondled a mole he hadn't noticed before. It was hard and round like a pot seed.

"I'm making a difference," she said, "taking a stand."

"What are we trying to save now?"

"Mountain lions."

"Are they endangered?" He looked at the silent TV. Richard Nixon was giving a speech. He looked dead with his gray skin and sunken eyes. He clung to the podium as if he couldn't stand without it. The camera panned over Reagan, Bush, Ford and their wives. Even the Carters were there. They sat behind Nixon, smiled, laughed and clapped their hands when he paused. Nancy was in a white dress that sparkled like a disco ball and was wearing the same blonde wig as Bugs Bunny.

"I hate it when you watch TV," Myoko said.

“Sorry.” Cole rubbed his palm down her back. A box elder bug landed on the TV and circled around Nixon's head.

“Why don't you want to live with me?” she said.

“I never said that.”

“Not in those words.” She leaned her head back on his shoulder and he slid his hands between her thighs. A strong wind rattled the shack and he wondered if it was raining outside.

“I need to shave,” he said. He scratched his furry chin.

“Let me do it.” She pinched the hairs on his chin and he jerked away.

“You'll cut me.”

“You don't trust me?”

“Have you ever shaved anyone's face?” He rubbed his chin.

The ground shook and the TV and lights flashed out. It felt like a small earthquake. Salt Lake had them every few years, little tremors—a fault line ran through the valley and any day now the big one would take them all out. Myoko clutched him and dug her nails into his back, her breasts jiggling against his belly.

“What is it?” she said.

“Sounds like a jet.”

“Hold me.”

The steel bookcase fell on the futon, scraping his left thigh and flinging CDs across the floor. His TV shimmied off the tray table. He pushed Myoko off him and leaped over the bookcase to catch it, slipped on a CD case and caught himself with his

good hand. His bandaged fingers brushed the corner of the TV as it toppled off the tray and crashed screen first to the floor. With a heavy sigh he fell back on the futon.

Myoko grabbed her jeans and shirt from the pile by the futon.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“I’m leaving.” She stood up clutching her clothes to her chest. The window exploded behind her. The sleeping bag puffed out like a parachute, tore free of the wood frame and swallowed her whole. She screamed and flailed inside the navy blue sack. Over her head Cole saw a tornado rip through the tall grass. It was skinny, only a few feet wide, like a long bony finger scraping a line across the Earth. He grabbed Myoko and used her as a shield against the glass and dirt that sprayed through the broken window. She beat his chest through the blue nylon. He fell back under her weight and rolled across the linoleum, tried to hold on to her but couldn’t. His knees slammed into the cupboards below the sink and his face smacked into the fridge. The cold metal vibrated against his cheek and he couldn’t tell if the motor had started up again or if the fridge was just shaking along with everything else. Using the fridge’s handle for leverage he pulled himself up. Myoko was crawling on her belly towards the door with the sleeping bag wrapped around her waist. He grabbed her ankles, yanked her into the bathroom and closed the door behind them, locking it.

“Let me out.” She pounded her fists on the linoleum and kicked at his shins.

“It’s a tornado,” he said.

“There are no tornadoes in Utah.” She lunged forward and grabbed the doorknob with both hands. He tossed her in the standup shower and she ripped down the shower curtain trying to stand up. The wind blew under the bathroom door nipping at his heels

and he jumped in the shower and curled up next to her. She buried her face in his chest. Dust poured in from cracks around the door and other places he couldn't see burning his eyes and nostrils. He wrapped the shower curtain over his head and held Myoko tight.

The shaking stopped after several long seconds but Cole waited a minute or two before pulling off the curtain. He coughed and waved the dust away from his face. His bladder ached. Myoko was still clinging to him. He pushed her off, stepped out of the shower and took a long piss—he couldn't remember the last time he'd pissed—then flushed and watched the thick yellow clouds spin down the drain.

“Hurry up,” she said. “I got to go too.” She jumped up and down in the shower

“Give me a second.” He scraped his teeth across his tongue and spit in the toilet. Dust settled around his feet. He grabbed the toilet paper off the floor, wiped the piss off the seat and flushed again. The bandage and metal brace had come off his hand. His pinky was throbbing.

Myoko opened the bathroom door and Cole stood behind her, his chin resting on her head. His futon was sticking out the broken window like someone had tried to pull it out and gave up half way. Most of his posters and clippings had been ripped from the walls, revealing the turquoise wallpaper he'd made a point to hide, and were stuck in the crevices between the futon and the window and scattered across the floor along with his CDs and books. There was dirt everywhere, and grass, and leaves from the giant Chinese elm up the hill from his shack. His aluminum tray table was stuck in the wall.

Myoko ducked under his arm and ran back to the toilet. She laid paper on the seat before sitting down. He walked out of the bathroom and looked for holes in the ceiling and walls but found none—a board was missing from the corner molding but he vaguely

remembered that from before. He stepped on a shard of glass, yelped and grabbed his foot.

“You okay?” she said.

“No.” He picked the glass out of his foot, right below his big toe and flicked it back on the floor. He thought he heard a crowd cheer and imagined Nixon falling dead on the podium but it was his neighbors from down the street yelling outside. His TV was on its side under his futon. He limped over to it, picking up CDs along the way. A thin crack divided the screen vertically. It was no good to him now.

Myoko stayed in the bathroom like she was afraid to leave it. She wore the blue sleeping bag like a toga with her right breast showing, smaller than her left but rounder, perkier, the nipple a little darker. It was his new favorite. He reached out to grab it from fifteen feet away.

“The toilet won't flush,” she said.