

Melon

The guy sitting across from the battered wood overlay table is the first person that I have told about the cancer. For that reason, I really wish that he would stop puffing on the unlit cigarette in his lips and say something. He's the only silent thing in this whole bar and the concentrated stare he is giving his own hands is making me squirm anxiously as my face and ears burn. As the silence stretches on, I begin to wonder if I even said what I think I said. I've rehearsed it in my head so many times, it's hard to know for sure.

Finally, he raises his thin arm and brushes his shaggy brown hair back with his fingers, and then abruptly drops his limb, lifelessly back to the table, knocking hard once onto the surface with his knuckles.

"Well, shit," he exclaims.

"Yeah," I say.

"I mean, I'm just really surprised. You really don't look like you have cancer."

"Thank you?"

"I'm sorry. I mean you have your hair. When will you lose that pretty hair?"

Is he being condescending? Yes, of course he is. He holds a bent unlit cigarette in his hand. It's the same one he's been holding all night.

"I won't. I'm not going to do any kind of treatment. No point."

"I see. How do you feel?"

"Great."

The waitress with the frizzy hair brings two more beers in bottles. He tucks the cigarette back behind his ear, reclines in his stool as he brings the longneck to his lips.

"So, then when will you die?" he asks.

"When will you die?" I ask.

"Please."

"They said eight weeks, maybe," I say, looking down at my beer, scratching at the red and white Lone Star label.

"How long ago was that?"

Wasn't it four days after I fainted in the kitchen and hit my head on the counter? That would have been two weeks before I came home from the hospice with the pamphlets that are stuffed in my dresser next to my winter socks. And since that was one week after I had received an identical third opinion, that means it was after the two days I spent lying in bed trying to cry. I couldn't be sure, but it didn't matter anyway. My life was now eight weeks long, and years stretched out in between each sleepless night.

"Three weeks, I think."

"So I shouldn't get too attached," he says. His smirk isn't empathetic, but it's not exactly callous either. It's just the casual, musing expression that sometimes accompanies talk about the weather.

“It’s hard to get attached in a few weeks anyway.”

“So then why did you sit down?” he asks.

“Hey, why don’t you just smoke that thing already” I say pointing toward the neck of my beer toward the cigarette in his hand.

“Well, I like cigarettes, but I don’t like to smoke them because I don’t want to smell like smoke,” he says. He grants me an apologetic shrug and drains the rest of his beer.

“You’re in a bar. There’s smoke everywhere,”

“That’s true, “ he chokes out through his last drink. A little bit of beer foam oozes out onto his lips. “But I can’t afford to smoke them. Too expensive. I’ve had this same cigarette for three days now and I feel satisfied. If I light it up, I’ll need another and another and then I’ll be broke.”

I nod.

“What kind of cancer is it? My grandma had ovarian cancer. Shit sucks.” He holds up the empty bottle and points at mine when the waitress walks by. Without stopping, she grabs both bottles as she passes our table. My bottle, still half full, sloshes out and onto the table, running off the side and onto my jeans. Without an apology she hands me the towel hanging out of her back pocket. The fizz seeps through the denim and stings my freshly shaved legs.

“It’s a brain tumor behind my nose. It’s next to my olfactory bulb,” I say as I blot up the mess.

“What the fuck is that?” he asks, still rolling the unlit cigarette in between his fingers.

“It’s like a sponge in your nose that soaks up smells. It’s how you smell things.” I deliberately drop the towel on the floor.

That’s how I’d imagined it anyway. I hadn’t bothered to read the brochure and the doctor’s explanation was the kind of technical regurgitation that I knew wouldn’t make me better anyway, so I quit listening after the word “inoperable.”

“Really? What does it smell like?”

“What does what smell like?”

“The tumor. You ought to be able to smell it, right?”

“Is that a fucking joke?” I ask. Why can’t I smell it, though? I never thought about it until he said it, but, yes, I really think I should smell it. I should smell it all the time.

“No, really.”

“I can’t smell it. It doesn’t work that way.”

“Really, if you could, you probably would have gone to the doctor sooner, right? And then you could get better?” he says.

I nod. That is probably true.

“Cancer has to smell bad, right? You know it can’t smell like vanilla bean or jasmine.”

“I do not know that at all. Because I can’t smell it.”

“Right. But it’s cancer. It’s ugly so it has to smell bad.”

“Yes, I imagine it does, but I can’t smell it.”

“I bet it smells like dog shit.”

“I bet it smells like rotten fish.”

“Vomit.”

“Cat Piss.”

“Houston.”

“Nursing home.”

“Dumpsters.”

The waitress brings us two more beers.

“So do you maybe want to leave after these?” he asks.

“Okay,”

“Okay?”

“I’m sober,” I say.

“I’m not,” he says. “But back to the other thing; really?”

“Yes,” I say. I expel it through a sigh. I whisper it like a secret I’m keeping even from myself.

“Well, okay then.”

“It doesn’t bother you then?” I ask.

“What?” he asks.

“The tumor thing” I respond. “It doesn’t freak you out?”

“Why would it? It’s not like it’s contagious,” he says, still looking at the cigarette in his hand. Has he actually looked at me since I told him?

“No, but knowing I’m dying- is that weird?” I ask.

“Did bother anyone else when you told them?”

I shake my head slightly, maybe even unperceivably. It doesn’t matter. He’s not looking at me anyway. He’s looking at the bouncer turning away two girls with apparent

fakes. Everyone's attention is now on the door, waiting breathlessly for the teens to make a scene.

"I think about death all the time. If you hadn't told me, I already would have fantasized about you dying anyway," he says, looking at me again, finally.

"Fantasized. I mean, Jesus. Fuck." I say, trying to muster up some offense that I wasn't really feeling. Maybe inoperable brain tumors are the only truly offensive ideas. Everything else is just annoying.

"Not in a good way, but I really think about it all the time. I look at people, strangers, my family, everyone, and wonder how they will die."

"Seriously?" I ask.

"Yeah. But I never would have thought cancer for you," he says coolly.

"Oh yeah?" I say. Me neither.

"Yeah, you read more of a stroke," he says. Then he corrects himself, "But not until you are very, very old. Like a normal person."

"Normal?"

"Yeah, normal like of natural causes."

"Cancer is a natural cause."

"It's not natural for a young person."

"Well then I guess I'm abnormal."

"Aren't we all." It's not a question, but a declaration.

"I see. What about, um," I pause and look around the room. "What about our waitress?"

"She is not normal," he says and I can't tell if he is kidding.

“No. I mean how will she die?” I ask. It’s not like I actually believe him or anything. I only ask because it’s nice to think about someone else’s mortality for a minute. I begin peeling the red and white Lone Star label from my beer.

“If she’s not careful, it will be drunk driving,” he says while pointing with his beer, over to the waitress, whose nametag says April. I watch as she takes two shots right after the other. “Wrap whatever little old sports car she drives right around a pole.”

I shiver at this divine prophecy. He flashes a proud smile, and winks knowingly at me.

“Okay, then. What about you?” I ask, unnerved by his audacious posture.

“Me?”

“Yeah. Surely you’ve thought about your own death,” I assert, slipping the label completely off my beer and starting to fold it in half over and over again.

“I’m going to be drafted, and die in whatever shit we step into next,” he says, placing the cigarette between his lips again, and angling it up and down.

“You mean Iran?” I ask.

“Could be. Could be North Korea. Could be Canada. Fuck we don’t know where we stand with anyone anymore,” he says, actually upset now.

“I doubt Canada. They don’t pick fights,” I say.

“I was just making a point,” he says, cooling down now. “I don’t really keep up with the news.”

I put the folded beer label into the ashtray.

“You ready?” he asks.

I nod.

He stands up and I step down off of the pub stool. I grab my coat and slip it over my blouse. I feel inside the pockets to make sure my license and debit card are still there. He's already at the bar when I get there. I pull out my card, and he shakes his head at me.

"Hey, let me get this," he shouts over the jukebox tune blasting from the speaker that is now directly overhead

"Really, I can pay. It's fine," I say stepping up onto my tiptoes and angling into his ear.

"No. I mean, don't get the wrong idea. I'm not your boyfriend," he says. I think he is teasing me but he never smiles or lets the tension unravel with that goofy laugh of his, so I'm not exactly sure.

"I wouldn't dream of it," I say.

"Good, then let's take your car." He points toward the door with the pen he has been handed by the waitress. I look at her while he is scribbling his name on the receipt and she frowns severely at me. I grin and shrug as she pops the top off of another beer and hands it to an older guy next to my companion.

My companion. It is too late to ask his name now. In my passenger seat he fumbles with my radio. He stops every few stations and sings along to mostly the country songs. I hate them, but then he carefully adjusts the knob to clear up this static-filled choir song that immediately sends chills up my spine.

"God, this song," he says, turning it up.

"It's kind of creepy," I say glancing at him. His eyes are closed and he is swaying his hands back and forth like a choir director. God, he really is drunk.

"It's my dad's favorite," he says.

“When peace like a river attendeth my way; When sorrows like sea billows roll-“

So, it’s a hymn.

“I’m not religious,” I proclaim over the choir.

“Me neither, but my dad’s a choir director at a Baptist Church.”

“It is well.”

“Which one?”

“With my soul.”

“The big one, the main one, downtown.”

“Jesus.”

“Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say-“

“I thought you said you weren’t religious,” he says turning the volume up.

“Though Satan shall buffet, though trials shall come-“

“I’m really not.”

“Even now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that when people are dying they tend to find God or whatever.”

I sigh and grip more tightly on the steering wheel.

“My sin, O the bliss, of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part, but the whole!”

“I thought that’s what you meant.”

“I bear it no more! Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord. O My soul!”

“And?”

“It is Well!”

“I just…” I begin.

“It is Well!”

“I think it’s a little late for all of that.” I bite my bottom lip and clench more tightly to the steering wheel.

“With my Soul. O, my Soul!”

The choir fades out, and a commercial for the bible store downtown begins to play. He reaches over and turns it off as I speed through a changing yellow light.

At my apartment, maybe we would sit on a couch if I had one. Instead, since I don’t, I apologize for the empty room sincerely as though it’s full of dead bodies and we go to my bedroom. He sits on the bed while I fumble with my iPod across the room, contemplating which song would set the right mood. Really, I’m contemplating which mood would be the right one to set.

He picks up my throw pillows and hugs it close to him, pulling his face toward the ruffled edge.

“You know, I expected there to be a fluffy white cat around here somewhere,” he slurs teasingly.

“Well, I don’t.”

“Are you allergic?”

“No, I just don’t have cat,” I say.

“You should get one,” he says.

“Really would seem irresponsible to get a cat I can’t take care of,” I say, deliberately allowing the sardonic tone to grow with each syllable.

“Oh right, sorry. Because you’re dying. Maybe you could find a dying cat, and the two of you can relate and comfort each other,” he says.

“Yes, maybe there are ads on Craigslist for just such a cat,” I say, looking up from my iPod and turning to face him. He lifts his head and sets the pillow aside and looks at me. I look away and sigh with relief as he begins talking again. If we stop talking, then the “casual” part of this “casual encounter” is over.

“You could post your own ad in the “Wanted” section,” he suggests.

“It wouldn’t work anyway. Cats have nine lives. It’s very likely that after we each use up the lives we are on, he will go right on ticking, and I’ll be dead. So we would be back to square one with no one to take care of him,” I explain to him in the way I would to a child.

“I guess you’re right.”

I give up on the music and drop the iPod in apathy. I walk over slowly and sit next to him on the bed. He is pulling on a loose thread in my bedspread now. He pulls it out further and further. He unravels several more inches of stitching before he realizes what he is doing and then abruptly releases the thread, and smoothes out the wrinkles his tugging has created. He looks up at me, embarrassed. Then, as if to atone for his mistake, he kisses me.

I pull away.

“I only want to have fun.” I immediately regret saying something so ridiculous. By saying it, I have contradicted it.

“That’s good.”

“I mean, just while I still can.”

He nods looking down at his knees then quickly turns to look me in the eye.

“Wait, you’re not a virgin are you? Because I really can’t do that.”

“No I’m not.” I laugh indignantly to corroborate my story.

“Good. I can’t do that. I can go along with this whole thing, but I can’t be picking cherries on a dying tree, you know?”

“Oh, please.”

“But promise.”

“I’m twenty-six.”

“But really.”

“I promise.”

“Okay.”

I can’t look at him anymore and reach across him turn out the light to turn out the light on my nightstand. He touches me, but not too much. He kisses me a little too much, though. Not on the mouth but on the neck. When he’s kissing my neck, my eyes are pointed directly on the ceiling fan above me. Even with just the moonlight, actually probably the streetlight, pouring in, I can see the clumps of dust that form on each of the blades. I wish he would kiss my mouth again, that his face would obstruct my view, so that I couldn’t see it. Instead, he pulls my shoulders up and raises my arms above my head.

He slips my sweater off. It is moist and sticks to the small of my back a bit. He directs my hands to his pants. I move them back to his neck, but after a few seconds of kissing, he pulls them back down to his crotch, so I reluctantly begin fumbling with the closures. I feel his oversized belt buckle, and the double button at the top of the zipper.

Really, clothes come off just as they go on, with about the same enthusiasm. Not slowly, but the way clothes are put on when you are running late. Deliberately, with a bit of annoyance at each piece.

“Do I need to do anything special?” he whispers in my ear.

“Fuck. How sexy,” I say, knowing exactly what he means.

“I mean do I need to do anything for your-“

“No.”

“Really, I just don’t want to shake the tumor loose while pounding you from behind.”

“You won’t,” I say. I hope.

He slides next to me and reaches down to the ground where his jeans are and I hear the rustle of foil as he slides a condom out of his pocket.

“Hey, don’t bother,” I say.

“You sure?”

“It’s okay. I promise,” I say, annoyed at his chivalry.

Back on top of me he keeps his face buried into my neck as he aligns our bodies. While fucking me, his breath is labored and reeks of beer. I remember the cigarette he won’t light, and have to stifle a laugh as the whiff of musty smoke from a hundred different brands of tobacco enter my mouth.

Again, my eyes are fixated on the dirty ceiling fan. When a car pulls into the apartment parking lot and the lights shine through my window, it is like a spotlight spilling onto the fan. How long has the dust clump been growing there? Why haven’t I

noticed it before now? He begins moving more intensely now and with my ear next to his jaw, I hear his teeth grinding.

Overwhelmed by the odor, the sounds, and shame for the dust, I can't take it anymore and I mumble that we should switch. He exits, holding himself protectively and falls onto the bed. I mount him, and pull him inside me. I move back and forth slowly, even still keeping my eyes clenched as tightly as my fists which are both pushing into the mattress on either side of his head.

And then, suddenly, I feel a tickle sliding down my throat and sinuses. I should have tasted it while lying down. I should be used to it enough by now to know when it's coming. I was too distracted by the cobwebs on the fan, by the sound of his teeth and breath and the entire force of his life. A splatter of warm blood rolls out of my nose and directly onto his face and into his open mouth.

I stop moving, open my eyes and stare at him in the dim light. My entire body begins trembling and burning with embarrassment.

He tastes it, closes his mouth and swallows hard. He probably swallows down vomit as another large drop of blood lands on his chin. I bring my hands to my face as I unhinge our bodies and climb from the bed, without a word. My feet sting as they slap hard onto the wood floor.

I go into the bathroom and run water over my white washcloth, wring it out, and bring the cloth ball to my face. I look into the mirror. One eye, my left, seems droopier than the right. I'm so tired. I hear the lamp on my nightstand click.

"I'm so sorry," I say through the closed door.

He coughs hard and the headboard hits the wall as the bed shakes.

“I’m coming back, but I’m naked. Would you mind turning off the light?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says as he clicks the switch.

I climb into bed and pull the sheet up to my neck, keeping the rag close to my nose. In the dark I glance over at him. I can see his silhouette against the illuminated window, rolling the cigarette between his fingers again.

“I’m so sorry.” I close my eyes and wait for him to respond. I hear him sigh and clear his throat in the darkness.

“It’s really okay. I guess you were for real.”

“What do you mean?” I ask looking over to his shadowy figure.

“I kind of thought you were lying.”

“What?” I’m mad. I’m really, very mad now.

“I don’t think I wanted it to be true. It’s such a waste, you know. A waste of pretty.”

I say nothing. I’m embarrassed. I’m irked by how earnestly and self-consciously my heart fluttered at the word “pretty” and I wait, shamefully hoping there’s more flattery to come. Even now, even after bleeding on him, I am flirting.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a lighter would you?” he asks.

“Why? Are you finally going to smoke it?”

“Yeah, now seems like the right time. In movies they always smoke after sex,” he says.

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t smoke,” I say.

“You really shouldn’t either. They say it causes cancer,” he says.

“That can’t be right,” I say.

“Swear to God. But honestly, with all this girly shit I thought you’d at least have one match to light one of your hundred candles you got in here,” he says.

We lie there silently. I lean back on the pillow and hold the rag. I’ve found this is the fastest way to stop the bleed. I stare again at the dusty ceiling fan. And then, in the silent darkness, I realize it for the first time.

“You know what?” I ask in a whisper, clearing my throat of the blood that has drained back there.

“What?” he says.

“It smells like cantaloupe.”

“Is that right?” he asks.

“Yes, very ripe cantaloupe,” I say.

“Well ain’t that some shit.”