

It Didn't Look Like Nothing

Tom takes his sister's wife's hand into her bedroom and she falls to the bed in exhaustion and kicks off her heels. She had just renewed her vows with Tom's sister, Susan.

It was a nice ceremony on a manicured lawn with an ice sculpture that at some point resembled an animal symbolic of virtue, honesty, truth, and somehow desire. There was real glassware instead of plastic, and flowers native from several different countries flown in for the centerpieces. Among other things, there was an altar made by his sister Susan, rose petals both red and white, a lot of cell phone use, a reporter for the Metroplex newspaper, and the sound of a lake nearby although he had not seen one; he thought the ice sculpture was a swan but it actually looked more like a mallard duck given the intense, perishing heat of mid-July in North Texas. The ceremony would receive nice reviews in the paper.

Veronica undoes her bra and he thinks it's a feminist theory thing to show she has power even in this moment of weakness. The leaves' shadow comes through the window in a spotted camouflage. The ghostly silhouette of a maple leaf covers her body.

Here is Veronica's body.

She dyed her hair blonde in the last year. The roots of her hair, still tinged with vestigial brown remains, thinned. Her eyes, also in the last year, went vacant, lost. She is open in the patriarchal sense of the word although she told Tom earlier that day she's closed in more ways than one.

Now, alone in the room with her, Tom says, "O is an absence needing to filled, you know."

"It's more just like a slit, to be literal," Veronica says.

In his early thirties, already divorced, Tom finds himself desperately lonely in the bedroom with Veronica. This is the third time. Both of them feel like crying.

He doesn't really care about the bra thing. He feels the khakis tighten around his groin with a sweet ache as he kneels at the foot of the bed. He has never done this before, kneeling before her, and she thinks he's about to, but he clasps his hands in a tight pyramid around his mouth and begins mouthing words to himself, quietly. He knows what will happen if his sister walks in and finds them like this in such a compromising position: her wife on the bed, he kneeling before her. Veronica almost thinks he is praying because he's not doing anything else down there.

She waits for him to do it. He has not even taken off his tie and yellow sweat stains half-circle at the armpit. Tom's oxford blue button down a slightly darker blue. She jacks herself up on elbows and her abs distend and crunch and her ribs poke shallow beneath her chest. She asks him a question.

He whispers into a teepee of fingers, "It's okay, I love you."

The curtains are open. Outside, his son plays with Susan on an EZ Jump trampoline. Tom is somehow 8 months older than her, a math problem that to this day stumps him. Veronica begins to think something is wrong. The leaves speak to him quietly. They both hear and see his son, and hear and see him kneeling before Veronica and not doing anything. Tom doesn't know if not doing anything saves them from the times they had. He responds with a three-syllable, two-word sentence: "I'm okay."

He remembers being second-best growing up. Susan was basically the same age, in the same grade, the better speller, the better student, had better pick-up lines and always had the hotter girlfriends. She went to Senior prom, he hadn't. She enrolled at Rice, he started at a community college. Susan called home once every week during the point the family psychiatrist had called Leaving The Nest and most times she was crying. She'd call while Tom watched cartoons. His community college did not require much homework. Mom said lots of encouraging things to her such as You're Doing Great, You're Leaving The Nest, You're Establishing Yourself, You're Doing The Best You Can, and when Mom watched Tom as Tom watched cartoons, she said You're Doing More Than Your Brother, and when Susan finally came out and said I'm A Lesbian, Mom said It's Okay I Love You. Tom would lie frozen on the living room floor, hoping to God that the coyote would catch the damn roadrunner with the ACME Anvil, or the Boulder, or Dynamite.

Now, Tom sweats, and the oxford blue button down grows a shade darker even more so.

He finds himself mouthing these words at the foot of the bed.

"It's okay, I love you. It's okay, I love you."

Veronica's eyebrows arch wide. It was never a love thing. What they did. She holds his head in her lap all the while patting his back like a mother, or an uncomfortable sister-in-law. He feels guilty because she must've done this for Susan when she was lonely, or upset, or stressed just as he is now.

Veronica feels something wet in her lap. Tom is crying; he is kneeling and crying into her lap.

The boy is free eight feet in the air after stealing Aunt Susan's jump and he never wants to come down. He feels like a drug before he even has an idea of them: euphoric, weightless, on a vibrating crest at the peak of the eighth foot. He sees something happening in a bedroom between two adults, and it looks like sadness. He doesn't have time for sadness. He judo-kicks the air telling Aunt Susan to watch him.

He says, "Aunt Susan, Master J at the KungFu Dojo taught me how to do the flying lotus kick, but Master J says I should really only practice judo kicks until I'm ready to master the flying lotus kick."

"Oh yeah?" Aunt Susan says, "but I bet he didn't teach you how to dodge this," and the boy screams in childish delight as Susan karate chops him in the neck. He goes down a little hurt but doesn't show it. She leaves herself vulnerable and he sweeps her legs Cobra Kai-style and they're both lying there on the EZ Jump in exhaustion. The bottoms of their feet are rubber-black and he has rug-burn on his elbows and knees. His karategi is also stained with rubber-black streaks. His yellow belt a thin sash of highway. His aunt kisses him on the forehead. He smiles and a totally comfortable feeling like summer ambience washes over him. He stares up through the leopard-spotted sunlight breaking through the tree. Crumbs of dirt litter the EZ Jump.

The boy says, "I saw Tom and Veronica in the bedroom together."

Aunt Susan glares him over.

The boy says, "Dad's bald spot is getting worse."

In the bedroom, she sees from the trampoline Tom and Veronica. Her forehead goes rigid. She tells the boy, "Wait here."

He asks why.

She tells him, “Jump on the trampoline when I leave.”

He asks why.

She tells him, “Aunt Susan is going to play a prank.”

The boy understands pranks.

Tom keeps repeating the motherly mantra and is on a recursive loop, trying to speak things into existence which he thinks is actually possible in a way that can audibly trick the mind.

“It’s okay, I love you.”

He doesn’t know why he is suddenly thinking about his mother, but the erection he had earlier is most certainly gone, and the ache in his groin is now an arthritic ache in his knees and he apologizes to her because he honest to God does not know what has come over him. This is all said between tears and gasps of air.

“Sis is probably better at crying, too,” he says.

Veronica asks him a question which he does not answer. The shadowy camouflage shakes about the room a bit, and the mid-July wind brushes against the window with heat. The EZ Jump sags and spits his son in the air and it almost sounds like a voice to him now.

Tom’s knees ache arthritic. He cannot break the spell. His sobbing, kneeling posture makes his back hump in a nonhuman way, but Veronica does not move either. Her lap’s completely drenched by this point with Tom’s tears. A puddle forms on the carpet—some of it is sweat. His shoulder’s heave into her each time he gasps for air and she does not entirely separate just how similar Tom cries and makes love. Over the period of a few minutes she goes from

feeling sorry and pity for him to a different kind of embarrassed sadness. She pats his back, really wishing he'd stop.

“There, there,” she says. “It’s okay.”

She messes his hair close to a bald spot he knows of. Her lap has an amorphous blob roughly the size of his head.

He says something to her about the curtains. She asks again if he’s actually okay.

“This is probably the weirdest thing to ever happen to you,” he says. “Besides realizing that you’re in fact a pseudo-lesbian, of course.”

Veronica says, “A situation similar to this is probably what made me into one.”

Huddled over himself on the floor, Tom looks much older than early thirties. Exhausted, he fingers the tie loose and breathes deeply, his knees a sharp peak his khakis stretch over, the sweaty tear stain a damp puddle before him.

She slips her arms through her bra and brings her knees up close to her chest, clutching her shins.

He says, “It’s the last time.” He says, “I can’t do it anymore.”

Veronica says, “I feel the house shaking.”

A picture of Tom and his ex-wife falls off the dresser and shatters. His son waves at them from the trampoline.

“Oh shit,” says Tom.

Susan kicks the door in, slamming Tom’s knees and he falls to the floor in a painful fetal position. Before she knows what happens, Veronica goes absolutely frozen. Susan jumps on Tom.

He says, "It's okay I love you," while looking at Veronica.

Susan says, "It's okay, Tom, love this," and smacks him on the top of his bald spot five, six, seven times.

The boy sees two blobs fighting, or one fighting and another just sitting there getting smacked on the head.

"Master J of the KungFu Dojo wouldn't just sit there," he says.

Suddenly, he hears something in the tree. Master J ambushes the boy, jumping at him through the leopard-spotted sunlight. He grabs the boy's wrist and flips the boy on his back by using his patented Wrist Flip of Doom technique.

"You're lucky I let you escape with both wrists," Master J says, stroking his Fu Manchu. Master J offers his hand but the boy is smarter than this. He twists his legs in the air and lands on his feet; Master J backs off and tightens his belt.

"I hope you've been practicing your judo kicks, boy," says Master J as he strokes his Fu Manchu again.

"I've already mastered judo kicks," he says. "I've mastered much more than you think." The boy gives Master J a knowing smile, the same one he's seen Chuck Norris give Bruce Lee. He settles his back foot, and then flies at Master J, spinning and twisting in the air, Master J blocks one foot, then the next, but as the boy spirals back down to the trampoline he kicks his leg up hard, catching Master J's jaw with a vicious kick.

Master J stumbles back and nearly falls off the EZ Jump, swinging his arms in wide circles to regain balance.

“It’s impossible for a yellow belt to learn flying lotus kicks,” he says. He spits blood on the EZ Jump. “Impossible.”

The boy says, “My yellow belt has black streaks in it.” He walks around the trampoline’s perimeter, tightening his stained belt. “It’s a new belt. I’m so much more of a master than you, Master J, that the entire Martial Arts Kingdom had to make a new belt for me.”

“That’s impossible,” Master J says. “No mere boy can defeat me.”

The boy gives one last Chuck Norris smile, then flies at Master J re suspended cables and hits Master J square on the jaw again with his own signature flying lotus kick. The boy lands facing the camera and Master J falls.

The boy wins the KungFu Dojo. He wins Master J’s belt.

Susan holds herself up by the door.

“I’m about to throw-up,” she says.

Tom lies there, bloody nose dripping, sweating profusely on the carpet.

“It’s the last time,” Susan says

“You can’t do that,” says Tom.

Susan says, “Watch me.” She asks Veronica, “Do you still love me?”

“Of course, of course I still love you” Veronica says. She nods into her knees and then unfolds on the bed.

Susan hurls on the floor equal parts champagne, equal parts shrimp cocktail. Tom lies perfectly supine, blood on his tie, knees aching and twisted, sweating an entire body halo.

The only thing they can hear is the trampoline's short breaths exhaling his son's flying lotus kicks into the air.

"It's okay," the trampoline says, "it's okay."