MEN IN APE COSTUMES

Mickey tells everyone that he doesn't read books, but I know that he likes reading the drug memoirs he buys in train stations, which quarter him between the commutes from Iowa to Nebraska and back again. His parents send him non-refundable train tickets every time winter comes around, which I've always wanted for myself, because Iowa winters are just enormous. Like impermeable. Soon as the snow falls, we string ourselves in a comfortable brand of sadness and start to get drunk, all the time—Mickey off of girls who make him rave and whistle, off of beer, off of skipping work to touch trees and get his feet numb, and me off of the loneliness I keep in my pockets and stroke with recognition, off of tobacco, hunting catalogues, trivia games, my father's habits that have become my habits. My head stays in those pockets, absent and unclear, while Mickey gets his hands stuck in drug problems he doesn't even have. During my first winter there, I sketched plans for a boating trip I would never take. I bought a fish that Mickey started calling the General because of how it swam back and forth all the time, and also because that fucker just wouldn't die, even though Mickey shook its tank around and poured vodka into its bowl, once, and didn't even tell me until a week later.

I'd say that Iowa in winter wants to murder you, and there's no reasonable compensation. You need the whole rest of the year to re-grow what you've given. Once, after leaving school, I called my brother, Eric, to beg advice. It was my first idle November and this totally incurable ache was just starting to set into my upper back. I was sitting in a Laundromat, waiting for my clothes to stop grumbling, and all he said was Yeah, real life is fucking terrible! I wanted to relay my inalienable interior and broken internships and how I was *strongly considering* leaving town for a trip down the

Mississippi River, even though it was all illegal without a boating license and they didn't let non-powered vessels through the checkpoint locks (so I would make it a good mile?), but it seemed like too much to say. Winter is massive. Snow gets labyrinthine. I'd read somewhere that the idea for a labyrinth was conceived by spilling an animal's intestines on the ground, so I asked Eric about it—have you ever heard that? Is that true?

"Feel like Iowa isn't good for you," he said.

So I needed to slip out of state this winter, but when I ask Mickey to take me with him to Nebraska, he looks at me like I've pushed a sore bone. He's leaning against the refrigerator with cards in his hands.

"Wow. Seriously?" he says.

"What?"

"Wow."

". . ."

"It's like." He puts the cards down on the counter. "You know Nebraska has nothing in it? And my parents are really excellent neocons. I wouldn't ever go there except they're blackmailing me constantly."

"I don't really know what that means."

Mickey pats his pockets like he's missing something. "I don't know. I mean. If you want to come along, you can, you definitely can."

"What are you looking for?"

"My wallet. Liquor cabinet's code red."

"I just wanted to get out of town."

"So come with. Seriously get a haircut before we go, though. Can I borrow some money?"

I lend him money and two weeks later we leave for Nebraska. I ask Mickey in the station if we can go to the zoo, because I've heard that Omaha has a nice zoo, and all he does is ask me what the fuck. The landscape drives off on either side of us into broad deaths of farmland for the entire ride, and my neck hurts like a stone. When I was younger, I went to an ape sanctuary in Des Moines with my dad and couldn't stop thinking that they didn't look like apes, but men in ape costumes. My father looked devastatingly blank during the entire visit, but when I told him this, he laughed. Making our parents laugh feels better than singing. The best job application or resume would be a spreadsheet or compilation of all the times you have made your mother and father laugh, and where, and what you said. You'd look like a hero. But when we step into Omaha, I'm told that Mickey's dad doesn't laugh ever. Just not a process he's equipped with. I chastise Mickey briefly for not crediting his parents with anything, and he tells me I haven't met them. They drive up and he turns to me, grinning.

"I grow, I prosper," he says. "Now, Gods, stand up for bastards!"

Here is my father and I'm eleven. I know only one magic trick, which involves 21 cards, and right as I finish it, my dad points out how it's just a mathematical deduction type of thing. I think how if anyone else were to destroy my secret so completely, I'd feel hostile, but of course my dad would figure it out because he's *the smartest man on the planet.*

"How do you know?" I ask.

“Twenty-one cards, you split it into three piles three times, with the card you want in the middle pile. At the end, it’ll be in the center of the center pile. Is that it?”

“I guess. Yeah.”

“Want to do some math?”

“No.”

“You did a math problem for me, now I’m going to do one for you. We’ve got to be fair here.”

“But you solved that by yourself!”

“And you’ll solve this by yourself!” he says. “So two heads of hair are growing. One’s growing four inches per year, and one’s growing a quarter inch per month. Which grows faster?”

“Why do I need to know this,” I say.

“So your hair can enter a hair race.”

“Those don’t even exist.”

“So we’ll make the world’s first one. Paper and pencil, Doctor?”

It’s early spring and blooming St. Louis is winking at me from the window, but I do the problem. It’s that time when everything is just beginning to drip and stretch its joints. My dad does the crossword every morning in pen and flips through Trivial Pursuit cards, answering everything. He works with stroke patients. At this time, I don’t know what that means, but I know he’s real good at what he does. He orders catalogues for hunting gear even though he’s never hunted, keeps his sons’ baby teeth in a cigar box, and knows everything there is to know.

At the time I'm leaving for Mickey's house in Nebraska, I haven't talked to my father in several years and he's beginning to splinter in my head. Every time I call home, it's in the afternoon, when my dad's at work, and my mom answers and says I'm sure your father would love to talk with you. I don't go home for family gatherings and the one time I stopped in on my way to East Prairie, he was lecturing to neurologists in Cleveland. Right as I got there, my nose started bleeding. I looked for my dad's car, nervous about seeing him and finally witnessing some expression of disappointment, but he wasn't home. And this just kept happening; I never called at night. I tell people all the time that my dad and I are extremely close, but intermittently wonder if he's been dead for some time and maybe my mom's just lying to me. Kidding—I couldn't believe that. I say that my dad and I are so so extremely close that we don't need to check in with each other all that often, and if there was something that needed to be said, it would be said. So there's just been nothing that needs to be said. Our phones stay shut, and several years get buried overnight.

There are chickens honestly everywhere in Mickey's house, which no one says anything about. Like something so present it's not even worth mentioning. Not real ones, just porcelain chickens and chicken magnets and little crocheted chicken coasters. My shoulders ache as I look at them and the bridge of my nose feels pressurized, like it's about to bleed. I once read that if a chicken is injured and the rest of its flock sees blood, it'll get pecked to death.

"Survival skill?" Mickey says.

"I guess," I say. "This is a nice place." It's a clean ranch with knitted everythings and there's a backgammon board on the kitchen table.

"Thank you," Mickey's mother says.

"It's not a bed and breakfast," his father says. He's looking at me through a fishbowl set of glasses, relaying back light so I can't see his eyes but just two big white orbs on his face. The rest of his face is like a walnut shucked clean.

Mickey doesn't say anything but just goes into the kitchen, and I follow him. He sits on the counter and leans his head up against the refrigerator.

"He thinks we're gay together," he says. "I can tell." He picks up two tin chicken-shaped salt and pepper shakers. I watch him pour a little mound of salt into his palm.

"What did your dad used to do?" I say.

"He had his own like, construction business? Selling forklifts and shit? The thing is, he'd never actually *ask,* you know, he just *assumes."*

"I could talk to him."

"You shouldn't. He'll probably be taking me out to see some people about jobs and stuff, so you might be here alone a lot."

"Jobs?"

"Like web design."

"How does your dad know people in web design."

"He fucking *finds* them. He tells people he has a son working as a callboy, I've heard him and he actually says 'callboy,' a callboy with a college degree who needs a real job."

Mickey works as a luggage porter in a hotel. It's several pegs in respectability up from what I do, which is work at a restaurant boiling noodles, but Mickey talks about it like it'll shame him until he dies.

"You are so goddamn lucky," he says, "to have parents who leave you alone." He looks at me. "You know your nose is bleeding."

This burning place of guardianship called my living room was always where my father sat, working. I remember calling home in my second year of college and imagining him sitting there, drafting grants or wading through stroke research. My mom answered and it took me aching, elliptical minutes before I told her that I was thinking of dropping out. What are you planning to do? she asked. What is there to do? Have you even thought about what you're going to do?

"I might go to Canada," I said.

"Your father's going to have something to say."

Right then, a headache like a held pinch clipped my head.

"I don't feel that well," I said. "I'll call back later."

I never called back later. Mickey and I dropped out at around the same time, so I searched for menial jobs with him. We spent a lot of time talking, as we drove and walked through town, about the rest of our lives, post-academics. We're going to fight through rivers, be adventurous, save up money and hitch out to Colorado. Boulder's supposed to have the best scene. Washington? Alaska? There is no limit. And we're going to work in kitchens, cubicles, at desks, standing beside elevators. Loneliness, drug

memoirs, our parents will shake their heads at us. We're going to boil noodles, hide from our phones, suffer the worst dreams.

"I can see us spending a lot of our lives in our rooms," he said. I also remember my limbs beginning to ache for the first time in my life, during one of those talks.

There are eight rooms in the house. Mickey's mother seems to exclusively occupy only two of them. As the week passes, she moves from her bedroom, where she reads and watches television, to the kitchen, where she cooks, and back again. Every day while Mickey's out with his father, I listen to her move between them with a slow, lingering walk. I'm reading in the living room with tissues and aspirin and a glass of milk. I have this excruciating feeling that I shouldn't be so still, but I can't think of anything to do. Outside is a long bar of ranch houses sweeping down and around my view, like this is a whole planet of small, chicken-filled homes with small, slow-moving people inside of them. Like him, Mickey's parents are both short and strangely delicate, although his father simultaneously looks conjointly inflated. His dad, Mickey tells me, is perpetually furious about the state of his body. He reads editorials from the Wall Street Journal aloud over breakfast and spits his words, actually *spits* them out of his mouth.

"Immigration," I hear him say. "Spics. Bags on their feet."

"Dad," Mickey says.

"You know what's true."

"I heard you used to work in construction," I say.

"Yes, I did. And what do you do."

"I studied history."

"And?"

And my entire body hurts. I am absolutely the best at boiling noodles, you should see it.

"I dropped out," I say. "I work in a restaurant now."

Mickey's dad doesn't say anything. No parent can say anything to this. I can tell that he assumes he knows everything about why I dropped out and who I am, and he probably does. This is the nature of resting, old people who have led accomplished and ambitious lives. Like they can curl up to sleep, lie in the comfortable core of the *everything* that they are and the *nothing* that you are, and rest dreamlessly. I grow, I prosper; now, Gods, stand up for bastards.

Another thing about my father is that he doesn't make any noise when he sleeps—he's so quiet it's like death.

Mickey and I go to a bar late in the week. It's this grisly place with a pool table and cobweb-cracked television screen and everyone looks tired. We order drinks and more drinks, talking about the girls we see, this one's legs and that one's hands. We're delicate about it. We want to think they're beautiful. I start talking about my old girlfriends and almost-girlfriends, the ones who rejected me. The ones I thought I would never recover from, and then did. Mickey starts talking about his first high school girlfriend, named Monica.

"Mickey and Monica," he says. "The jokes never stopped."

I take a drink, wondering about the time.

“And you know,” he says, “my dad hates that I call myself Mickey, instead of Michael? He thinks he has a faggot son with a cartoon name.”

“It suits you,” I say.

“Thanks. The faggot part too?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thanks again. Michael’s nonsense in and of itself, though,” he says. “My family’s crazy Polish. My dad’s name is Konrad.”

“Polish conservatives.”

“Hard workers.”

“The immigration thing is weird, then,” I say.

“Yeah,” he says. “I honestly never thought about that.” He orders us two more drinks. My eyes are becoming glazed and foreign; the girls look like antelopes across the room. Old names are climbing ladders through my head, childhood friends and girlfriends, cousins, people I only met once on street corners and at parties. Omaha, for a second, seems worse than winter. I’m sick and I know one of my teeth is coming loose. You should see me. My back aches, I can’t read a word.

Then Mickey says, “So, what’s your dad’s name?”

I take this question with a shock.

“Hm,” I say. I put my glass down.

“Did you hear me? I seriously don’t know anything about your parents.”

I nod.

“What’s his name?”

This question turns itself over and over in my head. I can't remember my father's name.

I don't know what to say. There's no hope in admitting this to Mickey, so I sit bolt-straight in my stool and look at the bottles across the wall. They're winking at me like spring.

"Do you just not want to tell me?" he says. "It's fine. Getting another drink."

I think my heart is collapsing, actually folding, inside my body. That's what it feels like. Ashamed and drunk. I'm thinking about the look that my father gave me when my high school friends and I once puked on our front porch, drunk beyond faculties. He ushered me inside and didn't say a word, but walked me to my room and went back downstairs to read. The next morning, I washed out all my sheets in the unfinished basement, next to plastic sleds stacked like shells and this weird, Impressionistic painting of a scientist holding a brain in his hand, and I stayed down there for nearly an hour, listening to the washing machine shudder. When I went back upstairs for breakfast, head pounding, my dad was already gone for work. But we had this chalkboard in our kitchen where my mom wrote calendar memos and chore lists and the like, on which my dad sometimes wrote lines and trivia facts before he left. I sat down at the kitchen table, looked at the chalkboard, and there was this Dostoevsky quote: *Love the animals: God has given them the rudiments of thoughts and joy untroubled!* I obviously didn't know it was Dostoevsky at the time and I didn't know what it meant. But I can see that written so clearly, like it's right before me now.

And I can see the look my father must've made when I dropped out of college, which I never witnessed but also know quite well. I can see the checkered curtains of my

bedroom, the roadmap bathroom rug on my floor. I can see every jar of buttons and cold tea lining the windows of my childhood home, melting into empty microbrew bottles on the bar stretching out on either side of us.

God has given us the rudiments of thoughts and joy untroubled. My heart is folding, and Mickey's head is on the bar, like nose to the surface. Still can't remember his name.

We have to take a cab home. I pay out of pocket and bolster Mickey's whole weight as we walk. He's talking about his parents, and then about the time he got laid on some girl's trampoline down the street, like right over there. Chicken-filled universe with small, inflated people. I'm trying to keep him on his feet, fishing through his pockets for the keys, when his father walks out of the house. My hand is in Mickey's back pocket.

"Nice, boys," his father says.

Mickey leans against me and tries to wave hello.

"Hi," I say.

"You're both drunk."

I think about it.

"My son brings his boyfriend home," Mickey's dad says, "and comes back drunk."

"I'm not," I say.

"Clean yourselves up."

Mickey's dad takes him from me, and it's silly to watch this small, swollen man carry his small, drunk son through a house full of chickens. I close the door and follow them up the stairs.

"We'll talk about this in the morning," Mickey's dad says to me, and brings Mickey to his room. I go into the bathroom and sit on the edge of the tub, vision slipping. I feel so furious. Through the door, I hear Mickey's father walk down the stairs and I go out to meet him.

"I think you're being a little unreasonable," I say. He turns at the bottom of the stairs to look at me.

"You think I'm being unreasonable? What is this, your house?"

"No, but I just."

"Who are you to come here? Who are you to say anything to me?"

I stumble down a stair. "I'm not his boyfriend."

"I don't care," he says, and starts to walk up the stairs towards me. "Go to bed. You're in my house and you're drunk."

"You are so." I hiccup. "You're so fucked-up."

Mickey's dad pauses on the stairs and looks straight at me. He shakes his head, like I am this wretched thing he has been stranded with, this vast embarrassment. The chickens watch him as he begins to climb the stairs, limbs all ridged and enraged.

"I mean *what* do you think you are *doing here,"* he says to me. I feel like a painting. I imagine my father and Mickey's father looking each other in the eye and being completely paralyzed, trembling like they were twin poles trying to move closer. So what happens is I go down the stairs and mean to push his shoulder with mine—Eric used to

do this in the hallway between our rooms because he was larger and mad at me for existing. Mickey's mother is watching a trivia show in the living room, and the house is so otherwise cottoned with silence that it rings really clearly. Something about the Sistine Chapel reaches my ears just as I notice a tooth has come loose. This is the state of my body. I push his shoulder and suddenly realize that his bones are like loose crayons in his skin, all liquid and rolling, and he falls backwards like a wobbling leg of water. He's a ripe balloon and I'm a brat. I've been so stupid.

His head snaps against the bottom stair and cleaves into two equal pieces, like this perfect, clinical slice. The trivia game is still playing and I walk down the stairs after the body that's still sloshing and a father's split head. I take the two pieces and put them back together, seeing where the seams would match up in a one-play puzzle. The chickens bear witness as I take my hands away and the pieces fall apart again. I repeat this and repeat it again. Virginia site of two Civil War battles? I hear. Architect of the Louvre Pyramid? I hold the two marble halves and hope for the click that will tell me they're back together and there's no blood. I suddenly realize that we are supposed to be going back to Iowa in a few days, but we may be delayed by this accident. It feels like I won't be going to bed for a while. My hands look larger to me today—they look more like Eric's or my father's hands than they ever have. And I'm still holding the two halves when it occurs to me that if I were to talk to my father in some breach of reverent silence, there would be so much to tell him—innumerable words, and the day would end with them, like I would never have enough.