

WILD

I used to steal electronics, return what I stole, then buy everything properly with store credit.

Applied the same strategy to dogs. Scooped a Shiba two towns over and pocketed the reward money. Frenchie's. Golden doodles. I've always been good with animals.

I jumped in front of a bus for insurance money. It really fucked me up. I wore a trench coat in broad daylight. Wrapped my palms in duct tape. You try making it in this world born ugly.

Back then I was the guy you would never bring home to mom and dad. Lucky for me, Marlene's parents left in a plane crash. Unlucky for the both of us, they'd left her penniless.

I'd rationalized my actions as schemes to make money. To supplement minimum wage. To take care of the woman I loved in a society that pushed me down.

I hardly had a work ethic. No exceptional drive for excellence. Actually, let me rephrase: I had a work ethic, just not for conventional work. Schemes, I'd pull all-nighters for. Schemes, I day dreamed about. But the last few hadn't panned out. I had nothing. I had nothing, but I had Marlene.

We were at the kitchen table when the lights went out. We'd just finished off one of her meat loafs worth killing a man over. I hadn't any money to pay the electric bill and neither did she.

I passed her my cigarette. *I'm tired of living for money.* It lit up her face like sunshine on a beautiful mountain. I wiped away those sparkling tears and tasted them on my lips. Diamonds.

There was a notice from the hospital threatening to send my bill to collections. The bus company was suing me for fraud. That whole charade had buried us. We were weeks away from eviction. She ripped the notice in half, and in half again. Her forearms tensed and I ached for her to put her hands all over me.

Marlene, bless her heart. She could always make me feel like Michelangelo. I tucked back her brown hair, she wiped ketchup from my cheek. We came to an unspoken understanding to chase the feelings we wanted to feel and not the ones society said we needed.

What was a rental agreement but black ink on expensive paper? We had no children, no pets. Our spirits had aged faster than our bodies and we wanted to turn back time. That night we burned the two-flat to the ground.

I doused the kitchen in gasoline and we flicked our cigarettes onto the tile in a ceremony fit for wedding.

We had one downstairs neighbor who worked nights. Jeffrey'd done time for peeing on a playground. Couldn't hold his liquor. Had been put on a list. We didn't feel bad about what we'd done.

We found my car a few blocks away and made out in the back seat until the windows got foggy and my jeans felt wet. Later we'd note this as the beginning of something special, a surge of euphoria that made the warm glow of heroin feel like the heat from a keychain flashlight. This felt like how drowning satisfies a deep thirst. Nile river flooded over. Falling in your dreams. Licking ice cream on a hot day.

We drove past our burning apartment. Firetrucks blocked the good views. Marlene rolled down the window and yelled obscenities over the sirens. *That place was a crack house. The people that lived there had no morals at all!*

I drove us into the setting sun like a cue ball on the break. Flames rose in the rearview. I cackled out the window and she gave me head all the way to the highway.

I took lesser-known roads down the eastern spine of the state, passed 100-person towns and campgrounds until I found a motel tucked at the ass end of a country road.

An old cashier's check got us a room with a vibrating bed, no questions asked. We expressed our passion for each other like high schoolers.

I heard the voices of everyone who told me I wouldn't make it as a professional basketball player, astronaut, or librarian. Look at me now, motherfuckers. No one ever got what they wanted out of life by playing it safe—quote unknown. Marlene pushed herself into me and I pushed myself into her and in the height of it all, I imagined my second grade teacher melting like wax.

I climaxed twice in one night for the first time since my teenage years. When we were done, she rested her head on my sweaty chest and we whispered sweet nothings. *You know I never thought I'd be attracted to an amputee, but for the first time since the accident, I think I've finally come around to it.*

I looked at my fake arm and feigned surprise. *What?! When did that happen?* Humor is the language of the depraved. We had it in spades.

I like to think my accident was one aspect of our relationship that kept us together. Her nursing me while I was bedridden and learning to use my claw. *I realize now that wasn't the quality time you were looking for.* I passed her the cigarette with my claw. *It wasn't. To be honest, I didn't know what I needed.*

I dislodged the prosthesis, and she did that cute thing where she almost barfs. We both got dressed. It was the middle of the night, but sleep felt like the last thing we wanted. We'd been asleep our entire lives. Now, we were awake.

The moon was dark. Marlene coughed. The trees leaned over us like ghosts. Coyotes yelled in the yonder. We brushed up against each other and our hands interlocked. We walked into the office and Marlene tapped the bell a few times.

The woman who'd got us the killer deal on the room emerged from the shadows and took the bell away. *Your check didn't clear.*

We don't need the room anymore.

She just stared at us. We stared at her. Excitement was palpable. I think my claw made her uneasy. We'd get passed that. I'd make sure of it. *Do you think humanity can be saved from itself? Do you want to feel more alive than ever in your life?*

I've been on a motorcycle before.

Take off your glasses. You need to see with your own eyes. The life you've been living has been holding you back. Us too. But tonight, we can rewrite our histories.

As I rambled on, Marlene cut the phone lines. *Take off your glasses.* Reluctantly, she did. Marlene and I both looked at each other and back at her. *You're perfect.*

We found a bottle of something brown in the back room and together the three of us polished it off. We began to have too good of a time. Celebrating something. But we had work to do.

Turns out Anne's student loans had more zeros than I did fingers. She hated this motel desk job. She'd always wanted to be a painter, a real artist. She hated her car. So we drove it out

to the canyons, put a brick on the gas pedal, and watched it launch over a cliff. Anne looked at us and said, *You were right. I feel amazing.*

Marlene and I smiled like proud parents. *Alright now let's get some paint.*

Are you aware of how a distraction such as, for example, someone having a seizure, presents the perfect opportunity for stealing art supplies? I writhed on the floor by the front of the store while Anne and Marlene filled their arms with canvas, brushes, and oils.

A timid crowd gathered around me at a comfortable distance. I made a real show out of it. Someone expressed concern for my tongue. I clanked my claw on the floor and went bug eyed. No one intervened. Everyone conducts their lives in fear of lawsuits and that's the problem with our species.

I winked at Marlene as her and Anne walked out the door. After a while I got up and left. Told the manager he better clean up my spit so someone didn't slip.

Anne painted sunsets that blossomed like flowers. Swing sets that dove underground. Trees with roots above and branches below.

The art took hold of us and we became nude. Splashed paint on our naked bodies and laid canvas out like a bedspread. Together we created art as repulsive and majestic as what we held within ourselves. I never wanted to bathe again.

The next day we drove down route 69 going 99 miles per hour and threw the canvases out the window at traffic behind us. People were better off for what we'd done. I'd long ago taken the plates off the car. We had no moral compass. We'd smashed it. This set us free. We couldn't stop.

We were runaway trains. We were every wave in 100 oceans.

We took turns naming activities society rejected. Marlene said *streaking*. Anne said *anal*. I just smiled.

We raced each other through a suburban mall of a big city worth forgetting. Fast and free and loose. Gazelles on the Serengeti. We undid 10 thousand years of breeding. We performed acts of majesty. Ospreys in flight, stealing fish from rivers. Foxes pouncing through snow. Herds of buffalo.

Passed clothing racks and stroller moms, cellphone stands and fountains, through the food court, across the parking lot, to our safe spot in the woods. My junk ping ponged my thighs. Marlene's tits bounced like loose dogs. No one chased after us. No one cared.

An arrest seemed imminent. Felony charges for sure. We prepared ourselves mentally for the long game. Marlene surmised a judge might throw out our lesser crimes. After six months of good behavior, we could get jobs pushing book carts in the prison library. I could be loved in a way I'd never felt.

We befriended a one-eyed basset hound that bore no name, just a number on the collar. Made him our official mascot, and just like that, we became a family of creatures born from the same stars.

One night in the height of our love making I thought about calling that number on the dog collar, if only to live in my ecstasy longer. That was the problem: the highs were short lived. Escalation became the only thing keeping us together.

Anne kept on painting her upside down worlds and encouraged us to find follow our own passions. Marlene joined her. I searched obituaries for my name. What I really wanted was to be pronounced dead. It seemed like being off the grid completely was the only way to feel alive. This idea stuck with me.

We had to work harder to feel a thrill. I started driving us over abandoned bridges. Took us to mountains with signs like Danger, Keep Out, Devil's Pass, Devil's Thumb, Devil's Pelvis. Smoked whole packs of cigarettes at gas stations.

When it seemed we'd gripped the ecstasy for good—atop a roller coaster with no harness, or under all the dirt when Anne and Marlene buried me alive—it slipped through their fingers and through my claw.

We corkscrewed through time, crossed state lines, committed crimes, but came out the other side unchanged. These things brought us closer to the end, but only pushed us further apart. Days passed in long white lines on an unending horizon. No one talked as we took unintentional vows of silence.

Anne bought a rifle, and we took turns shooting apples off our heads. This is how I got that buzzcut. How Marlene lost her ear. (chunks of her ear with him on ice in the envelope from the bus accident bill)

At the hospital, I had to check her in under a fake name. Made up a social security number by reciting my favorite lotto numbers.

Blood everywhere. The chunks of her ear I'd put in a bag we're deemed unsalvageable by the medical professionals. She seemed to lose hearing in her other ear too, or that was the shock setting in.

Anne and I waited in the parking lot with the dog, smoking cigarettes and watching the smoke rise in the air. Neither of us knew if what we were doing was worth it or would lead to anything. Maybe this was the end for us.

Turns out not having health insurance is better than most healthcare plans. It was easy to game the system, milk the government-funded cow. She got a prescription for drugs that none of us could pronounce that made us feel like our insides were scraped clean. Made our heads puffy like clouds. I hated it. Forced myself to throw up. Marlene accused me of being dramatic.

You have to make everything about you. I just lost my fucking ear.

Now you know what it feels like to lose something dear to you. We should go see my guy maybe he could make a fake ear for you

Into the ocean I waded, at low tide, kicking around for jellyfish by the light of the moon. Marlene and Anne splashed paint on their naked bodies and made castles in the sand for the Basset Hound.

Apparently, I was ruining everyone's party. Moonlight sparkled over every wave. The water was clear. Marlene called me a wet blanket.

You want to go back to being poor? Look around you. She gestured wildly to the neon paint dotting the sand, the moon's reflection, her bare shoulders, her glistening body. *You're rich in experience.*

It doesn't feel like enough. I don't feel enough. She had to stand sideways to hear me with her good ear. *Maybe you're one of those people who can't feel anything.*

I didn't want to believe her, but I worried she might be right.

And then I felt something. The jellyfish.

Pain cascaded through me like electrical currents. My leg purpled immediately. I crawled onto the beach in the grips of hysterical beauty. I felt so alive to be this close to death.

I guess I'd started hyperventilating. The tentacles left a gnarly tattoo on my calf. Anne gave me mouth to mouth, which was completely unnecessary. Something about this moment

struck me in its poignancy. This was *it*. What I'd been searching for the whole time—the ecstasy, the white light. Have you heard about those monks out east who set themselves on fire? Me neither.

In the middle of this rapturous moment, Anne whispered in my ear. *I know a place.*

The turn off for Ed's Snake Farm is at the last mile marker of the last county in this country.

Anne drove. Marlene leaned out the window and felt the air on the earless side of her head. My leg pain had stagnated at an eight out of ten and the white light had all but disappeared. The dog wouldn't stop licking me.

The snake farm had a smell we thought would kill us. But it didn't, that's where Ed came in. Ed was a professional through and through. He drew up some waivers on carbon paper and walked us around the reptile house. He didn't even ask about my leg.

He suggested I take off my prosthesis—*Let it bite ya in the soft pink flesh*—and fed me enough Tequila that I barely felt the snake's fangs enter my deformity.

That snake made quick work expanding its mouth around my nub. At first I didn't feel anything, but that wonderful potential on the horizon.

The orange blue sky kicked hard violet, and from far away Anne said she wanted to be eaten alive like Houdini. *Just to know.*

Marlene and Ed discussed the pythons. *I wasn't hugged enough as a child, I need to feel the womb again. I need to remember. I think I ate my twin, but I need to be sure.*

My mouth lost all water and I realized I'd peed myself.

Then I was overcome with a sensation of immense dread at knowing exactly where I was going. We became one, the snake and I, sharing the same slow breath.

Terrible thoughts rose within me. I'd never have a funeral. I'd never see people cry over me, regret on my potential I'd shown as a child when my dreams were simple and big.

What they tell you about dying is all wrong. You don't see your life flash before your eyes. Rather, you see the next life and the next life and the lives of others and the lives of every creature—every moment of every future from every angle sharp and ominous. I reached out for my family but they were already gone.

A magnificent dawn took over the horizon. Birds traced lines in the air with their calls. Baby ferns and mother ferns fed the air with mist like water-soaked sponges. I became the ghost among us hung from the mast of windswept sails gliding to the beyond.