

## *His and Hers*

The stain in the middle of the street is where he says his dog defecated after being struck by a car. He explains how waves of muscles in our colons ferry waste down our digestive tracts toward the rectum. His dog's incontinence was probably sphincter damage, or maybe he was just scared. These facts seem like his prayer and goodbye. Others in his family likely had a story to share, a picture; he instead chooses to detail the later stages of animal digestion.

"I'm sorry," I tell him.

I had seen him from the bathroom window. When I'd finished packing the kitchen and started putting my parent's bedroom into boxes, I decided to keep watching. After Mom finally laid down for a nap, and before she fell asleep, I asked about the boy.

"That's just Jessie."

Jesse holds vigil in the street with precision. Simple and direct, he remains stilled until stirred by a greater force. When a vehicle approaches, he walks a linear retreat. When the vehicle passes, he walks a linear return.

"Let's talk in my yard." I half-turn and half-step backwards with hope that my lead will coax a trend, but he remains unmoved.

Jessie, a head or two taller than I am, has a top that appears too far from his bottom. His gaunt, curved frame tilts towards the earth. I can't look him in the eyes without staring into the sun. He could be three, even four decades my junior; it's difficult to tell whether he's 15 or 25 years old. A thinning crown of red hair is defied by thick red coats on his lips and chin with acute acne underneath both. The crooked nose, the long legs, the thin lips, the mottled teeth are not

pleasant as individual parts but somehow marry into a pleasant whole. When he talks, points, or moves, he does so with wide, uncertain eyes and a subtle tremor.

I try again. "I--We also recently lost a--a pet, too."

Jessie's glance fills with minor enthusiasm, though it's difficult to say if he is looking at me or down my shirt. Neither could be too pretty a sight. I didn't put anything on to bring out my eyes or to hold up my breasts before coming out.

He says, "OK."

A car approaches. We part ways and I wave to the driver of the car, but it is only the children that wave back.

"Yeah," I continue and consider what I am doing, where I am standing, and what I am saying. "We lost our cat."

"Oh." Jesse pivots back and forth, silently auditioning responses between his teeth. "How old was your cat?"

"He was...seventeen."

"That's really old for a cat."

"That's true."

"How'd he die?"

"Uh, well. You know, he just got sick."

I found Dad at the mailbox across the street years ago clutching a handful of envelopes. He held on to them as if he were hanging from the ledge of a ten story building. The name on the mail was not ours. I took both his fists and whispered. His body shook much like his eyes rattled. The gravity of his mistake was a mystery. One fist finally let go of the mail and the other fist

took my hand. Mom met us in the street on our way back to the house with pruning sheers and dirt under her nails.

When I returned the mail, I got stuck with the neighbor. She was thin and boney, all right angles with skin charred into tanned folds. I wondered then if this was Sandy, the same woman with all the dogs that regularly shat in my parent's lawn. Mom had been frequently and passively referring to the maintenance of her yard and the maintenance of her dilemma. She wouldn't confront Sandy because her boyfriend had placed a shotgun in his mouth the previous April and killed himself in the garage. When I offered to speak to Sandy for her, she started to cry in the same way she did earlier in the week when I would not let her eat the wrong meal and flagged down our server.

This woman drank chardonnay from a large Slurpee cup and talked until I could only make out the end of her joint in the dark. It wasn't until it was completely dark that she introduced herself as the woman I took her to be. Sandy told me the whole story about her boyfriend. The windows, she said, were still moist from where Roland had boiled some eggs.

"We buried ours in the backyard," Jessie says. "Do you want to see?"

I wondered now if Sandy was Jesse's mother. They live in the house that all neighborhoods have. The one where no one lives in very long.

"OK," I said. "But I can't stay."

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The home smells like any home that is not mine; the scent is both familiar and foul. Jesse leads with short, leaden strides; his arms are hemmed at his waist with hands that hang loose at the wrist. He doesn't stop to share his home. There is only one purpose to his invitation and there is only one path.

Where the light from outside enters and lifts the dim indoors, a vaporous and permanent veil of smoke fills the divide. There is no one here. When they were here, they didn't stay long. The cigarettes at the top of the piles in the soda cans that have been shorn into serrated ash trays are as cold as the ones at the bottom. The glass tank on the hallway floor is empty of its reptile, the corners vignettted by spider webs. The television in the living room is the biggest television I have ever seen, and it wears a crown of trophies. The trophies--for bowling, for baseball, for soccer championships--do not boast in sports, but in spirit. The plates engraved with the original recipients have been replaced by crude placards that superimpose and repurpose the accomplishment. There is one for being the best Son in the whole wide world, another for doing all the chores in May without having to be asked, and one for memorizing and reciting the entire book of Psalms by heart. There are no dates.

Jesse slides open the backdoor. The glass, smeared with a mammal's wet nose and primates' dirty hands, slides along a metal shoot scattered with dead flies. A band of feral cats scatter like cockroaches next to a heap of compost in a rusty wheelbarrow. I can see the building where I almost finished high school. A group of plastic chairs face the outfield of the baseball diamond that ends at their chain link fence. Across the infield dirt, a man walks with his son and

their dog. The little boy and the dog have both picked up the biggest stick they can find and are carrying it for as long as they can.

A knot of dirt in the corner of the yard under three freshly planted pine saplings is unmarked. Jesse kneels and waits. I stand and watch. He places his hand on top, leaving an imprint then writes his name underneath as if it were fresh cement. This formality does not feel original to Jesse, but someone else's recommendation, one that he has made ritual and expects me and others to repeat. The look on his face does not consider that I might object.

I kneel on the grass, I place my hand on the dirt, and I sign my name. I look at the grave, then I look at our hands in the dirt, and they look exactly the same.