

Eiffel Tower of the Midwest

Our first hotel was in Columbus, Ohio. The door bordered by locks. All night headlights from cars leaving the Big Boy across the parking lot lit up the space between the doorjamb and the wall. We joked the locks held the door up, but when we left for breakfast the next day we put our luggage back in the car.

In Chicago, our room near the airport had gum cementing the phonebook pages together like pink, blue and green stones. The roar of the planes was muffled by the roar of the air conditioner, ripping away all night like a broken refrigerator. Rain poured that morning and we didn't want to set up your spot at the sale because the ground was already muddy the day before. You earned a bit of money off your jewelry the first day so we said fuck it and went to IKEA instead. We played house in the display rooms and you asked, "How's your *Malm*?" And then we kept asking each other that for the next three years.

You bought the saltwater fish for my birthday around that time. You thought I needed a hobby because you had your business, and I had nothing, but I never took ownership of the microreef in our living room. I liked exploring pet stores with you, and picking out coral, but I didn't like cleaning the tank or doing water changes for our little prison of fish. And, if not for you, the fish would've all died a lot sooner. At night I dreamt of the tank bursting open. All ten gallons flooding the landlady's flat beneath us, tiny flopping fish gasping for water, soggy plaster, ruined hardwood, rotten joists—our security deposit wouldn't cover that.

You started to hate the sales, but I loved the cities they took us to. I'd tell you to be patient. In reality though, the hours spent behind your table of jewelry would drag. During lulls, I'd get stuck in loops of inadvertent eye contact with other bored vendors. Them and I looking, then looking away for hours. But no matter how hard you wanted to quit, I kept making you go, so we could travel.

We'd never been to Minnesota as a couple, and neither of us had been there individually in years, so like all the other cities, when you got into a sale we didn't know where to stay and made our choice based on price. As far as we could tell the hotel in St. Paul didn't have a pool, but the hallways reeked like chlorine. Tired from the drive we lunched at the adjacent restaurant. You wondered, how bad could it be? Our booth near the dirty lobster tank was sticky with soda drippings, and your grilled cheese sandwich only had cheese on half the bread. To fix the mistake the waitress comped our drinks, which didn't change your toast into grilled cheese. "I don't want free drinks. I want a fucking grilled cheese sandwich," you said.

A Menard's glowed green across the street, and that night a man played darts with us. He said he was in town for alumni weekend with one of the schools. He wore a matching red cap and t-shirt. He bought us shot after shot after shot. He was doing something to us, but we didn't know what. When he went to the bathroom you dragged me into the hallway and said, "We need to go. Now."

In the morning, there was a rock through the Sentra's window. They didn't even take anything.

After that trip I convinced you to keep going by saying everything would be alright if we spent fifty more dollars a night on hotel rooms—and I was right.

We went back to Minneapolis around Thanksgiving, and because the time was winter, our extra fifty got us a room at the Hotel Grand. The Hotel Grand made us feel like we had to sneak in. Guarded with doormen. The hotel existed within the hive of skywalks in downtown Minneapolis. A restaurant served sushi on the third floor and a spa gave massages on the fifth. We pretended we hadn't parked a shitty Sentra a few blocks away and did after-plane-ride-stretches in the lobby. We were young, wealthy, and when we travelled we required the best—at least that's how we wanted the concierge to see us.

Besides a giddy outburst in the elevator, we played cool till we were in our room. A light turned on like a refrigerator when the closet door opened, puffy robes hung from padded wooden hangers with inflated purchase prices printed on information cards stuffed in the pockets—we figured out later the cards meant how much they'd charge us if we took the robes. The bathroom's floors and countertops were marble, a wicker basket with rolled guest towels rested on the floor alongside a glass scale. The shampoos and conditioners—a better brand than the type we bought for ourselves at home—were stacked behind the sink's golden faucet handles. The most impressive feature was a television installed in an alcove above the bathtub—Elvis shit. The bedroom walls were papered with curvy stripes like seaweed and the bed linens' weave gave off a pearl sheen unlike the

typical sheen of bleached out oil and dirt. The mattress was thick with comfort and a polished wooden spire twisted towards the ceiling from every bedpost.

Instead of watching cable on the bed with the pizza box between us, you suggested we break the seal on the mini-fridge and drink a bottle of wine in the bathtub. The TV's tinny buzz annoyed us, but because of the novelty we couldn't turn it off. Your face floated above the soap bubbles and your luxurious body soaked beneath. It was then you said we should get married sometime in the future. Marriage scared me, but in the bath the future felt like a big baggy ocean, and I agreed. We vacated the tub and turned the heat up. We air dried on top of the tightly tucked comforter. Your body lounged long on the bed, your hips curving against the duvet and breasts lolling over like you were waiting to be painted. Our cheeks were flushed from heat, and outside, snow blew down the salty Minnesota sidewalks. We ordered room service in the morning with champagne, and after breakfast strolled through the skywalks, warm without our coats above the icy streets.

The reef was thriving then. We added coral, shrimp and crabs. The shrimp would pick at the liverock all day, feeding. We got a firefish who lived in the hole of our biggest rock. Our last addition was the clownfish. He was like no other fish we'd seen. Not just because of his electric stripes, but because of how he reacted to you. You loved it. When you opened the lid the clownfish would swim up to the top, flapping his tiny fins. You giggled when you fed him and talked to him like a

baby. My nightmares about the reef exploding subsided, and I pictured that aquarium as a fixture. A part of our lives that would be there forever.

We still did the sales, but they became routine. The fifty bucks was all it took to stay out of the shitty hotels. We found a couple hotels we liked in Minneapolis and went back twice a year. We checked in, spent our days bored at the sales and nights exploring the Cities. You still wanted to quit, but not as badly.

It was our other trips near the end, I think of now, but I still feel a pang when I think of the sweetness of those early nights away from home. The lights of strange towns twinkling out drafty windows. Pizzas, wine and movies on the hotel bed, or nights out in unfamiliar places.

A year after our first night in the Hotel Grand, your sister died, and for that reason, your parents wanted to spend Christmas at a hotel with a water park. They picked us up early in the afternoon on Christmas Eve. The clownfish was sick, and I begged God to spare him for your sake, but in the morning before we left the fish died anyway. You flushed him, scrambled eggs and sniffled back tears while you cooked.

Snow covered the ground from a storm the day before and whenever your father drifted near the icy patches along the highway I clenched the door-handle. Out the window were farm fields asleep under the snow. I watched you and your mother for tears. I saw you both cry a lot then, and I consoled you when you did, but no one cried on the way there.

I was happy our room wasn't near your parents,' and thought you might cry alone in our room, but you didn't. We put our swimsuits on and met your parents in the hallway. None of us were in very good shape. I suppose you and I were in better shape than your parents, but we were all very pale and I don't think anyone enjoyed looking at any of us.

We floated around the lazy river in inner-tubes, went down the big slides and played basketball in one of the pools. Afterwards we soaked in the hot tub. The hot tub could seat at least twenty and sported artificial rocks imitating a natural spring. We boiled in the tub with our hair slicked back, not talking. Then a teenage couple joined us. They looked like they were barely out of high school. They were fit, and the girl wore a small bikini. They sat across from us. I tried not watching them, but I couldn't see their hands. A few minutes later, your mother suggested we shower off the chemicals then meet back for dinner.

You and I showered together, but instead of having sex we talked about the hotel and the room we were in. The bathroom had one of those retractable clotheslines for drying swimsuits, but at first we didn't know what it was. You didn't cry in the shower, but I knew you would eventually.

We drank red wine at dinner and everyone tried their best to talk without talking about anything that might make someone cry. Still, it happened, when your father held his glass out for a holiday cheers you cried, and I squeezed your leg, watching the candle flame bounce above the poinsettia arrangement in the center of the table until you finished.

When I think back to the dinner and the trip. I think there was so much realness between us all. Like we couldn't be different people if we tried. But *I* kept trying. You said at home the day after Christmas, "Who cares about all this shit? It'll just end up at Goodwill anyway." I told you not to say that, but I hugged you anyway because I knew it was true.

That spring, your friend Tessa invited us camping. You hated bugs, so we rented a trailer on the campgrounds. Not quite a hotel or a home, the trailer had a kitchen with empty cabinets and a curtained window above the sink we could see Tessa and her friends camping from. They looked like gypsies on our land—Tessa and her fiancé, and their friends we barely knew that had also come along. For dinner we cooked over their fire. I wasn't good at roughing it and took a bite from a cold in the middle brat. A film of cool fat coated my teeth, and I spit the bite out. You laughed at me, but not in a mean way. You laughed at me in a way that let me know you shared the bad surprise, like the way you laughed at yourself for doing something stupid. But I hurt when you laughed at me in such a loving way because I had already done things to sabotage our relationship, I was always sabotaging things, and your laugh reminded me how I wished I hadn't.

The things we had left in the tank were surviving; the firefish, the coral, the blue crabs, the peppermint shrimp, but we stopped adding anything new.

On our last trip together we went to Appleton for a wedding. My dad had just died, so I drove his new truck. We missed the early part of the day taking place in a park, but made it for the reception taking place in a basement.

Our friends didn't know what to say. Death wasn't supposed to happen so often. We mingled in the kitchen. Friends mixed strong drinks in Solo cups and pumped beer from a keg. We talked about how this party was like the parties we went to when we were younger, except some of our friends brought their children this time. The drunker the children's parents became the less they watched them, and the children shuffled unbalanced near the basement steps. I expected one of them to fall. I expected everyone to die soon.

The reception finished at midnight and we checked in at the hotel. The place was okay. An old hotel bought by a chain. I don't remember which one. A class reunion clamored in the hall, and a couple from the reunion rode up in the elevator with us. The girl's gold dress twinkled in the elevator light. I wondered if they'd been together since high school or if they were getting back together that night. They both still wore name-tags.

You woke me up in the morning for a swim. You were wearing your swimsuit and laid mine out. I think you acted more upbeat for me, and I appreciated it, even if I wouldn't let my appreciation show. We had the whole pool to ourselves. I swam a few laps then watched you exercise. You strutted in circles in the shallow end. So focused when you exercised—I could watch you for days. When you saw me watching you smiled without stopping. I left you there

and went back up to the room by myself. I already missed you. I already missed everybody.

Months later, I was alone in my father's new truck, by then, my new truck, practicing power poses, and picturing things exploding. The explosions came naturally. First, I pictured the plane, taking off in front of the see-through afternoon moon. Then one of the flats in the apartment building with the sandwich-shop on the ground floor blew out. Smoke rose from the trunk of a neighbor's car and that too would explode. I endured my visions and sat like I didn't care how much space my body took up, so in my mind I would believe I was larger.

When you moved out you left a lot behind. Like your ring. Like our fish. The morning the last fish died I spilled the remnants of the tank onto the patch of dirt where you grew tomatoes. There was rain that day and later I found the aquarium filled with water, transformed into a temple for mosquito fertility rites. I dumped enough out for one day, so the mosquitos got their orgy.

I drove to the Hotel Grand after I dumped out the aquarium. I don't know why. Maybe I thought I'd find your ghost in one of our old temporary spots, but the hotel had been remodeled and wasn't the classic type of hotel like before. The hotel had become *The Grand*. Redecorated with modern furniture to compete with the new W Hotel a few blocks away. Instead of a sushi restaurant The Grand's

craft cocktail lounge glowed with vintage light bulbs. The marble bathroom with the built in TV was the only thing left unchanged.

I wandered the skywalk through downtown, passed the Mary Tyler Moore statue where you and I took pictures years earlier; you mimicking Mary, throwing an imaginary hat in the air, me smiling that weird restrained smile like I always do in pictures.

Not far away I found the building the W Hotel moved into. The building was called the Eiffel Tower of the midwest because, when it was built, it was the tallest building in Minneapolis with an observation deck. The lobby had a water dispenser with cucumber slices suspended in ice, and the front desk clerk made me feel ashamed when I told him I wasn't a guest. Still, he unlocked the elevator so I could go up to the deck.

The wind was strong up high and iron bars curved from the balcony rail to the wall, keeping me from floating off. A half mile away tiny people dismantled the roof of the Metrodome. The highway to the Mississippi, and eventually Milwaukee, faded into the distant haze. A man and woman handed me their camera. I took their picture. They smiled with the bars and clouds behind them. The woman wore a sweater like one you wore once when I picked you up from the airport, and I pictured you with your suitcases waiting for me, re-feeling that feeling of seeing you again after you had been gone.

On the way back down I smiled at the guests who got on the elevator with me. I didn't want to smile, but it happened over and over. A doorman nodded and

said, "Good day," on my way out. I nodded at him like a guest and walked off at a speed suggesting I knew where I was going.

The peppermint shrimp was the first to go. Then the blue crabs disappeared one by one. I found the firefish rotating in the current of the aerator. I was glad when he finally let go. I promised you I would empty the tank properly and take the fish back to the fish store, but I didn't. I fed them until the water turned to poison. The algae grew and the spiny worms in the live-rock became more and more fierce. You could've saved them. But since you were gone. You were lucky you weren't around to see the reef spoil.