

Minor Reckonings

It had been such a good morning that Micah forgot to feel afraid. In a moment of daring, his hand struck the radio button and he was off down a road of patchwork cement jobs with an unfamiliar half-smile.

He did not abuse the button of the aircon he knew full well had been broken for years. Instead, he rolled the windows down and greeted a country so useless even capitalists weren't interested in sinking their dicks into it.

Just before town, a cat darted out of the weeds to play dodgeball with Micah's tires. She was a horrible cat. Even at a dead sprint, her tail was up straight and noble. She was proud of her asshole, Micah could tell. Her white coat could have been sold as mink on the black market. She was loved better than Micah and she wanted to be sure he knew it.

"If you're so loved, what the hell are you doing in a swamp?" Micah muttered, turning off the radio and slowing to see if he had hit her. There was nowhere to pull over so Micah just stopped the car in the middle of the road. It went straight so far you could see where it was buried in the curve of the Earth. No danger of being surprised.

The cat was not in the road. The image of her scooting her half-crushed body along into the roadside sawgrass made Micah walk back. At least her fucking tail would be down.

The grass was nearly as tall as Micah. It was dry this time of year, and sharp. The whistle it produced pressed tight between inner thumbs was soulful and low and very beautiful. Micah remembered the way it shivered through the whistler's blood.

His fingers found a hardy strand. He knew exactly the music this blade would make, how it could pull you forward by the pelvis until your knees bent.

Better than the radio but more dearly punished. It would have been okay if it were only Micah paying penance for his pleasure, but God, having surmised that Micah's instinct for self-castigation made him uniquely difficult to threaten, had begun to torture him with the blood of others.

A warm wind blew. The grass tickled Micah's ankles and laughed at him. If he had stood on the hood of his car, he could have seen ten miles in any direction. But he could not see through the grass. The grass was the only mountain on this land.

Bending to untie his laces, he thought he could feel the heatwaves on his hands, sliding over his knuckles like fresh skin. This was a familiar illusion. It belonged to a class of casual fantasies that increased in frequency the longer Micah went without a fuck.

The same kind that turned the swaying grass into a curtain of soft green velvet towards which Micah reached with sudden eagerness, half-expecting to find in its hidden valleys his princess of the marsh, swamp mermaid with a hula skirt of gently swaying used condoms, to pull him down and make love to him in still gray water.

His toes curled in the warm mud. The swaying grass parted to reveal small fragments of infinite paradises, then closed again before Micah could step into them.

He heard the strangled sound of a broken bell, a tinkle without a chime. He thought he saw white fur.

Already, for Micah, the cat was not a cat. Rather, a sweet sprite of the long open road, charging willfully at passing cars, tumbling in their tires the way mortal women tumble in bedsheets, accepting the tailpipe like hot breath on her neck, adopting a meek defenseless form,

though one not without its dignity, to detect in the sunglasses drivers of screeching cars rare souls in whom the vulnerability of a stranger incites tenderness, not exploitation, a hand that reaches out to caress, not squeeze dry. That would be how she would recognize the heart of her eternal lover, by the car parked on the roadway, and the urgent steps, the fearless barefoot trek into to the bowels of the marsh, blood drawn by sharp grass, and all of it to find her there, not a cat at all, no symbol of his moral shortcomings, but an immortal woman of flesh and blood, not a punishment sent by God, but a goddess herself, capable of undoing all the gods had done.

No longer a cat but a mess of blood and guts, skin hanging in streamers, no longer a cat but a final installment of evidence that there was very little Micah would not do, or think, to live one moment free of his terrible loneliness.

An alligator had gotten to the cat before Micah could. He adjusted her in his jaws. The cat gave Micah a pleading look. The alligator gave Micah a look that made it clear he regretted having his mouth full.

On a quiet night, you could hear the sounds the bog made, groaning and murmuring like a house settling as it pushed its ancient secrets farther down.

Micah sat on his veranda with a cup of tea and waited for heat lightning to shatter the horizon. He smelled the cold copper breath of the river.

He thought about Sasha like he did most nights. He thought about the way her body had looked—her ankle bones on the concrete, and how you could tell she was dead because no one would ever let their ankle bones rest on concrete like that if they could help it. He wished he had gone to her and taken his socks off his own feet and put them on hers, pulling them up over the bones.

He wanted to call his therapist but feared finding her calm. Micah had learned that a therapist who responds calmly to being disturbed so late at night does not have a great deal of faith in her client's soundness of mind.

That summer, it had been 23 years since Micah had felt anything but dread.

According to Micah's therapist, he was so terrified of finding himself in denial that any feeling undrenched in acid was immediately suspect. Small pleasures squeaked through—bright sundresses hung on a washing line, a great bellowing fart that ended a stomach ache single-handedly.

Micah turned these pleasures against himself with force, and eventually he came to dread them too.

When Micah's own cat, a scraggly grey thing called Bobbin, had been struck by a car some months before, he had suspected himself of secret suffering. But really all he felt was relief. The cat received a proper Christian burial and a rose bush to mark its grave and utilize the phosphorus that leaked from its rotting bones.

After the conclusion of the ceremony, Micah, the sole mourner, retired to the kitchen for a kind of reception. By noon, he had half a box of red under his belt.

He set about collecting the weapons scattered throughout the house. Drain cleaner strapped to a rafter. Nail gun under the porch steps. Knives slipped between the pages of books. Piled up on his kitchen table, they kept him company while he finished getting good and drunk.

He had hidden them after dreaming of stomping on a cockroach, only to look down and see that it was Bobbin twitching beneath his foot. Waking, he found the cat cowering in a corner. He did not know what acts of somnambulant violence he was capable of, but he was not taking any chances with the kitchen knives.

Because Micah was profoundly cruel, he learned to cut a watermelon with a butter knife. When Bobbin died, there was one less thing to fear.

But tonight, Micah was thinking of Sasha, not Bobbin. He was thinking about how he could not look right at her. Instead, he looked at her blood. Dust and leaves floated to the top and were carried along on its pulsing tide. It reminded Micah of racing paper boats down flooded streets as a child.

He thought of her not because the night was extraordinary, but because in so many ways it was not. The lightning menaced distantly, the swamp moaned hungrily, and Micah smiled bitterly.

"I hated that cat," he said to himself. To prove it, he flung his used teabag over the porch railing, into the memorial rose bush. Old teabags hung from its thorns like Christmas ornaments.

Micah had met Lou when she toppled a pile of apples at the grocery store. As the recently promoted Assistant Manager of Produce, he was eager to prove himself and responded with gusto, checking for bruises with sure hands, stacking pyramids to outlast civilizations.

"Efficient," said Lou appreciatively. It was only then that Micah looked at her face. He knew it from the dating apps he used and, though they had never matched, this emboldened him.

Elements of Lou's appearance stirred something in Micah, though she was not beautiful. He liked her big honest mouth and her smooth round arms, like a Renaissance painting of a woman in repose. In her photos, she read Victorian novels and drank tea with flowers in it.

She would be luxuriant, sensual, witty. He could not imagine her eating anything but fruit.

Micah quickly learned that his predictions had been wildly off the mark, but he and Lou grew into a kind of companionship that on some days could almost be mistaken for love.

He knew the entryway to her small apartment in a bad neighborhood, with its framed collections of rare souvenir spoons from the countries she had visited, all of them colonizers. He began to share and echo her insistence that good manners show thoughtful care for fellow man. He learned how to use three forks to eat dinner, and one day he arrived at her home to find only two set at his place.

"I only have two forks," he told her, puzzled.

"Three is for when we have guests," she said. That was the most Micah had ever felt like he belonged anywhere. A tear of tenderness salted his duck confit.

Still, there were things Micah knew he would never tell Lou. He would never tell her she had toppled the apples because he stacked the good ones on the bottom.

The stunt was not a ploy to demonstrate assistant managerial crisis response skills. Its origins were more innocent. It had begun when Micah was still working as a bagger, under the authoritarian gaze of a badly stick-and-poked teenage cashier who liked to roll quarters around the candy bar display and make vroom vroom noises.

There was a distracted airiness about Micah at the best of times, and though he had not worked there long, he had already known the humiliation of being called into the office of, and formally reprimanded by, a manager young enough not to have heard of Bob Dylan.

On this particular day, the conveyor belt was chugging along with its usual cheerful incessance. Micah was in the rhythm of its squares and spheres—soy milk on the bottom, tomatoes on the top. Odd shapes shoved in the cracks.

When all of a sudden, a watermelon came thundering down the line, an earthquake of grocery store proportions. Chewing gum trembled on its stand. And the watermelon was not alone. Riding behind it, a carton of eggs.

Micah considered his options. Admit to his pimpled dictator that he had not been looking down the line? Never. Eggs on top of watermelon? The carton would tilt, eggs would spill out and be crushed against the side of the bag. Watermelon on top of eggs? Likely the carton would break and the eggs shatter, but possible that the shattering would remain contained within the carton.

The woman was hardly out the door when the yolk began to seep through the fabric of her bag. Micah followed its trail to find her loading her car. He pointed to the drops of yolk on the ground. God, it looks like blood, he thought. The way the dust floats on top. It looks like Sasha's blood in the yellow of the streetlamp.

"I'll get you another one, Miss. I'll pay for it myself."

"It's inconsequential, dear," said the woman with a smile.

Inconsequential, Micah repeated to himself. Inconsequential.

The next day, he stacked the apples with the good ones on the bottom. Just to see.

Micah did not call his therapist. He called Lou instead. She slept peacefully in her bed beside him. The streetlamp through her thin lace curtains showed him her shelves of little china figurines. Frogs on mushrooms, horses with wings, a Dutch windmill. Unlike his nana's dolls, they suggested no malice. They were Lou's. They were of her—he was safe from them, and they from him.

She slept on her back, and Micah curled into her, abandoned his pillow for hers, and pushed his face into her neck. He could have taken the lamp from her nightstand and beaten her to death with it, a weapon slow enough to give her time to wake up and see what he was.

Instead, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep, feeling the closeness of her veins to his teeth, considering the quiet power of her heart. Micah started to shake. He gripped her hand and she frowned in her sleep.

She rolled away from him. "It's so hot in here," she said, putting distance between their damp bodies. They both lay above the covers, but even with the window open to the hilt Micah could not sleep.

He made a frightened fist around the fabric of her t-shirt. He imagined Lou's ankle bones on the concrete, small stones pressing into angry red craters, heels shifting and scraping against the violent pavement as the medics pressed on her chest. He pulled her back toward himself.

"You're suffocating me," said Lou gently.

"I'm sorry," said Micah, relinquishing her.

Hours later, he could not tell whether or not he had slept. He stood at the window trying to cool down. Two strangers passed in opposite directions on the street below, one going to work early and the other coming home drunk. They slouched enviously past one another.

The sky was close and warm. The heat lightning had not come to relieve its pressure, and it whined frantically through the voices of mosquitos. Micah caught one in the air and looked at his hand to see a stranger's blood in his palm. He wiped it on his bare leg.

He remembered Sasha at her shiniest, performing in drag as Shoto Todoroki to Pat Benatar's Fire and Ice. Cosplay or drag? Who the fuck cares. We do what we want here.

It was a unsleepably hot night like this 23 years ago when Micah put Sasha out on the porch swing of his college share house after everyone else was asleep. He put a blanket around her shoulders, knowing it was too hot but needing to suffocate the flames of her grief. She put the blanket on the floor beside her but kept a corner in her lap. He made them hot tea they would not drink until it was colder than the air around them. Rare comfort in hot climes.

Sasha told Micah the university had given her back the results of her rape kit. There was nothing strange in her blood that would explain the things she did not remember, they said. There was nothing strange in her body where they had scraped it empty without making her cleaner. Nothing. That was what the university said.

"They can't fucking tell me it didn't happen," said Sasha.

She was going to be a mathematician. She was going to solve the Collatz Conjecture. Micah held her hand between their bodies.

Standing at Lou's window, he desperately wanted a cigarette, though he had not smoked in years. Just thinking about it, he was salivating. Moths darted like snow in the yellow light from the streetlamp. In the silence, he could hear them throwing themselves against it.

He went to the bathroom, splashed cold water on his face and hair. Tried to sleep. Could not.

On the porch swing that night, they had waited and waited for the lightning but it had never come. The tea went cold in their mugs, and the mosquitos went to bed, and they kept sitting there until eventually Sasha said, "so what do I do?"

"Let it go," said Micah. "Don't let them hurt you any more. The university does not want to believe you. If you try to fight them it'll be like being raped all over again. For me, that was almost worse. Trust me." And she had.

Micah wondered if there were things Lou would never tell him. Of course there were. He turned to face her in her bed and watched her back as she breathed. Her hair looked different. Darker, curlier.

"Lou?"

She turned to face him.

Not Lou. Sasha. Sasha in Lou's bed. Sasha in Lou's t-shirt.

She saw his shock. "Really?" she said. "*You're* afraid of *me*?"

He could not even look at pictures of her. Her closeness made him recoil. Cheekbones, pockmarks. *Sasha*. "Not afraid," said Micah, "just so fucking ashamed." His shame was so hot in the small room he could smell it. Like fresh piss on hot concrete.

"I know," she said gently. "But you don't have to be. I'm okay now. You can be okay too, if you want." She put her hand on his bare shoulder. Her fingers were cold, but her palm was rough like he remembered, from summers spent repairing roofs with her mom.

Her hand moved to his hip, felt the bones so close to the surface of his skin. It did not feel right for her to touch him like this. She pushed herself toward him. Her body was so cold. Her hand on his ribs, her thigh sliding between his.

“Stop it, Sasha.”

He did not like to be touched like this, not all at once, without proper procedure.

It was so different from the way they had held each other early that morning after he walked her down the porch steps of his college share house and told her it would be okay. In the warmth of that moment, they had both really believed it would be.

After that, Micah mostly saw Sasha at parties. She stood him up on coffee dates and avoided the rooms where they had liked to sit together in the library. Micah understood. If she wanted to forget all this, she had to forget him, too.

The second to last time Micah saw Sasha was when she offered him a line of ketamine in the bathroom line at someone’s party.

The last time he saw her was after she jumped from the roof of the math building where they had once discovered a faulty window latch and gone to smoke weed and yell at pigeons.

In the puddle of herself, her face revealed nothing. She kept her secrets until the end.

In Lou’s bed, Micah pushed Sasha away and stood up. She followed him, wrapped steel hands around his upper arms, pressed him against the wall.

She whispered in his ear, “You always wanted to fuck me, didn’t you, Micah?” Her breath smelled like rotting fruit.

“Fuck *off*, Sasha.”

“You hurt me more than those boys did.”

“I know.”

“Were you jealous of them?”

He tried to push her, but she was impossibly strong. Her fingers climbed his arms without releasing him. They found the back of his head and knotted themselves in his hair, pulling his scalp so that the skin of his face tightened and his lips parted.

Her thumbs took his pulse. Her eyes grew hard and she gave a sour smile.

“Misfortune is supposed to come along just when things are getting good. When you’re starting grad school, having kids, doing yoga, fucking your shaman, selling your start-up, and then boom. Like that’s the real tragedy.” Sasha shook her head. “I don’t think I was ever really happy. Now I’ll never know what that’s like. Joy must be as complex as pain. And as rich. Is it?”

Her jealous fingers on his neck.

“I don’t know. What happened to you stole my life, too, Sasha. I have not felt peace for a single second since you died.”

“You still have so much life.”

“I was always in awe of you,” Micah tried to say, but he could not because her lips were on his and her tongue was in his mouth. It tickled him as he mumbled the words around it. It was so cold it hurt his gums—cold, rough, and dry.

Micah could feel the impossible length of the thing tickling the back of his throat. With the same iron urgency as her fingers, it wrapped itself around Micah’s own tongue, staked its claim in his mouth.

It did not feel like a kiss. It felt like she wanted to eat him from the inside the way he had seen ravens do to a dead bloated turtle that a wave of trash had washed up onto a beach in Mumbai, by pulling its intestines out through its ass.

He watched her eyes as she invaded him. At first she had been looking at him but now they began to drift apart in their sockets, the way the eyes of the cat had unmoored when the alligator's jaws severed their loyalty to one another.

He could feel her trying to tell him something, mumbling around the tongue that connected them and silenced them at once. He understood that he was being punished. He did not know if it would even the score or end it.

The tongue grew and grew until Micah's mouth was full of it. It flossed his teeth. It filled his cavities. It felt like being force-fed cold boiled eggs. Then it began to rot. He could tell it was turning green just from the texture of it, from the smell.

As the rotting advanced, the tongue turned to dust. It floated up the back of his mouth and into his nose.

He sneezed. The force of it brought his teeth together, severing the tongue at its root, breaking the bond between them. He shoved Sasha away from him as hard as he could.

Micah woke just in time to watch his own hands push Lou out of her open window.

In the early morning, the air was finally cool. The pressure had gone out of the atmosphere and the dawn hung limp and benign over her body. He could tell she was dead by the way her ankle bones rested on the concrete.