

Baptism

Tre leaned over the edge of that absurd structure. The Tridge. Suspended over the Tittabawasee major, Tittabawasee minor, and Chippewa rivers, this three-armed footbridge was the only unique feature of Midland, Michigan. Tre leaned over the edge, thinking about the last time he had gone skinny dipping off the Tridge with his friends in high school, only to be chased down by cops like the wet dogs they were. But these thoughts only occupied his mind for a moment. He was one of Midland's finest salesmen, and he had business to conduct.

Although Tre had some of the classic markers: unkempt clothes, a bad diet, low eyes—he didn't project the natural salesman aura you would have expected. He was uncommonly well read, called his mother often, and took pride in keeping his lugubrious Toyota Paseo clean.

Tre walked to the Paseo and ran through the list of today's clients: *Kennedy twins, Alicia, Chalmer's Diner, Vit, and the Newbie*. Oh yeah, the Newbie. Tre worked on trying to form an image of the Newbie in his head. They had only texted, but he hoped it would be a woman. Either way, they were probably just looking for a one off order. No sweat off Tre's back. That was just a natural part of the profession. But, he always found a peculiar excitement coming into people's lives—even for a short moment.

Now, obviously, Tre's real name wasn't Tre. In fact, his nickname wasn't even spelled T-R-E originally. He got the nickname because a friend said he looked like a lunch tray sophomore year of high school. Mealy white skin, thin as hell, and the possibility you could forget he was even there. But that's not to say Tre was a loser. Not by any means. He was well liked by almost all who knew him, and had a wonderful ability to keep a conversation going without ever over-asserting himself when people talked about themselves. People in Midland,

Michigan wanted to talk about themselves. Tre let them talk, and he was appreciated for the sincere attention. But he, himself, rarely talked. Just never had much to say, lost in his own world. If you were on a late night drive around town sitting shotgun blasting music and sit-dancing-hand-waving with the driver, you could easily forget Tre was in the back seat. Just like the lunch tray sitting beneath your plain burger and 2% milk.

For further clarification, his name is now spelled ‘Tre’ due to an honest mistake. It was his good buddy Sofa. Tre and his high school crew thought it was the most hilarious thing in the world to give nicknames based on one’s similitude to the qualities and appearances of inanimate objects. Tre, Sofa, Toothbrush, Rag, etc. Anyways, sophomore year Tre took a nasty spill on his skateboard and ended up in the hospital. While he was being wheeled out of the hospital, leg cast and all, Sofa held up a handmade poster board sign emblazoned with crayon and glitter paint that read: GET WELL SOON TRE. After about ten minutes of gut wrenching laughter at the dull inner-workings of Sofa’s mind, the spelling stuck. And each of the boys used these original nicknames as a way to momentarily escape the reality of their fathers’ failures. Sometimes they teased each other about whose father was the biggest failure. But that all stopped after Tre’s Dad got hauled off to prison and lost his life in Midland County Correctional. Even people who can’t spell ‘lunch tray’ know not to throw salt in a wound like that.

But at the time of this exceptionally muggy late July night, Tre was twenty-eight years old and one of the most important salesmen in Midland. He would never say he missed those high school days, but some of his friends viewed it as the zenith of their lives, an insurmountable high that could never—and would never—be sustained again.

Tre put the key in the ignition and punched the radio. He started driving slowly through the neighborhood. Relaxed, without direction. He ran through the list again, *Vit... Chalmer’s...*

Alicia... he stopped on Alicia. He hoped she would come out to the car wearing that lovely black lace nightgown again, like she did once at the beginning of the summer. Better to wait until later on in the night then. Just as Tre finished this thought, the words ‘five dollar footlong’ sprang out of the radio and shot into his ear canal, passing the hypothalamus, quickly taking a breather on the taste buds, and running down his esophagus into the stomach. Grumble.

“Chalmer’s it is.”

Tre continued to take his time driving through town. No rush, but the manager asked him to be there before 8 o’clock. It was 7:17. He could have delivered a couple orders before he pulled up to Chalmer’s, but he enjoyed sitting down and consuming the whole free meal at his own pace.

He pulled around the back of the diner and grabbed his bag. This was his cash cow. He sold to three quarters of the kitchen staff, and other random people were always waiting for his arrival on Friday nights from word of mouth. Back in the day, this is where he would buy from. That was until a bus boy came into the dining area and sparked a blunt just as the Sheriff walked in. That was about a year ago, and none of the staff could ever wrap their minds around the meaning of that absurd timing. But that incident opened up a vacuum in town. A young and organized person of means needed to deal weed to the northside of town. Tre happened to be that ambitious person.

Tre walked through the back door, straight into the kitchen, tossing his backpack on a vacant meal prep table.

“Aye, Romero, the shit’s all bagged up over here. Tell all your boys to go ahead and take whatever they ordered.”

“Aye, thank you so much G. Go ahead and have a seat at the counter, we’ll take your order in a minute.”

Tre bursted through the bump doors and into the dining area. Heads swiveled. They had been waiting for this moment, continually craning their necks to see when he would materialize. Tre took his seat at the counter. The manager, Billy Belefonte, came over to take Tre’s order.

“What’ll it be today?”

“Beggin’ eggn’ chee’ Billy.”

“You know you can order anything off the menu right?”

“Slap some Frank’s on there, too. And let me get a tepid water.”

Billy stared blankly. A few moments passed until he remembered who he was talking to. A strange order for a strange person, he must have thought.

Tre swiveled around on the stool and surveyed the restaurant. He could see men and women alike processing into the kitchen. Each person came over, one at a time, paying Tre in full. He hardly spoke to any of them. But he always remained amused. What a place—where people were breaking the law in the public arena, just to keep the moral righteousness of paying their dues. He never had issues with payment before, and he wouldn’t tonight. *God bless rural Michigan.*

Once it got to 8 o’clock, the owner came over and shook Tre’s hand. He reminded Tre of the significance of a salesman’s role in this small town, and mused about how his Friday night party would be wonderful. He extended the hero an invitation, to which Tre responded with a maybe. The weekly Chalmer’s ceremony concluded and Tre made his way out the back door.

The sun illuminated his face as he walked to the Toyota. At the end of July in these parts, the sun stayed up until around 9 o’clock, and it stayed bright enough to see until almost 10. This

was, of course, everyone's favorite time of year. The comfortable epoch of the summer—before you realize that there's not much left, and after the summer has materialized into something tangible. But there was still work to be done tonight.

He completed the order to the Kennedy twins quickly. They said what's up and slapped the cash into Tre's hands. Nothing but business with them. Alicia's house was just around the corner. Unfortunately, she didn't come out her front door in a skimpy nightgown— instead she wore tight leather pants, a fitting Pepsi-Cola cotton tee, and some makeup that made her look serious and sexy.

“Thanks a lot for this one, sexy Tre.”

“No problem hunny.” Now, Tre didn't have a shot with Alicia. He never had a shot with her. Although, years ago, they had some passion-filled nights where they ended up in bed together. Given the head-spinning drug-induced inertia they occasionally shared after college, who could say if they ever did it or not? Tre was struggling to make the junior varsity squad, while Alicia was looking like a major league prospect. This didn't bother him, he just appreciated her sexy banter.

Alicia leaned into the car from the passenger window. “You know I'm having a party later tonight, right?”

“Might've heard about it.”

“Well I could make it well worth your while. I've got some exquisite girlfriends coming up from the D. I'm sure they'd love to meet you.” She licked her lips.

Tre leaned back in the driver's seat. “Yeah, I'll think about it. Gotta make this green though, y'know what I mean?”

“And I've gotta smoke mine. I'll see you later baby, yeah?”

“You’ll find out.” Tre flipped the car into drive and sped down the road.

After Alicia there was just Vit and the Newbie. Tre decided on Vit first. Turned out he needed someone to haul his younger brother’s foosball table to a house five blocks away. It took the two of them three hours to move the damn thing. And this was after Vit made Tre wait until he rolled up and smoked a joint by himself. Didn’t bother Tre though. Not like he was too eager to sit in between two Detroit girls licking his ears telling him he was more attractive than he knew he wasn’t.

But after Vit’s entire debacle, Tre was tired and just wanted to go to sleep. Or maybe go to Alicia’s. He hadn’t made up his mind yet. But while scanning his mind, he remembered the Newbie. *Oh, poor Newbie.* They had probably been waiting all night to get a text. He whipped out his phone and texted as he drove.

-Yo. You still want this bag?

A text came back within thirty seconds.

-Yes.

-Word. Where?

-Can you meet me at M20 Liquors?

-Closed. Past midnight now.

-I know. Meet me there in ten?

-All good.

Tre expected something like this. Usually newbies liked to meet up in an inconspicuously-conspicuous location. Somewhere like a parking lot or garage or landfill. Obviously they didn’t want to get caught by the cops, but still, these were the places cops *expected* drug deals to go down. One thing buyers could never get through their skulls is that you

want to go to a conspicuously-inconspicuous place. In other words: hide in plain sight. But Tre wanted to unload the full package. That always made him feel complete. Like he earned his wage.

He approached the liquor store on East Isabella Road. He gave a quick scan to his surroundings, there was no one around. There wasn't even a car in the parking lot. He checked the time. 12:07. Three minutes early. As he put on his sunglasses he heard a knock on the window. Looking through the windshield he saw a woman moving around the car approaching the passenger's side of the vehicle. He unlocked it as she put her hand on the door handle.

Getting into the car, the mature forty-something looking woman with dyed blonde hair and murderous lips asked, "Tre?"

"Yeah."

"Drive."

"Where?"

"Around."

"You got it."

Tre pulled out of the liquor store parking lot and moved north on Homer Road. He would not be the first to speak. Silence hung in the air for forty, fifty, sixty seconds until the void began to suffocate the pair in the vehicle.

The woman lost the battle, "I found your number in my daughter's phone."

"Okay."

"She's in high school."

"Okay."

"She's fifteen."

“Bit young.”

“A *bit*?”

Tre let this comment fall flat. Sure, fifteen year-olds shouldn't be smoking weed. And more so, Tre never sold to anyone younger than eighteen. Things got messy if you did. But the high school seniors ordered in big doses and he knew why. Better to hand the job off to someone else, someone younger. Still, this mother's comment was bullshit. If her daughter wanted weed, she would get it. He had nothing to do with that inevitability.

“I'm sorry,” the mother said.

“No worries.” Tre didn't take his eyes off the road.

“I still want what you're selling.”

“Backpack. Back seat.”

The mother reached back and produced the singular cellophane-wrapped eighth left in the bag.

“Thanks. And I noticed she hasn't texted you... yet. If she does then just tell her Mom's already got it.”

“So she isn't too young.”

“She's too young to be dealing with older druggies.”

“Says the girl's mother, buying drugs.”

“Oh please, I have a medicine cabinet with pill bottles lined up to make it look like Andy Warhol's fucking soup cans. Probably enough to destroy whatever frat you were in during college. I just want it in case Cecily asks. I don't smoke.”

“Me neither.”

The mother craned her neck to look at Tre's strange face, hidden behind sunglasses.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to judge a—”

“No worries. Got clean from everything when I took up this exalted position.”

“Did you just say exalt—”

“I was in a frat though. Didn’t stop me from graduating with honors.”

“From where?”

Tre turned to look at his passenger for the first time since she got in the car. He smiled, “Go Blue.”

The mother twisted her neck further. She studied him. He enjoyed it. He rarely spoke about his impressive career at the University of Michigan, continually holding onto that trump card, hidden deep in the sleeve of his blue full zip Walmart sweater—beaten to hell by a myriad of washing machines over the years.

The mother was engaged now. “What’s your name?”

“Tre.”

“No. I want to hear your real name. Could you tell me, please?”

Tre looked through the windshield, pretending to scan for deer by squinting his eyes.

“Well mine is Tess. Tess Dove Keyes if you’d like to know.”

“Three names. How lovely.”

“I had to use my middle name. I lived in New Jersey until I moved out to Michigan the summer before 8th grade. Without my middle name I was subjected to cruel boys calling me—”

“Testes.” Tre cracked a smile, not big enough to fit a jack of spades through the slit in his lips. Tess smiled too. Perhaps this was the first time she had ever smiled at the joke.

“Yes. Luckily the Michigan boys were too stupid to figure out that clever wordplay—after the addition of my middle name.”

“Or they were too busy trying to jump your bones.” Tre looked to his right. Although he remained calm on the surface, unaffected, he worried he had pushed the latent sexual atmosphere between a man and woman driving alone at night too far. Tess shot a smile back. *Game on.*

“You know, you’ve got some charm for a pot dealer.”

“Charm is getting the object of your desire to say yes without asking any questions. You’ve got charm, too. You pushed your way into the car.”

“And what’s your object of desire?”

As Tre pulled up to a red light, he established hard eye contact with Tess. A streetlight illuminated gray eyes through his sunglasses.

“Always changing.” Tre slowly moved his eyes towards Tess’ legs. She returned a charged smile before looking away.

There were no other cars around, and this moment provided a necessary respite. Tre decided he would not continue with flirtation. Not because he wanted to, and not because Tess was probably married. However, the realm of intellectual flirtation is a space that can only be occupied for a certain amount of time—like being at the front of a buffet line. You have waited to scoop the cheesy potatoes and brats onto your plate, and you should be allowed to take as much time as you would like to select the best slice of pie—but your internal clock shouts at the top of its lungs pleading your lazy fat ass to move it along. There’s a thin line between intellectual flirtation and a full on sexual atmosphere. It’s just necessary to choose your brats, taters, and pie quickly.

Tess filled the space again, “And what if the object of your desire is gone?”

“What if it never existed in the first place?”

“It did.” Tess stared out the window. Her eyes scanned for any item in the passing landscape to focus on. When she found nothing to cling to, she unfocused her pupils, the same way lost children in class do.

“Do you know who my husband is?”

“No.”

“Brian Sartorius. The Sheriff.”

“Ah.” Tre shifted.

“Don’t worry. He’s not coming to look for you. Or me.”

“Wasn’t worried about it.”

“I slipped plenty of codeine into his whiskey tonight. He’ll be lucky if he wakes up by noon tomorrow.”

“Ah.”

“Did you ever hear about how our oldest died? Francesca Sartorius?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you read about it in the newspaper?”

“Yeah. Drowned in Traverse City. Was it last summer?”

“A year ago today.”

Silence.

Tess stared out the window. Now, resignation morphed into rigidity. “She didn’t drown.”

Tre didn’t react. After pushing his own silence for a moment, he realized Tess would not speak further until he prodded. He decided to assert himself. Tess wanted him to. “How did she die?”

Tess shuffled her hands on her lap. “My husband shot her.” Rigidity faded back to resignation. “It was an accident. It was. He was cleaning his state-issued handgun sitting on the front porch of our cabin. It misfired. Francesca just happened to be standing in the right place at the wrong time. These things happen.” Tess studied the mundane and gray-washed objects of a midnight Michigan landscape. “I was going to kill him tonight.”

“Because revenge will bring you peace.”

“No. I would not kill someone for an honest mistake. No matter how gruesome.”

Tre and Tess slipped under Route 10 again. Town was approaching. Tre didn’t speak. He gave Tess time to think about what she wanted to say. But Tre could tell she had been thinking about saying this to someone, anyone, for a year now. “I’m thinking about taking his life because of what’s happened since then. The cover up has been the most excruciating experience of my life. Francesca’s grandparents don’t even know what Brian did. They believe she drowned just like everyone else. Too much water damage to the body—closed casket funeral. Who embalmed the body? One of Brian’s best friends who he goes to the bar with every weekend. Cecily? She was staying at her friend’s cabin on the U.P. Certainly a Sheriff never would have gone to prison for something like this. But even still, he shields our friends, our family, our town, our entire universe from what he truly did. And the worst part—he has started to convince himself Francesca drowned. Last week, when it was just him and me in our bedroom, he confided saying he hasn’t known happiness since Francesca drowned. I said I hadn’t known true disgust since he started lying to everyone, including himself. Until tonight, there were three people in the world who knew how Francesca died. Now you’re the fourth.”

Tre continued driving slowly. His subsequent silence was not formed from a lack of words. The fragments of a thousand sentences simultaneously constructed and deconstructed in

his mind. Pressure mounted for Tre. He landed on clarification, “You were going to do this tonight.”

“I held the Glock 22 in one hand and my phone in the other.”

“And you chose the phone.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Could’ve chosen the glock and then the phone.”

“I guess you’ll find out tomorrow, then.”

Unconsciously, Tre had been working towards the Tridge. As it came into view, the two in the car could see purple lights illuminating that absurd complex.

“So the lie is the crime that deserves the penalty of death. Not the act of killing her.”

“That deception will be our suffering, for we shall all be forced to lie.”

“Suffering like yours will never end.” Tre put the car in park. “Come.” He got out of the car and started to walk towards the Tridge. Tess stayed in the car.

Tre walked back towards the car and opened the passenger door. Tess became confused with herself, “I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have told you any of this. I just changed my mind. I wish I hadn’t told you this. Please, take me home.”

Tre removed his sunglasses and sustained eye contact with Tess, “If you come to the Tridge, I will tell you my name. He shut the door on Tess, forcing her to make a decision. Within the next three minutes, she started walking to the epicenter of the Tridge.

He looked away from her, leaning on the railing. Tess said, “Well, are you going to tell me or not?”

“My name is Bart. Scuma.”

Tess’ eyes shot towards the ground. “Like the teacher at Dow High?”

“He was my father.”

“I see why you didn’t want to tell me your name.” Tess looked to the water.

“Naturally someone like me would like to protect their identity. But have you ever met a drug dealer who remains anonymous because his father was killed in prison for molesting one of his students?”

“No.”

“I would hope so.”

Tess laughed a little. So did Tre. But the moment lingered longer than it was welcome. Each mind turned back to its own unique suffering in solidarity.

Tre broke the silence. “Do you believe the fish think the Tridge is ugly too?”

“Probably not. They’re just fucking fish.”

Tre smiled, “Fair enough.”

“I do envy them, though. The fish.”

“Because their thoughts don’t continually swirl like ours do?”

“No. Because they are forever guided by the current. Sometimes I think about how easy it would be to have the current float me down—to relieve myself from making choices, like the ones I made tonight.”

“What’s stopping you from using the current?”

“Have you listened to anything I said tonight?”

“The weight you carry from the past into your future is something only you can control.”

“I wish the weight never existed.”

Tre studied Tess for a moment. Without speaking, he took off his shirt. Tess took half a step back. Pants came off. Shoes, socks, underwear. He climbed halfway up the railing of the Tridge. Tess watched with confused awe before making a decision. Tess Dove Keyes undressed and climbed onto the railing, taking Bart Scuma's hand. The two heroes—standing on the railing of an off-putting tourist attraction for a town that remained irrelevant in every other possible aspect—plunged thirty-one feet to a momentary illumination of infantile renewal in faith and peace.