

Half Off Banana Pudding

He hugs me on the threshold, holding me helpless between the musty hallway and the crisp, vetiver scent of his apartment. “Hey, Man. Lookin’ good.”

The greeting pinholes my heart. I’m sure he doesn’t notice the shirt I’m wearing. I remember the exact moment he discovered he’d outgrown it. He put it on, realized it was a crop top, and threw it to me, freckles speckling his shoulders like inky spills of coffee. I’ve worn it a lot lately.

“It’s empty in here,” I say, playing Captain Obvious like a real idiot.

“Just the futon and my luggage. Though, the futon’ll be my landlord’s problem.” He laughs.

I don’t.

Outside a squirrel races around and around the trunk of a skinny, potted tree.

He cringes with apology so I know what he’ll say before his lips finish parting. “I’m so sorry, but I have to cut it shorter than we planned. Jess needs some help.”

It’s not a discussion so what can I say? “I guess she’s not the best at planning.”

There’s a part of me that wants to warn him what it’ll be like traveling with Jess the Mess. She’ll only ever be something for him to take care of. But there’s no sense spending our last day together in a

fight. It's a battle I lost months ago anyway, the very first time he said her name with that weird little smile hiding in the corner of his mouth.

I've been choking up like a girl since he got the job, and another ball of tears is currently crawling up my throat, building pressure like a stoppered geyser. The sound of steps and his hand descends, warming my shoulder straight through to the socket.

"I feel awful for bailing, but I'll make it up to you when you visit. Here." Cardboard scrapes insistently across the floor. "Maybe this will tide you over."

I kneel so both of us can hover over an open box. The tableau feels echoing and timeless, like it's the same moment reflected forever between two mirrors. It belongs simultaneously to the here and now, and the little kids unearthing a box of comics at a yard sale, and the twelve year olds peering over cardboard flaps to stroke blind, wet kittens in his mother's closet, and the college students staring at the tumbled assemblage destined to become the very futon hiding in the corner like a jealous ex-girlfriend. The geyser gains strength.

"Not like I can take it with me. And it's too special to toss out."

Half a paper mache mask crowns the top of the haphazard pile, the bottom grayed with indeterminate smudging. Mine is whole, tucked inside a Vans box under my bed. The mask is partially covering the comic we only drew to page three, and a string of Scout badges that might belong to either of us. I close the lid on the box and everything I waited too long to say.

"Thanks." Could I be any more of a shmuck? "I love it."

I lug the box up three flights of stairs, and trap it against the wall with my stomach. Both hands are required to convince my door to open. As soon as it does, the box dives from my arms like a suicide. My apartment feels cluttered and too close after the echoing void of Jonah's empty loft. Not surprising since I live in a single room. Two if you want to be really generous and count my toilet and bathtub as their own separate space. Although I certainly wouldn't. They're entombed in what was almost assuredly

a closet pre-renovation. There aren't cabinets, a sink, or even a mirror. It might have been embarrassing to ask guests to wash their hands in the kitchen, but luckily a surplus of visitors has never been an issue. I'm still kicking off my shoes when the phone rings.

"Hey, Mom."

"Mikey. It's so good to hear your voice."

She pauses only a second or so, but it makes it so obvious that neither of us has anything important to say. She's just calling out of duty. It's kind of sweet that she cares enough to do that, but I wish we were the type of mother and son that talked because we wanted to. She rushes to fill the gap with the standard interrogation.

"How's work? Making friends?"

I don't know why she keeps asking, I always give the same response. "I like the friends I have."

"You'll need someone to fill in for Jonah once he moves. He leaves soon, doesn't he?"

"How's Dad?" This time the gap is longer.

"He's fine, Honey."

"Is he there?"

"Oh yeah. Watching the Cubs. They're in extra innings."

He won't want to speak to me then.

She barrels on to smooth over the wrinkle in our script. "I was just calling to see if you'd be home for the Christmas service."

I say I'm busy and we say goodbye. I don't promise to visit.

Dinner is a tray of Lean Cuisine, rice with woody green beans on one side and a molded block of steak on the other. I eat reclining, one foot plopped on my salvaged coffee table. The TV fizzes with light and sound, sickly as one of those fruity cocktails that hangs you over the next morning.

I shovel in half done rice before it can finish congealing, and watch people say things so other, invisible people can laugh about it. I roll my futon flat and stare into the misty electric light crawling in from the single window. Eventually I fall away to black dreams I can't remember.

My grocery store circuit is as familiar as the latticed, green basket banging into my legs with every step. I make the usual rounds: a bag of baby carrots, a tube of Pringles, a block of yellow cheese. I always save aisle six for last. My favorite place in the Universe is at the back of that aisle. It's a veritable temple of culinary miscellania where oddities from all over the world jumble together like uneasy neighbors. Here Bubbie's Best Sauerkraut and white rounds of Oaxaca knock against astringent yogurt from Iceland and European butter that costs more than I make in an hour. I move unerringly to the middle of the right hand side. There they are, my little yellow jars of bliss.

Other guys might crack open a cold beer after a long day of buzzing fluorescent lights, computer monitors, and voluntary muteness, but I crack open a Magnolia's banana pudding. I love every part of the process, peeling back the foil top, piercing the perfectly smooth pudding skin, the first explosion of creamy, banana goodness. I love the delicate bell shaped jar and the little chunks of fruit and the taste and the smell and even the chime of my spoon against the glass.

And they're half off! As per the cheery red sticker obscuring the price with CLOSEOUT. Now I regret not picking up an actual cart as I load my hand basket with every jar available

But why is it half off?

I've been coming to the same clanky, glass-doored fridge for years, and I've never seen Magnolia's at even a penny less than three dollars an ounce.

A pimply faced guy in an apron kicks open the rubber-lipped back door, his arms burdened with boxes.

“What’s up with Magnolia’s?”

“What?” He looks less than pleased at being stopped.

“The Magnolia’s pudding? Why is it on sale?”

“We’re making room for the new stuff.”

I set my plastic hamper on the floor and go to Google immediately. There in black and white a thank you to all their customers and supplies, those lovers of fine Parisian puddings the world over. There, first and foremost on the homepage a message of farewell.

I wander from the store in a daze. Out of business means I can’t find a different store or buy it online. The glass jars in my backpack are possibly the last in the state. What can I do to find more? Call every grocery store in America and then convince a bagboy to send them to me through refrigerated FedEx? And even if I could, what about when I ran out?

I’ve tried to substitute. I’ve tried to find some product that gave me even half the pick me up, but nothing ever came close. My chest aches.

Magnolia’s was the one thing I could look forward to without fail. Jonah made everything better when he was around, but now he’s off on an adventure without me. We’ll Skype at first; I’ll tell him about riding a subway car full of drag queens or the pig loose on Fifth. But how long until our calls get shorter? Until they start to be rescheduled? Until they stop?

I was getting ready for that, preparing myself so it wouldn’t hurt as much, wouldn’t be a shock. But I’d been counting on having one thing that would be the same no matter what, one thing that I didn’t have to worry about. Magnolia’s every night and some time with Jonah that’s all I asked of my life. Jonah was one thing. How could I ever hold him? But this was too much.

The street is searing, bright and oversaturated, noise hissing from it’s underbelly like steam. I adjust the straps digging into my shoulders, bobbing through the eternal river of pedestrians like a hollowed out pumpkin. No one looks at me.

I cut through an alley, startling the scabby cur snapping something up from a bulging black trash bag. The animal looks like a Halloween decoration: Half Skeleton Zombie Dog all yours for \$19.99. I can see the notches in its hip bones, and there are valleys between each rib, except where the abdomen is bloated with worms. Its fur is the same color as the russet potatoes pulling down the bottom of my backpack, except of course the parts that have crusted over with scabrous mange.

The mutt raises its head as I draw near. It growls, backing up, the ridge of hair on its neck coming alive where it isn't stuck down with grime. The dog pretends to be a tough guy, growling long after I'm past. He's still rumbling like a motor when I finally turn the corner.

It's just depressing. All the best things never stick around and the world is full of sad, pathetic creatures that nobody cares about. I wonder if the dog still pines for the person that abandoned it.

At home, the pudding jars make two orderly rows in the fridge. I close the door and listen to the light buzz overhead. The silence itches.

My eye catches on the knife block by my hand me down Mr. Coffee. I pull out the largest knife, a huge serrated affair, and hold it against my wrist, barely touching. I'm not actually going to do anything. I'm just trying the idea on like a thrift store coat, metal teeth prickling against my forearm.

The thought of pulling the blade down with enough strength to be effective makes something flutter unpleasantly in my belly. The knife goes home, buried in the wooden block like a tick's head, and I put it from my mind.

Or at least I try to. Without Jonah there's too much space in my brain.

I watch people as the train trundles on. It used to be a game to Jonah and I, sneaking a picture of the most outrageous example of humanity on our train. We didn't keep score per se, but every so often one of us would declare himself the winner and order the other to pay for drinks or admittance into Fair

Family Fun Center in China Town. There's no one interesting in this train car, anyway, the game doesn't matter. My throat closes up.

I badge in the front door at work and haul my backpack through the turnstile. Our office is in a small business park that everyone in management calls the campus. I don't know why they call it that, like we're a school, but they do. The elevator is overcrowded, people pressing against me. There's a tall guy in a salmon polo next to me. The tiny hairs on his arm brush against mine, sending a shiver racing across the back of my neck. Maybe he's looking at me, but I can't force myself to look up to see.

Technically I work in an open floor plan, those god awful, distracting architectural designs created by someone with more degrees than sense. Today is somebody's birthday. Everyone on our team is circled around a grocery store sheet cake like it's a virgin sacrifice to a cult of nerds. The tiny plates look ridiculous in their big, inarticulate hands. I'm outside the circle, adrift, a cometary body alone in space. I mosey, as if by accident, to the second largest congregation of cake eaters. "You guys see the new trailer for Divinity?"

"I don't follow that sci-fi crap," Mitchell answers for the group.

I swallow the gluey lump of sugar masquerading as chocolate cake. "Oh, this isn't 'Sci-fi,' really. It's actually a political drama with a space-epic framework."

"So a show populated exclusively with aliens and spaceships and lasers isn't actually about any of those things? Wow. Won't you please tell me more?"

He pulls an exaggerated pleading face and laughter erupts from the loose circle surrounding us.

I smile along as best I can, and don't say anything else. I'm halfway through my cake, but I can only force another bite before the geyser forces me to the safety of my desk.

So they didn't want to talk about Divinity, I comfort myself. The guys were all friends before you got here, it's a hard group to break into. At least no one can call you a curmudgeon. At least you went.

The realization slips in like a needle: I've become my mother.

Dutifully checking off the to do list of living with no passion and no point. I don't want to do most of the tasks in my day and there's no real reason to keep doing them. Besides Jonah, no one's ever cared if I'm there or not. Would I keep attending a party I wasn't having fun at? Of course not. So why am I dragging my feet through a never ending repetition of the same, horrible day?

At home, I immediately go to the computer. Most of the advice on the internet sounds either painful or undignified, and the rest is annoying do gooders begging me to live without any idea who they're talking to. Finally, I find a post that's actually helpful.

I prepare without thinking much about it, like Death and I are going on a series of casual dates. I visit my favorite restaurants. I call out from work. I throw out the spiral notebooks full of poorly written love poems and all my holey underwear. I have supplies delivered from the big hardware store down the road.

My final sunrise finds me starfished on my futon, forearm over my eyes, thinking about Jonah and Jess. I imagine them holding hands at some shrine, hoisting precariously balanced sushi rolls into each other's mouths with chopsticks. I imagine them kissing under cherry trees like they're in some shitty romantic comedy. Their ghostly smiles draw down the corners of my own mouth.

I sift Jonah's shirt from the dirty laundry and pull it over my head, stuff some bread in my backpack, and go out into my city. It's a short ride on the Subway to Columbus Circle and a shorter walk to the most famous park in the world. I rubberneck like one of the fannypack crowd, trying to capture the magic of Manhattan. When I first moved here, the city felt alive in a way no place ever had. But the old music won't play. It's just a city. I dodge a clump of picture takers, skirt a tiny newsstand selling water bottles at five dollars a pop, and walk past the ring of fountains that would be pretty if they weren't lousy with pigeons and refuse.



There's a family using the same lake outlet I want to, but I try to play nice. I give a slice of bread to a very sunburnt child under the watchful eye of his equally red father and we throw morsels to the swarming ducks below. The water smells like turtle shit.

Once I'm out of bread, I cut through the park and pay my respects to Lennon at Strawberry Fields. I've always been too self-conscious to do this, but this is my last chance. Despite the small crowd, I put my hand on his mosaic and thank him for writing *Mind Games* in 1973.

I find myself at loose ends, should I get a slice of pizza or go to the Met? I might like visiting the exquisite statuary where everything is gleaming white and peaceful. The sunlight in that place is so pure I've always felt cleansed just being there. But I can't muster any enthusiasm. Not for the elegant Greek statues, or the paintings as tall as the ceiling, or the Pharaohs forever in their coffins. None of it sounds like fun.

I head home.

I don't want to die on the toilet, so I line the bathtub with my blanket and pillow before setting up all my supplies, my last pudding standing sentinel on the lip of the tub. Ducktape joins the seams of the door and occludes the slats of the tiny, rattling vent. I clatter briquettes of pre-soaked charcoal into the dish of the camp stove and light them from within my bathtub nest. The first stab of smoke burns deep.

I don't want to think about my family, but the smell of charcoal brings them to mind. I'm beset by the same tedious memories that everyone probably has: the sizzle of chicken fat, the stink of lighter fluid. Dad always wanted me to work the tongs, turning drumsticks over the fire. When he finds out, he'll swear and never speak my name again. Mom will want to talk about me all the time, put up more pictures, remember my birthday. She tries to care, but it's always the same questions and the same answers. I could pre-record all my responses and play them verbatim and the conversation would progress without a hitch. Our calls are short and neither of us is happier than when they're about to end.

Jonah. The one person who understood me. The one person who made me happy just by existing. He's gone forever. Even if he comes back, he'll be someone else, someone I don't know. I could try and make friends, but every time I do, they seem to mist away. I could go out and see the world like Jonah and I used to talk about, but the thought of doing it all alone, of only taking selfies, is just so unappealing. The geyser bursts. I hate crying, hate the clogging, thick feeling of it, but unstoppable sobs are forcing their way out of me. I bury my ugly, wet face in my knees and give myself over to them.

The burning smell is heavier now. I suck in great big breaths and they come coughing out again. The smoke pricks my eyes like tiny needles. I close them, but it doesn't help much. My crying has changed to hacking, tears streaming for an altogether different reason. I grab some toilet paper to empty my sopping nose, but that only clears the way for smoke to jab at its tender mucous membranes. I can't breathe for coughing. That idiot on Reddit swore this was painless and peaceful, but it's anything but.

I can't see and at this point it's hard to tell if it's because my eyes are blind with protective tears or the bathroom is too full of smoke. I can't breathe. And yes, that was the point but it feels like being strangled not like falling asleep.

My lungs squeeze and I move without making a conscious decision. I flail towards the door, knee connecting with the camp stove with a mighty clang. The tape holds with a surprising ferocity, but I scabble at it like a desperate rat—hacking the entire time—until it gives way. Radiant heat from the briquettes menaces my bare feet as I yank at the knob.

With a final almighty wrench the remaining tape rips free and the door flies open. I stumble onto a glowing hot coal. With a primal yell I spill into the apartment, escorted by a rolling cloud of smoke and a scattershot of hot briquettes.

Hands braced on my knees, I vacuum in great heaves of relatively clear air, ears flogged by the sudden skirl of the smoke alarm. I turn in a panicked circle, like the doofus in an old cartoon, but there's nothing for it. Am I really going to explain to the fire department why I was cooking in the bathroom with

the door taped shut? That conversation is sure to land me on a three day watch at the psych ward. I put my shoes on, quick as I can despite the pain lancing through my heel, and escape into the hallway. I don't bother closing the door behind me.

Outside I'm forced to stop and hack for a bit, breathing in the night smells of petrichor and garbage. I would take the subway, but my Metro Card is in my wallet upstairs with my phone and crime scene. There's no way I'm facing the consequences of that miscalculation. Fuck it. The only way through is forward. I'm jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge.

My heart throws itself around and my poor abused lungs seem hellbent on making me suffer while they still can. I totter along, with red, swollen eyes probably looking exactly like the kind of guy that is about to throw himself off a bridge. Luckily, the streets are almost deserted and those who pass me barely look my way.

The river glints, peaks of black water catching the moonlight and dragging it under. This city is never truly dark, but there are velvet patches of jet every few feet and it is in one such inkspill I plan to spend my last meaningless moments on this Earth. Movement snags my sight as I turn down the walkway. There, between two garbage cans, is the scar-faced dog. I hadn't realized it could look worse than the last time I saw it, but now one of its front legs is swollen, two blood-black punctures surrounded by puffy, infected flesh. It looks painful. Apparently, I was wrong about her being a him. From this vantage point I can clearly see she's pregnant not just swollen with parasites. She glares over her festered leg, dugs drooping with milk.

“What the hell are you looking at?”

She limps to her feet and rumbles a warning. I can't help it. I burst into guffaws. We're the same person, both hobbling along with our messed up legs and shitty attitudes. Both thrown-away, useless things supremely pissed off we have to deal with any of it. My hysterics spook her and she determinedly hops away down the dark path over the water.

“Hey, wait.” I know it’s stupid to talk to a dog, but it just comes out. My foot throbs, jagged pain crawling up my leg until even my dick aches. She gimps away and I follow with a lurching hop-step.

The image we must make. Two lame ducks shambling along, me so pathetic I can’t even catch up to a crippled dog. I can barely breathe, but I’m unable to stop the cackling laughter pouring out of my mouth. I’m sure I sound and look psychotic, but it’s just so funny.

Finally, she’s too tired to go on. Congratulations to me. I’ve cornered the wounded, aggressive animal and given it no choice but to face me.

She’s chosen to make her last stand in a half circle platform for tourists. She grumbles like an old Harley and hunkers low, obviously waiting for me to get close enough to take a chunk out of. I pull off Jonah’s shirt, slow, then take a single lunging step and throw it over her head. She thrashes, but I fall on her like fate, and muzzle her in the fabric.

The walk back is torture. I can only take the smallest, limping steps, arms are straining under her meager weight. She seems too weak to struggle, but her growl is an unceasing basso counterpoint to the irritated chatter of my thoughts. I can’t even do what I came out here to do because of this stupid dog.

There are no fire trucks or police out front and someone even holds the door open for me so I can get into the building. There are no pearl clutchers in the hallway, although the entire floor reeks of smoke. My door is still open.

The window is wide, charcoal has been swept up and set in the camp stove now primly perched outside the bathroom. Tape still rings the door, curving down like strips of banana peel. Her paws touch the floor and she immediately skitters to the corner, tail tucked, eyes bulging.

There’s a note on my counter.

*Hello,*

*This is Mrs. Ortega in 306. Call me when you see this. 917-555-4371*

I'm not sure how to feel about a stranger cleaning my apartment, but I press on cutting leftover chicken into manageable chunks. The dog growls when I come close, but the food goes a long way towards improving our relationship. I squat near her, and watch her snap up my offering in a few, slavering bites. She doesn't make a peep when I bring her a bowl filled with water. Slowly, I reach out and stroke the non-scabbed side of her face. Her eyes close.

Jonah's box is still sitting by the door. I clear it out, setting our memories on my rickety card table, and flatten one end to make her a little bed. My softest towel is folded on the bottom for her comfort.

I take the rest of the chicken into the bathroom because periodic bribes are the only thing capable of getting this dog in the bathtub. Dish soap and a comb clean away the fleas.

By the end of bathtime, my bathroom is a wreck and my apartment stinks like a dog's ass smoked several cigars. I put her in her box, roll my futon flat, and turn off the lights. On my back, hands at my sides, staring at my too-low ceiling is the worst activity of every day. It's early in Okinowa, Jonah's probably asleep. Deep down, the geyser pulses.

The dog jumps on my legs startling me. "Can't a guy get a moment to himself?"

Her only response is a deep, doggy sigh. Owning a dog will be such a hassle. I'll have to take her to the vet and spend money on bullshit. When she has puppies, I'll have to deal with them too. Maybe that Mrs. Ortega would want one. Mom definitely would. Dad would resist at first, but he's such a pushover he'd be calling the puppy "his dog" within a week.

Her tongue curls against my thumb like a question mark. I'll think about it more tomorrow.