

King of Monsters

At the 7-11 I bought Maxi-pads, a pack of Parliaments, a Coke, and a lottery ticket.

Ilya gets mad at me when I buy lottery tickets, calls them an idiot tax, a phrase she must have learned when she was dating my younger brother Brian. Brian's a statistics professor, and has acted as my older brother ever since he caught me jerking off to a Wonder Woman comic book when I was 14.

"I've been paying for being an idiot for years", I told her forcing laugh. I left her our cellphone, in case of an emergency. The feeling of that small flip phone leaving my possession brought relief. For the last week my brother Brian has been sending texts, ALL CAPS, that he is going to kill Ilya and myself when he finds us. I would too. I've gone through more cigarettes than usual the last few weeks, in spite of Ilya's protests that I quit.

The Maxi-Pads are for Ilya, she's been bleeding a lot since the abortion three days ago. That procedure pretty much cleaned out the savings account after legal costs, medical bills, new deposit, and rent. This means we are resisting any return to the clinic if we can. Even a few numbers on this lottery ticket will give us a boost.

When the construction firm I managed went under I started working for the repossession firm I lost my house to. I lead a group of young punks, mumbling burnouts, into homes in foreclosure. The sudden eviction of the tenants leaves a mess we clean up. It makes no difference if the home was left strewn with garbage and graffiti, or pristine like a Pottery Barn catalog. The furniture, the exercise equipment, the kitchen utensils, they all head to the scrap yard at the county line. Of course we keep a few things for ourselves, as a bonus. We've hauled junk out of a few places I've built.

The Coke's sweet taste on my tongue after the cigarette is a treat to myself.

We spent yesterday talking to the police. The two officers were sitting on brown metal folding chairs, drinking our coffee from souvenir mugs representing New York and Key West resting on a playing card table, all reclaimed from a duplex. They spoke in dramatic pauses and moved with clichés borrowed from cop shows on T.V.

-Good news and bad news- slow sip from mug with a hollow slurp-good news being that you're lucky the threats are in text, so you have hard-bangs fist on table-physical-bang-evidence

The officer does not break eye contact with me as his partner starts to walk towards me.

-The bad news is-and he attempts a voice more sultry than hard-edged and raspy-the bad news is that nothing is final until this is approved by the judge and Brian is served the papers. The judge will take a few days and serving the papers depends on how easy Brian makes it.

Ilya was too overwhelmed by the Percocet to cry. To avoid laughing at their insincerity I picked at gum mashed into the underside of the cushion of the burgundy loveseat, one of my few possessions that has belonged to no one before me.

Walking back to my Pontiac, I eye the word FAGGOT carved into my driver side door, another thing I'd like to patch up with a surprise influx of cash. If I ever have a calm conversation with my ex, Victoria, I would explain that if I were in fact a faggot this mess would be different, therefore keying my car would be unnecessary. Exhibit A would be Ilya's ultrasound and abortion, exhibit B would be Victoria's ultrasound and medical bills from the miscarriage, and exhibit C would be this lottery ticket.

The statistical odds of Ilya getting pregnant from Brian's sperm came to zero, so it didn't take Brian's education to analyze the evidence. A week after Victoria found out she miscarried our own, something we were told had a low probability to occur at such a late stage in her pregnancy. I figure a lottery ticket isn't a terrible investment, all things considered.

Cool autumn air rushes over my face from the broken car window, an act of vandalism I attribute to Brian rather than Victoria. It would be so easy for them to join forces and finish me off. Driving home from the convenience store at dusk, the oil refineries' lights adorn this eastern plains castle, its pipes and vents like turrets aflame. I wonder if growing up near its chemicals increased the odds that we would all have such warped insides.

After the police left yesterday Ilya laid down for a nap. I popped a couple of her Percocets and took a shower. I turned the heat up all the way. I felt no pain but rather bliss as the scalding water ran over my back. I spent at least twenty minutes staring at the insects crawling in through the poorly caulked window of the shower. I swear they were larger, mutated, their mandibles and carapaces adapted to chew through anything.

Tonight, before I left our apartment, we were watching Jeopardy. The answer to the final question was Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery". I kept shouting it at the contestants while theme played. Ilya smiled at my enthusiasm and in her haze smiled at me, and in her almond eyes I saw a trust that we would rebound.

Victoria used to scold me, tell me that the contestants couldn't hear me.

When I flipped over to the Simpson's rerun it was the episode where Springfield has lottery fever and the anchor reports that every copy of "The Lottery" had been checked out. My mom, a high school English teacher, loved when Homer threw his copy in the fire because it contained no tips on winning the lottery. Classic gag. Anyway, the anchor then wins the jackpot with Marge's numbers that she couldn't play because their dog was sick, so everyone hates the dog but then they miss and forgive him when he runs away, which combined with the Jeopardy question seemed like a good sign that I should buy a lottery ticket.

I miss watching shows with my mom. The statistics of a history of cancer, her smoking, and the proximity to the refinery put an end to that just the way it did our father years ago.

I knew from the moment I saw the way my father and brother looked at her that Victoria would be my first wife. She accompanied me to a Memorial Day barbecue after our junior year finished. I found her looks plain, but a lot can be said for the effects of blonde hair and tan legs in jean shorts on men. When my mother would ask how we met we'd say we had chemistry class together, we were partnered up and just fell together from there, a story friendly enough to our parents' and their sensibilities.

We would always shape the truth, where the first time we actually met was at a lingerie party my frat threw, and she was simply what I woke up to the next morning. The following semester we did start seeing each other more regularly. I did have a chemistry class that I mostly skipped out on to do whipits. The only project I remember attending is when we had to dissect a pig fetus. Still though, nothing was wrong with us, and the looks my family gave as we laughed and chatted and ate burgers felt right, felt like how things should be.

I have a photo, maybe the only photo I've kept of us, I'm standing with a beer in one hand and my other arm around her, and I have the smile of a magician after pulling off such a trick.

Ta-da

After our guts were full of bratwurst and beer, the sun setting over the mountain peaks I'll never climb, my father came up from behind and rested his hand on my shoulder.

During the following summer I learned I had failed out of school. Quickly thereafter I started working for a construction firm. The following Memorial Day, which doubled as a celebration for Brian graduating early *cum laude*, we found out my father had cancer. I quickly proposed to Victoria.

I shared a townhouse with Victoria in a new subdivision my company built. It rested on the southern side of the city, a new outpost in the frontier of avoiding the problems of the urban old. After the miscarriage she moved back to the Midwest with her family. The people and the climate here in the West were too harsh, too dry, and too cold for her, while everything in the Midwest was all false niceties to me, so we fought a lot about that. She found out she was pregnant not long before Thanksgiving, so she flew out to the Midwest without me. I stayed behind and went to Brian's house. At dinner Brian reminded everyone the low odds that my Lion's would beat his Patriots and the high odds that my construction firm would fail in the next few years, which would have been the same crap I would have heard from Victoria's father. Everything has always been a competition with him.

Once as kids we watched one of those old Godzilla movies and immediately had to go reenact it. What started as rough housing ended with him breaking my nose, just to show that he was the king of monsters. In high school he became captain of the wrestling team.

When I had my fill of turkey and insults I went out to the garage for a beer, and on the way back in Ilya was waiting for me in the connecting laundry room. I started to kiss her, and she hiked up her skirt. After we finished she went into the kitchen and I sat at the table. I wanted to ask him the odds that a younger Ilya would choose his class out of all of the ones offered incoming freshmen, marry him, love me, and want to fuck against his front load washer.

I could total up the cost of all lottery tickets crumpled and cast aside the morning after the draw. I could add up every scratch ticket and the quarter used to reveal my need to get lucky and play again. I could even toss in my loss at the craps table during my first honeymoon in Blackhawk. This total would not even cover the cost of a month's rent.

When the company was going strong, when people still wanted to build things, I rented a couple lodges up in Yellowstone and paid for my family to join us. I even told Brian he could bring if he had one. That's when I first met Ilya. They met up with us at a truck stop diner, and amongst all the camouflage jackets and t-shirts with Native American designs she emerged through the doorway, her tan skin and almond eyes, her diminutive frame and cropped brunette hair.

"She's young, even for him!" Victoria snapped as we continued, now following my brother and his doe. She despised my brother almost as much as I, for their controlling and upfront behavior clashed frequently.

I tried to joke along. "She was still in elementary school when we started college" I pointed out. Yet this was for my benefit, because in Ilya I saw every confused feeling of want I had when I was young and naive, and it felt inexplicably drawn to certain girls in my classes.

The neighborhood Ilya and I could afford is about as far out east as one can go from the city until you're in the plains. It is one of the oldest parts of the city, built around the now decrepit factories and mills along the river. The landfills and scrapyards the renovation companies work with is just a mile further out. I often imagine the fetuses of the two children confined in medical bags washing down the river. Buried under old refrigerators and rotting meals, wood paneled TV sets stripped of their copper wiring and other pieces of refuse.

I heard they're going to start fracking operations not much further beyond the yards. They say the pay is great, and that guys like me can do really well.

When they start pumping the fuel out of the earth five miles further out the pressure will burst the sons out of their tombs and they will meet as brothers. They will dress in armor from fenders of Saturns and Pontiacs and Geos, and wield spears from rusted cast iron bedframes. They will greet me as their father and King and Ilya their mother and Queen. They will suckle upon the flammable faucets. With my lottery money we will finance an army, and when grown head West and take the city on the plain that exiled us to the land fit only for gas and trash. The city and its suburbs will become Vassals of our Kingdom and we will want for nothing.

When I pull up to our unit Brian is exiting the door. My first thought is that Ilya called him to save her because I couldn't. Then I notice that his polo is covered in blood and in his right hand is a crowbar. I know I should get out of the car, fight him, save Ilya. Instead I just sit there fumbling with my phone trying to dial 9-1-1. It takes so long that he notices me and throws the crowbar with the same technique used to teach the track team the javelin. The crowbar pierces the windshield next to me. I throw the car into reverse and slam into a truck parked behind me. Brian pulls me through the missing driver side window. In flashes I notice the neighbors are outside, shouting in Spanish and Polish and Latvian. The one voice I'm not hearing is Ilya's. I try to call out her name through blood and broken tooth fragments. Brian trips me onto the ground and as I'm crawling towards my unit, the gravel adhering to the blood on my skin, glass shatter as he wrenches the crowbar out of the windshield.

My face is gravel and glass and blood and tears and vomit. He is telling me how he will destroy me, how I'm a pussy and a bitch and all that, but it's the exact same script he would use when we were kids. I start laughing through the humors filling my face. With both hands holding the crowbar he strikes me in the gut and I exhale more bits of blood and teeth and gravel over the lot. Sirens in the distance, more hopeful for an ambulance than the police cruisers. He could easily kill me at this point with a blow to the head but instead he chooses to strike my legs. Curling into the fetal position I cover my head with my arms. I can only see a crimson blur of the lot, but I hear the screeching

of breaks and the slamming of doors. They yell for Brian to drop his weapon, but he keeps swinging at my broken thighbone. The crowbar hits the ground, followed by him to his knees. Paramedics run to me, to the apartment.

After my shower the other day I dried off and curled around Ilya, the warmth of my skin and my arms wrapped around her, her back dug into my stomach, and we began to shrink into each other. I breathed in her hair, she brought her knees close to her chest. My legs followed and if we would've shrunk into a single point we would've been just fine.