



*Matthew Barbehenn*

*An Interventionist's Love Story*



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Imagine a serpent yellow streak of metal and plastic, flesh and fat and bones straddling leather and foam padding and metal vibrating and spinning wet with oil. I tell her, Imagine my friend like this, imagine Brian, his head flush with the handlebars, teeth to tach, neck straight and eyes up, spine perfectly aligned in such a way that it seems impossible for those who are not gymnasts or Vietnamese. Imagine him like this and keep imagining until it's all there is. Imagine the Daytona sun, bright and serpent yellow and the entire sky, no, imagine the entire world, the mise en scene, imagine it all yellow, the sun and the bike and the heat waves rolling off the pavement, the bikinis and the fake tans and the pineapple drinks and crème de banana and the long, yellow road that stretches towards the crumbling horizon, yellow like the edge of a bruise.

I tell the nurse this, and I tell her how I flew all the way down from Philadelphia to see Brian in the hospital, but she is uninterested. His parents are unreachable, I say. They are retired and for the past two years they've been living in a pop-up camper outside Bamff National Park.

The hospital seems to have frozen. Doctors blankly eyeing charts, nurses and aides with rubber tubes hanging around their necks—their bodies appear suspended midstep.

The nurse's name is Olivia. I tell her about Brian's parents because she's been callously referring to him as my "asshole friend" and mentioning the number of people "just like him" that come through Florida Memorial each year, and I wanted to make sure she knew that he came from somewhere, that he had family, even if that family did things like move off the grid and into the Canadian wilderness.

She says that he is barely conscious and not even remotely lucid. He's been on a morphine drip for several days, and before that, stuff even stronger. Tough to believe, she says, but he had withdrawal symptoms while on the morphine, that's how strong the original shit was. She actually uses the term "original shit" instead of the pharmaceutical designation. She says the last coherent thought he had probably occurred when his body started its long, grating slide on the Florida asphalt the week before.

She says, He will quite likely have no idea that you were ever here. You should have waited at least another week. She steps aside, waiting for me to enter the room.



I've been thinking about his accident, I say. I imagine it in my head over and over again. It's like I'm there.

That isn't healthy.

It's a coping mechanism.

It's obsession, she says. You should go in.

I stop short and ask her, How many people have died in here?

There's no way for me to know that.

How much blood, do you think, has been spilled? In gallons.

Are you serious with me right now?

Just in the last month or so. Approximately. I can do the math from there.

We don't measure spilled blood. But I can assure you that once somebody reaches the ICU, the bleeding has been pretty well contained.

That's good, I say. That's good to know. I don't handle blood well.

She tells me that she will check his stub-arm's dressing for seepage. It was stopped earlier but sometimes when people finally begin to gain faculty and realize what has happened, their hysteria causes the clots to rupture and bleed again. It's quite a sight, the tears and the blood choreographed and fountaining out of the body. You can't imagine.

Olivia is a tiny, young woman, late twenties, my age. There is no wedding ring. She still wears barrettes and actually uses the word "stub-arm" when talking about my friend. She asks me if that will make me feel better, if the brave, brave man who flew to see his horrifically injured friend would like her tiny, tough little self to go ahead of him to check. I nod. She touches me on the elbow. The hospital resumes its cacophonous swirl around me.

Earlier that day, on my flight to Daytona, I casually signaled the flight attendant with a raised finger; my glass that had been whiskey and ice had somehow become strictly ice. I said this jokingly; I used the word 'subsumed' to describe the relationship between the whiskey and the ice. She rolled her eyes, visibly so.

She set a napkin down on the fold-out tray and asked if there was anything else. This was our fourth interaction and she hadn't cracked. I asked her to accompany me to the bathroom, where, I said, we could engage in one of three different types of sexual intercourse. As a gentleman, I'd leave the selection of method up to her. Her red hair had two long streaks of blond that stemmed directly from the roots. She continued to look at me, and then, silently, shuffled to the passenger directly in front of me and asked him in a



soothing, professional voice, if there was anything he would like, anything at all. She didn't look back at me. The man was Persian. He slipped between languages mid-sentence and the flight attendant kept nodding, pretending to understand.

Her name was Roberta. It was printed on her nametag in thick green capital letters. When she finished speaking softly with the Persian she returned to the edge of my seat. How's your whiskey? she asked.

Delightful. I said, You know I was kidding just now, right? I would never actually *ask* somebody something like that. I have a very strange sense of humor, is all. I suppose I get it from my father. Sometimes the things I say come out all, well, twisted, I guess. I'm sure you can understand.

I'm required to be nice to you, she said. But only to a point.

Well listen, I said, If you are ever in the market for a new watch, I can help you out. Like this one.

I showed her the watch on my wrist.

I said, This is the Smith-McKerney 1000 series. I'm a watchmaker.

The flight attendant said, A watchmaker, huh?

I smiled at her. We may have had sustained eye contact for several seconds. I found myself analyzing and critiquing the skin around her eyes, the pores and dark streaks and blemishes.

I told her, I myself do not *make* the watches. I'm the McKerney of Smith-McKerney. Smith makes the watches. He's the *horologist*.

So what do you do?

I sell them.

Huh, she said. That's not quite as impressive.

It was that fucking bike, I tell Olivia. I knew it right away. He bought it just after getting accepted to Emery-Riddle Aeronautical Institute, as a present for himself. He was going to be a rocket scientist. That was almost six years ago now. Then, we lived in a small village nestled into the base of the Pocono Mountains called Burksville. There were no stop lights in Burksville; several of the streets were named after high school athletes from fifty-some years earlier.

I tell her there was something psychologically natural about needing to leave Burksville, whether it was to move to the city or the Canadian wilderness or even space, but at the time nothing was going to get him away faster than the Aprilia.



The bike was yellower than I'd had the capability to imagine. It pained my eyes to look at it too long. It was one of those crotchrockets, a single-man missile with a six-inch windshield. Brian got on, demonstrated how to lay flat and become part of the machine itself. The bike stared at us. Each time I made eye contact with it, it seemed to change demeanor, like a dog planning an escape. They called it serpent yellow because serpents represented temptation and danger and the Aprilia was an indulgence. But there was something else, an undertone to the blinding yellow that wasn't quite visible but still there, menacingly there, as if to be considered serpent yellow the yellow itself had to be painted over something black.

This shouldn't be this difficult, I say, should it? I mean, he is right there. He is fifteen feet from me.

You can see him. You know that he is real. She folds her arms across her chest. I could use a woman like Olivia in my life, I think, somebody bigger than the parameters of her skin, somebody to push me forward like this.

I say, I can tell myself, 'Go forward. Walk. Pick up your right foot and place it in front of your left,' and I could just keep doing that until I was at his bed, but then what?

Right, she says, then what?

If he isn't going to know who I am, I mean. What's the point of even being here?

I'm not sure. Maybe you can buy him flowers. I'll water them every day so they won't die. Once he regains faculty he'll know you were here. He'll know how good of a friend you are and then the trip won't have been wasted.

I say, Is there a difference if I don't enter the room itself? If I just stand here in the hallway?

Brian's face is covered in bandages. His legs are in casts and supported in the air by large, looping belts. His stub-arm is on the other side of him, out of view. There are bags of fluid surrounding him. I look at Olivia, whose face has carried a rather flat expression the entire time. I try to imagine how she looks when she kisses somebody, if she smiles or if she even approaches that clinically. Perhaps I'll come back tomorrow, I say. Perhaps tomorrow I'll feel differently.

I told Roberta, I'm going to Daytona to visit my friend in the hospital.

That's so nice of you.

He had a horrible motorcycle accident. He's probably very badly



deformed now. The whole thing is just very, very sad.

Oh no! she said. She removed her hand from my arm and touched it to her lips. What happened?

I told her, He drove into the back of a semi.

This piece of information displeased her. Perhaps it was my tone, some vocal coldness that upon repetition had developed over the past few days. Her biggest question was how? What happened? Describe specifically the path his body took. I wasn't sure at all why this was important, but it was important—to me, to everybody.

She didn't hesitate to leave me and dote on the other passengers. I touched her arm to stop her as she passed me again. Her uniform was gaining starchiness as the trip progressed. I asked her if she wasn't the least bit curious about the third type of intercourse. The air teemed suddenly with the sound of throats clearing, impatient Italian suits shuffling against leather.

I'm sorry, she said, you're really not my type. Salesmen are all the same.

On my second day at the hospital, Olivia loops her arm through mine. There is nothing really romantic about it. Strangely, I don't even feel it at first. The pressure on the inside of my elbow doesn't assert itself until I see it with my eyes. The other senses have no context without sight. A long plastic tube is taped violently into Brian's mouth.

You can still see him on the motorcycle, right? You can still feel the yellow?

Olivia closes her eyes, nods. I can see it, she says.

It's important to really open yourself up to the idea of yellow, to let it sink into your psyche and gestalt and germinate your brain with its dusty yellow spores. I cannot overemphasize the importance of you actually seeing him on the highway, the ocean behind him, his flat back and the metal dipping and diving around traffic.

Mmm-hmm, she says. She breathes deep through her nose.

See his smile underneath his helmet, I say. Feel the yellow heat. Really stop and enter his body. Sit on the leather seat of the Aprilia, let the vibrations run through your torso and into your chest and through your arms and fingers. Pretend to accelerate by tilting your wrist.

Olivia stretches her right arm out, grasps an invisible handle. She has small, hard hands. Like this, she says.

Like that. Now imagine the increase in G forces as you pass eighty,



ninety. Look down at the yellow sun reflecting off your serpent yellow bike and filtered through the yellow helmet shade. Look up. See the truck. Identify it as a hazard.

She opens her eyes and together we watch as Brian lays motionless in his bed. Several monitors and boxes sit beside his bed; wires run into his body.

Jesus, I say. He's half machine.

She says, We should go in now. You can touch his hand. He'll know. You'll be surprised at how warm it is. Like there's life just below the surface, pushing out.

I tell her that I can't, that if I get any closer I'll lose all control over reality.

She says, What control? You didn't make any of this happen.

I can choose not to go in.

And I am choosing to be here with you right now, she says. Not the other way around.

For the moment I am more her patient than Brian is. I want to say, maybe tomorrow, but her arm has slipped away from mine and she loops her stethoscope around her neck as if it was a piece of jewelry and then enters the room without me.

Upon exiting the airport, my first dilemma was, Do I take a cab right to the hospital or check into the hotel? I knew that checking into the hotel would require a drink at the hotel bar, possibly two. I don't have a drinking problem, per se, but my most recent ex accused me of using alcohol to numb myself just enough to get through the day without experiencing any unnecessary and distracting emotions.

To which I said, Aren't all emotions inherently unnecessary and distracting?

This attitude enabled me to own my own watch company at age twenty-eight, she said, because feeling takes up around forty percent of the average human being's day and I was able to forgo such a burden and translate that time into pure productivity. It was also why I didn't have very many friends.

Needless to say, at eleven o'clock in the morning, I was the only one sitting at the hotel bar. It's called The Palm Bar and the stools were made of fake bamboo. I was telling the bartender a story about how earlier that morning I stepped out of my car in the long-term parking lot of Philadelphia International Airport and right into a large icy puddle, and these were the only



shoes I'd brought with me, nice all-occasion black dress shoes that are appropriate for the few situations I'd envisioned myself encountering in Daytona—the hospital, dinner, drinks at clubs where beautiful girls with beautiful tans would squeeze by me to order bright, pastel martinis, martinis I would buy for them with my American Express business card, utilizing one quick, watch-exposing motion wherein I would spin the card through the air with just the perfect, practiced amount of authority. When these girls noticed my watch they would examine it, distinguishing the brand; they wouldn't be able to, of course, because Smith-McKerney is a Philadelphia-based watch company whose distribution routes only run east to west as of yet, and I'd tell them all this at the club, loudly, over the house music, and then one particularly enamored girl would accompany me back to my hotel room where we would have three different types of intercourse and I would stop on a dime and ask her, Can I call you by a different name when I come? and she would say, Yeah, I don't care, because at that point she'd say yes to anything and then directly afterwards I'd kiss her tenderly on the lips and tell her that I loved her, and maybe right then she'd look me in the eyes and I'd see it there, that sense of depth you get when a woman looks you in the eye and loves you all at the same time, that warmth that married people are always basking in.

I told the bartender, And these are the only shoes I packed, of course, and now they are borderline fucking ruined.

The bartender said he knows, he knows, but didn't really seem to care on any meaningful level. Once I had a little bit of a buzz I asked him to call me a cab, which he seemed happy to do.

I said, Do you want to hear about what happened to my friend?

Olivia, I say. Olivia. All the really beautiful girls have names that end in a.

Why do you think I'm beautiful?

It's the third day. We're facing each other on either side on the door into Brian's room.

Is he getting better?

His condition has remained unchanged, she says.

Is that a good sign or bad sign?

It's not a sign either way. We tried lowering the drugs but he started screaming. What about yours?

My what?

Your condition. Your overwhelming fear of entering hospital rooms.



She has looked the same on all three days. Every time I enter the hospital, on the ride up to the ICU, I expect to find her appearance altered, just slightly. The barrette is in the same place, at the same angle; she wears the same striped green long-sleeved shirt under her scrubs. She taps her thumbs and ring fingers together when she talks.

She says, How long have you known each other?

Our whole lives. We've kept in touch, but not enough.

You know, she says, my mom died when I was only ten. It was a chemical thing. My dad told me her inside-chemicals were off, and she spent years trying to correct it with outside-chemicals, and anyway. That was how you explain it to a ten-year-old. It was tough to look at her lying there in her coffin. I almost couldn't. My therapist says it had something to do with anger, like I hated her. But then I was there, and I don't know. I went into this weird analytical mode of thinking where I stopped seeing what it was as a whole and started focusing on tiny little details of her appearance—discolored patches of skin, the burns and bruises on their neck, spots of blood, things like that. I started counting the buttons on the coffin fabric, the number of eyelashes. Little, tiny, useless things. My mind was mentally searching for patterns in order to better consolidate and store the memory. That's what I learned in therapy anyhow. How my mind both wanted to separate from what was happening while preserving it, because it knew beforehand how life-altering the moment was. But I didn't learn that for years. I went through hypnosis therapy and even then, someone had to tell me what everything meant.

We walk to the cafeteria. Olivia needs coffee. The cafeteria is a long, thin ell protruding from a hallway behind the main gift shop. The corridor leading to the cafeteria has walls painted a soothing periwinkle blue, a depressurization chamber between sickness and food.

I watch her eat a muffin. She is careful to pull her lips back so that the muffin never touches them, and I wonder if all girls do this, if Teresa had done this night after night after night.

I don't know why I'm thinking of Teresa at this moment, but I can see her eating when I told her she should probably move out. Ice cream, I think. I remember purposefully not looking down at the bowl because eye contact equals strength and what I was doing required it. Her eyes locked on mine, though, in a sort of staring contest. I tried to figure out if her hair had always been so red. The bookcase was squared behind her, and from my perspective it stuck out equidistant on both sides of her head. The way she chewed, with her mouth closed, it's like she struggled to do so. After she swallowed, she



said, What the fuck are you talking about?

You're holding me back. The other day, when I was meeting with a potential buyer, and you called, eight times, until finally I freaked out and swore in front of him. And for what?

I remember that now she set down the ice cream. I heard it but still didn't look.

There was somebody out back, she said. I was home alone.

It was the Warner's dog.

It *startled* me, she insisted.

This is generally where I end the story, eschewing the weeks of crying, the long, excessively punctuated e-mails and phone calls, the promises that she would come over, real late, if only I would ask her to. Two years, she would say, two years, as if there were some golden truth buried in the phrase that would expose itself to me if only she repeated it enough.

When people ask me what happened with Teresa, I say, God reached down and just plucked her out of my life. Her clothes, her toothbrush, the picture of us holding each other in front of the giant Sequoia in California—the one where, she once said, just looking at it made her feel warm, as if it were a sensation memorized by her skin that her nerves could recall on cue—it all just disappeared.

You never answered my question, Olivia says, about why you think I'm beautiful.

I don't understand the importance of why, I say.

She swallows and says, Because, I believe that you believe I'm beautiful, but I don't believe that I actually am. I consider myself to be kind of cute, but not beautiful. And this isn't a self-esteem thing, either. I'm only being realistic.

Why would I think you're beautiful if you weren't?

Because, I'm an excuse not to confront your fear. Which makes me the opposite of fear. You feel safe with me, and that's all I am to you. A feeling.

That's not true. You're a person. A person I enjoy seeing and talking with. A person who I think is beautiful.

No I'm not, she says. I'm not anybody. I'm just a small, moderately cute nurse, who in your mind now carries this irrational amount of importance because I am enabling you to not go into the hospital room and face your dying friend.

Dying?

I'm not a doctor, she says, and continues to carefully eat her muffin.



I drink alone at several different bars. Perhaps I am not going to the right ones. The cab drivers insist that where they are taking me are where the pretty girls hang out, but then I pull up a seat at the end of the bar and order a whiskey and drink in silence. There are girls, sure, but I don't leave my stool to talk to them. They no longer represent my needed escape.

When I return to the hotel, I call Teresa. I turn off all the lights and sit in the dark, waiting for the outlines of furniture to reveal themselves, rocking slightly, my eyes unable to focus. I keep one of them shut.

Hello?

Teresa?

Who is this, Jacob?

Hey, I say, how are you?

What do you want?

I ask her if she remembers a night three years ago when we'd first started dating and she'd said that if we were meant to be together, then we should be having the same dreams. It was November, that time just after Thanksgiving when people who are in love are even more in love, somehow. And there was a night when we crawled into bed and she pushed her face towards mine and touched our foreheads and said, I want you to dream about us getting married. I want to be wearing a strapless gown and you, a silver tux. And when you kiss me, after the minister tells us to, I want you to bend me back just slightly, and I want you to take my upper lip while I take your bottom. Your right hand should be just at the base of my neck, your left hand right here on my ribcage. I want you to dream about all of this and tell me in the morning if you do. Don't lie to me. She closed her eyes then, smiling. She always smiled in her sleep. I didn't understand it.

I tell her, Do you remember in the morning?

Yes, she says, You didn't dream it. You dreamt about nothing. I remember.

I tell her that I'd lied, that I had dreamt it, exactly the way she told me to, all the way down to the upper lip. I say that afterwards we had a reception on a great outdoor dance floor, surrounded by Sequoias, and I remember now, whiskey-blind, dizzy, how her skin felt in that dream. I ran my hand along the back hem of her gown and thought to myself, This is my wife. This is her wedding dress. This is our wedding. I could will it all back, I tell her.

So what, she says. You lied. You're a liar, that's what liars do.

Did you dream about the trees? I ask her.

Don't do this. Don't call me drunk.



Shh, I say. I'll be back in a few days, and then I can come see you.  
Go fuck yourself, she says, and hangs up.

I call her back and the call goes straight to her voicemail.

I leave a message. I say, Before they divorced, my parents used to fight all the time. Like we did. I'd come downstairs and my dad would be drinking a beer at the kitchen table, clutching the back of his head. I used to tell you this, remember? I'd run through the house setting the clocks back six hours or so. I was so stupid. I thought that clocks controlled time and not the other way around. But what I'm saying is that we can go back two years, you and me. We can start things over.

Maybe I shouldn't have called and told her. The whole clock thing seems a little too neat, psychologically-speaking. Maybe I don't say anything at all.

Aprilia is one of those Italian companies that builds performance vehicles. They have scientists who work with wind tunnels and stress resistance and construct machines that bend and flex through the most formidable of forces. In my dream there is a long, sharp curve ahead of me, the kind that sharpens more just when you think it has to be over. The Aprilia is leaning right, so fast the vibrations feel now like silk brushing the hairs on my skin. My angle descends, forty-five, forty, thirty-eight degrees. There are mathematical reasons, I tell myself, why the bike isn't plunging my body into the pavement. I have faith in the Italian scientists' calculations. The scientists come from a rich heritage of geniuses—Da Vinci, Galileo, Ferrari. The Italian mind suits this type of work. This fact comforts me. I can lean my head and touch the helmet to the ground and spark sharp yellow gnats that swarm and spin into nothing behind me. I sense the highway's every imperfection magnified as a series of impossibly quick thuds, a dulled drumroll through my head and neck. The Aprilia straightens. I accelerate further and approach absolute madness. My stomach collapses on itself when the trailer's liftgate comes into focus and I lean, almost entering the other lane, and the tires begin their screaming but my speed is greater than my will, yet again.

It's the fourth day. I've been praying for you, she says. For God to give you strength.

I thought I had to ask myself.

So ask.

I say, I can't. When I close my eyes I see him lying bloody and sur-



-rounded by bike parts with yellow paint trailing behind him, like the leavings of a giant yellow eraser.

Yellow?

You haven't been listening, I say.

She says, I'm sorry, I am trying to empathize with you, but I can't. I hate motorcycles. They are death traps. That's just the way I feel. That's why I called your friend an asshole. Because he was on a motorcycle going over a hundred miles per hour and now this. Now we are expected to be sad, and worried. How fucking selfish can somebody be? Leaving everybody behind like that, making you leave your job and come down here and for four days stand at the doorway to his hospital room and wonder if you can muster the strength to go inside. Who is he to do this to you? So I've tried, I really have. I've tried to understand things, but I don't. I'm sorry.

I say, In my mind there's yellow imbedded in his skin. It's infecting his muscles as we speak.

It wasn't yellow, she says, his skin. It was gray, brown. They scrubbed but it was deep, like a tattoo. It may never come out.

My hands are sweating and she notices, removes her hand from mine and wipes her palm on her pant leg. She's been holding my hand and I haven't even noticed.

We have to, there is no other choice, she says, and places her hand behind my back, pushes me forward. The room smells differently from the hallway, musty and contained. I ask her what it is.

It's hospital smell. It's not one specific thing.

I'm afraid, I say.

Fear is something that you need to invite into your body, she says. Once you allow it in, you are in control over it. Like it's a guest in your house.

She pushes me closer until I am at the side of his bed. His stub-arm juts aimlessly into the air on his opposite side. The dressing is clean, tight as a plastic lid. His eyes are open but unfocused. A thick laceration cuts from his forehead to the base of his jaw, directly below his ear.

Above his leg's casts are more severe wounds, thick and jagged and without destination. They seem to start and stop for no reason.

This isn't so bad, I say.

Touch his hand.

I take his hand in mine and say his name. Brian.

He doesn't acknowledge me. His hand is clammy and feverish.

What do you think he's thinking?



She says, He's probably still on the bike. Still driving down the highway. It's tough to say. I'm sure he has no idea what has happened to him.

What if he knows something's wrong but can't say what? What if he needs to talk?

He doesn't, she says. He has no idea that anything's wrong.

How can he not know? I ask.

He just doesn't. You'll have to trust me.

After leaving the hospital I walk to a nearby dive bar with thick grates over the windows. It's dark inside, and I'm the only one there. The jukebox is broken. I drink whiskey on the rocks until the bartender suggests that maybe I should go and then I go. In the cab, on the way to the hotel, I call Teresa.

It's the middle of the day, you know.

I say, Tell me that you dreamed about the trees.

Jacob, you can't keep calling me. I've met somebody.

Just answer me.

No, she says. I didn't. I didn't dream about anything. I didn't expect you to, either. I just thought, maybe, you would want to tell me you did. To reassure me.

Of what?

Of what, she repeats. That's the million dollar question.

I say, Brian.

Who?

Brian. He was in an accident in Florida. He's going to die.

Brian who?

In the hotel room, I pass out face down on the mattress and when I wake up, the sun has started to go down. I quickly flip through the phone book and find the phone number for Florida Memorial. I tell the operator, I need to speak to Olivia. She's a nurse in the ICU. It's an emergency.

Hold on, she says.

I splash some water on my face and look at myself in the mirror. I haven't shaved for several days now. Gray hairs have made an appearance along the side of my head. I look at my watch, which I also haven't done in days.

Hello? her voice asks.

Olivia, I say.

Who is this?

Jacob McKerney. I'm Brian's friend.



Oh, right, she says. How are you?  
What are you doing after work tonight?

I was going to go home. Why?

I'm staying at the Sheraton downtown.

Excuse me?

I want you to come over, I say.

Are you serious with me right now?

I want you to come over, and I want us to sleep together.

You've got to be kidding me.

There's something warm inside of you, I say. Something I want to touch.

She hangs up. I lie back down on the bed, fully clothed, and eventually get the energy to shimmy under the covers. This is the last thing I remember. In the morning, light pierces through my eyelids. I check out of the hotel and hail a cab to the airport. I have a few drinks at the airport bar and several more on the plane, and by nightfall I'm in Philadelphia, drunkenly opening my car door and sitting on the cold leather seat. I call Teresa, but she doesn't answer.

Halfway back to my apartment, I decide to drive to Burksville to see Teresa. I don't really know why. My car suddenly swings through three lanes of traffic; I don't realize what I'm doing until I'm at the exit, speeding up the ramp, heading towards the turnpike, north towards the Poconos and Burksville, where Teresa and Brian and I grew up.

The turnpike is narrow and I drive very fast, ninety miles per hour, faster. The highway is notorious for its lack of highway patrol, and I turn off onto Route 33, a thin, lonely highway that winds and vanishes into the mountains. When I see the sign for Burksville I begin to feel soberer. I wonder whether I'll see my father tonight, if it would be okay to knock on his door unshaven and reeking of whiskey—apologetic, maybe—and he would wrap his arm around me and sit me down and give me coffee and listen to everything I'm thinking. Maybe.

Burksville, at night, is barely a town at all. When I first started driving, I would head down Route 539 and miss it completely, not seeing the one thin road that led into town. I always thought this strange, that an entire town could go unseen, buried just out of sight in the dark. Forests, Burksville, the reservoir, everything was the same flat, depthless black. I find the turn this time, a gravelly hairpin that snakes into Burksville's shallow, narrow glen.

I'm suddenly at Teresa's parents' house. After I'd kicked her out, she



moved back into her old bedroom, which had been kept in a condition similar to that of when she left. She called me one time, weeks later, to say that thanks to me she'd regressed an entire decade, that she had become more dependent on her parents to take care of her, and she had even begun to again feel things for Ricky, the minor-league baseball player who took her virginity in the same bed which she slept in every night now. I'd never been in that bed, and I think perhaps that is the problem. We weren't in love until years after high school, when we met one random night at a Philadelphia bar. Back in Burksville, I didn't even know her. There were only six students from Burksville that went to the regional high school, and we all rode the bus together every day, and I never spoke to her. She lived two streets over. I knew her house, her name, but not her.

I knock on the door. The lights are off and the driveway is empty. It is nearly ten p.m. They must be inside, so I knock louder and then begin to call her name.

Teresa! Teresa, come down here and talk to me!

There is no answer. Back at my car, I open the door and press my hand on the horn. It lets out an echoing blast and I watch the windows for flickers of light, shadow movements. Some lights come on further down the street, and people begin to come out onto their lawns. I blast the horn for several seconds at a time, screaming her name between horn blasts, until the people who had come out as witnesses began to approach me, to communicate with each other and organize.

What's your problem? a man asks me. His coat is drawn steeply behind his neck, his arms crossed. What are you doing out here?

Teresa, I say.

You're causing a fucking racket. The police are on their way.

I tell the man, My name is Jacob McKerney. I'm from here.

Jacob who? Thomas's boy?

That's me, I say. Thomas is my father.

Thomas McKerney is a drunk.

The crowd has formed a circle around me, around the car. Their voices batter around in the air, asking me if I knew what time it was, if I was lost, if I liked spending the night in jail.

What's your problem, anyway? the man says. You got burned by some chick? So what? We all got problems, man. You don't solve them by waking up the whole goddamn town, laying on the car horn and screaming in the middle of the street. What is it with you, huh?



My head begins to hurt. The alcohol has been steadily wearing off and giving in to a hangover; I squint my eyes against the darkness, and realize that there are maybe thirty people outside now, the entire neighborhood. I scan the faces for somebody I recognize, a familiar face, an empathetic old friend who'll listen. But it has been too long, or these aren't even the same people I remember.

Just sit down and listen to me for one goddamn second, I say out loud, and the man gets closer—What did you just say to me? You come onto *my* street making this noise and expect me to listen to *you*?

What do you know, anyway? You're still here, living in fucking Burksville, living in a cheap house with your cheap watch and cheap jacket. You couldn't help me if you wanted to.

Now you're insulting me? Now you drive up, honk your horn, yell—and insult me and my town?

You piece of shit, I say. You hillbilly trash. I could buy you! I could buy this whole town just to burn it to the ground!

I back up and spit at his chest.

I say, You have no fucking idea who I am!

The man swings mid-stride, stepping towards me and turning his body in one smooth motion, and his fist catches the top of my cheek. Warmth explodes through my head and torso and I fall to the frozen concrete. My blood is warm. I touch it with my hand and rub it on my face, but soon the cold gets through that as well and it begins to freeze. The crowd still stands around me, fifteen of them at least. There are rows of feet and behind that, several soft yellow streetlights, glinting yellow off the road and windows of three cars; the man is still speaking in short, clipped sentences that I can't process and their eyes are bearing down on me, watching me bleed and the eyes all look up when the police cars arrive, their sirens squealing in a round and the yellow street lines and yellow moon and Please, God, if only this counted for something.

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