

Grotesque

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I missed the connection to some nowhere city on my route and wound up stranded in one even less appealing. Christmas season brought booked flights and little sympathy. So I decided to get sloppy at the airport bar and try to see how I'd do without a wedding ring on my finger (We're separating soon due to *her* wishes, so there's no need to judge.). Turns out, I was pretty invisible anyway.

At the next table over, a gaggle of stewardesses traded war stories over wine spritzers and curly fries. My hands clung to a glass of whiskey as I took in their white stockings and overzealous smiles. The least attractive one of the bunch had a gap in her teeth, and I kept glancing her way. It had been years since I had kissed another woman's lips; hers would do just fine. She even had a similar teardrop-like birthmark under her eye like my wife did.

Soon they finished their spritzers and curly fries and wobbled to their feet laughing. My gap-toothed one was the drunkest of the three, and her laughter was the loudest. I sucked at the ice in my drink to get at those last few drops. What led me to this airport bar? What led me to all the airport bars of the world with their peppery

curly fries and watered-down drinks? In the window to my right was the same reflection I'd seen throughout the last decade – my slouched self on a bar stool with a tie flipped over my shoulder, scribbling notes for another conference and grinding my teeth. There was a time when the thought of my wife was all I needed to keep on scribbling.

I had made a ton of money, and the company I worked for made even more. We sought out troubled corporations, swooping in and buying them out once they had no other option. Then we restructured them from the ground up. The vampire I'd become fired all former employees, and new blood was brought in. The boss man encouraged this vampire, actually *demanding* this villain, so how could I be blamed when I started to bring this monster home?

Through the window, I had a clean view of the runway and watched the planes sail into thick winter clouds. Right then I knew I didn't have it in me to catch one. So when the alarm on my watch beeped, I ignored it and waited until I could see my flight disappear into the white sky.

I needed a nap.

I needed to take a break, and I'd always been able to daydream well.

I found myself smoking cigarettes out of a cab with roll-down windows and tasting snowflakes with each inhale. The snow was pure, unlike where I came from, and hugged the ground like a crisp sheet on a freshly made bed. My eyes drooped from the four whiskeys in my belly. A sticker of a pinup girl on the back of the cabbie's seat faded in and out of focus, a beautiful teardrop birthmark under her eye as well.

We finally pulled up to an olive-green motel. I opened the car door and stumbled into a persistent blizzard. The cab sped away leaving me alone with the wind. My perfect suit was shrouded in white, my tie became frozen against my chest, and my wingtip black loafers disappeared in a newly formed mound. My hands were red and numb even under my gloves – the cab's heater was poor. Since no one cleared a pathway, I couldn't wheel my suitcase up to the door and had to carry it instead.

Inside was a dump. Ratty brown wall-to-wall carpeting. Lights

in the shape of Saturn hanging from a cottage cheese ceiling. A sleeping old man looked dead on the couch. The snow rapped against the windows behind me. If I had any indication to turn around, it warned me clearly to stay.

“Room, please,” I said to the ancient clerk at the desk, and slid my AmEx across the counter. The guy studied his wall of keys until he finally decided on one.

“Guy?” he asked, handing back the card. “That really your name?”

“Yes.”

“Parents too lazy to come up with a real one?” he chuckled.

“That about sums it up.”

When I entered the motel room, I shivered as my cell became out of range. I took a killer of a piss in the bathroom, washed my hands with soap I brought from home, and cleaned my mouth with some overpriced green tea mouthwash I’d purchased in the impulse aisle. The fluorescent lights purpled my skin. I lathered up and shaved until my face was pink and healthy. Then I scrutinized every angle. The deep dimples from when I smiled falsely. A butt in my chin. Good cheekbones but maybe too square a face. Closely cropped black hair, lean lips, and serious green eyes. I flexed a good muscle before leaving the bathroom satisfied.

I’d taken a few mini Dewars from the last flight. I spilled some shots into a plastic cup, parted the stained curtains, and stared into the swirling whiteness of whatever city I’d fallen into. Flat one-story buildings prevailed, and an interstate rumbled in the distance. Right now, my plane would be landing while a car waited to take me to the same type of conference I’d sat in a million times. All my associates were probably scratching their heads wondering where I was; the beauty lie in the fact that even I had no clue.

Since I prefer a drink on the rocks, I threw on a pair of warm-up pants and made my way to the ice machine. Even in the afternoon, the hallway was dark. Its Saturn-shaped lights cast faint orange lines along the walls and carpet. A slim shadow appeared from the swinging doors by the ice machine at the far end. I had only noticed it because the doors made a swooping sound when it entered. As the shadow walked towards me, I got a terrible chill. I stopped moving

and let it take shape.

Once it stepped close enough, I saw it was a woman in a silver dress with bright, red lipstick like blood. Like my wife, her body was full of curves. Curves in the L shape down her back, curves that separated her hips from her legs; even that silver dress had a great curve to it below her neckline. I could travel all day along her body and constantly get whiplash.

We gave each other a nod. She had a swish of a walk that either indicated arrogance or a limp. The thought that it could be a limp made me feel queasy. Her face was uniformly shaped: black eyes, a dot for a nose, lips pressed against each other as if they had emerged from an intense chill. Good looking if you took the time to look long enough.

Once she passed me, I swiveled around and realized she indeed dragged her left foot more than her right. Her keys jangled in her hand as she leaned towards the door of her room like she was telling it a secret. In her silver dress, she resembled an enormous, gleaming teardrop. Then she spilled inside.

Back in my room, I crunched ice and let my stomach burn with Dewars. Through walls and other rooms I imagined her slipping out of that dress and walking around in a bra and high heels. Puffing on cloves and letting the curlicues of smoke become lost in the cottage cheese ceiling. Dragging that left foot around and knowing how much it made me feel like a blade was puncturing my heart.

Two hours later, I'd chewed enough ice to make my throat sore but had a reason to pass by her room again. I let the mirror over the bureau play with my insecurities, fumbled with a cowlick that refused to go down, and checked my breath in the palm of my hand.

Once outside, I slammed the door. The hallway vibrated, but no one bothered to pop their head out. All I saw were rows and rows of faded maroon doors and watermarked paisley wallpaper. I was drunk enough to finally feel settled. When I reached her door, faint laughter came from inside. First it was just hers—a wicked laugh that was grounded more in mockery than in jubilation—but then a man's laugh—throaty and insecure—crept from under the crack of her door. I could see their shadows flickering like flames through the crack. Their laughter became louder and more intense; hungry laughs that tried to outdo each other.

I reached the ice machine, and their laughter muted once I turned it on. By the time it spit out the ice, they had quieted down, and an almost perfect silence filled the hallway. A fly buzzed around. Snow patted against a window. Soft music trickled from the lobby. Their shadows still flickered through the door crack. I imagined her finding me hours later, passed out in the hallway as I cradled my bucket of ice and she held out her hand to save me like she'd done it a million times before.

When I woke from my nap, night had fallen and the motel room was colder. The heater coughed and did little to alleviate the situation. I had dreamed intensely, dreamed of bonfires, and woke up frightened. I dug my knuckles into my eyes to rub those thoughts away and swung my legs over the edge of the bed.

I put on my suit because the only other clothes I brought were a pair of warm-up pants and a white T-shirt. It's funny how I always hated suits until I wore them every day and then began to feel awkward in casual clothes. I gargled some more green tea mouthwash, shaved again because I have the ability to grow a shadow in just a few hours, and combed my hair down pat. Whistling, I grabbed the motel keys, slammed the door as loud as I could, and took my time walking down the hallway towards the exit. I listened with my ear flush against the woman's door, but silence was all I heard.

When I reached the lobby, the ancient clerk was hunched over a small television.

"There a bar around here?" I shouted, thinking he was near deaf.

He pointed his thumb to a door behind the lounge.

Inside were a couple of locals. The bar wasn't much, but I counted a few beers on tap and thought that'd be the safest choice for the rest of the night. Barely lit, the people in the back were at most silhouettes. A trucker and his girl shared a pitcher by the jukebox. The woman in the silver dress was also there. She was speaking on the pay phone by the exit. I sat at the bar, flipped my tie over my shoulder, and ordered a pint.

Two pints later, I began to slouch. The woman was still on the pay phone. Granted, I chugged the pints, but it was an awfully long

conversation and she stopped talking back after awhile. I could barely even remember a time when people still used pay phones. The woman listened, nodded some, and occasionally shifted the balance off her left foot.

“Nother?” the bartender asked, but I shook my head. I smiled because my wife used to say, “nother” like that; she dropped vowels.

The woman finally got off the phone and sat a few stools away. She ordered a Manhattan and greeted it with disdain.

“I got that,” I said, and tried to look in her eyes. She twirled the straw in her drink but didn’t glance up.

“Thanks,” she finally said, after a glacial pause.

“Another beer, please,” I told the bartender. “Bottle this time.” I moved over to the stool next to her. “I think we’re staying on the same floor.”

“Motel only has one floor,” she replied. She tossed back the Manhattan in two gulps and left a smack of lipstick on the glass.

“I suppose now’s the time where you say something to keep me interested,” she said.

“My name’s Guy.”

“That all you got? I have an arsenal of lines I’d lend you if I liked you,” she replied, and then rolled her tongue across her teeth. She had amused herself.

I took out my wallet and leaned in. Her hair smelled like cloves.

“Here’s a line,” I said, my lips an inch from her earlobe. “How much?”

She stopped running her tongue across her teeth. The response in her eyes was the same as a corpse. After a few seconds, she shifted her weight on the stool and touched the floor with her right foot.

“I’d be offended if you weren’t so cute,” she replied.

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Oh?” She crunched the ice from her drink and let me stare at her until my imagination distorted her features into someone else. “I think I am.”

Upstairs, her silver dress had been left in a wad on the floor, and her snow white breasts slapped me in the face. She was gentler

than I expected. I was drawn to her because she was familiar. She wouldn't let me kiss her, though. She was clinical as hell about the whole thing. But then we started drinking a bottle of Three Fingers I bought off the bartender, and she became looser, or maybe I did. I asked her what her name was.

"Whatever you want it to be," she said, and I repeated the one name that it hurt to say out loud.

Soon the night passed and whiskey emanated from our pores. I left the bed to splash water on my face. Through the bathroom mirror, I could see her smoking cloves naked. The sheet covered her left foot.

"We done?" she asked, and crashed her last clove into the ashtray.

"I'll pay for the night," I said.

She shrugged her shoulders, but I could tell she was pleased.

"Morning's almost here anyway, Big Shot."

"I'll pay for you always," I told the mirror. Then I sat back on the bed with my hand inches away from her mysterious foot.

"It's getting past your bedtime," she said.

I could feel that foot graze my thigh with the sheet between us.

"You'll stay," I said, and swore I could see a flicker of life in her corpse eyes.

When I woke up in the morning, I saw what the night had hidden. My heart pounded in my chest once her foot slid away from the sheets and rested against my leg in all its grotesque glory. It looked like it'd been chewed up by some wild animal. Against my skin it was cold and lifeless.

"Shall we go 'nother round?" she asked. She looked at me, but I couldn't stop staring at the foot. I reached over and held a shriveled toe between my fingers. She purred.

She took my hand and slipped my ring finger in her mouth. Her blood-red lipstick smeared all over my wedding band; I hadn't even realized I'd put it back on. She then climbed on top of me and inserted myself inside of her, rocking back and forth as a lone tear dried under her eye. I took in her smell of cloves. My wife had always smoked cloves as well. When I met her at a party a decade ago in college, I had asked for a cigarette, and she handed me a

clove. I lied and told her how unique we both were because we liked cloves, and she crinkled up her nose like she always did when she smiled. When I finished that clove, she asked if I wanted, “nother,” and I replied, “Always.”

Thinking of a pleasant time from long ago kept me hard inside the woman. Since my wife had left me, I chased those moments from our past like a greedy fool. We were young once with fantasies of a hopeful future. Now she’d never look me in the eye again.

I ran my hands down this woman’s curves and held onto her mutilated secret, that charred piece of flesh. I let a lone tear slide down my own cheek as she crouched over me and bit my lip until it bled. It hurt, but I’d gotten used to pain.

Just last summer my world had crumbled up at the Cape. The bonfire was the only light on the beach. My wife and I had to attend my boss’s Labor Day party. The two of us had already grown distant, found ways to avoid each other. Living in Manhattan, we were afforded with the ability to have separate lives: endless hours at work, a daily cardio trainer named Dane who always had her in an uncompromising pose when I’d return home to find them “working out,” a charity organization that she threw herself into, and a half-empty glass of whatever for me. We had fought the whole ride up, and by the time we reached the Cape, I was shaking like a sad old man in need of a quieting sip. She asked me if I noticed that my nose had become red over the past year. She called me a soused Rudolph. She wondered if I realized that the capillaries in my cheeks were beginning to look like a map of constellations. She questioned if I even liked her anymore.

The rest of the night was all filled in later by third parties. They said it seemed like we were goofing around, play wrestling around the bonfire like a young husband and wife would, but the next morning I noticed in the mirror that she had ripped out a chunk of my hair, and at the hospital I saw I had gripped her arm so hard that an imprint of my fingers remained. That was the last time she looked at me, my curvy mummy all bandaged in bed who’d never walk properly again and would deservedly take me for all I had.

I thought about the sound she made when we’d gotten too close to the fire. That was the only thing I remembered from that night. Not her face, or even how I reacted because I’d been in too much of a wet fog for the past five years. She didn’t scream like I expected

her to. She let out a sigh as if she knew I'd eventually do something as fucked up as throw her into a fire and now she just had to deal with the reality that it actually happened.

I mimicked that same sad sigh as the woman grinded on top of me, but I'd already gone limp and was tired. In the morning light, this woman was a poor imitation of what I truly wanted, and when I rolled her off of me, she kept rolling right off the bed and landed on two solid feet. Her left foot was a shock of red painted toenails without any charred flesh. I felt the rage build up inside of me and cursed at the cottage cheese ceiling, loud and vulgar enough to get her running out of the motel room as fast as she could go. Was she ever even there? I licked my lips but tasted no blood. I was so tired that I lay back and let sleep take over, whispering apologies through reams of unconsciousness but knowing that out there in the real world no one cared to listen anymore.

The coughing heater woke me up. It was nighttime, and I was in my warm-up pants and a wifebeater. The clove butts had been emptied from the ashtray. I went into the bathroom. I wet a towel and draped it across the back of my neck. I gulped water from the faucet to try and flush out the alcohol. I gargled with my green tea mouthwash, and was about to lather up, but my face was surprisingly smooth – there was no shadow. I couldn't recall the last time I'd missed a day.

I retrieved my wedding band from the breast pocket of my suit and discovered my cell was in range again. I called information for the nearest airport to find a flight. Then I booked the next one available, took some last chugs from the remnants in the mini Dewars bottles, and jumped in the shower to fully wake myself up.

On the plane in the middle of the night, the recirculated cabin air was hot, and my collar was slick with sweat. I leaned my head against the window to my right and watched us sail through dark clouds. I had missed one conference but would surely make the next one. It was a miracle I was allowed to keep my job after what happened at that bonfire, but to be honest, the boss man had boasted that I was inhuman on many occasions and that night only proved him right.

The stewardess came by with a pot of coffee. The plane slept and snored as my eyes longed to follow the wisps of clouds to lull me into a sleep as well. So I declined her caffeinated offer because I'd heard from EPA tests last year that tap water on planes was not always heated enough to kill the coliform bacteria. When I told the stewardess that, she shrugged her shoulders and crinkled her nose with a smile, trying her hardest to remain polite while holding the heavy pot of coffee.

Truth was I wanted to dream again, no matter how twisted and lifelike those dreams were. The more I dreamt, the more I hoped I could eventually get back to a place of sanity. I'd waded through the evil present and swim through a backlogged consciousness until I reached a time when we both were happy. Of a senior year in college when we both needed the taste of one another to get through the day. Of our first apartment and the way her nose crinkled when I lifted her through the front doorway. Of talk of baby girls named Frank and Ryan because she loved when girls had boy names like her own. Of the way I'd paint her toenails on a lazy Sunday, never thinking that soon I'd be the cause of her having to wear a prosthetic. These times I'd never have again, not with her or anyone else, because I was no longer green and forever chained to the truth of what I'd become.

So I let the window and the world flying by become my pillow. My life was spent in transit, and therefore my life was spent in daydreams: in conferences, in foreign hotels, during stupors, on planes, and even at home – or what used to be my home and was now just bare walls. Never mind, I had an arsenal of conjured visions of the past to replace the present. They were always strongest in the moments before sleep – when reality and memories blur and the guilt doesn't take my heart in its hands and squeeze until its knuckles glare white.

When we landed, I talked a cabbie into letting me smoke a cigarette out of his window. Car horns, crowds of people, and the New York skyline welcomed me back. The snow tumbled, and an overwhleming sadness struck me when we reached my apartment. I wheeled my suitcase through a clear pathway up towards my door, greeted the doorman with a tired hello, and made small talk with

some lady in the elevator about the weather.

Upstairs, when I saw everything of hers had been cleared out, I realized what a bland person I was. She had been responsible for all of the apartment's character and color. Without her presence, it seemed un-lived in. I took off my jacket, loosened my tie, and poured myself a splash of Glenlivet. Leaning against a window, I stared into the swirling whiteness of my city: The prominent buildings, the bare branches of the Park; the city I shared with many but never again with the one I'd miss most.

A few more drops of Glenlivet and there she'd be again. Her limited vocabulary. Blond hair that only became blonder once summer arrived. The thick red lipstick that she'd wear and leave as presents on my cheek. Her curvy body that always seemed to surprise. My hands shook terribly. I put the bottle to my lips and chugged. Behind a thin filter, part of me wondered if I still had a chance at happiness in this life. If I could accept my wicked past but have a different future. Maybe I could open up a snack shack on a Caribbean beach. Take a round the world cruise. List the ten most absurd things I could think of doing and make sure each one of them got checked off. Or wake up hungover for the last time with the mantra that morning can mean a new beginning.

I could keep telling myself that, but I knew I'd always yearn for 'nother sip... 'nother sip... 'nother sip, forever refilling the glass so I could go back to a time before I turned into a walking and talking slur, before I brought out the beast within, before I threw her away.

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