

*Catharsis*

For the first time in months, I ordered us lattes.

Tall, double-shot, with a crown of whipped cream and two cinnamon sticks plunged deep in the foam. When drowning in a fetid lake, I reasoned with myself, what was the use in shaving? Clean-cut or indulgent with stray bits of fat and scruff, I was still toeing a vicious tide for which my body needed bulk. Sooner rather than later, my pockets would empty. In anticipation of the kill, I rolled up my worn sweater sleeves.

Meanwhile, three doors down, Maryjane dealt with the sandwiches: double-decker BLT's with guacamole and Dijon. She slipped them in her massive purse, that nappy one for knitting gear, and paid for them in quarters. I carefully scooted the lattes to one side of the counter. "Anything else?" asked the girl, cupping the grinds, black as ants, in one hand like some primeval exterminator. I smiled and tried to casually nod.

Two pieces of rumcake with the inch-thick white frosting comprised solely of sugar. Two chocolate éclairs and two coconut doughnuts. A cherry galette and a twist. All wrapped to-go, all packed in a bag, please. I stretched out my arm to stuff a dollar more yellow than green in the Columbia mug marked TIPS FOR TIPS in thick Sharpie. The girl stared at me as I did so. I suddenly felt anxious, subject to her woozy gratitude. Could she read my vicious stubble, my blood-shot eyes? Did I reek, in week-old clothing, so sharply of eviction? The bitch probably thought I was planning on settling down at a warm corner table and eating myself to sleep. I wrenched my hands from my pockets, praying that she wouldn't notice my scabbed and bitten-down fingers, grabbed my goods, and booked it.

Mary was already waiting, picking her nails in the passenger seat. She didn't look up when I jimmed open the door and stood dumbly outside, letting the November draft shamble in and spoil whatever warm concave she'd forged in ten minutes' time.

"Room service," I called.

She rolled her eyes but took the lattes from my hands with a gentle inward push as if to verify my wholeness, and peered over their profiles of froth with dry lenient eyes, done up with dark strokes which somehow portrayed her whole being as unfinished and willing. She wore the

loose black silk blouse we'd agreed was *just* long enough to suffice as a dress, and in anticipation of our final feast, her auburn hair was knotted with a straw wrapper. I slid into the driver's seat and held the brown bakery bag between my legs.

"The sandwiches are in the trunk," she said. Her voice was dark with accusation. She didn't meet my eye.

There was a pause. I stared at her stiff profile, bony features softened only by the fuzz of passing headlights. "So," I said. "Do you still hate me?"

She shot me a weary sidelong look. "Jacob," she sighed. "Don't start. All I wanna do is go home. I wanna take a shower and take off my shoes and sleep in my own fucking bed." I fought the urge to tell her that she sealed her own fate by moving in with me. Her eyes were bright, but I could see that all the fight had gone out of her. Mary was a crafty girl, but cleanly to a fault. In a gesture of weakness rather than affection, she rolled up the sleeve of my sweater and touched my wrist. "What are we gonna do when the tank runs out of gas, Jacob? Didya ever think of that? Even if we sell all the blood in our bodies, the landlord sure as hell won't take us back now." She took a deep breath. "I can feel a bad thing coming fast."

I studied the traces of dirt on her face—dried lipstick in one corner, a mottled hickey near her hairline—and said nothing. After a beat, she settled back in her seat and smiled grimly. "I guess I'll tell you now. The guy at the deli asked to elope with me."

"Which guy at the deli?" I turned my attention to the bag.

"The one with the Bad Santa beard and short thumb."

I passed along her piece of cake, its cellophane aglow and momentarily bobbing in a close, snowy darkness with the mastermind fork rising out from the frosting. It didn't sink in, but rather jerked defiantly upward, plotting with the sunroof. "Should I be flattered?"

"It wasn't romantic, really," she went on, gazing out the window at the headless row of movie stores and take-out joints. We were parked right in front of the handicap ramp, which, as far as I could see, only belligerent teens in knee-socks and tails ever used. "It was considerate, if anything. He said he'd see me in the movies one day. Wanted to know if I needed a ride to L.A."

I took a glug of my latte, pretending to ponder her words. "Do you like the cinnamon?"

"It's good. Daring. Festive." We sipped in drowsy unison. I eyed her open legs.

"Ready?" My attempt at flippant sarcasm fell through. She romped in its flesh-colored crater and grinned. I didn't like her vibrant sympathy. I pawed her inner-thigh, too visible beneath the blouse, and we began to eat.

It was remarkable how quickly the woe pushed through our quiet veil of propriety.

Three bites in and my nose began to run. I glanced at Maryjane, pensively munching with her eyes cast over the dashboard and unaware of the crumbs that clung to her chin, and felt a magnificent pressure in my throat. By the time I'd crumbled up my paper plate and dug my doughnut from the bag, the tears were undeniable. I stuffed my mouth and let them stream. Maryjane's head was bowed, her jaws furiously working. The perspiration on the windows began to form words, and I wept as I read them, trapped in this circumscribed sauna, my body's complaints overruled by the hypnotic sting of catharsis.

There.

The catalogue of girls I'd not been brave enough to touch, who I chose to hate in their pink sweaters because they couldn't read my mind. The calendar of nights spent dazed by loneliness, glued to a couch made burgundy by TV shadows and gnawed by the soft knowledge that nobody was expecting me. How every interview I'd ever scored was damned by the tremor of hung-over hands. Maryjane's migraines; Maryjane's new trepidation when I lifted up her shirt. The cup-sizes of all lovers I'd forgotten, and the rationale that made so forgettable—how obvious, even lounging in bed, that nothing would, nothing could, ever come of them! With a slop I turned to study Mary's right-hand window, but for me, it was just a window, dim and bleak and fogged.

I cradled my face in my hands but could no longer be protected.

Eviction was but a blip on my staggering list.

Here: the scads of friends who'd liked and trusted me so many times more than I had them. The secrets they poured into me, which I gobbled and threw up. How savagely I dared them not to know me. The names of friendly cousins whose letters I'd never returned, never thought to, and then the faded knowledge of their deaths—how much I didn't care. All the promises I'd broken, to my parents whose quivering faith in me was never to be justified and whose love only made me meaner, to my teachers in blue-printed skirts and gray leggings who

drank coffee all day at their desks so as to stave off this very sensation. My mother was dead like the cat with sad whiskers who slept in my bed and I could never express my affection for anyone, instead letting them die amidst watered-down favors in my tidy corral of time wasted.

Maryjane was bent double, her body a cuss.

I tried to call her name but my mouth wasn't working. I thought of how clean and sharp Maryjane had been the night I met her—we were hopping the fence to an outdoor rap concert, buzzed and fantastically unattached, having each spent the last of our unemployment checks on curry, booze, and, for her, a jumbo bottle of hydrogen peroxide. My heart ached as I remembered how she'd ripped her skirt, filmy bottle-green, on the chain-metal and just shrugged, unaware that the next four-and-a-half months of her life would be spent in tatters. We swayed to the subpar rhymes and made out on a stranger's blanket, high not only on the flesh that tasted strikingly like our exes' (eager, slick, anemic, and impolitely hot) but also on the nibbling thought that maybe, just this once, we'd finally struck it rich.

Now, at my elbow, Mary simultaneously let out a moan and a burp.

I choked on a wad of dough at the same time a white hand rapped against the window.

“He-llo?”

The voice was tiny, similar to the long-toed ones which bombard you, jacked on tea, in idle yellow bathtubs. Maryjane, just as she did in the bath, stretched up out of her woe-begotten yogic dive and swiveled with unnatural serenity, considering the rough state of her face, to where the voice resounded in angelic nagging fragments.

Dazed, I swept the sugar from my lap and cracked the window. All we had left was the pitiful twist.

“Yes?” I peered through the darkness which had fallen so swiftly I suddenly felt, with the drunkard's pissful of pride, accountable.

A hazy and emaciated youth, outlined by the HOT HOT COFFEE sign behind him, leaned upon the railing of the handicap ramp in glittering inquiry. He wore a black bomber jacket and a knit cap in the shape of a bunny. His voice was a knife with its blade turned flat and innocuous. “Hey,” he said. “Do you have a light?”

I stuck my head back in the car. His ghostly stakeout pulsed on the hood of our car.

Maryjane stared at me; her eyes were soft and red and blank. I tried to think of a joke to crack but my brain was a brick wall. “Well?” She adjusted her blouse with a touch of impatience. “Do you?”

I rolled down the window and found the kid in exactly the same position as before, pushing his stomach into the rail with his bare fists wrapped around it, alternating feet as he swung one in the air and ground the other into the concrete. I nodded and motioned for him to come inside. His pale slitted eyes drove into mine with a taciturn thank-you. I wanted to ask him what time it was, but felt that that might jeopardize my position of benevolent power.

He vaulted himself over the railing and in a heartbeat had opened the door and settled behind us, proclaiming to the faded leather, “I’m River.” He smiled, rustled, blushed, and we both felt the heat on the back of our necks. “Stupid hippie parents.”

He rooted around in his pants until he’d located his Camels. He blew lint off the tip of one and secured it between his lips. He discarded a handful of coins on the floor and unzipped his jacket with a self-sufficient flourish. Me and Mary watched it all in the rear-view mirror and didn’t flinch when he met our gaze, pointing questioningly to the cigarette in his mouth. “We don’t mind,” Maryjane said rather quickly. “Use the car lighter, God knows we don’t.”

Eyes crinkled in appreciation, the boy pitched forward such that all six of his ribs sought fulfillment and his unsmiling bunny scrutinized the tension we’d willed down into our legs, so stiff and so white, and lit up in the parameter of our perpendicular disquiet.

“Do these hippie parents know you smoke?”

I couldn’t have asked a lamer question and wallowed in Mary’s annoyance.

River didn’t seem to mind. He turned to face me, half-standing with a hand on my headrest, and inhaled slowly before shrugging. “One day they’ll find out,” he said. As if by accident he cocked his head and tugged his collar down, revealing a tiny blackbird on his breast. “One day they’ll reach enlightenment and then the shit will hit the fan.” He laughed to himself. “Besides, when you think about it, I’m no more guilty than they are.”

He peered into our faces, dragging a wreath of smoke around the three of us like merry convicts. Maryjane smiled and murmured, “That’s one way to see it.”

He laughed. “If you wanna stay sane, that’s the only way! I could regret a lot of things

I've done, like, well, getting tattooed by a nearsighted speedfreak or losing my virginity to Sadie Sundance of all people, but it always comforts me to think we're gonna die no matter what."

Maryjane raised an eyebrow. "That comforts you?" But I knew exactly what he meant. Sensing this, he turned to me, the ebbing orange bud of his cigarette like a bindi between his eyes. For a moment, I felt terrified. I gripped the steering wheel but couldn't turn away. "The highs are so short-lived," he said, "and I've come by every single one of them on accident." He adjusted his bunny so that its button eyes surveyed the world of neon slush outside our car. "All that pain and stupid shit will keep you company on the comedown, dig? Let my parents yell at me. Let them! Afterwards, I'll sit right down in the gutter, see, and savor my ability to smoke and sulk so publically. I'll look at my tat and feel righteous becuz when I die, at least my body will be mine." He paused, then let out a magnificent cackle. "Would you believe it, that ole Sadie was a Jesuit. Je-sus Christ." And away he fell to musing.

Maryjane pursed her lips and played with the fraying hem of her blouse, revealing too much leg.

It struck me that we could only be six years older than he was, seven at the most. I felt those years align in my gut like the sweets I'd just consumed: heavy and angry and fixed, though I knew that with a change of atmosphere as subtle as morning or mantra or liquor or fall, almost all would be soothed and forgotten. That was my condition: I was addicted to distraction. I'd fucked myself over with that very first kiss, lackluster and rushed, and a pubescent devotion to substances, pills to while away the hours, not heavy enough to knock me out but just strong enough to confine me. As of late, Maryjane had grown too thin and skittish to suffice. The withdrawal pains were like that of an archetypal cold shower. But, I always reasoned to myself, who among us in this modern age *wasn't* on the outlook for reprieve? River, I now answered. This kid is either magic or he hasn't got a fucking clue.

With sudden vigor, I turned the key in the ignition. As the engine purred I felt my body become weightless.

River had his elbows on the dashboard and was contentedly puffing away, unruffled by the gluttonous wreckage at our feet or backwards motion of the car. Maryjane looked at me, her eyes aglow, then at the boy.

“Well, River,” she asked carefully. “Do you have any mottoes?”

He grinned over the glowing ash. His pause, like an after-school swagger, inflated the very small space in between us. There was something so feline about his energies.

“What’s your name?” he winked with asexual slimness in Mary’s direction, prodding her with his exhale. We both saw the smoke allide up her nostrils and enter her lungs. She met my gaze over his shoulder, and held it as if balanced on the peak of his clavicle. “I’m Maryjane.”

The boy heaved with laughter. “Awesome!” he cooed. “I love that song!” We smiled and nodded. He settled into the backseat, forearm resting on each of our headrests. He peered dreamily out the front window at the formless parking lot. We were the only car in sight. From off the highway demonic headlights dabbled on the ice.

“My motto?” He sighed. His cigarette blinked in my periphery. “That’s a tricky question.” Maryjane *hmmmed* in agreement. I shifted into reverse. River continued to think, cigarette neglected as it played with Mary’s braid. “Maybe...well, my raver friends talk a lot about tolerance. You know, PLUR and all that lovey stuff.”

“That’s great,” I shot out.

“Yeah,” he continued. His bunny implored me: peace love unity respect! “But that’s not really my scene.” Maryjane shook her head. River squinted at the receding line of storefronts and jiggled his dead cigarette, beaming a cursory farewell. “I guess I just try be spacious and not stand in the way of the war.”

“Stand in the way of the what?” Mary asked, though our hearts had both begun to thump. River shrugged and his face seemed to darken. “Where are we going?” he asked after a beat.

I kept my eyes on the road. “River,” I said. My stomach gurgled and it sounded like the banging of soup pots on New Year’s. My heart was drunkenly counting down, throttled by the thought of one more year used up. “You seem like a generous fellow. A boy beyond his years.”

River said nothing, only shifted deeper in his seat and in a pantomime of manhood brought the indiscernible cigarette to his mouth. His bunny made eyes at me in the rearview mirror. Mary rearranged her legs and I plowed rashly onward. “I’d like you to do me a favor.” All that sugar and coffee had dried out my throat. I could tell that its scratchiness made him

nervous, but I didn't wait for his response. "I'd like you to tell me something, OK? I want you to tell me it'll all be OK."

The passing streetlights glinted off his face: *tabula rosa*, I thought dumbly. He clenched his jaw and appraised Mary and I like the parents he'd never ordained to be sexy and yet here we were, knee-deep in debris. "Where are we going?" he repeated in a voice only slightly different from before. In consternation, his face was like that of some perverted savior popped fresh from the blue.

Mary wheeled around in her seat and her smile was crustaceous, blurred on the bottom by her whorish black blouse and those blunted thighs in which the beige rose oh-so too-damn high. "Did you know," she began in a reverent murmur, "that your bone structure is marvelous? You could be in the movies, you know."

He floundered for his jacket, but still the smoothness of his face was undisturbed, like a monument of sass. How deeply etched were those eyes, two steely stomachs, two 101 exits.

In desperation I chugged the last of my latte. The cinnamon dregs seared my throat. "Tell me it will be all right."

He noted the hard edge of panic in my words and let the light slip from his fingers. It rolled to the floor and made no sound.

Maryjane was mesmerized by the window once more. I fleetingly imagined how lovely she'd be with a suntan.

"Tell me it will be all right." I squinted against the sting in my eyes. "Tell me. Right now. *Now*. Say it, say it, you fuck, it will all be OK. Say it, little blackbird, tell me all about the rivers and the rainbows and how it will all be OK, do you hear me? You hear?"

We were cruising through the night so cold it was hot and I felt his voice inside my body like a pilfered liquid, like a lover's listlessness, and his sweetness was a riddle as he found another cigarette and chanted, hands up, in my ear, "OK, OK, OK."

The consonants damn near choked him but the bunny-wunny was brave as the northern lights dribbled and Maryjane, growing golden, did the definitive twist.