

Animus

I come home late from work, pissed at my whole fucking day, my job, my commute, every person who crossed my path or looked at me wrong. And why not? The day hated me as much as I hated it—as it did every day.

I stew in the driveway, my feral stomach clamoring for something to eat, my mind still reeling out the day like a tape recorder on repeat, as the rickety garage door struggles open, groaning against age and rust and neglect. I gun the gas when it opens high enough to slip under, but punch the breaks before I get ten feet in.

In the stark red glow of brake lights, I am stopped by my neighbor's car: a Volvo station wagon—Hugs Not Bombs bumper sticker adorning its protruding ass—cutting across the faded white line that divides the tiny cement coffin I pay a hundred bucks a month to call a garage.

I want to grate my car past hers, drawing a long line of red in that side of forest green; a little message that says learn to fucking park or go back to whatever driving-deficit tree-hugging state you come from. Instead, I grow sick on the swirl of red exhaust and back out of the garage, careful not to scrape my car on the ridiculously narrow cement walls. I don't bother honking as I pull out and screech over the curb, forcing her as I had two times before—once in her bathrobe—to come down and move her car. I don't want the hassle tonight, the fake apologies, embarrassed smile as transparent as her small-town innocence. Instead, I spend twenty minutes driving around for a spot, half as long again trudging the steep hill home.

I drop my keys at the door to my flat, jab the wrong one in twice in a row before getting the right one in. The house is dark—not how I left it—not that it ever is. I flick the Hall light on

and see the mess. It should not be a shock to me now, not after so long. But it is, so I close the door, leaving my hate for everything—even my neighbor—out in the night air.

I step over shreds of newspaper, torn couch pillows, bent paperbacks, spilled, and fractured CD cases; walk from the living room to the kitchen, one disaster to another: crunching over granules of spilled kitty litter, ripped plastic bags, scattered garbage. Spilling out of the overturned Rubbermaid at the back of the kitchen is a bone from last night's pork chop, bitten in half, sticking from a used coffee filter like a memorial, soaked in a watery yellow puddle stinking unmistakably of stomach acid.

I would turn on the kitchen light but the light spilling from the Hall tells me enough. I step towards the refrigerator, my foot falling into something soft. I lift my shoe and see its print smeared in the thick orange turd just as it hits my nose—the rotten-sweet odor I can never get over no matter how often I smell it. Anger wants to swell up inside of me, bubble and burst out of my throat burning with fire, but instead it sinks, dribbling down my intestines, pooling over my sphincter so that I have to pinch for fear of shitting my pants.

I feel weak, flaccid, limp—I even limp to the fridge—uneven footed, one turd-caked foot skating slickly across the vinyl floor, gathering of bits of litter and refuse with every step. I open the refrigerator door and pull out a beer, twisting off the cap and taking the cold bitter fluid in my lips.

There I notice him, in the corner of my eye, twinkling in the dim light of the fridge's 5watt utility bulb, obscured in the shadow of the kitchen but for its two never-blinking, yellow eyes.

I want him dead—that is all I can say—and would kill him myself were I not so afraid of afraid of him killing me first. So instead, I slam the door closed, rattling bottles, snuffing the reflected light in those ghastly eyes, and tell him to fuck off.

He laughs at me, as he always does, and goes back to licking himself—the sound of his thick glistening tongue cleaning his long black nails, mangy orange fur, grossly swollen nuts—whatever it is he licks every hour of every night. I am ready to storm out with my beer, but think better of it, reach back in the fridge for the opened can of tuna from the night before.

“Here.” I tell him, dropping it under the table with a clank, watching it disappear in a flash under the table shadow, hearing the coarse sound of his tongue lashing the aluminum for every last flake of stale fish. Then the can skitters across the floor, clattering atop a pile of cans in the corner, all shining clean, and I remember tomorrow is recycling day. The tongue goes to back coarse sound of grooming again—claws, fur, balls.

I walk out with my beer, leaving behind a trail of shit all the way across the hall carpet to my room, slam the door and lock it behind me. I open it again a moment later, leaving my shoes in the hall.

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I am already in a foul mood: late for work, some accident snarling the road for ten minutes that I exaggerate to thirty to cover my sleeping in; the parking ticket I pulled for parking in a crosswalk last night; the cup of drive through coffee that scalded the shit out of my tongue so that everything tasted like burn toast. I slip in past my boss working the counter with some customer and hit the self-serve printer station, busying myself with all the incompetent people who don't know where to insert their print keys, which button to press, or where to grab their print outs. I smile, grit my teeth, fix paper jams, replace toner, and restock supplies, working hard

and fast to make up for lost time and keep my mind off her—at least until my first smoke break forty-five minutes after clock-in and I'm calling her at home and hanging up before she answers. Not that it matters. She wouldn't pick up anyway—she knows it's me. I suck the last life out of my cigarette and dive back into work.

It's raining by the time I get back—a cold, overcast San Francisco drizzle. I squeeze into my spot, pleased to see the new neighbor's car wasn't for a change. Maybe she was off with some boyfriend, maybe she had an accident, ended up in the hospital or just picked up and left.

At my door I stamp my shoes on the old doormat that came with the place, a plastic knobby frog, faded and frayed by a thousand pounding shoes. I stamp with a secret sense of pleasure, only delaying the inevitable. No one around, I slip in, quickly sealing the door behind me.

I sling my jacket over the Lazy boy in the living room. A rerun of Bonanza is on the TV—he is watching Bonanza—curled out on the long green sofa, licking. I scoop the remote off the floor as I sit, and immediately start changing channels.

He stops, tongue still attached to his ass like its frozen to a flagpole, eyes all hard glare.

“I want to watch the news.” I say.

He doesn't move—doesn't breathe.

“It's my TV. I work all day. I pay for this place. The TV. Right. I get to watch what I want when I get home. You don't like it—get a job.”

I face him, trying to match his stare. It's futile, but this time he smiles needle teeth and backs down, resuming his crass licking.

“I deserve a little respect.” I protest. I whine, He rises from the couch a moment later, stretching on all fours then drops to the floor, sauntering past, tail high in the air, farting as he passes.

I flip through channels until I end up on Bonanza again, no mixed with the stench, so I flick it off and yank the batteries out of the remote.

I decide to take a leisurely dump before fixing dinner. The bathroom is the only room I can truly have any privacy—the only boundary he seems to respect. I ease down on the cold porcelain seat, watching goosebumps sprout over my arms and leg like a rash. I pick through some old National Geographics I’ve read a dozen times before and notice the neighbor’s lights on through the small, frosted bathroom window. I’m surprised because I did not hear the garage door open. I reach over and turn off the bathroom light and slide open the window for a better view. The cold crisp air rushes in and in a few minutes she passes by the side window closest to her front door. She seems to be in a robe this time—often she’s strolled by half-dressed, once even topless, not realizing or even caring she could be seen—though this window was perhaps the only vantage point, and I always watched from the dark. In the two months she’s lived here I’ve only seen her alone—if she has a boyfriend he’d never been over. Maybe she stays at his place. Maybe she doesn’t have a boyfriend—dumped him back in Oregon or wherever state is on her plate, and she came crying here, tail tucked between her legs.

Next thing I know, she’s gone from the window and is out her front door, coming down the stairs. Half a minute out of view there is a knock at my door.

I wait, legs tense, ready to leap, one hand gripping the pants around my ankles like the toilet is about to buck. I feel a little queasy, dizzy, my legs, half-extended, sting with pins and needles. The door knocks again and I’m off my feet, out of the bathroom, hobble-running on

rubber legs still trying to get my pants up. I get to the front door, strapping my belt, standing just to the side of the peephole so she doesn't see my movement through it. I glance around looking for the animal, but he's gone, dashed off to his hidey-hole, so I turn my attention back to the door.

The knock again, then she calls out, her voice hoarse: "Hello? You home?"

I clear my voice, taking a couple of attempts, then crack open the door. "Yeah," I say, trying to act natural.

"I'm sorry to bother you. I heard you come in a while ago and was wondering if you could do me a favor."

She clutches the blue terrycloth bathrobe around her, probably less for propriety than warmth. Cold night air slips in from behind her. She stands hunched slightly and I notice for the first time we are the same height—from a distance she always seemed taller to me for some reason. The long black hair she always wears lashed like a snake now runs down her pale face and shoulders in tiny black rivulets.

"I'm sorry to ask this but I'm sick and my car is in the shop, and I ordered some take-out but now they can't deliver because their driver had an accident or something, so I was wondering if you could help me out? I mean it's not very far—Tsing Tao's—you know just over on the corner of 15th. I'll give you a twenty. The food is only thirteen so you could keep the change—for your trouble." She embarrassingly wipes at her draining nose.

In her other hand she's already holding out the twenty I didn't notice before, like I've already agreed to do it. Because of the mess, I'm still peering at her through a narrow crack like I'm going to slam the door in her face any second. I ease up, glancing once back over my shoulder, and open the door enough to take the twenty.

“Okay.”

“Okay. Thanks. Oh, if you could now, that would be great. The order’s ready.”

“You need anything else. I could...”

“No. That’s okay. I get my car back tomorrow. But thanks anyway.”

She smiles weakly, takes a step back, dropping her eyes to the ground. I hold the door, still smiling, cold mist washing over my face. She pauses as though for something else to say before turning and hurrying back up the stairs. “I’ll be up here. I’ll leave the door unlocked if you don’t mind just bringing it in. I’m going to lie down.”

Even after she disappears through the door, I am still smiling like an idiot. A cold draft blows my crotch and notice my fly is open. I turn around and the animal is stretching against the back of my lazy boy, raking his claws across the tattered fabric. I grab my jacket off the coat hook and leave.

Tsing Tao is close enough to walk, but I don’t want her food to get cold so I drive. I double park while I run in. She didn’t give me her name, so the hostess and I have to guess her order by the price. There are two thirteen dollar pick up orders. One for Luis, one for Jane.

Jane.

I pay the bill, pocket the change, then double park at the corner market on my way back for a quick in and out. I don’t know what she has, so I pick up a couple of boxes of Kleenex, two bottles of cough syrup—the kind that makes you drowsy, and the kind that doesn’t—a bottle of Aspirin, five daily packets of Vitamin C, a box of instant tea, bottle of orange juice, and for six bucks, those knobby flip-flops that massage your feet while you walk. I spend \$41.50 and keep the receipt in case she wants to return any of the stuff. The Middle Eastern guy at the register says something about my parking and I tell him it’s the city.

I knock gently at the door even though she said to walk in. I don't want to surprise her in case she's walking around without anything on. "I'm here", I say, peeking in. The place is dark except for a desk lamp curled on the kitchen table like a crane with a broken neck. I set the bags down and notice some Aspirin and Kleenex on a nearby kitchen counter. I consider taking the ones I bought out of the bag, tossing them in the trash, but figure she can always use them later.

"I got your food here," I call out down a darkened hall leading to an open door, which if her floor plan was anything like mine, would be her room. I look around—the place is sparse—most of the furniture colorless in the dim light. The floors are hardwood, as mine were before I had carpet installed—carpet I will pull and burn when I leave. If her place is a little barren, it is clean, as clean as my place had been—before he found me again.

I call out one more time, about the food, then move quietly down the hall. I poke my head into her room. She is asleep, bundled under a comforter thick as a bearskin. Black rivulets of hair stream down her pillow, pooling on the floor below and I find myself wondering how she sleeps with it—if she lets it fall wild, or if she had to tie it up at night so it doesn't choke her in her sleep. In a vanity against the far wall, I catching myself in her mirror, spying on her. I slink out and go back to the dining room.

The take-out I put in the fridge, folding the restaurant bag after I stuff the bill for the food in my pocket. I set out the other things I had picked up from the store, going through some of her kitchen cabinets to see where things go, then deciding to leave it all on the counter. I fold the other bags under my arm and leave her change on a small table by the door, pausing there, unsure if I should lock the door behind me or leave it unlocked.

If I lock it, I won't be getting back in if anything happens; I leave it unlocked—anyone can get in. I look down the stairs at my place, all of the windows so carefully draped no one can

see in or out. It's hard to even tell what lights are on. The only window I can see into is the bathroom window. Wide open, the light is still on, and I realize for the first time how visible I must be from up here.

Then I remember the animal and the residual smell of Chinese food stimulates my stomach and realize I'm starving. Jane moans softly from her room. She is having a nightmare. I could wake her, heat up the food, serve her a cup of sweet and sour soup. Join her for company. Instead, I lock the door behind me and head back down.

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I race home but he is already there, white utility van in the driveway, giant plastic rat adorning the roof like a trophy. My throat tightens and I have to force a swallow. How long had he been here? It wasn't even two. They give very specific windows of time. Between two and four they said. Not 1:45. I jump out of the car almost before I get it in park. The transmission coughing like my throat, the car lurching and rolling before I get it out of gear and pull the break.

Two o'clock. What the hell was he doing here this early? I run up to the driver side of the van, hoping is still there waiting for me. The window is cracked open, the crackle of the dispatch radio, clipboard and colored papers spilling across the wide vinyl seat, but no one is there. I am sucking in deep breaths, outraged, betrayed. I took off the afternoon to meet him here between 2 and 4. Why the fuck didn't he just wait?

I dart around to the side closest to me, peering down Jane's side of building, over the fence, seeing no one. I run around the front of the van to the other side, down the narrow space between my half and the neighboring unit. The gate is still closed—thank goodness—unlikely he went around back since it was usually rusted shut. Then it swings smoothly open, and he is standing there, white coveralls, goggles, utility belt and a large canister slung over his shoulders

like some munition. I am going to scream at him, tear him a new asshole. His impropriety, unprofessionalism—but he stops me with two words: “All done!”

I sign the \$59 bill, no charge for the WD-40 he used to fix the gate, not listening as he explains the service, wishes me a good afternoon, hands me a pink copy, and climbs in to his van. I watch the small rubber rodent suspended from his rear-view mirror swing wildly as he backs out the driveway and disappears down the street. I turn and look to the gate, curious to open it, to feel it open smoothly, silently, but for some reason I am afraid to.

I stand in my empty driveway, piece of paper in my hand, look at my watch and notice it is not even yet two. I never said a word about his being early. It didn't matter now. I replayed the words in my mind:

“You definitely have a serious infestation problem. Not sure what it is, but I left plenty of traps and bait, so don't go around back there or under the house. You should get that hole in back patched up as soon as you can so more don't come back in. I'll be back in a couple of days to change the traps. If you start to notice any smell in the next couple of weeks, probably means one of 'em died in the walls somewhere. Smell should go away after a while.”

I should go—get in my car, go somewhere. Get a hotel for a couple of nights. Visit someone. I finger my car key in my pocket trying to come up with some place in my mind I've always wanted to visit, but instead my hand settles on the house key and I'm running to the door.

I rummage through the meager selection in my fridge, concocting a medley of leftovers I leave under the table. I throw together a peanut butter sandwich I take with me to the bathroom. Remembering the paper in my pocket, I pull out the crumpled Tsing Tao bill with Jane's name and phone number written on it. I smooth it out and leave it by my bed.

A sound from the living room startles me. My heart pounding in my head. An intense feeling washes over me, but I don't know if its relief or futility. Tomorrow is another day.