

Black and White

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Twenty miles away from home and the furthest thing from his mind is the road in front of him. He's being angry and she's sulking and muttering. But the road doesn't care and it's a crackling whip and the curve sends them across the center line where they're scolded for their ignorance. They regret it. They're pushed to the side and the guard rail buckles. She's screaming over the music but speakers can't listen. The car spins over the side down the hill. He thinks he's falling up as he bounces off the roof. He says he loves her and she knows he does. They reach for each other like those contestants on television in the money tubes, grabbing and clutching for freedom. Some audience members scream, maybe. Their hearts break in unison as the metal crushes them mid-stretch. One partially cracked headlight shoots its broken beam into the cloudy sky. Batman's nowhere.

The walls are made of cauliflower and heads of red cabbage and lettuce. Broccoli makes the door and it's all backed up by tomato. Eggplant has my back, I'm going in. I reach for the lowest head of lettuce I can. I am a threat to structural integrity. I am aware she will be distraught.

"Don't do that!"

I wasn't going to take this one, I really wasn't, so I decide I will. I am a magician, an artist, the lettuce is my tablecloth. Elevator music beeps from the ceiling. I have a soundtrack, and the several-foot-high store display is my table. I am in control. This has to be timed right. The tension is thick. She looks at me and I look at her. I pull. It is a half of a second at most and the lettuce goes from the display to my hand to the cart. The rest of the lettuce heads shift a little. They bobble in stacks. I hear her hold her breath after a tiny gasp. They bobble a little more and we're silent. They hold each other in place.

"Why'd you do that?"

Samantha asks me the most idiotic questions.

We're shoppers and hypocritical animal rights activists in that we pay three dollars for eggs because they were stolen from chickens that are allowed to run free instead of rot in cages. I tell her we're still cooking potential chicken babies. She has an argument for me but I don't buy it. Look how cultured we are, America. I'm the epitome of culture as I tan in the buzz of the flu-

orescent lights and her heated glares. I try to hide things like hickory smoked lard and the jumbo-sized jars of pork hocks in the cart where she won't see them. Often times I don't actually desire that stuff to end up in our cupboards, but I think it's funny if she doesn't notice and we could (hypothetically) dine on hickory-smoked, lard-cooked pork hocks.

She notices this time and I feel like a naughty child of three years subjected to a mother's disapproval instead of a joking boyfriend of three years subjected to a lover's coy gestures.

"Put back the pork hocks."

She slightly grins as she says it, but I can tell she's trying not to. As I take them and turn, I see her smiling in the reflection of the jar. Her face seems ever-so-beautiful reflected in the glass jar of pork hocks and murky pig juice.

We check out and the cashier checks me out. My eyes wander to the line of skin above her pants and below her sweater. I don't think Samantha notices. I grab a Charleston Chew and throw it up on the counter. Samantha gives me one of those looks. I flip her off. Usually she grins but this time she reaches over and brushes some fuzz off my shirt.

Samantha's friend and the boy are bleeding to death in a night-time ditch, impaled and crushed. The girl can't breathe well enough to cry. The radio is still playing its songs to nobody. They were singing the words a few minutes ago. Before she goes black, she wonders what would have happened if she'd taken another three seconds to put on her coat at home, where they'd be if they'd traveled five miles per hour slower, and how things would have gone if they'd had less sex at home. Or more sex. Been more in love, less. Gone for a walk instead of watching a movie. She's got time to look over at him now, but it doesn't last long. She sees his eyes close and hers do too.

I put the three bags of groceries into the trunk, the moon my light since the trunk one's burnt out. She gets into the driver's seat and I smack the trunk shut. The front door beep-beeps at me as I open it. What are you trying to tell me, front door? I reach for the seatbelt as I sit down.

"Buckle up," she tells me.

I was going to, so I don't. I flip on the radio as I pull the door shut and kick it from station to station, finding nothing and opting for silence. The drive home takes moments – we live a few blocks from the grocery store. We used to walk and hold hands

and I'd stop under a streetlight and pin her up against it and kiss her for minutes like a crazed Frenchman and then we'd decide to go home and get preoccupied with each other and get groceries tomorrow instead.

After a few stop signs I notice she's had her hair cut shorter. She tells me where she got it done and instead of criticizing the place I say nothing. She asks if I like the place and I tell her I don't. She asks me why and I tried not to get into this but here I am.

We pull around to the back of the house. The driveway is gravel. The crunch means I'm home. I accidentally left the living room light on before we left. She tells me. I know already. We each take a bag and head up the wooden stairs behind the house. We've got grand plans for the place, most of them based on the word "leave," but it's not as bad as we tell each other. The rooms are all connected, it's not too big, and we like it. We've got some not-so-major problems, some squeaky floors, a leaky faucet sometimes.

But for now we have two bags of groceries. Two?

"You're the boy, you go get the other bag," she tells me.

"I'm a trendsetter. I'll put the stuff away and you get the bag."

She tells me the bag that's still in the car has nothing but the stuff I wanted in it.

"You wanted all that shit too," I say.

"Yeah, okay." She seems skeptical.

I remain silent.

"So are you getting the bag?"

Samantha prevails again. Our cat brushes against her leg and then hisses at me and my threatening foot. I head back outside and down the stairs to the car. It's cold out and darker than it was when we pulled in. The last bag is heavy. I carry it upstairs and feel like I'll fall through the old, rotted boards.

I step back inside and put the things from this grocery bag into the refrigerator. Plums and lettuce (I smile triumphantly at the memory of my lettuce-getting feat, then thrust the lettuce head into the air like a precious orb and am met with silence from the other room), butter, frozen pizzas, chocolate milk. I walk into the living room. I sit down on the couch and an old Popeye cartoon runs on the television. It's late evening and the television lights up the place in black and white. Even the colored things in

the room look monochrome. I can't get enough of that shit. Samantha's sitting on the floor playing with our cat.

"I swear you play with that damned cat more than you play with me," I say.

"You wanna play with me?"

I'd enjoy it greatly.

"Nope," I tell her. I sort of regret it.

She makes a face.

I walk across our living room to the bedroom. The carpet's soft and feels lumpy under my naked feet. The floorboards creak with every few steps. I step into the bedroom. It's small but it's ours. There's a lamp on my nightstand and I flick it on. The black covers glow under the yellow light. Forty watts, I think, but I'm not sure why. There's a clock on my nightstand too. It says it's 9:30.

I look out the window. It's snowing. I'm not tired. I lie down on top of the covers like people do when they're not tired. Samantha and I used to lie outside all sprawled out like this. We never lay out in the snow though. Dead space in campus clearings at two in the morning. The grass isn't cold like the snow. It's just starting to get damp. We forget a blanket again and our backs get moist. I have a cigarette in my mouth and she shares it, peer pressure I guess. Our kisses taste like smoke. I'm staring up at the sky with her. She kneels over me and puts our cigarette up her nose. With a cigarette up her nose she's the prettiest girl I've ever seen. She sniffs and takes the cigarette out, then covers my mouth with hers and lets her lungs deflate. She says we're breathing together. I laugh through lips-touching smiles and ask if she knows she's an idiot. I blow back out my nose. I can taste the smoke now, feel her on top of me.

I snap up. The clock says 10:30 and the T.V. is still on in the living room. I go back in with the intention of sitting on the couch. Samantha is sleeping on it. I lift up her legs and sit down, then rest them across my lap. I stare at her very closely to make sure she's breathing, like she might not be or something. She is. The cat is curled up between her and the edge of the couch. I reach for the cat so I can put her on the floor, but she is quickly overtaken by a look of terror and dashes to the other side of the apartment. Samantha wakes up and trudges to bed. I lie there on top of the covers. I fall asleep and in my dream the phone rings a few times and stops.

Four hundred miles away, the sun has come up and made Samantha's friend turn from black at night to blue today. Blood stains the torn interior and the radio still plays. Police find her and her boyfriend and call the families. They can't believe it and they tell the police there's a mistake, it can't be my daughter, it can't be her boyfriend, they were just here last night! But it is their daughter and it is her boyfriend and they are both incredibly dead.

I wake up the next morning and I can smell her hair next to me. I turn over and she's not there. Sound is coming from the kitchen. I pull myself out of bed. The sun's coming in like it does on Saturday mornings in movies. The world is bright, there's new snow outside. The walls are dark with spots of white bouncing off the frosty windows.

She's sitting at the kitchen table with a cup between her fingers and the cat on her lap. She's wearing a thin robe. I can see her underneath it. It doesn't seem as exciting as it used to. I sit down next to her and say good morning. She's quiet for a few moments.

"Amber died last night."

I don't know what to say.

"Car accident."

I don't know what to say.

"Shit."

I don't know what to say. So I talk.

"At least we're both alright."

"That was a little selfish." I already knew it.

"I suppose you're going home for the funeral?"

"You're not coming with me?" she asks.

"Am I supposed to?"

She tells me I'm not obligated. It comes out less like speech and more like frustration.

"I sort of had plans tonight," I tell her.

"What, to sit around and play your fucking video games?" I never thought she had a problem with video games.

"I've been making good progress..."

She doesn't stay seated long enough to understand the intricacies of collecting more hearts for Link to use so he can save Zelda from certain doom.

The cup hits the table.

She goes into our bedroom and starts to pack a bag. Drawers slam louder, her clothes are packed tighter, objects are

moved quicker. I sit on the couch and sulk. The door must be exceptionally heavy because she pushes it harder than usual on her way out.

I say, "No, wait," without looking at her but don't care if she stays or not.

I sit for a while. I call her cell phone. It rings three times and I hang up.

The clock ticks. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.

I'm hungry.

I get up off of the couch and pop some bread into the toaster. It cooks for seven hours. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Then it pops up. The butter's cold and hard since she put it in the refrigerator overnight instead of on the table where I like to leave it. I rip the toast to hell. There's butter and crumbs all over the counter. I toss my butter knife at the sink. It lands inside, then slides out and falls on the floor with a butter-dampened plop. The cat comes running from a mile away.

"Alert, alert! Butter on the floor! Acquisition sequence initiated. We have a lock. Deeee-ploying jet boosters and preparing to engage. Target engaged. Approach commencing. Tongue deployed. Yum, sir."

I let her take care of it. Samantha would be upset.

She's gone though.

I stand in the kitchen. Slurp Tick. Slurp Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.

"Target destroyed sir, commence evacuation."

The cat races to the other side of the apartment.

I'm still hungry so I eat the ripped-up, sort-of-buttered toast. It's great.

Saturday afternoons are the most worthless when you actually accomplish things, so I lie down on the couch like people do when they're not tired.

She's driving too fast, I bet, and she's talking on her cell phone to all of her friends about what a cock I am. But after she hangs up, she's still thinking about me, about us. That's how it is. I know I'm not the only one who thinks we've got a problem here. She's wondering about it, wondering what we'll do if it doesn't work out, if our love can't conquer all, if we can't reconcile all this shit that's been piling up for months, if our plans and our perfect careers, three kids, two cats, arcade machines in the basement of our self-designed house all never come to pass. She's thinking

about the careful importance our lives have together because that's what I'm thinking about. Right?

She's coming to a turn, I'm thinking, and she's dropped her cell phone and she's reaching down to get it at precisely 12:14, just exactly the time she coasts through an intersection without looking. An 18-wheel truck zooms toward her and can't stop in time to avoid slamming into her car and crushing her like her friend, ripping her apart like my toast.

She's coming to a turn, I'm thinking, and the song that reminds her of us has just come on the radio. She's taking her eyes off the road at precisely 12:14, just exactly the time she speeds through a stop sign and can't avoid the careening 18-wheeler. They collide and explode as though the air itself is gasoline.

She's coming to a turn, I'm thinking, and she's dropped that phone but she doesn't reach down to get it until 12:15. She grabs it and puts it in her purse and keeps on her way.

I'm coming to a turn, I'm thinking, and I've dropped something I can't quite place.

I stand up half an hour later and stare at the overflowing garbage can, like it's all of a sudden this magnificent fountain of banana peels, empty cans, and chewed up peanut shells (hers). It seems poignant enough for a Saturday afternoon.

"I do say, sir," this foppish British chap says. He approaches out of nowhere with his handlebar mustache and polished monocle. "That is one ex-qu-isite fountain! A real dandy! Five dollars, I'll give you for it. Ten! Look at the detail, the statements, the symbolism! Your relationship is these, these empty cans! Those banana peels! The peanut shells! Empty casings! Postmodern beauty! Don't you see it! I'll give you fifteen, sir. Twenty! We really ought not dawdle, now!" I toss the empty bread bag on top. The British fellow becomes consumed in his excitement and disappears.

I call her cell phone again. No answer.

I pull the garbage bag out of the plastic holder and tie it up. I push open the door and feel it crunch against last night's snow. I step outside wearing my robe and slippers, then head back inside and throw a coat on. A draft greets me as I go back out and pick up the garbage bag again. I'm an Olympic star, hammer throwing my garbage off the porch toward our one-car garage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we're prepared for a fine attempt today by this talented new American thrower." Two announcers

sitting on top of the garage speak into black microphones. "Yes, Ken, it is truly remarkable what this man has done for the United States hammer-throw team. He's ready for his first attempt."

I bow and thank the blowing snowflakes. They're too kind. I step into my spinning. The world's a garbage bag and a spiraling blur.

"The release! Magnificent!"

It plops on the ground and the white bag becomes indistinguishable from the snow except for its bright yellow handles. The gold! I thrust my hands into the air and become a victorious Rocky Balboa. "Yo, Adrian!" seems appropriate so I yell it to nobody.

Still bouncing about, I turn around to go back inside and a blur zooms past my leg and down the stairs. Before I think about it I'm down them too, chasing after what looks exactly like our cat barreling down the sidewalk. My slippers are covered in snow and I'm dressed like the gigantic lady who's always smoking at the old-folks' hair salon.

Her friend and the boy are as cleaned up as they can be, the pieces of them are dressed nicely anyway, but this funeral is closed-casket. Nobody can blame the parents (did you HEAR how far they fell? no shit!), but everyone's lamenting that they'll never see their friends again. If only they'd stayed the night here like I'd offered, someone thinks. If only we'd have kept eating a few minutes longer. Cheeseburger instead of hamburger. Cigar instead of cigarette. But the only thing they can do now is regret.

I'm running down the street and checking every few minutes to make sure I'm not guilty of indecent exposure. The cat is blazing through anyone's lawn, swerving from snow to ice to sidewalk to street, gaining distance on me even though I'm running as fast as I can. She's playing hard to get and I don't even want her. The cat stops by a streetlight a block or so from the grocery store, the one that I was thinking about the other night. She hides there, thinking I don't see her or something. Doesn't she know I don't want to kill her?

When I get to the streetlight, she tears off in the direction of the grocery store. I recognize the great probability of a wholly unfortunate situation. The automatic doors swing open as people walk up to the store. Then one swings open and there's nothing there but the cat. I didn't think they worked on cats.

I examine the windows for a "no shirt, no shoes" policy but

don't see anything and run in after the cat. That cashier from last night is here. She checks me out again. My wardrobe doesn't leave much to the imagination. Neither does hers. I tell her my cat ran in here and that I have to chase it. She laughs and says she hates cats. Were she a potential lover, she'd be eliminated on this technicality. She doesn't know our nothing is over. I dash past the lettuce section, and a few of the heads have fallen to the sides since last evening's precarious stunt. The comedy movie possibilities play out in my head and a movie studio executive appears in front of me.

"Okay, see," I say in my most convincing voice, "The cat could burst in, jump around on that display of watermelons over there and cause them all to fall down. She could scare the old lady standing there by the beans, and she'd throw her basket of soup cans into the air. Those can either break some windows or hit our actor, your call. Some of them could hit a seasonal molasses display and cause an unfortunate spill right there, see? It could take weeks to clean! Everyone would be oh-so-regretful!" The exec buys it and tells me to get a script ready. He vanishes and I keep chasing the cat.

But I'm there seconds before the soup can lady wanders into this aisle, and watermelons aren't even in season, and what kind of store really has a molasses display?

The cat slips through the metal swinging doors into the loading dock area and jumps outside through a vacant loading gate. I follow her and skid to the edge so I can sit on it before I push myself off. I jump and it hurts my legs and I'm pretty sure that lady over there just saw a little (a lot?) more than she wanted.

I dart around behind the store and there she is, sitting right there in the middle of the alley licking her paws. It's gonna be a sprint, I'm thinking. I toe my imaginary starting line. I crouch down and she notices me. We lock glances and prepare ourselves for the race. I start the countdown out loud so she can hear.

"Three!" She burns paw and flies down the alley.

"You fucking cheater!"

I take one step and fall face-first in the ice-coated alley. I look up. The sun's going down already.

I think that maybe if I had waited a few seconds before I started running I wouldn't be lying here, or if I'd tried to chase the cat anywhere but this alley, or counted down faster or moved

sooner. But I know that none of that's true because I can imagine the situations a million times in my head and it's the exact same consequence every time. Sometimes, there just seem to be things I can't fucking change.

The only thing they can do now is regret. Samantha is pulling in right now, I'm thinking, and she's got runny eyeliner even though she's gorgeous without it, and her friend's parents come out and they hug and she's so sorry. She says it like she's responsible because she didn't call and distract her friend for a few minutes so their car would be somewhere else, or she's feeling bad because she didn't visit more often, and that's all fine and good. But the only thing they can do now is regret.

So this is my life, I'm thinking, and things manifest themselves into neat little pieces and lay themselves all out on the sky above me so I can see what's going on. The players: my shitty job, my trivially ailing relationship (cause it's just small stuff, right?), my recent fascination with cause and effect, the snow on the ground, my sore legs, my potential lack of future with Samantha (cause I guess it could be serious), the cat's missing the cat hates me I'm practically naked it's cold she's gone forever, isn't she? and she's never coming back she'll cheat on me with some boy I could still go for the cashier my head hurts and that's it.

I forget about the cat, stand up, and go inside the grocery store. The cashier gives me a strange look, but she's the one with the metal bar stuck through her tongue. I buy my first pack of cigarettes in months, courtesy of a mystery Lincoln found in my front coat pocket. I grab a matchbook, thank the cashier, and leave. It's a really long walk this time. I pull a stick out of the box and use one of the store-branded matches (Cindy's Market! Your best in-town source for healthy organically-grown foods!) to light it up. This one tastes like college. I daydream like people do when they aren't tired.

She's watching the smoke float up into the sky from her vantage point on top of me. It's been a few months since she stuck the cigarette up her nose. She doesn't like smoking anymore. It's bad for your health, she tells me. Tonight she's telling me about physics and rocking back and forth on me.

"Physics is interesting for an every-day science," she tells me.

"Yeah, alright."

"Look at my body in motion!"

She suggestively wiggles on top of me.

Tonight she's back in her hometown halfway across the state, I'm thinking, reminiscing about the good times they shared and being a crying shoulder for the girl's mother. She's lying down on an uncomfortable twin bed and going to sleep early, wishing I were next to her. She's remembering what it's like to be in bed together now that she's in bed alone.

The walk home seems like it takes too long. I go through two cigarettes and put the rest in my coat pocket with the matchbook. I see my footprints in the snow, smeared and leading from the steps to the street. I turn around and walk backwards in them until I get to the base of the stairs. I swivel around and put my foot on the first stair and just about crush the cat. She stands there unfazed. I offer the phrase "son of a bitch" to the emptiness of the night. Why did I chase her? Why didn't I let her do her running? Why didn't I know she'd come back all along?

I reach down to pick her up and she doesn't move. Picking her up had always been a sort of game. I'd just reach down for her and she'd get the hell out of my way so I wouldn't step on her or kick her or trip on her. But she's just sitting there and looking at me. I reach down again. Nothing. I put my hand on her head and rub her back. I think she likes it. I pick her up and carry her inside. I sort of wish I hadn't been so mean to her all the time. I think maybe I could have done some things differently. But all I can do is regret.

That night the cat and I have a time. I make her a special little meal with some of the pork hocks I didn't realize we had, and put a pizza in the oven for myself. We finish eating and she comes up and sits on my lap. We watch a movie and she's falling asleep. I move her over to the other couch cushion and look really close at her to see if she's breathing, like she might not be or something. She is. I turn off the television and go into the bedroom. It's warm under the covers. I remember what it's like to sleep with Samantha now that I'm sleeping alone. The cat jumps up and sleeps on the other pillow.

She's waking up the next morning, I think, and probably before I've even gotten a shower and dressed myself she'll be done with the funeral and on her way home. She'll be driving along and she'll realize she doesn't need to put make-up on today since she's not trying to impress anyone and she knows I already know how pretty she is. She won't reach for the radio because it's flurrying

outside and she loves to watch the snow fall down. That's how it will be because that's how I think it will be.

I'm standing outside watching the snow flutter down, my back against the wall on the ground floor under our stairs, the flight above me serving as a sort of shelter, a barrier. Funny how such rotted stairs work that way, I think. I have a cigarette. The smoke mixes with the snow.

She'll get home safely because I know she can. I don't call her cell phone. She pulls into the driveway and gets out. She's wearing a sweater and a black skirt. I can see the skin between her hips and the bottom of her shirt. She walks over to me.

She reaches into her pocket and takes a cigarette, lighting it with her own book of matches.

I tell her we can't do anything but regret. She tells me too much regretting isn't healthy.

We stand there smoking for a while.

My hammer-thrown garbage bag is almost buried over there.

I tell her it's like college again. She puts her cigarette in her nose and inhales, then tosses the glowing stump into the snow. I follow suit and we head up the stairs.