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The Blue House Party

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The Blue House Party

By

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ABSTRACT

The Blue House Party, like Hemingway's Nick Adams Stories, follows the development of a character from childhood to adulthood. The Blue House Party's chronologically arranged contents, though loosely sutured together, should form a mosaic whole. The characters and events in The Blue House Party are fictional and should be read as such.

DOGWOOD WINTER

The red shingled roof was just visible above the oak and maple trees that lined the hillside. Beyond it green fields stretched toward the horizon that was defined by an immense body of trees. Drake kicked a rock along the gravel road and watched his dog, Lassie, prance about. Every now and then, she disappeared into the wooded hillside, tail wagging furiously back and forth.

It was gray out. A late, prolonged frost had threatened to undo April's promises. The land looked dead again—as if it were March instead of May. Drake rubbed his hands together or kept them in his pockets. He thought about what his grandmother might have in her refrigerator and hoped that she had chocolate cake or cherry pie.

Drake stopped by an old oak tree that had recently been struck by lightning. The strike had split it in two, leaving a long black scar. Drake felt the burned wood with his hands. He thought about the flock of birds he had once seen lining the oak's giant limbs. His cousin had aimed at them with his loaded gun and Drake had saved them by firing his own unloaded gun into the air. The sudden release of air pressure had startled the birds into flight and his cousin had turned to him and said: "What the hell you do that for you idiot?"

Long before Drake reached the bottom of the hill, he could see wood smoke curling from his grandmother's chimney. As he turned the familiar bend, his grandmother's two-story house came into view. Built in the Victorian style, it boasted several gables, dormers, and a pillared, wraparound cement porch. Its expansive yard was surrounded by a somewhat dilapidated post and rail fence that had been painted white many times before. A humble, makeshift garage had, at one time, been added to the house's graying side. From the backyard, a burr oak's branches hung like fingers over the red shingled roof.

Drake walked through the open garage and entered the furnace room. It was dark. The acrid smell of wood smoke filled his nostrils. He felt the air above his head until he found the metal cord. He pulled and a bare light bulb lit up the room.

The "grandma cat" greeted him with her plaintive meow. She was called the "grandma cat" because she was the first of his grandmother's thirty some cats. Other cats of varying sizes lounged about the room. Their luminous eyes watched Drake with irony and distrust.

Drake liked to joke about eating cats. Sometimes, he would pretend he was a coyote. He would sniff at a cat's belly and say: "Taste's Good!" When he saw the grandma cat, he sniffed the air and said: "Oh! You're definitely what's for dinner!"

"I'm in the mood for a cat sandwich," Drake said to the grandma cat. He scratched her chin with his index finger. In turn, she brushed against his legs while he searched the room for her most recent litter of kittens. They were six months old and nowhere to be found. Although the grandma cat wasn't allowed inside, she continued to brush against Drake's legs and voice her

plaintive meow. Drake held her at bay with his right leg as he entered his grandmother's living room. His uncle Carl was lying on the couch.

"Hi, Drake," Carl said. He was a balding man with a gray beard. He lived in California. He was here, in Missouri, visiting Drake's grandmother.

"Hi," Drake said. He hoped that his uncle hadn't heard him in the furnace room. He never talked like that around company.

"Your grandmother's not here," Carl said. "She went to town." His voice sounded like wood smoke smelled, Drake thought.

"Oh," Drake said. "Do you know where the kittens are?"

"Kittens?" Carl said. "You mean the cats in there?" He pointed toward the furnace room.

"No," Drake said. "They're not in there."

"Oh," Carl said. He shook his head.

Drake walked by his uncle into the dining room. He shot by the long, round table where he had eaten his last thanksgiving dinner, into the kitchen. He opened his grandmother's refrigerator and browsed the three great tiers with relish.

There was chocolate cake, but no cherry pie. Drake cut a large slice from the already half-eaten cake and poured himself a glass of milk. He ate slowly, at first, then hurriedly, enjoying the way his fork cut easily and smoothly through the cake.

Drake's grandmother had a small freezer in her kitchen. There were buckets of ice cream inside. Drake scooped chocolate ice cream into his glass of milk. He stirred the ice cream with his fork until all the lumps were gone.

Reasoning that one has two kinds of stomach room, Drake removed a large package of prunes from his grandmother's refrigerator and proceeded to eat them, one by one. After he had spit out several pits, Drake decided that his stomach had run out of both kinds of room. He deposited the dishes he had dirtied into the empty sink and left the kitchen.

Drake thought the kittens might be in the smokehouse. The smokehouse was a small, square building with a cement floor. It was situated behind his grandmother's house and was attached to a much larger building, a tall, rectangular shed. Beneath the smokehouse, down a long flight of stairs, was a root cellar.

As he entered the smokehouse, something scurried away. "Ugh," Drake said. There were spiders in the windows as big as his hands. He tried to ignore the sick feeling they produced in his stomach. He tried not to think about how black the windows were, about how dark it would be if he were to be locked inside.

In the dim light the open door provided, Drake surveyed the smokehouse. There was nothing but cobwebs and junk. There were no cats.

After Drake shut the smokehouse door, Lassie leaped playfully against his chest. No doubt, she had been off chasing rabbits and squirrels. Drake grabbed one of her paws and held it. "Shake hands," he said. She "shook hands."

Drake walked around the smokehouse to the shed. He entered quickly and shut the door.

The shed smelled like diesel. It was much lighter than the smokehouse. Tools, rags, and straw littered the floor. A huge stack of square hay bales ascended toward the ceiling where wasps and mud daubers flew in and out of the high up windows gathering materials for their nests.

As soon as they had heard him start to enter, the kittens had bolted for the door. Although they condescended to his caresses, they soon tired of his attempts to bait them with a

stray piece of straw. When Drake had also grown bored, he pretended that he was a coyote. Although he stomped his feet and promised to eat them in a hundred ways, the kittens' response consisted of little more than a sardonic glare.

When Drake opened the door to leave, he found himself in a predicament. Lassie, which had waited for the opportunity in perverse silence, stuck her head and shoulders in the doorway and muscled her way in. The door swung open, the dog charged in, and the kittens scattered—some outside, some inside, all wide-eyed and bushy-tailed.

Drake fought to control the dog with his voice. He yelled and stomped his feet. "STOP IT! NO, LASSIE! NO! GODDAMN IT YOU STUPID FUCKER STOP IT!" Lassie romped through the shed with such joy that she actually skidded across the wooden floor. Drake stopped yelling and stomping his feet. He knew the dog would seize one of the kittens with her jaws and kill it. He ran toward the living room, toward Carl, toward help.

Carl wasn't in the living room.

"Carl! Carl!" Drake yelled. He was embarrassed by his tears and his reddened face and the sound of his frantic voice in the quiet house.

A flight of steps led from the living room to the second floor. Carl appeared on the steps. He looked worried. "What's wrong?" he said.

Drake was too flustered to explain the situation.

"Calm down," Carl said. "What happened?"

Drake felt as though he were in a movie. He fought to catch his breath. He explained his dilemma in broken sentences then blurted out: "The dog's getting the cats!"

Carl looked more relieved than upset. "Why'd you do that for?" he said.

"I didn't mean to."

"Well, there's nothing you can do about it now. You should have been more careful."

Drake didn't say anything. He left his uncle standing in the living room of his grandmother's house.

Neither the kittens nor the dog were in the shed. Its door hung open, exposing the diesel-stained rags and tools. The wasps and mud daubers still flew in and out of the high up windows gathering materials for their nests. Drake left the shed and walked around the periphery of his grandmother's yard. There, beneath the burr oak, one of the kittens was lying by a corner of the white post and rail fence.

The kitten's teeth were fixed in a snarl. A lone fly crawled across its open eyeball. Drake knew others would be quick to arrive. He left for home, thinking about the beetles and the worms and the maggots the flies would leave behind.

Lassie was waiting for him at the bottom of the hill. As Drake turned the familiar bend, she pranced about in front of him as if nothing had happened. There was a steel rod lying in the weeds. Drake picked it up with one hand. He pulled it back and bit down on his bottom lip with his teeth.

"You stupid fucker!" Drake said. "You stupid fucker!"

But he couldn't make himself do it. He brought the rod down slowly and tapped the dog on the head. He shoved. Lassie skittered away and looked at him with such an aggrieved look that Drake regretted picking up the rod and threw it in the weeds.

"Get out of here!" Drake screamed, charging at the dog. "Get the fuck out of here!"

Lassie shied away. She watched Drake ascend the hill then followed him from behind, keeping mostly to the wooded hillside and roadside brush.

STINGING NETTLE

As the bus crawled along the far-off stretch of gravel road, a cold drizzle moistened my hair and specked my backpack and clothes. Although it was mid-April, wood smoke curled forth from my neighbor's chimney and hung in the air as if unsure of what to do with itself. The bus disappeared behind a hill then reappeared—having grown larger and more imminent. It kept disappearing and reappearing, gradually assuming its actual size, until it crested my hill and rolled to a stop. My little brother boarded first. I sat near the front, by myself, and stared out the window at the greening countryside, the grazing cows, the houses, fences, and barns.

The bus drove on through the drizzle. As he neared a wooden bridge, the driver accelerated sharply. The bus shot over the bridge, clattering my ribs like plates in a cupboard. Oomph! I hadn't braced myself. The fellow in front of me, who had been crafting an obscenity in the foggy window, hadn't either. He went up, mopped up half of his handiwork with his hand, came down, and landed rather abruptly on his rump. This I know because he said: "Ugh! My ass!"

For me, high school is a spattering of such recollections, a hodgepodge of buffoonery and lust. I couldn't recreate one day without riffling twenty of them. I don't remember getting off the bus that day (or riding it either for that matter) or circumnavigating all of the dangerous elements of my one-floor, one-building high school (i.e. the bullies and the pranksters). I remember staring at Jann Thompson: that golden-brown hair, that white blouse, those denim-clad legs she never crossed. I was thinking sweet, uncouth thoughts when my biology teacher announced that the inclement weather would be sure to pop up lots of mushrooms. It was nearing time to board the bus again. The drizzle had metamorphosed into a thunderstorm. Rain had fallen by the bucketful. Mushrooms, I thought. Well, I'll go mushroom hunting then.

By mushrooms, I didn't mean "magic mushrooms" or "shrooms." I meant morels. Every spring, I hunted for morels in the woods. In Missouri, morels are commonly found around dead cottonwood or elm, but they can be found almost anywhere: even in your backyard. Like all good mushrooms, morels like sunshine and rain. In its wake, the cloudburst had left plenty of both. In a matter of hours, my green hills had become hot and steamy and satiated with rain. There were sure to be mushrooms, my teacher said.

On the bus ride home, a recalcitrant grade-schooler took to pulling my hair. Every time I turned around, he responded with the greatest melodrama. He cowered, ducked—even scrambled beneath his seat. Growing bored, he swam the length of the bus's dirty black floor, kicking his legs back and forth like a frog. As he was navigating more dangerous waters than mine, he was seized and put in a headlock. He struggled while his captor dealt out arm punches: one, two, three... The bus reached my stop and I left him thus confined.

When I got home, I told my brother I was going mushroom hunting. He thought it was too early for that. I didn't argue with him. I stuffed a plastic bag in my right pocket, started out the door, paused, turned back, stuffed two or three more in my left pocket, and set off.

Walking downhill, I cut through the front yard and headed for a wooded ditch. This wooded ditch, which was located at the bottom of the hill, divided my yard from my neighbor's. Every Spring, my neighbor's sons and I vied for mushrooms. We told each other stories about refrigerators full of morels, about how we had found so many that our parents had implored us to stay home. Sometimes, we were telling the truth. And sometimes, like the greatest of fishermen, we weren't.

In the country, yards are often more than squares of grass. My neighbor had enough yard for cattle and baseball and so did we. It took my father eight hours to mow our yard. We let the rest of our land grow up in weeds and brush. My house, a double-wide trailer, sat on top of a hill—in what used to be a hayfield. Now, it was a regular grove. My parents had planted pines, evergreens, red buds, autumn olives, and fruit trees—among other things. Walnuts, hickories, oaks, and other native flora were given leeway to grow. With his push-mower, my father even made wide berths around sumacs—which had by now eaten large corners of “the yard.”

My dog, Lassie, jumped to and raced after me when I entered the weeds. She knew what that crunching sound meant: a spree of sorts that might involve rabbits, squirrels, and deer. She trotted back and forth in front of me, nosing the ground. Every now and then, she stalled to lift her leg and write the name of the one true god on this or that leaf of grass. She didn't make it to the wooded ditch. She saw something and took off jumping. She leapt through the waist-high weeds like a dolphin through water.

I could hear the tree frogs singing from their marshes, streams, and ponds. Their music grew louder as I neared the wooded ditch. I hoped their song would lure snakes as well as mates. I wanted to be a herpetologist. Or so I said. I plucked bullfrogs out of ponds and looked for rattlesnakes by the railroad tracks.

Adolescent honey locusts entwined their thorny branches before the threshold of the woods. I parted them with my hands and squeezed through, shielding my eyes from their nascent, one-inch thorns. The snarling locusts gave way to older, more peaceful trees: oaks, maples, and cottonwood. I moved beneath their budding canopy, scouring the leaf-covered ground for morels.

The cloudburst had turned the forest into a flower garden. Dog-tooth violets rattled their mottled arms and struck with their star-like eyes. May apples held erect their green parasols. Along banks and ridges, dutchman's breeches draped their balloon-like apparel that fluttered like pink and white clouds of butterflies. And everywhere, clumps of spring beauties clustered like miniature bouquets.

I dreaded that first mushroom so. It was a leaf, a stringy seed, a patch of bare earth. It was everywhere and nowhere. When I found it there was joy and apprehension. I didn't pick it right away as some hunters would. No, I paused—knelt down, felt its rubbery stem, and patted its ornate cap with my palm.

The first mushroom I found that season was a small gray one. It was on the other side of the ditch—which, at that point, was by a mere trickle. All of the water rushed away from where I stood and, as I would later discover, grew more and more turbid.

I walked along the wooded ditch, picking mushrooms, and moving farther and farther away from home. Several times, I resolved to turn back—only to spot more mushrooms just ahead. I pressed on, filling my bag—trespassing farther and farther into other peoples' land.

While circling a sloping cow pasture, I came upon a dead cottonwood tree that had lost its bark and been bleached white by the sun. Although it had once towered above its oak and maple neighbors, it now lay on its side, bridging the stream like a giant bone. Its naked, arm-like branches, which obstructed my path, had once stretched toward the sky. A small hillock overlooked a gaping hole where its roots had been wrenched free from the earth. On and around the hillock were dozens of orange-yellow mushrooms.

I stood there and stared at those mushrooms like a windowed cat stares at a bird. O the world! Was I given teeth and claws for this? They seemed to grow in front of me. I walked in circles and chewed my lip. I ran ahead, but the stream never narrowed. It grew wider and more powerful and I couldn't swim. There was only one way across: the cottonwood.

As I backtracked toward the cottonwood tree, I saw a large turkey feather lying in the grass by the edge of the woods. On closer inspection, the turkey feather became a rattlesnake. It lay there, curled up, and looked at me. It didn't make any noise. I admired its glistening orange, black, and gray scales from a distance then moved on.

My side of the stream was lower than the other side. As a result, the cottonwood lay at an angle. I tied my bag of mushrooms up and tossed it across the stream. Fresh morels are resilient as rubber. You can stomp them into the ground and they won't break. I straddled the cottonwood and inched along. The white wood was dry and shiny and warm. I reached the other side without incident and fell to picking mushrooms.

I had filled half a bag when I heard the distant roar of a diesel-operated vehicle. The sound grew louder. And louder. On the other side of the stream, along the brow of the sloping cow pasture, smoke appeared. I didn't want to get caught on someone else's land with a bag full of their mushrooms. I retreated to the dead cottonwood's roots, dropped my mushrooms behind the hillock, and laid down. A red tractor crested the far-off hill and came to a stop ten or fifteen yards away.

A farmer dressed in flannel, blue jeans, and gum boots got off the tractor and walked toward me. A plastic bag swung from his right hand. I looked away and caught sight of a prodigious patch of mushrooms yet to be picked. I lay still, sure the farmer would see me. But he didn't. He put one foot on the cottonwood tree and scoured the ground with his eyes. He stood impossibly close. "Aha!" he said. My flesh jumped, but he hadn't seen me. He bent down and plucked something from the ground—a mushroom. I held my breath and waited. That prodigious patch of mushrooms began to look more and more prodigious. What if he saw them? He would cross the cottonwood tree and discover me hiding at its roots. But for some reason he never looked at the other side of the stream. I wondered briefly if I should tell him about the rattlesnake. What if he stumbled upon it and got bit?

I lay there and daydreamed about the farmer. He wore nothing but gum boots and sunglasses. He walked toward a cow, scratching his privates. He held his penis in one hand and an empty liquor bottle in the other. He seemed to be chewing something. His mouth kept opening and closing, opening and closing—like some puppet's being worked by an aspiring ventriloquist.

He saddled up to a cow and penetrated it—or at least tried to. He caught the cow's tail with his free hand and was nearly lifted off his feet as the tail kept swishing, swishing at some invisible fly. He barked something and slapped the cow's massive haunch. The poor cow let out an indignant low. He mocked it. He humped away at the cow's haunches like a dog. Finally, he gave it up and rolled around in the cow patties. He laid still for so long that I thought he had

passed out. But he hadn't. He got up and walked toward me. Or rather—toward the wooded ditch.

He nosed around the threshold of the woods until he found a patch of stinging nettle. He grasped a large specimen and pulled it out of the ground. He rubbed his body with the plant, privates and all, as if it were a sponge. He bellowed and cursed and shot through the pasture toward his tractor as the cruel white pustules sprouted from his body. I thought he would get on the tractor, but he didn't. He just kept running—as if he could reach his destination faster by foot.

I daydreamed these things about the farmer while he poked around on the other side of the stream. I told myself that I felt bad about picking his mushrooms and wished that he would leave. But he didn't. He stayed there for a long time, filling his bag with the dozens of mushrooms that I had somehow missed. He never looked toward me. He kept his eyes trained on the ground. Finally, he moved on. The crunching sound of his footsteps began to recede into the distance.

No. The farmer shot through the pasture toward his tractor. His bag of mushrooms bounced up and down. He had been bitten by the rattlesnake. He clung to his bag of mushrooms all the same. He couldn't leave it behind. He had been poisoned by the rattlesnake that had looked like a turkey feather from afar. He was dying and it was my fault. No. I got to my feet slowly and looked around. The farmer was gone. I crossed the cottonwood tree as fast as I could and made my way across the pasture. My dog met me as I made my way into the safety of the woods. "Hey, Lassie," I said. I patted her on her head and she exploded into the air, rending long tears into my bag full of mushrooms with her thick black claws. I removed one of the extra plastic bags from my pocket and stuffed the injured bag into it. I left for home, walking slowly, with my eyes trained on the ground.

BUSY

When the phone rings, for the first time in months, my father says: “Woody, can you get that?”

My brother and I have been playing an online role-playing game for the last couple of months. We split the twenty-four hours of each day into turns of varying lengths. My brother, the morning person, gets most of the day shift. Me, the night owl, gets most of the graveyard shift. Since our family uses a modem, our only phone line has been tied up for the entirety of the last three months.

“Huh? No. Why can’t you get it?” Woody glares at the computer screen. He’s been dying all day and he’s pissed off.

“Because I’m doing the dishes.”

“So? Why don’t you tell Drake to get it? Drake you get it.”

“What? No, you get it.”

“Just get it, damn it!” Woody bangs the computer desk with his fists and the keyboard rattles.

“Somebody get the phone!” My father says, splashing water, and I know he’s about to get it himself.

“Fine! I’ll get it.” I get off the living room couch, where I’ve been watching TV, and race into the kitchen. I answer the phone. “Hello? No...yeah, just a second.” I walk over to my father, who’s scrubbing a plate in the kitchen sink.

My father dries his hands on his jeans and takes the phone. “Hello,” he says.

I walk into the living room. “What’re you getting for your birthday?” I ask Woody.

“Nothing.” Woody stares intently at the screen as if it might answer his question. Did I die? Did I? Oh, God—why?

“Oh...” my father says. His tone grows serious. I stand up and park myself in the entrance to the kitchen.

Minutes pass. Woody grows more and more antsy. He lays his head face down on the keyboard. “Why?” he moans. “Why?”

“You’re kidding,” my father says. “You’re kidding. Well, that’s really unfortunate. I don’t know what to say.” And he doesn’t say anything for a long time. “Uh huh. Yeah, you’re probably right. Uh huh. That’s true. OK. You too.” My father hangs up the phone. He has a grim look on his face.

I look at Woody, but he’s still glaring at the computer screen. I listen to my father walk across the kitchen and submerge his hands in the dishwasher.

“Are you off?” Woody bellows. His voice breaks.

“What? Oh. Yeah, you can have it.” My father has resumed his easy-going tone, but sounds distant. He looks stunned about something, but not upset. His hands move in and out of the dishwasher. He turns on the faucet and rinses a stack of dishes.

Our 56k modem makes its horsy noises as Woody connects to the Internet.

“I better not have died,” he says. “I better not have died.” He clicks the mouse furiously and waits for the game to load. I watch my father dry the dishes and put them away. I figure it can’t be that serious.

“Did you die?” I ask Woody.

“No. Thank God.”

“It’s my turn.”

“Hold on. I’m doing something.”

* * *

When my mother gets home from her night class, my brother is still “doing something.”

“Honey, I need to—hey, could you turn that down?” my father says. He motions impatiently. I turn the TV down a few notches. It’s my turn. Since Woody went over his turn, I’ll get more time on my next turn.

“What?” My mother looks at my father. She hasn’t heard him yet. “The TV was turned up too loud—what did you say?”

“Turn that TV down,” my father says to me again. I turn it down a few more notches. “I need to tell you something.”

“Can I get these clothes off first?” My mother clicks her way across the living room.

“Sure,” my father says. He ushers my mother into their bedroom. I get off the couch and stand by my parent’s door. I can just make out what they’re saying.

“Honey...your mother passed away...”

I can tell my mother has pursed her lips. She always purses her lips when she hears bad news.

“It’s really for the best...I think...”

My mother nods. Or looks out the window. “Yeah...” she says. My mother didn’t get along with my grandmother very well. I can tell that my grandmother’s death has come as a mixed blessing to my mother since she sounds both aggrieved and relieved.

A pause follows, in which my mother and father stare at the floor or at each other.

“I guess someone will have to see to the funeral arrangements,” my mother says.

“They’ve already been seen to.” My father’s cathartic tone makes me realize that this information caused him to grimace earlier—not my grandmother’s death.

“Huh?” A hint of anger enters my mother’s voice and I’m suddenly afraid.

“The funeral was yesterday.” My father says this with as much as tact as he can.

“Wha-a-t?” My mother’s tone grows livid.

My father goes on the defensive. “They couldn’t get a hold of us—these kids were on the thing!” My father’s voice cracks in a traumatic chuckle. “These kids are ALWAYS on the thing!” I realize that I am one of “these kids.” I feel indignant.

“You’re kidding.” I can tell that my father has succeeded in temporarily displacing my mother’s rage onto us “kids.” My pride gives way to fear.

“I wish I was.”

“You’re kidding?” My mother has exchanged her makeup for her war paint. I back up from the door.

“I really wish I was.”

“And you let them stay on there?” she says. By this time I have retreated to Woody. My parent’s bedroom door explodes. My mother’s face has turned ten shades of brimstone. “Woodam!” my mother roars. “Get off there!” She jerks my brother off the wooden stool (it used to be a chair, but we broke the back off “horsing around”) by his elbow and slaps his ass and thighs. “Get off there! You get off there!” she yells.

“What the hell?” Woody cries. “I am off!” He starts bawling.

“What are *you* laughing at?” my mother roars.

“I’m not laughing!” But I am laughing. I mean to say that I’m not laughing at my grandmother’s death or at the fact that Woody and I caused my mother to miss my grandmother’s funeral. I mean to say that I’m laughing at the surprised look that came over Woody’s face, at the fact that he never saw the spanking coming. But I don’t have time. I fall to the floor and curl into a ball as my mother spanks my hips and legs.

My mother clambers to her feet. “Something has got to be done, Harold!” she announces. “These boys need a father.”

“Honey,” my father protests.

“These boys need a father,” my mother insists. She rages through the kitchen, into the laundry room, and out the back door. My father grimaces and shuffles after her.

“Man, grandma died,” I say. I’m still laughing. “I can’t believe that. I feel like shit.”

“Yeah, me too” Woody says, still sore about the spanking. “But how the hell were we supposed to know?”

THE BLUE HOUSE PARTY

Drake met Love at a party. He smoked a clove cigarette with her and walked her home. He lay beneath the stars as she stood on the sidewalk and laughed at him. He hugged her and told her he had never been this happy because lately he had been so sad. She scoffed when he told her how beautiful she was, but looked pleased when he complemented her sarcasm and smiled when he asked her what her ethnicity was.

“Vietnamese,” she said and they walked on toward their separate dorms, over the sidewalks which led by dark houses and dark windows, beneath an orange harvest moon, toward this snow that has begun to fall.

Love is there, waiting for him, when he walks into Baltimore Hall. She wears an all-black outfit with five-inch heels. She looks at him with her big brown eyes and says, with a voice that is deep and husky, “Hello, Drake,” and he sits down beside her.

Love’s friend, Esperanza Rosales, is with her. She’s the kind of girl that could never look sullen or sad. Her cheekbones are so prominent that it’s as if she’s always smiling. If she were to cry she would look as ridiculous as a clown. Her brown skin, thick black eyebrows, and black curly hair give her an aura of warmth—which her downy forearms reinforce. In all, there is something non-combative about her. She walks and stands with a slight hunch as if she were always shrugging. She wears her glasses as if they were part of her face.

“Is it snowing outside?”

“Yeah, but it’s not sticking.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“What, you don’t like snow?”

“Not really.”

“At least it’s not cold.”

“It’s cold enough.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

They prattle on about the weather, about school, about how tired they are. They grow quiet and listen to the murmur of others’ formalities.

He stares at the wall, at the carpet. He has spent his life staring at walls and carpets. Staring at ceilings and notebooks and desks, at the backs of chairs and the tops of tables, at ceiling fans and mirrors and clocks—so much time spent staring at clocks—just staring, staring, staring at all those symbols and colors and geometric shapes until they form a language of their own, until they dictate his character and write his fate.

“I’m so tired. Biology is kicking my ass.” Love, who’s sitting with her legs stretched out in front of her, leans forward and touches the tips of her five-inch heels with her fingers. “I’m so short without these.”

No one says anything. Love sits up and straightens her back against the wall. She pulls her legs close to her and says, “Hey, I hear there’s male nudity in one of these plays.” She leans forward and watches Esperanza’s face like an expectant fisherman watching the water.

“What?” Esperanza’s thick eyebrows shoot up and her full cheeks explode into a blush.

“Yeah, that’s what I heard.” Love pretends to be interested with the flowery designs on the carpet.

“You’re kidding.” Esperanza throws her head back, shaking her thick, black curls, and blushes even harder.

“Nope.” Love traces the blue outline of a flower with her finger.

“Come on. You’re kidding. Just admit it.” Esperanza leans forward and attempts to look at Love’s face.

Love stops tracing the flowers on the carpet and looks at Esperanza. She adopts a serious, exasperated tone. “I’m not kidding!”

“Love, you’re so full of it.”

“We’ll see who’s full of it. Just wait.”

“Do you believe her, Drake?”

“I guess so. I dunno.”

The theater doors open. The ushers wear tight, thin dresses and bright circles of rouge. One hands Drake, Love, and Espy a pamphlet and escorts them down the sloping, red aisle toward three seats close to the stage.

There is something gritty about the little theater. It has the comfortably dirty feel of an old couch that has been sat on many times before. “Blister in the Sun,” by the Violent Femmes, is playing. Perfume mingles with the smell of upholstery and stale cigarette smoke.

“A night of one-acts at the little theater,” the pamphlet says. There is a smiling quarter-moon on the front cover. Sparkling stars surround it. He turns the page. There are three one-act plays. The third has a disclaimer that reads “WARNING: this play contains male nudity and strong sexual content.”

“See, I told you so. Look at this.”

“What?” Esperanza looks.

“You better close your eyes, Espy.”

Espy blushes.

“I better close *my* eyes.” He imagines the two girls reacting to his joke, but he doesn’t say anything.

Van Morrison’s “Brown-Eyed Girl” follows “Blister in the Sun.” As the music fades, the lights dim until the theater is completely dark.

The stage lights up. Five women sit around a table, drinking wine. They talk about their husbands, about their future success. One of them, a smoker, stands up, bangs the table with both fists, and says: “We’re going to be FUCKING incredible!”

The next play is also set in a restaurant. The central character wants a Philadelphia cheese steak, but the restaurant, which specializes in cheese steaks and is located in Philadelphia, doesn’t make Philadelphia cheese steaks. “How about a Cincinnati cheese steak?” the manager says.

“No, I want a Philadelphia cheese steak!”

The third one-act unfolds in three scenes. In the first scene, two men stand in an elevator—both dressed in suits. One lights a cigarette and smokes while the other starts a conversation, mostly with himself. The stage grows dark then proceeds to the second scene

where the two men stand on a balcony. The smoker leans over the balcony, plying his cigarette. The other man stands behind him, looking agitated. The two men trade their sexual innuendoes as if they were two jewelers deciding how a gem should be cut. Which way will this gem split? Where should I hit it? They wax existential and stare beyond the balcony at some phantom city and its phantom stars.

In the last scene, the two men have rented a room. They are both nude. The man with the cigarettes reclines on a couch, smoking. The man who was garrulous in the elevator leans over him, delivering his lines somewhat stiffly. His flaccid penis doesn't move, but Drake imagines it flapping ridiculously back and forth. His big, red scrotum looks like a clown's nose.

Drake wonders if the men are having a pre-coital or post-coital argument, if they have had sex yet. He wonders if he would leave if they started having sex and decides that he wouldn't unless everyone else did.

The scene ends. The stage grows dark then light as all the actors return—fully clothed—and take a bow.

The snow has stopped falling. He stands outside Baltimore Hall with his hands in his pockets.

“Aren't you cold, Drake?”

“Yeah.” He compares his thin, blue threadbare jacket to Love's winter coat with fur trim. “I'll be warm soon enough, though, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I think I do.”

“So, what'd you think?”

The two girls giggle. They've been discussing male anatomy since the play ended.

“I think the blond guy was well-hung.”

“Love!” Espy bats at Love's shoulders.

“Well, he was!”

“I tried not to notice.”

“Sure, you did.”

“Love!” Espy shoves Love, but fails to unbalance her.

“So what now? You wanna go to the blue house party?”

“Sure.”

“You wanna go, Espy?”

“Sure.”

Love produces a pack of cigarettes from her coat. She places one between her lips, poses, then sticks it behind her ear.

“Love, I didn't know you smoke.”

“I smoke when I drink. I drink when I smoke.” Love balances on one five-inch heel.

“Do you smoke, Drake?”

“Only when I'm drunk. I've never smoked a cigarette sober before.”

“Really? Wow.”

They walk along in silence. There is no wind. The campus's red brick buildings give way to apartment houses and convenience stores. They pass a fire station and its open garage. A fire truck waits inside for another chance to roar itself into existence.

Love's voice assumes an exaggerated sweetness. “Hey, Drake?”

“Yeah?” His face is so cold that he's begun to lisp.

“Would you buy me a cup at the party?”

“I don't know. Thass a lotta money.”

“I know but I’ll pay you back.”

“I was juss kidding. It’s only three bucks. Of course, I’ll buy you a cup.”

“OK. Cool. I’ll make sure I pay you back.”

“You don’t have to pay me back.”

“OK. Thanks, sweetie.” Love drapes her arms around him from behind and places her hands on his cheeks. “Your cheeks are freezing.”

“I feel like my nose is going to fall off.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you warm.” Love presses his cheeks with her hands and a shiver runs through his arms. “You can have some of my cigarettes, if you want.”

“Cool.” His teeth rattle.

Love keeps her hands pressed to his cheeks until they arrive at the blue house. People sit on the porch, drinking beer out of clear plastic cups. He ascends the steps feeling drunk and sober and clumsy and bumps elbows with someone. It’s warm inside. The great blast of body heat is refreshing. The keg’s in the kitchen and there’s a long line. People mill about, talking and dancing. Some jackass spills his beer on the floor and someone yells: “Party Foul!”

A girl with a fistful of cash stands in the kitchen by a stack of clear plastic cups.

“Hey, you doing cups?”

“Yeah.” She holds up three fingers. “Three dollars.”

Her hands her a ten-dollar bill and watches as she flips through the thick wad of cash. Her low cut blue jeans and tank top hug her voluptuous body and expose her fleshy belly and breasts. Beads of sweat have formed on her midriff. She hands him two cups and he stands sideways in the crowd and stretches them toward the keg. A thin blond in cutoffs pumps the keg with fast, furious strokes. She’s the same girl who said “We’re going to be FUCKING incredible” in the first one-act. She takes his cups and he watches as the beer runs down the clear plastic walls. He stirs the foam in the top of one cup with his little finger then attacks the piss-yellow liquid like a man dying of thirst.

“This stuff tastes like shit.”

“It will taste like water later.” The thin blond in cutoffs gives him a knowing look. “It always tastes like water to me.”

“Not me.” He disentangles himself from the keg traffic and stands by the refrigerator with Love and Espy.

“This stuff tastes like shit.”

“I’ve never known it to taste otherwise.”

Espy, who doesn’t drink, doesn’t say anything.

They stand there, in silence, watching the keg traffic. Love sips her beer. He gulps his.

“I’m going to get a refill.”

“Ok. We’re going to mingle.”

“Cool.”

The thin blond in cutoffs fills his cup. “That was quick.”

“Yeah.”

He sits down on a ratty couch in the living room and drinks the second cup. He returns to the thin blond in cutoffs, who doesn’t say anything this time, and drinks the third cup. He watches the people mill about, talking and dancing. There are girls with ankle tattoos and flip-flops. There are girls with black tights and fuzzy sweaters. He looks over their heads at a hole in the wall—at euphoria.

Somebody taps him on the shoulder. He spins around.

It's Susanna, a girl he has run into before. She has a thick body and short, red hair. She's wearing blue jeans and a T-shirt. "Can we cut in front of you?"

"Sure, how's it going?"

"Good."

A brunette's with Susanna. Nondescript. He doesn't know who she is.

"Hey, I'm Drake."

"Maxine." Her paw is warm and sweaty. "Boys are supposed to go outside, you know!"

"Yeah."

Susanna strikes up a conversation with Maxine about—well, he can't tell. Some guy in a cow print shirt staggers out of the bathroom and falls down. Susanna and Maxine slam the door.

"Dirk! What's up?" A shirtless kid wearing a black leather coat holds his hand up to be slapped or shook. He has a perfectly defined six pack.

"Leonardo!" He bumbles the slap-shake-thing.

"What's up, baby? Where you been?"

"Around. What's that?" He points at the bottle in Leo's hands.

"Vodka. You want some?"

"Sure thing." He lifts the bottle to his lips and the vodka burns in his throat.

"Woah! Save some, brother. Save some."

"OK." He slaps Leo's hand hard enough to make his own sting.

Susanna and Maxine fall out of the bathroom, laughing, and he falls in. He sets his cup on the marble countertop near the sink. "Truths that wake to perish never that neither listlessness nor mad endeavor nor man nor boy nor all that is at enmity with joy can utterly abolish or destroy" he chants as he aims the hot stream of piss toward a stray piece of toilet paper that clings to the bowl.

As he washes his hands, he looks at himself in the mirror and grins. "I'm so fucked-up. I'm already so fucked-up."

When he exits the cool, dank bathroom, the crowded living room hits him like an oven blast. He takes off his thin, blue threadbare jacket and stuffs it behind the ratty couch. He sits down. Between two sets of dancers who are making out, he spots Love talking to the blond guy from the third one-act. They stand ten or fifteen feet away. Love cups his chin with her hand and says something. He laughs. She runs her fingers through his hair. She removes the cigarette from her ear and gestures with it.

Leo and his friend, CJ, sit down on the couch.

"Dirk, I gotta..."

"Hey can I have some more of that?"

"Sure." Leo hands him the bottle. "Woah! Save some, baby. Save some."

"You got the best shit. You know that? You got the best shit."

"I know, I know. Now, listen, Dirk..."

"What's up?"

"Dirk." Leo pauses. "Me and my friends—we in the entertainment business. We started this thing called Pleasure Productions."

"Called what?"

"Pleasure Productions."

"Oh."

"We got shows all over the place. We gotta show in Philadelphia."

"Where?"

“In Philadelphia.”

“Oh.”

“We makin’ money now, but we could be makin’ BIG money. That’s where you come in. Interested?”

“Sure.”

Leo does the slap-shake-thing and Drake bumbles it again. “Now—everybody’s gotta do something, so what can you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what can you do. Can you sing?” Leo throws back his arms like he’s going to belt out an opera song.

“No.”

“Can you dance?” Leo brings his arms in close to his body like he’s going to bust a few dance moves.

“Hell no.”

Leo lets his arms fall. He brings his hands together slowly. “Well, what can you do?”

“I can write. Do you need someone who can write?”

Leo rubs his chin. “You can’t do anything else?”

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll find something for you. Just call me.” Leo reaches into his jacket and removes a white card. He hands it to Drake. “That girl you hang out with is fine—what’s her name?”

“Love.”

“That girl is *fine*.”

“Yep.”

“All right, Drake. I’m out. Peace, baby. Call me. Remember—Pleasure Productions.”

“Pleasure Productions.”

He sits there and drinks his fourth and fifth cup of beer. Maybe his sixth. He initiates a spree of introductions in which he holds out his hand and says: “Hey, what’s up, I’m Drake.” One of the girls he introduces himself to says: “Hi, I’m Linda. I’m not going to make out with you.” He returns to the thin blond in cutoffs for his seventh or eighth cup of beer. Maybe it’s his ninth. He says to her: “This beer still tastes like shit.”

She says something.

“What?”

She leans over the keg and says it again.

“What?”

She pulls him to her and roars in his ear: “I SAID IT TASTES LIKE WATER TO ME!”

“Oh.”

He returns to the living room and sits down on the ratty couch. He drinks beer until he can’t drink anymore. He vomits in his cup then leans over the couch and vomits in the corner. Nobody says anything, so he figures that nobody saw him or cares. He wipes his mouth with his hand and sets his cup on the floor.

Someone rubs his head back and forth and he closes his eyes. It’s Love.

“I’m going to take off. You ready to go? Or do you want to stay here?”

“I’m going to stay.”

“OK. Take care of yourself.”

“All right. You too.”

“Bye, hun.”

“Bye.”

His bladder is burning. And yet that moon above. Those stars. He tries to explain these things to the French, but they only laugh at him and tell him that he’s drunk. He staggers off to the side of the house that doesn’t face the street. He unzips his pants and soaks the blue sideboards with his piss. Someone approaches and he jerks his head around.

“Sup?”

“Not much.”

“I’m making water with my fucking dick—you could drink this stuff, seriously!”

The guy laughs. Unzips.

“Who needs Breta? Hell, I can filter your fucking water—this is pure mountain stream, this is some good shit.”

“You’re one funny motherfucker.”

“Yeah, don’t I know it. I should be a standup comedian.” He zips his pants. “I’ll check you later, dude.”

He staggers to the porch and slumps down on one of the three ratty couches. He sits there with his eyes closed and listens to the hum of the party.

“Hey, Drake.” It’s Susanna. He talks to her about school and other things before he kisses her. The inside of her mouth tastes like metal.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“What are you laughing about?”

“Nothing. I’m just really drunk.”

“I don’t want to make out with someone who’s laughing at me.”

“I’m not laughing at you. I’m just really drunk.”

“How much have you had?”

“I dunno. Too many. You have any cigarettes?”

“Yeah.”

They sit there and smoke. He inhales like he were trying to get high and blows the smoke over the railing of the porch. He puts his arm around Susanna and squeezes her middle. She puts her hand on his thigh.

“Wanna dance?”

“Sure.”

He dances close to Susanna, grinding his hips against hers. They dance for fifteen minutes or maybe an hour. They dance until Don Mclean’s “American Pie” finishes playing. As the song ends, he and others add special suffixes to two of its ending chorus lines.

Singin’ this’ll be the day that I die—at the blue house.

This’ll be the day that I die—drinkin’ beer with my fucked-up friends.

When the music dies, there is silence. Couples break up. People file outside. Some stand on the porch and smoke and chatter. Others stagger down the sidewalks, alone or in groups.

He retrieves his jacket from behind the ratty couch and puts it on. He leaves the blue house with Susanna. They walk in silence, holding hands, until they reach a volley ball court outside of their dorm.

He lays down in the volley ball court.

“C’mon!”

“I’m not going to lay down in that sand!”

“Why not? C’mon!”

“I’ll get dirty!”

“So?”

He fans his arms and legs out like he’s making a snow angel. Susanna laughs. He lays there for a minute and stares at the sky. He gets up and they walk on. Susanna tells him that she’s failing school, that she’s going to drop out. He doesn’t say anything. She stops in front of their dormitory in front of a dead flower garden. She stands there and looks at him.

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure.”

“How do you feel about me?”

He doesn’t say anything for a long time. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“You know what I mean.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Drake, I really like you. Do you like me?”

He tries to explain his feelings, but he can hardly talk.

“You make out with me. What am I supposed to think?”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not like I’m going to cry about it.”

“Good. I’m not worth crying over.”

“That’s for damn sure.”

He watches Susanna open the heavy door and show her card to the night monitor. He sits down on the edge of the dead flower garden. He sits there for a long time, staring at the windows in the building. Some are still light.

“What a waste of atoms. What a fucking waste of atoms.”

Letters have been cut into the gray stone: MISSOURI HALL. He pulls the heavy door open, steps beneath the bright lights, and feels the full weight of his drunkenness. The night monitor gives him a dirty look as if to say: “stupid fucking drunk better not make a run for it better show me your fucking card.” He fumbles through his billfold until he finds his student ID. “Thanks.” He bangs his knee on the stairs but feels no pain. His key clicks in the lock and he stumbles across his moonlight-illuminated room. His roommate is asleep. He locks himself in the bathroom, kneels on the piss-stained floor and, crossing his arms, grips the toilet seat with both hands. He rests his head on his forearms and empties his stomach into the toilet.

PICKUPS

Drake's reaching for the door, when he hears the second shout of "Hey!" There, on the other side of the pumps, is a pickup.

"Hey, you a homosexual?" the driver yells. He's a teenager in a white t-shirt and ball cap. He has one hand on the wheel. The other's pointed at Drake. His arms are long and sinewy.

Drake doesn't know this kid. He doesn't know the kid sitting in the passenger seat either. Or the old man between them. This old guy looks like he might be their father—or even their grandfather. He has his mouth wide open because he's grinning so hard. Drake can see his teeth. He looks like he's drunk.

"Uh, no why?" Drake says.

"Well, shit, that's too bad," the kid shoots back, shaking his head. He spits a wad of tobacco out the window. Pinches his t-shirt like a napkin and wipes his mouth. His right hand reaches for the ignition. He fires the engine.

The old man's still grinning. He's looking straight at Drake. Whitish-brown whiskers cover his face. His hair is greasy and scraggly. It hangs limply like the upturned head of a wet mop.

The kid riding shotgun's laughing. He grips the dashboard of the pickup with both hands. He has a ball cap on backwards. Tangle of dark curly hair beneath the bill. He's looking at the driver and shaking his head.

The kid puts the truck in gear. It roars past the pumps, out onto the highway, throwing up gravel and dirt.

Drake enters the gas station. He walks past the clerk, a short woman with dirty-blond hair, and back, between two aisles of assorted candy, to the bathroom.

Someone's in there. A stranger.

Drake stands there—stunned.

* * *

He realizes now how ridiculous his response was. "Why?" What kind of response was that?

What was he supposed to do? Give them the finger? Tell them to fuck off? Start a fight with two rowdy teenagers and their drunk-ass dad—or grandpa?

Drake has never been in a fight before. Once, he scuffled with a kid in second grade, punched him in the face. But that wasn't a real fight. These turkeys are a different story. Probably play basketball and football. Go to all the local rodeos.

A slanted line of mirrors above him stretches across the entire back wall of the store. In these mirrors, he can see almost anything. Maybe he'll look up there and they'll be back.

Walking through the door. With their cowboy boots—Drake’s sure they were wearing cowboy boots. And their tight jeans. Tight enough to bust a man’s balls.

The bathroom door opens. A man walks out, bowlegged, in gumboots and camouflage. His neon-orange hat is a beacon. Hunter! Hunter, here! He has a full beard, rosy cheeks, and a big, jolly smile. He heads for the freezers, distended belly jogging up and down beneath his overalls. And for the life of him, Drake can’t remember what hunting season it is.

* * *

He closes the bathroom door. Maybe, he should have waited in line at the theatre. But Drake doesn’t like urinating in busy restrooms.

Drake unzips his pants and lifts the toilet lid. The hunter’s left him a present. Aiming for it threatens to relieve him. But it doesn’t. He’s mad now. He’s pissed off.

Drake finishes. Zips his pants and moves to the sink. He lathers his hands with pink soap from the dispenser and rinses them beneath the squeaky faucet. He dries them with a paper towel and flings it violently into a nearby wastebasket.

Drake flips himself off in the mirror. That’s for them. They asked him that question to make him angry. And now he is angry. The funny thing is, he responded with “Why?”

Of course, he did. He’s a college student. He has three years of diversity under his belt. He has grown accustomed to accepting others—despite their differences.

He hates *them* though. They singled him out. Why?

Maybe it’s what he’s wearing. He has on slightly baggy pants. Flat Adidas shoes. An orange shirt with a white stripe across it. Maybe that doesn’t bode well with them. With people who choke the circulation out of their privates.

Maybe it’s the way he walks. Drake’s Phys Ed instructor informed him that he walks like he’s sixty. *Get those shoulders up. For god sakes son, walk with some confidence.* Maybe his gait is “effeminate.” Whatever the hell that means. Maybe he walks like a girl.

Still, he’s a clean-cut white boy from the Midwest. He was born forty miles from here. Has a buzz cut. Can still talk with a rural twang if he wants to.

And yet, maybe those three years shine from his face like hellfire. He’s read Sartre and Nietzsche, Kafka and Camus. Wrestled with words like they’ve wrangled with bulls at the rodeo.

Maybe they can smell it. And they don’t like it. To them it says homo. To them it says fag. But he knows he’s just being silly.

* * *

Drake exits the bathroom. Halfway up the candy aisle, he pauses.

Man at the counter. Leaning on it, one heel digging into the floor. He wears a tan cowboy hat. Blue Jeans. Red flannel shirt tucked neatly into the jeans and held tight by a fat brown leather belt. He seems to know the clerk. Says he has ten dollars in gas, and that he wants a pack of Marlboros. He whistles when the clerk turns around for the cigarettes. She laughs. Her laugh is raspy as sandpaper.

Drake pretends to inspect the bins of beef jerky. He puts his hands in his pockets. Drake doesn’t like beef jerky. He hates the stuff.

The man turns around after paying and heads toward the bathroom. His now visible belt buckle—a silver cowboy on a silver horse—moves in step with his swaggering hips. He looks up at the line of mirrors and winks at the clerk.

Drake doesn’t know the man. And yet his eyes train on the creased leather, the worn steel toe. The faint cologne of gasoline, tobacco, sweat, and manure floods him—and is gone.

The bathroom door clicks shut. Drake walks toward the clerk, jerky in hand. He imagines her naked. Ringing up beef jerky in a flatbed.

Outside, Drake spots the man's truck parked on the other side of the pumps. The engine's running. It emits a low growl that fills the empty parking lot. Drake can smell the burps of exhaust. The windows are down. And he knows the insides smell like diesel-soaked rags and beer cans—stale coffee and cigarettes.

Even after he turns the key, swings around the pumps, slides the lever down for a left turn, and guns the engine—he can still hear it, smell it. There's something else there too. A vibration. Like the devil riding a bull around the ribcage of the world.

QUIET DESPERATION

There are cement blocks in front of the windows. Inside them are tight fitting squares of chicken wire. Over them hangs a gargantuan black net. The tight-fitting squares come loose and fall. The net tears, unravels. Pigeons nest in the blocks.

Drake sits in his living room, watching the pigeons. One pigeon waits while the other delivers—one twig at a time. The delivery pigeon passes its twig to the waiting pigeon, which deftly arranges it.

The living room window, which encompasses the entire width of the room, is over ten feet wide. Although it's designed to slide open, like a sliding glass door, it doesn't. It's sealed firmly shut.

A black cat trots across the parking lot. A woman in high heels navigates the sidewalk. Cars shoot by on the road. Smoke rises above a motel. The cement blocks, the tight fitting squares of chicken wire, and the gargantuan black net fragments everything. The pigeons are most visible. They work continually—gathering twigs, passing twigs, arranging twigs—to build their nest.

Drake steps outside. Bang! The heavy door swings shut—click!—and locks. He walks down the green hallway toward the fourth floor lounge. The smell of oriental cooking wafts from a door propped open by an empty milk jug. He passes a wet spot where water has seeped through the concrete wall and pooled in the middle of the green hallway. The smell of oriental cooking gives way to the rank smell of the trash chute which, like each floor's lounge, is situated directly in the middle of the building.

There are nothing but mustard-yellow couches in the fourth floor lounge. No TV. No vending machines. He punches the elevator's down arrow. He waits. Beep! The doors open and a young woman steps out. She has short black hair, glasses, and a kind looking face. She looks Korean, but maybe she's not.

Drake takes the elevator to the third floor lounge. There's a TV there and two vending machines. But, most importantly, there are four washing machines and one dryer.

Drake's laundry is where he left it—in the dryer. The dryer is huge. The Korean girl would fit in there. He would fit in there. Maybe they would both fit in there. What if someone came up behind him, conked him on the head, and stuffed him in there? He looks behind him. There's no one there. He stuffs his socks, pants, shirts, and boxers into his laundry bag. He walks back to the lounge and punches the elevator's up arrow. He waits.

There's a fat, black man in the elevator. He has a metal cane. After the doors close, he staggers backwards and bumps into Drake. Drake steps aside.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't see you there. Whassup? I'm Dale.” He holds his hand toward Drake, but stares past him at the elevator's gray, carpeted walls.

Drake shakes Dale's hand: "Hey, I'm Drake." Dale staggers again as the elevator comes to a stop. Beep! The doors open. Drake leaves Dale behind. He walks by the mustard yellow couches, down the green hallway, past the pool of water. He looks at the door propped open with a milk jug. The oriental food smells strange and exotic and good.

Drake unlocks the door to his apartment—click!—and steps inside. Bang! His roommate, Bill, is in their bedroom—back from the law library. Drake wants to tell himself, out loud, that he met a drunken blind man on the elevator, but Bill's there. He can't talk to himself when someone else is around. They'll think he's crazy.

Drake exchanges greetings with Bill: "Hey." He folds his socks and boxers and puts them away while Bill marches in and out of the room with various cleaning supplies in tow. Drake hangs up his shirts. He says "excuse me" and "sorry" when he gets in Bill's way. Bill doesn't say anything. Drake finishes putting his laundry away, walks into the living room, and sits down at his computer desk. He watches the pigeons. He plays a game of online chess and listens to Bill clean the bathroom. He looks at his dirty dishes in the sink. They've been there for the past two weeks, but Bill doesn't know that. He just got back from his two-week stay on some beach.

"You need to do those. They'll draw the roaches." That's what Bill told him when he saw the dishes in the sink. He told him that this morning. Before he left for the law library. Now it's past three. He's done laundry and watched the pigeons.

He needs to do those dishes.

There are three rooms in his apartment. The living room, dining room, and kitchen melt into one room. Their boundaries are defined by physical objects. The living room is a mustard-yellow couch, the dining room is a large, round table, and the kitchen is a row of cabinets, a stove, and a sink. If their doors are open, you can see the other two rooms—the bedroom and the bathroom—from the kitchen sink.

The bathroom door is open. Bill is scrubbing the toilet methodically—as if a troupe of monkeys has been using it.

Drake fills the kitchen sink full of water. He washes his two plates, his two bowls, his five forks, and his five spoons. As he starts in on his pot, Bill says: "Hey, can I get some of that?"

"Uh, yeah," Drake says, thinking Bill means the soap. "Go right ahead."

Bill leans over the sink. Lathers his big hands in the dishwater. Rinses them. He shakes them dry—flicking the remaining droplets from his fingers. He does this slowly and decidedly.

Drake doesn't say anything. He just stands there looking at his pot. Bill walks by with his boxing gear over his shoulder. "I'll see you later, Drake," he says.

"Later," Drake mutters.

After the heavy door swings shut, Drake hefts his pot with his right hand, runs his left hand over its warm, firm surface. He brandishes it. Takes a few practice swings.

A key inserts into the lock. It's Bill.

"Hey." He grins. "Forgot something."

"Oh." Drake puts his pot away.

Bill leaves again. Drake flips off the door. He strains his middle finger so hard it hurts. "Fucking ape acts like a female," he whispers, looking at the door. Then, growing bold: "What spite!" He sits down on the couch. Air rises in a great "whoosh!"

He sits there and broods, watching the pigeons. "Fucking ape. I was doing the goddamn dishes, wasn't I?" He fumes some more then starts laughing and sings: "The old gray ape he

ain't what he used to be, ain't what he used to be, ain't what he used to be. The old gray ape he ain't what he used to be. Many long years ago."

Drake fixes himself a peanut butter sandwich. He plays another game of online chess and thinks about school. It's July. He starts graduate school in the fall. This is Bill's last year of law school. He takes the bar soon. He's lived here, in this shit-hole, for three years. No wonder he hates him. Just another interloper—like these pigeons. The apartment building can't keep the pigeons out. Bill can't keep him out. If dishes draw roaches, he'll draw the roaches because Bill never dirties any dishes: he has a meal plan with the university. Bill will blame him for the roaches—which were already in the apartment in the first place. On the first night, they congregated underneath his computer desk—as if to say: "Welcome! Welcome! You'll like it here!"

Drake finishes the peanut butter sandwich. He washes it down with a glass of water and wonders how polluted the water is. He watches the pigeons and plays more chess. He passes the rest of his day as he has envisioned passing it: doing nothing.

* * *

Drake's lying on the mustard-yellow couch, reading, when Bill returns from the gym. Bill walks into their bedroom, bangs around then spends a long minute staring at the thermostat in the short hallway that connects the kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom. Drake can't see him, but he knows that's what he's doing. He stops reading and listens. The thermostat hisses and lets out a sigh. Bill walks into the kitchen and opens the refrigerator. He grabs a bottle of water and drinks half of it on the spot. He stands over Drake like a prosecuting attorney.

"You like it warm, Drake?"

"Well, it's just that—I was just a little cold—you can turn it up if you want to—"

Bill doesn't say anything. Just shakes his head no.

* * *

The lights go out. Drake lies there in the dark, on the mustard-yellow couch, and thinks. Boom! A bolt of lightning sets off car alarms. The whole parking lot roars with their noises. He stands up, walks to the window, and draws back the filthy curtain. The buildings on the other side of the road have power. Their lights, the cars' lights, and all the other lights of the night mingle with the rain to form a watery sheen that twinkles with reds and yellows and blues.

The lights in the green hallway are on. Drake sits on the floor with his back against his door and reads. He's sitting there, reading, when the door opposite his opens. It's the Korean girl he met in the lounge. The one with short, black hair and glasses. She's carrying a sheaf of papers. She takes one look at him, says "Oh!" and shuts the door.

Drake wonders if she's looking at him through the peephole. Just standing there, looking at him. Maybe he's uglier than Gogol. Or maybe it's his eyes. Maybe they say things he doesn't want to say. Or, worse, things he does. The answer is in that "Oh!" and he doesn't have the balls to find out.

Fuck that. He knocks on the door. He stands there and knocks on the door and tries to think as quickly as he can. What is he going to tell her? He can't think of anything. He considers running away. Jetting down the green hallway toward the stairs or the lounge. But he doesn't. He just stands there and waits. No one answers. He doesn't have the balls to knock again. He just doesn't have the balls.

He walks down the green hallway toward the lounge. The elevator doesn't work. There are people trapped inside. They pound on the gray, carpeted walls—thud, thud, thud!—and yell for help, but he can't understand them.

The elevator is in the middle of the building. There are two stairways—one at each end of the green hallway. He walks down the other half of the green hallway, the half that doesn't pass his room and the Korean girl's room, to the stairs. There's a bullet hole in the stairway window.

Everyone that lives in the building, who's not trapped in the elevator, is outside. A large group of guys with sports shirts and ball caps stand or sit on the building's front stoop, drinking beer. Smaller groups of foreign-looking students stand in the parking lot, talking. Drake walks past the drinkers, who watch him, or seem to watch him, descend the stairs. He sits down on a concrete slab in the parking lot.

Dale, the drunken blind man he met on the elevator, is drinking beer with the guys. One of them, a young man with a terrible sunburn, kicks him in the ass.

"Who did that? Who wants a piece of my sweet ass?" Dale turns toward the kid with the sunburn. "It was you, wasn't it, Rosetti?" He swings the metal cane—several times. Drake flinches, but the guys sitting on the steps don't. They howl with laughter and drink their beer.

"Get 'em Dale! Get 'em!"

Rosetti avoids the blows and kicks Dale in the ass again.

"You fucker! You're gonna die for that!" Dale reaches behind his back. He produces a black, water pistol. He brandishes it. "Now you done it. You made me get my pistol you sunnuva bitch."

Rosetti laughs. He hoots and hollers. Drake gets to his feet and starts walking across the parking lot. Behind him, Rosetti yells: "You gonna shoot me with your pistol?"

"Hell yeah I'm going to shoot you with my pistol you sunnuva bitch."

"You couldn't hit a three-hundred-pound hooker's ass."

"Oh yeah? Oh yeah?"

Drake crosses a two-lane feeder road, then climbs a grassy embankment. He stands on a sidewalk, by a four-lane road that is divided by a long grassy strip. Cars zip by. Drake crosses two lanes of traffic and stands on the grassy strip. He crosses the remaining two lanes of traffic and walks down the sidewalk to a nearby restaurant. He sits inside, eating, and waits for the lights in his apartment building to come back on.

* * *

Drake walks in and out of his room, doing laundry. After several trips up and down the elevator, he's done. He sets his laundry bag on the floor, next to the mustard-yellow couch. He will put his laundry away tomorrow, after Bill leaves for the law library. He sits down at his computer and does some writing. His keyboard overhangs the edge of the table. As he types, it wobbles back and forth against the wooden desk—like someone drum, drum, drumming their fingers.

Bill walks into the room dressed only in his boxers. He parks his hairy body in front of the refrigerator and downs an entire bottle of water. He slams the refrigerator door and turns to walk away. The refrigerator door bounces open, rebounds against its hinges, and comes to a stop—ajar. Bill spins around and stalks over to the refrigerator. He pushes it shut slowly, ever so slowly, with his index finger...

Drake laughs. It's a quiet, nervous laugh and he's scared as hell. But what can he do? He has to live here. Like those pigeons. Nobody wants them around. He looks behind the filthy curtain. There they are—in their concrete block, asleep.

THE CADAVER

At his apartment, Stan asks Drake if he wants to see “his cadaver.” Drake says: “Sure, why not?” They decide to see Stan’s cadaver first, then play racquetball at Stan’s medical school’s recreation center. They won’t, Stan argues, want to go to the anatomy lab after they play racquetball. They’ll be too hot and sweaty and hungry.

They stand now in the locker room for Stan’s anatomy lab. Drake expresses some interest in how dead bodies become cadavers. Stan informs him that not all of the bodies that are dissected in anatomy labs are donated. Bodies without ties, without family to bury them, may also become cadavers. Drake wonders who Stan’s cadaver was. What kind of life did he lead? What kind of death did he die?

“I can’t show you the arms and legs,” Stan says. “They cut them off last week.”

“What for?”

“To get them out of them way. Since we’ve already studied them, we don’t need them anymore.”

“Oh.”

The cadaver’s amputated limbs will be stored underneath the dissection table for later disposal. At the end of the semester, they will be cremated along with everything else. There will be a ceremony. Drake imagines Stan at this ceremony, at the funeral for a man he knew so much and so little about.

Stan keeps his locker unlocked—like his car. “I don’t see the point in locking my car,” Stan says. “If someone wants to steal it, they will steal it whether it’s locked or not.”

Stan removes a box of surgical gloves from his locker. He asks Drake if he’s allergic to latex.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Well, anyway, these are non-latex gloves.”

“Oh.”

“So, are you nervous?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I just don’t know how I’m going to react.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. I don’t think I’ll throw up or anything. I’m not squeamish—”

“You’re not going to throw up.”

“Yeah, I know.” Drake struggles with his gloves. Either they don’t want his fingers in them or his fingers don’t want them around them. “I don’t think I could be a doctor. I can’t even get my gloves on.”

“It just takes some practice. It took me a while to get mine on too on my first day.”

When they reach the double doors to the anatomy lab, Stan says: “You might want to brace yourself for the smell. That’s the worst thing really—the smell.” But when they walk in the room, Drake can’t smell anything.

“I can’t smell anything,” Drake announces, relieved.

“Yeah, they must have cleaned—or otherwise you would really smell something—believe me.”

Drake looks around the room, at the two rows of dissection tables. Each table bears a long, blue plastic bag in the shape of a human body. There’s a black tub beneath each table wherein the cadavers’ amputated body parts are stored. Drake follows Stan to one of the tables. “This one’s mine,” Stan says. He reaches to unzip the bag then hesitates. “You ready? You feel ok about this?”

“Yeah, fine. Go ahead.”

Stan unzips the bag. The cadaver’s head remains covered—by a black veil. Drake stares at its torso. The legs have been cut off. Strips of flesh hang loose from the projecting bones. The remains of the cadaver’s legs remind Drake of the end of a drumstick. He imagines taking a bite out of them. To do that would not only be disgusting and cannibalistic. To do that would be to lose Stan’s respect.

The cadaver’s pubic region is darker than its torso. Its penis looks like a rotten banana, like a deliquescing mushroom. The cadaver’s nakedness embarrasses Drake. It causes him more discomfort than the cadaver’s death.

Stan opens his dissection kit and tells Drake what each instrument does. Drake stares at bits of gray matter that cling to the inside of the kit. They look like tiny chunks of mushrooms. “Is that human flesh?” Drake says.

“Yeah,” Stan says. He looks amused.

The cadaver’s ribcage has been cut free to allow passage to what it used to protect. Stan removes it and knocks on it with his fist. “Knock on it,” he says. Drake knocks on it. “It’s hard isn’t it? That’s why ancient warriors used to cut their enemies ribcage out and use it as a shield.”

“The Scythians turned their enemies’ skulls into drinking bowls and drank their blood from them,” Drake notes, somewhat irrelevantly. Stan politely ignores this remark and continues to cannonade Drake with a semester’s worth of anatomy. “Surviving in medical school is like trying to drink from a water hydrant,” Stan says. “That’s what one of my professors told me—and it’s true.”

Drake stares at the football-sized lung that Stan holds in front of him. “I didn’t realize our lungs were so huge,” he says

“Yeah. And this guy was small too.”

He wasn’t much smaller than Drake.

Stan reaches into the cadaver’s chest cavity and removes its heart. He explains how it works then hands it to Drake.

“This is heavy. How much does this weigh?”

“I don’t know. A couple of pounds, maybe.” Stan looks at Drake, bemused. “How much do you think it weighs?”

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t expect it to be so heavy.”

“It was heavier when it was filled with blood,” Stan says. “There was a lot of coagulated blood in it when we first took it out.”

“Oh.” Drake moves his hand up and down as if the heart were a ball. It seems to weigh somewhere between an orange and a grapefruit. He imagines tossing it to Stan then hands it to him.

“You want to see the head?”

“Ok.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Show it to me.”

“Most people don’t want to see the head,” Stan says. He pulls the veil back. The cadaver’s head is shrunken. The leathery, desiccated skin lies close to the skull. The small, triangular nose reminds Drake of Michael Jackson.

“You want to see a breast?”

“No. Maybe some other time.”

Stan laughs. “Yeah, right.” He leads Drake to a wash-up area and shows him how to remove his gloves. Drake’s an expert at this. He removes his gloves and flings them into a wastebasket. He washes his hands and takes one last look around the gross anatomy lab. Two rows of dissection tables bear long, blue plastic bags in the shape of human bodies. Beneath each table lies a black tub.

“Ed Gein would be at home here,” Drake says. “He’d start a clothing line.”

Stan frowns. “Who’s Ed Gein?” He stands still, waiting for a response, but Drake pushes open the double doors and leaves the anatomy lab. Drake doesn’t get Stan’s jokes and Stan doesn’t get Drake’s jokes. They know different things and have a different sense of humor, but they learn a lot from each other. “A serial killer,” Drake says over his shoulder.

“You’re morbid,” Stan says. “Who did he kill?”

“Some people in Wisconsin. Movies are based on him. Psycho, Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Silence of the Lambs.”

“Oh.” Stan frowns again. He’d like to learn more, but his practicality has kicked in. They need to eat. They can discuss Ed Gein over dinner. “So, you want to get something to eat?”

“Yeah.”

The two friends drive to a local chicken joint and share a bucket of chicken. Drake tells Stan everything he knows about Ed Gein and Stan talks about his future in medical science. Drake focuses on the sides, biscuits with butter and jelly, coleslaw, mashed potatoes. Drake eats the chicken too, trying to keep pace with Stan who devours everything in sight.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nat Smith was born on June 23, 1980 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He received a BA in English from Truman State University in the spring of 2002 and an MA in Creative Writing from Florida State University in the spring of 2005. He has taught first year writing courses at Florida State University and has worked as an associate editor of the Green Hills Literary Lantern.