

Lobster Clouds
and
Pieces of People

words by
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eleven

Modern passenger trains don't use steam engines.

They travel on powered cable lines from station to station. It's cheaper and more reliable than burning coal to heat a boiler in the end for a variety of reasons.

Each wire's current is ninety degrees to the frequency of its neighbor, so the train gets a steady push of electricity all the way down.

They're called *phases*.

They run over and along the tracks with the train.

But this train, this is billowing the thickest, blackest smoke you've ever seen from its engine stack.

It's a fifteen-car monster pushing gravel down the tracks.

Trees sway as it crashes along the mountainside.

Mountains tremble.

Even for coal, this train is powerful. I think, maybe something's wrong.

Maura looks at me complacently as I stare at the scenery flashing by outside the car. There's no one else in this car.

I think, maybe we shouldn't be here.

Time is a vector based on velocity and distance traveled. You cannot move through space in any direction without simultaneously moving through time, and any movement at all—any change in relative position—implies velocity.

FLICKER.

A shot of daylight through lines of western red cedar trees hundreds of feet deep.

SHUTTER.

Like a camera going off. Twenty-four frames per second.

We're ripping past forests, so we must be moving, therefore time must be passing.

But it isn't.

There aren't any clocks near us, but we can *feel* time not moving.

I think, maybe something's wrong.

In Seattle, we sat high up on the Yesler Overpass and rained handfuls of glass marbles down on the cars below.

I tried not to say much after Topeka. I knew Maura's track record, of throwing people away, and I wasn't about to be part of it.

And really, I wasn't sure if she wanted me to be part of it. First, it's about what didn't matter. Then, love. Somewhere, Cupid was kissing the barrel and splattering bits of his skull everywhere. Everything's changing, even if it's for the worst, I thought.

The planets are falling out of alignment.
Galaxies and superclusters are colliding.
Things are breaking down all around us.
Nothing is perfect, and even if it were, I wouldn't want any part of it.
Consider me a fan of imperfection. The knicks and cuts in the wood.
I *am* the B-minus.

I don't care how little sleep you're used to, when you take a red-eye flight clear across the country, you want to flush your head in the chemical toilet the second they tell you to exit the cabin.

You wish you'd blown the emergency exit door upon final descent and exited calmly with your carry-on in hand.

We came into at LaGuardia at six in the morning.

We were back in New York again, and I could barely see straight after the taxi to the runway. Drowning in a mess of CNS stimulants wasn't helping, but it was all I could do to keep from tipping right into a coma. We did seven cities in seven days right before that, and I got all of zero hours of sleep from beginning to end. I was setting records left and right.

I'm the *Guinness Book*.

We did seven cities.

Tacoma, Chicago, Boise.

In and out, like a John and his escort.

Kansas City, Jacksonville.

Seven days, seven thousand milligrams. Welcome to St. Louis. New Orleans.

Up until then, all Cherry really had me doing was signing books. I didn't need to do anything beyond that, other than spit out a few facts about my fake life to keep things moving if I got in a conversation with a fan, just long enough to move the subject somewhere else.

What do you plan to do with your life?

How do you deal with the loss of your mother now that she's gone?

But I kept changing the story each time someone asked me something.

Every time I woke up, I was a new person.

You're always someone different—well, you could be, every time you get out of bed. You can do anything you want. I'm not fake, reality is.

And it's what I tell it to be.

And it doesn't make any sense at all.

And it's a figment of my imagination.

And I can't control any of it.

So, the gun.

How I got the gun isn't anything special.

I took it off the sleeping guard in the bank lobby that day. Right after I walked in to close my account.

I didn't need Cherry's money. I didn't *want* Cherry's money. A liar's revenue.

"Sir, you don't have an account here," the teller said.

Of course I do.

I don't?

I must be in the wrong bank.

Maybe she didn't say any of those polite things to me when I left, I thought.

Maybe I didn't leave quietly or catch my duffel bag on the way in.

You begin to lose the ability to preserve memories after long periods of sleeplessness.

Maybe my past changed when I wasn't looking.

If I try to remember—

If I think hard enough—

I killed the teller. I shot her twice in the face.

The guard, too. Here's your greedy capitalist dogma, the searing bullet hole in your cheek.

It's called a *psychotic break*.

Oh God.

Jesus Christ.

Mother fucker.

Oh God.

He just shot her.

Oh my God.

She's dead.

Help. Fuck.

They're both dead.

Oh God.

The lives of everyone were changed in the second it took for the chamber to spin and send the bullet out of the end of the barrel.

Oh God. Blood.

Her face.

His face.

Oh. God.

It's called a psychotic break, and it's unstoppable.

It's not a slide, it's a trap door.

Their faces exploded into my sleeve when I pulled the trigger, and I'd written their obituaries in the span of five minutes. I got a little closer to zero then, too. They were reborn, and so was I.

They didn't get chances for redemption or salvation—they were saved in death, not life. Everything they had accomplished in their lives and all the difference it made when I pulled the trigger left a dark stain on the wall behind them. See, there's nothing after death.

Because there isn't anything before it.

I put the gun in my duffel bag and ran out into the street. Across it, through traffic, and tumbling over the hood of some beefed-up dick-extension muscle car.

It takes eighty pounds of pressure per square inch to break bone. I broke three.

Left wrist and two ribs, I didn't even feel them snap. Everything's water, and it's drowning me out.

Nose got shattered, too. I felt that one.

And now,

And now, nothing's real anymore.

I must be sleeping through reality.

A constant half-conscious daze cluttered with a thousand milligrams of—

Insert any drug you like here. Oxycodone to help you relax; methylphenidate to get you sharp again; a thin, bell-haired twig of a girl to wash it all down the side of your stomach. Toss in some Lanoxin to help steady your heart rate when you take too many stimulants. Because

you will, because you can't stop yourself. You do not have the power to say *when*.

And it wasn't important. Up until then, all I did was sign books. That day, I had a television appearance to make. A *media event*.

Foreshadow, verb.

To present an indication or a suggestion of beforehand; presage.

Imagine me and my blood-splattered jacket running clear across the city to the T.V. studio. Running like I was being chased by—

Demons?

Shadows?

Memories?

You are what you eat. And right then, I was eating shovelfuls of coal.

Imagine me billowing black smoke down Seventh Avenue.

Cherry slammed the door of the hotel room behind Maura.

"Enjoy your last thirty seconds of fame and fortune, honey," she said, "because this time, David's endangered not only a brand we're getting closer and closer to firmly establishing, here, but my entire firm. Everyone's fucked, honey."

I heard a woman in Raleigh strapped a bomb to her chest and cleaned out an abortion clinic on an overcast Friday morning. Not that I had anything to do with that.

Cherry went on, "Can I control this? I don't know. Spin and damage control is one thing, but this, this isn't bad. Fucking stupid is what it is."

"What are you talking about?" Maura asked.

I told the woman to discard one belief that was set in stone. She chose to throw out the belief that all life is sacred, and let take over the impulse to punish those who she believed were evil. She became, for one happy, enlightened moment, she became God.

Cherry told Maura what she knew, that I told the nice lady with the recycled-fiber shopping bag and hemp skirt and shoes to kill a bunch of people.

Cherry told Maura *everything* after that.

About Mr. Slicked-back.

About the deal, why I was really doing everything she asked.

"And the best part, nobody has a clue where he is," Cherry said. "We've been here two days, and nobody has even talked to him."

"I talked to him last night." What a liar, covering for me like that. Useless.

It's hard to cover for someone when you're trying your hardest not to cry.

Cherry's advance team was already at the studio. She was supposed to pick me and Maura up at the hotel and meet them there.

There's the pre-taping meet with the host during makeup and the audience warm-up. Typically, it's a producer or stage manager doing the warm-up. Sometimes, it might be a comedian or even the host himself, if you're really, really lucky.

If there's anything else you want to talk about before the taping, that's the time to bring it up. Otherwise, stick to the cards the host has on his desk. Prearranged spontaneity.

"So, how, just exactly, do you know all of this stuff?" Maura asked through her salt-water cheeks. Her head bounced up and down like some shaken car wreck victim. Family splattered on the bent safety glass. Crushed rear-facing infant seat.

Sniffle.

"What, did he *tell* you, Cherry? Confessed his sins to you? You know, because you're such

a fucking confidant of his.” Sneering, almost, through waterfalls.

“He hates you, you know that?” Maura said.

Maura went on.

“And now that we’re here, I think you’re a total bitch, too. You never cared about David, and every time—”

She called her *doll*—

“I want to beat the shit out of you. You’re so fake, and you don’t even know it.”

This is the part where Cherry told her how if she didn’t want to be called a doll, she shouldn’t act like one all the time.

Insert magnanimous restraint.

It was like Cherry came down from her Kingdom and spared Maura. She became the avatar of omniscience. A psalm of absolution. Cherry didn’t rip the hair from Maura’s head, opting instead for ditching the twist in the hotel room on her way to the studio.

Maura wanted to do something. Anything.

She *wanted* to make packing materials out of Cherry.

“I think little girls who don’t know how to dress like grown-ups and can’t even kill themselves right should know when they aren’t wanted and keep their little-girl mouths shut, that’s what I think,” said Cherry.

She *wanted* to do terrible things to her, hurt her, but instead collapsed on the hotel room bed and cried harder as Cherry slammed the door and left. Maura might have stayed right there on the bed, and that’s what a sane person would have done, but this was Maura, and her best moment was when she was taken apart.

Deconstruction in a room of frost.

