

Lobster Clouds
and
Pieces of People

words by
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nine

So we're standing on this bridge, me and Maura.

She's *screaming* at me, and I'm thinking about tearing her heart out with my teeth. I hate her. I despise her. She's not Maura, she's the antichrist.

Satan, the Devil, Beelzebub.

Belial.

Apollyon. Whatever you want to call it, it's got black hair and steel-blue eyes.

We're standing on this four-lane bridge at the edge of the eye of a hurricane that's actually bigger than the ocean, and we're yelling at each other because we blame each other for being in the middle of the bridge, rather than safe at the other side.

Maura pounds on my shoulder with her fist.

Abaddon.

She wants to get out of the rain. I want to sit on the edge of the bridge and get swallowed up, nail and tooth, by the wall—okay, the *mountain* of a wall of water and mist coming closer and closer in the distance.

More bruises on my shoulder. Fuck you this and screw you that, crushing my arm and my rib cage.

I don't normally hit girls, but I think you just dislocated my shoulder. The prince of Tyrus.

Maura's wet like an oil slick in the rain here, her hair's stuck flat to her head. Our clothes are completely soaked through to our bones, and we're up past our toes in water with the bridge starting to collect the rain. More yelling, like I'm some sort of sponge for her abuse.

We're pretty much beyond pissed at each other, but all we do is hug and hold on tightly as the big, thick wave steamrolls past the bridge. The ocean rising up to absorb the steel-and-concrete blemish. Breathing into each other's shoulders while the wave turns the bridge into gravel.

Makes you wonder whose dream it is.

Everything is a tragedy.

And I mean that in the best way possible.

I don't mean the loss of a family pet, I don't mean passenger train wrecks. I mean loving someone even just a little. Caring about someone you think really loves you back, someone who isn't a false memory. Not the silver linings, the grey clouds.

I always loved Maura's stories. When I could pull them out of her, that is.

When Maura came home from work at her hospital one day, there was tragedy all over the floor of her kitchen. Little bits of puked-up disaster and the warmth of blue-skinned depravity, courtesy of her wasted fuck-bunny Danny. I bet she would have blown him right there on the

kitchen linoleum if she thought he could have kept it up.

SCARE ME.

That's what they tell you.

S—STIMULATE the victim. If you shake him, does he react? If you yell in his ear, does he flinch? Rub his chest, see if he responds.

"Get up, you asshole!" she screamed. "You're fucking up my floor! Get up!"

Nothing. Nada. Less than one, responseless, without reply.

Maura started to panic, but remembered the stuff from her job. With her scrubs and comfort support shoes on, trying to revive Danny, you'd almost think she was still at work. That is, except for the fact that she wouldn't normally have kicked a patient in the ribs to revive him. Well, not all the time, anyway.

C—CALL 9-1-1.

Maura skipped this part. See, most police officers tend to make a note of heroin overdoses in their incident reports, and details like that often cause problems outside of detox. Her panic went from pre-staged, to staged, to full-throttle panicked in the time it took her to tear the elastic rubber strap from around Danny's upper-arm.

A is for AIRWAY. If the victim isn't breathing, clear his airway and make him breathe. Pinch the victim's nose tight—unless you like being sprayed with snot—and tilt his head back to open his airway. You hook your index and middle fingers together inside the victim's mouth to scoop out any obstruction—say, for instance, slimy chunks of vomit—to make sure air can get through. It's called *sweeping*.

Maura swept out gallons of breakfast while trying to keep her hair out of her eyes. Think about her hair sticking to her face from sweat and Danny's half-digested Lucky Charms.

R—RESCUE BREATHING. Breathe twice hard and count calmly. One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand. When you get to five, give two more firm breaths.

I thought about how it tasted in her mouth while she told the story. That sour gastric smell like you've been eating melted rubber and raw sewage out of someone's intestines. Nobody in a business meeting knows what love is, she thought. This is love, Goddamnit. This is having a deep relationship, being capable of devotion. I love *you*, and you're gonna love *me* when I revive you.

E is for EVALUATION. Has your brave and valiant work done any good at all? Check the victim's chest and fingernails. If you're lucky, his chest is moving up and down on its own, and his nails aren't blue. Lips and gums, too. If they're not blue, pat yourself on the back and pretend you haven't wasted your entire life on snack foods and fifteen-percent gratuities.

If not, remember that M is for MUSCULAR INJECTION.

A drug called *Narcan* is used like an antidote to temporarily reverse some of the effects of opiate overdoses. As long as you can keep the O.D.'er breathing long enough, he'll probably come through the tunnel just fine. *Narcan* is what's called a *competitive narcotic*—that is, it reverses respiratory and central nervous system depression caused by drugs such as heroin, methadone, and Darvon. In fact, if you administer too much, you can actually trigger withdrawal symptoms.

She came crashing back into the kitchen, syringe and vial in hand, after tearing the bathroom mirror from the wall searching for them. Bits of mirror on the floor around the sink. Seven thousand years of bad luck.

You're supposed to give the injection in a large mass of muscle, like the shoulder. You also can't have any air bubbles in the syringe when you push the plunger, so you have to be very

careful when drawing the chamber full. That's why you see doctors on television hold them up and tap them before squeezing them just enough to make the needle jizz into the air a little.

Pat the veined area to swell the veins, insert needle carefully. Don't penetrate to the other side. Or, in Maura's situation, turn him over, jam it into his ass, and push hard on the plunger.

In three to five minutes, the victim should regain consciousness, or at least start breathing normally again. Imagine a couple of diluted milligrams of salvation streaming through Danny as quickly as it could, and more rescue breathing from Maura after rolling him over on his back again.

E is for EVALUATION.

Your O.D.'er is breathing on his own again, despite being a little tachycardic. Monitor the heart rate until the ambulance arrives. Hope it doesn't become too erratic, because if it does, there isn't much you can do about it, short of a small supply of lidocaine.

All Maura could do was cry her stupid little head off on the kitchen floor, while Danny laid there shivering and clammy. She collapsed on top of his chest, sobbing and cursing him for not getting it over with. Not dying. Not leaving her. Not pushing a bigger needle and locking his heart down like a prison riot.

He got to live one more time, and she died again to make it happen.

Fair enough, I guess.

Now, Narcan tends to induce vomiting—in Danny's case, *more* vomiting—so Maura struggled with her entire being to get him on his side when he started convulsing.

Imagine the thin, murky fluid of an empty stomach coming up onto the flower-pattered kitchen floor, burning Danny's throat all the way up. Dousing his esophageal tract with acid, and filling the room with that smell that pokes through your nostrils with ten-penny nails.

"Fuck you, Danny!" she screamed.

For not handling your high.

For fucking up my kitchen floor.

"Shut up—"

Gasp, shake, tremor.

"You stupid bitch," Danny mumbled and stuttered back. He could barely talk, and that was what he chose to say. Shivering on the cold linoleum.

Fuck you for not dying, she thought.

For everything.

Induce vomiting. Induce cascading waves of love. Induce devotion, adoration, made-for-T.V. movies.

Induce the wonderful pain of being born again on the dirty floor of someone's kitchen.

They never tell you anything over the phone.

It reminds me of upper-management zombies firing people on Fridays and holidays. As if everything is perfectly okay in the world, as long as they're not in the office when it happens. No conflict. Separated by letter or phone, no danger to anyone.

Sterile, non-threatening public service announcements baked in buckets of starch.

"Hi, I'm trying to get in touch with David Preacher. This is the emergency room at— Maura Spring listed you as a contact— There's been an incident—" Maybe the voice said incident. Maybe she said *emergency* or *accident*. *Nuclear meltdown*. *Extinction-level collision event*.

Panic, adjective.

Of, relating to, or resulting from sudden, overwhelming terror.

Think “panic attack”, but without the clarity of direction.

They don’t tell you how it’s really only the shooters and hangers who are actually serious. Not crying for help. Those people don’t turn chickenshit and get talked down. Click, squeeze the trigger, kick the chair over, cut to black. Druggers take whatever they have—Depronol, Valium, Nembutal, whatever—hoping they’ll fall gently asleep and never wake up. They tend to think it’ll go well with red wine or something else equally poetic, but they usually just end up puking all over the place and living with a gastrointestinal feeding tube in their belly for the rest of their lives. You gotta down a lot of depressants to make it quick and easy, and most drugs—they always think mixing pills will make it so much better—don’t hit you at the same time. Some smarter druggers even take antihistamines to ease the vomiting.

Jumpers, all they’re doing is looking for attention. Whining for someone to save them at the last second. Most humans can survive a five-story fall onto concrete, most jumpers don’t know that. Even if they had the balls to jump, they’d just make a funny sound before the rescue workers got to them. Never mind that it’s almost impossible to kill yourself in a wheelchair. The same goes for those people who lock themselves in their garages with the car running. If they were really serious, they’d be somewhere their family wouldn’t stumble in on them.

Slashers are split into two groups. Most slashers are really just scratching their arms up, horizontal cuts across their wrists. This never works. It’s indescribably painful, and unlike the movies, there isn’t some blood geyser waiting for you three millimeters under the skin. All it takes is some applied pressure to stop the bleeding, and that’s no fun.

Don’t even think about your neck, either. The carotid artery that comes out of your heart and splits off into the side of your neck is protected on one side by your windpipe. It takes some serious will power and a deep blade to sever this thing successfully. Serious slashers razor the entire length of their arms instead, taking as many veins and arteries with them as possible. It’s next to impossible to stop an arm from bleeding once it’s split wide open like that.

Occasionally, a shooter will leave “hesitation marks” in the wall behind him, where he jerked the gun up at the last second before firing. May as well be a druggler. Most of those can’t even put the pills in their hands.

Maura was in restraints in her bed when I got to the hospital. I stood in the doorway while she slept—or was out cold, whatever—and talked to the attending on the floor that night. He told me how Maura’s neighbor called for help after stepping into a stream of water running out of Maura’s apartment. How the door was cracked slightly, and when her neighbor opened it, he could see the water pouring out of the bathroom in the near hallway.

The average person can lose five pints of blood before they bleed to death.

The EMTs found Maura in a blue house dress, submerged in a bathtub of warm, bloody water. They found the steak knife at the bottom, next to her waist, and a long gash lengthwise down her left arm. I thought about how much a cut like that must have hurt.

They call dark red blood *veinous blood*.

Pretty purple lips obscured by a garden of hair drifting around her head under the surface, fingernails colored to match. Jagged, serrated forearm skin leaking like an oil tanker off the coast of some habitat for endangered marine life.

A bathroom full of tragedy, spilling into the hallway outside.

Maura looked completely helpless and frail in the bandage wrapping around her arm. Looked, shit, she was helpless, locked to the bed with those thick leather straps around her arms.

“It’s really quite the miracle she survived at all,” the doctor told me. I wouldn’t have called it a *miracle*. Unfortunate accident, maybe. I thought Maura was rather unlucky in that respect, actually. Imagine being forced to think about it every time you looked down at your arm, or every time your scar itched in the rain or heat.

I tangled my fingers around her neck and shook her. Really shook her hard, like my worst enemy’s mother.

Die, I screamed.

You should be dead, I told her. I cursed her for not finishing the job, not leaving me, not throwing me away like everything else before me. You’re just killing yourself, I said, and you can’t even do that right.

You wanted to die, that makes you happy, I’ll help you. I’ll do it for you, Goddamnit. My fingernails started gathering flakes of skin scraped off her neck.

I’ll give you violence, if that’s what you want. I’ll give you self-destruction. I’ll give you *love* and *devotion* right through your windpipe. She looked at me blankly and let out thin threads of breathless gasps and creaks as I tightened my grip on her throat.

The *world* flashed this time, and I was standing in the doorway with the doctor again while Maura slept quietly.

“It’s hospital policy to monitor all suicidal patients for at least forty-eight hours. You’re welcome to stay as long as you like, but she’s going to be moved to Psych in just a little bit. They may or may not let you see her after they admit her,” he told me. “Probably won’t.”

I stared at the sheet covering Maura’s belly going up and down as she breathed.

“Your girlfriend is pretty screwed-up,” the guy went on. “Ultimately, it’s up to her to get some help, but I’ll give you a list of doctors with this hospital that can help her, or help you help her, whichever.”

I didn’t tell him I wasn’t planning on staying there long enough to get his list.

“So, why’d she do it? Any idea?” Kamikaze pilots don’t have those kinds of nerves.

Cut to: The tiled floor of Maura’s flooded bathroom, and up the side of the bathtub.

The water poured over the lip, Maura floated under the surface, and a small pine box watched over the whole scene from the flat corner of the tub.

Many people clean their houses when they’re angry or depressed. Jump back to Maura straightening up some boxes in her closet and finding a small pine box in one of the mislabeled ones. A tiny, wooden keepsake box. Any other time, the box would have gone up on a shelf or a mantle or something. But when you’re upset, you do stupid things, things you normally wouldn’t do.

The piece of a person inside the box told Maura she loved her. The elegant handwriting on the aged, yellowed paper.

Trigger tears.

Waves of joy that hurt like a jackhammer on your chest.

Trigger shaking hands.

Cascades of chemicals in the emotional centers of the brain.

Trigger a four-hour uncontrolled descent to the bottom. Rain falling on her head. Dark rooms and close quarters.

There was that dress they found her in that was like one her mother wore all the time. Maybe it was once her mother’s, but she couldn’t remember. There was the hairband in her hair, that was her mother’s, too.

You get the point. *Deja vu*, screaming at the top of its lungs as Maura’s filled with bloody

water.

“Where’s your doll?” Cherry asked.

I told her she was in the hospital. I didn’t tell her why.

“She’s still signing, right?”

Yes, she was, I assured her.

They covered the bullet points at the first meeting. The flagged info items.

Trained me to remember my life, the one they wrote for me and sent through Standards and Practices. Quality-assured, fact-checked life experiences. You don’t need your own memories when someone else is writing them for you.

Cherry’s team covered my philosophy. My checkout-aisle statement of purpose. There were three basic principles by which to live your life, according to the new me:

One, always remember you’re an important part of the world.

Two, remember that the light of the world is inside you, and with it, the key to universal happiness and love.

Three, the world is yours to change with your light.

The light inside you. That changes the world. Things this sugary and sweet give me big, fat cavities. It’s the same kind of stuff you hear chanted over and over by people who think they can talk to their dead grandmothers.

Learning your past is interesting. Being taught your past is fascinating.

Where was I born?

“Never answer that one.”

“Don’t ignore the question, but don’t reveal anything that points to anything. You’re mysterious and always seem to know more than you’re telling.”

I’m *mysterious*.

What was my childhood like?

“The orphanage—”

The orphanage.

“Was a lifelong struggle until you were in your late teens, but you persevered through it with the help of God and a sense of purpose and direction in your future life ahead.”

What does my message mean to me?

“Hope.”

“Love and understanding.”

“A sense of being and purpose in the world.”

What influence did my mother have on me as a child?

Oh, yeah, I forgot. The orphanage thing.

What do I believe my ultimate purpose in the world is?

“Giving hope to those who don’t have any of their own to give.”

This went on for weeks. Every day, I learned a little more about myself. Every night, I sat on the bus and hoped I’d get nailed from behind by a runaway tractor trailer. Broken glass and twisted steel collapsing and exploding everywhere from all directions. It’d be better than sex, even.

It went on for weeks, and I didn’t try to stop it.

Maura hadn’t gone back to her apartment since her suicide attempt. She was staying with me by then. We barely talked anymore. We were no more than thirty feet away at any given point in the day, and we were more apart than before.

I got to enjoy going to my training, I guess.

“Where were you born?”

I was adopted, so I’m not really certain about that. Being adopted has given me, I think, a good outlook— An insight into— A deep understanding of what it means to *belong* to something.

“What was your childhood like?”

The orphanage was a lifelong struggle, blah, blah.

“What does your message mean to you?”

My message fills me with *hope* and *love*. I’m given *purpose* and *strength* by it.

Don’t ask me about my mother.

