

Lobster Clouds
and
Pieces of People

words by
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thirteen

All of the lights in our car go out simultaneously.

Like a dozen pair of eyes closing at once.

The glass flower bell lamps are reduced to reflecting only the shine of the moonlight outside. They highlight and deepen everything around us simply by being consumers of light, rather than producers of it. The fluorescent glow coming off the water. The dark ink splotches where shadows fall from trees at the edge of the mountain.

Maura and I try to pick each other up from the floor, but the train takes the curve of the suspended track faster and faster. We can barely stand anymore.

The car tilts again, violently, and Maura hits her head on the edge of one of the wooden dining tables. I'm shaken to the floor unhurt, but Maura's knocked out cold.

Noise.

It's like pennies scratching steel.

It's outside. Underneath us.

I put my ear to the floor and hear only the rumble of the mechanics beneath the train and the scrape of the wheels grinding against the iron tracks.

Maura stirs.

I crawl over to her and shake her hard to wake her, but she doesn't snap out of it.

Wake up, Maura.

Maybe I'm the one who's asleep.

The coin-on-metal noise squeals and explodes violently—

Revolution, not evolution, as they say.

So, the gun.

The gun in my hand.

I pointed it at Mr. Talk Show Host, right at him, and the sprouting wet spot on the crotch of his pants. The studio lights shined off the barrel like the Sun bouncing off an oil spill.

No more endangered species.

Close your eyes, they're all dead.

Just like you.

Just like me.

I threw Cherry down onto the crushed velvet guest couch and looked out into the audience.

This wasn't just stunned silence; this was deep-earth-drilled shock. Ice core samples pulled up from somewhere dark and cold they didn't know they had inside them.

Mr. Talk Show Host just stood there, half-expecting some stage manager to let him in on

the joke that wasn't a joke at all. He stood there and waited for Cherry to say something, but all she did was scrunch her eyes closed when I pulled the gun back around to her.

You know the guy, with the chin and the top ten lists.

"David!" The voice behind me faded in through the commotion.

It was Maura. She kept screaming my name to get my attention as the guards dragged her away. I snatched Talk Show Host up by his five-hundred-dollar jacket collar and pulled him out to the edge of the stage. His nose started bleeding seconds after I shoved the barrel into it.

He squirmed and gagged a bit, so I held the gun to him harder to keep him still.

"Please don't kill me," he said.

Whatever.

I told the guards to drop her, and they did without blinking.

We're going to learn a little something about *control*, I said.

Maura looked up at me. "What's going on? Cherry said you—"

"She told you, I know," I said. I don't know *how* I knew, I just did. Maybe it was the tension, like violin strings, in her voice. But I heard what she was going to say before she said it.

I'm an oracle.

"Did you really kill someone, David?" she asked.

Of course I did. "Cherry doesn't know anything. Nothing at all."

"What do you mean, David? What doesn't she know? Come on, tell me—what doesn't she know?" she asked. Big watery olives for eyes. Curious and afraid at the same time.

Really, Maura knew. She didn't want to *believe* she knew, but she did. I thought about that day at the sleep clinic, and how it felt like we were passing thoughts through the air between us rather than just talking. This was no different.

"David, please, God, talk to me. What doesn't Cherry know? I want you to tell me."

"This isn't my blood," I said, pointing to my jacket. "Well, not all of it. I think I broke my nose. You know, suddenly my chest and wrist aren't feeling too good, either. Maybe I should call a doctor."

I looked at Talk Show Host.

"You got a doctor coming on in the second half, don't you?"

I pictured what the inside of the barrel looked like with his trickle of snot and blood dripping down inside of it.

"David, what the fuck are you doing? Let him go, David, come on!" Maura shouted over the audience noise.

They hadn't left, the sensationalism-addicted fucking sheep, sitting there, waiting for whatever I was going to do next.

Is he going to shoot him?

Oh, maybe he'll shoot that girl. Or that other girl.

Will someone in the audience get shot?

Maybe if we're lucky.

Please, please, please, he kept on.

"I am so sorry about this! You know I had nothing to do with this, right?" Cherry was still covering herself. Appeasing the client. Mr. Talk Show Host couldn't have given less of a shit about her, and yet, she kept going.

Not my fault.

Had nothing to do with it. This unfortunate turn of events.

We'll spin it, don't worry about it.

I'll get my team on it *ay-sap*.

"Shut your mouth and sit down," I said to her over my shoulder. I pulled Talk Show Host over the couch and sat Cherry down with my foot in her belly. I *guided* Talk Show Host to the couch with the end of the gun up his nose.

Technically, you don't break what people traditionally think of as bone when you break your nose, you break "cartilage bone", cartilage that has matured over time to harden into bone.

"Stop acting like a child, David," Cherry told me.

I pointed the gun at her face.

"Stand up," I told her.

One of the first things you learn in corporate negotiations is to assert yourself as the dominant before the other person has a chance to. Rarely is it possible to reverse the control of a negotiation once dominant and submissive roles have been set. Sometimes, it's a race to be the top. Sometimes, you win.

Sometimes you don't, and you're the bottom. Only fools ever think they can turn things around once it's over.

Imagine Cherry still trying to gain control and power over the situation as she stood up.

"You're not going to kill anyone, David, because—"

I wondered what kind of reason she could possibly come up with.

"Because right now, your little girlfriend is crying over there, and you'd never hurt her, would you?"

Okay, that was a pretty good reason, yeah.

"You want her to love you, right? No one loves murderers and lunatics, David. You're going to put the gun down and she's going to forgive you, aren't you, doll?" Cherry looked over my shoulder at Maura.

"Shoot the bitch!" Maura yelled back.

I grabbed Cherry and flung her to the front of the stage.

"Turn around," I said. I held the gun to her head for a moment and pulled it down.

Swallow.

I opened the cylinder and gave it a hard spin. My eyes kept locked into Cherry's, I closed the gun without looking at it.

"The cylinder of this gun holds seven bullets. So far today, I have fired three times." I spoke slowly to her as she shook, as she was gradually getting the warm feeling of knowing she wasn't going to get control of the situation, and wrapped my hand around the far end of the cylinder. With my fingers around the gun like that, whatever was or wasn't loaded in the chambers was completely obscured to her.

I rested the tip of the barrel on her top lip as gently as I could, so she could speak.

"Let's play fill-in-the-blanks," I said, "No pun intended."

Maura was breaking at that point. She hated Cherry almost as much as I hated her, but I guess the sight of the gun itself, in someone's face like that, almost in someone's mouth, was just too much for her to deal with. She kept turning around and around, cursing and crying. She'd take a step forward, call my name, then go back to bawling incoherently.

"Is this something you can do?" I asked Cherry. She nodded a little nod at the end of my arm and I kept going. "Good. Here we go. Are you ready?"

Cherry nodded quietly again.

I took a beat and said, "Okay. Good. I want you to say whatever answer you think is right.

Here we go, now.

“When I pull the trigger, you’ll have a *blank in blank* chance of surviving.”

Shivering silence.

“Cherry, that wasn’t an example exercise. What is the probability of you surviving when I pull the trigger? Come on, you took math in school, you’re in marketing, you should know this.”

She hesitated for a split second and said, “Three in seven?”

“Wrong,” I shouted.

CLICK, the thick, mechanical pulling sound of the trigger.

I don’t have time to react to the wreck.

The grinding metal shrieks underneath the floor hit my ear drum, and by that time, it’s too late to even think about it. It takes a second to break over the tracks, as we tear down the curve on our side. The train derails and chugs right off the side of the mountain, over the rusty iron rails and teetering wooden supports.

Windows explode and flurry everywhere. Everything’s a mess of glass and sparks.

A moment later, and we’re floating down to the ocean.

I think, I can’t wake up.

No matter how hard I try, I’m stuck falling.

The ocean drops, and suddenly there’s a thousand more feet to fall.

Then two thousand.

Then ten thousand, as the bottom gets lower and lower. Sinking, but not sinking.

By now, the train has hit terminal velocity, and it’s a steady free-fall to the water.

Steady for the train, but not for Maura and me. She awakens and crawls over to me, and we take refuge under one of the dining tables. Bracing ourselves stiff and holding each other tightly, we watch the world outside spin and tumble around us.

The mountain.

The water.

The sky and the moon.

Every half-second, there’s a different image outside the windows.

I think, maybe if I close my eyes hard enough—

When nothing happened, and Cherry’s face *wasn’t* blown through the back of her head, Maura collapsed to her knees and screamed as hard as the audience did.

On and off, on and off, Maura was a light switch again.

Shoot her, don’t shoot her, blah blah blah. It was starting to piss me off.

“No, that’s wrong, Cherry,” I said. “The correct answer is *one in two*.”

If it hadn’t been for her tears, I would have mistaken Cherry’s look for curiosity.

“Either you will be dead, or you won’t be,” I finished.

I told her to close her eyes.

This again.

I pressed the gun into her lip harder this time, telling her to nod when she felt the need to answer the next question. Her lip started turning white from the pressure. The gun-barrel coffee ring.

“Do you believe you control your fate? And I don’t mean what you make of your life, but destiny. Fate. The Big Question. Do you control whether you are alive or dead?” I spoke a lit-

tle more quickly that time, as Cherry started getting sick to her stomach and her face started turning a faint shade of pea-green.

She started to shake her head, when I pulled the trigger again.

Cherry flinched hard as the hammer smacked the steel bullet rim.

Still nothing. No explosion, no mess.

A spent shell casing sat in the top chamber. More screams from the audience.

“That was a bit hasty, Cherry. You’re just telling me what you think I want to hear. I want you to answer again, and this time, really think about it before you answer.”

Imagine Maura’s head between her knees, rocking back and forth on the floor.

Cherry whimpered, “What the fuck do you want from me? I don’t know what answer you want.”

“You’re missing the point, Cherry. I want you to understand that this is not something you can control. This isn’t something you can put in your day planner or your executive desktop calendar mat. The universe isn’t something you can control, because nothing you do matters.”

A beat.

“You do not matter. I do not matter. None of us makes one big fuck of a difference. Do you understand this?”

She just held her head down and cried.

“Me,”

All of the deals she’d brokered and negotiated.

“Holding the gun to your head,”

All of the people she’d manipulated and used.

“And you whimpering into the barrel,”

Millions of imaginary dollars passed back and forth.

“Is totally irrelevant.”

Not one tiny bit of it made any difference in the world.

Useless.

It all came out, every drop of it, until everyone’s flaws were wide open like cracks in the surface of a salt flat.

Cherry’s, the notion that her markets and margins mattered.

Maura’s, that other people mattered.

Mine, that I couldn’t deal with any of it anymore, and was about to blow that waste of an egg’s head off magnanimously.

Her eyes were still closed.

She’d heard the snap of the trigger again and didn’t open them.

She didn’t know what was going to happen until it happened.

Nothing existed around her, outside of her.

Physicists say that if you wait long enough, eventually everything that can happen *will* happen. Some even say that for every possible outcome of a single event, a separate “branching reality” is created to play out that outcome. Everything that can happen—happens, in every moment, in every possible way.

“Not only did you live, Cherry,” I told her, “But you died. You were disabled, you were miraculously only scratched when the bullet bounced off your lip, and I was killed when the gun jammed and the bullet exploded in my hand.”

How callous.

That's how significant everything was, I told her.

How everything mattered so Goddamned much that the universe just let it all happen anyway.

You flash, and suddenly, you're someone else. In a different reality.

Nothing's real, and nothing matters.

It's all in our heads.

Cherry was left crying on her knees when I went over to lift Maura off of the floor and to her feet. Her lips were dry, and her cheeks were as wet as a riverbed.

Maura said, "I'm scared, David."

I melted a little just then.

"I don't want it to feel like this anymore," she told me. Trembling; feeling what the end felt like. "I don't want to be numb, David. It's like I'm lost, and I don't even care about not knowing where I am."

Despair, noun.

Complete loss of hope; a state of being overcome by a sense of futility or defeat.

There was the hair stuck to her face and caught in the corners of her mouth. There was the film of drying tears on her cheeks, and there was the tattered bandage wrapping around her arm.

Chipped fingernails.

Tiny feet in worn-out sneakers and no socks.

Maura was completely spent from the inside out. I wanted to weep into her veins just so she could keep feeling something.

I took her by the hand and walked her over to Cherry, almost cowering on the floor. This time, Maura held the gun with me. I didn't even cover the gun with my fingers this time.

The end of the gun brushed the hair from Cherry's eyes. More coffee rings, pushed into her forehead.

Maura stood in front of me, surrounded on both sides by my arms, while I told her to keep her eyes open. Cherry still wasn't about to open hers, and I'd stopped caring at that point.

I told her, "You're not lost, Maura. You're right here, and this is happening, and you're doing it.

"You're going to feel this, Maura." I helped hold the gun steady to Cherry's head.

All Cherry knew was what was being said around her; her entire world was made up only of what she could hear and the thoughts in her head. And in all of that blackness, she heard the trigger being squeezed back and the *click, click, click* of the cylinder rotating slowly.

My hands weren't on the gun anymore.

It's like nothing's happening. You just fall and fall and fall.

It's actually pretty serene in a free-fall. Like gravity affects you, but it doesn't.

And after a few seconds, that's how it is in the train car. We feel that slight pulling-up of some invisible force while falling to the bottom of wherever, and things are just quiet murmurs of reality around us.

The sounds of happy, playful children in a room down the hall.

Wind instruments creaking from the floor and walls.

Until this very moment, my dreams are frightening; viciously scary things from which I can't run.

Until now.

I look over at Maura, tight up in a ball under the table with me, and I think.

I think, I love her.

It's something I know, but can't tell her. We're about to die, and I can't just open my mouth and tell her.

Every half-second, the moonlight scrolls across the windows and through the compartment, and every half-second, Maura's eyes shine like I've never seen anything shine in my entire life.

Perfect orbs of silver-and-blue glass.

Silken black hair turned blue in the haze.

I ache with her.

Everything else is just sound. The tinkling bits of glass jumping around; the pops of the broken lamps trying to light up again; beaded curtains knocking on the walls.

The approaching ocean below. Like coffee grounds shifting back and forth in a tin.

We're there together, as fears and pasts and futures melt away, as the only aches left are warm, happy ones, of love and togetherness.

And then, as the train finds the water.

This time, the gun spoke. It spoke loudly enough to crumble empires, and Cherry opened her eyes. It was the first time in history a gun had been fired, it was so Earth-shatteringly loud.

Fifty thousand megatons. Jet engines and meteorites and nuclear weapons. Field artillery.

I'm dead, she thought.

And then, pain. Hard pain *deep* in her right ear.

Maura held the gun less than half an inch from Cherry's ear when she fired it. The explosion didn't just hurt Cherry's eardrum, it destroyed it.

The *tympanic membrane*, they call it.

It amplifies sound waves through the middle ear, across the malleus and incus, and to the stapes and a "foot plate" in contact with the fluid of the inner ear. The tympanic membrane, typically strong, also acts as a measure of protection against severe trauma to the middle ear.

Tell that to the blood that drained out of Cherry's ear and down her neck.

All the little messes we leave behind.

The edge of her ear was singed when the firing pin struck the primer and blew sparks out of the gap at the front of the cylinder. Cherry bent over in pain, cupping her burnt and busted ear with both hands.

She couldn't even speak. Just wails and moans.

Maura was this perfect little A-frame of a person, still holding the gun as it smoked. She couldn't speak, either. You've never seen something so beautiful.

Frail.

But strong. Maybe stronger than she'd ever been. Ever felt. Ever wanted to be. For the first time in her entire life, Maura knew what control tasted like.

I gave that to her. My gift.

"No control, Cherry," I said. "Everything that can happen, will happen, but in all likelihood, you will only either be dead or alive. Maura didn't shoot you, like maybe you deserved to be shot.

"In this reality," I said, "the universe gave you *permission* to live."

You're only alive because I didn't kill you, I told her.

Over the panic of the audience, you couldn't hear the gun hit the floor. The crowd went

nuts when the gun finally went off, and the incoming pack of police officers were lost in the scrambling-for-their-lives mob of audience members.

A stagehand had used the emergency phone in the hallway across the stage. That phone was patched into the front security desk, where a call was sent across town to police dispatchers. It took sixteen minutes and thirty-seven seconds from the beginning of the first call for help for the police to arrive.

I heard them shouting through the crowd when they stormed the studio.

Guns drawn, tactical two-by-two formations.

Maura looked over my shoulder and said, "The cops are here. Shit. I wonder why *they're* here."

I turned to look at them and turned right back around to Maura.

"If I had to do something dangerous to get us out of here," she began, "how would you feel about that?"

The rush is always better when you're being chased, I thought.

Maura jumped down and picked the gun up off the floor. She handed it to me right as the uniforms got through the scrambling crowd, and I pulled her in close to me. Her hand lifted my hand—and the gun in it—to her temple, and she screamed at the officers.

"Oh, God, get back!" she shouted. The officers stopped dead in their tracks.

Please.

Don't let him shoot me.

Never mind that the bleeding bag of shit on the ground was all my fault. That is, unless you saw me blow out that chick's eardrum.

I coughed, and sent a light spattering of blood across Maura's neck. The look on the policemen's faces, staring at blood so dark it looked black on this ghoulishly pale girl's skin, was worth the price of admission alone.

It almost made them forget about the gun to her head.

It only took a second: the officers hesitated, and the crowd enveloped them again. And like some top-secret KGB spies, we vanished with the swarm. Well, as much we could.

"Sorry about that, David," Maura said. Her shoelaces made slapping noises on the floor every time she took a step.

As she ran in front of me, I heard something oddly familiar.

Like some half-forgotten daydream.

Maura said, as she turned around, "If you do something dangerous and unexpected, you don't have time to be scared."

Anything, as long as it's exciting, I thought.

This was getting back to zero.

And before we knew it, we'd made it to the lobby. Because nothing is impossible when you're invisible.

Because, it might just be possible to assume the reality you want.

Because, I can't prove anything's real anymore.

Because, zero feels pretty Goddamned good.

I turned to Maura.

Kiss.

