

Lobster Clouds
and
Pieces of People

words by
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three

Everyone's standing around looking at me.

I don't securely know who anyone is, despite the unsettling feeling to the contrary, but they seem to know exactly who I am. And that's frightening in itself.

But they're not looking at *me*, they're looking at a *part of me*. Below eye level. Down.

My legs. They're looking at my legs.

I look down, because suddenly something isn't right. I don't feel anything strange, but something's definitely up.

A vein. They're staring at a vein in my right leg which has become engorged. I think nothing of it, perhaps because, even through I don't know it, this is a dream. I look away, but I don't.

Without warning, feeling, or even me noticing it, my leg has changed. Now I see what everyone's really gawking at, jaws down, eyes out.

A flaccid, wrinkled flap of skin hangs down the entire length of my leg. My leg isn't in pain, but like someone standing behind you in a dark room, I know the skin is there. Phantom feeling. I lift the leg of my shorts above my knee and suddenly feel the python-like constriction of a cord of rubber medical tubing. It's tight over my leg, just above my knee, and that's where the loose skin starts. Still, no pain. No screaming, binding intensity. But there's blood.

It doesn't happen until I roll and snap the tubing down over my knee. As I look past the tubing now below my knee cap, a river of the thickest red reaches for the floor. I don't know what made the cigar-burn-sized hole in the back of my knee, the origin of this torrent, be it bullet or spread of infection from a needle or nail. But somehow I know it came from within; that this black and maroon void was not the product of outside influence.

It's dark, and now I'm cold.

"What the Hell do you mean you've found someone else? How do you find someone else? You find fuck buddies and pennies, you don't find *other people*," Maura said to the man on the other end of the line.

"Well, we met at my NA meeting, and—"

"You just happened to *find* her on your lap? That what you mean? Christ, Danny—"

His name was Danny. Her name was, well, it doesn't matter.

"I can't fucking believe you!"

Danny had secretly been saying *hello* to the little harlot—the other girl, not Maura—at his Narcotics Anonymous meetings for months. Maura was just finding out then.

"You don't think this hurts me, too? I've been thinking about how to talk to you about this for months, that's how bad it's been for me. I can't stop pacing."

For months.

“For months? Danny, do you even know what it means when you say ‘I love you’ to somebody? You can’t just say that to somebody, Goddamnit. It doesn’t work like that.”

A beat.

“For months! Fuck you, for months!” Maura went from just simply mad to the kind of mad political dissidents get when they cross that line from activists to rock-tossing rioters. And then, a minute—a solid minute—of silence on both ends.

A little background on Maura.

Before her twisted little telemarketer scam, Maura was a nurse on the chemical dependency unit of the hospital behind her building.

How she got there, she never told me. I like to think she was once there herself. You know, a hen returning to the farm to help the others lay eggs. But she never said, and I never asked.

When a driver full of cocaine would slither out of his wreck unharmed after nailing to a tree some car full of formerly breathing Girl Scouts, Maura would be there, holding his meds as he sat there. Handcuffed to his bed, breathing into a pan of his own vomit, Maura stood there with him. Bleeding from ashen, infected track marks, a worthless heroin addict was comforted like a newborn, courtesy of Maura. A grit-encrusted drunk whose only home is the detox ward is given solace between falling down and wetting himself.

Puke, blood, and piss, Maura was there for them.

Housekeeping to room 407, housekeeping to room 407.

That sick little smile I’d come to depend on, well, that was just the tops of the trees. Everything Maura saw on that floor—all the dependents, all the drifters, all the burn-outs—was exciting to her in ways that made everyone shiver like drops of quicksilver down your spine.

They were the end of society. They were the bottom. The people who came through her unit were the first on the boat when natural selection came calling. She was watching evolution in action; the herd thinning to make whatever’s left that much stronger.

Bottom-feeders. Low-lives. Societal fungus, clinging to the walls and floors.

They were free, she thought. The hanging clouds of addictions and dependencies only heightened their freedom. These people weren’t tied to jobs they despised; they weren’t tied to hundred-thousand-dollar mortgages on seventy-thousand-dollar houses; and they weren’t tied to closets of glossy shoes and evening dresses and those perfect little earpieces they found in that store with the tall glass windows and pretend people with twenty-dollar scarves around their pretend necks. The mannequins, not the salespeople. As if you could tell the difference.

Sharper Image junkies, these people were not.

Each one was a breath of freedom; a product only of nature, not some advertisement-ridden magazine. Complacency in complete depravity, just like Maura.

Not surprising, then, was when she began seeing one of the residents on her unit. Not surprising after that was when that same resident took up the wonderful world of prescription pain medication as a hobby. Nothing surprised me after her, and nothing surprises me now.

It’s just how Maura was. How she worked without giving it a thought.

Your acquaintance, your lover, your accomplice.

She didn’t get under your skin; she became your skin. Wet and visceral and real. Maura became your clothes, became your fingernails, became the dull red glow of light through your eyelids when you close your eyes. And you became a part of her, inseparable from the rest without structural collapse.

Co-dependent, adjective.

Of or relating to a relationship in which one person is psychologically dependent in an unhealthy way or someone who is addicted to a drug or self-destructive behavior.

Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was couldn't have understood her. He was just an addict, no better than the common crackhead, and she was just another rock. Another pill. Another line, another track, another shot, another fuck.

I don't even think they spoke the first time they met. It's hard to speak when you're face-first in a stack of hospital gowns. There would have been the obvious signs: smeared lipstick pressings in the cloth, a dusting of rouge next to that. Eyeshadow fingerprints. Maura didn't wear such things, so all that was left was a damp oval where her mouth had been.

Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was was inhaling a dune of cocaine in the laundry room when Maura walked in to get a gown for a patient. He didn't even flinch when she interrupted him.

No sense of shame, she thought.

It excited her; made her stand up straight. A sharp smile eased across her face, and she shut the door behind her. He barely even looked up when it clicked shut. Facing the door, Maura looked down at the lock.

No reason to keep people out of here, she thought. Neither of us has any shame.

Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was might have objected had he not been fried out of his mind when Maura grabbed him by his ears and started kissing the powder from the top of his lip.

Most people, when they want to do something wild and unexpected, they wear flashy sunglasses or take off for the beach spontaneously for the weekend. They might have a snowball fight in the park. Run around in the rain in their good Donna Karan dresses.

Maura, never one to acknowledge where the line is or even see it sometimes, saw a quickie in the laundry room with a stranger she'd undoubtedly see again as wild and unexpected; something to do. Fast, anonymous, and dirty; adventurous. Maybe "adventurous" isn't as close to Maura as "dangerous" really is. But Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was didn't even register it. All he knew, and barely knew it with all the coke sizzling through him, was that some nurse he may have seen somewhere before had just thrown his belt on the floor. That, or a snake with a metal head.

There wasn't a lot of resistance, and soon enough Maura had her back to him, bent over a table of powder-blue patient gowns. Hair stretching and swaying toward the ground. Tiny breasts flattened into the table's end. She did most of the work, pulling him forward, pushing back into his lap. Letting out a small whimper every time she crashed backwards, she enjoyed herself. Her mouth opened and screamed into the gown, right into the faded flower petal design, as she came at the top of her lungs.

In the unlikely event the reactor core reaches critical temperature, release the steam reservoir valve immediately.

"Can't thank you enough," she managed to squeak out between deep breaths.

She stood there for a moment and just stared at the damp spot her screams left in the cloth. A pretty, temporary reminder, she thought.

Maura turned around to face him, finally, and looked up to his completely red eyes. Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was wanted to go again and again and again. Maura just smiled and pulled her scrubs back down, her pants back up.

“These gowns need more softener,” she said, catching a glimpse of his name tag, “Doctor Daniel Kelly.”

Maura tightened her waistband, cinching her scrub bottoms below her navel.

Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was zipped himself up.

And the beautiful thing about all of this was that this was only the second time they’d done this.

She thought, she thought, she thought. That’s all Maura did sometimes.

And when Danny came to her with the news—he’d begun attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings daily over the past few weeks—she thought maybe she and Danny could have something more meaningful. Maybe she could fill an ever-growing void she had so deep inside that she wasn’t aware of its existence. Maura was always about what didn’t matter, and in her world that mattered so little, it was impossible to see what did.

Losing things in her life or being without something weren’t the things that made her hurt, but there were those sensitive cavities that made her cringe in pain when touched. Little places in her heart that cried with complete silence; aches of loneliness and reflexive anger. She changed boyfriends—and occasionally, girlfriends—almost as regularly as the seasons changed, never hanging on to anyone for any substantial length of time. Maura threw people away like so much plastic freshness wrapping.

Here today, gone tomorrow. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Something about cycles, she told me. Something about how she couldn’t love someone like that—that people weren’t objects you could show affection to, and how love was just some arbitrary thing that people used as a reason to get married and split the monthly bills. Relationships go from being exciting and full of brilliance and luster to situations of convenience and mere contentment; holy vows of indifference and adequacy. Maura didn’t want to become one of those people who were like that. She couldn’t stand to feel static and muted, like a lab animal half-brain-dead from electroshock conditioning.

Being a part of someone else for that long was against Maura’s doctrine, so it never happened. Maybe one relationship would end because she made it end, sabotaging it from the inside, while another fell from cruising altitude and crashed to the ground before Maura could save it. Probably, even those were inside jobs, destroyed subconsciously by Maura’s need to re-experience the genesis of a relationship as many times as she could.

A desperate, broken record player, playing the first wonderful passage of the most beautiful song ever, over and over and over. In this sense, getting her fix from a completely different kind of needle.

The first step toward recovery is to admit that you are powerless over your addiction, that your life has become unmanageable.

Assuming one piece of the universe can have control over another, even Maura couldn’t understand how something that didn’t have any physical manifestation could have any control over anything at all. Addiction, to her, was a word to describe something very normal; something that just happened in the universe. What Maura thought of as the subjective *good* and *bad*, after all, didn’t apply. Things are what they are. Manic-depressive Zen apathy.

With the drugs gone, there was room enough for her. One dependency out, another dependency in. Poor Danny. At least I saw it coming.

All I wanted was to be alive for a little bit at a time. I took it any way I could get it.

Tripping people over in malls for the curses they’d shout, I knew where I was; strolling through restaurants, putting my cigarette out in the wine glasses of upper-class white people

who hadn't seen a speck of dirt or a black person in their entire tiara-crowned lives, everyone knew I was breathing; dropping half-empty baggies of pot into the baby strollers pushed from department store to department store by sport-utility-vehicle-enabled soccer moms, that was being somewhere and in the moment.

God, sociopath-sized for your convenience.

Maura was never that kind of dead inside. I mean, she was certainly in disrepair, and even falling down in decay, but unlike me, she fed off it. She used the holes in her heart to slide down and revel in.

She had it all in having absolutely nothing.

This was not Tracy and Hepburn. He was not Humphrey Bogart and she was not Lauren Bacall.

Maura and David weren't part of some legendary Hollywood dream romance—Maura and Danny, I mean. Maura and Danny.

In fact, the two weren't even Archie and Edith Bunker. The Odd Couple would have felt like kings of civility next to the two of them.

There was no Mike and Carol Brady; no Ward and June Cleaver.

That is, unless June Cleaver enjoyed barking like a dog in public at strangers—you really can't appreciate that until you see it for yourself—and Ward was a recovering addict with a penchant for relapses.

And they came like clockwork, too, let me tell you something.

Everyone's an addict.

Danny found out just how many addicts there are in the world one night at a meeting when an orderly at the hospital came late, right in the middle of him and his confession to involvement in a string of missing medication trays on the floor below the C.D. unit. Right in the middle of explaining how easy it was to walk around with pockets lined with colorful treats like a gumball machine. Codeine candies. Librium lollipops. Dexedrine Dum-Dums.

We're all diseased.

Right in the middle of spilling his juicy little sins to the crowd of first-name strangers.

It took all of about ten minutes into the next morning for word to get back to the Chief Resident. Five minutes after that, fired.

Cut to: Fifteen minutes later, fried on the dash of his car. Head snapping back against the headrest of the seat. If this had been a movie, this is where you'd hear the seventies rock blaring through the car speakers.

Cut to: Click, the turn of the key in the steering column.

If you've ever seen a car swerving out of control toward the median on the road, you know what happened next.

Cut to: The SOUND OF THE JAWS OF LIFE as they TEAR through the roll cage of Danny's overturned car, twenty-one feet from the start of its skid across the asphalt.

Automotive safety experts recommend you have your seat belt certified or replaced every two years.

Now, as your new, sensible family sedan takes a slice of that Pinto at sixty miles per hour on the freeway, the rubber on the tires begins to heat up. This happens because you're skidding across the one-hundred-ten-degree asphalt road counter-clockwise doing sixty, coming up on your side. With the rubber heated up and the left-side tires' sides being chewed into landfill, the tires burst. That's the exact moment you switch directional axes, and roll over and over into the immovable concrete median. And just before the median teaches you a thing or

two about inertia, a mechanical switch is activated inside the steering column which closes an activation circuit connected to sensors monitoring the acceleration rate of the vehicle. In this case, it's monitored by an accelerometer only there for this reason. Accelerate too quickly, or drop in acceleration too quickly, and the switch is triggered.

Sodium azide and potassium nitrate combine inside the inflator to create explosions of nitrogen gas which inflate the airbag inside the steering wheel. The potassium nitrate is called a *solid propellant*.

It takes one twenty-fifth of a second for this chain reaction to occur.

The bony parts of your hips and your sternum are pulled back on by your seat belt.

Your body is sent forward, pulled back, and pushed against the seat. Amusement parks charge a lot of money for this experience, so enjoy it.

You hit the median, it doesn't move, and you're lost in a hazy cloud of talcum powder sent into the car by the airbag as you sit there and wonder if you can feel your legs.

But you can, amazingly, and you crawl out of the car without so much as a scratch.

You've been reborn.

It's a shame that all this was lost on Danny, whose synapses were drowned out by the powder flying through his head.

Cut to: Ambulances and fire trucks and rubberneckers.

Cut, cut, cut: A hospital bed on Maura's unit, and Danny resting as comfortably as someone in withdrawal can rest. Sweating vomit. Convulsions from the bottom of your stomach and the inside of your chest. Everything is hot. Sleeping, but not sleeping. Teeth moving around in your gums.

It breaks like a fever, and the immediate craving is gone. Enjoy it while it lasts.

Maura didn't stay next to Danny, but she kept coming back to watch him. This time she was also feeding off his suffering, not only her own. Once, in passing, she almost felt sorry for him. Once, in a fleeting moment of amnesia, I almost felt sorry for her.

Fade to black.

Not everyone's beginnings can be so violent *and* miraculous.

Not everyone can know that what they want is stupid and useless.

Not everyone can breathe water and see the light.

What others couldn't have, Maura owned from the start. She wasn't demure, she wasn't frail.

You might have thought she was, the first time you saw her, but you forgot it all the moment she opened her mouth. Once she stopped being the listener, everything in the room belonged to her.

Danny relapsed twice more before things ended. Maura watched him as he sank deeper and deeper into quicksand. Half of her paycheck and all of his savings sent up the end of a straw, washed over the water-soluble coating of whatever pills they could get ahold of.

Medicine continued to disappear from the hospital.

Danny sold everything he owned.

Nothing ever changes, even when it does.

Maura quit her job at the hospital to take the telemarketing thing, and Danny moved in with her. Well, not so much *moved in* as simply stopped going home for longer and longer periods

of time.

Things happened, seasons changed, and there were weeks where Danny pretended Maura's couch was a bed. But she never complained—far from it, actually. If anything could have delivered her from banality and the mundane, it was a passion-starved, hopelessly sick relationship.

I think I hear irony knocking.

When Maura was a little girl, she told me, her mother gave her a wooden keepsake box as a birthday present. When her mother was asked what was inside, the response came, "You'll never know, Maura, because you aren't allowed to open it, ever."

To anyone else, that would've been a terrible present. Maura loved it, and it traveled with her everywhere until it was lost during a move some years back.

It was everything and nothing at once.

The keepsake box represented the innocent wonder Maura had when she was a little girl. Everything was fresh; new. Unadulterated and untainted by drugs and sex and carbon monoxide exhaust. Not corrupt.

There were purple elephants in the box.

There were beautiful jewels. Shimmering stars and comets. Far-off worlds hidden from everyone.

There was even the little brother Maura always wanted, right there in the box.

Maura's mother never told her what was in the keepsake box, and Maura never looked. Maura was six when her mother passed away, and still the box remained closed.

Some wonders have to be mysteries to be wonders at all. Maura could never know what was in the keepsake box, because she refused to open it, and because the moment she did know what was in it, the wonder had to end. Part of the reason it was anything and everything was because the inside was left unseen.

There was once a famous physicist by the name of Erwin Schrodinger, and in 1935 he posed a thought experiment involving a very famous cat.

In this experiment, he described a cat inside a perfectly sealed box—no doors, no windows, no holes, and no cracks. Inside this box with this cat in it was a "lethal device" capable of rendering the cat dead. The lethal device would be triggered by the detection of the decay of a radioisotope also inside the box. Given a fifty percent chance the radioisotope would decay over an amount of time x , was the cat dead or alive at the end of x ?

Superposition, noun.

Physics. An undetermined state of existence where two or more states of being are superimposed upon a single piece of matter or energy.

The answer, as Schrodinger put it, was that the cat was both alive *and* dead until you opened the box to find out whether or not it was; the state was left undetermined until the cat was observed.

As long as Maura didn't open the keepsake box, anything was in it. Once opened, the only thing that was in the box was what was in the box.

Maura's mother was a 1950s vision of Maura, right down to the Cold-war-issue blue-and-white polka-dotted house dress. Black hair to her shoulders, turned up in a bouncy curl right before it touched her skin. She wore heels of some sort whenever she wasn't bathing, sleeping, or wearing slippers, so I suppose it would have been strange to see Maura in anything different.

She had aged beautifully, even though she was only in her thirties when she died. She had only a few lines like fine thread around her eyes and at the edge of her mouth, and just a sliver of grey running along the inside of one side of her hair. Maura was sure to inherit her mother's wonderful skin when she got older, something to which she looked forward.

Cherry red lips and shiny silver earrings, the wonderfully pretty things Maura grew up with.

"Maura, dear," she said. Maura recalled a conversation she and her mother once had at an amusement park. "What does that look like to you?"

Maura, all of six years old, craned her neck to take in a mighty Ferris wheel.

"It's a big starfish," the little girl said.

"It's a Ferris wheel, but it's more than that. Look closer."

"It's yellow," the little girl said.

"Look at the people in the cages, Maura. They're so quiet and happy up there. There may as well not even be a ground below. Right now, the entire world is outside them, and they can't be touched by it. Maybe they don't even realize it, but it's true."

Maura listened carefully, eating a cone of cotton candy bigger than her entire head.

"When I was your age, I went on one for the first time, and it was the scariest thing I'd ever done. My mommy just wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, no matter how much I cried and screamed. She knew I would appreciate it when I was older, and she was right. I was afraid out of my mind when we sat down in the cage, and the carny slammed the door shut. All these people were looking at our cage, at the little girl who was crying her heart out and her mommy who just kept pulling her down in her seat.

"When it started moving, I really got scared. I got so scared that I stopped crying and froze to the seat. I thought I was going to fall through the teeny-tiny little holes in the side of the cage. Back then, the cages had pieces of wood over the floor, so you couldn't see under your feet, but I thought I could feel how far down the ground was."

The little girl just kept eating her cotton candy and looking up at the ride while her mommy talked on.

"We got to the top, and then I thought I was going to float off into space. It was like we were over the Sun, and not even the birds could reach us. How's the candy, sweetie?" Maura simply smiled and nodded.

"It's hard to eat," she said.

"We went around three whole times, and when we stopped, we were all the way up top. I was still too scared to say anything, but I wondered if we'd be stuck there forever," her mother said.

"Were you, Mommy?" Maura asked naively.

"Of course not, sweetie. I'm here, right? We're at the park, eating candy and riding the rides, aren't we?"

Maura laughed as the candy made her sneeze.

"So I'm all the way at the top of the wheel, and my mommy starts talking to me. She tells me that I'll always be afraid of something, but that I'll never be more afraid than I am right then. My mommy told me that I could do anything as long as I wasn't afraid, and to remember being stuck at the top of that Ferris wheel with no way to leave or anywhere to go when I thought I was too scared to do something, and I wouldn't be scared anymore."

Then Maura remembered how the candy was bought at a candy shop down the street. She

remembered how the park was closed, and how the Ferris wheel wasn't moving and no one was on it. Grey clouds had started to rain and melt her cotton candy. An empty park and a puddle of water below their feet.

FAINT THUNDER in the distance.

"You're not scared, are you, Maura?"

How ironic that Maura, a former nurse on a unit full of co-dependents, was one herself. Stuck in a morally draining relationship, afraid to leave, lest what was left of her world fall apart.

You'd think she would have been into that. The falling apart thing, I mean.

She once told me, "You won't be better at living until you've come apart at the seams."

I once thought I said that to her. Funny how you remember things sometimes.

No sense in being strong; being weak and beaten and destroyed was knowing what you could do and what you couldn't. What you were capable of.

The people you loved were useless to you if they didn't know more about you than you did. This is where we fit together. Tight and solid and complete. Tab A into slot B.

Some of the strongest kinds of glue in the world are made from the hooves of dead horses.

"So, just how many months, Danny?" she asked. The setup.

"Three, but it didn't get serious until really, really recently," Danny replied.

Four, actually.

"So three months is better than a year? You can't leave me, Danny." Maura was finally getting to why she really cared. It wasn't betrayal, it wasn't territorial. She was afraid.

Maura didn't want to be left alone again, but she was realizing—very quickly, like an avalanche—that it was inevitable. Another person was leaving, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Danny took the longest breath in the history of Man.

"I am a co-dependent, Maura, and so are you. We can't be together, and more importantly, I can't be with you. I'll never get better," he said. A dagger through her neck.

The fourth step toward recovery is to take a searching and fearless moral inventory of yourself.

He finished, "And neither will you."

In her head, Maura couldn't decide if he was being petty and back-stabbing or telling the truth. In her heart, she knew it was the truth. It was time to break off another part of herself and let whatever happen. Throw it away and find something she didn't have.

"Just by being with you, I've hurt you. I can't tell you how bad that makes me feel, but I'm deeply sorry for all of it, and I hope one day you can forgive me," he said.

The ninth step toward recovery is to make direct amends to such people you've harmed wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

I guess he didn't think too hard about that last part.

"It's you or nothing," Maura cried. That was the only way she could say it, giving him a choice without options, making it happen.

Maura's heart tried to break. There were some things she at least *wanted* to care about, I guess.

She cried over it, the fucked-up little grown-up girl. She cried because she was lost inside the only thing she had any control over. Maura let go and fell through the bottom like glass, and

got completely lost inside herself. Alive again because it hurt.

That night, on the telephone, she was found.

Not by God. Not by Allah. Not by Ganesha.

Maura was found by David Preacher. Don't call me a savior, or a healer, or a divine beam of wisdom. What I was, was freedom.

What I was, was fire behind driven eyes.

I was going to show her sick little laugh what didn't matter. And she would save me.

