

Lobster Clouds
and
Pieces of People

words by
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twelve

I think, maybe something's wrong.

We pass through a tunnel that isn't so much a tunnel, but nightfall, and the temperature in the passenger car drops hard.

I wonder how much we're supposed to notice.

Clouds of breath fall out of my mouth, and Maura's devilish smile is sullen. Nothing's moving; we're in a world of perpetual stasis.

The train feels less powerful, somehow, for reasons I can't describe.

It, like everything else before, just feels different—has a different taste to it. Surrealistic and eerily empty.

The lamps in our car begin oscillating slowly as we clear the trees and suddenly can see for miles and miles outside the windows. Everything out there, now, is an infinitely dark-blue ocean reflecting moonlight through gentle harbor fog. It's the kind of darkness that's more soft than it is dark; the kind of darkness that makes you shiver because you can see things around you, but only what glows in the plush moonlight above the water.

Even though we can't see them, we know the tracks have become nothing more than old, rusted steel pipes held up by rickety chopsticks for supports. They splinter up from the waves hundreds of feet below and sway back and forth underneath us.

Toothpick shadows on the water.

The tracks curve down, way down, and we're tossed on the floor as the train dips with them. We roll to the front of the car, stopping only because of the sliding door that doesn't open.

A monstrous CRASH OF THUNDER in the night outside.

I think, we're going to die in this train.

602 was Phoenix. 312 was Chicago.

210 was San Antonio. In 1997, it split into 830 and 956 with the increase in population density in the northwestern and valley areas.

In case you've ever wondered why larger cities tend to have smaller area codes, picture a rotary telephone. Back in the 1940s, when the area code system was designed, there was no such thing as a touch-tone phone—all telephones operated via rotary dialing pulse operation. Each number you dialed on a rotary phone sent an equal number of "pulses" to the local exchange. Add up the numbers of the area code and you got the total pulse count.

Larger cities tend to be older cities, and more importantly, cities which have had telephone systems longer than others.

It's a matter of *time*.

It took longer to dial—to complete the pulse count—larger area codes on a rotary dial than smaller ones, because you had to wait for the dial to finish rotating back for each number you dialed. States that had only a single area code were all assigned NPAs with a zero in the middle, as called for by the original 1947 plans. This practice ceased in 1952.

620 was Wichita.

815 was Rockford.

That's all I could think about as I ran through the street.

Not cars barreling through intersections. Not changing stop lights.

Not the trucks constantly switching lanes.

Every time I passed a pay phone on a corner or somewhere, I imagined the last number it dialed.

351, Boston overlay.

I could see them dialing.

971, Metro Portland area.

I saw the world getting farther and farther apart with each cell tower and PBX that went up. Overflowing phone trunks and skyscraper radio towers grounded with copper halo grounding rings.

I barely felt it when I ran into the side of the car coming across the intersection.

My body snapped and bent over and my face bounced off the hood. Over and over, tumbling across the car. My mouth and nose filled up with blood. Down my neck, coloring my collar.

I thought, at least it wasn't the windshield.

Police forensic teams can use a vehicle's skid marks to determine how fast it was going before the driver slammed on the brakes.

The studio was an entire floor of the Knight Building. Actually, it was only one, but it spanned more than that.

Floor sixteen of fifty-two, above the first sky lobby.

Twenty-three minutes to showtime.

"What do you mean, he isn't here? Where is he?" Cherry found I wasn't anywhere to anyone when she got there.

"We don't know any more than you do," her assistants told her.

"Well, I can't fire myself," she started, "so I guess that just leaves you two."

Thrown away; useless like broken condom wrappers.

Cherry fired both of them on the spot without losing an icicle. Her assistants didn't think she was serious at first, so they laughed and watched her eyes carefully, like deer in a hunter's scope.

Midnight blue eye shadow, thicker than cardboard.

Cherry didn't laugh back. "Go on, I don't want to see either of you again. Goddamned losers. I give you an easy task—this was a *simple* task, and you geniuses screwed it up. If the two of you can't keep tabs on one person, I have no use for you," she said.

Something about displacement, Dr. Morgan might have said.

Twenty minutes out, and I wasn't about to stick around for an accident report.

The car jammed on its breaks the second before I broke my nose on its vented muscle-engine hood, and the truck behind the car didn't have enough time to react. The back windshield of the car exploded into the street when the trunk and rear suspension accorded into the back seat.

In the unlikely event you're not wearing a seat belt, the safety glass conveniently located to your front will ensure you're safely contained within the vehicle.

The noise dissipates, and everyone's standing around me.

They're looking at the accident and the ground beside me. At my gun.

I'd forgotten to zip up my duffel coming out of the bank. I scrambled up and grabbed it, arrowing it wildly but steadily at the people gathering around me.

"Get the fuck away from me!" I screamed at them. The crowd inched back away from me like fallout.

They asked if I was okay.

Do I look okay?

I'm cradling my wrist and ribs, and my face is covered in blood. My shirt's not looking any better. I'm blowing bubbles every time I talk.

No, I'm not *okay*.

Fifteen minutes to showtime, the perky, espresso-amped Production Assistant told Cherry.

The peppy thing probably mainlined cappuccino in a bathroom stall somewhere when no one was around.

"David is on his way, I know, because I just checked in with him. He's stuck in traffic near the hotel. Shouldn't be long now." Right through her teeth came a smokescreen of thin air.

Droplets of sweat down her armpits and sides.

Nothing made her nervous, but this did. This shook her.

This was katagelophobia, the fear of ridicule, maybe. The aftereffect to what doctors call the "Social Phobia". An ego-dsytonic cake frosting.

Embarrassment.

Humiliation.

Nothing shook Cherry.

Nothing but this, that is. The fear of being humiliated and humbled, that was her nightmare. What she lived with—what drove her, what kept her sealed off behind pinstriped, double-breasted barbed wire.

That fear was her motivator.

The funny part was, I guess you could say I really was stuck in traffic, in a crash-test-dummy sort of way.

313 was Detroit.

You've never heard profanity like the toxic waste that shot out of Maura's mouth after Cherry left her at the hotel. She had run down to catch Cherry, but Cherry was long gone. Every sexual insult you could come up with was tossed out like hail. Things Cherry did, things her mother did, things Cherry swallowed, things her mother swallowed.

Right up to the sky. Angry with it, even.

People on the sidewalk tried their best not to make eye contact with Maura. She was in a place they'd never be, so they had to quarantine her just so they could keep feeling good about themselves.

Maura ignored them all and rolled around on the concrete curb, bawling and cursing at the same time.

Modesty, out the window. Sanity, in an abandoned prison somewhere in northern Siberia.

I always did get a bit turned on by a girl with a dirty mouth, but even I would have gone soft and floppy after hearing the twisted shit that Maura screamed down the street on the sidewalk.

You'd have thought she was a crazy person, the way she shouted at the missing car.
Imagine that.

Imagine me and my busted nose taking off again through the gathering crowd as I caught a glimpse of Maura in a taxi, on her way to what was starting to seem like everyone's destination at that point.

Now, the Knight Building had this clock outside, over these massive glass doors that were rimmed with gold-plated steel or iron or something. The glass was a good half-inch thick, and was beveled everywhere you could have beveled a flat piece of glass. The handles on the doors alone were over a foot tall.

Eight minutes to showtime, the clock said.

I clearly remember being chased through the ground lobby by the security guards after I barreled through the ten-foot-tall double-doors. I remember how I kept almost slipping on the blood falling out of my mouth and splattering trails across the checkered marble floor because my shirt wasn't catching it all.

The average person can run about twelve miles per hour. I did twenty.

While Maura was already there, arguing with the lady at the front desk about getting let up to the studio, I just sailed past, throwing open the door to the stairs. In the explosion of confusion, with everyone starting to scatter, Maura took her cue and hit the elevator with some future audience members right before it closed.

I thought about what I was going to do. How I'd send my message out to my largest audience yet. This was what I'd waited for, the opportunity to open millions of eyes at once.

To make them believe I could save them.

To make them *want* to be saved.

It was an amazing sight. It was *cinematic*, even. Cherry pulled up her jet-engine lighter and a cigarette just as I opened the door to the maintenance stairwell. One big drag, and she was lost in a slow-motion cloud of carbon monoxide and methyl sulfide burn-off. She forgot about being scared for a moment when the smoke cleared enough for her to see me walking calmly and steadily across the hall toward her.

Sixteen flights, and not even winded.

Her mind went from shaking to blank to blown when she saw me covered with blood and gripping the revolver down by my thigh.

My wicked grin. Sick and enlightened.

Her cigarette smacking the floor and bursting into sparks.

I'm in widescreen.

Two minutes and we're all dead.

Wasted like cellophane wrapping.

Hallelujah, rejoice in the warm comfort of sulfur riverbed deposits. I didn't want to be shielded or protected from any of it anymore. Give me chemicals, I said.

I wanted preservatives.

I wanted filler.

I told myself I'd burn everyone down like they'd burned everything before them. The over-developed forests. The strip-mined mountain ranges.

Their parents and their teachers.

Gods and mythos and cultures thousands of years deep.

We've killed it all, and now, we're killing ourselves and each other.

It's revolution time.

It's time to die and get reborn.

It's time to know you're alive.

The clock said—

Ring, the sound of the elevator doors opening and Maura running for the studio entrance as she ran into the lobby.

The clock said—

I threw Cherry out into the studio by her arm, toward the main stage, and walked out behind her with the barrel of the revolver in her back.

"Jesus fucking Christ, you're fucking insane," Cherry said. "What do you think you're doing? You're crazy as shit!"

I told her to shut up and just walk.

"Like, talking-dogs-and-clowns crazy," she finished. I would have kept my mouth shut if I'd been in her position, but that's just me.

The clock said,

The clock said,

Three.

Two.

One.

