



SHIRLEY

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HOMELESS HEARTS

BY TARIQ SHAH

The marriage between Dylan and Susan Spade had been wasting away for months, but Dylan just knew the alligator would save it. It was on sale at half price. And it was cute, in its own way. It chirped.

That it was an eccentric solution to a complex, serious problem was not lost on Dylan, but he found the idiosyncratic nature of his remedy a potent source of its power. It may be just the thing that makes it succeed against all odds, he figured, as he watched it wriggle atop its brothers and sisters, there in the big glass display at Pet City. It happened in Reader's Digest all the time.

Dylan had met Susan in the waterbed section of Slumber Land, the local mattress store. Neither had owned a waterbed before, though both had long wanted one. They were the only customers shopping that Tuesday morning, four years ago.

It was difficult for them to pinpoint what single thing made them hit it off so famously that day. Both Dylan and Susan had recently moved into new apartments. Both loved the sea, though for different reasons — her, the scent and the motion; him, the colors, the vast of its reach.

Each gave the other the same strange look when Waylon Cobb, Slumber Land's owner, cracked wise about what sleeping on such mattresses got you. And in the spirit of the moment, and without any talk, both slid themselves onto it, right there on the show room floor. The mattress gurgled with both took as a kind of contentedness, and as some sort of lucky sign.

Dylan worked in jewelry sales. Susan was a paramedic. He'd always wanted to learn to windsurf. She secretly knew how to play the accordion. Their contrasts and similarities seemed to crackle with a puzzling energy. They were intrigued by one another. The story blooming between them would be enduring lore, and that made them both linger over what they both thought was a spark.

Ultimately, both decided to buy more conventional mattresses that day. At the register, Dylan turned around to her and said, "It's just I have a phobia about puncturing things, you know?"

"I do," Susan replied. She knew she had something more to say — a joke, an admission — but when she tried to elaborate, the earnest cast of Dylan's doe eyes rendered that terse response sufficient. And anyway, she didn't want to lie.

"We should celebrate our sensible purchases by renting a sports car and scoring a speedball," she said.

"I was about to say, 'Want to get a cup of tea with me?'" Dylan said.

"Okay!"

And off they went.

*

One afternoon Chip, Dylan's neighbor, noticed him pull about halfway into his garage, get out and open the back. In the back was a tank, and in the tank was a box, and in that box, the gator, about the weight and length of your average churro.

"They all got some fish, looks like," he noted to Missy, his wife, though she, per Chip's habit of delivering dirt she found super boring, ignored him.

Dylan placed it all on the living room coffee table. With its sliding glass door and big, west-facing bay windows, there was always a really promising light in the room at that sparkling point in the afternoon. He lit a cigarette and took things in, before she got home. The hanging smoke revolved lazily, like wind chimes that are never quite still.

Susan arrived home from the hospital with a testiness about her that, like any callous, formed as a natural consequence of the friction caused by the skirmishes between them, often at that hour of evening. However, when she saw her husband lounging in the living room, staring at a box within an aquarium, she kept poker faced. Susan tossed her work bag in the bedroom closet of their bungalow, changed into sweatpants, and was just about to look through the day's mail when the rasp of claws on cardboard caught her attention.

"I heard you come in, but I wanted to pause for dramatic effect," he said.

Curious, somewhat riled, Susan drilled a look into Dylan's balding pate from the far side of the parlor, where he patiently awaited the incoming volley of questions. Despite her better judgment, the words *What'd you do* escaped, giving Dylan a start.

"I've had enough drama already today," she said.

Creeping into the parlor, she leaned over the aquarium, looking in. "Is that a...gerbil?"

"*Au Contraire...*" Dylan made his eyebrows dance.

"This isn't funny. What did you get?"

"I thought we needed something that we could do together."

"Dylan what did you buy — No don't! Don't open it. Is it a rat?"

But Dylan had already unsealed the box before Susan had adequate time to protest, and out slid the little sucker. It scampered a bit around the tank, blinking, posing like some Dauphin before that needle-lined yap widened, which was the baby alligator's way of giving Dylan and Susan a smile.

Surprisingly, the Spades found themselves returning the favor.

"I've got some gravel n' shit to put in there with it," Dylan muttered, as he and Susan gawked at the animal.

"Look at that guy," Susan marveled.

"Want to pet it?"

"No!"

"Okay."

“Will it bite me?”

“Nah.”

“How do you know?”

“Why would it bite you?”

“All the usual reasons?” she said, windmilling her hands.

“They fed it before they let me take it home.”

“What does it eat?”

“*Fingers.*”

“Don’t be a — jackass,” she said, swatting Dylan in the arm. That sent the alligator off to the corner, where it clambered, boosted by its tail, and attempted climbing free.

“Go ahead,” Dylan whispered, “Struggle all you like, little gator — honey, look at its underbelly. It’s so smooth, like it’s dough, just a little green — maybe like pistachio bread dough.”

“That’s really super fascinating. If that thing gets out, I’m going to blow up this house.”

Though it seemed to him a rather obvious bluff, Dylan chastely nodded.

“You want me to get some tacos for dinner?”

Susan wasn’t immediately concerned with thoughts of food, but said, “Fine. Just don’t make a big fuss about the guacamole like before.”

“Like what before?”

“It’s like I married Scrooge.”

“It’s too much.”

“Please just don’t create an international incident about spending an extra buck seventy-five for guacamole is all I’m asking.” She looked at the aquarium. “That’s not going to stay there is it? In the living room?”

“I thought — because of the light.”

“Do you *really* think I’m —”

“Nevermind it’s fine I can move it to the pantry or something!”

“It is not allowed out of that cage for a single second. I can’t believe I married you,” she said.

“Isn’t this exciting? It’s like, it’s happening! Here we go!”

*

As a gesture of goodwill on account of Susan being such a sport about the whole situation, Dylan thought to extend her the honor of christening their alligator.

“I was thinking,” he began, “you should be the one. To name him.”

Head bent, Susan postponed taking a bite of her taco, trying to fathom her husband, as its juices dribbled down the valleys of her knuckles. Dylan threw a nod toward the alligator scoping out the action going down across the room.

“I don’t want to, you name it.”

“But...it’s gotta be at least both of us, like a mutual-type solution — bilateral’s the word I’m looking for. That’s the thing. Otherwise?”

“Really though, it’s a dangerous animal? What about when it gets to be an adult?”

“Nah, don’t worry. For one, they don’t get too big. I checked. For two, I figure we can just find a farm that wants it once it’s too big for us. They’re everywhere, right? We’ll just drive out for visits on the weekends and all that. Like it’s college.”

“I wish you would’ve asked me.”

“I know. But it had to be a surprise I think.”

“How’s that.”

“If I asked, you would’ve said no, and if I did it anyway, the sentiment would’ve been all wrong.”

It sounded so stupid, yet Susan found herself stumped, unable to locate a chink in that logic. She *would* have said no. If he had brought home an alligator after she'd forbidden it, they'd be talking divorce. She turned to size up the animal on the coffee table, took a drink of her Tecate. "It's quite bold of you, a move like this. Bringing children into the equation."

Dylan chuckled at that but when he sensed his wife's somber gaze, grew uncertain whether he really knew what he had done.

*

As the weeks passed, the alligator's original purpose became vague to Dylan. Susan never really cared to understand in the first place. Dylan dutifully stopped into the Pet City on Kangaroo Avenue each week to buy the usual bag of insects, watched them tussle and leap like popcorn in the knotted plastic bag while he perused the tropical fish section, a habit that brought him a bit of peace — they really were living the good life, he thought. Not a worry in the world.

Every morning before work, he fed the alligator a handful of the bugs — however many escaped when he untied the bag and shook them out over the open tank. He cleaned the cage twice a month, transferring the entire thing into the garage, then moving the alligator into another, merely-for-transferring-tank, which was the recycle bin, and which neither Dylan nor the animal ever enjoyed. It even bit Dylan's thumb one time, a minor experience on the whole, but one that drew bulging red pinheads of blood from his fingertip. "You're a fucking asshole," he sneered, then left to nurse his wound. Their garage chirred through the night.

In spite of this petty betrayal, or perhaps on account of it, the alligator was permanently moved into a larger tank after a few months. The new tank afforded room for a small wading pool, a few plastic jungle ferns, and a small boulder on which it might bask in the ultraviolet rays beamed from the ultraviolet light Dylan hung like an amethyst sun above the enclosure. Though it spelled eviction for one of their cars, Susan didn't seem to mind.

One day the following week she came home in a brighter mood than usual. "I thought we could sell the sofa," she called across the room while Dylan lay there on it, admiring the wall. "It smells like crickets in here."

"It's not crickets dear it's mealworms."

"Do you think I should vacuum?"

"Why," Dylan asked, "do you need to vacuum?"

“The stink, I mean, right?”

“Isn’t there like a powder they sell?”

“So anyway — yeah there’s a powder you can get — a guy’s coming by later this week.”

“For what?”

“For the couch, that he paid for, this afternoon.”

Dylan’s eyes narrowed. Susan futzed about in the kitchen, relishing his dumb pause.

“I’m getting a replacement, don’t worry.”

Dylan gulped. “This is payback,” he said. Susan smiled as she left the room, calling out, “It just wasn’t working for me.”

“This couch is awesome,” Dylan mumbled, stroking one of its cushions. “We’re naming him Balthazar, by the way,” he shot back.

“No we’re not,” Susan replied.

“Oh yes, we are,” he yelled. But before he went on any longer, he thought better of it. “Honey,” he sighed, “I think we’re fighting. We should go look at the alligator and remember what’s really important. Whatever his name is.”

“I like the sound of that.”

The Spade’s routines adjusted further to accommodate their pet, and Dylan came to feel cautiously optimistic his rescue plan was having its intended effect. He figured if nothing else, at least they were bickering again.

Chip and Dylan pulled into their driveways at the same time after work one evening and caught up with each other before heading in.

“How’s Missy?” Dylan asked.

“Oh she’s great. Better than great.”

“Nice. Good to hear. We’d like to have you two over one of these days. Maybe grill some steaks, before the weather turns.”

“Missy’s vegetarian.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that. Did I know that?”

“Sure, we’d be happy to come by. Been too long.”

“We have an alligator though.”

“That’s fine. You have an alligator? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s...it’s a therapy thing.”

“No.”

“It’s gone pretty kick ass so far.”

“You bought an alligator. What, they all out of rattlesnakes?”

Dylan smirked. “Why Chip, you ought to know, you married the last one they had.”

Dylan and Chip went over the details — the diet, the climate, security, logistics, fun facts, germane personal anecdotes, and as they shook hands and each went home, the notion of a dinner party had, without a word, become a figment of imagination, a plan to be determined at a later date.

Whatever-its-name-is rapidly grew to be submarine sandwich-sized. Its hues deepened to those of a drab house salad dressed with olive oil and ground black peppercorns.

“How long do gators take to get full grown?” Dylan asked Glen Standelle, the Pet City guy, one night after an awesome day at the Jewelry Barn.

“They’re never full grown,” he replied. “If you keep feeding them, they just keep going.”

“Not what I heard. Interesting. See because ours is getting to be a big guy. We keep trying to resist it, but he does this yelping thing in the night that sounds sort of like a baby would. Wrenches the heart at this...strange angle.”

“Say again?”

“I don’t know, but so one of us will get up and toss a leftover steak or something into the tank. Sometimes a slice of pizza or two.”

“I’d stop doing that.”

*

By winter the alligator had outgrown the large tank Dylan purchased for it and now lived in a kiddie pool that he penned off with some Plexiglas he bought used when Pet City went under, which was fine since the gator had graduated to feeding on mammals back in October.

The week before Thanksgiving, Dylan left work early and arrived home to find Susan sitting on the fancy new red suede couch. At the coffee table, atop a swathe of wallpaper ripped from the hall that served as a kind of place mat was a sheet of construction paper and a row of finger paints in dixie cups. Next to them was a square compact mirror. On the square compact mirror, enough cocaine to fill a shot glass and a crazy straw, scissored into thirds. At each end of the coffee table a red scented candle burned, a pair of little palace guards. When Dylan saw his wife, she froze.

“Am I interrupting some kind of...play date?”

“No, just,” she stammered, “bear with me here,” and looked around her, unsure, overwhelmed. She wet the tip of her pinkie on her tongue, dabbed it on the powder and raised it between them; he watched her finger’s tremor.

“What’s that smell — passion fruit?”

“Wait, come here. Just relax,” she said.

He sat down. Lifting Dylan’s upper lip, Susan dabbed along his gums. When she was done, Dylan licked his benumbed front teeth, went, “Hm.”

“I think it’s time for a state of the union,” she said, “I’ll go first. I think our situation is intensifying.”

“One of the great things about our marriage is how it unfolds,” Dylan said. “Every day brings a little new surprise.”

Susan cringed. “Gator time?”

“My initial thought is Gator Time ought to wait. Susan, are you addicted to cocaine? These candles — if I didn’t know better I’d think —”

“I’m just an enthusiast.”

Dylan pressed his palms to his eyes as if he'd been freshly maced. He laughed unhappily.

“Oh, blow me Dylan. Cocaine,” Susan explained, “is a hobby, not a habit and it’s fun and *not* ‘addictive’ or some ruinous pastime...or at least it’s not as ruinous a pastime as bringing home dangerous reptiles so you can salvage a relationship with a person you make no attempt to — get to know. A person you make no fucking attempt to perceive beyond her being some fairytale character in one of your silly fantasies.”

Dylan was unaccustomed to such brutal appraisals of character from his wife. “You said you were into it...”

“I mean — I kind of am? — or was, or whatever...” Susan reached for the straw but Dylan stayed her hand.

“Let’s check out what the gator’s up to,” he said.

“I don’t want to.”

“But don’t you get it? That’s the point!”

“I don’t *want to*. It’s boring. You don’t make sense, anymore.” Dylan let go.

“This is all so dumb,” she said, frowning at the floor.

Nevertheless, they stood, miserable, and trudged to the garage, where the gator was doing nothing at all, but seemed to each of them, in that span, to have grown larger than ever before.

“I just don’t want you to get hurt,” Dylan said, gazing into the pool. Susan shook her head. She began to cry.

“Why’d you have to come home early?” She sobbed.

They were tired. Their efforts toward civility had burned them out, left them too tired to care. Pulling along her husband, she shuffled to their car, opened the backseat door, and led them both in, where they wept in the stale heat and mourned and grew confused until they both fell into a deep sleep.

Susan dreamt she had a laugh attack in line to buy shoe polish at the drug store. Dylan, when he woke, remembered only that he’d been desperately mopping a factory floor.

In the morning, the alligator was gone. There was no trace of it. Still, Dylan turned the house upside down.

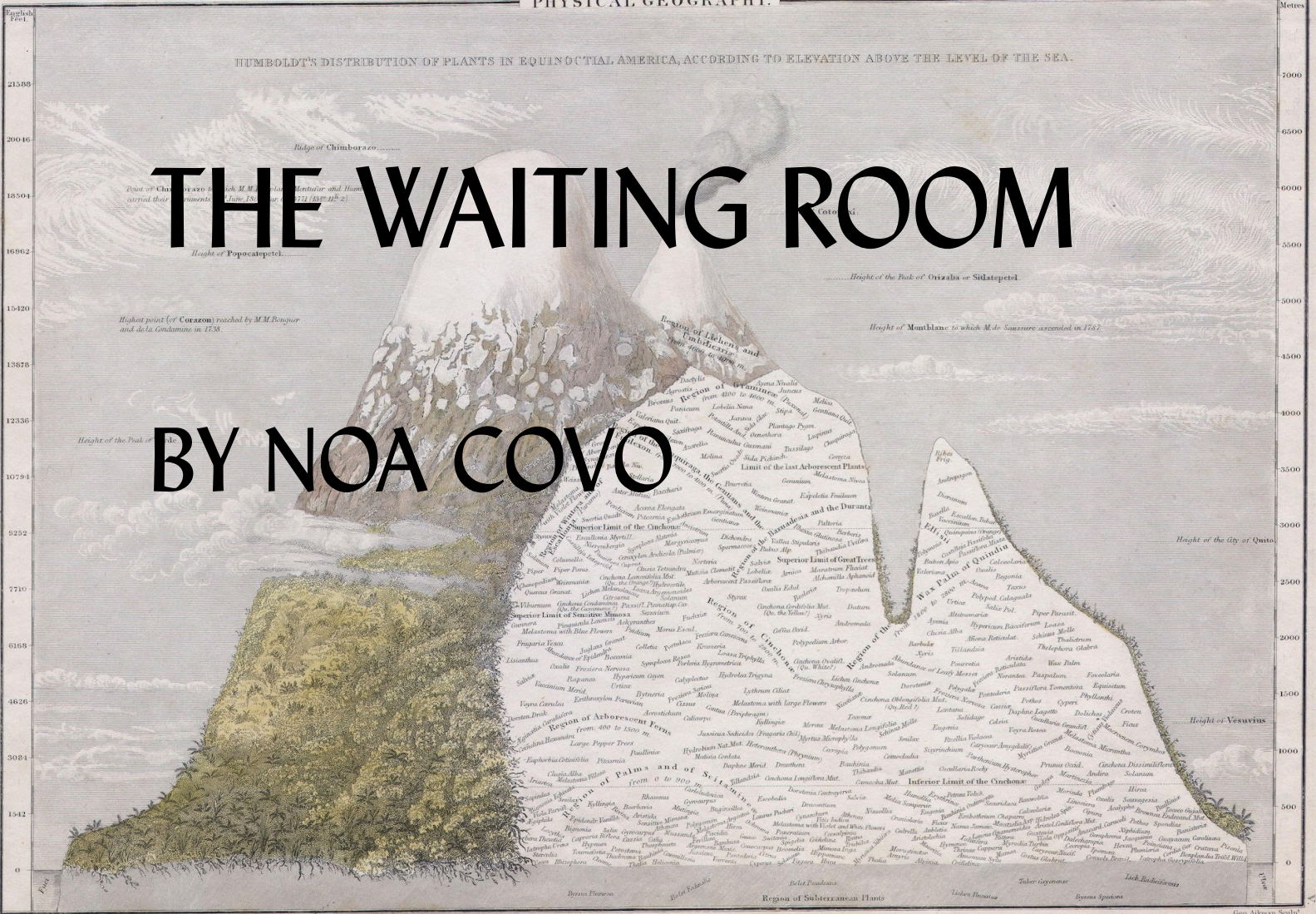
Susan didn't bother searching. Instead, she beheld the animal's favorite spot in that miniature tropical paradise, captivated by its little, inedible wax palms, its blue pebble beach, and the unique shade of sunset pink the pool's plastic made the water, finding it all very lovely, a perfect little home, if it only fit them.

Tariq Shah is the author of Whiteout Conditions (Two Dollar Radio, 2020). His chapbook, 'heart assist device,' was a finalist for the 2019 no, dear/small anchor press chapbook series. A Best of the Net award nominee, his work appears in jubilat, Heavy Feather Review, No, Dear Magazine, Anomaly, and other publications. Find him on Twitter @tariqshwa.

HUMBOLDT'S DISTRIBUTION OF PLANTS IN EQUINOCTIAL AMERICA, ACCORDING TO ELEVATION ABOVE THE LEVEL OF THE SEA.

THE WAITING ROOM

BY NOA COVO



The women in the waiting room share a magazine. Its papers are dull and ripped, the recipes scribbled over, the photos crumpled. The women mutter at the gossip section, insult the models, drop the magazine and go into the office one by one. The line is long today. The clinic is in a city where the regional quota of procedures is reached voluntarily every year. The residents take pride in their city being one of the most devoted to restoring Earth's natural habitats.

The women have deposited their things in a locked bin beside the front door, their objects carefully marked with forwarding addresses. Inside the office, a machine clicks and whirs. The women tap their fingers restlessly on the seats of their chairs and shuffle their feet clad in paper slippers against the floor. There have been no men in the waiting room today. They will come when night has fallen, their faces hidden in the shadows, silent, embarrassed. The women appraise each other silently. All of them have come dressed in their finest. They plaster their sense of civic duty over their faces to hide the apprehension underneath.

"I would like to be a salamander," a woman with fingernails painted bright yellow says, breaking the silence. A sign over the chairs prohibits discussion of the procedure

between patients, but the receptionist is out on her cigarette break, her third in an hour. There is no one to hear them converse.

“Well, *I’m* going to be a tiger,” a woman with a gaudy bead necklace replies.

“Selection’s tricky for that one,” a brunette woman says knowledgeably. “There are loads of criteria.”

The other women look at the woman with the bead necklace critically. She won’t make the cut, they think. She is probably one of the ones for whom the procedure is their only option, perhaps it is even court mandated. She seems, they think, like the type of woman that nurses illusions of grandeur the same way other women tend to desperate cabbages and scraggly tomatoes on their windowsills, replacing them each time they wither up and die.

A scream comes from inside the office, before being swallowed up by the clicking of the machine. The women look at the door.

“I hope it’s quick,” the woman with the bead necklace says. “I would like to be in the jungle already.”

The rest of the women exchange knowing glances. A few resist the urge to smile. The woman with the yellow nails chews her lips nervously.

“What if,” she asks, “what if we meet someone we used to know, in the wild?”

“We won’t remember,” the brunette replies. “It could be our very own child and we wouldn’t know.”

The women sigh collectively in relief.

“That’s good,” the woman with the bead necklace titters. “That way I won’t be worried about accidentally eating someone I know for dinner.”

The receptionist returns, bringing with her the smell of asphalt and garbage, and the women fall silent. She picks up a plastic clipboard from the desk and asks if everyone has signed the necessary papers. A few shake their heads and she hands them out along with pens. The women sign without reading the fine print.

The receptionist asks the woman with the bead necklace if she would like to put her necklace in the bin so that it may be forwarded to the next of kin. She adamantly refuses. The receptionist does not argue. She is allowed to sort through the discard pile at the end of the day. She hasn’t bought a box of cigarettes since she started working here.

The machine stops clicking. The door opens. A man in a lab coat emerges. There are bleeding tooth marks on his wrist. His thumb has been lovingly wrapped in a flowery pink Band-Aid. He checks his list and calls out a number. The woman with the bead necklace sways to her feet.

“Jungle, here I come,” she mutters.

The door closes behind them. The women in the waiting room pass the magazine around again. The machine starts up. Inside the office, the woman begins to yell.

“You’re mistaken, doctor, you’ve got it all wrong, I *ought* to be a tiger —”

A scream. Silence. The clicking of the machine. The rustling of the magazine as it passes from hand to hand to hand.

Noa Covo's work has been published in or is forthcoming from Jellyfish Review, Passages North, and Okay Donkey. Her micro-chapbook, Bouquet of Fears, was published by Nightingale and Sparrow Press. She can be found on Twitter @covo_noa.

LUCKY PIGGY

BY MEGHAN LOUISE
WAGNER

I clean lucky piggy in a gas station bathroom with a toothbrush and Dawn dish soap. I am careful not to go against the grain of his bristles since he sliced my index finger last time. Mitch tells me to be careful with his teeth, too. Technically, he's a hedgehog, but hog sounds so gruff for something so delicate. I use a stiff paper towel to pat him dry. There is a moment when he tilts his black eyes at me and looks like he could be my baby.

Mitch says it's dangerous to treat a probability enhancement totem like a person. "That's what they want," he says. "Makes them unpredictable."

Crumpled toilet paper sticks to the bottom of my flip flops when I shift feet. The restroom smells like chlorine and grape flavored bubble-gum. I think about my best friend in high school who used to say that pool water smelled like semen. I would just laugh and ask “And how would *you* know, Holly?”

The door is heavy and rips shut behind me. I clutch lucky piggy like a cantaloupe beside my breast. The air is thick, hot, and humid. Mitch leans against the gashed in hood on the front of the car, holding a burning cigarette. He’s only ten years older than me and the hair on his head is all brown but his facial hair always comes in gray. What my mother would have called a hatchet face.

The first time we met at the donut shop, he told me his sister’s name was Miranda, too, and I don’t know why, but I thought that meant he was a nice guy. He asked me if I’d ever been to Canada and I was mostly curious about what he had in the cat carrier sitting at his booth.

I move past Mitch and open the back door of the car. I kneel in the passenger seat and place lucky piggy back in his cage with his goldfish shaped pillow and the 2016 Republican National Convention t-shirt he uses as a blankie.

Mitch finishes his cigarette and gets in the car. I sit in the passenger seat and he drives. Later we’ll drink vodka mixed with sugar-free soda in bed. He’ll fall asleep but I won’t. I’ll smell his shoelace breath and run my fingers over the stiff bristles on his jaw, careful not to go against the grain.

*

The next day we’re at a gift shop in a Windsor casino and a well-meaning cashier runs over to me with Mitch’s clover shaped keychain dangling from her fingers.

“I think your husband left this,” she says, smiling.

I don’t correct her. There’s something about the shape of a husband-wife-and-child family that people like to see. I carry lucky piggy in my arms to the elevator. People think he’s a baby and don’t look twice unless it’s to say, “What a cutie. He looks just like you.”

Magical creatures are obviously banned in casinos, but we’re able to get around the rules with lucky piggy. Part of his abilities are to make people see what they think they should, not what’s there. I don’t understand all the specifics. I just know that the more people mistake him for my baby, the more I want it to be true.

*

I once asked Mitch where he found lucky piggy and he told me he won him at an underground poker game in Boston. “It’s a hard game to get into,” he said. “If you don’t have anything of value, they make you put your soul up for collateral. Thing is, they’re picky about that, too.”

I asked if he lost his. All he said was that the order is real strict. “They’ll hunt you down and slit your throat if you get caught in a casino with a P-E-T,” he said. “They don’t fuck around.”

“But what do they do with it after that?” I asked.

“The fuck does it matter?” he said. “Your throat is slit.”

*

Lucky piggy sits on the bed and watches TV with me. It’s a curling championship. I flip through the glossy room service menu during commercials. Mitch hits the bathroom and comes out freshly shaven, dressed in a clean gray blazer over a blue shirt and black slacks. He asks me for lucky piggy, which he just calls *the PET*, and I keep my fingers perched on his head.

“He doesn’t want to go,” I say.

“Miranda,” he says, opening his hands. “Don’t treat it like a person. It’s dangerous.”

He tucks the baby in the pocket of his blazer. Lucky piggy’s small enough to fit. People will see him and just think he’s a cell phone or a pack of Camel Lights. They leave and I consider fixing myself up so I can go down and play some slots.

The blue and green tiles on the shower are arranged in alternating squares so that if you squint, it looks like a swimming pool. I think of Holly and her pool water semen. Fancy ovals of soap sit on folded towels. The label says they’re supposed to smell like chamomile tea but they remind me more of apples.

In the sink, I see tiny flecks of Mitch’s white and gray facial hairs. I use my finger to swirl around the smooth bowl, making lines in the grit. It reminds me of sitting in the sand, making moats. I look through my reflection in the bathroom mirror, wondering how different I would look without a soul.

I don’t get dressed or go to the casino. Since Mitch will make a lot of money tonight, I order a banana milkshake with rum and a fancy grilled cheese stuffed with brie and roasted pears. The hotel employee who brings the room service says the kitchen forgot to add the pears. I tip forty percent anyway. I take the bottle from Mitch’s bag and

add extra vodka to the shake. The curling championship ends and I watch Easy Rider with Peter Fonda and Jack Nicholson.

It's late when Mitch comes back to the room but I don't know how late since the curtains are thick. He smells like cigarettes and dirty socks. His heavy paunch rises and deflates, occasionally punctured by a rip of snores. I peer into the darkness, trying to make out lucky piggy. His cat carrier sits on the floor near the bathroom. Beyond the wall, I hear gentle thumps and muffled moans. I always imagine when other people make love they are handsome and young, with gym toned bodies and shiny hair. No split ends. Beside me, Mitch keeps snoring through it all. I lift his arm from my waist and roll out of the covers. The carpet is soft beneath my feet. I kneel and flick my fingers through the grates in the cage. Lucky piggy's little spine rises and falls like a tiny balloon.

I unclasp the door and scoop him into my hand. We sleep curled together, his sharp, spiky head beneath my chin. I am careful not to press him too hard, though there are times I want to squeeze.

In the morning, Mitch walks to the bathroom and takes a piss. The door stays wide open the whole time.

“Don't treat it like a person, Miranda.”

*

I order a Sex on the Beach not really knowing what it's supposed to be. It tastes like cranberry and vodka but something in it cuts the back of my throat like horseradish. Mitch has lucky piggy with him at a blackjack table so I am all alone. I wander through aisles of red, blue, and yellow slot machines. They blink and squeal and beep like video games. In the bathroom, an old woman in pink stretch pants tells me that the trick is to find the machines placed at entrances and end caps.

“They want people to see you win those,” she says. “That's why they hit more.”

I carry a purse filled with Canadian coins that Mitch gave me. I sip my drink and crank levers and I don't win anything.

I get bored again. Mitch looks like he's on a winning streak but he knows better than to be obvious about it. I am probably the only one on the casino floor who can see lucky piggy poking his head out of his blazer pocket. Everyone else sees what makes sense. A pack of smokes, a handkerchief, a folded valet ticket. A waitress passes by and asks if I need another cocktail and my first thought is, *“But how will you find me if I leave?”*

I tell her that I would like something less sweet this time, maybe with an olive. After she walks away, I dart three rows over and duck behind an electronic baccarat game. It reminds me of when me and my sister would hide from our brothers behind the stairs. The boys almost always gave up and went off to play something without us.

The waitress has no problem finding me. She holds a square shaped glass with three green olives on a plastic toothpick.

“It’s a real martini,” she says, crouching to her knees. “We just can’t use martini glasses.”

*

Mitch falls on the bed fully clothed, Canadian bills falling out of his pockets like Monopoly money. We eat stale tortilla chips for breakfast and drink Keurig coffee. He snaps at me to pack the bags and find the room card because it’s my job to remember things. We can’t find *his* keys with the clover so we have to use mine. All this means is that my keys become his keys and then I don’t have keys.

*

We drive on gray highways and jagged, gray bridges. We sit at customs gates, bored. We argue with motel clerks about leaky ceilings. We eat fast food in parking lots. Gas station attendants always give me side-eye when I ask if they sell travel-sized bottles of dish soap. I forget this isn’t a “thing”. I forget that most people aren’t washing pots and pans on the road. When I can’t get Dawn, I buy Johnson and Johnson’s baby shampoo. I brush lucky piggy’s bristles in bathroom sinks at rest stops and travel plazas. I don’t tell Mitch that he’s been cooing and curling more often. Sometimes, he flicks his tiny tongue to my finger as if he wants to clean me, too. His black eyes glisten and become round, his small nose and mouth take shape, I can see his teeth when he smiles. I sit on toilets and press his sharp nose into the skin on my neck and something about the pressure makes me able to breathe.

When I put him back in his carrier in the backseat, Mitch watches me from the front and says, “From now on, use the carrier.”

“Won’t that look more suspicious?” I say, tucking lucky piggy under his RNC t-shirt.

“It doesn’t matter, Miranda. People will think it’s a cat.”

“But he’s good. He never tries to run away.”

“That’s not the point,” he says. “It’s dangerous treating it like a person.”

“But I don’t,” I say, feeling my throat ache. “I don’t.”

Later Mitch nicks his cheek shaving. He mutters in the bathroom and yanks toilet paper from the wall. I sit in bed with lucky piggy on my lap. Mitch pats paper to his bloody stubble and stomps his foot.

“See?” he says. “This is what happens.”

“He didn’t do anything.”

“Miranda,” he says. “I told you.”

“Now it’s his fault you cut yourself?”

Beneath my palm, lucky piggy bristles the same way I used to when Dad stubbed his toe and looked for someone to blame. I keep my fingers poised above his little head, as if to tell him he should stay calm. I’ll protect him.

Mitch storms back into the bathroom, slams the door, and runs the shower. When he comes out, I pretend to be asleep with lucky piggy curled at my side. Mitch leaves the room and it’s just as well. Both of us sleep better while he’s gone.

*

We travel so much it’s easy to feel like we don’t exist anywhere. At a casino in Detroit, I see a woman cranking slots who looks just like my high school friend Holly, all grown up. I point her out to Mitch and he squints. I say, “The one in the blue sweatshirt.”

He just shrugs and asks why it matters. He takes lucky piggy off to the blackjack table and I wander over to Maybe-Holly. I run my fingers over the stools connected to the machines and pass by her, saying nothing. Her blond hair is frizzy and she wears an orange scrunchie on her wrist. She swipes a credit card into the machine and buys ten more pulls. I linger, waiting for her to see me. When she doesn’t, I say, “You know, the ones at the endcaps hit the most.”

Maybe-Holly keeps her puffy eyes on the face of the machine. “That’s a myth,” she says. “Casinos want you to think that so you’ll play them more.”

She jerks the lever and doesn’t look at me again. That’s when I know it is her.

I continue to wander and wait for a waitress to take my drink order but maybe they only do that in Canada. I see people with red Solo cups of beer and I follow a line to a bar. Above, I see an electronic ticker with a running scroll announcing big jackpots. In

the near distance, I hear cheers. I assume the winners all have probability enhancement creatures. I see Mitch at the far end of the room, also winning.

*

Mitch treats me to a proper breakfast even though it's eleven o'clock at night. We eat blueberry pancakes, fried eggs, sausage, potatoes, and cornbread with cherry jam. I drink black coffee and can't quite get the sharp edge out of the back of my throat.

When Mitch pays the check, I ask him to unlock the car door for me with my keys so I can lay down and digest everything. He stands at the counter and presses my key fob through the thick glass window. The parking lights blink on and off.

I walk with lucky piggy in his carrier, my stomach heavy. I tuck him in the backseat first and then I crawl inside. He presses his tiny hands out of his cage, pulling for me like I am a slot lever. I sit up a little and see Mitch still inside the diner, talking to the hostess, probably asking her if there are any other casinos in the area worth checking out. Or, maybe, she's like me, back when I was nineteen, when he came into the donut shop and asked if I'd ever been to Canada.

I unlatch the gate and lucky piggy crawls into my lap and up my chest to my neck. I can breathe. I rub my fingers over the quills on his head and keep one eye on Mitch, already knowing what he'll say if he catches me.

Through the window, I see a black car pull up right in front of the diner. Two men dressed in puffy blue windbreakers and sweatpants get out of the back doors right as Mitch is walking from the entrance. He casually swerves past them but then one of them grabs him from behind and holds him in place. The other takes a knife and slashes his throat in one quick gesture. Blood ribbons down his neck and gray blazer.

He drops.

I watch it all, clutching lucky piggy in the backseat.

If we try to run, the men will see us. Lucky piggy is all I think of, my only concern. All I want is to protect him.

My baby, I think, they can't take my baby. We sit, frozen.

The men step away from Mitch's body, get back in their car, and drive off just as fast as they came. The front door of the diner blows open and the pretty hostess throws her arms up and screams. Inside, customers hold their phones up to the windows, like they just can't believe what just happened. They're all in shock but I'm okay. We're okay.

Lucky piggy nestles his head against my neck. His voice is soft and gentle and clear and intentional.

“Mama,” he says.

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