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Lungs

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Lungs

In my very best fantasies, you are dead before you touch the ground; very neat, very easy. Your blood blooms like an exotic flower on the wall behind you, forms a modern art masterpiece. I shoot you between the eyes, but there are no brains on the wall, no fragments of skull. Just blood, bright and cooling fast. Neat. Easy. You don't fall to the floor; you slide. Breathing cut off like a paused record. It's neat. It's clean. I'm always humane. You leave no ghost.

Joel says you are gone now, hidden somewhere down south. South does not seem right for you; it does not seem right for the boy I thought I knew, with his corduroy and vinyls and patient potential for destruction. South is for spiritual refugees or simple criminals, men who drink too much and hit both of their wives or shoot their neighbors' show dogs. You—you are not simple. It took me nearly a year to figure that out.

I ask myself sometimes whether I was even looking for simplicity, and the answer tends to be *no*, which makes me a hypocrite. But I *was* looking for purity, whether I knew it or not. And you seemed pure—oh God, you seemed *pure*. You dressed darkly and laughed darkly, which I understood, because I did it too, but I thought you were one shiny kid. You had your clear skin and gold hair and you acted like you hated it, hated the pretension and the shine and the idea of beauty, but I knew you didn't. I thought in terms of literature and thought you were the foil to me. I assumed purity.

A year ago, after Joel had introduced us and before Poughkeepsie, he had come up to me, awestruck, said something like, *you look peaceful*. It surprised me too, and I smiled at him, said, *I think I am*. Whether I had temporarily found peace or I confused for peace the period of non-anger and non-fear of the world that you brought, I don't know. Joel knows nothing. No one has told him anything; you've abandoned campus and as a friend or social creature or being, I was never really here. When he sits next to me now, even in this frigid

November air, he leans away a little to avoid the smoke I exhale. But maybe it is something more; maybe it's a sixth sense, him wising up, smelling the danger mixed in with the smoke, finally picking out the pieces of a story he does not want to hear.

"I'm finding him this weekend," I tell Joel.

He stares at me.

"I know the name of the town," I inform him simply. "And I know *you* knew it for a while and you weren't telling, by the way. So thank you for *that*."

"I didn't want you going there."

"Why? Afraid?"

He hesitates, a faint blush rising up in his neck. "I don't know. A little."

I take my cigarette from my lips to force a laugh. "What do you think I'm going to do?"

Joel smiles a little, half-heartedly. "You know, you're the only person I know who enjoys promoting fear."

I shrug. "Consider it a safety net."

"I'll try. Why do you think I was talking about you?"

"What?"

"Why do you think I meant that I was afraid of what *you* were going to do?"

I'm silent for a moment. "I don't know. Were you referencing your best friend?"

"I guess. I wouldn't call him my best friend anymore. Listen, you're going to think I'm crazy, but—" he leans forward "—I don't like the idea of you with him. Dean is... he isn't a good person."

"Too late," I tell Joel bluntly.

"What?"

"Never mind," I say, wishing I had shut my mouth. To his credit, Joel does not press on. I ask, "What do you mean, not a good person?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry I said that. It's not what I meant. But I don't like the effect he has on you—had on you."

"He doesn't have an effect on me."

"He does, though. You obsess over him, and it's scary. Since you went on that trip with him, you've.... Listen, this sounds terrible, but do you have any friends besides me anymore?"

"It's not terrible," I say dryly. "No, I don't. But I've never had any friends besides you. In fact, I'm flattered that you even consider us friends."

Joel looks hurt. "Of course we are. You don't consider us to be? This is exactly what worries me. This, and you drink more and smoke more than before. And the thing is, you don't even like it."

One of the many reasons I avoid friends: you underestimate them, and then one day, suddenly and without warning, they decide to become observant. But all I reveal is irritation, and say, "You sure know a lot, don't you?"

He sighs. "Okay, do that. Be difficult like always while people try to look out for you. Just answer this: were you in love with him? Or, are you?"

I choke a little on the smoke of my cigarette, an aggravation I thought I had gotten past years ago. "*No!*" I say, bewildered. "God, no."

"Okay." Relief floods his face. "I'm glad, because.... You know, I'd thought maybe something had happened on the trip you guys took. Jesus, look at your *hand*."

I look. It's trembling. Cigarette ash distributes itself on the table. I put both hands under the table and grip my thighs to steady them, although all it does is make my legs shake too. I do not look at Joel; I don't want to see that he sees. As flatly as possible, I tell him, "You're paranoid."

"Don't find him," Joel says. He tries to stare me down with the eyes of an abandoned puppy — pleading, pitiful, pathetic. "Don't go. I'm asking you this for your own good."

"That's a dumb thing to think about," I snarl. How terrible and freakish that we're friends, or whatever he wants to call us. How awful for him. I think to him: *This is your cue! Leave me. You don't need this, you don't want to be involved, get out, please.* But he doesn't pick up on my thoughts, and it's me who stands up to leave.

The room spins. I clench my toes to the ground, attempt to stay standing, keep my posture. "I'm leaving tomorrow," I throw to him carelessly, directly to the too-soft, too-hurt, brown eyes. I fight for balance, and without victory, leave.

What drew me to you was your smile, precisely because it reminded me of nicotine and I liked that, the sound of it: *nicotine smile*. In retrospect, it didn't mean much — the words just sounded cool and dangerous in my head and I wanted to use them. I didn't even know if you smoked.

It turned out that you didn't, which I liked, but that was the year I started. Even then I needed to destroy things. I'd thought punishing my lungs might be an interesting experiment.

It wasn't that I thought smoking was cool; it was that, in some twistedly romanticized way, I thought the masochism was. I thought beauty and health and living were silly things to idealize (why obsess about things that did not belong to you?) and I supposed that I wanted to mock everyone who held them as their highest reverence. I had watched my peers hopelessly strive for vanity, walking through drugstore aisles wild-eyed and clutching tanning lotion and Maybelline and diet pills to their chests like Bibles. Through the windows of salons were visions of their future: middle-aged women with Crayola faces who had years ago lost sight of their necks but faithfully had their head re-bleached and fried every month, as if having MTV-appropriate hair would narrow their waistlines, tighten their skin, transform them back into the unattractive teenagers they were, in bodies that were at least accepted by desperate adolescent males. I thought it was silly, all of it, and I thought *they* were silly, that pulsing obsessive

consumer mob, so I pushed the futility of their very lives in their faces. *Yes! Watch me!* I commanded silently, whenever I flashed them a smile after catching their stares. Do you see the futility of it all now? I can smoke and blacken these teeth and rot this skin and wear ugly clothing and *still* look better at 6 in the morning than you will look on your wedding day.

Had they heard the thoughts in my head or looked inside me, they would have vomited. In the dreams where I was flung from the car and watched my own autopsy from above, the doctors opened the torso and then exclaimed in horror, *Oh dear Lord, what is this?* while staring down at the most hideous human insides they had ever seen, a blackened appendix, a stomach partially eaten away by its own acid, intestines like a mutilated snake, a heart that had started its decay nineteen years before it stopped beating.

How strange, I would think whenever I looked into a mirror, always in the detached, impersonal way accountants looked at paintings. How strange to have this body chosen for me. In some kind of repeat freak accident, the nice girls with nice brains and nice philosophies were somehow nearly always given the unfortunate bodies. I tried to convince myself that the irony was amusing.

In Biology class, the girl in front of you would pull out her compact and some makeup tools and fumble with her face for a minute. I could see the amused condescension in the muscles of your face. You would turn to the side and grin at me, as if we were sharing some private, terribly funny joke—one that, I realize now, you knew I wasn't quite in on yet.

Another thing I had liked about you, before Poughkeepsie: you drank whiskey, not beer. You watched foreign films. You wore an army-green jacket. You quoted William Burroughs, even though nobody knew what you were talking about, or perhaps because of it. You smiled rarely but the rare smiles were at me and I thought, *nicotine*. You were so close to being indifferent.

I thought you bled poetry.

You had a 1994 Cadillac that I was in love with. As a rule, I hated loving anything, but if you had to love something, the more materialistic, the better—and it was a *nice* car. It was clean and it looked good under moderate sunlight, like its owner. On the trip to New York, I got attached to that car. I had thought that I wouldn't mind driving in it with you indefinitely, always with the destination, the possibility, of New York. In Poughkeepsie, where I knew we wouldn't reach New York, I scrambled for some rocks on the ground to throw at the car. I was disoriented; I don't know if they hit.

You wanted to look at graduate schools, and you invited me, confidently, smilingly. I said, *Great, graduate schools*, but really, I couldn't wait until graduation to leave. I needed to transfer as soon as possible. Our campus was suffocating me, and it was getting hard to maintain indifference about it. It was even harder to act indifferent about our temporary escape. We were going to look at Philadelphia, cross the Pennsylvania border, look at schools in lower New York

state, and stop in New York City before turning back. The possibility of New York thrilled me. I stayed quiet about it.

You didn't like my silence. We talked as we did when we had met – you said something witty and cute, I replied with something witty and snarky, very Oscar Wilde-esque, very prettily shallow—but my thoughts were foreign to you. Once, desperate for something, you said to me, *You really have no feelings, do you?* I had looked at you curiously, thinking of how to answer and wondering why we were friends. I prayed silently that it wasn't because you liked how I looked, although truthfully I could think of nothing else that could've been attractive about myself. The worry nagged me a little, but mostly I thought you were too smart to fall for anything external. I thought you could see past it. I overestimated you.

Here's the truth: I liked you. I liked you so much pre-Poughkeepsie that I couldn't think of being anything but your friend, or anything but a passing acquaintance. I was human enough that my sadism wouldn't extend to you. I didn't want you to have to deal with me and everything I came with. I didn't think you deserved it.

At Poughkeepsie, after the bar where you kept refilling my drink and my eyes clouded over, in the motel room you followed me into, you told me I deserved it. Onto the bed where you thought my senses were dulled and the fighting was just a reflex but I felt it, I felt everything: *You deserve this, you bitch.*

My car is no 1994 Cadillac, but it works. It will get me to you. What New York used to occupy in my mind is now filled up by you. I dream now only of your face when your door opens to reveal me. This road, the fading towns and rotting cities I pass by are all incidental and meaningless. You are the destination. If that sounds romantic, it is. Poets, for as long as they exist, will aspire to deaths as beautiful as yours.

After it was done, you fell asleep. The small part of me that was not silently screaming in pain and disgust wondered how something as peaceful and guiltless as sleep could come to you after what you had just done. Your face was on my neck, intimately, as if we were lovers, as if I had not kicked and screamed and fought you with every cell in my body.

The dead weight of your hand was still on the bottom half of my face. Ten minutes before, you had clamped it over my mouth to prevent me from screaming for help, and it had taken me a few seconds of trying to bite you before I realized that you were also covering my nose, and I that couldn't breathe. I tried to jerk my head away, to open my mouth, desperate, searching for air. You were busy elsewhere, drawing blood, pushing into me; you didn't notice. Your fingers were tight over my skin, and when I was able to break my lips apart the slightest fraction of an inch, all I could taste was hot, recycled exhale.

In that moment of terror: the realization that broke through my mind was as sharp and surprising as an intake of pure oxygen. The one desperate thought

was: I want to *live*! I wanted to live, I wanted to live, I wanted to live, even more than I wanted your skin off of mine, even more than I wanted you dead—I wanted to *live*. And my whole being was suddenly concentrated in my lungs—what miracles they were—gasping, gasping, searching for life. And then, miraculously, the grip of your hand slackened, slid downward—and one of my nostrils make contact with cool, clean air.

There are no sufficient words to describe the ability to breathe. It has been attempted before, but we fall short. Metaphors just utilize breathing; they can't describe it. I once fantasied about telling someone everything. But how to even begin? Even if I found the words to relay the moment when you pushed into me and everything else slid out mutilated, even then, how, later, could I describe that instant when my lungs reclaimed air? How could I have made anyone feel the sharp joy of oxygen? I suppose I would try to search, and fail. I would scramble. I would hesitate, and inhale deeply, and then I would say, *It was like breathing*.

After it was done and you fell asleep, I wriggled my arm out from its holding cell between my back and the mattress, and tore your hand off my face. I struggled out from underneath your weight and fell a short distance to the floor. The pretense of never crying was lost. I could not put on the same clothes you had torn off of me. I pulled on the long coat I had come to the room in, the coat I had tossed carelessly on the floor just a few hours before, laughing at something that was so far off now it could not have possibly existed. Now I wrapped it around my destroyed body, buttoned every button, pulled the belt tightly, squeezed my legs together in some type of now useless self-defense. Each twitch of each individual muscle now was a reminder of you.

Before I left, before I crawled out into the April night and crawled and crawled until I was hunched over at some street corner far away, staring ahead wide-eyed for a taxi, I stood over the bed where you now slept deeply. I thought about killing you. I thought about taking the keys and slashing your throat. I imagined uprooting the small motel television and smashing your skull in with it. I pictured waking you up before it happened so you could see what was coming and feel real fear, like I had felt, so you could open your mouth wide for a scream that wouldn't have time to find its way out.

When I left the room, you were still occupying it, alive and whole and asleep.

How that memory haunts me—after all I had destroyed, I could not destroy, out of all things, you. I punished myself for it, interrogated myself, tried to close my eyes and put together the fragments and figure out what held me back. I didn't doubt my physical ability to kill you and I didn't fear any consequences by the law. I wanted revenge. I wanted your worst fears to manifest themselves, and I assumed you would be like the rest of them: afraid of death. In my nightmares, sometimes I would stand over the motel bed with some instrument of death and your eyes would be indifferent, accepting, unafraid. It terrified me

to think that you could be like that. Nevertheless, a week after the incident, I would wake up shivering violently at 4 A.M. and simply know: I had to kill you.

But in my very *best* fantasies, the ones too beautiful and impossible to dare to think about, a Cadillac slides backwards. We never cross a state line and are stuck on a dying campus in Pennsylvania. Joel introduces me to you and you to me. You say something witty and cute and I reply with something witty and snarky and we smile awkwardly. We get silence. You see through me and I think *nicotine* but decide purity is overrated, and anyhow I don't deserve to seek it, and I never get the chance to see through you. My body is not mine, but it is never yours. You live. I let myself keep the really sacred. I let myself keep indifference. All we exist as are fading occupants of the same time and space. If everything comes full circle, neither of us knows it yet.

And here is your door.