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It Begins with Two

It begins with two women. It seems as though it has always been two women. There is something to them, something of note. Is it their faces? Reinforced corrugated-steel heart-shaped faces both, bristling with elegant defenses, armed to the flashing white teeth, beautiful and cold and weathered, *hardpretty*, *sensualsneering*, *lovelyvenomous*. It is not their faces. Is it their names? Are they possessors of themed appellations, are they Lily and Petunia (of course not—too botanical), are they Mercedes and Lexus (no, no, too adult-entertainment), are they Artemis and Athena (this is ridiculous, are we talking about two women or two plot points in Chick tracts from ancient Greece?), and in the end, they are only named May (born Mary to a pious parent and raised in a single-mother single-minded single-story household) and Trish (born in July of 1985 to H—and J— K—, names rescinded as American law requires; this woman is now in the United States Federal Witness Protection Program), and in the end, Mary and Patricia are the two most common female names of the last fucking century, so no, after one-hundred-and-eighty-odd words, we can conclude that it's not their names.

The suspense must be lifted before the narrative can progress any further. Their notability derives from their line of work and nothing else. There. It's out in the open and now we can deal with it as necessary. They are professional bandits, burglars, swashbucklers, crooks. They are stickup artists, kidnappers, killers, and a hundred other nouns in between. They are May and Trish, and they are walking up a starsplashed side street in a generic Rust Belt city at 2:00 a.m.

May hocks an irradiated loogie onto the cracked blacktop. "I just don't understand the appeal," she rasps. They are moving at a fast clip. No time to experience, only to act.

"Of truck nuts?" Trish answers, glancing over at her companion, an arched eyebrow implicit in her tone. May has the emaciated-yet-somehow-still-suggesting-a-semblance-of-muscle-tone body of a former track captain and current amphetamine user. She is lanky, white, bottle-blonde. That is May. "I don't think it's necessarily a matter of *appeal*. There are only so many stupid fuckin' things you can put on the bottom of your F-150, right?" Trish hoists her large brown knapsack farther up her back. She is curved, lush-haired, of indeterminate (to us, not to her) Latina origin. That is Trish.

"You don't get it," May says, narrowing her eyes at the reeling figure up ahead and to their right. "I don't understand the market as a whole. I don't understand those little family decals. I don't get fuzzy dice. Diamond plates. Even bumper stickers are so weird to me. Who cares? It's just a silly attempt at individuality"—the figure is revealed to be a man in a gray business suit, drunk, foolish, clutching a stop sign—"that doesn't actually *mean* anything"—the man jeers, catcalls, propositions, casts wildly-inappropriate-but-not-altogether-inaccurate aspersions on the sexualities of the two women, all in a moment's time—"from the eight-year-old city councilman sticker"—the women share a glance of mutual understanding—"to the 'Co-exist' one where you know the driver can't even name all the movements the symbols represent"—the drunkard is lifted by his ashen lapels, protesting in slurred slurs, Trish rifling through his wallet while May sticks her sidearm in his flabbergasted face, wagging its suppressor under his chin as he gasps out obscenities—"right down to the fuckin' Gandhi quotes about leaving the world blind and ripping out eyes"—and it is finished, and he crumples into a rapidly coalescing pool of crimson, and they pick up the pace a bit, for this was not the main attraction, only an unanticipated sideshow.

"I'd rather see an Idi Amin quote, or something by Kim Jong-Il, or a Reagan or Bush quote on one of those American-made fuckers," May says to herself, or Trish, it doesn't matter, rambling, on a jagged high and allowing her words to bounce out irrespective of forethought or coherence.

"It'd be something new, I guess," Trish concedes, looking over her shoulder, a bit shaky but more talkative the faster they trot.

"More than that. Dictators and authoritarians speak better than almost anyone else on the planet. Take Bush Junior. Worst president we've ever had, but the guy knew his constituency." May adopts an exaggerated hillbilly stutter: "'Ev-everywhere that freedom stirs, heh, let tyrants fear.' Now if that doesn't put the fear of God and country in you, I don't know what will."

They are at the place.

Trish breathes deeply. They do not need masks. Either no one will see them, or no one will be able to identify them. One way or another. "I wonder what he even does now. I wonder if—"

“Who cares?” May cuts her off. “He ain’t boosting cars and wasting nobodies for their pocket change, is he? He knows where his next meal is coming from.” She kicks in the window, an impossibly high kick, and they are inside.

George Walker Bush, former President of the United States of America, former Honorable Governor of the State of Texas, onetime chairperson of the G8 Summit, onetime First Lieutenant, 147th Recon, former President of Delta Kappa Epsilon, doesn’t know where his next meal is coming from. Paula, the housekeeper and cook, is gone for the night. Hunger gnaws. Multiple Budweisers require companionship. You know how it is. He has begun drinking again after twenty-seven long years of staid sobriety. He does not know why. He worries about Dad. Dad is, in plain Texan terms, old as shit and ready to die, but his eldest son is not ready to see it happen. He cracks another Bud.

George (for us he is not Mr. President, he is George, he is our friend and colleague whose Uncle Will still half-affectionately calls him Georgie the fuckup, the little Georgie that couldn’t, even now for Christ’s sake, even after two presidential terms and God alone knows how many fundraiser dinners) rises at length and moves pensively to the atrium of his secluded North Dallas residence, his home-away-from-ranch, to where his easel and paints are illuminated in the soft lighting, waiting to be picked up (please permit this mediocre personification for the sake of an unsullied glimpse into George’s thoughts). He hasn’t been painting lately. He did some pretty nice dogs and cats, and all the nerdy hacker people on the Internet who got ahold of those love them, or maybe not—it’s hard to tell sometimes—but they talk about them lots. But he’s been stymied by this wretched soldier. His humans are still a bit misshapen, still make their homes somewhere in the uncanny valley, but they’re mostly passable. But this soldier’s goddamn mouth, well, the smile is ghastly, looks like the poor fella was born downwind from an outhouse, as folks are wont to say around these here parts. But the smile is very important. He tried to explain this to Laura once, but she didn’t get it. Told him to try painting an eagle instead. Sometimes people don’t get things that George tries to explain. He is used to it.

George thinks about himself for some time. Jeb said history would be kind to him. History is one thing, but regular folk haven’t quite caught up to that yet. He gets his fair share of awestruck Tea Partiers and fawning Wal-Mart managers, not to mention the boys at the country club and the DKE meetings that still treat him with respect and camaraderie, but that all kind of pales in comparison to the rest of it. Venomous glances, mocking photographs, egg all over the brand new Silverado—and half the pavement besides—in the middle of the goddamn night. Pretty much anything you can

imagine, short of actual physical violence, and even that is probably only out of fear of his Secret Service detail. The neoliberals and the commies on the Internet, too, are—he stops himself here. He remembers what Don Evans told him. They call him stupid because they can't understand him. They call him a monster because they are ignorant. They call him unreasonable because they are lazy, intellectually and physically lazy. There is a whole table of *if you think that then you are this* and Cheney laid it out for him once, but George was thinking about parachuting into a canyon full of wild dogs who might be friendly and lick his face when he landed and help him stand up to the people who told him things as if he didn't understand them and the parachute was, well...was it blue or was it rainbow colored? Maybe neither. It might have been sunburst yellow and the landing would teach him something important about himself and it would teach him something about God, the Almighty, the Unknowable, the *Ineffable*, a word he had learned from a science fiction book Laura had left lying around. It means unknowable but he likes *ineffable* because God isn't Effable, he Effs you. He fucks you over again and again and suddenly you're in your sixties and hundreds of thousands, or maybe even millions, yes definitely millions, of people think that you—

Enough. We do not need this much of a window into his thoughts, do we? That is basic storytelling. This is a former American President and we all know everything there is to know about him thanks to the cults of personality that form around presidents and heads of state. Suffice it to say that George gets up with force to show himself that he means business, and he heads upstairs to bed.

Trish limps all the way home. She has not been injured in the line of duty. She and May are rarely injured in that way. She has only twisted her ankle after vaulting herself in through the jagged window, stray shards of glass puncturing her thick gloves. She sloughs off her knapsack, its interior spangled with jewelry, small electronics, candlesticks, whatever else might be in a successful thief's backpack after a night on the town. Use your imagination. It's not important. She arranges herself awkwardly on the creaking metal frame bed. The house is empty, save for May in the other room, and it feels perhaps even emptier with the knowledge of her presence. It has been empty for what seems like a long time. She thinks about the people tonight.

The people were...they were afraid and pleading and she had—May had told her—May said to—and she—The one man kept asking for God to help him and May said she would give him a whole minute to see if God would help him and the man cried during her countdown and then May—and then Trish yelled soundlessly and ran into the bedroom to get the jewelry and vomited out the window in a haze of shrieking fluorescent heat. The money

is there though and the money will help things. It will fix what Trish cannot and bring light to her dark and empty surroundings. Trish thinks that. There is a palpable disconnect between her thoughts and the reality of things, but of course you already knew that.

Trish fidgets for a few minutes but soon sinks into a dreamless and blanket-like sleep. She moves very little as her breathing slows and the noises from the next room recede.

George is also in bed. There is a strange ticking noise and he does not know whether it is in his head or coming from an external source in the house. He keeps a fifth of Evan Williams in the bedside table, next to a container of melatonin tablets and a small bottle of Ambien CR. He sleeps in a separate room from Laura now. They had a calm and smiling discussion about how it was the best thing for both of them because you know how you snore, George, and don't you want your own space anyways, all this room in the house? And George saying okay, all right, that's fine. He feels very little about this. He folds his hands and stares at the ceiling, letting the soothing tones of a nameless news anchor wash over him. His thoughts shuffle in orbital patterns and dark circles ring his eyes.

Trish is jarred awake by an unfamiliar voice, speaking in a very familiar tone. There are police at the door, and she is coldly aware of this in less time than it takes her to open her eyes. May is shouting. There is too much light and Trish is afraid, feeling as though her long-dead mother has just caught her smoking menthols on the back porch.

George cocks his head like a terrier, his attention briefly snagged by the anchor's use of the phrase "killing spree." Onscreen, a group of mutely shouting men in dark blue body armor surround a tumbledown home that resembles nothing so much as Dorothy's house from *The Wizard of Oz*, albeit the overall aesthetic is more Detroit than Kansas. The anchor is gravely intoning that the two targets of this raid are suspected of over a dozen instances of robbery and murder. "We here at the station hope only that the suspects can be taken in without any further violence," she says. Her eyes betray her.

There is smoke in Trish's eyes and in her mouth and in her brain. She hears the chattering of semiautomatic weaponry and the slower *pow, pow* of May's sidearm, and she understands numbly that she is about to die. (She is not, of course, which you'd know if you were paying attention, but she is so

thoroughly convinced of this that for days afterward she will awaken radiating heat from every extremity, certain she has finally emerged from a lingering coma into a netherworld of punishment and grief). Her eyes dart across the room and she lets out a low, awful moan. She is not cognizant of this.

George sighs, a dry, reedy sound, incongruous with the low hums of the settling house and the excited chatter of the news anchor. He thrusts the remote forward with one hand, presses the channel button without watching the screen, faster and faster until his thumb begins to tire, unconsciously groaning, mirroring Trish halfway across the country, mirroring all of us, searching unceasingly for some way out of this mess.