

LEISURE

BRYCE DOERSAM

▲ Maybe it was the stress, or maybe it was the wet or the heat or the fact of being woken, but the night John Dairy lumbered up from his cot and pissed in the hallway outside the leisure room, I told him to leave. I said, Zip it up and pack your bags. This ride is over.

It was above my station. I did not have the say-so to fire anyone. Dan had hired John Dairy the same as me and in that one way at least, we were equals.

Still, he believed me, and when he stomped up the stairs with his face screwed up, I felt good in a way, like a boss might feel after letting someone go, knowing it was bad luck for them but good for the business.

I lit a cigarette and put my feet up on the least wobbly card table and watched half an hour of the family video we'd found in the crawlspace. There was no cable and no other tapes. The happy screech of children blared from the speakers.

Then John Dairy sulked back down to the leisure room and sat on the floor and asked if he could come back. He said it was a medical disorder and he couldn't help it. He said he needed the money because he'd been in the hospital for so long that his credit cards were all past due. He said Visa and MasterCard had been sending goons to his apartment to threaten his limbs with bats and chains, so he couldn't go home until he had enough to pay the interest, at least.

The dog howled from its closet upstairs in a way that seemed to say, Forgive, forgive, so I said, Fine, okay, come back.

He said, Thank you, and lowered his forehead to the floor like a monk.

He laid back in his cot with his face smooth and blank and instantly fell back asleep.

Looking down on him, I felt large and generous. And then weighed down. Like he was now my responsibility. My heavy son.

2.

The next day I tried giving John Dairy pointers as he did his work in the usual half-assed way. He rattled the equipment too loud and didn't think before he moved, and I told him so, so he could fix it, but he didn't. When I showed him how to lift a certain tricky bottle and pour it at the right angle so it wouldn't slosh or dribble, he thought I was taking over for him. He sank into the old floral couch and nodded off in his plastic suit, fogging the face guard.

At eight, we bagged the day's product and filled a five-gallon bucket and hauled it to the dry shed.

When I was recounting the buckets that were already there, John Dairy pulled the hood of his rain coat down and looked around the dry shed and said, Why can't we just bring the cots in and sleep here?

He'd been complaining a lot since the rain had trapped us indoors. Upstairs was filled with hot work lights that we were not allowed to turn off, so the house had gotten humid, the air thick, dripping down windows, pooling in the carpet. We woke up every morning with new rashes sticking to our ribs and thighs.

I said, There are rules for a reason. You think this stuff would be safe in there?

John Dairy said, Are we not safe in there?

I said, We're not this. Plus we have the dog.

He said, Right.

Later that night, John Dairy was lying in his sagging cot, his ass nearly on the ground, and he said, When we're finished the season and paid out, I'm gonna rent a boat. A sixty-two footer. Full bed and bath and beyond.

I said, What about your credit cards? What about the goons?

He said, Then I'm gonna crash it into a million pieces on the rocks. Leave someone else in the lurch for once.

He opened one eye and rolled towards me and said, What are you gonna do?

I said, I'm going to be smart and buy my own stuff. Work on getting some long-term security. Start my own thing and become my own Dan. Maybe I'd even hire you on next season, if you're lucky.

John Dairy turned back to the ceiling and said, No thanks. I'll be floating.

3.

I heard a truck pulling up outside. I looked over and John Dairy was still asleep in his cot with his rashy legs sticking out from his stretched-tight blanket, white showing in one eye. I jumped up and kicked his shoulder and told him, Someone's out front.

John Dairy groaned and said, Probably just Dan.

Only when I got out front, it wasn't Dan. It was Lorraine, who shouldn't have been there, driving Gary's old Ford.

Lorraine, I said. You shouldn't be here. Is that Gary's old Ford?

Gary is past tense now, she said. We need to talk.

Sitting in the leisure room, she told me she'd come home from Levy's two Tuesdays earlier to find Gary in a bad state. He was sitting on the couch staring at an empty wall. It was like he couldn't see her or hear her, even as she pinched his arms and shook his drawn-up shoulders and called him names. He just sat there stiff and blinking, looking more afraid than she'd ever seen him, his eyes fixed on something horrible that she could not see. He'd been frozen like that ever since. She'd talked to one of the doctors but he more or less shrugged about it, the human body and mind and everything being kind of a mystery, as he said.

At the end, Lorraine asked, What do you make of that?

I said, Sounds like Gary had enough of your crap.

She pinched my arm. She said, The point is, I need somewhere to crash for a bit. Our place was Gary's, and now it's nobody's. Or somebody else's. I'm gonna head west to get a new job on the coast doing tourism or whatever, but I need a couple more nights to finish getting my money together.

I said, No offence, but this is my work, Lorraine. It's basically my office. You can't just crash in my office.

She said, No offence, but your office is an old piss-smelling house in the middle of the woods. I doubt anyone minding.

I said, Why can't you crash with Linda or Diane? Or the nice one with the big shoe?

She said, Come on. It's two nights max. I've got beer in the truck.

4.

A different day, I would have said no and turned Lorraine around, but I thought a night off might help John Dairy reset his nerves. Maybe that was too generous, but I felt for him in a way.

We were probably halfway through the beer when Lorraine sat down on the floor and turned the VCR on. The screen lit up to show a bunch of sunburnt kids trying to drown each other in shallow inflatable pools while the parents looked on, bored and happy, sipping at pink cocktails in clear plastic cups.

Lorraine said, Whose house is this? What the hell are you guys actually doing here?

I said, It's complicated.

John Dairy shrugged and said, Not really. It's just a factory, more or less.

Lorraine stood and walked up to the table and asked, Factory of what?

John Dairy leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head and said, All I'll say is me, personally? I wouldn't touch it. I used to have problems with that kind of stuff until one May Long I got kicked by some guys behind a Domino's and they burst my thing, whatever it's called. I was in the hospital for over a year. Christmas and two birthdays.

He raised his skinny ass onto the table and lifted up his shirt to show Lorraine a long pink scar, like a worm hugging his ribs, inching towards his armpit from the rashy small of his back. She touched it and said, Jesus, and leaned towards him, but their weight on the table bent the legs and the empties went flying and they both fell down in a wet pile, giggling in beer-foamy spasms on the carpet.

5.

The next day I woke with a sour mouth, my eyes dry and blinking. I looked around and I was alone. The house was quiet. I found a letter stuck to the TV with a piece of gum. It said:

Dear Brother,

John and I have made a hard decision. We don't think it's safe working with this stuff, plus its worth more than you're paid. Send us yr address in the future and we can mail yr share. We'll be on the ~~coast~~ ~~boat~~ around.

*Love & prayers,
(you understand)
Lorraine & John.*

The dry shed was empty. Gary's old Ford was gone from out front. Dan would be coming in a week and a half to count the buckets and check the house for deductions and finally pay us out. Only now, obviously not, and I was the only one left to be put on the hook.

So instead of calling Dan and being put on the hook, I went through the house and packed up my clothes. I took the tape from the VCR and packed that too. I checked the closet upstairs and found the dog, blinking on her afghan. She seemed to have noticed the change in mood around the house, staying small and shrimp-shaped until I finally dropped her on the passenger seat of my car, where she expanded again like an inflatable toy, pushing her mouth through the window and lapping at the rain as we drove west.

6.

I had enough for one night at the Midway Motel, just off the highway, and the woman at the counter made me pay up front since I had no credit card. The room was clean and dry and had a decent TV with almost a hundred channels, and a window that looked onto the road and the sky.

With the room paid for, I still had forty dollars and change, so I went back downstairs to the bar. Instead of the Midway Bar, like you might think, it was called The Sailor's Paradise, named after a story about a

sailor who had crashed on an island in the middle of nowhere. He was the only survivor and he pounded his fists on the sand and cursed God for days, until he finally walked around to the other side of the island and discovered it was actually a tropical paradise type of situation, with girls in grass skirts serving light beer out of chilled coconuts.

That's a good story, I said.

They make me tell it, the young bartender said. It actually sucks.

I said, Are those fruit machines back there?

7.

The dog and I sat playing fruit machines, each with a beer, hers untouched.

Strawberries, I said and pulled the arm.

Peach, peach, banana, pear.

Pears, I said and pulled the arm.

Cherries, banana, strawberry, black square.

The news was playing on a TV on the wall and they were running through photos of some teenagers who had recently drowned and playing snippets of their favourite songs. None of them sounded familiar. I'd been away from TV for too long.

A hot feeling spread from my stomach and I thought about how the next pull could change everything. But also, how either way, I still had enough money or gas left to make it somewhere else, where I could win a pull, or find a new Dan, or otherwise get on for long enough. I thought about how it was not impossible that Lorraine and John Dairy might find me the next morning before I left to beg forgiveness and put everything back like it was, and also, I thought about how the dog would probably not mind if I took her beer, since it was still untouched, and it might even please her to share, like I was saying, Here, we are equals. What's yours is mine, vice versa implied. I leaned down in my chair and felt no wants or needs. Then I went to pet the dog and my hand waved through the empty air that should've been her head.

8.

I eventually found her in the back lot, sitting next to Gary's old Ford, staring into the passenger window. I walked up slow. I wasn't sure if John Dairy and Lorraine had found me on purpose or if they'd been looking for somewhere to stay themselves and just not seen my car, since it was parked behind the dumpster at the side.

The rain had stopped raining. Seeing the truck, the buckets still in the back, I started to feel large and generous again. Reinflated. I imagined throwing my arms around their shoulders and dragging them back into The Sailor's Paradise. They would be embarrassed, maybe even afraid, but I'd put a little glass of beer in front of each of them and say, It's fine. Forgive, forgive. My beautiful sister, my big heavy son. And we'd all sleep it off in my room with the view, then John Dairy and I would drive back in the morning and finish our season, while Lorraine went on to the beach, where she got a job, and had a life, and someday, maybe, named a baby or two after me.

I walked up to the dog and softly palmed her head and leaned down to look through the window.

John Dairy was on the driver's side and Lorraine was the passenger. I tried the door and it wasn't locked, but they didn't seem to notice it open. Didn't seem to notice me at all. They were both staring forward at something I couldn't see. Something invisible in the space between the window and the world outside. Their faces were like the faces people make right before they scream, only John Dairy and Lorraine did not. They just stayed frozen there in that moment, and I stayed frozen myself, because what could I do. What exactly could I do.