Guppy

With no pants or shoes I felt like an animal. My name was lost to time, and I only existed to myself. The truck slowed, then stopped, gas off, the driver out of his seat, probably taking a stretch before coming around the back to get us. I could hear him grazing his hand along the side of the truck. I pulled away from the doors. They opened and the night poured in, so bright after the darkness of the truck.

“Come on out boys,” the driver said.

The four of us stepped out in our yellowed briefs. A man and a teenage boy appeared from around the truck. The man smiled so warmly I almost liked him. They gathered us, and led us up the stairs. Inside the building, the floors were carpeted. I felt bad getting my dirty feet all over the carpet, but I guess the men didn’t mind – they knew how dirty our feet were. The T.V. was on. We all stared at it with our still adjusting eyes wide. It showed a woman talking about a steam-cleaner. She showed how it worked on wood, and tile, and all these surfaces, by dripping chocolate sauce, and jam, and spaghetti sauce on little cut-outs of each material. My eyes followed each drip, and I imagined being there, and lapping it all up like a kitten. Then a voiceover explained that you could call a number and they would send you the steam-cleaner. I looked over to the teenage boy who was still in the room with us. He lay on the bed with his feet crossed, texting on his phone. I imagined breaking the antenna off the T.V. and stabbing him in the eye, right through the brain. I’d take the phone and run right through the door with it. But he’d see me break it, and catch my arm before I reached his eye, and by the time I’d get to the door to unlock all the different locks there were, the other man would be back and I’d be caught. So I didn’t try. I repeated the numbers in my head, afraid the screen would go black, or back to the chocolate drips, before I knew the number. I could hear the lead man shuffling on the other side of the door beside the T.V. The man stepped out of the bathroom, gently shoving the boy he had been in there with, in front of him. I swallowed all my thoughts, even with the knot in my throat. The boy’s hair was wet, and stuck to his forehead His naked body was dried off, but his face was still wet and droplets gathered in the creases under his eyes. I caught the man’s eyes for a second, but immediately turned to the TV and pretended to have never broken my gaze from it.

“You can sit boys.” He touched a couple on the shoulder gently. He stepped sideways towards me, and then rested his hand on my shoulder a little longer. “Come on, I’ll help you get cleaned up.” He smiled down at me when he said it.

I followed him into the washroom, where the tub was still full of the water from the last boy. I was glad I was called second while it was still hot, and not full of dirt. He didn’t have to ask; I took off my briefs, and stepped in. I sunk in so that only my head was sticking out, my knees locked and extended under water. Parts of me insisted on floating upward, but I tried my best to keep all of me against the bottom of the tub. The man sat on the closed toilet by the faucet, where my feet were.

“I’m Richard.”

I nodded. He didn’t want to know my name, and I knew he wouldn’t ask. After a moment of him looking at me, while I looked at the dripping faucet, he knelt beside the tub with a plastic cup in his hand. He sank the cup in the water and gestured for me to turn around. I sat cross-legged facing away from him. He put his free hand on my forehead to block the water from my face as he emptied the cup on my head. I closed my eyes. It felt so nice. The water fell in beads all over my body, like candle wax. I wanted him to put my whole face in his hand, and I wanted his hand to belong to someone else. My head drooped toward sleep. He stopped me from slipping under. “You are a very good boy, aren’t you?”

I tensed and gave one little, half nod.

“Do I look like I want to hurt you—do you feel like I want to hurt you?”

With the same small range of motion, I shook my head no. His hand now felt very cold on my shoulder.

“I don’t. You boys have been through a lot of tough stuff right?”

I lifted my other shoulder.

“I’m gonna take care of you, I have a treat for you later. We can take photos together, little videos, you can play on the patio sometimes. I will treat you like a little prince, as long as you know I’m the king, and you do what I ask. Do you understand?”

I nod fully and quickly.

“It’ll be fun, like camping with your uncle. You can call me Uncle Richey, okay?”

I stood up in the tub when the conversation, or whatever that was, was over. Richard wrapped the damp towel around me, and picked me up and placed me on the rug he had been kneeling on. While he wiggled my body around, trying to make me laugh as he dried me off, I studied him. I’ve decided you can learn most of what you need to know about someone from their hands. How worn out they are, or groomed, how they grip, and how they gesture while their owner speaks. How they twitch, or keep themselves busy. Richard’s hands floated over my towel-clad body, though before on my bare shoulder, it sunk heavy and firm. The treats Richard had were miniature chocolate bars and bags of chips. He threw them on the floor for us to run and fight for. Despite myself, I threw my body to the ground and tried to gather as many as I could along with the rest of them. I succeeded in getting one Mars Bar, and one bag of Ruffles. I sat at the bottom of the bed, and pulled opened the bag of chips. I put the chocolate bar on my ankle. I took one potato chip out and I ate it. I wanted it so much before it actually reached my mouth, but by the time I had finished my third chip my stomach was turning. It was like it was all stuck in my throat, so I closed the bag and held both treats in my hands.

In the dark I could feel all the other little boys’ bodies beside me. The thin blanket draped between us let in too much cold air. But still, my hands with my treats in them were sweaty. I breathed extra soft so that no one could hear me, but the harder I tried, the heavier I needed to breathe. My wrist lay against my hip and I felt my thin skin stretch over it. I imagined it disintegrating right before my dilated eyes. I imagined with speckled vision seeing my skin peel away from my bones, my heart turning grey, and my chest becoming an empty cavity. And the specks of my sight getting larger and larger until all I could see was absolute blackness. Would I still think with a dead body? My heart beat faster then, very much alive. But I was stuck in this bed, I could shift my eyes from the ceiling to the boy beside me and back. But what is sight? Why do I feel like a single thing at all? I stopped. I cleared my mind, and thought of nice things, thought of summer, and growing up, and having a girlfriend and eating, and being rich. And going to Hollywood. And having a little Christmas tree, even though it was hot out, and giving someone presents, and making cookies, and cleaning everything up with my very own steam-cleaner, and somewhere in there I fell asleep.

I woke up to the feeling of being watched. Richard gave us new black boxers—new to us, but not new. I ate my entire smushed Mars bar, knowing it wouldn’t last another night, but still clutched my crumbled Ruffles. The Mars bar felt like a perfectly delightful, chunk of liquid tar between my teeth, and I felt like it might just pull each one out of my gums. Richard, who had fallen asleep on the love seat opposite the patio, opened the sliding doors. I hoped that wind would come and fill the room, but the air outside was almost as still as it was inside. He said we could go out one at a time, as long as we didn’t bring anything, not even our treats. In the sun on the little patio, I felt the pores of my skin open up and absorb the rays. I put my legs through the bars of the fence, and let them dangle; my feet heavy and swinging on my skinny ankles. I put my forehead against the bars. I tried to get them to sink into my temples, but the bars were just a little too close together. On the ground, there were many shadows. I didn’t know which one was mine, so I wiggled trying to find myself. There I was, the block of navy blue between the stripes.

“You have to come in now,” the teenager called out to me.

I watched Richard get himself all cleaned up. He rolled up the sleeves of his pale blue linen shirt and folded the cuffs of his khakis. At the door to leave, Richard took the teenage boy by the back of the neck, said something in his ear, then kissed him on the forehead. As the door closed behind Richard, the teenage boy laughed to himself, and walked to the desk. I didn’t know it, but I was staring at the teenage boy. He looked up at me and made a face.

“Do you want to see what I’m doing?” he asked.

I nodded and shuffled over to him. One boy was still in bed, and the other two were sitting knee to knee, looking out the sliding door window fogged with humidity caught between the two layers of glass.

The teenage boy was downloading photos from his phone onto a laptop that I had seen him pull out of his backpack earlier. A box with a bar quickly filling green read, ‘78 of 437’ photos. Face after face popped up.

“See any you know?” he asked.

I shook my head no. The teenage boy swivelled his chair, and put his feet up on the bed, a couple inches away from the face of the sleeping boy.

“How long have you been with us then?” he asked.

“Five months travelling.”

“You having fun yet?”

“No”

“You will. I started with photos like you but now I work. With Richard it’s not a bad deal. Just do what he says is all.”

As the teenage boy was about to turn back to his laptop, I said: “Well actually I started with work.”

He turned back to me with his eyebrows raised. “Why’d they start travelling you?”

“Too handsy with the money. No belt was thick enough to send me the message, is what they said.”

“Now you’ve got no money to get handsy with, Guppy.”

“Nope, just chocolate bars.”

We smiled at each other. By now the two boys by the window were both watching our interaction.

“Where are you from?” he asked me.

“Chicago.”

“No kidding? I worked in Oak Park.”

I was tingling inside. Bonding with the guard to the door. Bonding at all. He saw me, a guppy swimming around, that maybe he’d like to catch and show the routes. He was one of us, more than one of them; I knew it because he didn’t talk about what we were doing like we were camping with our uncles. He talked about it like business, and a strange series of events. And that’s what it was.

The teenage boy told me his name was Jamie. And when the conversation died out, I watched Jamie roll himself a joint, pouring his freshly ground weed into a straight line, and licking the edge of the paper to close it. As he raised the lighter, I imagined knocking it out and holding the lighter to the carpet by the door, with me on the other side. But it was too humid, and I didn’t want to know I burned Jamie alive. Or the other boys, I suppose. Jamie wrapped his lips around the joint and breathed in, held it, then let the smoke burst out of his nostrils. I tried to seem like I wasn’t looking at him by running my fingers over the buttons on the remote control, while I leaned against the headboard. Jamie closed his computer and leaned into me. His eyes were bright.

“Guppy you know tonight we’re gonna put you on file. And all online. Do you think that it is strange, men wanting boys? It’s pretty fucking nasty if you ask me. But money, is a toke, is a dick, is a grown ass man.”

He leaned in closer and blew the smoke in his mouth onto my crotch.

“To you it’s money; to me it’s just what I have to do while I wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“To get out, maybe go home, maybe do something with my life, maybe be someone. Maybe you're gonna die a pimp, who started as a whore, and that’s your life. But it’s not mine.” My dull eyes were swollen and wet while I said that to him. Jamie dropped his playful smile, and pulled away from me. He suddenly wound his arm back and smacked my face down into the desk. When I gathered myself up, I felt naked.

“Why don’t you just turn around and I’ll make my way to the door. You didn’t see me, you were stoned, and you thought we were asleep. How about you do that Jamie?” I asked softly.

He leaned back into me.

“How about you turn around. This message doesn’t need a belt.” Jamie stood up and turned me over, shoving my face into the mattress. I could hear him take off his belt and pull down his pants. He leaned over me, and put his cheek against my ear and said: “Guppy, you’re gonna die a pimp too.”

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