

BABY

Baby birds cry from an unseen nest overhead. My path is mostly shadow, occasional drips of sun leaking through the cracks in the canopy. I pass a tree crawling with so many red and green beetles that it appears a glittering jewel.

A perfect summer day in the New England woods! No humidity. A gently tickling breeze. Hot, but not enough to break a sweat. The days where the girls wear the skimpiest of outfits—not that my social anxiety allows me to interact with such specimens.

Just one more thing to make this afternoon truly sublime: drugs.

Dry swallow two Xanax, smile, then spark a jay. Hello, happiness! Hello, relaxation! Goodbye, real-world problems.

Mmm! Walking rules. Most of my stoner friends are too lazy to leave the house, but I love the great outdoors. The more isolated, the better. I almost never run into people out here, and when I do, they're always just walking their dogs, and dogs kick ass. If everyone had a dog by their side, maybe other people wouldn't stress me out so much—I could just talk to their pets instead of them.

I'm about to pop in headphones and crank hip-hop when I hear the crying. At first I think it's a cat, or a woman trying to keep her orgasm quiet. But no, neither of those.

A baby. The clear, distinct wail of a squalling infant. "The hell?" I mutter before shouting, "Hello? Is someone there?"

I instantly regret this, fearing that I'm being a busybody and interrupting some parent who is already dealing with a fussy kid and now has to deal with me as well. However, when my call yields no reply, I deem the rudeness worthy of investigating. Besides, the cries don't sound like they're coming from further down the path. Rather, they come to me on the wind from deep in the heart of the forest. Looks like today calls for straying from the beaten path.

Crunch. I leave the main path for the world of dead leaves and pricker bushes. Wails tug me along, an irresistible siren song.

No way someone left a baby out here. I mean, there's just no way!

"Hello?" I call again, the trail long lost behind me. No reply besides more crying and some birds taking abrupt flight from the tree beside me. The thicket grows thicker, strangling, leaving me crawling and babbling, fully infantilized.

And then, just when I'm about to turn back in annoyance, I pop out into a tiny clearing, a circular patch of grass just wide enough where I could lie down straight if I so desired. White rocks ring the enclosure. The air here is beyond musky. Apparently I've found the forest's armpit.

In the center of this space lies a squirming, wailing mound of pink flesh. The baby.

But...

I have to blink to confirm I'm seeing it properly. I've never had a child of my own, but I still like to think I know the basics of what babies are. Women go on and on about how painful childbirth is, how it's like trying to shit out a football. This baby, however, is nowhere near the size of a football. In fact, it looks like it could fit nice and snug inside a woman's lady-parts if it so desired, for this child before me is no larger than a stick of butter.

Is this some sort of preemie baby? Or a woodland abortion? No, aborted babies aren't still alive afterwards. And this baby doesn't look like a fetus. No, it's fully formed, just... fucking tiny. Even a midget baby wouldn't be this minuscule. What the fuck have I stumbled upon?

"It's okay," I whisper, reaching out to lift the tiny creature. As I scoop the child from the dirt, I'm terrified my giant fingers will crush it like delicate

dragonfly wings. The naked child's skin burns hot to the touch, an inferno raging beneath its thin, cotton-candy colored skin. "I'll take you somewhere safe."

I barely remember walking home, the baby dominating my attention as I stroll. It stopped crying after I picked it up but I was terrified that it would start again so I sang lullabies all the way out of the woods and back to my apartment. The landlord doesn't let tenants have pets but surely that rule doesn't apply to babies. Besides, it's not like the kid will be here very long. Once I call the cops, they will surely take it off my hands.

However, now that I'm home, I'm finding that contacting the authorities is the furthest thing from my mind.

"This is my living room," I tell Baby. "And this is my TV." Click. "See? Cartoons! We already have things in common. What's your favorite anime?" Oh, what am I saying? This kid is so small, odds are they were born mere minutes before I found them. Or no, if that was the case, they'd have been covered in placenta. Damn it, too confusing. I should stop questioning things—it never ends well.

Look down to find Baby shivering in the palm of my hand. Idiot! How did I not think to get the kid some clothes? But, on that topic, what do I dress it in? I don't have any baby clothes. And, am I dressing up a boy or a girl? Every time I try to check the child's gender, it's like my eyes go all swimmy and everything turns into a muddy blob.

Deet-a-leet-a-leet.

Quiet, damn phone! I'm in the middle of a situation here.

In my attempts to hit *Ignore*, I somehow instead click *Accept*. Blast my fat fingers.

"Hello?" a voice croaks from across the void. "Jerry, are you there?"

Ugh, it's my Mom. Actually, maybe this is a good thing—she might know where I can buy extra-extra-extra-small infant's clothes. "Mom?" I say, lifting the phone to my face.

"What?" says the voice. "Jerry, this is your Father."

Oops. Damn my Dad and his feminine voice. Frantically stab at phone screen until the call disconnects. That was a close one. If he asks, I'll say I was driving through a tunnel.

Turn off phone before it can give me another panic attack. In my underwear drawer, I grab my last clean pair of socks and gently slide Baby into the one that doesn't have a giant hole. "How's that?" I ask. "Cozy? It's like a sleeping bag!"

Baby's shivers slowly subside. Odd that it never cried during its cold spell. I thought babies cried over everything. As it warms, its smile grows. Fat eyes stare up at me. Am I high, or are Baby's peepers slightly too big for its head?

While Baby coos and watches TV, I do a Google search for 'how to take care of a baby'.

"Oh Jesus," I cry.

According to this, I'm already doing everything wrong!

The very first rule at the tippity-top of the list says that you must always wash your hands, or at least use hand sanitizer, before handling a newborn. I've been picking it up willy-nilly! And my hands are vile! Trust me, I know where they've been.

I read on, every line presenting new nightmares to ponder over. So many rules! How did my parents ever pull it off? I mean, they're totally inept, I can't see them memorizing all this crap.

"Okay, Baby, enough TV." Remote clicks, screen flickers before kicking the bucket. "We need to go shopping, otherwise you're going to die ten times over—the internet told me so."

The internet also told me I can't drive with a baby unless it's in a car seat, but how the fuck am I supposed to buy a car seat without first driving to the car seat place to buy one? Fucking bullshit! Besides, Baby is so tiny that they fit perfectly in the cup holder. That's good enough for me.

Bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-BUDROOM!

Car starts faster than usual. Today is my lucky day. Probably because I have a leprechaun by my side. I should add Lucky Charms to my shopping list. Never

mind, I already have two boxes. Road seems bumpier than usual, the very world around me trying to kill my car-seat-free child. I do five miles an hour all the way to the mall, ignoring the honks and middle fingers from cars passing me illegally in the left lane.

I tuck Baby, still wrapped in a sock, into my coat pocket before exiting my rust-bucket of a Volvo. Crossing the parking lot, a wind that could chap Santa Claus' ass beats down on us. In the mall, the AC is cranked to a factory roar. Baby keeps sticking its head out of my pocket to sneak peeks at our surroundings. "Down, Baby," I hiss. "Security here is hella tight." Could swear I hear Baby grumble in response. My little goober is growing up so fast.

My trip to Baby Gap confirms my worst fears: my kid is too tiny for actual clothing. Plus all the associates give me funny looks. I guess I don't look like someone who should be buying baby clothes. Judgmental cunts.

"Can I help you, sir?" one says.

"Don't you think I can help myself?" I snap before storming out.

Pace the corridors. Barely any shoppers. Thanks, Amazon. Now what do I do? I haven't shopped here in a while, and where I expect to find a Sears, I instead find a Target. Perfect, they have everything. Or so I've heard.

Turns out the rumor is true, because my shopping list gets crossed off in record time. Well, except for the 'baby clothes' part. However, as I stroll through the toy aisle, inspiration strikes.

"Big fan of dolls?" asks the slutty looking cashier who rings me up.

Smiling ear to ear, "Just their clothes."

She rolls her eyes and snaps her pink bubblegum. *Cha-ching*. "Here's your receipt."

Walking on sunshine all the way back to my car. Wind whistles but I whistle back.

It turns out, installing a car seat is a major fucking pain in the dickhole. I wrestle it, punch and kick it, yet it refuses to strap into place. I tussle with the seat belt, desperate to find a way to tie down the obtuse child chair. "Damn your eyes," I shout as I give up, throwing the seat willy-nilly into the back. Baby watches all

this from the cup holder, insect eyes never blinking. I'm tempted to clap my hands in its face and shout "Boo!" just to see if it reacts. Maybe Baby has a dose of the 'tism.

The drive home is more treacherous than the first trip, giant trucks tailgating me to the point where I hyperventilate, fingers squeezing the wheel until bones squeak. Birds and squirrels dart in front of my car, daring me to swerve out of their path. I don't, squishing every last one of the daring-dos. My car is coated in critter blood by the time I pull into my driveway. Hopefully it rains later.

Inside, Baby tries on outfits from Barbie and Ken dolls while I try to figure out which gender looks more appropriate on the lil' cutie. In the end we mix and match, dressing Baby in one of Ken's leather jackets paired with Barbie's pink skirt.

"Where oh where did you come from?" I ponder. Baby just goos and gahs. "Damn your adorable anime eyes. Don't worry, I won't let the pigs come for you. From now on, it's you and me against the world."

And boy, does the world strike quick.

Pounding at the door comes like gunshots. "Oh shit." Then, remembering there's a child present, "I mean, shoot." *Bang-bang-bang!* "Stop rushing me!"

Fuck! Too much happening at once. Apartment the polar opposite of presentable. What do I hide first, the baby or the bong? Who's knocking, anyway? The police? Maybe someone saw me with Baby at the Mall and snitched.

"You need to stay nice and quiet until I return," I tell Baby as I close them inside my sock drawer. "Otherwise they'll take you away from me."

Maybe I'm imagining things, but I could swear Baby nods in acknowledgment.

Door is shaking on its hinges as I approach, every fresh pound making me wince. "Yo," I call, "Who it be?"

"Jerry?" a woman calls. "Open up!"

A lady? Here's hoping she's sexy.

I open the door and then groan. "Oh. Look who the cat dragged in."

“We need to talk,” says my Dad, pushing past me to enter my home. I add *breaking and entering* to the long list of things I hold against the man, an inventory I’ve been building since the moment I slid free of the womb and he looked at me funny (or, I assume he did, damn his eyes).

“So,” I say, not bothering to hide my annoyance, “what brings you to my neck of the woods?”

Shooting a glare my way, he says, “Why don’t you tell me?”

Blast! I hate when someone answers a question with a question—it’s my kryptonite. “Um... because I hung up on you earlier?”

Angry now, his voice going higher than ever, “You hung up on me?”

“I didn’t! I was driving through a tunnel.” Face flushes scarlet. Fists clench. Deep breaths, Jerry. Remember what they taught you in anger management. Put on a happy face. “Ahem. Can I get you anything? Coffee?”

“No, thanks,” he says.

Never one to take *no* for an answer, “I’ll make some coffee.”

Scoop. Splash. Click. Bubble, bubble. Coffee maker issues rumbling farts as it works, filling the room with the powerful scent of java. Lights in kitchen flicker. Need to change that consarn bulb before its palpitations send me into a seizure.

Once I’ve poured two cups, I can’t ignore the man any longer. Handing him his brew, “So? How is Mother?”

“Same as usual,” he says, setting his drink down on a cluttered countertop without even taking a perfunctory sip. “Watching TV all day. Drinking by lunchtime. Crying herself to sleep at night.”

Trying to turn my frown upside-down, “Sounds like Mum.”

“She wasn’t always like this,” Dad says. “Not before you dragged the family name through the mud. She was a respectable woman. She-”

“Is there a point to this visit,” I interrupt, “or did you come here just to mash my potatoes?”

Dad glares. I glare back. This isn't some plain-old staring contest, this is animal kingdom shit—primal, instinct-fueled psychic warfare. I'm tempted to start peeing on the kitchen floor to mark my territory, maybe hump his leg while I'm at it.

"I came here," he finally snarls, "because it's time for you to make amends."

My brain becomes a black hole, sucking any and all attempts at thought into its murky abyss. "No, no, no," I sputter. "You don't mean—"

"Oh yes, I do. Your mother and I have lived in humiliation for too long. It's time for you to start restoring our family's good name."

Hyperventilating now. Talking to Dad is never good for my mental health. If he had any sympathy for me, we'd never interact again. He can't really expect me to do *that*? Not after all this time. I've already paid my dues to society, I don't owe him and Mom anything extra.

I'm about to tell Dad all these things—I really am! It's just, this also happens to be the exact moment where I realize that Baby has entered the room.

How?

What?

How?

I rub my eyes, but that doesn't make my vision of Baby crawling across the counter-top any less real. This is bad. Like, *dick and balls caught in your zipper* bad.

Jumping from my seat, "Have you seen my backyard before? I have a little garden that I think you'll love." Lies, but I need to get this dude out of here before he notices the teeny-tiny elephant in the room.

"Blast it, son—stop trying to change the subject."

God, I hate when he talks. He's so squeaky that he could get a job playing a chipmunk in one of those retarded movies. Wish I had an old man with a normal voice so I'd actually take him seriously when he's worked up like this.

When you look at it that way, my rampant immaturity is all his fault.

Need to get Dad out of here, into any other room. “But have you seen my bedroom? Come on, you can see what I’ve done with the place.”

I reach to take him by the arm but he smacks my paw away. “Don’t you dare touch me,” he trills, face burning jack-o-lantern red, blood hot as magma and threatening to burst out through his liver spots. Christ, the treatment I put up with! It’s not like I killed anybody.

Behind Dad, Baby is teetering on the edge of my sink, which holds a cities worth of dirty dishes, plates stacked skyscraper high and cups still half-filled with spoiled chocolate milk. Knives stand skyward, a row of pikes waiting to impale any falling children in the vicinity. Holy deathtrap! I’m way behind on baby-proofing this place.

Time seems to slow, the kind of corny effect you only see in movies. Shove Dad out of the way in my mad dash to save Baby from their sure-to-be grisly demise and, even in slo-mo, his cry of pain is still high-register. Lights buzz, flicker. Sneakers squeak against linoleum like the cries of a baby bird. Sweat tickles my eyebrows, dampens my balls.

Two syllables, but they take an eternity to get out:

“Baaaaaayyyyyyy-bbbbbbbeeeeeeee!”

Baby looks at me.

Dad looks at Baby.

I reach Baby, snatching it up before gravity can send it toppling into an early grave. Finally breathing a sigh of relief, time snaps back to its normal speed. “Damn it, Baby,” I say. “How’d you escape my drawer?”

Dad grunts as he picks himself up off the floor. “Son?” The light that had been flickering gives one last flash before dying once and for all. “What the hell is that *thing* in your hands?”

“Um...”

What do I do? Should I go for the gaslight, simply deny reality and say I’m not holding anything? Or should I plead the *it’s not what it looks like* defense? Damn it, I wish I still had my Magic Eight Ball. Granted, there’s probably an app

for that nowadays, but this isn't really an opportune time to check. Eeny meeny miney moe, catch a shitty alibi by the toe...

God knows why, but I decide to try the truth. I know, I know—honesty is a sucker's game. But sometimes, when your back is against the wall, it's best to get crazy.

"Dad," I say, holding out my teacup sized child in the bowl of my hands, "meet my baby: Baby." Dad's head is spinning, his mouth sputtering random consonants like a robot whose circuitry is frying. Since he isn't answering, at least coherently, I add, "Congrats! You're a Grandpa."

Maybe that was too much.

"You sick fucking fucker!" Dad levels an accusatory finger-gun against me. I freeze as if it's real. "How dare you pull a stunt like this? After all the humiliation your Mother and I have already lived down! Jesus, Jerry, this might be the death of her. You're scum—you're fucking scum!"

I yawn. "You know, that might have hurt my feelings. That is, if you didn't sound like an elf on helium."

The elf on helium attacks. Clumsy fists fly, scrawny limbs spasmodically lashing. A blow to my cheek, my shoulder, the side of my neck.

Meep! Must protect Baby!

I must have a feminine side that I never knew about, because my maternal instincts kick in hard. In this moment, I would do anything, *anything*, to keep Baby safe. If you can't understand that, well, you must not be a parent. You non-breeders are all the same: super-judgy. Plus, Dad struck me first. Anything that comes next is self-defense, and I'll swear it up and down before any and all courts of law you feel so inclined to throw me before the mercy of.

Poor Baby must be so scared as I clutch them to my chest with one hand and rummage through the sink with the other, Dad pounding at my spinal column all the while. "Don't worry, goober," I whisper. "I'll make this all okay."

Dried pizza cheese coats the long blade of the knife. The handle: bright blue. Then, a boatload of red enters the scene. Wet, runny, seemingly unending amounts of red.

Did you know my Dad would beat the shit out of me when I was a little kid? Well, he didn't really, but that's what I'm going to tell the police if they ever catch me. Stuff like that plays well with juries.

Gasp for breath, arm aching from the sudden workout. Knife slips from numb fingers, clatters across dirty linoleum. Dad, meanwhile, gurgles and burbles. I stare, cock head, blink slowly. Feels like I'm only now seeing him, the *real* him, for the first time. How was I ever afraid of this man? For the millionth time in my life, I pray I was adopted.

"Isn't that something?" I say to Baby. "He came over here angry that I cut our phone call short, only for his life to be cut short as well. Does that count as irony? I have no clue, that word always confuses me." Baby laughs and coos, pudgy arms happily pinwheeling. I wipe polka-dots of blood from their forehead. "Does someone need a bath?" Then, "What am I thinking? We have a body to hide!"

As an avid deer hunter, this isn't my first time dismembering a large corpse in my garage. However, it does mark the first time I had a super-cute Baby helping out with the task, even if their contributions were relegated to moral support. Blood drips on a tarp. Dad is hanging from his ankles, body split wide open from neck to arsehole. Organs scoopy-scooped, piled into slop bucket. Hands and feet sawed off and sealed in plastic bags to be disposed in various public trashcans, all headed to different dumps. Head crushed to a pulp. Kept separate to be buried in deep pit in woods far, far from here. Meat stripped from limbs, stored in freezer in stacks of steaks. I'll figure out what to do with those later. Bones. So many bones! They'll be buried in concrete after my next shift working my construction gig. That is, assuming I can find a babysitter. Crikey, life is going to get real complicated real fast.

And to think, this was only Day One of my weekend. Hopefully Sunday proves a smoother ride.

Bath time! No, not for me.

Baby splishes and splashes while bright new toys bob in the bubbles. And since Baby is only four and three-quarter inches long—I measured—the bathtub is only filled to an inch and a half of height. Also, the bathtub is a Tupperware container. Hey, I couldn't risk Baby accidentally going down the drain! Their bath toys: a rubber band, a toothpick, a feather, and a plastic Pokemon coin that's too

big for Baby's fingers to grip but shiny enough where they have fun batting it around.

I'm definitely a good Dad. That's what I'm thinking as I take my own shower later, as I'm watching my own Dad's blood spiraling down my legs and towards the drain.

"Nighty-night," I say after reading Baby a hundred bedtime stories.

Baby doesn't hear me. Baby is already sleeping. Ah, the expression of perfect innocence that can only be found in the face of a sleeping child. Moments like these make killing a family member all feel worth it. How dare Dad try to rob me of this bliss? Typical American, never happy for the happiness of others. Land of the free, my cornhole.

My head hits the pillow and I'm gonzo. Sweet dreams are made of cheese.

Then.

Have you ever woken to the sound of screams? Trust me, it's a major fucking shock to the system. At first I thought it was a fire alarm, but then I remembered I don't have any smoke detectors (the annoying things were always beeping at me when I was trying to mellow out AKA smoking pot).

Yesterday's events suddenly click back into my brain. The haze of sleep made me forget that I'm a new father and, now that I'm reoriented, I fling myself from bed and make a beeline for Baby's makeshift crib (a shoebox). Inside it, Baby has become some sort of living air raid siren.

"Hey," I say, barely able to hear myself over the racket. "Cut that out."

Baby doesn't cut it out. Their face beet red, they somehow manage to take their shrieks to even higher decibels. Mother of pearl, my neighbors are going to think I'm killing someone. Which, given the fact that I actually did kill someone earlier without any neighbors hearing, would be rather ironic (that is, assuming I'm not messing up how to use that word again).

Stomping my foot, "Dammit, Baby."

Think brain, think! What does it mean when a baby is crying? Do they need a diaper change? Apparently not. Has Baby even used the bathroom since I found

them? Shit, have I even fed Baby yet? No wonder they're so pissed off—I get cranky when I'm hungry, too.

“Okay, Baby,” I say. “Here’s a bottle. I hope you like formula.” Given Baby’s size, their bottle is actually an eyedropper. I squeeze a drop out onto my own tongue first. Fucking disgusting. “Enjoy!”

Like their Old Man, Baby finds the fluid vile. They spit and wail and spit some more. It would be kinda cute if my head didn’t feel on the verge of spontaneous combustion. “Shut up, shut up, shut up,” I mutter, hands clamped around my ears. “No wonder someone left you in the woods.”

Hours pass in this manner, Baby screaming at top volume while I rock back and forth on the adjacent floorboards. Oh well, nobody ever said parenting was going to be easy. I should feel lucky the honeymoon phase lasted as long as it did.

I must have fallen asleep eventually because the sun never rises, it just suddenly appears between blinks. Back and shoulders ache from spending the night on hardwood floor. Meanwhile, Baby’s giant eyes peep at me from over the rim of their box.

“Really? Now you like me again? Better late than never.”

A new day full of exciting possibilities. I won’t bore you with the incriminating details involved in dead body disposal, but trust me, Baby and I have a busy morning. Miracle of miracles, we get all our chores done before lunch. Now we have the whole afternoon/evening for sweet, sweet relaxation.

When I get home, Dad’s car is no longer in my driveway, per the help of a wigger I know who runs a local chop-shop. Inside, I crank rap-metal and crack a beer. Fred Durst is screaming about doing it all for the nookie so loud that I almost don’t hear the phone ringing.

Punching the green accept button, “Casa de Baby, how can I help you?”

A braying, nasally voice replies. “Jerry?”

Uh-oh. I’d know that smoker’s rasp anywhere. “Hello, Mother. How are you on this fine Sunday afternoon?”

“Jerry? Jerry, can you hear me? Are you there?”

“Yes. Yes to everything. What’s up?”

“Jerry?” she croaks. “I can’t find your father, Jerry. I’m getting worried.”

Yawn. “Has he finally run out on you? I always suspected he was keeping a woman on the side.”

Mom explodes with hysterical sobs. I’d say my job is done here.

I hang up, satisfied that I’ve given her what she needs to start moving on with her life. Dad always held her back anyway. Maybe now she can finally live out her lifelong dreams of... I dunno, traveling the world and fucking various ethnic dudes. Time to press pause on menopause!

Cartoons are the best. Hours of them fly right by, Baby and I laughing up a storm as Mordecai and Rigby give their boss yet another major headache. I change the channel when *Steven Universe* comes on, not wanting my innocent child exposed that particular brand of propaganda.

“-begging the kidnapper to please, please return their child.”

Huh? What is this? The news?

“Anyone with information regarding the whereabouts of the child is being asked to please come forward.”

“Jesus Christ!” Nacho chips fly from my shirt as I lunge to my feet. Need to turn this off, fast. If the cops are looking for me, I’d rather not know about it. For now, it’s Schrodinger's Kidnapping Investigation; as long as I avoid hearing about it, there’s still a chance it doesn’t exist. Denial, a new law of physics.

TV screen goes bye-bye. That’s enough tempting fate for one evening.

“Okay, Baby, let’s play a game.” I win fifty rounds of tic-tac-toe in a row before getting bored. Not watching TV sucks. At least Baby hasn’t cried all day. Maybe the crazy squalling of last night was just a dream.

Ding-dong.

Uh-oh. More company? Don’t they know what happened to my last visitor?

Raising my voice, “Coming.”

Should I clean? No time. Should I put on pants? Probably. Hide Baby in sock drawer? Check. And now? I guess I should get the door.

Why do I have a feeling this is going to end horribly?

“Who is it?” I call, loading my voice with faux-sweetener. No answer. Can’t be the cops, they’d have kicked the door down by now. Need to invest in a peephole.

Open door a fraction of a crack. My view is a mere sliver, paper thin. Green where my shrubs sit. Blue-white skyline. Somewhere in the middle, a person. But who? Or, should I have said *whom*? Oh, whom cares?

Finally, the stranger speaks, their distressed voice so drawn out and creaky that I initially mistake it for the groan of a floorboard. “Jerry?”

I breathe a sigh of relief and open the door. “Jesus, Mom. You had me worried you were someone who mattered.”

Mom’s face is scrunched into a raisin and she rubs her hands together furiously, one hand occasionally stopping to squeeze the other in a serial killer’s stranglehold. Her hair is a mess and her makeup is only applied to the right side of her head, lipstick cutting off just below her nose, one eye elaborately decorated with thick mascara, blue-green blush. Sparkles. By contrast, the unpainted side of her face comes off corpse-like, a *Walking Dead* extra. Looks like someone forgot to take their happy-pills.

“Jerry,” she hisses. “I need to find your father.”

My eyes dart left and right, feigning confusing. “O... kay?”

“Jerry. He must be somewhere, Jerry. Please, help me find him.”

Piteous groan. “Come inside, Ma, before the neighbors stare.” She doesn’t move so I grab her by the shoulder and yank her off my front porch.

“Jerry?” she says as we tunnel through my cluttered hallway.

“Only speak when spoken to,” I snap. Yes, I know this sounds harsh, but trust me, this is the only way to get through to this broad. She only understands pointed words and direct orders. Anything less leaves her tripping over herself.

The hallway ejects us into the kitchen, where I begin making coffee. Mom is doing her best impression of a mannequin until I guide her towards a chair. “Relax,” I say, my tone implying *or else*.

“Jerry?” she says. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

“You’re confused, I know. Let me guess: with Dad gone, you’re off your schedule. Missing meals. Missing... meds.”

Mom explodes with tears, a living lawn sprinkler. Yawn. Typical. I smoke a bong until she runs herself dry. Now it’s a tossup as to which of us has the reddest eyes.

“Jerry?” she says.

I hold up a silencing finger and then smoke more, not because I want to, but because I want to remind her that she’s in my domain, that things move on my schedule here. Through an exploding marijuana plume, “With Dad gone, you need to re-learn how to live. You need to find meaning in existing for yourself instead of others. And, most importantly, you need to do it far, far away from me.”

I don’t think my speech is sinking in, because Mom’s eyes keep darting to something just over my shoulder. “Jerry?” she says. “Jerry, what’s that?”

Peeking backwards, “That’s just Baby—they’re always sneaking out here when they know they shouldn’t. Quit trying to change the subject, Ma.”

In a rare show of will, she ignores me, leaps from her chair, and rushes to Baby, who is currently on the floor and playing with a dead cockroach. Baby’s current ensemble consists of jean shorts and a pink tank-top whose eye-catching hue is likely what attracted Mom’s attention in the first place. I need to install a padlock on my sock drawer ASAP.

Baby’s alien eyes go wider than ever as Mom plucks them from the floor.

“Jerry!” she cries. “Oh my God, what is this thing?”

Groan. She’s worse than Dad.

Baby and Mom eye each other with intense curiosity, two animals trying to size the other up. Meanwhile, I'm white-knuckling the handle of a dirty frying pan in case I need to bash this bitch over the head in the near future.

"Jerry," she says. "Jerry, this is so..."

I wind back my arm, ready to send brain-matter splattering.

"This is so..."

Start to swing. RIP Mommy.

"... so amazing!"

Wait, what?

Arm freezes, weapon halting an inch away from skull, death granted temporary reprieve. "Excusez-moi?"

She spins to face me and bonks her nose on the frying pan. Shaking off the pain, "Jerry, this is wonderful! After all that trouble you got into last year, I gave up hope on ever becoming a grandmother. But, you can't have adopted—the government would never give you a kid. So, who's the lucky mother?"

"Bitch ran out on me," I say. "Kinda like Dad did to you."

Thankfully, this doesn't spark another crying jag. "Jerry, I'm so proud of you! Gosh, there's so much I don't know. What's her name? How many weeks old is she? She's so tiny! Was she a preemie? Where does she go when you work?"

"Slow your roll, Mom. I need a Tylenol after all those questions. Besides, I don't think she's a she, those were just the only clothes that fit properly."

Mom pulls back the waistline of Baby's shorts. She only looks inside for a moment, but whatever she sees turns her face paper-white. "Jerry..."

Not in the mood for a lecture, "It's 2019, Mom. Stop being so uptight about gender roles."

Mom squints at me, as if double-checking who she's talking to. "Jerry, is your voice different? You sound higher pitched than usual. Almost... well, it's almost like I'm hearing your father talk."

“What? My voice is perfectly fine.” Except, now that I listen to myself, I do sound squeakier than usual. The fuck? When did this happen? Whatever, it’s not important.

What is important are some of the other points my Mom brought up. I have work in eighteen hours and no plans whatsoever for child care. A construction site isn’t exactly a place for a baby. However...

“Mommy?” I say. “Beloved, lovely Mommy dearest? Greatest Mommy of all time?”

“Jerry?” she asks.

“Tell me, Mother. Are you capable of working a regular babysitting gig?”

She smiles. Bingo!

Rest of the day passes in blurry fragments. I hit the bottle while Mom attempts to get Baby to drink formula. Sunlight shrinks until windows are black pits. Shows on Netflix seem to end the moment they begin. When I belch after dinner, it hits me that I don’t know what I just ate. I mean to ask, but I blink and find myself transported to my bedroom. Mom is tucking Baby in, a haunting lullaby spewing from her lips. I’m down to just my red checkered boxers. Fall into bed. Smush of pillow. Tidal wave of blankets cascading my frame. Cozy-wozy!

“AAAAIIIIII!”

This time, when Baby’s inhuman shrieks jolt me awake, I simply clutch my pillow to my ears and pray for it to end. I do, however, suffer a minor heart attack when bony fingers grab me by the ankle.

“Dammit Mom,” I say, trying and failing to tug free of her hold. “What are you doing?”

“Jerry! There’s something wrong with Baby!” She has to scream to be heard over the background insanity, but still, the shouting makes her sound hysterical, a mental patient in need of a straight jacket.

“Just ignore it,” I say.

“Jerry,” she starts.

“I said, ig-*fucking*-nore it!” Bitch better not make me repeat myself a third time.

With some help from my bedside vodka bottle, I’m back to sleep in a matter of moments. Dreams fly through my head, riding broomsticks and cackling like corny comic book villains. When the morning alarm rings, I’m already puking before my eyelids can open. Guess I’m washing my sheets today. Scratch that: I guess Mom is washing my sheets today.

Speaking of everyone’s favorite housewife, Mom is perched over Baby’s crib in a vulture’s pose, her back turned to me. “What’s going on over there?” I say. “Is Baby okay?”

“Jerry, of course they’re okay.” Mom rotates towards me and I instantly flush red. Not only has she tugged her shirt down to allow her tits to hang out, but she has Baby pressed up against one of her nipples. “In fact, I finally got Baby to start eating. It turns out, they only wanted some mother’s milk.”

“What? What?” I pause, trying to process, but in the end, I still only say “What?” again.

“Jerry, you’re going to be late for work. Hop in the shower while Baby and I make you breakfast.”

Nozzle twist. Water hiss. Steamy steam. Scorching temperatures, a cozy hellfire. Shampoo leaves hair foamier than Cujo’s muzzle. Skin lobster-red when finished.

“Steak and eggs for breakfast! Aren’t I lucky?” I swallow a bite with some coffee and then, through my next mouthful, “Wait, did you go shopping? I don’t have any steak.”

“Jerry, you must be confused. You have more venison steaks in the garage than you’ll be able to eat in an entire year.”

Eyes go wider than Baby’s. Gulp. Swallow. Stomach gurgle-gurgle, Dad saying *hi* from the afterlife. Trying not to puke. Besides, it’s not like it tastes bad. In fact, I’m too hungry to stop eating now. Belch. Rub tummy. Baby squints at me as if somehow aware of how fucked up I am.

At work, I encase Dad's skeleton within a cement tomb. Bye bye birdie. At lunch, Boss treats everyone to Quizno's and my broccoli-cheddar soup is a sneak peak at heaven (like the moon, heaven is made of cheese). In the afternoon, a brick falls on Bob's head and, even though he was wearing a hardhat, he still has to be taken to the hospital. I hate Bob, so this is a good thing. No, I didn't drop the brick on his head!

Punch the clock and then speed the freeway. Cars swarm beneath a lava lamp sunset across highways that will exist long after humanity becomes but a distant memory to our humble, eternal planet. Brakes squeal as I skid into my driveway and I can hear my bong calling to me as I race through the front door.

"Honey, I'm home!"

"Jerry?" Mom calls from somewhere in the depths.

Tiny white dots pepper my vision as I force my way through the obstacle course my hallway has become. Apparently Mom has moved in, because all her belongings are in boxes that I find myself having to crawl across it before I can be born into the kitchen. "Mom?" I say. "Mommy? Mother-wuther?"

Mom stares at me through glazed eyes, Baby again clutched to her bosom. "Jerry?"

"Mom, don't you think Baby has been feeding long enough?"

"Jerry," she exhales, "what makes you say that?"

Baby's lips are slicked crimson, red trails snaking down Mom's shirt from where it has leech-latched onto her nipple. Its wide eyes seem to glow in the sunset haze as it suckles.

"No reason."

Days pass in this manner. I work. I come home. I get stoned/drunk. My voice grows steadily higher in a weird act of midlife reverse-puberty. Mom, meanwhile, grows more and more confused. When she moved all her things to my place, she apparently forgot to pack her Mother's Little Helpers. Maybe that's a good thing: if she was thinking clearly, this whole set-up would surely fall apart. She requires a lot of patience, but lucky for me that's the kind of thing they teach you in anger management, in which I graduated at the top of my class. Baby still

wakes us nightly with its ghastly shrieks, but a midnight snack from Mom usually makes it stop. Usually. On the nights where it doesn't stop, sometimes I almost think I can hear something screaming back at Baby from outside the window, voices echoing to us across the night from the direction of the woods. I do my best not to think about such things. Sometimes it's hard, but my healthy alcohol regimen helps.

We celebrate Baby's first birthday on the one year anniversary of my finding it. Baby has now grown from a minuscule four and a half inches to the giant size of eight inches. So big!

"Jerry, we need to give Baby a real name soon."

"I agree. I've thought long and hard about this, and I think we will name them... Jerry."

"Jerry? But... but you're Jerry."

"Not anymore. I'm Dad now."

Mom nods in solemn acknowledgment. After that, she stops sleeping on the floor and joins me in bed.

Years slink down the drain. Mom and I attend Jerry's parent-teacher conferences and make sure the schools don't discriminate against their peculiar height and ambiguous gender. Eventually Jerry is all grown up, aged to its mid-twenties and having reached a remarkable eighteen inches in height. It's around that time that Jerry has a very unfortunate, very public run in with the law. After that, Mom and I sever ties with Jerry, only calling once a month to make sure they haven't done anything else to drag our family name through the mud.

On one occasion, my call is answered but nobody says anything.

"Hello?" I say. "Jerry, are you there?"

When they finally reply, their voice sounds like it's being beamed down from the dark side of Pluto. "Mom?"

"What?" I snap. "Jerry, this is your father."

Click.

Did they... did they just hang up on me? That ungrateful little shit! This is the thanks I get for rescuing them when they were left to die in the woods? No fucking way. I'm going over there to give Jerry a piece of my mind.

Bang-bang-bang!

Jerry's house is the size of a doghouse and has all the accessories of a normal home, only significantly scaled down in size. When I rap on their door, I only use one knuckle for fear I'll knock it off the tiny hinges. It takes forever, but finally Jerry calls through the door, "Yeah? Who is it?"

"Dammit Jerry, come out here and face me!"

When Jerry opens the door, they look surprised about who they find. "Oh. I thought Mom was here. Jeez Dad, your voice is squeakier every time I see you."

"You're one to talk, Lollipop Guild."

Jerry growls and I hiss back, spit flying between clenched teeth. I'm so angry that I'm seeing white spots in the air. Hope I didn't burst an important blood vessel.

"You picked a bad time to visit," says Jerry. "I have a lot of balls in the air at the moment."

The hell does that mean? Whatever, don't let Jerry derail the convo. I try blinking away the dots that are turning my sight into TV static, but it only intensifies. "This has gone on too long," I say. "You don't know what your antics have done to Mom. You're simply too stressful. Have you considered moving? It wouldn't cost much to have Amazon ship your house to another state. I hear Florida is full of colorful characters, I bet you'd fit in perfect there."

Jerry flashes a sly grin. "Sorry Dad. It's too late for me to move. In fact, I've settled in deeper than ever, really sunk my burrs into the place."

"Remember when you were four and a half inches tall and not a massive pain the ass?"

"Yes," says Jerry. "In fact, I remember it perfectly. My people, we have flawless memories. If I felt so inclined, I could sit down and rewatch my entire life as if it were a movie."

“Oh,” I say. “So you know what happened to the other Dad? The one before me.”

Jerry nods.

My knees go jelly and I fall to my butt. “But you never told Mom?”

“Mom is too fragile for those kinds of truths.”

Since we’re putting all our chips on the table, I finally ask what everyone’s been dying to know. “What are you?”

Jerry smiles and, in this moment, I can almost see him/her as Baby again, the cute, fun-loving goober who sat in my cupholder when I drove, who not only wore Barbie clothes but made them look fucking cool. Unfortunately, I blink and the moment passes.

“You want to know what I am?” says Jerry as white dots swallow my face. “Well, so do I. But I’m close to finding out.”

“Jer-” I start, but am cut off as brilliant sparkles of light flood down my throat, filling my lungs with their ethereal emanations.

“My family has been reaching out to me for years,” Jerry continues, “but it was only after you and Mom turned your backs on me that I bothered to seek them out. Do you understand: you drove me to this.”

And, in the moment before Jerry, once the baby known as Baby, can plunge his blade into my guts, hereby ending my life, I reach a sort of epiphany. In this moment, I am a psychic, and with these abilities, I can see the future. After I die, Mom is going to come here in search of me. Unfortunately, my body will be long disposed of. Unable to cope with living alone, Mom will move in with Jerry and help him raise all his new Babies. For that is what the white dots choking me truly are: countless baby Babies. Not only that, but one day, one of Jerry’s Babies will grow up to inherit the name of Jerry, rendering Jerry the new Dad. And on, and on, and on; always and forever, the Oedipus ouroboros. Somehow, knowing I’m a part of a greater cycle makes me content with my impending demise. I wonder if these thoughts went through my own Dad’s head as I slaughtered him. Something tells me that they did.

Is the sun setting, or is death just really dark? I thought dying involved going into a light.

Oh wait, there it is.

Goddammit, this is going to suck. And that sound. Something like... like baby birds crying from an unseen nest hanging high overhead.

I try looking for them, curious to see the babies.

I try for a really long time.