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River

jaeger, jacob
University of San Diego

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Jake Jaeger

Jjaeger@sandiego.edu

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“*That* guy? That guy is so full of shit,” said one of the bussers, the tall and awkward one. He had red hair and wore a blue gas station coverall shirt; he looked around and picked his zits when he spoke. There had been a bad sun that halted production. We sat under a plastic gazebo tent sweating and watching shadows slink about the dirt car park. *Carl* was the word embroidered into the chest of his shirt, though I doubt it was his. Apparently, they tended to hand back the wrong shirt to the wrong employee after laundry. They didn’t even change the names, so employees who were fired or quit or died or moved on still had shirts hanging in laundry. My shirt read *River*. He thumbed *Carl* looking towards a BMW at the far end of the lot. We had been dispatched mainly to supervise the already parked cars and we sat naked-armed and sore-thumbed from rolling rounds from the inside supply closet onto the tented grassy lawn of the golf course where we would then throw poorly ironed black table cloths over and haul racks of white hollowed plastic chairs that would sit uneven on the grass around them and an elderly woman would fall out of one drunkenly later that night and her wine would spill on her white pants and spew from her mouth between her teeth and out of her gums so it looked just like hot red blood.

I took no offense to the tall red assistant. In only a few hours I would be back in silver toe black leather boots, jeans, leather, ripped tee shirt listening to blood guts and sex through the shining turntable in the corner of my room, the one down in the moist basement with the blue metal door where there sat an oily sheen of marijuana and incense and *Carl* would be off spanking it in some upper room to borrowed porno tapes trying to find something inside he didn’t even know he was looking for. A guy like *Carl* lives in a white home with probably a

Tesla in the driveway and at night his dad will come home and he will dress down into basketball shorts and he will want to see *Carl* but *Carl* will not understand the gravity of it and he will stay upstairs spanking it alone while his dad watches television and tries not to think about hanging himself again.

I would put on Iggy's "The Idiot" and try not to think about *Carl* and then get to thinking about the Joy Division singer who hung himself while the A side of this record played in his kitchen, and it would be 11:11 on the blue tin alarm clock on the floor next to the mattress with no frame and I would wish that I could stop hurting people with inattention and that I was less shy and had a bigger cock. Once I heard Iggy Pop described as *one big chord of sinews leading straight down to a dick* or something to that effect but I had no muscles and I wasn't unique looking so I'd settle with a self-conscious half dance in jeans and socks and no shirt trying not to think about my jiggling parody of a self. The words *Calling Sister Midnight* crackled through the ripped tweed speaker. I would give up and switch it over to something with louder drums.

"It's no joke man, Rob told Sherry, Sherry told me," said the shirt named *Ryan*, which wore a completely bald and thin kid with blue eyes and long dirty fingernails.

"You know some of us need this, right?" Carl said.

"Lighten up, man, I heard it got a laugh out of Rob," said Ryan. He took off jogging towards a parked car to retrieve the keys from the valet and laughed loudly. I ended up having a beer in the bathroom shirtless singing softly and wanting to feel the weight of the piano key pushing back against me and I would go home with an brown sack full of Michelob stolen from behind the bar while Rob was out and everyone was dancing outside in the grass.

Rob, the boss man, was incompetent. I'd gotten the call on a sunny day and I was walking around with a pink smoothie which I am sure looked strange against my head to toe

black clothes. I wanted to smell the grass fresh after the mowers had hit it because I love the way it hits your nose and feels like you are in some kind of misty earth shower and it reminded me of when I used to watch the tractors go by into the green fields and the way I used to sit on a plastic tricycle and pretend it was me who got to drive the heavy machines so bravely out into those meadows. The smoothie was pink and thick and I used to stroll across the shimmering deserts of playground gravel into my mother's arms and watch the bandage go over an oozing graze. I was brave then. The smoothie was pink and thick, and my phone rang since I had earlier indicated in passing with Rob that I might be in need of work someday, and I let it ring several times because I was not finished smelling the cool green grass. I was not finished drinking the thick pink smoothie. I answered.

“Hello?” I said.

“It's Rob, you still want that job we talked about?”

“Which job?”

“Banquets.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Fantastic. You start Monday at 10. Bring your id for taxes.”

“I was wondering if--”

“Say, you don't still have that frizzy hair, do you? Wasn't that you? It was real long and real frizzy, right?” I lied. I said I didn't, but I did and when I showed up, I tied it all up and he never said a word about it.

After the call it was night, and it was a night when my good friend Jack and I got real drunk and danced around all over the place, but Jack was Jack Daniels and dead from an infected toe where he kicked the iron safe in his bedroom with all his loot when he got too drunk to open

it. I understand, sometimes when you get real drunk and you're delirious and its late you want to look at something shiny and something yours. I can see him now getting off to the stack of gold coins, holding the cold smooth coins or the stacks of government paper, rubbing it on his fat old man drunk southern belly and guffawing to his loyal army of copper stills. But then it was just me and I danced fast and I danced hard with a pretend microphone spraying sweat out onto the hundreds of pretty girls with painted red fingers in the crowd, all the blond ones reaching out, trying to rip my clothes off and take my keys out of my pockets and devour me as I collapsed onto the stage in dramatic exhaustion after some advanced wiggling. I woke up that morning dead and naked to filtered sunlight from the sheet tacked up above the window. It was a white sheet and it felt like the light of heaven only it was just my basement room with the blue door.

I am 27 yrs. old, fattening, balding, and I work banquets at a golf course and this is my only job, slinging tables and escorting old women cars to the parking lot where I sit and I watch but when I finish the work it's time to dance again and I'll slip off the nametag and the shirt with the collar and into tight, tight Levi's and boots and shake it stoned and whiskey drunk. On nights when I go out, I dance before and after I go out. I always start with Iggy and I will end with something else. Some nights, I cover the mirror with the white sheet and imagine I'm slim and handsome and wanted. I started at the golf course because I had been around there since I was a young kid and I always wanted to work in the kitchen because I liked knives and big crashing metal pans and fire. They put me on for one day as a prep cook years ago, but I got fired when I had some beer and got so lonely thinking about the hordes of female fans in my bedroom that I grated three pounds of butter into a soup thinking it was cheese.

"We like to cross train here, everyone ought to be able to do everything," said Rob. The sun was blinding, and heat rose form the asphalt. "We'll start with trees. Trees should be

trimmed to exactly..." I had no idea why Rob was teaching me to cut trees. The boss man himself showing me how to do the hard work in the blistering heat. My blue shirt with *River* was already moistening under the arms and below the chin. There were old men whirring past in electric golf carts with no show socks and pleated shorts. They were smoking wood tipped cigars and scowling with chins low to the steering wheels. They drove past Rob and me without a glance. Rob had a bead of sweat forming at the bridge of his nose. I watched as it balled up and shook as he spoke. There was more green grass just across the asphalt from the trees. I wanted to touch the grass and to lie in the shade and fall asleep to nothing, just a breeze and arms around me.

"Got it? Repeat to me what I just told you." I stared at Rob blankly. I tried to open my mouth, but it took strength. The sun was shimmering now, and no words were inside of me. Rob raised his eyebrows and deepened his frown. Sweat began to pour from my face and I opened my mouth again.

"The trees need--" Rob's phone rang loudly and I jumped. He raised one finger towards me and pulled a flip phone from a holster he wore on his belt.

"Hello? Yes. No. No. Yes. Okay. No, 150. Perfect. Bye." He looked at me and said, "Get working on those trees, I'll see you in an hour."

I cut the trees best I could and while I worked, I thought of a night where I was drunker than usual. It had been a rainy day and I had sat exhausted and deflated in a downtown library for most of the day reading Nat Geo and wondering about the sounds of the rain hitting the corrugated tin roof of a tiny shed in the middle of rural America somewhere in the woods where there were no people and no grocery stores or golf courses and no music. I would be alone dressed in furs wandering the misty forests by day and dancing to the beats of tribal drums by

firelight at night. There would be me and my many animal friends and I would never have to work or drink or speak again I could grunt and howl and be myself in my dances and in my prowling the trees and I could fight it all with hardened resolve and defend the little creatures who relied on me for food. There was a tap on my shoulder as I read, and the library was closed. I was out in the rain with no hood and my hands in my pockets for three miles of walking the dreary streets. I ducked into Quick Mart on 8th street when it passed and bought a whole bottle of Gin and hit it over and over as I covered the final mile or so home and skipped and jumped and danced and hollered in the streets like they were my woods. I was quite drunk but quite alive as I entered the basement room with the blue door.

Unlike the grassy field above where the tables had been set, the basement beneath the kitchen and the storeroom was a moldy with decrepit rebar and concrete walls. *Ryan* led me through the stone labyrinth. It was so damp down there it was almost mossy. There was a wonderful canopy low-hanging pipes and twine on the ceiling. I tried to ignore the pipes and their convenient height as I followed *Ryan*. Only a stool and a rope's length tall. I was shocked out of it when we passed the laundry, a small and dimly lit corridor leading into a tight but cavernous room filled with sweat and cigarette smoke. I turned to poke my head in but there was a loud and wet cough and a hiss from the inside and I sped up to follow *Ryan* closer. We were directed to find the liquor closet at the heart of the concrete maze, retrieve three cases of Tito's, and return them to the reception tent which was being erected in the grassy lawn outside of the restaurant. *Ryan* and I each grabbed a case, and *Ryan* slipped one of the glass bottles out of the box and tucked it into his shirt. We wove our way back to the stairs and he hid the bottle behind them grinning.

“For after dinner,” he said.

We set the cases at the bar outside, and as soon as *Ryan* left I took the bottle, sipped it, and hid it behind a bush in the lawn.

The sun had gone down and the reception was well underway. We in our anonymous blue shirts were called into the breakroom for what is known as *staff meal*. This is a rather tacky and unimaginative way to label the fuckup dishes, scraps, and inedible bits that were going to the trash anyways. Tonight, it was the ends of prime rib and the crispy parts of the garlic mashed potatoes that were supposed to go out for the wedding. It all tasted marvelous to me. I sat at the only unoccupied seat which was between two of the older women talking about their boyfriends and their children and I tried to shut them out with Iggy or Jack while I ate as fast as I could.

I was back on the lawn now. Dishes needed to be taken from the tables. I was sure *Ryan* was downstairs furiously searching for his hidden bottle. I took a drink. Then I took another drink and my stomach began to feel warm and I felt a lot smarter and a lot more handsome. There was music playing and there were purple lights and I watched as people in suits and blank champagne eyes touched each other and laughed. I moved quietly between tables with my hair tied up tightly so my head hurt and I clattered the plates together as I stacked them with unprecise hands but it was not heard because the music was loud and the air was damp and the people were happy and dancing and together. I found a glass of red wine on the table and I finished it. I found a piece of steak on a plate and I finished it too. The food and the wine were delicious, but the air was beginning to cool quickly so I dropped the plates off and I had another drink from the bottle in the bushes. I thought about dancing. I danced alone and they all danced together but I liked to dance alone. It was furious and honest and no one had a say in what you did. Besides, these were all terrible dancers. My dancing was art and it was life and death and

eternal and I could not be bothered by their dances. The music wasn't right either. It needed to be Iggy Pop and it needed to be loud.

I went into the bathroom with the bottle and drank some more. I was feeling good now, like everything was light and fuzzy around the edges, like I could say and feel what I wanted and everyone would love it and they would all cheer for me as I ran around the stage half naked and greased up and they would all want me and my words and my body. My audience was here in this bathroom, contained in the mirror. I drank again. I thought of the night when I had danced so hard I felt dizzy so I had decided to shower to revive myself. As I writhed in the scalding water, an angel came to me bare-chested. She told me to slow down, to watch myself or else I would drown there in the white tub drunk and alone. I asked her to stay for a dance. She left with her face blotted out by the light of the yellow boob lamp on the ceiling of the bathroom. I felt alone and afraid, just as I did on the bathroom floor drinking Tito's during work.

Outside the tables were empty and the dance floor was full. I stumbled to clear the remaining dishes. There was a lone woman with white hair and a cane sitting with a glass of red wine on a plastic chair. I stumbled past her and picked up the empty plates on the far side of the round table. The far side was covered in crumbs, sauces, spilled drinks, but her side was completely clean. I asked her why she wasn't dancing. She seemed quite drunk. I asked her if she would like to dance and she said no. I picked up the rest of the plate and went back to the kitchen, I swear I went right back to the kitchen. The walls and the grass and then the carpet were all swimming.

I went into the bathroom to collect myself and to pour out the rest of that damned cursed bottle that was giving me such hell. I had a headache and couldn't pick up dishes without clattering them and I knew I was going to start smelling strongly and someone would be onto

me. I looked into the mirror, deep into my sleepy eyes. There were red stains on my blue shirt. I tried to scrub the stains off with a towel but the stain just smudged and spread into a dark mass. I drank water from the tap and sank onto the floor with my head in my knees. My neck was weak, and I was very tired. I stood up, washed my face, and walked back to the lawn.

There was chaos then. A crowd was standing around someone beneath the tent. There were murmurs and shouts and panic. A siren blared in the distance. I approached the crowd of people and looked towards the middle. It was the old woman, on the ground, her face covered in red stains like wine, like hot blood. I tried to ask what happened, I tried to find out how I could help. No one heard me, they all just stared at the woman. We all just looked on until finally an ambulance arrived with lights on but no siren now and three paramedics jumped out and approached the woman. She seemed to lull in and out of sleep and wake. She seemed tired, so tired. We waited a while. She finally woke up. The paramedics asked her what was wrong, what had happened. The old woman struggled for a moment. She stared at the ground with confusion. The paramedics dabbed at the wine that was dribbling from her mouth. Then her hand went up. She extended a long, bony, ringed finger into the dark air. She moved her arm slowly down until the finger landed pointing at me. Then she began to bawl. The paramedics gave her oxygen. She began to scream, but it was muffled by the plastic oxygen mask. They dabbed at the wine and told her to try to stay still. She screamed louder, the mask fogging up and wine leaking out. They carried her off, into the back of the ambulance. The doors shut. The ambulance drove off. The reception music resumed, the people went back to their dancing, and the night tumbled forward to dawn without so much as a tear.