*Since you put me down
It seems I've been very gloomy
You may laugh, but pretty girls look right through me
They don't sense the faintest glimmering
That is the torch I bear
There's light enough for me to find my way

But I only have to tell myself that by now you could be with someone else
Is there light beneath your door and laughter from within?*

-Elvis Costello and Burt Bacharach

I sit in the middle of the room and stare into the mirror. It is an inferno in here, inside and out. Thick, swimming heat. The air is running out. I’m choking, my clothing is soaked with sweat. I stare into my eye, and I look for the spark of life in there, quivering like a mote of candle flame threatened by a breath, a taper in the wind. I ache. I stare. I burn alive and watch my eyes and try to come to grips with the fact that no one’s coming, that it was already too late when I started. It’s hot as hell in here.

There’s a knocking, someone says ‘fuck’ and then there’s a nasty rattling. My jerry-rigged lock is getting pulled apart.

“Boy,” Comes a voice like a garbage disposal kicking on. “Turn your music off and come down here.”

I frown. A year ago, he and I had it out, and I am considering telling him to fuck off. But that’s my dad down there, and two weeks ago he paid for a surgery I did not ask for but could not refuse, and for some reason that stops me from showing him much fang lately. It doesn’t stop me from bristling though. I stab my boom box with a claw and cut off the workout tunes. Then I stalk over to the narrow stairway and see him standing there.

He is huge. Even for back in Alaska, dad’s body is enormous. We are among the heaviest bears on the planet, though he remains a full one-hundred pounds heavier than me. As of a year ago, he no longer towers over. I look down at him, standing at the top of the stairs, and let my claws dangle at my sides.

He’s silent, sizing me up. “Your fag friends are here.” He says eventually.

“I said not to say that stuff.” I say, my paw curled in a reflexive fist.

“I don’t give a shit what you want me sayin’, cub. It’s not your den. You know the rules.” He points a claw up at me. “And if you don’t want it to be even less “your den”, then I don’t want to hear any more lip out of you.”

I bristle, immediately irritated he got to me. My head hurts. I try to remember what time it is, and if I have a pill coming. I hate this. I stare down into dad’s eyes and try to drive him away with the heat of my anger alone, but it doesn’t happen. He just stands like a mountain in my door frame, wearing a corona of orange hallway light. He knows if it comes to blows, I’ll win. But I’ll be out on my ass afterward. This is the mutually assured destruction that is keeping me warm and dry at night until I turn 18. “Yes sir.” I say. But I don’t change my face or my posture.

He turns and lumbers off. “Hurry up. I don’t want people thinkin’ they come here all the time.” I can hear the vibrations of his heavy steps soaking through the walls. I listen as he slithers back his couch, and perches there under the trash bags and loose cans of Miller like Smaug on a hoard of corduroy and aluminum. There’s the real Lonely Mountain for you.

I take off my workout shirt and grab a clean one before I grab another pill and toss it down the hatch with a glug of water. The headache is starting to come back anyway, and I want to be able to deal with whatever my friends need me for. I’ve learned to be proactive about this. Things really go to hell when you’re not paying attention. Be vigilant, do it right. I run a comb between my ears, hit myself with some musk-off, and stomp down the stairs.

I’m thinking that if I make a big racket going out, he won’t get up to check that I’ve left. Just to make sure, I look in the living room before I go, and up on the wood-paneled wall is his silhouette in the mingled blue corona of daytime TV. The smell of bear musk and cheap beer is overpowering. He’s not going anywhere. I make sure I have my wallet and my phone. I leave.

It’s hot as hell in that house.

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“Dude how can you wear that during the summer?”

“He’s got a thick pelt. It’s how come he doesn’t wear heavy coats in the winter. He’s insulated.”

“There’s no way that’s comfortable.”

“That doesn’t make a difference to him. He’s tough. He’s a real man, aren’t you Ish?” Jesse whips a playful punch into my shoulder and smiles his cheeky little mustelid smile. “Born in a mountain’ raised in a cave…!” he chants eagerly.

I sigh and close my eyes.

“Trucking and fucking….!” Says Jesse.

“Is all he craves, yeah yeah.” Says a small voice behind Jesse. Michael. “Way to play up a stereotype. I think it’s even funnier the four-millionth time.”

“What else is there to say about it? Ish dresses like either a serial killer or a trucker. And I don’t know any cute rhymes about psychopaths.”

“Now you’re just being a dick. Ish, tell him he’s being a dick and he has to stop.”

“You’re being a dick and you have to stop, Jesse.”

“Fine, you big psycho trucker baby, I’ll cut it out. But only if you promise not to tie me up in your basement and rape me for decades and decades.”

Michael bursts out laughing, and try though I might, I can’t resent him for it.

We’re along the rails which run parallel to highway 63 going east. It’s 98 today, and I am feeling it. Jesse is a skinny little weasel kid, and he can’t believe I’m wearing dark green flannel and heavy jeans in summer weather. It’s all I wear, though. The wind picks up, blows some dust. Jesse’s right, it does make me look like a trucker. As for what he means by serial killer, well, there’s nothing I can do about that. Like my dad says, I just have one of those faces.

Up ahead Jesse is war dancing with Michael. Michael is an english spaniel, skinny and dexterous. Jesse is on the basketball team, but he goes out for track in the spring. He has a lot of practice jumping around, having these little mid-air seizures. The pup is laughing with him, playing along, playing that stupid little game of chicken they always do. These days, Mike is the only one who keeps up with Jesse. I could, once upon a time, but I’ve grown too big and too heavy for it. Too clumsy. I lumber behind them, casting the longest shadow on the dust. I’m grumpy about Jesse and Mike fucking around, so I snarl at them a little.

“Nobody’s gonna sell to a couple of spazzes. What are you guys, like eight?”

“Yes.” Says Jesse, prancing backwards with a smile full of fangs. “I’m so happy you noticed.”

“This guy is a real creep if he sells to 8-year-olds.” I say. “Even mental 8-year-olds.”

Jesse springs up at me from a half-crouch, wheeling his arms in the air. I catch him by the scruff and dangle him. He sways giddily and his tail flickers everywhere. “Relax my fine ursine,” the weasel says, reaching a toe for the ground and gracefully wriggling free of my grasp. “This is an old buddy of Anton’s. He’s cool.”

“Yeah,” says Mike, his tail still swaying easily, his cocky self-assured grin cranked to the maximum. “He was always cool to me, and he never fucked with Anton any. We used to bring our mom’s kitchen scale to make sure but he never came up short. Kelly’s cool.” We step into the shade of a brittle old elm tree and hang out in the shadow to watch the grass yellow in the summer sun. “He probably has something that could help with your eye, Ish- the dude knows everybody.”

“Maybe.” He does not. Maybe he has something, physically, but I’ve already got what I need for that. I’m steady now. I don’t want to rock the boat. “I don’t have any money on me though.”

Mike gives me this sorry look, as if he should have remembered I’m dead broke. It was always true, and that made it hard to remember sometimes, I guess. “I could spot you a little.” He says, and he’s so loyal and earnest that I almost go along with it.

“No dude. Kelly deals weed.” I tap my eyepatch. “And unless that shit works on more than glaucoma, I’m not gonna smoke anything here that’ll help me.”

“I mean, he could get in touch with someone else—”

“Who would sell me molly and tell me it was good for headaches. Or they’d sell me plain gummy-bears.”

“NO.” Gasps Jesse, and he clasps a paw over his muzzle. I roll my eyes.

Mike gives him a look and turns off toward the alley where Kelly’s house lays moldering amid the yellow wild grass and rain-scoured lawn toys. He hops over a dry kiddie pool and gives a motion to hurry up. “Come on.” He says. “He’s gonna think we’re getting a sting ready.”

“You’re just going in there?” Says Jesse, hopping along after him. I step in the kiddie pool and then out of it.

“Yeah,” says Mike, and pulls away the screen door so he can knock on the real one. “It’s what we’re here to do.”

“And you’re just gonna let them turn The Captain into a gummy cannibal?”

An empty bag of cool-ranch Doritos whaps him on the tail, and it’s the only answer he gets.

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Kelly’s house stinks.

The carpet is old and unwashed. Piles of discarded clothes line one side of his squalid den. The sunlight falls in rigid, lambent bars through the blinds, the color of iron in the forge. Bags from various fast-food places line the walls, the coffee table is buried in a succession of ash trays and 70-ounce big-gulp style Styrofoam cups, bags of popcorn and empty ziplog baggies with strange residue providing occasional punctuation. It smells like fear sweat and pleasure sweat and piss in here, and even as I feel the oxy wrapping itself like a blanket around the headache behind my bad eye, I feel the tension rise a little bit, just from being in here. My good eye follows a black line from behind the TV and up the wall, curling in a bit at the ceiling.

Wonder how it got there.

Kelly takes a long drag at his joint and sits back in the ruins of his fabric couch. Some of these scratches are from the man himself-- I notice he keeps his claws out during conversation. He’s a strung-out old hippie of a cat, and I guess he likes the kids who buy from him to remember he’s got something to cut with at all times. I think he must be justified in that, even if it is a little vain.

“Man oh man. Apple doesn’t fall far, does it?” He says, and his voice sounds a little like my dad’s, though it has this scratchy feline rasp to the end of it that sounds a little swishy. He’s looking at Mike, tapping his joint on his grey knuckles and contemplating. “Shit, you look just like him.”

“Yeah, heh.” Says the English spaniel, scratching behind one ear. “Everyone always thinks we’re twins. But we’re years apart.”

“I always said ‘Anton boy, you’d better eat your meat’.” Kelly says as he exhales a plume of curling mary-jane in our faces. I watch patterns resolving in the sunlight. “I said to him, ‘you’re gonna grow up all runty’. I’d say he didn’t follow my advice, but….” Another drag, another plume, followed by a long felish smile at Mike. “Y’all know he finished every God-given day with some meat in his mouth. Ain’t that right Anton?” Kelly shakes his head. “Ain’t that right, Mike? Heh. Shit boy, you are his spitting image. I can’t get over it. Can I get you fellas something while we talk business?”

“No.” I say.

“What’s that you’re smoking?” says Jesse, pointing with a single claw from his position beside me on the love-seat. Kelly looks at his roach, then back at Jesse.

“What I’m smoking ain’t being given away as a free sample. This, my tube dude, was grown from the seeds of the original Red Rocket strain.” He holds it casually enough for Jesse to reach at it but plucks it away before the stoat’s claw can close over it. “The one that made such a fuss in the 70s. One gram of this shit will put you in space for a week.”

“Holy shit dude.” Jesse says, and I can tell by the cat’s expression that he’s made his sale already. “Ish, you know they had a whole campaign about this stuff? Remember *Red Moon Riot*? That old PSA was made BECAUSE of this stuff.”

I do remember Red Moon Riot. There was a huge canine outrcry and class-action lawsuit, but somehow the film survived. It had struggled valiantly to come down the ages and give modern highschoolers something to sleep through. I give my weasel friend a look, but he’s already looking at Mike, who’s already wagging his tail, because God has cursed him to go through life with no poker face whatsoever. Mike believes in this weed. I have a bad feeling about it.

“That sounds awesome.” He says.

“It is awesome.” Says the cat, and he reaches inside his grimy vest and yanks free a little ziplock full of stinky MJ, and the bag is crinkled and sticky-looking. “And it’s the last of its kind, you know. Cut and cured already, the seeds bred almost into non-viability. Kids, my supplier says this may be the last of it, the last of all. The last of the real shit. The end of an age. You boys want suck some of the last red rocket?”

“Yes we REALLY fucking do!” Says Jesse.

Mike stands up from his folding chair and says “How much for an ounce?”

“Well shit, I need to get my pricing book.” Kelly lurches to his feet and pads over an empty plastic kool-aid pitcher that’s been left in the middle of the floor. “You mind comin’ with me, Ant—Mikey?”

In the sunlight, I see him beckon. I see Michael go over to him, see the fluttering trails of fur on his swishing tail as he goes past. Mike, forever pure, forever unbothered. This shithole cannot touch him. Its towers of old take-out boxes and molding t-shirts and underwear will not corrupt him. The filth of my hometown washes off of him like rain in coyote fur. I see Kelly smiling at me as particulate dust scintillates in a veil between him and Mike and me, and I watch his green feline gaze as it trails across the floor, up the wagging tail, and onto my friend. “God,” he whispers in a voice he thinks I do not hear. “God, you look just like him.”

200 bucks. That’s a reasonable price for miracle-weed. Mike and Jesse pay up and we leave. No one asks about my eye. I say nothing about the meth-smell.

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Night. White streetlamp light, wind shaking the power lines. The mournful passage of a train, and it sounds like wolves to me. Like the town canines the night before summer break ends.

I am watching the street outside of Fleabitten’s Bar and Pub, and by now the oxy has smoothed everything over. Maybe at one point it dulled me, but now it blocks out enough of the pain and the irritation to get things making sense. It settles things, allows me to enjoy the constant burn-ache in my muscles, lets me feel hungry even as it thickens my tongue. I am all of those now, and more, and more. The anticipation sits in me, masquerading as a need to piss. I have already tried three times, and nothing comes out. I have never done this before.

I almost miss it when it happens. He steps outside, briefly. He saunters over to a comfy shadow, and I can see the details of his face by the glowing cherry at the end of his cigarette. Old. Blissed out. He was just coming up when he sold to us, but now he’s settled in a permanent sunbeam, shining just for him in the heart of Derry, in the heart of nowhere. The meth has him. It makes me mad. So many things make me mad, but he is the one who was here tonight, that foul fucker, that strange tail-touching blunt-smoking queer, that skuzzy *meth-dealing* cat who looks too long at the asses of teenage boys. God damn him. God, please, damn him. His very silhouette boils my blood.

It takes every ounce of patience to tread up to him quietly. I can’t do it quick, so I have to do it careful. I sidle around the pool of light, I keep in every shadow. I listen to him mutter and hum to himself. I hear the spattering of his piss, the irregular stops and starts. I hear his breathing, taste the smoke of his cigarette.

I put a claw to his back. It’s long and hard- maybe he’ll mistake it for a gun or a knife. I lower my voice an octave, put some ursine snarl into it, and it passes like thunder through my heart. “You deal to Michael Carpenter.” I say.

He goes very still. I see tension in him, and then I see him relax. I move a little, trying to keep both him and the light in my good eye. “Yeah.” He says. All business. I find myself frustrated by his ease, and I jab my claw against his back.

“You’re going to stop.”

“Or what?” Comes his rasp of a voice. It’s cool. “You gonna shoot me, huh?” He begins to try to turn around to look at me. “With your gun?”

“Shut the fuck up.” I say, pushing him up against a wall, into a black shadow that swallows us both. “Just shut the fuck up. You’re going to stop dealing to him tonight. You’re not going to push product, you’re not going to give samples, you’re not going to take his money. Period.”

“Or. What?” He says again. “You’ll tell the police? You’ll gut me, huh, you’ll let me bleed out on the street?” The old cat spits. “I know people who would fuck you up, kid. They’ll core you like an apple and send the video to your mother if you so much as scratch my jacket.”

I am so angry I am shaking. Instead of issuing my next threat, I shove him and he thuds into the side of the building and he grunts. Then a nasty little giggle issues out of him like an afterbirth. “What’s with that Michael kid anyway? Are you his boyfriend? I’m here to tell you, friend, his brother sucked every cock in this town twice over, and he’s aiming to beat that record. I made him pay double for weed and he STILL sucked one out of mee—eeaaAAAGH!”

I have his arm up behind his back now, and his joints are straining. I do not feel in control. I am against his body now, pressing him hard to the cold brick siding of the bar. I grab his muzzle and lever down hard, and he chokes a little on his scream. I ease up so he can breathe. I open my mouth to say something, but I am drooling. I am flush with him and I am drooling, and I am dimly aware that his pants fell below his ankles. He’s struggling against my hold but I am powerful. Fear washes into his smell like ink spilling into water, and that makes me feel good. I run the side of my muzzle up into the musty fur of his neck, inhale deep, like a canine.

“You’re gonna stop.” I rumble, and it comes out with a low bestial chuckle that resonates bearishly in my chest. I sound like I’m having the good time I’m having. “Tonight. You’re gonna stop tonight.” I ease up on his muzzle, and he sucks in breath like I’d been drowning him.

“Or…?” He manages to get out, shoving and straining with real intensity now. Ordinarily, he might have pushed me off, but something has rooted me here. Something wants me here, like this, and I stay over him like the slab of a tomb, completely obedient to this sudden new will. It’s like I’m not even here. It’s like I’m only watching it happen as I grind my hips up on his. I’m hard. He doesn’t know where I’m going with this. We’ve left the realm of his experience, and I am alive with the scent of it.

“Or what?” I whisper. This is more than I’ve spoken in months, and my voice has developed a pleasant rasp of its own. “Or what? You keep looking at Michael…” One of my claws slides up the back of his thigh. “You keep talking to him, you keep selling to him?” He flinches as one of my long claws pulls at his nutsack. He squirms away from me. He does not wish to be touched. I touch him. I mouth into his fluttering ear like a lover. “I’ll tell you what happens.”

Something fits itself against him. Something sharp and nasty of mine. He feels the point now, against where he is most vulnerable. He turns his head and a ray of moonlight falls on me. I show him my eye, the bad one, its patch folded neatly on my workout bench at home. I have him look deep into it, have him see the black and ruined depths, the deformed iris that can no longer contain the pupil, the weird band of hazel-gold that lays stretched across the lower-right third of the sclera, as if my iris had been pulled out and muddled. I think of the scariest thing I can say. Then I tongue it like honey into his waiting ear and play with the flaccid wilt of his penis.

“I will not slay thee in thy turn. I will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond all darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shriveled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye.”

The methamphetamine in him turns his ignition. I can feel him mouth “What the FUCK?” against my paw and with sudden insane strength, he kicks and scrambles for his life. The old cat plants a boot in my stomach and whips a claw across my face before I can do anything about it. For a fleeting instant I am reflected in his horrified gaze. I am in full moonlit regalia. I recoil and wheeze as Kelly barrels off into the night. The cat trips as he goes, and the blood from his knee leaves a long streak on the pavement.

I collect myself, start breathing again. My face doesn’t hurt: the oxy takes care of it. My limbs shake as they run out the extra adrenaline, and I can’t help but think that none of this is real. I’m not even here right now. I passed out on my workout bench again. The heat was too much, and I passed out, and any moment, I will wake up. I don’t wake up. The dream feeling follows me.

I stand in the far dark when I go back home. I turn and look one last time at the parking lot, at the lonely cone of existent world within its center, the last of its kind, summing up the night and the town and my life and the dream. I watch it for a moment, and then freeze, unable to look away.

Through the blurry sliver of non-sight in my ruined eye, I see it turn over.

Years later, I will lie to my therapist and myself about having seen anything at all.

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I stir the ribbons in my egg-drop soup with one claw. I haven’t felt like eating all day.

“Oh shit,” Says Jesse. “Oh shit this smells so good. Kelly was right, this shit is straight ACES, man.”

“Oh dude, I know.” Says Mike, his tail wagging up a storm. “There is nothing on this earth that beats toking up and getting a ton of food, and this….”

He spreads his paw out at the microwaved eggrolls, the stale crab Rangoon, the piles of noodles and fried chicken bits in different sauces, the chicken skewers. I give him a a weak smile and he performs a showman’s flourish over the entrees. “This is an emperor’s feast. So you guys better do your part, ok?”

“I will. But it’s the Captain here who’d better nut up. How are you gonna do this eggroll-percent run totally tokeless, dude?” Jesse pokes at me with his chopsticks, and I fence with him using my claws for a bit.

“I’m a bear. I’ll find room.”

“Yeah,” says Mike. “They call it ‘filling up the corners’, you know? It’s your skinny ass we have to worry about.”

I smile at Mike. I smile and smile, and we eat shitty lo mein, and I wish everyone were back here and that I was 8 again and that things hadn’t been stepped on. The night extends into one glorious golden smear of an instant and is over.

I’m back in my room, dipping into the triple digits on my bicep curls, all matted in sweat and just at the threshold of pumping away all the things that creep into the dark place of my mind to lay their eggs. I stop for a moment, lean panting over the bench and lay aching upon it. I can hear a chain rattling against a pipe in the wind outside. Distantly, a train moves through Derry. The old house shifts as the temperature lowers. Dad is downstairs, and I can smell him making a Hungry Bear dinner, salmon and lingonberries. An allergy commercial promises him he’ll be able to go on his spring jogs again.

I think about jogging and I think about running with our little group. I think about the ears of an English spaniel halo’d red by the evening sun. I think about the smell of a lit cigarette and an empty parking lot. I think about Anton, and whether or not he’s alive, and what he’s doing.

I have another tab of oxy, crank up the music, and keep lifting. It’s hot as hell in here.