

Mission

I am still trying to find a way to insert “We salute the rank, not the man” into conversation. I had a hard time getting here, but now that I’m here I am never leaving. People leer like they’re real concerned. Tonight in this very bar a man growing out a Hulk Hogan mustache said I looked like I’d “been through it” as a means to hitting on me. I tapped the bar and said, “Drink or what?”

I’m not going to ask what “it” is. Last week I had a moment with God. I was driving Jess’s car to the Ikea to eat some little meatballs and steal two potted plants. The plants were for the group of people who have been hosting me for a few months. On my way to Ikea, I thought of the girl who used to sit on my stoop, back when I had a job and was close to being an adult. She was always smoking yet she always asked, “Got a light?” What? Dumdum, you gotta invest in what matters to you.

I don’t know why I thought of her (this is the part with God). She came into my mind after so long when I thought I was done thinking about that old building and that old time. I haven’t thought of her in forever and ever. And the whole time she was sitting on the stoop in my brain and she decided today was a good day to ask for a light.

But then in Ikea as I shuffled my way with the foreign families towards the cafeteria, I saw her sitting alone, eating a plate of meatballs. The same girl! This is four years later, three states away from the stoop on the building where I lived when I was close to being an adult. I felt like I had a chunk of snow cone stuck in my throat, a small burning lump that didn’t burn the way hot things do.

I ended up not stealing the two potted plants as per my original plan. Plans change. Last week we watched four episodes of *Band of Brothers* at Jess’s sister’s

boyfriend's house. We all learned so much from watching those men, crouch-running and pointing with guns. I learned good plans are complicated and rock solid, yet disposable.

In the new plan, I did still get some little meatballs. I sat in a children's chair in the Ikea cafeteria and positioned myself to look at the girl and make a positive ID. She wasn't smoking but it was her. She had her hair pulled back tight into a ponytail and her big bulging forehead and her tragic fuzzy hairline. She had two eyebrows tweezed into sperm shapes.

The only good part of the culture today is that I can ignore my eyebrows and the shopgirls all say they're jealous. At least there's that.

I walked around the Ikea showroom and then fell into a king bed. The model room was black and turquoise, for bachelors. I wanted the room that looked like the living room at Jess's sister's boyfriend's house. Or, even better, the room that looked like the place I had when I was almost an adult. Shiny white walls, tall ceilings, dinged wood floors. Plants everywhere. That room was not there on the showroom.

You ask God what he wants from you. He's not going to answer at all. He's too busy overseeing church bazaars and consoling the lottery winners who didn't know what they were asking for. All he can do is throw down a scrap, a half-assed text while he's driving.

The man growing out the mustache waited for me. This is outside the bar tonight. I didn't even care. I said, "If you're going to kill me and make me into a lamp or something," but I didn't finish. I pointed at his cigarettes and said, "Permission to smoke." He could be my dad or an uncle that moved to Tampa with his young Puerto Rican bride. So I had to ask for permission because I thought that was the real situation.

Since the failed operation at Ikea, I'm so used to disposing the plan that I'm having trouble keeping up with the real situation, the one that could be, the one that could have been if I was still almost an adult.

I know I will not go home with him. There's no need to worry. About that. And that's where we are now.

I have travelled too far from Jess's sister's boyfriend's house. Let's call it the Noodle House for short, though I'll never mention it again. I left it this morning after I woke from a dream that an ex-boyfriend was a Nazi and was coming after me. He did serve in the Marines and was in Afghanistan. I never followed up on him because it was easier to imagine he died than to ask.

I crumpled everything I cared about in a free bag that I got from the Red Cross, and I thought I could go finish my degree in another town and find a job or find a man who had an extra space in his apartment for a girl with pretty good eyebrows. I humped along Route 40 and thought about what that man's apartment might be like, what it would need. Time moves kind of like a meatball. Mashed and pointless but rolling along all the same. Obviously I will have to steal plants again, as a host gift.

When I was almost an adult, I saw things as a grid, and I could've led a company into battle. I could crouch and point and tell you what your job was and who you were. Someone else gives you your meals and your clothes and you don't worry about where you live because all you do is hump with your brothers through the forest. You can try asking God for whatever you need now, but if you don't even know what day it is, how could anyone take you seriously?