

El Corazón

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Billy was squatting on top of the toilet lid in the stall at The El Corazón Disco Lounge, and he was staring at the gun in his shaking hands, the gun he had bought that afternoon at a pawnshop just outside the Smoky Ordinary town limits. The fluorescent lights were flickering, casting strange intermittent shadows on the bathroom ceiling. The graffiti on the stall wall asserted that someone named Mo-Mo sucked his own cock, to which someone else had remarked that Mo-Mo was a lucky limber bastard. The rhythm of Billy's own heart tingled in his fingertips. Sweat trickled down the center of his chest. He turned the gun and looked down its barrel, aiming at his own eye. He studied the dark nothingness there, thought *You can do this, you piece of chicken shit. Don't think. Just do it.* The gun had heft, a solid weight in his hands like it belonged there.

He wasn't afraid to die. He was, however, afraid of pulling the trigger, the violence of it, the possibility that someone might save him, that he might become a vegetable or a cripple. He did not like to picture his wife Sarah and his other wife, his non-legal wife Candy, having to take turns wiping his ass. He wanted to remove himself from their lives cleanly. He wanted, for once in his life, to be selfless like his late father, the Reverend Bill Senior. Funnily enough, Billy was just the sort of man that his father would have tried to rescue, not that Billy deserved it. Billy adjusted the gun. Right here. Right in the cornea.

Just then, as he was staring down the barrel of the gun, two guys came in to take a piss. Billy froze, tried to control his erratic breathing. He listened to them walk over to the urinals and unzip, and to the sound of the piss hitting the porcelain. Billy tried to concentrate on the death that was waiting for him, the relief of it. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, tried to keep centered on himself. As they were zipping up, the two guys began talking. Billy managed to concentrate on his breathing, to tune them out for the most part, but then one guy made a passing remark about the other guy's sister, something intended to be complimentary, something about her luscious onion of an ass. Inside the stall, Billy rolled his eyes and mouthed the word *Jesus* to himself, because he knew that the one thing a guy should never do is open his mouth about another guy's sister. Even Billy, complete fuck-up that he was when it came to women, knew that one fact. Because, he thought, the only thing worse than insinuating you wanted to screw a guy's sister was insinuating that you didn't. You really couldn't win. And that was one thing Billy was an expert on—no-win situations.

And then also it wasn't a good idea to talk shit about someone's sister in this place, the El Corazón, because it wasn't a gentle place, not like the martini bars he went to with the guys from work, not the kind of place the soft-skinned, suit-wearing

guys from Atkinson & Neidermeyer would like. It was a place where men in fatigues sat at tables by themselves all day and where the tattooed kids from the housing project always tried to get served underage, sometimes with success. There were Christmas lights up year round and scores of stuffed and mounted dead animals on the walls, some of them wearing hats or lingerie, some of them decaying, the false noses and eyes exposed. It was one of the places that Billy's band The Lonesome Rangers played a lot, which was why he had decided to die here.

It had been hard to find a place to die. One of the problems with being dispossessed, Billy had realized, was that there was no space that was just yours, where you had the privacy to jerk off or eat pork rinds off your chest or shoot yourself. He supposed he could have offed himself at his mother's house, where he had been staying since he'd finally done the right thing and left Candy. He'd left her after she said that she was having his baby. It was another one of her lies, another ploy to hold onto him, to keep him from trying to get back into Sarah's good graces. But he had suddenly realized that Candy's lie, the fake baby, was no worse than his own. After all, he had fake married her, had gone through the sham of a ceremony but had never filed the papers with the state of Virginia—because he was of course already married to Sarah. Maybe he and Candy could have kept trying to outdo each other until they both went into fake comas or something. It seemed to him that on top of so much bad behavior, shooting himself at his widowed mother's house would have been too unkind, too ungrateful.

So he was here in the El Corazón Disco Lounge and these two guys were now in a heap on the bathroom floor, rabbit punching each other in the gut and grunting and swearing. Billy sighed and put his head in his hands, resting his forehead on top of the gun, waiting for them to finish and get out. After a while, there was the squeak of the door opening again. Whoever it was obviously couldn't get in, blocked by the two idiots wrestling on the floor, and so just stood there with the door open. A breeze came in from the hallway, a breeze of malt liquor and cigarette smoke and jalapeño poppers, and on that breeze was the faintest sound of Veronica Hawksworth's voice. Even though she sang for The Lonesome Rangers, his own band, it was suddenly as if Billy had never heard her before, or maybe had never listened. She was singing "Stand By Your Man" on the karaoke machine. Her voice, Billy thought, sounded like honey and sandpaper, so deep but also unmistakably feminine. How could he have forgotten about Veronica Hawksworth's voice—that there were things so beautiful in the world? He smiled, his forehead still resting on the gun, and he closed his eyes and traced the shapes of the notes in his mind. He imagined for a moment that this was all there was—just him and that voice. He could see himself floating in a wonderful white emptiness, intertwined with nothing but the sound. Here, he would never see the terrible haunting sadness of women's eyes—Sarah's, Candy's, his mother's. This was how his life could have felt if he had been someone else, someone brave enough to end things with Candy, or never to have started them, and certainly never to have

started things with those other girls, the lesser ones—Amber from Accounts, Molly the waitress, that police woman from Garstang. Now, in this lovely empty space with the music, Billy could picture Sarah's face as it was before all of this started, her freckles and dark hair, her faintly hooked nose, the dimples that appeared whenever she tried not to laugh. Those intelligent green eyes, the way there seemed to be thoughts swirling behind them always just beyond his reach. Listening to Veronica Hawksworth's voice, he imagined his life with Sarah as it should have been, as it was meant to be. Simple and beautiful, a sustained full-bodied note.

The two guys wrestling on the floor became louder then, screaming.

"Oh God," one of them finally yelled, "my eye!"

Billy stood up slowly, his legs cramped and tingling, and he peered over the top of the stall. As he did, he vaguely noticed the man who was holding the door open, little and bald, just sort of standing there like he was waiting for a bus or something. Over by the urinals were the two wrestling guys, one of them now with a hand over his eye and feeling around on the floor, uttering a steady stream of obscenities. He was skinny and he wore lace-up boots under his jeans and a pink WMAX T-shirt.

"Hey," Billy said. "Can you guys shut up? I'm trying to hear the music."

Pink T-shirt ignored him, continued crawling around. "If I've lost my eye," he said to the other guy, "you're going to fucking pay for it."

"The fuck I am," said the other guy, who was lying on his back, panting. Blood trickled from the side of his mouth into his scraggly goatee. "That fucking eye is creepy as hell. Be glad it's gone."

"You take that back!" Pink T-shirt yelled, turning around. "That is a fucking top quality eye. It came all the way from fucking France, you big ass."

"The only big ass in this place is your fucking sister's," the other guy muttered.

Pink T-shirt paused, turned. He took his hand away from the shriveled eye socket. "You stop thinking about my sister's ass," he said. Then, with surprising speed, Pink T-shirt jumped to his feet and kicked goatee guy in the face before there was time to turn away. Blood splattered the walls and the outside of the stalls. Goatee guy's nose was smeared across his cheek, as if it had been made of clay. He began to scream in a way that Billy envied, in a way Billy had dreamed of for the last month. The guy clutched his face with one hand and Pink T-shirt's leg with the other. He pulled up Pink T-shirt's pant leg and bit him on the calf, just above the boot, sinking his teeth into the flesh until blood trickled down. Pink T-shirt screamed, trying to shake his leg and also trying to rip the empty paper towel dispenser off the wall so that he could bang the other guy over the head with it.

Angry heat began to rise from the center of Billy's chest, up into his throat. He pinched his eyes shut. "Shut up! Just shut up!" Billy yelled. He slammed the gun against the stall several times. "I will fucking shoot you both if I don't hear the end of this song."

Pink T-shirt froze and looked at Billy as if he was seeing him for the first time,

one brown eye alert and nervous, the other little more than a flap, a deep black void, like the barrel of the gun. "Whoa, dude," he said. "Relax."

"I will not relax," Billy said, pointing the gun at him. "Until you shut up."

"Okay, dude," Pink T-shirt said. "Sure, no problem."

"Yeah," said the other guy. "We love music."

"Do you know us? I'm Paul," Pink T-shirt said pointing to himself. "And that's Ernest, a.k.a. Wild Man. Paul and Wild Man in the Morning? WMAX?"

"We can get you free CD's," said the guy on the floor hopefully. Blood streamed over his face, covering his teeth too. His voice was low-pitched and nasal now, like he had a cold.

Billy closed his eyes. "Shut up," he whispered.

"Sure, okay," Paul whispered back, and then he lowered himself next to his friend.

Standing on top of the toilet, the gun's barrel resting on the top of the stall door, Billy tried to concentrate again, this new silence like water in a boat's wake, rippling. He breathed deeply and exhaled, relaxed his shoulders. He tried to find Veronica's voice, tried to find that whiteness, that floating feeling. He leaned into the quiet and began to make out the words again.

Just then, the door squeaked shut. Billy opened his eyes. The little bald guy was gone and so was the breeze from the hallway and so was the music. With a sigh, Billy turned the gun and pointed it at his own head.

"Whoa, hey," said Wild Man, sitting up, flinching with obvious pain from his nose. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?"

"She's not worth it, whoever she is," said Paul.

Billy thought of Sarah, smiled weakly. "That's just not true," he said.

"Do you know how many guys have offed themselves because of my sister?" Paul said.

"Oh, wait, I know," said Wild Man, bringing his hand to his goatee and then looking up. "Two. Is it two?"

"That's right, moron. Two," said Paul. He turned to Billy then. "Why do you think I'm trying to keep this genius away from her?"

Wild Man turned to Paul with surprise. "Hey, that's sweet," he said. "Are you really?"

"What are friends for?"

"It's not the same thing. I know what I'm doing," Billy said. He cocked the hammer. "You guys can leave if you want."

"No. Wait, just wait," Paul said in a drawn-out way, thinking. "What if we played your band on the radio or something. Chicks love musicians. Maybe you can get her back. Or maybe you can get another girl, a really good one."

Billy lowered the gun. "How do you know about my band?"

"What, are you kidding?" said Wild Man, still sitting on the floor. "We come here all the time. You guys are awesome."

"Do you really think so?" Billy said smiling. He thought about Veronica's voice, thought if there was one thing in his life worth sticking around for, maybe that was it. He thought about Sarah again, her face as it had been in his daydream with the music, contented and peaceful, without the burden of his mistakes. Maybe somehow the music could take him back to that place for real, a place where Sarah's eyes weren't pained and hollow. Maybe it would help him find a way. Not that he expected her to love him again. If she just liked him, didn't hate him. That would be something.

"We've been talking about it, haven't we, Ernie?" Paul said to Wild Man, who nodded enthusiastically, blood gushing from his nose. "Tip your head back, man, like this" Paul said, pinching the bridge of his own nose.

"Yeah, we want to have a local showcase on the program," Wild Man said, addressing the ceiling in a pinched-nose nasal twang. "Maybe have you guys, County Seat, Dale & Erv, The Lunch Ladies, people like that. What do you think?"

"Listen," said Paul, "I need you to do this. I didn't do so good with those other guys who offed themselves for my sister. One of them was a good pal. So, be a sport, will you?"

The bathroom door squeaked open a crack then and Veronica stuck her head into the room. She was wearing that pink headscarf thing like usual, sort of like a bathing cap, and the color of her round face was uneven under the fluorescent lights. It made Billy think of the moon or cheese or something. And yet she was beautiful, those enormous brown eyes that had somehow retained an innocence in spite of everything—working in a factory for twenty years, taking care of her sick parents, dealing with the death of her repairman husband, who fell from the town water tower and was impaled on his own car antenna. "Billy? What's going on? A guy out here said something was up," she said, surveying the room. "For Pete's sake, what are you trying to do, kill yourself?"

Billy stuffed the gun down the back of his pants, rattled. "Well . . ."

"Because leaning your head back like that is dangerous," she said to Wild Man. "You'll choke on your own blood."

Billy slumped and shook his head in resignation. Then he smiled—much too broadly really to be believable. He sniffed, wiped his nose, as if it were true that nothing was really happening, as if it was the most normal thing in the world to be standing on the toilet, talking over the stall door to two guys who looked like extras from *Carrie*. "Hey guess what," he said to her then. "Guess who they are." He pointed to Paul and Wild Man, who were smoothing their hair and their clothes, smiling as if it were school picture day. Exactly how it would look if the El Corazón had picture day.

Veronica paused, squinting at Billy for a moment, pulling her chin back quizzically into the girth of her neck. She opened her mouth, her pale lips quivering,

skepticism poised there.

Billy jumped down from the toilet and burst from the stall. "Hey, don't worry. I have great news," he said, going to her with open arms. He looked over his shoulder. "Isn't that right, guys?"

"That's right," Paul said.

"Hey," said Wild Man, lunging toward the floor. "I found your eye!" He scooped it up and gave it to Paul, palm open and the eye in the center like a communion offering.

"There, you see?" said Billy. "It's a sign." He watched Paul hold the eye up to the light, inspecting it, and he couldn't help feeling it was watching him, the way he often felt like his father watched him, from somewhere just above, not from the sky but closer—from a vantage point where he could see Billy's mistakes exactly as they were. Not crimes of short-sightedness but of expansiveness, a sort of double-jointed ability to love more than one person at once. Billy reached over and gave Veronica a squeeze. "Do you have any idea how wonderful you are?" he said. She smiled and wiped at the sweat on her upper lip, the way a woman does when she feels singled out, on top of the world.