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THE END IS BEAR

Exterior—Christian County Cornfield.

A bolt of lightning killed my wife.

She was a photojournalist, covering the negative effects of global warming on Midwest farms. I tagged along, an unemployed and undisciplined screenwriter, writing a never-ending script, about death and its existential companion grief. Going on four hundred pages, the bear didn't have a title. It hibernated in a cardboard box, waiting to be fed more words. After I'd finish every new section I'd write the words **THE END IS NEAR**. Joke was on me—the end never came.

We had been in Christian County only a week, eating at local diners, floating through pawnshops like ghosts haunting graveyards, absorbing the nature of a small town, the nurture of America. She was a method photojournalist, much like an actor, sucking in her surroundings like a sponge, transferring that energy to an image captured on film. She called what we were doing now seeking the tangible nature of freedom.

Interior—Bed of Endings.

We had sex every day.

She called it *mating*—two animals charged with the ambiguity of self, seeking out the companionship of another in flesh. There were never outfits, or lubricants, sex toys or props. Only two bodies, twisted together in unbearable heat.

I called it *ending*—inevitable, a lovely death.

She would climb up from the foot of the bed like a tiger, pinning me down with her hands, calloused from handling her camera equipment. I would flip her onto her back and slide down her smooth skin, kissing section after section of her familiar body. I would go down, sucking at her, lapping at her. We devoured each other, wholly, our teeth tearing at nipples and bends of flesh. Sex was, like the local Christian County farmers said of their fields, a ritual of celebration to the gods for the bounty of companionship.

My husband, my wife would whisper.

My wife, I would whisper back.

Interior—Hotel Room.

The day she died I waited for her in our hotel room.

I cooked up a fresh batch of words to calm and quell the bear in the box, but stopped when I began writing the same sentence over-and-over: My god, will this ever end?

On television, there was a game show marathon. I became a contestant over time, testing my collective knowledge of Americana, question after question. If my math was correct, which I'm sure it was, I had won sixteen million dollars.

Evening came and my wife never came back to the hotel. I called her phone and it rang, perfunctorily, until finally someone answered.

My wife, I said.

Nope, bro, he said.

Who is this, I asked.

The kid who found this phone, he said.

This is my wife's phone, I said.

Who is your wife, bro, he asked.

A photojournalist, I said.

The pretty lady with the camera, the kid asked.

Put her on, goddamn it, I said.

The kid laughed.

Please, I said.

No can do, bro, the kid said.

Please do, I said.

Here, bro, the kid said, handing the phone off to someone else.

Who is this, a woman asked.

This is the husband, I said. Who is this?

The paramedic on site, she said. Is this her phone, she asked.

I'm sure it is. I dialed her number, I said. The kid answered. Then handed it to you.

I'm so sorry, sir, she said.

Why, I asked. What have you done?

Sir, she said. Your wife is dead.

The host of the game show asked the following question: What is the psychological reaction in which a person is faced with a truth that is too painful to believe and opts, instead, to believe that it is not true despite what may be overwhelming evidence?

A contestant with thick-frame glasses buzzed, but I could not hear her answer.

Interior—Christian County Coroner's Office.

I drove to the Christian County Coroner's Office of Missouri to identify her remains.

Empty slabs of steel gurneys and unused equipment rested on trays. The floor was checkered with alternating red and black squares. It smelled like Chinese food—hot and sour soup and garlic beef. A woman stepped out from an office, wiping her mouth with a napkin. She was short with long blonde hair. She wore a white lab coat and when she finished wiping her mouth, she crumpled the napkin and threw it at a trashcan. The napkin missed and fell to the checkered floor.

I'm the coroner. You the husband, she asked.

I'm here for my wife, I said.

I want to prepare you, she said. It's not the same person you remember.

But still my wife, I said.

Your dead wife, the coroner said.

My dead wife, I said, repeating the words.

She'll look the same, but different too, she said. So take your time.

Different how, I asked.

She opened a tiny hatch and pulled out a long body-sized tray. I felt like I was in an airplane, lowering a tray for my tiny cup of Coke and bag of peanuts. She pulled back a sheet. My wife's body was burned blue and the hair on her head had been sheered clean off. Her face still held an angelic charge that only an animal in love could recognize. I touched her lips.

Take your time, the coroner said again.

It's her, I said. But barely. I could never mistake that face.

It never makes sense, she said.

Death, I asked.

Being left behind, she said. The coroner handed me my wife's duffle bag filled with a notebook, torn maps, cash and prescription medicine. She had been fighting bronchitis for months, but never heeded the doctor's advice to take time off from work.

We'll ship the body back for the funeral, she said.

Thanks for keeping her warm, I said, pulling on the sheet. I hugged the coroner, resting my chin on her shoulder. Her hands pulled me close to her chest. She felt warm and smelled of garlic beef. I pressed my nose into her neck below her ear. I kissed her neck, dotting a line to her lips, finally latching onto hers, hungrily.

The coroner rested her hands at my shoulders, eased our bodies apart, and said, "I have another body to examine."

I said, I'm sorry. I said, I'm not exactly sure who I am anymore.

Exterior—Street Corner in Christian County.

Outside the coroner's office, I waited for my cab to take me to the airport. The sky was bold with bright blues, not a cloud in sight. I had expected it to rain—a bleak and angry sky, a harsh wind slicing through Midwestern streets—but weather rarely parallels a state of being. I stood on the corner near the metal statue of a soldier with a rifle slung over his shoulder. The plaque at the base read: William Christian, a Kentucky soldier of the American Revolutionary War and founder of our simple town. Christian County, Missouri.

A wad of gum stuck on the butt of the statue's rifle.

Interior—Airport Terminal.

At the airport, I waited by the gate for the plane to arrive. My bear was my baggage and slept nearby in its box.

Every hour the flight attendant in navy blue pants suit pulled on the bungee cord of the intercom to tell us our flight would be delayed another hour. The reason was always the same—visibility. I sat at the end of a long line of hard chairs; the kind that drives people to commit acts of violence. The giant window looking onto the tarmac had smudges of tiny fingerprints on the glass. A woman with headphones danced in our plane's parking spot. She twirled an orange stick in the air, the kind that guided planes. Another plane taxied out. It lifted up, tucking its wheeled feet in like a sleeping cat on the arm of a couch. The sky was still clear, but the excuse was the same—visibility.

An older woman with an oval-shaped head next to me retied the scarf around her neck—something she did after each delay. The flight attendant told us we're delayed and snapped the microphone back onto the wall. The oval-headed woman pulled the scarf from around her neck, smoothed out the wrinkles in her lap before tightening a perfect bow under her chin.

The intercom crackled. An announcement. Grief or boredom chewed at the soft center of my bones. The flight attendant held the intercom to her lips, but did not speak. Passengers sat on the edge of their seats.

Good evening, passengers, the flight attendant said. We apologize for any inconvenience. Our plane has been grounded due to visibility. We anticipate being back on schedule soon. Please remain in the gate area for further updates and instructions.

The oval-headed woman reached for her scarf.

Excuse me, Ma'am, I said, with a fake Southern accent. It would be an absolute shame if, in my humble-pie opinion, you were to undo that seemingly perfect purple knot again. My accent was spot-on, disarming, pleasant, polite. Not rebel flag Republican, but more of an Independent voting Republican. I wasn't sure what I was doing. The voice was certainly mine, but had nothing to do with me.

Really, the oval-headed woman asked, her hand hovering above the knot.

My mamma always said, if a lady's looks look bad, you keep shut, I said, accent thick. But if a lady's look looks right, then by all means speak up and speak often. And, ma'am, that knot looks mighty right. I wanted to strangle the old coot with the goddamn thing.

My, my, my, aren't you a polite young man, the oval-headed woman said.

Mamma raised a Southern gentleman proper, I said.

Where are you headed, she asked.

Off to war, I said.

You a soldier, she asked.

Yes ma'am, I said. Like my daddy and my daddy's daddy and my daddy's daddy's daddy.

You here with the rest of your platoon or group or whatever they call it, she asked, looking around.

Sadly, my mamma died yesterday, I said. I have to bury her back home before I ship out.

Ship out, she asked.

Fly out, I said, correcting.

I am so sorry, the oval-headed woman said. If you don't mind me asking, how did she die?

Gator, I said.

Gator, she asked.

Gator got her, I said.

My word, she said.

Gruesome, I said, nodding.

The oval-headed woman shook her head and wrapped her arms around me, pulling me into her bosom. She rubbed my back like my mother never did when I was little. The oval-headed woman smelled like fresh-cut flowers. Her tears soaked through my shirt to my skin. Well, at least she's free now, she said.

Free, I asked.

Free to be free, she said.

I faked a sob to ease the oval-headed woman's sadness, but the sobs continued to come until they could not be controlled. We cried together in the airport, waiting for the plane that never came.

She gave me her number in case I ever needed to cry again.

I gave up on the plane, rented a car, and drove back to my empty home in Baltimore County.

Interior—Empty House in Baltimore County.

There were dishes still in the sink. Two purple plates. Two purple coffee mugs. And a butter knife. Coffee slept inside the lip of the mugs, one holding more coffee than the other. A substance curled like an oil slick at the surface.

I tipped the mugs over and ran hot water in and out of the hollow, rinsing them with foreign and immediate vigor. Before long, the sink was empty and clean. I could see my reflection in the porcelain well, a shadow of myself too dark to see the exact features of my face, but clear enough to know I looked different.

My wife had asked if we should wash them before we left to catch our flight.

Nah, I said, waving her away.

They'll grow mold, she said.

You're not old, I said.

Mold, she said, pointing at the sink. They'll grow it.

Mold can be cleaned, I say. Now let's go!

Re-entering, the air in the house felt heavy like an evening fog, a staleness hovering over nothing. On the couch, crushed into the corner cushion, was an orange blanket she used to cover her legs with at night while she scribbled notes in her notebook. At the bottom of the staircase were her house slippers—pink, fuzzy monsters larger than some cats. Her black raincoat hung on the doorknob of the closet, never quite making it to a hanger. A stack of travel magazines spilled out of a paper bag, in route to the curb to be recycled, but held up like a truck at a weigh station. Unopened bills and the last book she read waited for me in the foyer. It was hardcover and thick. *The Collected Works of Freedom*, historically annotated—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, Bill of Rights and all amendments.

I pushed through the screen door and ran outside to be sick in the gravel driveway. I knew if I ran to the bathroom, there would only have been more of her to fuck me up.

Exterior—Unfamiliar Field in Western Maryland.

Her funeral was a small affair. Family and friends attended. It was an eco-friendly burial, sans formaldehyde and solid oak casket with white ruffle trim and lavender-scented padding. Instead, she was wrapped in gauze and boxed up in a biodegradable coffin and buried deep in a field of wild weeds and sunflowers in Western Maryland, far from any supermarket or gas station or highway, a baby mulberry bush planted as her headstone.

My mother didn't attend the funeral. She had been missing for years, but in a non-alarming way—more of an escape from responsibility and the real world. It had happened after she survived a car accident. A woman had run a red light and crashed into the driver's side of my mother's car, which rolled over and spun sideways. Mother was hospitalized for minor injuries and before I could get to her private room, she had checked out, against doctors' wishes, and disappeared. I still wonder if she called a cab to drive her to the airport, or if she walked.

My father didn't attend the funeral either, but only because my father had been dead for a while—heart attack in the waiting room of a dentist's office—his six-month checkup.

At the funeral, people asked about her.

Where's your mother, my dead wife's mother asked.

Unknown, I said.

Out of town, she asked.

Out of her mind, I said.

Okay, little one, she said, rubbing my back like the oval-headed woman, like my mother never did. She moved her hand in smaller circles.

Interior—My Eulogy.

In my eulogy, I spoke of the time, years before, when my dead wife and I drove to a casino to gamble the last hundred dollars in our bank account, in hopes of making money, at least enough to make rent for the month. It was cocktail hour. Drinks were two for one. We each gambled with fifty. I lost my share in minutes and drank mine and the one that was free. My wife won fifty bucks and didn't drink at all. We left with what we came with minus a bit of pride. On the way home she took pictures of me driving, buzzed, ranting about being broke and angry. We missed paying rent that month, got evicted, rented a room in a boarding house, and never gambled again. Soon after, my dead wife's photos of her husband were published in a local magazine, supporting an article about an impending recession. The article and photos soon found life in a national. Then, her jobs never stopped coming.

My screenplay sprawled on, never revised, only appended. I bought a second box to keep it contained. **THE END IS NEAR.**

Interior—Envelopes.

The day after the funeral I stood on my stoop, thumbing through a pile of past due bills like a well-worn deck of cards. The street was quiet, except for some kids skipping rope and an ice cream truck playing that damn tune. I opened my credit card bill and it read like a pulp novel—oxygen tanks, harpoons, wet suits, and goggles; revolvers, shotguns, cigarettes, and cash withdrawals; tuxedos, flowers and single malt scotch.

I called the credit card company.

I didn't buy any of these, I said.

It appears there has been some unusual activity on your wife's account, the account manager said, a woman with a child's voice.

My wife is dead, I said.

You should have notified us. We are authorized by law to flag your account, she said.

I am not responsible, I said.

Of course not, sir, she said.

Who did this, I asked.

Unknown, she said. You should call the authorities. It seems someone has stolen your wife's card and is using it, egregiously.

Egregiously, I asked.

To an extraordinary degree, she said.

But what is there to steal, I asked.

Whatever is left, she said.

Exterior—An Officer in Plainclothes Driving an Unknowable Car.

I called the police and they sent an officer in plainclothes. He said that if someone had stolen my wife's identity that it was a serious crime. He classified the thief as a Level

Eleven terrorist.

How many levels are there, I asked.

Thirteen, he said. One is the worst.

If identity theft is Level Eleven, then what is Level Thirteen, I asked.

That's classified, the Plainclothes Cop said.

I've lost everything, I said.

You still have your health, he said, walking away. The hole in my heart opened and I collapsed at his feet, screaming into the gravel of the driveway.

Don't leave, I begged the Plainclothes Cop.

I balled up the credit card bill and stuffed it into my mouth to swallow.

If the thief calls, contact me, he said. He dropped his card to the ground. His phone number was all sevens. He drove off in an unknowable car.

Exterior—Doggone Desert.

It was Mother's Day, so I called my mother. Her phone rang, but no one answered, so I left a message.

I said: My mother, It's your son. I'm not sure. Where you are. Call me. If you can.

I replayed my message in my head and felt like I was going crazy.

I called the oval-headed woman, southern accent and all.

My goodness, she said. Are you back from war already?

I'm actually still over here, I said. And if I may be so bold, I would have to say you sound younger than when we met, if that is at all possible.

Oh, you are such a doll, she said. Did everything go as planned with your mamma?

They did, ma'am, I said. Thanks for asking.

Oh, I am so happy to hear that, the oval-headed woman said. I said so many prayers for you and for her and for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to keep her safe on her journey home.

Where are you stationed, she asked.

I can't say for security reasons, I said.

Me and my nosy self, she said.

If they can get to you, then they can get to me, I said.

Ten-four, she said. Roger that.

Are you still tying your scarf with perfection, I asked.

I can't tell you that. A lady keeps her secrets hidden. Confidential and all, she said.

I recon, I said, slipping into cliché. I don't know if you have kids, but I was out here in the heat and the sun and got to thinking about you and wanted to give you a call, I said. Wanted to wish you a happy Mother's Day.

My, she said. Don't make them like you anymore.

Ma'am, I said. It's simply, doggone miserable out here.

Interior—Formless clouds Outside.

The sunset sat on the horizon.

I didn't sleep, even though that's what everyone told me to do. I sat on the couch instead, eating rigatoni and sauce from Vacarro's in Little Italy off the Inner Harbor, waiting for the sun to rise again. I finished my pasta and drank the rest of the wine, then rolled the empty bottle across the room to the trashcan like a bowling ball, which veered left and got stuck under the kitchen cart next to the first of two bear boxes.

When the sun finally rose, it held high behind buildings, but didn't shine—smothered by formless clouds, filled with a tiny inevitable death. *A Tiny Inevitable Death*—this, I determined, would be the title of my screenplay, now five hundred pages.

Interior—A Weak Moment.

I flipped to the back of one of those free magazines.

When she arrived, the prostitute said, Let's fuck.

Instead, I asked her to leave.

Interior—A Proposition.

My phone rang. It was a woman I didn't recognize. She sounded rough and ragged, perpetually pissed off or perplexed, I couldn't tell which.

A proposition—meet me for a drink, she said.

Why would I, I asked.

Come alone, she said.

I am alone, I said.

I want to talk, she said.

I thought you wanted to have a drink, I said.

Both, she said.

Who are you, I asked.

I am not your wife, she said.

My wife is dead, I said.

Depends on your perception, she said.

I buried her in a box in beautiful place, I said.

You buried a body, she said.

You're the thief, I said.

Depends on your belief these days, she said.

I wish to believe in anything these days, I said.

Interior—A Neighborhood Place.

At my dead wife's favorite bar, The Cat's Eye Pub, the thief sat at a table under an orange cone of light. The bar was small, serving drinks, but no food—a neighborhood place, but not my neighborhood.

Thin black hair hung over her eyes as she sipped a single malt scotch and lit a cigarette.

What do you want, I asked. A plainclothes cop said you stole her identity. Well, I said. I didn't know she had died, she said. Which is why I called.

Morbidly curious, I asked.

Honestly concerned, she said.

A thief with grief, I said, shaking my head. Well, I asked.

You seem lost, she said.

Not lost, I said.

Stuck, she asked.

I shatter into a million pieces every night and spend the time to piece it back together. I know exactly where I am. I just can't keep it together long enough to move forward.

Which is why I wanted to meet you, she said. I can help.

Answer me this: what did you do with all the stuff you stole, I asked.

Started a new life, she said.

You run away from something, I asked.

I transition. Transferred from an old thing to something brand new, she said.

You followed the life plan of a bank account, I asked.

I am surviving the only way I know how, she said.

Change is overrated, I said. Boredom is more dependable.

Your parents teach you that, she asked.

My father's dead, I said.

Your mother, she asked.

My mother might as well be, I said.

The thief knocked ash from her cigarette and blew a thin stream of smoke out of the corner of her mouth.

I don't need any more women in my life right now, I said. But thanks.

A woman can help set things right again, she said.

How are things wrong, I asked.

Not wrong, the thief said, standing, thumbing the cigarette out. Just sideways.

The room bent like a piece of paper.

She touched my cheek with her fingers, which stunk of tobacco, then kissed my lips with the bite of scotch still on her breathe. I sucked in the air around her and kissed back, standing too; our tongues touched like torches.

Interior—My Heart.

A fragile organ. A muscle, laughably so. An organ possessed. By some better than others. The muscle flexes, some say *contracts*, and pumps blood through the body via an intricate system of tiny vessels and valves. Others better than some. Blood vessels. Heart valves. This is the cardiac cycle.

Should I write this into my screenplay?

Four chambers the size of a fist. Aortic. Mitral. Pulmonic. Tricuspid.

The human heart suffers and one sees a cardiologist, a doctor of hearts, to batter away at a battery of tests. To find answers.

But then the human heart breaks and a cardiologist is irrelevant. Instead, one sees a mortician. Or a stranger at a bar.

Exterior—Parking Lot Ending in Darkness.

The day was finished, dark and dead. It had rained, everything wet and worried with weight. We crossed the parking lot to my car in the back by an abandoned building. Her heels sunk through the wet gravel. She stumbled and fell to her knees. I lifted her up. She limped behind me, trying to keep up.

I cupped her tits, lifting them in my palms. My hands slid up to her head. I made two fists in her beautiful black hair and pulled her towards me. Our lips crushed together with forgetfulness, not forgiveness, before I set her ass on the hood of the car.

Her stocking ripped. Her voice weak.

My pants bunched at my ankles. Belt scraping the gravel.

Her panties dangling from one heel. The other heel knocked off and on its side.

My hands in her hair. My face in her breasts. My hips thrusting into darkness.

Her hands at my neck. Her nails tearing at skin.

My dead wife's words remembered like a prayer.

My husband, my wife whispered.

My wife, I whispered back.

This was the ending I'd been avoiding.

Interior—My Dead Wife's Notebook.

The last notes in my dead wife's notebook drove home a sense of urgency and commitment. I was not exactly sure to what end, but it all somehow felt directed at me. Her research into freedom led her to that cornfield. To that wicked bolt of electricity dropped from the sky with a shrug. Was her research into freedom a cosmic joke?

Fact: a single bolt can race upwards of 130,000 miles per hour.

Maybe it's time to write myself into my screenplay. Speaking of cosmic jokes.

How many times can I write **THE END IS NEAR** before I start to believe it?

Perhaps, instead, I should write **THE END IS BEAR**.

The last notes in my dead wife's notebook:

According to reports, William Christian never lived in Christian County, Missouri. His name is all that exists. Politician and soldier in the American Revolutionary War. Born in Virginia. Died in Kentucky. Hardly any connection with Missouri. But fought for independence and our right to freedom and, honestly, aren't those the only real things that we have left anyway?