
Kate Wyer

Two Fictions

BRIDGETON, NEW JERSEY

Get me a banana Laffy-Taffy, says the woman next to the dumpster. She holds out the nickel in the palm of her left hand. Her right is busy drawing circles of hot pink lipstick onto the apples of her cheeks. I take the nickel. The woman uses both hands to rub the pigment into her skin.

The penny candy is on the bottom shelf, near the door. All the dust and exhaust fumes blow over it, coating the wax paper wrappers with a film of South Jersey.

Using a single finger, I push the flavors around until I find the banana near the bottom. It is hard and stale.

The counter girl presses the buttons on her register. A pack of Marlboro lights, with the receipt of purchase taped around them, sticks out from her apron. Her forearm is coated in something shiny and wrapped in clear plastic, to protect the new tattoo of a name, the same one as on her name badge.

Six cents, she says. She barely sees me, her focus is outside, by the far dumpster.

I put the nickel on the counter and take a penny from the dish.

This isn't for that lady, is it? She asks, her hip leaning into the counter.

I shake my head no, then take the key with the soup ladle attached to it.

The bathroom is on the far side of the building. There is long-haul trucker piss everywhere, everywhere except the place I've stashed my acorns.

I lift the porcelain lid of the toilet's water tank. The bag of acorns is suspended in the water reserve, the nut's bitter tannins flushed with each push of the lever as man after man relieves himself. Clean potable water filling and draining. The water in the tank is clear, instead of tea-brown, which tells me the acorns are ready to come out.

I had already tested them for worms by dumping them into the tank and seeing which floated. After discarding two handfuls of them, the rest were solid and edible.

A man's fist pounds the door.

Come'on, he says.

I grab the roll of coarse paper towels, and wrap some around the dripping bag. I replace the tank's lid and then undo the door's lock.

The man backs up a little when he sees me, then smirks and tries to lean into my body as it passes.

Water continues to drain from the bag as I walk across the lot, mindful of the counter girl's eyes. If she sees me hand over the candy, I'll most likely be banned from the store too. I see her pouring coffee grounds into fresh filters, her shoulders telling me her mind is absorbed in her task.

Psst, I hiss under my breath.

The woman lifts a hand above the drainage pipe. I walk to her and then slide down the slight bank to join

her out of the wind.

She takes the candy from my hand.

You'll pull your teeth right out, I say.

She shrugs as her eyes try to focus on my face.

A SILENCE

Mom lined up us on the linoleum floor of the kitchen. She sloshed water over and around and under our bodies. Plain washcloths were on our foreheads. I remember us there, all nine. Naked, sweating, talking in tongues. Rooted to the floor by visions. I remember when the sound cut out, when the pain in my head imploded and there was nothing.

And then the white nothing of the hospital. I opened my swollen eyes and saw a TV. On the TV, a cartoon dog moved his mouth. I did not at first notice the silence. *I am not home*, I thought. Three of my siblings were also in the room. They were sitting up and drinking juice from small cups and tiny straws. They were focused on the dog. A cat entered the frame and the dog chased it around and around a tree. My siblings laughed. I saw their faces move and their bodies rock backwards. I began to laugh too, to join them.

Imagine yourself, eight, laughing at a cartoon dog chasing a cartoon cat. And then imagine three siblings turning at once in horror at the sound you've made. *A laugh*, you think. I laughed. It was funny. The dog and the tree and all that. But their faces. You knew from their faces that something about you had changed.