

“I have to go, Jen. I just can’t stay anymore. I hope you understand. I love you,” I say quietly, trying to ignore the pouting face of the girl in front of me. Keeping my annoyance in check, I roll out of my girlfriend of one month’s bed, shrugging my threadbare black t-shirt over my shoulders, pulling on my jeans, and avoiding looking back at her barely concealed body.

I resist the urge to tell her that her stale odor of sweat isn’t tempting, but instead I throw her one last fleeting smile before closing her bedroom door behind me. I sweep my jacket off the hallway floor where she tore it off of me the night before, apparently in the throes of some passion that just wasn’t making its way to me; the entire night had been a blur of one too many beers and our sticky, writhing bodies. I flip the jacket over my shoulder and stomp towards the front door, not even bothering to be quiet when I see her father snoring in a reclining chair, the television in front of him tuned in to an old baseball game.

I learned the first time I went to her house that if her father wasn’t awake and lolling around the fridge, he was drunk enough to be proclaimed legally deceased and would stay like that for hours.

There’s a cat sitting alert in his lap, watching me. I give it the finger and slam the door behind me. The fresh air is welcome, pulling the smells of sweat and cat piss out of my nostrils.

When I get a fair distance away from the trailer I fumble a pack of cigarettes out of my pocket, scouring my jacket until I find a lighter and am able to create a vague glowing spark past the tip of my nose. I suck in the smoke, breathing it out, less in craving and more in boredom; it feels like *more* than breathing, and I make it an activity I can focus on, instead of thinking about why I’m wandering around having sex with needy girls. I banish the meaningless words I gave to Jennifer from my mind, replacing them with smoke. It helps.

I pull my jacket on, feeling the soft but thin leather fold around my arms, warm as the late summer sun hits it.

The screen door of my house slams behind me, creaking like a plaintive old man; I’m still surprised the glass doesn’t bust out of the rusted frame. I can remember when it used to be shining white.

I don't bother taking off my shoes; the less time I spend here, the better. I pull off my jacket, careful not to let it trail on the floor, where the accumulated filth over the years sits like some strange, grey carpet, littered with sloshes of beer and bits of broken glass.

The stairs creak once as I head up to my room, and I can't help but curse as the rustle of movement reaches me from downstairs, the sound of worn springs sighing from the grease-stained armchair. It's not difficult to draw parallels between mine and Jennifer's fathers. Last night's clothes join the heap in the corner of my darkened bedroom; I don't know when I last bothered to pull the curtains open. I only ever come here for clothing and food anymore; if my father's too out of it, I live without them. My bed looks like it always does, empty and neatly made. It's been like that since three years now, when my fifteen year old self realized I couldn't stand my father anymore.

I dig in my closet for a t-shirt and a pair of jeans that aren't too badly stained, grab my wallet from its hiding place in the wall, and stomp my way back down the stairs, forsaking silence for speed. My father hasn't even made it out of the living room before I've grabbed a granola bar and am on my way out the door.

"Jeremy," he calls, and even though I'm already taking a step onto the porch, I can't pretend I didn't hear his foghorn voice. I pause and turn around to find him staring at me, bloodshot eyes and stained red t-shirt, and a lisping voice out of a dopey smile.

"How are you, kid?" he asks me, one thick hand going to the back of his sweaty head; a sure sign he's nervous. He waits for me to say something; I put one foot back into the house to show I'm listening, but leave the door open behind me. He looks me up and down.

"You're looking good. Haven't seen you in a while," he says, and I pull my foot towards myself. He holds out a hand, but I don't flinch like I used to; I can see the desperation in his eyes.

"Listen, Jer, I'm in a bad spot. I'm getting a job next week, I just need a twenty, I promise I'll get it back to you... No, Jeremy, wait! Your mother wouldn't want you to leave me like this!" he yells, but I just keep walking, feeling the blood pound in my ears. Yes, my mother, my dead mother, she would have had the sense to leave him long ago; he's tried that trick too many times to count, so it's easy to ignore, but it still stings to hear him throw her memory around like that to

try and secure tomorrow's beer supply. I take another cigarette out of my pocket as I hit Main Street.

The sun doesn't feel as bright anymore, but I try to shake it off. I pull my coat around me, the broken zipper dangling uselessly. I'd buy a new one, but for that I'd need money; for money, I'd need a job, and to want to get a job, I'd need something to look forward to, like school. Haven't been there in a while; I never really liked it, so it's not that great of a loss.

I'm hitting the corner next to the run-down gas station, nearing the end of my cigarette when I hear it. A small, pitiful sound like a kitten being kicked in the ribs. I flick the butt onto the ground and mash it into the sidewalk, listening; I almost keep walking, shaking my head, until I hear it again, this time weaker, a sickly mewl coming from a nearby dumpster.

I walk over slowly, knowing that if it's a kitten, I can't do anything about it; I have trouble enough feeding myself with what little money I'm able to scrounge around. When I lift myself over the wall of the dumpster, I look into the shadows, the gloomy alley walls leaving almost no sunlight, and find myself flat on my ass next to the hulking metal bin as I lose my grip.

*No, it couldn't be. Definitely not a kitten.*

I pull myself back up, ignoring the smell, and this time I'm prepared, but my heart starts racing all the same: mixed in with the over ripe bananas, the rotting take-out and the disgusting general debris is a small, writhing mass; when it sees me, it stops crying, making pathetic whimpering noises. *A baby, right here in this dumpster.* I reach a hand over the side, but the garbage mound isn't high enough and I can't reach him; he shakes his fists in fury, wailing again. Wishing for once that people produced more garbage I pull myself over the side, my mind whirring in a thousand different directions. *What am I going to do with it? Who left it here?*

I feel the garbage seep into my shoes as I land shakily on the other side, but it doesn't cross my mind to be disturbed. I try to remember what small amount I learned about babies from child study classes, slipping one hand under the baby's head and the other under his back; both are covered in filth. He squirms but quiets down a bit as I pick him up, and that's when I notice that what I thought was a bit of dirt on his cheek is actually a large, brown birth mark. It reminds me of a dog I had once - I don't even remember his name - that had a large spot over one eye.

Somehow this makes picking the baby up easier, and I continue to think of him as a small puppy as I awkwardly pull myself back over the side of the dumpster, cradling him carefully in one arm. He stops crying when he feels the jolt of my feet on the ground, and stays silent as I pull off my jacket and lay both it and the baby carefully on the pavement. He wiggles, his scrunched baby face looking up at me. His eyes are bright blue, and they stay trained on me as I slowly wipe him off with my jacket, cursing my luck; I'll never get one that fits this well again. When most of the garbage is off of him, I wrap him in the jacket and have the insane urge to laugh at this baby wrapped in leather.

"Aren't you just a bad-ass," I mutter quietly, looking around for anyone else I can hand him off to. I half expect his mother to come around the corner and take him from me, as if she'd misplaced him. There's no one around, for once, and I set my feet resignedly towards the police station on the next block. My heart skips a beat every time he makes a noise, and I'm almost running by the time I reach the front doors, not wanting to do anything wrong to this kid.

The fluorescent glow of the police station hits me as I open the door, but not even the telltale humming of the lights can mask the awkwardness in the room: an old lady stands by the counter, and gives me a peaceable smile, but she's the only one; a scrawny guy by the door sneers at me, his teeth yellowed; a beefy guy is staring moodily at a floor tile, looking as though he wants to smash his head against it; and a heavily made up woman in her mid-forties looks at me like she wishes the baby were ours. I avoid looking at them all and stand there in silence until an officer slips out of a back door and notices me.

"Can I help you?" He asks, grinning broadly at the baby; the kid looks at him with a little bit of terror in his eyes and starts crying again. I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks, but for some reason I also feel my arms grow tighter instead of trying to throw the baby at the man so I can run. Something about him makes me uneasy, his eyes already looking past me; and where will this kid end up if I hand him over? Some foster home where he'll most likely be shipped from house to house? There'd been kids from a couple at my school, and they'd been even more messed up than I am. I look around the room slowly.

"D-Does anyone know how to change a diaper?" I ask, and the officer shakes his head and disappears behind the same door he came out of. I stare at the dirty floor, ready to turn around

and walk back out, to deal with this new burden I've just given myself, when a voice comes warbling out of the corner.

"Come on, there's a changing station at the grocery store," the old woman says, packing her things back into her purse from their various places on the desk. She passes a small envelope to the man behind the counter and comes over to me, grabbing my arm and leading me back out the door.

For a small old woman her grip is surprisingly strong, and she clings to my arm as we shuffle slowly down the street.

"Is he yours?" she asks, smiling at the baby. I stutter for a moment.

"No, mom's working early today so she asked if I could watch him," I say, and she gives his jacket-blanket a good long look before turning away. It almost makes me want to laugh and tell her the truth, so she doesn't think badly of my imaginary mother; so she doesn't think badly of me.

"I have three boys – all of them grown men now – and I've missed having kids in the house," she says, absentmindedly stroking the baby's fingers; his eyelids droop slowly towards his chubby cheeks. The grocery store's dingy grey walls come into view around the corner.

"Now, do you have an extra diaper with you?" she asks with a sly smile, and I know she's expecting my answer.

"Um, no...guess that would be helpful," I mutter, and though she sighs heavily there's a smile on her face as she grabs a giant box of 48 diapers – now with extra absorbent padding! – and pays the cashier, before toting them towards the back, where the bathroom sign hangs like the northern star. Two wise men, a baby, and not a bit of gold in sight.

We walk into the small family designated bathroom and she goes to work, opening the changing table and letting it swing down from the wall. It's like the doorway of a U.F.O. opening to show me something completely alien.

“Now,” she says, scooping the baby from my arms and laying him gently on the plastic, “this is one thing I do not miss about having children,” she grumbles, and I laugh along with her - until she takes off the jacket and actually opens the diaper.

“My goodness, how long has it been since he’s been changed?” she cries, and I have to take a step back to keep from gagging; I don’t know how she can tell he’s a boy, because all I can see is shit. The baby starts howling again.

“Oh, no, this won’t do. Go buy a pack of baby wipes,” she orders me, giving the baby a sympathetic look and me a look that tells me there is no arguing. I hurry out, buy the wipes and rush back in, passing them to her in the hopes that she won’t ask me to help.

She starts the labour-intensive work, muttering and giggling at the baby, who has flung his hands out towards her as if saying; *you see what I’m working with?*

“What’s your name?” she says when she’s done, wrapping the boy into a new diaper, flicking her eyes over her shoulder at me. A smile tugs at the corner of her wrinkled mouth.

“Jeremy; what’s yours?” I ask, feeling as though whatever it is, it should be carved into a metal plaque. She smiles as she wraps the kid back in my jacket, passing him to me.

“Edith. Well, Jeremy, your brother’s all cleaned up, and see to it he stays that way,” she says, slowly leaning over to pick up the box of diapers. She passes them to me, and I juggle for a moment before getting my *brother* sitting on one arm and the diapers packed under the other. Edith runs her fingers over the pearls at her throat, looking at the baby.

“You tell your *mother*,” she says pointedly, and I know immediately she doesn’t believe my story, “not to work too hard. This little one needs some loving care, so he doesn’t end up on the wrong side of things,” she mutters quietly, and I see again the envelope leaving her hand at the police station.

“Is your son in jail?” I ask, and if my hands weren’t so full of babies and diapers they would fly to my mouth. On any other day I would have probably cursed at three old ladies, but this feels different. Edith simply smiles, not giving an answer either way.

“You keep out of trouble, now, Jeremy, and look after this one,” she says, and gives both the

baby and I a kiss on the cheek before leaving the bathroom. By the time I can make sure everything I'm carrying is stable, she's gone.

I leave the grocery store, and start walking unconsciously towards home. I laugh loudly at the sky, looking at my predicament; a nameless baby and a drunken father. Oh joy.

When I get to the house, I stand outside for a moment, listening; my breath whooshes out of me when I hear the snoring, and I climb the stairs quickly, looking the baby in the eyes to tell him what I would think of any crying right now. He stares back at me, toothless mouth working soundlessly.

I close the door of my bedroom and set the kid on the bed, placing the box of diapers next to him. First things first, I pull the jacket from around him and throw it in the garbage can by the door, grimacing; I take a random sweater from the closet and pull it on, grabbing a shirt from my drawer. I'm there for ten minutes before I manage to fashion an outfit for the kid; one of my old shirts, pulled over his head and safety-pinned through his legs. The world's ugliest onesie, but it will have to do.

Finally I let myself collapse on the floor, keeping the baby in my line of vision. My father, though drunk out of his wits most of the time, will never let me keep a kid. I lean over the side of the bed, and when he spots me, the baby laughs. He actually laughs, and for some reason I can't help letting a laugh escape me, too. There hasn't been laughter in this house for a long time.

I grab my old backpack out of the closet, pulling it hesitantly towards me, unwilling to voice my plan out loud as it strikes me. I pull all of the diapers from the box and stuff them into the bag, which is fit to burst, and finally manage to zip it closed. I grab an old grocery bag from under my bed and pack it with clothes, as much as I can fit. I've done this before, with the same plastic bag, but for some reason this time I know I'm actually going to do it.

I wrap the kid in another shirt for good measure and walk downstairs, both bags and baby in hand, and stop just as I'm passing the living room. My father's snoring away, but for once I don't feel anger, just a sort of detached annoyance.

“That’s right, keep snoring until you’re dead,” I hiss, and see a bottle of beer on the counter. Something comes over me and before I can stop myself I grab it and whip it into the living room, and I can barely hear it smash, even though I’m only in the porch; I’m so far away already.

The lights at the bus depot flicker, but I hold the bottle I got at the grocery store – along with a couple of cans of baby formula- steadily, watching Eddie drink; that’s what I’ve started calling him, in honor of Edith, the diaper changing wonder. He seems to like it, but then he can’t really tell me if he doesn’t, so he’ll just have to deal with it anyway; but the first time I said it, he kind of waved his hand at me, so I took that as an okay.

The headlights appear around the corner, and I dig in my pocket for money, my breath almost stopping; I’m actually running away.

I carry my bags on with me, and everyone is so blissfully ignorant of my presence that I want to hug them and at the same time I want to scream about this kid that I just found, but instead I sit down slowly in the first seat, arrange Eddie in my arms, and stare out the window as the bus pulls away.



