

James Taylor vs. the King

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After holding up the liquor store, they return to their motel and fuck standing up in front of the tall bedroom mirror. The whole thing has left them feeling sexy. But that isn't anything new. On the TV, Elvis is thrusting and dripping wet with sweat. Because she's so small, he can pick her up, hold her completely in his arms. It's not anything he's been able to do with a girl before. It feels sweeter than it looks in the pornos. She laughs loud, hair bouncing, and holds on tight to his shoulders. In the mirror, their eyes meet and do not part. The money's black duffle bag lies thrown in the corner. Someone in the room next door bangs on the wall. They howl.

It was just some little no-name town in Connecticut. They could have pushed ahead for another hour or two and been in New York City. But then they'd be in New York City. Neither one of them wanted that. They exited the highway into an anonymous congestion of strip malls and department stores and discount motels all wound up in industrial parkways, and after twenty minutes of circling around, they had it all figured out. They got a room at a Budget Inn and used their real names at the check-in, where the woman running the desk did her best not to stare at his scars. In their room, they showered together and he brushed her long black hair while she recited words to him in Spanish.

"...cicatrices...carajo...bocadillo...."

"That sounds pretty."

"You'd think so."

They drove across the street to a liquor store in a shopping plaza, and while Jonas asked the clerk all about Canadian whiskeys, Marie walked around the store, playing the mousy housewife. They bought big jugs of Collinsworth and Crown Royal and again, Jonas paid with his credit card. Afterward, they sat in the car and talked it out while Marie drew on the paper liquor store bags with a chunky

black magic marker. It smelled. The liquor store closed at nine. It was already six o'clock. Plenty of downtime. They locked up the car and walked around the Stop & Shop next door, goofing around while picking out snacks for later. Olives and cheese and sardines and crackers. They paid in cash but made sure to remove the receipt anyway before putting the snacks in their empty black duffle bag. It wasn't even seven o'clock yet, so they flipped a coin between eating or fucking, lost, so drove over to a seafood restaurant with nets and lobster traps hanging off the walls, and though the place looked stupid they had beers and baked scallops and ended up having a good time. They lied to the waiter and said it was their anniversary. He brought them a free slice of pie with their check.

After dinner, they parked the car behind the shopping center in the shadow of a refrigerated trailer that didn't have any truck attached. They waited until five past nine, when the clerk from the liquor store stepped out the back door, arms full of cardboard for the trash. He left the door open when he went back inside for more. Jonas and Marie strolled in after him. It took the clerk a while to realize he was being shadowed around the store.

"Should I explain this?" Jonas asked. He was wearing a paper bag over his head. "Or do you have this pretty well figured out?"

The clerk looked between them. Jonas carried the black duffle bag but Marie was holding the gun. She had a bag on her head, too. Jonas's just had two oval holes cut in for eyes and an abbreviated dash for a mouth. On Marie's, she'd drawn a kitty. Not just the face. The whole cat. The clerk nodded and walked behind the counter with his hands held over his head.

Because it was closed, the store had only two lights on, one over the register and one over the door leading to the storeroom out back. It felt calm in the dark. Jonas set the bag on the counter and the clerk started filling it with bills. His nametag said CHET. Nearby, Marie slow danced with a cardboard cutout of the Most Interesting Man in the World.

"While you're at it, Chet, could you put a few nips in the bag, too?"

“Which ones?”

From the dance floor, Marie dipped her partner and stage whispered, “Whiskey!”

“The woman would like whiskey, please.”

“Does it matter which ones?”

“Maybe two of each? We’ll do a survey later.”

The clerk turned to the shelf behind the till and started selecting tiny bottles. He took his time with it. Like he was really thinking about what these folks might like. After a while, Jonas told him that was enough.

“Thanks for being such a good sport about this.”

The clerk shrugged.

“Maybe you want to come with us?” Marie had joined them at the counter. She was wagging the gun around like she was teasing a dog with a toy. “We could go on a crime spree!”

“No thank you.”

Jonas grappled the bag’s straps and dragged it off the counter. “Do you have a warm coat, Chet?”

He did. The clerk fetched his coat from the office and they led him into the beer cooler. They apologized for everything and handed him their bag of snacks. He seemed to understand.

“Maybe I could come with you guys after all.” He was looking at a half-stack of ice beer 18-packs. It was the only place to sit.

“Sorry, Chet. The kids take up all the free space in the van.”

They locked the cooler and locked up the store, snapped off the remaining lights, and left. It was a brisk October night. Dead leaves rattled across the streets.

Jonas and Marie both prefer fish to meat. They like dessert but not candy. Gum doesn’t even blip on their radar. They both think their childhoods were long bad jokes but now and then, with the right delivery, the joke can be funny. Both would rather lose a fight than learn some terrible news. Each had gone to boarding schools but not the kind people brag about. They like watching movies but

couldn't care less about dialogue. Popcorn is gross. It is also annoying. Both used to think they were just biding their time but neither one feels that way anymore. It's agreed that pizza's best cold the morning after. Each believes their bodies are what attract so much trouble in their lives, but sometimes their bodies solve that trouble, too. Marie thinks Jonas's scars are pretty and are what give his face character and so are really a blessing of sorts, though he claims to maintain no opinion about them one way or the other, so in a sense, they agree on this, too. Both think the other is the one who bought the gun (it's Jonas's but he forgot: Marie found it in his closet, at the bottom of a bowling bag, underneath a bowling ball). Neither believes in spirits, but when they're naked together, they have their doubts. Neither one of them has ever been to Florida.

Jonas met Marie at a dumpy little bar in Boston's North End, not too far from the Garden. The place smelled like potato chips and farts. But as he'd just been fired from the warehouse for punching his supervisor in the neck, he really just wanted a beer. Marie was the only woman at the bar. She was surrounded by three guys who Jonas thought looked like meatpackers. It wasn't a description that made much sense to him, but somehow it felt correct. Slumped against the bar, tiny and dark and surrounded by goons, Marie looked miserable.

Jonas ordered a beer and sat on a corner stool, watching the guys take turns leaning in to whisper whatever nastiness they had to say. He really didn't want to get himself into another fight. But there didn't seem to be much else as an option. After a few minutes, Jonas got up and approached them.

"I don't think she's picking up what you're laying down, sport."

All four of them turned to look at him. He could tell they were taking in his scars. Then Marie did some sort of feral rebel yell and grabbed the glass of beer from his hand and smashed it into the nearest guy's face. He fell backward gripping his cheek and ear,

blood mixed with beer foam scrawling strange designs between his fingers and down his arms. Jonas remembers: it looked neat. The other two backed away. Marie slammed down the rest of her drink, took Jonas's hand, and led him out onto the street. They walked a few quick blocks without speaking. He asked if her hand was okay, but she didn't respond. Then she asked where he wanted to go.

"Um ... do you like sushi?"

She stopped on the sidewalk and stared up at him, head cocked. Her skin was pale but he could tell, in the summer, it'd be much darker, almost brown. Her eyes were just dark spots in her face. She was doing a curious thing with her lips. His hadn't been the response she was expecting.

"Yeah," she finally said. "I do."

They walked to a place he liked nearby and got big bowls of chirashizushi and a bottle of unfiltered sake. There were fish in aquariums along all the walls. The light from the water made their white sake look blue. It didn't feel at all like they'd just been in a bar fight together. It was the closest thing to a date either had been on in years.

Signs indicate that the motel has a swimming pool. After fucking

in front of the mirror, they rinse off in the shower and head down to the pool, carrying plastic cups of the whiskey they bought. The pool is only twenty feet long and ten feet wide and maybe five feet at its deepest. But it's water. Because Florida has beaches, Marie has planned ahead and brought a bathing suit, a strappy two-piece covered in neon pink and blue flowers. Jonas goes in in his underwear. There is no one else in the pool. The back half of the poolroom is made of sheet glass overlooking a scrappy little garden, one leafless tree and some nude bushes gathering plastic bags and wrappers. Everything echoes madly. While Marie tries and fails to teach him how to float, Jonas sings to her in his most emotive voice, drawing out the syllables:

*The sad sack was sitting on a block of stone
Way over in the corner, all alone.
Big Boss said, "Hey buddy, don't you be no square.
If you can't find a partner, use a wooden chair."*

When he refuses to stop and refuses to float, she slaps his forehead and pushes him under.

Afterward, walking back from the pool, they get lost trying to find their room. Clapping her hands to her cheeks, she fake-screams, "It's a maze!"

"It's a horseshoe," he corrects her, and keys into their room.

Most people behave as though he's much bigger than he is: it's something in his carriage, the way he moves himself through the world. No one is willing to accept him as a welterweight.

Marie knocks into doorframes, bumps the corners of tables, knocks over chairs. Her hips and shoulders are always bruised. She maneuvers through a crowd like a pinball. She's noticed: other small people do the same thing. As if, being so little, they should be even smaller, fitting through spaces they cannot fit through. She has no idea how much room she takes up in the world.

Of course, after their date was over, they went back to his apartment and destroyed the place. He was twenty-eight years old and had never had sex like that before. When your face is jigsawed with scars, women either think you'll hurt them or they can hurt you. But Marie was something else. They were like two animals not thinking about what they were doing, just doing it and enjoying what they were doing. Or maybe they were like two suns in a close orbit, tearing each other apart while spinning faster around and around. Whatever it was, it was mutual. It made everything else feel silly. Afterward, they lay exhausted on his kitchen floor, sweat sticking their skin to the linoleum, and he stared at the sloped hollow of her belly

moving softly with her breath, wishing he could see it in the sun. So he made up his mind. Summer was a long way off. He had no idea if this would last that long. So he'd do the next best thing. He'd do anything to make it happen.

"I used to work in places like this," she tells him later. They are naked in bed, each with a tiny bottle of Johnny Walker Red. On the TV, *Two Lane Blacktop* is playing with the sound off.

"As a maid?"

"What, you think just 'cause I'm a spic I'd be a maid?"

"You're not a spic. You grew up in Ohio."

She punches him in the shoulder. "Yes, as a fucking maid. I was terrible at it. I kept getting fired and kept finding new work doing the same stupid thing. It took me forever to learn."

"Why would you get fired?"

"I can't make a bed to save my life."

"Oh, sure you can."

"Why would I lie about something so dumb?"

He shrugs and finishes his nip. She pushes him off the bed and strips off the blankets and sheets, then puts them all back on.

"Wow." He stands back beside the TV and watches her. "Really?"

"See what I mean?"

"You really can't make a bed."

"It looks exactly like two people have been fucking in it." She hops onto the mattress, bounces from her knees onto her belly. She does not roll over. She keeps her backside pointed his way. Sometimes her smallness makes him think he's sleeping with a twelve-year old. The idea scares him. He turns to watch the TV.

"James Taylor," he says, "might very well be the worst musician ever."

"Eric Clapton. Dave Matthews. The Eagles. Creed."

"But goddamn he's great in this movie."

"Uh-huh."

“You think it’s because he keeps his mouth shut the whole time?”

From the bed, a pillow sails to whap against his neck. He bends to pick it up, and when he turns to throw it at her, another pillow hits him in the face.

“Hello?” She snaps her fingers and points at her body.

“Oh. Right.” He turns off the TV and climbs into bed.

Marie left Ohio because it didn’t know what it wanted to be. It sometimes considered itself Southern and sometimes Northeastern and sometimes part of the Midwest, but it couldn’t be all three and so instead it was nothing. If a piece of geography so big as Ohio couldn’t know what it was, what chance did she stand there? She headed east because, like nowhere else, the East was certain about what it was. She worked her way first to Providence then eventually up to Boston and oftentimes stole because stealing was more interesting than work. She stole clothes from department outlets and food from grocery stores and restaurants. Petty theft. Now and then, she squatted in houses that were up for sale, which is also kind of like stealing. It rarely occurred to her that she could someday get caught. She was smarter than that, she believed.

Her smallness and her beauty were always weapons used against her. Most men simply thought she was theirs. Finders keepers. Defending herself so often against people’s wrong thoughts eventually built a callus around her. She had to remain hard to remain her own. This, too, she attributed to Ohio. Acting out against something outside herself that wanted her to be something else. On the night she met Jonas, when she smashed in the creep’s face with a beer glass, she was not thinking: Fuck this guy. She was thinking: Fuck Ohio. No matter where she went, Ohio always followed her there. Then she met Jonas, and Ohio was gone. She couldn’t explain how or why. But she knew that it was true. Jonas was her first new land.

For a few hours before sunrise, they sleep. All tangled in legs and arms and sheets. Jonas dreams that he's James Taylor's character in *Two Lane Blacktop*, at the starting line of his final race, but Marie dreams of the first place they robbed together. They didn't need a gun that time. It was an all-night gas station that catered mostly to truckers, a mall of energy drinks and jerky and radar garbage just over the New Hampshire border. They showed up after midnight and hung around back by the freezer cases of ice cream, keeping very still until the fat man running the register forgot they were there. When he stepped outside for a cigarette, they emptied the register and left a ten on the counter. Jonas carried a forty of Old Milwaukee out the front door. He was wearing makeup to cover up his scars. When the fat man saw them walking out of the store, surprise scrawled all over his doughy face, Jonas jerked a thumb back toward the store, drawling, "Keep the change, guy." The fat man smiled and kept smoking. Marie had her mouth on him before they pulled out of the lot. They barely made it five miles before pulling off down some access road, Marie squeezing into his lap between the steering wheel and his chest, already coming before he was all the way inside her. But in the dream, it's not like that at all. The fat man goes out for his cigarette, but when they head for the register, he's back behind the counter with a shotgun in his hands. From his bower of cigarettes and scratch tickets, he tells them to hold it right there, fuckers, and let me see your hands. And then he shoots them anyway.

She wakes up when the shots go off. Beside her, in his sleep, Jonas mumbles, "We're not going to make it." She touches the lightning jag running from his left nostril to his lip. But he doesn't say anything else after that.

He used to bare-knuckle box in his teens. In a parking lot behind the box factory. He made a lot of money one summer, then lost a lot of money, then got spooked and quit. It's why he has weird scars on his face. Other boys' busted hands tearing apart his skin.

But he's never told Marie about it. He tells her: a man's allowed a secret or two. It embarrasses him that he quit. It embarrasses him that he ever started.

The morning after robbing the liquor store, while Marie gathers provisions from the motel's free breakfast table, Jonas burns their paper masks in the parking lot. "Bye-bye, kitty." He squats behind the car, watching the ashes march across the pavement like little grey soldiers in puffy pantaloons. The sun shines white and cold. He loads their bags into the trunk and checks out at the front desk.

"Do we push on to Florida today?" she asks from the passenger seat, around a mouthful of rubbery egg-and-cheese sandwich.

"Let's just see how far we get today. I'm in no hurry."

"Me either." She reaches over and plays with his earlobe. "I'm having fun."

As they wait for street traffic to let them out of the motel parking lot, Marie points out the handful of police cruisers in front of the liquor store across the street. The pale lights on their rooftops spin uselessly in the morning air. They make it look like a panic. But nothing's going on. Though they can't be seen and it doesn't matter anyway, they both wave. Then traffic breaks and they join in its flow, anonymous and safe among the morning commuters and merging onto the southbound highway.

