

M. OWENS

Rain Over Memphis

I don't hear the stairs creak until my father is almost to the foyer. I'm in his house, unannounced, sitting naked on a ladder-back chair. The television is on with the sound muted. I've been fighting scabies for eight months and this is my third attempt to rid myself of the welts and itchy patches caused by microscopic parasites. My skin is covered in a thick layer of ointment called Lindane. I wait for the chemical to turn from milk-thick white to translucent and file deep into my flesh. Lindane has to cover the body for an eight-hour period without being disturbed, which is why I am naked in my parents' house, awake at five a.m.

My father looks at me with tired, overworked eyes.

"Boy," he says. "What the hell are you doing?" He isn't angry. He is wary.

I tell him the rash I've been fighting is scabies. I don't tell him the whole bit about why I'm naked. He trusts me.

His underwear has holes in the front and back.

"You should ask mom to buy you some new tighty-whities," I tell him. "The skid marks reach around from both sides."

He laughs. It isn't a laugh-laugh. It's more of an "a-ha" or an "uh-huh" with a tobacco edge to it that catches on tar mid-way through. It means

"funny." It means "smart-ass." It means "good job." "Love you, too." And "I'm not the one sitting naked on a chair."

He coughs. Pushes his hand through his long hair. Shakes a cigarette from his pack of *Cambidges*. Lights it. His hair drifts back down over his eyes and sticks to his trimmed beard. It has grown back fully since he cut it some years before. His boss at the time offered him a promotion under the condition he look more professional. Soon after, the company folded and the same boss skipped town with everyone's money, including three months back pay. If the first stretch of long hair grew from a youthful rebellion then the second growth matured as a genuine fuck you to a world that would see him as gullible. He won't cut this second growth for another five years, and he will cut it that time for a court appearance. He will get fired from a superintendent job after missing too much work because of crippling panic attacks and a slipped disc in his spine. His boss will not pay out his workman's comp. My father will win the lawsuit. He will have small cell cancer building in and behind his lungs while in court. The cancer will look like microscopic glaciers and it will shift and spread and float until it melts and becomes the surface. He will think it is pneumonia. My mother will say he is having a hard year.

He will throw up blood, and my mother will force him to come away to the hospital. They will ride in a helicopter. It will be my mother's first time in a helicopter, and she won't look. There will be snow drifting and she will think it looks pretty even though she doesn't want to. She'll put her hands over her eyes and her hands will shake. She will laugh even though she doesn't want to laugh and then cover her mouth to stop the laughter. Cover eyes, shake, laugh, cover mouth—all of the way to the hospital where my father's heart will stop beating for five minutes. When he is resuscitated he will only be bone and fiber and liquid and the cancer will spread.

But now, he asks if I want any coffee and I tell him yes. I hear him in the kitchen. A thump of tin can set hard on the Formica counter, a rush of water into the filler tank, and a clap as the lid closes. He goes into the bathroom and shuts the door, screech of rusted hinges, a slam.

I turn the channel to the weather. He would have anyway. He likes to watch, without sound, over coffee and in the darkness of pre-dawn. I assume The Weather Channel comforts him. I assume he projects himself out of this life and into a void, into a place where the landscape appears colorful and two dimensional without any actual setting or people. A place where one can think without losing any time. In a couple of years he will watch The Weather Channel specifically for updates about Washington state, where I will live. His panic attacks will begin, worsen, and take over. He will call to let me know it is going to rain for three weeks straight and I will remind

him that it will rain for seven months. In this time he will start talking. He will tell me of how he met my mother while working at a gas station, fell in love with her, worked hard, raised us kids, *and now this*. He will tell me he does not know where the panic attacks come from and neither do the doctors. That he can't stand loud noises, that my little sister doesn't understand he needs more quiet and she lets her friends come and go at all hours. That he just wants to be alone. He will tell me he is proud of me for leaving, and then he will ask me to come back. I will tell him no. I will tell him I'm happy where I am and he will say more times than necessary that he understands.

The coffee maker bubbles. I listen for him to come out of the bathroom. The Weather Channel shows footage of a flood in Nova Scotia. A hot spell in the far north has melted glaciers. For a moment, before going back to the safe and anonymous graph, it shows people in canoes floating next to pitched roofs. I am glad he missed the live footage.

I doze. I don't hear him come in with the coffee, but I wake when he sets the cup down on the cherry-wood table he made for my mother. The table he lost his thumb building. After the table saw severed his thumb, Smokey, our grey cat caught the top half and ran out of the house. My dad grabbed a towel for the gushing blood and chased after her. His brother, who helped him run the lathe, fainted. My mother screamed, then laughed, then covered her mouth and shook in the hallway. My brother and I watched from the stairs, and my oldest sister called 911. He didn't

catch Smokey and she never came back home. I watch as he puts another cigarette to his lips with the half thumb and pointer-finger, lights it and leans back in his recliner chair.

My father coughs and the smoke billows out. I am eager to be in this moment, few as they are, few as they have ever been—a moment for just the two of us. We haven't talked much since I moved out two years before, at sixteen. I took a Greyhound bus to Detroit where I then traveled to Montreal. He didn't want me to go, but when I told him he could either let me or consider me a runaway he caved. Friends drove me to the bus station, and he did not say goodbye. When I flew home three months later, emaciated, with sparse chin hair, he met me on the tarmac. I could tell he meant to run to the airplane stairs but he checked himself. I cried against my will when I saw him down below, cried from guilt, from love, from growing up. I cried for passing out too high on PCP and waking up alone in a living room I did not recognize. I cried for the nights of being homeless in Montreal. I cried for not knowing what to do once back in Memphis. Then I stopped, and washed my face in the small airplane bathroom.

"How much longer you got to sit like that?" he asks.

"Two more hours."

"Could you move then? I wasn't a glass maker and so you ain't see through." He gestures to the TV. His smile. Cigarette buckled in his teeth. Steam of coffee. I stand up, embarrassed of my

testicles, and move the chair.

"What's there to see?" I motion to the green and blue map on the screen. A red graph-tail snakes down from Ohio, alongside the Mississippi river. Rain over Memphis.

Through the living room window, the sun spreads low early morning light, humidity rising faster than the temperature. I imagine the Mississippi pulsing beneath the Memphis bridge, alongside the Tennessee and Arkansas border, and on down to the Gulf of Mexico.

"Dry as a bone ain't it?" he asks, cigarette held between his forefinger and the hard dual-mound of bone raised from his half-thumb.

"Looks like a sunny day," I say. But I know it'll change. The light will exist long enough to cast shadows. Those shadows will vanish under the water-weighted clouds.

"It'll rain," he says.

"I know," I say.

I will wake up sometime later and my coffee will be cold on the cherry wood table. I will lie on the couch covered by an old quilt. Without a discernable memory, I will know he wrapped me in the blanket and moved me from the ladder back chair. Somewhere in the house, my mom will be vacuuming. The gray light will creep in through the window and the sun will sit barricaded behind storm clouds and thick rain. I will get up and go to the bathroom and shower. Out there, in the city somewhere, my father will be driving in his truck, or standing in an empty house half remodeled, and he will smile when it starts to rain. 