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Hamster

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Hamster

I was limping down East Eleventh Street with a film canister full of opiates when I stumbled into one of those open-air markets where they sell quinceañera dresses and hamsters in tiny cages. This new therapist I was seeing had told me I should take more walks. Something about endorphins and how they trick your brain into thinking you're on hydrocodone. Her office smelled like old tamales, and the jewelry she wore resembled something you'd get at Mardi Gras for showing your tits. This morning, she had worn these purple and yellow beaded necklaces, one on top of the other, and the more personal her questions got, the more she tugged on them, so that by the time she got to "Have you thought about hurting yourself in the last week?", her fingers looked like honeycomb.

I pulled my camera out of my bag and took a photo of the hamsters. Their cages were stacked on top of each other in a pseudo-pyramid. I wondered what would happen if someone wanted one from the bottom.

"Fifteen dollar," an old woman said to me. "Twenty-five for two."

"I don't have that kind of money," I said. It was a lie, but after giving me a once-over, she seemed to believe me.

"Ten dollar," she said. "Very good hamsters."

I squatted near the pyramid and peered into their cages. The top and middle consisted exclusively of baby hamsters, all roughly the size of my film canister. The bottom were adults with long yellow nails and eye crust. Most of the hamsters were sleeping or pretending to sleep. A few were enthusiastically nibbling on browning lettuce in a way that made me think they'd accept anything you gave them. I wondered what would happen if I slipped one of my pills through the bars.

"Good pet," the woman said. When she smiled, I counted more gaps than teeth.

I was supposed to be scaling back on impulsive behaviors, which I had interpreted to mean making as few abrupt changes to my life as possible. I'd been off pills about three weeks but was still selling. Nothing big. I was a receptionist at a community hospital and only took whatever the pharmacy was throwing out—opiates, antipsychotics, antiretrovirals—whatever was nearing its expiration date. I had an agreement with the pharmacy technician in charge of waste disposal. She pocketed

some of the expiring drugs for me. In return, I let her use my apartment when she needed a place to cheat on her husband.

Usually her lovers would pretend they didn't see me boiling pasta or reading a magazine on the sofa. But sometimes, after they had finished making love, the three of us would order a pizza or go to Salvation, the bar where I sold most of the pills. There was one woman there, a neighbor, who always bought all my red pills. They weren't even the same pills—some were round, some oblong, some tasted three times worse than they smelled—it didn't matter to her. She had once seen the future after taking a red pill she had found in a nursing home stairwell. "It was horrible," she said. "God came down from the clouds and put the whole city to sleep."

I had twenty-eight dollars in my bag. I needed a few bucks for the bus ride home, a few more if I wanted to eat something other than what was in my fridge, which, if I remembered correctly, was hot dog buns, Swiss cheese, and a gun. I didn't know if ten dollars was a fair price for a hamster or what sort of formula a person would use to determine an animal's worth. My head hurt. My tongue had this dry, patchy feeling, like someone had sprayed it down with antifreeze.

I gave the old woman ten dollars. "Give me one from the bottom."

I didn't go home after the market. I passed my stop, and then a few others, and got off a couple blocks from my mother's apartment. She was wrapped in a blanket on the couch, watching a Mr. Clean commercial on repeat.

"What smells?" she said.

"I brought you something," I said. I placed the hamster cage on the coffee table.

"What is it, some kind of rat?"

"It's a hamster, Mom."

"Why does it look like it has cancer?"

"It's old."

"I didn't know hamsters could get old."

"We used to have a hamster. Remember? We called him Nibbles."

"Nibbles," she said, squinting her eyes. "Oh, right. Didn't he get glaucoma?"

We watched the Mr. Clean commercial a few more times, until whatever message my mother felt he was sending her was conferred, and then I convinced her to switch to a movie channel. In whatever black-and-white film this was, a man on a horse chased another man on a horse. Shots were fired. Women in bonnets cried.

"How's Debbie?" my mother asked.

"Fine," I said. "She's fine."

I hadn't spoken to my sister Debbie since she ran off with my ex-boyfriend Barry two years earlier. Our last interaction had been in a hospital, where she was being treated for a bullet I had put in her toe for a reason that was vague to me now. I mean, I knew why I had done it. I just couldn't remember what had been special about that day, why I hadn't done it sooner. Anyway, when she left, she didn't leave a number, didn't confide her plans to anyone I had spoken to. In the last two years, I had called every rehab, prison, and homeless shelter from California to Wisconsin. I had tried to do the same for all the bars and strip clubs, places I thought Debbie might work or hang out, but that had proven impossible.

I was becoming increasingly confident that she was dead. Other than my mother, it seemed like everyone in this city who had known Debbie had either OD'd or left. I couldn't talk about her with anyone. It was like she had never existed, like she was a hallucinatory by-product of something I had taken when I felt I was dying or when I couldn't feel anything. Lately, I'd been having dreams about her, horrible dreams in which she pulled pills out of her throat and made me eat them. Sometimes I felt her planting thoughts in my brain, telling me to do things I didn't want to do. My therapist frowned when I told her that.

"I'm not hearing voices," I told her. "Don't you get it? This is exactly what Debbie would do to me if she were dead."

Every so often, I considered blowing my savings on a private investigator. I had gotten the name of the guy my neighbor had used to find her birth mother, had even dialed the first few digits of his number a couple times. Each time, I got this feeling like my lungs were cinder blocks holding up a car. It wasn't about the money; I had nothing better to spend it on, nothing worth saving up for. I was terrified of knowing for sure that Debbie was dead. Even more so, that she was alive.

I spent the first half of my shift babysitting the cousins of a woman who was getting her stomach pumped a few rooms away.

"Tricia never does this," one of them kept saying, as though she thought I had some say in how hard the doctors worked to revive her.

The others nodded and the one with the penciled-on eyebrows cried and then a phone rang, and it was the pudgy one's husband, telling her they were out of salami and Bud Light and mayonnaise and could she pick some up on the way home.

I took my break around one in the morning, the best time to roam the halls of a hospital. Someone was always exalting their gods or condemning them, crying for their mother or becoming a mother, bargaining, whimpering, making noises I had never heard before and would never hear again. Every floor had its own smell. The NICU was fabric softener, the emergency room rubber and antiseptic. A night nurse told me once that smell could trigger psychosis, which was why the psych ward smelled like nothing. Its essence had been sucked out, leaving an absence that reminded me of how it felt to watch an empty washing machine run.

I sat in a vacant operating room and looked at photos of my hamster. My mother hadn't wanted him, so I'd taken him back to my apartment and named him Paul. Right now, he was probably sleeping or eating a baby carrot or doing that thing where he washed his face with his tiny paws. Just thinking about him, how innocent he was, nearly brought me to tears. I was taken by things that nobody wanted. People, too.

When I got back to my desk, the cousins were gone, having left behind their scent and a pile of picked-over parenting magazines. There were many moments in the hospital like this one. I would spend hours decomposing in the same air as a complete stranger and take the bus home later wondering if they had existed at all. A week earlier, I twisted my ankle trying to chase down a woman who I was sure had shared my waiting room the month before, after her husband had fallen from a balcony stringing Christmas lights. I was drinking with a man who had the most penis-like fingers I had ever seen when I noticed the woman sipping a martini at the bar. What a relief to see her again! It was like finding out, years later, that you had been breastfed. I tripped over an ashtray that someone had accidentally or intentionally left on the ground, and by the time I came to, she was gone.

When my shift at the hospital ended, I took the bus to Salvation and sold some more of my pills. My canister was almost empty, save for a few red ones. I had made enough money to drink through the whole morning, maybe even the afternoon. My ex-husband Ronnie usually came in around five, and I could count on him for at least one drink, possibly a second if his girlfriend had been a bitch to him earlier. But the best part was I had snagged my favorite spot at Salvation: a booth facing the jukebox, where I could watch the faces of my people, my brothers and sisters, change as they selected the song that reminded them how it felt to be loved. I spent all morning doing that.

I left around noon, sober, with all my money in my pocket for what felt like the first time since I was a teenager, waiting at the bar of a seedy

strip club for Debbie to dismount from the pole and take us home. I knew that if I ever saw her again, she'd make sure I didn't see it coming. I'd show up at my therapist's one morning, and Debbie would be the receptionist asking me to please take a seat. I'd follow her out to a van parked behind the building, driven by whoever was fucking her or giving her pills, probably both. Where we ended up after that and with whom was anybody's guess. The last time it happened, we candy-flipped with two men who claimed to be disgraced Albanian princes, though I recognized one of them as a cafeteria man from our high school.

I hoped Debbie never found me. Then I remembered that she might be hog-tied in some ditch, grass overtaking her final resting place. There was some beauty in that, a kind of poetry that made me want to swallow my gun.

I stopped by my neighbor's apartment to give her the rest of my pills. "You can keep the canister," I told her, but I don't think she heard me. She was mumbling something about supplies for the rapture and where will all the animals go. I left the canister in her shaky fist.

When I got back to my apartment, there wasn't any alcohol to throw out. Either I had already drunk all of it, or I had never had any there to begin with. In my bedroom, Paul was nuzzling the toilet paper tube I had left in his cage earlier. I watched him try to fit his entire body through the narrow opening. He got stuck. I watched him wrestle his way out.