

Chicken and Stars

I cross “Nutter Butters” off the list and button my sweater. The grocery store always puts me in a sour mood. It’s freezing. Employees in red smocks stack boxes and my cart is in the way. A girl with blaring headphones stares, probably wondering why I’m here on a Friday night. I want to tell her I got home late from the office and couldn’t stomach another can of chili. My basket is filled with boxes of macaroni and cheese and dry cereal instead. I pull into the pet food aisle. A wheel of my cart rolls over one of my sandals.

“Ouch. Shit,” I say with a tightened jaw.

I hold my foot close, balancing like a wounded flamingo. A woman frowns. She gathers her canned cat food and hurries away. The skin around a toenail is torn. I find a twenty-five pound sack of dog food and hoist it onto the bottom rack of my cart.

The frozen section greets me, laughing through its foggy glass doors at my uncovered toes. There is a certain organization in the frozen section. All squares and rectangles, all identical, predictable. Mashed potatoes and Salisbury steaks and four-cheese lasagnas are concealed with cardboard—mysteries I choose not to question. Taking four of each, I stack them neatly in my cart.

“Charlotte?” a deep voice asks.

I squeeze my eyes shut, thinking like a child that if I can’t see him, he can’t see me. No makeup. Hair piled in a nest atop my head. Workout pants from yesterday. But I want to see his face. A deep breath in and I turn.

He had picked up my books from the floor after I dropped them and received a dirty look from the ancient librarian. I breathed a thank you and he smiled back. His hair was cut

short and his shirt had a pinprick hole in the chest. Gray eyes peered through black-rimmed glasses. As I walked out of school, he held the door and soon he held my phone number, too. The paper flickered in the wind.

I recognize his legs first. Blond leg hair glinting under fluorescent lights. He wears sandals, too. We are two frozen peas in a pod. I snort at my own joke and realize he's probably wondering what is wrong with me. His face is just the same. A little sharper, more real. But he's there. I still haven't said a word. His fingers grip a massive carton of Coca-Cola.

"James?" I say.

"Yeah. Hi."

"Hi." A freezer door slams as a short man deposits rainbow sherbet into his basket. Then we are alone, standing beside stacks of Rocky Road.

"Just pick one. Anything you like," he said.

"Mmm, I can't decide. You choose."

He selected Mint Chocolate Chip. I grinned. We half ran to the checkout. We took turns holding the carton, leaving fingerprints on the icy exterior.

"You know what we forgot?" I asked.

"What?"

"Spoons."

"Be right back." He left me with our melting ice cream. The beeps of the scanning machine filled my ears. I read the cover of a tabloid. A woman scolded her child for riding on

the front of a cart as everyone pretended not to hear. An old man argued about expired toilet paper coupons. For ten minutes, I stood with numb hands and allowed six customers to go ahead of me.

"Got 'em," he said, standing in front of me, soft breath coming in waves.

"What took so long?"

"I got lost." He held up a bag of twenty-five plastic spoons.

"Holy shit. We don't need that many."

"It's okay. Let's just get out of here."

He paid and the cashier winked at me. When we sat in the car, having licked the last bit of green from our spoons, I pressed my cold hands to his chest.

"Thanks for a lovely dinner," I said.

Our lips tasted the same.

I stare at my purse. The pouch is wide open, a black hole of bobby pins and crumpled receipts. Used lip balm tubes and my tattered wallet rest inside.

"How have you been?" I ask.

"Good. Really good, actually."

"That's great. You look good, too."

"Thanks. So do y—"

"Please don't. I'm a mess. I planned on coming home from work and collapsing on the couch, but I had no food, and...I'm sorry. You don't need to know all that."

"Char. You look great."

I can't decide if he's lying, but he used my nickname and I tug at the sleeve of my sweater. He fiddles with the cardboard tab of the box until he eventually rests the whole thing against my basket.

"I want you to know that I'm really okay," he murmurs.

"I believe you." The truth surprises me.

"I'm home visiting my parents. They don't buy coke anymore." He shrugs. "So here I am."

"Tell them I say hello. It's been awhile."

"Yeah."

Eight years.

The party had gotten too big. People spilled into the backyard, and the beer was almost gone. I found him in the corner, tucked away in a leather armchair. Empty cans lined the mantle in the living room. He sat cross-legged next to the window.

"Have you been drinking?" I asked.

"No."

"Do you want to drive me home?"

"Sure." He stood and I reached for his hand. He shoved it in the pocket of his jeans.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I'm just tired, I guess."

I tiptoed down the driveway, dancing around wet half-moons that the sprinklers had made on the concrete. The lawn shimmered like bits of broken glass. He opened my door. I laid my head in the middle seat, and when he slid behind the steering wheel, I rested against his

thigh. He didn't start the car, so we sat listening to the night. The air was still and hot. My legs felt sticky as the seatbelt dug into my hip.

I sat up. "Baby, what's wrong?"

"I really don't know," he answered. His voice wasn't angry. Only scared.

My toes are becoming numb and the injured one has stopped throbbing. He doesn't know I adopted the dog he wanted or that sometimes I wake up with damp eyes or that I saw one of his doctors in a coffee shop just after I almost lost him and nearly asked the man if he remembered James Darby. Instead I had fiddled with the lid of my cup and watched blue scrubs disappear through the door.

"I should probably check out. My parents will wonder what happened," he says.

"Yeah, I should go, too."

And then we are walking together. A container of laundry detergent has spilled in Aisle 8, and fresh cotton scent is everywhere. Halfway to the glowing lights of the Express Lane, he drops the Cokes beside a can of Chicken and Stars in my cart. His fingers move mine from the plastic grooves of the red handle. I step aside as he guides the basket toward the conveyor belt. The cashier frowns at her keypad. James begins unloading.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

He shrugs.

"Seriously, I can get it. You should go home."

"Just let me do this for you."

"Why?"

There is no response. He pays for the groceries.

The tablecloths shone like ghosts in the candlelight. Our waiter recited the specials, and I asked for James's jacket. Draping it around my bare shoulders, I could smell his sweet musk. The woman next to us babbled about choir practice to her husband. The man methodically cut his steak, nodding and chewing.

"We're old now," I said.

James drew lines in the condensation of his glass. Our knees brushed together beneath the table, and we didn't move them. Silence grew between us until the waiter arrived with a slice of chocolate cake topped with a sparkler.

James just barely smiled over the flame. We both blew; smoke billowing aimlessly into the night.

"Congratulations on your anniversary!" the waiter cried. I giggled. We weren't married, but it was nice to celebrate something.

James didn't pick up his spoon. I ate one bite and then another, waiting for his help.

"Here, have some," I said.

"That's okay. You go ahead. I'm full."

Eventually, the entire piece of cake was gone, whipped cream and all. I rested my spoon on the plate.

"Are you sure you didn't want any?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"No. You just have serious willpower."

"Maybe."

The jazz band in the corner packed up their instruments. The last few tables were cleared away.

The lining of his jacket was smooth against my skin. When we parked in front of my house, I didn't take it off. Beneath the lapel, his fingers traced my collarbone where the skin was stretched thin. His lips met mine.

"I love you, Char."

"I love you, too."

He drove away and I watched the taillights disappear.

In the darkness of the parking lot, a light flickers above my car. He nestles the plastic sacks in the trunk and slams it shut. Half of the moon shines tonight. I forget whether it's waxing or waning. The carts slam together in the distance when he leaves ours between the long metal bars. He turns and walks back to me, an image I recognize but not from a memory.

My mother brought me out of a dead sleep and I thought she was lying. She pulled the covers down to my waist. Her eyes were dark when she told me again. The pillowcase against my cheek became stained with tears.

"Mom, I didn't know," I say. "I didn't know." But the guilt was like a stone on my chest, and it rose and fell with every breath.



“Thank you so much for my groceries.”

“You’re welcome.”

He holds his box of soda, and I jingle my keys, yet our feet stick to the yellow paint of the parking space. Apologies come to my tongue, and I swallow them back. He knows them all. I know his, too.

I sat beside his hospital bed. His fingers were cold against mine, and he rolled over and stared at me with gray eyes. I combed his hair, and the nurses injected him with foreign liquids. When he winced, I pressed my mouth to his fists. Eventually the nurses shooed me away because I wasn’t family. I closed the door gently. The beeps of machines echoed in the hallway as I left him.

Cars file out of the parking lot. We press our bodies against my Nissan as a family in the van next to us begins unloading their plastic sacks. The children are arguing while their father buckles them into car seats. James watches them. When they drive away, he clears his throat and turns back to me.

He came home from the hospital one day, and I pretended not to see a small orange bottle on his nightstand that had never been there before. He smiled when he saw me appear in the doorway, and I smiled because he was breathing.

“It’s good to be home,” he said.

I nodded.

“What do you want to do?”

"I want to pretend this never happened."

But since we couldn't do that, we penciled answers to a Crossword instead. He shifted against me on his bed, and I wrote "ELIXIR" on the paper. I didn't stay long enough to know if it was right.

He leans against my car door and I take his left hand, turning the palm toward the sky. My trembling thumb caresses the soft pink lines on the inside of his wrist; where veins gather and spread, blue rivers of blood. His hands are bigger. The scars are faint now, but I feel them still. He doesn't pull away.