

camel blues

Ethan Grant

—Sleep. No. Sleep—no, this was a zoo. Or an aquarium. Walking through, brown light, warm smell of salt and cleaning chemicals. Brown lights, water tanks green. Light rays shimmering on the greenstreaked glass. Manta rays; moray eels, electric eels. Wide eyes: elongated faces—Trip.

His foot kicked, and suddenly he felt the stiffness of the boards beneath him. He gasped harshly, as if he had been holding his breath underwater for too long. Stiff: all around the world felt like solid wood. Pale moths clicked their bodies into a light-bulb by the door, their shadows heavy and sharp, gliding through the dim pool of amber light.

Yes, the porch. And he could smell the ocean, feel the grind of sand beneath the blanket: the beach house, yes.

He sat up and let the sheet slide off. The night was far from cold, and his body felt sticky, choleric. Rachel hadn't moved. She was facing away from him, curled up on their makeshift bed, breathing faintly, her sheet twisted in a nautilus shell around her calves.

Rigidly, he rose up, dull pain throbbing in his lower back, and he walked over to the porch railing over which draped his shorts. Left pocket: no, house keys . . . Right pocket:

smokes, yes. Lighter, too. He plucked from the blue-labeled pack a cigarette. He automatically tilted his head to the side as he lit the end, in learned imitation of his father. Quick snap of his head, sleigh-bell snap of the Zippo, a short burst of white smoke from his nose threading little tendrils in his graying beard. Fishing boats. Fish hooks. Aquarium.

He stood half-clothed and smoking with his elbows casually leaned on the railing. It was a misty night, and looking out into the yard he could see little. An orange utility light made the darkness look glassy, somehow infinite. A few lights ranged down the road, sand and sedge grass in the yard, the fence and mailbox, mostly in shadow. Cicadas and crickets were chirping in the air, in everything—

“Can't sleep?” Rachel muttered, still facing away. A bolt shot down his spine when she spoke: the guilty feeling when one's assumed solitude is shattered. She was awake.

“I think I slept some,” he said, feeling a plume of white smoke billow from his lips. “But then I had one of those tripping dreams.”

She turned over and yawned like a cat, catching a glint of

the utility light in her nose stud. “You were tripping in your dream?” The words were stretched out wide with her yawn.

“I mean, a stumble. My foot caught something and I started to fall.” He turned to her. Tired eyes looking up at him, brown hair hung in curls over her tan shoulders. Skin sunburnt, life-jacket wet and chilly against the peeling skin. Dad picking me up, pulling me away from hooked teeth. “And then I woke up.”

“I couldn’t sleep at all. I didn’t think it got so hot this far north. I can never sleep in heat like this. Even as a kid, I always had to take a cold bath before bed in the summer or I’d lie awake for hours.” Her eyes followed his hand as it brought the half-smoked cigarette to his lips. “Do you think I could have one of those?”

“Since when do you smoke?” he asked, extending the open pack to her.

“I don’t really. They just sound sort of good now and then. And now’s one of those times.” For a moment she appeared cross-eyed as she poked the cigarette tip in the oily Zippo flame at the end of his outstretched arm. No tilt. Once the tip glowed red, she sat back and stoically blew smoke up at the haint-blue beadboard. She smiled in satisfaction. “I promise I don’t usually do this.”

He turned back to the railing. “Neither do I.”

“Are you serious?”

He took a deep drag. “Nope.”

She smiled. “I didn’t think so. You’ve smoked just about every day since I met you.” He shrugged, still looking out at the glass-glazed blackness. After taking another long pull, Rachel closed her eyes. “God, my head’s swimming right now. Everything feels blue . . . do you still get this kind of buzz?”

He ashed over the side of the porch. “Not really, no. Long time ago I did, but those days don’t last long. To be honest, smoking’s not even really that fun anymore. Now it’s sort of routine, just going through the motions.”

He pulled a patio chair to the edge of the outspread blanket and sat down. She sat across from him, on the blanket still, her arms cradling her updrawn knees. Her brow was wrinkled pensively as she stared at a knothole in the floorboards. A few wisps of smoke drifted from her lips.

“It’s like,” he continued, studying her wrist, her hand, the graceless way she gripped the cigarette. “It’s like, instead of smoking for the pleasure of it, you smoke so you can stop thinking about smoking. Just like you eat to stop thinking about hunger.”

She let out a curt chuckle. “You know, you’re really not selling me on this right now. I’m not even sure if I want this anymore.”

He picked up an empty beer can from the base of the porch column and dropped his spent filter inside. He offered the can to her. “Well, I mean, I’m going to finish it first,” she said. “It feels pretty goddamn nice right now.” She took one last drag and tried to suppress a cough, but succeeded only in redirecting it violently through her nose. “Just don’t

let me do this again.” She dropped it in the can. It fizzled metallically within. “I don’t need to make this a habit.”

“Will you return the favor?” he asked. “Keep me from smoking anymore?”

“Really? Are you quitting for good, or is this another joke?”

“No joke. I mean, why not? Tonight’s as good a night as any to quit. I started one August, may as well stop in August.”

“Just like that?” Her voice had an incredulous drop in it.

“Sure, just like that.”

“And you really think you can do it?”

“No, probably not. Sorry to say, but I quit all the time. Doesn’t mean I’ll stick with it. It’s the easiest thing in the world to quit when you’ve just stubbed out a cigarette. Everything’s good and leveled with the universe. Just give it a few hours. Let the nicotine get out of my system and then see what I say.”

“Okay, I’m serious: Don’t let me smoke anymore. I don’t want to get into that.”

“Deal.”

She stood up and stretched her arms above her head, yawning again. “I’m going to get dressed.”

“You leaving?” he asked, standing up in response.

“Thinking about it. I need a shower. And I’ve got air-conditioning at home, thank God. And it’s already . . .” she checked the wristwatch lying out on the railing. “It’s already almost half past four. Jesus, I guess I did sleep a little while.”

“Well, you can leave if you like,” he said. “Or, you can stay and take a walk with me.”

“Right now?”

He shrugged. “Do you actually feel like going back to sleep at this point?”

“I mean, I was completely exhausted earlier. But now I’m wired; it’s strange. Is nicotine a stimulant or something?”

“I have no idea. Stimulant, depressant, nicotine’s a bitch either way.” He reached down for his shirt, crumpled in a mass by the door.

“Why did you start?” she asked, shaking the sand out of her tank top.

“Why did I start what? Smoking?”

“Yeah. You obviously know it’s terrible for you. So why’d you ever let yourself pick it up?”

“Pretty much the same reason you just smoked that cigarette I gave you. People offered them to me, they felt good, I started getting my own, and there you go. Addiction. Cheap comfort I guess.” Carton in Dad’s drawer—he’s out at sea—Mom at work, lazy afternoon, sunlight streaming

through the bedroom window. Dust floating in the air, smell of red cedarwood. Take a few, won't notice a few.

"That simple, huh? I guess it just doesn't seem worth it to me."

He pulled the shirt over his head and ran a hand through his hair: sand there too. "There are worse things for you. My lungs are shit, but at least I'm not a drug addict. Or obese."

"Well, yes, I guess that's one way of looking at it."

"Come on," he said, starting down the steps. "Let's get walking before the sun comes up. There's a place by the water I'd like us to see." Barefoot, they wandered off through the sand and slumped grass and out into the humid night air.

The asphalt road ran toward town, parallel to the sea. It was bordered by a long row of telephone poles, their lamps casting orange spheres of light in the mist, growing smaller and fainter as they stretched off in the distance. The stillness pulsed with cicada songs. He thought of painting, of the palette of a seaside night, as they walked down the road, their forms waxing and waning when passing beneath the streetlight halos. Cadmium orange, Indian yellow. Obsidian black.

Eventually they left the road and started over the smooth sea-rocks, which gave way slowly to sand. He led her in the fog and half-darkness toward the beach. Soon, a shape

materialized out of the mist: A pier, blurred and ill-defined, extending some thirty feet into the shallows before the planks ended, and only a twin row of piling continued on into the darkness. "I've lived here for almost three years now," Rachel remarked, "and I've never seen this before." In the mist, the pier looked ancient, like the sea-weathered skeleton of some great leviathan, long forgotten to time.

"We've been vacationing at this beach all my life," he said, "and I don't remember a time when this pier was still standing. We always thought they would tear it down, but it never happened. Guess they just forgot about it." He placed his palm flat against the post by the stairs. The wood was old, split and warped at many places. Gray day, foggy like this. Water black and harsh, the pilings clumped with algae and barnacles. Seagulls, one landed on this post. First time seeing one. Stared at me with its black-orange eye, like that marble eye, those hooked teeth.

He tried to take her hand and lead her up the shadowed steps, but she started off ahead of him. When he reached her, she was standing at the edge of the pier, looking into the water, her left hand clutching the tethered post, her right brushing hair out of her face. She turned to look at him. "All the fog's over the water. You can't see a thing."

As she leaned over the edge, one of the planks shifted, and she flinched away from it. He grabbed her hand. There, he thought. There. Her sunburned hand in his, so small and warm.

"Are these boards sturdy?" she asked, bobbing up and down cautiously.

“Sturdy enough. It’s always held me, my dad, and my uncles when we’d fish. And that’s a lot of weight.” He squeezed her hand, and they sat down with their calves hanging over the black fog, above invisible old boards buried in silt on the floor of the sea. He thought of people drowning in water like that, black water: He thought of Charybdis sucking whirlpools down into its cavernous belly. Then, her warm hand in his.

“So does your family own a boat out here?” She was peering off to the left, north along the shoreline. Even through the fog and mist, the lights of the fishing boats at the wharves were clearly visible. He could almost see the masts rocking, almost feel the lurching decks and hear the halyards and rigging clinking in the wet emptiness.

“Yeah, we used to have one. When I was younger.” White boat, blue sky, clouds like cream, sunlight white and yellow and flashing on the waves, my towel with the sea-stars, Dad and Uncle

Jake angling that blue shark, so excited, and the time that fishhook went through my finger, didn’t bleed at first, didn’t cry at first. “But we sold it a few years ago. Upkeep just got too expensive. I told you what my dad does for a living, right?”

She stared off for a while at the boats before answering. “He fishes, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah. He’s a lobster man up north. Commercial fisherman. Used to be he’d only have to work about half the year and have the summer off, and we’d all come out here and fish on our own. Take the boat out, spend all day on the water when the weather was nice. We actually caught a blue shark

one time. A big one, almost nine feet long, three hundred pounds. We made the news. Such exciting times. Fishing still had meaning to it, beauty. Those were the good days.”

“Why did those days end?”

“A lot of reasons, I guess. And lobster-fishing’s not all that lucrative anymore. It’s come to the point where they’re fishing year-round just to keep getting the hauls they used to get fishing only half that time.” He looked down at his sandy feet kicking in the moist air, and her feet next to his, threaded bracelets on each ankle. Warm. “It’s not a big deal, but I would’ve liked for us to come out once more before school starts up. Maybe go fishing one last time before it’s too late. I feel like I’m getting old so fast.”

She smiled. He couldn’t see her face, but he could hear that she was smiling as she spoke. “So now you’re just out here by yourself, doing your own thing, painting all summer?”

“More or less. I just didn’t want to be at home—it’s tense these days. So I came out here to the beach house, good quiet place for painting. And we’ve got some family not too far off.” He laughed anxiously. “I don’t know . . . sometimes I feel like a deadbeat.”

His hand reached for the familiar rectangular shape in his left pocket. “So,” he proceeded, changing the subject. “What would you say if I were to smoke again? Given what I said earlier?”

“I’d say, do what you have to do. It’s your life. But I still don’t want one.”

“I’ve only got four left. I figure I might as well.” A sleigh-bell clink, and he could see her face briefly in the spectral glow of his lighter. His head tilted, and things were quiet as he blew the first satisfying lungful of smoke into the mist. They could hear the waves splashing at the pilings, and the rumble of thunder caroming in off the sea.

“So,” she said. “You really just smoke because you feel like you have to? Is it really that hard to just say ‘fuck feeling good right now,’ and forcing yourself to stop?”

He stared into the dark water. He could see little beyond the red speck smoking at the end of his fingertips, but the darkness seemed paler now. He wondered what time it was, if dawn had begun to wheel in over the horizon. “I’ve actually been thinking about that since we left the house. I think I know why I smoke.” He paused for a moment, continuing when she stayed silent. “It sounds strange, but I think I smoke for art.”

“Art.” She thought for a second. “Okay, I don’t follow. What do you mean by ‘art’?”

“I mean, when I try to quit, yeah, it’s rough, but I could power through it if I only had to deal with the cravings, you know? Just the habit of it. But there’s something more to it. I feel . . . well, I guess I feel like I’m a part of some larger tradition when I smoke, something I would neglect by not smoking. It’s something generational maybe.” Dad tilting his head, smoke tendrils. “Something part of our generation.”

She shook her head. “How is smoking part of our generation? We were raised being told how awful it is. All

those anti-smoking commercials. We were kids when they killed off Joe Camel.”

“It’s not so much us individually.” He struggled to formulate his words. Below them, the fog was breaking. The humidity had died down. “It’s more this collective idea of art. Impressions of art: Van Gogh and a green bottle of absinthe, those crooked cobblestone streets in Paris, hidden shops, back alleys, and those sidewalk cafes with the greenish iron tables, and gas lamps, and wine bottles and cappuccinos . . . and smoking. There’s always this idea of smoking. Those old black and white photos of writers at their desks, a typewriter and a lamp and an ashtray full of smashed cigarette butts. There’s something artistic in smoking. And I’m a painter, and you’re a poet—we’re artists.”

“You know, I’ve seen a lot of my friends’ poetry,” she said. “So many of them try to play into that idea of ‘art’: ‘The smoke of my cigarette curls up into starlight,’ and shit like that. Like they think inserting cigarettes into poetry makes them more credible as artists.”

“That’s the hell of it though: It makes you feel like an artist. And feeling like an artist is halfway to being an artist.”

“Or at least halfway to playing the role of an artist, yes. It’s all so fake these days. All these excuses for destructive behavior and complacency.”

Thunder again rolled in off the ocean, foreboding, the black summer god, dread scatterer of antelope. “My parents,” he said slowly, “were not at all happy about me coming out here. They wanted me home. Dad wanted me

there, working. But I left anyway. I couldn't deal with it, another idle, useless summer. I needed to create, just to do something creative." He flicked his cigarette-end off into the sea, watching as the somersaulting spark sailed through the darkness. "My dad said something when I was leaving for the summer. I—I don't want to repeat it right now. I don't feel comfortable doing that. . . . But he was disappointed in me. Very disappointed. Like I failed him, his only offspring. Like I was a deadbeat, a drain on society, a waste of life or something." Driving away down St. John Street, afternoon sunlight green and golden on the May leaves, my eyesight fractured with tears, smell of a barbecue, children in a yard playing baseball with a plastic yellow bat, looking at me, crying, me, And I thought I raised up a son.

"Should you have come out here?" she asked, after some time. "Was this all worth it to you?"

"I mean . . . maybe it was. I painted a lot, I certainly managed to create, so yes. But still, what does that really mean? All these artistic struggles and birth-pangs—who honestly gives a shit? It's all personal. It means nothing to anyone else. Sometimes I just want to leave it all, you know? Art, academics, privileged living—leave it and go work on an orchard somewhere. Just grow apples and pears and peaches, and tend to them all day in the sunlight. Simple living. Living life as it should be lived."

"I'm going to be honest," she broke in. "I really hate that sentiment, 'live life as it should be lived.' I was almost with you until you said that. So many people our age try to play that card. They think we're the enlightened generation, that we see something our parents didn't. But the truth is that our parents all grew up not that long ago. Sixties or

seventies. They were just like us, full of progressive, artistic ideas. Honestly, every generation's essentially the same. Just different clothing and hair-styles. Even your Dad. He was young once, and he probably said the same thing about his generation, about his father. We're barely in our twenties. We don't know life."

"My dad wanted to be an architect when he was younger." Younger, he thought, he wanted to be an architect: an architect building, making changes, making art. He had the tools once, an easel, drafting board, paints, pencils, inks, crayons, straightedge—sold them all. What did he learn in growing up? That life has no room for art? No: that he has to get up early in the darkness to sail out before the sun to trawl lobsters to support his family, his waste of life son doing meaningless nothings on his dollar—is that life, then? My turn coming up, growing up, I feel the turning. "He wanted to create. Now he's out somewhere up north along the Atlantic, catching lobsters, doing work with no beauty in it, no meaning."

"You know what your problem is?" she asked. "You over-analyze everything way too much. Just stop it. Stop trying to figure things about your generation or about life. We're one of a million generations. And each before us managed to get along and keep the species going. Things will be just fine. Life will play out as it needs to play out." Black thunder gods riding in, closer now, sharper: a few chilled drops of rain.

"I just want to make an impact on something or someone. I don't want to be this disappointing waste of life. And more than anything, I want . . ." Say it, he thought, say the words, I want to be a worthy son, say it. Tears were starting to rise

in the channels of his cheeks. He tried to hide them. He couldn't say the words to her. "I guess more than anything, I want Dad to—"

"If you don't mind my asking," she ventured, "does your dad smoke?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it, and looked out toward the lights at the wharves, the fishing boats. He thought of his father tilting his head, lighting up, his Carhardt hood over his head, his beard, the cigarette sticking out, sending smoke foolishly up in the watery snowfall. My own. My own deepdown hunger for it, the screaming of my brain, my hands shaking, craving in the ceiling of my skull, in the ends of each nerve for a pull, the tilt of the head.

"Hey," she said softly, turning his face toward her with her hand. "Stop worrying. You don't need to atone for anything. Your dad understands more than you think. Now, I've only known you for a month, but I can see what a good man you are. You do make an impact on others, you change things. Tonight, for instance—sleeping on the porch, taking this walk—you took that initiative and it's made an impact on me. I'll never forget this night. There's a genuine goodness to you if you'd just stop trying to conform to your generation or to art or your dad. He understands. Everything will work out with time. Just relax. Live your life."

A peal of thunder shook the air, and a downpour swept in off the Atlantic. In that instant the world was alive with noises, the waves washing in, sloshing, the percussion of raindrops on wood. Water streamed off the railings and over the edge of the boards, catching glints of light from the streetlamps, from the fishing boats anchored at the

distant wharves. The sky was turning steel-blue with early morning light. Dense clouds drifted languidly in the lower atmosphere.

They sat for a moment without speaking. He stared up at the sky, as if he hadn't noticed the rain and was now puzzled by the sudden wetness. Then she turned to him, her curled brown hair plastered straight and black on her forehead. "What should we do now?"

A hot blue wire of light sprang through the sky overhead, scorching the air with the phosphorescent glow of spoiled mackerel. Then came a crack, thick and black in the rafters of dawn. Like a movie, he thought. Like the climatic ecstasy of cinema, the thunder the fanfare the tempo—Art imitating life and life conforming to art.

Once more he took her hand and led her back along the slick boards and down the steps to the beach. They stood looking eastward, and he could imagine seeing them both, as if in a film, black and white, two tiny black figures standing on the black-gray shoreline, wet sand reflecting an immense gray sky and the sea black, breaking with white foam and the clouds breaking in places, pouring down weak light, and fishing boats in the sea-sharpened wind clacking and ringing in the harbor, in the hollowness of space—Too much. Art. All too much.

They were both soaked. His shirt stuck to his chest with a heavy cold suction, and her hair glistened like porcelain, and suddenly he ran over to where the waves smoothed the shore, and he called back, "Rachel!" but another clap of thunder drowned his call. He dashed out and threw his feet before him, sliding into the mealy sand like a baseball

player taking home, and he dug his feet into the sand and leaned back in the water, letting the ocean surge against him and the surf-froth pool at his thighs. “Rachel,” he said again, and this time she came to him. She came and sat down with him in the sea, among endless waves and the grinding water, warm with all the hours of summer behind them.

He had no words, and she had no words: seawater and rainwater and windwater engulfed all sound. He pulled from his pocket a sodden mass of blue and white cardboard. Ruined. He squeezed it once and heaved it out into the dark churning brine, watching it cut through a cresting wave: bobbing there, floating slowly back to shore.

So when the storm subsided and just a light drizzle remained, they walked back, their feet slapping on the wet pavement. Exhaustion clawed at the backs of their eyeballs, stinging them with sleep. The few laconic words they exchanged were on the topic of the seasons. He held that the particular time of year—the middle of August—always felt the saddest. Though the weather was still hot and full, summer was past its prime. “In August, summer learns that even he’s mortal” was the phrase he most proudly extemporized. She disagreed: she said that people ascribe too much value to the summer and long hours of daylight and heat. Each day is divided equally, she argued. The only change is in the sun, whether it spends more time risen or set: “I always enjoy life the same,” she said, “long days or short.” Here, their dialogue died.

The yard seemed different in the growing light. Objects looked closer together, more real and confined, so unlike the infinite potential of darkness. He considered saying something to this effect, but he had waited too long before deciding it wasn’t worth it. Back on the porch, they screwed wordlessly, their skin electrified, scented with sea-salt and rain.

As they lay together to sleep on the rain-dampened blanket, he could see the ocean through the porch railings, gray and purple, mystical in the early morning. A heavy red sun oozed between the clouds on the horizon. Rain had cooled the world. He thought of how late an hour they were choosing for bed, as he stared up at the haint-blue beadboard, trying to count the grooved panels.

But it’s not late, he realized. Not anymore. It’s early now. So when did night become morning? Midnight? No, anyone would agree that one, two, three in morning is still nighttime. So when is the deepest, latest point of night? A truly late night would simply have to go on and on forever and ever from sundown on, never to be usurped by the rising sun.

“Rachel,” he whispered. Warm under his arm, she stirred slightly. Then nothing. “Are you awake?”

Her head tilted toward him, eyes still shut: “mmm . . . yes.”

“Did you ever notice that there’s no such thing as a truly late night? Night turns to dawn at its latest point, and . . .” He trailed off. Her breathing. Is it? Yes. Yes, she’s asleep. Let her sleep.

Sleep, he thought. Sleep well. So warm. Sun coming up on the sea, scattered on the waves, rays flashing. Like a painting. With the grass like that and the fence posts, and the driftwood bowed in the sand. Need to paint at dawn sometime. Before summer ends. Day usurped by night. Night like this, wonderful. Wonder what will happen when she leaves. Don't think about it now. Two weeks. Sleep. Two weeks. The boats last night, this morning. Boats in the dark fog like that. Like dry ice, like smoke. No. Don't need to smoke, no. Tobacco smell still on fingertips. Mouth ashy. Fishing boats. Write a poem. Paint. Way they rocked, so peaceful. Dad's out there now. Out in that storm. Cold and wet. Battered and sleepy. Sleep. Watched the sunrise, maybe. Maybe he's happy. Out there with lobsters and buoys and trawls and overalls and gloves and salt spray and hooks and . . . And maybe he is happy. Maybe. Purpose to life. With friends. Friends. This warmth under my arm. Letting me love her like that. So warm. Warmth. And the sun that day. White and gold, and the blues. Sky and sea. Blue shark thrashing on the deck. Slippery, eyes like black marble. Did it see me. Should have gotten closer. Don't touch it, keep him back now, keep him back. Long face, corpse-white gills, teeth hooked like that. Dad yelling, Keep him back, keep him back. And grabbing me with his tanned wet arm so strong, and feeling his beard and I was safe, and he smelled like the ocean and blood and the water so blue that day like cobalt or midnight hued with a touch of titanium white and the wind so warm and yet cool and he picked me up and even if I cried that day when my finger was hooked through I knew he was there so I knew I was safe.

