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*The Criterion*



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## This Did Not Happen

Christine Ottoni

We were on our parents back deck. Hot summer night pressed heavy against our skin, a warm breeze rubbed sweat up our backs and over our brows. We'd left the back doors open in a rush as Jake barreled through the house into backyard. Light from the kitchen flooded the deck. He was slumped in a chair at the outdoor table, the umbrella extended above him. His clothes were crumpled, long shadows rested in the creases around his elbows, shoulders and knees. My hand was on the back of the chair across from him, ready to pull it out and join him, but I stopped. I watched him breathe, his chest shaky, pinched with panic as he ran his hands back and forth along his thighs. I could see fear beginning to creep its way through, drawing tense lines on his forehead. He was sobering up.

Oh fuck, he said. Fuck, fuck.

He must have gone out straight from the office to the patio. Must have been doubles and beers. He stank of Jack and ginger.

I didn't sit. Instead I went back into the house to the dining room buffet. I pulled out a bottle of whiskey. It was my dad's stuff, barely touched. I got a tumbler from the kitchen and went back outside. I set the glass on the table in front of Jake, smoking now and ashing on the deck between his feet. I splashed some whiskey into the glass, making a healthy dent in the bottle.

I was house sitting for my parents while they were in Arizona. It was one of the first of their early retirement trips. They had always been eager parents, overbearing even, well into our twenties. When you had a kid like Jake, oversight was necessary. But that night, standing across from my brother in the house where we grew up, I could feel their absence, the great emptiness they had left. I felt, for the first time in our lives, we were on our own.

Jake had driven out from the downtown. He worked for an IT company then, developing financial programs for banks. His car was parked crookedly in the front driveway. The headlights woke me up as they turned over the front of the house, coming in through the window. I was always a light sleeper. I hit my phone, plugged in and charging on the pink nightstand of my childhood. The screen lit up in response: 2:43 a.m. He started to bang on the front door. I sat up on the twin bed and kicked off the floral quilt.

He was in such a state. My little brother rattled the doorknob, scraped his spare key helplessly against the lock.

Cass! He thumped his fist against the door.

I sat down at the top of the stairs, leaning my head against the banister. It was so late. My alarm was set for work, it would go off in just a few hours. I'd ironed my suit for the next day. It was hanging in the child size wardrobe. When I was seven, I spent an hour meticulously spotting the doors with Looney Tunes stickers.

I could have left the light off, left him on the porch to handle it.

Please, he said. A pitiful whine. I got up and opened the door. He stepped in, relieved and reached out, swaying, fingers tight to my arm for support. I held him up while he kicked off his shoes. His face was red, a sheen of sweat damp on his neck and cheeks. His socks were purple. There was a hole in one, the big toe peeping through.

He stumbled through the house, muttering confusedly, and went to the backyard. I followed behind him into the night, heavy with heat. He fumbled with his cigarettes and a lighter before he dropped them on the table and folded himself into a chair. He was shaking.

Oh fuck, I did it, oh fuck. I hit him.

Why did you drive? I couldn't believe Mara let him at the car. They bought the beat up '92 Civic on a whim. I thought it was ridiculous, a car in the downtown. Him driving. She should have known better.

He looked up at me and tipped his chin back so that his mouth fell open, soft and vulnerable. His eyes were glassy in the light coming from the kitchen, wide with earnestness, pleading to be understood.

I'd seen that look on others before and I never tolerated it. I'd known too many boys stripped off pretense by just one more pint, one more shot. And then all that was left was the pathetic backtracking after a broken bottle, another girl, a hand on my ass. The falsetto of drunken remorse crying please, please, I didn't mean it. I shrugged them all away.

But on Jake, this was new. Completely helpless obliteration. He had always been so comfortable with fucking up. He welcomed it. When he dropped out of his last semester at McGill I called him. It's not the direction I'm going in, he said, his voice distant, strained over the line as he pulled on a joint. I could see him at his bedroom window, fingers flaking ash onto the street below. A long sigh. Maybe I'll travel, I dunno. My hand-wringing parents and I agreed that I would go to Montreal and bring him home.

I left on a Friday, straight from the office to Union. I was doing admin work then, boring stuff. We are the front face here, the head executive assistant told me on my first day. I remember rushing down to Bay in a blouse and skirt, weaving through the commuter crowd, sweating in cheap polyester, my legs trapped in fabric tight down to my knees. I cursed myself for not bringing a change of clothes.

Jake lived in Montreal's student ghetto with three other guys. When I got there, his roommates were hunched over a small TV in the living room, yelling at each other and jamming buttons on controllers. They didn't look up at me. The place was covered in Big Gulp cups and empty beer bottles. It was damp, the old wooden walls rotting from the inside out. I felt the prickle of fur against my leg. A cat slipped by me, out the open door.

I found Jake upstairs lying on his bed in a pair of ratty boxers. His arms were folded up under his head, legs dangled over the side. I watched him from the door. He was calm, basking in the disorder. He was so pale, the veins in his arms stretching tight through his skin. I wanted to wrap him up in a thick coat, a woolen sweater.

Downstairs, the boys screamed, a rumble that threatened to shake the house to the ground. He was the contented epicenter of all that chaos. Floating high above it. And I, the intruder, was stunned at his nonchalance.

Jake, I said, it's time to come home.

He rolled over at the sound. Hey, he said with a grin. *Found me.*

He was the bringer of shit, my brother, but he always carried it with ease. A happy shrug the morning after, another can popped, another girl sent on her way. A pat on the bum, see ya later chicka. And he would stroll, head up, into another hot, empty night.

But when he looked at me in the backyard I knew he was afraid. He sent my chest on edge, my hands towards him. Wanting to unburden him.

Cass, he said, pleading with me. Cassie I fucked up. I really fucked up.

His eyes slipped in and out of focus as he struggled to stay present. I was looking at him through water.

Go slow and tell me, I said. I pulled out the chair and sat down facing him.

I drove into the alley, too fast, I was picking up from Mark's guy.

Just weed? It was best to get the list out of the way early.

Yes, Scotia chose up our program, so Mark wanted to get dead. I left them to go grab.

He grinned and looked past me. His mouth twisted awfully and he tucked his chin down into his chest. The earnest boy was gone, replaced with something different. I looked away and my eyes on the table. He was rubbing the lip of the tumbler; his thumb traced the glass edge over and over.

And I drove into this alley, he said quietly. I pulled in too quick, it was off King somewhere, and I hit him. A bum. I killed it, probably.

You don't know if anything happened, I said, still watching his thumb.

I felt it.

Did you see it?

I left, his voice cracked. I came here, oh fuck. He emptied his glass.

I didn't say anything. I had no way of knowing if it was real. I sat back. My mind clicked away, fully awake now, weighing our options. We could report it. Then, another DUI on his record, another night in the drunk tank. Court ordered rehab, maybe.

And then my gut hardened, the sinister *what if* forming in my ear.

*What if he did it.*

Cass, he said, it's out of control. I need -

No, I said.

*He came to me.* I could see the circumstance reaching for him, threatening to pull him under. He was swimming, deep. A drip of sweat rolled down his brow.

So I dealt with him the only way I knew how.

This did not happen, I said. The words were soft at first. I didn't believe them myself. But the longer they hung between us, the more I felt them grow, buoyant with life.

This did not happen, I said again, louder He lifted his chin.

I believed he was unburdened. The event, trying to suck him under and away, was gone.

I picked his empty glass up and poured more whiskey into the bottom. I lifted it to my lips and drank. It burned hot, the fire coiling down my throat into my belly, loosing the rock deep below. I felt light. I was never much of a drinker. I extended the rest of the glass, an offering of solidarity, towards my brother. He watched me and took the glass, his face open with all the patience of a child watching some ritual for the first time. The ceremonial snip, altering his life, stitching the night up. It did not happen. He drank.

Jake was gone when I woke up in the morning. The bottle and the cups had been cleared from the table, his car was gone from the driveway. I drove to the train station and caught the 7:35 a.m. downtown to work.