

FICTION

Her Only Monster

John Mauk

Laurel's cheeks shudder while the planet sucks him back to its core. He waits another few seconds to feel the pressure in his limbs, his own body resisting its return. He pulls the chute. The canopy spreads, his torso gets yanked upright, and the sky stops screaming. He loops clockwise—north, east, south, and west. A freakish high-pressure system has made the view so crisp, roads and borders like someone drew them with a quill pen. Lake Erie is a huge blue jewel, a gleaming expanse of aquamarine veins, and Davis Bessie down there like a small white tooth, a fang that will hold its shape for ten thousand years, fifty thousand, long after the city gets flattened and silted over, after apes, roaches, or some new dinosaur takes over. Straight below, the Maumee winds like a strand of brown sugar, all the sediment of Fulton and Williams Counties, Indiana beyond them. And now comes west Toledo, its rigid swaths of cropland, the kidney-shaped subs sprinkling onto the checkerboard of corn. His blue Chevy shows up like a beetle in the weeds. He comes gliding in, takes four long moon hops, slips his goggles down, and wipes his eyes before the others come.

~

At home, Colette's in the kitchen with lights off. Her head aimed down, she asks about his day.

“Good,” he says. “Good.”

They've agreed not to fight. After Paul disintegrated against the ground, she insisted Laurel quit jumping. She couldn't wait around to identify parts of her husband. He understood. Losing Paul was tough, and he tried his best, but after three months on the ground, he started guzzling beers and driving like a werewolf. He couldn't sleep through the night. When he started sleepwalking again, Colette conceded. He could jump but she'd have to cut some emotional cords. You can't hook your heart to someone dancing with suicide every week. It's not suicide, he said.

“Shauna home yet?”

“Band practice.”

She's cutting carrots but he's the cook.

"Come on," he says. "I can do it." He reaches for the paring knife. She hands it over without looking. Jump days are like this, Tuesdays better, Wednesdays better yet.

When Shauna comes in, the front door bangs like a grenade. Laurel likes it. He wants her to be like thunder, like an earthquake.

"Land in one piece?" she says.

"I think so. You get through band in one piece?"

"I think so."

They eat in the living room, the television murmuring beneath questions and answers about school. Any news on the big history test? None yet. When's the *Lord of the Flies* paper due? Next week. Does the cafeteria still stink like cat poop? Definitely. In a lull, Laurel starts to say they should consider a weekend trip, the three of them on the open road. "I was thinking," he says then stops. Colette turns, her mouth mostly full. She wrinkles her forehead. He swallows, acts like something went down the wrong pipe, and gives her the never mind wave.

Shauna's watching an ET segment on some new singer.

"Who's this?" he says. "The new heartthrob?"

"Justin Timberlake," Shauna says.

"Timberland? Like the shoes?"

"Lake, Dad. Like a pond but bigger."

"And what's his problem?"

"His problem," Shauna says, "is he's selling a zillion records all over the world."

"Man, that is a problem."

"Wasn't he in Backstreet Boys?" Colette says.

"You guys are killing me."

“That wasn’t his band?”

“NSYNC, Mom. I mean, that’s like the difference between Thomas Jefferson and George Bush.” Good one. Shauna gets things. She’s tuned in, probably too much.

Laurel’s motor doesn’t slow down until 1:00. He reads downstairs. For years, he read in bed while Colette drifted away. That changed. He became an irritant. She needed to stay sharp, especially in the morning when everyone on her network was checking in, giving locations, calling for info. Their schedules were pulling them apart. That’s what he said a month ago. She didn’t deny it.

~

In the back office, Ricky is presenting a muddled cucumber margarita because, hey, it’s almost summer. The usuals gather at the counter: Fiona, mopey-faced Lev, and Victoria Herself. They all lift their jiggers. There’s the polite moment of contemplation, everyone gazing at the office rafters. Then Lev says it’s quite good. Fiona nods with her whole neck. Victoria gives her stately smile, inhales with her eyes fluttering, and calls it perfectly refreshing. Laurel expects to say nothing, but the mashed-up cucumber makes him gag. The snottiness of it hits the back of his palate and makes him cough. He brings the jigger back to his mouth and dribbles into it. The rest he swallows, which prompts an involuntary groan.

“Not a fan?” Fiona says, a smirk coming on.

“It’s fine,” he says, clearing his throat. “It’s fine,” which probably comes off as theatrical. Fiona nods a little.

And then Lev makes a decree. “Well, it’s on the menu starting now, so make sure you pay attention when Ricky shows you the ropes.” It’s a public smackdown, an open embrace of the new guy.

Out front, he stands a few feet off while Ricky performs the art of muddling. “It’s not just mashing,” he says.

“Really?” Laurel says and no longer wonders if Ricky gets anything not written in colorful chalk. He’s all sculpted muscle and nitwit energy, a painting with no shadow. Maybe Victoria has herself a pet, a blond lapdog who licks her face at night.

Happy hour gets rolling. There's a crowd by the front window, people waiting for a first or second drink. The Beyers are here, one row back. He winks while pouring two cabernets. He'll get to them in less than three minutes. That's the goal. Nights like tonight, he's got two orders going, two in his head. He gets three shorties lined up—Maker's Mark, Goose, and Tanqueray—while starting a pale ale tap and two chardonnays. He pulls up vermouth, stops the tap, and levels out the ale mug. He adds a cherry, guns in tonic, drops a lime and another lime. Cocktails done. He fills the chardonnays, notices the couple watching, catches the woman's eye, winks, and pours a little more—the bartender's salute. She smiles and elbows her man. Customer service. A trio in front of the Beyers wants a Woodford, neat, and two dirty martinis. He's gets those rolling and sees Glenn and Sheila Jones coming through the door. They'll start with vodka gimlets and then roll into cabs for dinner. He shakes the martinis, one in each hand, and pours. A woman with straight bangs and purple glossed lips leans way in.

“What can I get you?” he says.

“I'd like to try that margarita special,” she says pointing at the board. He considers dissuading her, saying it tastes like mucous, that you deserve something more refined or elemental, young lady. “Sure,” he says, “I'll get that going.”

Down in the fridge, there's a globule of cucumber. He considers alternatives, maybe melon vodka. Ricky looks his way, and Laurel almost tells him to make one of your fancy-pants salad drinks for the pretty girl with bangs, but that'd be a white flag. He stands, inhales at himself in the big mirror, then slithers past Ricky and Lev both. He swoops under the gate and shoots for the kitchen.

“Guys, I need a cucumber.”

“Got a date?” Charley says.

“Muddling.”

Charley shakes his head, gives the hee, hee of a Western villain.

“Don't rub it in.”

“Here, take these,” Charley says, handing him a bowl of slices. “Have at it.” That's Charley. A walking-talking side of bacon, but a good guy.

Up front, people are crowding. It's Victoria's at full steam—post-work frenzy meets dinner hour. He doesn't want to ask for Ricky's muddling tool, that archaic bowl and mallet. A blender or trash can would work better. He gets a spoon, nestles up to the taps, and starts mashing. The cucumber meat slips and catapults away. A whole slice shoots toward a woman's twinkly dress and stops shy on the bar. He cups the slices with his right hand and rolls the spoon hard. He makes sure to lean over the operation—like lighting a campfire in the wind. All this work, all these silly theatrics. He scans the immediate space. The Beyers are now eight minutes without a drink, and the Joneses have migrated to Ricky's side of the bar.

He's managed a couple tablespoons, so he gets to work on other parts—tequila, lime juice, and syrup. He'd have to abandon his corner to get the new organic sour mix down by Lev—a white and purple jug that looks, with its spindly swan neck, like it's got better things to do. He opts for the usual mix down by his knees and adds a splash. Then he scrapes in the mucous, shakes the hell out of it, and serves. The girl smiles big.

He finally gets to the Beyers and apologizes. They're nothing but nice, glad to see the place getting all this business. He gives them the standard lines about summer, how Victoria's magically packs people in while other places are thinning out. It's the atmosphere. The air conditioning, she says, pulling her blouse out a little. He pours blancs, slides them forward, and comes back to center, back to the bin and sink where he takes stock, counts, and charts next moves. And here's the margarita girl with bangs. She's leaning in again and holding out the glass. She's clenching a little, showing her teeth. "Can I just get a gin and tonic?"

"Of course," he says. "Very sorry about that." And he wants to ask if she'll testify—hand on a Bible—if she'll stand as the representative twenty-something who has no yearning for mutilated vegetables in a glass, but it's too busy and she's icked out.

"Gin preference?" he says.

"Anything really."

~

The crowd is gone. Laurel wipes the taps and looks forward to getting home. Servers are flipping chairs. Lev lumbers his way. "You move any of the features?"

"You mean the cucumber thing?"

“Yeah. How many?”

“None really.”

Lev nods, folds his arms up, and leans on the counter, his pressed plaid shirt doubled in the big mirror. “You don’t like that kind of drink?”

“It doesn’t matter what I like. I’m a bartender.”

“No, I mean, you don’t think we should serve it.”

“Because I coughed?”

“Not just that.”

“Hey, I’ll make whatever you and Victoria deem good.”

“I know. I know.” Lev’s tone is doused. He’s tired. Maybe this is some type of apology.

Laurel pulls out the garbage bag, twists it fast, and knots it up.

“We’re just trying to keep things fresh,” Lev says.

“I understand,” Laurel says. “I’m not against experimenting.”

“I’m open to ideas,” Lev says.

“Even from me?”

“You haven’t offered.”

“It hasn’t been conducive lately if you want to know the truth.” It’s out now, and along comes an argument on the current that runs from gut to throat and through the teeth. It makes Laurel admit how he got one order, how he ran to the kitchen, how he got further behind than he’s been in years, how he made regulars wait, and how the cute twenty-something—the type everyone might imagine as fresh—handed the shitty thing back over the bar in exchange for a conventional gin and tonic.

Lev stands stiff, his breast pumped outward. “Maybe you didn’t make it right.”

“Of course, I didn’t. No one can.”

“I tasted it. Victoria tasted it.”

“Well, everyone has tastes.”

“You think we don’t know what’s good?” Lev says, arms now hanging down.

“Maybe you’re confusing taste with fashion. That happens, even to the best of us.”

“I’m not confusing anything,” Lev says.

“Well, like I say, it can happen to the best of us.”

Lev looks down. He’s trying not to get stoked. That’s obvious. But he’s blotchy. And Laurel’s legs are a noodled because he’s been running hard for eight hours.

“So,” Lev says, “you’re right? Victoria, me, Ricky, everyone else is wrong?”

“No,” he says, “Ricky’s wrong. You’re maybe caught up in it.”

“And you’re caught up in nothing? You’re above it all?”

Servers are standing still among the front tables, silhouetted by indirect kitchen light, a gaggle of onlookers drawn to the sounds of friction.

“Okay. Okay,” Laurel says. “This is getting silly. Let’s just call it for now.”

“You’re telling me? I’ll tell you when we’re calling it.”

“I’m going home. You gonna get out of my way?”

Lev re-folds his arms. There’s nothing to do but wait. Laurel doesn’t think he’ll get slugged. If it comes to that, he’ll slug back. Lev’s has thirty or forty pounds on him, but Laurel’s cocked and loaded. At some point, he doesn’t know when, he put the trash bag down on his right shoe. He’s got a few feet in front of him to lean into it. Lev’s head would go back into the liquor, maybe the mirror. It could get bloody. Someone in the shadows drops silverware, the clanging loud as fireworks. Lev pivots like a stone gate and says to take a week off. Laurel pulls his foot free, leaves the bag where it sits, slips past, brushes an arm, walks around the back of the room—far away from everyone like a lone satellite, like the first satellite in history circling up there beyond the sky.

~

It didn't make sense to leave a note. He hoped to wake before Colette left and say something quick, but it didn't happen. He pulls in from a grocery run. The house is quiet, a little music murmuring from Shauna's room. He wonders if that's how evenings go: mother and daughter on separate orbits. From the hall, he sees Colette in the bedroom mirror, folding and flattening. She turns and her mouth drops. "What's going on?" He winds up for the pitch, considers all the angles, would rather it'd all leak from his head, a harmless puddle of information for everyone to consider.

"Is that Dad?"

"Hey, Daughter."

They're all here, convened in the hall. Colette asks again. She's got a reflex for routine. He's seen her at work—in the thick of it, with that headset on, taking calls from truckers, clients, warehouses all over the country. She can manage a million things as long as the chaos remains distant, some port or highway in another state. He speaks more to Shauna than Colette. "Dad got a week off because he doesn't care for cucumbers."

"Cucumbers?" Shauna says through a grin.

Colette says nothing, a folded towel in her hand.

"Did you punch Rrrricky?" That's been Shauna's move.

"No, Daughter. No punches were not thrown."

Colette's waiting for more, but the hallway feels rotten. He asks if they've eaten. It's a no. "I'll get it going," he says. He heads downstairs and gets a skillet. He whisks flour, butter, and broth, gets it all squirming in the heat. He starts spooning in leftover stew, mixing, churning it together. Shauna comes in and watches the final sprinkles. He wants to give a sermon on work life: she'd better get a degree, not an Associates like her parents but a full-scale BA or MA. Or maybe buy your own place and rule with an iron fist. Call it Shauna's Eats and Drinks or Shauna's Pub and Grub, a serious old-time eatery that'll obliterate the trendy hotspots. Live like an unopposed dictator. Take prisoners. Make them love you.

Colette shows up with dishtowels. He pours a bourbon on rocks, a pinot, and slides the glass toward her hand. She says thanks, is probably doing the budget in her head. They carry bowls

and glasses to the living room. He clicks the remote, glad for some noise, and turns the volume down. He takes a long cool sip. The bourbon blooms through his sinuses.

“Okay,” he says. “I told Lev what I thought of the new regime.”

“So he gave you a week off?” Colette says, then stirs her bowl. “After all you’ve done there.” She’s on his side, at least in front of Shauna. They’ve been good with money. He cleared forty-five last year. She brought home close to sixty, her seniority and tons of overtime adding up. They’ve got savings, a college fund underway, and the mortgage is small since refinancing. They can tolerate a week—a month—without his pay.

“How’s school, Daughter?”

Shauna shrugs and turns toward the television, a nature show with seals and polar bears, prey and predator.

“That good, huh?”

Colette gives him a look, which means another bad day. At the start of the school year, a tribe of girls decided to mar her life by calling her dunderthigh.

“Daughter, how about this? You stop by Victoria’s this week and kick Rrricky in the privates. I’ll swing through the school and kick Jenny in the butt.”

“She’d probably like it,” Shauna says.

~

On Wednesday, he’s in the sky again. Two jumps in one week, but he has a stash for emergencies. He even paid for an extra two thousand feet. He’s been watching out the window, studying intermittent cumulus clouds. It’s getting close, so he sits back and enjoys the engine growling against gravity, this tiny tube climbing away from history. Butch gives the go-sign. The others go first and shoot away like leaves in a storm, then he throws himself out, flattens, and pivots in a 360. Come back! Come back! He laughs at the way Paul would say it, how he’d imitate Earth in a panicky high voice.

It’s all milky haze now, moisture seeping up from the Gulf, high pressure officially giving way, Toledo a gray and brown Oz, Lake Erie no longer a jewel. He loops out and tries not to let Victoria’s into his vision but knows where it sits—in that thicket of roads, two over from I-75.

Back in 2004, he and Paul jumped into the Summer Picnic, blue and yellow smoke canisters filling up the sky, reminding all picnickers of the big logo, and wouldn't it be something to kamikaze the place? To splinter the roof and splatter himself throughout the whole dining room? Muddle this.

When the canopy spreads, he feels something like disappointment. After his feet pound the field, he stands still, goggles down, parachute draped behind, sobbing fast and hard, trying to get out whatever's in there.

~

After midnight, Shauna comes to the living room. She's standing like a pole, eyes open and vacant. He gets up, puts his arm around her, and whispers. "Daughter?" In front of her, Jean-Luc Picard is giving a stern order. If she were awake, they'd watch the full episode. It's their favorite Sunday thing—*Next Generation* marathons. He cups her shoulder and turns her toward the stairs. He nudges her forward and keeps his palm on her back. There are her legs, not dunderthighs, and her toes grasping the carpet, unaware that the Shauna ship has been hijacked.

He gets to her bed, closes the door, and sits on the top stair—way up here at the peak of their home, up here where dark clouds form. Some night, she could tumble down, break something, or knock herself silly. In the garage, he digs out an old wind chime. The tubes are grimy, but it'll do the job. He holds it tight, carries it upstairs, and winces at the clogging as he ties it to her doorknob. She'll be nerved out in the morning, but he'll make light of it somehow. Consider it your entry music, your theme song.

~

Shauna's talking a mile a minute about band rehearsals, how most of the clarinet players can barely squeak through a song, how Ms. Anderson made the third and fourth chairs play their parts in front of everyone, how it was so wretched, like animals dying, and how she had to hug Melanie Pahl in the bathroom afterwards because she was crying a waterfall.

They're here, just the two of them, at Lead Belly's. Colette called to say, in full administrative voice, she'd be late, no apology or explanation. He wanted to say, listen, it's not my fault, none of this, but they long ago established a no-tension rule for phone calls. Work is hard enough.

They order drinks—one Sierra Pale Ale and one root beer.

“Two beers on the way.”

“She’s cool,” Shauna says. “Maybe I’ll be a server.”

“You’re not going to be a server. You’re going to captain your own ship.”

“I know,” she says.

“Don’t get caught up in cool things. Keep your eye on the prize.”

“I know.”

“You think Jean-Luc considered serving?”

“I was just saying.”

“Sorry.”

“I know.”

“I know you know.”

“So what’ll happen next week?”

“Next week when?”

“When you go back to work?”

“I’ll probably gut-punch Rrricky and get fired.”

“Oh my God. Please let that happen. Not the firing but the punching.”

“Daughter, I’m kidding.”

“Still, it’d be awesome.”

He agrees. Let there be a formal duel—Laurel v. Ricky, pistols at dawn, three paces, turn and fire. The whole staff would root for him, everyone but the bosses. “Listen,” he says, “you’re old enough to know. I might need to move on. Jobs don’t last forever. Things change, usually for the worse. You start somewhere, do your best, and watch the things around you turn slowly to

crap. I can land another job, no problem, but if I had a four-year degree, it'd be easier. I'd have more options. You hear what I'm saying?"

"Loud and clear."

"You're going to get a degree and then another. Twenty or thirty if possible."

"That's too many," she says.

"Okay, ten."

"Five at most."

"Whatever work you do, there'll be trends, silly and useless things that won't make sense. People will make you crazy. Customers, bosses, employees, everyone."

"And Rrrickies."

"And their mucousy cocktails."

"Man, that's disgusting."

"You have to decide: am I going to play along or not? Because it's hard to stay in the middle. People will come along and needle you. If things get rough and tumble, you can always slide into something else, something better, but only if you have degrees."

"I hear you. Five."

"Make it so."

The server shows up with beers, a long ponytail falling below her belt. Like Shauna says, she is cool. This place is cool, way cooler than Victoria's. Granted, the old queen has done an awful lot right. People come for big discounts through the week, the rebellion of it, the joy of drinking hard on serious days. But this place isn't trying so hard, doesn't need to. You come for beers, a sandwich, an easy-going hiatus. You can bring your kid if it's early. You can drink yourself stupid if you need, and any way you go, the place itself will be on your side. There's a guy standing at the far table, giving an artificial lecture to his comrades who are covering their faces, shaking their heads. Next to them is a quiet threesome watching, and then a four top of business casuals

airing out the day. You can't plan a place like this, can't muddle your way to allure or comfort. You build it and people come.

They order—burger and chicken sandwich, steak fries all around because it's a fun night. Shauna and the server have a moment because Shauna hasn't learned to hide her admiration. He wants to stand up and hug the server for being nice, for treating his daughter like a person, for letting her smile freely and returning that pre-tarnished energy. Last winter, he visited the principal's office after Shauna's first panic attack. He made an appointment, wore a tie, and shook hands with Mr. Derrick, an ironed and proper type. Things devolved fast. When Mr. Derrick said how girls are naturally cliquey, Laurel called him out. It wasn't true to begin with because only some girls are cliquey and even if it were true, his job, the school's job, is to moderate behaviors, natural or otherwise, that negatively influence other children. Mr. Derrick wasn't ready for a debate. He said they'd keep an eye out but couldn't possibly manage every single sentence that gets uttered, which Laurel called straight-up bullshit. He hadn't come close to suggesting they manage every single sentence and if this is how administrators function, how they respond when cornered, maybe he could see why some students were freewheeling bullies. At some point, he was standing up and had his finger in Mr. Derrick's face. He may have called him a name, two or three names. He turned around and another guy, apparently a coach because of the whistle, was standing in the doorway. Laurel left but not before making a threat.

~

It's 11:00. He comes through the back, doesn't want to look at the bar—whatever Ricky's done to it. Victoria and Lev are in the office. The blind is up, door shut. Laurel makes himself obvious without knocking. Victoria stands but keeps talking at Lev, keeps the flow going. Lev is nodding, but it's not a game plan. It doesn't feel that way. It's more casual, like they're working through produce orders or payroll.

“Laurel!” she says opening the door wide. “Come in. Come in. We were thinking through the July calendar.

Lev closes the calendar and a desk drawer without looking up.

“Have a seat,” Victoria says, her arms draped in a tunic-style blouse, finely stitched helix patterns running in all directions. “You need anything?” she says. “A drink?”

Laurel laughs, then realizes she's serious. "Oh, no thanks. I'm good." He sits on the metal chair in front of her giant desk. He has a list of questions ready but lets things settle. The last time he sat here like this—in this metal chair with Victoria on the other side—he was judging bartender applications. They needed someone to replace Jackson who couldn't stay off the sauce. The stack was high. He helped narrow it to five. Had he known Ricky Darrick was such a soulless shitface, he would've voted no. The resume whispered bored bourgeois kid from Sylvania, but he let it pass. That was only six or seven weeks ago.

Lev sits on a barstool, a spare with a few good nicks in it. He's above Laurel, looking down, clearly a plan. "First," he says, "I want to say that I let things go too far last week. I should have managed that better."

"Okay," Laurel says. "Thanks for saying so."

Laurel waits for more, for Victoria to say something. She doesn't. It's his turn, so he inhales through his nose and explains how he's been thinking over the past few days. He's getting older and needs to know if he'll have a future here. He's got a daughter in middle school. He wants to work, likes working hard, but can't give another twelve years, which probably sounds harsh but it's too late now, to an organization that doesn't appreciate his contribution. He waits for Victoria to jump in, expects she will because she tends to frost over tension. That's her charm. But she says nothing. He says he'd like to stay but feels like he's being pushed to the margins, and, okay, he needs to ask a question, and so here it is: "Is there room for me here?"

"Well," Victoria says, her palms coming down flat like in a séance, "I hope there's a future for you here, but we have to ensure there's a future at all. We have to try new things, and sometimes that means some risks, even stumbles."

"I understand, Victoria. I really do. But a risk doesn't need to be a stumble. I mean, you have some expertise here, and if one your employees—any of us—can sense a wrong decision, it seems like that'd be valuable. Lots of money and resources can get wasted otherwise."

"Like what resources" Lev says.

"For instance, have you done the numbers? What's the cost on all these specialty drinks? Vegetables, lemons, grapes? Is that cost getting buried in the food budget?"

"You think I don't follow that? That's my job."

“I don’t mean to say you don’t, but after a few months, I’m wondering how much you’ll lose in tossed produce because I can’t imagine we’d move a whole container of muddled cucumber every day. That stuff goes rotten quick.”

“I’ll keep an eye on it.”

“I know,” Laurel says. He’s working to keep things civil, to make it all about numbers and business, the whole shared enterprise. “I’m just saying, it might not be sustainable.”

“Have you noticed happy hour?” Lev says. “The bar’s full. It’s always full.”

“That happens every year about this time.”

“But it’s more.”

“Maybe. But these kids sit for two hours while they nurse a half-priced drink.”

“That’s better than a half-empty bar,” Lev says.

“Maybe not. Is my point. Especially with this newer crowd. These kids scream laughter at one another. It’s like a volume contest. They drive people nuts.”

“They drive you nuts?”

“No, Lev. I watch. I’ve been bartending for a long time. I know how people operate, and I watch other customers scoot down, move to a table, or just leave—people, by the way, who might stick around and order another drink or two if they weren’t getting screamed at.”

“That’s how bars work.”

“That’s how bad bars work.”

“Be careful.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he says to Victoria too. “You know what I mean. I’m just saying, it’s not sustainable.”

“Why are you saying that?” Lev says. “This is a restaurant, not a tree farm.”

“I mean it’s trendy. That’s all it is. A year from now when everyone’s making fun of muddled vegetables, you don’t want Victoria’s in such talk. This place is better than that.” And he’s hoping that’ll hook Victoria in, that she’ll lean forward rather than sit back like a judge.

“I’ve done the homework,” Lev says. “That’s also my job. I look to see what other places are doing. Plenty are serving these drinks. It’s not just us.”

“What’s important,” Victoria says, “is that there are even more classic Toledo venues closing down. I’d rather be open for business than mourned by a few old-timers.”

“Of course,” Laurel says. “Of course. But you can’t ruin what you’ve got. People like Victoria’s because it’s not all goofy. It’s comfortable. It’s classy.”

“And you think a muddled cucumber drink will ruin that?” Victoria says.

“Well,” he says, “I think it can.”

“That’s crazy talk,” Lev says.

“You have to embrace change, Laurel.”

“I’m all about change!” he says, and he’s losing ground. “But, look, you handed the whole drink menu over to this punk kid. He’s been here for weeks.”

“So that’s the rub,” Lev says. “You’re mad.”

Victoria is leaning back again, her arms making a triangle from desk to chin.

“I’m not mad, Lev, not even close. I’m frustrated by something I know won’t work in the long run.” And then he realizes a key point he wanted to make, the second bullet he wrote down earlier—that every featured drink last week had at least two kinds of fruit juice. “Two kinds!” he says.

“We’re heading into summer,” Lev says.

“But every single drink? Sorry. I mean, every single drink can’t be some form of punch.”

“Now, you’re just being mean,” Victoria says.

He doesn't understand how. He's talking about a drink menu that desperately needs re-thought. And he's the bartender. In rehearsals, in bed, on long drives, on the drive today, he planned to say that you can't go squirting fruit and vegetables into everything, especially for people over twenty-five, which is most of their crowd. You can't make people chew a little after each sip, and the real reason Ricky insists on multiple silly ingredients is to show off, to maximize the time he can stand in front of the customer mixing, shaking, muddling, and fucking it all in slow-motion. Of course, he hasn't said anything close.

"We didn't want things to go like this," Lev says.

"Like what?"

"This."

"Look," he says, "I'm sorry if I'm heated up. I feel a little ownership in the place to be honest. It's hard to take a backseat to something that seems misguided. That's all."

"But you're also saying we're the ones misguiding it."

"No, Lev. I'm saying that maybe you're caught up in a trend."

"That happens to the best. I know."

There's quiet now. Laurel realizes he's been pulling his pant leg like crazy, that it's really the only noise in the room.

"Look," Victoria says. "Take another week and cool off. Then let's regroup."

"You're sending me home with no work for another week? That's not how I cool off."

She has no response.

"Twelve years. That's two more than you, Lev. Eleven and nine/tenths longer than Ricky. I've jumped out of airplanes for the glory of Victoria's, and now I'm going home because I disagree with the new kid who wants to squirt silly string into people's drinks? This is insane."

Lev is standing. "You're leaving now," he says.

Laurel stands and realizes he's probably not coming back, so he says it clean and straight. "No shit, I'm leaving."

“Is that your resignation?” Lev says.

“You wish,” he says.

~

“He gave you another week?”

“Victoria did.”

Colette’s eyebrows go up.

“Lev and I got into it again. She didn’t like it.”

“She can’t take an argument?”

He shifts into a British accent. “It chafes against the decorum.”

Shauna smirks and gives a head wiggle. Maybe she shouldn’t hear about all this.

“Was this at the bar?” Colette says.

“In the office.”

There’s nothing else to say. “If it’s not Shauna,” she said months ago, “you don’t give.” She meant his insistence on daily routines, and then his point about her sister’s family, their upcoming visit, on and on. He couldn’t disagree, but work, he said, takes it all out of him, every concession, every impulse to grant passage, to abdicate. He could try harder, but she, too, had to admit something. She’d lost her kindness. He said that, and now he wonders if she’s a glad about everything, if she’s happy to see him struggle. It proves her point.

When she goes up for bed, he follows. He slides in, doesn’t reach for a book, and turns off the light. He rubs a knee against her. She moves away.

“Just trying to keep the peace,” he says.

She exhales into the dark.

~

He shouldn't spend the money, but he's feeling victorious, a full breath of something new coming along because he walked into Lead Belly's for lunch, sat at the bar, and asked if they needed an extra hand on deck. The bartender stiff-armed him. "Sometimes," she said, but then he divulged a little, and she changed her tune. She knew all about Victoria's, had maybe even seen him there before, and wouldn't mind a serious bartender to back her up. "Can you ride shotgun?" "No problem at all," Laurel said, and before leaving, he'd given all his information. She said to come back early next week, and so hallelujah. Let Victoria and Lev drown in muddled goo. Lead Belly's would yield less. The price points are lower, but the traffic is consistent. He'll help the place. He'll add some old-time class, and maybe he isn't one of those mincing middle-aged guys after all.

He's up here with Mike, the only one who'll jump on a whim. They don't say much on the climb. Sometimes, it's a party, sometimes quiet medicine, just like drinking or drugs. At some point, he'll stop. He'll get old enough, calm enough, to leave the sky alone. He'll direct the impulse into something *productive*. That was Colette's word.

Butch gives the go sign. Mike jumps with his somersault. Laurel prefers the simple stretch, how the wind grabs hold like a giant hand and pulls him into a brain orgasm. A haze now blurs away all lines and boundaries. Fields and towns intermingle, the whole landscape like a field of wilting wildflowers. He inhales the tartness, something you can never smell down where all the moss, mildew, tar, and stone hang like fog. When he pulls, he doesn't feel the yank, the moment when your stomach charges into your throat. Above him, the chute is tangled, twirling like a whirligig. He pulls the reserve and yells out because he knows it was too quick. He didn't cut the main, didn't let it fall away, and sure enough the reserve doesn't get air. It's a rookie mistake. He doesn't look down, knows better, just keeps his eyes locked on the twirling red folds, the resistant flapping. It's been a good ten seconds. It won't open on its own. He climbs the cords, pulling himself toward the mass, trying not to get his arms and legs caught. At this point, someone from the ground would know: this guy is in trouble, real trouble. He's climbing like mad, almost there. The wind wants to pull everything away, tight white cords slipping through his grip. He's calling the chute a fucker. He's saying get down here, get down here, you sonofabitch. If it weren't for Shauna, he'd maybe throw his arms out and howl at oblivion, but he's her only monster, the one creature in the universe that will destroy everything in sight to keep her safe and brave.

He gets to the chute, ripstop nylon slapping against his face, writhing like a wild animal. Any second now. He grasps the fabric in both hands and pulls like he's tearing open a huge bag of potato chips. It explodes against him. He falls from it, watches it eclipse the milky sky above.

The cords go taut. He's hanging in them, his arms pulled and splayed. His shoulder feels torn. Up there, the chute is a giant clam, partway open, mostly open, knuckled down on one side. He's coming in fast but not freefalling. He can feel closeness, structures approaching. He can't turn, can't see the ground—building, pond, barn, house, highway, whatever's down there.