



## **Single: Two Stories**

Jim Hanas

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This e-book contains two previously published short stories: "Miss Tennessee" and "The Cryer," which first appeared in *The Land-Grant College Review* and *One Story*, respectively. I began distributing *Single* as an e-book in 2006 as a way of extending the lives of the stories, which I feared would be entombed forever in these respected but relatively specialized journals. I called it *Single* because I thought of it as an indie rock 7" I was peddling from the back of my virtual tour bus.

Did this work? In finding readers, absolutely. *Single* has been viewed or downloaded more than 10,000 times. Both stories also now appear in *Why They Cried*, my full-length e-book short story collection, released as a Joyland eBook by ECW Press in October 2010. If you like this sample, visit [whytheycried.com](http://whytheycried.com) for more informaton. Thanks for reading.

Best,  
Jim Hanas  
November 14, 2010  
[jim@whytheycried.com](mailto:jim@whytheycried.com)

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## MISS TENNESSEE

I loved the little guy from the day she brought him home. She carried him wrapped in a sweatshirt from the shelter at the corner where she'd been saying for months she was going to go. She set him down on the hardwood floor and he clipped around like a fawn — clip, clip — looking through doorways and carefully eyeing us both. He was tiny but he was strong. He was muscular and sleek, like a miniature greyhound, and we both watched intently as he clipped around, soldiering things out and whining under his breath.

Miss Tennessee looked at me and smiled and said: "Well honey? What do you think?" And I told her: "I love the little guy."

He was never really my dog. He was more like my step-dog, but together we named him Steve. We thought it was funny, giving a dog a man's name like that. But it fit, like Miss Tennessee, which I started just to tease her about being full-grown and long-legged and pretty, but in a tomboyish way that made it both absolutely ridiculous and absolutely plausible that she had ever been Miss Anything. It always made her swallow a grin. Steve's name, on the other hand, made it sound like he wasn't a dog at all, but this little man. Miss Tennessee often called him that: the little man.

Steve liked me okay but he loved Miss Tennessee. With me it was man things. After he got snipped or when he was stung by bees, down there, in grass that came up to his chin, he would come sit by me, hoping I'd understand. With her, it was everything else. When she took a bath, he stood with his paws on the side of the tub, and when she went someplace he couldn't go he stood where he last saw her and waited. If she went into a store and left us together in the car, he stood with his paws on the dashboard, waiting and crying and looking at me like maybe I was to blame.

He was tough in his own way. He growled at people passing by and people who didn't give him what he wanted. It was a deep and sincere growl, if not loud or at all intimidating, based as it was on anatomy smaller than a cat's. Like a cat, he sometimes brought home dead things. He brought Miss Tennessee chipmunks and mice and assorted birds, which I buried — in his view and with much ceremony — in the soft, gray dirt under the porch.

His confidence was not unshakable, however. He was aware of certain limitations. Sometimes, when furious, like at me or at Miss Tennessee's sister or Miss Tennessee's sister's dog — an Alsatian monster who

sometimes came over and hoarded all the little man's bones — he knew better than to strike directly so he would bite something else instead. He'd bite the arm of the couch or a pillow or the little blue rug he'd learned to pee on and he'd snap them around with his head — really killing them — his big marble eyes locked on the real target. It was like he was thinking: "This is you. You fucker. You fink."

Sometimes we spoke for him. "This is you, Prince. You fucker. You fink," I'd say when Steve pretended to bite Miss Tennessee's sister's monster Alsatian, and we would all laugh. There was always something Steve seemed to be thinking, and we were always saying it for him. When we ate breakfast in the living room, he'd get up on his hind legs to look at the fruit and toast laid out on the coffee table. It was creepy to look at, like maybe he really was a little man, weaving back and forth like a dancer. Miss Tennessee would nudge me with her foot to make sure I was watching.

"Look at the little man," she'd whisper. "He's going: Where's mine? Where's my toast." And I'd say: "I don't see why you guys get all the fruit and toast when you're both already so big. Look at me. I'm tiny."

Steve would catch on that we were talking about him and he'd run around the table and I'd play with him a little, batting him back and forth while he growled and snapped.

"Look," Miss Tennessee would say. "He's going: You're not so tough. You're not so tough." And I'd say: "Fuck you. You fucker. You fink." And we'd laugh until Miss Tennessee had to go take a shower.

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Miss Tennessee worked eight to five in a pediatrician's office and I taught school, although not in the summers. I usually stuck around her house after she left for the day. She wore smocks covered with balloons and clowns that made little boys want to marry her, and I would kiss her goodbye on the porch.

In the mornings, I sat in the backyard and let the sun beat on my face and watched Steve march around. In the afternoons I ran errands. If I was feeling ambitious, I would cook up a pot of gumbo with ducks my brother had hunted and killed near the lakes north of the city. It would surprise Miss Tennessee when she got home, which was usually around six, seven if it was a bad day, and eight if she went to aerobics. Sometimes she came home later and we would fight over my mentioning that I had wondered where she was and if she was all right. She would say I

didn't trust her and we would argue. Later we'd sit in bed, batting Steve around, and she would nudge me with her foot.

"Look. He's going: You've gotta trust people silly man." And I'd say: "People that want to be trusted should learn to use the telephone. I can't. My paws are too damn tiny." And we'd laugh until we kissed and then we'd laugh again before we fell asleep.

One night Miss Tennessee was very late. I was in bed but not asleep. Steve bounced off the bed like a spring and met her at the door. He spun around the bedroom — up on the bed, down on the floor — in tighter and tighter circles. Miss Tennessee didn't say anything. She just got undressed, draping her clothes over the open doors of the wardrobe.

"Well," I said as Steve gnawed on a piece of rawhide that he'd placed next to my hand so he could pretend he was gnawing on me. Miss Tennessee looked over her shoulder as she pulled on a pair of boxer shorts:

"Look honey," she said. "He's going: Better be careful with that hand, tough guy. I'm gonna bite it off."

I looked down at Steve.

"Look," she said. "He's going: Go back to your own house before I bite your hand off, you fink." She was smiling but I didn't smile back. "Honey, you heard him," she said as she got into bed. "Don't worry. I'll call you tomorrow."

I drove home wishing I hadn't said anything. My apartment was a mess. I was only there enough to mess it up but not enough to clean. Clothes hung over the furniture and the bed wasn't made. I sat for a while, thumbing through mail and bills and magazines. I folded my clothes across the back of a chair and lay there wide awake, thinking about what Steve had said.

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I spent the next morning cleaning. I sorted my clothes between closet and hamper, emptied the refrigerator, and even thinned out my medicine cabinet and the bookshelf covered with small piles of change and tiny receipts that appeared to be blank except for raised bumps. Miss Tennessee called in the afternoon.

"I just wanted to make sure you were coming over tonight," she said.

"You don't have plans?"

"Of course not silly. Are you coming or not?"

"Sure."

"Let yourself in," she said.

I spent the rest of the afternoon running errands so I could cook dinner, to show her I was sorry. When I got to her house she wasn't home. Steve went berserk, running circles around the room and across the furniture. He seemed glad to see me. I sat in the backyard for a while, watching him blink into the sun before starting dinner. While he slept on the bed, I made a stew with parts of a deer my brother had hunted and killed.

Miss Tennessee was late, even for aerobics night. She came into the kitchen and kissed me on the neck as I warmed a loaf of French bread in the oven.

"I didn't know you were going to cook," she said, sniffing the air around us. "You smell funny," she said.

"I was in the yard. I'll take a shower before we eat."

When I got out of the shower, she was sitting on the couch. Steve sat on the floor in front of her, staring up in worship.

"Why don't we eat in the living room," I shouted as I got dressed. "Fine!" she shouted back.

After I'd shaved and combed my hair, I loaded a few bowls with stew and lengths of French bread and knifefuls of butter. I carried them into the living room and sat down on the couch next to her.

"Oh honey," she said. "Everything smells so good."

We ate and watched *Jeopardy*, calling out the answers when we knew them. Steve kept his nose up in the air, sniffing, and he spent a lot of time wobbling on his back legs trying to see what we were eating.

"Look," Miss Tennessee said, nudging me. "He's going: Silly man. You smell like wood." Steve sniffed around my feet. "Just like wood. Like all silly old men." I looked to see if I'd dropped some bread on the carpet. "Not like Mommy's friend the astronaut. Not at all. Mommy's astronaut smells like TV."

"Silly?" I said in the way I had of talking when I was talking for Steve. "People smelling like TV. Now that's silly. I know that and my brain's no bigger than a walnut."

"Look," Miss Tennessee said, nudging me again. "He's going: He does. I've smelled him. He smells like shampoo and baby aspirins and electrical fire."

I turned to Miss Tennessee, who was still smiling at Steve. "There aren't any astronauts in this part of the country," I said.

"Look," she said, nudging. "He's going: That's what I thought, too, but I smelled him. I know."

I took our plates into the kitchen. I could still hear Miss Tennessee's voice from the other room. "Yees. Yees. The little man doesn't like wood does he? The little man likes astronauts."

I put the dishes in soapy water and told Miss Tennessee I was going home. "Alright," she said, shaking Steve like a puppet. He looked at me and squinted.

"Look. The little man's going to miss you," she said. "Say, I'm going to miss you," she told him. But Steve didn't say anything.

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On my way home I stopped and bought beer. In my immaculate apartment, I sat in the chair in front of the television and propped the beer next to me. I flipped through channels and drank. I watched some sports wrap-ups and bits of a beauty pageant for teenagers, although this only made me restless.

An astronaut? Was he really an astronaut? Where had she met an astronaut? Are there still astronauts? The people in the shuttles, are they technically astronauts? I opened another beer and tried to decide whether I was upset because Miss Tennessee was seeing somebody else or because that somebody else was an astronaut or because he maybe wasn't an astronaut but had said he was and she believed him. Or maybe it was because he smelled like TV. I opened another beer and smelled my hand. Like skin and bones and beer. Like deer and French bread. Not at all like wood. I grabbed another beer and took it with me to the shower.

I didn't hear from Miss Tennessee for days. For more than a week. I began looking forward to school. I kept busy with errands and lesson plans and some new books I was expected to teach. Early Saturday I joined my brother near the lakes north of the city to shoot at ducks and deer. I tried not to think about Steve or astronauts or Miss Tennessee. At night I ordered pornographic movies on pay-for-view, which were edited for such purpose and shot at odd angles, and wondered what the PTA would think of me now. I imagined Miss Tennessee with the astronaut, drinking cocktails made with Tang and having multiple orgasms in weightless environments. Weightlessness outside of deep space, I knew, was impossible, but then I hadn't known we still had astronauts. I tried not to think about these things.

Miss Tennessee called while I sat in the driveway outside my apartment. I was considering the latticework on the porch of the big house where my landlord lived and thinking about all these things anyway. I

didn't answer the portable phone I kept with me in case she called, but went inside to listen to the message. She sounded as sweet as could be.

"Where have you been silly man," she said. "When you get done sulking, give us a call." I was nervous about who us might include but I called back anyway.

"Hey," she said when she heard it was me.

"Hey," I said.

"The little man misses you," she said. I could hear her talking away from the phone. "Yees. Isn't that right?" she was saying.

"And you?"

"Me?"

"What about you? Do you miss me?"

"Well of course, silly. Why do you thinking I'm calling you?"

"I don't know," I said. "Is everything alright?"

"Fine," Miss Tennessee said.

"With us, I mean."

"You shouldn't worry so much. Now are you coming over or not?"

I thought about it for a minute, although I knew what I would say.

"Sure," I said. I could hear Miss Tennessee talking as I hung up. "Yees," she was saying. "Yees."

I took a shower and made the bed. I combed my hair and shaved. I thought about shopping for something to cook, or maybe for something for Steve, but decided to go straight over. She met me at the door. Steve bounced back and forth behind her and jumped up at my knees.

"Yes," she said. "We missed you. See, he's going: We missed you."

She put her arms around me and kissed me on the neck.

"I missed you, too," I said.

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As we lay in bed, Steve chewing on a deer hoof between us — not the pet store kind but one I'd gotten from my brother — Miss Tennessee nudged me with her foot.

"Look," she said. "He's going: Mmm. This tastes good."

"Very good," I said, rolling over on my side to look at Miss Tennessee's grin. "He's thinking: This tastes better than ever. Better than I remembered."

"He's going: I'll eat it all and then I'll be huge," she said.

"As big as you guys, with all your fruit and toast," I said.

"If it only lasted longer. This will be gone in no time." Miss Tennessee pressed her body against mine leaving just enough space between our legs for Steve.

"He's going: Hey. Tough guy. I hope there's more where this came from." I pulled her closer to me and kissed her on the forehead.

We were quiet and Steve scraped his teeth on the hoof like scissors on a golf ball. Miss Tennessee rubbed the soft heel of her foot up and down my shin under the covers.

"Look, honey," she said. "He's going: Too bad it doesn't last as long. It's over way too quick." Her voice got thin and dreamy as she continued. "I mean it starts and it's good and then it goes for awhile but then, poof, it's over and gone, burned up."

"As quick as it takes to make a phone call," I laughed. "I know that and my brain's no bigger than a walnut." Miss Tennessee got quiet. She pulled away a little, rolled over on her back, and the room was filled with the sound of Steve's scraping.

"Look," she said. "He's going: Really I hate this thing. I've got to bite it. I hate it. Like somebody who gets drunk and always talks too loud."

I rolled over on my back and stared at the ceiling.

"Like someone who thinks she can do anything she wants and pretend it never happened," I said.

"Like someone who passes out and snores," she said, sing-song, smiling at Steve.

"Like a liar," I said.

"Like someone who doesn't trust people."

"Someone who doesn't let people's feelings get in the way of her fantasy worlds."

"A mama's boy," she said.

"A flirt."

"Some pussy."

"Crazy."

"Like wood," she said, grinning.

"Look, look," I said, still smiling, putting an arm across Miss Tennessee's bare stomach. "He's saying: Are you so desperate and sad and stupid that you really believed that guy was an astronaut? He's not. I smelled him. I know."

Miss Tennessee shot out of bed and glared at me. As she stood there, bronze curls falling across her face, I looked at the fine lines of her long legs and hips, her appendix scar, her delicate neck, her thick upper arms and her thin wrists. I realized the little boys who wanted to marry her

because of her smocks covered with balloons and clowns had the right idea, even if they didn't have all the information.

"Fuck you. Fuck you. You fucking fink. You fucker," she screamed.

\*\*\*

When I went to get my things, school had already started. Miss Tennessee left a message and told me to come when she wasn't there, she would put my things in a box. I went one day after school. I was dressed in an Oxford and slacks, a disappointment after the shorts and t-shirts of summer, especially since it had yet to cool off.

I let myself in. Miss Tennessee had done as she'd promised. There was a cardboard box inside the door. I closed the door behind me and knelt down and opened the cardboard flaps. There were some paperback books, a few cds, two T-shirts, a pair of socks, a cheese grater, and a garlic press I'd brought over to work on a pan of lasagna. There were things I'd given Steve: a stuffed kangaroo with the eyes gnawed off, a pair of deer hooves, and a stick with a feather on the end (a cat toy, really) I teased him with. As I looked through the box, I realized the little man had not met me at the door, jumping at my knees or running around the room — up on the furniture, down on the floor — in ever-tightening circles.

I went into the living room, expecting to see him asleep on the couch. I looked in the kitchen and in the bedroom. The bed was unmade and Miss Tennessee's smocks hung over the door of the wardrobe. I even looked in the backyard to see if Steve had been left out to squint into the sun. He was nowhere to be found and there were no signs of astronauts. No Tang stains or envelopes from Cape Canaveral. I fished around in a kitchen drawer for a piece of string and fished around in my pocket for all of Miss Tennessee's keys; keys to the front door and the screen door and the shed where she kept the lawnmower. I threaded them onto the string and opened the front door to drop them into the mailbox.

I didn't notice the little man until I reached back inside for the cardboard box, but I almost tripped over him when I turned around. He stared up at me with his huge, marble eyes, making out what I knew could be little more than a blur. He slowly squinted, almost closing his eyes before opening them again, like he was trying to hypnotize me. "You are wanting to feed the puppy dog," I always said in my best fortune-teller accent whenever he did this. "You are wanting to feed the puppy." And everyone would laugh.

He was calm, just sitting and squinting. His tan fur was dark brown in places, like he'd been rolling in dirt, and he had an enormous bluejay pressed beneath his paws. It was nearly as big as he was and its feathers were dirty and bent but still brilliantly blue in places. It occurred to me to take the keys out of the mailbox and go get the shovel. Steve looked at me expectantly, his tiny ribs heaving in and out, but I knew he'd want her to be there. As I crouched down and gently smoothed his matted fur, I winced at the thought of the vicious, eye-pecking struggle.

## THE CRYERER

When his Agent called, the Cryerer was sleeping in the Valley. The sun, already up for hours, had long over-powered the air conditioning unit that hummed in his ear, and he woke as always, pasty and flush; moist in a malarial way that felt like, but was not, a fever. He lurched out of bed and patted around for his cell phone. He patted pants and coats and towels and magazines and all over the bedspread, wiping sweat from his face with a damp forearm, before locating the phone on the floor between the bed and the ash-covered nightstand.

"Where in God's Dark Universe are you," his Agent said. "I've been hitting you with 911's all morning."

"I've been running errands," he lied. "My batteries are dying." He unbuckled his belt and wiggled out of his pants. He wandered into the bathroom, surprised to find himself alone. He opened the door gently.

It wasn't working, his Agent explained. The network wanted to write him in.

"They need your pathetic quality," she said.

"I wish you wouldn't call it that," he said, easing the shower curtain aside with two fingers..

"What? Pathetic? Quality of pathos. It's from the Greek."

"But the connotations."

"Put those out of your mind."

"Is it bad?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Of course it's bad. It's terrible. It's worse than church. Worse than prison. That's why they want your pathetic quality."

"I will be who?"

"The Brother."

"Of who?"

"Of the Sister," she said. "Of the Mother of the Baby."

"And the Baby is?"

"Gone," she said.

The Cryerer wrote down the time and location on an envelope he found hanging out of the nightstand, then fell back onto the bed.

"Don't forget the Mall," his Agent reminded him.

"Yes," he said, mashing a pillow into his eye sockets.

"You're the best," she said.

The Cryerer lay on the bed, trying to find a position. The fever was bad this morning and he smelled sulfur. Rather, he had the sensation of smelling sulfur. There was no sulfur. This much he had learned.

Where had the Brazil Nut gone? He rolled over, expecting her to be there, as if he had missed her before. He mumbled her name; then shouted it.

They had met on a movie of the week. He had been the Brother and she had played the girlfriend of a Columbian drug lord. They'd gone for drinks and she had told him everything. He hadn't told her anything, but she had worked up a warm feeling telling all without interruption — save long pauses she spent, he realized later, snorting cocaine in the ladies room — and she had associated this feeling with him.

Where was she?

The Cryerer thought maybe he had killed her. He didn't actually think so, but he had the thought. When the fever was bad, such thoughts came from nowhere, shouted at him from a great, echoing distance. *You killed her*. Like the smell of sulfur. *Depraved*. He went through the events of the night before like a clown counting his fingers after waving them into the lion's cage. He could do this, he promised himself.

Had she really rolled down her hip-huggers and let a team of development executives lick liquor and salt off her perverse paunch in an after hours club in Los Feliz? Had that happened? Had she gone completely drug mad and challenged all manner of men to all manner of things and then looked at him and shrugged like this had an inevitability to it that was obvious?

Yes. That was something she would do.

Had she stood, bombed out, in his shower wearing only a strapless bra, staring up into the nozzle and letting water splash over her face and into the dark grooves of her body, slicking back her black hair and smiling blissfully as if she were standing, not bombed out in a shower, but in the chill, rejuvenating folds of a waterfall?

Yes, yes. This made sense.

And, thus soaked and resuscitated, had she snapped back, remembering where she was and who he was and, in short, thrown herself at him, cooing sweetnesses and addressing his flesh in a way he pretended was, but knew was not, unaided by substances abused and pre-existing conditions? He thought of the backs of her knees pressed against his elbows, her tanned toes pointing. "Is what is like with ballerina," she said. "Is what is like with everyone," he thought.

She had not been a ballerina in some time.

The Cryerer rolled out of bed and staggered to the bathroom. His vision strobed, and he imagined he was part of a photographic experiment designed to determine if his feet left the ground as he shuffled. He shook

an empty bottle of Valium and an empty bottle of Xanax. He shook a forgotten bottle of Dramamine by his ear and tablets rattled inside like dice in a cup. There were three. He washed them down with a handful of warm water before falling back onto the bed and muttering ... *for the motion of the Earth* ... into the pillow.

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When the Brazil Nut called, the Cryerer was standing in a 24-hour drugstore in the Valley. He was in the magazine aisle, checking on the competition. What his agent said was true, he reminded himself. He was the best. There was a guy in Chicago turning in good work in telephone commercials and another in Miami who scored well in Hispanic households, but he was the best. He had range. From a single, slow-rolling tear to a face-wrenching, hyperventilated blubber, there was no cry the Cryerer couldn't do. He had cradled dead babies and dead soldiers and dead sisters in his arms. He had received grim prognoses, medical results, and death sentences. He had been shot wide, close-up, and from cranes, looking up from the lifeless bodies of babies and soldiers and sisters, crying out into slowly rotating skies.

He read a story about a movie star he had known in Van Nuys, when he, the star — both of them for that matter — was a nobody. It took him a long time to answer.

"Oh hi. Your are up?" the Brazil Nut said, shouting over music bumping in the background.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Are you out?"

"No. I'm at a drugstore."

"It sound like you are out."

"No. I'm not out. Where were you this morning?" he asked, only slightly relieved to be cleared of a capital crime.

"Out," she said. "Why don't you come out?"

"I can't. I have to be at the Mall tomorrow."

"You are shopping?"

"No. It's just a thing."

"Thing?"

"Yes." he said, distracted by the magazine. "I'll talk to you later." He put the phone in the overcoat he wore over his pajamas, took out a bent cigarette and lit it. Despite frequent appearances as the Brother, people didn't recognize him in drugstores in the middle of the night. Sometimes

people asked if he was okay, if he was sad, but even they didn't know why.

This guy, he thought as he read. People probably recognized him in 24-hour drugstores. Here were pictures of his secret wedding in Malibu, apparently taken from a helicopter. Here were stills lifted from video shot by a turncoat guest. The Cryerer thought of some videos from Van Nuys the bride might like to see. He puffed on his cigarette without interference from the security guard, who was busy dazzling the cashier with shoplifting stories.

The Cryerer heard his name and collected his pills at the pharmacy, dropping the magazine on a row of glucometers.

"Are you okay?" the cashier asked as the guard looked on and massaged his sidearm. "Are you okay?"

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When his Agent called, the Cryerer was sleeping in the Valley. He had almost fallen asleep on the way home from the drugstore, having shoveled down a palm full of Xanax in the parking lot before starting the car. He had slept deeply.

"I was afraid that Colombian might keep you out all night," his Agent said.

"She's from Brazil."

"I thought she was Colombian."

"That was a movie."

"Now look nice," his Agent said.

"Yes."

"It's for charity."

"I know."

"Rested?"

"Yes."

"You're the best," she said.

When the Cryerer got out of the shower, he opened the medicine cabinet and shook the empty bottles of Valiums and Xanax and the now-empty bottle of Dramamine before remembering his pills were still in the pocket of his overcoat. He rifled around in the nude and dug the coat out from under the bed and washed down a pair of Xanax with warm water.

The Cryerer sometimes made appearances in malls and on talk shows. He was frequently auctioned off on dates to women who dreamed of dating a man who cried fluently. They were usually disappointed. A

calm came over him as he ran a hand over his freshly-shaven face. He had a serious face, and when he had no expression at all he looked angry. It made him look old. He put on a black suit and a shirt the color of a Band-Aid. He tugged at his belt and tried to find his waist. He appeared to be thin, at least clothed, but his stomach bulged, foiling attempts to keep shirts tucked in. His well-kemptness had a half-life, eroding during the day via forces he couldn't control. He checked and steadied himself in the mirror, and tried out a few tearful poses.

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When the Brazil Nut called, the Cryerer was sitting on a stool in the Valley. He felt the phone humming in his pocket but couldn't answer because he was next. The stage was arrayed with a semi-circle of stools. On each stool sat a bachelor. There was an attorney and a doctor and a policeman and a soap opera star. The Cryerer had worked with the soap opera star once on a Sunday night sweeps-sweetener about the life of St. Augustine. It was called *The Temptation of St. Augustine*, but was really all about temptation. There had been protests. The Cryerer had played the Brother, although for all he knew St. Augustine didn't even have a brother.

The soap opera star stood on a makeshift runway in an open-collared tuxedo, describing his dream date.

They, the soap opera star and his date, would meet for drinks in a bar atop a hotel in Santa Monica. They would hop into a sports car and drive the Pacific Coast Highway at sunset, up to Santa Barbara for Italian food at a little place where, the soap opera star alleged, the prociutto tasted like sweet candy made of meat.

The bidding was slow. Much slower than the bidding for the policeman, who was middle-aged and bulky but had promised to escort his date to a series of self-defense classes and firing ranges and help her secure a carry permit. The doctor, who seemed very young to be a doctor, had promised a series of teeth-whitening sessions and hinted, obliquely the Cryerer thought, at the prospect of a boob-job. It didn't seem fair.

The bidding was slow. The hostess, a thin blond woman in a smart aquamarine business suit, urged the women on. "What do we have ladies, for a soap opera star and sweet candy made of meat? For charity?"

A few hands went up. The star stood awkwardly on the runway, crooning "Come on, ladies," into a cordless microphone. The Cryerer

squirmed on his stool. A few bids came in and a few minutes passed and the hostess closed the bidding. "Sold," she said, "to the lucky lady in the light blue dress." The lucky lady, a woman old enough to be the star's mother, joined him on the runway where they locked hands and bowed to desultory applause. The Cryerer was next.

The hostess introduced him, detailed his many appearances as the Brother on Sunday night movies of the week and on cable channels well known to the audience. "Remember ladies, it's for charity," she admonished before surrendering the microphone.

The Cryerer walked to the end of the runway. He managed a smile — "Good afternoon, ladies" — and began his spiel, which included oysters, cocktails, a walk on the beach, and, he hoped but did not say, backs of knees pressed against elbows, preferably knees not belonging to someone old enough to be his mother. The bidding was slow. He looked out on the faces of the women perched on folding chairs. There were conversations, women explaining to friends who he was and about his pathetic quality. The explainers whispered out of the sides of their mouths, pointing and looking at him. Explainees nodded and made emphatic faces that said, "Aww. He cries," and the bidding gained momentum.

"Five hundred."

"Six hundred."

"Seven-fifty."

This is the way it always happened.

"Eight hundred."

"Nine hundred."

Women were curious and concerned. They wanted to help.

"Nine-fifty."

"One thousand."

They would be disappointed.

"Two thousand."

All heads turned to a pale, tall redhead standing behind the rows of folding chairs.

"Do we have a bid in the back?"

"Two thousand," the redhead said, arms crossed, one foot balanced on a heel in front of the other. She turned away, revealing a jagged silhouette.

"Sold," said the hostess. "To the woman in the back."

The redhead joined the Cryerer on the runway where they joined hands and took a bow. Through the applause, the woman whispered, "I'm a really big fan."

\*\*\*

When his mother called, the Cryerer was driving in the Valley, speeding toward Manhattan Beach with the redhead at his side. She wore leather pants and a purple jacket that matched her toenail polish. The Cryerer didn't answer. He hadn't spoken to his mother in years.

"So I loved you in *The Cryist*," the redhead said, walking long fingers up his leg and smiling. "And in *The Crying Man*."

Here was a true fan. Before he'd become aware of the scope of his pathetic quality, the Cryerer had appeared in adult features. It was a turn-off to most — a man who bawled helplessly before, during, and after the act — even to women, among whom the pornographers in Van Nuys thought this display might find a sympathetic audience. To men, it was so implausible as to be upsetting or, on the other hand, so plausible that habitual users reported a moment of clarity that often put them off the trade for good. The redhead was an exception. She leaned over and breathed into his neck. "Do you feel sad?" she whispered.

When his Agent called the Cryerer was in the fetal position under a bar in Manhattan Beach, a cold brass foot-rail bumping rhythmically against his forehead. He covered his head from blows delivered by a giant man, who — he had managed to gather — played cornerback for Pepperdine. He braced and waited for it to stop, trying to protect his face.

"Fucking crying ass faggot," the giant shouted, punctuating each blow with a syllable. "Fuck-ing cry-ing ass fag-got." Eventually it did stop and the Cryerer rolled onto his back. The redhead knelt at his side, running purple fingernails through his hair and searching his face for tears.

"Are you alright?" she said.

"I guess," he said, stretching his body tentatively.

"Go ahead, you can let it out. Let it out," she said.

It all happened quickly and the Cryerer had not immediately understood. The redhead spoke breathlessly all the way from the Valley, about his movies and about his pathetic quality, and about how these made her feel. In the bar she had leaned very close to him, running single long fingers lightly above her plunging camisole, talking about how excited she was and how she couldn't wait for the evening to come to an end, which

would really be only the beginning. But now, lying on his back, he understood. She had excused herself from the table and returned with the giant man, who she had told all about the Cryerer and his pathetic quality, about how he was a creep and was bothering her.

"Go ahead, you can let it out. Let it out," she urged.

It had progressed very quickly.

"Come on it's alright," she panted. "Give it to me."

Clearly she was disappointed.

\*\*\*

When his Agent called the Cryerer was lying awake in the Valley. It was mid-morning already but he was lying there, still and awake, monitoring various pains in his body and wondering what they might mean.

"You better not be in bed," his Agent said.

"My face is fine."

"The Columbian?"

"No."

"Did they love you?"

"Sure."

The Cryerer stretched his body cautiously, poking at his ribs with two fingers.

"Are you ready?"

"Yeah."

The Cryerer rolled out of bed and peeled off his suit and the shirt the color of a Band-Aid. He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and found his face to be as he had reported, terminally serious but untouched, although his torso was covered with red bruises the size of compact discs. He eased himself into the shower and stood there for a long time.

\*\*\*

The phone rang again while the Cryerer was driving in the Valley. The fingers of his right hand were stiff and sore and when he reached for the phone he knocked it under the passenger seat. At a light he reached over the emergency brake and his aching ribs and fished around. The phone rang as he fished, but when he finally located it the ringing had stopped and his hand was smeared with streaks of thin, brown film and he tried to remember not to touch his mouth or his face, going so far as to

retrieve his cigarette pack from his pocket and a cigarette from the pack all with his left hand as he drove to the studio.

When the Brazil Nut called, the Cryerer considered the phone and the thin, brown film before answering. She was crying.

"You are where?" she sobbed.

"On my way to the studio," he said. "Where are you?"

"In darkness," she blubbered.

"You'll be fine."

"No."

"You're fine. Take a Valium. Do you have Valium?"

"Already I take."

"You'll be fine."

"I am dying."

"You are not either dying," the Cryerer said.

"No."

"I have to get ready. I'm late."

"No," the Brazil Nut sobbed as the Cryerer hung up the phone.

At the studio, the guard waved him through with barely a pause. He parked the car and sat, wiping his hand on the passenger seat, taking a few moments to collect himself. He dialed a number and let it ring. When the redhead answered — "Hello, this is Alex." — he hung up, relieved she was still alive. He smelled sulfur and heard metal scraping on metal. He recalled yellow gun-shaped controls that sent tiny cars flying around the track, and often flying off the track, at what seemed like impressive speeds. There had been no intensive training and everything was left to chance. Hold the trigger tight and so what if the car, filled with oil from a tiny plastic bubble, comes flying off the track and across the carpet amid smells of sulfur and reckless speed? These were not historic runs.

He remembered the day, four days after Christmas, that the track caught fire, right there under the tree. It was the scraping of the trigger back and forth, lurching the cars around the track, that set the black plastic pieces of track on fire. Pieces of metal like two wooden sticks scraping together to make fire. The gorgeous smell of electrical fire.

\*\*\*

The Cryerer limped into the studio. He had worked with the Sister, the woman playing the Mother of the Baby, before. She had had a sitcom once and had since been in many of these missing baby capers. The

director was somber and supportive. He nodded whenever people spoke and looked into their eyes. The Cryerer thought he recognized him from Van Nuys. He couldn't be sure, but if so he had once been known as the Skin Doctor and he might have the tapes that could wreck that beautiful Malibu wedding.

"So," the director began solemnly. "You are the Mother of the Baby." He fixed his eyes on the eyes of the Sister and nodded. "And you are the Brother." He turned his eyes to the Cryerer, nodding and fixing. "And the Baby is gone."

Brother and Sister both nodded.

He repeated: "And the Baby" (looking at the Cryerer), "your baby" (looking at the Sister, the Mother of the Baby), "is gone" (looking intently at both).

When the Brazil Nut called, the Cryerer was having make-up applied.

"You are where?" she sobbed.

"I'm at the studio. I told you."

"I am dying."

"Can I call you back later? Listen I'll call you back later," he whispered. "You're fine."

"No. I won't be here," she said. "I'm going away."

\*\*\*

The Cryerer couldn't remember how long he sat there, watching blankly as the racetrack melted and the Christmas tree dissolved in flames. It was engulfed almost immediately. He was not startled; not even amazed. He sat there on the living room carpet, watching the tree spit bits of itself onto the rug around him. His father appeared, suddenly and aggressively, stomping viciously on the racetrack and headlong tackling the flaming tree in a counter-intuitive attempt to make it stop flaming, which (more counter-intuitively still) seemed to work. He watched with fascination in lieu of horror, his father wrestling the green, smoking limbs back and forth across the deep-pile carpet before finally standing up and kicking ridiculously at the smoldering branches, sending storms of dried needles across the carpet.

His father, covered in botanical soot, loomed over him. The Cryerer sat awed amid the wreckage, pulling the trigger of the pistol-shaped controller. Metal on metal. Back and forth.

"Put that fucking thing down," his father boomed, grabbing the cord and snapping the controller out of the child's hands. The moment the controller left his hand, he returned to the scene. His father looming. The Christmas tree smoldering. He had begun to cry all at once, uncontrollable spasms racking his small body, terminating in a full, open-mouthed blubber.

"Look at this," his father roared. "You think this is funny?"

The boy shook his head, gasped, and moved his lips in an airless, "No."

"Quit your damn cryin'."

Another airless, "No."

\*\*\*

When the Brazil Nut called again, the Cryerer was on the set in the Valley, preparing to embrace and comfort the Mother of the Baby.

"You have a call," whispered a production assistant who had stepped up gingerly beside him. "It sounds like an emergency."

The Cryerer excused himself. He stepped behind a camera, put a finger in one ear and picked up the phone.

"What."

"You know," she whispered quietly. "I am loving you David."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know, I am not blame you for anything David."

She was not crying.

"Get some rest. I'll call you later."

She was singing.

"Am not here later David," she sang.

"I'm working," he said. "Go to bed."

The Cryerer stood there for moment. He put his head down and closed his eyes. When the director appeared he waved him off.

"Almost ready," he said.

\*\*\*

His father lay flat on the carpet, peaceful except for the red half-moon spreading around his head from where he had collided with the coffee table, causing a cloud of Christmas cards to erupt and gently float to the ground. It all happened quickly — the clutching, the staggering, the falling — and the Cryerer had not immediately understood. His mother

appeared from nowhere. Kneeling amid ashes and drink coasters, she ran long fingers through her husband's hair and dabbed at his head with a dishtowel. "Are you alright?" she screamed. "Are you okay?" she begged him as the Cryerer muttered a steady stream of airless Nos.

\*\*\*

He passed a forefinger under each eye to mop up tears that had already begun to form. "I'm ready," he said. A woman in an army jacket appeared and applied a few fingertips of make-up under his eyes.

"I'm a big fan," she said. He nodded, managing a twitch. "Are you okay?" she asked.

It started in his lower back, an intense and knotted throb. It would've been difficult for him to sit, and he shifted from foot to foot to keep the spasms moving.

"Places," the director said, and the Cryerer took his place outside the door. The Mother of the Baby sat inside some sort of a waiting room — it could have been a hospital or a police station.

He tried to stand still with the throbbing growing in his back and contractions, like hiccups, taking hold in his chest. He tried to still his quivering lips.

"Rolling," the director called from the other side of the door. "And action."

The Cryerer lurched through the door and his pretend Sister, the Mother of the pretend Baby, rose.

"I came as soon as you called," he panted.

"Oh John."

"What is it?"

"It's the Baby."

"Where is she?"

"Gone," the Mother squeaked, nodding slowly in a protracted wince before burying here face in the Cryerer's shoulder, the Cryerer himself now coming unglued as the throbs and contractions became no longer local, wrenching his entire body and turning his trembling lips into an eight-shaped, teeth-baring hole. The crane zoomed in to capture the close-up and locked for a moment before panning right, then left, then spiraling gently up and around the entangled bodies of the mourners as the point of view rose, turned and dissolved somewhere up — up, up, up — and into the slowly rotating sky.

### **From the same author on Feedbacks**

Cassingle: Five Stories (2009)

A follow-up to 2006's *Single*, *Cassingle* is a collection of stories that originally appeared in *Fence*, *McSweeney's*, *Bridge: Stories & Ideas*, and *Twelve Stories*. Toronto's *Eye Weekly* wrote of *Cassingle*, "No matter the cut, this is writing that speaks American, in all its complexity."



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