

## Guitar, Table, and Bottle

Justin just kept pouring sugar into the tea, like sand, time. I was already loopy enough from the first batch. His dad, Dave, sat outside drinking Crown Royal with the gang. Justin called me fat, but I'm not. But there's this pouch just below my belly button, very marsupial, where the kangaroo lives. The kitchen shimmered. The walls, the refrigerator, the sink, and the counter with all of the chicken and Cous Cous laid over it like a buffet. Everyone took their plates outside to eat. They listened to Neil Young on the radio. I felt the twangs. That voice, carved by age and depth, blew across my skin, rearranging the hairs on my arm like wind ripping through a canyon. I'm shorter than Justin and always wear jeans and sweaters or something with sleeves and keep my hair knotted behind my head and watch everything with my wide, brown eyes. I'm pasty and don't feel very Spanish, like Dad.

Justin quit pouring sugar into the pot. He stirred it around and looked at me with that clown look of his. His hair is stringy and chopped off near the bottom of his neck but curls up at the ends. He's skinny and tall and has these lips, like an actress filled with collagen. You want to hide because it looks like they're going to explode and ruin your clothes with

melted margarine. Justin poured some chunky tea into a coffee cup and we shared it, each took a turn drinking from it and tasting the sweet sugar that overpowered the dung and dirt. I looked around and noticed the jagged edges of the counter top and the way the chickens seemed to be alive and living at separate angles from each other. I touched Justin on the arm and felt the kangaroo kick inside my pouch. I was afraid Captain Black would come around and make me get rid of my kangaroo. Nobody believes he exists but me.

The citronella candles chase away the bugs, and Justin covers the dying coals in the grill with lighter fluid. He tells Stunt Bear to stand back. Stunt Bear turns his head but when Justin closes the lid to the grill, fire shoots out from beneath, the sides, the top, every conceivable angle.

Justin looks up, still clutching that bottle of lighter fluid, smiles and exclaims, "Goddamn, I love vapors! I love pyrolysis! I can control Fire!"

I smile and shake my head. He's such a clown. Him and his science.

He grabbed  
my hand and  
said, "Love

you baby.” He  
grinned, and I  
could see my  
reflection in his  
eyes.

I smiled  
and said, “Love  
you too.”

We  
walked out of  
the kitchen and  
into the dark  
backyard. The  
night covered  
me as a quilt of  
blue, red and  
green squiggles.  
I could barely  
make out  
the forms  
at the table.  
Their faces  
shimmered in  
the candlelight,  
distorted, as if  
they had been  
destroyed and  
glued back  
together by a  
child.

Jay, the guy who's writing this, and Rachel are there. Jay'll sit and quietly drink Old Milwaukee with Lutrell, laughing when it's appropriate and louder when it's not, until he's good and drunk and Rachel has to drive both of them home. Stunt Bear will follow Holly into bed once Justin burns him with his fucking science. Maybe I can get some Demerol from Stunt Bear before he disappears. Justin's dad, Dave, sits in a chair and looks like a redneck Santa Claus. He's a DEA agent. That's how Justin and I get all the best shit. He'll get wasted and be obnoxious and make everyone laugh. He'll call Justin's brother, who doesn't have a license yet, and make him come and pick him up and drive him home. When that happens, Lutrell'll show up to fill in the void they create and drink Old Milwaukee until Jay's drunk and ruined another night out for Rachel. Then Captain Black'll step out of the shadows with more beer, but by that time, nobody'll be around but me. Reality will have collapsed, and Captain Black will pick up the pieces and put them to good use in his propaganda machine.

“Justin, this chicken’s great!” Dave says. “You’re cut off! No more Crown Royal for you!”

“But Dad, I haven’t started drinking yet.”

“It’s eight o’clock. Get the Absinthe!” Dave wears a tee shirt pulled down tight and making it look like he has a belly, but he’s really in good shape. He is a DEA agent, after all. I have a pouch. There’s a kangaroo in there.

Justin hurries into the kitchen and comes out with a green bottle. He unscrews the cap and divides the green of the bottle into five small glasses.

Dave says, “Man, this stuff’ll fuck you up!”

Holly asks, “Isn’t this what van Gogh was drinking when he cut off his ear?”

Justin says, “Absolutely.”

“And you guys want to drink this stuff? Stunt Bear, don’t drink that honey.”

“One shot won’t kill me,” says Stunt Bear.

“Besides,” Dave rolls his hand around in the air, “I think we all know van Gogh couldn’t hold his liquor!”

“Sure it’s okay for me to drink, Dad?”

“Shut up.” Dave looks at Jay and Stunt Bear and says, “I never minded when he drank. Even when he was sixteen.” Dave slurs his words and rolls his head around as he talks. “The only time he ever got in trouble was when I came home from Columbia one time and all my Crown was gone. Justin, you’re cut off! No more Crown for you!”

Everybody laughs. “Drink this, Dad.”

“Is my favorite daughter-in-law gonna drink?”

I smile and say, “Yeah, give me some of that.”

Dave and Stunt Bear and Jay and Justin and I pick up a glass and

throw them back. I taste the liquid black licorice that melted on the grill when Justin made his fucking science. I hate Science. It's a manipulation of nature. It leads to war.

Rachel glares at Jay, the guy who's writing this. The last time he drank Absinthe, she had to take him to the Emergency Room.

The five of us kick back two more rounds.

Then Holly says, "Stunt Bear, sweetie, can I have some candy?"

Stunt Bear, with his curly, thick, black hair that comes down his back and his gruff voice and intimidating size and demeanor, says, "Jesus Christ, baby, you've had eight bars of chocolate already today."

I envision him wearing a tutu and a tiara and riding around on a unicycle in the circus, cussing the entire time and shooting dirty looks at the Ringmaster, and I giggle and shoot my hand up to cover my mouth, looking around to make sure nobody hears. And to make sure Captain Black's not lurking around.

Holly smiles and replies, "I know, but I want more." Her eyes flash and she smiles the smile of troublemakers who want to look innocent when they're after something.

"Justin, you're cut off! No more Crown for you!"

Stunt Bear lumbers off, stopping to scratch his back against the door frame, to get the candy for Holly that he's hid somewhere in their house, which is next door to ours.

Rachel smiled in the candlelight. The flicker of the flames gave her freckles that I knew weren't really there. Her face looked round but was jagged at the edges by the red and blue and green squiggles in my eyes. I got up and moved to sit on Dave's lap to get her from a different

angle. I saw her profile. Her small nose came down to a curve just above her mouth. Her hair was pinned to the side of her head with a dragonfly barrette and the rest of it hung in her face like a mask. Faces popped out from the lines in the fence, and they stuck their tongues out at me, and I giggled uncontrollably.

Dave said, "Justin! Where'd that Absinthe run off to?"

"I put it back in the kitchen, Pop. You want some more?"

Dave slapped me on the back and said, "Hell yeah, son! Pour another round!"

And the now somewhat green bottle made its way back to the table. Justin's such a clown.

David picks up the phone and dials, "Matt, yes, come pick me up, stat, I'm drunk."

Matt walks through the gate. He's tall like Justin but with a Drill Sergeant hair-do.

"Ready,

Dad?"

"Gotta  
do one more  
shot!"

I stand  
up from Dave's  
lap and look  
around at the  
splintered  
picture in front  
of me. I know  
it'll never be  
put together in  
order again.

Justin  
fractures the  
green bottle  
into five glasses.

Matt says, "Come on, Dad. I have school in the morning,  
and I still have homework to do."

"Homework's  
for losers,"  
Justin butts in.

Lutrell walks through the gate carrying a twelve pack of Old Milwaukee. Stunt Bear and Holly have gone to bed after Justin burned Stunt Bear with his science, and Matt drove Dave home. Justin's in the bedroom doing physics calculations.

Rachel says, "Great, it's Jay's shadow."



But Jay, the guy who's writing this, just grins and starts drinking with Lutrell until they're both too drunk to walk and Rachel has to drive them both home.

And then I'm by myself in the blanket of the darkness. Justin's going to have to learn to create. He's going to have to give up his fucking science. I slouch forward and light a cigarette and look down and see my marsupial pouch where the kangaroo lives.

\*\*\*

I exhaled and watched  
the smoke drift into the  
air. That's when Captain  
Black stepped out of the  
shadows. The light from  
the street seemed to run  
through him.

I shivered and  
wrapped myself up  
in my arms and said,  
"Hello, Captain Black."

He said, "Hi  
there, Stephanie."

"I don't want to  
give up my kangaroo."

He sat down in  
front of me and pulled  
out a can of beer and  
crossed his legs and  
smiled. "Tell me why."

“I don’t want  
to destroy anything else  
with the science.”

He marked that  
down and said, “But  
it’s too late. You use the  
science everyday. There’s  
no reason to change  
your lifestyle now.”

I started to  
cry, and he jotted  
down something in his  
notebook. No doubt  
more data for his  
propaganda machine.