

Way Down in the Hole

by Jonas Mueller

Aiden was walking Lurch when he heard sirens. Lurch, a Boston terrier who had been stubbornly licking himself in the middle of the road while Aiden tugged at his leash, howled along with the sirens until Aiden picked him up and tucked him under his arm.

The noise came from two directions, and the sirens rose as they got closer, then converged in his street. Aiden began walking home. Lurch squirmed in his arms. He ran out of breath a block away, but even from there he could see the police cruiser and the fire truck parked in front of his house.

“Shit,” he whispered to himself. He remembered hearing a loud crash downstairs before he took Lurch out, but the couple who lived downstairs were always fighting, so he didn't worry about it at the time. Now he felt dizzy thinking about it, and a sickly thrill passed through him. He was afraid he might drop Lurch.

Aiden walked past the nest of emergency vehicles in his driveway and tried to get into the backyard, where the stairs led up to his apartment. The lone police officer, a woman with a face like a parakeet, stopped him. “Sir,” she said, held up her hand, and waited for him to turn away. He walked back to the edge of the road and scratched Lurch behind his ears. Lurch shivered and whined.

Most of the neighbors were too polite to gawk. Instead, they peeked out their windows, or walked their dogs past the house, or just slowed down as they drove home. One of them stopped and pulled over. The window rolled down, and Nurse waved at Aiden.

Nurse wasn't a nurse; he was a euthanasia tech. Every day he killed dogs and cats for ten dollars an hour. He had a shaved head to hide his premature baldness and a boyish face so white it seemed to glow. Aiden and Nurse knew each other from high school, but never really hung out until all of Aiden's friends moved away and all of Nurse's friends withdrew from the smell of death that hung around his scrubs and his car.

“What's going on?” asked Nurse. Lurch, the only dog that would come near him, stopped whining when he heard Nurse's voice.

“I dunno,” said Aiden. “I'm kinda worried.”

“Do you have anything up there?”

“Anything?” Aiden shrugged. “You mean...”

Nurse nodded.

“No, I think we used up all of it last night.”

“So that's not it,” said Nurse. He rubbed his head. There was a five o'clock shadow shaped like a swooping bird of prey on the back of his crown.

“I don't know,” said Aiden. “I'm fucking losing it. Can I-”

“I need to shower first,” said Nurse. “I'll call you when I'm done.”

“Okay.” Aiden stood up; he was shaking a little, but nodded at Nurse as he drove away.

Then he heard the parakeet-faced officer's voice behind him. “Excuse me, sir? Are you a resident?”

“Yes,” said Aiden. He turned to face her. Lurch whimpered in his arms.

Aiden and Nurse played with Lurch in Nurse's living room. Down the street, they could hear the police driving away from Aiden's house and the sinkhole in its ground floor living room. They turned on their sirens, though Aiden didn't understand why.

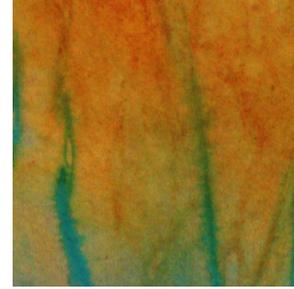
“So do you have anywhere to go?” asked Nurse. He and Lurch were in a tug of war over a scrap of fabric. “I mean, if they do condemn the place, and it doesn't look like it's about to collapse from outside.”

Aiden watched Lurch maul the scrap of fabric. “I could get a hotel,” he said. “Or I could call Mom, but I'm never gonna find a job here if I'm in fucking Louisiana.”

“Louisiana's not so bad,” said Nurse. “Can't be worse than this place.”

“It can,” Aiden said. “You have no idea. I mean, just fucking churches and mud, and then I'd have Mom up my ass every day about how much money I'd be making if I'd done this or that or what the fuck ever. And besides, I put all my goddamn savings into staying in that place.”

Nurse yanked the denim out of Lurch's snout, and Lurch climbed



onto Nurse's torso to get to it. Then he rolled over and licked Nurse's face. "I'm always weirded out that this dog likes me so much."

"Maybe he has a death wish," said Aiden. He was playing with his hair, picking out tangles and unknitting them.

"Maybe." Nurse picked Lurch up and put him down on the floor. Lurch sat down and licked himself. "Anyway," said Nurse. "I was thinking you could crash here tonight."

"You sure? I don't wanna be a burden."

"Don't worry about it." Nurse stared at the floor between them. "I mean, if you're lucky, the guy from the city's just gonna okay you to move back in tomorrow. And anyway, this place has been kind of weird since Nathan left for Nicaragua."

The next morning, Aiden woke up on the couch under the front window. He looked outside and saw Nurse walking Lurch. Lurch circled him, tying him up with his leash.

He bought the dog the previous month, exhausting enough of his savings and the money his family had given him when he graduated college that he barely had enough left for another month's rent. His work study job had gone to an incoming freshman, and while he'd tried to get a new one in the two months since, a part of him still felt as if he only had to make it until August to receive another check from financial aid. Most of the time he played video games, or read books, or smoked pot with Nurse, who let Lurch sit on his chest while he lay on the floor, staring at his own smoke.

No one called Aiden, so he called his landlady. The house, she said, was a loss, and he had three days to move. The building inspector had refused to even set foot upstairs, or to spend another minute in the house, after he saw the condition of the living room. His landlady was livid; she yelled at him as if he'd caused the sinkhole. He said goodbye to her in mid-sentence and hung up.

"So what's happening?" asked Nurse. He'd just gotten back from work, and his left arm was wrapped in gauze.

"The short version or the long version?"

Nurse picked up Lurch and gave him a kiss. "Short."

"The house is condemned and we need to get my shit out of there."

"We?" Nurse looked at him from behind Lurch's head.

Aiden sucked on his cigarette. "Sorry."

"I'm kidding," said Nurse. "How much of it is there?"

That night they went down the street to the condemned house.

The front door had a yellow sign nailed to it, but the stairs only had a strip of caution tape tied to the railings. They ducked under it, treading lightly, watching the road for police. Aiden thought he saw the house sway, and the steps croaked like frogs under his feet. He wasn't sure if he remembered them doing that, and wondered what it meant that no one had bothered to board up the door yet. Inside the attic, he took his boots off and tried not to make any noise.

Nurse looked around. "Do you want the couch?"

"Let's not touch it," said Aiden. Was the floor moving under him? "I don't wanna move heavy stuff around in here, y'know?"

"I hear you," said Nurse. He'd bought a stack of cardboard boxes and was putting them together in the middle of the room. Aiden piled his clothes in a suitcase and smoked.

The house groaned, and Aiden started. "We gotta hurry," he whispered to himself. Then he looked at Nurse, who was still taping boxes together with his back turned toward Aiden, and silently mouthed it. "Hurry hurry hurry shit shit shit c'mon c'mon c'mon..."

The house whimpered. Nurse looked around. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah."

"We should hurry," said Nurse. He glanced out the window that overlooked the street.

That night Aiden woke up on the couch with the Weather Channel still on. The living room reeked of Nurse's pot, and he could hear Lurch scuttling around behind the baby gate in the bathroom. Aiden's sweat cooled on his skin. His hands shook.

He tried to think back to the rest of the evening, but all his thoughts crumbled into a little hole in his mind. He tried to stand up and the room drifted around under him. His chest fell in on itself and he barely managed to cross the room before falling over and catching himself on the baby gate. It tilted over, and Lurch climbed over it. He licked Aiden's sweat off his forehead until Aiden pushed him away.

Nurse opened his bedroom door and stood there in his black briefs. He switched on the light, illuminating the boxes of Aiden's things that stood between them.

Nurse clambered over the boxes. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," said Aiden. He shook. His skin was pale, and his lips felt chilly. "I... Can you help me up?"

"I don't think I should," said Nurse. "Just lie there for a moment. I'll get you some water." He ran into the kitchen and poured a glass, then came back and held it to Aiden's lips.

"The baby gate," said Aiden. Nurse put it back in place, secured it, and chased Lurch around the room.

Aiden pulled himself upright and leaned against the doorway. He kept on drinking. Nurse leaned over and took his pulse. His fingers were warm against Aiden's skin, and Aiden's heart slowed down a little.

"I think you're gonna be OK," said Nurse.

"Cool," said Aiden. The room stopped flailing and now rotated slowly around the axis of Nurse.

"But we should go to the hospital," said Nurse. "All right?"

Aiden nodded. "How about the clinic?"

"Hospital's closer."

"It doesn't matter."

A few minutes later, they were on the road. The car smelled like frightened dog, so they rolled down the windows and smoked cigarettes. It didn't get the smell out.

Everything in the clinic seemed to glow, even Nurse. They had the waiting room to themselves, but it still took half an hour for a bony nurse to call Aiden's number. He got up, and Nurse followed, but she stopped him. Then she led Aiden to a dingy little room and left him there for ten minutes. He laid down on the examination table and had almost fallen asleep when she came back with a blood pressure monitor. Then she took him back to the hall, weighed him, took his temperature, shone a light in his ear, all without a word except for the occasional instruction. "Judging by your paperwork, it's just a panic attack," she said. "But I see here you're a smoker. You wanna talk about that?"

Thirty seconds later he was back in the waiting room.

"How'd it go?" asked Nurse.

"She said I had a panic attack."

"So it's nothing?" They both stood at the billing counter. Nurse smoked an imaginary cigarette.

"Well," said Aiden. "It's a panic attack."

Aiden paid and they left. Nurse lit a cigarette the moment they got outside. When Nurse turned the ignition in the car, the clock said 3:08 AM.

"Shit," said Nurse.

"What?"

"I work in the morning." He started the engine.

"What time?"

"Seven to one. They cut my hours again."

"You might as well stay up."

Nurse sighed and pulled out of the parking lot. They drove through empty streets, and Aiden felt the crumbling feeling in his chest again. He took deep breaths, tried not to take them too quickly, felt like he'd lost the ability to breathe without concentrating. He could feel the car drive off the road and over empty space for miles, then he looked outside and the road was still there. They were halfway home when Nurse slammed his fist on the horn and screamed, then put his arms back in two-ten position as if nothing had happened. Aiden wanted to ask him what was wrong, but Nurse turned on the radio and cranked the volume up all the way.

They lay on the living room floor, staring at the dust that floated above them and sparkled in the lamplight. Nurse's GED, associate's degree and Euthanasia Certification stared down at him, two eyes and a mouth on an otherwise bare wall.

Nurse stared up at the ceiling fan and said, "I don't want to go to work tomorrow."

"Why not?"

"I want to be fired. I want them to drag another dog into the room and tell me to destroy it, and I want to tell them to go fuck themselves, and I want them to fire me on the spot and chase me out of the building. I want them to try and euthanize me." He hissed out a laugh.

"That'd suck."

"If I got fired?"

"If they euthanized you."

"Why?"

"Cause then I'd have to move back to Louisiana." Aiden paused.

"Can you euthanize Louisiana?"

Nurse licked his lips. "I'm not certified there. I think I need to take

another sixteen-hour course or something.”

“You can't just transfer?”

“You know, when I told my parents what I was doing, they didn't even know the job existed. They said 'But you need a veterinarian, right? At least supervising you?' Like how it is at the vets. A lot of people don't know jobs like mine exist.”

He paused, glanced over at Aiden, who looked away. “Maybe in Louisiana,” he said, “this job doesn't exist.”

Lurch sniffed his way over, pausing to lick the carpet between them. Then he curled up in Nurse's armpit. Aiden reached over and petted him. He noticed Nurse watching his fingers. Nurse closed his eyes.

“Thanks for taking me in,” said Aiden. “I'm gonna try to find a job again tomorrow.”

“There's a bunch of openings in the strip by the shelter,” said Nurse.

“Really?”

“I can drop you off. I mean, not this morning, cause you're too out of it, but the next time I work, which I think is Tues-. No. Fuck, I'm out of it.”

It was another week before Nurse took Aiden to the strip mall. In that time, Aiden read want ads on Craigslist and watched television, filled out online applications on the university's job site and checked his inbox. He smoked in Nurse's kitchen, blew smoke rings out the window, and his mother called almost every day. Once, he went out to hunt for job applications, but she called him on his way out the door, and he spent half an hour appeasing her about his future only to hang up and find that the talk had knocked the wind out of him. He spent the rest of the day reading and playing with Lurch until the little dog shit on the carpet and he locked him behind the baby gate in the bathroom.

That Friday, Nurse dropped him off at the strip mall, which was really a quartet of strip malls gathered around an intersection. The animal shelter cowered behind a Bed, Bath & Beyond. The shelter's front entrance was only accessible by a dirt road, but the dumpster was in the strip mall parking lot, and Nurse parked next to it.

Aiden nodded goodbye, turned around once more on his way to the corner, then went into Starbucks. The line swelled on both sides of him, and when he got up to the counter the press of people behind him made

him feel like something was scuttling down his back. He forgot to ask for an application.

At Bed, Bath & Beyond, he barely got past the door before a salesperson approached him. She asked him whether he was interested in their new line of three-hundred thread count sheets. He had no idea what that meant, so he decided they'd never hire him.

Barnes & Noble sent what looked like a loss prevention worker after him. Someone must have seen the folder he'd taken for applications, and thought he was stealing books. He tried not to make any sudden moves, and he knew better than to ask for an application.

The pet store told him to e-mail them a résumé. The cashier gave him an e-mail address, and he wrote it down on the inside of his folder.

In the end, the only application he got was from an ice cream store that forced its employees to sing whenever anyone tipped them.

“But you can't sing,” said Nurse while they sat in a restaurant booth and waited for their beer.

“Yeah, I know,” said Aiden. “Worth a try, right?”

“Did you ask here?” asked Nurse. There was a little bloodstain on his scrubs. Aiden couldn't stop staring at it.

“I'm not really sure who to ask.”

The waitress came back, and Nurse asked her if they were hiring. She stared at the ceiling for a second and told him to call the next morning, when the manager was in. “The number'll be on the receipt,” she said, obviously in a hurry.

When they got home, neither of them could find the receipt.

Aiden spent the next two days online. He dug around Craigslist, read a string of suspicious e-mails that allegedly came from nuns or elderly philanthropists who needed a blank check to set up direct deposit before they could send him an application, and smoked too many cigarettes. When he filled out online applications, he always found something he couldn't fill in; his hourly wage at a store that paid him entirely in tips, the mailing address of his first job, an emergency contact. If he chose his mother, what would it say about his social skills? And what if he chose Nurse? What would they think when the work number was the number for Animal Control?

“You're being ridiculous,” Nurse kept saying, and every time he said it Aiden could feel something bottom out inside him. “They never check

that kind of stuff. And besides, you're a college graduate. Shouldn't you be working somewhere better?"

"No one's hiring," said Aiden. "All I get is a bunch of pyramid schemes."

"That law office at the strip mall had a sign out for a receptionist."

Aiden looked up from the screen and rested his head on his fist.

They stared at each other for a moment, and then the room began to tilt, and Aiden clung to the laptop for stability. Any moment, the floor would turn sideways and pour him off of it.

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"Are you okay?" asked Nurse.

He could barely hear Nurse, who seemed tilted at a bizarre angle, like a sculpture just beginning to fall over.

Nurse had a hand on each of his shoulders

and pulled him back from the laptop. "Dude, you're hyperventilating."

And he was. His breath came fast, and it felt like something outside him was sucking air out of his lungs and blowing it back in. After a minute he got it under control and the room slowly shifted back into place. Nurse was still holding onto his shoulders.

Aiden would wash Nurse's dishes, vacuum his carpet, clean his counters. He alphabetized Nurse's DVD collection and wiped the patina of brown ooze off his absent roommate's door. He dumped the ashtrays and bought new batteries for everything in the house. He got little beads full of lemon-scented fluid that deodorized the garbage disposal.

One night they were drunk together, watching an awful movie that Nurse said he needed if he was going to get his mind off what he'd done that day—a whole litter of miniature dachshunds and both parents.

"I thought there was a lot of demand for purebreds?" said Aiden. He stroked Lurch's back. Lurch snored.

"Not if they have kennel cough." Nurse sat straight up. He still wore his scrub pants, but he'd changed into a plain olive t-shirt. He stared at the TV with a look of wide-eyed fascination, like someone who wanted to avoid staring at something else.

"They had kennel cough? All of them?" Aiden realized he was

staring at Nurse, and turned to watch the TV. On the screen, a black-clad woman broke a man's spine, leaning forward to give the camera a good view of her breasts as she did so.

"One of them," said Nurse. "But it spreads like crazy. And we can't afford to risk having the whole shelter get sick."

"The vets don't give you any kind of discount?"

"We don't call the vets," said Nurse. Lurch made little snorting noises. "Can we not talk about this?"

"OK," said Aiden. Lurch's snorting turned into honking.

"Lemme see him for a second," said Nurse.

Aiden handed the dog over. Nurse cradled him in his arms and gently pinched his nose. Then he scratched Lurch's throat, and after swallowing a few times Lurch strutted onto the arm of the couch, lay down and fell back to sleep.

Aiden imagined Nurse putting the dachshunds to sleep. He imagined a room with pink walls, picture windows shot through with sunlight, Nurse cradling the tiny dachshund puppies and sliding the needle in when they fell asleep in his hands. He imagined them taking one slow, calm breath and going slack on a soft pillow in a shoebox.

In the movie he and Nurse were watching, the black-clad woman and her friends dragged an unconscious teenage girl to the black-clad woman's car.

Nurse came back one day with a manila folder full of job applications. His skin had a glow on it that Aiden hadn't seen in days. The cartoon dogs on Nurse's scrubs seemed to be grinning at him. Lurch ran in circles around Nurse's feet and pawed at his leg.

"Dude," he said. "I don't know where you asked, but you missed a ton of openings. I mean, they kind of looked at me funny, but I guess that's what happens when you go to Barnes & Noble looking like this." Lurch ran into the kitchen, where Aiden had been mopping, and slid around on the wet floor before scuttling back to Nurse with a scrap of fabric.

"Thanks," Aiden said. "I'll look in a minute."

"I'm taking a shower," said Nurse. He scratched Lurch behind the ears, tugged on the scrap until it came loose, and threw it into the bedroom. "I'll leave this by the couch, okay?"

Nurse left the room and Aiden finished mopping, then went to the

living room and

looked at the manila folder. Lurch followed him, the drool-soaked scrap of fabric hanging from his mouth. A Starbucks application slid out of the folder and flopped onto the floor. It was bright green and reminded him of the color of Nurse's favorite scrubs. Aiden picked it up and read it over. He thought about the loss prevention worker who'd followed him through the aisles, wondered if Barnes & Noble even had any, then crumpled up the application and stuffed it into a box of his clothes. No sense taking that kind of risk.

Sometimes, their walks synchronized without the slightest thought or effort, until one of them noticed and slowed down. Sometimes, one of them would go to walk Lurch, and the other would come along, say that he had nothing better to do. Sometimes, one of them would come into the living room and find the other one staring at the TV screen, holding a cigarette that had burned itself down to a finger of ash, and would know not to ask. It was at times like this that Aiden thought his life was going somewhere.

Once they were walking Lurch when they passed Aiden's old house. One of the walls was starting to sink into itself, and one side of the roof sagged visibly. Some of the vinyl siding had already cracked.

"Wow," said Aiden.

"What?"

"I'm really homeless."

Lurch peed on the mailbox and stared at them with his bulging eyes.

"Not really," said Nurse. "I mean, you live on my couch, so I guess that's a home. And my roommate might not be coming back until spring, so you're pretty much set."

"Really?"

"Yeah," said Nurse. "He called me yesterday. Said he'd joined this missionary group or something."

"Weird." Aiden couldn't stop smiling.

A couple days later, Aiden stood in the parking lot behind Bed, Bath & Beyond with a folder full of job applications. He had a voided check and his social security card in his wallet in case anyone wanted to hire him on

the spot. He'd warned Nurse that this wasn't likely, it being the middle of summer and there not being all that many openings, but Nurse asked him if he was serious about finding a job, and Aiden got out his checkbook without a word.

"If you get a job," Nurse had said the next morning. "I mean, I need you to find one either way if you're gonna be sleeping on the couch, and Nate's mailing over his room key and if you're gonna be subleasing then you definitely need one, but anyway..."

"Yeah?"

"If you can find even some shitty part-time minimum wage thing, and I can find some shitty part-time minimum wage thing, then I've been crunching the numbers and we could make the rent without me having to kill—without me having to destroy animals anymore."

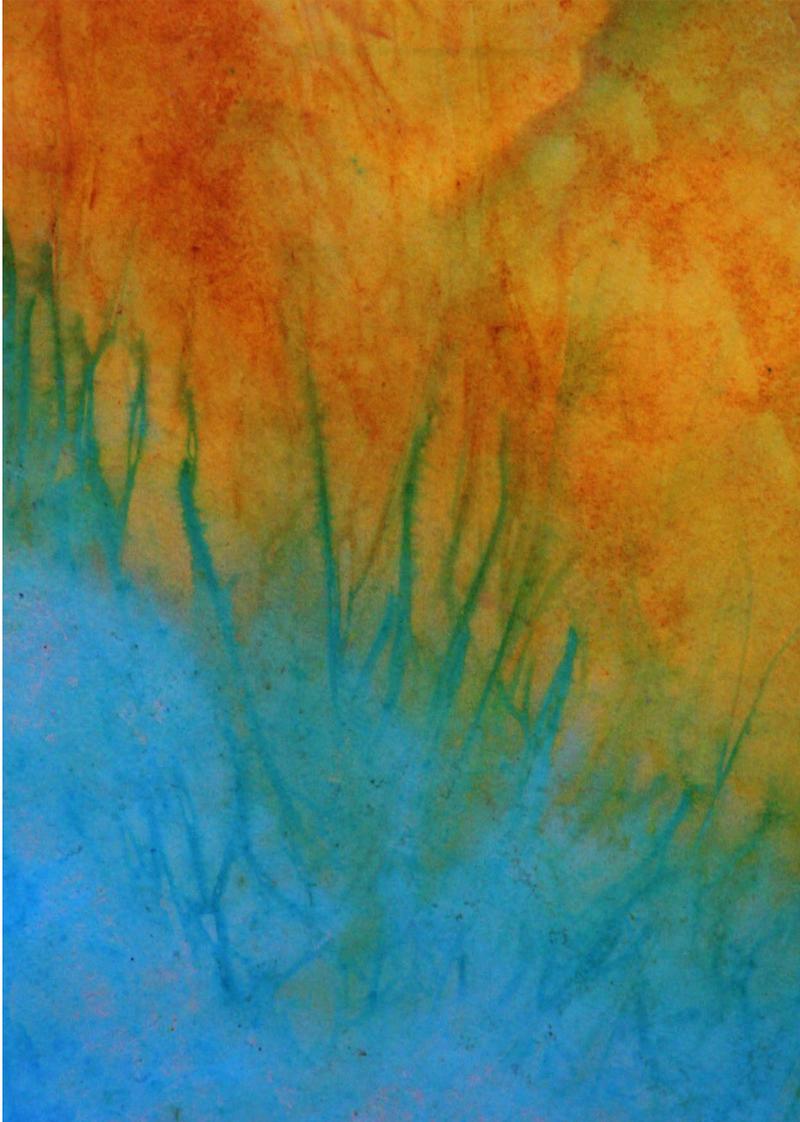
Nurse was probably destroying his first animal of the day while Aiden walked around the corner to Starbucks. The earth seemed to open up between him and the front door; it grew farther and farther away with every step he took toward it. Aiden sat down on a chair outside the store and looked at the application. He checked it carefully for mistakes, but there was nothing wrong with it. He remembered his time at the library, scanning, stamping answering an endless barrage of stupid questions, excuses for late books, having to keep everything moving. Then he looked through the Starbucks window at what the baristas were doing. It occurred to him that he didn't know the answers to any of the stupid questions he'd get asked. That he wouldn't know what to do with any beverage. That he was a terrible barista. He threw the application away.

That was stupid, he told himself while he stood in line for coffee. He could learn. They all had to learn. Then he went to FedEx and did the exact same thing.

It was a hot day, and Aiden's dress shirt was laced with sweat. The girl at Top Dollar kept glancing at his armpit. She looked over his application. "So you can only work these hours?"

"The bus doesn't run any later," he said. He thought about telling her that he could call a taxi if the shift was long enough to justify the cost, but before he could formulate the sentence she said, "We'll call you if we have an opening. Was there anything else you needed help with?"

Outside, everything was white with late morning sun, and the parking lot swirled with mirages. He looked over the applications, looked at the strip malls on every street corner, realized how many times he would have to do this, and each one would give him that same tone of voice, those same



quivers in his stomach, that same feeling of a world just starting to turn over on its side. But at least now he knew not to waste time with the places that were open after eight.

“I’m done,” said Nurse as he came out of the shelter’s back door. He had a dark stain on his scrubs with a clear imprint of a dog’s nose in it. “I’m gonna fucking quit.”

Aiden’s world stopped turning for a moment. “What?”

“I fucking can’t take it anymore.” Nurse unlocked the car and got in.

Aiden yanked on the passenger side handle until Nurse unlocked it. When Aiden got in, Nurse had turned the radio up all the way, but Aiden turned it down.

“Dude, you can’t fucking quit. I mean, not until I get a job.”

“Yeah, sure.” Nurse rolled his eyes. “I’ll wait until then.”

“Hey,” said Aiden. They were speeding out of the parking lot.

“What the hell do you mean?”

Nurse lit a cigarette without rolling down the window. They drove through residential streets where the parallel parked SUVs barely left them with any room to drive. A shrill talk radio host bleated through the speakers.

Nurse rolled down the window. “Nothing,” he said. A cloud of smoke had formed in the car, blotting out the smell of scared dog. “I’m sorry, man. I can be such an asshole sometimes.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Aiden. “I’m kind of a shitheel myself.”

A week passed. No one called. Nurse kept telling Aiden that he should call the places where he’d applied, and Aiden kept saying that he would, he just wanted to wait a little.

“I shouldn’t be pushy,” he said. “Besides, how often do you call the vets you applied at?”

“I called one of them this morning.”

Aiden sighed. He was reading job postings online. All of them looked like pyramid schemes or outright frauds. “I’ll start calling tomorrow,” he said. “Can I get a cigarette?”

Nurse stuck two in his mouth, lit them, handed one to Aiden. He felt something else pass to him, and then Lurch stumbled into the room,

tripped on himself, and flopped over to sleep next to Aiden's laptop.

Aiden overslept the next day, and the day after that he woke up to hear Nurse on the phone. He stood up, still dressed in a wrinkled t-shirt and a pair of jeans, unwrapped the dingy sheets that had coiled around him while he slept, and walked into the kitchenette. He started making coffee when Nurse came into the room and leaned against the doorway. Nurse sucked viciously on his cigarette.

"Barnes & Noble couldn't find your application."

"Huh?"

"I called and told them I was you."

"What?"

"And the other places, too. You gave the wrong phone number at the dollar store, by the way." Nurse lowered his head and shoved the last three words out through clenched teeth. Then he walked into the room, sat down at the dining table and rested his forehead in his hands. "Aiden," Nurse said. "What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know," said Aiden. He took a seat across from Nurse. Lurch slid across the tile floor and begged for scraps.

"Because I want to help you, and I want you to..." Nurse ran his hands over his shaved head. "I want you to pull yourself together, and to... I don't know. I mean, I don't even know what's wrong with you."

"Nothing's wrong with me," said Aiden. Lurch sat on the floor and stared at him.

"Then why are we here?"

"Because I—"

"I can't help you," said Nurse.

"I don't understand."

Lurch gave up on Aiden and began scratching Nurse's leg. Nurse picked him up and held him. The dog sneezed and licked Nurse's face.

"Look," Nurse pushed himself upright, stood there, his eyes half-closed. "I come home every day smelling like anal glands and covered in streaks of blood from where the needle doesn't go in right or the dog's been bitten or where it's bitten me. I can't help you."

"So what do I do?"

"I don't know."

Aiden got up, went to the living room and dredged a backpack from the heap of clothes in his open suitcase. He stuffed it with underwear, a few decent shirts, some socks, a pair of khakis.

"You can keep Lurch for now," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know," said Aiden, and he pulled his cell phone charger from the wall. "I'll call you later today." Then he left.

It was a humid morning, and he felt the first drops of sweat percolate on his skin as he stood on the reeking porch. He could hear birds in the distance, and the swoosh of the morning commute on the nearby highway. The newspaper lay by the edge of the road, and he went to pick it up. He could picture Nurse waiting for him inside: Nurse scratched his shaved head with one hand and held Lurch in the other. Lurch's bulging eyes stared at the doorknob as if he'd never seen it before.

At the edge of the driveway, Aiden looked both ways down the street. He could feel the heat build up under his bangs. He imagined Nurse, on his way to work tomorrow, and the day after, and the killing room filled up to Nurse's chest with dead dogs. Lurch would wait behind the baby gate all day, chewing a scrap of denim, peeing in the corner until Nurse came home and cried into the dog's velvety fur.

Aiden imagined that he might be able to help them.

The street shifted around him. Aiden's sweat became icy, and he had to fight to slow down his breathing. He focused his eyes on a palm tree across the street, and when the world stopped spinning he turned and saw a couple walking their dog down the street. One wore a yellow sundress, the other dressed entirely in black. They walked a few inches apart and passed the leash back and forth between them as the dog circled their legs. For a moment, Aiden watched them, enraptured at their movements, and then he took a deep breath and turned around.