

DUNCAN KLUWAK
BLACKBERRY JUICE

—MAYBE WE OUGHTA GO TO THE SHORE, she's saying, but she doesn't know. I don't hold it against her. I don't know either.

—Maybe.

—Or we could walk around Jack London Square?

This I hold against her. Oakland wanted that tourist trap like Charlie here wants to share his kibble. —Who's a good doggie? You're a good doggie, I tell him in baby tones. He shakes his head, and his ears slap his cheeks. Our TV hisses something about how this unarmed black guy was shot by a policeman on the BART. People are angry. The protests may turn violent, explains the television personality, and then a duck tries to sell us car insurance. —No, I don't want to go to Jack London Square.

—Well, we can't waste another Sunday.

—Whatever you feel like. I just need to get out of this apartment, I say, and take a sip of lukewarm coffee. It's giving me heartburn, and the grinds are collecting along my gum line. Even more disconcerting are these energy efficient light bulbs that bleach the gentleness out of everything. Her choice. Very enviro-conscious, the girlfriend, and I hate that I can't criticize her for any of it. Hanging above the stove there's a plaque that reads, 'Live the life you've imagined.' I remember we bought that together at a bookstore, which is a place one goes to purchase housewares.

—Well, she says, —we need some groceries. We could at least get that out of the way.

—Alright. Let's do that, then.

So we turn off the TV, tell Charlie to stay, we'll be right back, and hop in her hybrid for a drive all the way to the Berkeley Whole Foods. It's full of babies. Their fat limbs stuffed into designer outfits, the recent-born, so satisfied, so ostentatious, glide like pharaohs through the aisles of bright produce. No matter where I go, there's always one staring at me. They're bulbous, and horrifying. Barely strong enough to hold their skulls upright,

yet already their posture is better than mine. —I special, one of them gurgles at me, and I back slowly away.

—Blackberry juice? asks a sales lady. Clown-red lipstick. Desperate amounts of eyeliner. I can hear the mascara crumbling when she blinks.

—Alright, I say, and throw back a thimbleful.

—It's from Saskatchewan. Do you like it?

—Sure. But a little steep at \$14.99 a bottle.

—Maybe, but you wouldn't think twice about paying that much for a bottle of wine, would you?

—Honestly, I can't really tell the difference between wines, so usually I just go for whatever's cheapest. Plus wine gets you drunk, right?

Her pitch: —True, but if you're a recovering alcoholic and you want a red wine substitute, then this is perfect for you.

The girlfriend and I are dumb for a moment. We look each other up and down, trying to decide which one of us this sales lady suspects of alcoholism. I guess I didn't shave today. Or yesterday. Maybe it's me.

—My son is an alcoholic, she clarifies.

—Oh, I say, and break eye contact. Hoping to wait out the silence, I stare down the dry goods aisle, and maybe it's the colour-coded packaging, or maybe it's the retreating shopping cart, but the perspective lines seem to stretch and sharpen, leaving the world more distant. If it wasn't so painful in the long run, I'd stay here; I'd live here. But the seams are imperfect, and in spills that familiar isolation, a weightless, gossamer obscenity filling the space between me and the sales lady. And so I have to turn back. I have to say —I'm sorry.

—Hey, says the sales lady. —What're you gonna do?

—I bet he was the sweetest kid, says the girlfriend. She sounds sympathetic, but I've lived with her long enough to detect mockery.

—Oh, the sweetest.

—I bet he did all his chores.

—Without even being asked to, says the sales lady, and a flake of mascara cracks off. It catches on her cheekbone.

—I bet he—

—Right, I interrupt. —Well, we, like, really can't afford the blackberry juice. So ...

She nods understandingly.

Having escaped to the frozen foods section, the girlfriend says, —Jesus Christ that was awkward.

—Hmm, I say.

—Can you remember if we have any organic pizza bagels left?

I check my email while she stores celery in the crisper. There's a message from my dad. He wants to know if I think the San Jose Sharks have a chance at the cup this year. It's good we can still talk about hockey, because it seems everything else we had in common dissolved after I left Vancouver to live with the girlfriend. Games played, goals scored, save percentages ... maybe these aren't the things love is made of, but they are at least enough to provide a semblance of intimacy. Yeah, I think this is their year, I write him back. In the webpage's right margin, there's an ad for Shark Week on the Discovery Channel. A great white's jaws are reflected in the goggles of a scuba diver.

No, of course there's no going back.

Browsing over to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, I find a human interest story on some woman from the Tenderloin who won a modelling contest. There are pictures of her, a stunner, a real 10, now a great success on a runway in Paris. I can feel a hard-on growing, and as the girlfriend leans over to rearrange frozen chicken breasts, I stand to slide a hand up her shirt. She jumps and knocks her head on the open fridge door. —Ah, *fuck*.

—Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to startle you.

—What do you want?

—Are you alright?

—Yeah. It didn't really hurt much.

—Oh, OK. That's good, I say. And then, after straightening a Shiva magnet that we bought on a trip to India, I kiss her.

—Hey, she says, pushing me away. Charlie's drool is flowing down the unlevel floor.

—What, I say, and kiss her again. This time she kisses back, and then there's the removal of shirts and the unbuckling of belts, but I turn all goose flesh and shrivelled. —Your hands are cold.

—They were in the freezer, she says, rubbing them together and warming them with her breath. —How's that? Better?

—Yeah, I say, but nothing she does gets me beyond a semi. —I'm sorry.

—It's OK, she says, and I believe her. But whether it's OK because she accepts me, inadequacies and all, or because sex with me is a chore nowadays, is a question I choose not to ponder.

I pull up my pants and check my email again.

We decide to spend the rest of the afternoon with Charlie in a park by the port. There's no one else here. Walking through this place, I can't help feeling that it was once a concept tossed around conference tables. Some urban planning committee decided the waterfront needed refreshing, and in a grandiose re-editing of public space, they cut directly from industry to grassland. But everything is grey, and damp, and too cold, and I'm annoyed.

The Mumford Perplex, one of those gargantuan transport ships, is being unloaded by cranes that resemble the crippled offspring of giraffes and can openers. —What do you think's in those things? I ask, pointing to a container suspended by magnetism.

—Frankincense, wigs for those on chemo, lamp shades, Peruvian doubloons, and goats.

—Alive?

She nods. Alright. Pretty good answer, I think.

—And what's your guess? she says.

—I don't know. All I see is corrugated metal and customs stickers.

Charlie doesn't care to imagine what's inside the containers with us. He runs unleashed up ahead, beneath the bars of an alien jungle gym, and then spins after his tail. —Charlie, come here, she calls.

—Let him be, I say, and kiss the crown of her scalp. She turns to smile up at me. She's really not that attractive. Sometimes I wish I could rub out her features with turpentine and repaint her face.

—I love you.

—Love you too, I say. We walk for a while in silence, hands in our pockets, eyes mostly on the ground. Voices from the port come travelling inaudible on the wind. Laughter. Jokes about someone's wife, I bet. That whole area is fenced off with chain link and razor wire. —But I felt kind of sorry for her, you know?

—Who?

—The juice lady, I say.

—Oh, she says, laughing.

—She just seemed sad, is all. I mean, how broken do you have to be to tell a stranger that your son is an alcoholic?

—How deranged do you have to be to use a story like that to sell juice?

—But she told us that almost straight off, right? Before her name, even.

—Where did Charlie go?

—He's over there, I say, pointing to our pup dashing along the sea wall. Overcast clouds have turned to misting rain. I never should have worn wool.

—Hey, there's our good boy.

—But don't you think?

—Think what?

—That she was trying to, you know, actually be vulnerable in front of someone.

—Jesus. No. She was trying to sell an overpriced bottle of juice.

—Alright, well, fuck it then.

—No, we can talk about it if you want, she says, but Charlie starts barking, so we drop it and rush over to the retaining wall. —What's the matter, boy? What's bothering you?

The tide is way out, and a flat bed of seaweed extends for hundreds of yards to the San Francisco Bay. Though a municipal sign claims that this is a vibrant ecosystem, there is no movement on the slimy plain. It's just a mass of algae and decomposition. But what's got Charlie's attention is this life-size model of a dolphin leaping into the air. If the tide was in, it would appear as though the dolphin was just breaching the water. As it is, I can see the crooked stand reaching from the sea floor into the dolphin's belly. We both crouch to calm Charlie with pats and hugs. —It's alright, boy. He can't hurt you.

And as we make eye contact across our dog, as she smiles at me and stretches Charlie's skin over his shoulder blades, I wonder if she's thinking what I'm thinking: that we both love him; that neither of us will give him up; and that, any day now, Charlie will be the source of greatest bitterness between us. Are we competing for his affection? I know he likes his ears rubbed, so I rub his ears.

—Thing looks about to break its nose on the landing, she says, and we stand to observe the model dolphin.

—Yeah, we came at the wrong time of day.

She nods and looks back towards the city. —I can't believe the weekend is almost over already.

—Hmm.

I've lied at least once on this walk. Has she? I think so. I hope so. It'll make things easier when the time comes. But maybe we could avoid it. Maybe we could step down into the muck to make a mattress of Styrofoam, kelp, and soggy cigarettes. We could mummify ourselves in seaweed, and then, all salty and calm and preserved before rupture, lie side by side, forever under the dolphin. —You're in a gloomy mood, she says. She can read my thoughts like that sometimes.

—Makes me not hate people so much.

—Well, I like you better when you're happy.

—Fair enough, I say, and I know she's right. I am better when I am happy. But even at my best, she's always been too good for me, and I have no right to judge her. Or maybe that's just an excuse. A crab scuttles out from beneath a blade of kelp. It wanders for awhile, seemingly at random, and then after inspecting a plastic grocery bag, disappears once more below the surface of a muddy pool. —You remember that night back in India, at Palolem, when we went swimming and we stayed in the water for like five hours straight?

—Yeah. Great night.

—I know. Amazing night. And there were those plankton that lit up whenever you moved? I remember I'd sweep my arm underwater and it'd look like I had this trailing wing made of lightning or something.

She nods and gives a sort of smirk. Or maybe it's only a smile.

—But there was this one moment, I say, —that I don't think I ever told you about, because I thought that if I did, then it would be, like, changed, or something. But it's been so long that—

—Three years, almost.

—Yeah. Like three years. But it doesn't matter how long ago it was. What matters is that it was getting towards dawn, and the sky was turning this incredible violet colour, and the water was dead still. I mean, I didn't even know the Arabian Sea was supposed to get like that. And but also it was so warm that there was this mist rising off of it. You remember that? So there was this violet sky, and the water a perfect mirror, and the mist blurred any difference between the two. Looking west, it seemed the whole Earth had been transformed into this, like, luminous ether.

It's hard to keep my voice from breaking on the memory.

—Then you disappeared. I looked everywhere around but you were just gone. And I even started to panic a little, because I swear it was like two minutes before you surfaced again. And you did it real slow, so there were no ripples. It was more like the water just slid back from your features, and I remember your eyes were closed, and your hair was black and shining, and it was so quiet I could hear the water dripping back into the sea. But the thing is you were so far out in the bay by then that I couldn't really recognize you. Your face was all purple shadows, and there were these weird angles of pink and blue that didn't join together right. Then you opened your eyes, I mean

it was just your face suspended out there in this brightening ether, and then you opened your eyes, and I swear, right then, you might've...

—Might've what?

You might've been Eve, new to the world, still held in God's hand.
—You just looked very pretty, is all.

Definitely smiling now, she takes my wool sweater between her thumb and forefinger, and tugs me closer. The dolphin, too, is smiling. Here's hoping it gets washed out to sea by the tides.

—But, you know, you really could have been nicer to the juice lady.

She drops my sweater. —How about we just forget the fucking juice lady, alright?

—Alright.

—Anyway, this place is kind of a drag, she says, and walks off in the direction of her car. —Come, Charlie, she calls.

—Pass the pizza bagels?

—Here.

—Thanks, she says, sliding a few onto her plate. She's through her second bite when the sirens reach us. Emergency lights tint our walls red then blue, and then it's all a roaring orange. Shouting. Gunshots? Charlie hides under the dinner table. —Jesus. What the hell is going on out there?

From our fourth-floor window, the two of us watch police advancing in riot gear, civilians fleeing, and fire trucks trying to navigate through gridlocked traffic. A few streets east of us, an inferno is turning buildings to cinder. It seems like the whole block is on fire, the flames curling taller, now twice the height of any building in the neighbourhood, and still endlessly higher into a black sky. Wind blowing in off the ocean kills any fiery sounds. I can hear seagulls calling, and the air smells of fresh oysters.

—Oh my god. Should we leave? What should we do?

—We're fine, I say. —They'll put out the fire before it gets anywhere near us.

—But what could have happened?

—I don't know. Those protests, maybe.

—That's a full-scale riot, not a protest.

The life I've imagined: coffee minus the heartburn; socks that don't fray; books actually read; autumn without the passing; knowledge of carpentry; deliberateness; a room to be alone in; a dog who finally catches his tail; a kiss, meant; and youth, well spent. —Things must have gone wrong.

—I hope no one gets hurt, she says. An ambulance goes screaming past. Someone shatters the windshield of a Camry with a baseball bat. —But, hey, if it's really bad, I might not have to go into work tomorrow.

—Yeah, that'd be great, I tell her. —Then we could spend another day together.