

Skosh

Short story / Dark comedy / crime

Complete story.

You're jolted awake by an angry wind's morning song and find yourself in a sleeping bag on a hardwood floor. Your first question is whether you've broken three years of sobriety and ended up passed out in a crack den. The cobwebbed ceiling fan staring down at you does little to ameliorate your fears. Your next questions regard the 20-something redhead next to you: namely, who is she and why is she dead?

You try to piece together a patchwork of memories from the evening prior as you take in the thunderstorm-stained clouds through a window looking out on a residential street in Richmond (at least you think it's Richmond) and remember how your grandmother would always tell you that God is at his bowling match when a thunderstorm hit.

You hear footsteps. You think you're in a walk-up apartment. Or maybe a house? The monolithic oak tree outside is at eye level, and from that vantage, you glean that you're on the third floor of a row house. Richmond, it is.

The contents of the room conspire to give you zero useful clues. Aside from the sleeping bag you're sharing with a girl whose throat is slit like a hastily opened envelope, there isn't much: two suitcases, a handful of boxes, and a 40-inch TV resting against exposed brick.

Your brain needs rest. You wonder if God is indeed in a bowling league, who else is on his team, what their average score is, and whether they use bumpers.

The trouble with being a recovering alcoholic and drug addict is that your memory is a hodgepodge of grainy clips filmed on an ancient Super 8 Camera. For instance, you remember someone with perfectly manicured hands pouring a white powder on a table like fairy dust, then flipping

one of those hands up and twirling it like a well-trained sommelier finishing her pour. The only problem? This could have happened last night. Or it could've happened eight years ago.

You try to remember the difference between deductive and inductive reasoning. Your brain hurts even more as a result.

You've never seen a dead body before. Well, technically, Uncle Walter had an open-casket funeral, but that doesn't really count. Or does it? Okay, you've never seen a murdered body before.

You look up at the ceiling fan and realize it isn't moving. No wonder it's so goddamn hot in here. Well, it could also be that you're sweating up a storm because you woke up next to a dead girl. Could be the lack of circulated air. Could be the dead girl. Could be your thyroid.

You get up to turn on the fan and realize you're stark naked. You peer inside the sleeping bag and find a pair of boxers, a pair of jeans, and a button-down shirt. You get dressed and turn on the ceiling fan.

You have a splitting headache. Yeah, you could've easily gotten fucked up last night. Or maybe someone drugged you. Or both. Or it's the dead girl you may or may not have fucked before she died? All of the above?

You assume you had sex with the girl because you were both naked in the morning and she is - was - breathtakingly pretty. But maybe it was just really hot in there and she didn't know how to turn on the ceiling fan. Or the light. Evidence has shown, you superb fucking sleuth, you, that this girl had just moved in.

You think that that was inductive reasoning but remain uncertain.

You think of the movies you've watched where the protagonist does something really dumb and you think to yourself, God, that's so dumb,

and then try to decide what to do next that someone watching you on TV wouldn't have that reaction to. Nothing springs to mind.

You didn't kill her. That much is clear.

Well, it's clear to you, because you know that you're not capable of slicing open another human being like a Thanksgiving turkey. It'd be anything but clear to Richmond's Finest when they come and find a dead girl in a bedroom with nothing but suitcases, boxes, and your DNA.

Maybe there's someone else's DNA? There has to be.

You didn't kill her. You're 99% sure of that.

Wait. Where did that 1% go?

Is it because whoever killed her didn't kill you? Maybe she was the target, and the killer didn't want a two-fer on their hands. They had to have been pretty sure they didn't leave their DNA anywhere, otherwise, they would've killed you.

You begin to wonder if you're making an ounce of sense. Your brain needs another rest. You start to think about rattlesnakes. You question how infinity pools work. You remember how much you like the

word ‘skosh’ but don’t remember what it means.

You miss Mango, your cat, whom you had to put down last month. You feel guilty because you could’ve saved Mango if you’d forked over a \$1600 vet bill. How much would you have paid to save Mango? \$1000? \$500? Those jeans you’re wearing cost \$120. On sale, but still. At full price, that’s what, \$300? Five and a half Mango’s. You’re a jerk.

There are too many questions that need answering! You must focus! You can’t afford to feel guilt right now!

(Just like you couldn’t afford to save Mango, you selfish asshole)

You saunter across the hardwood floor and check the suitcases for a name.

Kerri Horton-Tucker.

Doesn’t ring any bells. You reach into the pocket of your overpriced jeans and take out your phone, search through your contact list. No Kerri’s, no Horton’s. Abel Tucker was your plug in Boston. You should’ve deleted him after rehab. You’re such a flake.

You tell yourself to snap back to reality and try not to get the Eminem song stuck in your head.

Interesting. You’ve never met a single Kerri? Not even during your drunken party days? It’s a pretty common name. Is it weird that the first Kerri you meet ends up dead? Doesn’t seem to augur well for the Kerri’s of the world.

You go through your call list from last night. Three missed calls from a 310 number, starting at 2:14 a.m. and ending at 2:21 a.m.

A quick Google search informs you that 310 is an area code assigned to the greater Los Angeles area.

Why didn’t you answer this Angelo who called you three times? And why were they so desperate to get a hold of you that they thought you would answer on the third try after you didn’t pick up on the first two?

Back to square one.

One of the boxes is partially open, a turquoise sweater and a pair of fashionably ripped jeans leaking out. You want to open one of Kerri Horton-Tucker’s suitcases, but you worry about your DNA.

Seriously, you toad? Your DNA is all over the place! Hell, your semen might be inside Kerri right now and you’re worried about a -

HOLY. SHIT. Is that what you think it is?

Unfortunately, you're pretty sure it is.

You were expecting some neatly folded blouses and a few pairs of jeans when you unzipped the pink suitcase. Instead, you happened upon a fuc-

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

"Ker?? Hey girl, it's Bethany. We're all going to brunch. Bottomless mimosas! You wanna roll?"

That isn't good.

"Hey, Bethany, I'm currently dead, or I would absolutely love to go and start my day off with 17 mimosas."

Your next move is crucial. The person watching you on TV is telling you what to do and what not to do, except you can't hear them, 'cause they don't exist and it's you deciding, isn't it?! No, no, you can't start thinking about whether free will exists! Not now!

You close the suitcase and as you're tiptoeing toward the sleeping bag you feel the tentative floorboards creaking underneath you. Shit. Bethany knows someone is in there and awake.

You open the door and meet Bethany, who introduces herself with a handshake that's weirdly firm. She's short and cute-hot and wearing

glasses that you doubt she wears when she goes out and has the bubbly demeanor of a tour guide for prospective college students.

"Hey, I'm Jay," you tell her. "Kerri had a bit of a rough night and she's still sleeping it off, so I don't think she's gonna make brunch."

"Awww," Bethany says as if her cat died. Like Mango. Don't think of Mango right now! You need to focus. "Well, tell her I hope she feels better, and we'll be back in a couple hours if she needs anything."

"I'll absolutely do that. Enjoy your brunch!" Your two-hour brunch...

You shut the door behind you. One of Kerri's roommates has now seen your face. She knows your name. Shit. That's suboptimal.

You hear Bethany and a couple of other girls outside, which means the house is likely empty. You walk back to the suitcase, zip it shut, exit Kerri's room, shut the door behind you, and head for the stairs.

You step outside into an oppressively cold and windy morning, take out your phone, and request an unwitting getaway vehicle. Alicia, your 4.9-starred Uber driver, is only a minute away.

Alicia pulls up to the curb, sees your suitcase, and pops her trunk. You put the suitcase inside and hop in the car. When you and Alicia meet eyes in the rearview, you're pretty sure she's judging you. You aren't sure whether she thinks you're another hungover douchebag doing the walk of shame, or she saw that your suitcase was pink.

Alicia puts on her left blinker as she leaves the curb, despite the street being entirely empty, and you immediately dislike her; maybe you just want to dislike her because she's unknowingly acting as a mule for you.

You wonder how many Uber drivers act as mules or getaway drivers without ever realizing it. You plan to use that plot thread next time you write a story.

Who are you kidding? You're never gonna write a story again, cause you associate writing with being high, told yourself you can't write unless you're high, and you're never gonna be high again, you hope against hope. You've found, however, that hope rarely stands a chance of winning that particular battle.

You arrive at Winks' residence, a modest ranch house walking distance from downtown. Just being there makes you feel queasy.

You exit the Uber, grab the suitcase, and as you roll it up the driveway to Winks's side door, you take out your phone and overtip Alicia.

You knock three times on the familiar beige door. After what feels like an eternity, Winks partially opens the door, leaving it chained.

"Jay?! It has been a long time, my friend! Come in. Welcome back."

Winks is a Haitian drug dealer. He was your drug dealer for years. The smell inside is familiar; a mixture of incense, weed, and perfume. Winks always has at least one girl over. True to form, there's a short female next to Winks's enormous TV, dancing to music that isn't playing, high on H, nodding off to the point that she looks kyphotic.

You enter Winks's office, where he conducts his business. He's wearing sunglasses, like always. He's called Winks because his right eye spasms so often that it appears as though he's winking at you. After dealing to you for about a year, he told you what happened. "Men lie, women lie - or sometimes they throw lye at your face."

You remember thinking it was nice that he could sublimate such a traumatic incident and have a sense of humor about it. Or maybe you perfunctorily smiled and nodded and hoped he'd shut up and give you your drugs? That seems more likely considering what you were like back then. Back then? Because you're such a saint now! You're -

You stop yourself. No self-shaming - that's one of The Steps. Would your current situation be an exception? Probably. Still, though.

"I inherited something I think you'd be interested in," you lead off with.

Winks nods at the suitcase. "Do tell."

You unzip the suitcase and show him the twelve bricks of heroin. Twelve kilograms. A dozen keys. A boatload of money.

He whistles (not very well) and rubs his soul patch with his thumb.

"And from whom did you inherit this?"

"A girl I know." You're proud of yourself for remembering to use the present tense. "I'd tell you more, but, it's kinda on the down low."

"Say no more," Winks says, holding up his right hand. He looks perturbed. Something is bothering him. "Get naked for me, Jay."

"Sorry, man, I still like my meat off the bone," you reply, even though you know exactly what he's asking you.

"Not a request. I don't see you for three years and you show up one day carrying federal weight?" He kisses his teeth and shakes his head. "We are cool, brother - but we are not that cool."

You nod and unbutton your shirt, showing him your unwired chest.

"Full naked, Jay. I know it's cold outside. I won't judge."

You offer a wan smile as you take off your belt, unzip your pants, and show him that you're not wired for sound. He appears satisfied and gestures for you to put your clothes back on, which you do in a hurry.

"Take a taste for me," Winks tells you.

"I quit," your under-salivated throat manages.

"You think I am asking you these things? If you want an audience? If you want to make a deal? You do what I tell you or get outta my crib."

You swore to yourself - and everyone who loves and cares about you, an ever-diminishing group - that you'd never touch the stuff again.

You know why he's asking. These days, you can never be sure that heroin isn't cut with fentanyl - or worse, carfentanyl, a new and 'improved' synthetic opioid that'll end your life you sure as you were

born - and being the principled businessman that he is, he needs to know that this batch won't kill off his customer base.

There's a bigger problem than saying goodbye to those three years of sobriety - you don't know if the drugs are cut with anything. And, with your tolerance back to zero, even a taste of fentanyl would have you pushing up daisies.

You weigh the risk and reward. The scales are pretty heavily tipped - you're broke, you need to get out of town, and you may be on the run for God knows how long. It's been a while, but with inflation, you stand to make...

You can't do the math in your head, but it's a lot of dough. Still: you'd be breaking the biggest promise you ever made. And one of the only ones you've ever kept.

You take a pair of scissors off Winks's office desk and open one of the bricks. You take a - now you remember - skosh of heroin and snort it.

You lean back in the chair, staring at Winks's ceiling fan - it looks exactly like the one in Kerri's bedroom - and start thinking about rattlesnakes and wondering how infinity pools work as your eyelids get heavy and your body turns as warm as a sunny August day and everything you saw, felt, and experienced this morning melts away into what may or may not become a memory you struggle to remember one day in a future that you may or may not be a part of.