

Milk & Scotch

By Hannah Butcher

Milk

i.

Jackson stomped barefoot in puddles. He liked the way the soggy gravel rolled between his toes. His mother had warned him about parasites, but he knew they were just invisible monsters in the depths of the ground. Invisible meant they couldn't hurt him. "Nope, no hurt," he sang to himself, as he squished and squished in the rain.

ii.

It was Sunday. Jess, the old housemaid, was at church with her daughters, but his stomach was talking to him again. He clambered on top of the kitchen counter, standing on his tippy toes and grabbing the Rice Krispies from the top shelf, and poured it into his favorite faded bowl. He liked Crackle—the cartoon boy who wore a long, red-and-white hat that resembled eccentric hair. His mother snored on the couch. He was careful not to shake the box.

iii.

When he heaved the milk jug from the top shelf, his biceps rolled upward and he was a giant in a tiny kingdom. When his fingers slipped and the jug crashed, milk pooled into the cracks in the floor and beneath the fridge. He was small again. The snoring stopped like a cut engine. Jackson froze like a puddle.

iv.

His mother beat him out of the house with a broom. She slapped him with it so hard that the bristles left welts on his arms, and she huffed so fiercely that Jackson thought the same sound must have been what the wolf made in that story she read to him years ago. He sat on the porch with his head in his hands, pants soaked with milk and eyes puffy. The cows, grazing behind the fence,

moaned. *They hurt, too.* He plucked a petal from his mother's hydrangea bush, red like Crackle's hat, and tucked it behind his ear.

v.

Wearing the flower made him feel better. He was blooming like the welts. While it wasn't raining anymore, the puddles were still swollen, full-bellied. He hopped in one, then the other, his feet still bare, the welts on his arms dripping. He imagined he was wearing red and white.

vi.

Sheila pulled the window curtain to the side. She blinked and wiped her nose across her sleeve. The flower in his hair particularly infuriated her, and his movements were fluid, effeminate. She didn't like seeing her son like this, overcoming weakness and finding strength in it. Why couldn't *she* do that? She could barely remember the last time she danced. Maybe prom night with his father: hay stacks pushed against the walls, low-hanging lights, beer breath, pressed hips. She popped a couple pills and dragged herself outside.

vii.

When she opened the door, Jackson stopped with two feet in grimy water, face suspended in a half-smile. She plucked the flower from his ear, grabbed his hand, pulled him back inside. Told him that, if he promised not to dance like that again, she'd make him eggs.

Scotch

The piano man's black coat, worn at the elbows, was a shadow dancing on the wall. I imagined his face in the keys; it was gentle, yet passionate. His eyes had a story to tell.

My drink was warm and welcoming, like caramel, and my pupils drowned in it. The ice bobbed up and down, swaying to the vibrations of the piano, the vibrations in my skull. I hummed under my breath.

“You okay, boss?” The bartender placed his white rag on the counter. I nodded without looking up. Yeah, I was okay. I was like the piano man, a shadow against white walls. My mother would have liked that comparison.

“Want me to call you a cab?”

A cab? No, no. I wanted to stay here, in the music. My fingertips tingled, and I held them to my face. Laughed.

“Alright, boss. Let’s get you home.”

The piano man played ferociously now, his black coat swaying back in forth in a violent rhythm. Home? No, I didn’t want to go home. Two hands gripped my shoulders, and I yanked them away. I was tired of being pushed around, told how to feel.

“Calm down...” Voices sizzled in the heat and my ears pounded with it. My arms swung, eager to punch anyone, anything. When they didn’t make contact, I chucked my glass of scotch against the wall.

The music stopped. The piano man stared. His face was not what I had imagined; it was cold and harsh, worn and judgmental. There was no semblance of youth in his eyes. No trace of gentleness.

More hands hauled me from the bar stool. Foreign voices surrounded me, and there was the start of an engine, the rumbling of a motor. “Your address, boss, what’s your address?”

I mumbled something. Numbers, then my mother’s name. Then nothing.

I sputtered awake with my hands gripping the sheets.

Light streamed in from beneath the thick curtains, and the radio on my nightstand blasted something awful and autotuned. I imagined the sounds streaming from a piano instead and sunk back into the pillows, splaying my limbs across the sheets. A couple of empty beer cans tumbled to the carpet around me. I pretended the dots on the popcorn ceiling were constellations.

When I rolled my head, I saw my mother standing in the doorway. She unbraided her hair and opened the windows and released the tobacco-filled air, letting it escape into the city. She scolded me for the mess. I returned her insults with a smile.

A knock on my front door. I groaned, stifling a headache. It was probably the neighbor in the next apartment, equipped with her arsenal of complaints with that yapping dog at her side. I closed my eyes.

The knocks continued, pulsating until I swung my legs over the bed. *Goddamn*. I steadied myself on the walls, sifting through cigarette cartons, stumbling to the door.

The rusted chain squeaked free. “Can I help you?” I tasted last night’s alcohol on my breath.

“Yeah, uh... You were the man at the bar last night, right?”

“There were many men at the bar.”

“I meant the man who, uh, threw the glass.”

“Yes.” My headache flared. I closed my eyes, wanting to be back into bed.

The man shifted his feet. “Can I come in? I’m the man who played—who plays the piano.”

“Oh.”

“Can I come in?”

I sighed. The humiliation of last night clung to me like fog, but I couldn’t shake it off. *God, just let it be done already*. I opened the door and motioned to the tan-colored couch, bills and books on the armrests. “Excuse the mess.”

The man stepped inside and coughed. He still wore his black trench coat. He tugged his black gloves from his hands. They were frayed at the fingertips, speckled with white fabric.

I sunk into the couch and pressed the back of my head against the wall, closing my eyes. City horns blasted in the distance, construction workers bellowed out commands over the revving of trucks, and shopkeepers scraped open the metal doors to their shops. I tilted my head toward the window, absorbing the sounds.

“The music of the morning,” he mumbled.

I analyzed his face. He looked at least sixty-five years old—salt-and-pepper stubble, crow’s feet, dark pouches under his eyes. Something in his face looked familiar, though, as if I had known him for years.

“What do you want?”

The man balled his gloves into his palms, toying with the fingertips. “I want to help.”

I chuckled, steadying my arm around the back of my couch. “Yeah?”

“You’re not well, especially—”

“Why do you give a shit?”

He lifted his eyes to mine and then turned, taking in the piled dishes, the unorganized bills, the overturned Rice Krispies boxes across the counter. He shook his head, his face falling. Disappointment.

I froze, feeling small, watching this familiar, skinny body block my television. He lowered himself onto the couch in silence, leaning down to pick up a half-used cigarette from the ground. He tugged a lighter from his coat pocket and held the white paper loosely between his lips.

As he settled, he cocked his head, seeming to listen to the discordant sounds outside.

“I know you miss her.” The cigarette in his mouth sizzled. “I do, too. Have for years. But she’s never coming back.”

Oh.

This was the man I was never allowed to contact. This was the man I was never meant to meet. Rage, grief, blame, curiosity; what to say to an intimate stranger, a broken old man with whom I share a dead woman, a man who loved the same woman I loved and yet hated her enough to leave her with a newborn? What to say?

It didn’t matter. No words were needed. We sat sank into the couch together until early afternoon, absorbing the gray smoke and the music of the morning.