



TELEVISION

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TEXACO

San Diego to St. Augustine.

It was a plan he made, she was paid to be there. Think Make-A-Wish—but older, tired, less cost effective. He had this thing in his brain. Big fleshy creature with teeth and ideas of what a tumor ought to be. Ideas like freedom. Growth. The tumor read Locke. Fought the brain most nights.

He wanted to see the pirate museum. That's why they were going to St. Augustine.

She was doing her job. She liked being a caregiver about as much as anyone can. This patient was one of the good ones.

She was in the passenger seat of the Nova, looking at her hands, remembering a moment many years ago when she was a waitress in the Gaslamp. Some young half-drunk guessed her age. Said age was in the hands, you could always see it. Back then she was impressed when the half-drunk guessed twenty four. Now, staring at her hands in her patient's Chevy Nova, she didn't see much of a point in the game.

Her patient was inside the gas station, eyeballing energy drinks. He wasn't allowed to drink many. Bad for the tumor. Bought one anyway. Hid it in the pocket of his jacket, drinking it down the toilet while she sat outside, aware of her patient's recklessness.

The patient stared into the cold metal can and tried to talk to the creature in his brain.

How much time do I have left?

He stood the empty can near the faucet, tried to make it look like it belonged there, waited on a response. Let his eyes blur. Aluminum can, toilet porcelain, silence—something indistinct and achy. Everything becoming part of the furniture.

The tumor didn't answer. It was lazy like that.

He chose a strange path through the states.
Trying to prolong the thing in his head from
growing. An arrangement:

Don't grow until St. Augustine.

The first stop was a rundown set of hotels in
Primm, Nevada.

He opted for the hotel with the log flume.
The ride ran through the casino. Little railings
kept the drunk distracted from falling in. When
he was a kid he was terrified of the man-sized
machine cowboys peppered along the flume
edges, the way the paint on their eyes chipped,
blind and agonized. Still, he wanted to see the
animatronic masked bandit through the window
of the arcade. Used to be you'd climb into a log
and shoot your laser gun at a bunch of fake
cowboys. The outlaw used to pop out from
behind a barrel and shoot water into your boat. It
doesn't do that anymore.

So they ended up at McDonalds. McGriddle. It tasted like floor.

They slept in separate beds. Kept it professional, always.

The patient talked in his sleep. Maybe the tumor talked for him.

In the morning he insisted they take the monorail to the other hotels. They saw the car Bonnie and Clyde died in. It looked exactly how you'd expect, only someone must've scrubbed the inside.

The last stop was the carousel but there was no carousel there.

Some radio advertisement stuck on repeat.

Give your hair new body.

Give your hair new body.

They drove through the desert.

Got a headache, he said.

No more til New Mexico, she said. Try to
hide it all you want but I see your hands shaking.

He had a problem. Didn't admit it. What
does it matter. The tumor was getting restless. If
he couldn't feel the thing in his head expanding,
it wouldn't burst.

She wanted the best for him.

Besides, he was driving.

Employee is banging on the bathroom door.

Bathroom out, out bathroom, Employee says.
The patient complies. The tumor isn't talking
today anyway.

She's out in the car as usual, browsing a stolen
issue of *Sky Mall*. She has never been on a plane.
Maybe she's got time. Sell the car after the
patient croaks in St. Augustine. Catch a flight
back to California. Save herself some trouble.
See the sky.

He's trying to break the Nova's window. She keeps her hand hovering over the lock. He runs around the car trying to unlock a side she's not guarding with the bent up key he's got but she's quicker.

Just one, he says. It's agony.

Not until we've stopped for the night.

He tries to break the windows. Can't get the velocity right. He walks away, sits down in the street.

Fine, he says. I'll just wait here.

It's late, so she can afford to wait.

The patient falls asleep on the crosswalk.

She watches. She can sleep tomorrow all the way to Carlsbad Caverns.

The radio picks up a numbers station. Yosemite Sam is threatening something between gasps of silence. The sound of the radio fills the car with ghosts.

Patient in a fetal pose. The sleep-talked prayer of *Give your hair new body*.

When did this become normal, she wonders, this crosswalk drenched in strip-mall light. This could be anywhere. This could be anyone.

Tomorrow they will find a place to get pancakes. Always pancakes. For some patients it's chocolate-chip pancakes or banana-nut pancakes. With this one the pancakes are plain.

Why don't you drive?

One crash is all it took. Don't have the stomach.

Could save us some trouble.

No license, not anymore.

Am I allowed to ask?

You'd make it too Hollywood.

So that's a no?

That's a no.

Carlsbad Caverns is a hole in the ground.

Wow, he says. A big hole in the ground.

He's the one who chose to come out here. It's his erratic flight path.

They walk into the hole. Wait, eyes adjust. They are determined to make it to the bottom. He holds the handrail, suspiciously quiet.

What do you think? she asks.

I'm pretending I'm inside a giant.

Then he thinks about the tumor and corrects himself. *On top* of a giant.

They drive to Las Cruces. It is a long drive. Not many stops in between. At a gas station he begs for pills. Just one, he says. Been driving all day, and then there's the walking.

She is resilient, even when he breaks her nose.

Here is Las Cruces and apologizing.

They check in to a La Quinta. Blood on the curtains. Continental breakfast.

Room 413.

Color television.

She asked for twin beds but they gave her a queen so she'll have to make due on the floor.

They watch *The Price is Right*. The patient on the bed. The tumor inside the patient on the bed. Pressing his eyes. Becoming his eyes. He walks over to her. Says, Can I get some help here? Fist clenched. Eyes apologizing, desperate.

Let me get my purse.

On television people struggle with the wheel. People try spinning it but it just looks so heavy.

Bet my tumor could do it, he says. No big deal. Easy.

She fiddles with child-proof bottle cap. One pill left. It makes the bottle look big. A pharmaceutical dollhouse. She broadcasts potential futures in her brain. How many different parts of a face can be broken? The pharmacy is so far away. She revisits dismissed daydreams, pictures flying coach over Arizona, the patient calm in the ground.

Seems peaceful.

The Price is Right morphs into a marathon of *Family Feud*. It is getting late. The patient's eyes blur, a collaboration between the tumor and exhaustion. He slips into the crack between mundanity and dreams.

She sits in front of the television, asks Steve Harvey what to do. She prays for a sign from the Almighty. She prays that there is an Almighty and that, whatever it is, it can communicate through game shows.

Steve Harvey's questions have nothing to do with caring for terminal people.

The patient sleep-talks. The words are more slurred than usual. The tumor is winning. Infecting his language. Soon it will make ears ring, muffle other voices. It will take his bowels. It will take his eyes, his image of her.

First it will take his patience.

She's heard stories. Whispers from peers about caregivers who couldn't stick it out. People who thought they were making it easier. Less painful. Less traumatizing.

There was this video passed around on the sly where a grandmotherly woman builds a way out via plastic bag and party-balloon helium. The humane way.

There are no party supply stores in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

She tells herself it is just a game. This kind of thing is supposed to be cathartic. She's heard of this technique too—picture the aggression fully. Let it out. Imagine particulars. Note the logistics.

She scans the room for sturdy objects. There is nothing quiet enough. She thinks the gift shop switchblade in the zipper pocket of her purse, a cheap looking thing with a hotel name etched into the faux-wood. Imagines slipping it into her pocket to put it out of her mind. Even in her daydreams, she is not cruel.

She settles on the pillow—the red round throw. It is the only gentle option.

In her mind it is the middle of the night and she's sitting on the patient's chest trying to vacuum-seal the pillow over his mouth. But the dream is wrong— she didn't account for his strength. Didn't expect the thrashing. The switchblade in her back pocket tickles. This is her holding it over the patient's chest, making marks. Think Thanksgiving turkey carving. The patient feels how his body is soft. The tumor feels silly for hurting all this time. The body is soft. The tumor is not a knife. Pain makes time elastic. The tumor apologizes. Every time the tumor made the patient dizzy, enraged, teary-eyed, whatever—the tumor sees how greedy it's been. And for once it feels. Small.

Tumor's got nothing on the determined human making a blade dance on the patient's chest. The tumor regrets. It's sorry it ever believed. Got too big for its britches. If it had stayed a small tumor, a hardworking but meager little tumor, it wouldn't be in this mess. And the patient is done with the conflict on his body. He's looking over her shoulder at the television. Cartoon bears hawk toilet paper. Then he catches her eyes. The look of apology, the look of relief, the way her eyebrows and nostrils flare in unison—almost comical. She'll take the long route back to San Diego, back to the bar where the young man looked at her hands, and it'll all be one clumsy cautionary tale. In the middle of this thought, the patient leaves his body behind.

The patient's tumor-talk brings her back into her body, back into the room, back to the noise of *Family Feud*. Her shirt sticks to her chest. She lowers herself onto the carpet. In the glow of the commercial break she feels her ribs relax. The pressure on her chest recedes. She is a house settling.

She's missing out on the continental breakfast. It feels like a waste.

The television ignores her. On screen a closeup cartoon angel sprays hair products on scalps. *Give your hair new body*, it sings.

She counts her years in the marks on her hands. Her eyes are drowning. Her throat is dry. She imagines the body on the bed dissolving into ash and scooping it into her purse and walking out of the La Quinta toward San Diego, back to young men and educated guesses. But she can hear the patient's cough muffled through the comforter. No ash. Nothing is that simple.

The television is parading hairlines. There must be some glitch in the broadcast because when the commercial ends, it starts again.

Five dollar admission to a wax museum in San Antonio. The place is cramped. Smells of old wood. Mirrors make the rooms look bigger but once the trick's discovered it's impossible to unsee.

What do you think this place is like at night? he asks.

Probably like it is now. Darker, maybe.

Do you think the workers play tricks on one another? Like someone puts Abe Lincoln in the bathroom for the cleaning crew to find?

Maybe, she says.

She is polite. She knows the patient's mechanisms. His throat plays at conversation when he's nervous. Maybe it's another time for the tumor to take over.

They walk through the Hall of Presidents.
Washington's fingers puddled on the floor.
Hands like mangled paws.

It's like they're sick, the patient says. Waxy
lepers.

She tries to picture the patient as he was
before all this started, before the clippers
removed the hair from his right side, before his
left eye started to water over nothing.

They stop in front of the cast of *The Wizard
of Oz*.

She points at Toto. This one looks like you,
she says.

His laughter blocks out Washington's broken
fingers.

The pirate museum is filled with kids on field trips. They chop each other with plastic swords. The minimum wage man reminds them not to touch the exhibits. Keeps their faces off the glass.

The patient and the caregiver look at the last pirate flag on earth, a wobbly skull above two sad bones. He hasn't spoken much since San Antonio. The calm in the car had been eerie. We came all this way, she thinks, and he's still not having fun. There he stands, fixated on the flag, propelling himself backward. A robotic copy of Blackbeard's head hangs from a mast. It taunts the children passing by.

The patient pictures the tumor outgrowing his skull, escaping through one of his eye sockets and becoming someone. The tumor seems the size of Blackbeard's head.

Let's go somewhere else, he says.

They came all this way for twenty minutes.

Somewhere down the road a glass tank is filled with water and women dressed as mermaids. The patient and the caregiver stand off to the right. The fake fishtails glimmer in the sun. They swim in circles.

It seems impossible to be here. A tumor's illusion. It peeks through the patient's eye. The three watch mermaids swim, timing blinks to hide the times when the women come up for air.

NYLON MAN

Tonight you watch *Nylon Man*. No fade in. Shaky camera hand. Suzanne cooks cereal on the stove. Box of cornflakes upside down. The window is sideways. The radio is on. The cornflakes are done. The radio says *Give your hair new body. Give you hair new body*. And Nylon Man appears. He floats over to Suzanne and her cornflakes, puts a hand on her shoulder. It is a tender kind of entry. Close-up on cornflakes as they get soggy. They spell out your name.

TELEVISION

Waves, waves of pharmaceutical commercials. Little pink pills on the screen. This is what color television brought home. She remembers Father, shirt sleeves rolled high, lifting the old black-and-white off the stand. He lifted with his back.

You know what this means, right? he said after the old television made it to the floor. Means you can keep this thing in your room.

She loved color television but it wasn't hers. She belonged to the B&W. And when it sat there glowing at her, there in her own bedroom, she was seeing the world for the first time. She'd fall asleep on her side. All the pressure of her head's weight on her little neck. She would dream in black and white.

Some nights she woke up to the emergency broadcast test. She'd climb out of bed and sit in front of the television. It looked tired.

Then a commercial, out of nowhere. Closeup of a woman in her kitchen, eating cereal. Her back to the window. The woods trapped in the window. The women consumed by the rhythm of her chewing. The camera zooms in slowly. Over the woman's shoulder. Into the woods. Closeup on a shape between trees. A voice whispering *Give your hair new body*.

This is how Susan met the Nylon Man.

She woke up to faded action stars selling muscle machines. The varnished wood around the television was idyllic. Like a family gathered at the breakfast table, mother pouring orange juice. She's on her back, putting her bare feet flat against the television. The warmth is something she can fall into.

The breakfast table is cold spackled blue. Her place is set. Blackened toast gone cold with waiting. Sad cinnamon puddling in the center.

Father reads a book on freaks. Shows her pictures. Book gutter filled with crumbs.

Look at this one, he says, got hands like lobster claws.

He pinches together his stubby fingers. Mock-claws at Susan. She giggles out of habit. It isn't funny. Never was. But she is at that age where she does things for security. If she didn't laugh he'd see how old she's gotten. He'd stop making lobster claws at her, toss the book of freaks in a box somewhere, and only ever talk to her about grown-up things like the news or the Farmer's Almanac. She isn't ready to feel that old.

They do the dishes. Father lobster-passes plates for her to dry. They'll see each other tonight.

Practice. Violent practice. Father sets the bottles up, hangs them from lower branches. Broken glass collected underneath. He's got one of those steel desks outside. Spreads his rifles out on it. He prepares for a statistical anomaly, a home invasion, the apocalypse. As he loads his magazines he thinks about breakfast. Susan getting old. Too old for lobster claws?

He buries his cigarette in the dirt and begins practice.

His hands shake.

Susan loves commercials. They're like mini stories, quaint and calm. She finds in them explanations.

At first she dreaded them. They showed her what she couldn't have. She couldn't fly. She couldn't build a boat out of a screen door. She couldn't pour orange juice for her family.

They were personalized insults.

That changed the night she met the Nylon Man.

From the moment the test broadcast flickered off Susan knew she was accessing something no one else ever could. She could almost step inside this box, step inside another kitchen, look out into the blackness of the woods from the window and trace the outline of the figure wandering there. It called to her. And when the camera pulled inward, in the special frame that rested on the woman's face-side and shoulder, Susan recognized the ear's tightened cartilage. It looked like her own.

She sneaks the VHS recorder into her bedroom.
Her father is tired. His violent practice wears
him down. Makes his sleep soft.

She keeps the tape recording throughout the
test broadcast. Tries to sleep but anticipation
won't let her. Then the moment comes.

She captures the kitchen on tape, waits for
the test broadcast to return, ejects the cassette
and pries it open. Marks the boundaries of the
commercial with a marker, cuts them with craft
scissors, loops the segment with Scotch tape.

The reassembled tape reenters the VCR.

The commercial plays a perfect loop.

The sad truth is that he doesn't know. He doesn't know where his wife is. She has that kind of job—that drive-around-the-country kind of job, that lonesome-road-away-from-home type job, that can-you-make-it-feel-like-love type job. He knows that this kind of thing is never as simple as television makes it seem.

She was a caregiver at one of those pay-you-under-the-table type places. He didn't need to be told about dying men's last wishes. He could guess them. And even if it wasn't like that all the time, it was bound to happen at some point.

He hasn't seen her in four years.

And his days aren't spent preparing for anything.

Violent practice just passes the time. It is loud enough to keep him from mistaking the sound the air conditioning makes for a car carrying his wife back home.

He thought the color television could become a new thing for him and Susan. They could watch together in the evenings. He made the mistake of giving her the old one. Now she stays alone, growing.

The loop is beautiful. Her mother looks younger than she remembered.

The Nylon Man is there. He calls to her. She puts her bare feet flat against the screen.

She falls in.

Father panics.

He grabs a rifle from the closet and prepares for anything.

She's not in her room. The television is off. The living room is a mess of cords where the VCR was ripped out. Still no Susan. Out through the back door, into the woods. No footprints anywhere. Susan's shoes still sitting on the mat outside the house. No tiremarks, no broken windows, no forced locks. No Susan.

No Susan.

The missing persons report is salt on the wound.
The process seems designed to draw out his
suffering, commit it to a sterile page. And when
the officers are gone and the commotion inside
settles, Father sits alone in the kitchen.

The breakfast table is cold spackled blue.

The book of freaks is open to a man who can
pretzel himself, be locked inside a box.

Father looks for Susan in the stove, looks for
her in the crawlspace, the dryer lint trap, before
realizing that Susan could never pretzel herself.

He sits in her bedroom, turns on the television.

He wades through commercials, made a zombie through waiting.

Angels sell hair cream. Father sees that he is balding.

They have a fancy treadmill now that mimics country roads.

Wives pour orange juice.

Cereal in glue. They do that now—use glue instead of milk. It photographs better.

Father falls asleep, dreams himself among the flakes.

The test broadcast must be designed to be
annoying. Waking up here feels wrong.

His neck is tight from sleeping on his side.

He hums. Tries to find harmony with the
pitch blaring from the screen. Then a cut.

A woman in a kitchen.

Nylon Man in the woods.

Almost familiar, almost Susan, but older.

Everything, older.

TELEVISION was written in Oakland, CA
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This chapbook utilizes two typefaces—
Fanwood by Barry Schwartz and Ostrich Sans
Tyler Finck

