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CUDDLE BED FOR WAYWARD BOYS

TIM JONES-YELVINGTON

Derrick tells me it's wrong to live for him, that I shouldn't live for another person. "What else should we live for," I ask, "if not other people?"

"Live for yourself," he says. "For the things you love to do."

The things I love to do? Biking, blogging, television, jacking off. Great, I think. I'll live for hobbies.

Picture us on opposite sides of the bed, turned toward either wall. The space between us is gravity in reverse. I used to think Derrick's was the coziest bed in the world, but that was before I slept in it every night for two and a half years and it became just my bed.

I told Derrick that I don't need to drink, that I'd be happy giving it up for him, that he's well worth the sacrifice, but he said he shouldn't be the reason I stop.

When Derrick was fourteen years old, he raided his parents' liquor cabinet and mixed gin and tonics. One night, after several weeks of this, he stood in his living room and watched his father, a heavy drinker, asleep on the sofa, his arms and legs splayed, his chest rising irregularly, his sleep disturbed. Derrick thought about his childhood, how his father was sometimes himself and sometimes not, and how you never knew which you were going to get. He circled his straw through his drink, displaced ice cubes. He sipped. He said to himself, I could get used to this.

Then he emptied his glass into the bathroom sink. This was twenty-six years ago, and Derrick hasn't touched alcohol since.

Yesterday, I biked home blackout drunk. I walked in the door just after 6:00 A.M. with a bloody lip and ripped, muddy jeans, my bike seat stuck at a ninety-degree angle and the shift cord severed. Now Derrick and I are having a "very serious conversation." We're one of those couples that values communication. Generally, "don't go to bed angry" is a good rule to follow. At other times, all I want to do is disappear into the bathroom, lock the door, run a bath, pour essential oils into the water, and play calming music, the kind I would never admit to owning, something categorized by retailers as "adult contemporary," and at these times I wish we were a more normal couple, the kind who might scream and stomp and throw and break things, begin to ignore one another, pass nights with one partner sleeping on the couch.

"I need you to tell me what you're going to do," Derrick says. "To ensure this doesn't happen again."

It's a trick question. If I say I'll never drink again, Derrick won't believe me. If I say I'll moderate my intake, he'll say, "That's what you said last time. You don't know how."

Last night I worked a closing shift. I'm employed part-time by Crate and Barrel, selling mass-manufactured housewares. When I visit friends, I recognize their vases, dinnerware, couches. I call them by their names: Good to see you, Birgitta Goblet.

Yesterday I shared a counter with Donna, a woman who tells me stories about douches in the seventies and cocaine in the eighties. I've always taken her lined skin and bleached split ends as signs she's truly lived, and her raspy voice and rattling cough seem to authenticate her experience.

"You wanna know what women want, Benny?" she said.

I expected her to say something expected, something sitcom-esque, like multiple orgasms, a deep tissue massage, a man who does as he's told.

Instead, she said, "We wanna get drunk. You coming across the street with us after work?"

As with most of my co-workers, Donna and I have little in common save booze. Across the street from our store is a Mexican restaurant called "Hacienda," but nobody calls it that. We only ever call it "across the street." It's not a real Mexican restaurant, but rather a middle-brow, Tex-Mex chain restaurant-type Mexican restaurant, with papier-maché toucans and women in starched, dry-cleaned peasant blouses. I've never tasted their food, only their drinks. They painted a sign on the side of their building—"Es Tiempo por un Swirl!" A Swirl consists of frozen margarita swirled with frozen sangria. They look girly and innocuous, but three of those things will put you under the table.

Last night, I was on my fourth Swirl when I looked at my watch and realized it was already 11:00, the time I'd told Derrick I'd come home when earlier I'd phoned him after closing.

"Time for me to go," I said, sliding off my stool.

"No!" Donna said, then thumped my back. "Stay with us, Benny. What twenty-three year old calls it a night at eleven?"

"Ben's married," said Melinda, a fellow sales associate. "His man's got him whipped."

"What?" I said. "That's bullshit."

I called Derrick.

"I'm going to stay out a little longer," I said.

"Okay," he said. "How long?"

"Only an hour or two," I said. "I don't want to get home any later than one."

"I'm going to bed in the next hour. I had a long day."

I tried to read his voice. He sounded okay, like maybe before I called, he'd already resigned himself to an evening alone. I told myself not to worry.

"I'll call you when I'm on my way home."

"How many drinks are you going to have?"

I eyed my fourth Swirl, two thirds of which I'd already downed. "No more than three," I said.

"How many have you had so far?"

"I'm on my second."

"So how many more?" he said.

"One," I said. "Only one."

"How many total?"

"Three," I said. "Only three."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"Call my cell phone when you're coming home. I'll turn it off when I go to bed so you won't wake me."

Before I go any further, I should back up; I should say more about Derrick. So far, you might be inclined to think of Derrick only as uptight, a killjoy. You'll be unlikely to sympathize with Derrick, unless you happen to be Derrick himself, in which case you will say, "I identified with Derrick, and I didn't appreciate how the narrator dismissed Derrick's perspective. The narrator's drinking alienates me like it alienates Derrick. Imagine sitting at home, waiting for the narrator, worrying about his safety. Imagine, too, doubting the future of your relationship, of your own happiness. Imagine being Derrick's age and still having to cope with such uncertainty."

I met Derrick the same week my mother kicked me out of the house. I met Derrick at church. I didn't attend this church for very long, and neither did Derrick. This church was comprised primarily of homosexuals, their friends, and family. The greater denomination of which this church was a member did not approve of homosexuals, and so the church understood theirs as an activist stance.

"I feel too comfortable here," Derrick said after a time. "I feel like we are complacent."

The church held a worship service where the pastor struck a ceramic chalice against the altar and split it in half. The pastor held up the two fragments and said, "These fragments represent our denomination's broken promise. Our denomination has

broken Christ's covenant with us through its exclusionary policies. We will not reunite these fragments until these policies have changed."

Then we prayed.

Derrick said, "They are worshipping their own oppression."

Thereafter, Derrick and I spent our Sunday mornings in bed playing pornographic hangman.

"E!" Derrick once guessed. "L! ... T! ...fellatio!"

When Derrick ran out of guesses, I drew a hanging man with dangling testicles and penis, an X for one eye and a dash for the other.

"His name is Chad," I said.

"Poor Chad," I said. I caressed the paper with my palm.

"Sweet, hanging Chad."

We nicknamed our bed "Derrick Mickelson's Cuddle Bed for Wayward Boys," a playful reference to Derrick's predilection for caretaking.

Even though we've shared the bed for almost three years, Derrick still likes to place his body in its center, stretch his arms and legs to each side, and say, "My bed. Mine."

"Not your bed," I say. "Our bed."

"I bought this bed long before I met you," Derrick says. "This bed has been good to me."

Then he pulls the sheets and blankets up around his face and says, "Swaddle me," and I dive beside him and cuddle him close, thrilled by the reversal of roles.

Derrick taught me things, functional things, like how to balance a checkbook, correctly position a collared shirt on an ironing board, or enhance the flavor of hamburger patties using barbeque sauce and French onion soup mix. I am not the first younger man he's fallen for, and this is something else he taught me: how sometimes it's the younger one who holds the power, on account of we don't necessarily know who we are or what we want, and so we might leave at any moment. When Derrick told me this, how he'd been left, I made a vow never to leave him

After I got off the phone with Derrick, I texted my friend Miguel: What R U Up 2?

He texted back: Chillin @ home

I responded: Can I cum over?

Miguel works at the store. When I first met him, he didn't make much of an impression, but then, a few weeks later, he got a haircut, and I started noticing him. He stood behind the counter as I walked toward him across the sales floor, and I smiled, and then he smiled back, and the way he smiled, the smile he smiled, that smile hooked me, and that's when I knew I wanted to have sex with him.

We had our first conversation shortly thereafter, in the break room, over lunch. He told me he was a DJ, that he dropped out of college several years ago but wanted to go back, and this time major in sound production. He said someday, after he met the right man, he wanted to raise a kid, but he'd just gotten out of a long, toxic break-up, and it was still difficult to trust people. I have always appreciated people who open up about their toxic breakups first thing after meeting you, and so I liked Miguel immediately.

This is where I should probably explain Derrick knows all about Miguel. We have an open relationship, but only when one of us is out of town. Sex only, nothing like prolonged emotional intimacy, everything shared with one another, and I'll be honest—I resent having to explain this; I resent that I can't just say "open relationship" and leave it at that. But I know that if I do not explain, you might misunderstand the situation, and, in this case, to misunderstand is to miss the point entirely. Being open brings Derrick and me closer. We check out men together, call attention to those we know the other will appreciate. Sharing fantasies is a bonding ritual; it energizes our sex life. I've never understood why straight couples manufacture such

desires, I believe, allows poison to seep slowly into a relationship.

I waited until Derrick was away on business and then propositioned Miguel in writing, over Facebook. He wrote back, "I think I'm interested, but let's talk about it tomorrow."

I prepared our apartment for his visit. I swept and vacuumed and hid the dirty dishes in the oven. I pictured Miguel on top of me and got hard. I wanted to feel his soul patch graze my lower lip, wanted him to look into my eyes and moan my full name, "Benjamin, Benjamin, Benjamin," or, even better, its Spanish pronunciation, which sounds like, "Ben ha mean, Ben ha mean, Ben ha mean."

The next day at work, I watched him. I have always been attracted to boys with ADD. Miguel could only hold a conversation for a minute or two before something—a cute child in a stroller, a puppy in a handbag, a well-built heterosexual man on the arm of his fiancée—distracted him. He ricocheted across the sales floor like veggies in a wok, and I would've liked nothing better than to hold him steady.

That night, after our managers dismissed us and he still hadn't said a word to me, I approached him as he opened his locker and said, "Do you have a minute?"

We stood in the rug aisle for what felt far longer than a minute, occasionally looking at one another, but saying nothing. I giggled.

"What?" he said.

"What what?"

I thought for sure he wanted it, but was perhaps too shy. Derrick once told me single people have more to risk by hooking up with someone partnered, and so they often need the partnered person to make the first move.

"Do you want to come home with me?" I said.

"Listen," he said. "It's like I know myself, right? Sometimes I have these intuitions, like the timing isn't right, or I can feel something isn't a good idea."

I went home, feeling like one of the large rugs had rolled off the shelf and landed on my chest.

As it turned out, that evening in the rug aisle was only the first of many times I did not have sex with Miguel. Later, there was the time he texted me when he knew Derrick was out of town, and said, "Can I come over?" But I'd already jacked off, so I said, "Maybe another time." Or the time I invited him out with me and a friend of ours, but he cancelled at the last minute and said he was staying in, and asked me did I want to stay in with him, but I couldn't think of a polite way to extricate myself from our friend, and so I said, "I'll call you later."

"I know he wants me," I told our mutual friend Cyndi over beers. "Not knowing isn't what bothers me. It's never hearing him say it. It's longing, like in the old days, like we're star-crossed or something. It's good drama, not bad drama."

"If I tell you something, do you promise to vault it?" Cyndi said.

"Vaulted," I said, and made a motion with my fist like I was spinning the dial on a safe.

"Miguel told me he's afraid to hook up with you because you're the kind of person he can see himself falling for."

After that, I became truly obsessed. I needed to hear him say it, hear him say he was afraid of falling in love with me. Or perhaps even make him fall in love with me. I wanted a brief and passionate affair. I wanted to feel tempestuous and torn. Then, after weeks of pitched emotion, I wanted to say to Miguel, "I'm sorry; it's over. My heart still belongs to another." I wanted to put my hand on his chest, kiss his forehead, and say, "We'll always have Crate."

I took a cab to Miguel's apartment and left my bike chained outside the store. When I got there, he was waiting on the curb, looking intense and revolutionary in an olive commie-worker cap, white wife-beater, and one of those Palestinian liberation scarves-turned-hipster-fashion must-haves draped around his neck. He was shorter than me but also broader, stockier, darker,

hairier. He maintained a permanent scowl because he'd shaved shaving gave him ingrown hairs. I had no idea whether he'd ever cracked the spine on a book of poetry, yet I imagined him dragging his cheek across my nipple while murmuring Neruda.

"Go on inside," he said. "Door's unlocked. I'm going to go grab some beer."

We popped Coronas and sat in front of his laptop. "Have you seen this yet?" he said, and called up a music video on YouTube, a band of shaggy boys with synthesizers, DayGlo warpaint on their cheeks.

"Wait," he said. He paused the video a minute in, opened his iTunes. "Have you heard this one?"

Certainly, you must understand why I found him entirely adorable. He was a total spaz, and all I wanted was for him to spaz me. I needed to spaz out.

"It's hot out," he said. He threw his scarf across the tiny room where it landed draped across his sink. He peeled off his top. He unbuttoned his shorts, shimmied and kicked them aside. He grabbed my belt buckle and pulled. "Take these off," he said.

We stood a foot apart in our underwear, drank multiple beers, bobbed casually to the songs on his computer. Women belted rhythmically about the allure and alienation of nightlife. The ceiling light glared; you could see dust bunnies under Miguel's desk. I sucked in my gut, rolled back my shoulders, crossed my arms. I felt a draft and shivered.

Probably, you are wondering about Derrick, whether I gave him any thought. The more sensitive among you might picture Derrick alone in his cuddle bed, sleeping fitfully, awaking periodically to check for me, to wonder when or whether I'll come home.

He'll understand I needed to see this through, I told myself. He'll understand if I'd called him, it would have interrupted the moment. He'll be proud I overcame my fear of initiating, that I finally put this Miguel situation to bed. Got Miguel to tell me everything. Every fucking thing. And then, when I come home,

I'll bring a sexy story.

"I used to think about you a lot," I said, raising my voice to be heard over the music. "But lately I haven't. Maybe I'm getting over it... you... it."

Immediately, Miguel kneeled, pulled down my briefs, whipped out my dick, and stuck it in his mouth. I was flaccid, could almost feel it shrinking inside him.

I should clarify I like blowjobs, but I hate them when I'm not already hard, when I haven't worked up to them, haven't felt a tongue inside my mouth or breath across my neck. And I hate watching them—I always skip that part of any porn film—hate how robotic they look: no bodies touching, no eye contact, like the men are just tools instead of people, like they could be anybody. I feel demeaned, and then I feel embarrassed, and I wonder what's wrong with me for not wanting to watch this, like maybe I'm more like a chick for wanting a bunch of vanilla touching, and then I grow more self conscious, more uncomfortable in my skin.

After a moment, Miguel took it out of his mouth and said, "I like dick."

"I always thought it would be cool if it was like this," he said. "Like you could come over occasionally, no strings attached, and we could just get our rocks off."

I reached for another beer and realized the pack was empty. I shook it.

"You got anything else?"

Miguel emptied his cabinets and found a half-empty bottle of cheap vodka. I grabbed ice from his freezer and filled my glass more than halfway before topping it off with Coke. I thought, Tonight might be my last chance. I remembered how in the past alcohol made me more pliable, more willing. I drank.

Miguel sat back down in front of his computer, and I pulled up a chair beside him. I moved closer, wrapped an arm around him, balanced my chin on his shoulder. I felt somehow we'd lost ground. I didn't understand how we went from sucking back to

sitting. What was he thinking? I waited for him to make a move to grab me, move me, take me, take control, to take over, to do something. I drank.

Sometime later, he threw open the door to his back porch. We heard birds and saw a hint of sunlight.

"Fuck," he said. "Do you know how late it is? You should go."

I motioned toward his bedroom. "I can crash here."

"I've got a twin bed," he said. "I can't share that shit."

I stared at the wall while I put my clothes on. Once on the corner, I hailed a cab. Halfway home, I drove my fist into the seat. In the rear-view mirror, I saw the driver eye me suspiciously.

"Fuck," I said aloud. "Fuck. Fuck."

What the fuck, I thought. What the fuck was that?

I dialed Miguel's number and his voicemail answered.

"Fuck you," I shouted. The cab driver pulled over, stalled.

"I'm sick of this fucking bullshit. You fucking asshole. Fuck. I'm fucking done. Fuck."

I hung up.

"Out," the driver said.

On the curb, I shivered, had a vague recollection of having just yelled into Miguel's voicemail. I immediately dialed his number.

"I think I just said some bullshit," I said. "I'm sorry. I'm coming back down there."

This ends tonight, I thought. Enough. I will make him tell me everything, whatever it takes; however long I have to stand in his apartment, I will make him tell me exactly how he feels about me. I'll tell him what Cyndi said. I'll tell him what I already know. Then he'll tell me. I'll make him.

I hailed another cab. I gave the driver Miguel's address.

A tall, wrought iron fence flanked Miguel's building. The gate was locked. I wrapped my hands around the bars and shook it. I stretched my leg to the highest crossbar and hoisted myself up, felt the pointed fence top poke my buttock before I landed in a squat, feet throbbing.

The door to Miguel's apartment was behind another locked door. No buzzer. I phoned him again. No answer. I went to the side of the building, pulled up a trashcan, looked in his window. The lights were off, but the glare of his laptop escaped through his open bedroom door into the outer room. Maybe he was awake, watching a movie. I rattled the screen. I banged on the window, lightly, then loudly. I shouted his name.

I heard the front door open behind me. I heard a dog barking somewhere, behind another closed door.

"What are you doing here?" Miguel said.

"I don't—I left—" I couldn't remember.

"You need to go home," he said. "God, are you okay?"

He grabbed my arm, pulled me back through the front gate to the sidewalk. "We need to call you another cab."

"Let go," I said. I pulled my arm free.

I ran. Somewhere, I stopped running and remembered my bike. Even though the sun was up, I thought, if I leave the bike out all night, it will get stolen.

I do not remember going back to the store, retrieving my bike. I remember riding, how I tore around a corner, through an alley, decided to ride on the sidewalk, caught my wheel on the curb, fell.

I remember later, I looked up, read a street sign, recognized the names, miles north and west of home. I'd taken the wrong street, a diagonal street, and overshot.

I remember I turned, lost my balance, fell. I got up, lost my balance, fell again. I saw my front light bust off the handlebars, heard it scatter across the pavement. I rode. My gears wouldn't shift. My seat was all wrong.

I rode and rode, only sporadically remembering. I remember I saw a familiar train station, realized how much farther I still had to go, and I remember I shouted, "I just want to go fucking home. Fuck, I just want to go home," and drivers in their cars turned to look at me.

When I opened the door, Derrick was already awake,

getting ready for work.

"I'm fine," I said.

"You're bleeding."

"I'm fine."

Derrick held me. He wiped the blood from my lip and fixed me toast with raspberry jam.

Now we're lying feet apart at either edge of Derrick Mickelson's Cuddle Bud for Wayward Boys.

Derrick asked me what I was going to do to "ensure this won't happen again," and I told him the accident was a wakeup call, that it traumatized me as much as him. I told him this to keep him from ending us, but also because it might be true.

Then Derrick said maybe we should separate, and I said aren't there other options, and he said, what other options, and that was several minutes ago, and we've been quiet ever since.

The bulb in the fixture above our bed flickers.

"We should buy light bulbs," I say.

"Maybe Lisa has extra," I say, when Derrick doesn't respond. Lisa is our landlord.

"Lisa thinks we should have a ceremony," I say. "She wants to plan our reception."

"I don't need other people to validate my relationships," Derrick says.

"Yeah," I say. I stare at the flickering bulb. "Plus, straight people's marriages all end in divorce anyway, right?"

Derrick is quiet again, so I keep right on talking.

"And the ones that don't end in divorce end in death. You either break up or you die. There aren't a lot of options."

The bulb flickers to black. Then it flickers back on, fainter than before. I think about what I want to tell Derrick but can't. How earlier, when he held me, when he pressed the warm washcloth against my cut lip, I could feel what he felt, his terror and relief, and, for a moment, I felt happy. I felt happier than I'd felt in ages.