

The Bathroom Body

So, the bus had broken down earlier. That was the only reason why I even considered entering this crust-hole of a gas station. I was on a five-hour trek from Ottawa to Toronto; Ottawa because my hometown was in the Lanark boonies, just outside of the barely-there capitol; Toronto because college—and everything I was supposed to be—was over there. It was only supposed to be four hours, but the rain screwed up our chances of good timing, go figure. Everyone on the road was making it back from their cottages and getaways and whatever else they were doing when they weren't working their 9-to-5s, and I, going back to school after a little visit home—far less noble a cause than the more established adults on the route—was caught up in the middle of that congestion.

I can tell you that when we got back to the replacement bus, everyone else had some kind of gas station charcuterie of Slim Jims and Ritz crackers, or a McDonald's takeout bag, or some other thing that could keep them going. I asked my seatmate if she'd gone in the same direction, if she saw what I did. She just kind of looked at me weird and shrugged, saying what had become a common refrain from everyone else: "I don't think so, I don't know this area well." Nobody knows this area well. It's the middle of nowhere after getting past fucking Asphodel. I wanted to know if she saw the gas station, I wanted to know I wasn't going crazy. Hang on, I'm getting ahead of myself; I'm getting caught up in the details of what happened after. I just don't want to think about it. I don't even know *what* to think about it.

When I got there, I felt like I was going to crash. I had taken an edible for the bus ride and Asphodel wasn't so far out from my hometown that it had the chance to really affect me during the nap that I was attempting to have. It hadn't kicked in yet, for all I was aware. These things—five government-approved milligrams of sativa marijuana and all-natural green apple flavouring—

worked for a good, long while on a low-tolerance stoner. Long enough, in fact, that by the time that I'd arrive at Union Station, it'd be leaving me with a toasty glow as I slithered into a taxicab that took me from Union to my dorm building. That was what happened most of the time, anyway. It was probably the worst thing to have ingested prior to this incident. Well, maybe acid would've been worse—

Sidetracked again, sorry.

So, I come upon this derelict gas station that makes me think of the old one out in Beckwith township that snapped up its doors after the 2010s. Inexplicable plywood boards and propane on palettes, sitting as neighbours on the gravel beside the station door. Two pumps offering gas and diesel. A hand-scribbled sign that barked "CASH ONLY" out of the window. I try not to be presumptuous, because part of being a college kid is attempting humility (and so being, by that logic, above the foolishness of youth, by one's own youthful determination) and assuming you don't know that much about the world. Sometimes, you'd be proven right that you don't know shit. Sometimes, though, you got your biases confirmed. This place really did raise my fucking hackles, let me tell you that.

I walk in and this guy—I don't know, I think his name was David? Daniel?—a pimply, gangly kid with a sad patch of chin scruff, hair down to his shoulders, and a labret piercing, is standing behind the counter. I'm not very sure if that was his actual name or just the nametag that he decided to wear for the job, but he's there behind the counter, and I have to take a wicked piss because I'd been out in the rain, and I'd been trudging through wilderness on a dirt path away from the highway, and I honest to goodness didn't really question why there was a gas station on the side of the nowhere-country road. There's enough of them out where I used to live.

I say to Daniel, David, whatever, “Hey man, is there a bathroom in here? 'Cause I really need to use it and it's- it's raining like hell and I'm traveling,”— I could feel the edible creeping up on me with how much headroom my brain was giving the rest of my skull. I talk a little too much when I'm high, so I was trying to go through the motions.

He looks at me weird—it's like he can see that I'm not from around here anymore. But then, after a half a second of squinting at me, his eyes soften up a little. A lingering recognition between us that I still haven't identified. Maybe it was the septum and the labret being cousins in the alt kid piercing pantheon, maybe he saw the sad mustache I was trying to grow and felt sympathetic. He looked like he was just a little younger than me, but I've always been bad at clocking someone's age.

He goes, “Alright, you need to use a key.”

So he gives me this key, and it's got a big wooden board attached to it. Like one of those stupid hall passes we had back in high school when people kept peeing on the floor. I go in and to my surprise, it's a bathroom with a couple stalls, which makes me wonder: does he just hand this key to everybody that needs to go? Or is this like, a capacity thing? Is this some new rule after COVID that never got reviewed?

And that's when I see it slumped over in the third stall. At first, I just think it's someone having a real bad day I can't and won't be a part of, and I feel a deep tingling in lower areas of my back—my ass starts sweating when I get nervous. The door's just half open and my gut drops. I can see its legs on the ground, stiff and straight. Usually, I couldn't give a shit what people do in the bathroom, but that soundless stillness of the resident of the third stall and the buzzing of cold fluorescents made me nauseous.

I made my way over to the first stall, the room feeling wider with each step. Everything looked a filthy kind of sterile, where even the grime had defined contours, piss stains their own browning archipelagos on the floor. I allowed myself to void my bowels the way that I was originally planning to, but with the extra vigor of somebody who wants to get the fuck out of wherever he is. If I got any higher in this place, I would be properly stoned. Shit. The entire time I'm thinking about them, the legs. No one in a good place in their life sits on the floor of a fucking gas station bathroom. I'm sweating when I finish my business and wash my hands, just splashing water and wiping it on my pants. But then something stops me, some questionable twinge of justice in my gut that makes me think, check on that guy, idiot, what if he's dying? This would be one hell of a place to OD, and it'd suck for that kid to have to find the scene himself. I walk over to that stall, and I don't really get close, but just close enough. He clearly wasn't breathing.

God, I'm getting sick just thinking about it. Sorry, give me a minute.

I can tell you what the pallor of a corpse looks like. I've seen movies, I've been to two open casket funerals, I've gone to the wrong side of the internet, et cetera. I can tell you about the way their eyes stay open if they die a certain way, and I can tell you they shit their pants. I could even tell you that a fresh body with a still-firing nervous system can sit bolt upright on the autopsy table. This wasn't good. Just this frozen face. God, his fucking eyes were open and I kept thinking they were looking at me. I couldn't bring myself to come any closer than maybe a foot from the door.

I speak, legs wobbling, having to manually work up courage, "Hey dude, how are you? Hey, should I call the cops? Should I call an ambulance? Are you good?"

I approach and gently touch his shoulder, half hoping he wouldn't move and half hoping he'd jump awake and be completely alright. He just kept staring straight forward with those glassy fucking eyes. My heart's beating out of my chest, and I could feel the ground swelling and shifting underneath me and god, I can feel my pulse in my ears, sorry—I told you; it was a Bonafide corpse sitting in the bathroom.

I go out there, back into the convenience store, trying to reconcile the difference between the stark place where I saw a man lying dead, and the bright colours of Doritos bags, Mountain Dew, the advertisements for lottery tickets and lighters, and out-of-order slushie machines.

I go back up to the cashier and I say, as clearly as I can through the haze spreading through my body—unsure if the light-headedness was the weed or the shock—“Hey, man, I think that there's a dead body in there. I'm a little scared for him, 'cause he looked fresh. Maybe an O.D.”

So, I thought this guy would look at me pale-like and go, ‘we need to call an ambulance, we need to call the cops, we need to do something! There's a dead body in the convenience store I'm working at!’

Instead of that kind of reception, Daniel-David-Cashier-Guy looks at me and goes, “Oh yeah, he's been there for a little while. Couple months, I think.”

I balk at him— “I'm sorry? That's a fresh corpse. That's- *there's a dead body in there.*”

He rolls his eyes, “I mean yeah, it's kind of annoying, but it's just there. I don't know what to do with him... Why do you know so much about decomposition anyway? You a scientist or something?” The small-town indignation felt a little too familiar to me.

“That doesn't make any sense-” I elect to shut up and pay for my Red Bull—I've always counteracted my marijuana with caffeine when I need to be alert (great combination, I'm sure)—and a protein bar, feeling like I'm about to fucking fall over. It's already been way too long since I had the takeout dad bought me before I left. I don't eat either of them, I just stand there with the bag that I brought along—I knew that if I ended up at a convenience store I'd end up getting something—and I just stand there a little blank.

I realize what's probably just happened: David killed that guy, and this is the best cover story he could conjure. Dumbass.

I leave the convenience store, and I notice that there are some people out at the gas pumps: a blonde and her stocky boyfriend stretching their legs around the perimeter of a pickup truck. I barely think when I call out to them in the highest, sweetest tone in my talking-to-strangers register, “Hey, excuse me, I'm sorry, I just- I think that the convenience store clerk might have killed the guy in the bathroom. I'm a little scared.”

I try not to show that I'm not with anybody. I try to show that I'm confident but a little freaked out. And I try to show that I've got my phone in my hand, just in case these people get the wrong idea. They're clearly from around the area; they look way too comfortable to just be traveling through.

The blonde calls back to me, “Are you talking about the one in the third stall?”

“Yeah, y— wait... you know about this?”

And, perfectly timed in the rhythm of the conversation, as though an extension of her, her boyfriend chimes in, “Yeah, he's been there for a while.”

“And you’re fine with this?”

The blonde just shrugs, “He's been there for a bit. It's not a big deal. Are you OK?”

I blinked at them for what felt like an hour. It was probably just a few seconds.

“Oh yeah, no, I'm fine, I'm just a little shaken up by seeing that corpse in the bathroom,” my voice starts to crescendo, “I'm not too sure why everyone's just okay with this. It's been there for a while, you said. Why would- why would we not-” something clicks, and the part I got stuck on finally gets unstuck, “why the fuck isn't it rotting if it's been there for a while?”

“Hey, calm down, no need to get intense,” the boyfriend grunts. No one offers an explanation.

I get into this state when I get a little irritated about something, whether that be because I'm confused or because I'm actually really righteously angry about it, and I get this feeling like I can go no-holds-barred with what I say to people. It's not a good trait, but it's one I barely let out, so I guess it's one of my personal social vices. That, and oversharing. So, I start barking with some sense of self-righteousness about speaking on behalf of this fresh-or-not dead guy I'd never met, “Oh, I'm sorry, there is a fucking *corpse* in that bathroom. I don't know why everyone is so casual about it. It's a *corpse*. There's a dead body taking up the bathroom stall. Why isn't it clicking for you guys that this is a *real guy*- this is a guy that was alive at one point. You said he's been there for *months*. He looks *fresh*. He looks like he *just* died!”

“No, that's the same guy. He's been there for a while. You get used to it,” the blonde asserts with all the intensity of a library return,

“So he hasn't rotted at all?” They just stare at me like I'm crazy, and I feel a little crazy, “You guys are all fucking with me. You're all in on this. *I fucking bet you killed him.*”

The boyfriend, visibly shaken by the accusation, jolted as though the very idea physically hurt him, “No, what the hell! We didn't kill him! He's just *there.*”

So now I'm sure I'm in dangerous territory, surrounded by three shit liars, glancing everywhere, “I'm gonna call the cops, because this is *fucked.* I'm scared now. *Fuck you guys.*”

I place the call. Look, I don't feel good invoking the pigs, but it's all I thought to do at the time. They come over within a couple of minutes. Maybe they were doing their patrols. They show up, they don't even have the sirens on, they just saunter over and I see one of them go in. I see in the window that he greets David-Daniel like normal. David-Daniel shrugs. The other cop went into the bathroom while the first one looked around, and the two came out looking a little bit tired in the face.

I ask one of the officers what's happening now, and he says, incredulously, “Well, I mean, yeah, there sure is a body in the bathroom.”

And I just stare at him, the final realization grabbing hold of me full-force alongside the edible, “... you guys aren't gonna do anything about this, are you?”

“This happened a few months ago.”

“That's a fresh body. You'd think that like, you guys would have some sense and know that.” I'm starting to feel dizzy again.

“Don't sass me, ma'am.” I don't bother to correct him, because we're just outside of Asphodel. I'm not going to be correcting police officers that don't notice that I'm a boy when they don't seem to notice the severity of a corpse, but that's neither here nor there.

I keep staring at them, stunned, “*Are you gonna do anything about this?*”

I'm starting to feel a little helpless and my heart's beating out of my chest even harder than before. I'm thinking about that man's blue lips, his glassy eyes, the veins that were popping out on his neck. I feel my gut gurgle and ache. I feel my ass sweating again.

I speak through my dry mouth, “How often does this happen?”

“Well, he's just sort of there. He's the only one that doesn't rot, hasn't rotted for a while, so we're a little concerned about what making contact with him could do to our officers. Nobody's tried to move him before.”

Ice hits my gut when I remember that I touched it. I feel like I'm going insane. Could I just be pathologizing some weird tradition of the gas station up in the middle of the fucking woods? No. God. There's something wrong with this place and I can't reason with it. I look at the officers and I, damn near crying, nearly pissing myself all over again, say,

“Thank you for your time, officers.” And I run like hell back to the broken-down bus in the rain. None of them pursue me.

When I recover my appetite, I drink my Red Bull and eat the cookie dough protein bar. I don't bother to tell anyone what happened just now out down by the town of Asphodel, just ask them if they'd seen this place. Like I said before, even questions about the existence of the gas station got me shrugs.

When I got to Union Station, I was still wondering about that gas station out by Asphodel. I think about his face sometimes. The dead guy. The way he might've died, what's kept him from rotting, maybe some freaky shit to do with whatever drugs he took while he was alive. I think about what sort of person he was before being the resident of the third stall, if his family knows where he is now, if he even had one. Maybe that's what being forgotten looked like. Maybe that's what it looked like to be remembered. A little part of me wants to go back to the third stall again, do the work of burying him myself.

I'm glad I moved to the GTA this fall. None of the constant back-and-forth anymore. No more risking a broken-down bus.

There's a spiritual stain that he left on my hand that even Lysol can't get out. I've nearly made mustard gas in my sink a couple of times trying to get the right combination of chemicals to be clean again. I mean, fuck, I'd been high for days after the fact, waking up panicking and scrubbing my hands. I impulsively shoved my hand in a bucket of bleach the other day when I swore I started to see it rot. It might've been the drugs. Or maybe it was the fact that I was washing it too much. The thoughts refuse to leave me—I guess that's why I'm telling you about it... Does this look like necrosis to you? Because from where I'm standing, it could be infected, but couldn't it also be—what do you mean, my hand is fine?