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# MOTEL STORIES



*for S.*

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# *Aura*

After several weeks, she looked up the place where it had happened on Streetview. A wide, cracked parking lot and a dirty yellow building, stapled by rows of bright blue doors, running along the far side. High up by the edge of the road was a sign reading “COMFORT” in red neon. She wondered why he had chosen it. As she stared, a bullet hole appeared in the window of the room he’d checked into. Confused, she reached out and touched her computer screen. The broken glass cut her finger. Several weeks ago the police find her blood on the pane. They never find the bullet.

# *Bandages*

“There’s a hole in my heart,” he said into the receiver. “At first it bled all the time. It would soak through anything I tried in an instant. But everything gets tired eventually, and now it’s alright if I keep the bandages fresh. So, that’s what I do all day: I change the bandages. From when I wake up in the morning to when I fall asleep at night, it’s the only thing I’m doing. When I watch TV, I’m changing the bandages. When I buy a six-pack, I’m changing the bandages. When I talk to you—” He was silent for a minute. “This is just my life now. The wrappings feel more natural every day. I’d say I’ll be okay, but I’m not sure what that means anymore.” Soft and distant, the voice on the other end of the line: “I hope you figure it out.”

# *Breakfast*

The man had walked all the way across the parking lot to stand next to you. You kept trying to get inside, but you couldn't get the keycard to work. The indicator light kept flashing red, red, red. "I'm going to make you eat my tongue," he said. His lips were bent and stretched across his face.

# *Cartel*

After a few days of walking, staying low, sleeping rough in sad little clumps of trees, they found a burned-out husk that used to be a “Lazy L”, according to the sign, to set up more permanent operations in. There was graffiti all over the place and half the roof had caved but there were boards on the windows and no one had bothered to cart away the mattresses. She got busy stringing wires while he dosed up and started feeling the place out. Beyond the usual haze he could taste stale beer and dark bedrooms, thick like molten lead. They were back in business. Customers would start showing up soon. Somehow they always knew when a new vein got opened.

# *Cursed Ground*

There were vultures circling all the time. Too high up to see but he knew they were there. He felt the doom inside, in hidden parts of himself. Every window showed him a darkness coming. He kept a satchel full of knives and duct tape under his bed. He didn't think it would save him.

# *Destination*

A row of identical cabins by a big metal sign by a lonely highway. In the light box beneath the blank rectangle where the name should be:  
**COLOR TV / AIR CONDITIONING / FULL 100%  
SOUNDPROOFING / BLACK WALLS / VACANCY**

# *Down by the Pool*

There's a girl in a plain white bikini down by the pool. The strings on her top are tied a little loosely, a little sloppily, because she did it herself, looking in the mirror. There's no one else around. She's sitting on the white concrete rim with her legs dangling over the edge and her feet slowly kicking in the water. She's looking at the way the light catches on the blue-green surface, the way the shimmers slide and bend and squeeze into nothingness. She feels like a shimmer herself. It's a hot day, but the horizon is thick and gray. Soon the clouds will come and the rain will fall and her body will wash away.

# *Drug Party*

They were having a drug party in a room at the cheap place outside town. There were empty baggies and blunted needles all over the floor. The beds were full of ash. They all were wearing each other's clothes. One of the girls was talking about starting an electrical fire. She was saying she'd always wanted to. No one could understand her. The room smelled like it had already melted. Someone was crying in the bathtub, behind a locked door.

# *Dust*

Sometimes cities empty out in the midday. Sure, his city never did, not like this, but they must have a slower pace around here. That was all that was happening, he told himself. Just a sleepy little town having an afternoon siesta. He ground down the words until they felt like truth between his fingers. But dust was choking the cracks in the asphalt, and piling up against every locked door.

# *Encounter*

The room smelled like spermicide. He felt another rib snap, crisp like an intake form. The boy underneath him said thank you. He didn't know his name. Outside, bright black oil pooled on the asphalt. The night was sweating.

# *Erosion*

The surveyor's report came in a cream envelope sealed with red wax. It confirmed what they had feared: the erosion was accelerating. The main building would almost certainly slip off the cliffside within the decade. They could operate for a couple more years at most, but their long-term guests, they knew, had nowhere else to go. The air down there was too rich for them now. So they prayed for guidance, and got a reply, and started nailing boards over all the doors, and laying down trails of gasoline.

# *Faith, 22*

She couldn't see anything. She was waiting to be choked. Someone would come through the unlocked door and put their hands around her neck until her vision went to less than nothing, inverted and pulled itself out through the bottom of her consciousness. Every week she said a secret prayer for them to never let go, even after everyone was dead. It hadn't been answered yet.

# *Forsaken*

There was a speaker in the corner of every room piping in live radio. The sound was cheap and muddy, like a leaking pipe, and it couldn't be turned off. In the small dark hours, those asleep would be awakened by the slow, somber tolling of church bells. The recording played at a different time every night, so you couldn't plan around it. It was still better than home.

# *Golden Hour*

They watched from behind the dry streaks of window cleaner as the light grew brighter on the horizon. They thought they could almost hear the screaming, out there in the distant light. It had just been a little suitcase, left on a bench in a train station. That's all it had taken. They were very tired, but they couldn't close their eyes.

# *Here, Anywhere*

The siren started while he was stubbing the third cigarette out on his arm. It swept down the street like a colorless wave. On TV, a man was reading coordinates for places very far away, but static cut holes in the numbers. No one could tell where they were supposed to go. He wasn't worried. He was already anywhere.

# *Home*

He felt himself pick up the rock. He felt himself stumble forward, and he felt the glass shatter. The note around the rock said: "This is my last gift for you." He felt himself go home.

# *Hourglass*

The scarabs all showed up at once. We found them in the same spots in every room, moving in circles we didn't understand. When we tried to grab them they'd scatter, all at once. We put the ones we caught in little glass boxes. They tapped out foreign letters on the sides. We started to hear their pincers while we slept.

# *The Hole*

There was a bottomless pit in the floor behind the front desk. The guests never saw it checking in, but the workers never forgot it was there. It liked to whisper when no one was around. “Your home is not where you left it. Your children are not in their beds. Come closer, I’ve seen you before. Let me tell you what you’ve left unsaid.”

# *The Inhabitant*

No one ever saw him. He never seemed to go outside, and he paid every week by bank transfer. But there were more and more complaints: strange sounds, odors. It was starting to hurt business. People were talking. When the manager went and knocked on his door, there was no answer. Later, it took four deputies to force it open. Inside, it was filled halfway to the ceiling with gleaming bones. We never found out what of, just that they were too small to be human. They didn't find him buried among them, or anywhere else.

# *The Innkeeper*

He liked to call himself “the innkeeper,” although no one would call his establishment an inn. He kept a pair of cracked spectacles perched on the long, narrow beam of his nose, and his wiry frame was always wrapped in a grey and dusty smock. At night, his guests would see him in their dreams, crawling up a distant edifice, moving like a spider.

# *Invocation*

They were still outside. He could feel their blank eyes. Cars seemed to accelerate as they drove by, nervous creatures acting on instinct. He heard a muffled door open, very near the corner he was crouched in. His memories kept playing back all scrambled, like the tape was tangled in the machine.

# *The Kid*

The car was already burning when it crashed through the wall. There was no one inside it to rescue. He had been on the far side of the room, hunched over the sink. He saw words in the smoke as it filled his lungs: “COME BACK COME BACK COME BACK COME BACK.”

# *Living in Paradise*

None of the curtains are drawn, so you can see inside each room as you pass it. They've taken out the beds and replaced them with straw mats. Each mat has been boxed with chainlink fencing stretching floor-to-ceiling. It looks flimsy but it gets the job done. The rooms are mostly empty. The few people already inside are still handcuffed. None of them are wearing clothes. A stereo across the parking lot is playing Born Slippy at earsplitting volume. Everybody's laughing.

# *Love Story*

You bent down and kissed her where her last tear had fallen. No one knew where you were, or that you were in love. The moon looked beautiful that night.

# *The Luminaries*

They've plugged themselves with tubes, and hooked all the tubes together. They've wrapped their limbs in gauzes and quick-set plasters, and let them harden and immobilize. They've rigged shotguns to the doorknobs, and pointed them at their heads. They're closing off their systems, and making a new world.

# *Morse Code*

He lifted the plate to his nose and snorted another line of orange powder. It stung like a snowball hitting the inside of his skull. Every time he blinked ideas sprouted, flowered, and instantly rotted. He reached for his pencil. Someone was pounding on the door, and he needed to mark down the beats. He was sure he would be able to decode them soon.

# *The Nameless Man*

Ring ring. He picked up the phone. It was the front desk. They said there was a man there to see him, and that he wouldn't give them his name. He said he didn't know any nameless men. There was something about the way the clerk had said "man" that disturbed him. He could still hear it on the highway the next morning, wedged in the wheel well, scraping against the tire.

# *New Home*

He'd stripped off all his clothes and picked up his hammer. He was punching holes in the wall. The sound soothed him. One, two three, four, even and steady, all in a line. He didn't need to go back. The walls would let him in. One, two, three, four. The room got smaller with every blow.

# *Night by the Window*

Cobwebs fell across the ceiling in long curves. The silver ring was still on the bedside table. The only sound was the stale hum of the air conditioning. It had forgotten to run out of power.

# *No More*

He was stumbling, falling. He wanted to cry out but his voice had gone grey. All the lines were converging. He saw a bug crawl out from under a door and stare at him, silent as a statue.

# *The Obese Man*

The obese man has a plastic bag over his head. It's fogged up with sweat and breathing. Every time he inhales it puckers into his mouth. His eyes are streaked and blurry behind it. He's sitting on the edge of the bed in a pair of boxer shorts, flicking a lighter on and off. It's been many years since he had a name.

# *Obire*

She sees infernal designs every time she closes her eyes. Most of the time she feels like she's lost in a dark forest, cutting her feet on arrowheads. She lives wherever shows up on the side of the road when she's about to pass out. Her car is held together with yellow bile. She can't let anything about herself become permanent. Her mascara never stops running.

# *Old Math*

The manager was drunk all the time. His office reeked of sweat and gin. He would spend all day hunched over, filling notebooks with equations. He would tell us he'd found the real math, the kind that God had used, that his proofs were nearly complete. When he talked about it, his lips looked like a tree trunk splitting open. No one got a look at his work until after he died. The pages were sick with grease, and the ink was all smeared into ugly whirlpools.

# *On-Site Report*

We were all hanging out in his motel room when we heard the news. Wrong configuration, impurities in the salt. Some girl no one knew started screaming, crying, the whole lot. Getting snot in her mouth. She ended up the same place he did. The rest of us were changing our plane tickets. By the time the sun came up it was like we'd never existed.

# Oven

The room had an oven built into the wall. It was large enough to crawl inside, and there was no window on the door. The dials went all the way to 1000. They were very dismayed. They murmured and muttered: "It doesn't seem very safe for the children..." But it was late and they were tired, so they stayed. The door fell open while they slept. Inside it was black with soot, so black you could slip and never stop falling.

# *The Parking Lot*

A crack opened up in the parking lot one night. The asphalt split and made room for a chasm that went all the way down. First all the cars fell in. Then all the vending machines. Then all the lamps and TVs, and all the people asleep in their beds.

# *Passion*

They had rented the room to die inside. That was the whole idea. They'd stopped taking the medication a month ago, long enough to save up two lethal doses. The hallucinations had gotten so bad they'd started leaving bruises. Their veins tracked across their skin like snakes. As they lay and waited to be filled with silence, they found themselves amazed at the depths in each other's eyes.

# *Penance*

The man was thin and rickety, dressed neatly in black. He checked in with one suitcase. Inside of it was two changes of clothes, a large knife, and a bottle of deer urine, affixed with a typewritten label. He took out the bottle and carefully splashed it in the corners of the room, then sat down on the bed and waited. Later, the coroner found fur from seven different wolves in his wounds, and traces of saliva from an animal no one could identify.

# *A Recording*

A man has stepped behind the curtain in your room. His shoes are poking out at the bottom. They're glossy black leather, and they're so clean you can see your reflection in them. He isn't moving anymore. There's a chair jammed under the doorknob.

# *Recovery Period*

Eventually, she accepted her ankle was really broken and she had to get off the road. The first place had a sign out front that looked like it had never been washed. She gave a fake name at the desk. The guy behind it was so thin she could see his ribcage under his shirt. She found some old bandages in the trashcan in her room and used them to make a splint. She lay on the stained mattress until her bones healed, crooked but strong.

# *Regional Manager*

He stands in front of the bathroom mirror and practices his faces. Thoughtful, attentive, enthusiastic, sympathetic, serious. Every face he knows. He wants to make sure all of them are just right. He wants to make a good impression. He flew a long way to get here. The mirror is covered in soot.

# *Resting Place*

Sometimes she would open her eyes again and see who had come there after her. Usually single men with blank faces, or single women with faded clothes. A nice family, occasionally. She once spent a whole night watching a couple sleep, and tried to remember what love felt like. Mostly she kept her eyes closed, though. Like she had wanted.

# *Road Trip*

She took out the money and counted it again. They still only had ninety dollars left. She remembered a time when there was so much it took half the night to count it. They had worried more about the locks on the doors back then. She would have dreams about masked men, black rifles, body armor with big, white letters on it. But they had never come. She understood now they hadn't needed to.

# *Robert's Home*

There weren't any chain restaurants in the town, she discovered. The only listing was for a place called Robert's Home. The delivery man showed up wearing some kind of animal mask. She couldn't figure out what it was supposed to be. The ears were too tall and thin, and they looked like they'd been scorched. He disappeared into the darkness as soon as she took her food. Even the crickets were silent that night.

# *SILENCE*

There's someone walking around, out in the parking lot. You couldn't sleep, so you've been watching him. It took you a while to realize it, but there's a pattern to his movements. He's tracing the same lines and curves over and over, forwards and backwards. Like he's writing a message in cursive. No matter which way he turns he's just a silhouette.

# *The Sin*

“Adultery is a sin,” she said into the phone. “I know,” he replied. Their beds were on opposite sides of the wall, behind opposite doors. They sat like that until dawn, letting the receivers transmit their breath back and forth.

# *The Sleepers*

One morning all the doors were open, and all the rooms were empty. Everyone was spread out on the road or draped on top of cars. The police were called, of course, and then the EMTs, and then the ambulances carried them to hospital beds, where they stayed. And all the rooms stood empty, for no one wished to join them.

## *Someday You Will be Somewhere Else*

She was “erratic.” She had a metal plate in her head. When she, of course, got kicked out of home, she started living at the motel in town. Sometimes she picked up radio waves, inside herself. The station IDs never mentioned cities she recognized. One night she got a news report about a monument that had just been unveiled. It commemorated “the lost sects”. Sometimes she heard long stretches of soft static, which always concluded with the applause of a large crowd.

# *Tide*

He had spent his life beside deep green lakes, watching other people drown, but now when he looked out the window he could see the ocean. Tomorrow he would be walking into it and never coming out.

# *The Traveler*

Once, a traveler stopped here for the night, to rest and regain his strength. He has stayed ever since.

# *Trophy*

Inside the ice bucket was a hand with its fingers pointed towards heaven. As the ice melted, they slowly fell back to earth, and stayed there.

# *Tube*

He turns on the TV. A demolition derby. A woman screaming. A swarm of wasps. A pile of broken glass. A police interrogation. A woman wearing a chastity belt. A stalagmite. A homeless encampment flooding with water. A hideous color. A clown laughing. A parliament of owls perched on a banister in a dirty house. A preacher shouting. A horse falling off a cliff. A surgery. A bronze skeleton. A pile of rotting fruit. A prisoner tying a noose. A man burning photos of a black pyramid. He changes the channel.

# *Untitled*

You're sitting in your car in the parking lot. The engine is on. You're looking through the window of your room. Inside, you're sitting on the bed, facing away. You've been here for hours. It still isn't dawn. There's blood running down your face.

# *Wild Night*

Rays of sun fell through the edges of the curtains and pooled on the bed. The room was ice cold but her head still felt like a blast furnace. She blinked three times and realized she didn't know where she was. She looked around for her phone and couldn't find it. She peeked around the curtain and saw a burning car outside.

# A NOTE ON THE TEXT

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