

Rodeway Inn

by Jonah Scott Mendelsohn

I sit with my arms crossed atop my belly fat,
my back curving against the hard motel headboard,
legs stretched long beneath the coverlet. I can't sleep.
A couple fights in the room next door,
the thumping of their headboard knocking the wall.
Whose headboard was knocking, I wondered when I woke,
and when I knew it wasn't ours, I had to ask:
are they having sex or murder next door?
It's definitely a fight. I consider – should I
get involved? Call the desk, or the cops, or walk next door
and bang on the door myself? But I am informed:
I studied domestic violence in college, and I know
better. The cops won't come, and if they do
it may only make things worse. Given the chance,
she's as likely to clam up and climb into the car
with the man. And if not, where could she go?
The motel is a row of doors on a two-lane road,
a long porch of fluorescents reflecting on windows,
illuminating the hoods of parked cars before rapidly
surrendering to darkness. Entering the void requires
a destination; otherwise, one clings to companionship.

The curtains are opaque, thickening the dark. My husband
has managed to fall back to sleep, in spite of it all.
In my head, blood pounds above the diminishing shouts
next door. I slip out of bed, grope for my notebook, climb
into a chair by the window, lifting the curtain just

a sliver, in case the light should rouse him where
shouts do not. The yelling flickers down, giving way
to a woman's quiet keening, then subsiding into a
surface tension of silence separating our two rooms.
I send my pen scratching across the page – it's so loud,
a harsh descant above the drone of my husband's snore.
How does he sleep so deep? Long and slow, his exhalations
tune me back to stillness. In the curtain light, shapes
emerge into discreteness, as my eyes adjust –
the table, my pen, the wall, the bed, the headboard,
the dresser, the unlit lamps on the opposite wall.
Gray on gray, the large mirror gathers shapes
in its frame, settling into a dark composition:
Rodeway Inn. The familiar motel room design
fulfills its function: to isolate, to mimic comfort
with its illusion of privacy.

Does one watcher count
as vigilance? I want to wake my husband, to burst
our bubble, to act, but my anxiety – a flapping bird –
sinks under the weight of his reverberant breathing,
drifting down into the night, rippling quiet as it recedes.
That's why I married him – his deep acceptance, his center
of gravity, pulling my nervous trajectory into his orbit.
Before him – before us – I rarely took vacation.
Neither did he. Yet here we are, driving north on 95
for a third summer, trading city heat and 80 hour weeks
for eight days elsewhere. It could be anywhere –
this third-tier motel, the closest we'll get to roughing it:
resorting to resorts, restaurants, repackaged summer stock –
nothing uncivilized. Nature, though – human, or other –

breaks through the cracks regardless.

How thin

is the wall that separates us from violence? My husband and I –
we'll fight once this trip: some primal, piranha will break
the surface. A work call will interrupt breakfast,
which I'll feel compelled to take, while his eyes grow cold,
like my eggs. He'll pay the check, cross the parking lot,
silently unlock the Toyota, August air wavering in the heat.
The steering wheel's too hot to touch – but the air is frozen
between us. I'll slam the door, try to provoke
a crack in his silence: "Get out." I won't, but the
morning pastime – a bike ride? a pedicure? – is cancelled.
A car will pull into the next space, not noticing
two white men in a parking lot in Maine. There's no
shouting, no tears. The bill's paid, the vehicle's
insured. It's him and me, and it will be
my favorite memory from the trip: two fronts,
hot and cold, met in the confines of a car,
dark clouds flashing with real thunder, then
breaking, dispersing in time for a sunset walk
on the marginal way, waves crashing far below.

Outside,

gray gives way to light – I haven't slept a wink. I don't mind.
I wake worried, so a sleepless night leaves me
weary but relieved. The husband stirs and smiles
as he always does in the morning. He takes great joy
in choosing when to wake. I click my pen, flutter
the notebook shut and climb sideways under the sheets,
matching his back's curve. I kiss his hair,

cut so short, it's hard to tell it's a human head. His gravity
pulls me in for splashdown from my night flight.

We bob like buoys in the ocean of sleep, until it's time
to check out.

Should I say anything at the front desk?

Or do they know, this desi couple who owns the motel,
what goes on? They will scrub clean the room next door:
no carpets, its laminate floor is ready for any spill.
Nothing stains, not a drunk's puke or a baby's. Is it right
to bring last night's cries into their home? Behind the desk,
a seven-year-old peeks from down the hall, and
the smell of spices from the apartment kitchen betray
any attempt by the décor to sustain a mood
of corporate anonymity. The man, the manager,
the owner looks expectantly at me: do I have
something to say? I glance at the child, who clings –
curious but shy – to the shadows, and tear
a local map off the pad on the counter instead,
smiling awkwardly, which the father accepts with
a curt nod. My husband reclaims his credit card
and coaxes me out to the car. I consult the map,
select a breakfast spot, then fold it in quarters,
the smell of turmeric rubbing off on my fingers
as we roll down the highway, the rising sun
behind us.

for Andrew

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