

Slaughter-
house-Five
Is About
Believing
in Love

James Charbonneau

Oh this so dark a night as to be fingerless.

I enter what I call my home. I spread my overcoat over the wings of a hanger. I make my coat jump up and down, by gripping the hanger's hook—my head—and jerking it from high to low, over and over again. I stop when this begins to make me—me, not coat-hanger me—a little sick like car with closed windows and someone smoking, sick; like chipped red paint Tilt-A-Whirl ride, sick.

I knife-edge my hand down the front of my overcoat to knock off all the bad molecules.

I go through my pants pockets looking for the Post-It. Nothing. I cannot remember what it said, and now it is gone.

I hang my overcoat and I make the empty coat hangers in the closet clang together and I think about sparrows and hunchbacks and suddenly I can see the guy who sits day after day in front of my building with a cardboard sign that just reads HELP, all in caps, no exclamation point, no specific type of help requested, just help. I want that Post-It as badly as that man wants a ham sandwich or some gin or a dick to suck or a game of checkers with a true adversary.

I close the closet door and walk from the hall into the living room.

Olivia sits on the couch facing me. She has seen me do this searching ritual before. Everything from an old magazine with a specific article with a specific quote about a specific subject that didn't really have anything to do with the main subject of the article; to a specific winter cap, black with a white stripe, I remembered having three winters ago, which she told me for a fact had been ruined by the snow blower when the hat blew off my head and into the moving blades, but mostly Post-Its, yellow Post-Its. On them, everything from the practical, a list of American cheese and wheat bread and three-ply toilet paper, to one line, like *Hamlet is about grief*, to one she found crumpled under the sink near the trash barrel that only had numbers

on it in rows, all 7s, seven rows wide and seven rows long, until, in the second to the last row, two 7s in from the right, there was a 6. I had lied to her and told her I didn't remember its meaning. I could tell she was too sick of this trait of mine to be sick of it anymore. Now she was just bored.

"Have a good day?" I say.

I watch her face. The angle her eyes take on arouses me. Her forehead wrinkles. I can see the words fill her mouth. She swallows, washing down whole sentences, entirely formed thoughts, hours of conversation.

Maybe the words are hidden in the wrinkles of her forehead. I look, but alas, the skin is wiped clean. I often use words that nobody else uses anymore from all centuries and eras and cultures, words like *alas*. I say *groovy* at least twice a day.

I think of the Post-It and my stomach churns.

"I went for a good walk this morning—had a good workout," she says. "Then I went grocery shopping."

I smile at her on purpose, like bait. "See anybody?"

"No. Well, just Janine. She told me about her continuing diet and some problems with Jerry. But nothing earth-shattering."

"She's always been a waste of time." I free the words without caution, with intent. I am looking for trouble now. Is the Post-It that important? Is this why I am getting all hostile on her? What did it say? I try to force what is written there, my memory of it, to the forefront of my mind and only see the yellow of a blank Post-It note.

"Right, just my best friend," she says.

"Look, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. It's just that ..."

"You've never tried to get to know her." Her voice peters out. "Not really."

My eyes bounce around the room and land on the cabinet Olivia restored for use as a bar. A doily protects the polished top, and I had lined the bottles up in neat rows long ago. The glasses and coasters and napkins were stored inside. I grab the ice bucket on my way to the kitchen.

One cube in the second ice tray won't come out, and I twist the plastic until I hear it crack.

I run the tray under water and it keeps getting hotter and hotter. I hold it there until the cube is completely gone. Back to its source: solid, liquid, gas, or was it hard, soft, nothing, or was it rock, paper, scissors? Are scissors nothing? The thing they do takes place in the space between the blades, and the paper they cut keeps the blades from touching again until the cut is complete. So what really cuts the paper? Nothing.

"What about Betty?" I call out from the kitchen. "I had a good time talking to her at that barbeque at what's-their-names house last weekend." I come back carrying the ice bucket. "We had a few laughs."

"Until you had to go and start telling your stories," she says.

I put ice in my glass all the while pouring the vodka until it tops the ice. I know the vodka is melting at least a little bit of the ice, stealing its cold, but I can't see it and I want to see transitions today, some change, the bounce of a coat becoming nausea.

I take a long pull off my drink and taste turpentine. I make a face of disgust and hope Olivia will turn and see it and think I'm making a face at her. I look down at the vodka in my glass and expect to see an oil slick. I pick up the bottle and look at it, tipping it this way and that. I take another sip, and now it tastes like chilled vodka again. Everything is A-okay.

"What's wrong with my stories?" I say.

She says, "Did you ever think that not everyone is interested in your work. Some people are bothered by your stories? They're morbid."

"I work in insurance. How can that bother anybody? Actuarial tables don't bother anyone. And they don't lie!"

Olivia turns around and looks at the drink in my hand. The condensation at the base of the glass draws her eye.

"How about me?" she says and turns back.

I put ice in a glass and fill it for her. I look at the back of her head. Her hair is the most beautiful thing I have ever touched. Black

strains of silk connected without connections. All I have to do right now is touch that hair and I will love her and crave her and miss her, everything at once, like the universe.

I think about taking my dick out and putting it in her drink for a second. Fellatio once removed. My second thought has nothing to do with propriety and everything to do with the possibility of an ice cube getting stuck to my flesh and the cartoon it would paint for her when she would turn around to see what all the ruckus was about, seeing me, legs spread, head down, with an ice cube freezing the tip of my dick off and me afraid to knock it away, the thought of skin grafts—skin from my ass to replace the skin from my dick—dogging my mind.

I think of words like *ruckus* and *dogging* that nobody uses anymore.

“Here.” I hand her the drink over the back of the couch and step back to the cabinet.

I listen intently to my wife taking the first sip of her drink. I try to judge just how far down the vodka is in her glass by the pitch of her next sip. Somewhere around C-flat I will pour more for her right from the bottle into her glass without her having to ask or move or even think. Pure service. I down my second drink.

“Think I’ll take a shower,” I say.

“That’ll be good,” she says.

And there it is.

I can hear it in her voice. I am not contagious. I am the contagion. All the numbers and percentages and pieces of the pie charts I rubbed up against all day have worked their way into my skin, filling my pores, through muscle, to the bone, the meat of the marrow and the spaces in between. All those slimebag tornado victims and slut flood victims and airbag sucking lowlifes have penetrated me.

I watched her once. In her car before we had officially met, outside that coffee shop. She had been one of them then. No seat belt.

Now I know I make her feel dirty with my mathematics and I

want to spit mortality tables all over the back of her head, all over that beautiful, beautiful hair.

“I was at Hooper’s the other day” says Olivia, “and George said he was going to be getting in some stuff from an estate sale. He said there were a few pieces I might be interested in. Pretty beat up, so I could get them cheap.”

“That depends on what George means by cheap,” I say.

“He always gives me good deals,” she says.

“I wonder why that is,” I say.

I can see through the back of her head that she makes the effort to close her mouth and say nothing.

Raging Bull *is about jealousy.*

The beginning of the third drink starts a marble of warmth in my belly that turns fluid with my second gulp. It begins to leach out from my stomach and I know it is my own will making it spread throughout my body. Once it gets to my fingertips, I realize that the circle is near completion. The journey from the glass to the stomach to the fingertips that held the glass is almost done. I force the vodka in my body through my fingertips and through the glass and back in among the cubes. I watch the bubbles come up from the bottom of the glass like a garden hose filling a kiddie pool from the bottom up. If this keeps up my glass will never empty. It might even overflow.

Jesus is about abundance.

“So what do you think?” she says.

“I think your friends are a bunch of losers,” I say.

There is a pause like a sinkhole that has swallowed the car, the amusement park ride, and the man who needs help outside my building.

I want a real fight now.

She puts her drink on the coffee table.

A knockdown, drag out. I want drinks flying, furniture tipping over, pictures falling from the walls, frames splintering, glass shattering, some blood this time, at least spit.

She gets up, her back to me. The motion of her shoulders tells me that she is crying. I had not considered tears on my list of the bodily fluids that I want from her. She makes her way up the stairs.

“Not fair,” I say, downing my drink. “You don’t fight fucking fair.” She is gone. “You fight like a fucking girl, you *throw* like a fucking girl,” I yell up the stairs, seeing myself run to the bottom of the stairs to do so, to be more effective in a big-screen ranch-owner epic kind of way. To be heard. But when I look I find I am still standing next to the cabinet, not even a foot forward to start the motion.

“You smell like a girl,” I say with affection balancing on the precipice of misery and rejection.

I pour myself another.

The Post-It sends me part of its message and a peak of it comes to me, more the memory of the idea of the letter-to-letter act of writing the words down; more accurately, the idea of the memory of the act. It is right on the edge of my recollection and I attempt to pronounce what little I think I can make out to give it a verbal push, but my effort backfires and the slight vision recedes, and nothing comes out of my mouth but gobbledygook.

I start to go to the closet to check for the Post-It one last time, but I turn back and go to sit down on the couch and miss. My drink spills. With a deft twisting of my wrist, I manage to keep more than half of it from soaking into my shirt and pants and couch and rug. I come to a final resting place with my head against one of the seat cushions. My neck is pinched, so I let myself slither the rest of the way down, a cool snake against the cool, cool floor.

Cool. Groovy.

But the floor is not cool. It is a square of thick rug silencing any approach to the furniture. The ceiling distracts me with its series of patterns of white squares within white squares. Something I have never noticed before. Trapped within the last and the smallest of each of the squares within squares is a flower. Open blossoms within blossoms. Roses!

Which never need water or sun.

“If they could see me now,” I tell the roses. “All those diseased ones that I have sent help in order to get the cure. They would know that I am here to take on all their afflictions and rid them of all their floods and fires and famines. They would know that I am the vessel into which all the filth must empty.”

My drink tips from my hand and falls through the molecules of my living room.

Suddenly, the words of the Post-It appear in the smallest of one of the squares within squares far above my head as raised letters, riding the blossoms, alive and nearly permanent until the day when the ceiling will crumble and fall.

It tells me: *A vessel can be both a ship that rides the water and a container that holds the water.*

“I am the vessel,” I yell. This time I turn my face away from the stairway even though I’m pretty sure I’m standing at the bottom of it now.

I raise my foot to take the first step. “I am the vessel.” I will chant it with each step up, until I reach my blushing bride.

Olivia is sitting on the edge of the bed. She smiles at me and I know that she has not been crying at all. She knows what the truth will do to me and she frees the words without caution, with intent. Like bait taken.

The watering of the vodka had been more an experiment than an act of alcoholic sabotage. Intervention twice removed. She had been doing it incrementally, she says, by slight degrees, she says, by exact measurement, she says, for months. What I am drinking, have been drinking, all this live-long day is more water than vodka.

She has always been smarter than I ever was or ever will be. Perhaps the word is devious. I tell her this. She smiles at the compliment.

By this ratio, it is not possible for me to be as drunk as I am acting and feeling. But this knowledge, all knowledge, changes neither the way I am nor the way I act.

Nor.

So close to *now*.

Change.

Another thing for me to add to my list of continuing verification of everything solid, then liquid, then gas.

Rise up and smell the roses on the ceiling.

