

Prune In a Tube Top

Tad and Margo are pieces of shit. Doesn't mean they're unlikable. On the contrary, they tend to grow on people. Like scabies. Or any other rash with an over-the-counter fix; a hiccup in your groove but once it's gone you almost miss the itch.

We could go back to pets? Tad said throwing his arm around the passenger seat, hand that was all knuckles and cheap rings.

Tad, no, Margo said. Not in front of Rose.

Pets? Rose asked, wiping her eyes and peeling her face off the leather of the backseat.

Margo moaned.

Tad barked back, Shit, once you saw how quick a dollar could come...

One of the last of a dying breed, a bounty of rust and reliability in evidence, the old car flung fragments of itself over the cliff's edge as they began their descent through canyon.

Pets? Rose asked.

We had a run at it, Margo said.

'Pet-nappin'. Tad said. He made eye contact with her in the rear view and grinned.

For someone who never got caught, Rose thought, he was a fucking idiot.

Margo continued. We'd take someone's cat or dog and after a week of letting them believe it was lost we'd send a ransom note.

Let a little panic set in.

Rose sat mouth agape.

Rate of success was unlike any other rub, Tad said.

What about cops?

Jumping to solve the case of a missing pet?

We'd keep the ransom low, Margo added.

How low?

Eh. Couple hundred bucks, Margo said. Fifty bucks for birds or amphibians.

That even worth it?

Quick and easy, on to the next, Tad said.

Rose studied his old rings. Rapping against the steel of the headrest. Jesus, Margo, she scoffed.

The three stretched their necks to get their first glimpse at the ocean. A jolt of electric blue peaking through the dried ombre of the canyon.

Well, how the hell else is Tad's sister supposed to pay for school, Rosy? You'd want her following our lead?

I'm not judging, I'm just—

Sounds an awful lot like judgement, don't you think, Tad?

If not in the talk, in the timbre, Tad agreed.

If you think about it, Rose, it's not void of altruism.

I'm thinking about it, Rose said.

No, really, said Margo, the pets don't know a damn thing. We feed the fuckers and Tad plays with em' plenty—

I form a certain kinship with the little beasts, said Tad.

And the owners? Margo laughed. Hell, they get a renewed sense of appreciation.

Little fuckers are sleeping in the bed for weeks, Tad insisted.

People need reminding, Margo said. If anything, that's what we're charging for.

Tad ran his fingers through Margo's hair and tugged on it gently.

Essentially a victimless crime, he grinned.

Rose laughed. Other than the hundred bucks that someone has to pay to keep the pet they already own?

Two hundred, Tad chirped.

Margo snapped back, And I suppose you'd have Tad's sister work at the Taco Bell till all of her pretty little youth is dried up and she's another prune in a tube top looking for a daddy?

Rose looked down at the cracked leather of the seat. I'm not judging, she said.

Tad pulled into the beach access and parked and let the engine cough into the crisp onshores. The three sat silent and surveyed the thalassic

tableau. A pudgy, young boy sank into the wet sand, melting like a spilled piece of cake. His mom took selfies a few feet away on a beach chair under a purple umbrella.

She liked the way she looked with her hair tied back in her scarf, white with purple Dahlias. She felt like a Hepburn. She would upload the selfies to her private site where a handful of 'Daddies' would bid on her Saturday evening. The appointments would usually take her out to the valley. The men smelled of cologne that'd been sitting in the bottle too long and wore suits that looked recycled out of the interior upholstery of old Buicks. They'd insist on the Tiki-Ti Cocktail Lounge, confident of its charm and pleased with the novelty of it all—gentle ukulele, hula girls painted under acrylic moons. She was happy enough with the sweet drinks and dim lighting.

But today was different. This selfie, on this particular Saturday afternoon, was just for her. She'd finally saved enough to quit the mischief and coast for a while. She told herself that after a little 'me time' she'd go back to college. Veterinarian school maybe.... didn't much care for animals but at least she wouldn't mind the marks those patients left. She reveled in the banality of it. Thought it an altruistic turn.

Tad shook Margo and yelled like a kid. Look at that little beast run! God dammit, sometimes I wish I could be as happy as a dog running full speed on the sand.

Simple as you are, may as well try, Margo said.

Look, baby! Fat-boy loves it too.

Tad. Jesus, he's a kid, said Rose.

Bet we could get three hundred for that fuckin poodle, he yelled and turned back to Rose. People cough up way more for kids' pets.

It's a Labradoodle, idiot, said Margo.

You know, don't call me a fucking idiot. Why would I know the *species* of every stupid dog I see?

May as well know the worth of what you're stealing, Rose said.

Jesus, Rosy, Margo interrupted, no one is *stealing* anything.

Castles made of sand and justifications, said Rose.

Rosy, Tad barked, I know you love your eastern philosophy and your fucking Tempeh, but shut the fuck up.

Rose kept quiet.

Margo laughed, We've got our cons, she got her Koans. She winked at Rose and in the same breath snapped at Tad. And don't ever curse at my friend again, you fucking idiot.

The hell is a Koan? Tad asked.

Like a mystic riddle or some shit, answered Margo. Not supposed to make any sense.

Buddhist, said Rose, And it's not a point of sensical or nonsensical. It's about the greater truths one unlocks in one's search to solve.

Tad crinkled an empty bag of chips and threw it out the window. He spoke calmly. Truth is, Rosy, this ain't a free ride any longer. You are getting that damn dog,

Rose leaned forward, And just how the hell am I supposed to steal a dog from a little kid?

The Labradoodle splashed in the ankle deep water and the boy laughed and threw sand at it. His mother grimaced at the pup. There was no way around that dog getting her car terminally sandy. She put her phone on the blanket and leaned her head back with her eyes closed. That fucking dog, she said to herself.

In exactly one week from this afternoon, she'd have to prematurely halt her retirement from said mischief and turn one more trick so as to buy back that fucking dog. Some cretin had demanded \$300 for the Labradoodle. The sloppy ransom note was covered in orange finger smudges, and sand was caked in the dried Elmer's. And to think she was relieved when she thought the dog just ran away that day.

She would meet the man at the Tiki-Ti and she would drink her cocktail out of the coconut and they'd go back to his place. He seemed like most the others except he didn't smell like old cologne. He didn't smell like anything and he never smiled with his mouth open, not even when he laughed.

Authorities would never recover her body and the man would continue for the better half of a decade before one victim broke free and eventually led police back to his home. The heinous uncovering would come to be known as the Dungeon in Canoga Park, joining the dark and

crowded ranks of Los Angeles atrocity.

After a 2nd week with no response to the ransom note, Rose, clueless to the eclipsing tragedy at hand, was overcome with guilt and snuck the Labradoodle back to the address of the boy. The dog's return and continued companionship over the following decade was what the boy would claim as the single saving grace of his wrought childhood. Having been ignorant to any ransom note, he'd always assumed the dog simply wandered back because it sensed he needed its love.

Tad finally turned the car off to let it cool and the engine huffed and spit like a beast out of breath. Rose was getting sweaty and her legs were sticking to the leather of the backseat now.

She asked, You don't worry that your sister will wonder how her schooling is getting funded?

Tad smiled at Margo. Nah, I sure don't, he said.

But if she did, you wouldn't tell her?

Nah, I sure wouldn't, Tad said.

And as smart as she is, I assume she's smart— attending university and that there being no shared acuity wasted on siblings— you don't think she'll just find out?

Rose! Margo interrupted. What is your massive hang-up with our charity?

It's just the truth has its way of finding people is all.

Well, Rosy, Tad said, *truth* is I don't have a god damn sister. So Truth is gonna have to go through an awful lot of god damn trouble to find her.

Margo punched Tad but she couldn't help but laugh.

Oh my God, Margo, said Rose as she slumped back and surrendered to the stickiness of the seat.

Tad perked up and smiled back at Rose and said, Say, I've got one of those cons for you—

Koans, Margo said.

How long does it take the truth of one sister's scholarship to reach the sister one does not have?

Rose stared at his mouth while he laughed, disgusted by the neon orange of the Flaming Hot Cheetos caked in the cracks of his crooked teeth.

Margo smiled at Tad and said, Ya know, baby, you may not be

incorrigible yet.

Fuck's that supposed to mean?

Means for the first time in a while, you don't sound like a total fucking idiot.

Tad scowled at her a moment, switching his focus from one eye to the other. He ran his fingers into her hair and grabbed a big chunk of it.

Rose's pulse climbing for her friend. And then, he just smiled.

Margo turned back to Rose and very matter-of-factly said, Someone out there's got a sister that's gotta go to fucking college.

Tad grunted to agree and pulled Margo towards him and they kissed.

Rose tried not to look at them, her misophonia triggered with each smack of their lips.

When they finally parted, Rose gasped. For sitting there staring at them in front of the car, soggy, sandy, and happy as it was dumb, the fat boy's Labradoodle.

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