

The Motel

by Brad Davis

Shadows lay on the small parking lot and against the walls of the motel. It sat between two mountains and was the only stop between the towns of Deaver and Sandhill, NC. The motel was one level with thirty rooms in all. A pole stood next to the road, thirty feet high, and once held a rectangular sign that read *Lanton Motel* in fat, blue lettering. It stood now, empty and solitary against the cloudy sky. Kevin and Beth Alexander were standing next to their car in the parking lot. She stood next to him and gently rubbed the swell of her stomach, while he eagerly assembled a large camera. She walked to the pole and stood beside it with her arms folded. She lightly kicked it and then looked back at him. He stood cradling the camera in both hands and watching her. The wind blew her black hair to one side and she tilted her head in the opposite direction. He held the camera up and admired her through the lens before snapping a picture. He lowered the camera and smiled briefly.

"I used to play out here," she said. "When I was little." The wind died and she laughed while rubbing her swollen stomach. "Imagine me little." She looked up and pointed to the tall dead tree next to the motel. "I was always scared of that tree. Grandma told me it was a giant that had been turned to stone."

"And now?" he asked walking in its direction.

"And now," she looked at the dead tree with its two big branches stretched out like arms ready to snatch her up. "I'm still scared." She looked at Kevin and thought he looked a little disappointed in her. "I'll always be scared of things, Kevin. You're the brave one." She walked to his side and brushed the hair behind his ear. "Do you think we're ready? Are we ready for a living thing that is totally dependent on us and our ability to keep shit together?"

"Does it matter?" He sounded playful, but she knew him too well to be fooled. "Joke," he said when he noticed she wasn't

smiling. "We'll be fine." He stood by the car and took pictures of the main office. The front door was red and peeling. The large window next to it was dark and dirty.

Beth put her hands up under his bicep to warm them. She kissed the side of his neck. "Let's be happy today," she said. "Like we planned."

They walked to the office window cautiously, as if they thought someone would jump out from behind the door. They wiped the dust from the window and peered inside. "Spooky," Beth said in Kevin's ear and then walked back to the car. "I don't really want to go in. Let's just take pictures out here." Kevin turned around and held his camera up to take one of her.

"Not me." She covered her face with her hands and he snapped the picture.

"Beth playing Peek-A-Boo," he said. "That's the title of that one."

"I'm waiting in the car," she said.

"No, you can't," he said. "This was your home. And your idea." He looked at her and thought about the day she woke him to tell him she was pregnant. She was wearing his Cleveland Browns t-shirt and he had pulled her down on top of him.

"I want to go in one of the rooms." He looked at the motel and then back at Beth.

"They're locked," she said. "Or should be."

They walked from room to room, twisting the knobs of each door. Beth started on one end and Kevin on the other. No cars drove by and the sun kept disappearing behind the clouds. Beth felt the occasional shiver, but didn't want to complain. She didn't want to be inside the rooms, but at the same time she looked forward to being out of the wind. She stopped at room twenty-six and watched Kevin twisting one of the knobs hard as if he thought he could break the lock with brute strength. She smiled and thought of the day she told him she was pregnant. She had thought he would be upset because he had plans to travel to Alaska. She was supposed to go with him. They were going to live day to day and blow through all

the money her grandmother had left her in the will. Kevin didn't know much about her grandmother and so, after telling him about her and growing up in the motel, he had asked to see it. Three weeks later she told him she was pregnant and she felt closer to him than ever. She decided she wanted to share more and so she said they should drive down to North Carolina and visit the motel. He could take pictures and use them in an art show. He had planned to take pictures in Alaska, so she thought the motel could take the place of that. She hoped it would.

"Here's one," he shouted. He opened the door to room nine and walked inside. She slowly walked to the open door and stuck her head in. The wind picked up and she walked inside. The bed was unmade and books and torn clothes were lying all over the room.

"Does it smell funny to you?" she asked with a wrinkled nose. She looked around the room and started backing up towards the door. "Let's get out of here, Kevin."

"Look at this." He sat down on the bed and picked up a six pack of beer from the floor. One of the bottles was gone.

"Southpaw," he said. "I used to drink this in college. Can't get cheaper than Southpaw." He looked at her and she thought, for a second, that he looked different. Like someone she didn't know. "Let's have a drink," he said.

Beth laughed quietly, thinking he was joking, but stopped when she saw him pull out a beer and twist the cap off. "What are you doing?" she asked. "That could be a hundred years old."

"Relax, chickee," he said with an asymmetrical grin. "Just a joke." He lay back on the bed with his arms behind his head.

"You think we could get money out of this place," he said. "You know, sell it."

"Maybe the land is worth something," she said in a soft voice. "Let's get out of here." She walked to the door and looked outside, expecting someone tall and ugly to be there. The sun was completely hidden by the clouds and the mountains loomed over the motel.

She felt tired and wanted to be done with everything. She wanted to be done with Kevin, the baby, with life. She felt like she had as a little girl in her grandmother's bathroom with the bottle of pills in her hand. She hadn't known what they were but that they were round and white like the moon. And now, as she stood in the doorway and looked out at the dark evening sky, she felt alone and hopelessly tired.

"The date on this bottle is from three years ago," Kevin said from behind her. She ignored him and started walking back to the car. She thought of the time her grandmother fell while mowing the grass next to the sign. She remembered hearing a howling from outside. She ran out and saw her lying on her side. The push mower was on its side too. She ran to her grandmother and tried to help her up. She was pushed away and her grandmother howled.

There was no other word she could think of to call it. It was a strange inhuman sound that she never forgot. Some nights, when alone in the kitchen or in bed, she thought she heard it outside.

Even after deciding it was just the wind, she still thought of her grandmother and how she slowly went mad inside the motel. Beth took care of her for as long as she could, but eventually she couldn't any longer. She felt alone and tired. She swallowed the whole bottle of pills and lay down in her grandmother's king-sized bed. She woke up in the hospital with her grandmother brushing her hair.

On the car ride home they listened to the radio without speaking a word. The landscape slowly changed from mountains to small rolling hills. They stopped at a gas station halfway home where Beth fell asleep while Kevin pumped the gas. When they pulled into the driveway, Beth woke up. She laid her hand on the door handle and then looked over at Kevin.

"What are you thinking?" she asked. She wanted to say something. She suddenly felt guilty for not saying a single word the whole way home. She wanted to lay her head on his shoulder.

“I was thinking about...” He looked out his window and then slowly turned his head back towards her. “How such a beautiful girl like you snores like a giant bear.” She laughed and laid her head on his shoulder. He kissed the top of it and sighed. She thought it was a happy sigh. She told herself it was a happy sigh.

Later that night, Beth was reading a book in bed while Kevin was in the shower. Her mind skipped from one thing to another and she had to read the same page over and over again. She closed the book and laid it on the nightstand next to her. She rolled over onto her side and listened to the water running in the shower. She closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. Kevin woke her up when he climbed into bed. She opened her eyes. The lights were off. She looked at the clock on her nightstand and saw she had been asleep for a couple of hours. She rolled onto her back and sighed. “I love you,” she whispered into the dark room and then rolled onto her side, facing Kevin.

“I love you too,” he whispered back and moved closer to her. She laid her head on his chest and aftershave. She took a deep breath and exhaled against his skin. He gently ran his finger down her ear and she raised her head to kiss him. She pushed her lips into his and held them there. With Kevin awake and looking out the bedroom window, she fell asleep in his arms.

She dreamed of a beach. The waves broke with great force, each time carrying large chunks of the beach back into the ocean and leaving a black void behind. She was sitting in the sand and watching. She felt herself pulled closer and closer. She tried to stop by digging her hands into the sand, but she wasn't strong enough. She felt the cold water against her feet and calves. She looked down and her legs were gone below the knees. Terrified, she looked behind her and saw Kevin lying on the motel bed covered with empty beer bottles. She screamed. She felt the water against her waist, but was too afraid to look down at it. She screamed and

looked back at Kevin, who had given up struggling against the bottles and just lay there laughing.

She woke up breathing heavily, and looked at the empty space next to her. She sat up and yelled for Kevin, but no one answered. She looked at the clock and realized he was at work.

“So how was it?” Beth's friend Joanna asked. “Still there I guess.” Beth was in the kitchen waiting for the coffeemaker to finish brewing. She was holding the phone against her ear with her shoulder while writing out a grocery list.

“It's still there,” Beth said. “As grungy as ever.” She laid the pencil down and looked out the window at her neighbor, an old woman who had just moved in two months ago. She was sweeping off her front porch in bare feet and listening to the radio. “We made a bit of a discovery while there.”

“A discovery?”

“Yeah, one of the rooms was unlocked and it looked like someone had been living there,” Beth said. “Bottles, books, clothes...all kinds of stuff just laying around.”

“Weird,” Joanne said. “Right? Maybe it was a mountain man tired of living in the woods. I could see that.” The coffeemaker beeped and Beth told her she had to go but that they should get together for lunch real soon. After her second cup, Beth went back over the grocery list. She wanted to make pork chops with baked apple slices for dinner. She walked upstairs to the bedroom and fell asleep in the bed.

That night, after eating Chinese take-out, Beth and Kevin stayed up late in bed watching a movie. They made love gently and quietly as the credits rolled down the screen. They listened to each other breathing in the dark and she could tell, by his slow rhythm, that he was almost asleep.

"I had a really bad dream last night," Beth said while looking up at the ceiling. Kevin didn't say anything. "Don't you want to hear about it?"

"Sure," he said. "Say it was bad?"

"Yeah. I can't remember exactly, but I do remember you were in it. And it was at a beach. You weren't there at the beginning though. It was at the end."

Beth lay quietly for a minute, thinking of him covered in beer bottles.

"Well, what happened?"

"I don't know," she said. "I can't remember."

"Well, I'm sure you won't have one tonight," he said and then rolled onto his side facing away from her.

She couldn't sleep because a memory kept pushing its way to the front of her mind. She was seven-years-old, and was playing near the dead tree by the motel. She was scaring herself by running close to it. A little blue egg, near the trunk, caught her attention. She thought she had found something beautiful and mysterious. She was mesmerized by its soft blue color. She ran into the motel to show her grandmother, but she found her sleeping on the couch behind the front desk. So she walked to her bedroom in the back and lay down. She held the egg up to the light and wondered what was inside. "A dragon or a dinosaur," she thought. She twirled it round and round with her tiny fingers. She thought of how her life was about to change and how she would have to love it and take care of it like a baby. The more she thought though, the more afraid she became. "What if it's dangerous?" she thought. "What if it tries to eat my grandmother?"

With wild thoughts rushing around, she walked outside with the egg cupped in her right hand. She had decided to put it back. She sat the egg down under the tree and thought "What if it smelled me? What if it remembers my smell?" Terror shot through her like bolts of lightning. In a moment of panic, she picked up the egg and smashed it against the tree trunk. The goo ran down in a colorful mess. Her hands were sticky and wet. She rubbed them violently in

the grass, and with each rub, she could feel guilt rising up from deep inside her and latching on to her heart. In terrible tears she ran into the motel and jumped onto her grandmother who was still sleeping on the couch. Her grandmother asked what was wrong but all Beth could say was "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Her grandmother held her in her lap and Beth slowly fell asleep with her face red and wet with tears.

The next evening, when Kevin came home from work, she sat him down on the living room couch. She told him she was thinking about a lot of things and that she wondered if he was too.

"About the baby, you mean?" he asked. She didn't answer but she put her hand on his and began to cry. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Is there something wrong?" The light pouring in from the windows was orange and changing every minute. The lights were off and so the room was bright one minute and then dark the next. There was no wind blowing outside.

"I think I need to go back on my medicine," she said. She wiped the tears from her eyes and let go of Kevin's hand. "I think..."

"I thought you couldn't. I thought it would affect the baby."

"I don't know," she said.

He placed his hand on hers. "Maybe we should go back and talk to Dr. Souvrin," he said. "Maybe she can explain things to us. Help us to understand."

"I mean," she said and stopped. She placed her hand on her stomach. "I don't know about the baby."

The room fell completely dark and they sat close together, holding hands and looking at the floor. The wind slowly picked back up and a thin howling could be heard. At first, just for a second, they thought it was someone crying. They looked up at each other, in the dark, and realized it was just the wind.

