

ASH WEDNESDAY

by Eric Boyd

Everybody knew the McDonald's at the Waterfront was selling theraflu stamp bags, and I guess I'd heard how bad it was for you—they'd had reports of dumbasses ODing on channel 2, 4, and 11—but it was a lot stronger than regular heroin and a lot cheaper and it was really a bad winter for me. The Pretty Kitty closed down because of everything in the back, and there weren't many places for me to go except the booths, like half a mile down 8th. The girl there, Vanessa, she told me about the shit, how much it cost and how strong it was. She'd heard about it from another girl at GreenBrier while she was doing a three month stay. I always liked GreenBrier; all the beautiful trees, the grass; it was a lot better than Western Psych but when you left Western Psych you were downtown and you could score again quick. GreenBrier was like 30 minutes away if you had a ride. So Vanessa said it was great shit but that you had to had to *had to* cut it. She said you could last half a week on one bag if you were good. I liked the way she said that. It made me think of my mom, but then I thought about it too long and ended up slapping Vanessa. She didn't hit me back, but she should have. At about 10:30 I walked down to the McDonald's before work—I was staying on 8th at this guy's place, an artist named Ben Franklin, like the president. We met at Al Anon even though neither of us drank; we took pills; Ben had a bad back but he actually *had a* bad back, not like everyone else said to their doctors, which I liked, so I said hi to him and we got along really well and he showed me his place, which was above Jack's coffee shop, and the roof leaked when it rained and even sometimes when it didn't, which was pretty funny; but it was nice because we were right across the street from the gas station, and that place is run by these nice Indians; they'll sell you a cigarette for fifty cents as long as you ask right—and it was snowing. It'd been snowing for weeks. I actually couldn't remember the last time I had seen grass. Maybe at GreenBrier. That was in the summer? As I walked I looked at the trees and it was weird how

once they were alive and now they were dead, but they would be alive again. So many plants and animals get to leave the world during the winter, why not me? I wanted to be a tree or a bear or one of those insects that sleeps for seventeen years. Why not? I was trying. I'd heard that the woman, I think she was the manager, at the McDonald's did it through the kids meals. You asked for an extra toy in your kids meal and that's where it was. The only problem for me was that she only did it from out the drive-thru, and I didn't know what to do because of that. Those things only work when you have a car, like they have a weight or a sensor or something. The big grocery store, Giant Eagle, was right there and lots of buggies were around the parking lot so I took three, pushed them together, and wheeled it to the drive-thru. A voice came on and said Hi, how can I help you today? And I couldn't remember where I was so I asked and they said I was at McDonald's, then I remembered. I asked if it was the manager I was speaking to, and they said it wasn't, but that they could get her. I said that would be good because I had a fucking problem with the last thing I got there and that I'd been puking all week. You have to say things like that and be smart. If I went up and asked for the manager for no reason they'd be suspicious. So I said something about eating a really bad fish sandwich. I wasn't sure if they even sold fish sandwiches any other time than Lent. Like that green milkshake they do. But it was January. Lent wasn't for a while, I didn't think. My mom always took me to church on the first day of Lent; I would get ashes on my forehead and imagine the black cross like an opening where all the evil inside me could escape. This little hole that all the bad things could crawl up and out of. I'd wear the ashes until they were gone, every day it grew smaller and smaller and I'd cry; my mother would tell me the ashes were just smearing off, fading away, but I knew it was my sins overtaking the goodness. When the opening was gone I felt empty again. Or actually, full. I felt full of lots of things I didn't want. Now I go to St. Max's on Lent and I still receive ashes, but it doesn't work like it used to, so I found other things. The manager got on the speaker and asked what the problem was. I said that my daughter had gotten sick from her kids

meal. She said she thought I'd eaten a bad fish sandwich. I said just give me the shit, with an extra toy. She said she'd make my order herself, then she laughed. It was a pure laugh, so pure that the speaker crackled because all it was used to was bullshit like Hi, how are you? and Extra sauces cost fifty cents a piece. But she'd said something pure, and for a moment the distance between us shrunk and blue noise in the air swirled. I began shaking from the cold inside and outside and all around me. Then I was surrounded by light but it was just a car high-beaming me from behind. It honked and I realized I was still at the menu and the speakerbox even though the manager told me to move up to the first window. I shouted at the car to fuck off and pushed my buggies up. The headlights from the car made them sparkle. At work they call me Starla, it's just what the owner said my name should be. Once I asked Ben what it meant while he was in the middle of making a painting and he said it just meant star. I liked that. It was simple. I was obsessed with names for a while—I was going to the library, checking out these cute books and using the computers to look stuff up—but it didn't work out. My father used to tell me Rachel meant something. He's Jewish but my mother is Catholic. They didn't last that long. I have an overdue Edith Stein book I need to return or they won't let me use the computers. The manager popped her head through the window and she yelled at me to move my damn shopping carts before she got in trouble. Then she hit a button on the side of her head and said welcome to McDonald's to the car behind me; she asked them to please wait one moment. She asked me if I was retarded; I turned the buggies, one of them with a broken wheel screaming, and pushed them away. They crashed in some dumpsters and made an ugly sound. The manager shook her ugly head and told me my total was two dollars and ninety-nine cents and to please tip her ten dollars. I usually pay twenty or twenty-five, so that was pretty fucking good. I dug in my pocket, a bunch of change fell out and a few other things. Mints and gumbands and a couple of old fortune cookie papers. I kneeled down and picked everything up. I looked up at the manager and doing that

bugged me. I hated her. She looked like an actress that wasn't famous anymore and sold things on HSN. I didn't want to be buying the shit from her. She disgusted me. In her I saw everything I couldn't stand. The flowers always need the sun but the sun couldn't care less about the flowers. It's not fair. I found the money, uncrinkled it, and gave her fifteen. She put the ten down her shirt and rang out my change for the five. I didn't like looking at her, but when she gave me the kids meal box, red and yellow and perfect, I adored her smile. She told me to have a good day, and said it like a cunt, but what did I mind? Before I left I asked her for some ketchup. She looked at me confused, reached at some packets in a rack next to her, and shoved them in my hand. I left and started walking back. By the train tracks, a big arm came down and started blinking red light, then I heard a whistle. I couldn't tell where the train was because it was pretty foggy outside. I went to cross the tracks and I heard the whistle way louder. An old woman grabbed me from behind and said What's the matter with you? These kids today with their damn headphones, blasting that boom da boom. But I wasn't wearing any headphones. The train was going by very slowly, like it'd run out of coal or some shit. Other people started showing up, waiting. One guy across the street kept looking my way, and I think he took a picture of me. The old woman asked where my child was. I said what the fuck are talking about, lady? She looked down at my kids meal box and reached her hand out at it. She started to say something and I jumped back from her. The train was so slow that I could see the inside part of the wheels. The rest of the train was filthy, but the inside of the wheels were shiny metal. The guy who took a picture of me screamed Goddamn! and jumped between two train cars. I felt like that old woman wanted my shit, so I checked if there were any cops around, then I hopped on the train and crossed, too. Walking away, I looked back at the train, and everyone was coming through, but it looked like way more people than I remembered standing around me. They looked endless, and they were shadows. They were just shadow people and they didn't seem like they were crossing the train, but coming *from* it, like these

terrible CHUD creatures or something. The only person I recognized was the old woman, and she fell off the train just as she was stepping down. The shadows surrounded her and I have no idea what they did to her. I walked very fast until I got to 8th Avenue. Once I got there I felt better because I could feel how close I was to the apartment. As soon as I could lock a door I'd feel better. On the corner, a man in a wheelchair was getting off the 61C. People were honking and yelling at how long it was taking, and the bus driver opened up his window and yelled back, but when they all saw the man was a veteran because he was in a green army jacket and everything, they shut up. He had an automatic wheelchair and he drove onto the curb fast, whipping into a turn and crossing the street in the middle of traffic. He had a little American flag taped on the back of his chair like the kind they have at parades or cemeteries. He gave everyone the finger as he crossed the street and that made me laugh. He was really taking his sweet time. I had more than an hour before work, and I thought about just going there and doing it in the bathroom. But on TV they'd said the stuff was cut with fentanyl, and that's supposed to be good for skin pops, so I knew it was better to do it at the apartment and grab my gloves in case I bruised. I have these really nice gloves from the sex shop down the street; I applied there a few times but they never hired me, not even for the basement. I got to the apartment and it was so fucking cold and filled with mist. One of the windows was left open and I knew Ben was smoking again even though he told me he'd quit. I don't like liars. I sat on the futon and felt my hands tingling just to touch the box. I placed it in my lap and imagined how good it would be. I'd try a little bit, just under the skin so it'd last longer. I'd take the food with me to work and, by the time I was coming down, I'd eat and it would taste so fucking good. I had my whole night planned and was proud of myself. It's important to plan. But when I opened the box, its cardboard flaps harder to get through than I'd thought—they didn't glide open like I thought they would, they didn't sing—there was nothing inside. Just the fucking stamp bag that said THERAFLU, and some napkins. I ripped the ketchup

packets from my jacket pocket and threw them on the floor. One of them opened on my hand and at first I thought I'd cut myself, but when I licked it it didn't taste like my blood. I was so fucking pissed that bitch screwed me on the kids meal. What did I pay the three dollars for? I thought I was getting chicken nuggets and fries. Or a cheeseburger. Whatever. Why else would I ask for ketchup? I called the Chinese place up the street, on the other end of the bridge. I didn't know what I wanted—their number was just on a magnet stuck to the fridge—and they said they were closing in ten minutes. I ended up ordering fried rice, orange chicken, wonton soup, and these crab stick things that aren't made from real crab but taste really good with the dip they give you. They said the total—it was something like thirty dollars—and hung up. I reached into my pockets but there was just the change from the bullshit kids meal. I tried the other pocket and there nothing in there but an old Desoxyn, which was actually pretty great. A boy I knew a long time ago was able to convince a doctor he needed them for his ADD. He should have become a lawyer instead of nothing. I liked Desoxyn, you could take them with Xannies and it balanced everything out in this really profound way. You felt up and you felt down at the same time. Like an angel at the feet of God. I took that and went through my coat, but the money wasn't in that either. I must have left it all on the ground at the fucking McDonald's. Before I could get upset, I stopped myself and recited a few steps of positive thinking. Walt Disney was fired from a newspaper because they said he wasn't creative enough. That must have been a really good newspaper. I went into the bathroom, found a packaged needle Vanessa got me, and took a bottle of iodine from behind the mirror. I opened the stamp bag and got a spoon from the sink, the one with a plastic handle. I went back to the futon and sat down, spreading everything out on the table. I put the spoon in the bag and dug a tiny bit out. As I was squirting the water into the spoon I felt like a witch making a potion. I think I said Eye of Newt out loud and I laughed really hard, shooting half the water from the needle onto the table. Once I refilled, I got my shit together, concentrated, and finished mixing. I

always tried to think of anything but what I was doing when I was getting fucked up; I could get really nervous or too excited and ruin it, so it could be hard to concentrate, but you have to. I heated it all up with Ben's Zippo that I got him for his birthday. I saw it at the pawn shop next door. It was really old and I think it was made of brass, with this picture of an airplane from World War 2. Ben liked history. I don't. Anyway I traded the lighter for this Star of David necklace my dad had gave me, plus I had to give them a dollar. I couldn't fucking believe that! I asked for a receipt and they had to fill one out by hand, with that grainy yellow and blue backing paper, but they did it. I laughed as the dude wrote everything down. *Lighter*: \$1, 0¢. If they were going to be so tight I was going to make them earn it. I tacked that receipt up on my vanity in the bedroom. Ben helped me move that from the house while my mom wasn't there. That was when she was in the hospital the first time. I put the needle in, shallow, and pushed the plunger gently. My hand was shaking and I tried to control it. My skin started tingling right away, and I knew I'd done good. I pulled the needle out, put it down, and sat back. My hair was in my face, I brushed it aside and looked at my arm. It was already bruising. The bottle of iodine was on the table but I didn't feel like reaching for it; I always tried to put that on so I didn't get infected or anything. Undead is such a weird word. You're not alive and you're not dead; it's like you're not-not dead. I wonder if ghosts think of themselves as just being unalive. Maybe it's nicer that way. I miss my mom so much. Why did she have to leave us? I hear she's sick. If she wouldn't have left I could maybe take care of her? Time never passes. It's like everything hits me all at once all the time and when I try to stop it and breath, more shit just ends up happening. My body began vibrating. I heard a noise like death, some kind of banging, and I wanted to scream out but I knew nobody would hear me. A voice said something. I said something back. It said I have food for you. Suddenly things made sense again. I got up and opened the door for the delivery boy from the Chinese place. He was just a lanky white dude and I laughed and laughed. I remembered that I didn't have any money. I asked him to

hold on, then I went into the bedroom and started rummaging around in my drawers. I usually had some cash balled into this pair of pink socks. My hand wouldn't go where I wanted it to. My arm looked fat like Popeye's and I felt sick when I saw it. The delivery boy came up behind me and asked if I was alright. I left the door open? I ran past him and dove into the futon, burying my head in the crease. I'd seen an ostrich do that on TV. Not with a futon. When I finally turned around and looked up, the delivery boy was still behind me. He sat down next to me and his face was kind. It glowed. I wondered where Ben was. He said he was going to Atlanta for an art show? I missed him. Maybe this was all a dream? It was becoming bad. I kissed the delivery boy. He climbed on top of me but I didn't want that. Not yet; it was too fast. I was covered in this dark liquid, like oil, but I think I'd just knocked over the iodine or maybe it was blood but it was black. The delivery boy kept saying Do you have a phone? and I told him he was too loud. He got even louder. My skin was on fire. I could hear the burn, like gravel being kicked through thick woods, the sound bounced around and came back at me all garbled. I wasn't in Hell; Hell was in me. Everything became quiet.

. . .

I'm not sure how long I've been at Western Psych, nobody will tell me. I think it's been a while because I'm getting really hairy. Someone said Ash Wednesday is coming up, so yeah. I'm hoping they bless us here. The food is bad and I don't like the soap. Sometimes I feel fluey but not too terrible. They give me some stuff to help with that. I've been ill a long time. I watch a lot of TV. Five ODs in the last twenty-four hours, and like thirty people in the last month. The mayor is issuing warnings but he doesn't get that nobody cares about that. He says how it's cheap and potent but dangerous. All anyone is hearing is THIS IS REALLY GOOD SHIT and tuning out on the end. I can't wait to leave; I can see downtown from my window. It still looks foggy outside, but not as bad. I can see everything a little better.

I'm scared that I won't get out of this place even though it's not like I have a lot to go back to. My brother Josh comes to my work sometimes, asking me to stay with him and his wife, but she's a bitch. She looks at me and goes into the kitchen until Josh joins her, then they both come back into the room and nobody speaks.

I've been talking to a girl here. She told me she's from up on Mount Washington. Me and her have been talking all week. She's my best friend. I feel bad for people because they don't have any friends at all. I do. We talked about Mount Washington and I said I was there for a field-trip once. We went up the incline and when we got to the top, it was like a giant cliff and we could look out at all of Pittsburgh right there. It was a sunny day and the skies were so clear. The best part was when we were given quarters to put into these binocular things. If you looked hard enough, you could see people in the office buildings, walking around, working, doing things. Living.

I wonder if anyone has looked for me, like Vanessa or Ben. The girl here though, that I've been talking to, she told me about this row of houses there called the Twelve Apostles. They were all made by the same carpenter, I think, and they look down on the city. It reminds me of how everyone's looked down on me for so long, so I think, just once, I'd like to be the one up on top like that. So me and her, I think her name is Marie, we're going to go to those houses after we get out of here, and I'm excited for that. A part of me wants to know if the name means anything, but mostly, when I'm alone in my room thinking about all of this, trying to clear my head, I just want to fall back asleep.

this story was originally published by The Offing magazine.

