Astronaut

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Astronaut

It was getting on toward August and nearly time to make a decision when Adam’s rust-bitten ’88 Pontiac with its bruise-colored upholstery showed up in the driveway. Luz was standing at the window looking for the cat when she saw the car turn the corner at the end of the street. It looked like Adam’s car, and it made the same affable grunting-farting noise she remembered as it rumbled down the block, full of purpose, toward her front door. It occurred to Luz to draw the curtains, kill the lights, try to make it look like she wasn’t home. But she didn’t believe it could be Adam - here, again, now - even though she could plainly read the car’s “DOOMED” license plate and make out the wide L-shaped gouge on the passenger’s side door.

And she was right. It wasn’t Adam, short yellow-skinned veiny Adam, who stepped out of the car and unfolded himself to a startling height, gripping his wrist and teetering backwards in a spine-popping stretch that exposed soft baby’s flesh where a purple T-shirt crept up his snowy abdomen. The lanky monster yawned and gathered a handful of brown hair into the anxious beginnings of a ponytail, dragged a canvas duffel from the passenger’s seat and made his way up the walk.

He was Jonas, he said when Luz answered the door. Joe. Maybe she didn’t remember. A buddy of Adam’s. He’d been over a few times.

Right. Luz eyed the green sack on his shoulder.

Adam didn’t call?

She blinked. No, Adam didn’t call.

Oh, he said. This is awkward. Luz didn’t think Jonas had ever felt awkward in his life.

Adam was supposed to call, he said. The thing is, he said, scratching at his ribs, I’m just now moving to town. Back to school. Jonas grinned. Thing is, I don’t have a place yet. Adam said he thought it’d be cool if I crashed here for a
few days. Until I find a place. You sure he didn't call?

Pretty sure.

Damn. Man. He hated to put her on the spot like this. Damn. His eyes were already gazing past her, into the house. She looked at the rusting ghost in the driveway. A true piece of shit. Yet it looked so much at home there that it seemed like it had never left. The familiarity of it made Luz lightheaded.

It's OK, she heard herself say. There's a bed in the basement, plenty of room. Jonas grinned again. She stepped aside and, just like that, he moved in.

**Jonas**

Jonas - Joe - seemed like a nice enough guy. He cooked dinner that night, improvising a sort of spicy southwestern macaroni & cheese with red bell peppers and chili powder from what was left of Luz's food supply. He even had a bottle of merlot on him - he pulled it from the canvas sack like a rabbit from a hat, and they sipped the wine from plastic Jurassic Park collector's cups from Hardees.

Joe had been living in Oregon for almost a year, working on a fishing boat the last two months of it, which he said he'd hated. He still smelled like salmon, he laughed, holding out a stemlike arm.

Here, he said, smell.

Luz lowered her face until she felt tiny soft hairs brush against her nose, but smelled only late-July sweat and the musty interior of Adam's car. Jonas filled her in: Adam had come to visit him earlier in the summer, stayed at Joe's place for a few weeks.

She got up and put on a CD while Joe carried dirty dishes to the sink.

Thing is, his voice said over the sound of running water, Adam liked Portland so much he decided to stay. Enough, apparently, to sign Joe's sublease and sell him his car for practically nothing. Good guy, Adam.

Good guy, she echoed.

That night Luz brought blankets downstairs. It was hot outside and the house didn't have air conditioning, but it could get chilly in the basement. There
were already sheets on the bed, not very fresh, but Jonas didn’t seem to mind. She showed him the bathroom and said goodnight. He was lying on his back with a paperback *Odyssey* in front of his face when she went back upstairs, his long, almost hairless legs crossed at the ankles and his head propped lazily against the wall. Perfectly at home.

**Adam**

You wouldn’t think to look at him what a pussy he was. Adam was built like a linebacker, only short. There wasn’t a part of him that wasn’t thick and heavy. Luz remembered learning in physics or somewhere that gravity is a function of mass; the bigger and denser an object is, the more gravity it has. That’s why the earth has a stronger gravitational pull than the moon. That was how she thought of Adam. In bed she felt herself tumbling toward him. She felt like so much debris, circling in tighter and tighter orbits until she crashed to the surface, clinging tightly. But Adam wasn’t built to withstand the impact. He creaked ominously.

He had other reasons for leaving, of course. That was what he said, and she didn’t have any compelling reason not to believe him. School was too much. Wisconsin was too much. Something about his mother, too; she didn’t quite catch it. He was on a collision course with 401K plans and domestic tranquility. There was nowhere to go but elsewhere.

Jonas was already gone when Luz got up the next morning, off looking for an apartment, she guessed. She put food out for the cat, who still hadn’t shown up, and thought about frying up some eggs. She made coffee instead.

The dishes lay in the sink where Jonas had left them soaking in grayish water. She pulled the plug and filled the sink with hot, soapy water and went to work on the week’s worth of dishes stacked precariously around the counter. When she finished, she wiped down the table and the
counters and swept the floor.

The place looked like hell, she realized. She hadn't cleaned in weeks. Months, even. Luz couldn't remember the last time she'd vacuumed. The mess hadn't particularly bothered her lately, but now there was somebody else staying here. Jonas was a mooch, of course, one of Adam's dirty, shiftless friends. But he was company, and this was embarrassing.

She spent the rest of the morning gathering up clothes, magazines, dirty dishes, empty pop cans and potato chip bags from the living room. She shook the dust out of the couch cushions and vacuumed the floor, moving the furniture around to get at the fuzzy junk that had gathered beneath. She found almost four dollars in change.

By noon the living room was looking decent. Luz put the vacuum away and went to take a shower. She brushed her teeth, leaned in close to the mirror to study her face. She still looked young, she thought, too young. Lately she'd pictured herself as something of an enigmatic waif, with dark brown eyes grown heavy with wisdom and world-weariness. Instead she was dark, swarthy. Her face was childlike, chubby, with a glistening fringe of acne beginning to blossom around the hairline and the creases at the corners of her mouth.

Undressing, she turned to one side, then the other, appraising her body like a beauty pageant judge. She was still too short, she thought, simply one of the cruel facts of her genetic legacy. Her stature left something to be desired, she thought, but she'd generally been able to make it work. With her tan, lithe body and her thick black hair cut short, she was cute, puckish. But she'd put on weight over the summer, enough that she shied away from the bathroom scale, eventually hiding it away in the hall closet like a barrel of nuclear waste that continued to radiate poison even though hidden from sight. Her hair was growing out, she noticed, starting to look sloppy, and her flesh was pale, languid. Her breasts drooped, splayed sideways over a belly that reminded her of a headless African fertility figure made of clay. She turned her back on the mirror and stepped into the shower.

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The Cat

When Jonas came in that night clutching a brown grocery sack and an open styrofoam tray full of barbecued pork ribs, Luz realized she’d been waiting for him. He put down the bag and looked around.

Been cleaning?

She shrugged.

Looks nice, he said, and headed down the hall to the bathroom. As the door closed behind him, Luz heard him let out a low whistle. The bathroom was clean too - she’d done it that afternoon after she got back from the store. The change from the couch cushions, along with the last twenty in her cash reserve, had been enough to put a reasonable stock of food in the fridge.

I got some beer, Jonas called from the bathroom. Have one if you want.

Luz reached for the bag, wondering at the brazen splashing noise of his urine in the bowl. He whistled contentedly behind the door. She couldn’t remember Adam ever making that sound. Had he been sitting down the whole time? She popped a can, held it away from her as foam crawled over the rim and dribbled on the floor.

Joe reappeared in the living room. He sat down and dug into the ribs, gnawing the bones and licking sauce from his fingers. Haven’t eaten all day, he smacked. He held the tray out. Want one?

Luz shook her head. I’m good, she said, lifting up her beer can. Supper.

He grinned, glanced lasciviously at the half-eaten tray of ribs.

How’s the apartment search going?

Jonas held up a finger, swallowing. He opened a beer and took a long pull. Good, he said, good. I looked up a friend of mine. He had a few leads.

That’s good.

Yeah. He reached into the bag for a napkin. What’d you do all day? Besides clean.

Luz looked around. Hung out, she said. Looked for the damn cat. They laughed.
What color is he?
I don't know. Sort of brown. She has a red collar.

Joe nodded. I think I might have seen him down the street. Maybe I'll go look for him after I eat. What's his name?
Isolde, she said.
Isolde?
Adam's idea. Adam's cat.

Right. He wiped his mouth and got up. Think I'll pop these in the fridge.

He came back and sat down at the other end of the couch. His proximity was alarming, unsettling, though he barely seemed to notice her. He picked up a magazine from the coffee table and began thumbing through it, taking intermittent swallows of beer. Ghosts of Adam flickered through her brain. She gathered her legs up to her chest against the too-familiar warmth at the other end of the couch, and turned on the TV. They watched for a little while before Joe went out to look for the cat.

Luz stretched out. She watched a movie on TV for a while before dozing off. When she woke to the sound of the overnight test pattern, Jonas hadn't come back yet. Neither had Isolde. She hit the lights, turned off the television and went to bed, leaving the porch light on.

For the next few weeks Jonas lived in Luz' basement, coming and going at unpredictable times, usually carrying the green satchel. He seemed to be on the same schedule as the cat. At first he gave encouraging signs that he was hot on the trail of his own apartment, scoping out jobs, registering for fall classes. But eventually Luz stopped asking. True, he was living under her roof rent-free, but Adam had paid his share through the end of the lease. Jonas bought food, lent her the car, and occasionally left money on the kitchen table to help defray expenses. Didn't smoke, much. He helped clean up now and then, even volunteered to mow the lawn once. And, best of all, he was an excellent cook. He made supper three or four nights a week. Occasionally Luz would get up in the
morning to find him in the kitchen, working on some elaborate breakfast, looking like he hadn't slept.

Anyway, she began to realize, she liked having Joe around. He was always pleasant, if a little crass, even when she was feeling bitchy and tried to antagonize him just for something to do. They went places together sometimes, to parties or to the little bar around the corner. Mostly they just loafed around the house, rented videos and ordered pizza, got high from time to time. In many ways it was like having Adam back, only without his preoccupations, his intense, futile concern over money and time and responsibility. Everything was easy for Joe, laughably uncomplicated. He was a walking shrug.

**It happens**

It was only a matter of time, of course.

It happened one night after she'd gone back to work at the library, a move she liked to think of as a step toward re-solidifying her life, though she couldn't deny her reasons were mostly economic. Joe called from a bar somewhere downtown. It was still early. He'd met some friends and wanted to bring them over.

Yeah, she told him, sure. The more the merrier.

I figured you'd be cool, Lucie, said Joe. You're cool about stuff.

Thanks.

Yeah, he said. Thing is, this guy Walt's got some good shit.

Luz groaned.

He's a nice guy, Joe said. You'll like him.

God, Joe. You're turning me into a pothead.

He said he'd be there in half an hour.

She shrugged out of her work clothes and straightened the place up a bit. Joe and his people showed up with grocery bags full of beer and junk food. Luz thought she recognized Walt. He wore jeans and a bulky Ohio State sweatshirt in stupid defiance of the dry late summer heat. He was a pleasant enough guy, as
promised. Walt introduced the two women as Erin and Meg. Joe kept insisting they were sisters, which made them laugh and stare at the carpet. Nobody, not even Walt, could keep their names straight.

Everybody was in good spirits, and the weed didn't hurt. Joe stuffed Cheetos in his mouth by the handful. Walt broke out the pipe. Luz stuck mostly to the beer, rolling her eyes dramatically whenever Joe elbowed her and passed the pipe. When she balked he tickled mercilessly. Walt and the women laughed. Giggling, she landed a bare foot in Joe's gut and he flew back, landing on his back with his eyes staring wide and tongue hanging out like a dead animal. Luz kicked his limp shoulder playfully and took a modest pull from the pipe.

Why do you make me smoke this shit? she coughed. It turns me into an idiot.

Not me, Walt said. I'm smart. I'm a geeenius.

Erin - Luz thought it was Erin - tossed his hair. Walt's a genius!

If Walt's a genius, Joe pronounced from the floor, I'm a fucking astronaut.

The girls laughed.

Anyway, he yawned, Lucie's no dummy. Lucie's my girl. She's a damn...astronaut.

Luz giggled. Something in the sleepy sound of his voice made her think of Adam and how he used to lie in bed late at night talking to her until his sentences began to disintegrate and he fell asleep. That was when she would shove him until he rolled out of the bed. Wake up, she would taunt, talk to me more. She'd make him do pushups before she let him back into the bed. Adam was solid, muscular. He could do fifty pushups at a time without breaking a sweat. Luz remembered looking down from the bed, counting off reps, pretending to lose count and making him start over, laughing. She looked down at Jonas, wondered how many pushups he could do.

Meg got up and put on a CD. The TV was on, and Walt and Erin stared at the screen like two bowls of warm pudding. Erin put her head on Walt's shoulder. Luz went to the kitchen for something to eat. Finding nothing, she downed a
glass of water and went back to the living room, sprawled on her back on the floor with her feet propped on the couch and her head cushioned on Jonas’ flat, indifferent stomach.

The sheer pointlessness of it all was exhilarating. Adam would have disapproved. She couldn’t understand how Adam had ever been friends with Joe. It was impossible not to get along with Joe, of course, but wasted time made Adam antsy, and Joe was an all-consuming hurricane of sloth. It wore her out.

She had never known anyone so miserably conscious of the passage of time and the directionlessness of his life as Adam. The fact that he never actually did anything about it was irrelevant; Adam was far too mesmerized by the slow-motion dropping of each grain through the hourglass to do much of anything at all. She could see it in his face - calculating, counting, ticking off every second they were together. She knew all along it was only a matter of time before panic took hold and Adam became a frightened animal capable of gnawing off its own limbs, and there was nothing she could do but dig in deeper, try to embed herself in him so deeply that the flesh grew around her the way a tree trunk grows around a fencepost, to make herself a permanent part of him.

After a while Meg said goodnight and disappeared. Luz dozed off. When she woke up, the others were gone and Joe’s hand was stroking her forehead in the dark, smoothing her black hair down on her head. She tried not to think about Adam. She reached up and took his hand, brought it to her face, brushing a cool knuckle back and forth across her lips.

It had been months.

She felt his body shift gears beneath her head, distinct as a shrug. Okay. Why not.

**The Note**

Adam came home from class one day to find a note on the table. It said “I’m late.” When Luz got back from the clinic an hour later he was drinking beer at the kitchen table. It was okay, false alarm. Adam didn’t seem relieved. He was not
interested in holding her. He asked if she’d been taking her pills. He said it like he thought maybe she hadn’t. A week later he was gone.

Jonas made himself scarce over the next few days. When he did turn up, he gave no indication that anything might be the least bit out of the ordinary, to Luz’s relief and disappointment. Might not even remember, for all she knew.

She was in the shower when the front door opened and she heard Joe rattle down and back up the basement steps. He called out a raucous ‘howdy’ as she wrapped a towel around herself and ducked down the hall toward her room. By the time she had dressed and reappeared in the kitchen there was water heating on the stove. Joe asked if spaghetti was okay.

Sure, she mumbled.

Everybody likes spaghetti! he sang, mincing fresh cilantro for the sauce.

Over supper she kept wanting to talk about it. Absurd - the elusive it. Adam would want to talk about it, or at least he’d have the sense to act like he did. Jonas chewed and slurped, eyes darting to the TV in the other room. Every time she thought about saying something she felt ridiculous. It would be like asking a tree for its thoughts on health care reform. Joe was incapable of discomfort.

How’s the food?

OK, she said. The guy definitely knew how to cook. She put down her fork. Joe.

Yeah, said the part of his brain not tethered to the television.

I think it’s time to leave.

Where we going?

No, she said. It’s time to leave.

Joe looked at her, daubed a spot of tomato sauce from his lip.

Oh.

You were just going to be here a few days, remember? Luz could tell he was trying hard not to roll his eyes.

Is this about the sex thing?
The sex thing. At least he remembered.

She sighed. Not in itself. The simple fact that you can ask me a question like that is probably a good indication that we shouldn't be roommates.

All right, he said. Whatever. I'll start looking for a place tomorrow.

His eyes were back on the TV before the words were out of his mouth. His fork twirled noodles endlessly through the sauce, inscribing wide, sighing spirals on the plate.

If it had been Adam she would have run to the living room and unplugged the damned thing. She would have brewed a stiff pot of coffee. Grabbed a handful of hair and slammed his head on the table a few times if necessary. They would have talked.

But Joe was not Adam. Joe would never be Adam, she realized, no matter how many tendrils he sprouted, no matter how securely he rooted himself to the fissured concrete of her basement floor. She knew this, just as she knew that Joe would not get around to finding his own place tomorrow, or next week, or next month. Nothing short of a restraining order would pry him from her life, and that was an impossibility. It was hard enough just asking him to leave. And she knew that the unfathomable warmth of his lanky ease pulsing up through the rafters and the thick-carpeted floorboards of her bedroom would only grow more and more insistent, irrepressible, irresistibile. The gravity was getting dangerous.

Gradually she would find herself waiting for him, wondering where he was, resenting him for not being there. She would plague him with questions until even Joe lost his patience, and the absurd inadequacy of his answers would shatter hers. Maybe she'd get disastrous ideas. Make dubious assumptions. Start sabotaging the contraceptives. Get careless and let something slip, maybe something lethal like the word ‘married.’ Things that would send guys like Adam running for the hills of the Pacific Northwest. That much was clear. But she knew they'd ignite little more than a shrug and a wry comment in Jonas.

Joe grew tired of spaghetti, smacked sauce from his lips, shuffled into the living room and stretched his slender body across the couch with a feline yawn.
Ten minutes later he was snoring softly. Luz got up. She left the dishes on the table and went to her bedroom.

As she folded up clothes she thought about Adam, wondered what he might be doing. Imagined him at the bow of a ship, staring into the damp gloom of the Pacific like Ulysses grown tired of traveling, stinking of fish and the taut, languid body of some Oregon Calypso. He was not coming back. Luz knew that. She filled an oversize suitcase, then began loading up garbage bags with clothing and books. Her photos, papers and documents fit in a single cardboard box.

Luz dragged them all to the Pontiac and started the engine. She left the front door open. Left Jonas in the house, lounging on the couch in a glorious blaze of indifference. Left the dirty dishes and unfinished spaghetti on the table. Left the TV, the bathroom scale, the library, left the cat. Took off down the street in the grumbling, dirty car.

It was September, time to make a decision.