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Another Dirty Spring

Peter Horton

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It made my job near ten times harder whenever I showed up late to work. Trucking to campus around six or seven used to be the norm, though whiskey headaches made waking early hard to come by lately. I'd been a groundskeeper for the University since I was 16, taking my dad's job on the crew after he up-and-left for Seattle to chase some forestry major who knew her way around a lawnmower; he said he liked that in a woman. Lately I'd been picking up nights at The Union, clocking more drinks in my shift than hours on my time card and paying the price when it came time to mow in the morning.

Being a groundskeeper had its annoyances: shitty pay, shit-tier hours, and shit-covered boots when the students let their dogs become savages in the Oval come spring. However, unlike lawyers or surgeons, or poets, I got the unfathomable satisfaction of starting my day off with the smell of fresh-cut grass. It was a revitalizing scent, so earthy in its essence that a good whiff reminded me why I was 22 and still doing yard work for paychecks. It was also just the slightest bit comforting knowing business men and professions of wealth are willing to spend 20 bucks for candles or car fresheners that smell like cut grass; all I had to do was pass out in my work clothes or on the pile of them that slept on the right side of my bare queen mattress to get the same effect. Things were different in the spring, though.

The sun had been up for over an hour, bright and on time. Light hit off an empty whiskey bottle, reflecting right into my eyes of fragile state. 12 months ago it would have been beer cans, maybe wine jugs, but whiskey had been the drink of choice this year; it was something to hang on to when life gave you the shakes.

I was almost awake, in that purgatory of slumber when eyes are half open but the brain still dreams. I took a deep breath, the smell of green engulfing my sinuses as my nostrils sucked against a grass stain on my Levis from yesterday's mulching. My head rest

on a pile of clothes, the right side of my bed doubling as a second dresser and a throne of laundry for my cat to rest on; it used to be April's spot, but she didn't sleep here no more. It wasn't the sound of my alarm, but rather the the pain in my arm from the bite of my cat that finally roused me up. I dragged myself out of bed and into my Carhartts, the ones with the padded knees and the hole in the back that told what color boxers I was or wasn't wearing that day. I took a step, the pounding of my head responding to every damn move my stiff body made as I shuffled squint-eyed over coffee-stained carpet and once-white walls towards a source of caffeine. Almost there. Rays of sun illuminated my eastern-facing kitchen as I entered, bouncing off dirty pans and grease marks, reminding me once again that the wicker blinds April had insisted upon were strictly decorative; that white sheet had worked great before she came along.

April and I met under the dirty lights of The Golden Rose three springs back; I had been a 19 year old going on 22 with an expanding ego and my own apartment, she had been a 27 year old going on 23 with lists of insecurities and a history of bad relationships that seeped from her pores like a 10 year hangover. It was a perfect match. We had started off across the bar from each other, though over time found ourselves closer and closer until our bodies faced. I only drank beer and asked if she'd like one; she ordered a double whiskey. Hormones had moved my feet as PBR moved my mouth, regurgitating slyness and quirky remarks that men seem only to have in their late teens and early twenties; after that we have to rely on good looks or better jobs. She told me she was an artist; I told her I sculpted nature. Her lips curled. She told me she liked music; I told her I played the shovel. She didn't get it but move closer. She told me she wrote stories; I told her I wrote poetry. She stopped. She told me she hated poets; I told her I was different. She believed me.

We slept that night in the glow of my porch with two blankets, a pillow, and a red bottle of Kuick-Stop's finest wine.

The next time we met was a year later at the spring charity event for the Art Museum featuring an exhibit of paper-mache

aborigine children; they were shady statues in multiple poses that made me uneasy. Missoula's high society loved them; the guy who cut their grass, however, thought it was a waste of paper. I spotted her in the corner between two large men with beards and buttoned flannels sipping whiskey from a tin flask. They all wore sunglasses and smirks and a stench of something skunky that I detected as I approached her from behind an ink-splattered paper child. Her back was hunched to the angle that often results when one becomes buzzed, when they stop caring how they look and more how they feel. It was as though her back was smiling, curving slightly with every swig from the bearded brother's whiskey. Around her neck was a string tied and attached to a wrinkled black dress that draped her slender body; the dress was faded but was dyed to a fashion and made to look like she had slept in it. Maybe she had.

I asked her if she wanted to grab a drink. She grabbed a half glass of wine from a passing elderly couple and said she took my question literally. She threw the wine back, turning to her bearded friends as the two men filled her glass with the last of their Seagrams and then, as if on que, dispersed into the crowd of men in suits, women in dresses, and children of recycled paper. It was like a vanishing act. They poured the whiskey; I looked down at the glass. I looked up; they were gone. I looked back down; the whiskey was gone, and so was her smirk. April just stood and stared through her dark lensed glasses; she had seemed different that before. I couldn't tell if she was expecting something or if the whiskey was starting to catch up to her. Maybe both.

I asked her once more to grab a drink, she took off her glasses, let in the light, and we spent the night at her place in a loft full of stuffed dogs and murals of black people.

After two months of late nights, our visits continued to get more and more frequent. One day she showed up with a box full of paint brushes and a stuffed beagle and took a spot next to me on my queen mattress.

I had always been a clean freak, my plastered white walls surrounding my fuzzy white carpet that led through my sparkling white kitchen into my bare white room and onto my moon-bright white sheets. April wouldn't clean or doing anything while I

worked though, she'd just smoke and paint and sometime write stories about me, which were really just lists of my flaws and imperfections. Once when she was stoned I sat on the couch and read one as she slouched to my left, softly pulling a joint and blowing its smoke in my face; it was awfully written and told me I sucked in bed. I never read another one, but would catch her eyeing me when she put her pen to paper and would make it a point to avoid her when she was playing writer.

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We lived like that for the better part of a year. Last March I came home to her lying beneath a black man on my white sheets like a six-foot-three stain of coffee. She moaned and talked and made sounds that I'd never heard when we got intimate. He was her ex-boyfriend, a poet from Vancouver who wore bowler hats and scarves and oversized glasses. A book of his poems had come with her box of paint brushes and a stuffed animal and had lie open on my coffee table for quite some time; they were good. He wrote about dogs in distress a lot; he called himself Dirt Dog, he thought he was one of them.

I sat on the couch with the cat, sipping ramen broth from a straw as I let them finish. Dirt walked out, seated himself on the couch next to Cat and asked what I thought of life; I told him I didn't get the question, and he said he'd write a poem about our talk someday. He said nothing else, only petted Cat with his mud-colored hands, kneading her to sleep. I could see April through the crack of my open door; she too lay sleeping in the dark of my bedroom. He told me I looked tired; I saw him next on the back cover of his poem book when I woke up. The lights were off and moonlight shown through the shitty blinds, illuminating a pen and it's ink he had left. Scribbled in the white space to the left of his picture was a poem.

April's fool you have become, but remember this one thing: living in a house of white can't stop the Dirt of spring.

I went outside to turn on the hose, watering Cat and spraying off the griddle for breakfast while turning to piss behind the rhododendrons. I left the griddle for Cat to lick dry as I went inside to scavenge for food. Money'd been on the low lately, and with

the microwave and oven both on detention, the griddle had been my saving grace, slowly burning whatever I found in the hollows of my fridge, crisping it beyond taste recognition, where it was then doused with Frank's Red Hot before eating. Bon appetit became burnt appetite; it was just a matter of letters. And a griddle. This morning was leftovers of last night's cornbread and a some night's chinese.

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I shoveled down the burnt, spicy mush, threw the cat some nip from my truck and hightailed it to work, driving right over that round-about on Higgins that makes driving fast and hung-over so much more difficult.

By the time I got to the work shed my crew was out, already starting on a day's work and with all the good tools; all that was left for me was the cursed wooden rake that would give up and quit when the leaves got wet.

It was spring, meaning that not only were the students out and about but they were beginning to get anxious for summer, a day of sun leading to trickles of brave ones in shorts prematurely laying out in the oval, getting in my way. A high sun hung over campus like my uncle's bug zapper, unconsciously drawing people outside to bask in it only to sting them with fits of late spring hail. Trees spawned long bare branches, yet to be pruned, casting pencil-thin shadows for backpacks and their students to snooze under, giving gum-wrappers and soda-cans enough time to escape from beneath the zippers, making their packs lighter, the grounds filthier, and my job load heavier. The spring sun had soaked up most of the moisture winter had left for the grass, meaning less mud in the fields and more dogs running around, eager to finally escape their winter pent up in studio apartments and backyards, ready to make up for a season's worth of dog bombs on campus. I couldn't stand dog bombs, they clung to boots like chicken poxs to a kindergarten, spreading like a virus with every step. Every spring the snow would melt leaving born-again concrete, sparkling due to months of winter protection from the cleansing snow, wiped clean like a driving record after a short bout of community service and a check to the court house; I'd had a few of those. But those damn dogs always ruined that concrete, ruining my love for it like a black poet

in my white sheets. I grabbed the wooden rake from the shed and made my way towards the forestry building, raking and straightening the beds in front of the honors college as I made my way. And then I saw it. Making its mark in the strip of green to the left of the library was a Black Lab giving the earth below its squat four months of pent up frustration. As he finished, his owner ran up, gave him a few playful slaps, and sprinted off down the oval, the newly brown bellies of his Timberland boots tracking the first bomb of spring all over the main drag of campus. It was looking to be another dirty spring.