

Couplings

by

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“Just get in the fucking car, Jenine!” He yelled it. Then he hit her.

She stood there a while with a hand cupped over the eye. A guy with a scraggly beard rode by on a bike and pretended not to notice. Jenine blinked at her reflection in the drivers-side window. It was going to swell unless she acted quickly; if she could find some ice it would probably be fine by morning. The blow had nearly knocked her onto her back, though not because of the force. Gerald usually sounded angrier before he got physical. She'd have to remember this new bit if she didn't want to be caught off guard again.

The International rumbled to life. Black smoke spewed from the tail pipe. Hank Williams rose from out the speakers to blare at a deafening volume. Jenine reached for the knob but Gerald smacked away her hand.

He'd been up all last night drinking and listening to Hank Williams on repeat, howling along to Your Cheatin' Heart and beating his fist against the dash. Jenine had curled up in a sleeping bag in the back and wrapped a pillow around her head, which did no good. She got maybe two hours of sleep.

In the morning the battery was dead and the two had spent the better part of the early hours soliciting the help of any stranger whom might be packing jumper cables. Eventually an elderly woman exiting a church pulled her car round and gave them a jump and a Gideon Bible.

“I put my phone number inside every one of these, so if you ever want to talk

about it, please—” the old woman had tried to convey such seriousness that she didn’t allowed herself to blink once “—please don’t hesitate to call me.” Then she took Jenine’s hand and put the little green book in it. The woman’s fingers felt like brittle kindling.

“These would burn right up,” said Jenine. Then the woman got into her car and drove away.

Jenine had been thumbing through the little green book—admiring the brightly worded bits printed in red for some reason—when Gerald struck her. She dropped the Bible in the street then picked it up and tossed it onto the dash, once she’d regained her wherewithal.

“Thanks for driving,” said Gerald. He cradled head in his hands. He was screaming so as to be heard over the music. “I can’t even see straight yet—” Jenine flicked the knob on the radio and grinded into second gear.

“Well I’m really not surprised, Gerald. You drank an entire fifth.”

“It was over like eight fucking hours.” He grumbled the words into his hands while tapping his foot to some internal rhythm. “The body processes like an ounce an hour—so that’s half the bottle or something, so I was fine.”

“Yeah, you look fine.”

The engine knocked at any speed above forty miles an hour. Everything shook inside the cabin. Jenine took the exit for Highway 126 west and eased the International into traffic. She rolled down the window and lit a half burned cigarette. She took two small drags then handed it to Gerald.

“We should get something to eat,” he said.

“I’m starving,” she said. She blew a mouthful of smoke out the window then

twiddled her fingers anxiously, signaling for the cigarette. “I am so sick of being hungry.”

“Yeah,” he said.

Gerald rubbed his forehead with an opened palm then worked the back of his head with the knuckles of his other hand.

It was still early. The clock in the dash flashed 12:00 a.m. In the rearview mirror, Jenine watched the sun crest a distant mountain and ignite the eastern sky with a dull orange light.

There were clouds to the west, large gray ones that looked coastal and heavy with rain.

“We have plenty of gas,” she said, using her sweetest tone—she didn’t know why.

“Gas in our ass.”

“That, too.”

“How much we got?”

Jenine lifted her butt off the seat and reached into her back pocket. She pulled out a fifty and five fives.

“Shit, baby! You got fifty yesterday?”

“You seemed surprised—” She tossed her hair, arched her spine and thrust her breasts toward him.

Jenine was sick of feeling dirty. Her clothes hadn’t been washed in nearly a week. The white tank-top she wore was stretched out along the neck and armpits, leaving the purple bra beneath clearly visible. Her shorts felt thick with the residue of her own sweat. It was July and it had gone over the hundred degree mark everyday that week. She feared

she could smell herself through the shorts as she carefully directed the shivering International along the narrow two-lane highway.

“Don’t,” he said.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t right now. I’m too fucking sick. Even your tits make me wanna barf.”

“What’re we doing then?”

“We’re eating.”

“Nope.”

“Jesus Christ, Jenine! We’re going for food, the fuck is wrong with you?”

Jenine flicked Hank Williams back to life. The high pitched twang rang out over everything. Gerald calmly extended his hand and turned the knob. He glared at Jenine with a flat expression while searching for the right volume. He stopped, turned, and reached behind the bench seat. He rifled through a heap of garbage and clothes then produced a can of Old Milwaukee’s.

“Yuck, that has to be warm.”

“Of course it is, that’s not the point.”

He cracked open the can of beer. There was no hiss, but he chugged the thing down anyway.

“Ah,” he sighed, cringing, and let go a monstrous belch. “That’s not fucking right, Milwaukee.”

“Are we gonna go to a laundry mat?” asked Jenine, once again in her sweetest tone.

“I feel like everything’s been starched.”

“I feel shrink wrapped in spunk.”

“I feel like a scrotum.”

Jenine picked at her teeth with the tip of a particularly long and sharp fingernail.

The International rolled into the parking lot of a Fred Meyers somewhere near midday. Jenine inched the vehicle carefully, trying hard to fit it within the lines of a single space. Convinced this was impossible, she straddled the colossus over two spaces and cut the engine.

It was hot now and Gerald, after consuming the beer, had quickly fallen asleep. He lay with his cheek pressed against the passenger window. Jenine watched him breathe for a while before moving to wake him. He'd fit his hands between his head and the window. He looked like a child, curled in such a posture. He barely needed to shave and, though he'd turned twenty-one last fall, his smooth skin and towheaded flop of hair got him carded everywhere he went. It wasn't until one looked him in the eyes that the angry, often sad and bewildered young man appeared.

She checked her appearance in the rearview mirror. The eye had started to swell. She snatched a pair of dark glasses off the dash, lowered them over the eye, and then looked again into the mirror. It would have to do.

She pulled the latch on the door and kicked it wide. Gerald woke with a start, thrashing his head against the door. Jenine laughed a little.

“Oh! We're here already! I love sleeping in the car, it's like no time passes at all.”

“It's amazing, in fact. When you close your eyes the whole world disappears. You should see it sometime,” she said, still grinning.

“You look hot in those glasses, baby. But you’re talking like a fucking retard.”

They walked arm in arm through the automatic doors. A rush of cool air met them. It felt nice on her tender eye. Gerald pulled a cart out of a row and then shoved it back in. Pulled. Shoved.

“Hey, what does this remind you of?” he snickered. “Pile driver!”

“I’m starving, sweetheart.”

“Alright, alright,” he said and came round with the shopping cart in his hands.

“How much should we do?”

“Uh—” Gerald thought on it for a second. “Let’s do like thirty!” he said, peering hard at Jenine out bloodshot eyes, a huge crooked grin on his face.

He’s gotta be drunk. “You wanna do thirty? For real?”

“Yeah, why not? Fuck it, we can make more.”

A cold sting gripped Jenine’s chest.

“We could get a bottle, smokes, bread, peanut butter, cream cheese, fucking Twinkies, baby!”

Jenine’s stomach growled. “Whatever. I can’t think right now. Let’s just get a bunch of stuff so we don’t have to be hungry like this again.”

“Now you’re talking. And condoms!” he exclaimed.

Several faces twisted in Gerald’s direction then turned away.

“Go get your stuff,” she said. “Give me the cart and I’ll get the rest.” She had meant she’d get the food and toiletries. Gerald would take a great deal of pleasure picking out the booze and cigarettes, so she let him have that.

He sped off and she could hear his hooting and heavy footfalls even after he’d

disappeared into the deep corridors of the supermarket.

Jenine steered the cart up and down the maze of aisles, blinking a lot and gaping at the overwhelming array of choices. Bar soap. There were over twenty-six kinds of bar soap. She counted them then selected the Lifeboy because it was the cheapest and weighed the most. She spun the cart. They had over thirty different kinds of toilet paper. She marveled at the colorful packaging, the outrageous claims printed in bold cartoony lettering, and then selected two single rolls of the Armor single-ply because it was the only one sold individually. Without looking at the price, she snatched up a box of frosted Twinkies and threw it into the cart. The rush of impulse shopping flowed through her. They had a jar of peanut butter just called Peanut Butter and it was bigger than a football. She picked it up. She wished she had the confidence to just start in on the jar of peanut butter while still in the aisles. She'd tuck it into an arm and feed herself with one hand while the other steered the shopping cart. She came to the bread aisle and tossed four loaves of Wonder Bread into the cart then two containers of cream cheese and a pink box of granulated sugar so she could prepare Gerald's favorite cream cheese and sugar sandwiches.

What else was there? Condoms.

She wheeled back to the toiletry aisle and began searching for the prophylactics. But what she wanted more than anything was deodorant. Oh, how she desperately wanted deodorant.

She came to the display and reached for a container of Lady's Speed Stick. She contemplated shoving it between her thighs, but settled instead on a quick unsuspecting swipe beneath both arms. She looked up and down the aisle and then placed the stick

back on the shelf. She sniffed herself and smiled. She'd smell like a flower for the next three days.

Behind her was a wall of condoms. She stared at them for a while. She couldn't help but envision all those penises sliding in and out of the stinky rubbers. A family of three came trudging up the aisle toward her. A man, probably in his thirties, was carrying a young boy atop his shoulders while a woman with tall blonde hair steered a heaping shopping cart.

"I can't find it," she said, stopping to search the boxes of hair dye.

"Can't find what, mommy?"

"I can't find my color."

The man took hold of his son and brought him down slowly, making sure the boy's feet were beneath him before letting go.

"Is Paula going to help you with the dye-job this time?" the man asked the woman.

"I'm helping!" exclaimed the little boy.

"You are helping," said the man.

Jenine wheeled the cart past the condoms and continued to watch and listen to the family.

She pushed the dark glasses tighter against her face and pretended to shop for toothpaste.

"Here it is, mommy!" cried the little boy.

The mother came over to where her son was standing and bent down close to him.

"Nope—but that's a good try though. You've got purple there. Look for

something like mommy's hair.”

The little boy neatly tucked the box back in its space and continued to scour the area.

Jenine was in front of the deodorant again. She picked up the container of Lady's Speed Stick and ran her eyes over the description on the back.

The little boy came bounding up the aisle with an ecstatic smile and clutching a big golden wig of fake plastic hair that glimmered under the lights.

“Whoa, look what you found!” said the man.

The mother reached for the wig and placed it on her head. The boy stared and smiled as his mother sashayed, tussling the mess of golden streamers with her hands. The light shimmered off the wig and Jenine saw the boy's face go suddenly very somber.

“This is it, huh? This is like mommy's color?” A smile grew bigger on the boy's face until he was erupting with laughter. He shook his head yes vigorously. “Thank you, sweetie—I feel very pretty now. I guess we were looking in the wrong place this whole time—”

A strange sensation coursed through Jenine and she tossed whatever was in her hands into the cart and raced off down the aisle and entered the checkout line.

When she got into the parking lot the sky had completely grayed over. The asphalt smelled like electricity and there was a moist sticky quality about the air. Jenine carried two paper bags in either hand and sauntered deft-footed across the lot. Gerald was leaning against the International with one ankle crossed over the other and smoking a cigarette.

“They had Lucky’s!”

Jenine didn’t say anything. She unlocked the back hatch and put the bags inside. She came round and unlocked Gerald’s side and then her own. She threw the dark glasses onto the dash and revved the engine once it had finally started.

“Can you believe it? It’s gotta be like the last fucking place on Earth still selling Lucky’s—” He threw the butt out the window. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m hungry.”

“Well let’s get on it!” he yelled and leaned forward. “Sky’s gonna open up—” They drove into town and then out of town. They circled the outlying areas but couldn’t settle on where to camp down for the night. Jenine heard a rumble and then a streak of white light split the sky.

“Whoa! You see that shit?”

“I saw it,” said Jenine.

“Just find somewhere, it doesn’t matter. If someone fucks with us I’ll just beat some ass.” Gerald lit another cigarette and put his feet on the dash. “This is amazing— We’re camping out under a lightning storm!”

Excitement came as a hollow twinge that panged in her stomach, and Jenine felt only a little ashamed as it threatened to shift her mood too quickly. The corners of her mouth turned up a little. The empty roadway turned back toward town. She would stop at the first suitable place she found.

Another bolt lit up the sky. Through the floorboards Jenine felt the earth shake.

“Just there—just pull in there—that’s fine. I wanna get out in this,” said Gerald.

Jenine pulled the International off the road and drove along a short dirt trail. The

branches of overgrown pine trees scraped at the sides of the truck. The trail let out onto an opening that cradled the lip of what appeared to be a severe drop. She killed the engine and Gerald bolted out and into the dry storm. Jenine sat in the silence of the cabin and listened to the engine tick. She watched the skies, waiting in anticipation for the world to light up again.

Outside, Gerald was running around and waving his arms above his head. He looked like a native enraptured in some frenzied rain-dance, clapping his hands and jumping every now and then.

Jenine crawled over the bench-seat and into the back and began rifling through their belongings. She gathered their sleeping bags and mats, pillows and coats, and laid them all out flat. She opened the bed of the truck and lifted the back hatch so that they might lean out to better view the storm.

She lugged the bags of groceries and rested them on the ground. She took in her surroundings. They were near town. She could just barely detect the sounds of traffic, and the city—twinkling off in the distance—emanated its low pitched groan. They were near a defunct rock quarry of some kind. It had obviously sat long in disuse. There were several tiers cut into the dry earth and there were pine trees down at the bottom and thick underbrush which had begun creeping up the sides.

Jenine wished for rain. There would be no laundry mat tonight and she still felt filthy despite the pleasant smell issuing from her underarms. Perhaps Gerald's rain-dance would prove itself effective.

The sky ripped open and a streak of light tore across the horizon. Jenine was momentarily blinded by it. There was darkness then a pinpoint of light that grew slowly

until the world was restored.

Gerald was waving his fist at the sky and hollering in a high voice. “Is that all you got, motherfucker!”

“Idiot,” muttered Jenine, and she rose to her feet and went to where Gerald stood near the edge of the pit and wrapped her arms around him. He smelled like wood smoke. He took her mouth in his hand and put his over it. Then it started to rain.

Gerald refused to sleep in the truck. He wanted to camp out in the rain with the sounds of the storm rushing all around him. He’d hissed and flailed his arms wildly to illustrate to Jenine just how awesome he thought this would be. But the light was fading rapidly, so he had to move quickly to string a tarp high about a pine. He fastened the other end to a stake he then drove into the ground using his foot. And Jenine backed the International under the tarpaulin awning so that the gate could be left open without getting everything wet.

Gerald zipped the sleeping bags together then curled up close to Jenine in front of a small fire he’d started with some old newspaper and the Gideon Bible the old woman had given to Jenine. The kindling he’d gathered from nearby the pit snapped and small embers popped out at them every so often. The rain fell in torrents and Jenine listened closely and let the incredible noise consume her. She breathed in the coarse scent of tree pollen lifting from the muddy earth.

Then Gerald rose and went to the truck and cranked Hank Williams to full blast. And when Jenine heard this, she clamored out the bag to stomp and dance in the mud. She hated Hank Williams so much, but she danced anyway and mouthed the words she’d memorized from innumerable listenings. She looked to the truck and saw Gerald inside

the cab with a bottle of Jim Beam turned on end. He wiped his mouth. His lips made the shapes of the words streaming from the speakers.

Jenine watched him for a while, then she stripped naked and used her bare hands to scour her body clean. She let the rain have her and thought for just a moment that she could smell the ocean and home.

When she was finished, Jenine went back to the sleeping bag and lay near the fire. She gazed at the city whose shape she could just barely detect through the dark breath of the storm.

She put on a tee-shirt and panties and knelt close to the flames. Gerald returned with a quarter of the bottle of bourbon already drunk and plopped himself awkwardly in front of the fire. He pulled a cigarette from the pack, handed it to Jenine, and then lit one for himself.

They stared at each other in the flickering light, smoked in silence while passing the bottle back and forth. Jenine let the liquor coat her throat and waited, attentive to a faint buzz stirring inside her—she was anxious for the alcohol to take effect—while the fire glowed bright against Gerald's cheeks and forehead and his eyes glistened with drunkenness. And it wasn't long before Jenine too was drunk and the campsite loud with her laughter and their wandering conversation.

A free-for-all ensued upon their supplies when Jenine remembered at last just how devastating was her hunger. She stuffed down four Twinkies while she constructed three cream cheese and sugar sandwiches using her finger for a knife. Gerald smacked his lips and lashed his tongue at the offering. His eyes shut and turned toward the blackened sky. Jenine watched him eat, recalled his words earlier that day—that she could always make

more money, that this would be no problem whatsoever—and a cold sting rode a cord into her heart, but she only reached for another of the little yellow cakes, stuffed it her mouth and swallowed it down.

The storm moved directly over them and Jenine moved back into the sleeping bag with Gerald and gripped him tight when the world shook so violently that her body went limp. She seemed to be drifting off into the air even as her bones succumbed to a magnificent pressure that pinned her to the Earth. What remained of her awareness—a sharp and clinging fragment—entered the interstice, then broke off and wandered free, leaving only an enormous space which opened and glimmered for just a moment. And when at last she could come to reoccupy that space—felt the rain and wind against her skin, the reek of damp cinders smoldering in the fire pit—she filled it entirely and smiled privately at the thought that perhaps she'd just acquainted herself with the biggest thing in the universe.

Gerald only hooted, a loud shrill call that fell flat against the heaviness of the night. And it got muggier and the fire grew dim and it was not long before he was on top of her. He kissed her and it tasted like whiskey and cigarettes and granulated sugar.

When they were naked inside the sleeping bag, Jenine felt for Gerald and directed him toward her. He kissed her face and Jenine flinched at the sting of her eye. Gerald kissed it; he put his mouth over it and left it there for a while. Then he started to cry. There was no sound of crying, just tears falling out of his eyes and dropping onto hers. Jenine reached into the grocery bag to retrieve the condoms but found only a container of Lady's Speed Stick.

“What's the problem?” asked Gerald in a kind voice.

She hesitated for a moment before saying, “Nothing’s the problem.” And she took Gerald into herself.

Gerald’s tears dried up as he came to life upon her in the overeager manner of a much younger boy. He heaved himself into her and flopped wildly. Jenine had to work at herself with a finger to get things moving. And it did hurt for a while, but then Gerald eased himself into a rhythm and Jenine let herself go. She ran her fingernails along his spine and bit his ear and savored the pained sounds he made. She fought vainly against him and against herself to prolong the sensation that good things still happened to her. And when the white light of orgasm opened, the sky illuminated in a flash of terrific light and everything was momentarily visible. Gerald whimpered against her neck and was soon still.

All night she dreamt of tiny little hands holding golden streamers of light; they brought them to her and she gobbled them down.

In the morning Jenine quietly gathered herself and dressed while Gerald continued to snore beneath the dripping tarpaulin. An extinguished fire tainted the crisp morning air. The horizon was amber and Jenine could see only the peaks of the jagged mountain range in the east. She practiced a few times before starting the International, and it was a lucky thing that it started on the first attempt. She revved the engine once and then flung mud and debris in all directions as she sped away. She didn’t once look into the rearview mirror to see whether Gerald was coming after her. In fact it wasn’t until she’d taken the Highway 126 exit east and found a comfortable speed that she bothered to look into the rearview mirror. She’d forgotten all about ice, but the swelling

had gone anyway. Jenine pressed the pedal to the floor. Everything inside the cabin shook.

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