



SPUN SUGAR

by Jason Adler

“LISTEN,” Mae says, telling it true so far as she knows, “I’ve been out here chattering my teeth all night and the fish with the top hats they *never* stop coming, they’re airborne and swarming, fluttering like it’s no big thing, but it is, ’cause this is exactly how Lonny went, they stalked him and stalked him till he went mad and thought he could escape only by teaching them where they belong, teaching them like you teach a pet, through the motions through-the-motions through the *motions*, you know, so he dipped into the lake—hatless, as fish should be—and held his breath as long as he could but Lonny was pretty out of shape and couldn’t hold his breath too long and just didn’t have the grit for it so he tied his wrists and ankles off with

full spools of fishing line and leapt in—*plop*—and then Lonny was gone but the fish they're still here and I suspect they always will be but there's really only one way to know, you know?"

"Mae," Lonny says. He peels back her masquerade mask as he eyes the other costumed partygoers in Sam and Sadie Fennimore's living room. "Mae. It's a fish tank, hon. A fucking fish tank." Mae is breathing fast and hard, her eyes fixed on the tank. Glitter from her mask is scattered across her cheeks. She pulls her palms from the glass fast and hard, like her breath—like there's resistance. The tank wobbles only slightly before settling into place, but Lonny knows it's too late to secret this away, to bury it with his earlier overindulgences in marshmallow ghosts and deviled eggs, the spilt blood punch on the Fennimores' sofa, and other things he wishes could be undone.

This was Mae's sixth episode in as many months. The first, alone at the supermarket, where the manager found her whispering *empty* in mantric repetition, surrounded by egg cartons, her hands dripping with yolk. The second, and the first in Lonny's presence, at the itchy-seated movie theater on Hawthorne, just after the admonition about cellphones and crying infants. Months of nothing, then a brief outburst at home, another on stage during one of Mae's stand-up routines, and another at Lonny's

childhood home in North Carolina, after which Lonny fielded his parents' many questions alone. Then this one, sudden but sustained—a withering finish to the Fennimores' annual Fright Fest.

“Let’s go,” Lonny says, catching Sam Fennimore’s downturned eyes, Sadie’s expression twisting and fixing in tortuous discomfort. “Let’s get out of here.” Lonny notices a throbbing ache in his spine, the tautness of his skin, his offbeat pulse.

Lonny and Mae push past Frankenstein, an under-dressed nurse, three zombies in various states of decay, and a young Abraham Lincoln. Lonny takes off his *Rocketeer* jetpack, lets it dangle at his side, and offers a muted wave as he and Mae walk out the front door.

Mae is fine now, in her way, teasing the keys from Lonny’s jacket pocket as she slides in front of him and into the driver’s seat of their Civic. Mae kicks on the ignition and the stereo shivers: *cause they hustle so lazy / I’m out here grinding for a life that could never be basic.*

“You sure you’re okay to drive?” Lonny asks.

“I had *a* vodka soda, Lon—”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” he says, his leg bouncing in nervous vibrato.

“Oh, I know,” Mae says, throwing the car into reverse and peeling out of the Fennimores’ driveway. “You always—”

Mae cuts herself off and prods the brakes, rhythmically herking and jerking the Civic while looking at Lonny in mock horror, distracting him from the promise of actual conflict. Instead, she’s grinning, and she runs her fingers through her hair on the way to Lonny’s thigh, stopping him from tap-tap-tapping for a minute. Mae pokes him between his legs—a firm, forceful jab with two fingers—and laughs. That laugh is litmus; after each blurry episode and each gawky aftermath, it shows Mae is constant.

“I’m fine, Lon.”

When they arrive home, it’s an ordinary Saturday night. Mae showers. Lonny shaves. Mae brushes her teeth, Lonny brushes his, and they climb into bed. Mae is on top this time, and she oscillates, flush and swelling, kinetic and free, and Lonny stares at the dark, unclear ceiling, thinking about top hats and fishing line and, if he’s being honest, part of him wishes the little stucco bits above would extend into plaster tentacles, descend, and take them both into the maw of the ceiling, somewhat intact, somewhat uncorrupt, somewhat something like they were before all this began.



The doctor says they should have a seat, both of them. The doctor says this, well, this *condition* could be many things. Some symptoms are consistent with schizophrenia, but others are not; some symptoms are consistent with dissociative disorders, but others are not. The scans came back fine, the bloodwork came back fine, Mae's day-to-day functioning seems fine, and, by all appearances, despite the Halloween incident, Mae looks to be relatively fine. The doctor says, regardless of what is causing the delusions—and this is the first case quite like it he has seen—this hospital is the best facility to help manage the symptoms as they manifest, which they almost surely will continue to do, so Mae and Lonny should schedule a follow-up. The doctor nods at all times. He does not shake his head side to side, even when Mae stops looking him in the eye, even when Lonny's hands clench and perspire, even when the doctor tells Mae that it is not treatable, not at this time, not without a clear diagnosis, no.



Lonny wipes his dripping brow and guzzles water from the kitchen sink.

“Mae?”

Mae is in the bedroom, swaddled in blankets and an electron blue glow, typing on her laptop. She mouths the words she writes, her lips like tiny smoke rings vacillating from shape to shape and then vanishing into nothingness when she pauses to think.

“Hey, Lon,” Mae says, not looking up. “How was your run?”

“Fine,” he says, standing up straighter, pushing his chest forward a bit. “How’s the writing?”

“Alright, I guess.” She closes her laptop. “I’m out of material on minutiae, so I’ve pretty much devolved to downplaying the seriousness of eating disorders and death and slow-moving traffic.” Mae smirks, squinting playfully. “Anyway, my brother called. He invited us to visit this weekend. Get away, see the kids, bask in the tranquility of toddlerhood.” Mae’s brother lives about five hours south of Portland, just across the California border. “We haven’t been in awhile.”

“Yeah,” Lonny says. “Is it a good idea to go now, given... you know?”

“I’m not dangerous, Lonny.” Mae climbs out of bed. “I’m not a lab

monkey. You don't need to keep me caged."

"You know that's not what I mean," Lonny says, unconvincingly. In truth, he is a little scared of Mae's episodes, of the possibility that they'll whisk her away, leaving him alone, holding only the memory of what she used to be and the slow-growing black hole that swallowed it all. "Let's go. It'll be good. I'll take Friday off and we can drive down early."

"Great," she says, with a skeptical flick of her eyebrows. "Pack me, please?" Mae hugs Lonny's sweaty arm. "Mmm, you're gross," she says, and for a moment, Lonny feels secure, like Mae is permanent again.



The technician settles into Lonny's cubicle at Stumptown Storage Company and begins fiddling with Lonny's malware-ridden PC. The technician periodically inflates and deflates a sphere of cotton candy Bubblicious as she works. Each puff reminds Lonny of college, of that flannel-wearing prick who sat a couple rows back in Philosophy 186, a man with two significances etched into Lonny's memory: first, his illimitable aptitude for prattling about his father (a self-made cotton candy magnate, so the stories

went, inventor of the dominant strain of flavoring concentrate in the continental U.S.), and second, that he fooled around with Mae while she and Lonny were taking a break. The technician double-clicks, and Lonny remembers how distraught he had been about Mae's fling with the magnate's son. The technician clicks three more times and exhales. A pang of anxiety rises in Lonny and immediately falls, magnanimous in its transience, barely registering before it wafts away.



There is a small park near Lonny and Mae's apartment where they lie with their backs against the bare grass watching airplanes trace across the violet-grey sky.

Lonny tugs at a blade of grass and plucks it free. "Have you read about those people who cry on airplanes?"

"I haven't," Mae says. She's splayed out snow-angel style. "Tell me."

"They cry when they see sappy movies on airplanes. *You've Got Mail*, *Love Actually*, that kinda stuff. But they don't cry on the ground. Not about movies, not about much of anything."

“Hm,” Mae says, turning onto her side. “That’s weird, Lon. Why?”

“They’re overwhelmed. Like emotionally incapable of processing the idea of flying.”

“Interesting.” Mae nestles her chin into the crook of her elbow. “You never get that way, do you?”

“No,” Lonny says. “Not really. I mean, not like these people. They’ve totally lost their bearings. Mentally, they’re stuck in the city they left. But physically,” he says, thrusting his arm straight up, “they’re moving at incredible speeds somewhere else.”

“Right.” Mae’s face scrunches a bit as she rolls onto her back. She stares up at a passing 737. She’s quiet until it’s gone, a distant red flicker. “How *rough* for them,” she says. “They’re in neither place. *And* both.” She sits up and wiggles her arm in a sort of stage-magician flourish. “And then they land.”

Lonny curls his tongue. “Not everything is a joke, Mae.” He sinks into the grass and inhales, pressing his shoulders back against the earth. “Let me go pack up so we can get out on time tomorrow.”

They walk home along the sidewalk, paces apart, the space between them raw and enlarged in the cool moonlight. When they get home, Lonny

heads to the bedroom. He opens the closet and pulls a black duffel bag off the shelf. His *Rocketeer* helmet falls to the ground. Lonny picks it up and stretches it over his head, breathes deep and damp through the air vents. For a moment, it's intoxicating, amplifying. He's far away, but through the slits in the latex, sees the room in its pinhole obscurity. Everything familiar is different, indistinct: malformed pillows, a warped table lamp, grotesque candles with dripping wax appendages. He thinks about Mae, how each lapse detaches her further, how quickly she shifts after each episode, how desperate she must be to return to normal. A bead of sweat zigzags across Lonny's brow, around his nose, down under the dip of his upper lip. He removes the helmet and flips it inside out, wiping it dry. He puts it back in the closet and closes his eyes, briefly anchored, glad for the clarity of blackness.



The therapist asks Mae and Lonny to each talk about how they're feeling. The therapist is reliably unsuccessful; Mae spends most sessions regarding her feet, while Lonny alternately watches Mae, Mae's feet, and the therapist.

The therapist asks if Mae remembers the Halloween episode and Mae says not really. The therapist asks Mae how she felt afterward and Mae shrugs and looks down. Lonny drives his fingers into the microfiber loveseat, eyeballing the slow beat of the therapist's left temple, pleading. The therapist asks Lonny how he feels; Lonny opens his mouth, ready to admit aloud that he is afraid, an unsteady, swelling vessel of distress, despair, and defeat, but Lonny's not the victim, Mae is, so he says he's just worried about Mae, you know, he just wants Mae to be okay.



They're a little under three hours outside Portland, around Sutherlin. Lonny is halfway through a Big Mac and Mae is nibbling on the remnants of some fries when she lapses. It's odd, this one. Not just in content—Mae describes a telepathic, regenerating celery stalk who doesn't mind being eaten but minds when her eaters consider her too stringy—but also because when Mae returns, it's only halfway. Lonny can tell. She's pale, slack-jawed, and her mouth is set open like an unsettled scar.

“Mae? What was that?”

Mae is silent, staring out the passenger window.

“You know, don’t you?”

The windshield wipers *thh-wump* back and forth.

“Mae, please talk to me. You have to talk to me.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Mae shivers. “It doesn’t matter. I’m here now.”

Lonny stares straight ahead. “It matters. You vanish and I stay here and watch. I need to know what’s going on.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Mae sits up. “Stop, okay. Just stop—”

“No,” Lonny says, “I’m done tiptoeing around.” Lonny watches Mae, searching, and something on her face suggests empathy—or is it pity?—and Lonny, in a flourish of autonomy, swerves deliberately and decisively from the left lane to the right shoulder, as if to say *I’m not sick, you are*, and they skitter over the rumble strip a little too far, stopping when the front passenger’s side tire dips off the pavement and ruptures in a pyrrhic *whoosh*.

“Fuck,” Mae says, looking at where they’ve landed. They’re at an unusual tilt, lopsided landscape in all directions. “I’m fucking scared too, Lonny.” Mae reaches for Lonny, grazes his arm, and he slips it away.

“I’m no *fish*, Mae, I’ve got grit.” He waves his hands in alternating circles between his face and Mae’s. “What do you think I’m doing? What

do you think all this takes?”

Lonny keeps his arms going, tracing the air, all fits and kicks. He eventually stops, spent. Mae’s wearing this sort of hieroglyphic expression, a lot and nothing at once. It makes Lonny think about her back at the dorm at Pomona, that summer between their second and third years, his bed a makeshift stage surrounded by Rubbermaid tubs and cardboard boxes packed full, Mae’s knees jutting out at rough angles, her toes digging into the cerulean vinyl on that tiny twin mattress as she performed, spitting jokes with an unflinching rhythm, riffing on top of riffs until the original material was a distant ripple, working the crowd of one, Lonny nodding and laughing and smirking even at the unfunny stuff, the two of them tethered together until Mae paused, face blank, leaving Lonny sure that she was doubting, probably thinking about some dumb comment he made or the magnate’s son or how a summer apart would be more manageable if they separated, but then Mae dismounted, a clumsy long jump from the bed to the space between two suitcases and, upon landing, smiled—just smiled—and instantly erased a feeling that, to Lonny, just moments before had seemed absolute.

Mae reaches across Lonny and stops the engine.

He shakes his head and looks out the window. “It’s all nostalgia,” he

says. “Even right while it’s happening. Just nostalgia.”

“Come on, Lonny,” Mae says. “Everything’s fine. I’ll call AAA. Everything’s fine.”



When the tow truck arrives, Lonny and Mae are still in the car, at an uneven angle, Lonny staring out and up at a pinkish cumulus. The mechanic says it’ll be a quick fix, and Lonny says okay, but the word escapes reluctantly. The mechanic looks at Lonny, studies him closely, and says he can offer a discount, this kind of thing happens to everyone, it is what it is, you know, it’s really not something to get too hung up about. There was a deer, Mae pretends, and Lonny had the presence of mind to avoid both it and oncoming traffic, and if it weren’t for that pothole, they would’ve escaped unscathed. The mechanic asks if Lonny and Mae are local, if they’re in a hurry. He says they ought to check out Crater Lake once he switches the tire. It’s a sight, really, a beauty this time of year.

When the work is done, the mechanic points Lonny and Mae to a visitor center where they can get a map of the lake and the footpath to the

shore.



In the gas station minimart on the way to the visitor center, Lonny flicks his thumbnail against his forefinger as Mae pores over the chocolate bars. She settles on a Caramello. While they pay, she strips the wrapper off and bites, letting caramel drip across her lips and down her chin, watching Lonny and waiting, her free arm hanging close to his. Lonny lets his fingertips skim Mae's, extended.

“Thank you,” she says.

Crater Lake is a caldera lake, the visitor center says, a half-mile deep reservoir created when Mount Mazama erupted and collapsed. There are no inlets or outlets, just a roundish hollow that reaches full volume every two-hundred-fifty years through rainfall and melting snowfall. It has no indigenous fish population. In the late 1800s, the park service began stocking the lake: coho salmon, kokanee salmon, cutthroat trout, steelhead trout. Most species did not survive; three now self-sustain.

One trail provides primary access to the lakefront. It is a steep, mile-

long path ending in Cleetwood Cove. When Lonny and Mae arrive at the cove, it is empty, and Mae bounds ahead, closer to the shore. Lonny follows, watching her hair whip and pull in the breeze, animate and inspired. Lonny looks past Mae at the water—at everything the mountain, not truly undone, left in its wake.

Mae removes her shoes and socks and places them neatly on the shore. She dips her toes in the water, laughs her lilting laugh.

“Come in,” Mae says, beckoning.

Lonny leans forward. Behind Mae, in the distance, yellow swirls of pine pollen float on the surface of the lake, bobbing and pulling, expectant.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “It’s not that bad.”

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