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Caulifloret

Abstract

It's after midnight, and we're cold. I'm without a mask—but the streets are well-emptied; only other gelid monsters roam, and they take no notice of us. I walk her to the house. Outside its front door, I say, pointing upward, this is the house, and I know it makes her happy to see it finally after high-stepping so far in the ice-crusting snow. She smiles with relief, and when she looks beyond me to the numbers on the door, she reads them aloud: one-oh-one Yeye Street, oh, I like it...

Cover Page Footnote

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Caulifloret

Fiction by Jason DeYoung

It's after midnight, and we're cold. I'm without a mask—but the streets are well-emptied; only other gelid monsters roam, and they take no notice of us. I walk her to the house. Outside its front door, I say, pointing upward, this is *the* house, and I know it makes her happy to see it finally after high-stepping so far in the ice-crusted snow. She smiles with relief, and when she looks beyond me to the numbers on the door, she reads them aloud: one-oh-one Yeye Street, oh, I like it.

I'm pretending to want what she wants—remote-entry garage, multi-headed shower stall, gas cooking, upscale furnishings (Bombay-style), plantation-shuttered windows, a front walk not torn up by roots, a child—but I *do* want to please her, and that is real.

She goes around me, holding to the frozen railing, and walks up the front steps, leaving spirited corrugated snow-powder footprints on the shoveled and swept bricks. She points to the mailbox, flicks snow off its flat top, and taps it without worry: Did you do this? This check mark?

I smile at her and nod my head. I know I look boyish and shy with my ball bat on my shoulder, with my hat turned back, with the fingers cut from my gloves, with a half-open backpack dangling from my left hand, handcuffs and knives in its shallows, and I think she likes it. I wipe falling snow from the corner of my eye, a gift. Well, she says, show me.

I reach around her and open the door. Is it conveniently left unlocked, or is it luck? Either way, we leave imitation at the threshold as we kick and smear dead snow off our shoes. The lights are all off, but the interior is tilted with dimly lit spaces from the streetlamps gawping in from the windows. I'm happy to show her the house because I hope it will thrill her. It's the one I picked just for her. The foyer is hardwood, and just beyond is a beige carpet, deep pile. And from the front door we can see the dining room with its broad mission-style table and a fixture above it dripping with little ocular crystals that catch and reflect the streetlamps' glow and cast a spectral and muzzy art on the pale walls. At this table is where we'll have family dinners, one day, after tonight.

She reaches for a switch to turn on the light, but I ask her to wait. Oh, okay, yeah, but, she says. But nothing, I say. Wait.

In the dark, I walk her to the kitchen and tell her that here is a kitchen she could blog from. She laughs at herself. She daydreams that she doesn't have to leave the house, and that she stays home with children whom she cares for, cooks for, blogs about. And her readers are jealous of her choices, freedoms, and children. Her readers love her husband, too, despite his looks. They love him for his generosity and presence in his family's life. I love this fantasy, too.

She touches the black knobs on the gas stove. Turns one and listens to the igniter *tick, tick, tick* and then flinches when gas turns into flame. She pops a glove off her hand and holds it over the fire. Ooooh, she says. We both look down into the bars over the gas burners and see a caulifloret, misplaced and forlorn and beginning to gaze back with pimply toasted eyes. We've never lived where cauliflower could be found in the stove grates. No house is perfect, I whisper, and then kiss her cheek, and hope this doesn't turn her angry. She pulls one of her long fingers through the grease frosting the stove's hood: Will have to take better care, she whispers to her oily finger.

Come on, I still have the best thing to show you, I say, swinging the backpack onto my shoulder, taking hold of her hand. We leave the gas flaming and the floret turning into smoke. I kiss her dirty fingertip and hope it conveys *I want what you want*. Yes, in the darkness it is an odd and direct showing I'm giving her, but I need to be swift. I turn and catch a glimpse of her in a slant of light before she slips back into darkness. Beautiful and tall in a frayed puffy jacket and stocking cap, peeled and dirtied. I see her someday in a blue and rose summer dress that flows in such an agreeable way. I imagine how well she'll look in our new house. How well *we* will look, standing beside the mantel in family photos, my hands on our son's shoulders. In the picture I imagine age in my eye and grace in hers, and strength, too. But this is not all I see;

there's more. But how can I describe it all? I'm so excited to start living this life. My whole body judders in anticipation. I think it's at this moment I stop pretending.

I open the door to a room, and I can hear him in there breathing softly. We walk over to the crib, and in the small light from the street we see the sleeping infant, swaddled. One of his arms has gotten free, and his hand is to his head, holding hair. His cyclopean eye is barely closed. Oh my, she says, doesn't he look just like you? And I'm happy that she sees the resemblance (how could she not?) and that it makes her happy. I *am* making her happy, I know it. Soon we won't be so sad anymore. She reaches down and picks him up. I panic briefly that the baby will make a fuss, and then I relax. He'll be ours. Why should I worry? You've really outdone yourself, she says. And I'm suddenly proud of all the work I put into finding just the right house for us, and this child.

The smell of smoke gets stronger. Why we left the stove burning I don't know. We do these things. The house smelled so sweet when we first walked in. Now its fragrance is burnt, increasingly acrid.

I touch the baby's cheek, and then I turn to my wife—or she will be, soon, tonight—and I kiss her on the cheek again and tell her that I have to go upstairs now. I have to make this real for the others in the house. We smile at each other, and I can't make out what her eyes are telling me in the darkness. I just know we are smiling. We are creatures in the dark, ripe for something, a *becoming*—too difficult to explain with too many potentialities. But this is the moment; we both understand it.

We hear movement upstairs, and I drop the backpack and swing the ball bat up to my shoulder. My soon-to-be wife looks angrily at me, still holding *our* new son. The clank of handcuffs and knives makes the beautiful white flower of an eye on his forehead flutter open, gaze sleep-drunk into my eye, a gaze that makes my own singular eye dilate, or I feel it move, as our two eyes meet for the first time—for me it is an awakening and recognition of kinship. And then it ever so slowly falls back into place. My heart hurts with love when I look at him, and for a moment I feel sad about what we're doing here, what I'm about to do.

S'okay, I say.

He's ours, she says.

Yes, I say.

Don't forget to cover the baby . . . when you put him down, I say.

I raise the backpack. So light. And shake my head.

Maybe sing to him, when I leave, I say, so the noise isn't a bother.

She gives me a stern nod of approval.

As I walk up the stairs, I hear a stranger's voice, a woman's. At first what she is saying is just a murmur, and then I hear it very clearly although she speaks quietly. The scorched cauliflower smell gets stronger as I climb the stairs. I grip the bat just a little more tightly for some reason, and I wonder whether the woman in the room at the top of the stairs smells it, too, lingering at risk in her bed. The smell is so strong. Her voice is getting louder, and now she is shouting. I wonder whether she's as ready as I am. Ready to make this real. It's a monstrous thing when we have to stop pretending. When she sees me, she'll know how things are going to change. And she certainly sounds ready for some sort of change as she begs Bill to wake up.

Jason DeYoung lives in Atlanta, Georgia. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous publications, including *REAL: Regarding Arts & Letters*, *Corium*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Music & Literature*, and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Best American Mystery Stories 2012*. He is a Senior Editor at *Numéro Cinq Magazine*.