

## **The Trip**

by Maria Santos

The pharmacists across the street were kind. They made house calls. Two nervous hands could exchange wrinkled green prescriptions for fresh, rolled-up bags of medication. There was the spoon, the dropper, and the holy candle and the sucking syringe, its brother, the sweet needle. There are more elegant addictions than these, maybe in more civilized countries.

Here was the wilderness, the weeds and the rats and the peeling paint. The empty church and the good doctors with the Good Humor cooler. One street consumed the universe and it was possible to walk to its edge and watch the horizon fade and the tide roll in. The 27th Street junkies were the only ones who knew a stranger was born the moment you looked at him and died the second you glanced away. A friend was born the moment he slipped his dick into you and died when your lovers stopped mentioning his name. A lover was born the day he gave you the drug, dead the day he swallowed the needle. The wilderness scraping the skin off your feet, peeling the white off your lips. Remember how it felt to kiss an ugly man? It was the itch deep inside your inner ear. A skull scratch did nothing to ease the memory.

Your mother's addiction was a dirty one, something disgusting like earwax and stringy black hair flowing from a pale armpit. Yours was pristine by comparison. When you closed your eyes, it felt like a smooth dark marble between your fingers. When you opened your eyes, it felt like a glass jar on a cluttered shelf. Your mother's addiction was secret at night and yours was different, illuminated by long fluorescent bulbs and shuddering streetlights. Your addiction was bold and terrible and wonderful by definition. By definition, your addiction was a preservation. Your addiction was a cold mosquito in a jar.

Sometimes there was the white van and the dirty cop with his jeans and his Astros cap and his sweat as salty as his come. Dirty because he didn't bring the prescriptions or the medications. Dirty because he wasn't a doctor or a pharmacist, though he looked you over the way a doctor would, put his hands in the same places, checked your cunt with a thick finger and a rubber glove. You always felt better when the white van was gone. It scared you worse than any fist or bloody needle could.

Remember how it felt to touch yourself? Slide a hand up your thigh and pretend it was someone else's? Here, there was no one with hands like yours.

-

Having a sick day. Don't know if it's just me, my body, or if it's just the time, the climate, my location. Trying to read things like news tickers on CNN. Isn't working. Words so useless. Used to write letters to friends without once using the word "I". Can do it again without trying. Had a nightmare last night. Tried to pull myself out, eyelids shuddering with the dream seizure, couldn't find Jak in the dream replica of our bedroom. Screamed for him to help and shocked awake. He was there. Hadn't made a sound. The nightmare wasn't anything real. Mostly faces, a little boy and his father. If you focus on a face in a dream, it'll change. Focused. The boy changed into something disgusting and evil. He opened his mouth and ate his father. Tried to wake up, but kept seeing faces like negatives, all white, but moving and screaming.

Wrote "Pharmacy" last night. Maybe that's where the nightmares came from. Withdrawal nightmares were bad like that. Broke through windows in those dreams. Opened my bones in those dreams. Like an excruciating itch on a missing limb. Today kept turning my head and feeling the blood slide back into my neck. Could be doing something more useful with these words, something productive. Feels good to burn the beautiful. Like quizzing Tak on obscure emo bands and kicking his ass, pulling wild cards like Avoid One Thing and The Weakerthans, Planes Mistaken for Stars, Dallas' Slowride, Austin's Pop Unknown. Telling him his sweaters and glasses are all for nothing. Feels good, feels good to burn his black hair and the clay in his jeans. Scrape ash from his half-Japanese features. Foggy like bath steam the way it feels to drench myself in a migraine stew, stirred with morphine and something cool to drink. Foggy like Ball halls on a Friday with Thursday's acid on my tongue and the half-conversations like fingers from my palm. Things to say like "I hate this school. So fuckin' crowded." "Who stepped on my shoe? Nigga, you step on my shoe?" "Goin' home to get me some drank." "She was all up on him, had her fake-ass nails down his pants." Just things to say, something to fill the air. Used to catch my breath and hide in empty stairwells with boys like me who couldn't do anything right. Foggy like December on the windows. Foggy like the steam rising from an air-condition drip. The way it feels, another sick day. Could be the weather, but the sun's coming back. Tiny ball of skin slipping into a fingerprint crevice. Must have come from my scalp.

Remember the dirt? Remember being all oil and sweat coming back from 27th Street? He dropped you in the tub, shaved your legs himself, your armpits. A new smooth disposable razor and a can of gel. He washed your hair, gentle like Teresa's mother in the sink. Held you by the neck, lifting you in and out and into the water. You cried because you didn't understand, tried to do it all yourself and choked on soapy water and a rope of your own hair. Too clean. It'd been weeks since you'd done this.

And do you remember the hands? You couldn't help but thank them. Giving you things, pinching your arms, drawing heat across your face, so fast only to keep you alive. Do you remember why they wanted to keep you alive? No, why would you? You were never told. You could only imagine that your cunt wouldn't be too appealing dead and cold. You were kept alive to fuck, to buy junk. Remember the ugly pictures in your head? Or did they melt away like good nightmares? Remember why you never wanted to make something abstract? You knew they had to be there to know and you wanted them to know, not in colors or the shapes of feathers. You wanted them to understand. But now you know that this might take a while.

-

Slept through March, a quiet ride. Acres of green and far-off blurs of white cotton and cattle. Took a train once, twice, New York to Philly, Philly to New York. Factory villages and symbols of anarchy. Symbols of lots of things. Weeds and roses. Rocks and pebbles. Chain-link fences and iron gates. Spent both trips crying and reading. Felt very good to be alone. The March snooze was a train ride. Shocked awake by April, April and cocaine.

You used to remember anniversaries. Remember what April meant? Yeah, you do. Fucking liar. (At this point in the story, the author pinches the skin of your back and pulls.) How's your indigestion? Remember that at least. March was a month things

came apart. April was hell. You remember April. Remember the Women's Center? Yeah, you wouldn't. Rosie on the wall baring a bicep. You wanted to be her. The pamphlets, one scared you. A child's drawing of a frowning face and, in juvenile scribble, the words "Sad is how you feel when Mommy gets beat." It wanted so badly to make someone guilty, that crooked yellow frown. You ate dinner, didn't look at the women, stole a pack of Camels, and left. The Women's Center was on First Street and it was 27 blocks to walk home.

Remember wishing for a mentor? Someone to teach you a lesson in sanity? Someone to give you reasons, tell you exactly why the football team drinks ginger tea, why we excavate the worm-hole caves in Mars? Something maybe to do with the regeneration of muscles and polar ice caps. Twelve dimensions and four men lifting a 3-ton Chevy from a lake of mud. Science was an excuse for his hands on your thigh. Mr. Reese and a ponytail, a backpack and an ugly shirt, and a pretty face.

You remember the ones who saved you, not with crossed legs and folded hands, friendly grips on your shoulders, you remember the ones who carried you like the God whose huge footprints marked the sand on the Women's Center poster.

Do you remember Greg? Yeah, some things you won't forget and other things you try so hard and you tuck them in a hole in your arm and all they do is kill your T-cells. Speaking of diseases, saw Greg today. He talked a lot about you. Sometimes wonder which one of us he's in love with. Probably you, but it confuses him, the way we look so much alike. Kinda turned me on the way he wielded that hairdryer over a wet print, circular motions like his thumb on your clit. A Pier 19 pelican frowning at the camera or the eye. Grainy, but that wasn't my fault. Marla, slowly growing pregnant as we watched her twist the knobs on a dilapidated old enlarger and tell us how disappointed she'd been in the Battle of the Bands last week. "The Hallowed got fourth before they even finished their set. And the last song was the best. That Paris in Flames song you like so much. And you'll never guess who got first. Colin and Jarvis' band, Fallout. They sang Vanilla Ice songs." The Hallowed was Tak and Ryan and Kalle and Neal. Greg always laughed at them. "Bad hair doesn't make a band," he said. He said a lot of things. He said, "Death for ambition." Today.

-

Yes, you agreed with him that "catharsis" was a word for essays and analyses. To inject such a word into the song's bridge might be too bombastic for the intentions of an unassuming, one-minute long acoustic melody. You were skeptical about referring to weed as beedi. Too symbolic in a way no audience would understand. You told him he should be a poet and he told you to fuck off. So you did.

The jungle was quiet that day, you basked in the afternoon's sun, let it coax the sweat from your pores. The jungle was silent, no wind to provoke the crooked, junkie trees to mutiny. They just waited as acid water crawled down your cleavage, shone on your calves, licked your thighs. A beautiful flashback erupted from your ears, stung an orgasm from your eyes. You dropped a cigarette into the grass and luckily Greg was watching you through the kitchen window, luckily he stamped out the fire and carried you inside so you wouldn't fall into the blades of glass growing from between the boards of the Hard Knox porch.

Remember when he graduated? It rained that day, soaked their cardboard caps and made black their purple gowns. The football field was a no-man's land in northern

France, choking and drowning and churning, made fertile for Great War poppies. You and Greg wrote songs for days like those. Burned and flickered in your rotting memory. Punctured your wrists like whistling needles. Freud ruled those dreams, where apples and cherries were cunts, oranges and melons were breasts. Cocks were cold faucets and spurts of rusty tap water. Come was just a waste of resource. Sex was a cleansing and cathartic thing. Long words were ugly in those dreams, but you swallowed them anyway and were refreshed.

(Decided Friday night to quit writing forever. Changed mind approximately one hour ago or midnight Sunday. Picking up where left off. Sort of.)

Ugly lucid dreams this afternoon, sleeping off some forgotten pill no doubt. My knees being pried apart, kicking, screaming, some man with iron hands and a latex cock trying to fuck me between my calves. Finally forgot what I was fighting and opened my legs. At this point the welcome rapist disappeared and my finger found my clit and my eyes found a mirror and my eyes found my clit. This marks the first time I ever got off using my reflection as inspiration. In a dream, that is. Light woman come slicked my thighs and the orgasm tried to wake me. Eyes slid away from my head, floated a few inches above my forehead. Could see my face from a new disturbing angle. Blinked in terror and at last threw my head violently at my shoulder. Woke up, sneezed several times, ran to the bathroom and threw up in the tub of all places. Washed it down the drain and listened to the pipes vibrate. Felt horny again and fucked myself til Jak got home. Made him dinner, sucked him off, read a stolen book, wrote the end of this.