

Fall Out

When you don't got shit, you run with the punches, and that's what Casper did. He was my high school crush for a while, but then he dropped out and posted bail for marijuana and stole all his mom's cash and ran. If you knew him back then, you'd know he kicked ass at research papers and cried when he saw single dads with kids and played some mad soccer and hated grapes. I didn't know, but that's what he told me when we ran into each other at Molly Malone's.

At first, I wasn't sure it was him. He wore gray fleece over his ears as he pushed a crate-stacked dolly toward the side door. I stood under the lamps, glaring at the rusted brick like it was why I'd just been fired from The Bow Tie. Really, it's because I steamed my own milk behind the counter. It's not like I did it all the time, but that bitch Jeri had it out for me. I used to make lattes for her too, but after she found out I fucked her boyfriend, well.

"Hey, why the hat?" I called to Casper, desperate to think about other shit. He offered a fat grin and lifted his beanie. Swear you couldn't even call it hair—all greenish blue, wide strip shaved down the middle to reveal a shiny pink scalp. I said something like yikes.

"Thanks," he said with a wink. Then he pushed the crates inside.

I went through the front just in time to catch the bearded bartender give Casper a half-hearted salute. Casper grabbed his crotch and thrust into his palm like a bull rider. They both laughed, but no one else got the joke. Casper wheeled more barrels to the back, then sat at the far end of the counter and continued to chat with the bartender.

I downed two Guinness and a shot of Jamison courtesy of a tall man with a neck tattoo, and he didn't follow when I ducked outside for a breather, too stifled by the warm swell of my brain.

Casper had parked his company-issued semi along the side of the building. The black trailer looked like cargo cars by the crossroads, but shinier. *Rhinegeist* and a colorful banner were painted on the side in red and yellow. German colors. The truck had a skewed fender over the left wheel, and the back was pretty grimy, like he'd driven a dirt road on his route. Someone had written *Ur Mom iz fine* in the dust. "Fine" probably meant attractive, but I read it as a sign that she'd come back from RCCC without being too fucked up. That the rehab would work. That she'd finally be clean and be a decent mom again.

Casper wasn't super smart—left his keys in the ignition and everything. Sometimes I imagine what would happen had I stolen it. I want to believe I'd never get caught, but semis are real slow. And anyway, I had zero plans. I was unemployed. I didn't drive off though. I opened the side door and hopped into the passenger seat.

The entire cabin smelled of cats and Swisher Sweets—the same red I used in the high school bathroom—but I never once saw Casper smoke. I probably shouldn't have, but I closed the door anyway and then lay across the hairy, tribal-patterned bench seat. It felt like home minus the meows—even the ass dips in the seat matched my mattress. Casper's scrawny white cat leapt off the dashboard and sniffed my hair. I think I drifted a bit because suddenly he was there.

"What fuckery is this?" he asked when he wrenched the door open. I jumped but didn't move far—just stared and waited for him to freak out or strangle me or some other

stupid violent thing. He didn't though. He just laughed. His entire face puckered from his eyebrows to his nose. I looked him up and down. He was bonier, especially his shoulders, and his snakebites were gone, just tiny holes in his face, but it was definitely him.

“Wow. Been a while,” I said because I felt like I should.

“No shit. Knew I recognized you,” he said and hiked his leg on top of the tire. The cabin shook as he settled in. Ruby immediately pounced, kneading his jeans. Casper lifted her to his face and gave her Eskimo kisses. Then he turned to me.

“You stuck here?” he asked.

I shrugged. We moved to Cincinnati once Mom got hooked, and yeah, her first dealer's been locked up for a couple years. I thought that'd be the end, but I guess it's not hard to find another one.

“Keisha's still in high school,” I said. “We're waiting ‘til she's done.”

Casper never met my sister, but he nodded like he had. I didn't want to talk about her though. My stomach sank even more. I still hadn't told her I'd been fired.

“What about you?” I asked. What I really wanted to know was about his jail time, but Casper didn't explain any of that. He ruffled Ruby's fur and mentioned this brewery logistics gig—dragging kegs all over Ohio. Sometimes he drove to Chicago because he'd sub for coworkers with families, said he wanted to help his team out, but he really used it to get away.

He'd never tell a stranger this, but his father studied cosmetology. He used Casper's head as a dummy whenever he went home. I never thought it was a big deal. Hair's dead. It doesn't matter how often you change it. It grows so fast too, so who cares. But Casper did.

I'm pretty sure he lost himself when his dad started to fuck with it. He denied it, but he kept his head covered when it looked especially bad. He kinda had this mushroom skull, like the tip of a bald circumcised dick, and depending on the cut, you could truly tell how wide his forehead was, easily five fingers.

Once we stopped at a Dollar General in Columbus because I love that shithole. Mom used to work there. Whenever she had a stock clerk shift, we'd run up and down the aisles, play hide and seek, try on sunglasses and wigs and boas. Other times, I'd help her organize the Hallmark cards or the nail polish colors. There was always more to do.

Casper shook his head as we pulled into the mostly empty parking lot. It was almost 10. I dragged him to the cheap party favors aisle and thrust a trick cube into his hand.

“Try to put the all the balls in the holes,” I said.

Casper snorted, and I shoved his weird mushroom head.

“You walked straight into that,” he said. Then he turned his attention to the toy cube. Minutes passed. The tiny metal spheres continued to skid across the oily green plastic.

“Fuck,” he said. He hunched his shoulders and sucked in his bottom lip.

I probably mocked his defeat a little too much. I mean, I still haven't done it either, but he didn't know that. Casper frowned and pocketed the cube, obviously used to getting things for free. I continued to look through the various bins and messy shelves, and that's when I saw the bald cap.

“Holy shit.” I grabbed it from the bottom shelf. It flopped all slime and rubber against my fingers.

“God,” Casper said. He backed away with his hands up.

“Dare you to wear this to the next bar,” I said.

He said he’d do it if I went to a house party in Clifton when we got back. I agreed because house parties are pretty chill, at least from my limited experience.

Casper started to walk toward the cash register, but I yanked the hood of his coat.

“What?” he said.

“Exit’s that way,” I said, hooking my fingers around his elbow. We snuck through the back. It says alarm will sound on the door lever, but that’s complete bullshit. When you grow up somewhere, you learn all the ins and outs.

I don’t know how long we were on the road again. Time always passed in spurts—sometimes a quiet rumble and muffled wind, other times radio truck lingo or ACDC. I never liked the old school rock, but Casper said he needed the CDs because he’d go batshit if he heard Train or Lady Gaga one more time.

Casper was sipping an A&W float when the police flagged us down. We were right near a Mobil. He eased on the brake slightly and set his cup in the holder. Then he reached into his jacket and pulled out a small plastic baggie. Inside were seven tiny blue pills. Casper held the bag out to me with shaky fingers.

“I need you to hide this,” he said.

“What is it?” I knew it was hard, but that’s all. I wasn’t a druggie.

“Just do it,” he said.

“Fine.” I took the baggie. “Where?”

“Where do you think,” he said, eyes darting to my lap. The sirens sounded nearer now.

“Oh my fucking god,” I said but rolled the damn thing anyway.

Casper turned his head toward the driver window as I pulled down my underwear. I pushed through my coarse hair and spread myself open. I could tell I was too dry, so I spit on my fingers. Then I grit my teeth and stuffed it inside. It was nothing like a tampon. The scratchy plastic crinkled uncomfortably against the walls of my vagina, and I could still feel it after I’d pushed it in all the way. I smoothed down my skirt.

“Done?” Casper asked. He glanced toward me, face more red than usual.

“You fucking owe me,” I said.

Casper scoffed. “You’d go to jail too, you know.”

The cop car followed us as he turned into the gas station. He braked by the Diesel pumps and kicked open his door.

“Good evening, ma’am,” he said to the cop with the low bun. Her nostrils flared, and her square glasses made her brown eyes look like fat potholes. She craned her neck for a better view inside the cab. I could tell she was sniffing.

“License and registration, please,” she said.

Casper squeezed my knee as he leaned over to grab papers from the glove compartment. I didn’t move, afraid one tiny budge would alert her to the pills I’d hidden. We waited for five minutes while the cop inspected his information. Casper’s leg bounced furiously. Finally, she handed him her business card and a citation. 10-day fix-it ticket. Apparently one of the brake lights was out.

“Drive safe,” she said, giving us a polite smile. Then she let us go.

Once we'd pulled back onto the highway, Casper asked if I would leave the baggie in until we reached Cincinnati.

"Sorry. I'm just so bloody paranoid," he said.

"Are you serious?" I glared at his oval face, natural brown hair curled around his ears.

Casper sighed, his index fingers drumming against the big wheel.

"I'm about to wear a bald cap for you. Isn't that enough?"

"Whatever," I said. Of course, it wasn't enough. Nothing he could ever give me was enough. He seemed to have it easy sometimes, living life on wheels, probably stargazing along the way. Besides, it was just another hour or so.

Casper just squeezed my shoulder. He never said thank you. Then he grabbed his truck receiver and brought it to his mouth.

"Fed the fucking bears and escaped squeaky clean," he shouted. Other faceless drivers keyed up, cackling and tripping over each other with their own stories. No one mentioned any drugs, or if they did, I couldn't catch the keywords. It was a world I didn't know at all.

We arrived in Cincinnati around midnight, trailer stocked full of IPA. I don't get it. I mean, it's the worst fucking beer, tastes like complete ass, but it's on tap everywhere.

"You still live here?" Casper asked when he entered Over-the-Rhine.

I crossed my legs, gaze fixed out the window. We weaved through the narrow streets, all right angles and super lame sedans parked along the sides. The tall brick buildings, red and brown, packed together in misshapen clumps. There's always construction too—always

more uniform townhouses being smashed into someone's side garden. If I wasn't from around here, I'd think this was the cheap part of town.

"It's not as good as you think," I said.

Casper didn't reply. I didn't expect him to.

I removed the baggie as soon as we had parked outside Sundry and Vice. Casper took it and immediately stashed it in his jacket again. He laughed at my wrinkled scowl.

"What? Not like I'm gonna smell it later."

"You're fucking disgusting," I said.

"Meh," Casper said. He unwrapped the bald cap. I helped him put it on, stuffing his soft hair under the elastic flesh, too dark for his skin. It failed to adhere around his elephant ears and hung around his lobes like stringy chewing gum. I bet nothing matched his scalp. It looked sunburnt year-round, and it wasn't just his head. Winter sweaters emphasized his tiny pink hotdog neck, and his red earlobes had empty holes stretched from gauges he wore in high school. He rocked emo punk back then, even the fingerless gloves.

Casper unloaded kegs of Truth outside Sundry and wheeled them around back, bowing to the dark wood entrance.

"Greet the bar before you enter and she'll serve you the best drinks," he said.

I shook my head. He always talked a lot of shit. Even in high school I'd hear his name whispered around the track team. Something about fucking our truancy officer. We never found out if it was true, but one look at him and you'd probably write it off as a joke.

Casper handed me ten bucks and told me to get myself a drink because I deserved it.

I sat under dim lights with a Blank Slate Pilmo and sipped among college kids with fake frames and suspenders. You overhear a lot of unexplainable phrases in bars, and this time I was in for a treat. To my right was a group of young people, probably students, was in a deep discussion about existence and how shit can't exist unless you can numerically count it. They took turns sketching random diagrams and circling figures. To my left, an older guy with a flannel shirt and huge boots yapped excitedly with some younger woman about how he'd found some life-changing elixir. Probably some weird drug speak.

Casper returned then a bit damper than usual, the bald cap sliding down his forehead.

“Look at this shit,” he said, shoving his phone in my face.

I scrolled through a Business Insider article titled, “Hippest cities everyone under 30 wants to move to.” It listed Cincinnati third. They called it an arts, culture, and foodie hub, as if that disguised Over-the-Rhine and crack houses and dope and high school dropouts.

“Dumb fuckers probably went inside a hipster bar with stupid fancy drinks and jizzed,” Casper said, motioning around us. He flicked his tongue against a toothpick he’d probably picked up from the back.

“Hey, I’m headed to Illinois to grab a shipment from Canada. You coming?”

I swirled my beer. “I don’t know. Do you want me to?”

Casper itched under the bald cap. He didn’t meet my gaze.

“I don’t care. I’m just saying that’s where I’m headed next,” he said.

I clutched his phone to my chest and stood.

“Where you going?” he asked.

“I have to call my sister to tell her I’m going out of town.”

“Cool, cool, cool,” Casper said.

I locked myself in the bathroom and called Keisha. She said she’d just stay at her boyfriend’s house for the weekend.

“Oh, and Mom called,” Keisha said. “She misses you.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Really, you should ring her when you’re back. She’s not sounding that good anymore.”

“Not surprised.” I chewed on my tongue. “I’ll think about it.”

“Fine,” Keisha said. I could hear from her voice that she wasn’t happy with my answer.

“I gotta go, ok?” I winced, didn’t even wait for her reply before I hung up.

When I returned, my glass had been drained. Casper liked to help himself to my shit. He had replaced the bald cap with a large smile, his teeth slightly more yellow than I remembered. I didn’t see him brush his teeth ever, but he drank a goddamn crazy amount of beer and Redbull.

“Let’s go by that party I mentioned,” he said, wiping his hands on his jeans. I nodded as he grabbed his coat from the back of the chair.

Once you hit Clifton brick fades to abandoned mansions and corner stores. Casper parked half a mile away from the house. He yanked the emergency brake and hopped out with his hood up.

“I’d prefer if you waited out here,” Casper said. If it wasn’t sketchy before, it definitely was now. I knew he was about to deal with someone. I’d seen it before with Mom.

Keisha and I waited in the car by a park and Mom locked the doors and was straight gone for what felt like hours. Sometimes I'd sleep. Other times I stared into the darkness and waited until I saw her come back, a little more hustle in her step than usual.

"No. You invited me," I said.

"Fine. It'll be a quick fix though," he said, checking behind us as we walked through the deserted, dark lanes.

The sidewalk of the old Victorian-style manor was overgrown with weeds, like patches of armpit hair. Turquoise paint peeled from the wooden siding. Dead trees littered the brown yard, and loud bass rumbled the broken windowpanes. The front door had no doorknob, just an empty circle.

Casper went right in. I trailed my fingers along the grand banister as we headed closer to the muddled voices upstairs. The hallway smelled like vinegar and acid and some unpleasant sweetness that peaked every few minutes.

"Don't worry," Casper said when we reached the door. He knocked briefly and a young guy, probably no more than eighteen, answered.

"I'm here for Pooter," Casper said.

The boy gave him a once over then settled on me.

"She with you?" he asked.

Casper nodded, and the boy stepped aside, door widening. I peeked around his shoulder. The room stunk of chemicals and plastic, empty except for a few dilapidated couches and a circular glass table. Black trash bags hung across the windows, stuck above the crown molding with duct tape, blocking life from both sides. The guy called Pooter was

stooped over the table. Small pipes, belts, syringes, and dirty spoons covered the glass. A Bunsen burner sat on the ground by his feet. Pooter swept fine white powder with a loose razor across the glass to form three thin lines. I've seen my mom snort before, but this dude wasn't fucking around. She never did more than one, at least when I saw it.

“You want dope?” Pooter asked.

Casper nodded. I kept my eyes down, feeling more out of place by the second.

“I got Wollie, Belushi, and some new shit they call Gray Death,” Pooter said.

“Gray Death?”

“Crazy fucking rush,” Pooter said. “Just watch your dose.”

Casper chose that and some brown powder, exchanged some twenties for what looked like a cement rock. Then Pooter asked if he wanted to do a couple lines. Casper glanced at me. I shrugged because I wasn't about to hightail out like a little bitch. I wanted to be cool.

“Wanna hit?” Pooter asked me as Casper crouched next to him.

I shook my head. Pooter handed Casper a long glass stirrer. He plugged one side of his nose and snorted, head falling back. Then he did another.

“Thanks, man.” Casper said. “See you around?”

“Sure thing. Take care,” Pooter replied.

Once we returned to the truck, Casper said, “Your turn.” He slid straight into the passenger side. He'd never asked me to drive before but Canada would be a damn long ride.

I steered down 65, barely feeling the blacktop. Usually we drove across rickety concrete slabs. I would doze off in the sleep cab with Ruby tucked under my chin. Maybe

that's when Casper smoked Swishers. I imagine sometimes he popped pills with Redbull to stay conscious too, but I never asked.

"I love this road. So fucking smooth," Casper said and pulled a CD out of the glove compartment. CD roulette, he called it. But it wasn't really since he knew every single one. Casper chuckled and flashed the front. Black Eyed Peas. Monkey Business.

I thought he was going to feed it to the player, but then he took out the brown powder. He carefully opened the zip and pinched a bit between his fingers. He set it on the back of the CD and formed a line with his lighter. Then he reached into his pocket. He rolled the cop's business card into a tight cylinder.

"Here goes nothing," he said, and with one rigid sniff, the CD was clean.

We stopped at a Love's near Merrillville, entire lot full of other semis and truckers hanging off the doors, smoking cigarettes. A couple women in short shorts and fishnet stumbled near the pump, probably drunk or high or whatever. One shouted that she gave the best head on the street. Casper's neck whipped, a repulsive glint in his eye. I felt sick.

"I need to go to the bathroom. Do you want anything?" I asked.

"Hot chips and Mountain Dew. The blue one," he said and handed me his credit card.

I took it even though I wasn't planning on using it.

I walked through all the food, perused the Chex Mix for a bit too long. I closed my eyes and tried to find that feeling from the Dollar General—that sense of nostalgia and silliness of waltzing through the aisles, but I couldn't conjure it again. I sighed and grabbed Casper's stuff, gave a slight wave to the dude at the checkout and went back to the truck.

Casper was slumped over the wheel. Ruby mewled loudly. He had blue lips and gray skin, saliva around his mouth. The baggie with the grey rock had fallen onto the ground by his boots. I touched his skin, checked his pulse point. Nothing.

“Well, fuck.” I pushed his body over until there was room for me in the driver’s seat. I buckled him in, his head lolled toward me, eyes puffy and bloodshot. I opened the bag of hot chips. Ruby jumped onto my lap, circling a few times before settling in. I turned the key, and the engine roared to life. I gripped the wheel, honked the horn for good measure. Then I turned back onto 65 and kept driving.