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*THE END IS BEAR*

**Exterior—Christian County Cornfield.**

A bolt of lightning killed my wife.

She was a photojournalist, covering the negative effects of global warming on Midwest farms. I tagged along, an unemployed and undisciplined screenwriter, writing a never-ending script, about death and its existential companion grief. Going on four hundred pages, the bear didn't have a title. It hibernated in a cardboard box, waiting to be fed more words. After I'd finish every new section I'd write the words **THE END IS NEAR**. Joke was on me—the end never came.

We had been in Christian County only a week, eating at local diners, floating through pawnshops like ghosts haunting graveyards, absorbing the nature of a small town, the nurture of America. She was a method photojournalist, much like an actor, sucking in her surroundings like a sponge, transferring that energy to an image captured on film. She called what we were doing now seeking the tangible nature of freedom.

**Interior—Bed of Endings.**

We had sex every day.

She called it *mating*—two animals charged with the ambiguity of self, seeking out the companionship of another in flesh. There were never outfits, or lubricants, sex toys or props. Only two bodies, twisted together in unbearable heat.

I called it *ending*—inevitable, a lovely death.

She would climb up from the foot of the bed like a tiger, pinning me down with her hands, calloused from handling her camera equipment. I would flip her onto her back and slide down her smooth skin, kissing section after section of her familiar body. I would go down, sucking at her, lapping at her. We devoured each other, wholly, our teeth tearing at nipples and bends of flesh. Sex was, like the local Christian County farmers said of their fields, a ritual of celebration to the gods for the bounty of companionship.

My husband, my wife would whisper.

My wife, I would whisper back.

**Interior—Hotel Room.**

The day she died I waited for her in our hotel room.

I cooked up a fresh batch of words to calm and quell the bear in the box, but stopped when I began writing the same sentence over-and-over: My god, will this ever end?

On television, there was a game show marathon. I became a contestant over time, testing my collective knowledge of Americana, question after question. If my math was correct, which I'm sure it was, I had won sixteen million dollars.

Evening came and my wife never came back to the hotel. I called her phone and it rang, perfunctorily, until finally someone answered.

My wife, I said.

Nope, bro, he said.

Who is this, I asked.

The kid who found this phone, he said.

This is my wife's phone, I said.

Who is your wife, bro, he asked.

A photojournalist, I said.

The pretty lady with the camera, the kid asked.

Put her on, goddamn it, I said.

The kid laughed.

Please, I said.

No can do, bro, the kid said.

Please do, I said.

Here, bro, the kid said, handing the phone off to someone else.

Who is this, a woman asked.

This is the husband, I said. Who is this?

The paramedic on site, she said. Is this her phone, she asked.

I'm sure it is. I dialed her number, I said. The kid answered. Then handed it to you.

I'm so sorry, sir, she said.

Why, I asked. What have you done?

Sir, she said. Your wife is dead.

The host of the game show asked the following question: What is the psychological reaction in which a person is faced with a truth that is too painful to believe and opts, instead, to believe that it is not true despite what may be overwhelming evidence?

A contestant with thick-frame glasses buzzed, but I could not hear her answer.

### **Interior—Christian County Coroner's Office.**

I drove to the Christian County Coroner's Office of Missouri to identify her remains.

Empty slabs of steel gurneys and unused equipment rested on trays. The floor was checkered with alternating red and black squares. It smelled like Chinese food—hot and sour soup and garlic beef. A woman stepped out from an office, wiping her mouth with a napkin. She was short with long blonde hair. She wore a white lab coat and when she finished wiping her mouth, she crumpled the napkin and threw it at a trashcan. The napkin missed and fell to the checkered floor.