

*INCINERATOR*

Brett spots it while he works the crane, lifting trash into the wavering red mouth of the incinerator. It sits half-immersed in a load of garbage, and even from Brett's seat in the cab, through the water-stained window, he can see the ornate design of it, the pale painted man, crossed arms holding a staff and spear, the colors livid gold and red among the cottony garbage glue. Brett heaves on a lever and the load stops in front of him, swinging slowly. He whistles, and swings the claw back toward the concrete floor of the warehouse. By the time he gets down, the others have pulled it free and surrounded it.

"That's some Indiana Jones shit," Tripper is saying.

"King Tut," says Jimbag.

Brett thinks it belongs in a museum, under glass, but when he bends over and puts both palms against it, the surface feels light and strong, like the pieces of petrified wood he used to find at City of the Rocks. The others bend to touch it. It's bigger than a coffin, about 10 feet long and waist high. The painted man is beige and wears a white wrap like a skirt, and though the design is faded, the vermilion headdress and golden strands around his neck and ankles radiate. The men slide their hands and stop, like they're listening.

Then they hear The Hilt, his boots like padded hammers on the concrete floor. The Hilt is the floor manager, a squared-off box of a man who's at least 20 years older than everyone else on the crew. He thinks they're a bunch of dumbasses, and they know it but don't care. They consider him a relic, a joke. Brett retains a sliver of admiration for The Hilt because he seems sure of himself, but he would never tell the other guys.

The Hilt starts in. "You miserable shitheels," he says. "Get your hands off it."

He sets himself between some of men and the sarcophagus.

Brett says, "I found it."

"*You* found it?" The Hilt says, incredulous.

"I found it," Brett says. "I sat that clawful of shit right there."

He points to the mound of trash on the concrete floor. It smells like living mulch, a mess of biology just rotten enough to be reborn. The view out either door is a simple canvas of tan earth and pale sky, divided by a level horizon.

The Hilt says, "This thing's gotta be worth some money."

The Hilt watches "Antiques Roadshow" on PBS. He dreams of better days, but he hates his dreams.

Tripper says, "I think Brett's got dibs."

"Yeah, Hilton," Jimbag says.

The Hilt looks from face to face. Brett blushes under his glare. Finally, The Hilt shakes his head, says, “Pearls to swine,” and stomps off.

Brett puts it in the living room, in front of the couch. It’s not a level surface. You’ve got to be careful how you put down your drink.

He lights three candles that Ellie left behind. They are sticky with dust. Two votives in their flimsy metal shells, and a taper he wedges into an empty brown beer bottle. In the candlelight, the colors seem burnished with dark promise. Brett sits on his sofa and looks at it. It gives the clutter a center, a sun to orbit. He thinks that this is a sign of something. He thinks the name of this thing is: Mummy.

The mummy makes him think of shaded, impossible things, of vampires and the Holy Ghost. He mostly doesn’t believe in ghosts. He mostly does believe in God—though not enough for his mom. One votive trickles out, and the angle of light changes. The gold deepens, and the shadows thicken in the mummy’s grooves. Brett drains his fifth beer. He turns 27 in a week. The empties are lined up along the chest of the mummy. Brett thinks of the candles in his mother’s Catholic church. Maybe he should pray to it. Maybe he should ask it to grant him a wish: Bring Ellie back. He heads to the kitchen for another beer.

That night, Brett dreams he is speaking to it.

“Are you a mummy?” he asks.

“Remember this,” the sarcophagus says in the voice of Vincent Price, a voice that is tired of explaining itself to humans. “We hate it when you call us mummies.”

He wakes up Saturday. His head is foggy, about average. He goes to visit his sister in Garden City. She lives in a square white home, wooden siding, yellowy lawn, and in her living room are porcelain creations of every design—Austrian children in lederhosen, keg-strapped Bavarian dogs, the Statue of Liberty. On a table at the front window is an aquarium with his sister’s three angelfish—Bernadette, Galadrielle, Emmanuoso.

“Mom says I should refinance,” she says. “I hear that the Bradfords—you know them, right? Jenna Bradford? With the retarded boy? *They’re* refinancing. Mom says they got five seventy-five. I wish I could get five seventy-five. We’ll be lucky to get seven, with Roy’s credit. It doesn’t seem like a lot, maybe, but over the life of a loan, it adds up.”

Brett repeats, “Life of a loan.”

His sister sniffs. “Why can’t you talk like a real person?”

He sits in the living room and waits for enough time to pass so he can leave. His sister gets up and feeds the fish. They float, golden with black stripes, bladed heads tipped up, mouthing the bits of food. She walks into the kitchen for coffee and Brett lets his eyes rest on the fish.

Time is standing still, he thinks. But then he sees it’s not. One fish slowly turns and rises belly-first to the surface. Then the second fish. Then the third. Their graceful, watery fins trailing. [continued]