

Stray Dog

Leather, rotting fruit, sweat. Flies buzzing and the television static. Heat rising in waves off the tarmac, shimmering beneath Florida's persistent sun.

Sebastian, six years old, touches the moisture on his own skin. Licks it to combat the dryness of his tongue, grown too large for his mouth, and tastes only salt. He drags a little white stool across the ground, scraping over lino towards the sink, and stands on top of it. As he tries the tap, his small hand scrapes across rust. It flakes off into the basin – copper snowflakes. There is a squeak but no water.

He gets off the stool and returns to the living room, bare feet silent on the worn carpet. A figure lies motionless on the sticky couch, masked by a blanket. It's Sebastian's. Yellow and frayed at the edges from years of infancy. He doesn't need the blanket anymore, now he's six. Six is grown up.

He thought Ma was supposed to be grown up too.

For a few minutes he runs his finger over the cigarette impressions in the leather of the couch, digging his nail in and trying to pierce through the material. It all smells like smoke. Even after the hide is cured it can't get relief. Burning, and burning, and burning.

A low growl. No neighbourhood dog; just his own belly.

Sebastian doesn't bother looking in the fridge. He is big now, and knows that it doesn't magically offer up food.

Instead he swallows down the little stone in his throat and walks to the front door, sliding it open into the heat of the afternoon. His shorts hang low over his knees, and the fabric brushes together as he steps out onto the porch and shuts the door behind him. Down on the pavement, the black asphalt is hot on his feet. He runs like a foal, picking up his feet and avoiding melted pools of tar.

It's a straight line all the way. Sebastian's been there before, with his Ma and with the kids next door. Now he's six, he can get there all alone.

The small, white building, and those huge words in faded red – *FOODS SnacKs & Liquor*. Sebastian slows down when he sees it, trotting into its shade. There's a woman inside with two babies in a pram, and then there's the aisles and aisles and aisles of colour.

The wall of refrigerators. A holy place. Ma tells him about God and about being good and how when he dies, he'll get to go to heaven. He knows it's mostly white and it's never ever sweaty, and he also knows no one is allowed to smoke up there. Just like aisles of refrigerators stretching into forever, with millions of bright-red ice blocks.

Cool air presses down on Sebastian, drying the sweat on his forehead and ruffling his hair. He pulls at the grey handle of the fridge and grasps a bottle of milk. Clean, white, cold. Standing in the open rush of freezing ventilation, he twists off the blue top and starts drinking. Some of it spills down his mouth and onto his Thomas the Tank Engine t-shirt, making a little puddle on the cracked tiles beneath his feet. He drinks until he feels like his stomach might burst, and then he puts the bottle back, carefully closing the refrigerator door. He can hear the sound of a man talking with the cashier, exchanging coins and cartons.

Outside, the town stands like a sleeping mare. It feels like an oil spill; end-of-the-earth; flat soda; stray dog. Stupid and forgotten about.

Sebastian leaves the store. He is thinking about his baby teeth, which are collecting in a small plate on his ma's dresser. Once there are enough teeth, he will be old enough to take care of her, according to Ma. He looks forward to that time because he knows he will be tall and unafraid.

Right now he is small; so small that no one notices his milky footprints, or his ratty t-shirt, as he pads out of the Most Greatest and Most Colourful place in Florida. He wants something to chew on, but the other kids taught him to be quick and quiet. When Ma sleeps through the morning, it's never good to wake her, and so he'll take milk over the crunch and crackle of a cereal box. Going to the store is just the same as appeasing a sleeping Ma.

When Sebastian gets home, Ma is no longer on the couch. She is all ferality now, wide-eyed and snapping, her blue lips churning out sound.

I thought you were at school; look at the walls, they're crumbling, the landlord doesn't care; there's rats in my bed and in the shower drain; I was just doing taxes and I think we've been robbed; I think I got mugged the other day, I'm bruised all over; why won't you stop standing there; what's all over your top; you look like a runt; you're the runt of a litter of one.

He scurries into his bedroom and avoids her mad dashes. She's like a walking exclamation mark.

Sweat beads over his top lip as he slides underneath his bed, lying flat and staring up at the slats above him. Ma flips a lot. Sometimes she berates him for his silence, sometimes she strokes his head and talks good of her serious little boy. Right now he doesn't want either. He is the runt of a mother cat's litter; he wants to curl up in a back alley and smell the interesting smells until he dies.

Ma is noisy in the kitchen. The sounds of metal and plastic almost drown out the knocking at the door, but the sound perseveres, until they both go still. Sebastian feels like he's playing dead. A spider crawls over his hand with feet like tiny cotton balls.

Maybe it's Dad, it's Dad, Dad's here because I've turned big, I'm six, I'm six, today, Dad.

It's all silent and thick and heavy as Ma goes to open the door. It's maple syrup on pancakes, from diners of lost dreams.

The visitor at the door is a woman. Sebastian turns over and squeezes his eyes shut, forehead and nose pressed into the fraying carpet, hands coming up over his ears. If only there were something to cling to beyond his own body. There are strange things creeping up behind him as he lies and compresses himself down. He is becoming the soot on his father's old shoes. The spider is creating miles of web; she's going to encase him so tightly that nothing will ever touch him, just like when Ma used to wrap him up in his yellow blanket, keeping his limbs pressed to his body and his heart inside his ribcage.

His bones and flesh are all coming apart.

‘Sebastian!’

Oh, that’s a loud sound. She’s shouting for him.

‘Sebastian. Get out here!’

Milk churns in his stomach. Cows parade in his imagination, a whole crowd of them, calm in their western plains of grass and dirt and blue sky. Instead of a cat or a dog, he could be a cow. A cow couldn’t hide under a bed. A cow wouldn’t. It’s too sturdy, too serene.

Ma comes stomping into the room in bare feet and a t-shirt. Sebastian sees her knees, and then her toes, and then her crazy, wild eyes. Her hand is an iron cuff around his wrist – she’s going to snap it, he can’t fight her, he’s flesh and she’s something more. Something alien. She came down to earth on an asteroid and swallowed up all the minerals.

Heat trickles down the walls in rivulets. Sebastian’s cheeks are aflame with burning fever, bright red, incriminating. As the house weeps, he stumbles after Ma to the front door. When he sees the visitor it’s like his intestines constrict.

Ma’s taken him to the local church before. Confronted with the store-owner of *FOODS*, the image of the suffering Christ clogs up his head like a wet napkin. That long, long man, stretched out and twisted on a wooden frame – his contorted face and the flush of his skin, the tremor of his toes. A static image, vibrating with a hundred lives. Whether it’s the pain or the shame or the guilt, Sebastian can’t stop seeing the graceful fingers, the bleeding feet.

‘You a made a mess in my store, boy,’ she says, with a voice that scrapes. ‘And you took without payin’.’

Sebastian wishes more than ever for the hunger he’d felt in the morning. The milk is sloshing around in his stomach and curdling in the heat of his gut.

He tries to apologise but can't. The woman calls him a mongrel, snapping and growling like a gator out of water, and Ma holds onto his wrist like it's the tail of a squirming cat.

Later, when the woman is gone, Ma shakes. It's like there's tiny tectonic plates inside her. She locks Sebastian in the bathroom and he sits in the shower, getting his shorts wet, pressing his knees together. His head knocks back against the tiles, squinting at the ceiling grout. Dead flies collect in the light, which is off, leaving the room grim and dank.

Outside the house, the great state of Florida extends in all directions, dripping hot and orange, a brilliant invitation for tourists to dance and run and spend.

Inside, Sebastian celebrates his sixth birthday, counting black bugs and wearing everything he owns.