

Detroit Muscle

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*This novel is dedicated to my mother,
Elaine Vande Zande, a former substance
abuse counselor, and the tough muscle
that always kept our family going...*

“The only thing separating Detroit from the rest of Michigan is a comma. As Detroit goes, so goes Michigan.”

—Former Michigan State Senate Majority Leader Randy Richardville

“You are a hymnal too, I said aloud to myself.

A scrap metal mantra. Beauty inside rust.”

—Ken Meisel, "Detroit Hymnal"

“Muscles actually have a memory of their former strength—and that memory may last indefinitely.”

—Kristian Gundersen, University of Oslo

Below, Detroit sprawls outward in asphalt and cement, juts upward in brick and glass, from the bank of its namesake river. A rust-colored freighter sits suspended on the waterway crossing under the Ambassador Bridge. In the near urban distance, the white-roofed Ford Field and the green diamond of Comerica Park sit side by side. The seven skyscrapers of the Renaissance Center tower over the water. Overlooking the financial district, the stately Detroit One Center. The Greater Penobscot Building. The Guardian Building. Minoru Yamasaki's One Woodward Avenue building, the design of which he would borrow from to create the World Trade Center. On the ground, a twisting of interstate and highways merge into the grid of city streets hosting a rat race of cars.

It is a masquerade. A charade. A smokescreen.

Down there too, in more abundance, pockets of desolation and loss spread horizontally across the urban landscape. The Packard Motor Plant. Fisher Body Plant 21. Detroit Gray Iron. AMC Headquarters. Peerless Cement. Roberts Brass Works. Grand Trunk Cold Storage. Thorn Apple Valley Slaughterhouse. The abandon

spreads, including the nameless rotting rec centers, golf courses, playgrounds, stadiums, and community centers. The city's vertical reach is also an illusion. Entire buildings stand abandoned. The 15 floors of Charles Noble's Art Deco Lee Plaza. The gigantic Michigan Central Station. The 38 floors of Book Tower on Washington Boulevard. The Free Press Building. Too many vacant buildings to name. A city of empty stories atop empty stories. And then too, less towering, the over 40,000 abandoned homes. Whole neighborhoods decaying or razed. Churches, cathedrals, hospitals, schools. Each one a carcinogen in the urban tumor, which slowly metastasized its vacancy, anger and despair up I-75, spreading into Pontiac, Flint, and Saginaw, each with its own rot and exodus, its own stories gone empty.

Robby Cooper turns away from the window. The plane continues its descent into the city's airport.



Beyond the cracked parking lot and cyclone fencing, and down the slope rippling with big bluestem and switchgrass, the Walter P. Reuther Freeway drones with four lanes of westward five o'clock traffic escaping Detroit. An older model Mustang merges onto the interstate from the Orchard Lake Road onramp. Giving it gas, its driver veers in front of other cars, threading a path through the tight configuration. Whole lanes slow with the chain effect of sudden braking. Other drivers signal to switch lanes. They are honked at unforgivingly. The flow backs up to a lurching crawl. The freeway flashes red with the dominoing of taillights.

Robby stands outside an apartment door and watches the Mustang racing unapologetically toward I-696's merger with I-96. The overcast sky threatens rain. Looking at the marbled cloud cover stretched gray to the horizon, Robby scratches feverishly at his upper arm. A raggedy-looking robin lands on top of the cyclone fence. Just as suddenly, it flies away. Robby's green eyes follow it until it's out of sight. He then looks down at the address on the scrap of paper trembling in his hand. The Mustang's waning dual exhaust thunders faintly in the western distance. Robby checks that

the number on the paper matches the number on the apartment door. He checks it again. Finger-combing his bangs away from his face, he tucks the longer strands of brown behind his ear. A swatch of hair near his temple is prematurely gray. He inhales a long breath through his nose and looks up into the rusted underside of the second floor walkway. Drying his palms against his jeans, he looks behind him and then looks to the door again. The growl of the Mustang is gone. The freeway is an angry red of brake lights. Exhaling a sigh between his teeth, Robby knocks.

~*~

A woman Robby's age opens the door. Her face blanches at the sight of him.

He looks down and his hair falls across his face. He sweeps it aside again. His smile is tight-lipped. "Hi, Tif," he says softly, glancing at her rounded abdomen.

She looks at him as though he is an apparition that might disappear, that hopefully will. She wears a long, blue maternity dress. Her auburn hair is pulled back from her slender face in a ponytail. Her eyes are almond brown. "You shouldn't have come here," she says. "You should have called." Her hand goes to the door, moving as though to close it. "Who gave you the address, anyway?"

"Your mom." He shrugs, looking down at her sandals and the red polish flaking from her toenails. "She said it was good that I come see you face to face."

Tiffany exhales a scornful little laugh through her nose and shakes her head. "She was wrong."

Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he hunches his shoulders towards his ears. He looks at her. "I just wanted to talk."

"I really don't think we have anything to talk about." She crosses her arms between her belly and breasts. "I don't expect anything from you if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not worried..." He shrugs again. "I just thought that we could talk."

Rain begins to fall, dinging off the hoods of the cars behind him. He looks toward the noise and then back at her.

Tiffany hugs her arms tighter against her body. She glances out at the rain and then back at him. “Is this something you have to do for your program? Are you supposed to talk to people that you might have—”

He shakes his head. “No, I’m not here because—”

“Because I’m not hurt or mad at you, not anymore. That night was a mistake, but it’s done. It happened.” Her hand goes to her belly and rubs gentle circles. “I really don’t expect anything from you or want anything. You’ve got your own problems. This one’s mine...and it’s not even a problem, okay? I’m fine.”

Robby looks over his shoulder at the water suddenly sheeting down over the cars and asphalt. He looks back at her. “We can’t even just talk...just for a minute?” he says, raising his voice above the racket of the downpour.

She studies his face. “You’re tan.”

He nods. “I guess.”

“That place was in Florida, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“It was a cold winter here.” She shakes her head. “Almost seems like you were being rewarded.”

“It wasn’t a picnic.”

She says nothing. The left side of her mouth nicks up into a disbelieving, mean smile.

He shivers. “Can we, though? Can we just talk?”

“Aren’t we talking now?”

“Tif.”

She combs her fingers into her hair, squeezing her palms against the side of her head. “What, then? What do you want to say?”

The water slashes in at an angle, soaking his hoodie. He looks at her and his bangs fall across his face again. He shrugs his hands at her. “Do you think I could come in?”

The static hiss of the rain soundtracks a frozen moment between them.

Tiffany sighs and then steps back, opening the door wider. “I don’t have much time. I need to get ready. I’m covering for someone at work this afternoon.” When he doesn’t move, she motions with her hand, gesturing him inside with her fingers in a movement

that might be used to swat away a mosquito. “Come on. Just don’t plan to stay long.”

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The apartment’s kitchen, living room, and dining area are all in the same small space. The chair, coffee table, and sofa look worn and ready for replacement. There’s no dining room table. Tiffany walks past Robby and sits in the recliner. Her hands go to her belly and rub, as though trying to predict a future from a crystal ball.

“I just moved in last month,” she says. “I’m just starting to put the place together.” She smooths her hand over the frayed arm of the chair. “This is the furniture that came with the place.”

Standing on the mat near the door, Robby looks around. “It’s nice,” he says.

“No it isn’t.”

He nods, pushing his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. A moment passes and then, “Are you still at the dealership?”

She looks at him for a few seconds. “You can sit down.”

He smiles and his lips buckle in against his teeth. “Okay. Thanks.” He unzips his hoodie, takes it off, and holds it in his hand. He bends toward his laces.

“You don’t have to take off your shoes. You’re not going to hurt this carpet.”

He walks over to the couch and sits, draping the soaked hoodie across his legs. “Are you still at Shuette’s?” he asks. He watches the motion of her circling hands.

She nods. “Still at the reception desk, but not for much longer. Dan said that he’ll start training me for a title clerk position after the baby is born.”

Robby flips his hair away with a snap of his head. He nods thoughtfully. “That a good deal?”

“Better than what I have. It’s high stress, but a lot better pay.”

He glances up at the sound of footsteps coming from the upstairs apartment. Then he looks at her again. “That’s cool, right? I mean, good for you and everything...the better pay.”

She shrugs slightly. “What about you? Are you working?”

He shakes his head. Running his fingernails up his arm, he leaves four white tracks in his tanned skin. "I just got back yesterday." He brushes at the tracks. "I'm going to talk to Ty, but not about working." He takes a breath and then releases it. "I don't think he'd give me my job back."

"I wouldn't think so," she says, smirking.

"I need to talk to him though." He looks at the floor. "To apologize."

The muffled sound of the downpour outside fills the room. Tiffany pushes her palms against the arms of the chair and raises the leg rest. Immediately after, her hands go back to the business of rubbing circling calm into her womb.

Robby looks up and watches. "Does it kick?"

She glances at him and the tight purse of her lips suggests that the question is none of his business. "Not exactly. He moves, though. I can feel him moving."

His face brightens. He smiles. "Him? It's a boy?"

"What did you want to talk about, Robby?"

A muted chime vibrates from his pants pocket. He takes out his cell phone and looks at the screen. It reads *Mom*. He presses a button, sending it to voicemail. He looks at Tiffany and stuffs the phone back into his pocket. "I don't know, Tif...everything, I guess."

She smiles coldly. "Is there an everything, Robby?"

He scoots forward on the cushion, rubbing his palms over his knees. "I think so. Don't you think so?" He blinks.

She looks into his eyes, her head shaking slowly, certainly, from side to side. "No. I don't. I really don't."

"It's mine, though, right? I'd heard, and then your mom said—"

She pulls up on the lever and slams the leg rest back into the recliner. "Yes, it's yours. It's yours because you showed up to a party high and started telling me how much you loved me. You found me down in the basement drunk, and you lied to me, and then you fucked me." Tears well in her eyes and she brushes them away with her fingertips. "I didn't hear anything from you after, and when I finally heard something, I heard that you were out of state in rehab. You didn't even—" She takes a deep breath and exhales it

slowly.

Robby watches his finger and thumb pick at a loose thread on the couch. “That’s not fair. You weren’t drunk,” he mutters.

“What did you—”

“I didn’t lie to you.” He looks up at her and into her eyes. “I’ve had feelings for you since high school. I always—”

She crosses her arms. “Shut up, Robby. Just shut up, okay? I don’t want to hear about any of this. I wish you wouldn’t have even come here.” Taking a breath, she catches her cracking voice. “Why’d you come here?”

He glances toward the window at the water coming down the glass in wormy lines. He lets go of the thread and squeezes his forearm in his hand. “You talk about things when you’re in, things you want to make right. That’s what they want you to talk about. My mom told me about you...about the—” He looks at her. “I would have called, you know. I was only allowed to talk to one person, though. That was part of the program. I got to talk to my mom once every two weeks. That’s it.”

Tiffany looks at him, almost through him. “I don’t want to hear—”

“For the last three months, you were who I talked about. In group, in one-on-one. I talked about you...you and the baby. I just want to do something right. I want to play some kind of part—”

“No.”

He looks at her, eyes wide. Outside, the rain is an indecipherable whisper.

She shakes her head. “We’re not part of your recovery. We’re not going to be the thing that makes you feel better about yourself, okay? You’re just going to have to—”

“I don’t mean it that way,” he says. He bows and holds his head between his hands. “It’s not about my recovery or... I just want to help. I want to be involved in some way.”

“That’s fine, but I’m saying no. I don’t need any help from my mom, and I don’t need any help from you...especially not you.”

The heating unit kicks on and drones into the room.

He closes his eyes and squeezes his forehead in his hand. “Why? I don’t understand. I just want to do something...” A tear breaks

from his eye and he smears it across his cheek. “I mean, he’s my son, too. Like it or not—”

“I want you to leave.”

He looks at her. “Tif—”

“I know what you’re thinking.” Using the arms of the chair, she pushes herself slowly to standing. “A boy should have his father in his life.” She looks toward the window. “That’s probably true most of the time. But you’re an addict and a liar and a thief. I don’t want that in my life or his life.” She turns back toward him. “I just want you to stay the hell away from me, okay?” She glowers at him with stony eyes. “I should have never let you come in here.”

Dropping his face into his hands, he releases a choked sob. His body shakes. Then, he stops himself, breathing in a strained breath through his teeth and exhaling it into his palms. “Jesus Christ, Tif,” he whispers. “You won’t let me be any part of this? You’re really saying that you won’t let—”

“Robby, just go. That’s what I’m saying. Just go.” She walks to the door and opens it. She looks at the floor. The sound of the rain is like colossal radio static.

Pulling his hoodie over his head, he looks out at the cold, wet world waiting for him.

~*~

Outside her apartment, he turns back to her framed in the doorway. “Could you call me, at least? Or, call my mom? Would you at least do that?”

Her eyebrows knit together. “Call you? What are you—”

“When he’s born.” His voice cracks. “Could you just call me when he’s born?”

To the south, the freeway is a misty river of brake lights.

She looks down at the well-worn welcome mat. Her hand rubs her belly. “I don’t know,” she says, pushing the door toward him. Her hand stops rubbing. “I don’t think so.” She closes the door.

Tears stream down his face. “You weren’t drunk!” he shouts above the noise of the falling water. He turns, flips up his hood, and runs through the rain toward his car.