

THE PURE COMPLEX



THANK YOU



HERBERT,
DELL,
BAJA,
JR. &

CHARLIE, FOR YOUR
THOUGHTS, TIME, & CARE!



REPPYK,
FOR READING!

I DID THE COVER SCULPTURE THIS TIME!
I DONT NEED TO THANK ANYBODY!
MERRY CHRISTMAS!

LINDSAY DANE

Lucy

"I thought you only liked the roasted ones,
are you sure these are what Lori usually gets?"

"Sure."

Lynn glances over at Cam.
"You said you didn't like it
last time I used these."

"I didn't care."

Unconcerned with easing Lynn's
obvious insecurities, Cam
picks at the stray threads of
his sleeves and ruminates on
nothing in particular.



The worst of the Friday afternoon rush has cleared out, but the store is far from empty.

Limping, twisting, a few crawling, shoppers drift from one aisle to the next, going through the ever similar-but-different motion of grocery selection.

They speak little, if at all. Occasionally the poor coordination of one leads to collision with another, and halfhearted grunts are exchanged.



Eye contact is a rarity,
but hasn't it always been?

Cam eyes a woman walking towards them.

She looks past him.

Her gaze settles on something
above and to the side of Cam.

The shirt she's wearing is buttoned incorrectly,
its floral pattern ill at ease with itself.

Neither of her feet
fully leave the floor
as she approaches.



Glancing over as she passes them, Cam sees Lynn stiffen visibly. The woman stops just a few feet away and turns to the aisle opposite them, bending at the waist to examine the rows of canned beans.

Lynn is frozen in place, can still in hand, staring at her.

"Hey," Cam nudges Lynn's shoe with his own, the front of the cart swaying slightly with his shifting weight. "Let's just go. We can get food somewhere on the way home."

"Huh?" Lynn's voice is quiet, and his eyes are wide. The woman across the aisle is still immobile, staring at the cans in front of her. She slumps forward, and both of her hands dangle limply at her sides, knuckles brushing the floor.

Cam walks ahead, pushing the cart past Lynn without waiting for him to put in either of the cans he's holding. Tearing his eyes away, Lynn follows him.

"I'm sorry, Cam, it's not – I don't want to do that, you've probably been eating garbage all weekend. Let me make you something." He's whispering, his breath hurried even as he takes two steps for every one Cam does. Cam doesn't look up at him.

"I don't care. I told you I don't care. Why are we still here?"

His question sounds more like a statement, and there's irritation in his voice. Lynn furrows his brow.

"You...I don't know. I don't know. I worry about you, you're young, you need someone to look after you. And Lori can't right now, but I'm here, so–"



Cam makes a derisive noise through his teeth, the sharpness in his voice fading as they round the corner of the aisle.

"Yeah, I got that part. But you're overdoing it. Driving me to school is one thing, but you're cooking more than Lori does. She never makes me lunch, she doesn't do shit like that."

"Well," Lynn hesitates, glancing up in thought as he walks. "She's been taking care of you since you were born. I've only been staying at your house a few days."

"Oh, so it's just a matter of how long until you get sick of me? You'll stop harping about dinner once the novelty wears off?"

"No, not at all!" He sounds alarmed, stopping in place and looking down at Cam with sincerity in his wide eyes. "That's not what I meant at all, I've just had less time t—"

"Lynn, I don't care." Cam cuts in. There's something genuinely endearing about how seriously Lynn takes everything he says. "Like, I appreciate it. But I don't care."

It's hard to read the expression on Lynn's face. It's something like relief or disappointment, but not quite. Cam nudges him again, rubbing his sneaker against the leg of Lynn's clean slacks.

"You're not my mom," he drawls exaggeratedly. "Don't you have anything better to do than this?"

When Cam starts walking again, Lynn follows him reluctantly, clearly still troubled.

Cam keeps talking.



"No one else is paying attention to anything anymore. I've been getting away with murder this week. No one cares, they don't notice. I pulled my sleeves up all the way to my elbows in the middle of chemistry and got nothing. No one looked twice."

They pass a man in a polo shirt, bent sideways at the waist seemingly as far as he can go. The whole trunk of his body is limp, the full weight of it sagging against his waist.

One arm sags with the rest of him; the other reaches forward loosely in the direction of a pack of sausages.

Lynn stares openly.

The man stares back, eyes glazed as they track his motion.



"You know what you should do," Cam continues idly, quickening his pace somewhat.

"You should call Melanie. It's been a few months since she broke it off with you, hasn't it? You should call and ask her for your ring back. Feel like she might just hand it over if you asked, with how everyone is now. She was always kinda, you know. Not exactly a free thinker. None of her people are, really. Even before this. Sorry if that's rude, or whatever, but it's true."

Cam can already feel the burgeoning reproach on Lynn's face.

"It's good you didn't get any more involved in any of that happy horseshit anyway. Would've been depressing to see you flush your life down the toilet like that. I know you weren't great at school, but you're at least smarter than...fuckin'. Churning butter, or whatever the hell those people do. Pamphlets. Did they ever make you do pamphlets? Going door to door and all that shit?"



They're walking side-by-side now, and when Lynn jumps at the chance to cut Cam off there's an edge in his voice.

Cam still doesn't look over at him.

"I was the one who broke off the engagement, Cam, I don't know where you got the idea that it was her. And I let her keep the ring, she asked and I said she could. I wouldn't want it back if she offered it in the first place. And we never made our own butter, Mormons don't do that, you're thinking of the Amish."

Cam stops the cart.

"No, I'm pretty sure some of them do.
It's like how they don't marry teenagers,
where they say they don't, but they do."



"No one was—" Lynn catches himself, clearing
his throat in frustration and striding ahead of him.

He takes the cart by its front, turning to go down an empty aisle,
and Cam follows, ambling a little quicker to keep up.

Standing facing the aisle, Lynn pulls a folded sticky note out of his breast
pocket and compares the list on it to contents of the shelves in front of him.
He does not turn to Cam when he speaks.

"Her name was Michelle. And all her brothers married adult women."



"Michelle?" Cam wrinkles his nose. "Really?
Feel like I'd remember if her name was Michelle."

Lynn clears his throat stiffly. "You feel wrong, then."

"Did you ever have sex with her?"





"Just asking. You were engaged for a year, as in to be married. Surely you got her to put out at least once."

The skin under Lynn's eyes looks hot, his face flushing so blotchily it gives the impression that he recently stopped crying.

"I don't think I'm going to – I'm not going to tell you that! You can't ask me things like that."

Cam stares, watching him work himself up.

"That's...it's so inappropriate, you know I'm not going to answer. I'm not. There is a reason I don't talk to you about some things, Cam. That's personal. And it's crude."

"I'm taking your side, man."

"Is that what you call this? You're – it doesn't feel like it. I don't want to talk about sex with you."

"Why not?"

The disgust on Lynn's face pollutes itself with exhaustion. Cam looks up at him expectantly.

"Cam, why would I want to talk about sex with you."

"I don't think you would. But it's weird that you don't. Like, the way you phrased it. You have a preference for if you'd like to talk about sex with me or not, you've thought about it before."

"Of course I – you brought it up! I never bring this kind of stuff up, it's always you who wants to talk about it."

Lynn sounds more petulant now than anything else. Cam sizes him up passively, watching the grinding motion in his jaw as he avoids eye contact.

"You should care less about this," he says flatly. "If you're the one who broke up with her then there's no reason to be upset, anyway. You won."

Lynn stares silently, at a loss. He shakes his head, sighing deeply as he turns back to the shopping list.

"It's just sad. And it's embarrassing. I'm really...I'm not sure what I was thinking. There were a lot of reasons it was never going to end well."

"Happens."

Cam slouches back into place over the cart's handlebar, watching Lynn.

"What did you do, though? When all this started, before you showed up at our place."

"Mh. I had been...oh, I don't know. I wasn't sure what was happening at first, I thought it might have been another wildfire."

Lynn exhales deeply, rubbing the side of his face.

"It was scary. Cam. I didn't do much at all besides go to work. Nothing worth having a conversation about."

"It looked a little like a fire, I guess. You just sat around scared for half a week?"
Cam's casual tone is at odds with his naked disbelief.

Without exception, every interaction they've had since they started talking again has been like this.

Conversational minefields all the way down. Cam was nothing like this when he was little.

Unable to think of an excuse not to answer, Lynn looks away from Cam in troubled silence.



Cam rocks back and forth, pushing the cart with him. An inch forward, an inch back. His face betrays nothing, and he raises his palms in condescending surrender.

"What. I'm curious, I care."

"I really...Cam, no. I'm not going to go through all this again with you."

Cam turns away from Lynn and the woman, pushing the cart a few inches forward impatiently.

Catching the hint, Lynn drops in a box of cereal and strides ahead of him.

Cam has posed the same question to Lynn at different angles a handful of times over the last week, and Lynn, bizarrely, has yet to buckle.

It's only a matter of time, though, and the reason Lynn is lying is more interesting than the actual answer.

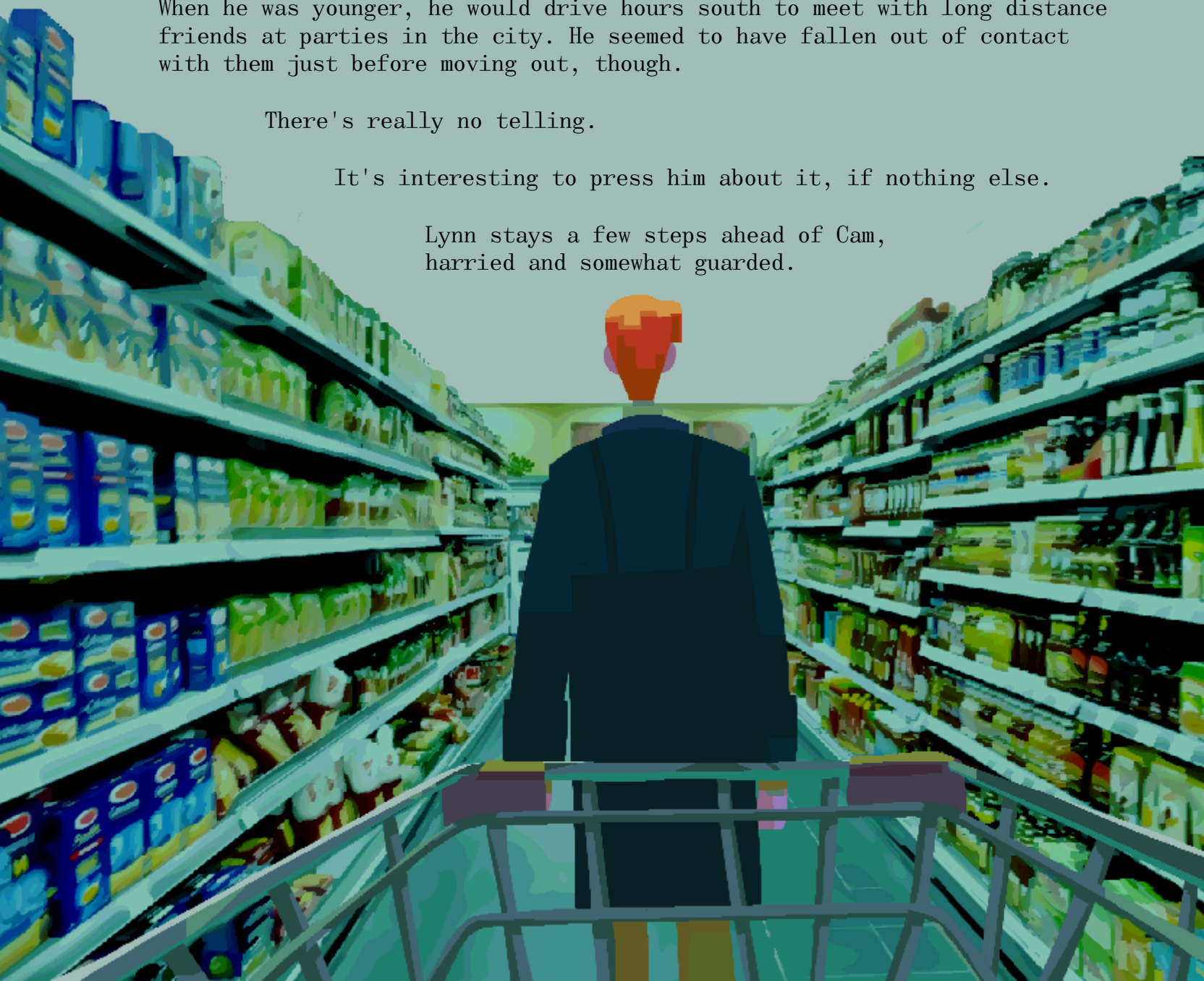
Lynn doesn't seem the type to have an affair, but Cam knows him well enough not to discard the idea. Even spineless men have needs.

When he was younger, he would drive hours south to meet with long distance friends at parties in the city. He seemed to have fallen out of contact with them just before moving out, though.

There's really no telling.

It's interesting to press him about it, if nothing else.

Lynn stays a few steps ahead of Cam, harried and somewhat guarded.



One of the front wheels of the cart is sticky, and the groceries rattle with it as they round the corner into the next aisle.

There's no one here.

"Are you done with my CD yet?" Cam asks, pushing the cart up alongside Lynn abruptly.

"Your – no, I'm not. Almost. I still have a few weeks. Why? Do you want something else this year?"

Cam shakes his head, declining without a second thought.

"Nah. Just wondering."

"I don't know why you want them," Lynn half-murmurs, leaning over Cam as he glances with reluctance at the frozen dinners.

"You hated both the mixes I gave you last year."

"Not everything. Radiohead was fine."

"Of course you like Radiohead."

Cam looks up. Lynn is actually looking down his nose at him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Lynn says. There's a faint loftiness in his voice, a sticky little spot of confidence.

"They're just huge, is all. They're everywhere. It's Radiohead. A lot of boys your age like them, it makes sense that you like them."

Cam snorts. "You'd know more than me about boys my age, I guess. Anyway," he raises his voice to talk through Lynn's disgruntled exhale. "The one you made me for my birthday last year was good."

"You liked five songs out of fifteen, Cam, that's not good at all."

"It's good compared to the other ones. Did I tell you I'm failing math, actually?"



Lynn knits his eyebrows, looking down at Cam with an uncharacteristic, almost paternal air of disapproval.



"You're failing math?"

"Sure."

"Why? You're good at math, Cam, you were in advanced classes—"

"Was not. Lori didn't want me in there while I was failing English."

Lynn's crestfallen frown is audible. There's no need to look.

"You were so far ahead for your age. She should have let you move on, it would have been good for you. Do you have anyone to help you now?"



It sounds like an offer.

Cam shrugs, leaning over the cart to look at its contents.

"You're getting this for me?"

Exasperation shadows Lynn's features.

"Can you not have one linear conversation with me? It's worrying, I care —"

"I don't. It's just the geometry shit anyway, I did fine in algebra. Hate shapes, though. It's bullshit. I'll be back on it next year."

He sizes Lynn up from the handlebars of the cart.

"If there even is a next year. Way things are now, they'll pass me as long as I act like I'm passing. Besides," He waves his free hand dismissively. "If I change my mind, I know where to find you."

Lynn flushes and balks at the insinuation.

"I don't think Lori would want me tutoring you. But you should get someone."

Cam shakes the cereal box conspicuously, redirecting Lynn's attention.



"Pick something else if you want," Lynn says, sufficiently irritated at last.

"That's just what I remember you eating before."

"You remember me eating this?" Cam grins lopsidedly.

"Do you really?"

Lynn looks to the ceiling helplessly.

"You don't have to be so dramatic. Just doesn't seem like it's been that long since you moved. I haven't eaten this since I was a baby."



"I didn't know you when you were a baby," Lynn says sharply.

"Well, not like an actual baby,"

Cam intones idly, still shuffling his feet as he walks down the aisle.

"Six or seven, you know. Maybe eight. Prepubescent, you know. It's all kind of the same."

"It really isn't," Lynn says sharply. He bristles in the corner of Cam's vision, suddenly defensive.

Cam drops the subject, reveling in the revitalized tension.

Discomfort radiates off Lynn, and Cam can feel it as something physical.

Rolling waves of unease curdle the cold air of the freezer aisle.



The deli counter is just ahead of them and to the left.

The attendant is already staring at them. His shoulders slope heavily out of his neck, and they jerk in awkward rhythm, keeping him upright.

In Cam's peripheral, Lynn doesn't move. There's something about the way people act now that terrifies him in a way that Cam can't make sense of.

He's always been timid. Bill has a cabinet of delicate ways he describes his son, but the words Lori uses when she's alone with Cam are less gentle.

By her description, Lynn is spineless, wormlike in sensitivity and untrustworthiness.

Cam has yet to see him contradict her, but there's always room for will in a grown man of Lynn's proportion.

There's something exciting about the prospect of it, a sum of intention twisting under a meek layer of membrane. He'll be pushing thirty soon, still hiding his intentions away in conscientious little non-requests.

Had he been born a bird, he never would have made his way out of the egg. As a mammal, he's lucky not to have gotten stuck halfway.

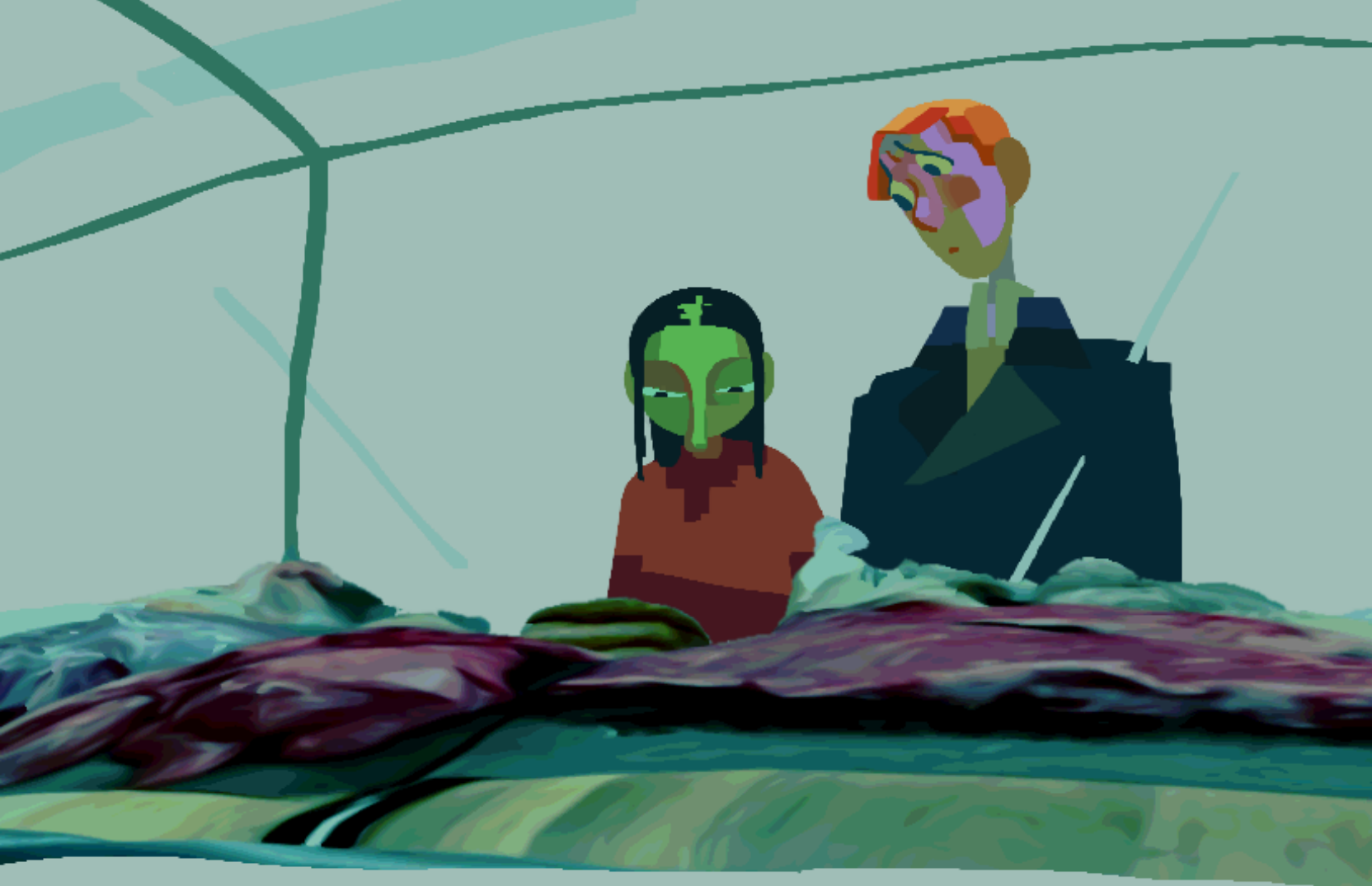
Locked in a staring contest with a man something less than half-awake, Lynn holds himself like something snared.

Lynn's bigger than anything Cam's snared before. Bigger and more aware, now, of what happens to things that get caught.

He looks like he's ready to run right now.
But he won't - Cam knows he won't.

Who runs in grocery stores?





Cam glances between Lynn and the man behind the deli case for another few seconds before taking initiative. He grabs the front end of the cart and pulls it behind him as he approaches the counter, and Lynn follows.

Standing silently in front of the case and the attendant, Cam can feel Lynn looking down at him, as if for guidance. He doesn't meet his gaze.

"You going to get something?"

"What do you want?", Lynn asks in a half-whisper, leaning closer to Cam almost imperceptibly. Cam barely shrugs.

"I don't care. Nothing greasy, no salami or whatever."

To his credit, Lynn's voice is no unsteadier than usual when he places the order. His discomfort is visible, though, and he stares blatantly at the attendant.

The attendant stares back at him in silence for an equally inappropriate length of time before slouching down to pull a plastic-wrapped loaf of meat from the case.

He drags his left leg on the floor on the way to the deli slicer. At some point in the day, his shoe must have rolled to the side, and the sole faces inward.

His pants are too shapeless to tell if his foot is similarly twisted, and he shuffles forward at a snail's pace, putting weight on the locked knee of his limp limb as if it were a crutch.

It looks like it hurts, Cam notes idly.

The attendant doesn't show it if it does.

People move their bodies like puppets, now, in various states of bulgy-eyed unarousal.

There's little to observe past the odd posture.

And the posture isn't even always that odd.



"Do you think it's safe for him to be doing that?" Lynn asks quietly, leaning in again to whisper.

Cam only shrugs.

Behind the case, the attendant doesn't seem to have any trouble operating the deli slicer. The motion of the weighted blade is rhythmic, rocking forward and back with the motion of the employee's arm.

He rocks a little with it, his head swaying in time.

Cam stares, half-processing the visual input in front of him.

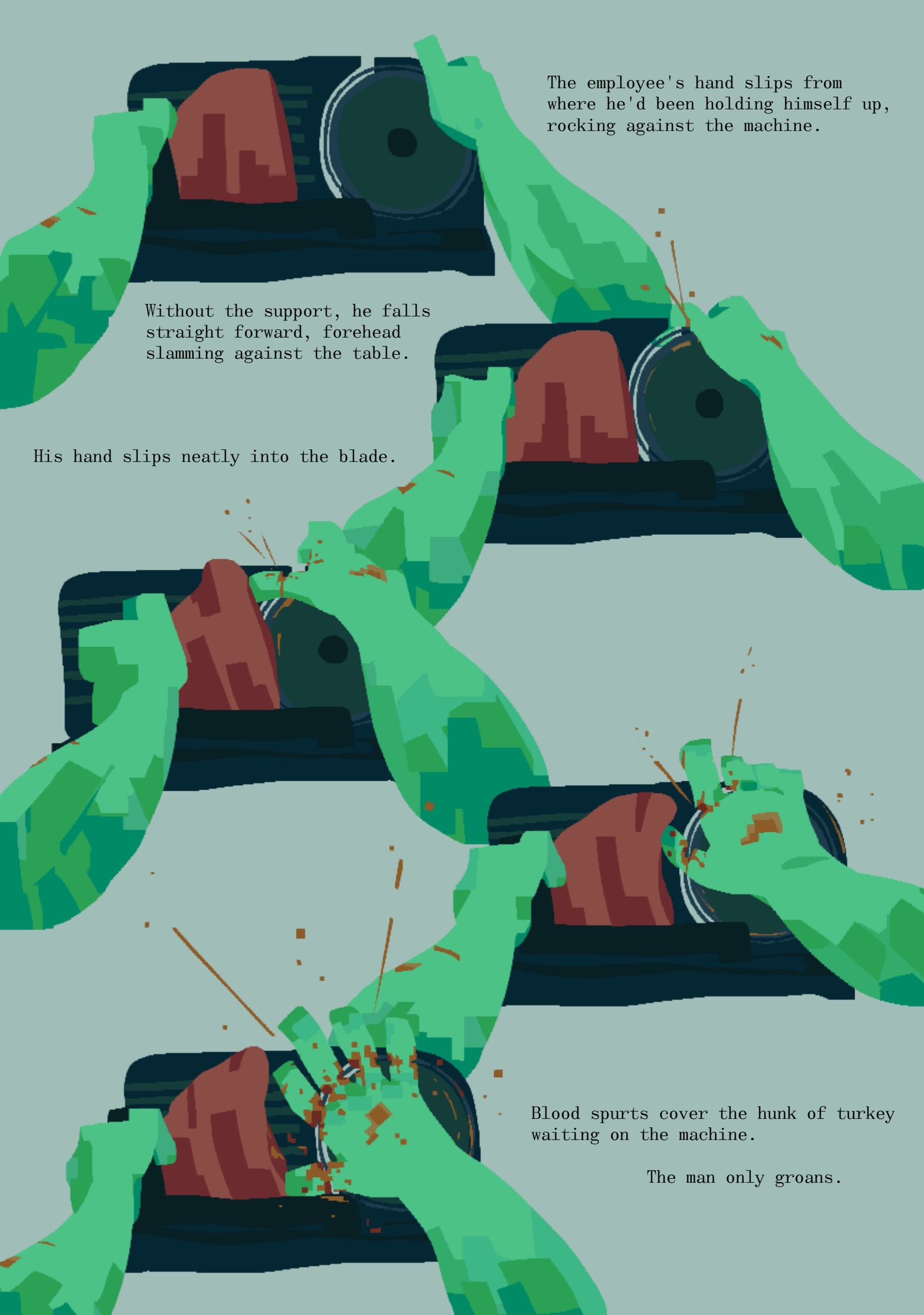


Lynn's gaze is fixed on Cam.

He looks worried, intensely so, having spent most of the shopping trip and the drive to the store ruminating his earlier walk in the forest with Cam.

Turning to face Cam more directly, he speaks with a low urgency distinct from the whirring throb of the deli slicer.

"Mitchell, I really think—"




The employee's hand slips from where he'd been holding himself up, rocking against the machine.

Without the support, he falls straight forward, forehead slamming against the table.

His hand slips neatly into the blade.

Blood spurts cover the hunk of turkey waiting on the machine.

The man only groans.



Lynn gasps, wide eyed
with a hand over his mouth.

He sounds panicked, his words a mumbling,
squeaky whine that seems like it belongs in
the mouth of someone much younger.

"Cam, I think you need to call
animal control for that dog."

Cam is still staring directly at the slicer,
but it's hard to tell if he's actually seen
what just happened.

He blinks when he turns to Lynn, like he just woke up.

WHAT?



He didn't notice inside the store, but Cam can feel now that one of the wheels of the cart is higher than the others.

It isn't even touching the ground.

He keeps his eyes on the wheel as he walks, watching it spin in place, frictionless.

If he can't feel Lynn's eyes on him, he can feel Lynn's thoughts about him. The man worries the way an animal does.

He's unsubtle, even in wordlessness.

Cam hadn't grown up around animals. When he had first moved in with Lori permanently, she had tried getting him a dog.

It had gone as well as could be expected.

This was long before he'd gotten interested in trapping. Naturally, he'd found more casual ways to enact cruelty on it.

It hadn't liked him, and he either didn't want or didn't understand how to play with it.

Lori gave the thing away to one of Cam's aunts after he kicked one of its teeth out.

He no longer remembers what kind of dog it had been. He can remember, though, its distress at visitors, at strangers on walks, at people passing around the front of the house when it was in the backyard.

Lori had trained it well enough not to bark, but it would fret and pace, whimpering constantly and punctuating itself with the occasional desperate yelp.

There's something reminiscent now of the dog's anxiousness in Lynn. Cam keeps his eyes fixed on the ground.

He's not easily embarrassed, and he certainly isn't now, but there's something intensely awkward between them.

Generally, antagonizing Lynn was fun and low-risk. But this feels different. Lynn's sensitivity has been a source of malicious entertainment for Cam for years, now, but he's been becoming increasingly distant.

Even before the sky changed color, he'd stopped acknowledging Cam's missed calls.

The last time Cam saw him actually pick up a call from the house phone was when Bill called him a few weeks prior.

He had only picked up after the call had gone to voicemail, when Bill had started to leave a message.

It's hard to be insulted. Cam had first noticed the effect he had on Lynn at a Christmas party in 2003, and he's done nothing but abuse it since then.

Lynn's return to the family gathering after three years of absence had felt somehow offensive. The feeling compounded when Lynn greeted him with an even brisker, more inane politeness than he had everyone else and moved on.

He'd spent the party haranguing Lynn first in anger, then in amusement; more than just put off by Cam, the man had seemed afraid.

It became something of a habit after that. Bound as he is by desperate servility, Lynn is easy to game. Cam's gone as far as asking him for rides home from house parties, calling late from unknown home phones. He caves every time he picks up.

It's incredible, as if he can't say no.

But this is no holiday party. Lynn has been living with Cam for almost two weeks.

It's obvious that, however uncomfortable Cam (or even Lori) makes him, Lynn is scared enough at the prospect of living alone to stick it out. Cam wonders if he would feel differently if he'd been living with someone when the change started.

It had been disconcerting to watch Lori and Bill change, their behaviors reduced to simpler and simpler renditions of the same. And in retrospect, Lynn may have a point about them hurting themselves.

But it's hard to envision. Rote though their actions were, they were familiar. Cooking, cleaning, leaving for work. They're far better off than the deli worker.

They even still talk.





Lynn's ankles flit in and out of Cam's field of vision as he walks.

One step for every two Cam takes.

His socks are matching, clean white above his shoes. He must have watched his step in the forest. The sides of Cam's shoes still have dried mud clinging to them.

He stops walking when Lynn does, barely avoiding running the cart into the car.

Lynn doesn't seem to notice, fussing with the keys in his pocket and popping the trunk of the car.

He starts loading the groceries into the trunk at a brisk pace without looking at Cam.



Lynn's obviously still upset. He straightens himself up, shopping cart almost empty, and addresses the inside of the open trunk.

He rests a hand on the car, still staring straight ahead. When he speaks, there's too much space between all of his words.

Cam is struck by the vague awareness that this kind of thoughtful hesitancy might be endearing to someone else, and the idea almost irritates him.

"It isn't good. What you're doing out there," he says.

He enunciates even more clearly and deliberately than usual, his speech that much more stilted in sincerity.

This happens, Cam has noticed, whenever he tries too hard to make a point.



Maybe they teach it in therapy.

"Okay."

"I'm serious. It isn't right, it's actively bad, it's dangerous. For you and... anything you come across. But mostly for you. That's the important part."

"Okay."

He's visibly holding back tears when he turns to face Cam, who is struck with such a visceral wave of hot embarrassment that he almost turns away from him.

Only half-perceiving this, Lynn leans forward, desperation in his lowered voice.

"I just don't understand, Cam. I don't understand. You're so smart. Isn't there anything else you'd rather do?"



There's something humiliating about the whole situation that's amplified by the fact that Lynn isn't even mad about any of it.

He's concerned, he sounds guilty. He's looking at Cam like Cam is his fault, like he's responsible in some way for whatever comes from him.

It's adjacent to infuriating.

He leans back, away from the unrepentant silence in front of him.

"I know it isn't good for you, either," Lynn says, his voice low and unchastising.

It's soft and reassuring, at odds with his physical backpedaling. The kind of voice you'd use a few inches shy of someone's ear, at a brief, intimate distance.

He talks to Cam as if Cam was the one upset over what he'd seen in the forest, as if Cam cared at all about the outcome of this situation beyond whether or not Lynn would tell his mother what he was doing in the forest.

"We should call animal control. Something.
You need to let them go."

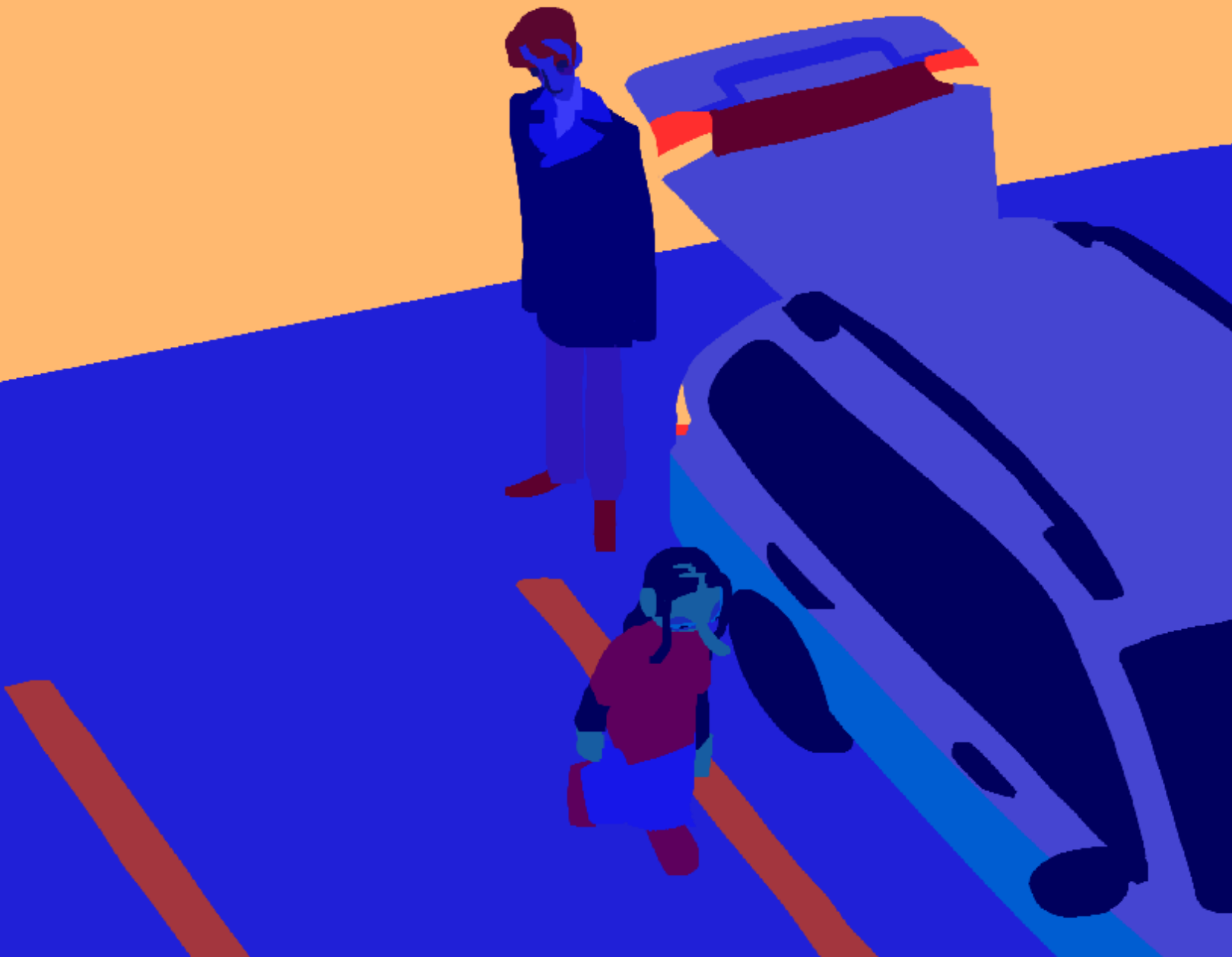




At his full height, Lynn feels almost like a proper adult.
He talks a little more like one.

The absence of a response from Cam is the closest
he'll get to consent, and he knows it.

Cam breaks eye contact first, turning and pushing the cart aside, sending it
sailing aimlessly away from the car. He walks around the vehicle and opens the
passenger side door to get in, leaving Lynn alone in front of the open trunk.





Half-sitting down in the vehicle, he sees them in the passenger side view mirror. Several yards off behind where Lynn stands, a flock churns.

They dodder around, locomoting with hobbled steps, trembling and huddling in a mass against the cold air.

They take no interest in their surroundings or in Cam and Lynn. Blindly, they bump into each other in constant, aimless shuffle.

If they're making sounds, Cam is too far away to hear them. He can't remember if the one he encountered earlier had made noises.

It may well have.


Lynn catches Cam's eyes in the mirror and follows his gaze, turning in place to see the congregation behind him.

Cam can imagine the look on his face with clarity, but he can't see the real thing.





Fleshy, rotund little things, twitching
bundles of translucent skin that seems
only barely capable of bearing back the
weight of their insides.



He looks away when Lynn turns back to face him, catching a sliver of the whites of Lynn's eyes before he lowers himself the rest of the way into the passenger seat, shutting the door and leaving Lynn standing alone behind the car.

There's a few seconds of silence before he hears Lynn's hurried footsteps around the back of the vehicle.

Then the door opposite him is open, and Lynn's arranging himself hurriedly in the driver's seat.


Lynn reverses out of the parking spot fast enough that Cam's head jerks forward.

Cam whips around in place, looking past the headrest of his seat to look out the back window, but the car lurches forward before he has a chance to process what's behind them.



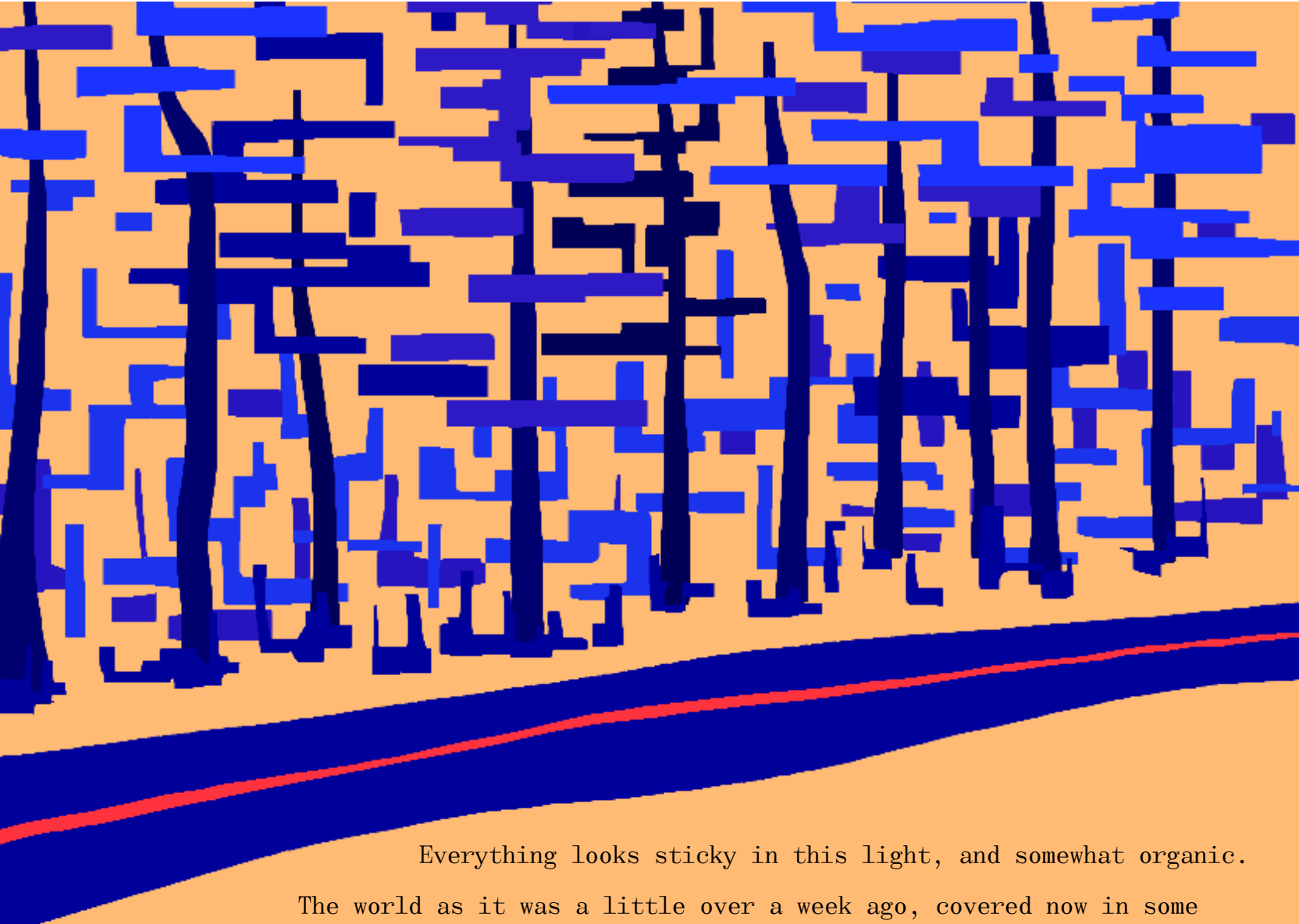
Peeling out of the parking lot with uncharacteristic recklessness, Lynn's face behind the wheel is unreadable, and Cam doesn't care enough to stare.

He tilts his head back, laughing out loud as the car sways back out onto the street, milk and onions lurching audibly in the trunk.



"Didn't think you had that in you," he cries, shaking his head.

"You didn't even put the cart back."



Everything looks sticky in this light, and somewhat organic.

The world as it was a little over a week ago, covered now in some ambiguous translucent wax.

Lynn's gaze keeps jumping from the dashboard to the road ahead. He doesn't say anything to Cam, doesn't look at him.

The sickly color of the sky makes the pavement glow orange, and the amber of the streetlights melts yellow traffic lines into the road.

The road is narrow, with only two lanes, but doesn't feel too crowded now. It's different when you're driving. Cam's made this drive himself a few times. It's close to being scary, with no rails on the sides and no median between the two lanes. Cars roil by going the opposite direction, great oncoming trucks with such mass that just passing them makes Lynn's little wagon rattle.

It's all less meaningful when someone else is driving, though. There's a carelessness that comes naturally with being out of control, as if the outcome of a crash would in some way be mitigated by the innocence implicit in the passenger's seat.

Not that anyone would guilt Lynn for wrapping the car around one of the streetlights right now. Accidents happen all the time. Lori might have blamed him, if she wasn't already checked out.

There's a common delusion in people of a certain background that it is never too late to avoid the worst possible outcome.

No matter how deep the tunnel goes, someone can always turn around. No matter how far in the middle of nowhere you are, there's always a gas station coming up. The world at large is a passive thing, waiting to be carved into the right shape.

Good people deserve good things.

The car slows, bouncing gently as it sways into the lot of a gas station. Lynn pulls up to one of the pumps and stops the car, parking and sitting in silence with his hand on the key.

"I'm sorry," he says, and hesitates. "I'll hurry, I'll be back out in a second."

Cam looks at him like he's said something ridiculous.

"I don't care."

Lynn stands, still holding the keys in the ignition, and Cam stares at him. The more straightforward the response, the more lost he seems to get.

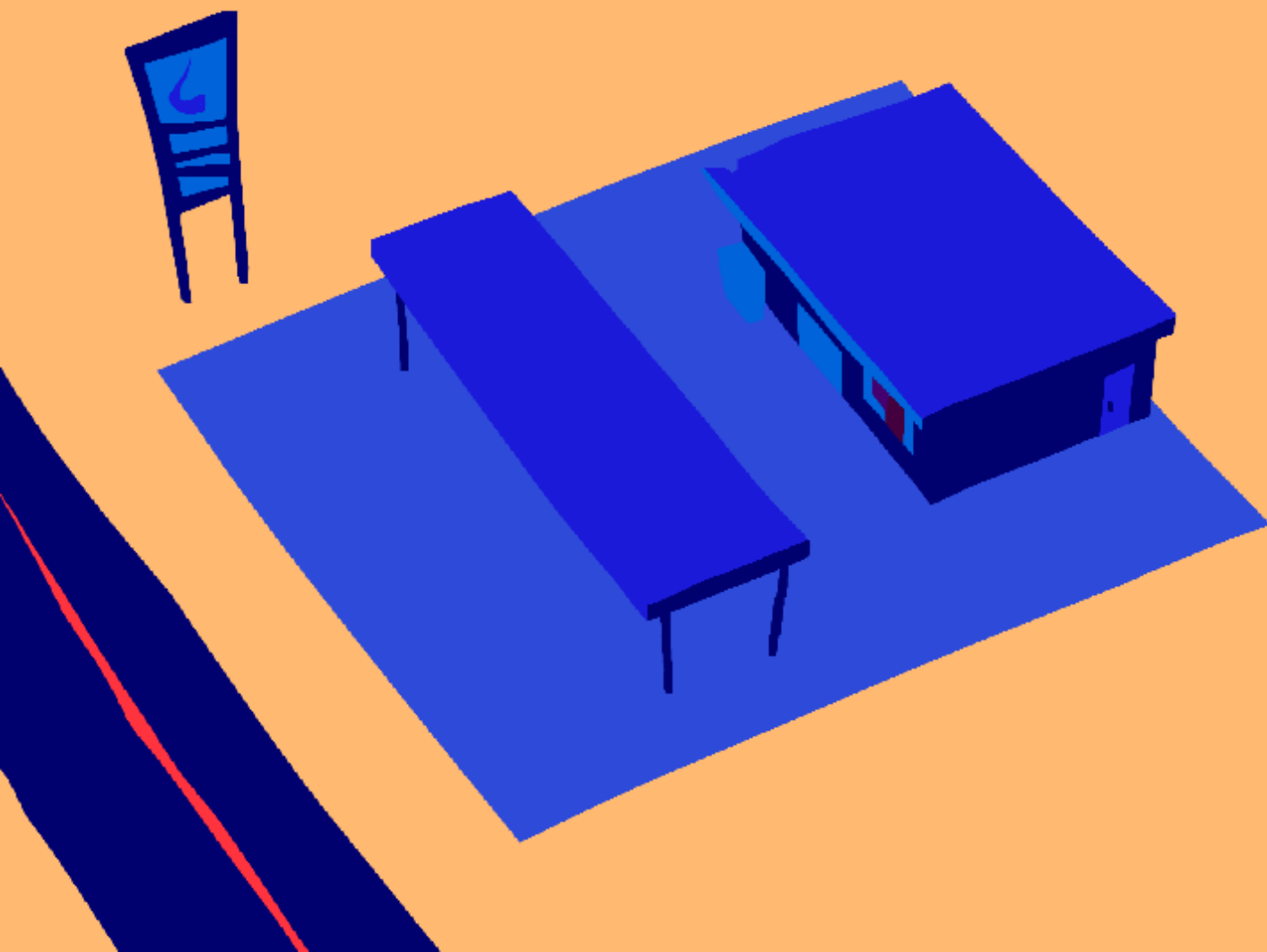
He straightens himself out and closes the car door without saying anything. Cam watches him put his hands into the pockets of his coat on the way into the station.

The door slams shut behind Lynn, its metal frame rattling loud enough that Cam can hear it from inside the car. He stares blankly at the advertisements blanketing the glass panes for a moment before getting out of the car.

It isn't even that cold out.

Whatever vast modification the sky has undergone, the weather seems unaffected.

There's no wind right now, and this year's nights have yet to freeze. The sun has barely set, and it's fine outside even without a jacket. It won't be a long wait, anyway.





They're the only car at the station right now.

By all accounts, the buzzing fluorescent lights should be pointless. The sky has only gotten brighter since the sun has set, and the hazy orange above has faded.

In the few minutes they've been driving, it's paled to an equally disorienting light-gray ghost of itself.

It's still orange, barely, in the same way that bloodless skin retains its color. Pallid and resentful, the brightness feels superimposed.

No light, orange or gray, reflects off the surfaces over which it holds itself.

In this way, though the sky above is almost white, the road remains dark, and the gas station and its surroundings are lit only by the insect-adorned fluorescent lights of its awning.

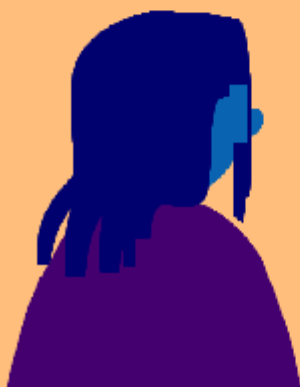


Cam stares across the pavement. There's a wall of trees on the other side of the road, too dense to see past the first few rows.

Everything is still.

He walks to the edge of the lot and stands with his shoes hanging over the abrupt cutoff of the pavement, still staring across the road at the treeline. There aren't even any cars going by.

Just to his side, there's the crunch of gravel and the soft hiss of a lighter.

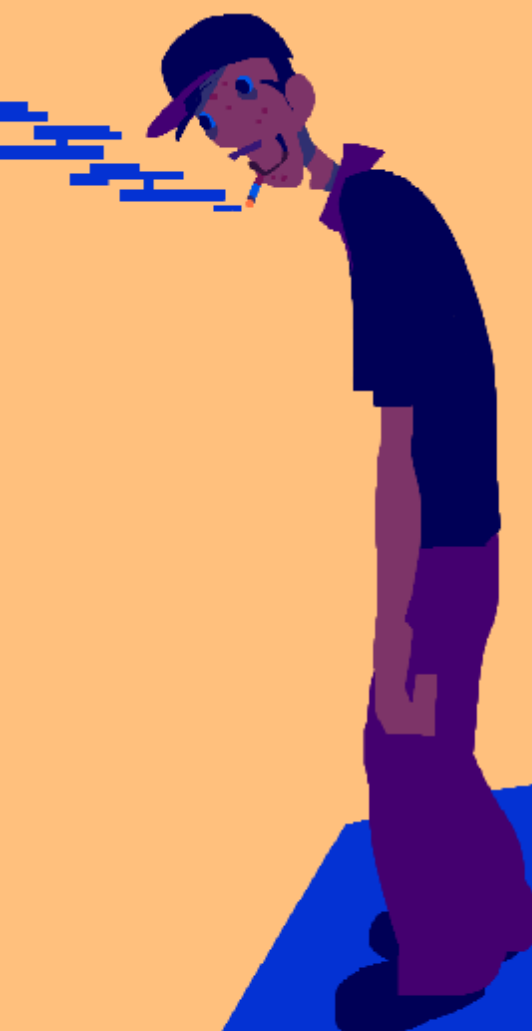


He's taller than Cam, standing not
four feet to the right in a
collared work polo.

His posture is terrible, but he
holds his head upright, looking
straight ahead at the same treeline.

His motions are slouching and
imprecise as he pockets his lighter,
but his eyes are clear.

Cam squints at him critically.



Paying no mind to Cam, he puffs on his
cigarette, holding it in pursed lips with
both hands dangling limply at his sides.

"Weird out lately, huh?" he says.



"I guess," Cam intones flatly. He's still staring at the guy's face, trying to get a read on just how awake he is. "It always gets a little weird out this time of year. Little forest fires and whatever."

"Does it?"

"Yeah. Every year."

The more Cam looks at this guy, the younger he seems. Younger than Lynn, at least. His acne is visible from where Cam is standing.

He's been smoking for a while, though. There's no deliberation in his exhale after he takes a puff of his cigarette, just the casual outward breath of conversation. Smoke tumbles through teeth covered in yellowy plaque as he speaks, unbidden and unnoticed.



"That's crazy. Every year?"
"Are you from Phoenix?"

He snorts, unaffected.
"I'm here," he says.

"We're all here, now.
Doesn't make that much of a difference."

"No. If you were from here, you'd know
how it looks out this time of year."

"It doesn't look like this any
time of the year, anywhere."



Cam doesn't have anything to say to that at first. He stares quietly across the road, flat gaze still boring into the treeline.

"I'm from Tucson anyway," he continues, frowning. "This kind of shit never happens in Tucson."

He hasn't raised his hands to the cigarette since he lit it, holding it between his lips. The ash on the tip is growing.

"Not like there's some strong local culture out here, anyway. Doesn't matter where I'm from. Nothing out here to integrate into."

"I don't think I've heard anything flattering about Tucson."

"Nothing out there either, man. I might as well have always been here. Might as well have crawled out a hole in the ground."



There's tangible condescension in the way he calls Cam man, the kid implicit in audible disdain. It's even a little offensive; whatever gap there is in years between Cam and the attendant, it's certainly not reflected cognitively.


It's hard to get worked up, though. He's smoking at the edge of a gas station lot, probably on his break, making noise about how vapid it is here and where he came from. It would be like getting mad at an insect.

He does seem more together than most people have been, but not by much.

"Sure," Cam says.

A hole in the ground in Tucson.





"Everywhere's the same, nowadays.
People, too. People are the same.
Just a bunch of users, you know?
People use you. Nothing good about it."

A half-inch of ash drops from the end of
his cigarette, and Cam watches some of it
settle on the front of his shirt.

"I had a girlfriend, back in Tucson. Don't think I even
told her I was going before I left. Probably she still
doesn't have any idea what I was thinking at the time.

"But I couldn't stick around, you know, and it
wasn't going to work out with her anyway.

"She was a little younger than me,
you know. Think she's graduating
this year. Probably she thinks I'm
awful, about now. Some user creep.

"You start to feel bad about some things,
when you get older.

"But probably we shouldn't, that's
what I think. People do it all the
time. It's how new people get made!"

He clicks his tongue in mock laughter at himself, shaking his
head and reaching up to take the cigarette out of his mouth.

"You mean you've got a kid back in Tucson?" Cam asks, grinning lopsidedly.

He's always liked talking to strangers,
but recently it's become even more entertaining.

The attendant bows his head and laughs into his own chest.

"I haven't heard a thing about child support yet, tell you that much!"
He says, loudly. He's swaying now. It's as if the conversation is
sapping him of something.

Cam stares with childishly blatant interest.

Back over past the car, he can hear the
loud jangling of the station door.`



"Are you even supposed to be doing this so close to the pumps?"
He asks, and the attendant lurches forward, wheezing.

He nearly doubles over, cigarette held aloft in one hand.

"Hey man," he says without standing up.

"Hey, man. What else am I supposed to do?
I'm right where I need to be, just like everybody else."



Cam doesn't have anything to say in response to that. He watches the attendant stand slumped in place, making no move to rise, one arm in the air. The cigarette is burnt almost down to the filter.

When Cam glances over his shoulder, Lynn is standing at the car, watching him, looking tense. The price on the display screen of the pump ticks up, unwatched.

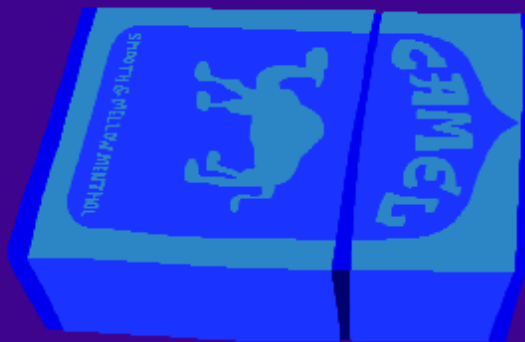
"I have to go," he says.

He knows he's not talking to anyone anymore as he says it.
He's already walking away.

"Something I need to help get cleaned up."



In the car, Lynn sets a box of cigarettes on the console before he starts the engine. Cam stares in silence as Lynn clears his throat.



"I'm sorry. I know this probably seems like an overreaction to you, and I know that you and your father have your own ways of...doing things, out at the house when you're together."

He's rubbing the top of his thigh with his hand, looking up at the roof of the car as he chooses his words.

"But this is scary. And I really think it'll be better if you don't...do this anymore. Fixating on things like this, on...pain, and hurting, it isn't good. Even if it's...even if you're only hurting little things, there's just...there's nothing good about it."

His voice softens to something just above a mumble and he locks eyes with the gas pedal, seemingly unable to look at Cam.



"I know you don't like it, Cam, but you're young. You are. Even if you don't feel like it, what you do and think about now can affect you -"



"I know," Cam cuts in. His voice is flat.

"It's fine, I hear you. I'll stop. Let's go."

He takes the cigarettes off the console and examines them. Lynn watches him, looking vaguely tormented.

"Cam, I'm not trying to..."

Cam waves him off without looking at him.

"Do you smoke these too, or do you just remember what I like?"

Lynn looks injured.

"I quit when I was with Michelle."

"And what, you're still doing weird church shit for her? You're single now, that's great. I wish I was single. You can do whatever you want."

"Well," Lynn says faintly, "I guess I can."

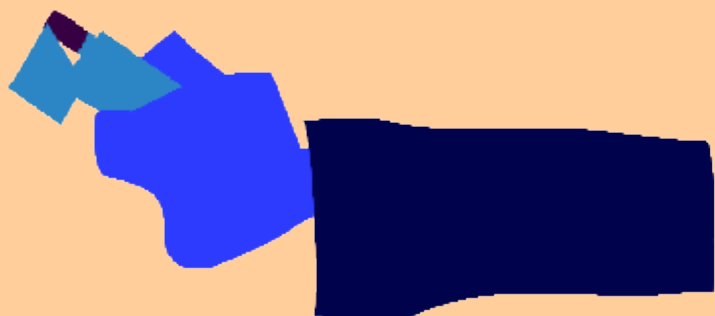
"Right. Heard you talking to Bill about it anyway."

He's unwrapping the box already, crumpling up the plastic and pocketing it as he flips the top open.

"He puts you on speakerphone, sometimes, when Lori's not around. You want one?"

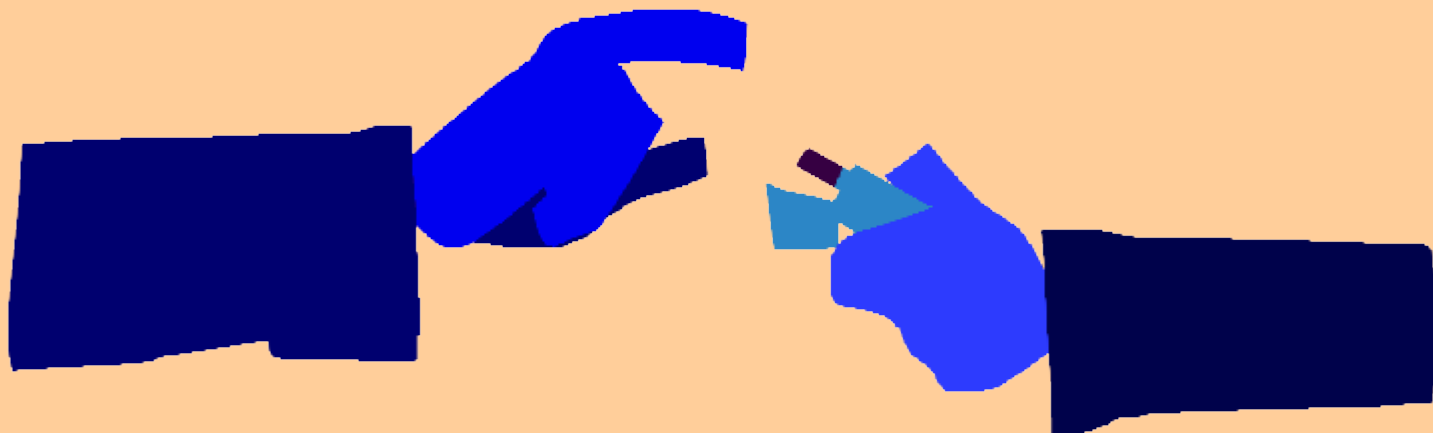


Lynn reaches out to take a cigarette from the package he's extended.



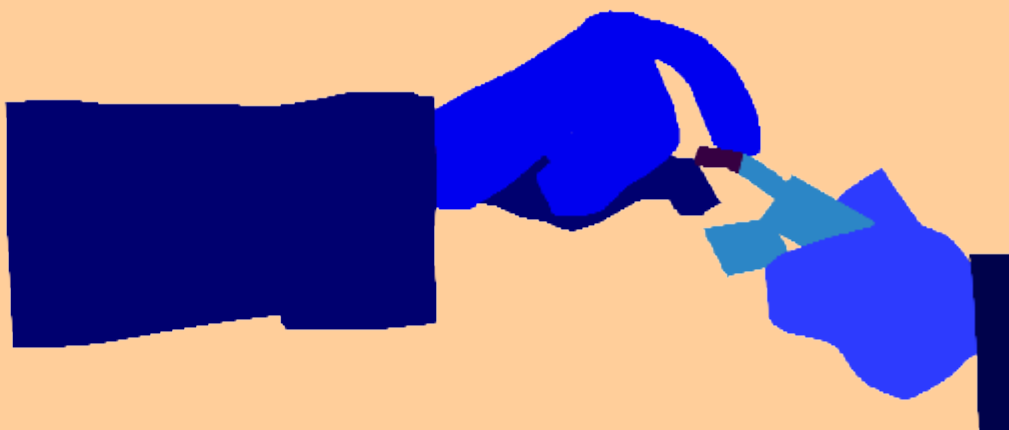
"You should be taking advantage of your situation, anyway. You're not old enough to be moping about not getting married, unless you want to end up like our parents.

Could you imagine getting divorced just to remarry and get stuck with a kid like me? Or you."



He catches a look from Lynn and rolls his eyes.

"Don't look at me like that, I'm serious. You're lucky."



"You're not old enough to talk like that.
It isn't the same as dating in high school."

Lynn speaks softly, cigarette between his lips, gaze fixed straight forward as he starts the car, making to leave the station but stopping before he pulls out onto the main road. He fumbles with something in his jacket pocket.

"How's it different?"

Cam leans over, resting his elbow on the console, and Lynn sighs.

"I don't know. You'll understand when you're my age, I guess. Or maybe you won't. Maybe you've already got it all figured out. Everything feels like life or death while it's happening."



He's lit his cigarette now, and the embers at the tip casts shadows on his face that make him look tired and more authentic than usual.

"Exactly," Cam says dryly, "And nothing matters once it's over, so nobody's got anything to worry about."

He inclines his head towards Lynn casually, cigarette in his teeth. He's postured insistently, but it doesn't show in his face or his voice.

"You got nothing to worry about. It's got nothing to do with age."

Lynn reaches over the console and lights Cam's cigarette.

Cam's eyes are on the fire, and he doesn't look back over at Lynn as he leans back into his seat, taking a drag and stretching comfortably as he exhales.



He makes the whole process seem luxuriant.

Lynn looks away before Cam can make eye contact with him again, rolling down the windows as he pulls out onto the road.

