

Desolation

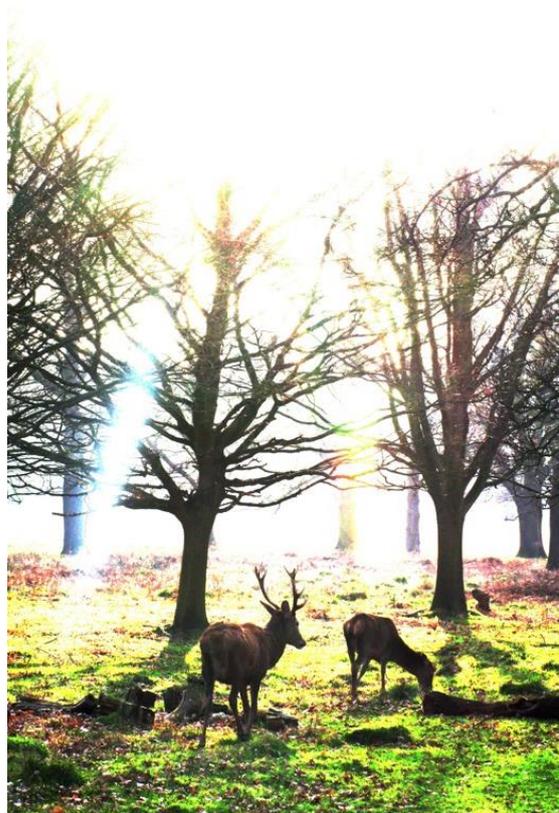
By John Plaski

A jar of pickled eggs stands beside the cash register. Each one of them, twenty-seven in total, stares back at me and my glass of scotch: exactly twenty-seven, not a single massive blind eye missing from this tank of cloudy vinegar. I counted twenty-seven eggs when I first wandered inside Ragtime five nights ago, and it's still twenty-seven eggs tonight.

Newness squirms all around me instead, like a fungus swallowing up a fallen tree. The strings of LED skulls and bats dangling from the rafters are almost a week old at this point, while outlines of hands dressed up as turkeys are taped to the vintage photographs hanging from the backs of every booth: three-weeks-ahead, on top of five-decades-previously.

There's also a dancing Santa Claus doll standing between the cash register and the towering jar of eggs. Joey and Martha, the two bartenders working tonight, awaken him with every ding that accompanies the opening of the drawer; then, whoever comes in from behind with a second deposit shuts him off. It's almost ten o'clock, and I've been half-listening to the fuzz of the Lions game since eight, accompanied by the same five-second loop of sleigh bells suddenly jingling and abruptly stopping.

I've also been half-studying the colouring



pages plastered over the mirrored wall behind the bar. Everyone who enters Ragtime gets a page and a repurposed bucket filled with cheap wax crayons; the pictures themselves are culled from a year's worth of holidays: cackling witches, dancing leprechauns, goofy rabbits handing out chocolate eggs, Uncle Sam in all his finery, and Rudolph leading an entire troop of reindeer.

My first picture, from Monday, was Frankenstein's monster rising from its slab while

Tuesday was a jolly Pilgrims-and-Indians mixer. Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday leaned closer to winter, while tonight's is the most baffling yet: a ten-point buck and its doe standing atop a rocky crag with scraggly birch trees clustered around its base. I frowned at Joey, and he shrugged and said that some people get excited about hunting season. And if I wasn't that kind of person, he could swap my picture for a baby in a New Year's Eve sash or a pile of lacy valentines.

I wordlessly accepted my portrait of venison-in-the-making, a washed-out bin of chicken livers filled with Crayola crayons, and my glass of scotch: two of these three things have sat on the bar, untouched, since I arrived at eight. In the meantime, my reflection in the mirror has been steadily shrinking since Monday night, swallowed up by the same dozen portraits in a thousand different colour combinations. Some of them have signatures, others go up without crediting the artist, and I scan every one every night, hoping that Molly's scrawl will hit me like a mountain rocketing through a board-flat horizon. She'd never come back here, but I keep looking, hoping that I just missed her.

The bell above the front door dings once. Several seconds pass before a dull chill curls around the legs of my barstool. And when it refuses to leave, I twist my head around, wondering what kind of idiot is keeping the door open.

There's the jukebox, aglow but silent, on the left side of the entryway, and an MIA flag draped

over the window on the right. (Veterans Day is next Saturday, to add on to all the other holidays stuffed inside Ragtime right now.) And standing in between them is this young guy with his right hand fastened to the doorknob. He's taller than me, dressed in athletic shorts and a light grey t-shirt. I'm about to turn back to my drink, snorting at this kid's outfit for this late in the year, when he takes a second step inside the bar and the jukebox's glow washes over him.

He's bleeding a lot. Or he was, and only stopped a short time ago. Three long streaks of black, like the roots of a mangrove tree, rise from the collar of his shirt to the underside of his chin. Then, they splinter into a dozen trails running up and over his lips and cheeks. His right earlobe is a fat, dangling scab while thick, rusty cakes crowd under both of his eyes.

He scans the booths and tables before finding my gaze, and his widened stare sends a corkscrew flying through my stomach: no twisting, all force. I half-expected cavernous, clotted holes, but his eyes are dry and clean instead, the irises a soft, crumbly brown.

Nobody else seems to see him as his right hand slowly peels away from the doorknob. Ragtime is resealed with another ding, but it barely breaks through the cloud of conversation swirling around us. Even the air is alive with movement: skulls and bats twinkle in the shadows tucked beneath the rafters as tables full of drunks sway in time with their chattering. Linebackers charge on the television screens

Then, on the other side of a sea of scribbles, this young guy sits in profile. There's a shaved head starting to come up with bristles and a round face slathered in crust. His eyes shoot straight through me as I focus on his right ear: the lobe houses two ragged holes in its centre.

overhead while Joey and Martha dash back and forth behind the bar like pistons pumping inside an engine block.

Now add two pools of silence at opposite ends of the room. Or one bottomless pool standing by the door and a puddle perched beside the bar, the latter quickly evaporating under this maniac's gaze.

He jerks toward me, his face caked with ink, tar, char, dried blood, or God knows what else, and I have to decide if I'm going to stand my ground and face him or turn, drop my head, and hope that he walks past and doesn't send a fist into my right kidney or the back of my skull.

I choose the latter, huddle up, and brace myself for impact. Five seconds pass as I hold my breath, and no blows rain down upon me. Instead, the stool to my right pulls away with a long, dull groan. There's the sound of soles hooking into its rungs, then silence.

And not wanting to look up at the quiet looming beside me, just as they say to never lock eyes with a gorilla, I study my tumbler instead. I've been staring at it for the past five nights, but it's never held my attention quite like this. Then my eyes travel towards my left hand, inspecting

my thumb and the web of skin between it and my index finger as they press against the cold, kaleidoscopic glass; I never realized that specks of light from the jukebox make it all the way over here. Meanwhile, my right hand is tucked inside my left armpit, my forearm braced against my chest with my elbow ready to fly at any moment. I tip one side of my tumbler off the surface of the bar, testing its weight and percussive capabilities as quiet roars from the stool to my right.

I figure I can't hold my breath forever, so I slowly lift my chin and try to find myself in the silvered mirror tucked behind the bottles: short and stocky, head topped with long yellowed locks combed behind my ears, and a moustache the same shade as my eyebrows.

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I clear my throat and rub the side of my nose as my stomach does a backflip.

"I'm, uh, trying to have a drink here," I say, a notch above my usual volume.

I sneak another glance to my right, and my neighbour's gaze has all the force of a diamond-tipped grinder as the channels closest to his nose, starting at the corners of his eyes and flowing to the top of his upper lip, glisten in the glow surrounding us.

My right hand leaves the comfort of my armpit and lands on my untouched colouring page. I weld my wrist to the top of the bar and only raise and lower my index finger, trying to hide my shakes as best I can as I tap the top of the buck's head, dead centre between his antlers.

“*And* you're blocking my light . . .”

My voice gives out as I glance at him a third time, finding smooth brown eyes and a face slashed from brows to collarbone with black rivers. My throat tingles at the sight of his right ear dangling in three separate pieces.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I'm just a little rattled, I think . . .”

I expect the slurring of someone who's been concussed, or for more blood to come pouring out of his mouth, but this guy's voice is light and crisp instead.

“Can I have something to drink?”

I point to my scotch, and he shakes his head. I order a glass of water from Joey as he rushes past, and as he busies himself with it, not even looking at this new guy beside us, I turn back to my drinking partner. He's sitting regularly enough, one forearm planted on top of the bar with the other braced against his knee, but he radiates strange energy. As if he crashed through

the ceiling, heavy as a meteorite, but the slightest touch would shatter him into a cloud of dust, never to be collected again.

The glass of water lands beside him, and he blindly grabs for it and takes small, quiet sips until two-thirds of it is gone. Then, setting his drink to the side, his eyes find the colouring page lying between us: two deer crowning a jagged cliffside.

“You need some help with this?” he asks.

“It's *all yours*, buddy.”

I push the bucket of crayons towards him, and his eyes follow my wrist all the way up to my profile. I cough once and tuck my hand back inside my armpit. The tumbler is still within reach, just in case, as I inspect his black-splattered shoulders and lean, muscular legs.

“It's been a while since I've coloured something . . .”

As he mumbles this, he reaches inside the bin and pulls out an orange crayon, warm as a long summer sunset. Then, with quick, forceful strokes, my neighbour starts filling in the buck. I snort once and look away.

“What's so funny?”

I stop, surprised that he could hear me. I shuffle my shoulders and clear my throat again.

“You're colouring the buck orange,” I say.

“Yeah?”

His eyes blaze through the paper as his hand sweeps back and forth across its surface; the words falling from his mouth sound like they're being dispensed by a machine.

“It's funny because, when you go hunting, you

wear orange so that the other hunters don't shoot you," I explain. "Deer are colourblind, so they don't see the orange."

I pull my hand away from my chest and drop a finger on top of the buck's antlers.

"This guy could walk through the woods all day, and *nobody* would shoot at him."

"Huh..."

Already finished with the orange, my neighbour chooses a second crayon for the doe. It's a brilliant dollhouse pink, and I snicker again as I watch the second deer begin to glow beside its mate. It's the first time I've laughed in five days, as far as I can remember.

"And you know how pink helps the doe?"

"How?"

I watch the streaks of colour, realizing that this is my first joke in as many days as well.

"Everybody would see the orange buck in front and think it's a hunter. Then they would see this pink thing walking behind him and think he dragged his wife along for the weekend."

I laugh, expelling more air than noise, and my neighbour slowly cracks a smile as he drops both crayons inside the bin.

"Would you shoot an orange deer?" he says. "Or a pink one?"

"Neither. People would probably think I spray-painted them or something."

"True."

The rest of the water is gulped down, and the glass lands on the countertop with a clunk.

"Do you want to hear something kind of

crazy?" my neighbour says.

I turn and lean my weight against the bar, netting my fingers together. An icy knot tightens inside my stomach, right beside the first coil from Monday afternoon: Molly asked me a question that turned me into an iceberg, and I'm still sitting and smoking five days later, inspecting the black marks all over my partner's face. They could be fresh ink, barely dried in places.

"How crazy?"

"Only a little."

We start with introductions: Pablo and Chuck. Pablo does utility work for the county, and I manage the groundskeeping for three different churches in town: two Catholic, one Lutheran. He asks me if hopping around causes any problems, and I can't tell if Pablo's joking or not, so I just say that I've never stepped inside any of these churches, making a divine lightning strike possible but unlikely.

Colouring the topmost boulder a queasy shade of lilac, Pablo glances at me and says that he hasn't been to church in a couple years. He's young, and his parents are letting him "figure things out" before he settles down and resumes the standard procedure of attending services. (Preferably with a wife and kids in tow.) I nod along silently as he talks about a church that's right down the road from Ragtime. There's an apartment building one block over, and that's where Pablo was earlier tonight.

His partner used to live there. Emil was a couple years older than Pablo, taller and skinnier

too. He did coding from home, and they met at a coffee shop near the city centre about nine months ago.

“Did you two have a fight?” I ask.

I study the black crust slithering down Pablo’s cheek as the lilac inside the topmost boulder escapes its borders only slightly. Next is scrambled-egg yellow for the blank sky behind the rocks and trees; half the sky goes bright and waxy before I realize that Pablo won’t answer my question as is.

“You look pretty beat up,” I add, noticing a rusty trail pouring out of his left ear.

Pablo nods mechanically, still filling in the sky. He says the two of them used to hold a mini-anniversary on the day they met, the twenty-eighth of every month. They loved driving together too: Emil handled the roads while Pablo managed directions, snacks, and photo opportunities. They had just finished two weeks in the Porcupine Mountains when one of Pablo’s friends texted him earlier tonight.

Nine months of honeymooning isn’t exactly the ancient past, but this sudden jump from long ago to the past twenty-four hours pins a lump inside my throat. I finish my scotch and set the glass in front of me; I’ve been staring at it for five nights and never realized how much of Ragtime can fit between its rim and base until now. Meanwhile, Pablo finishes the overcooked sky: last to be filled in are the bottommost stones and the scraggly trees pointing towards the summit.

“What did they say?”

“It was a screenshot of Emil’s Instagram . . .”

Besides one lilac stone on top, the rest of the boulders will be sky-blue.

“It was a post he had made yesterday. It was a photo of Emil and this other guy standing out in the woods, both wearing hiking gear. Both of them were smiling, and Emil had his arm around his shoulder.”

The boulders, filled in record time, look like a massive pile of cotton candy while the trunks and branches turn scarlet, as if the forest floor is soaked in blood. And as this redness seeps upward, Pablo’s voice drips with sharpened steel.

“The post said, “Thinking back to last summer with you, Theo. Miss you, mi dulce.””

Our little pocket of two stools, two glasses, and one sheet of paper falls silent. Even the scratching of the crayons has stopped, now that the trees are bathed beyond help.

“That looks pretty bad for Emil . . .”

“I thought it had to be something else. Or that it was *someone* else. Like, my friend was wrong or just seeing things. But it was *definitely* Emil from last year. And I looked up Theo, and he was a barista at the coffee shop we had met at nine months ago . . .”

Seeing this screenshot, Pablo left his place around nine o’clock. He wasn’t sure what to do first: it was only when he pulled up to the coffee shop that he realized it was after hours and no one would be inside. In the meantime, he kept texting Emil, asking if they could meet up and talk, but Emil was silent. Pablo wanted to say

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everything all at once, but he also wanted to break the news only when they were face-to-face: there wasn't any time for three little dots endlessly pulsing in a row.

Finally, after ten minutes of idling beside the curb, Pablo drove to Emil's apartment. The streets were packed, so he parked several blocks away and jogged to the front entrance. Dressed in only a t-shirt and shorts, he hadn't bothered changing clothes as he rushed out into the night, the cold barely registering as it clung to his arms and legs.

One of the doors was propped open with a cinderblock, and the lobby was wide and silent; the only noise ringing throughout both wings of the building was Pablo hurrying up two flights of concrete stairs and down the west wing's carpeted hallway. Emil's door, third from the end of the corridor, was marked 327.

Pablo sent two more texts, saying that he was outside and wanted to talk, but there was still no response from Emil. He then hammered on the apartment door: no pauses, no calling out, just a steady stream of blows that rippled along the walls and down the stairwell he came from.

Eventually, buried beneath the din, Pablo heard the door unlock. It leapt back an inch, held

in place by the security chain, and there was a sliver of Emil's face tucked inside the gap: long, thin, and pale with fury.

"What the *hell* are you doing here?" he hissed.

"We need to talk."

"So come back in the morning."

Emil scanned the empty hallway on either side of Pablo.

"You're going to get me in trouble with all this noise—"

Pablo slammed his foot against Emil's front door, directly to the left of the deadbolt. The chain, still in its track, tore away from the frame in a plume of sawdust as the slab of wood slammed against Emil's shoulder.

He stumbled backwards, legs flailing, and collided with the corner of the wall behind him. The apartment door hovered halfway open, and Pablo slammed it shut behind him; the freed chain clacked uselessly against every surface it could reach, sounding like a windchime gone berserk.

"What the *fuck*, Pablo . . ." Emil groaned, climbing to his feet.

"*Who's Theo?*"

Emil looked up from rubbing his shoulder, and his stare was cold and distant, as if he had

travelled immeasurable miles to reach this moment, like an asteroid twinkling across the night sky.

“He’s just a friend.”

“You two seem pretty close for a couple of friends.”

Emil straightened up with a scowl and shuffled deeper inside his apartment; Pablo followed close behind him, too hot to speak, as Emil stopped somewhere in the centre of the living room, his back to the window while his face was turned toward the television hanging on the wall. Pablo hovered to the right of the screen, his arms folded across his chest.

“We go *way* back,” Emil sighed. “Before you and me.”

“It sounds like you two are still a thing.”

“You just read it the wrong way—”

Pablo tore himself from the wall, and Emil straightened up even further. The icy look on his face didn’t soften; instead, a stiffness rapidly seeped into his neck and shoulders, as if he were readying himself for a punch.

“I thought it was you and me, Emil,” Pablo whispered, halting after one step.

“It *is*.”

“So what about Theo?”

“If me sending stuff to my friends freaks you out this much,” Emil said sharply, “you should’ve told me sooner. We didn’t discuss you acting like this—”

“We’re discussing this *now*, Emil!”

“And *I* don’t want to talk to you while you’re

acting like this.”

“So when’s a good time?” Pablo growled

He brandished his last word like a knife, and Emil didn’t respond right away; his hands were gathered in front of his waist, slowly spinning a silver ring on his fourth finger as he stared at what was playing on the television.

“Tomorrow,” he finally said. “And you’ve got to promise me that you’ll act civil.”

“And *you’ve* got to promise me that you’ll tell me the truth.”

“You first.”

Pablo suddenly stops his story, as if the tape inside of him has run out. Half of the bar is empty now, and three finished colouring pages lie between us: two orange-and-pink deer, a quartet of blue-and-purple pumpkins, and a cornucopia not from this world. I look up from this multi-coloured chaos and try to peer past the dark stripes lining Pablo’s face.

“What’d you do next?” I ask.

Pablo stares at one of his fists as it lies in his lap; the other is firmly glued to the top of the bar, weighing down his latest drawing.

“I moved towards him,” Pablo whispers, “and he disappeared.”

The televisions are turned low, and Joey and Martha are silently moving amongst the emptied tables and booths, collecting glasses, mats, and balled-up napkins.

“What do you mean?”

“He was standing there one second, and then he was gone the next.”

And back inside Emil's apartment, a moment of stillness followed his vanishing: whether it was real, or a trick of the eyes, Pablo saw his partner's outline stamped on top of the couch and the corner of the window before everything burst.

A wave of pressure like a huge steel fist grabbed Pablo by the front of his shirt and threw him into the centre of the room. One huge blow ramming against his diaphragm forced all the air from his lungs as a gristly snap echoed inside his skull.

The couch juttred forward a foot as he stumbled, the window pinged and shattered inward, and the television hanging on the wall slipped off its mounting and slammed against the floor. The lamp in the corner and smashed to pieces, its bulb exploding and throwing all this sudden movement into darkness at the exact moment it started.

Pablo quickly righted himself. The whole world went blind and silent except for a scorched ringing pressing against him. He felt wetness trickling over his lips and down his neck, and the hand he ran across his face came back thick and red; both ears felt like they were stuffed with burning cotton as his eyes sizzled inside their lids. A stabbing pain made him reach for his right ear, and most of the lobe was missing, in addition to the two diamond studs bolted inside.

And with the only light coming from the busted television lying facedown on the floor, Pablo stood in the darkness and waited for Emil to come back. But, when he didn't, Pablo

checked all the rooms and left, closing the apartment door behind him as blood poured out of him like a fountain. The chain beating against the wood didn't register, nor the slamming of the glass door in the lobby. And it was only after a block of walking, the cold finally appearing and clinging to the front of him, did he start hearing the rustling of branches overhead and the whistling of the wind down the empty street. A sign at the corner read "Ragtime," and that seemed like a good place to stop.

"And *that's* when you came in?" I ask.

"Yeah."

Now the bar is only a quarter-full: Joey wipes down glasses and watches the post-game interviews dangling above the bar.

"You were right," I say with a low whistle. "That *was* a crazy story . . ."

"I told you."

Pablo signs each of his three drawings with a flash of black.

"So what do you think happened?"

"To Emil?"

"Yeah."

Pablo drops his crayons inside the bucket and spreads all three drawings in front of us: two deer, four pumpkins, and the overflowing cornucopia. The colours, all garish, all wrong, remind me of pages torn from a *National Geographic* from an alternate dimension.

"I think he teleported."

Pablo speaks plainly with these pictures spread in front of us, like he's telling me the story

of which colouring books they came from and how much they cost. I glance at Pablo, and his face is a storm swirling behind dark curtains.

“You think so?” I ask, trying to sound anything other than sceptical.

“You take something out of a room really quick, and you’re left with a big hole to fill. And *all* the air and stuff rushes towards the centre.”

“Makes sense. ‘Nature hates a vacuum.’”

“It’s only a theory.”

“And it’s the best theory we’ve got right now.”

Pablo’s eyes dart across all three drawings while mine are glued to his profile.

“What about your studs?”

Pablo furrows his brow. His thoughts could be right beside me, or light-years away.

“Emil probably wanted them back. They cost him a lot.”

I swallow heavily as Pablo takes the candy-coloured mountain and slides it towards me.

“I think you should have *this* one,” he says.

“Why?”

“You could put it on your fridge.”

I snort once and push the page back towards Pablo, its trees hotter than dying stars.

“I don’t need a reminder when it comes to *that* story.”

I firmly tap the buck’s head, squarely between his orange antlers.

“*You* can keep all of them. You’ve had a rougher night than me.”

Pablo stares at all three pictures again, his

brow slowly relaxing.

“I don’t want them either,” he says.

“Then give them to Joey. He can put them up behind the bar.”

“And then they’ll be here, staring us in the face every time we come in . . .”

Pablo rests his cheek in his hand as his voice trails off. I finally see the blood poured inside the lines of his fingers and tucked underneath his nails.

“They’ll only be up for a couple days,” I explain. “And by the time Thanksgiving rolls around, there’ll be a whole bunch of Valentine’s Day pictures covering them up.”

I smile as I say this, and Pablo follows along with his own half-hearted snort.

“Will *you* still be here for Thanksgiving?” he asks.

“Who knows?”

Pablo turns his head upon his fist, studying me closely as I climb off my stool.

“I should pay you back for the drink,” he says softly, “but I went out without my wallet.”

“It’s alright, Pablo,” I say with a quick wave of my hand. “All you had was water.”

I push in my stool, and it hits the edge of the bar with a hefty clunk.

“And I never asked why you were here tonight.”

“Don’t worry about it! You had your own story to tell. Full of misery and woe.”

“That doesn’t mean you don’t have one either.”

Gripping the back of my stool, I stare at Pablo staring at me from behind his own clenched hand. His eyes shine bright and big atop the mangrove roots trailing down his cheeks and chin. Physically, he's unchanged from when he first came in, but now there's more space behind his eyes: they've been emptied of one story and wait for another to come inside, even if old bits still cling to the walls of the sockets and the undersides of the lids.

I clear my throat and smooth my moustache with my free hand.

"Come back tomorrow, and I'll tell you the *whole thing* . . ."

I try out a grin, and it's coated with a little less rust than my usual expression this week. "And maybe *you'll* have a happier story too?" I add.

I stare at Pablo as he inspects me closely, scraping at the blood daubed on the side of his nose. It's been five years since I've flirted with a stranger that wasn't Molly, and seven years since it was someone who plays on the same team as me. My heart is beating much faster than expected, so either I'm unused to the exercise, or I should've had less scotch tonight. (Or maybe I

should've had more?)

"I guess I'll work on it tonight," Pablo says with a grin of his own.

"Same here," I chuckle. "I'll be up *all night* putting my notecards in order . . ."

Pablo watches me stand and sway, and the seconds tick by, aching slow.

"Can you improvise?" he says, nudging my stool aside with his foot.

I stare down at my vacated seat, then all around me. Martha sweeps while Joey watches the post-game stats, his neck craning towards uniforms two time zones away.

"I *can*, but it won't be pretty," I say softly.

I climb back onto my high chair as Pablo laughs and pats me on the back; I feel his palm grate against my denim jacket, each of his fingers finding and following the curve of my shoulder blade.

"Don't worry, Chuck," he says.

The pressure lingers long after his hand leaves, and my eyes cling to his smile as it shines behind bars sculpted from dried blood.

"You only have to impress me."