

Tenderloin Meat Company

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So the meat truck ain't got no kick to it, I'm screamin *hurry hurry hurry* while Burgin stuffs a napkin up his nose to stop the bleeding. The Chinese guy ain't runnin after us in the rearview no more but I'm still a little shit-between-the-ears on account of the keyboard cleaner and my heart's like a jackhammer on cement over the past not-even sixty seconds. Burgin says we're good long as we make straight for the Bay Bridge. I ain't so optimistic--the sign says *TENDERLOIN MEAT COMPANY* all big and obvious on the box freezer takin up the truck bed, I got the pedal on the floor and we're barely pushin forty-five, the brakes are so jerky it's makin Burgin carsick, and the steerin wheel pulls left like the truck's got a curse draggin us into oncoming traffic.

I pull off Geary and head down Anza. Burgin thinks all the stop signs are good, *what cop's gonna wanna drive through this stop-and-go?* he says and it makes sense. I venture we're gamblin with seconds not minutes though so I pull up alongside any pedestrians walkin east on Anza and holler: *Hey! All the meat we got in the back of this truck for five hundred bucks!* and first they're startled, then they look at the *TENDERLOIN MEAT COMPANY* logo and the bloody napkin stickin out Burgin's nose, and say no, under no circumstances will they buy our meat.

Burgin hollers when I don't turn down Oak towards the bridge, he's actin goofy, dabbin at his gums with a thumb that comes back bloody. He got popped good--Chinese dude in overalls

sprinted across the lot, tossed a right jab through the open passenger window like *bam*, and now Burgin's nose has a lump in the middle like a witch and it whistles when he breathes. I ask for the keyboard cleanin spray in my backpack and he looks at me all groggy and tells me we're all out, and I'm all we're out? and Burgin's like *you're drivin!* and I can't believe how quick the Dust Off went, I say we're really out? and he's all *we're fuckin out man!* I screech through a red light at Haight and Stanyan into the McDonald's parking lot, all kinds of shiftin and thumpin in back, and Burgin yells *the meats man!*

I know I'll catch hell but I park the truck and say we ought to ditch the truck. Burgin looks at me funny and asks if I'm crazy, a helluva question comin out of his broken-ass face--he says we can be in the East Bay in less than an hour, ditch the truck near the Acorn projects, make out like the Christopher Columbuses of gettin high and be so high for days. Burgin's fiend daydreams are makin him stupid and he's talkin with this strange slur on account of the busted beak. While he's speakin I notice a meter maid on the far side of the parking lot givin us shitty-eye, a big black kid with a little white helmet squeezed over his head, eatin a Big Mac all huddled up in his metermobile. I motion towards the little cart and say it's one of them get the hell out of Dodge while we're ahead scenarios. *Ain't it a Ford?* he says glancin at the emblem on the steering wheel and he's shaky on his feet as he climbs out of the truck. It's as he's standin there leanin on the hood for support that the meter maid crawls out of his cart and peerin hard our direction starts walkin across the lot towards the meat truck, dabbin at his mouth with a golden-arched napkin.

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I gotta help Burgin from fallin over into the gutter, I got an arm around him leadin him down Waller towards safety like brothers in combat, we almost run into a tattooed cat on a bike as we're crossin Cole, the kid just about eats shit and yells somethin at our backs. I got the backpack and Burgin has the Jack In the Box, blood is seepin through the napkins in his nose and runnin down his chin. I don't think the meter maid's chasin us but those metermobiles are sneaky bastards. *We just let it get away from us*, Burgin yells, *you know how much mileage we coulda got outta that thing?* and I'm thinkin he means mileage like on a map, like we could go on a road trip around America in the meat truck, and I think are you crazy? CHP would be on our asses before state lines, but then I realize he means mileage in the, uh, *metaphorical?* sense, and I'm like yeah we coulda gotten a damn lot of miles out of that thing for sure.

Burgin's got a ladyfriend whose house we can hide out in on Broderick, he's talkin it up like it's the promised land of junk and secrecy. I'm surprised but not all that surprised really when he leads me to the front steps of Doreen's house. *You know her?* Burgin asks as I help him up the steps and I say yeah kinda. Redhead bird some people call Red, the kinda chick who'll land you in a cell or a grave, though I don't tell him that part. Last anybody's heard she'd gone to jail for punchin a MUNI driver, which they got signs about right there above the driver's seat, maximum penalty of the law and whatnot. It's been a couple weeks since anyone heard from her but Burgin's got the key to her pad, problem is there's probably like forty other ex-boyfriends got keys too, and even though it's a chill place to hide out and score most times, motherfuckers get territorial.

This cat Enzo is on the couch in nothin but boxer shorts smokin cigarettes watchin Maury Povich. He don't seem all that surprised to have visitors, except when he sees Burgin's face beat to lunch meat he jumps up like *whoah*. He's like a god damn nurse, wettin a t-shirt in the sink and holdin it to Burgin's nose. They sit on the couch while Enzo smothers Burgin's face with the shirt like he's tryin to choke him out, Burgin's like *careful with the pinchin man, it hurts!* and they sit watchin Maury Povich like nothin's wrong except Burgin's about to pass out. I'm like damn bro you missed your calling, shoulda been a doctor, and Enzo's like *I know right*. You coulda wrote some killer prescriptions, I say, and he grins yellow teeth at me and says *I know right*.

Enzo seems like Doreen's current manfriend but he don't know where the hell she is neither and he's not sure how long we got in this apartment before Doreen gets the boot and him with her. Landlord posted a sign on the door that Enzo crumpled up and used as toilet paper without even readin it so it's anybody's guess. He says Doreen's sister came knockin on the door a couple days before and he'd hid behind the couch to keep from bein seen. Enzo ain't holdin but he's got some vodka. He ain't exactly bein generous though--he's pissed we're out of keyboard cleaner.

Enzo used to be one of them cats painted silver movin like a robot down in Fisherman's Wharf, but he stopped 'cause he thought the silver paint was seepin into his skin and givin him cancer and maybe even fightin for control of his brain, but mostly I think he just don't wanna pay for silver body paint no more. He freaks me out and I know Burgin and him had a little beef in the past but they seem cool now. That could change at a moment's notice though 'cause Enzo's crazy, like a legit psychopathic lunatic.

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Not knowin the whole story you might think Burgin's my best friend or my sidekick or whatever but I've only known him like two months? and I only know him 'cause one time he was holdin and we was in the back of the 49-Van Ness. We both got off at Eddy, and I ended up crashin with him in some S.R.O. on Leavenworth he was staying at, for a couple weeks til he got kicked out for tryin to steal a laptop from his neighbor's room. That was two days ago and Burgin don't know what the fuck he's gonna do and that's maybe why he went a little too crazy slammin the keyboard cleaner. I'd walked with him to Geary just expectin to get some Jack In the Box and maybe score some dope in Golden Gate Park but then he pulled out the Dust Off and crouched in the doorway of a church and took a good rip then handed me the canister makin weird faces sayin *sweet christ god damn*. I took a hit and my head was like *womp-womp-womp* and time didn't exist no more. Next thing I knew we was trippin past the gas station a couple extraterrestrial motherfuckers. Burgin spotted the Chinese dude goin in the bathroom leavin the engine runnin on his meat truck. I turned around and Burgin was runnin, like *hurry motherfucker, you drive!* and now here we was with a red hot felony on our hands and maybe a little frozen meat to show for it.

But this guy ain't my best friend. I can't tell you one thing about his past or nothin, except he's from Mendocino County and he's got scars all over his back from bein a boy. He said somethin once about a kid he's got named Caroline, but he was high on crystal at the time and didn't elaborate and I didn't ask him to. One thing you learn, don't trust none of these people

with your shit or they'll run wild on you and drive you crazy and steal your shit and break your heart open like an egg. I ain't got a best friend.

But it's some real small world shit when he's got the key to Doreen's apartment 'cause I got one too somewhere in a pocket in my backpack. Mine don't work no more though, that lock changed months ago. I hold onto keys for some reason even if they're useless 'cause maybe someday it'll fit another lock on accident and I'll be glad I held onto it. You know what I mean?

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In explainin Burgin's busted nose I mention the meat truck and the mountain of sirloins just sittin in the back of the truck festerin, and Enzo looks at me like *is you crazy white man you left behind a perfectly good truck of meat?* and I feel ashamed all a sudden, like I blew somethin good, like life dropped somethin right in my glove but I can't never catch it of course. Enzo says he could offload the truck quick, he knows some cats in Bayview who *for sure* could use a fuck load of meat and would pay top dollar no questions asked and we'd be high like so high like right now. He's got me so I forget myself, I say well hell it might still be there, it's just a few blocks away, let's go be somebody, and I show him the keys with the *TENDERLOIN MEAT COMPANY* keyring. Enzo throws on some clothes like *oh hell yeah my man let's go get that meat*. Burgin's snorin on the couch. His pinky finger's twitchin with his heartbeat and the wet shirt over his nose moves with his breath and one eye open's a sliver, and I'm worried he might be, what is it--*concussed?* not to mention he's been fiendin a day and a half and it's gonna be bad if he don't figure somethin out soon. *Leave him*, Enzo says, *us two will go see about that truck*,

and the way he says it I understand. We finish Enzo's vodka real quick and quiet and leave Burgin on Doreen's couch with Maury Povich playin loud.

Enzo only walks on the shady side of the street, he calls it *tree cover*, to block the Google satellites from takin his picture. I follow him down Page squintin up at the sky for UFOs. Accordin to Enzo Google's workin with the CIA to monitor the streets of America with a supercomputer in some compound under a mountain in Colorado, they got eighty percent of the world mapped in real time and they could be watchin us at any moment. *The world's a board game to them niggas*, he says, *one big game of Risk*, and I remember why I don't roll with Enzo on the regular. He's talkin about Google and the U.S. government and somethin bout all them billionaire white men bein brothers in secret societies and eventually I got to tune him out, I got my eyes on the sidewalk. I find a cigarette butt with red lipstick smudged on the filter and light it up, my nerves are straight fried and I'm tryin not to lose my cool but the adrenaline's worn off from the heist and I gotta score soon or exceptin my nose I'm no better off than Burgin. I ask Enzo how Doreen's doin these days. *Red? She fuckin bad, man, she in jail! What you think!* and I realize neither of us wanna talk about her so I don't say another word all the way to Cole Street.

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The day I met Doreen she was so strung out she could hardly talk but I got one look at her and was like, now there's somethin--sexy dirty red hair cropped just below her ears, wearin big aviator glasses, a bird tattooed on her forearm she said was an eagle but to me looked more like a vulture. I was hopin she was holdin, which she wasn't ended up, but I had a pint of Royal

Gate in my jacket so I was her best manfriend on the block. We sat on the hill drinkin and smokin butts we found in the grass, and watched people play fetch with their Labradoodle-doo's or whatever. It was a hot day, hot as tits, but it musta been a weekday 'cause there wasn't many kids out. Doreen passed out with her hand on my side and I fell asleep with my arm around her shoulder kinda cradlin her, the shade was nice and the grass was soft. If she'd been holdin it woulda been a whole other story but it was nice besides.

When I woke up the park had filled up with people and Doreen was sittin a few feet away talkin to a group of college kids with a buncha bikes tumbled over in the grass, the girls was playin with hula hoops as their boyfriends snuck hits off a weed pipe. Doreen musta got a hit or two in cause she was talkin to these kids a mile a minute about nothin that made sense, tryin to get at more of their weed and maybe some beer. Doreen was persistent you could say, the group of kids fell silent as she kept on talkin til finally the kids packed up their things and rode away on their bikes. Doreen was like *what? I just wanted a beer* but I was glad those kids took off to be honest. I told her I'd walk her home and she told me where she lived and I was like, damn that's kinda far, but I walked her home anyway. I thought I was walkin her to some shithole in Western Addition or somethin but she actually lived in the middle-level flat of one of them Victorians. Her sister who lives in Redwood City pays her rent and also helps clean the house and brings Doreen out grocery shopping once a week. Doreen's sister is a pain in the ass--she don't want any booze or drugs in the house, Doreen ain't allowed to make copies of her key, and no one can crash there under any circumstances.

I ended up stayin... a month? Somethin like that?

Enzo wants some meat for the apartment, Doreen's sister ain't dropped any food off since she disappeared and he wants some beef and bacon and chicken and maybe some turkey if they got it, which I could argue with but fuck it let's get to McDonald's and figure the rest out later. Somethin in me's got this real bad feelin, like I let my own self get in the way of a hell of a score, like maybe if I'd stayed calm and not bailed on the truck so quick we coulda been in Oakland wheelin and dealin by now, me and Burgin makin that strip steak money and we'd never been to Doreen's house and never got caught up with crazy-ass Enzo. But also there's part of me that's like, okay, so the guy got his truck back, it's like a *clean slate*? like it never happened, like we ain't gonna end up sat on the curb with our hands cuffed behind our backs tellin the cops the how and why of it while a crowd watches from the sidewalk--things ain't gonna be, you know, *like that*. But I can tell by the look Enzo's shootin me he's thinkin *you better hope that meat's still there* and I feel like shit, like man, how many times can I keep doin shit like this? how long is it gonna keep bein this way?

We round the corner into the McDonald's parking lot and there she is snatched up behind a big yellow tow truck like a whale at the end of a line while a big guinea-lookin tow truck driver stands next to her the whaler, and I feel like it's my own heart hung at the end of that rig. Enzo runs across the parking lot yellin behind his self *you the one with the keys god damn you!* so I kinda run across the lot to join him as he sweet talks the tow truck driver, *we was just parked here for a minute, it ain't got to go down like this* and I realize there ain't a cop in sight, not even big Mr. Meter Maid. Enzo says *look my friend got the keys*, and I take the keys out of my pocket as proof. *Customer parking only*, the tow truck driver says, not tryin to be an asshole but not tryin to be too nice about it neither. *Just doin my job sir, once she's hooked she's hooked, you*

gotta pick your truck up at the impound. Well Enzo don't take bad news too graceful, he gets all fired up cursin the driver just slobberin mad all of a sudden, he's throwin his arms in the air screamin about the Constitution and racism and the systematic oppression of the poor or somethin, and I'm thinkin this the shit you don't want Google to see, Enzo? The tow truck driver takes it for a minute with his head down, then he climbs into his truck like he's like to get stabbed if he sticks around, Enzo runs forward and hocks a loogie on his windshield as both trucks go lurchin forward, one leanin close behind the other like two giant robo-rhinos fuckin, and he takes the curb too quick and the meat truck bounces hard *ka-chunk!* and even though it's good as gone to me forever I'm thinkin *mind the meats homie!* The two trucks lumber down Stanyan almost runnin over a couple teenage hippies and their pit bulls, and the truck's just a rumble tearin the air that fades til its gone.

Enzo's quiet for a moment with his hands on top of his head lookin after the trucks, then he turns on me. *The po-leece didn't even know!* he yells, *the po-leece didn't even know about the mothafuckin meat truck man!* There's a couple McDonald's employees watchin us from the back door of the store and some teenage girls hold their phones up takin pictures. I try to talk him down but he hits me once in the side of the head with the bottom of his palm *kaboom!* and I'm thinkin damn Enzo's gonna kill my ass right here. But he calms down, not angry no more so much as devastated by loss and he starts walkin back down Haight Street mutterin to his self and I got nowhere else to go so I follow Enzo, hangin back about eight steps all the way to Broderick.

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The best time with Doreen was the morning before she had a chance to drink. I'd wake up and watch her sleep on the mattress on the floor while I sat next to the window smokin cigarettes. There was a tree right outside that birds nested in and I could hear them baby chicks goin nuts squawkin for mama. The morning after I met Doreen I saw her red hair had slipped off her head a little and brittle brown hair showed underneath all patchy and cut to the scalp like she'd given herself a haircut with a weedwhacker. I didn't say nothin when she woke up and tugged the red wig back over her hairline. She got up from bed and sat with me in just an extra-large white T-shirt with her sexy legs crossed all bruised, smokin cigarettes and listenin to the birds, we didn't talk, just listened, a time as close to peaceful as I'm like to feel, til she'd smoked her cigarette all the way to the filter, flicked it in the Folgers can and asked where the vodka was.

As we hung out more I noticed she'd slip a couple fingers under her wig every once in a while, get some hair pinched around her finger and yank it out of her head as casual as itchin her nose. She'd hold the clump of hair up and look at it like a scientist studyin evidence of some alien species, like she couldn't believe it came out her head, and she'd let the hairs drop out of her fingers to scatter with the trash litterin the floor. After bout two weeks of watchin I asked what was up with it, we was drunk and high and the way she got nasty and callin me names made me wish real quick I never brought it up.

Some things ain't built to last. The upstairs neighbors called the cops too many times, too many bottles of booze pocketed from Safeway, too many Wednesdays sneakin out the back window avoidin Doreen's sister. I was only there a little over a month before that flat was

scorched earth, I had to leave even if it meant sleepin in a doorway shiverin and fiendin. Me and Doreen, we just had that bad chemistry like poisoned love that'd leave us both dead, and a man can't live his life just for the mornings.

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Enzo's at the top of Doreen's steps mad-doggin me from above sayin I ain't allowed in the house, he'll skin my ass if I even try. But when he opens the door he finds Burgin in Doreen's bed stripped to his undies snorin blood out his nose all over her pillows, and suddenly I gotta talk Enzo out of guttin Burgin with his pocket knife right then and there. I hustle Burgin out of bed, he's all groggy and blood's crusted over his top lip, but he hears Enzo scream and a plate smash against a wall in the kitchen and I'm like let's bounce and he's right on board. As Burgin hurries to pull his shirt on inside-out I look around Doreen's room and nothin's changed, the fold-out chair's still there next to the window with a Folgers can half-full of butts, and I wonder if Enzo ever sits there listenin to the birds in the morning. *You guys get the meat truck?* Burgin asks, and I say fuck it, forget that thing ever existed, fuck the meat truck, fuck the meter maid, fuck Doreen, fuck Enzo, we got to bounce, and I reach into the Folgers can and stuff a handful of cigarette butts into my jacket pocket. I hobble Burgin to the porch, he's got his sneakers in his hands, and Enzo slams the door behind us so hard the porch shakes.

I ain't thought about it in a long time, but easin Burgin down the stairs it comes to me: Doreen and I sittin on her porch after shootin some good shit we scored downtown. We was ridin the clouds man, hardly noticed a shape scoot past us up the steps, the lady upstairs sighin as she

unlocked her front door. Woke up some time later with a pile of mail in my lap, like the mailman had dropped it there rather than the mail slot. On top is an envelope from Publisher's Clearing House with a picture of an old Mexican in a cowboy hat holding one of them giant checks for three million dollars. I nudged Doreen and said *check this shit out* and she tried to look at it but she was too cross-eyed from the H to really understand what she was lookin at. *This lucky bastard won three million*, I said. *Can you even imagine that shit?* And Doreen snickered but her eyes were closed and before I knew it she was asleep on my shoulder. But I kept lookin at that picture of the old man, probably worked most his life in a field, now a millionaire in his sixties or seventies, and I couldn't imagine it, not even for a second, and I dropped the envelope in my lap and leaned on Doreen, our dead weights proppin each other upright.