

THE WEEDS

Eve Hamilton

Some waiters are serving life sentences. Everyone knows who's hurting more than they are, everyone knows who's going to break next. Serving, drinking, serving, drinking. When someone falls off the wagon, they might show up anyway, they might stumble through their side work and hope the manager doesn't notice their quivering hands. Of course, managers can fall off too.

The day I walked from campus looking for a job, George was in his first week as general manager and three days into a bender that didn't stop to sleep. He lifted his damp cheek from the marble countertop, clutched my résumé but didn't read it, and hired me even though I'd never waitressed before. My first night, the owner—a calm, giant man with a braid down his back—sent George home to sleep off the booze. One waiter, Billy, made sure I was doing alright because I probably looked as lost as I felt. He recited an autobiographical limerick: “There once was a man from Pawtucket...” and I laughed.

Kate lit a menthol in the parking lot behind the restaurant. Exhaling into the late summer air, she scoffed, “Billy? He's a cokehead and he has a kid. Stay away from that, sweetheart.”

When the night's done and the people are gone, the rules change, the music comes on, uniforms fall off, bottles are momentarily pilfered from behind the bar while the GM is downstairs swearing at the cooks and sliding his fingers down rows of numbers on credit card print outs. One waiter, Steven, passed us all shots of Jack—me, Billy, Chah-lie the Portuguese, bobble-headed baby-faced Jonah and little Max the busser with dark circles under his eyes. We clocked out. We made it to Hot Club down on the water, where it smells like fish and brown liquor. Billy offered me a ride home and I accepted.

I awoke and passed my eyes over his body. His skin was summer-tanned and taut. He had clean features and hair so blonde it was nearly invisible. His eyes were slate blue, mythic, the sort of eyes everyone notices. (“Have you ever looked into his eyes, it was like the first time I heard the Beatles,” Steven joked, quoting *Superbad*.)

Murphy’s Pub down near the Dunkin’ Donuts center right before last call looks like a waitering convention: the Cheesecake Factory crew in all-white, staffs from Federal Hill with black ties, us in white button-downs and jeans. Waiters make good customers: we don’t ask for extra bread, we order another round, we tip 20%. With the waiters, I wore my accent a little differently, laughed along when they complained about how kids from over at the college don’t tip well. We don’t tip well, I realized.

Billy kept his hand tight on my thigh. “I hate that, when people say I’m a cokehead,” he said, “I had a phase when I did a lot of drugs, when I didn’t care about anything. But until three months ago, I was going to meetings everyday, working out, taking the EMT course. People talk, but they don’t know what they’re saying.” He said he was going to be a firefighter soon, so I told my cautious, well-brought-up friends that I was dating a firefighter.

When he’d pull up to my apartment to pick me up, he’d turn on his emergency lights and lean on the horn. I’d come out and he’d be holding the passenger door ajar for me, yelling “Get in the cah!” He owned a few dozen pairs of Nikes that he kept in their original boxes, only wearing them when we went to dinner or movies and being careful not to scratch them. He insisted on paying, always had a few hundred in twenties folded in his pocket. Once, as we were crossing a puddle-strewn parking lot, he thrust his arm in front me holding me back, and mimed throwing his jacket over the water so I could safely cross. It was

all a joke: his interests, his Rhody accent, his tenderness. After we made love, he'd shake my hand and introduce himself: "Hi, I'm Bill."

But the bouncers and spinners at clubs and pool halls called him "Crypto." One of the grill chefs at work, ("Matt, call me Splat") had known Bill since kindergarten and called him Crypto too. It was a *nom de plume*, a tagger's alias.

Billy drove me into the cuts so I could see his murals. Alleys and lots lined in chainlink, underneath freeways and bridges. He told me how difficult tagging is, being scared, being up high, only getting one try, trying not to get caught. He told me how to steal twelve cans of paint at once. We drove the streets and he pointed out the murals and told me the stories of the street artists who'd been there, telling the histories of control and loss, reading runes of an English dialect people like me don't read.

He showed me his portfolio, polaroids of the letters C-R-Y-P-T-O sprayed twenty-feet tall on the sides of dozens of boxcars and overpasses. The snapshots were ordered chronologically: he grew from a tough adolescent to a handsome twenty-something, then his hairline receded slightly. A photo of his little girl fell out at the end, onto the hardwood floor. I didn't want to snoop. I put it back in the album.

He is an artist, I told myself.

I told Steven everything. He lived a few doors down from me, worked lunch and brunch with me. He'd puff-puff the hollowed filter of a Parliament Light and light it. He was a sweet, self-proclaimed wop with a chinstrap beard. He behaved more like a mayor than a waiter. He spoke in catch-phrases, shook hands, asked folks how they were doing tonight. He was deep into a quarter-life breakdown, had moved back to Providence and taken a waitering job to prove he was worth less than his mechanical engineering degree, which he had decided would never be used. He carried valium on his key-ring, but never took

it. He would remove his glasses during a shift when he didn't want to know how slowly, or quickly, time was passing. He called me "doll," and confirmed that "Bill-boy is a good guy." I was more comfortable around Steven than Billy.

There was a girl in Italy who Steven was in love with. She was going to come back for Christmas, he said, and then he'd tell her how much he loved her.

In Cranston, at 3 A.M., I recorded back-up vocals for one of Tako's hip-hop tracks. Encased in a padded booth and headphones, I rified "I just can't get over you" over and over. Tako was Portuguese, Native American and Puerto Rican, his head of cornrows rocked with religious fervor when he mixed, his fingers flying over knobs. He pulled my voice onto a screen and dissected it, strained it, made it into something I'm not. Singing back into the booth, my voice sounded as if I belonged to that world. Billy sat in the lounge, sketching out the insignia he planned to tag on the studio wall for Tako. They picked a date when he would come over and paint it, plans they had made before and broken. The basement studio was buried in the concrete of what had once been a mill. I sat at a dying upright piano and pressed on the keys. Dust and silverfish stirred in its guts.

We climbed from the basement and Billy pulled his low-riding Honda onto I-95. Ninety, one-hundred, one-hundred-ten. I clutched the seatbelt across my torso, and didn't say a word. I saw oncoming bends of the road like tidal waves, calm at a distance, crushing at approach.

We got to my place and he said he should probably just drop me off. I wanted to argue with him, convince him to spend the night with me.

He used my bathroom, came out clutching a plastic bag of powder.

“Brunch is hell,” Steven said, stamping out the first cigarette of the morning. I was still up when the birds rose at dawn, lying in bed, yelling at Billy in my mind. I finally fell asleep around six and dreamed him back into the bathroom, dreamed that bag swirling down the toilet. I dreamed him back across the puddle with his jacket thrown across, I dreamed him shaking my hand after making love. I dreamed him into my bed on that first morning, tracing my eyes along his summer-tanned skin.

“You in the weeds? You weeded?” the waiters asked. It’s a term that only waiters know and one they don’t use unless they have to.

The weeds are when you feel your hands scooping ice into a pitcher but your body has forgotten that it belongs to you and you don’t even know where you’re supposed to walk with the pitcher you’ve just filled because instead you’re remembering that the gorgonzola was supposed to be on the side for 73 and that bald guy wanted a spoon, and as you cross the dining room you can feel the eyes of every person who wants something from you that you cannot possibly give them—to just get some refills for the kids, to tell you the chicken is undercooked, to ask whether the mussel preparation with saffron is gluten free—and just as you are about to put that fifteen person order into the computer a bottle of ketchup explodes red across the tiles and the chef points out that you are retarded and a credit card stripe goes dull and somebody asks if you can break a hundred and your manager circles like a vulture above a rotting corpse and you fantasize about ripping off your fucking apron and walking out the door, perhaps into oncoming traffic, because there is no conceivable way that anyone could save you from the awfulness that is this job.

“Like death, the weeds must ultimately be faced alone,” Steven said. I suppose it is like what someone must feel as their mortality swirls inside an erring vehicle, or a body of water sucks them under, or, crouched in a bathroom stall, they wish

they could re-locate sobriety. Or when you realize he's not just a mixer, he's a dealer. And he's not just a waiter or an artist he's—

“What are you doing?” Billy called and asked.

“Reading a book.”

“You're wicked smart.”

Billy first took me to his house in the dead of the night. He'd said he had two roommates, but by roommates he meant parents. In the big box windows facing the street his mother had constructed an elaborate scene with miniature trick-or-treaters and papier-mâché jack-o-lanterns that flickered with electric bulbs all night long. He had regular Coca-Cola in the fridge, which he'd bought just for me. He, like most every Rhode Islander I've ever known, only drank Diet. And, in the morning he warmed my clothing in the dryer, to protect my skin against the cold air in his childhood room.

Nights became this, whispering beneath the drone of his parents' snores. We'd stop at a Sinclair gas station on the way to Pawtucket the bucket and he'd buy Diet Coke or yellow Vitamin Waters, explaining, “These yellow ones have caffeine, the others don't.” He'd buy microwavable Tostitos cheese with Doritos, or Cheez-Its. He'd have *Lost*, *Mad Men*, *The Office*, or *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* recorded. There were two lace-doily-draped sofas, but we'd share one, pelvis pressed to pelvis, brain dead. We'd watch until five or six. I'd think about how I had class at 10:30, but wouldn't mention it to him, because another episode meant another hour with his body laughing under mine.

“My mom made all the curtains,” he told me. They matched the lampshades. She was once almost Miss Rhode Island, but his father had not let her compete. For weeks I didn't meet his parents, but smelled their menthols and knew the sounds of their sleeping.

When we ran out of new episodes, it'd be the Food Network,

which taught us about mirepoix, the French holy trinity. I told him that cilantro and coriander are the same, that what they call a burgundy is basically pinot noir. Once, in front of a table of six, he asked me in a quasi-theatrical waiterly-voice, “You’d agree that the Le Grand Pinot Noir would be an acceptable substitute for a burgundy?” It was if he’d explained to the customers that we were sleeping together.

And one night, I was on, working the booths in the back, and Billy walked in with his little girl. Word in the restaurant spread that Billy was there with his daughter, and I watched them walk through and sit in my section. I ran downstairs and outside because I wanted to tell someone that I was terrified. But instead I filled a water pitcher and walked over and said hi to them, wearing a voice that was both waitress and coworker, girlfriend and adult around child. She wore a small pink coat, which he took off tenderly and set on the booth alongside her. He ordered her salad with chicken fingers, cut up her food into small bites, told her to sit up straight. They both colored on the white paper laid across the tablecloth. I watched them from the back, didn’t want to stand next to them and interrupt father-daughter time. They only got three nights a week. He tagged C-R-Y-P-T-O over and over on the table, and she scribbled.

“Luna, say hello,” he told her, and I don’t believe she said anything back. She was shy. She was beautiful.

“I’ve been an insta-daddy once too,” Steven told me over a pitcher at Minerva’s (not a great place, but Steven liked to go there to sweetly accost the girl who took phone orders, his attention rousing her customer-less nights. “How’s my favorite Portuguese lady?” he’d ask. She was square-nosed but otherwise not unattractive. She would blush). His tone hinted at the fact that he sympathized with me, but he spoke as if becoming an insta-parent is a phase everyone goes through, and I needed to

get over myself.

His ex in Georgia had two daughters. He referred to her as “the best lay I ever had.” He always gave titles to the girls he’d had: there was “the most beautiful girl in the world,” “the only girl I ever loved,” “the best girl I’ll ever get.” He talked about the girl in Italy every day, referred to her as “the girl I’m gonna marry.” Sometimes I thought about how the girl in Italy maybe didn’t exist.

Luna, Billy and I went to Wal-Mart so I could buy white button downs from the little boy’s section, size 16 for \$15. White shirts quickly soak up wine, aioli and ink; we all went through them like toilet paper. Luna and I strolled the aisles together, she slipped her tiny hand in mine.

One morning I realized that during the night she’d climbed into our bed.

The Minerva’s waitress insisted she was hardly Portuguese; the furthest she’d been away from Rhode Island was Virginia, once. Steven dreamed of Italy. Billy had taken exactly two flights in his life — one to Vegas, for his honeymoon, and one back. Luna had a t-shirt that said *Las Vegas*. The shirt bothered me. The timeline was never clear to me, but for three months he and his ex-wife had been married. I knew, too, that his wife had been a stripper. It seemed unlikely now that he’d ever take a flight again, “because of the baby.” He always referred to Luna as “the baby,” even though she was almost four.

Luna danced with silly rolling eyes to songs in her head. She was proud of her innie belly-button and ran room to room before bath time. She demanded we watch her talent shows, that we play grocery store, that she have one gumball now and one gumball later. She had long mermaid locks and her eyes pooled with tears when he brushed them.

“Daddy, excuse me,” she’d scream over and over if he and I tried to hold a conversation while driving. Sometimes he’d reply

with feigned attention (“Yes, Luna?”), sometimes with sarcasm, (“Oh I’m sorry, Luna, I forgot you’re the only person in the car”), sometimes there’d be a note of real anger in his voice (“Will you hold on a minute?”). She always wanted the music louder. She didn’t mind his hip-hop, but she preferred her sing-along CD. We drove in his hot little sports car: twenty-seven-year-old father, twenty-year-old girlfriend, and three-year-old daughter, busting the speakers with: *Dinah won’t you blow, Dinah won’t you blow, Dinah won’t you blow your horn—*

For three days Billy’s parents went out of town and I saw his house during daylight. We rose with Luna jumping on the bed, made Folgers and eggs downstairs. When he poured her milk instead of juice she sobbed. She finished her fit and he ironed while she and I watched Curious George. He pulled her little jeans onto her and chided her for getting big. Every time he dropped her at his ex-wife’s mother’s house for the remainder of the week she cried hysterically, grabbed his knees. Sometimes I felt she was jealous of me. Other times I realized that there was no way he would ever love any girl as much as he loved her.

“Cocaine is a marvelous drug,” Steven said, “But I can’t touch the stuff.” It was because of the panic attacks, same reason he never worked nights. I got used to them. Every once in a while we’d be out somewhere when he’d suddenly turn to me and ask if we could get out of here, his face pale and voice low and shaky, the valium in the key ring rattling around. We’d leave together and I was his friend.

I came to Steven upset when Billy disappeared. Stopped answering my calls, stopped calling me back. Every minute I would invent another reason to call him, to see if he answered *this* time. What *was* the word Rhode Islanders use for submarine sandwich?

“What’d you expect?” he tried to sound tough, but I knew he was sympathetic. “You’re young,” he finally said. He called

himself “nearly-thirty,” though he was just twenty-five: “I’m staring down thirty like it’s a barrel of a gun,” he’d say. He pissed on someone’s stoop. He broke his empty beer bottle against a bus stop. He held my hand and swung it back and forth as we went running to the next bar.

With as little warning as when he’d left, Billy showed up again, mumbling something about his phone battery, a stray wandering out of a wild stint in the woodwork. His eyes were small and dark. He laced up some fresh Nikes, held open the door for me, bought me a nice Chinese dinner at a restaurant in Massachusetts that advertised its fresh sushi on late night TV.

He was back but I’d caught worry. Whenever I suspected that he wasn’t calling me back, my thoughts got angry. I’d scrub Luna’s magic marker tattoos from my legs in the shower, take the graffiti picture of my name he’d done off my wall and hide it in my bottom drawer. I’d delete his number, knowing I’d get it back when he called.

His mother’s front windows were lined with pilgrim figurines, turkeys, and cornucopias of ears of corn and squash weaved from raffia. Luna was still talking about Halloween. She didn’t realize it was over, because no one had taken her trick-or-treating.

The easiest way to get Luna to go somewhere was to race. Luna always won the races and Billy always got dead last, panting and collapsing in pantomimed face-plants. We put on jackets and raced through the crisp brown leaves at Slater Park Zoo. Fanny the elephant had spent thirty years of her life chained to a barn there. Billy remembered Fanny, remembered boy scouts, remembered his brother-in-law who was fatally stabbed at a bar down the street. The plastic tunnels electrified all of our blonde hair. I wondered if the low-talking thirty-something mothers with state-of-the-art strollers and protective sunglasses thought

we were a family. Did I look like Luna's mother or her sister? Did Billy look old enough, mature enough to have kids?

Because we always exchanged the same stories twice, Steven told me about how he was an insta-daddy in Georgia again in the back of his Turismo. He'd bought the Turismo off this kid Barnabe who parked it in the lot behind the restaurant, paid \$700 cash for it, which meant he'd given up medical insurance for the rest of the year. It was low-riding, maroon inside and out. Steven owned four cars, but only drove one of them. The Ford was the everyday car, the Rabbit was for summers, the Camry sat in his grandparent's driveway on Federal Hill and the Turismo was his point of vanity.

A couple of drinks and we'd go out to the Turismo, turn on eighties rock radio, light cigarettes. "I could do anything to this car," he'd brag, "I could take a dump in it, I could light it on fire. Nobody would care because it's mine. I'd say to them, 'do sumfin 'bout it!'"

He could do anything in the Turismo except drive it. It had no plates or insurance; it sat in a lot shielded by bushes. "*Apra il libro,*" Steven said, as he propped the trunk open with a tree branch. He was taking Italian classes so he could woo the girl he was going to marry, but the only phrase he could ever remember was "Open the book." Tracks of snow melted across the warming glass. We laid in the back and fantasized about driving to Savannah, to San Francisco, to somewhere. Steven spent most of his time planning escape routes. All the waiters did. Wiping down hundreds of pieces of hot wet silverware they'd discuss how much they owed, how long it was going to take, where they were going to go when they got free.

I flew home for Thanksgiving. Billy called me after I'd landed. I was in the car with my father on 580. The City glistened over the Bay's late autumn mists. "Rice-A-Roni, the San Francisco treat..." Billy sang into the phone. At home, I spent a lot of time standing in the bathroom, running bathwater. I went to my

hairdresser and had him cut off my hair. My parents asked how the firefighter was. I said he was fine.

“No hair!” Billy yelled from his window as I stood outside TF Green Airport, breathing into the collar of my thin coat.

Billy’s mother had four kinds of store-bought pies congealing in the fridge, and instant mashed potatoes stirred with peppered ground beef. He nuked bowl after bowl as he talked, his eyes were small and dark. He said he’d slept through Thanksgiving. “If somebody wants me to take an eight table section, I will. If I have a bag of blow, I’ll finish it, even if I don’t want it.” He said. “I just get bored, I’m just never content with anything.” We all think such conditions are unique to ourselves, I wanted to say. “I’m gonna go visit Bill and Bob,” he told me, euphemistic AA lingo for climbing back on the wagon. “Hi my name is Billy and I-I-I-m baaaack,” he said chuckling.

He stroked my skin, looked at photos of my childhood home, my dog, my family. He paused at the snapshot of an incarnadine sunset over my grandfather’s porch at the lake. I told him about the slopes, the cabin, the water so cold you couldn’t breathe. I said he could fly out for Christmas, if he wanted. I told him I had a free ticket he could use.

I pictured explaining to my parents, or to anyone but Steven, what exactly Billy was. I remembered standing outside some dealer’s house at four in the morning while Billy threatened to kill him. I remembered Luna dropping four nickels into a porcelain piggy bank and saying wishes, “For Chuck-e-Cheese, for Daddy to kiss Mommy...”

He was going to visit Bill and Bob. He didn’t have a problem with coke, just coke when he was drunk, so he was going to just give up drinking. He was going to just give up brown liquor, because brown liquor made him violent. He was just going out after work, but just for a nightcap. He was going to a sick show this weekend, could I take his Saturday night shift? If he saved an extra two-hundred a month he could get a studio apartment,

His parents liked having him and Luna there. He was going to have enough money to start trying to get a firefighting job, maybe June. Maybe next year. He always gained a little weight in winter.

The windows had angels. The Food Network told us everything there is to know about struffoli, a fried Italian holiday treat neither of us had ever tasted. He molded his body into the sofa, didn't bother with Luna, let her bother me. For the first time, I mentioned to one of my friends at Brown that I was dating a coke addict with a kid.

Steven wrapped his big hairy body around me. His boa constrictor's cage lamp lit his room up red. "You know when you're surfing, and you're tired, and you just get that one last dinky wave, and ride it all the way to the edge? That's what you need to do," he said. Steven was counting down the days until the girl in Italy flew to him. He trimmed his chinstrap beard.

"How's my favorite Portuguese lady?" Steven said, and the Minerva's girl blushed, wished us a happy New Year. She grabbed us a pitcher before we could even ask for it. "You are an angel, how do you always know what I want?" Steven said happily and turned to me with a look of blank sadness: "She didn't come home for Christmas. Or at least I didn't hear from her. I sent her flowers but she didn't call." I told him I had thought that might happen all along. He looked at me with the same stupid eyes I'd looked at him with for so many months, and said, "Really?"

We finished our drinks and then two more and flick-flicked our Parliament Lights. We were sopped in feeling like victims, of getting what we deserved, of having known better. Outside, Providence spit out whatever kind of weather it wanted, rain or ice, sleet or slush, and the sun gave up and set in the early afternoon.