

Jake Buckholz

Mountain on Fire

Tucker L. Dixon used to walk down to the laundromat when he couldn't sleep, slip inside, and waste quarters watching the washing machines spin. He found the aesthetic soothing. It got him through some tumultuous nights.

As a child, Tucker's family always owned their own washer and dryer, so he never had to spend time at the washeteria. In fact, the home units were an important part of his youth. His parents did laundry in the evenings, and the sound of a dryer rumbling in the hallway closet lulled him to sleep most nights. It got to the point that he couldn't sleep without it. He'd lie awake, staring at the ceiling, or he'd dip in and out of nightmares, soaking his sheets in cold sweat, yearning for that tranquilizing drone.

When his parents divorced and his mom moved out, the laundry schedule changed, and Tucker stopped sleeping. His father began to stay up late, sipping clear liquid out of a short glass until falling asleep in front of the television, and the piles of dirty laundry grew higher and higher. Tucker couldn't stand it, so he went to stay with his mother at her new husband's house for awhile, but her new husband was a very

peculiar man who did not allow Tucker's mother to do laundry at night. He thought she might fall asleep and the dryer would catch fire. Instead, he made her wake up early and wash their clothes in the grey hours before work.

Tucker moved back in with his father who had quit drinking clear liquid in front of the television. Now he stayed up late taking the stationary bike on marathon journeys. The contraption gave off a faint whirr that was reminiscent enough of the rumble of a dryer for Tucker to fall asleep to, so he got in the habit of dragging his pillow and blanket out to the couch, and drifting off to the sound of his father riding far, far away in the back corner of the living room.

This got him through high school.

The first year of college was easy enough. He had to live in a dorm room with a guy named Carl who watched NASCAR on their shared tv and mixed vodka into gallon containers of Hawaiian Punch and always had a sunburn, but Tucker only used their room to study and change. At night, he slept in the dorm basement amongst the rows of washers and dryers.

"This guy fucks," Carl said of Tucker one morning when he was sneaking back into the room after a night in the basement. Several of Carl's friends were in the early stages of waking. Two on the floor, and two more in his own bed. Tucker blushed and said hello.

"I didn't think you'd mind if we borrowed your bed, seeing as you never use it. Some buds from back home came down for the weekend."

"Yeah, that's cool," he answered sleepily.

“I don’t know where he goes,” Carl explained to his buds. “He won’t tell me, but he sure doesn’t sleep in here.”

The buds rose a ruckus of respect as Tucker stepped carefully through the bodies on the floor to take a seat at his desk.

“Toss me that HP, will you?” Carl asked. Tucker leaned down to the mini fridge wedged under the television between their desks and removed its only contents. He tossed the bottle across the room and Carl caught it, twisted the cap, and took a swig. Then he offered it to his nearest friend. The gallon made it around the room and back to Tucker who waved it away.

“We’re going to the lake today,” Carl said. “Do you want to join?”

“Thanks, but no,” Tucker said and opened his laptop and put on his headphones. When he turned around again a long time later, they’d gone and an empty gallon bottle of Hawaiian Punch rested on top of the tiny recycling bin. Someone had made Tucker’s bed, albeit sloppily.

The summer in between his freshman and sophomore year, Tucker was the best man in his father’s second wedding. Afterwards, he drove a U-Haul across several state lines while his dad and new step-mother followed behind in their sedan. He stayed with them in their new home in the desert for a couple weeks and then his dad drove him to the airport and his mom picked him up and he stayed with her until he could move into his own apartment near school.

The drive through the desert was an experience. Unable to sleep for the entire trip, he began to hallucinate as he drove. Styrofoam cups of gas station coffee piled up on the floorboards as the azure, pink,

yellow, green, and brown of the desert swirled dangerously before him. Once, outside of Phoenix, his father called and suggested an alternate route.

“It’s supposed to be beautiful. I mean the road is called Carefree Highway, afterall. Ginnie remembers it from when she was a girl. You can stay on the freeway if you want and we can meet back up at the hotel tonight, but we are going to take it.”

“No, I’ll go. Pull in front and lead the way,” Tucker said, afraid to go off on his own in his current state.

Saguaro cacti as high as telephone poles filled the dusty plains on either side of the two lane highway. Mountains rose and fell in the distant haze. Every few miles, signs warned of the danger of flash floods in the area, and visions of these massive cacti swaying beneath a sea or standing stock still like coral as strange desert fish awoke from their long hibernation to flit around them filled Tucker’s head. Gusts of wind buffeted the high walls of the truck as *A Horse With No Name* started up for the twelfth time on the mix cd his dad had handed him at the start of their journey with a knowing wink.

“The heat was hot and there were birds and shit,” Tucker mumbled to himself as he gulped cold coffee from styrofoam and tried to get a grip.

Sophomore year was hard. The only apartment he could afford didn’t have a washer or dryer in the unit, nor even a communal laundry room on site. He got by on Youtube videos of dryers, but his sleep was shallow and haunted. He was often visited in his dreams by a golden-eyed fox. In the first dream, he’d been on the playground of his elementary school when he noticed a hole burrowed into the gravel beneath some of the equipment. For some reason, he lowered himself into it, and, crawling forward with his elbows in the

tight space, two golden lights appeared before him in the darkness. He woke up gasping in a dark room to find his laptop had died, the phrase *My golden-eyed fox* on his lips. In the moment, it seemed to mean something deep and he wrote it down, but later in the day he realized it was nonsense.

In later dreams, the eyes watched him from some bushes as he walked through the woods, or stared through his bedroom window.

One morning, he realized he had never actually seen the fox. He'd only seen the eyes and woken up with the idea of a fox. The dreams began to freak him out, and after one of his professors appeared to teach an entire class with glowing, golden eyes, he gave up on using the laptop to sleep. Clearly, it was doing something to him.

He did poorly in school out of sheer exhaustion, but the fox stopped visiting him.

When his lease ended at the end of the school year, Tucker was on academic probation. If he didn't figure out a way to start sleeping and soon, he would fail out of college. He took out a larger student loan and began working a part-time job in order to afford a room in a house with a washer and dryer.

Even though his new job left him feeling exhausted, emptied out, and hopeless, it didn't help him sleep at night. And the laundry room at the new house was a tiny closet at the far end of the hallway from his bedroom. Lying in bed, he couldn't hear a thing.

Desperate, he climbed out his bedroom window one night and dropped into a bush, ripping his t-shirt and scraping his arms and legs. Cursing, he stumbled through the dark front yard towards the street where he found his bearings and started walking. He didn't have any destination in mind, but it was a pleasant night. The air sat light and warm in the dying days of August.

That was the first night he came upon the laundromat. Its fluorescent lights buzzed through steamy windows and he stood transfixed. An automatic door slowly peeled open and he stepped inside. It was empty but for two old women who stood on opposite sides of the building, not speaking to each other. He walked down the aisles in awe wondering why he'd never thought of the laundromat before.

The next thing he knew, a strong pair of hands was shaking him and he awoke to find two policemen standing over him.

"Son," they were saying. "You can't sleep in here. Do you have somewhere to go?"

"What--I--" Tucker sputtered.

"You have some place to go?"

"Yeah," he managed. "I just fell asleep." He stood up and brushed himself off.

"Best get on home then," one of the cops said and Tucker pushed between them and out the door.

The next day at work, he thought of nothing but returning to the laundromat.

After work, his new roommates invited him out to the bar, but Tucker said he had to do something and went to his room, gathered all of his clothes, clean and dirty, shoved them into trash bags, loaded them into his car, and drove straight to the laundromat.

The immediate calm of the dryers greeting him, each like a waterfall contained in machinery. He exchanged a twenty dollar bill for eighty quarters. They clattered into the small bowl before overflowing and rolling across the ground. He dropped to his knees and began filling his pockets with the runaway coins.

"Rookie mistake," said a voice behind him. He turned and saw a young woman sitting atop one of the machines, legs bouncing in front of her. She hopped down and helped him gather the last of his change.

“Never put anything bigger than a five in there or it’ll dump everywhere. I’m pretty sure they designed it that way on purpose; just another way to screw us over.”

“And what, they come gather the lost coins for themselves?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah,” the woman answered seriously before climbing back atop her machine. “It’s a vicious world, man.”

She wore a pair of pink cotton shorts with the word BALLA printed across her rear end, clunky white tennis shoes, and a billowy white t-shirt.

Tucker thanked her before turning to claim a secluded corner for himself. He figured he’d study during the wash cycle and then get some sleep while his clothes dried, but he found the room hypnotizing and couldn’t concentrate on his book, so he simply stared into the washing machine and watched his t-shirts and underwear spinning violently along with his jeans and socks. Nearly every machine had a sign which said not to sit on top of it, but he could still see the back of the woman’s head, elevated above everything else in the room.

When the buzzer went off, Tucker wondered if he’d fallen asleep without realizing it because it certainly didn’t feel as if forty minutes had passed.

He retrieved a cart and unloaded his clothes and then pushed them across the room to the dryer section. He chose the most secluded one he could find and nestled himself into a little nook nearby. There was a steel door labeled Emergency Exit and another locked door which was probably a supply closet. Against the third wall, there was a bench and he laid himself down on it, figuring if the cops came again, he’d have the excuse of actually doing laundry this time.

The sound of a door closing awoke him and he looked around, but neither door showed any signs of having just opened or closed. Sunlight poured in through the windowed front and the washing section was busy with people.

Tucker felt newly revitalized for the first time in as long as he could remember, and he resolved to return that evening.

Professor Alvarez praised Tucker's participation in class and asked *Where has this guy been?* Likewise, his new roommates confessed they'd been worried the first few days that they had found a drug addict to live in their home, but after a meal together they realized how wrong they'd been. Again, they invited him out to the bar. This time he simply said that he wasn't much of a drinker. He waited until they left, and then he closed his bedroom door, turned off the light so it'd look like he was sleeping when they came home, and walked down to the laundromat.

This time, he didn't expect to be productive during the wash cycle. Instead, he let himself enter the weird trance, only regaining consciousness when the buzzer rang. Then he dragged his clothes back to the same corner, put them in the dryer, and curled up on the hidden bench.

Some time in the middle of the night, someone bumped into him and he stirred. The door to the storage closet was open and he thought he saw a set of stairs and heard strange noises coming from within, but he was too groggy to know for sure. The door sealed itself shut and he fell back asleep, unable to resist the lure of the machines.

In the morning, the door was locked from the outside with its usual padlock.

On that drive through the desert, it had seemed to him a mountain was on fire in the distance. The night was a deep black and his eyelids drooped heavily, but he'd been shocked awake by the burning mountain. It pulsed angrily in bright flashes of white and seemed to do so only for him. He remembered driving for a long time without looking at the road, one of The Handsome Family's eerie ballads playing from his dad's mix CD, watching the mountain, and then he remembered sitting in the hotel lobby eating breakfast with his dad and step-mom while she asked him if he was excited to return to college and start taking classes in his major.

"Geography, that's interesting," she was saying. "I was always terrible at memorizing the state capitals, but the schools put such emphasis on it. Even now, for the life of me, I can't figure out why it's important for me to know if Wilmington or Dover is the capital of Delaware."

"Wait, don't tell me," Tucker's dad said excitedly, "It's Wilmington, isn't it?"

"No," Ginne said, biting a sausage link in half, leaving the other half pierced through by her fork, "I am pretty sure it's Dover."

"Let's make this interesting. Let's say winner gets to pick the music for the rest of the drive."

"You're on," she smiled and bit the rest of the sausage from its pronged embrace. They both turned expectantly to Tucker who blinked hard.

"Uh, Dover," he answered in a daze. "I am pretty sure the capital of Delaware is Dover."

The next night, he went through his usual routine, but this time he resisted the urge to fall asleep. Lying on the bench, he kept his eye on the padlocked door, but the dryers overpowered him and he fell asleep around midnight.

An hour or so later, he dug himself out of sleep, gasping awake, shaking off dreams of a wildfire consuming a mountain as foxes ran terrified through the flames.

This time, the door was wide open, and all the dryers were silent. Tucker sat up. There really was a staircase and it descended down into the basement from which he thought he could hear music.

Standing up from his bench, he peaked around the corner and saw he had the entire laundromat to himself. Goosebumps blossomed up both his arms as he stepped through the door frame and down the stairs.

The girl who helped him collect his coins that first day was behind the bar in a dim lit speakeasy. She wore a suit and gave him a nod. For a moment, her eyes seemed to flash gold, but they were only reflecting the lamps which hung low over the bar, each illuminating only a small, but overlapping bubble. The rest of the space was occupied by round tables. About half were empty, and the others contained couples, or loners. The one large booth, tucked away in one of the corners, housed a large and rowdy group of card players. In another corner, there was an elevated stage where a man played piano.

“What can I get you?” the woman asked.

“What is this place?”

She nodded up to a sign hanging over the long mirror: The Golden-Eyed Fox. Tucker jumped in astonishment. He looked at the bartender and then back to the sign, but it had changed and now read: Burning Mountain.

“Can I get you a drink?” she asked, sounding as if her patience was running thin.

“I’ll have a gin and tonic,” Tucker found himself saying. Further down the bar, he saw a familiar man sipping a bright red liquid from a short glass. Carl nodded in greeting then stared back down at his drink.

As he sat and sipped his own drink, he thought of his father after the divorce, and he wondered if he'd done enough. While he drank and thought of his father, he realized the piano man had begun playing a cover of a familiar song:

The ocean is a desert with its life underground

And a perfect disguise above

Under the cities lies a heart made of ground

But the humans will give no love.