

1. Rhus Typhina

A baked potato dripping with butter, cheddar, bacon. Blueberry-peach pie, streusel, a scoop of vanilla. Granny's weird strawberry dessert with the pretzel crust. If I keep my eyes shut, I see a table full of food in front of me. My shaking hands grip a fork and knife instead of the steering wheel of my parked car.

I'm no stranger to hunger and its varying degrees. But sometimes I get to a desperate place where my hollow stomach devours my presence of mind. Right now, my brain is a film reel of food. Cheeseburger. Plastic-wrapped snack cake. A single apple. Hunger's hook deepens and reels me back to reality.

The November wind buffets the car as I open my eyes. Wendy's wrappers and an empty Cheetos bag scud across a nearby vacant lot into a thicket of sumacs gone wild with neglect. Twirling my necklace chain between trembling fingers, I blink at the convenience store on the corner. Full of snacks, a milkshake machine, hot dogs spinning on a roller grill, all costing money I don't have.

I have a strict no-shoplifting policy, followed religiously since the last time I swiped two oranges and a box of crackers from a shop in Baltimore. But why bother with principles? Hunger is dragging me away from what's left of them, too far to come back now. Another day, I'll make a better choice, but this is once-in-a-lifetime hunger. This is the brink of starvation. If I don't eat, I might not live long enough to learn my lesson. Decision made.

The garish pink and orange sign stands out against the chilly gray sky, impossible to ignore. I climb out of my car, pushing my scruples down deep. I'll do what I have to do, but I won't like it.

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The cashier looks up at me, bored. She's clicking the end of a pen, elbows on the counter. Another employee stocks milkshake cups behind the ice cream freezer, whistling tunelessly.

I give them an inane smile, then case the rest of the store for other people. Seeing only the back of one man's head surveying the drinks coolers, I make a beeline for the empty non-perishable goods aisle. When I sneak another look at the store employees, the cashier is gazing outside now and the ice cream guy bends to reach into a box for another sleeve of pink and white-striped paper cups. I bounce my eyes away from them, perusing the shelves instead. I pick up a can of tuna and slide it into my right coat pocket. A second can goes into my left pocket. I stuff a package of peanut butter crackers into an inner zipper pocket as quietly as possible. A mini can of spray cheese just fits into my sleeve.

I scan the options but most of the available groceries are too bulky. Besides, my limbs are trembling, my heart racing. I need to plan my exit and get out of here. But when I lift my eyes, the other customer is looking back at me. He doesn't appear suspicious; it's the disinterested glance you'd give anyone whose eyes you meet in a public place.

I smile and pretend to examine the groceries blurring before my eyes. Blinking fast and praying I'm not sweating visibly, I check to see if anyone is watching. No. This is it. I lift my chin and walk smoothly around the back of the aisle—

—straight into the other customer.

He says "Sorry!" and everything would have been fine if the can of cheese hadn't slipped from my sleeve and fallen with a clunk to the floor.

My brain doesn't have the capacity for sound decision-making at the moment. The man and I look at the cheese, then I take off on a burst of adrenaline for the door. I'm already well

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into the cold parking lot, tuna cans banging against both thighs, when I hear a male voice shout, “Stop, police!”

A litany of foul words spirals through my mind and a few make it past my lips.

I know not to lead the cops to my car, instead heading off into the nearby vacant lot with its dense acres of woods, hoping to take refuge in the thick stands of Amur honeysuckle. The shrubs still wear most of their leaves, yellow-veined now, and my drab coat will blend right in.

I don’t expect the police officer to follow, to go through so much trouble for a few dollars’ worth of groceries, but I hear him panting behind me. I run with every fiber of strength I can muster. I’m lean and strong on a good day, but I can barely see through my hunger, barely run through my trembling. I veer to the right and leap over a fallen ash tree, but misjudge the height of the trunk and my feet catch. I plow chin-first into the mushroomy-smelling salad of leaves and acorns, the wind going *oomph* out of me. One hand zings with sharp pain.

A second later, I sense him looming over me. Out of the corner of my eye, I recognize the man from the convenience store, the guy who ran into me. *He’s* the cop? He grasps my upper arm and I wait for my Miranda rights.

“Are you okay?” he asks instead, helping me to my feet. I reel a little and he braces me until I’m steady. Well, steadier. It takes all my strength just to stand.

He’s waiting for an answer. I try not to look at him, at what I know what I’ll see: clean, new, pressed, tailored, well-fed. Oh, God, all I can think of is food. For a moment, I want more than anything to soften, to relax, to heft the burden onto someone else’s shoulders for once.

“Officer,” I’d say, “I’m just too tired. I give up.”

But of course I don’t say that. I button it all up. Stuff it all down. Stay silent.

“Do you need cuffs?”

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Black spots swarm like ants behind my eyelids when I blink. “No,” I say quietly, too wrung-out for any other answer.

“Good.” He flashes the shiny badge in a black leather case. “I’m Detective Ezra Truax.”

I keep my head down, stare at his desk-job shoes, now streaked with the same mud caking the knees of my jeans. I focus on standing upright. On keeping the churning bile safe in my stomach.

He sighs patiently. “All right. Go on, I’ll be right behind you.”

I trudge back toward the road. The black spots dance along before me. His footsteps crunch.

“I don’t usually make arrests,” he tries again, his voice loose, conversational. “You can probably tell.”

I can. I don’t say so. He can talk all he wants to; I know how to keep quiet.

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It’s not until I’m settled in the back of his vehicle that Detective Truax asks me for the stolen goods.

I sullenly empty my pockets into his waiting hands. It seems ludicrous. Two cans of tuna and some peanut butter crackers. Worth a grand total of about \$5.00, including tax. Only five dollars and some odd cents maybe, but worth a lot more than that to an empty belly.

Dropping my head against the seat and shutting my eyes, I try to find the relief in surrender, but all I feel is faint. Detective Truax slides behind the wheel and starts the engine. The vehicle, an old Ford Bronco, hums beneath me.

I consider the other options for assuaging my hunger. I could've snagged those flavored creamers from the coffee bar at the store. The creamers aren't filling but they taste like candy and they *are* calories.

I could have found a crab apple tree, maybe. Not many calories, but they contain vitamins of all kinds and are slightly more filling. Crab apples do *not*, however, taste like candy.

There's always the rock-bottom option I keep in my back pocket for a rainy day: hawk my car for, what, five hundred bucks? Today I was too desperately depleted to make time for something like that. Besides, if I sell my car I would be truly homeless.

My bleak thoughts are interrupted when something drops into my empty hands. It's the package of peanut butter crackers. The one I stole.

"You look hungry," says Detective Truax, smiling at me over his shoulder.

"Thank you," I croak, gratitude and hunger squelching any pride. I can barely rip open the crackly cellophane to stuff the first cracker sandwich in my mouth. The dragon in my stomach roars for more.

He shifts into gear and pulls out of the parking lot. "I have to take you to the station. I'm sorry."

I think about jail as I devour the crackers. Warm. A comfortable bed (more comfortable, at least, than the backseat of my Toyota). Three meals a day.

"What's your name?" asks the detective.

I don't answer. Too busy stuffing crackers into my mouth. One left. I crunch into it, chew, swallow it down. I'm woozy, head swirling like the water in a toilet.

"Thirsty?"

I look up to see he's handing me an unopened soda. And then when I take it, he tosses back a box of granola bars.

"Thank you," I say again.

"The pop's not cold," he warns.

"I don't care," I reply, not daring to look him in the eye. Unscrewing the top, I take a long draught before tearing into one of the bars and stuffing it into my mouth. The detective is talking again, about not having time for meals at his desk, about having to vacuum out his front seat because he's always eating in his car and not to worry about granola particles in the backseat, about being glad he keeps extra food in here.

I only half listen as I guzzle. My stomach is starting to feel sated. The pain in my hand snags my notice again and I look down where a gash, ripe with coagulating blood and peppered with bits of leaves, grazes my knuckles. I've had worse injuries and I'm not worried about this one. With my good hand I unzip the front of my jacket and smell the unwashed scent of my shirt and my hair in the heat of the detective's vehicle. I haven't been able to justify a truck stop shower for a long time now, though I did manage to wash my hair a week ago (or was it two?) in the sink of a church bathroom. I'd used hand soap that made my scalp itchy and my long blonde hair a tangled rat's nest, but at least I didn't have that gasoline skin-oil stench on me any longer. That was a while ago. My disheveled state makes me more aware of his shiny cleanliness.

He's young, early thirties at most. I'm not sure if he's handsome, or if he's just clean and well-dressed. That line is blurred. I study his reflection in the mirror, admiring the sharp cut of his cheekbones.

If I were not me—a month past my latest shower, mud-smearred, reeking of sweat and dirt, and, most of all, just caught shoplifting—I would consider acknowledging a flutter in my chest. Just an innocent flutter for a man I could never consider.

But here I am devouring his charity granola bars. I reach up to brush a lock of greasy hair back and catch his narrowed eyes again. A moment later, he swerves off the road into a parking lot and stops with a jerk.

“Damn it,” he says, “What am I doing? I’m not going to take you in. Or...maybe I should,” he hesitates, then twists in his seat to face me. “Will you be okay?”

I stuff the half-eaten granola bar back into the box. Without looking up, I nod.

“Where do you want me to take you?”

I don’t know how to answer. I don’t want him to take me to my car and to the license plate number that he will surely run and keep in his records. He seems kind and fair, but I’m a vagrant and cops don’t like vagrants.

After a beat, I reply, “Take me to the sidewalk in front of the UDF.” If he drops me at the convenience store where I stole the food, at least I’ll be close to my car.

“You want to walk home in the cold?”

I remain silent.

“All right. The sidewalk in front of the UDF it is.”

I’m silent, half-dozing, while he drives back the way we came. When he stops the car, I sigh and reach for the door.

“Wait, you scraped up your hand pretty good. Um, just a sec.” Papers rustle and plastic crinkles in the front seat. After a moment, he climbs out and I do the same. It’s cold, and dark

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now, and the wind has stilled to a whisper. Up the road, my car waits like a crouching beast. I don't look at it.

“I put some food in here,” Detective Truax tells me, holding up a plastic bag. “And I added a bottle of ibuprofen—already opened, sorry—and some Band-Aids and antibiotic ointment.” He reaches past me into the Bronco for the bottle of soda and the box of granola bars I left on the seat, and tosses them into the bag before handing it to me.

“I put my card in there too,” he goes on, stuffing his hands into his pockets, “in case you ever need help. Really.”

I can't speak around the lump in my throat.

“In case you don't remember, I'm Ezra Truax. I didn't catch your name.”

That's because I didn't tell him my name, and I don't intend to. I hold the bag tight against my stomach and force out the only words I can at the moment. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

And I take off down the sidewalk without a backward glance. When I turn the corner onto Westbrook Avenue, I peek back to see if he's driven away yet. Nope. He's still there, hands in his pockets, watching. I wonder if he sees me looking back at him.

I wait, leaning against a telephone pole. And wait.

Finally, he drives away. Home to a shower and dinner, probably a wife, maybe children.

I start making my way to my car. When I pass under a street light, I open the bag and look in. Along with my unfinished food and the first aid supplies, I find another soda, a box of store brand strawberry toaster pastries, a full jar of peanut butter, three apples, and hotel-size soap, shampoo, and conditioner.

I'm glad he's not here to see the tears squeezing from between my lids.

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