

## Guts

Ben pulled off the highway and parked in front of the double-wide. Its off-white siding was dirty and smattered with sickly browns and greens. Vines and mud. Filth. He turned his head and looked at the hand-painted sign on the side of the highway, complete with blocky lettering: COLON THERAPY. Depictions of what looked like a hair dryer and a waffle maker filled in the empty space. These objects, if they were what they looked like, did not seem to match up at all with the idea of an alternative medicine shack on the side of a rural North Carolina highway.

Ben remembered the first time he'd noticed the place. He'd told his wife about it as soon as he got home from work at the chicken factory, but Karen hadn't believed him. She told him it was a misspelling or a mistake and that there was no way the Health Department would allow a place like that to operate. Ben knew he hadn't been fooled and that the Health Department didn't have any real power, but he wasn't in particular need of a colon cleanse or whatever else went on there, so he never looked into it. But he drove by every day, and he thought about it all the time—especially on the nights he was kept awake having sex or arguing with Karen.

He got out of the car and squinted through the setting sun at the trailer, then walked up the wooden steps and pulled the screen door open. He rapped on the door three times. He wasn't timid about it—he had waited long enough to know what this place was and what it did to people—but he hoped his knock didn't give away his sense of urgency. He waited another minute before knocking again. No one was home. Or they were too busy inside. He thought about walking around to the back of the trailer and trying to get a peek through a window, but something didn't feel right about that. Whoever they were, he was positive they were doing noble, necessary work, so he resolved to come back tomorrow. Besides, Karen was staying

overnight in Charlotte for a work thing. The house was empty and still, and he had all night to think about what he would ask these people when they let him inside.

## §

He got home and went straight to the fridge for a beer. He popped the top with the bottle opener from the silverware drawer and walked into the bedroom. The apartment was small, but he and Karen didn't have much stuff. She liked limiting any attachment to material objects. So they had simple furniture and food and toilet paper. Essentials. Ben sat on the edge of their bed and sipped the beer. He held the bottle on his knee and looked at the label. It featured a photograph of an old push broom. It unnerved him.

Work had been especially brutal today and Ben was glad it was Friday. Left winger, that's what they called him—he stood in line and pulled the left wing off every chicken that came down the belt. Supervisors wanted eighty chickens processed a minute, and Ben rarely missed his quota. But he hated it. It was messy and gave him too much time to think. And often those thoughts centered around his eight years of marriage and then immediately to the clinic he passed every day.

He took a look around the bedroom—Karen had even gotten rid of their television set two years ago. He finished his drink quickly.

Ben decided to go out for a few minutes before settling in for the night. He went to the kitchen and tossed his empty bottle in the trash. The house phone started to ring, but he ignored it. He knew it was Karen. She would want to talk about work.

Grabbing a fresh can of beer, Ben walked out the front door. The air was chilly as he stepped out of the apartment and down the stairs to the parking lot. He unlocked his car and climbed in, then cracked open his beer can and took a deep drink. He put the can in his cup holder and started the engine. The bar was close, only three minutes away—right around the corner. He pulled out of his spot and slowly made his way over the speed bumps that marked the lot. The cell phone in his pocket vibrated, and he knew it was Karen. He fished it out and looked at her picture on the LCD screen. Ben hit the green button, lifting the phone to his ear.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hey, baby.” Karen's voice had only the slightest hint of Southern in it. She grew up in the city; she was removed from those deep accents that penetrated the more rural areas of North Carolina. “I called the house,” she said.

"I'm not home yet. Work was good?" he asked. He took another drink from his beer and kept the wheel steady with his knees for a second. He wasn't all that interested in her answer.

"Oh, fantastic. They loved the presentation, and Chad said he was real happy with it, too. I wish I could get home tonight, but there's a brunch in the morning I need to get to. Chad wants me talking to folks and pushing the new program. I'll be home in the evening. Should we go out for dinner?"

Ben steered his car in front of the bar and parked. He tipped back the beer and finished the can. His mind was on the trailer off the highway. "What?" he said.

"Dinner," she said.

"I haven't eaten yet, I'm just pulling up to the house."

"No, when I get home," she said. "Let's go out. We'll make a night of it."

"Right, tomorrow. You'll be home." Ben looked out the windshield at the flashing OPEN sign above the bar's front door. It was pink and ugly and distracting. "Is Chad there now?"

There was a quick silence. Ben knew she and Chad were sleeping together. He knew Karen was pretending he didn't know. They both knew the other knew.

"Yes, he's right here," she said. Then, "Are you at the bar?"

"I've gotta go," Ben said.

## §

It was almost eleven when he exited the bar. He wasn't drunk. He drank a lot, and often, but he was rarely drunk. Ben sat on the hood of his car and smoked a cigarette. His phone showed no missed calls and no text messages. He was alone. He was thinking about the clinic.

A couple walked out of the bar and moved toward their pickup truck. The man was talking to the woman, using his hands animatedly and stumbling over his words.

The woman interrupted him. "You're not listening to me," she said. "I just can't stomach the whole thing. It's not proper."

"I'm only telling you so you know," the man said.

"You're not listening. It just makes me so sick," she said.

## §

Before heading home, Ben drove down 81 and again parked in front of the double-wide. There were no vehicles in the driveway but his, and he didn't turn the car off or get out. Instead, he lit another cigarette and smoked and thought about who might be inside. He pictured the owners sleeping in a bedroom that shared a wall with one

of their treatment rooms. Ben envisioned himself lying down on a second-hand hospital stretcher and asking for the full work-up. The sheets were white and clean and smelled like bleach. The thought made him warm, and he finished his cigarette and drove home.

## §

The next morning, Ben woke up and started a pot of coffee before he hopped in the shower. He could smell last night's bourbon on his breath while he washed his body. The heat of the water coaxed the drink from his bones, but he didn't feel clean afterwards. Karen hadn't called after they spoke last night.

He got dressed and sipped his coffee and smoked at the kitchen table. It was nearly ten when he finally got up and walked out the door. It was easy to pretend to be calm. He and Karen had practice at pretending.

The day was warm, and Ben knew that the place would be open. There would be people inside, capably running things and ready to answer all his questions. They would welcome him. They would offer to take his jacket, if he were wearing one. Gastroenterologists—even the amateur, semi-holistic backwoods kind—needed politeness due to the inherent impoliteness in their work. It helped keep them clean.

The highway was empty as Ben smoked and drove. The artificial breeze from his cracked window kept him cool. He saw the sign ahead on the right and slowed down. The blow dryer painting made him uneasy today. It reminded him of his shower that didn't quite do its job. When he pulled into the driveway, he was disappointed there were no other cars in front of the trailer. This did not help his nerves.

He got out of the car and lit a cigarette. He stood still and tried to make himself stop sweating. The double-wide looked the same as it did the day before. The mud was still there. He smoked, and when he was finished, he threw down the butt, flattened it under his shoe.

He walked up the wooden stairs. Smoking had calmed him down. He was ready and excited now. He felt the same sense of urgency that he felt yesterday start to creep inside of him. Knocking on the door, he waited, and knew they were inside. He could feel it in his gut. There was no answer. He knocked again, aggressively. He didn't care if he betrayed himself and gave away his feelings. He was tired of acting.

The door opened, and in front of Ben stood a short woman with brown hair down to her shoulders. She looked to be in her mid-thirties, around Ben's age. She was wearing a rust-colored apron with yellow flowers on it.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I don't know," Ben said. "I saw the sign out front."

Opening the door wider, she gestured with her arm for Ben to step inside. He entered the trailer, looking around for the first time. He was standing in a living room. Two vacant La-Z-Boys faced the corner where a television played a Western on the Hallmark channel. Cabinets bordered the walls, displaying china and collections of spoons and ceramic cat figurines.

“How can I help you?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Ben said.

The woman smiled warmly. “You saw the sign out front. Follow me.”

She turned and walked down the hallway to a door on the left. Ahead was the kitchen. Ben heard someone in there walking around and making noise but he couldn’t see the person. The woman opened the door and showed Ben inside. The room was a lot like he pictured it. An old stretcher with white sheets. A counter with a sink and a series of overhead cabinets. Ben saw gauze and plastic tubing and lots of white. Products of sterility.

“I’m Linda,” the woman said. “Daddy is making waffles. He’ll be right in.”

With that, she turned and closed the door, leaving Ben alone in the room. He sat on the edge of the stretcher and listened to his breathing. He wanted to know exactly what this place did. If they helped people. He was certain they did, but he wanted to know for sure. He had to know.

The door opened and in walked a man wearing a white doctor’s coat. He was tall, well over six feet. His brown hair was cropped close, and he held out his hand to Ben. He smelled like waffles.

Ben stood and shook his hand.

“Name’s Don,” the man said.

“Ben.”

“And you’re having trouble?” Don asked.

“Trouble?”

“Yes. Are you having trouble?”

Ben thought about this. He only wanted to know what went on in this place, but he should have seen this coming. His phone began to vibrate, and he turned it off through his pants.

Don said, “We help with all sorts of things. Weight loss. Abdominal pain. Relationships. Gas.”

“How do you do it?”

Don looked around the room slowly. His eyes scanned the cabinets and stopped on a square package wrapped in plastic that maintained its uncontaminated nature. “We flush it out,” he said. “We

take everything that's bad and troubling inside of you, and we flush it out. It's painless, you won't feel a thing."

"But I'm not really having trouble, I just—I want to be clean," Ben said.

"I get that. And everything we do here is clean. We've passed all the necessary Health Department inspections. But we both know they don't have any real power, don't we?"

Ben wanted to laugh. He wanted to lie down like he imagined and let Don do his work. Instead he said, "There's nothing wrong with me."

He met Don's gaze and they stared at each other for a moment before Don spoke.

"It's Waffle Day anyway," he said.

They looked at each other for another second and Don turned and opened the treatment room's door. He walked back down the hallway and Ben followed. Don opened the front door and turned to face Ben, who stepped through the door and down the wooden steps. Ben looked toward the highway and saw the hair dryer on the sign again. He turned back to the trailer. Don was still towering in the doorway, watching him.

"You do help people, right?" Ben asked.

Don took off his white coat and hung it on a peg next to the door. "Yes," he said. "We do."

## §

Ben didn't call Karen back, and that afternoon she walked through the front door calling his name. He helped bring her bag inside, and they both lay in bed facing each other. They shared a smoke between them and talked about Karen's conference, and Chad never came up.

Karen leaned on her side and set the cigarette in the ashtray. She rolled back over to look at Ben. He looked back at her. They had sex without looking at each other again, and Ben knew she faked it.

Afterwards she showered and then mentioned dinner. She looked clean and Ben thought that was unfair.

"We can go wherever you want," she said.

"Okay," he said.

"You can order whatever you want."

"Okay."

"So what do you want?"

"I want waffles," he said.

## §

They settled for Yang's Paradise a couple blocks away, despite the restaurant's "B" rating, and ate the sesame chicken in silence. Ben

drank three warm beers. Their eyes only met while they were chewing. He paid the bill and opened the door for Karen on the way out.

In the car, he kept his hands squarely on the wheel and wished he had another drink. When they pulled into a spot at home, Karen got out, but he stayed in his seat with the car running. She bent down.

“Are you coming?” she asked.

“I think I want a television,” Ben said.

She was looking at him, but he kept looking straight ahead through the windshield. Her phone lit up in her hand, and she looked down at the screen.

“I think we should do what we want,” she said. There was a finality in her tone. “Are you going now?”

“I only think it’s fair,” he said.

“I’m going to get cleaned up.” Karen shut the door.

Fine, Ben thought. He was finally going to get cleaned up, too.

## §

It was black outside, and he couldn’t see the sign off the highway, but he knew where to turn. He couldn’t see the hair dryer or the waffle maker, but he knew they sat on the edge of the highway like sirens calling to lost sailors. Once again, he pulled into an empty driveway. The gravel crunched underneath his tires as he crept forward and parked. He flipped his headlights off, and it seemed his cigarette was the only source of light for miles.

He climbed out of the car and up the steps to the front door. Ben knocked on the door loudly. He didn’t stop at three knocks or even fifteen knocks—he kept knocking. No one came. He looked back out toward the highway and the sign. Anxiety and worry and sweat were settling in. He needed help, he needed to get inside. He took a drag from his cigarette. Grabbing his phone, he used its flashlight to peer through the living room window beside the door, but the curtains were drawn. Ben had nowhere to go.

He walked to the back of the trailer. The glass of the kitchen window broke easily, and he cut himself on a sharp edge as he climbed inside. The kitchen still smelled like waffles and maple syrup from the morning, but it was empty. He checked the lights but none worked. His phone lit his way as he went through each room of the trailer, looking for Don or Linda or anyone who could flush him out. He would wake them when he found them and say, “Clean my guts.”

Both bedrooms were empty and plain. The recliners in the living room were unoccupied. Ben went to the treatment room Linda had guided him to earlier in the day, the only room he had not checked yet.

The door felt stuck but he pushed it open with a little force. He grabbed a gauze bandage from the counter and wiped his bleeding arm with it. The cut was deep, but it didn't hurt.

He sat on the stretcher and wondered where Don and Linda were. His phone vibrated in his hand, and he took the call.

"Did you get a TV?" Karen asked.

Ben didn't say anything.

There was silence on both ends. He thought about asking if Chad was there, but he had stopped caring as soon as he shattered the window. Maybe before.

"Are you at the bar?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I'm at the bar. I'll be home soon."

Ben hung up the phone and lay down on the stretcher. He looked up at the ceiling and cleaned more blood off his arm. It was starting to throb but still didn't hurt. He needed a long shower, and looked forward to getting home to the soap and steam. His stomach felt funny, so he put his hand on his belly, feeling for where things had gone wrong.