

MARK WALTERS

Piggies

I was completing my work on Aisle Three when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I spun around and two men wearing pig masks stood on the shiny floor, their rubber faces lit up by the sick white glow of fluorescent lighting. When I saw those snouts, I felt genuine fear, and it wasn't just that it was four-thirty in the morning and my stomach was at a boil from the weak watery coffee they dished out. My headphones cranked out the last couple of songs on *Slanted and Enchanted*, but it wasn't the guitars crashing left and right in my ears, either.

One of pigs wore red pants. The other one pointed a gun at me and gestured down the aisle toward the front of the store. A gesture that said: *Let's go. Take me to your manager. Piggies want cash.* And so I led the pigs down the aisle, past all my hard work. I raised my hands in the air because I figured at what point in my life would I have another opportunity to walk around the store with my hands raised in the air, leading a parade of pig men? I was still holding a can of cream of mushroom soup and I thought about pitching the can at their heads, but instead we walked by the soups, we walked by the sugar and the flour, and we walked by the spices and the salt. At the end of the aisle we turned right.

Twenty feet ahead of us another pig stood in front of Jim's register, reading *People* magazine. Jim leaned back at his station with a disgusted, seen-it-all expression on his face: *Pigs robbing the store again? Oh please.* He didn't even have his hands up in the air—instead he folded his arms across his chest in classic I-don't-give-a-shit fashion and said hello to the three little pigs and me. I was wearing my dumb company-issued golf shirt with the little shopping cart logo and the name of the store above my left nipple. It hadn't been washed in a week. Headphones around my neck. The lemon whiff of floor cleanser mixed with the sugary smell of fresh donuts in the bakery, and out the front windows the carts gleamed, the sky was blue-black, and the parking lot was empty.

Jim glared at the pig holding the gun, looked that piggy right in the eye and fired away: "I suppose that you're going to *ask* me to

open the safe, right? Is that what you want?” The pig with the gun shook his head and pointed the gun at me.

“*Him?* You want *him?* You must be kidding. He’s *worthless*. He’s the worst Conditioner we’ve ever had. A totally worthless college graduate. Sure, take him if you want.” He opened his drawer and pointed at the money. “You sure you don’t want any money? For *diapers?* Pigs can’t shit on toilets, can they? Maybe you little baby pigs should go grab some diapers so you don’t make a mess. Aisle Twelve. Or do piggies shit in the woods?”

One of the pigs without the gun flipped Jim the bird.

This was a couple of years ago, my first job out of college. I worked at a grocery store straightening cans and boxes. I spent every morning except Tuesdays and Fridays restoring randomly assigned aisles to their proper order. If you’ve ever been at a grocery store after midnight you know what I’m talking about. We got things ready for the Morning Stockers. I was a Morning Conditioner. I went down the aisles from two in the morning until about six or seven in the morning and I faced the product. *Faced the product* was the technical term that Rich, my boss, used all the time. *Faced* meant pull everything to the front of the shelves so that the aisles looked neat and orderly and *product* referred to the cans and bags of pasta and boxes of cereal and the huge plastic containers of laundry detergent we worked with. Twelve aisles in all. Rich gave us our Primary Aisle by rolling a die in a coffee mug he kept on his desk. If you got a three, you did Aisle Three and Nine; a two, you’d be doing Aisle Two and Eight, and so on. Aisle Three was the can aisle, and it was the worst. You didn’t want Aisle Three. Cans of soup, cans of consommé, cans of broth, cans of vegetables, vegetable soup, turkey soup, cans of processed meat.

Cans took a lot longer than boxes.

By the time Jim started teasing the pigs, Rob and Ron, the twins, had made it to the end of their aisles. Right on schedule, they walked up with their four forty-five a.m. box of fresh donuts for Jim to ring up using their employee discount. They’d go to the break room to take their fifteen, set the box down in front of them on the table, eat the whole box in five minutes—twelve donuts, six for each of them—and then go back to work. They washed it all down with a

bottle of milk that they both drank from. After witnessing this ritual a few times, I sat down beside them and spat out a coffee-fueled rant that they should start a band, a scream-at-the-top-of-their-lungs two man hard rock band, and that they should switch off bass guitar and drums. And that the majority of the songs should revolve around donuts. And that they should call themselves Cruller.

They pretty much ignored me after that.

Rob saw the gun, dropped the box of donuts, and ran off in the other direction, tripping on his shoelace and falling to the floor. The pig who was looking at the magazine walked over to the donut box and grabbed it. Rob held his hands over his head to protect himself just like he had seen in a thousand movies. Ron stood at the end of the aisle in front of a huge display of toilet paper, squeezing one of the rolls inside the packaging. I could hear the plastic crinkling.

The Pig with the Gun made a sweeping gesture with his hand and we filed out of there: The Pig with the Gun, followed by me, followed by The Pig with the Red Pants, and finally, the Pig Who Had Been Reading the Magazine, who was now holding a box of donuts.

As soon as we stepped through the sliding doors the thick heavy summer air slammed into us. A long white van idled at the curb. At the wheel was a man wearing a ski mask, who waved to us. The pigs gathered around me, grunted, grabbed my arms and threw me in. Inside, the van smelled like ripe bananas and soggy old sandwiches. Here was my new cell, complete with my own sleeping bag and pillow. The van slipped slowly out of the parking lot.

I fell asleep a little while after this. I fell asleep still clutching the can of cream of mushroom soup. I fell asleep to the sounds of the three pigs and the driver singing along to "Yellow Submarine," softly spilling out of the radio.

It sounds like the beginning of a joke: in walks these three guys in pig masks.

When I woke up a couple of hours later the piggies were all asleep with their masks still on. I peeked up front. The driver still wore his ski mask. I felt comfortable enough to grab the box of donuts and sit beside him in Shotgun.

The driver waved at me.

The sun was coming up behind us in my rearview mirror and the clock on the dashboard said 7:03 in green numbers.

The driver ejected the tape, threw it on the floor, selected another tape from a huge bag at his side, and smashed it into the tape deck, all without taking his eyes off the road.

A piano chopped out a familiar melody. Mick and Keith *ba-ba-lam-ba-bomp-bomp-ba-da-da*-ed together, and then Charlie's snare drum ripped "Let's Spend the Night Together" wide open. I spent most of the song hoping that the tape was *Between the Buttons* and not some junky compilation tape.

I was starting to think that I had not really been kidnapped by evil kidnappers. Evil kidnappers do not make you listen to *Between the Buttons*.

You've never really heard *Between the Buttons* until you've been kidnapped by pig men and listened to it headed west in a smelly white van while the sun is coming up behind you: the fuzzy, super-distorted guitar solo in "Yesterday's Papers," which you will recall because you are a good rock and roller, sounds so good that early.

I felt too comfortable sitting there next to my kidnapper. It had been far too easy to climb up beside him. Wasn't I supposed to have someone watching me in my sleep, to make sure I didn't jump out of the van? Why were we listening to good music? And why wasn't I pistol-whipped as soon as I moved up to Shotgun? If this was (as I strongly suspected it was) a tape of my father's copy of *Between The Buttons*, I knew exactly where the skip was, right at the beginning of "Connection." I learned the songs from that record, and the version of "Connection" in my head had a skip in it about halfway through the first chorus.

The song arrived and so did the jump. The music skipped once, twice, and the song continued on its way.

I waited until "Cool, Calm and Collected" was over before I ripped the ski mask off.

"Surprise surprise surprise," said my brother, Jackson Vincent Green. There it was: the family nose jutting out from the center of his face like a sundial. Jackson was always skinnier than I was, and now—after two years of college—he was even skinnier than he used to be. He was all bone.

"So you're spending your summer riding around with guns kidnapping people?"

“Relax, it was just a prop. We need you on this tour.”

“What tour?”

“This tour. We’re on tour. *You’re* on tour now. We had a show in St. Louis last night. We started that band.”

“Not the Shakespeare band?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s a little rough right now, our name isn’t really out there yet, we spent too much money on costumes and not enough on CDs or tapes, so all we have to sell right now are these crappy T-shirts we made . . .”

“. . . you’re seriously performing parts of Shakespeare plays and then playing music?”

“Well, both. All together. Mostly covers. We have this cool Caliban suit that Eliot’s mom made for us, so we do that song “Fish” by The Damned, Eliot does a Hamlet soliloquy and we do “Pretty Vacant” and “I Don’t Know What To Do With My Life.” We’re called The Groundlings. We have a human skull.”

“I thought you were kidding when I talked to you on the phone. I thought that maybe you were drunk. I was hoping you were.”

“We thought you were kidding about working in a grocery store as a stock boy.”

“I’m not a stock boy.”

“It was kind of tricky to find you. I had to send the Three Stooges in because I didn’t want you to see me, you’d figure it out right away, and they hadn’t seen you in awhile. They came back and said they only saw two fat twins . . .”

“That was Rob and Ron. You should have grabbed them, too. I’ve encouraged them to start a band.”

“And you don’t wear a name tag. It seems like the kind of job where you have to put on a name tag. Why weren’t you wearing your name tag? Give me a donut. I’m assuming those are donuts?”

I handed him the box. He selected a donut and tossed the box on the floor—again, without taking his eyes off the road.

“So we could really use you as a roadie, is what I’m saying. We figured we’d get at least to Kansas City before we told you what was going on and let you decide. We’ll buy you a Greyhound ticket back to where you came from and you can return to your college diploma stock boy job . . .”

“Conditioner, not stock boy. Conditioner. I straighten the aisles.”

“... or you can please please *please* come roadie for us. Because these guys,” his voice dropped to a whisper, “they do not know what they’re doing. And we have this bass player, Dog, you know him, he was a grade behind you, and he almost wrecked the van...”

“Why are you whispering? They’re asleep.”

“Almost killed us all. Almost backed us up right into an oncoming semi. We need *guidance*. C’mon, forget your stupid job. The rest of the summer is booked until school starts. We’re staying with Bjorn’s sister Astrid in Austin for a few days—that’s where we’re heading right now, Texas. So what do you think?”

“I think it’s the worst idea I ever heard. It’s so... English major. It’s so overeducated college English major. Something an English major would come up with while the professor was going off on a tangent about *The Rise and Fall of Silas Lapham*.”

“*The Mayor of Casterbridge*, actually.”

“People are actually paying you? And how’s your drummer? Who is your drummer? The drummer is key, I’ve always told you that. The drummer is your pitcher.”

“Bjorn’s our drummer now.”

“Bjorn the Valedictorian?”

“A little anal, but he’s getting there. His arms are getting big. He’s the one with the money and drums cost the most.”

“And you’re singing? No, Eliot’s singing, I bet.”

“Eliot’s singing, I’m playing guitar.”

“Texas, huh? So that was Eliot and Bjorn and Dog. Who kidnapped me at plastic gunpoint.”

“Exacto.”

“Let me guess, with the gun, that was Eliot, if I know Eliot.”

“He really wanted to hold the gun, this is true. Now listen. Come with us. What else do you have back there? Some clothes? Your camera? Mom said you got rid of all of your records except for, like, five, Freak of the Week. Come with us. Or not. Like I said, the choice is yours.”

“So what you’re saying is I have options now. And this isn’t a real kidnapping.”

“You have options now.”

Dog was the first of the pigs to wake up a couple of hours later. Here’s the deal on Dog: his real name is Christopher Something

or other. Something pretty basic. Brown, Johnson. As for the nickname, I've only heard bits and pieces, but I can put it all together—a show-and-tell can of dog food, a can opener, and a lunch table of nine-year-old maniacs: the story writes itself.

Dog grabbed my shoulder and stuck his face up front. “Hey,” he said, “You’re not mad, are you? About the kidnapping?”

“As far as kidnapping goes, that was almost pleasant.”

He grabbed a donut and sat down in one of the two chairs in the middle of the van. One of the other pigs shifted around up in the loft. “So, what have you been doing out here? Or up there. Where are we?”

I felt another tap on my shoulder, another familiar voice buzzing in my ear: “Stick those hams of yours up. Up in the air!”

I turned around to see Eliot, once again pointing a gun in my direction—only this time without the benefit of a pig mask. And I knew the gun was fake. “Jackson? The lead singer of your fake Shakespeare rock band is pointing a fake gun at me.”

“We’re never, we’ve never really been holding you against your will. You can jump out of the van anytime,” Eliot explained. He settled into the other chair, next to Dog.

“So what about Bjorn? When will we hear from him?”

“He’ll sleep until we get there. See? Up in the loft we built in the back. He’ll sleep until he needs to pull rank or until we wake him up. He’s a bit of a narcoleptic,” Dog answered.

For the rest of the morning, I became Shotgun DJ, using the tape bag. I let the rest of *Between the Buttons* finish, and I played some Devo and Flamin’ Groovies, a little Big Star (during which Bjorn woke up, rocked out, sang along with the rest of us, and went right back to sleep), Dr. Dre, and Minor Threat.

We stopped for gas late in the morning, and I earned the respect of the others about ten minutes later. We parked the van in a corner of the parking lot and we all got out to stretch our legs. I walked around, fingering my new good luck charm—the can of cream of mushroom soup from the grocery store. Perhaps a bit oversized for a charm, it had done the trick: I had not been raped, gagged, handcuffed, duct taped or tortured. Instead I was almost having fun. And then I noticed a short man in cutoffs and dirty white sneakers standing at the back of the van, digging through their stuff. I yelled and fired the can of soup at his strike zone (the head) but it went

down and away, hitting him on his back with a loud *thump* and he ran off behind the gas station.

“You clocked that guy, Jesus. Did he get anything?” This was Bjorn, suddenly appearing behind me, all business now. He had seen the whole thing through the window of the gas station. He pulled a clipboard that was attached to the wall of the van, and started going down a checklist, ticking things off as he looked over the backseat—a well-organized maze of boxes, instruments, and costume trunks.

“Everything’s here. Your father would be proud,” he said, referring to my father’s short career as a relief pitcher. “And this would be a good time to tell you that I always have the salad. So don’t worry about that.”

“So you’re a vegetarian with a checklist?”

“Salad is our word for,” and he paused and looked around the parking lot to make sure no one was listening, “money. Cash. The salad. Okay? The salad is always with me. We’ve got to start remembering to lock this door,” he said, tapping it with a pen.

He picked up the can of soup and handed it to me. We decided that the can had saved our lives, helped us avert tragedy, and that we would worship the can as a deity, affording it all the characteristics and benefits of a god. By this time the others had come back and Bjorn told them what happened.

We put the soup on the bumper of the van and got on our knees, all of us, in the parking lot, supplicating ourselves, in homage. We gave thanks to the Almighty Soup, and then we climbed back in the van.

Four and a half hours later, Dog wrecked the van and there was nothing a can of soup could have done. He’d spent part of the afternoon playing baseball, although I’m not sure how much that had to do with the accident. When I say *playing baseball* I don’t mean that he was taking batting practice with Tony LaRussa. *Playing baseball* had nothing to do with double plays or two seam fastballs; it was his code for getting high. *Getting a base hit* meant getting high by yourself. A *double* or a *triple* meant one or two people getting high with Dog. A *grand slam* meant that everyone in the van took a hit. Except Bjorn, of course. He abstained, though I imagined him playing along with us in his own way; I envisioned him in the role of manager, watching us bat around from the dugout.

And like I said, the accident can't be blamed on baseball alone. When he was fourteen Dog fell off the high dive and hit the water at a funny angle, and when he popped back up to the top, there was blood trickling out of one of his ears, so they rushed him off to the hospital, where they ran tests and said that there would not be permanent damage. Ever since this time, without the aid of modern hallucinogens, Dog had visions, saw things that weren't there—usually in the form of a famous person. Jackson explained to me that I should be on alert, because so far in the month or so that they had been traveling, Dog had seen David Bowie in a bathroom at a gas station (“smoking a big fatty”) and Eudora Welty in the audience in Nashville. These things he saw, they were real people; he was convinced he saw them. They weren't transparent or wispy. These were not ghostly apparitions.

When I wasn't sleeping or looking out the window, I read parts of Ernest Shackleton's South Pole diary that I had found on the floor. All afternoon I had been imagining our van and our crew as distant brethren of Shackleton, without the beards and icebergs, without the marching across the frozen Antarctic wasteland, without the penguin pies, without the impossible journeys under ridiculous temperatures, and without the inevitable shooting of the dogs.

Since my kidnapping, I had fallen asleep, woken up, thrown a can of soup for a strike, fallen asleep and woken up again. I had not adapted to the thrills of sitting in a van all day. I was confused and disoriented—so it's not like I should have been driving. Besides, I had a decision to make. Accept the bus ticket and go back to my apartment and five records. Reject that and hang out with a rock band for a couple of months. A rock band with costumes.

We were somewhere in Texas, almost in Austin. An hour, an hour and a half to go. Three-quarters of a tank of gas. *Daydream Nation* on low volume, the song “Providence” playing, Mike Watt's voice calling out to us, our long lost rock uncle, and I was trying hard not to fall asleep again.

I woke up in the air. I wouldn't say that we were launched into the air like a bullet, like a rocket, like a cannonball. It was closer to an ejection, and we (the five guys in the van plus the van) were a piece of stiff gum from the mouth of a prepubescent eleven-year-old who has been chewing all afternoon. And our ejection was neither gracious nor gentle; there was no dignity in our tumble into the ditch.

That theory of long seconds, of time stretching like a rubber band when something tragic or traumatic happens—while being eaten by a tiger or attacked by pumas or swallowed by a horse—well, that theory was shot to shit. We were in the air for maybe half a second and the land around us melted into a liquid blur: the grassy fields turned into swirls of green and yellow, and the sun, brilliant and bright and low in the sky. It was too much; I shut my eyes. We crashed down and our heads hit the top of the van. I heard the rattle of Bjorn’s hi-hats, then all of the amps and instruments slid to the left and slammed into the side of the van.

The van rolled along for awhile and came to a slow stop as Dog put on the brakes. I had a sick feeling. That weightless feeling you get in car crashes.

Dog turned the engine off and began his defense.

“Let me just say before you guys start in on me that with what I just saw I could convince a jury, okay? Let me remind you all that I have a disorder. Unrecognized and undiagnosed by the majority of major health care professionals in the Greater Metropolitan Richmond Virginia area. It all made sense, what I did. And I’m not even going to tell you who I saw out there this time.”

We opened the doors to a shocking blast of afternoon sun. We should have been crawling out of shattered windows, bleeding and broken, we should have been lashed into our seatbelts, waiting for the firemen to crack open the van like a can of tuna. The van was neither on fire nor on its side. The van still had all four wheels. The van rested in the center of the ditch as if we’d parked it there and now we were going to break out the Chardonnay and cold chicken, the crystal and the china and have a highway ditch picnic.

The truth about us and Shackleton: our crash into the ditch was the closest we had come so far to tragedy. We were nothing like Shackleton. We had none of his bravery. We were weak. We had food and warmth and a combustible engine. What did Shackleton have? Penguin blubber? Seal meat? He led his men over mountains, across the open sea! We could barely handle Oklahoma. Nothing could have saved us, not even The Almighty Soup.

Shooting the dogs, though—that was starting to make sense.

How many of our friends were working horrible summer jobs, sweating it out on lifeguard chairs, shoveling popcorn at a multiplex?

The moment I stepped outside, I began to feel unafraid, because I understood my fear, that it was nothing more than a reaction to something unknown—in this case, the unknown was falling through the air in a van. And the unknown turned out to be harmless enough. It was the same feeling as earlier on that long day, when the unknown was the snouts on the pig masks. Strange and unexpected, yes—but once I realized who it was behind the masks, my fear dissolved. Everything in the van settled, and my decision had been made. I wanted more of that feeling, because fear was just the fear of change and I knew that if I was no longer afraid of change, I would, in fact, welcome the unknown, that I would want it.

I followed Jackson and Eliot around as they inspected the van. We stood off to one side and watched Bjorn pop out of the van with a stern look on his face, watched him as he walked towards Dog. “Here he goes,” I narrated, “asking for the keys to the van like a manager asking for a ball, pulling a pitcher out of a bad inning.” Dog even stood apart from everyone, and from the van, his hands on his hips, looking out at the barren road (which, for the record, was a long flat stretch of highway, had no other people on it, not even another car) and even adopted that blank stare on his face that I had seen on pitchers (including my father, on videotape) as they waited for their manager to step across the mound and ask for the ball.

“Oh, and by the way,” I said to Jackson, “I’m sticking with you. I’ll stay. I’ll have to get some clothes of course, we can stop at a thrift store, I still have this smelly work shirt on. But I’ll stay.”

“Yes, we know. Your stuff is in the back of the van,” he said, running his hand over a small blemish on the van’s side, “camera, lenses, books, clothes. All of the stuff from your room. It fit in two boxes. We had the space. Your roommates left a window wide open, so that part was easy, the breaking and entering. Oh, and your five records. We had to leave your stereo behind, sorry. We got your stuff before we got you. It’s not like we were going to give you a choice. This is a kidnapping after all. You have no choice. Surprise.”