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## Absolute Green

By Madeline St. Clair

On days like this, when the sky is so blue and bright that it's white and the sun beats on him from every direction like a hammer pounding down the surface of his skull, Levi wonders if it will ever rain. The truck has been melting for years. Now as it barrels down the dusty road, turning up rocks buried beneath the packed dirt, tires shaking, wipers groping the windshield, he's afraid it might fall apart underneath him. A motorized toy similar to the Hess Truck he was gifted as a kid, but he played too rough until the rubber tires popped off and it eventually made its way into the trash bin. The interior of the junkyard Ford is soft and sticky as if the seats have been covered in tape for too long and once it was finally peeled back, the adhesive couldn't help but stick to the pleather. There is no fixing things in Amber, Texas. There is no escaping the sun in Amber, Texas. All you can do is wait for a thing to dry up and hope that you don't dry up with it.

“I don’t want to hurt nobody,” Roy says. He digs his fingers into the melting glove box and rips the pleather off, rolls it into small pieces between the pads of his fingers and drops them to the floor.

“Who said anything about hurting nobody?” Levi asks. You can tell by his yellow teeth, the way his hair looks like it’s been slicked back with canola oil and how his mouth doesn’t always seem to work right when he talks, as if his jaw and lips can’t get around the word, that Roy is not a smart man.

“Nobody said anything about it, I’m just saying what if I got to? I mean I will, if I got to, if it comes down to it, I just don’t—”

“Stop thinking about it and stop picking at that. You’re making me nervous,” Levi says. They just have to get there, that’s all. They just have to get there, get in and get out— a simple equation really. That’s what Levi says to himself when he starts to imagine what’ll happen if it all goes terribly wrong. When those thoughts come of him in the tight cuffs that will strangle his wrists and slice the skin down to the bone he thinks of Missy and the baby. He dreams about them too, most nights, and when he wakes up the sweet aroma of the baby’s skin like candy and daffodils fills every inch of the room and for a second, it all feels too real

“Well I’m nervous and you should be nervous too. I don’t know about this man,” Roy sinks back into the passenger seat. “I just don’t know,” Roy says.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Levi asks. They pass the town’s water tower. It’s white and has “Amber” written across it in bold, black letters and it is just as big as the one in Cecil. Those water towers are the only things the two towns have in common.

Amber, Texas is all land and all dust. She has metal fences and gravel driveways that turn the bottom of Levi's shoes white like chalk. Most of the grass is brown and in places where the dirt is especially dry, it's hay. Not like the grass in Cecil, where everything is green. Not the real kind of green, but a perfect monoculture of freshly cut grass. A community of over-tended lawns made of chemicals and pesticides that leave Levi's knees pink and throbbing if he forgets his kneepads at home. He gets paid to tend to those lawns and to mulch and to plant. Sometimes, depending on how big and nice the house is, he cleans out the fishponds with the imported goldfish from China or Japan or something like that. Those fish, in their fish homes, even have green leaves and green rocks, and none of it is real. But there for just one moment, in the outskirts of Old Miss Amber, Levi is surrounded by real green grass. Right on the edge, a few miles before Randolph County turns into Petrie County, everything is real and everything is alive.

"Roy we've talked about this," Levi says.

"It's just—"

"It's just easy, Roy. Remember? It'll be easy. That's it," Levi stretches his arm across the back of the passenger seat. It's never been that hard to talk Roy into anything, he's kind of like a lawn mower. The loud, small kind you push around the yard. Sometimes it'll smoke if you don't clean the underside of the mower deck or if oil leaks into the exhaust muffler but all you have to do is turn it off and let it cool down. That's what Levi's got to do with Roy sometimes, cool him down.

"I don't know. I mean, man, it's not even afternoon yet. Like we're doing this in broad fucking daylight," Roy replaces the rolled up balls of glove box for a scab on the

top of his knee. They're also pink, like Levi's sometimes are, except Roy's are always pink. He never brings his kneepads to work because apparently that's "some pussy shit."

"Roy just think of it like we're at work and it's just another garden to mulch. We get the job down, get the money, and leave. Three simple steps— you go in, grab the stuff and get out."

"We're not going together?" Roy asks and for a second it's as if he might cry. He looks at Levi with those eyes that are too big for his face like they belong on a child. Surrounded by the stubble and the puffy skin they just look mad and red like a rose, but not so delicate.

"Roy," Levi turns on the radio. "Now, we talked about this last week. You remember, right?" Roy's eyes dig into Levi like a shovel thrashing deeper into the mulch with each jab. Levi wants him to look away. He needs him to. Afraid that if Roy stares at him any longer he might see that Levi's afraid too. "And you've seen the movies, there's always got to be a driver. You're not going to bail out now, are you?" If Roy says yes, he'll drive this car right off the road and into the water tower, so this whole damn town can drown. Levi switches to the local radio station, the one that plays all the old country songs. The mornings when the two were assigned to the same house, Roy would pick Levi up in his old, pale blue, Tacoma truck. Every morning he rolled down the driveway blaring some twangy folk music. It made Levi want to pop his own eardrums but it kept Roy happy, even at five thirty in the morning.

"No man. I'm not going to bail, okay?" Roy hugs his legs into his stomach. Roy's always had this nervous tic about him. The first time they met, when Levi was working on one of the houses in Cecil and Roy just started to work landscaping, they laid down

mulch together next to this lady's back porch. She was a stout woman with short red hair that curled at the top of her forehead. Her garden was small, so instead of using the wheelbarrow, they opened a few bags of mulch and poured it out in sections by hand. But every time Roy tried to pour out the mulch, it kind of just went everywhere, in the grass, in the bushes and on top of the flowers. It went everywhere except where it was supposed to go. Levi assumes his shakes came from the fact that he uses.

“Good, because I'm buying Missy and our kid a place right back there.” Levi points to a sign that reads “Merry-Go” and the grass around it is long and un-kempt. The tops of the trees explode into long streams of raining leaves that cover the homes hidden behind them from prying eyes. Benny, that's what he'll name the kid if it's a boy, will grow up nice there. He'll be a good boy because Levi will teach him right from wrong and together, Missy and him, him and Missy, will build a solid life together.

“You really think you're going to be able to afford a place back there?” Roy asks.

“Sure, after we get into Mr. Collin's house,” he says.

“We don't even know what's in there,” Roy says. He stretches his neck across the center console to get a glimpse of the time.

“Roy, I told you about the birds, remember? I know exactly what's in there.” Just last week Mr. Collins had invited Levi to his home office to speak with him. Levi mistakenly thought he was getting a promotion.

“You mean when you got fired.”

“Yeah, yeah, well at least I didn't almost blow up a house.” Levi says.

“Okay, that wasn't my fault. Jared left me alone to take care of the pipes. How was I supposed to know which ones to tear out and which ones not to touch?” Roy asks.

It was probably the biggest house Levi had ever seen. The monster already had four stories, a pool and a garden that looked like a children's fairytale, but the owners- whom Levi assumed must have either won the lottery or worked as brain surgeons- were having an addition put onto the house. Every once in a while if there's a renovation crew working on the same house as Levi's team, they'd pay Mr. Collins to borrow a few of his men. Chosen for the unfortunate task, Roy used a saw to cut the wrong pipe and some gas spewed out of it. It smelled like rotten eggs and the fire department was there within minutes.

In Roy's defense, cutting pipes wasn't exactly a part of his job description and it wouldn't have been that big of a deal had he understood how to handle the situation. Instead, when Jeremy came back to find the fire department parked out front by the mailbox he told Roy to "get his god damn shit together before someone really gets hurt." Roy didn't like that so much and started to go on about how he wished the place had burnt down so everyone could see how careless of a manager Jeremy was. Levi tried to vouch for him to Mr. Collins, because it really wasn't part of his job to cut pipes and tear down insulation, but still Roy's temper had got the best of him and there was no denying that.

"Whatever-- either way we both got fired and we're both going to get what we deserve," Levi says. Mr. Collin's house also had four stories and each one seemed longer and wider than the other. It was all open, like somehow there were rooms without any walls. In his office, Mr. Collin's had a collection of priceless figurines. The collection, however, went far beyond any hobby. It was an obsession. The wall behind Mr. Collin's desk, which had to be at least eighteen feet tall by twenty six inches wide, was full of

them, one next the other, and all birds. Small rainbow parrots, yellow finches, green parakeets with orange beaks, a red cardinal and the others Levi can't remember. Except for two that Mr. Collin's kept right on his desk.

"Those are my cocks," Mr. Collin's said.

"What?" Levi asked.

"My peacocks. Get it?" Mr. Collin's asked. He was a bald man with a square head. The two didn't go well together, but the only trace of hair left wrapped around his head from ear to ear. Levi couldn't tell if he was fat or if his upper body just carried more muscle than his legs. Either way he was big. Mr. Collins took a sip from the nice crystal glass on the desk.

Levi's parents had glasses like those when they were still alive. But they only had two, one for each of them. They'd break them out on nights when his father finally sold a car for way more than he paid for it. Those were the nights when he'd come home with a bottle of whiskey, the kind his mother liked because it was sweeter than the rest. Most of the time they'd forget to ask, but on those nights they always asked how his day went. Levi never had much to say about it, but the way the grasshoppers chirped and the chairs rocked against the planks of the deck, it felt as if the whole world was finally listening.

"Oh, uh, yeah. They're nice," Levi said. And they were. The birds sat in a glass case at the edge of Mr. Collin's desk. When Levi pictured a peacock, he saw a colorful bird, maybe blue with feathers that looked holographic under the right kind of light and it would have a tail kind of like a fan that enveloped its entire body in a halo. But these figurines were dark, almost black. They stood high on small pedestals and their tails draped down more like a cape than a crown.

“They’re Daum Crystals. Daum is a crystal studio out in France that’s been operating since the 18somethings. These babies were made back in the nineteen-twenties. Can you believe that? The nineteen-twenties! I wouldn’t be surprised if they were worth at least, I don’t know, seven hundred and fifty thousand each. Maybe more,” he said.

“That’s a whole lot of money for some birds,” Levi said.

“That’s a whole lot of money for anything really. But isn’t that the point of having money? I say if you’ve got the means, you might as well go for it. Do you understand how money works, Levi?” Mr. Collins asked.

“I’d say I’ve got a good handle on it,” Levi said.

“Would you spend your money on something you didn’t need?”

“No sir. I don’t think anyone should buy something they’re not going to use,” he said. Mr. Collins went on to explain the importance of money and how if you’re going to waste it on something, it better be important and good and worth it. According to Mr. Collins, Levi was not worth it.

“You understand what I’m saying, Levi, don’t you? I mean I think I’ve been pretty gracious towards you. I made you a manager for Christ’s sakes and what do you do? You waste my time by sticking up for that no good drugged up friend of yours and you know what’s even worse? You know what’s worse than that? You gave him time off after he threw a bag of mulch at another one of my workers and then had the nerve to allow him some time off and pay him for it,” Mr. Collins said.

“Sir I can explain that. It was right after—”

“Now you know what that sounds like to me, young man?”

“Mr. Collins you have to understand he didn’t—”



“To me that sounds like time theft. To me it sounds like you let him steal time from my company.” Mr. Collins sat back in his throne, took a sip from that nice crystal glass and looked Levi right in his eyes as if he were waiting him to say something. Not so much waiting, but daring him, egging him on, wanting him to beg, plead and get down on his knees. But that’s not the kind of man Levi Charles is. They sat there for a few moments, Mr. Collins guzzling down his favorite brown liquor without blinking, still staring into Levi like the devil himself, before Levi stood up from his chair.

“You have a nice evening Mr. Collins. Please tell Mrs. Collins I said hello,” and he walked out of the house. He closed the front door that had been painted blue and knew he would be back because while Mr. Collins was looking at Levi, Levi was looking at the birds.

“Besides what other choice do we have? You need to bail out your brother and I’m about to have a baby,” Levi says.

“You really think the money’s going to make Missy want to stay with you?” Roy asks.

“You really think the money’s going to keep your brother from going back to jail?” Levi asks. That isn’t fair, and he knows it. Roy’s only ever been good to his brother even though Matt was the one who got Roy hooked on meth in the first place. At least that was how it sounded whenever Roy talked about the “good ole days” when him and his brother moved out to California. Now Matt’s in jail for driving around with an 8-ball and a scale and Roy, for reasons Levi will never understand, feels the need to get his brother out. Levi, on the other hand, has always been terrible to Missy, who only ever wanted to love him.

“You know what, fuck you,” Roy says.

“Don’t say that Roy, okay? I’m sorry I didn’t—”

“No, fuck you man and fuck the birds and fuck your stupid plan,” Roy smacks the glove box with the palm of his hand.

“Roy calm down okay? You don’t mean that, everything’s going to be fine,” Levi says.

“No it’s not! You tell me it’s going to be easy, just a small job, nothing to worry about. You didn’t tell me that I was going in by myself. Roy this, Roy that, Roy there’s no other choice,” he says and by the way his body shook, Levi is surprised he isn’t foaming at the mouth.

“Are you high right now?” Levi asks. Roy stops shaking. He cups his left hand with his right and places both into his lap.

“No man, I told you I’m clean,” he says.

“Really? Because we talked all of this over last week,” Levi says.

“I just haven’t got a lot of sleep, that’s all, not enough sleep,” he says.

“That’s it? Not enough sleep?” Levi asked.

“Yes, now stop asking me so many god damn questions,” Roy says.

“We can’t do this with you like that-- I’m turning around.” Levi looks in the rear view mirror to see if he can get away with a U-turn.

“You’re not turning this fucking car around,” Roy says. He lunges for Levi’s collar and twists it into his fist. Levi’s fingers sink deep into the steering wheel. He holds onto it like he’s never held on to anything in his life. Roy pulls Levi towards him, the fabric digging into the side of his neck, rubbing against the skin, pulling at Levi’s throat

as if any second it could sever his neck and leave him there hunched over, his head dangling by a strand of skin.

“What the fuck, man? I—”

“I need him out Levi, I need to get him the fuck out of there,” Roy says.

Desperately, he holds on to Levi, his mouth against his ear. Levi’s hair reeks of wet dirt and mulch and Roy remembers he said something about his water being turned off. When was the last time he showered? But Levi needs to hear this; Levi needs to know how badly he needs his brother back. Maybe if he’s mean, maybe if he scares him a little, Levi won’t try to turn around. Roy shakes him, he shakes him good like he’s just a can of soda and him and his brother are kids again running around the yard popping cans and spraying each other until they’re sticky and wet.

“Alright man, let go.” Levi grabs Roy’s wrist and tries to pull his shirt out of his grip but he won’t let go.

“Please, Levi, please,” he says. He digs his mouth deeper into Levi’s ear. His breath engulfs him in a bitter, warm blanket Levi can’t get out of. Levi’s only seen Roy like this once, after his mother died. It was the day after her funeral. He came to work even though Levi told him to take a few days off. One of the guys helping Roy mulch kept telling him not to get it everywhere. After the third time, Roy picked up an unopened bag of mulch, lifted it over his head as if all he ever loved were in that bag and dropped it on the guy. The guy wasn’t hurt and Roy apologized immediately and told him he’d pick up the rest of his work that day and give him all the money. They all knew about Roy’s mom and had grown accustomed to his temper so the combination of the two wasn’t all that surprising. The guy told Roy not to worry about it and Levi had to force him to take

the rest of the day off. But Roy isn't letting go this time. As Roy holds onto his collar, Missy's face floats further and further away from his thoughts until he can barely see her warm, green eyes.

"Roy seriously, get off," Levi yells. With everything he has, he bashes Roy's face with his elbow. He hits his nose and it cracks underneath his elbow like the time he broke one of his parent's only two nice, crystal glasses.

The sirens come from behind them. The sound fills up every inch of the truck. It is loud and intrusive like a bullhorn, only more constant. It digs into the back of Levi's head and expands into every crevice of his mind as the cop car draws closer. It's too bright outside for the lights to do much but from the rear view mirror, they are red and blue and spinning.

"Levi, that's a cop," Roy says through his fingers coated in blood like he dipped his hand in a can of paint.

"No shit," Levi says. He straightens his collar and wipes sweat off his hands on the side of his jeans. "Just don't say anything, you hear me? Don't say a single word." Roy tries to wipe the blood off his nose, but it just keeps coming so he pinches the bridge and tilts his head back. Levi pulls the truck over into the grass.

"Levi, I've got to tell you something," Roy says. He turns in the passenger seat so that his knees touch the center console and his head rests against where the seatbelt comes out. With his head back, and nose bleeding, he really does look like a child. For a moment, Levi feels bad that he made him bleed, and that he convinced him to do any of this in the first place. He almost forgets that Roy just about killed him with his own t-shirt.

“Make it quick,” Levi says.

“I’ve got a warrant,” he says. Levi turns to him, slowly, his hands still on the steering wheel.

“What do you mean you’ve got a warrant?” he asks. The cop gets out of his car. From the review mirror, Levi can only make out his uniform from the neck down. It’s blue, like they all are, and the fabric seems thick, too thick for Amber’s heat.

“It was a long time ago and I was on probation. Nothing serious or anything but I missed a court date or and never really took care of it,” he says.

“Just be quiet okay? Shut up,” Levi says. The cop stops behind the car to check out the license plate. Levi wonders if he’ll notice the rust and if that will make him look bad. He comes to Levi’s window and taps it a few times with his finger and he holds a notepad in his other hand. Levi rolls down his window.

“Hi there officer,” Levi looks at the man’s badge, “Henry.”

“Where you boys headed?” he asks. Officer Henry bends down and rests his elbows on top of the window, “You alright over there?”

“He’s fine, he’s got chronic nosebleeds,” Levi says, not sure if anyone really has chronic nosebleeds.

“I wasn’t asking you,” the cop says. He looks back up at Roy.

“Yeah, it’s just a nose bleed,” Roy says. His body shakes and his shoulders tick. There’s a tension in his face and Levi can’t tell if he was about to sneeze or about to cry.

“That why there’s blood on the dashboard?” Officer Henry asks.

“Yes, sir,” Levi says.

“I clocked you going fifty-five in a forty.”

“Really?” Levi asks. “I had no idea I was driving that fast.”

“License and registration?” he asks. But it wasn’t so much a question it was a statement. Levi reaches for the glove box but before he can get to the handle, Roy is trying to open it for him. There is no way to control his shakes. He fumbles with the handle, his fingers desperately try to grab on to it, but there’s no use. It’s just not possible. Levi swats his hand away and opens it himself. He grabs the small piece of paper and the brown leather wallet so tattered it feels like paper itself.

“Here you go,” Levi says.

“Thank you, I’m going to need to see your friend’s license as well,” he says. Levi looks at Roy, who looks back at him. His eyes are open, completely open. They’re black, completely black. If they were to pop out of his head and roll onto the floor what would Officer Henry do then?

“What for?” Levi asks. “He’s not the one driving.”

“Just a precaution,” Officer Henry says. Roy wipes both of his hands on the top of his red Nike basketball shorts. The kind that are too long for anyone under five-seven and Roy is barely five and a half feet tall. He opens the front zipper of a small army green backpack that sits in front of his feet.

“Here.” Roy hands Officer Henry his license between two shaking fingers, holding it between his nails.

“Alright, I’ll be right back,” the officer says. Leroy rolls his window back up and the two men sit there. They both stare ahead at the dusty road. Levi thinks about Missy. She’s probably working, at the gas station next to the tackle shop, sitting on the stool behind the counter. She’d be holding her belly between the palms of her hands, bored out

of her mind because no one really comes into the store. She's stopped eating the candy bars in front of the counter because she wants the baby to come out healthy. She's crazy about that. She eats lots of fruits and vegetables and drinks at least a gallon of water every single day. She never goes out and is always in bed by 9pm. She'll make a good mom. She'll make a good mom whether or not Levi is there and even though he hasn't been, for awhile now, he's going home to her after all of this.

"You know, Roy, lately I've been thinking you're more trouble than you're worth." Levi doesn't look at Roy, but instead finds himself eye to eye with his own reflection in the rear-view mirror.

"That ain't true Levi. That just isn't true."

"Oh but isn't it, Roy?" There's a red vein right above the lash line of his right eye. Pulsating, popping, moving, filling his tear duct with red as if, at any moment, he could cry blood.

Roy turns around and stares out the window at the grass. which is long and unkempt. He thinks about Matt in a cell all boxed in and cold. The night they got him, Matt told Roy not to leave him in there. That if he loved him he better come save him. I'm coming, he thought. I ain't leaving you there. Roy reaches back into his bag. One year when the two were still small, their aunt came to visit for the fourth of July. He can't remember much about her except for the way she rested her breasts on the picnic table. It made him uncomfortable then, but now there's something comforting about the image. Like he could bury his face between the two and feel at home again. She gave the boys two small wooden guns, the kind that shoot rubber bands. The next morning he woke up with welts all over his arms and one on his neck from the shootout the two had had

beneath the fireworks. Now, he pulls out a small revolver. It's all black with a black barrel and a black grip. The trigger, however, is silver and cold.

"What is that?" Levi asks.

"We can't let this guy ruin the plan, Levi," Roy says.

"Yeah but shooting him's only going to get us caught. Put that shit away," he says. Levi knows Roy isn't going to shoot the guy. He's crazy and loves meth and his brother more than anything in this world, but he isn't the kind of guy to kill a man. Or at least, Levi assumes he isn't. Officer Henry hops back out of the police car. Levi rolls down his window. Again.

"Alright, I'm going to need the two of you to step out of the vehicle," he says.

"What for?" Levi asks. Officer Henry pulls out his notepad.

"In the system it says that Roy Cassidy's got a—"

And before Officer Henry can finish, Roy shoots. All sound is gone except for a ringing that rattles everything inside of Levi. There's something wet on his face. He touches it with his fingers and it is warm and thick. Officer Henry falls to the ground. His left arm latches around the window and the door so he hangs there. Levi hits the gas with his foot like his boot is filled with lead. He doesn't feel the pedal, his hands aren't on the steering wheel and he can't take his eyes away from the rearview mirror.

The next thing he knew, he's upside down. Small white feathers are falling around the truck like snowflakes. He just drove into a truck delivering chickens to a nearby farm that happened to be passing by when Levi hit the gas. When he opens his eyes, his ears are still ringing. He looks over at Roy, but this time there isn't any life left in those eyes. A piece of glass is sticking out of Roy's neck while another has penetrated



his ribcage. Levi isn't sure if there's any glass in him. He can't feel his own body. He's too afraid to look down so he turns and looks out the window. From there, so close to the ground, all he can see is the grass.

“You smell that, Roy?” he asks. There's a breeze coming through the window, through the shattered windshield and it covers his body the way it does in the morning when he walks outside for the first time after being stuck alone in his room the night before. But there's something strange about this breeze, it feels almost like it's pushing him somewhere. The grass even parts a little bit, calling Levi to follow its sway somewhere far into the distance.

“Do you see it, Roy, do you see how green it is?” he asks, and he wonders if it will be just as green on the other side.