

## DETOX

“TODAY WE ARE GOING to talk about the S-O-B-E-R of sobriety. As you can see, and I’m sure you are experiencing, the letters spell out: Son of a Bitch, Everything’s Real. I’m giving you this lecture today because even though it’s my job as a detox worker, I’ve also been sober for eighteen years. Are you listening, people? Jesse?”

I listen to her, I listen, yes, I am listening. But it doesn’t get through, I still want out of this fucking detox, I still want away, and what does she know anyway? I think that after eighteen years she can’t remember this ache in my gut and the pain in my head and the way the white spots go in and out of my eyes, like nasty little dust mote elves. I haven’t even been alive eighteen years, lady, turned sixteen just last month. Fuck. I lean back on the vinyl couch and put my legs up under me. I’m cold. I’ve been here too long, a week, too long. Can I do this detox thing? Do I want to? Today I close my eyes, today I am going far, far away on a sailboat, on a ship, to the Indian Ocean, on a trip around the world. I am in Bali, and I can hear the brown girls singing, just like in that movie, *South Pacific*. All I have with me is me, naked on the beach. A beautiful woman is peeling a pineapple for me. The knife cuts expertly down, so the juice stays in. She hands me the pieces

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in a little plastic bag. I am going to swim alone and then after, smoke Marlboros on the beach, one after another. Nobody is going to tell me that the meeting is over, that it's lights out, that in recovery, I should get more sleep. The sun's licking my skin, and I don't need to get loaded here, it's a high without the drink or drugs. Cuz I am alone on this beach, by myself. And I never get high by myself. Well, I mostly didn't.

Laurie, the women's nurse, is taking my blood pressure when I see Gerard, the male nurse, put a new name up on one of the beds in the opposite wing. There aren't too many people in here. Detox is dead quiet in the summer. The weather's too good to clean up in, and the tourists have lots of money for the skids to beg for. Most druggy skids don't show here till about October. But my summer stopped early, stupid me, Jesse, Jezebel, Janus, anus, dumb fuck-up. I had two stomach-pumping admissions to hospital in two weeks. My mouth tasted of the charcoal for days. Some fancy detox counsellor says to me the other day, You should've been dead, and, You are so lucky, so lucky they found you behind the hotel like that. I say to her, What's lucky, if I'd wanted them to find me in the first place, I would've sat in front of the hospital and done it, I didn't want them to find me. What kind of druggy skid you think I am, don't know my own doses? She just shakes her head, in that way all them counsellors do, and hands me an appointment slip. See me again next week, she says, when your head's clearer.

At least there is no Jell-o here at detox. At the hospital, all they give you is Jell-o: breakfast, lunch, dinner. Here, there's three squares of what you can call food. I always ate

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good food on the street. Just soup kitchens and places. I'm good at some things, really I am, and I'm not stupid, even though I dropped out. I'm good at sleeping. That sounds crazy, but it's not, I've read books on it. Hey, skids can go to the library, too, you know, but getting an actual library card is hard. I never wanted to take the books out anyway, just read and get warm between tricks and then scoring. Actually, making yourself fall asleep is a feat in self-hypnosis. People just take stuff like that for granted. It takes a lot of effort to put yourself to sleep.

One of my roommates here in detox, she's good at puking. Ruby, her name is, she pukes all the time, even when she hasn't had anything to eat. We have these long lines of beds, in five wings, like flower petals, so everyone can see everyone. She comes out of the can, wakes me up, and says, I just puked up lunch. Then I nod and go back to putting myself into sleep-hypnosis and she goes downstairs to use the exercise bike.

Once, when we were smoking downstairs, Ruby says, I got a kid. My kid's in the foster home. They fuck with kids in the foster home, you ever been there? Yeah, some places, I say, But there was this nice one, with a nice lady, and a nice man that never came home from work, he worked so hard. Ruby says, Well, then you never really been in care, when you haven't even had a shitty foster home. I don't tell her about the other ones, why bother? I smoke my cigarette. Sometimes the nurses come down and tell us not to smoke too much, watch some AA movie, eat something healthy, like tomatoes or crackers.

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The name that Gerard tapes above the bed is Phoebe. The last name goes up later: Phoebe Elliot. Guess the girl didn't have ID at first, guess the girl came from off the street and not by ambulance like me, lucky. I go down to the Drugs R Death lecture to see her: Phoebe Elliot. I bring my smokes but she isn't sitting in the smoke room, so she doesn't smoke. She's different, then. Almost all druggy skids smoke. I don't know why, it's expensive. Must be, what you call, a phenonoma, phenonoman. Whatever. I think Phoebe Elliot must be older, though, maybe not even an old skid, maybe even a twenty, twenty-one-year-old type who goes to school or something, goes to university even and sits in real lectures where they teach you better things. Her long legs are crossed on the Naugahyde couch, and I wonder if she's one of those guru pothead types, like at the Hare Krishna feasts me and some of the skids on East Hastings went to every Sunday for free, weird food. I don't look at her as I pass by to get to the smoke room, but my cheeks feel her eyes look up at me. I love her already. I don't care if she is one of those flaky religious, god-buddha-jesus-shiva-loving types, it doesn't matter to me.

After dinner is over, I know lots about my lover, Phoebe Elliot, already. She prefers ham to tuna sandwiches at snack, which could be really that the tuna is soggy, but maybe not. She doesn't smoke. She's not an airy-fairy guru-type cuz Ruby asks her, What's your drug of choice, and she says, Heroin. Everybody fucking knows you have to be hardcore to do H. Phoebe Elliot, her hair's brown, and she's kinda butch, kinda really looks like that actor guy Christopher Walken in that

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old Vietnam war movie, *The Deer Hunter*. The detox workers are going gaga that all us druggies should see and learn from this movie cuz it's about death and suicide and the guy gets hooked on junk in Saigon even after the war was all over. Christopher Walken's the one who plays Russian roulette at the end of the movie and his friend tries to save him, but Walken bites it – the bullet drives through his sweating skull, right at the end.

Ruby's in the smoke room. Hey, she whispers, I puked after dinner. That's great, I say. Really I think it's sick, and why does she keep telling me? Do I look like I fucking care that she's wrecking her stomach lining? It's like she's jonesing on puking now that she's got no drugs to do and she's OCD-ing all over and having to tell me. But I guess I care cuz actually she's pretty cool, like getting to be like family. Sometimes we talk about shitty tricks and tell skid stories to each other when she knows I'm feeling shitty, and the workers can't hear. We're not supposed to be talking street stories in detox, but what the fuck do they know? It's like our only photo albums, you got to have some comfort in something. I pick up some *Reader's Digest* off of the table and vow to learn three new vocabulary words every day, and use them, too. Don't you think that puking is tumultuous for your stomach? I ask Ruby. What? she says. I would think that puking would be destructively detrimental to your esophageal lining, I say. You're screwed, Ruby says. I give myself one of those word tests, and fail it really bad. I think maybe I should've been on the honour roll at high school, but I guess the marks they gave me were right.

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Ruby says, And you know what else? Today I puked eight times already. I say, Oh yeah, going for a record? And then I pick up the atlas book and look at all the cool tropical places to go in my head. I go off on a brain voyage to Providence, in the Seychelles.

The sand is so white and it squeaks as I walk over it. There's no one else on the beach, it's too early, except there's a dog. He's a mangy old thing, lots of bites, and he jumps all over me. I think he must remember me, I must've fed him last time I was here. We walk together. I am naked, I don't remember if I ever had clothes here, and I don't care. I wade into the jade-coloured water and start to swim. Dog is still on the beach, barking at me, but I keep swimming. The water is hot-bath warm, but my toes are cool as I swim further and further. When I dunk my head under and open my eyes, they sting from the salt. I can see fish, rainbow colours and stripes, swim towards me and then veer off as they sense me. I float there on the surface for a while, the sun hot on me, the water lapping on my belly and face. Then I swim back to the beach and sleep all day under the palm trees. When I wake up, the sun has changed. I am wearing a peach-coloured dress with purple streaks through it, I don't know when I put it on, or where I even found it. Phoebe Elliot is there, over by the fire. She's cooking some kind of meat on sticks, gives some to Dog begging at her feet. She walks over to me with a bowl of something. She sits down on the sand next to me and rubs my stomach – it is fat and hard and round. It's got a baby in it, I think, and Phoebe leans down to kiss me. Her lips are salty with the meat. She leans back and takes something out of her

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pocket. Then she pushes me gently back on the sand and lifts my dress up, over my belly, so it rests against my breasts. She rubs some oils into her hands and then onto my belly, and I sigh, it's a strong smell, almost like a tea I haven't had in a long time. Coconut oil and camphor, Phoebe says, as she rubs and rubs in a circle around my belly. It's to help the baby move freer inside, she says. And I lay back and I believe her, cuz I can feel my little baby rolling inside of me, swimming, and I fall asleep to the soothing motions.

I run downstairs before the AA meeting even starts, so I can make sure I sit next to her. Phoebe Elliot always sits on the left side of the couch. Some people come from the outside, with their washed jackets and their new-looking shoes. The meeting starts five minutes late. One woman talks about the importance of sponsorship in AA. I start to shiver, I think of moving cuz I love Phoebe Elliot, but cannot stand to sit this close to her. The woman says, if I didn't have my sponsor, I would die or I would be in jail. She says, Because that would mean I wasn't able to trust and if I wasn't able to trust, then I wouldn't be able to open up, and, If I couldn't open up I would be using again, and then I would die. The woman makes my head hurt cuz of her annoying voice. I'm only a week clean, seven days seven days seven days. I don't want to hear about you, lady. I just want Phoebe to touch me. She does once during the hour-long meeting. She is stretching, and her legs stretch out, and the hairs on her leg touch me, right above the knee.

The doctor checks my liver today. She says it's still distended, but it's going to be okay. I tell her it feels like I'm

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pregnant, and she says, Is that possible? I say, No, and I kind of feel sad, and maybe I am surprised that I feel sad. She says, Your body is getting rid of all its toxins, so it's going to take a while for your liver to shrink. I know that, I say, You told me all that last week. The doctor says, I will see you again next week, goodbye.

Phoebe Elliot is at the detox treatment centre lecture. She is going to some day program thing cuz she was in detox last summer and went through a long-term treatment program back then. So she doesn't want to go again. I want to go to day program too, with Phoebe. I tell Laurie, who is my nurse and worker, and she says, No, you need to go to a residential treatment facility. I tell her that I can handle day program, but she says to me, No, Jesse, you are too young and not an emancipated minor, you're a ward of the state and you are going to a residential treatment facility. I say to her, You aren't my foster mother, bitch. She says, Why don't you leave the meeting now, please. I go downstairs to smoke. I think I want to be with Phoebe, Phoebe Elliot. She and I are meant to be together, we are supposed to have babies together. Normal people don't understand real love like this.

I'm drinking tea from a flowered thermos in a hut. There is so much light, it's sunny. Phoebe is eating bananas with sweet milk and papaya jam. My belly aches, it's almost time. Phoebe tells me, The midwife will be here at two, and then we will take you to the water. I don't know what time it is now, but I trust her, and my water hasn't broken. I doze against the bamboo chair, my eyes open to the sun flashing through the slats in the wall. After some time, Phoebe reaches under



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my arms. It's time to go now, Jesse, she says. I look down as she lifts me up and I see a puddle of water under my chair. My belly is cramping, and the pain is long and deep. Phoebe lifts my arms and pulls my wet dress off. She wipes me with a cool cloth. I am naked and shaking as Phoebe leads me down the wooden steps, away from our hut. There is a woman on the beach. Talange. She is very, very brown, and she has magnificent green eyes that wink at me. Talange is rubbing oil into her hands, and helps me onto a mat by the water. The cool green waves lap against my legs and up and up, until I can feel them push the water inside me. It helps with the pain, but not much, and Phoebe is whispering against me, Breathe, breathe. Phoebe is at my head, massaging my face. She puts her fingers against my lips, mango juice, and I drink thirstily, gratefully. The sun is not hot, it has gone down behind the glade of palm trees. Talange, the green-eyed midwife, coaxes my belly with her heavy, strong brown hands. I push and heave and feel hours of explosions of rocks and glass and shards inside my head, inside my belly, between my legs. I am split open upon this beach like a hard nut, cracked and throbbing with pulp and juice. This baby slithers out so quickly later, much later, like a little eel, a spit of seed. I sit up to wash her, my girl, in the waves. I lick at her face, her belly, her tiny toes, and the saltiness of her, and me, mixed with the ocean water. Phoebe is crying, she is salty too, and she kisses us. We stay by the water for hours, letting the afterbirth float away from us with the tide. Her name is Jade, I call her Jade, after the colour of Talange's eyes, after the colour of the long ocean. Jade sleeps against my breast.

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Gerard removes Phoebe Elliot's name from above her detox bed. Phoebe Elliot leaves with her backpack. I'm in the smoke room, flipping through *Reader's Digest*. From the corner of my eyes, I catch her waving through the window at us sitting there smoking, but I don't look up. After, I go upstairs, and I watch Gerard remove the sheets from her bed. He throws the piece of masking tape in the garbage, right by the front toilets. When no one is looking, I take the tape out of the garbage. I put it in my diary, and write, Today Phoebe Elliot is gone. I loved her. Then I climb under my sheets and put myself to sleep.