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El Pirata

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El Pirata

After my last shift is over, I drive to Jeppy's club and wait for my wife to finish dancing so I can take her home. Sometimes I sit down in the dressing room, but Jeppy is an old drunk, and I end up doing jobs around the place like changing light bulbs and bringing kegs in from the backyard. Jeppy's like my boss at the garage. Same bloated neck with a tacky chain around it. Same bright shirt with sweat rings. Both of them can barely move because of their fat asses, but one thing they can't stop moving are their mouths, always pretending they're better men, telling the same jokes just to turn themselves on. My wife thinks I'm a fat ass too, but she likes it when I rest my stomach against the small of her back in bed and put my arm around her. She says she feels safe, and she knows I sit on my fat ass all day. I might go load the trunk, or open the backdoor for old women, but I try not to get out of my seat, especially since I bought those beaded seat covers. When I sit in this plastic chair in the dressing room, my spine and ass feel tender. The chair squeaks against the floor. I look up at the stupid cuckoo clock that Jeppy got the bartender, his nephew, to hang on the wall. Next to it is the calendar where the dancers' names are scheduled in, a job I do sometimes when Jeppy's getting drinks for the regulars, or when he's locked in his office, auditioning a new dancer. I usually get to the club around the second-to-last show, when the dressing room is empty. Luckily, no one's really bothered me tonight. Only Hilga came in and asked me to zip up her costume. All the dancers at Jeppy's have German names because Jeppy was raised by his grandmother, who was part German. My wife used to be in one of the more popular shows where she and another dancer would dress up like milkmaids and fight each other with whip cream, back when my wife looked younger and Jeppy thought about changing the name of his club to Elise, which was his grandmother's name and the name of the piano song he would play sometimes from his DJ booth when a few regulars were getting private dances and the stage lights were dim. Now I can hear music pounding through the walls. Maybe my wife is almost finished with her show. Back when she looked younger, all she had to do was lower one bikini strap and the whole club would whistle and throw wads of dollars at her feet. Magarethe, that's what they called her when they crowded the stage, begging to be teased. Her name was on the sign out front, spelled the German way. And her hair was dyed red, her pale skin made paler by the stage lights. That was back when I only drove two shifts, when we went to tango after work at another club closer to the beach where wooden statues

of toucans and parakeets with Christmas lights strung from their beaks overlooked the dance floor. That was before Magarethe had her last miscarriage. Now she can't get pregnant anymore, not because she's too old, but because of all the dancing she's done. Not that we've been trying to have a child and even if we did have one, I think I would resent it for taking the place of the one that never had a chance to live. But both of us are too tired at night to do anything but take pills and fall asleep and if we try to make love, it hurts her too much. I can hear men shouting and whistling. They still give her dollar bills that she clenches between her teeth, or throw clumped bills at her feet that get soaked onstage and after we get home we have to flatten them out and put them in the microwave. I count how much money I made today. Magarethe will be disappointed. When I see what she made from dancing tonight, I'll feel humiliated but relieved. There's a plate with sliced pineapple that Hilga brought. It's sitting between her make-up kit and a pile of thongs and feather boas. Before she went onstage, she said I could eat some of it. She's one of the younger dancers. Sometimes she kisses me on the cheek, and I look over to see if Magarethe is getting jealous, but she's busy putting mascara on her wrinkles or shaving herself in front of the mirror. One of the dancers, Berta, I think her name is, enters the dressing room and undresses. I put my money back inside my pocket. She turns the radio on and gets inside the shower. Whenever the dancers get undressed in front of me, I know they don't feel embarrassed, but I still look away. I think about Magarethe when I first married her, about how smooth her skin was when she stepped out of the shower and when she used to wash her hair with mandarin shampoo that mixed with the fresh oils of her skin, and the smell of it all made me want to lift her on top of the dressing room table, but I never did because the dressing room is different than the rest of the club. Quieter, more respectable. Maybe that's why I like waiting here. And tonight's quieter than usual. The regulars have stopped hollering, and I can hear Berta singing in the shower to the song on the radio. Traffic crosses the highway that runs above the club. Magarethe's show must be over. Tomorrow the sun will bake through the window, and I'll be dizzy by late afternoon. White spots have appeared on my ears. The doctor told me not to worry about it, but if I could pay him more, he would be honest with me, tell me what they really were, the sun's cancer becoming a part of my body. The boss lets the customers have shades on the back windows, but not for the drivers in front. He said the shades would make us get in wrecks. I drive all day, and the roads are endless. I never repeat the same stoplight or corner. Mostly I get trapped on the highway, because people think it's faster. But the highway is sluggish, and the fare goes up, which is good for me, but I keep falling asleep, and I try get my passengers to talk about something, but our conversations usually bore me, and I take pills

to stay awake. Berta gets out of the shower, and her hair smells like vanilla, her skin shines. I ask her if my wife was doing an extra show, but she's already turned up the radio and started combing her hair, and steam from the portable shower fills the room. I wipe my glasses with my shirt, and put them back on. Berta leans into the mirror, picking at blackheads on her chin. I wonder if Jeppy still invites her to his beach house, where the younger dancers stay sometimes. Ever since he bought the beach house, his club has become more of a shithole. Nowadays, it's mostly the regulars who stop by, waving wads of bills at the dancers, slapping their asses before getting limp again and getting another round of drinks. Berta wipes the puss from her chin with a cotton ball. A fly is sucking at the pineapple juice. It must've flown inside the room when she came in, or maybe it was flying around the yellow stains of the ceiling the whole time I've been sitting here. I touch the white spots on my ears. If I picked them, would they explode like Berta's blackheads? I get up out of the chair when I hear voices down the hall. The door is kicked open, and it's Hilga and the bartender carrying my wife into the shower because she's passed out. I get inside the shower, lifting her head up so she doesn't choke on water. They say they already called the ambulance. I keep saying Magarethe, tapping her cheek to wake her up. She opens her eyes and holds her stomach like she's about to vomit. I don't ask what happened, and nobody tells me. The bartender helps me carry her over to the table where I was sitting, and then everybody leaves the room. My wife is telling me I should kill Jeppy and burn the club down. I rub her stomach, but she tells me to stop. I say we should go to the hospital, thinking to myself that they lied about calling the ambulance. Jeppy wants to get rid of me, she says. He's too much of a coward to do it himself, so he keeps El Pirata around. She grabs her stomach again, and I think about killing Jeppy and burning down the club. This is the first time she's ever asked me to do it. I guess El Pirata never hurt her like this before. He's usually tender with her unless the music and whistling get too loud, or the stage lights make him panic. He only wants Magarethe, and that's why she has affection for him. I'm no killer, no arsonist, and Magarethe knows that. If the regulars get rough with her, I don't want to know about it, because there's nothing I can do. If I punched a regular, Jeppy would get the bartender and his buddies to take me out to the desert, and leave me there with a screwdriver in my neck. I tell her we need to go home, or to the hospital, but she doesn't want to be moved from the table. She wants me to get her some whisky so she can take her pills. The walls around us pound with music. There's a puddle around my feet. When I leave her in the dressing room, I don't close the door all the way even though no one could hear her over the music if she called out. Down the hallway is Jeppy's office, still locked with a soft light shining beneath the door. I've never been inside, but I've thought

about how many lamps and mirrors he has in there, and whether he has his own bar and a bed that lowers from the wall. I walk behind the stage, and my legs feel separated from my body, a numbness that makes my walking slow. Out here the air is thicker, and my shirt sticks to my stomach, but my shorts have already dried. Inside the men's bathroom, one of the regulars has pinned a dancer over the sink. The light above them is flickering. His pants are around his ankles, and his wallet is sticking out of his pocket. I could probably take it, and he wouldn't notice, but if I got caught, Magarethe would be without a husband, and she would have to work here twice as much to survive, that's if Jeppy ever let her work here again. They say no one ever worries in hell because you know it can't get any worse, but you'd worry about the people you left behind, the ones who have to carry your sins after you're gone. The bartender asks if the whisky is on Magarethe's tab. I shake my head and put down a few bills. The place is mostly empty. Hilga sits in the lap of a regular who's wearing a birthday hat. Confetti on the floor trembles when the speakers get louder. On my way to the dressing room, I step outside the backdoor where the air is cool. Since it's late, the highway has less traffic. El Pirata is in the backyard, tied to a faucet. The quiet breeze scatters the smell of his shit. The donkey's called El Pirata because he has a tuft of hair growing from his chin that looks like a pirate's goatee. It used to be a darker color, but these days it's gray. His brittle ears hang back, and his eyes are set far apart. Jeppy used to keep a dog back here too, but a regular shot it one night. Now all that's back here is an old donkey that looks at me with disgust as if he knew he was the one all the regulars whistled and clapped for onstage, the one whose name was written on the sign out front, the one who was closer to the secret of Magarethe's love.