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Tomato Soup

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Editor's Note: "Tomato Soup" was previously published in Luke Hawley's collection of fiction, *Northwoods Hymnal*, Otter Press, Feb. 6, 2013. It won the Nebraska Book Award, 2014, and was one of Amazon Editors' Favorite Books of the Year for 2014.

Tomato Soup

Luke Hawley

"There's a Ray Bradbury short story—I can't think of what book it's in. *The Pedestrian*. That's the name of the story anyway. This guy gets picked up by the police one night—this is in the future of course—for not watching his television. He just wants to go for a walk, get out in the air. But it's illegal to do. You're supposed to stay home and watch television, I guess."

Moses listened to his old friend talk. The air was cooling. It was September, but a stubborn summer had stuck around keeping the leaves on the trees and the days hot and humid. He could smell it in the air though. Winter was coming. Autumn would pass in a blink. He'd wake up one morning to frost and all the leaves suddenly brown and scattered about his yard.

"That's why I followed John Prine's advice," Moses said.

"And what's that?" Roger was an avid reader but, having gone deaf in his left ear as a kid, never paid much attention to music.

"You know that old song. I can't think of the name." Moses warbled the best he could. "Blow up your TV ... something something ... grow a bunch of peaches ... something ... find Jesus."

Roger nodded slowly, "Quite a rendition." He put his hand over his eyes like a visor and looked at the streetlight on the boulevard.

"Of course, I didn't blow it up. It just quit and I never got a new one." Moses pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and looked up past the streetlight into the darkness of the sky. "I always wanted to take the parts out and turn it into a fish bowl."

"You should."

"Yeah." Moses stretched his arms over his head. "I'm too old for that."

They both laughed, pitched low and full of gravel, quiet laughs laid underneath the treble of cicadas and crickets. In the distance, a semi down-

shifted, jake-braking its way down the slope on the western edge of town.

"I think my brain's going, Rog." Moses ran his hands through the hair on the sides of his head. When his hands reached the back of his head, he made two fists and pulled the hair into his fingers. It was strange to have thick hair around his head and no hair on the top.

"Can't be." Roger locked his fingers, bent them backwards and cracked them against his chin. "If you think it's going, then you still have it enough to know something at all."

"Makes sense." Moses nodded. "Sure is good to have smart friends."

"Dad!" Roger's daughter, Erica, hollered from the front door. "Dad! Can you please come inside?"

Without turning his head: "No dear, I cannot."

"Please Dad. Nobody likes a creeper. Come on in and watch some television."

Smiling so only Moses could see: "Absolutely not."

"Or read one of your books."

"Later, Honey." Roger raised his hand over his head and flopped it back and forth, a fish on a stringer. "I'm talking with my old friend here. I'll come in later." The door shut, echoing a metallic clang. "Speaking of losing your mind."

Moses hmped. "Is she pregnant?"

"She thinks I'm losing mine. Because I don't like television." Roger stared into the dark sky, trying to measure the space between the stars. "Because I sit out here. So they're gonna send me away."

"Say what now?"

"I saw the paperwork on the counter. Ebenezer, I guess, over on the south side of town."

"That fancy new place?"

"They can dress it up as much as they want. I can see the razor wire."

"When are they taking you?"

Roger twisted his mouth, most of his lips moving in the direction of his right nostril. "Don't

know.”

“It wasn’t supposed to go this way.” Moses thought of his wife, dead seven years. “Every almanac I’ve ever laid eyes on said we were supposed to be the first to go. I feel like an old prune, dried up and unwanted.”

“Now that’s not quite right,” Roger said, holding up his hand, pointing like a politician. “Plenty of people want prunes.”

“Just old people.” Moses chuckled. “Babies too, I guess.”

“I read a blurb about Bradbury the other day. Said when he died, he wanted to be cremated and he wanted his ashes put in a Campbell’s Tomato Soup can and sent on a rocket to Mars.”

Moses raised his shaggy white eyebrows. “Better to burn up than dry up, I suppose.”

“His Mars obsession,” Roger noted. “Must love tomato soup too. Just put one and the other together.”

“I’ll be damned.”

“Thing is, Moses, I don’t love anything that much. I don’t love anything as much as Ray Bradbury loves tomato soup.”

Moses shifted in his chair. They were old lawn chairs, the kind with the plasticky straps woven together. Every time he shifted, the chair tried to fold in on him. He preferred a good wooden chair, a rocker if he could. Plenty hanging in the shop, but they didn’t fold up for the back of the truck. Ease over comfort, he thought: Aren’t those two supposed to go hand in hand?

They were quiet then, for a long time, feeling the cool come down like a damp towel, listening to the buzz of the streetlamp.

“I hate that thing,” Roger said.

“What thing?”

“That light.” Roger pointed to the corner. “Blocks out most of the stars. And buzzes to beat the band.”

Moses squinted his eyes and looked at the light, then at the sky. “Seems pretty full of stars to me.”

“You can’t even see the half of them.” Roger stood up and began to search the ground around his chair. “Help me find a rock, Moses.”

Moses stood up and looked around the boulevard. “You think it’s plastic?”

“What?” Roger got down on his hands and knees.

“The light cover. I bet it’s plastic. I bet we’ll hit it and those rocks’ll just come flying back at us.” Moses put his hand up over his eyes. Now that he was looking at it, it did seem awfully bright. A world full of people scared of the dark; he was too old for that nonsense now. “Hold on then, Rog. Let me check my truck.”

Roger continued to search the ground and Moses walked around the lawn chair to the driveway. They had been sitting a long time, longer than usual, and he could feel the extra air in his joints. He high stepped and his hips popped, followed by his knees, his ankles, and down through his toes. Moses thought about what Roger said, about the nursing home, and he knew he wouldn’t go like that. He would go rocketing out into the dark.

He pulled his toolbox from the bed and found two long, thick nails, the kind he used making picnic tables. He grabbed a couple of short tow straps and one long one and walked back over to sit in the chair.

“Find a good rock?” Moses asked.

“No. But I might walk around back.” Roger stood and dusted off the knees of his slacks. “I think the peonies back there are planted in rock beds.”

“Just hold on. I’m gonna need your help. Hold this.” He handed Roger a nail and a short strap and sat back in the lawn chair. He lifted his left boot up on his right knee and held the nail along the inside of the boot, the sharp edge an inch or so past the sole. He wrapped the short tow strap around his ankle and ratcheted the nail tight against his boot. He took the nail and the short strap from Roger and repeated the action on his right boot. “You’re gonna have to help me over there. It’s tough to walk in pole spikes.”

“You’ve done this before?” Roger took Moses by the elbow and lifted him out of the chair.

Moses read the worry in Roger’s face. “When we were kids, my brothers and I would shimmy up skinny little aspens and jump from tree to tree, like a bunch of howler monkeys. Lord knows I can’t shimmy anymore.” He chinned at his boots. “This ought to help though.”

They stood underneath the streetlight looking up at the yellow-orange glow. Moses looked past Roger down the block. “Go grab a hammer from the truck, would you?” Roger nodded and Moses

staked his right boot into the meat of the pole. The nail dug into the bulbous bone on the inside of his ankle. He placed the long strap around the pole and grunted, heaving up his left foot, to where he was off the ground. He leaned back and let the tow strap hold his weight.

"Here you go." Roger was back with the hammer. "Are you sure about this?"

"Hook it in my belt." Moses shifted his weight towards Roger. "I'm as sure about this as I am about anything anymore. You should be asking, 'Are you sure about you?' in reference to my body. That I am not sure about. But"—Moses took another step, holding tight to the tow strap—"I sure as hell am not going to just dry up and die. Just dying sounds like about the worst thing I can imagine."

"So you're okay breaking your neck for a light bulb?"

"It's something, ain't it? For stars I can't see?" With each step, Moses grunted louder, feeling the sweat forming on his leather skin. The grunts and sweat were the same as when he worked in the shop, sanding chairs and hammering tables. But the blood pumping to his temples was something different, like the difference between making something comfortable to sit on and swinging a hammer in the name of destruction. "Who knows, maybe all those extra stars will be my tomato soup."

Halfway up the pole he thought he was having a heart attack and he stopped for a moment.

"Are you alright?" whispered-shouted Roger. Moses wanted to wipe the sweat off of his forehead, but he couldn't let go of the tow strap. He grunted again and took the final steps to the top of the light.

"Is it plastic?"

Moses steadied himself against the pole, leaning into it and put all his weight on the spikes of his boots. He hugged the pole with one arm and with his other hand pulled at one side of the covering, bending it slightly, slipping it out of its hold. He looked down at Roger and dropped the cover to the right of him. It bounced off the boulevard and clanged into the street, sounding like a bucket of spilled soup cans.

"Are you ready?" He could see Roger nodding, smiling, lit like a halo by the brightness of the uncovered bulb. There was something maniacal about him, in the way he rubbed his hands together, close to his chest. With his free hand, Moses pulled the hammer from his belt and swung at the light bulb, covering his face with his swinging arm. Through squinted eyes he saw the explosion, the burst of brightness followed by the sound of glass hitting the pavement of the street. He looked down at Roger, standing off to one side of the pole, staring up past him. Moses followed his old friend's gaze, looking up into the night, into the stars, into the millions of tiny lights set against the black backdrop of darkness.