

Permanent Visitors

KEVIN MOFFETT



*Permanent
Visitors*



*The
John
Simmons
Short
Fiction
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Tattooizm

Dixon drives. Andrea attends to the beachside drifters pushing shopping carts along the sidewalk. She calls them “Cajuns.” She likes how it sounds when yelled. Cajun! She likes that the drifters have no idea why she chooses this, of all things, to yell. She and Dixon drive past a restaurant that sells only hot dogs, past a giant rocking chair made of cockleshells, which you can pay to sit on. Cajun! Andrea wants to throw something. A ripe pear, a stuffed animal maybe, something not too hard.

Dixon is excited. He sings along with “Afternoon Delight” on the radio, smiling without smiling, something in the squint of his eyes. Andrea isn’t bothered by his singing—his voice is soft, non-intrusive, nearly pleasant—but she finds herself waiting for him to

stop. In a few hours she has to babysit for her brother. She thinks: *Something has always just happened or is about to happen. Nothing is ever happening.*

She is nineteen, Dixon, twenty-four. He has red, tightly curly hair, red eyelashes, red hair on his arms, his chest, red hair all over, except on the top part of his legs, which is shaved. He is training to be a tattoo artist by practicing on his thighs, covering them with flames, leaves, wings, cartoon characters, hearts, crosses, squiggles, spirals, and other meaningless designs. When she first met him there were freckles and soft red hair on his thighs. Now it's a mess, a tattoo stew. He is wearing shorts and if Andrea looked away from the street and at his right leg, she would see a purple tiger paw pulling scratch marks across his thigh.

A man pulling two clear plastic bags steps into the crosswalk. "Cajun!" Andrea yells. The man jerks his head forward, then sidelong like a fish extending for a worm, hooked.

He has to practice on somebody, Dixon tells her.

He is singing again, to a song that goes, "I want it," over and over—it being, Andrea guesses, sex. Dixon is excited because they are going to see a building he wants to turn into a tattoo studio. He drives exactly thirty-five miles an hour. He thinks the streetlights are timed so that if you maintain the speed limit you won't get any red lights. Every few blocks he's proven wrong.

Early this morning, they were naked in his bed. "Maybe you could allow me your right shoulder," Dixon said, tracing a finger along her clavicle. Andrea told him that at the end of August, on their first anniversary, she'd let him tattoo a small roman numeral *I* on her thigh. She's mad at herself for saying it. She doesn't want a small roman numeral *I* on her thigh. It seemed reasonable when they were naked. Anyway, it didn't satisfy Dixon at all. "I need practice," he told her. "I'm running out of room on my legs. All I've got is my arm."

They pull up next to a stucco two-storied shop with dry-rotted awnings and a FOR LEASE sign on the front door. It used to house, Andrea can read in the dust and sand collecting on the torn-off window stickers, the Fun Shack. The building looks slightly nonplussed, as if someone has just asked it a question.

"Look inside," Dixon says. "Imagine chairs and artwork on the walls. A big dog walking around." He sprints across the street,

kneels to one knee, and holds a camera to his face. Andrea waits for the flash's wink, but it doesn't come. The sun is shining.

She cups her hands over her eyes and leans against a window: a pair of sawhorses, balled-up tarps, bar stools. The blond pine floor shines in parallelograms where the afternoon sun comes in through the windows. Andrea tries to imagine a big dog walking around.

"It's expensive," Dixon says when he gets back. "And the location is no good. We'll have to lure people down here."

She should offer something pleasant. She should compliment him on finding this Fun Shack. He is sitting on the hood of the car, deep green tattoos sneaking out of the hem of his shorts. "Tattooizm," he says. "There'll be an orange neon sign in the front window. Tattooizm with a Z, indicating impatience with the way things are."

She could say she likes the pine floors, that he has managed to find a building with the loveliest pine floors she's ever seen. "Aren't there licenses you need?" she asks. "How are you going to afford it?"

"Loans. Business loans."

"Didn't you ruin your credit, Dixon?"

"Come here and enjoy our building." He pats the hood of the car. It makes a solid, an unsociable sound. "Let me worry about the particulars."

She walks over and sits beside him. He reaches his hand inside the waistband of her shorts and underwear, rests it casually atop her thigh. Whenever she hears what kind of person Dixon thinks he is, it causes her to wonder what else he is mistaken about. Does he realize that lately he uses *we* when talking about his plans for the tattoo business, and that she feels pretty much indifferent to the whole thing?

His hand is just *sitting* on her thigh, inert as a cicada's vacated husk. Stillness unbothered by anticipation—it makes her jittery. She grips his elbow and moves his hand higher and to the right, closes her eyes while he maneuvers his fingers up, searching for her, slowly, finding her. He rubs with two fingers, rests his thumb in her navel.

Her new favorite answer when her next boyfriend asks what Dixon was like: He could draw a really good Yosemite Sam.

She looks forward to some rest when school starts in three months. Dixon's an increasingly demanding lover. In the morning he picks her up and they drive around or go to his house and have sex three, four times before she has to babysit her brother in the evening. Dixon lights candles, burns sage oil, turns his bedroom into a little shrine. He keeps his shirt off, his hair wet from repeated showers. They watch a lot of TV together: Dixon has a lot of channels. Sometimes while a woman in an apron, say, is extra praising a no-wipe oven cleaner, the TV goes black and Andrea looks over to see Dixon's rapt face moving toward her lap. She helps him slip off her underwear, leans back on the sofa, tunnels her fingers through his tight red curls. He has a certain appeal, she'll be the first to admit.

Now, on the hood of his car, she shudders from her tailbone ahead toward Dixon's hand. Once the feeling passes, she's left fogged by momentary cheerfulness. Dixon slowly slips his hand out of her shorts. Her eyes are closed. The sun backlights the blood vessels in her eyelids. She opens them and sees Dixon holding his hand aloft and still, like it's about to be fitted with a special glove. "Well," he says.

The air smells very suddenly like orange blossoms.

"It's a nice building," she says.

Dixon smiles, hops off the hood of the car. "I wish that expression were permanent. I wish it would stick around a few days at least."

"What are you talking about?"

He kneels, pulls the camera out of his pocket, and snaps a picture of her. "Satisfied. I've satisfied you."

She lets whatever expression was on her face go slack.

"And away it goes," he says. "Hope it sends me a postcard."

He drops her off at the security gate to the Grove, where she lives with her mother and brother, and where the guard has told Dixon that since his car is no doubt leaking oil, he can't drive in, where there are children and wading birds and endangered cypresses. The second he pulls away, Andrea feels untethered. Never has someone's absence exerted such influence on her.