**An Essay About the Story I Tried To (But Never Did) Write About the Portal at the Liquor Store**

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 When I was 21, I worked briefly at a discount liquor store in Kansas. What I remember was the chill of the cooler where I’d spend shifts restocking cans. I also remember the particular joy of closing time: walking a circle around the store and flipping the various switches on neon signs for Heineken or Jäger or Corona or Grey Goose that shone and flickered in the picture frame windows like perfect siren calls.

 In the years following that stint, I would try and fail to write a story about a recurring daydream I had while working there. In the dream, I would walk to the back room where piles of cardboard boxes stood like mountains on the prairie of the tile floor. I would circle the boxes, looking for one to fit some wine for a customer, and find behind the stacks a portal glowing the brightest blue.

 In every iteration of this story, I couldn’t get much past this scene. Sometimes I would enter it—hop in like a bunny to its burrow—but my imagination never followed me far in there before the story would hit a dead end.

 Sometimes I think I could never finish the story about the portal because I never understood what it was meant to symbolize.

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 For some time before, during, and after my time at the liquor store, I had a problem with drinking: I couldn’t do it without losing at least part of my memory to the blackness of intoxication. This meant that there was a year or so composed of many weekend nights I can remember only partially. The nights exist as a series of cloudy images and blurry flashes of time that are (besides) likely to have been corrupted by the faulty hard drive of my mind.

 I am visited by these memories—real or not—when I least expect them. They barge into my brain like so many unwanted guests. I’ll be driving to work and remember falling into the snow and struggling to my feet as the sun came up. I’ll be cutting carrots and remember spilling liquor onto the floor of a metro car and watching the puddle move with the vibrations of the train on the track. I’ll be in bed, alone or not, and remember kneeling before a stranger on a staircase landing of a soviet-era apartment—not the feeling of his dick in my mouth, but the sight of a woman’s long fur coat coming down the stairwell and the sudden need to run lest we be caught. I’ll be taking out the trash and remember the way a girl looked at me on the dance floor before (as I was later told) I kissed her. But the kiss I don’t remember. It is only her swaying.

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 There is one other thing I remember about the liquor store. An older woman peeled into the parking lot in a truck she shouldn’t have been driving. She entered the store, took off her shoes, then stumbled toward a case of Bud Light. I asked her how her night was. She replied that it was shit, but now she had her Bud. I asked her if she needed help getting home. She said she could drive. I watched her swaying. She said she was fine. I sold her the beer and watched her truck pull back out onto the street. I spent the night refreshing local new sites for word of car crashes. But she made it home, I’m sure. Sometime after this, I quit.

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 Sometimes in the story, the portal would lead to another world. Somewhere crisp and colorful. Sometimes there would inexplicably be a cat in the story. Sometimes I would enter the portal and pull my other self out of it, before she forgot what she was about to do. Sometimes I tried to write about that woman, shoeless, clinging to a lifeboat made of anything other than beer.