

# SUNBATHER

Ava Munson sits on the beach. She burrows her bare feet deep down in the sand and looks out at the zenith of the sun beating the mellow out of the Pacific. By her side lies a hedgehog.

Why, she thinks and straightens her wrinkled blouse, won't the sun set already.

She laughs a little laugh, sounding like a lost bird trilling for company. Then she cries, and although the tears cake her cheeks in deltas of salt, they taste like spun sugar.

“That won't do,” she says and pulls the tip of her spindly finger out of her mouth. She wipes her cheeks with the back of her hand and sighs. It was one of those days, a day of delirious flux; a day of tipsy electromagnetism destabilizing the poles.

Earlier that morning Ava's boyfriend of two years, Timothy, left her for Debbie, a woman with a can-do attitude and eyelashes the curve and length of spider-legs. Debbie was young, and Timothy was an ill will materialized, at least according to Ava's dad: “Look at his mustache!” Ava's mom had, contrary to factual evidence, long suspected that Timothy was a pornographer; he was an investment banker. “Same difference, Ava. Same difference.”

Both Mom and Dad had suggested that Ava leave Timothy, but as things turned out, Timothy beat them all to it. While Ava was in the kitchen cooking breakfast—chopping circles of onion to turn golden in the deep fry—Timothy appeared in the doorway separating the kitchen from the master bedroom, a bulging suitcase by his side.

“I'm leaving,” he said in the voice of a news anchor losing the lines on the prompter, a single bead of sweat winding its way down his forehead.

Ava, surprising herself, threw the kitchen knife at him. It whirled past his shoulder and clanked against the wall, leaving a dent in the woodwork.

“Okay, that's dangerous; I'm leaving,” Timothy repeated, now with a wry smile that turned his mustache to a billowy maggot.

That face! Ava thought – and she said: “I’m handing you over with a full heart so that you can fuck in peace.”

The billowy maggot danced. “Good-bye, Ava. I do wish you all the best.”

“Oh, do fuck off!”

As Timothy exited through the front door, a hedgehog waddled through the dog door at the bottom of the back door.

Why, Ava thought, is the god damn dog door still there? She looked at the pendulous motion of the square-shaped flap and then at the hedgehog. It inched toward the kitchen knife on the floor; it sniffed the sharp blade and turned its pointy face toward Ava, asking, in a pip-squeak voice:

“What if the blade had got stuck in his eye?”

That’s peculiar, Ava thought, subsequently—within a matter of seconds—finding herself at peace with hedgehogs speaking their minds; it was, she gathered, one of those rare and wondrous days of magical realism. Inside she could feel an acid geyser preparing itself.

“That would have been a pointed argument,” she said, following it up with a chuckle—was that all? A chuckle?

The hedgehog smacked its tongue and shook its nose. “Murder or blindness is no laughing matter. It’s, oh, I don’t know—darkness.”

“Darkness,” Ava said and bent down. “Are you the only hedgehog in America?”

“How should I know?”

She shrugged. “Because you’re a hedgehog. Do other animals, like cats and dogs, talk, like you?”

“Not to my knowledge, but there are quite a lot of things I know nothing about. I really can’t be trusted.”

“Hah! Trusting a talking hedgehog—it never crossed my mind.” She poked the hedgehog’s quills. “I’ve noticed there’s a raccoon in the backyard, or is it a big rat? Do you ever hang out with ... it?”

“Never met either, and please—stop poking me.”

Ava stopped poking—sudden elation rubber banding her being—throwing her arms in the air: “You and me, we’re off to the zoo!”

Ava Munson sits on the beach, burrowing her feet deeper down the sand and looking out at the three o'clock of the sun painting the Pacific a hazy green. By her side lies a dead hedgehog.

Why, she thinks and flicks a scab from between her thumb and index finger, does the sun not set already. She despised the overt sentimentality of the color-display, and the bitter aftertaste of her sugary tears infuriated her.

She flops back on the sand, modeling angels in the sand. She angles her face toward the dead hedgehog. Its front left leg is missing and both eyes—along with some viscera—had popped from their sockets, making the hedgehog look like a deflated sock puppet.

Earlier that morning, Ava had put the hedgehog in her handbag and bicycled to the zoo.

“Would you look at that,” she said and pointed at a chimpanzee flinging feces around. “One could argue that flinging poo is indecent even for a monkey.”

“There's nothing inherently indecent about feces,” the hedgehog said while hanging on to the edge of the clutched interior of the handbag.

“Want to come up?” Ava asked.

“I really do.”

Ava picked up the hedgehog and put it on the ground in front of the chimpanzee's enclosure.

The hedgehog waddled closer, drawing the attention of the chimpanzee.

“Let's see if it talks,” Ava said, nudging the hedgehog with the tip of her shoe.

The hedgehog waddled even closer. It cleared its throat in an almost inaudible wheeze. “Do. You. Talk?”

The chimpanzee gripped the steel-bars of the enclosure and stared in silence at the hedgehog. If there was understanding in the air, it was for no one to see or hear.

The hedgehog turned toward Ava's shoe. "Seems like it prefers to fling feces."

The chimpanzee grabbed the hedgehog and yanked it through the space between the steel bars. It squeezed the hedgehog's body like it was a squeeze toy and chewed on its leg like it was food ripe for the taking. Overall, it was a scene of great gore. However, the chimpanzee had fun with it – the squeezing and the pulling and the biting, and the spurts of blood.

"The monkey's killing a rare specimen of hedgehog!" Ava screamed after overcoming the initial shock. She picked up the key-chain from her handbag and broke the retina of the chimpanzee's right eye with the tip of her bicycle-key. The chimpanzee dropped the hedgehog and wailed an otherworldly hee-haw while clutching its bloodied face.

"You. Useless. Fuck!" Ava screamed. She stretched her arm inside the enclosure; she wanted to be able to keep on key-stabbing the cowering chimpanzee.

After a hundred dollar fine—the dead hedgehog in her handbag, and the bruised and blinded chimpanzee clinging to an outraged keeper's leg—Ava left the zoo for the beach, but not before issuing a threat to sue: "Fuck opposable thumbs! This hedgehog talked!"

Ava Munson sits on the beach. Under cover of near-darkness, the pale visage of the half moon a non-committed observer (mouthing: oh, my), she digs a deep hole in the sand. She puts the hedgehog in the hole. She fills the hole with sand. She throws up.