

Kent Quaney

Burning Up

I stumbled into the bathroom to piss, hung-over as shit, barely awake, but I needed to get moving so I didn't waste my Saturday off. I had booked a commercial shoot for Monday, so skipping the gym was absolutely not an option, no matter how many beers past reasonable I had gone last night. I pulled the waistband of my underwear down, but stopped abruptly mid-crotch and winced. A pearly crust had glued the head of my dick to my green Hanes boxer-briefs.

I'd never had a wet dream before, had always been far too adept at jacking off to ever have the kind of buildup required for one, so the idea that I had finally had my first at thirty made me laugh as I tugged gingerly at the waistband to see if I could loosen things up. No dice. Solidly attached. Cemented. I squeezed my eyes shut and ripped the fabric free with a quick snap of the wrist. Problem dispatched with minimal pain, I leaned over the toilet to get things started, relaxing into the flow, and screamed. The clear, alcohol diluted piss streaming from my body had grown dozens of invisible teeth that were now eating my dick from the inside out. I fell into the wall and grabbed the toilet tank to steady myself and pissed all over the floor, every vein

in my body pulsing in pain. I righted myself and finished.

“I’ve got fucking gonorrhea.”

Did people even get gonorrhea anymore? HIV sure. An evening out was an unavoidable barrage of billboards and flyers, and the voices of volunteers from the Los Angeles AIDS Project working the bars around Sunset Junction and Santa Monica Boulevard – pious lecturing lesbians mostly, who didn’t even catch the shit. No one my age got it really. My generation. Angelenos. Art school graduates, filmmakers and hipsters. We were too smart for HIV. Too smart to be felled by something so easy to avoid. But gonorrhea? It had snuck back in from another era. It was so Jazz Age. So Hemingway and Fitzgerald paying the price for a visit to a Paris brothel. A total anachronism. And I had it.

I shuddered again, let my shorts snap back into place and flushed. In the living room, my roommate Jeff and my sister Celeste sat on the floral sofa Jeff’s parents had given us in college. He had on an old Long Beach State t-shirt, and scribbled in a spiral notebook as he watched the MSNBC stock market ticker on a silent TV. Tinny European club music leaked from his headphones.

Jeff was going to be a millionaire any day now. The only person I knew who hadn’t been wiped out by the crash. I didn’t understand a thing about what he was doing, tried to listen when he rambled on about finances. But we’d been best friends since college and regardless of the corporate games he was playing now he was a good roommate and still killer fun to go drinking with.

Besides I’d only booked three acting jobs in the last year. Two Safeway commercials and an episode of This Gun for Hire. SAG minimum pay, so I was perfectly happy to

stick around and wait for him to make that million and buy our first place in the Hollywood Hills. He pointed at the tv, and continued scribbling, his pencil making a dry scratch against the paper.

Celeste was dressed in a body hugging tank top, and she messed with a deck of tarot cards she had spread across the coffee table. “It wakes,” she said, she said, gathering the cards again to shuffle. “Big night last night?” She had started at Long Beach two years after we did, and she and Jeff had dated before he came out of the closet. They were pals now, in a way that only exes can be. It was weird. She lived off of PCH and did tarot readings, pet therapy and something she called “spirit greetings.” I couldn’t believe she made a living at it, but she had a string of bored housewives and c-list actors who paid her to play swami, and last year she had bought a sweet one bedroom condo just a mile down the beach from the Malibu compound. My Mormon parents had never set foot in it, having disowned both of us by this point; their age-of-Aquarius, hippie dippy daughter and their gay actor son had shattered their dreams of missionary work, grandkids and temple marriages.

She handed me a card. A drawing of a man in medieval garb falling into a well. The Fool.

“You go out too much,” she said. “I’m worried.”

“I think I have gonorrhoea.”

“I sensed something was wrong. Your aura is gray and red.”

“That’s not the only thing that’s the wrong color today, believe me.”

“You sure?”

“There’s no other possible explanation for what’s going on down there.”

She grabbed the card back. “Shit, I’m sorry. It was a joke.”

Jeff pushed his headphones back. “I’m putting a grand on Netflix. Bastards keep raking it in,” he said, then noticed we weren’t talking. “What’s going on?”

“He has gonorrhoea,” Celeste said, before I could talk.

“Well that sucks.” He looked at the screen then back at his notebook and started scribbling again.

“Jeff are you listening?” I asked.

He looked back at me, distracted. “Yes. Sorry. You have the clap. Hooray. So go to the doctor.”

“I don’t have insurance. I don’t have any fucking money.” I realized I sounded a little shriek-y and lowered my voice. “It’s Saturday. No doctor’s office is open. I guess I’m going to the emergency room?” I imagined myself covered with festering sores, gasping for breath, nurses in wimples hovering around me in a quarantined Victorian hospital.

“Calm down,” he said. “You’ll be there all day. Don’t do it. Go to the County health clinic. Hollywood and Gower. Get a shot. It’s over.”

This was not the first time Jeff had told me to calm down.

“How do you know this shit?”

“I walk past it from the subway on my way to work.”

Jeff made five times what I did and still rode the subway. The Los Angeles Subway. Something a lot of people would insist didn't exist, yet there was a stop just a few blocks from our house. When we moved in, we had joked that it was a fake, a set for a movie shoot, but after a few weeks when no craft service trailers had appeared, and no one had reported any celebrity sightings, we had ventured down the escalator to see if there was actually a train running under this strip-mall lined stretch of First Street. There was. It even went a few places, and connected to a few more lines that went a few more places. So, relieved I could save a little money, I'd sold my old Volkswagen and gotten a transit pass. Jeff said he did it for the environment.

"It's three blocks from the studio. Just down from the Pantages. Old Hollywood. Very retro."

He was a studio accountant. I waited tables at a fake '50's diner in Los Feliz so I could get to auditions.

"It sounds horrible," I mumbled. "Trashy. I'll wait it out at the hospital."

"Look who's talking trashy," he laughed. "It won't be that bad. You'll be in and out, and free beats a thousand dollar emergency room bill."

Celeste just messed with the cards.

I thought about sitting in a waiting room full of the dregs of what our beautiful city had to offer as they joned for meth or whatever else people did at free clinics, and cringed. Then I thought of the hours it would take to be seen at the hospital, and the possibility of having to piss again before I had pain meds. I almost threw up.

"You up for a drive?" I asked.

“Mustang’s out of commission. I took out the old carburetor but haven’t put the salvaged one in yet. Take the train. You’ll be fine.”

Jeff and I were working on a '68 Mustang. Well, he was. I was watching and learning and pretending I knew what I was doing. It made great bar conversation anyway. Won you huge masculinity points.

“You guys want to come with me anyway? I’m kind of freaked out.”

“We told Dave and Karen we’d meet them at Café Stella,” Jeff said.

Jeff and Celeste still went on dates like they were a couple. Celeste told me once that Jeff’s homosexuality was fluid, flexible, an echo of his being female in a former life. Mine was more set in stone. And people paid her.

“Who did you catch it from anyway?” Jeff asked, the first sign of interest registering in his voice.

The question burned me up.

“How am I supposed to know? It’s not like people tell you this sort of thing before they go down on you. And don’t be such an asshole. I thought you were my friend,” I said,

Celeste put a hand on Jeff’s arm. “Be nice. We can cancel lunch. I’ll come with you,” she said.

I realized I wanted to be alone. “I’ll be fine,” I said.

Celeste took both my hands in hers. “Take in my energy. Be healed,” she said.

Jeff stood up, shaking his head, and walked toward his bedroom. He ruffled my hair as he walked past. "You'll be fine," he said. "She's crazy."

They left while I was showering and I got dressed in silence and walked outside. The lawn of our thirties Spanish bungalow was brown and bare in patches as it led up to the cracked and weed-filled sidewalk of our block: an endless row of houses exactly like ours, most in disrepair, all with bars on the windows. Echandia Street curved dramatically downhill toward the main business drag of Boyle Heights, the slope propped up by a crumbling, cream colored stucco retaining wall that was covered with Spanish graffiti that had been painted over and painted over until it had become a palimpsest of L.A. gang history going back decades.

At the bottom of the hill, First Street was a treeless, flat strip of taquerias, check cashing stands and churches with names like "Fuego de Salvacion." We'd looked at this as temporary when we'd moved in, a fixer-upper to turn a profit with, and we constantly talked about moving those first few months, but everyone on the block knew us now, knew that we partied, that we didn't care about a little noise, that we didn't call the cops, so no one gave us shit or tagged our gate anymore, a rite of passage in gangland. It wasn't so bad, and with the housing market in the toilet there was no way to sell, so we decided to hold on and save money until it turned around. A few of our neighbors had even started talking to us.

We lived across the street from three brothers who took care of their mother and grandmother. We'd been drinking in our yard, messing around with the Mustang last Sunday, and they'd said hello and asked about the car. They had a '72 Impala convertible and a '66 El Camino in various states of repair, so we'd shot the shit about wheels and engines, shitty movies that got filmed in our neighborhood, and the

fucking LAPD. Jeff had gotten a twelve pack out of the fridge and we'd all had a couple. Later that night their mother had brought us a pink pan dulce covered with sugar sparkles.

One of the brothers was in his front yard now cutting back a banana palm that had started going brown. I stepped out of the shade of our unmanageable rogue fig tree into the Southern California sun and instantly broke a sweat, envious of the Mexican women at the bus stop, who huddled under huge parasols covered with images of the Virgin Mary or Sponge Bob, waiting to be taken to the West Side to clean toilets, and indulge the demands of white children who had never heard the word "no." He waved at me and I walked over, a little nervous, but optimistic about how friendly they'd all been the week before.

"What's up, Brendan?" he asked as he lowered the clippers.

"Hey, Eduardo." I'd heard his family call him "Lalo," but I didn't think I was allowed to yet.

"Where you walking in this crazy heat?"

"Not walking. Errands. No big deal. Taking the subway."

"You're gonna burn up, man." He said. He was about my age, fit, wearing the neighborhood uniform of wifebeater and Ben Davis khakis. Handsome enough that he made me nervous.

"I'll be all right."

"You want a ride? Was thinking about running the El Camino around. Found an

original radiator at the salvage yard on Mission. Almost no rust. I just put it in. Been wanting to test it out.”

I thought about my looming horrible errand, the pain still on the tip of my tongue. Of course I couldn't go with him. But Jeff and I had agreed that we should try to be as friendly as possible now that the ice was broken, so I stood there stupidly making small talk.

“We just found a carburetor there,” I said, “that place is a gold mine. Jeff's going to be working on it this afternoon. Might be able to take it out later.”

“Cool that's a sweet little car. Let me know if you want any help with it.”

“Definitely, man.” I turned slowly, trying not to jostle anything in my pants. “Well, I guess I should get moving.”

“I said I'd drop you off, man. I meant it. Where you going?”

He took a step toward me. I imagined him shooting me and dragging me to a dumpster.

“Hollywood. Got to...” I fished for a logical reason to need to go to that part of town.

“I need to drop off some paperwork.”

I cringed at how unoriginal the lie sounded. My improv coach would have screamed at me for being so vague and obvious. At least I'd brought my backpack with a few books for the waiting room. I could pretend there were papers in it.

“Seriously, I got nothing going on,” he said. “We can take the 101 and really open her up.”

“Okay then,” I said, nodding in fear, before I realized what I was doing. So that was settled, I had a gangland escort to the clinic.

He dropped the clippers and walked over to the arched adobe porch.

“Mama,” he yelled through the screen door, then rattled off a few sentences in rapid-fire Spanish well beyond my second year high school comprehension.

I heard a female voice answer just as rapidly.

“It’s cool you take care of her and your grandma,” I said, then cringed at how stupid I sounded.

“Why wouldn’t I? We’re family,” he said

“No. I didn’t mean you wouldn’t. Sorry. It’s just nice.”

I waited for him to punch me. He just shook his head.

“You white people care too much about being independent or whatever,” he said.

“Family is family. You take care of your own.”

I nodded, trying to avoid further embarrassment.

The El Camino had been beautifully restored. Glossy red body with contrasting ivory panels. Chrome perfect. Not a scratch. Tires so sleek and liquid black that they looked like they’d never touched asphalt.

I got in on the passenger side and dropped my backpack between my feet.

Lalo revved the engine, a loud, deep rumble. Heat, gasoline and oxygen making

magic.

“Nice,” I said, relaxing a little. “You got some power under there.”

“I dropped a Corvette engine in it. Over 500 horsepower. Wait till we hit the road. You’ll see.”

He slowly backed out of the driveway and waved at the women under their parasols as we rolled past the bus stop at a crawl. They all waved back except a pretty young girl who shook her head and turned away.

He rolled to a stop at the end of our street, the bus stop just visible in the rearview mirror, then floored it as he turned onto First. I looked over at the speedometer as he blew through the first light. Sixty already and we weren’t even on the freeway.

“Roll your window down so you can feel the speed,” he said as he pulled onto the entrance ramp at the next light. I did, and fell silent as I let the rushing wind knock me back in my seat. Laughing, he merged into the light Saturday morning traffic, and we blasted past the unimpressive little cluster of skyscrapers that masqueraded as downtown LA, curved past Dodger Stadium and sped past the fountains of Echo Park Lake. He weaved in and out, passing cars dangerously close, using all six lanes as if the road were his own private test track. He had hit 90 as we curved around the smaller skyscraper clump of the Mid-Wilshire district, the overpasses now covered in Korean graffiti rather than Spanish, the car swerving and lurching like a coyote chasing down a rabbit.

The Hollywood Sign loomed over us from Mount Lee, and he slowed as we approached the Gower Street exit, then glided to a smooth stop at the light.

“What do you think?” he asked, panting, exhilarated.

“Amazing. Fucking Awesome. Jesus,” I said. I realized I was smiling like an idiot but it didn’t matter. “You’re a crazy man.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” he said. “I think I did a pretty damn good job.”

He turned under the freeway and drove past a pile of abandoned derelict furniture toward Hollywood Boulevard.

“Where do you need to go to?” he asked.

“Oh just drop me anywhere along here. I have to go to a couple of places. My agent’s over here, and I have to take care of some other stuff.”

Stupid. My agent was in the valley. But he wouldn’t know that.

We slowed to a stop at a traffic light right in front of the clinic. 1970’s two story tan stucco. Huge white letters. Los Angeles County Department of Health. Totally clashing with the arabesque detail of the Taft Building next door.

“No worries, man. I’ll take you. I got nothing going on. You shouldn’t have to walk around in this heat.”

“It’s really no big deal. I’m actually going to that insurance office right there,” I said, pointing across the intersection to the first business I saw.

The light turned green and he pulled through and parked in a loading zone in front of a crowd of tourists, all bending down to read the names in the pink granite stars that ran for miles down the sidewalk. Names no one remembered. The office was dark.

“They’re closed, bro.”

“Well I can drop them through the mail slot I guess then I’ll walk over to my agent’s office. We have a meeting scheduled.” I grabbed my backpack and pulled it up to my lap.

“If you’re sure,” he said.

“Yeah. Thanks for the ride. Awesome. Really.”

“It’s cool.”

He looked away as I stepped out of the car and walked slowly toward the office, fumbling in my backpack for something to push through the mail slot. The car accelerated and disappeared into traffic, so I turned and ran past the spindly row of date palms that lined the street, back toward the clinic.

The nurse was short and thin, her cream colored scrubs dotted with teddy bears. She stabbed me with the needle so quickly and fiercely that I staggered against the table I was leaning on. “Don’t have sex for ten days. Don’t drink alcohol for a week,” she said, her tone abrupt, disconnected. “And try to be a little smarter about this shit,” she added as I pulled up my pants.

I walked out through the linoleum tiled waiting room, past people in orange plastic chairs whose sex lives I couldn’t imagine, through the glass doors to the street. Lalo stood leaning against his car smoking a cigarette. I froze.

“Why did you lie to me, bro,” he said. I imagined the dumpster again. “Look, if you’re going to the clinic you don’t have to be embarrassed, right?” he said, a big grin

cracking his face.

"I. I, just felt like an idiot," I said.

"Get in the car." He pitched his cigarette.

"What did you catch?" He asked as we entered the Hollywood freeway for the second time that day. I hesitated. "Sorry. You don't have to tell me that's cool. I understand. My brother Jorge caught some shit once from a skank he met at a party in Alhambra. He didn't want to tell anyone 'cause he was so embarrassed, and he let it get worse and worse. By the time we got him here he was screaming for mercy." He paused. "Does your boyfriend know?"

"My boyfriend?" His question caught me off guard.

"You know. Your roommate. Aren't you guys, you know?"

"He's not my boyfriend. I mean, yeah we are..."

I paused. Nervous. I'd been out since my sophomore year of college but couldn't say 'gay' to my neighbor. "Um, we're just friends."

"Didn't mean to piss you off man. I wasn't sure."

"It's okay. I just don't know how to talk sometimes."

We passed the stadium again, the vast parking lot empty. Not baseball season yet.

"You know you don't have to mess with that shit, right?" Lalo said.

"I know man, wrap it up next time." I forced a smile.

“Well yeah, of course, but I mean, you don’t have to run around like that, is what I meant.” He paused for a moment and looked at me. “You’re a cool guy,” he said.

“Maybe we could hang out together sometime. I don’t know. Work on the cars. See a movie or something. Keep you out of trouble.”

I was stunned. Was he asking me out?

“Okay. Yeah. That sounds really cool.”

“Rad. How about this week sometime?”

“Well, I’m not supposed to do anything with anyone for seven...”

“You think I’m trying to get in your pants?” He clenched the wheel and glared at me, the car swerved into the breakdown lane a bit. I wondered where he kept his gun.

He corrected and we passed a cluster of Harleys, their engines drowning out all conversation.

“Not everything is about sex, bro. I was thinking we could just hang out,” he said after the noise died. “You know, go on a date.”

“No, that’s totally cool. Sorry. I’m a fucking idiot.”

“So get smart,” he said. “I think you’re cool. How about next weekend when you’re feeling better?”

“Sounds great.”

As we drove on he talked about his family and his job working for the city. I told him about growing up Mormon in Orange County. He pulled into his driveway and killed

the engine.

“I’ll stop by on Friday,” he said.

I got out of the car, trying not to grin like an idiot, and walked across the street in the burning sun toward the shade of the fig tree, sweat running down the back of my shirt.

Author Bio

Kent Quaney recently completed the master of letters program at the University of Sydney, and is now a doctoral candidate in the fiction writing program at the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Writers. Kent’s work has most recently appeared in the *SoMa Literary Review* and *Q Salt Lake*.

Citation: Quaney, K. 2012. ‘Burning Up’, *Polari Journal*, 5 (April 2012), www.polarijournal.com/resources/Quaney-Burning-Up.pdf (accessed <insert date>).