

Reconciliation

At nine o'clock on a particularly blistering summer Sunday morning, Andre stood squarely in front of his neighbor's waist-high chain link fence. He cleared his throat and shouted, "Hello there, sir!"

From inside the house, a surly octogenarian peered through his screen door. "Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Andre. Just thought I would come over and check up on ya."

"I don't need anyone to check up on me. You least of all." The man's gravelly voice gurgled like a lion roaring underwater. He narrowed his gaze on Andre, "I don't trust your kind."

Andre shook his head and grinned. He never knew how to respond to this sentiment. As the smile faded from his face, a massive barking doberman tried to break through the man's screen door. The dog sustained a cacophony—much the same way that libraries don't.

"Nice pooch ya got there!"

The old man didn't flinch. "This is Francis. She also doesn't like people who look like you."

Andre flashed his quick eyebrows and let out a little laugh. Then he launched a response over the incessant barking, "How come you know that!?"

The old man's eyes narrowed further, "Because she doesn't like *anyone*."

"You know, I'll bet you ten dollars your dog'll come over here and let me pet her belly."

The old man scratched his mismatched stubble. Then he looked to the murderous bloodhound biting his screen door. A wild and toothless smile overtook his face.

“I’ve never been one to turn down a sure bet. Even if I am a little tight on cash. Why don’t you open that gate over there, and come into the yard. Then I can let ole Frannie have a running start at ya.”

Andre smiled and said, “Yessir, no problem.”

Unlatching the gate and walking into the chainlink arena, Andre momentarily felt like the convict he used to be.

“Now, you’re sure you want to do this? I don’t think there’s a snowball’s chance in Mexico you can hop that fence if she gets a bite into ya.”

Thinking of snow capped Mexican mountains thousands of feet above sea level, Andre nodded. “Unleash the beast.”

The old man shook his head and cracked the door. The dog launched herself towards Andre, foaming at the mouth. Who knows how much she had to eat over the past week? Andre looked on in admiration as her muscles expanded and contracted inside a beautifully shiny black coat. In a fraction of a second, Francis was mere inches from her challenger’s face. Andre could count each of the wonderful jagged teeth inside Frannie’s murderous cavern.

At the exact moment before Frannie reached him, Andre reached into his pocket and produced a singular gravy-coated milk bone. The dog snatched the treat from his hand and gobbled it up in the same amount of time it took her to leap off the front steps. Francis then tackled Andre, giving him a lovely amount of slimy licks to the face.

The old man’s jaw slacked as his eyebrows contorted. Andre let out a hearty chuckle and petted Frannie’s belly.

And so, the Sunday routine had begun. The next stage would include Andre apologizing to the old man, Barry, and spinning a tall tale about his magical abilities to speak with animals.

To make amends for hustling the poor old man, Andre offered to mow the lawn. Barry always refused at first, but Andre knew Barry liked his lawn kept tidy.

Barry showed strong symptoms of dementia, but hadn't been to the doctor's office in six years. He hadn't even left his house in five and a half. But Andre had been assisting him for a while now. Ever since he got parole. Each Sunday morning, he would wake up and head over to the old man's house. Each time, he had to win Barry back over. Although those words always gave him pause—*I don't trust your kind*—Andre knew they came from a temporarily twisted mind. In all fairness, Andre couldn't blame Barry for hating how he looked any more than he could blame himself for the tattoos chiseled on his face and throat.

A

While Andre was mowing the lawn, he couldn't keep himself from thinking about Barry's son. Certain Sundays, Andre found it easy to ignore the memory of Vincent. But with the sun burning so hot in the dead of summer, Andre found himself reminded about the day his best friend had died.

In the end, Andre took the sentence. Vincent took the bullet. Things hadn't worked out like either thought they would. But as Andre cut small ridges back and forth on the lawn, he wondered if things between Vincent and Barry ever could have been different. After all these years, would Vincent ever have returned to take care of Barry like Andre did? After Barry kicked Vincent out so many years ago, that would have been unthinkable. But here Andre was, taking care of the person who rejected his best friend years ago.

Andre flipped the power switch on the mower. Sweat dripped from his burly shoulders as the sun climbed even higher in the sky. Despite the noise of the mower, Barry had nodded off a few times while the grass was being cut. His small but once proud house was beginning to sag.

Andre noticed the roof tiling coming loose in multiple places. He promised himself he would repair it once the weather changed. But for now, he needed to get out of the sun.

He called up to Barry, “What do you think?”

“You did a great job, boy. Looks like I got the best of...” Barry searched his mind, unable to pick up on the thread exiting his mouth.

“We made a bet, sir. I lost and had to mow your lawn,” Andre lied.

Barry nodded with eyes glazed over. This had been happening more often recently. Now a different, cooler sweat covered Andre. This was always the tricky part—retrieving Barry and Frannie’s weekly supply of food. He always worried Barry would reject him at the gate, forcing him to start the ritual over again.

“Hey, sir?”

“What’s that?”

“I lost my dog a month or so back. I have a bunch of extra dog food I need to get rid of. You mind if I bring it over for ole Francis?”

Barry looked at Francis sitting on the porch, tail wagging. “Whaddaya say, girl? Want a little extra food in your bowl tonight?” Francis tilted her head.

“That would be just fine with us, boy.”

Andre nodded. He moved quickly. He had everything bagged up: Francis’ food by the door, two plastic bags in the fridge, two on the counter. As Andre practically ran towards the chain link fence, the cold sweat on his neck made him think of the morning he lost Vincent.

Andre was in a hurry when he moved off the front steps that morning, too. Although Andre and Vincent had gotten tattoos to mark their allegiance, they still needed to stick up some random

joint for full status in the BSK. Vincent had always aimed to join the Bluffside Kings. Andre was never sure. But on that day, things had already been set in motion.

Andre remembered how worried he was to ask Barry if he knew where his son was. Barry was irate seeing his son with a face disfigured by snakes and the ink they were forged in. The morning Vincent died, Barry threw his son out for good. Andre's mind replayed the look of genuine fear masked by stubborn self-assurance in Barry's eyes when he came looking for Vincent. Andre's mind replayed the events of that night as he gathered the items for Barry. Hardened by his resolve to help Barry and Frannie, Andre pushed the thought of Vincent's death out of his mind.

N

Andre came into Barry's line of sight as quickly as possible.

"Ah, see girl, there's the food!"

Andre breathed a huge sigh of relief. Now it was time for the next step. Today, he was lucky again. Barry allowed Andre to enter the house. Walking inside, Andre breathed the familiar scent of sickly stale air. He put the food in the fridge and cabinets, always in the same places. Then he put two cigars in a special box and a bottle of bourbon on another table.

Barry mosied through the house and looked around, surveying this strange new-old place. His eyes lit up when he saw the bourbon.

"Ah, I forgot I still had this bottle. What do you say we sit on the porch and have a drink? I'd say you earned it, son."

This was the key. As long as Andre could get a glass of bourbon into Barry's hands, it no longer mattered what he looked like. At that point, he didn't have to be an intruder anymore. He could be Barry's friend. "It'd be my pleasure."

Barry smiled honestly for the first time that day. “Now what good is a drink without a smoke? Do me a favor and look in that dusty box. That’s where I keep the good ones.”

Andre walked to the porch after gathering the cigars and glasses. The old man smiled again, “A gentleman of my taste! One ice cube. Just how I like it.”

The two started on the whiskey and cigars. Andre looked out at the lawn. He had done a good job. He exhaled a plume of pride and smoke.

Now it was time for the portion of their routine when Andre didn’t know what would happen. Sometimes Barry would sit in almost complete silence, save the occasional: ‘top me off, will ya?’ Other times Barry could reach back in the supposed empty recesses of his mind and tell stories of his childhood. Even though those special moments had become increasingly rare recently, Andre would let Barry speak for as long as was possible. It was healthy for Barry to remember what he could. But Andre has always feared the arrival of next words that came from Barry’s lips.

“You know, my son had tattoos. Just like yours.”

Andre’s stomach twisted, just as it did in that weekly moment of self-doubt, right as Francis lunged at him.

“Is that so?”

Barry spat. “Senseless—the way he died.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“He was shot by a convenience store owner. On the same day I told him I never wanted to see him again.” Barry shifted and a small noise escaped his throat. It was one of those indiscernible creaks, just like the ones that escaped occupied adirondack chairs in the dead of summer. “My boy, I spend my days in a fog. I often find it extremely difficult to remember

where I am, to tell you the truth. But I can tell you one thing—I will never forget what my son looked like when I pried open his casket.”

It never got easier hearing this. When Barry didn't speak after his comment, Andre reminded himself that Barry never elaborated further after this admission. He could be safe if he let silence linger. But in a Sunday routine Andre had perfected, this day presented an aberration.

Barry pushed through the silence, “You see, the thing about losing your memory—it strips you of everything. You live in an impenetrable fog.” The old man sipped his bourbon and stared into the street. “But every once in a while, that fog clears for a moment or two. When you spend so much time wading through nothingness, small clarity feels as though you have reached a lucid island. One that can truly save you. And when you finally touch something from your previous existence, you find an overwhelming sense of relief.”

Andre reached down to Francis and scratched her ears. Would this be the day he could summon the courage to tell Barry he had been with Vincent the night he died? Would Barry even be willing to listen to how he had grieved the loss of his closest friend, how Andre thought of Vincent in prison—and out of prison—as often as his father couldn't? Would Barry believe that Andre didn't want them to join the BSK? Andre was paralyzed within the fences of his own inaction.

Barry reached into his pocket and produced a gold ring with a red seal, featuring a snake. Andre had seen it before, but never in Barry's hands.

Barry played with the ring in his palm, “I pried open that casket looking for my son. There was nothing left of him. At least—nothing I could recognize. But that's when I saw the ring I had given to him, and took it off his finger. I can't remember to do much, but each morning I remember to take it off my dresser and put it in my pocket.” Barry moved his thumb

counterclockwise over the ring's captivating seal. "The ring lets me remember that my son had lived."

Barry continued to follow the momentum of the ouroboros. He moved in harmony with that singular snake, forever consuming its own tail.

Barry looked out to his freshly pruned lawn, the small world that contained his life since the day his son died.

"I guess... When you spend so much of your time without direction, even keeping close to the person that brought you the greatest amount of pain is a comfort."