

THE CHAIR

"HEY MARLON," Kid called from the garage. "C'MERE AND LEMME TALK AT YA A SECOND." Countless rounds of chemo and radiation had done little to diminish his orator's voice; it thundered through the garage door, through the kitchen, and through the door to the backyard to reach me in the gazebo where I was smoking a cigarette. I had been admiring his handiwork: over the previous decade, he'd transformed our shabby little backyard into a lush paradise, complete with hand-built wooden patio, banana trees, a gazebo, a chair swing, and a raised garden bed where he grew his tomatoes and peppers. He spoke loudly by nature, but rarely bellowed at anyone at full capacity; the range was undeniably impressive.

I felt my blood pressure drop.

"What's up, Kid?" I asked, entering from the kitchen a moment later. He stood in the center of the garage over his latest project: reupholstering Mom's butterscotch leather club chair. By then his hair had gone a ghostly gray, and his body was thin as a reed. After the surgical team removed the softball-sized tumor from Kid's supraclavicular nodes, they reconstructed his neck using a portion of his pectoralis minor; he was left looking more the survivor of a bear attack than cancer, two deep grooves running parallel to the makeshift sternocleidomastoid. A Winston 100 cigarette dangled from his lips, burnt nearly to the filter, ashes still clinging to it in a stubborn cylinder.

His attention was on the deck of the chair, where he'd been pulling out staples from the frame with a pair of pliers. "Take a seat," he said. He wore a white button-down with western style red embroidery, a shirt he once filled out with beer belly and barrel chest, but which hung from him now like the burlap sack on the scarecrow in the backyard.

I sat down in the dusty blue recliner nearest the door and tried to conceal my expression with a sip of coffee. "How's the project coming along?" I asked, hoping a cheerful attitude might soften the incoming blow.

"We need to talk about the porcelain hippo," he said, the tone of his voice so blunt it hit me like a closed fist.

"The hippo...?" I stammered.

"The one in my bathroom. Where I hide my painkillers."

I stared at him without breathing. Both of us knew what Kid would do with a thief who wasn't his stepson.

In the corner, a Pabst Blue Ribbon lantern creaked gently on its copper chain as it spun around, infusing our garage with the malty warm glow of a dive bar. Kid pried loose another staple. The chair was propped up on two pushed together ottomans in front of the TV, its former golden covering peeled back around it like the shell of a tortoise beetle, hand-tied springs an exposed network of steel nerves. The TV was

muted, thankfully, as Sean Hannity was carrying on about Obama using an umbrella, or something.

"What about it?" I asked.

Kid coughed and blew ashes all over the synthetic sagless backing.

"Goddamnit," he murmured, standing from his stool to brush it off. The liver spots on his forehead gleamed like a Rorschach under the light of the garage door opener. He sighed heavily and looked at me out of the corner of one rheumy eye. "Found it tipped over. My pills were scattered all over the shelf. Either somebody got real sloppy, or they think I'm a fucking idiot."

I said nothing. Tried to keep my poker face.

He blew a stream of smoke sideways from the corner of his mouth. "Two days ago I had 25 pills in there. I counted twice to be sure. Now there's only 22. And I haven't had any yet today." The blood vessels in his forehead raised, bulging at me as if his brain was swelling, preparing itself to absorb whatever bullshit I was about to offer.

I shifted in my seat. The garage was sweltering suddenly, the angry red glow of the space heater bearing down on me with its oppressive gaze. "Well, I didn't take them?" I offered, with zero conviction. "Maybe it just fell over and some of them got lost."

Kid snubbed his cigarette in a ceramic ashtray on the concrete half-wall, the ledge of which was lined with bumper stickers -- 'I'M NOT OPINIONATED I'M JUST

ALWAYS RIGHT', and 'RON PAUL 2012: RESTORE AMERICA NOW'. He shook his head slowly, wiping his hands off with a shammy. "Maybe you just don't have any damn respect for me, Marlon," he said. "I reckon that's probably it."

My eyes looked askance, anywhere but his face. I stared at the break action shotgun mounted on the opposing wall. Thought briefly of my cousin committing suicide with a similar weapon, in a grassy median between two busy lanes during rush hour traffic. Above the gun, a Confederate flag. 'The War of Northern Aggression' Kid called it, something something state's rights. Robert E. Lee was a personal hero of his; he'd named his youngest daughter Shelby Lee in tribute. He liked The Allman Brothers and Creedence Clearwater and Lynyrd Skynyrd, and our living room chest was overflowing with guitar chord books covering songs from Eric Clapton to Johnny Cash to Neil Young.

The son of a locally famous surgeon general and an alcoholic mother, Kid was raised primarily by the Buchanan's black maid Mira. From everything I've heard, Mira was a saint, and doted on Kid with all the affection and love that Elizabeth Buchanan was too inebriated and depressed to provide. She taught Kid how to prepare a variety of Southern soul food -- cornbread and collard greens and grits and so forth. This may have insulated him from believing he was capable of espousing any views that could be regarded as racist, even while owning a Confederate flag, and a painting of a young slave girl he inherited from Mira which he placed over the kitchen stove, and a fondness for Hitchcock's Civil War Surplus Store on Main Street in Ashwick, the most racist store I've ever had the displeasure of stepping foot in. He loved the South, warts and all, and like most Southerners, he hated the federal government. Particularly ever since he'd

worked at the White House writing speeches for a Senator during the Reagan administration, which I found very telling.

That said, there wasn't a person on the planet I had more respect for than my stepfather. He had a photographic memory with near perfect recall. He whipped my brother Fitz's ass in tennis directly after they put a chemo port in his chest, chain-smoking Winstons the entire time. Once while deep sea fishing, a baby shark leapt out of the ocean and clamped onto Kid's hand; he punched it in the face to get loose. He was a genuine badass. Yet he talked to people like they were his favorite neighbor, always game for a good story and a fifth of Scotch. He treated my mother especially well, with that old school Southern gentility, and lately he'd taken to referring to me as his son when he introduced me at the trivia shows he hosted, a title I bore with great pride.

"I have nothing but respect for you, Kid."

He pinned me to my seat with his glare. "Who took them then? I checked every square inch of that bathroom. I didn't take three and forget and then knock down my own hiding place. Your mom is out of town. Your brothers haven't been here in weeks."

My throat filled with marbles. I set my coffee down on the fold-out table beside the recliner, hand visibly trembling. "I don't know. How am I supposed to know?"

"C'MON NOW," he shouted, going full Gandalf the Grey. I heard our dog Jackie scramble across the kitchen floor as she fled from the sound.

I went silent. The lantern creaked. The heater purred.

Kid's pliers slipped and missed a staple, gouging the wood. He muttered another blasphemy under his breath. "Hand me that kit under my peg board," he said, pointing at it. "This one's stubborn." I did as he asked, feeling his eyes bore holes through my back as I retrieved the kit. I handed it over and tried to leave. "Sit down, Marlon. We're not finished talking. Not by a long shot."

I huffed and sat back down. "Don't know what to tell you, man."

Kid took a swig from his can of Coke, then opened the kit and took out a claw with a wooden grip. He worked it carefully under the staple in question, jimmying it back and forth and grunting at the effort. Finally the claw end slipped under, and the staple groaned at the application of pressure before it popped free. "Try the truth," he said.

I wondered vaguely if he'd ever used a claw like that on someone when he worked for the CIA, a fact we'd only recently learned when a clearance letter arrived in the mail. Twenty years had passed, so he was now given permission to talk about his time with the agency. Kid claimed he just "trained at the Farm, and shot up a couple boats off the coast of Guatemala", no big deal.

But it was a big deal to us, and certainly to Mom.

I stared past him at the illustrations on the garage door. Each member of the Buchanan/Grundy family had chosen a square to paint with their own design. Mine was a chess board with the word 'THINK' stenciled across it. Mom's was filled with all things

Beatles-related. Shelby drew an intricate crucifix at the base of a tree. Delilah made a sunrise on the ocean, the sort of thing you learn from a painting class on Groupon. Beth's square was solid black, because she never finished it, which we all agreed was apropos. Family friends took up a few squares, too: here a Lord of the Rings tribute, there a Georgia Bulldog. I don't think Fitz ever made one. Sandy's square was a chaotic mess; it began with a microphone and an Atlanta Falcons logo, but due to prolonged use of synthetic marijuana and the subsequent deterioration of his faculties, he'd scribbled over most of it with angry red lines, written 'FUCK MADDUX COUNTY PD' in the adjacent square, and for unknown reasons had sprayed insulation foam into the cracks.

The Brady Bunch, but with drugs, as Schroeder liked to say.

My eyes were on Kid's square. It featured an electric guitar, an Allman Brothers psychedelic mushroom, and the words VERITAS VINCIT printed beneath.

"You know I don't take those pills for fun, right?" Kid asked, coughing into a closed fist. He'd turned his attention to the spool of cotton for the deck's padding. "Ain't fun for me, Marlon. Pills are medicine. Pills mean sickness and excruciating physical pain. When you take 'em just to get your rocks off, man..." He shook his head at the indignity, then rolled out a section of the cotton and retrieved a box cutter from his toolbox.

"I can't imagine what you're going through," I said. But it was hollow. Robotic.

I kept picturing my grandmother in her hospice bed. How she got so thin that the cannula attached to her oxygen tank kept slipping from her nostrils. I pictured my Uncle Jerry, and the purple box on his chest after they removed one of his lungs like a bad piece of fruit. His house was the first place we lived in Georgia. He used to take naps in the butterscotch chair, mouth-breathing in front of Sunday golf with a chubby orange cat in his lap. Something shifted inside me, shame beginning to ooze through the cracks in the walls of my fortress.

"I think I left my cigarettes outside," I said, my chest hurting.

I covered my face with both hands.

No, no, no, no. Don't.

The welt in my throat broke open and I started to cry.

"Hey, hey now..." Kid said, lowering the box cutter.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what the hell is wrong with me," I gasped. "I took your pills. I'm a piece of shit. I'm so sorry."

Kid sighed, his anger sapped. I wasn't fighting fair, and we both knew it. He approached me and laid a hand on my shoulder, offering paternal comfort, which made me feel worse. "Look, man. I get it. When I was young, I stole stuff out of my parents' medicine cabinet all the time."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said, eyes on the floor. "Just promise me you won't do it anymore, alright?"

My hands fell in my lap. I exhaled slowly. "I promise. I'm done with them forever, I swear." And at the time, I meant it.

"Good." He moved away, back to the chair, back to the safety of button twine and nailhead trim. "We'll keep this between us for now. No need to bother your mom with it."

I sniffed, rubbed my nose, pulled myself back together. "Thanks, Kid."

Two days later, after working tirelessly in the garage day and night, the chair was finished. And just in time. Mom returned from her trip to Memphis, where she'd been visiting her sister. Kid had the chair sitting in the living room with a big silver bow on it.

"Oh my God," Mom whispered. She traced her hands along the arms and tested the cushion, marveling at the restoration and the rich oxblood color. It matched her new Mustang in the driveway. It matched her newly painted kitchen. "It's beautiful."

No doubt her mind was filled with many things. It was originally her father's chair. She cried about him at least once a year. And she was crying now. Her emerald eyes shimmered with tears until they ran down her sunburned cheeks, and she kissed Kid on his mouth and chin and brow over and over again until all her pain and abundance and

love was planted there, in the cracks of his weathered face. "You are the best husband," she said, her eyes alight. "How did I get so lucky?" she asked me.

I shrugged and offered a weak smile, trying not to disintegrate. Trying not to let my moral resolve wane, though I could feel it begin to sieve away like sand through the bottleneck of an hourglass. Cold beads of sweat dotted my forehead. My muscles were beginning to cramp. My peripheral nervous system was coming back online, piece by piece, bringing with it the sensation of my nerve endings being stripped raw by a rusty pair of pruning shears. The opioid receptors in my brain began to whisper half-truths and justifications, the proverbial devil-on-the-shoulder, my personal Voldemort.

He found out this time because you self-sabotaged. Left a mess for him to find.

You can be sneakier.

He has an unlimited prescription.

What he doesn't know won't hurt him.

A few hours later, I was back in my parents' bathroom, on the prowl again. The need had opened up inside me like an existential Sarlacc, and into it tumbled everything one might associate with a normal human identity. If I didn't act now, my night would be filled with horrible cramping, restless legs, a stomach ache and a low-grade fever. I'd been through it enough times before.

Just one last time. To help you taper off.

I pictured Kid lying supine on the radiation table, wearing a 3D-printed mesh mask meant to stabilize his head and neck for the nearly two hour treatment. The doctors had to shrink the tumor enough to chop it out of him. He couldn't move, not even an inch, or they would be forced to begin the procedure anew. Valium helped, slightly. But Kid had regaled us with horror stories of his nose beginning to itch a half hour into the treatment, and being completely powerless to scratch it. For an additional ninety minutes.

Man in the Radiation Mask, starring Thomas Kid Buchanan.

He's going to die.

Look how happy he made Mom with that chair, and now he's going to die and leave us.

I'd already checked the porcelain hippo. I'd rifled through all the cabinets and drawers. I'd searched the windowsill, where for a time he'd kept the bottle hidden behind the curtain. I'd dug through my parents' dresser, and the chest at the foot of their bed. I even crawled up into the attic space, however unlikely the pills were to be there.

Look at you. You can't control this. You're a slave.

Oh boo hoo, poor little Marlon, so sad and so afraid.

Pathetic.

Nothing but a worthless little leech, draining your parents dry.

I gave up for a while. I laid in my bed, trembling, sweating, cramping. I knew it wouldn't let up.

Then suddenly it came to me. A junkie's premonition. I had checked every nook and cranny of my parents' bedroom except for their bookshelf. Rolling out of bed, I hurried back and scoured the shelf. I picked the thickest book I could find: 'Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell'. Cracked it open.

Lo and behold, like every cheesy spy movie ever, Kid had carved out the pages to hold his giant amber prescription bottle of oxycodone. The Holy Grail.

I unscrewed the cap and dumped three pills into my open palm. The gel caps were black and yellow, like little hornets. My pulse raced.

He's definitely going to count them, I thought.

But that worry was rapidly consumed by the howling banshee inside me, with its bottomless pits for eyes, the Gimme Monster--*gimme more, gimme more, gimme more, gimme more.*

Down the hatch they went.

And then:

"What are you doing?" came Mom's voice, from the adjoining hallway. My adrenal glands split open like the South Fork Dam, and the incoming euphoric rush from the pills was caught in the deluge. I screwed the bottle cap back on and replaced the

stash in the book, but she was in the room before I could clap it shut. "Marlon?" she said, incredulous. Her face looked the way it did when I was five and she caught me peeking at the Christmas presents hidden in Grandma's closet.

She was supposed to be on a phone call with work. How had I not heard her coming up the stairs? "Uh..." I stammered, my tongue thick in my mouth. "I was just looking for something...to uh...read..."

"No you weren't. You're in here taking Kid's pills," she said. "You're in here stealing medicine from my sick husband." She closed the door behind her and saddled up next to me, her mouth reduced to a thin, vengeful line. She looked like a blonde Annie Oakley, ready to tan my hide. She seemed to grow double her normal size in my periphery.

I cleared my throat and tried to think of what to say. I held the book in both hands as if I might escape into it, hide in there with the pill bottle. I thought of the Bible. I thought of being spanked that Christmas. Of confession in Sunday School. I thought again of the break action shotgun mounted in the garage.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself, son?" Mom asked.

I exhaled slowly. "I'm a terrible person, I guess."

For a moment I thought she might slap me in the face. She inhaled sharply through her nose and looked away from me. "You have betrayed us. You have betrayed *me*."

"I know."

She gnawed at her lip. "We don't even make you pay rent or anything to live here. Do you have any idea...?" She trailed off, before erupting into tears. Jagged sobs she attempted to quell with the heel of her palm against her mouth. I moved to give her a hug but thought better of it. "I want you to go downstairs and wait in the living room, Marlon," she said, once she could speak clearly. "I need to think about some things."

I nodded. Awkwardly returned the book to its place on the shelf. Then brushed past her on my way out the door.

I sat in the newly upholstered club chair, my palms sweating hard against the red leather. I felt impossibly small in it. I prayed it would open like a python's jaw and swallow me whole. I could live out the remainder of my pitiful existence imprisoned in its belly under the springs, where I belonged.

Mom and Kid entered the room together, faces grim. They sat on the couch opposite me, the hand-carved Japanese room divider behind them, European antiques to either side. Both wearing Minnetonka slippers. A Russian carpet at their feet. Snow globes and hippos and other trinkets on the mantel above the fireplace. Their living room might've been a catalog from World Market, as designed by Southern white people in a lower middle class suburb.

Mom had her oversized plastic mug of grape Crystal Lite, for comfort. "So," she began. Beside her, Kid massaged his own chest and shoulder, which appeared to be giving him a bit of a bother. Mom leaned forward with her forearms on her knees, cupping the mug, full on manager mode. "We had a long talk."

The break in the dam inside me was still chugging away, flooding my senses. My toes and fingers went numb. I felt like throwing up, maybe. "Okay," I said.

Mom looked to Kid, who offered her a reassuring nod. She took a deep breath. "I always said I didn't want to be one of those mothers who kicks her own kids out on the street. Not for any reason. But now..." She bit back another pang of heartbreak. "My first priority has to be Kid and his health. That is the only way he has a chance of beating this awful disease. And you're twenty-six years old, Marlon. You're not a little boy anymore. It's time you started acting like a man."

"Yeah, you're right," I said. Not sure what else I could offer.

"We will give you a month to make arrangements elsewhere. In the meantime, we will be buying a safe to store Kid's pills in. Under no circumstances are you to enter our bedroom or bathroom again, for any reason other than to speak to one of us. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

Mom paused to sip her Crystal Lite. "You obviously have a problem with these. How long has this been going on?"

I sat very still. The torrent inside me had begun to dissipate, my insides untangling. "A few years. Off and on. Started when Grandma died." I didn't tell her that it was Fitz, primarily, who supplied me with them. And I certainly didn't tell her that the night we found out about her passing, we went to Fitz's apartment for 'a brotherly time of mourning', i.e. crushing a handful of oxy under a whiskey glass and snorting three rails a piece.

Mom was searching my face like I was someone she hardly recognized. "I can't afford to send you to rehab, baby," she said. She didn't seem angry anymore, but deeply fatigued. "So I want you to attend weekly meetings, at either AA or NA or both. Whatever you need to do."

"Okay. I can do that."

I was relieved that the secret was out, truth be told. But some part of me wished Kid had hit me, or Mom had followed through and slapped my face. I needed reconnection to my body, to my sense of self. Little Marlon, still expecting corporal punishment. This felt like a light sentence.

She seemed to have run short on her list of demands, and for a while the three of us merely sat there, everyone feeling lousy. "Do you want to say anything, honey?" Mom asked Kid.

He cleared his throat. "Well," he said, his expression gentler than I expected. "I want to see you get back to your life, Marlon. Maybe go back to acting. You need something to occupy you. You're too damn smart to be wasting time with this crap."

Mom nodded in agreement. "And that's a very high compliment coming from him, as you know."

I nodded also, though I felt anything but smart at that moment. "Thank you. I'm sorry I let you down. I want to get better. I want to do better. Ya'll don't deserve my selfish ass making your lives any harder. I'm just -- I'm sorry."

"It hasn't been all bad," Mom said, forcing a smile. "You've been a big help most of the time." They looked at each other. They looked at me.

And that was the end of it.

Kid died in 2014, at home in a hospice bed, in what used to be my old room. Mom was washing his feet. I was looking right at him when he exhaled for the final time. I've been compulsively counting my breaths ever since.

Mom died two years later. Turned out she'd been growing tumors in her lungs and brain for quite awhile. When she first got the diagnosis, her initial expression was one of profound calm, as if at long last, her grief had been assuaged. She wanted to be with her husband.

Neither of them saw their 60th birthday. They are buried together at Arlington Memorial, with some of their ashes in urns we keep on a shelf in Del's house. Shelby left two places empty for them in the front row of her wedding ceremony, in tribute.

The chair sits in Del's house too, in the corner adjacent to the fireplace, red as a kidney bean against the smoky gray of her walls. Del's Rottweiler puppy likes to take naps in it on her back, belly exposed, awaiting scratches. Sometimes I sit there with my five-year-old nephew and read him a story.

Since he was born, I've stayed clean. I even quit smoking cigarettes.

The chair reminds me how.