

Omaha James, a young, unshaven black man with wooly thick hair, was crouched down in the back of a convenience store, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. The cold grey brick behind him provided him with a chill that felt similar to his heart.

The old woman restocking ramen noodles stopped and looked at him down the aisle. He looked up at her, blankly, and they shared a moment of mutual awkwardness. She shakily raised a hand to point at his unlit cigarette. Omaha raised a finger and put it over his lips, pursing them.

"Don't tell on me, okay? It's bubble gum. You know...thug life." he said passively. She smiled an awkward smile and let it slide, because it was a small town and everybody knew about everything that ever happened. Sometimes all you could do was not make it worse.

After awhile, Omaha realized that he had been thinking about clouds while indoors. He didn't know how much time had passed, his head tilted back, resting on the wall. The sound that drew him back to Alabama was a couple of cans of Pringles hitting the floor in the adjacent corner of the store. Omaha let his head tilt towards the commotion and saw two young men in their early twenties shoving around a teenaged boy with brightly colored hair. He was backed into a corner and his struggles to get past were moot.

Omaha leaned over a bit and saw the old lady clerk leaning on the counter eyeing them transfixed in fear. Mentally, he noted that she reminded him of a cat hissing at an unwanted human. Frail, very weak, but wary. Tricky.

One of the twentysomethings, let's call him Trucker Hat, slapped the kid in the corner and then grabbed him by the oversized hole in his ear while his friend leaned in close and said something that sounded, to Omaha, vaguely sexual.

Omaha leaned forward and stood up taking the cigarette from his mouth and reaching up to push his hair back. He was reminiscent of a lion, his hair sort of like a mane, adjusting his wife beater and belt as he walked towards the three of them casually, as if inspecting a wild animal. Wasn't too far from the truth.

"Hey, boy, you better-" Trucker spat, interrupted by getting a bubblegum cigarette flicked into his face. He shook his head once in surprise, blinking a little bit. Omaha sighed deeply and reached up to tap his chin, twice, his eyes half lidded and vacant.

A moment later, Omaha found himself back in his corner of the store with two new friends.

He pulled out a pair of cheap sunglasses and put them on his face, but Mr. Trucker slapped them off. "Well that's rude." He replied nonchalantly.

The other person, we'll call him Horse Face, reached out and pushed Omaha back into the wall when he tried to lean forward and get his glasses. Omaha's back hit the concrete hard enough for a thud to occur, but he just smiled softly.

"Be serious. Please take this more seriously." He said, pushing his hair back again and leaning forward, only to be pushed back into the wall.

"Come on, do something. Do something real." Omaha pointed at his chin again, a thin smile etched on his face.

"You can probably stop with the fifth grade shit." he said, some of the frivolity in his voice dissipating.

“Here’s the thing. You, Horse Face, are a minion. You’re following around a guy who’s shorter than you and helping him pick on people because you have zero-“

Trucker interrupted his speech by punching him in the face. Omaha’s face was turned right by the blow, but it did not snap back. Instead his eyes now lined up with the old woman who held a phone in her hand. He raised a hand to her, waving for her to put that down. She didn’t move, but he was fine with that. He just hadn’t gotten to speak his piece. He turned back to Trucker Hat.

“I’m talking to your friend here. I’m trying to figure out if I should kill you where you stand, so just hang on, okay.” He said plainly, leaning over a little to get a good view of the guy behind him.

“ Now, like I was saying, Horse Face, you have zero personality. You are a minion to some bumpkin. You’re so sad that I’m not even going to hurt you, I’m going to just leave you to figure out how to live on your own when THIS fucking clown...” he said, nodding to the man holding him up against the wall, “...is no longer with us.”

“The fuck are you talking about, boy!? I’m fixin to tear your damned head off!” he neighed, bucking up a little bit, his pal Trucker letting go of Omaha and holding him back. Omaha took the opportunity to retrieve his sunglasses, putting them on his face even though he was in a dimly lit little hole of a store. He pushed himself up from the wall again and reached out, grabbing Truckers shoulder, pushing Horse Face back. Horse Face tumbled over a bit, but Trucker spun around, a fist connecting with Omaha’s face again, sending him sprawling back. Trucker held him to the wall with both hands on his shoulders.

Omaha’s glasses were ruined, his left eye lense cracked and half missing. A brown, wide, eye stared out from the gap, his face strained taught in a smile that could only be described as

deranged. Blood ran down the corner of his mouth in a single crimson bead, the red staining his teeth and his expression.

“No! That is not enough...That is NOT ENOUGH!” His voice started low, rising to a scream, reaching up and taking Trucker's hand. When his assailant tried to step back, understandably a little caught off guard, Omaha refused to allow him to. Omaha held his hand with two firmly on his chest, over his heart. His glasses fell from his face and tears from his eyes, running down his smiling face. To him, life was a joke. A joke so funny that it wasn't.

“Come on, Killer. You don't hit a guy you aren't prepared to kill. Come on! Hurt me here. Can you do that? Can you hurt me here, you fucking bitch! You NOTHING!” he yelled, Trucker now pulling hard to escape Omaha's beating bleeding heart.

When the bell sounded from the door opening, Omaha let go and Trucker Hat stumbled back a ways, then froze at the sight of Officer Pender.

This was a small town. News travelled fast. People knew more about your own life than you did sometimes, rumors snowballing out of control, hardships made exquisitely public.

Officer Pender was well known. In their town, there weren't a lot of black men on the police force, but he had been around a long time. He'd spoken at schools and anytime something crazy took place, they'd have him go on tv and speak. Now, he was just sort of pushing around papers and dealing with drunks, his hair and thick mustache peppered with grey, crows feet forming on the corners of his eyes.

“That's enough. Thanks for calling me, Maezy.”

Outside of the store, Omaha sat on a milk crate with his elbows bracing his knees, staring out into the dusty road. Officer Pender was speaking to the two bullies near his car just past the gas pumps. During the part before this, he hadn't spoken a word. Didn't try to tell his side of the story, didn't apologize to anyone except for Maezell, for making a little mess. He was told to just wait there, but his patience was already up.

Omaha stood up and dusted off his black jeans and shoved his hands in his pockets, walking towards the road and continuing on.

He knew how the conversation behind him was playing out.

Town like this, those boys probably hadn't heard about it yet. Young people might be too oblivious to know about something like that, but old folks were making casseroles and saying prayers.

He didn't make it far, maybe a mile down, before Officer Pender pulled up beside him and stopped his car. Omaha stopped walking and looked out off to the other side, into a field. Inside of him, like most black men of a certain age, was the consideration that when a police officer pulls up to you, you might be better off running. He imagined dogs chasing him, oversized shackles on his wrists and actually laughed a single "Ha", before coming back down to Earth and walking over to the car window, leaning down and peering into the open window.

Pender looked at the young man with what he hoped was a neutral expression. They'd already had some terse words. He looked in Omaha's eyes and saw, in his head, the slightest ember of a fire.

"Get in the car."

Omaha sneered "I'm not riding in the back of this thing. I'm not a criminal, yet."

Pender sighed deeply and leaned over to open the passenger side door. Omaha climbed in and shut it. The car pulled off and back onto the road, headed back into town, the man and the boy remaining silent awhile. Omaha's elbow was propped up in the window, his hand covering his mouth. Pender stared out ahead at the road.

A few minutes later they were driving past small businesses, people living their lives out. The ride was quiet, the destination ambiguous. Finally, he spoke.

"You know, people in this town, they feel real bad about..."

Omaha's mouth was still covered by his hand, his eyes dark.

"I shouldn't have fucked with those guys back there." He said, his voice weary. "But they were wrong."

The two were silent a moment longer, but Omaha spoke up again.

"Not often in this world can you look at a thing and say 'This is wrong and this is right'. Honestly, it almost never happens. Is it wrong to steal? Kind of, but what if you have to feed your kid, you know? Is it wrong to cheat on your wife? Maybe, but what if she fucks your brother."

He was quiet again for about a full minute and then, out of nowhere, he chuckled.

"I'll actually never know, now, whether my girl would have fucked my brother. I feel like I got robbed of a Southern tradition."

"Jesus Christ, boy."

Omaha sighed deeply and closed his eyes, leaning back.

“I know that usually nothing ever happens with this sort of thing. Be honest with me. You don’t have enough information to investigate or anything, do you?”

Officer Pender was silent, shaking his head a single time.

“Son, I’m going to do everything I can to find out why this happened.”

“It’s not your fault. I hope you don’t think I blame you. People shoot at each other over stupid shit all the time. This time it was drugs, but I bet you it was just some kids. Kids with shitty parents, living in shitty situations and just barely living, you know? I know how that is.”

Omaha’s eyes weren’t looking at anything real, just following the greens and ambers rolling past the window. Officer Pender must’ve been driving him out to his parents’ home. He couldn’t decide if he would go inside and change into something appropriate for a funeral or if he would go upstairs and try to sleep forever yet. It was hard to make a decision when you felt nothing on top, everything under a thin layer of your heart trying to keep the pot from boiling over.

“But I can’t stop thinking about something.” Omaha said, his voice somewhat ragged.
“If there is someone responsible for this, who do you think it is?”

Pender shook his head again, chewing the inside of his lip for a second before stopping himself. Horrible habit.

“I don’t know, Omaha. You can’t say it’s the parents for sure. Sometimes it’s just one person, trying to do right by their kids. You can say that it is their fault for just having a kid and being unprepared but...that don’t seem right, does it? That’s saying people can’t learn from mistakes.”

“You’re right. You assume that I’m a rational person, who cares about other peoples’

feelings, but okay, fine. So then who?"

Pender sighed again. "I know you. I've seen you grow up. If you didn't care about people, people wouldn't be so worried about you. But they know and I know you're a good kid."

"I don't care about all that. I don't know what I care about. I'm sorry that I'm like this right now." He said, the hand somewhat covering his face moving up to rub his temples. Officer Pender drove silently. He didn't have any words to fix this and refused to burden Omaha with pleasantries.

This was Alabama. Even when grieving, you were respectful, you were polite and you behaved a certain way. Something about hearing Omaha apologize for feeling bad made Officer Pender doubt the worth of words.

In his head, all he thought he could do now was drive Omaha home to someone who could give him a goddamned hug.

Officer Pender parked the car outside of the James residence under the shade of a tree, coincidentally. The two sat in place for awhile, Penders lips taugt, looking out ahead at the two story home the James resided in.

It was a well-known fact that Omaha's grandfather had been something of a celebrity. To the family he had abandoned there had been two contributions. He purchased in full the large

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home in which they lived and then he disappeared again.

Omaha and Officer Pender were both looking at the house, but seeing different things.

He opened the door and slid out, offering a passive thanks before trudging off towards the steps. Pender got out of the car as well and followed him until they reached the stairs at which point Omaha gripped the rail and then sort of lingered. His head was down, eyes closed, fingers drumming the metal twice in quick succession.

“We never figured out who to blame, Officer Pender.”

He let go of the rail and walked out into the dust in front of his place, hands sinking deep into his pockets.

“If it’s not the people who shot the guns, since they were probably some poor neglected kids, and it’s not the parents because maybe they have some great reason for not being around then who? If it’s drugs, what..we go up the line? How high?” he said, shrugging.

“There is no point in sitting here going through this right now. Omaha...the funeral.” He said, struggling.

“There is no point in being alive, if you want to get technical.” Omaha spat, eyeing Pender, daring him to be offended. Daring him to be anything but a punching bag.

“I hate when people die and in movies they’re like, Oh lord, bring back my baby! It’s so stupid. You can’t resurrect people, you can’t turn back time. You just sort of crawl.” He said, finally heading up the stairs and pulling the door open. It wasn’t locked. What could they lose that would matter more than what they were putting in the ground?

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“You crawl along the ground until you forget that life is shit. Pray to heaven, drink a beer. It’s all nothing. I don’t want any of it, though.”

He looked back down at the man who’d given him a ride home and a bent ear.

“Maybe one day, I’ll figure it out. Maybe I’ll figure out whose fault this actually is and then you guys can not have any answers for THEIR families. You can tell THEM that I just happen sometimes. You won’t, Officer Pender, but that is as fair as this gets. Lucky you, I don’t have it in me to do anything about it. I’m a nice fucking kid.” He said coldly, shutting the door behind him and falling away into the darkness of his home, the shadows of things long and thin, hate flooding out of him under the guise of his breath.

Inside the house, no lights were on, but it was only a little after noon so the sun was sufficient enough. Omaha took a few steps in and then used his foot to pull off one of his boots without untying it, the other sliding off of it’s own weight with a few shakes. Coming home, the ritual was almost always the same. His mom would have punched him or yelled at him for leaving his shoes there, but she was somewhere probably dying right now.

He swallowed hard, a hand reaching out to hold himself up, sort of bracing the wall, but it was pointless. He fell into it hard, his body shaking, clutching his own shoulders and sort of rocking.

Omaha woke up to the sound of the drawer across from where he was slumped over being opened, the intimidating presence of his father standing in the dark in front of him holding a silver gun in his hand. Omaha blinked and his head swam a little, but he pushed himself up and tried to stand up. His father reached out and took his hand, helping him get to his feet then drawing him in and holding him in a tight embrace. He felt his father's stubble and smelled his cologne and realized that he had been a much smaller person the last time his father had held him for any reason.

When he let go, he wiped his face of errant tears and then exhaled deeply.

"I'm not ready to go to the damned thing." His father said, exhausted.

Omaha followed his father out back and the two of them sat on the stairs of the back patio, his Dad still holding the revolver in one hand. Omaha sat down and then stared out at the field behind their home.

"What's with the gun? Trying to make the news, old man?"

"It's like the opposite of holding a baby, O." his father said, smiling, if you could call it that.

"I won't see the face of the boys who were shooting, probably for the best. But it feels solid...it feels real. I know the weight of this thing is the weight of a man's life. Sometimes you

need something like that to keep you from just floating the hell away.”

He turned his hand over and opened his fingers for Omaha to pick it up, which he did, gingerly. Omaha held it up and out at nothing for a moment and frowned in a manner that his father felt was reminiscent of the boy being buried not long from then.

“I understand, Dad.” He said, letting his hand drop into his lap, exhaling a deep breath. Holding it made him feel something akin to peace.

Omaha thought that it was a certain freedom. He thought about pioneers and men who conquered the world, holding weapons and to him, it was the freedom of action.

You could go to jail for murder, you could be burned at the stake, but for a moment before that you were just a man holding power in your hands. You were the deciding factor in a situation, God of a moment, and life and death were yours. It was fleeting, he imagined, but it was so true he felt it deep inside himself.

“These things are scary.” He lied, handing it back to his father.

He stood up and held a hand out to his father, helping him get to his feet and they headed inside, where they began the process of getting dressed for the funeral.

They didn’t talk much, but they sort of helped each other get right.

Omaha couldn’t tie a tie to save his life, but his father showed him, again.

He found his father’s nice shoes.

His father didn’t use the gun on himself. Omaha didn’t break his promise to his mother by skipping out on the funeral.

They took silent comfort in still being alive and together.