

## TO THE HILLS

During the long summer months, the city belonged to the men and women that had no home. Luther and John - two men of this circumstance and time - sat along the sidewalk on a flattened cardboard box with all of their belongings before them. A beaten suitcase found on some street corner. An old gym bag, a backpack, sleeping bag and donation jar. They both wore second hand clothes that had not been washed, if ever, and their long greasy hair and black fingernails made them look like castaways. Huddled against the side of the building amongst the trash, much like the cracks of the sidewalk and the broken shards of glass.

Towering skyscrapers eclipsed the sky, and city-folk passed by without notice, as they headed to the surrounding restaurants and shops, a continual stream in-and-out of the corner bodega, taxis whizzing by, lights flashing. On the northern corner of the block, an old boarded up Episcopal church housed a large group of homeless men on its wide stone staircase. They slept covered in torn sleeping bags and army surplus canvas. It was amazing that they could sleep with the city block so busy, but the staircase, tucked back from the sidewalk and behind an iron gate, gave them a dark sanctuary amidst the lights and noise.

Luther watched them with a certain disdain, and he said, "It's a regular Holiday Inn over there. I swear them boys got no shame!"

John, whose head was hunched down as if in some act of commiseration, looked up. His pale blue disconsolate eyes. He asked, "What about us?"

"We're different."

"How?"

"We choose to be here."

"I never chose nothing."

"You're here ain't ya?"

"But they're there."

"But they don't have to be you see, they could be here."

John looked at Luther with reverence as if his words had conveyed great wisdom and he nodded. "Yes they could be here with us."

"Exactly. And they ain't got no alcohol neither, poor bums."

"We're almost out."

"Don't worry, as soon as that there jar gets filled, we gonna take us a little trip."

"You've been saying that all night."

"It may take all night."

John nodded and opened a crumpled plastic pouch and pulled a pinch of tobacco out, and placed it into a paper that appeared in his other hand. He rolled a cigarette, his tongue sticking from the side of his mouth, and then lit it and took a long drag and exhaled. He watched the smoke tendril upwards as if in awe of the sight and said, "Isn't life mysterious?"

"Without God it is."

“With or without, he's just as mysterious. He tells me to persevere. But he also tells me that things are not what they seem. It scares me. And then I wonder if it's really God that I hear or some trick ... ”

“Well, you can't know that. Thinking like that, it can be mysterious. You have a blessing and a curse John, like the prophets of the old. But you must have faith in yourself.”

“I know, but it's a burden. I've been feeling weird. I'm anxious, but I don't know why. I keep thinking about...”

“What?”

“They won't let me you know, they just won't.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

“You talking about a job?”

“Forget about it.”

“No, whatcha mean?”

John was quiet. He looked like he wanted to say something important but was scared to, like a child holding back a secret. Luther pushed him on.

“You can tell me. We're pals.”

“Well, when I was in the hospital last week, they wanted to put me on all these drugs. Said I had some kinda problem.”

Luther's eyes widened. “Yeah?”

“I told 'em I was fine. I just want to be normal you know. Like normal people. I told 'em I would stop the drinking, but that wasn't enough for 'em. They said it was something else. They wouldn't let me be.”

“What did they say was a matter with you?”

“I don't know. As soon as I told 'em that God had told me to stop the drinking, they started acting

funny. It don't matter bunch a quacks.”

“Yep. They want to tell you that it's something wrong with ya, but hell, it's life that's wrong. They act like everything is cherry, and we the ones that got something wrong, but it ain't us. You know at the VA they said I had post traumatic something or other. My nerves was bad. They said I was sick. I kept thinking, 'Hell it'd be unnatural for a man to not be sick doing what I done.' I said, 'To hell with you'll, actin' like you know something just cause you got a fancy degree.' Don't you think it's crazy that a man should care more about his little dog than the thousands that die everyday from hunger? What about them poor bums over there? Don't nobody care. Ain't that crazy?”

“Whose to say though, what is or what isn't, whose to judge?”

“God.”

“But what if you can't be sure its really him?”

“Like I said, one must have faith.”

John stared at Luther with a penetrating intensity, his eyes feverish like ball lightning. As if he were not content with the answer. He reached down and picked up the liqueur and took a drink. The whiskey bubbling, sparkling in the streetlights glow, two-thirds gone, and Luther reached towards the bottle, making to grab it, and shouted, “Damn your drinking it all!”

John wiped his lips and batted his hand away. “This here is mine!”

“But what about me?”

“As soon as that jar gets filled, ain't that what you said?”

“Ah, c'mon now be a pal.”

With a frightening abruptness, John slammed his fists into the ground.

“It's mine!”

Luther looked shocked and scared. His face rigid; the skin pocked like old asphalt. They were

quiet for a few minutes. But soon Luther's face softened.

“I'm sorry. We'll get more alcohol okay, just take it easy. You're scaring me. I don't want to see ya doing anything stupid now. You know what happened with me and Charlie. He was my best friend, and having to look after him and such was hard. I say it just wasn't right the way they hauled him off the street like that, but then let em go, got no place for 'em, and they haul him off the street again. You don't want that now do ya John?”

John shook his head as if to rid some thought and stubbed his cigarette and picked up the bottle, swirling the remaining contents. Luther went one, “Yeah, there you go, have you the rest of that. I don't mind.”

John swallowed the remaining liquid, but instead of the familiar warmth, he felt a sudden pang at the idea of it really being gone. Suddenly, a terrible feeling washed over him as if every bad memory, *every* pain and disappointment, was colluding to form one seamless monstrous whole, swinging up like some terrifying apogee. He felt like screaming, shouting- striking out at the man passing. He began to breath short and fast. Luther asked, “You all right John?”

“How much money we got?”

“A few bucks.”

“Damn. I can't take it!”

“Calm down.”

“I need a drink.”

“Hell, you just had one.”

John started rummaging through one of his bags, his old clothes, his dirt streaked hands, the desperate look on his face.

“What are you doing?”

“Remember when I came up with all that liquor a few weeks past?”

“Yeah.”

“I'm going to run up the street and see what I can find. I'll be back soon.”

“What you gonna do?”

John stood up and looked up and down the block in a panic. “I'll be back.”

“Don't do nothing stupid now, John!”

But just like that, he was gone. Luther left alone with his thoughts. For a brief moment the streets were quiet as if John's departure had left some vacuum behind; the green ash lining the sidewalk swayed, the leaves brushing in a whisper. Tombstones spaced like dark husks along the far side of the church, half hidden by trees, and the large black gate covered in ivy. Luther stared in that direction as if with a stoic acquiescence, and then at the homeless on the staircase. Back-and-forth-and-back. And then he took his hat off and rearranged his bandanna and put it back on and rolled over onto his stomach and pushed himself onto his knees and grabbed the handles of his walker and dragged himself to his feet.

Luther pulled himself down the sidewalk. The large stone stoops of the brick row-houses passed slowly, while cars and taxis whizzed by along the street. At the blocks end he stopped and waited for the light. When it changed, he crossed, and came back up on the other side of the street towards the diner, just a stones throw away from the church. Luther swung open the glass door and entered. Inside the lights were bright. The booths were full. The front counter seats were packed shoulder-to-shoulder, and those closest stared at him with mild disinterest. Luther pulled his pants up and fixed his jacket and struggled towards the bathroom, muttering to himself, while the tennis balls on his walker slid silently across the floor.

There was a line outside the bathroom door, so Luther sat down at an empty table near the back

to wait. He stretched his legs out and massaged them, while others tried not to notice the smell. A few minutes passed and the line got shorter. Luther closed his eyes and nodded for a moment. His reverie was broken when he heard a man in a commanding voice ask, "Sir, are you okay?"

Preening, he opened his eyelids, one, then the other. A man with a name-plate across his shirt that read 'Manager' stood, hands on his hips, looking at him with a scowl.

"Waiting for the bathroom is all."

"There isn't a line."

Luther turned his head as if to evidence the fact, "I'll be damned," and he reached across his shoulder and began to pull the walker towards him. He stopped mid-way and looked back to the man who had turned away while shaking his head. Luther called, "Will you give me a hand here, my legs are about give out?"

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From the ceiling fluorescent bulbs emitted a cool blue sanitized light, a spent bulb flickered. As if to confine the rows of glass bottles below to an endless variance of light and shadow. The plaster ceiling sagged with urine colored rings blossoming outward from its center. The cashier stood behind the front counter with a miniature television propped on a wooden stool beside him. The door opened, letting of a high brassy ring, and a tall skinny man strode through with wild black hair. He was wearing sunglasses and a black sweatshirt and soiled jeans. He nodded to the cashier, and walked towards the back of the store and stopped in front of the vodka and hunkered down to read a label. The cashier watched him as he stood back up and walked to the other side of the store, and then back through the middle aisles as if aimless. He turned the volume on the television down and asked, "Can I help you with something?"

"Do you got a bathroom I can use?"

“It's not for customers.”

The man swayed on his feet, and then stepped backwards and knocked into a display, almost turning over the bottles. He grinned. “Whoops.”

The cashiers face grew serious. “You need to leave.”

“Hold on now, let me just use that bathroom.”

The man headed towards the storeroom door and the cashier shouted at him, “I said we don't have a bathroom!”

“It won't take but a minute.”

John opened the door. The store attendant stepped from around the counter with a wooden baseball bat clutched in his hand, the veins suddenly bulging from his temples.

“I won't be but a minute ...”

“I said we don't have a bathroom!”

But John slammed the door and turned around. Crates upon crates of liqueur were stacked atop each other. A fresh breeze came through the open door that led out to the alley, and two men were unpacking a crate in the corner of the room. One, looking up in alarm, asked, “Who the hell are you?”

John was too surprised to answer, his face frozen, eyes wide and red. The store attendant had begun pounding on the door, and the two men dropped the crate, the big one clutching his hand into a fist.

“Now wait just a damn moment!”

John's eyes darted to a liqueur crate next to him and he jolted forward and grabbed it and rushed out into the alleyway without a moments foresight. Now running, the wind streaking his face, his heart hammering in his chest, all that had been on his mind was gone, the worries, the voices, and nothing seemed to matter but the grip on the crate and outrunning the men who chased him. From somewhere



deep within his mind, there was a relief, finally, something real that he could fight against.

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Luther took his time as he crept out the front door. It was darker than it had seemed before. He readjusted his hat. A metro bus pulled up to the sidewalk and stopped. The door opened and a woman got off, the men outside the bodega, cat calling her as she passed. Then the distant sound of someone yelling.

“Jesus!”

From around the corner of the block, John came running with a cardboard box rattling in his arms. He dodged through pedestrians, while two men in lockstep chased him, spitting off insults and threats. John, seeing Luther across the street, slowed and cried his name. Holding the box under one arm, he waved his hand and started running towards him, but he missed the sharp drop from the sidewalk to the street, and in mid-step, his foot found nothing but air, he locked eyes with Luther as if in sudden realization- their gaze broken by traffic- then him hanging in the air. His descent was freakishly magnified as if frames had been slowed. First, vertical, then angular, parallel now, he lost his grip on the box and it flipped, the bottles flying like bowling pins, and he hit the ground, while the bottles crashed around him in a shower of broken glass and the rich stench of alcohol.

Above and below heads turned and voices shouted. John was lying across the sidewalk motionless, his head turned to the side. The two men stood beside him laughing. The one man poked him in the ribs with his toe.

“Looks like he's not gonna be able to have that drink.”

George nodded his head in approval and replied, “Yes sir looks that way.”

The bigger man spat and stuck his hands in his pockets and asked, “You think he's dead?”

“No, he sure as hell is knocked out though.”

Police sirens sounded from a few streets down. Then blue and red lights flashing. The onlookers had formed a wide circle around the broken bottles, pointing and echoing sentiments. Luther burst through the crowd heaving. The two men looked his way and George pointed and asked, “You know this guy?”

Luther looked at John. He paused and stepped backwards.

“Na, I don't know 'em.”

*March 2011*