

IN THE CHAIR

God, that night was killer cold. Like a bullet, you know? The kind that only comes when the wind whips around the bodega on the corner and stabs you right in the lips when you're all alone in the city. Leaves behind a long and slow burn, like the Man upstairs himself is trying to brand you.

That's where the memory always begins. Cold, lips stabbed, God angry.

Then I go back further.

Back before I had to face the frost, back when I was still waiting in the car. While sitting there, hiding from the elements, I had this surprising picture pop in my head—a time when I was younger, much younger. Back when I was just a boy in Brooklyn during another mean winter, and my old man sent me to work our front lawn. The snow had piled as tall as my little shoulders stood, but he handed me shovel anyway, and we went to work to clear the driveway. I complained and complained and complained, bitched and moaned till he got tired of it and told me to shut up. He said if I was so damn cold, I should push my body harder. He said if I shoveled harder, my body would keep warm and I'd also finish quicker. Then I'd have nothing to complain about. Took me a couple years to see the light but he was right. That man understood work. Taught me to always get the job done.

That night, so many years after such sage advice, I was lazy as all hell, letting the engine pump hot air around me all night. I didn't wanna get outta my cruiser. The warmth hugged me, kept my body functioning so my mind could drift.

After stumbling through that childhood memory, I returned to traversing the mental landscape I lingered most nights—imagining Molly in our bed and baby Ben in his crib. I wondered how they felt snuggled in their blankets. Maybe she was still awake and missing me. I prayed she was keeping warm too.

She's always cold around me now.

I coulda stayed in that car forever, listening to distant sirens and cars humming and the radio buzzing. Inside that metal box, I was home. But when you gotta go, you gotta go. And I knew it was time to go. Time to get to work.

“Paul, it's bath time.”

My reminiscing is cut short. I open my eyes and refocus. The TV is on. That's what I was doing—watching NCIS—but then I fell asleep. I twist my neck to try and find Molly's face, but she's too far back. She's standing somewhere above me. Her shadow reigns over me. It blankets me.

“Let me watch my show,” I say. “It's almost over.”

“If we don't do it now, you'll never get clean.”

She wins. She always does. I blow into the plastic pipe hanging next to my face. After

some humming, the computer built into my chair begins to slowly turn me around. Molly grabs the chair and pulls it to a stop.

She says, “No need for that. I’ll push you.”

As we move, her long, blonde-dyed hair tickles the back of my neck. As it slides and bobs, I can sense the lack of sensation—the distinct point where feeling suddenly disappears—as strands glide over dead neurons.

I get my bath every week on Saturday. She’s missed a few, but I don’t complain. If I complained, she’d have the nurse do it, which I don’t want. I’d rather stink for one extra day. I don’t want a stranger surveying my broken parts.

As we approach the bathroom, the chair hits a bump and she pushes hard against it. There’s a thud, a bounce, and my left arm falls outta my lap.

“Sorry,” she says.

I hate it: how my arm dangles out the chair’s side like a dumb piece of sausage hanging on the butcher’s hook. I want to look away, but I can’t. It’s got me transfixed. I can trace every vein running through it. Blue, thin. A damn river system in a drought. Thin, so thin. Makes me scared—how the muscles have all but evaporated.

She picks up the limp arm with her small hands and places it back onto my lap. Then we continue to roll.

In the bathroom, she always begins the same way. She pulls off my shoes, then pinches my socks, tugging them off one at a time. Always so delicately. I wanna ask “Why?” but I never do. She just takes so long. I can’t feel them anyway. Why does she need to take so long to pull off a damn sock? “Just rip them off!” I wanna scream. But I never say nothing. Never do. Instead, I stare at her kneeling on the ground, her face beside my feet.

Reminds me of a few years back—when she’d tickle my toes whenever she needed a little sugar. Every time I couldn’t believe it. I’d try to grab her and hug her tight and good like a cobra, so I could tickle the back of her neck till she yelled at me and told me that I was crazy. Then we’d both laugh and kiss and embrace and usually a little more would follow. You get the picture. And that reminds me of other times she’d kneel. But the little snake below stays dead.

Next, she pushes a bar of soap across my chest. I twist my neck down to look at my body. My pecs have forgotten what I did to them. I made them suffer; I made them work. Now they’re lazy and flat.

“Baby, I gotta tell you what happened last week. It was crazy.”

I’ve told her to quit her job before. She’s an assistant manager at Duane Reade. Every time I tell her: We have money now... the department gave us plenty of money... we’re fine. But she refuses. She says that they’d be lost without her.

She always tells the same kind of stories.

“Karey is cheating on her boyfriend with a guy named Max. I saw him one time

though and he is gorgeous, like a model.” Max sounds like an ass.

“They need to fire Stan. He leaves early at least once every two weeks because he says his daughter has another piano recital. I don’t even think he has a daughter.” Stan is definitely an ass.

And so it goes, gossip and soap, shampoo and grapevine. Then she’s done. Given my nakedness and slipperiness, she struggles to perch me on the side of the tub, but eventually manages to slide me out. Everything is custom built now—custom ramp, custom sides. I’m not good enough for the normal thing.

She wipes me down and dresses me with new clothes then uses her remaining strength to pull me up onto my chair. It’s a push, drag, push, drag affair. After I’m situated, she turns the chair toward the mirror.

She says, “You look good.”

“Thanks. I love you.”

She squats down and stares at me, her mouth flat. Her eyeliner stretches far past her eyelashes, reaching out to the sides of her face. There are two more bags under each eye and one new wrinkle on her forehead compared to last month. But she still looks good. She could have anyone.

Her stare lasts a second too long.

She breaks it with her goofy smile and a hug. In my ear, there’s a sound so quiet I can’t tell if it is imagination or reality. Maybe she whispers, “I love you too.”

She rises. “You still wanna watch your show?”

I nod.

“Okay.” She wheels me back and turns on the TV. For some time, while she sits by my side, we are on the same level as each other. I sneak a glance at her. Sometimes I wish she wasn’t so beautiful. It would make it easier. But she’s still young enough. Still plenty of time.

She stands suddenly. “Shit, I forget about Ben. I’ll be back in twenty.”

That means she’ll return in an hour.

“Sure. See ya later.”

As she opens the door, a brief flash of outside light stings my eyes. It’s like He is watching, blinding me, cursing me. He is watching, isn’t he? He is. He must be. He’s watching.

Then the door swings to a close. And the light’s gone. The glow of the TV and thin rays of sun peeking through thick window blinds are all that remain.

Sometimes she’ll spend hours with the other moms. I wonder if she’s talking to their husbands too or just looking at them. Groceries take too long too. She’s already gone out for milk three times this week. We could pay for deliveries—we got the money now—but she insists on doing it herself.

I don’t like it when I’m all alone, cause my mind gets too free to wander, but at the

same time I only like it when I'm alone. That's the only time I can be honest.

Every time I'm alone and my head begins to run, I try to remember the old days, the good days, but I can never keep them in focus. Only the worst bubbles to the top. The therapist that was given to me said I needed to meditate or some garbage. That'll never work. Therapy doesn't work for guys like me, workers. After I was injured, she told me I had nothing to be ashamed of, that I did my job, that I was just unlucky. A few years later, she stopped saying I was unlucky.

They think more thinking will solve my problems. No, that's the pathway to hell. It doesn't matter what they want. It doesn't matter what I want. There are no more choices to be made. My brain's a dying animal, gagging on its painful, guilty, and delirious chemicals, and it will give me what it desires.

So that's what I do. I sit, I remember.

The night progressed quietly but quickly. After I turned my engine off, my radio buzzed its message again: "*10-10P, Reported on corner of Lewis Ave and Halsey St.*" Time to go.

I wrapped my hand around the door handle of my car and pushed. Immediately I was hit hard. The wind filled the interior of the car, slammed the door shut, and pushed me backwards, slapping my face.

The elements were telling me to rest, to relax in the car, but we both know I was never gonna listen. That's not how I was raised.

I pushed the door open once more and forced myself outside. I took a deep breath—air tasted like ice—then exhaled. It left behind a little gray cloud of suspended smoke. I dashed through it. I needed to go, I needed to move.

I was wired. My blood plunged throughout my body. That *buh-dum, buh-dum, buh-dum, buh-dum, buh-dum* blocked out everything else. Winter had shocked me awake.

Everything became hyperreal, like concentrated doses of living existed within each second, with each step forward. Cold, night, breath, blood. The body knows before the brain does. The body knows.

I could see the back of his head at the end of the block. He was gazing away, out toward the street's soft lights, standing camouflaged under the black sky above us.

I began to run.

I close my eyes and breathe in. That is one thing the therapist taught me which works. To breathe. Breathe, you bastard. I wait a moment and open my eyes again. I'm not there, I am here. I'm home and the TV is on. I look to my blinds. The sunlight crawling behind them is dimming. It's almost night. Molly and Ben will come home soon. This is how I return.

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“The Lord tells us we can always find strength within ourselves. This is the path to salvation. Even in the darkest of days, you must find Him in yourself and by doing so He will guide you.”

Saint Barbara's has done good by my family over the years. It's funny—it used to be me dragging Molly here, back when we got together at the end of high school. Now, just this morning, she had to yell at me to get out the door.

We always sit in the back cause it's easier for me, but it's hard to hear Pastor John. Instead, I focus on the Marino family in front of us. They got two kids and a third on the way, with Mrs. Marino plump and happy, blooming with her little bastard for months now.

I'm watching Marino's boy. He's about six and he's sitting next to his sister whose eighth birthday party Ben skipped last week. I can remember when that kid first saw me. How his little eyes spun in terror when faced with the frozen body in the massive machine of a chair. How he turned and whispered to his mother, then pointed at me. She was mortified. She apologized then and the next week she apologized again, but I laughed it off each time. I told the kid not to worry about me. I smiled at him and said maybe I'd give him a ride sometime.

But I hated it, that look. I hated every second of it. I hated the way he cowered; I hated the way he whimpered. He saw a monster. His look made me want to bite off his finger. Maybe he saw the monster right.

Now he flicks his sister's ear with that finger I spared, every two seconds. Watching it is keeping me awake. Keeping me focused.

“We are each God's children...”

Flick.

“...and we each have our purpose...”

Flick.

“...it is important to...”

Flick. Flick. Flick.

The girl snaps. She grabs her brother's fingers midair and throws them down. The two devolve into a subtle battle, pushing and shoving each other down onto the pew, till the boy disappears, hidden behind the backrest. She's managed to stuff him down, face flat against the wood. She smiles and sticks her tongue out at him, victorious.

Suddenly she releases him. I glance at her side. Mr. Marino is staring at them, hard. He holds his glare till the two of them are back sitting straight and right and focusing ahead on God's servant. He smiles at them and returns to Pastor John himself. He places his hand on his daughter's shoulder and pulls her gently by his side.

I look back to my son. He's fallen asleep, with his head cradled against his mother's

shoulder.

“I’d like to finish with one of my favorite verses of Corinthians, 3:16. It reads, ‘Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?’ Ask yourself this question and let the answer bring you joy.”

I used to think God walked with me as I strutted down the street, but now I’m not so sure. That night it may have been someone else.

From afar, I called out to him, “Young man! Young man!” but he couldn’t hear me. Sometimes I wonder what woulda happened if he had.

###

As Dave walks into my home, the first thing I notice is how big he’s become. He’s holding his wife Cathy’s hand and his veins pop, twisting down his arm like vines. He used to work with me, if you can call it that. He was a skinny kid who took too many smoke breaks. Now he looks like a tank, a man. A pink grin stretches within his dark beard.

“It’s great to see you!” He plops down onto the couch beside my chair, while Cathy greets Molly.

“You gotta visit more often, man.” He raises his hand as if to push my shoulder, but then his eyes dash to the side, away from me. He pulls back.

Molly interjects, “We’re going to bring out the food.” The girls disappear into the kitchen, and I’m left alone with Dave. Left alone with our silence.

What does he think of me now, like this?

“You know all the guys miss you a ton,” he says. “You should visit.”

Despite my better judgement, I can’t help but ask, “Yeah, what are they saying about me?” I look away, embarrassed, but then I glance back at him. I want an answer.

He takes a moment to think about it. “I guess, well, it’s not like the guys talk about you a whole lot. It’s been a while.”

I say nothing.

For a second, he appears frantic. “But don’t take it the wrong way! We’re just busy, that’s all.” He looks uncomfortable with my silence. “We all love you, Paul. You should come around and talk to the kids who visit. You’re a hero to them. And to us.”

Footsteps emerge, the girls return. Cathy announces, “We found the Cabernet!”

The night unfurls itself as the three of them drink, while Molly tries to pour wine down my neck, which I mostly refuse. They talk about their rote lives: the intricacies of buying a new laundry machine or working on getting the kids to wake up without screaming.

I smile and nod, letting the night cruise to its fortunate end. They wave goodbye to us,

promise they'll call a cab, and leave.

Molly pushes me to bed. After she lifts my legs onto our low loft, she collapses beside me.

"That was nice," she says.

"I guess so."

"I'm going to visit them more often."

Soon she falls asleep, leaving me to stare at the ceiling.

I wish our boys wouldn't throw around 'hero' so much. It's a weak word.

I close my eyes and try to get some much-needed sleep, but it isn't coming. It's cold in the room and I'm not tired. I try to think about Dave, Cathy, Molly, Ben—any of them, any of the good times—but nothing can hold my focus. Only the night, always the night.

Dave was supposed to be there with me that night. He called in sick.

I was closing in on him. "Young man!" I screamed for a final time. "Show your hands!"

We'd gotten a report of a robber, and the guy on the street fit the description—black, tall, young—and looked suspicious enough to me, standing, waiting, lingering.

His hands were in his pockets, his dark arms disappeared into his jacket.

I moved in closer but still received no response.

"Freeze!"

He turned slowly, and everything became one. His brown eyes met my brown eyes and they locked together. A kind of peace emerged outta the tension. All our decisions, all our existence, led to there and then, and, in each other's eyes, we saw our mutual terrors. His, the glimmer of the gun. Mine, the dark possibilities of the night.

He began to pull his hands outta his pockets when I heard a sound behind me.

It only feels slow now, while I look back. During the night, it all ended in a second.

My brain twitched. I squeezed the trigger twice. The boy in front of me fell. A pool of red began to accumulate.

I went over to him, mechanically, too shocked to feel. As he lay gasping, I searched his body. There was no weapon.

I always spin the same story, and now my brothers spin it too, and so the others will continue to spin, so much so that even if I wanted to tell the truth it wouldn't matter now. We say: He started to run toward me, so I fired.

But I cannot deny He knows the truth, and if I'm not honest in my head, I'm not honest with my soul. That boy and I, we were born in the same city and we will die in the same city and both of these things are my fault. He is forgotten by most, but I remember. And I remain.

I open my eyes. I am home. I fell asleep, perhaps. I frantically turn my neck. Molly is

there, snoring. Outside, the city begins to hum. It will be morning soon.

###

Ben sits entrenched in our brown armchair in the living room's corner watching cartoons. I loved that chair, while I could use it. My father gave it to us as a gift when we moved to our new place. He pours his bowl of cereal down his throat as he refuses to look away from the screen. In the back of the room, Molly stuffs sandwiches into his tiny lunchbox. It's got a picture of a fireman on the front. She closes it and grabs Ben by his shoulder.

She says, "It's time to go, unless you want to be late again."

They have this routine down. Ben takes as long as possible to exit his chair, slowly sliding off it, before he dramatically rises. Sometimes in the process he'll spill his milk and Cheerios onto the chair—my chair. I can't imagine what my father would do if I did something like that. And if I did it again and again? Hell would arrive. The floorboards would shake, my heart would quake, and fear would become known. But I say nothing. Do nothing. Molly yells at him, yet it keeps happening.

"Let's go. Hustle." Molly grabs his hand and pulls him toward the door.

As they leave, I say, "Have a good day at school."

Ben turns back and looks at me but says nothing. Silence. Only an empty stare. It amazes me, how a boy's eyes can inflict so much pain.

Then they're gone. And I'm alone once more.

A few seconds after I searched the kid, I froze, staring at my work. He had two black holes in his body, one below his neck, the other in his chest. Two pits of deep darkness oozing red. Only then did I realize what had happened in its entirety. His life had trickled outta him.

I stepped back, and with every breath, my body shuddered. Adrenaline had become my blood supply. That's also when I realized, out from the echo of the gun's blast, footsteps were emerging. They rung across the street, coming from multiple directions.

I don't know how long I stood there, hanging over the kid like the Reaper himself, but it was long enough for a posse to form.

Four, maybe five, people stared me at a distance, all dark in the night. They were trying to determine what was happening, then one of their faces curved and twisted. He screamed, "You killed him!"

Suddenly they were all shouting, while I remained frozen. I knew my radio was buzzing, and their anger was mounting, but my brain couldn't process any of it, not with the dead boy by my feet and the cold wind whipping against my back.

More and more of them arrived, and then I realized I needed to leave. I needed to call

in backup. The situation had become dangerous. I pulled out my radio and that's when, outta the corner of my eye, I saw a piece of silver glint in the darkness.

I began to turn, to angle my gun at the crowd, but I was too slow. Maybe that momentary weakness was His punishment. I hope that isn't true.

I heard three shots.

The first went into the ground, sending the crowd running. The second connected with my left leg, and I began to tip. When the third hit, I instantly collapsed onto the concrete.

I tried to use my hands to push myself up, but I couldn't find them. I tried to tug on my legs, but they were missing too. Quickly the pain faded. As I lay on the pavement next to the fallen boy, I stared into his open eyes. How they frozen they were. Gone, captured by the void. I thought the same was coming for me: The end, a final night, for I could feel only a cold, dull nothingness stretching down my spine and spreading throughout my body.

But still I remained. Above me, the crowd scattered, then someone yelled out, "Oh shit," and more police sirens followed. The moment before I fell unconscious, I heard the blast of two more bullets followed by screams.

I found out later the dispatcher called in the wrong address.

###

What was it all for?

The thought dominates me during my Monday afternoon walks in the park with the nurse. I don't want her here—the chair operates fine and my mouth still works, but Molly insists I need her.

Already the trees are beginning to change. Summer is coming to an end. Mostly they are still bright and green and shiny, but on some I can see a hint of orange, just at their edge. Fall will come.

I remember two summers ago--the doctors told me there was a small chance for some quality-of-life improvements. Maybe some motor control in my shoulders and parts of my arms. We tried it. Molly prayed every night. But they were wrong. It didn't work.

Your friends say you'll get stronger and better. Maybe Molly believed it too, at least for a little while, but sometimes it simply isn't true.

I can imagine the two of them, the small family. At home, Ben is playing with his toys while Molly relaxes beside him, chatting on the phone with her sister. They're loud right now, smiling and yelling. They're both enjoying the time they have without me. I know this cause the moment I get back a vacuum sucks up their noise. They grow so quiet: Molly whispers and Ben lets the TV talk for him. Maybe they don't know what to say. Maybe they think I like it.

I hate it—that quiet, that silence. It's poisonousness.

Though, I must admit, the park is beautiful. When all you can do is sit and watch, you end up studying all details down to their intricate soul. Only now I notice how the leaves curl back and shrivel up before they fall dead, or how they expand and bloom in spring. And in the distance, little kids shriek, so excited, while their parents chat with each other, enjoying the long sun before night swallows the parks.

But the thought returns: What was it all for?

I didn't think this much before the injury. I was never a thinker. I was raised to be a doer. My father taught me to work. By the time I was seven he'd take two shovels, hand me one, and together we'd dig the car outta the snow together. Every day, he'd come home from work and hug my mom and kiss her twice. Our house was always noisy. Five kids. Five. We'd scream, we'd laugh. We'd fight, we'd brawl. We loved each other.

I grew up and did my job. I paid my bills. I loved my wife. I loved my son. It worked and I never stopped going.

Now all I can do is sit and think.

Even years later, my dreams remain the same. Occasionally they'll shock me awake. Body paralyzed, mind frozen in fear. But, even with that terror, every night I look forward to the same horror, cause, for however briefly, I can live how I was meant to. I can walk. And in the moments before reality reemerges, I can imagine things turning out differently.

If God needed the third bullet to hit me, if he couldn't just make it miss, at the very least he coulda moved it further down and to the left. Away from the top of my spine, away from getting turned into this. He shoulda put it deep into my veins and arteries; he shoulda just stopped them all together. In the heart of my dreams, awake or asleep, this is what I pray for.

I need someone else to wipe my ass and it's my fault. I'm useless and it's my fault. I'm not sure what bothers me more: the broken image of myself in the mirror or the bleeding kid on the ground. But, at the end of the day, when the night gets cold and the stars aren't out, it's this darker thing that bothers me most of all. A truth I can't deny, cause I know it is the truth, and He knows it is the truth, and I know the devil has won. In the darkest nights, when my tears aren't enough, I see this truth: If I had the chance to kill them all that night to get my body back, I woulda done it. The devil knows it. He knows it.

I woulda shot them all. I woulda watched their blood drip outta the holes in their bodies till they shriveled and crumpled and became soulless. I woulda turned them into a shiny pile of black and red dripping in the night, littering the sidewalk like bloody trash, reflecting the streetlamp's light in their pool. I woulda fought for my escape as a gladiator. I woulda snuffed them out. I woulda killed all those niggers. I woulda become what they always acted like I was—the terror in the way they looked at me—their monster. Swallow them in the night. I woulda showed them no mercy. I woulda killed

them all if it meant I could hug my son and He knows it too. He knows it.

It was just so fucking cold and I was scared.

I will not let my family see me like this much longer. I can't. I can't fail them. She needs someone else; he needs someone else.

I will do what I know I've needed to do for so long now. I don't know when but soon I will summon my courage. I will free them both and I pray He will understand.