

They Were Done

They were done for now and they were looking for what came next. The unlocked cars had been ransacked of the cash they found tucked inside shifter consoles; cameras and purses ripped from where they had been shoved under passenger seats. They had swept by the later model, 1970s-era vehicles on the second level of the garage to see if any fool had left their key in the ignition so they might joy ride these cars up and down the ramps, but no keys were found. They had sat dialing numbers on the black rotary phone inside the attendant's booth until they got a woman of any age at the other end of the line – and if she sounded old they told her that her husband was dead and if she sounded young they told her they wanted to fuck her in various ways – but now they were done with that too. The departing cars that it was their job to check out two dollars at a time at the end of the concert going on in the arena under them would not arrive for an hour at least. With the two thousand watt heater drying out their brains and blasting them out of the booth away from their high-school homework and into the swirling nighttime snow of the exposed ramp, they were looking for something to do and free to damage anything they chose.

A young pigeon confused by the wind and snow escaped from a buried nest under an iron roof strut, skittering blind into the sky a few feet above them. Tillie watched it fly into the storm-shaded city beneath him. Hard music tickled up from the concert in the coliseum rubbing itself against the spiraling ramp and rippling upward into the boys' knees and shinbones. Sledge stepped forward into the dry area of the garage proper one level below a roof lot that was tonight filled with snow and empty of cars. He liked this movement so much and, urged on by the beating and rocking beneath him, he kept walking.

Where are you going?

The music ceased and everyone in the arena stopped with it – sisters and brothers holding their breath for the next nascent-punk exchange of drums and guitars. And now there was not a sound under or between the boys except that which came from the acres of Japanese and German and American cars still chirping warm oil all around them. Sledge continued to walk toward the next boredom expelling, no-consequence act of defiance – whatever he might find that to be. Tillie chased along behind him.

Where are you going? What are you going to do? We really shouldn't be leaving at the same time.

But they could leave. And they did. No matter that Tillie's uncle the cop moonlighting security at the garage would read them the riot act if he found them absent from their fort at the end of the ramp. No matter that a whole system of graft and earning were dependent on these two boys and the cash they brought into the pliable garage manager's office at the end of the night where a police captain would take out a share for himself and his cohorts and then protect the rest along with Tillie's uncle as they walked it to the little steel door of the night deposit on Church Street. No matter that the moonlighting cop and the submissive garage manager and the crooked police captain all already had these boys pegged as capable of doing more wrong and causing more damage than anything the three of them would ever dream of doing as men of a certain age. No matter. Despite the consequences that they still did not understand, Tillie and Sledge walked onward anyway. A vast roof of snow waited, and who knew what they might do now that they were finished with what had come before.

Cavanaugh was done too, for once and for all. He was done with the bullshit of noisy second hand cars and a brood of crying daughters needing to be fed. Done with his red headed wife with fat cheeks and a loud rosy mouth who had trained herself to open a purse expectantly under his chin, forcing him to go for his wallet every time he got comfortable on the couch. He was done and he was ready to shut them all up with cash. He loved Nixon and he even loved that new egghead Ford. Loving these guys even more now that they had ended the war and he might once and for all be able to stop herding platoons of cops through crowds of hippies as they wafted inside clouds of protest smoke, braless and freaky, on the New Haven Green. Cavanaugh loved that order was being restored so he could stop fucking around and make some real money. Not stupid money. Not money without limits. You had to understand how things could turn bad quickly if you weren't thinking; understand how greed and hubris – greed without caution – were the downfall of Tweed and Mussolini and Huey Long. A smart man of money, money he could keep for a long, long time was, after all, a man who remembered history. And Cavanaugh was a smart man. And he was done.

He was so completely done that even parking his car was an insult. He was a captain. A captain had juice and this car most certainly did not. German cars his ass. Engineering marvels his grandmother's tits. Not this Nazi tub of butter, not this dome-topped orange bug bag of shit. What the fuck was he thinking trading in a perfectly good Buick sedan for this VW tugboat? Gas crisis. Better mileage. Save a few bucks. Did that matter if you had to break the balls off the shifter handle every time you needed to get this pork chop into first gear to park it?

Back and forth, sawing at the iced tarmac of the surface lot adjacent to three stories of parking, Cavanaugh cranked the bug into a tight spot between two lamp poles, far enough away from the tour buses and limos to keep it safe from the drug fog of long-haired hired drivers and truck and bus jockeys who might blindly crush his ride home. He'd come to the event just before it was over. Now he'd get up into the garage office with a few minutes to spare to shoot the shit with Tony and that ignorant WOP sergeant he didn't like but could tolerate. And then in a little while, in would come the money, delivered right to him in a canvas bag with industrial zippers. You had to *earn* a spot like this in the pecking order. A spot like this could buy him a car so big that no truck or bus or limo would fuck with it. He was ready for that. He had ascended and he knew where he belonged.

With the car snug between the poles Cavanaugh popped the door, swung out his legs and buried his shoes all the way past their old high water mark into the snow that was again reclaiming the surface lot. It got plowed. It got covered. It got plowed again. But in this January weather no crew would ever be able to keep it clean for long. Cavanaugh thought of the poor shits that had that job. Of other poor shits working other never-ending, poor shit jobs. Of the endless work of life and how it was up to you to choke the shit out of work until you squeezed out every dollar you could get – what belonged to you and, god damn it, even what belonged to others if you could get away with it cleanly – until work was dead and you had yours and more than yours and what you had left was not the work, but just the life, eternal and good. He looked up at the snow falling from the sky onto his face, at the girders buttressing the outer edge of the top level of the tiered garage. Now that he was done all he could see was a castle veiled in white at the edge of a kingdom that he could rule.

Tony Mendoza and Mickey Amendola were not done, but they soon would be. They were drinking and were going to keep drinking until they had drunk themselves toward an inflection point – a tiny, sharp moment when each of them would feel the spark of realization that one drink too many would bring. And then they would be done. A light would flicker through the warm haze and they would see how a drunk cop and tipsy garage manager could sabotage their own freedom of expression: a captain showing up to find the cop smelling of scotch and tripping over himself as he tried to wrangle a crowd of teenager concert-goers; a political boss looking across the desk into the eyes of the garage manager to see the pinwheels of his inebriation unwinding the mechanics of a functioning city business. And that ram rod image of reality would give each man pause and it would be enough to push Tony to swipe the bottle back into the drawer of his desk while Mickey stumbled over to aim the coffee mugs back onto their hooks above the Mr. Coffee. That place on the peg board where the “world’s greatest dad” and a bikini clad model eternally smiling under a handle of “man’s best friend” could quietly share a vertical bed.

And when they were done drinking, Mickey and Tony would do next what they had always done. They would sleep. Because sleeping was easy, and sleeping was safe. Because even if someone had found them dozing, there wasn’t much for Tony and Mickey to do anyway at those moments. Not while the crowd was still safely tucked into their seats. Not as long as Mickey had his police radio to alert them awake. And there wasn’t much any wiser or more powerful man who found them napping would say about it either, except to ask what more you could expect from two schnooks who unhappily worked double shifts just to make ends meet.

What could you expect from a garage manager who was good at keeping and cooking books but not at knowing there was more he could earn with those skills if only he were smart enough to put them to more devious use? What could you expect from a city cop who was so dumb that he slapped around his sons and nephews just because even at their ages they were already much smarter in many ways than he would ever be? What could you expect from a couple of guys like this who got winded and gave up just a few feet from the finish line of a high school graduation?

You couldn't expect much and because of that these guys were easily forgiven for sleeping on the job in a way that they would never have been forgiven for drinking on the job. Because drinking led to a whole other level of high school dropout stupidity. Drinking till you were out of control and dangerous was something that even guys like this knew you just did not do. And in that small way and other small but deadly serious ways just like it, Tony and Mickey were still infinitely smarter than the sons and nephews that Mickey slapped around.

On the streets below now, the plow drivers were making their second pass, flirting with the snow to strip it down to the naked asphalt underneath. Tony and Mickey could hear the dim drop of the plows and the scrape of the blades some stories below them. They knew that the plow drivers were having the time of their lives attacking the streets with all the joy and power of little boys turned loose on the city. Taunted in this way by the gleefully sober world outside, Tony and Mickey knew now that they were done.

With the bottle put away and the cups rehung, Tony and Mickey put their feet up on opposite sides of the same desk and, leaning back, they began to doze. It was a simple sleep. A sleep where they could go back in time and would forever be little boys turned loose on the city.

A sleep where they were not done and would never be done. A sleep where the lives they hated so much would never end.

Snow was everywhere their eyes could see. Flat and whisper perfect, an untouched virgin field begging to be desecrated by the two boys standing at the edge of it. So Tillie and Sledge ran into the field from the top of the ramp where they stood and they began to jump and roll and kick each other into the freeze. They turned snow angels into snow devils as they raised their arms above their heads and pulled each other's hair, wrestling each other into submission. They swept the snow with their bodies and faces until the cement of the parking lot shown through in a cross-hatch of tar patches and rubberized parking lines, until the white plot around them was dirtied with the grey of their snot and the grit from their sneakers.

But it was not enough. The more perfect snow they destroyed, the more there was left to destroy. Cubic yards of it, whole pastures of it, hundreds of parking spaces filled with the stuff. All of it left untouched even after they had attacked as much of it as they could. There was more of it than Tillie and Sledge could ever destroy. So they had to think of something else to do.

It was Sledge who came up with the idea. In actual fact it was just a seed of an idea at first, in the truest way that something can be called a seed. Because as soon as Sledge scooped the snow into his hands and packed it into a rough roundish thing – right after Tillie thought it was meant to be thrown at him – Sledge saw the snowball as something more. It was the start of

something much larger than both of them. Sledge realized that it was a promise that they could nurture into a thing as large and destructive as they could ever hope it to be.

Tillie also knew they were onto something big as soon as Sledge dropped the snowball to a clean part of the field and nudged it with his hand. Turning it round three hundred and sixty degrees in the clean snow had easily doubled its circumference and, seeing this, the boys started taking turns nudging the ball and spanking it along. Very quickly it got bigger and heavier and Tillie and Sledge were soon working as one, pushing it with a hand apiece until it grew to be the height of their thighs and they had to use all four of their hands to move it along. And when they rested momentarily and looked back over the field and saw the trail of carved snow that had started in a single five-inch patch and grown wider and wider and wider as it snailed and zigzagged across fifty or sixty parking spaces, they knew that this would be the most awe-inspiring thing they had ever done.

Still, it had to be bigger. As big as they could roll it and yet still lift it. So onward they pushed it, putting real work into it now, no longer seeing it as a prank, seeing it as a job they would be paid for in bragging rights and in the long-lived memories of their old age. And when the ball of snow was no longer a ball but a boulder pocked by handprints and the size and uneven thickness of two barrels stacked side by side, the boys stopped rolling and started trying to lift it up onto the flat-topped outside railing of the lot. The railing, a vertical girder, over which and out yonder was only the empty space of night. That and a porous net of swirling snow, and a sheer drop to the surface lot six stories below.

At first they could not get their monster ball of snow more than a foot off the ground before having to drop it again. Then Tillie – the smaller but brighter and more inventive of the boys – told Sledge to wait while he thought for a minute. Though it didn't even take a minute for Tillie to figure out that if they rolled this thing just a few more feet to one of the angled vertical struts that held up the railing, they could use both their arm strength *and* the weight of their bodies to capture their bolder of snow against the strut and inch-by-inch roll it up and onto the wide iron shelf of the railing.

They were sweating now, the snow fairly boiling off the tops of their bare heads as it fell on them. But as they grunted their boulder to the top of the railing and then slid it finally into a place where it could rest, they became more and more desensitized to the heat or cold, to any force but the forcing function of what they were about to do. Now, standing on either side of the boulder, they pushed themselves up with their hands, lifting onto their toes to see over the top of the chest-high railing, to look at the ground sixty or seventy feet below and find out where this bomb they had created might collide with the world thereunder.

The storm was too thick, however. All there was to see were the faint yellow auras that blossomed at the top of the light poles in the surface lot and not even the poles themselves. And so it was with a leap of boyhood ignorance that Tillie and Sledge solemnly tipped the bolder the final inches off the railing into the history of that night.

For what seemed like a long while in the unscratched itch of endless time upon which a boy's mind is built, they thought that nothing would happen. That the boulder had softly disintegrated as it fell, that the billions of flakes coursing around it had become jealous of its

mass and size – of its arrogance – and had ganged up to claw it into powder. In fact, Sledge had already gone into that crooked-lipped shrug he used when other plans he had conceived had gone lacking and Tillie was just about to dissect what had gone wrong in order that he might make it right the next time around.

But then came the explosion. Then the sound of a man bellowing from the bowels of some long ago outlived and forgotten night terror. It was the bombing of four hundred pounds of snow onto something metal and hollow. It was the screaming of a man frightened beyond his mind's capacity to understand.

Flapping onto their chests at the top of the railing like startled teenage seals, looking downward, Tillie and Sledge could see nothing except the faintest glimmer of orange and silver sparkling deep, deep below them. A glimmer that was gone in seconds as their ordnance of snow stopped cascading and completely covered anything they could see except the glow at the top of the light poles. Then, in seconds, Tillie and Sledge were gone as well.

They tore, yelping across the boulder tracks and deepening patches of clean snow, alternating the steps they needed to carry them across these two different surfaces. With mincing toe falls against the slippery, cleaner ground and fully pumped knee pulls to get through the snow that had drifted toward the opening of the roof lot, they made their way back to the car ramp, dropping to the breaches of their pants, using the incline of the ramp to sled to the bottom. Behind them the man's screams had formed into a single word, repeated over and over again.

Hey. Hey. Hey.

But Tillie and Sledge might just as well have not been there. For now they were really and truly done. Snorting like beasts and laughing in a dry, covered place where they had fooled themselves into thinking that they would forever be little boys.

What these boys did not yet know is that there is no man or boy who is too alive to be made to feel the terrible punch of God. Even a smug man like Cavanaugh with big plans and a pocketful of promises knew that any man, at any moment could always be made to know the nature of that force which created him. One minute that man will be walking through a parking lot in a snowstorm just a few feet away from a car he drives but hates, a police radio in his hand and cigarette he has just lit tilted in his teeth and glowing off the tip of his nose. The next that man will be on his knees praying to Jesus.

So even before the mass of snow was pushed from the upper stories of the garage, Cavanaugh already knew it would be coming. If not then, someday. If not exactly a boulder of snow, than something else that would be looking to lay him low. God, Cavanaugh knew, just had that way about Him.

Thinking back on it later, Cavanaugh will remember how close he was to the car and hence to the end of his life and he will imagine his near-death experience as snippet from a movie directed by the Almighty himself and underscored with a touch of music to highlight His cunning. Four hundred pounds of snow begins to fall through space in the frame and a corkscrew of strings starts to bleat lightly, growing in speed and timber the closer the snow gets to the roof of the orange car. A few feet from the bug the boulder of snow is made to move in

slow motion and the music stops momentarily so that the viewer can more fully concentrate on the final inches of black night that are gradually growing smaller and smaller between the snowball and the roof of the car. And when the film speeds up again and the snow impacts the curvature of the roof turning the cave of the car inside out, the music crashes in for the finale. It's an entire eighty piece ensemble of woodwinds and brass and strings striking an A-minor chord that is detonated with a percussion of timbales and kettle drums, the ding of a delicate triangle still echoing even after the music has stopped and the snow has destroyed the roof of the car over the back seats and Cavanaugh, hitting the ground out of instinct and fear, has started screaming for God to save him. *Hey. Hey. Hey.*

Even in the moments immediately after it happened, while Cavanaugh was still on his knees, he knew that God had had his shot but for the time being had missed. Just to be safe, however, Cavanaugh searched the night sky for another boulder of snow that might have had his name on it. When no second boulder fell, Cavanaugh decided that he had to get himself under the protection of the coliseum's covered loading dock. From this place he stared out at his car. The sight of the squashed bug filled Cavanaugh's soul with anger over what had been taken from him, though there was still room-enough in Cavanaugh's heart for him to feel that the car had gotten what it deserved.

Cavanaugh cleared his throat and, thinking about the large new car he would now be able to buy simply by coasting on the momentum of pity everyone would feel for him, he pulled himself together and adjusted the channel on his radio. Knowing this garage organization as well as he did, Cavanaugh figured that there could only be two reasons for what had happened to his car. And he was sure that both of those reasons were at this very moment about to escape.

Lifting the solid brick of the radio to his lips, Cavanaugh called out to Mickey Amendolo and Tony Mendoza, speaking loudly and with oh so much clarity of purpose. It is the way he knew that God would want him to speak after allowing him to live another day.

Before they were even fully awake they were on their way to the Cushman cart they used to roll around the garage. For a second or two after he had been startled out of his sleep by the crackle of a captain's voice on the police radio, Mickey Amendola even wondered if he was still at home dreaming it all. Tony Mendoza, on the other hand, knew he was not dreaming. He just wished he were.

The Cushman was a funky, farting thing, an electric golf cart with all the power of a kitchen appliance, and a small one at that. Mickey drove it in shame, his plastic covered watch cap banging the underside of the roof, the rotating yellow light just above his and Tony's head painting a continuous ring of amber as it tried to flash a serious warning but only succeeded as the punch line of a joke. Tony and Mickey – overgrown and bulging out of this cart with its toy steering wheel and push button accelerator – had all they could do to maintain any dignity as they buzzed away up the nearest ramp to the second level.

From past experience Tony and Mickey knew what Tilley and Sledge were capable of and they knew what that had to do once and for all tonight. The Cushman might be too lightweight to bring gravitas to the task at hand but it would get them there and once there they would do the rest. Boys would be boys, was how the old cliché went. And tonight, when

Mickey and Tony got out of their inconsequential cart near the bottom of the roof ramp, they would force that cliché to run for its life.

Which is not to say that Mickey and Tony were not tired. Maybe even a little too tired to do what needed to be done. Not easy to be done and then to have to start again. Not easy to smarten up a couple of boys who lived in a world of ignorant men.

Tilley and Sledge were no longer looking now for what might come next. What was done was done. Though what was next was coming for them anyway.

First it came in the form of a stout, orange VW bug, which the boys ran away from as it crested the ramp toward them with its smashed back roofline and a police captain leaning sideways and sticking his head out the window like a trolley motorman in order to drive the car. Then it was a Cushman cart coming straight at them in the direction they were running. Then it was the ramp back up to the roof which they turned toward but which they would actually and really have to be able to fly up and over in order to get away. Then it was only a brick wall surrounding an internal elevator shaft fifty feet in front of them, the only place left to go, which, even if they could have defied gravity and walked up the wall and across the garage ceiling, would only have led them back to where they already stood.

There was nothing left for them but to wait for what came next. So they stood their ground while first an uncle and then a garage manager shook off the humiliation of the Cushman they were driving and stepped toward them on leather heels, the lazy spinning light of the cart

swiping their faces in three second intervals. Slowly, slowly like a fat man parking his wife's wheel chair, the police captain rolled his VW bug up just behind the boys, kissing them slightly with the bumper on the seats of their wet pants before he ratcheted in the hand break and shut down this wounded turtle of a car.

Mickey got to them first and, brushing off some of the snow that remained on his nephew's shoulder, he shook his head and tilted his lips into a dangerous smirk. Tillie read this smirk in the way it was intended, but Sledge did not and when he smirked back at Mickey, Cavanaugh, who had just squeezed out through the widest crack he could make given the sprained door of his car, reached across the hood and tapped Sledge on the shoulder. When Sledge turned around to face him, Cavanaugh un-seated the gun in his holster and lifted it from his belt.

In all the eras of the world there had seldom been three men who understood two boys more than these three men understood these two boys. Men who knew their own flaws and who understood the malicious stupidity that can live inside a child; men who had first hand experience with the irrevocable acts of prankish defiance and willful destruction that were stored in the soul of youth. It was understanding that came from having barely surviving the actions of their own boyhoods and from knowing that for a man to live a boy must die. And because they understood in this way, there was nothing these men would not do tonight to teach these boys that it would all begin and end right here.

For Cavanaugh's part, he believed that in our early years we all deserved the chance to be horrified by our own stupidity, that each of us had done something that by all rights should have

killed us or some other human who got in our way. And Tony Mendoza, as he took off his winter gloves and rolled back the sleeves of his coat, also understood that even the most vicious of children needed to be given the opportunity to learn about consequences, to be so shocked by their idiocy that no court of law would ever have to touch them. Even Mickey Amendola, the dumb uncle serving tonight as a surrogate father, somehow sensed that these boys knew not the cost of what they had done, though he would gladly teach them before it was too late.

So the crack of Cavanaugh's pistol against the back of Sledge's head was done out of love. Each bare-knuckled punch that followed, knocking out Sledge's teeth and breaking Tillie's nose, had the humanity of Jesus and Buddha and Mohammad behind it. And when the final kicks were ministered to each boy as he lay on the ground weeping, they understood that they had been absolved of their sins and that, without a doubt, as of tonight, they were done.

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