

All Night Long with the Thump, Thump, Thump

Edwards knows he should have left school as soon as the verdicts were read. He should have driven south until he landed on an Orange County beach, someplace where there's sea spray and bonfire smoke – nothing like this. Now he's crouched inside his studio apartment, peering through a quarter-inch gap below the bottom of the blinds. It's wide enough for him to keep an eye on his car – his baby – which he'd parked just outside. It's his first, his only car that doesn't smell like his mother's perfume.

Rioters stream past his window, some with unwieldy grocery carts. Sirens from different locations merge with one another, making a constant high-pitched wail. Two teenagers stop in front of the liquor store on the corner. They're eyeing the smashed glass door and the people coming out, arms full of booze, pockets stuffed with candy. Edwards sits up. He knows this boy. *Romeo. King of the eighth-grade, Romeo. Asshole Adonis Always Late Romeo*, except that one day, and Edwards was stupid enough to thank him for it. Romeo cocked his head, squinted, and said, "*What, Cookie Bitch?*"

And here he is. *Romeo*. Diving in and out of that doorway like a kid in a bouncy house, frolicking, with a glossy girl in a form-fitting, royal purple dress outside waiting for him. Her weight shifts to one hip, where the dress tightens, revealing the fullness underneath. Edwards hopes she's Romeo's sister, maybe a cousin, until she plants a kiss on Romeo's neck.

Edwards ducks down and feels his face burning. He lets his body sink below the blinds and he stretches out on the couch which is also his bed. As he lights a cigarette, he looks down

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at his blue veined hands, pointy little fingers. The rumpled light blue sheets of the hide-a-bed he never bothers to put away. Piles of clean clothes mixed with dirty clothes. The books and papers and videos and mail on every surface, the bottle of good Russian Vodka on the floor beside his bed. It's his first place of his own. He could never bring a woman here.

Edwards' phone rings. As soon as he picks up, his mother groans.

“*Shit*. Hold,” she says. The line goes silent.

Elaina Edwards owns a sign business in Santa Monica. According to her, she works thirty-hour days, ten days a week. She only calls when she wants Edwards to do something.

He lights a cigarette and waits.

The line clicks. “Renegade Signs this is Elaina.”

“Hi,” Edwards says.

“Look, I'm real busy,” she says. She lights a cigarette -- there's the click, the pause as she inhales, the croaking exhalation. Telephones bleat in the background. “I need you to go check on Grandma.”

“*What?*” Edwards asks.

Four cop cars and a fire engine race past the liquor store. Sirens overwhelming the conversation.

His mother says, “Like, right now. Something's wrong.”

“Do you have any idea what's going on right now?” Edwards blows smoke into the receiver.

His mother blows it right back. “Do *you?*”

“Well I can't --”

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“*You can’t*. Dammit, Eric! Your grandmother is all alone, watching this crap on tv, and she could be dying on the floor right now.”

“Grandma is *nowhere near* the riots!”

“You listen to me – for once in your life, get off your ass and do this one simple thing.”

Helicopter blades are chopping the air. Flashing lights cut through the smoke blowing down the street. He holds the phone up to the window, so she can take it all in.

When Edwards puts the phone back to his ear, she’s coughing. “Shit,” she croaks. “I gotta go. Call me as soon as you get there.” Click. Dial tone.

Edwards grips the receiver and slams it into the couch cushion. Every time he talks to his mother he feels like killing somebody. He quells his violent urges with another cigarette.

He feels the room darkening. Outside, black towers of smoke rise from every angle, whirling into a dome that turns daylight into dusk. The dim orange streetlights pop on, confused by the changing light. Everything beneath that dome seems to be shrinking. His apartment, his car, his life. Edwards wonders if Romeo ever told the glossy girl about his math teacher, the cookie incident, knowing full well that he didn’t. The only person still thinking about it is Edwards.

His first week as a teacher had been a disaster. So the second week, since the kids sure liked to talk, Edwards decided to have a Socratic discussion with them. He would introduce “The Allegory of the Cave” and he would convince these fourteen-year-olds that they were future leaders, “king bees,” capable of much more than living in the shadows. Edwards didn’t even make them read it. He gave them the gist -- how slaves in a cave watch shadows on the wall, mistaking those shadows for the real objects that cast them. If only they could step outside the cave, they would see reality. They could achieve enlightenment.

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Nobody said a thing. Not a “Quite true” or a “Surely yes.” Edwards took their silence to mean he was getting through to them. He rushed to the climax: the vehicle to enlightenment is an education. And they were entitled to that. He continued, even as he heard the plastic wrap crinkling. He was there to provide a solid education, if only they would accept the challenge. He saw the girl take out a cookie. He told them that a sense of Goodness comes with enlightenment, that they too could contribute Goodness to the world. He saw the girl flick her wrist. As the cookie hurled right at him – a straight shot, coming in at eye level – Edwards wondered if he’d forced them into the light too quickly. Edwards saw how they might take this discussion of darkness and lightness the wrong way, that he might actually be insulting them. Before he could backtrack and explain, a stale chocolate chipper struck his forehead. It crumbled, dusting his eyelashes. It left a slight sting.

It’s been Cookie Bitch ever since. Even the good kids have to call him that or nothing at all, because retribution is a certainty in middle school. Retribution comes from all angles, with full force, without any sense of proportion.

Somewhere down the street, more glass is breaking. It’s methodical. Smash! Car alarm. Smash! Car alarm. It’s beyond Edwards’ range of vision, but he can tell it’s getting closer. The air inside his apartment looks grainy, as if the air were de-materializing, as if everything at the finest levels were coming apart. Edwards feels a strong burning in his chest and he wonders if it’s a message sent by his grandmother as she lay on her carpet, dying.

* *

For the first few miles, drifts of orange-brown smoke envelop the car. The Harbor Freeway teems with fire engines and National Guard trucks that seem to be racing around to no effect. As he travels east, he looks back at the heavy plume hanging over the central parts of L.A.

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Even as he escapes it, Edwards feels that he’s traveling in the opposite direction from where he wants to go, that someone is maneuvering him against his will.

By the time Edwards pulls up to the old folks complex, he has smoked one cigarette too many. He feels agitated, raw, ill. He stares at the tiny brown apartments, stacked in pairs like washer/dryer sets, all the windows barred with the beige curtains sealed shut. The grass is yellow and hard, mowed on a schedule but never actually tended. There are no trees or flowers. The only sign of life sits on his grandmother’s windowsill. It’s her glass figurine collection – mostly Tinkerbells, with a few Bambis. He wonders if maybe she really is dead in there. Maybe his delay has cost her her life. Then, the dark blue curtains part and there she is in her recliner, staring right at him. White-haired, ancient, foul. Edwards restarts the car. He’s about to drive off, but she’s pulling herself up from her chair, heading for the door.

Edwards stubs out his cigarette. He’ll make this quick. Endure the mean-spirited questioning -- *Why don’t you ever have a girlfriend? You don’t seem to have any friends now do you?* Then he’ll explain that the riots are 50 miles east of here and she’s not in any danger. As he walks across the hard grass, her front door opens. Grandma looks worse than usual. She looks like she’s been hanging upside-down.

She tries, unsuccessfully, to clear her throat. “What are *you* doing here?” she rasps.

“Where’s your mother?”

“Working, as usual. Your phone doesn’t seem to be working.”

“Why aren’t *you* working?”

“I was...” he begins, but there’s no point explaining. “Are you okay, Grandma?”

“*No.*”

“What’s wrong?”

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She stares hard at him, which is strange because Edwards can't recall her ever really looking at him. She swallows hard. “Your *mother* should've come, that's what's wrong.”

“Is something the matter, Grandma?”

“Well,” she begins. “My T.V. broke, for starters. *Yesterday.*”

A long, thick silverfish wriggles up the doorjamb, antennae twitching. Every apartment she's ever lived in, every place for low-income seniors has had some sort of infestation.

“And did you know that I have six children, all an hour away, and no one comes to check on me, to see what's happening?”

Edwards stuffs his balled-up fists in his pants pockets.

“I guess you'll want to come in and take a look,” she says, and she heads inside. “You're letting out the cold. Shut the damn door.”

Edwards feels he has no choice but to follow her. He'll go in, look at the tv, and offer to buy her a new one. He holds his breath as he enters the dark, frigid apartment. He tries to repel the powerful smell of old person, the smell of the end, but it fills his nostrils, clogs his sinuses, and oozes out of his own pores. The tv sits on an oval-shaped oak table across from her recliner. There's a beige rotary phone beside it. Then down on the carpet, sticking out from behind the table, two cords sit idle, unplugged, the beige one crossed over the black one. Edwards stops and points at the cords.

“*Grandma,*” he says.

She's already planted in her recliner. She glances down at the cords, then, nonplussed, she picks up a tv guide. He stares at her until she looks up.

Her thin, orange-penciled eyebrows arch. “Well? Is it fixed?”

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Edwards picks up the cord and plugs it into the jack. The old unplugged phone trick, plus the unplugged tv trick. He turns and stares at her, wanting to say things he shouldn't.

Edwards notices that the room is arranged in a parabola, with all the furniture aimed at the tv. On the wall behind it, a dozen pretty little rainbows dance on the wall as if some breeze were causing them to move, yet the crystal figurines on the windowsill are perfectly still. He wonders what causes the refracted light to move, what makes it dance around like that? He remembers that the Dodger game was cancelled because of the riots. Without a television, Grandma has no idea.

He presses both hands on the sides of the box. He squeezes the hard plastic, rocking it, rocking it, slamming it back to the table. He flips the channel dial around. He fumbles with the ON switch. He doesn't even look at the cord.

The old woman sets the guide down on her lap and glares at him over her huge reading glasses. It's that look, her disbelief that someone who went to college doesn't know how to plug in a tv.

“Nope,” he says. “It's shot.”

Her eyes narrow. “Try that thing again. We'll watch the ballgame together.”

He looks at the tv again and shrugs. “It's done.”

She's silent.

“Your phone should work now. My mom can bring you a new one.”

Edwards makes his way for the door when a truck with a noisy muffler pulls up outside. A car door slams.

Grandma whips around in her chair. She reaches for the curtain and snaps it shut. Beyond the heavy drapes, Edwards can feel a man approaching the building. Grandma aligns her

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figurines, making sure the curtain is tucked behind them. She’s out of breath They’re sitting in the dark.

“Who is that?” Edwards says.

“Shh!”

Heavy footfalls rock the stairs outside. The door to the apartment upstairs slams. Heavy boots sound like they’re about to come through the ceiling.

After checking the curtain several times, she finally turns on a lamp. In the light, Edwards can see that her face is flushed. She has spun the recliner away from the window, and she looks at Edwards in a way he’s never seen before. She’s frightened.

“Grandma?”

“Don’t go out there yet,” she whispers.

“Who was that?!”

“Keep your voice down.”

“Where’s the old lady who lives there? What’s her name?”

“Ethel.”

“Yeah, Ethel. Where is she?”

“Not here anymore, is all I know. Now shh!”

“Why?”

“It’ll start soon.”

“What do you mean?”

She looks up at the ceiling. “The thumps.”

“What, Grandma!?”

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“The *noise*, dammit. It’s all night long with the thump thump thump. All night.” She rolls her eyes back down to meet his. “I sleep in the day now.”

“But what’s he doing?”

She lifts her chin. “Makin’ dope.”

He laughs a little. “*What?*”

“Nothin’.” She puts on her giant reading glasses and drags her finger along the tv listings. She checks the alarm clock on the table beside her. “Dodgers start in ten minutes.”

“Why do you think that’s what he’s doing?”

She wags her finger at the tv. “*I know*. Now go plug it in. Channel 5.”

Edwards pulls his car keys out of his pocket. He jingles them because he really has to go. He can’t drive through what’s being called a war zone after dark. “So call the building manager. Or the police!”

She swats the chair’s arm. She really pounds on it. “No no no no no.”

“*Why not?*”

“This is *HUD*, that’s why!” She scoffs. “*Building manager.*”

Edwards stares at the front door, wishing he’d left ten minutes earlier. He feels like a man on spacewalk, a man whose shuttle has just abandoned him. He feels himself crumpling. How long can he last in here? Five minutes? If he leaves now, he’ll not only be the grandson who hid in college all these years, but he’ll also be the one who abandoned Grandma to the drug dealers.

A muted pounding begins overhead.

“You mean *that?*” he asks.

Grandma’s tired eyes settle on his face. She stares at him as the pounding intensifies. He can feel her watching him, registering his surprise, his annoyance at the pounding, his

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blossoming awareness of how useless he is. She looks at him with the same bewilderment as his mother, his students, every woman he’s ever talked to, even babies – each of them wondering, “*What’s the matter with you?*”

It gets louder. Edwards looks up at the ceiling, wondering what the noise could possibly be. It sounds like billiard balls being sloshed around in a bathtub, but why would anyone do that? It goes on and on, in a precise, unceasing rhythm, one thump every half-second. The ceiling trembles. The walls. Edwards notices that she’s taken down all the family photos, mirrors, artwork from the county fair.

“That?” he asks.

She closes her eyes.

The pounding goes on. Edwards pictures his students, the boy with the boombox, the girls sitting on their desks and cackling, him up there trying to teach, students ignoring him like he doesn’t even exist. He thinks about his mother. The comments. “*And when do you plan on making some real money? Why would anyone major in math? You really have no sense of reality, do you?*”

He tells himself to ignore the pounding. Plug in Grandma’s tv and leave. But he finds himself fixated on it. It’s impossible to do anything but sit here and wait for the noise to stop.

“Every night?” he asks her.

She nods.

“*All night?*”

Nod.

“For what, a few days? *A week?*”

“Two months,” she says.

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He clenches his teeth. He tries to think about his car, the ride home, dinner, but he can't think about anything but the noise. It's as if the man were pounding directly on Edwards' head. He thinks of the rioters burning the neighborhood, not so much demanding something like justice, as simply letting off heat before their own bodies explode. *For every action force there is an equal and opposite reaction force.* That reaction force had finally been released. And now Edwards wants to go up and grab the guy upstairs, relentlessly pound on his head, and see how he likes it.

Edwards stands up. “Grandma, I can't -- you have to call the police for stuff like this!”

“*I can't.* Get me thrown out is what you'll do, calling the police.”

He sinks back into the couch. All he can do is pull the cigarettes from his shirt pocket and fumble for one, even though he would never light it in front of her. He twiddles with the cigarette. Of course, a bigger man would have already made the noise stop. His mother would have been up there as soon as the pounding began, demanding silence, making that asshole come down and apologize to Grandma.

“*Grandma,*” Edwards pleads with her, but his voice goes nowhere.

The thumping continues. Snow falls from the hallway ceiling. Silverfish zip along the baseboards like they're going to a rave. The old woman's head rests on the recliner, eyes closed. The corners of her mouth dive down, her bottom lip protrudes, her mouth opens slightly as she silently sobs. Tears run down the old bat's cheeks.

“*Shit,*” Edwards says, and he stands up.

One simple thing, he thinks as he climbs the stairs, taking each step to the beat of the jackhammer, or whatever it is. The staircase is made of concrete slabs covered with polished

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gray gravel. He imagines himself lecturing his mother, explaining that there’s no such thing as a simple thing and maybe she’s the one who’s clueless about reality. When Edwards makes it to the landing, he can feel the thumps vibrating up his shins, up his spine. The concrete slab shakes like cheap plywood. Edwards steps up to the door. Shadows flicker beyond the peephole. A man coughs. When Edwards curls up his right hand and pounds on the door with his fist, it feels like another person is committing the action. Here is the mind. Over there is the body. He commands the fist to thump louder.

Footsteps approach, and the peephole goes black. Edwards looks away from the peephole, the eye behind it. He considers the stairs. The man thunks away from the door and the pounding stops, the floor shudders. A door slams. Everything is silent, still, with faint echoes of a television blaring in some faraway apartment. Latches click, chains swing. Just inside the door something hits the floor and rolls, something metal, something small and dense, maybe a bullet.

Edwards backs away from the door. He looks down the stairs. His escape route undulates like a rope bridge. As he stands there imagining his moron’s death, the door opens. A large, backlit form fills the doorway.

“What?” the man says, and Edwards suddenly feels off-balance. The fumes are overwhelming. “You lost, little man?”

Edwards misses several opportunities to catch himself, grab onto the bars, curl into a ball, sit down on the top step, but he does none of those things. He falls like a tree. Silent and resolute. Backward. With Plato assuring him that his education was not a waste, that he is now capable of being a man of both thought *and* action, but, bear in mind, action entails falling at times. Edwards thinks, *and that is why I prefer not to act!* The back of his head slams into a stair and dents like cheap clay.

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He’s aware of the man looking down at him.

When Edwards comes to, the man is gone. It’s nighttime. A bright light shines on his face. A bare bulb. A porch light. He rolls over and manages to pull himself up from the concrete, shielding his eyes from the light. It feels late, like the rest of the world has either fallen asleep or died.

He opens the door next to the porch light, and finds his grandmother snoring in her recliner. A black and white television throws off shadows and flashes. He’s still at his grandmother’s house. He needs to sit down.

Edwards shuffles over to the couch and sinks into it. He can’t get the images on the screen to focus, but he hears that it’s the World Series, Dodgers and the A’s, and the names sound familiar but wrong -- Lasorda, Canseco, Hershiser. He’s no baseball fan, but aren’t those guys retired? Plus, the World Series in April? He remembers the World Series being around Halloween, because there was that one year when his mother refused to take him to a costume party because of the World Series game. He isn’t sure about anything. It hurts to breathe. He seems to have broken some ribs.

Grandma clears her throat. “You’re back.” Her eyes flutter as she tries to focus on the screen.

He needs to ask her some things, but he can’t form the words.

When she turns to look back at him, she smiles. He can’t remember her ever smiling at him. She points at the ceiling. “Well look at that.” He looks up at the lumpy white ceiling. “Got m’quiet back.” His grandmother’s smile makes him feel like a solid person, battered but intact, as if his cells had acquired something more than thoughts and air. He can occupy space *and*

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affect matter now. As he expands, he feels the pain invading his body, as if everything were swelling beyond its natural limit. But that proud smile on her face, directed at him...

Grandma smacks her hands when a Dodger strikes out, and Edwards winces. She leans forward on her seat as the next batter steps up to the plate. When the A's pitcher strikes out the next Dodger, Grandma smacks her hands again, and for a second the room goes completely dark.

Edwards thinks maybe he should call a doctor, but then the crowd roars and a white screen comes into focus. Edwards can make out the finest details. He can see a fan eating a hot dog wrapped in checkered paper. The catcher has two different shoelaces, one a brighter white than the other.

“Grandma?” Edwards says. “I should go home.”

“It's almost over,” Grandma says.

Her statement seems to apply to so many things. Edwards considers the possibility of dying on this couch, really dying, without having experienced so many things. What would they carve into his tombstone? College Boy? Cookie Bitch? He's always feared death, yet most real life experiences seem to come with the potential for death. The stakes are always so high!

When he tries to sit up, he can't put any pressure on his hands. Edwards pulls out a cigarette and lights it. *Suck it up*, his mother would say. He sucks, inhales the smoke, and as he exhales, he feels his face prickling with tears. A tv guide hits him on the arm.

“Put that out!” she says. “I only got one lung.”

Edwards pinches out the ember. He tucks the cigarette back into the pack and swipes at his tears. He sees four pitchers on the screen instead of one, there's a mess of numbers, a whole line of umpires like a chain of paper dolls. He weeps. He can't stop.

“What are you crying for?” his grandmother asks.

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“I don’t know,” he says.

“Sure you know.”

Edwards thinks for a second. “I think I’m hurt.”

Grandma studies his face. “You look fine to me.”

But then it’s dark in here. There’s only light from the tv, and it’s flickering and constantly shifting.

“Okay,” he says, even though he means to call 911 because he realizes that he has a serious head injury and he just might die here.

At the inning’s end, an aging Ken doll appears on the screen with Breaking News. There are some broken windows on the Westside. Armed shopkeepers are firing at looters.

“What’s this all about?” Grandma says, leaning forward. “Is this because of that Rodney King?”

That’s not it, Edwards wants say, *that’s not it at all,* but there are too many things, too many bad things to explain, but who is he to explain injustice to Grandma? Who is he to explain anything to anybody?

“Was the world always this bad, Grandma?” he says. He looks up at the quiet ceiling. “I mean, people making drugs in an old lady’s apartment. Cops beating people senseless. All the violence. Doesn’t it seem like everything’s out of control? Like evil is gaining the upper-hand?”

He feels his grandmother’s stare. She tells him to quit talking, or go home.

“What do *you* know?” she says and turns her attention back to the ballgame.

The game pauses. The camera zooms in on the Dodgers’ dugout, then on a player they call “the last best hope.” He’s an older guy, receding hair and an oversized brown mustache. He hoists himself up from the bench and hobbles over to the stairs. He slips on a helmet, rolls his

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shoulders around, and limps up to the field. As he passes the on-deck circle, the crowd chants, “Gibby! Gibby!” Edwards grimaces. If this is the last best hope, we’re screwed.

There she is in her den. On self-imposed curfew, watching shadows on the wall, in an apartment teeming with insects. She’s been outside, she’s seen reality. She’s been mugged, impregnated, divorced, beaten, abandoned by everyone she loves, and who knows what else, and ultimately, she chooses the cave. He thinks about his own life, how, by going to college, becoming a teacher, working and living in a tough area, he’d always thought he was out there, experiencing the real world. But then what is his life really like? What does he do?

He likes going to the movies alone. He likes writing out his thoughts just to make sure he keeps having thoughts, not that he cares to share them. He likes reading Russian novels that he never talks about with anybody. He likes allowing his thoughts to ramble and run, without the interruptions of another person. He likes not having to worry about saying the right thing. Moreover, he likes to eat alone. He likes to drink alone. He likes to sleep alone.

A squeak from Grandma’s chair interrupts Edwards’ epiphany. She leans forward in her chair, her knotted hands raised above her knees. “Gibby,” she whispers, an incantation.

On the next pitch, someone hits a high fly ball. Edwards closes his eyes and feels his head roll backward and land on something hard. There’s the white noise from the crowd, and that special silence of a ball soaring into the lights, somewhere in that shared space over everybody’s heads. Everyone is looking up. In the stands, a wave of blue satin rushes in one direction and a little white ball keeps barreling across the sky, unstoppable, like a meteor. Edwards squeezes his eyes before impact. He opens them just in time to see Grandma leap out of the recliner. She stands on wobbly, half-bent knees and jabs her finger at the television.

“You see that, Eric? You see?” she cries. “That is not so bad. *That is not so bad!*”

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The fans – grown men mostly – roar and weep and hug and pour beer on each other’s heads.

The commentator tries to speak through the joyous pandemonium. He pauses on each word. *“I don’t believe... what I just saw!”*

Edwards pulls himself up, standing in front of the couch, clapping and whooping about this old game, trying to participate in this bittersweet ode to L.A. even as it burns to the ground, but it’s all very painful to him and he feels that he should sit. His vision has blurred. He rubs his eyes and he wants to tell them all, *let me in, let me in!*

But the room swings to one side. On his way down, he catches a glimpse of his grandmother’s chair, her frightened face, a cottage cheese sky speckled with glitter. Then there’s the faint thump of an off-balance washing machine, just getting started.

END