

THE ART OF BEGGING

In life, you only get one shot. For me, it came when I was debating between my last drops of Captain Morgan and my high school finals. I didn't walk at graduation. In fact, that day, I had passed out before noon. I had blown my one shot and four hours later, I spent my first night homeless on the concrete intersection of Sherman Street and Hennepin Avenue. At least I would've except my twelve-year old sister snuck out of the house and walked two miles out to find me.

"Come on," Lauren said nonchalantly as if it was normal for little sisters to sneak out at midnight to bring their big brothers back home. "You can sleep in my room."

I looked up, my vision still hazy from the buzz of cheap vodka and an empty stomach. "I'm not allowed."

She shrugged and smiled. "When has that ever stopped you? Let's get you up." She grabbed my hand and pulled. Unfortunately, I had close to a hundred pounds on her.

"Go home, Lauren." I pushed her and turned away. My parents didn't want to say so, but part of the reason they kicked me out was so I couldn't drag Lauren down. The messed up thing was that they had a point. A good one. "Just leave me alone."

The best thing for everyone was for me to simply disappear.

Two arms wrapped around my neck. A ball of warmth pressed into my back. "No."

Lauren called it a second chance. I told her that we only get one but she kept repeating that word, only two letters, but put together to form the most beautiful sound I've ever heard.

"No."

That night, I cried into Cinderella pillow covers underneath baby blue blankets.

"You're a shitty big brother," Lauren said from the floor. "But I love you and I need you. So even if you give up on yourself, please don't ever give up on me."

I nodded wet streaks into her pillows.

"Promise?"

A few years later, I would finally answer her question.

My little sister only has one shot at life, an experimental drug trial that she won't get into. A chance is what the hospital calls it, but I overheard a conversation between nurses and at St. Jude's, there's only one spot left. It's between my sister and a kid named McFarlan. The ward she sleeps in is named after a McFarlan.

Ever since I found out, I've been saving money. Maybe she has no chance at this hospital, but if I transfer her to another, she'll at least have a shot. And at the low deductible of a thousand dollars, I can give that to her. I sit beside her, watching her chest rise and fall to the rhythm of her heartrate monitor.

"Hey big brother," Lauren says when she awakes.

I give her a soft smile. "Hey little sister."

"Have you been waiting long?"

I shake my head. An hour is nothing. I once waited two hours outside her school gymnasium window to listen to her play Fur Elise at a talent show. The wind made it hard to hear and snow made it hard to see, but god damn did she steal the show.

“So, you have the money to save me yet?” she asks jokingly.

“I will.”

She stares back with one eyebrow raised. “Actually?”

“I only need a hundred dollars now. I’ll have it by the time I visit tomorrow.” I plaster a grin onto my face. “Who would’ve guessed?”

Lauren snorts out a sharp laugh. “My knight in shining armor!”

“You don’t sound that happy.”

“I thought my knight would, well... shower more.”

We share a laugh. Her voice rings like a melody.

“It doesn’t matter what I am.” I raise my hand, pinky up. “I’ll save you, I swear.”

She takes my pinky and smiles. “I’ll hold you to that.”

We stay up all night talking. I tell her about that one time I found a drunk guy passed out butt-naked with his ass in the air. She looks at me horrified. She tells me about the tattoos she wants. I fumble for arguments against her. We talk about old movies, books she’s read, and finally when she can barely keep her eyes open, she tells me goodnight.

Before I leave, I stop by the McFarlan kid’s room. His room looks like something out of a travel brochure: plasma screen TV, Xbox, ten pillows on a king-size bed, fucking magenta carpet.

Less than two days from now is the deadline for the drug trial and if she stays here, she’s as good as dead.

Every good beggar knows it’s all about first impressions. You get one three second window to convince your customer that you’re selling the finest humanity the city has to offer. A dollar in my cup buys you a lifetime’s supply of gratitude, redemption for whatever sin you committed the previous week, and five minutes of that warm fuzzy feeling in your chest.

I even have regulars. I remember their names; I wave and call out to them when they pass by. Tom. Chris. Haylie. The list goes on. None of them know my name, but that’s just our relationship. Our talks don’t last more than a few minutes, but my customers always leave happier than when they came. That’s what I sell.

I see Haylie. She always pretends she doesn’t see me until I call out to her. She then smiles as if our encounter is by chance. But I know where she works, she takes a detour to go down my street.

Showtime.

“Haylie.” I’m all smiles.

“Hello,” she says, her eyes widening in surprise. “How are you?”

Every time we meet, she asks the same question. Ritual dictates that I tell her that I’m splendid, the world is splendid and she is splendid.

“Terrible,” I say. “My little sister’s in the hospital and I’m a hundred bucks short to save her life. Do you mind sparing a little extra today?”

A frown flashes across Haylie’s lips before they press together into a thin smile. “Of course.”

I can see it in her eyes. Betrayal. We had a deal and I just ripped it to shreds.

“Here you go—” she digs into her purse and pulls out a twenty and some change— “I’m so sorry to hear about your sister. I hope she gets better.”

“Me too.”

When she leaves, her steps aren't light. She isn't sashaying down the street, no, she's walking as she normally does. This is probably the last time I'll ever see her.

I take the money and hide it in my coat pocket. It looked like she handed me another two dollars in change, but only a fool would count his money in broad daylight. Only seventy-eight dollars left, approximately.

I look down the street and see a familiar face. I wave and say, "Chris!"

I'm not going to make it; I can't believe it. I even broke my rule to find out, I snuck into an alley and counted my money in broad daylight. I am fifty dollars short. Chris didn't take my sob story as well as Haylie did and Tom never showed. In fact, there were very few regulars today.

With five maxed out credit cards and no more jewelry left to pawn, my parents couldn't cover the fifty dollars. And the only friend I have is the one sick in the hospital. I shake my head. The sun hadn't set yet and though my potential customers are thinning, they aren't gone yet. I wear a strained smile and try to make eye contact with the next passerby.

"Please sir, the money's not even for me."

Three hours until I fail.

"Ma'am I really need the money. Now."

Two hours until Lauren dies.

"Please, give me some fucking money!"

I am panting amidst a small crowd of stunned pedestrians. The lady in front of me scurries back the way she came. I scan the buggy eyes of the people around me. I want to scream at each and everyone one of them who won't spare a dollar to save Lauren's life. To put a match to every hospital that won't treat her because it isn't profitable enough to. Smother every McFarlan that gets to live in place of her. Instead, I leave before someone calls the cops.

Only slivers of the sun rises above the mountain range in the distance.

"C'mon, there has to be something." I close my eyes.

Fifty dollars and barely two hours left. Only God could help me now. I open my eyes. Of course, a church.

But only one church gives afternoon sermons on a Thursday and its St. Martin's. Back when I first started begging, the pastor had me arrested. If I expected any amount of money from them, I'd have to put on the greatest performance I've ever done.

I arrive just as the last slivers of sunlight disappear. As if awaiting my arrival, the church doors open as the afternoon sermon ends. I take a deep breath and head toward them.

Showtime.

"God bless, my friend!"

Four dollars.

"Christians really are the most generous."

Three dollars.

"You have no idea what this means to me." I sniffle as my eyes water. Six dollars.

I've never put up such a performance before. Forget fifty dollars, I'm cleaning house.

Hear ye, hear ye! All ye gather round for I have the finest humanity this city has ever seen!

"Thank you, Father. I hope God watches out for you." I clasp my hands in prayer and nod.

"He watches over us all, my son." The priest says. He hands me a ten-dollar bill. "I know things are rough, but they will get better."

I smile the widest my lips can stretch. "They already have."

When the last of my customers leave, I pick myself up and head to the hospital. I'm a little behind schedule, but I'm sure Lauren will understand. Not only can I pay for her transfer, but I can buy her a present too, something that'll make up for three years of missed birthdays.

A tattoo? I burst out laughing. Lauren would certainly like that.

Another beggar down the street eyes me strangely. I smile back. "My friend," I say as I bring out a small wad of bills. I hand him a five and put the rest in my jeans. "You look like you could use a meal."

The beggar's eyes widen. Clearly, no beggar expected to receive alms from one of their own. "God bless you, sir."

I give him a wink. "He already has."

I skip down the street humming Fur Elise. Never before have I been so happy to be a beggar.

My face slams against the ground. My teeth snap shut and my nose crunches against the cement. Someone yanks my jacket off me. It must've only been a second I was out, but a second too long. The first thing I see are a pair of faded white Vans sprinting down the street and the glint of a pistol.

I take off after him. I am chasing down a man with a gun.

My calves feel like napalm is racing through its veins. I want to scream, to tell the thief that he isn't stealing my money, it's my little sister's money. It's the only thing I can give her because even when I smashed her piggy bank to buy more liquor, she still snuck me into her room. Even after countless broken promises to change, she still believed me, lie after lie.

But I can't say these things. I'm breathing through a straw.

My thief turns, gun up. "Back off!" It's the beggar I had given money to. "I swear I'll shoot!"

The barrel of the gun points straight at me. His finger twitches on its trigger. I go faster. That's my little sister's life you're stealing.

Thunder erupts from the gun. It cracks through the night like God clapping. The bullet hits me in the chest and I skid across the ground. My heart feels like someone is pressing a lit cigarette against it. Then, darkness.

It's that monotonous beeping that wakes me up. I've heard that note so many times that at first, I simply think it as background noise. I open my eyes and wait for the world to come into focus. Sunlight streams through the window into my room. The clock on the wall reads 2:30 which means that Lauren's deadline passed over two hours ago.

Another broken promise.

"I see you're awake," the nurse says as she walks in. "How are you feeling?"

"How's Lauren?" I ask, my voice raspy. For the first time, I notice how dry my mouth is. The Sub-Saharan isn't as dry as my tongue.

“Your sister is asleep in her room. When she heard about what happened to you, she threatened to drag herself, heart machine and all, to here. She only calmed down when I personally said I’d check up on you every thirty minutes. —” The nurse chuckles. — “She must love you very much.”

I nod. More than I deserve.

“You must be wondering what happened,” the nurse continues.

“The trial.” I have only strength enough for a few words at a time.

The nurse purses her lips. “Unfortunately, Lauren did not get the spot.”

My heart rate monitor spikes. I push myself up as my shoulder flares with pain. If my mouth is a desert, then my shoulder is a pile of lit coals. They don’t just simmer, they ignite. But my shoulder is still too weak. It gives out and I collapse back into bed.

Pathetic.

The nurse scolds me, something about tearing my stitches. I stare at the fluorescent lighting above. When she’s satisfied, she tells what happened. A gunshot wound a few inches above my heart in my shoulder region. She uses words like ‘miracle’ and ‘lucky’. It’ll take me only a few days to recover and only a few hours before I’ll have the strength to move around again.

Afterwards, the police come to question me. The officer yawns as I tell him my story. I don’t blame him. I’m as uninterested as he is. The deadline had already passed. The money no longer mattered. After an hour, he leaves, but not before handing me the contents of my jeans. Sixteen dollars.

I browse the hospital gift shop and decide to go with a teddy bear. Instead of a chance to live, Lauren will have to settle for a stuffed bear.

“Hey little sister,” I say when I see her waking up.

Her eyes are slow to open. “Hey big brother,” she whispers. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

I grab her hand. Her fingers are icicles ready to break at the slightest squeeze. From behind my back, I unveil her present. “I hope you’re not too old for stuffed animals.”

Her face lights up like a fizzling lightbulb. She reaches for the bear but it slips out of her grasp. She stares at her hand, a strained smile still on her face. “Sorry,” she says.

I bend down to pick the bear up from the floor and I stay down, chocking on sobs. If Lauren can smile through it all, so can I. But the tears don’t stop. I bite my lips. Squeeze my eyes. Nothing works.

“Her name is Tibbers,” I stutter as I grab the bear. I hand it to her, tears still rolling down my cheeks.

“So you’ve heard the news then?”

I stare at my feet. Silence. The clock on the wall ticks. The heart monitor beeps. Nobody says a word.

“Hey,” Lauren finally says, “it’s not your fault.”

She smiles. She smiles for me. She knows I’m hurting and if she smiles, she can pretend that she’s better than she is, that her once wavy blonde hair isn’t pale and wispy, that her fingers aren’t so weak she couldn’t even grasp a teddy bear. And she used to play concert piano.

I stay to talk, but the conversation doesn’t come. It feels like there is a brick wall between myself and her. So before she’s even tired, I say my goodbyes and leave. Tomorrow morning, Collin McFarlan will get a new experimental drug while my sister withers away. I bet he’s fucking celebrating.

Begging's an art and the best artists can make anything happen— who am I kidding?

I stand outside of Collin's room with my hand hovering above the doorknob. I try to leave, to will my feet to step away, but I can't. Just like when I nearly passed his room on my way out, I am stuck here.

I try the doorknob one more time. Of course it's unlocked, it wouldn't have locked itself from the ten other times I tried. But this time, I push. The door opens slightly ajar and I stare through the cracks.

In the midst of swirling pink tulips, gilded family portraits, and wooden picnic baskets of candy sleeps the twelve-year-old boy that would live in place of my sister. The remnants of a cake lay on the table beside him, right next to stuffed animals that certainly didn't come from St. Jude's convenience store.

I walk in, surprising even myself. I'm even more surprised when I lock the door behind me.

A dim lamp by Collin's bed guides the way. I find myself at his side. From this close up, I can see the little red bumps that litter his face. Ah, puberty. On the floor beside him are enough pillows for a family of ten, all of them nicer than anything Lauren's ever slept on.

It's one of those moments of clarity where everything comes into view and suddenly the world makes sense. I realize the only way I have left to save my little sister, to repay her for all the love I didn't deserve because even though I'm a beggar, I never asked for her love. I never had to.

Tears roll down my cheeks as I grab a pillow.

I dig my fingers into its plush covering.

My arms shake so much my stitches might tear.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, my voice trembling.

I press the pillow into Collin's face. His heart monitor goes berserk. He jerks his body from side to side, kicking and screaming. But his kicks aren't very hard and his screams are muffled.

I hear the beeping of a pager outside the door. "It's locked?" a male voice says, "someone get me the keys!"

Not good. My shoulder is still weak from the hole in my chest. Every now and then, Collin wiggles out of the pillow for just long enough to gasp for air. I need more time. At the edge of my vision, I find my answer. A chair. I let go of the pillow and prop the chair against the door.

With a giant gasp of air, Collin shrieks, "Help!"

He rolls off the bed and hits the floor, army crawling under the bed. Smart kid.

I grab his ankles and yank him out. He bites and scratches at my arms. I swat his arms away and squeeze my fingers around his neck until his wild shrieks die into a gurgle. My gunshot wound is an inferno, searing away whatever is left of my heart.

"The keys aren't working!" I hear. They bang against the door, its hinges shaking every time.

I squeeze harder.

"Get security up here! Help me break down the door!"

Collin's eyes roll back until the hazel disappears and only white remains.

The door buckles and bends, but stays up.

Collin's legs stop kicking. The heart machine beeps like a bomb about to blow.

The door breaks open, but it's too late. The heart monitor is singing a single steady note and I'm gasping for breath, my arms at my sides. I look at the stunned doctors, nurses, and policemen with the widest smile I can muster.

I have saved my little sister.