

The King of Nothing

The droopy, downcast eyes and the slowly measured gait, with the neck retreated between hunched shoulders; signal a resigned acceptance of surrender. Each one of them, the inhabitants of barren cells of gray concrete and chrome chain link, are dependent upon him – though they are only marginally more hopeless and helpless than he. It is that narrow fulcrum point that separates them, the oppressed, from the master.

They are reliant upon him for food and shelter. Even more importantly, they relinquish their future to him. He determines their fate. The calendar is carefully measured with a cold precision that gauges the distance between a life sustained and an impending death. Time renders all other considerations worthless. Except, that is, physical abnormalities. The slightest hint of major illness - excessive coughing, significant loss of weight, prolonged limp... may be enough for him to exploit their vulnerabilities and justify termination. It is on the edge of such a precipice that they live – anxiety ridden and indebted to his power.

Each morning, seven days a week, he trudges down the long hallway that separates the cells into two rows that resemble the fashion and style of an egg carton. Today is no different from countless mornings before. He has performed this ritual enough over the last five years that the regularity blunts any interest in his duties. It deflects their blank, faceless expressions, their baying cries of hunger, and their whimpering pleas for freedom.

He works at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The dog pound. The animal shelter. It's a job. Simple as that. It's available to him because it's menial and low paying. There aren't many people competing for such roles. Leftovers of the classified section of the newspaper for those people lacking in marketable skills and an education. His is a testament to an accumulation of poor choices and

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decisions gone awry. To that degree he has imprisoned himself, and therefore his family as well, within pressing limitations. The scope of his family's future shrinks with each passing day. He has bequeathed his seven children grim prospects and cheap dreams.

He pulls the handle with his right hand, the one that required wire stitches last year to close a gash from the viscous bite of a German Shepherd, and simultaneously opens the doors that divide fresh air and stale air. They are released into their outdoor cell. The exchange of an indoor cell for an outdoor one is equal in containment, with the exception of the view. There's a false sense of freedom. The sky offers the promise of an endless world beyond the chain link barrier. It is a world they may never enjoy again.

He retrieves the hose from the hook on the wall and begins directing the powerful force of water at the small piles of excrement and the puddles of urine that dot the floor of the cells. The waste is guided down the drains by the torrents. It will take longer for the stench to disappear.

Before he lets them back in he loads up the cart of food and leads it down the aisle, stopping briefly at the entrance of each cell to deposit a bowl of food, sliding it on the floor inside. It is standard fare, cheap and generic. The same every single day, without worry of discriminating tastes among the consumers. Too bad for them.

He checks the clock at the end of the hall and registers the amount of time he will allow them to enjoy the fresh air. This gives him a break as well. It's an opportunity to wrestle with the paperwork that goes along with the job, processing entries and departures, whether paroled to accommodating families or dispatched to the graveyard like paupers. They're nameless to all but him. He becomes the lone guardian of their memories.

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The ash tray is full and the thermos of coffee is empty. It's time to go home. He approaches his car with the timid and calculated step of someone trekking through a mine field. The heap always threatens to cough, sputter, and pass away at any given turn of the key. He is prepared. There are a handful of tools in the trunk somewhere amid assorted crap and tangled up jumper cables that work like a defibrillator to resurrect a battery flirting with death. Concrete blocks that he uses to weigh down the car for traction in the winter as a hedge against his lack of snow tires and a spare tire that's bald but holds air.

It starts. He backs out of the small lot and heads home. The ride is a bit of a salvation. There are thirty minutes and twelve miles that separate work and home but the barking of the dogs and the whining of the kids prove almost indistinguishable to him. Two sides of the same coin, that's all.

As soon as he steps through the front door he finds kids everywhere, jostling for the few spots that offer a good view of the tiny screen of the black and white portable television. The couch, like all of the furniture, is weary and aged. There are things all over the floor. He steps around the debris and goes unnoticed toward the bathroom. The door is closed. With nine people in the family the lone bathroom in the flat is almost constantly occupied. He thumps his fist on the door and prompts the departure of one of the boys who rushes out grabbing his pants around his waist.

The food is ready. It's the usual. There's not much that can be done with the government commodity food, even if mom was as adept at preparing meals as a television chef. The list of food distributed by the welfare department is virtually identical each month and taxes creativity.

The mashed potatoes are borne from powdered flakes in a box. The stringy turkey is tough and should have remained in the can it came in. So should the peas. The Kool-aid is too sweet and the powdered milk is too flat. There is never dessert.

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The tribe assembled around the table adds nothing to the ambiance of the meal. The faces are similar, dismal and bleak. The chatter of varied conversations blends together in an unrecognizable and disconcerting noise. Hands are thrust out from all directions as people reach for food and drinks with the abandon of hunger and thirst. Dishes are passed around the table with the casualness of a game of hot potato. Soon, the food vanishes and the drink has disappeared. At the same time, the diners scatter away from the table as if they heard an announcer bellow "ready, set, go." Their mother is close behind, darting to the kitchen to fill the sink with hot water and detergent for the dishes.

He is left alone at the head of the table. The disarray - plates smeared with gravy, forks and spoons strewn about, drops of Kool-aid here and there, scraps of food carelessly splattered - remind him of the clutter and confusion found at battlefields in the hills of Korea in the aftermath of an intense firefight. Only there aren't bodies. Casualties of an emotional nature perhaps, but no bodies to be carefully tucked away in a bag and shipped home. Residue from the war is never very far from him. Gnawing at his psyche like maggots slowly laying waste to a piece of rotten meat.

He was among those Marines surrounded by hundreds of thousands of Chinese at the Chosin Reservoir. The Marines progress was blocked and they were forced to return south. A reporter asked the commanding general if this marked the first time the U.S. Marines had ever retreated. He replied that they were not retreating; they were simply attacking in a different direction.

He is surrounded again. This time by a horde of kids and all their needs. By a pile of unpaid bills with anxious creditors. By too many questions and not enough answers. By a demanding work schedule that depletes his strength. By a world that is overwhelming to him.

He is once again attacking in a different direction. But this time he is without aim. He is thrashing, clawing, and battering recklessly through life, like a blind man, in hope of discovering an escape.

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His attempt to right himself is useless. He is destined to fail. He is now like a dog spinning around and around, unknowingly chasing its own tail. He is the cause of his misfortunes, he just isn't aware of it. His decisions and actions have engulfed him and are slowly suffocating him.

Depression grips him tighter and tighter. The grime that coats the faded wallpaper paints a gloomy picture. Cob webs drape the upper corners where the ceiling meets the walls, festooning the room with an effect opposite that of crepe ribbons that decorate celebrations. The holes in the walls evidence a history of carelessness and anger and leave the room looking like a pockmarked teen battling acne. The gaps expose the thin strips of wood between the brick exterior and the plaster wall interior. The slats bear a grim resemblance to the visible ribs of an anorexic girl. The apartment becomes smaller and smaller as the kids grow larger and larger.

His stomach is flaring up again. He lights another cigarette and slowly draws the nicotine into his lungs before blowing out another cloud of smoke into the stagnant air of the room. The haze from his previous cigarettes forms a thin veil which encircles him and allows him to feel hidden within the apartment.

The cry of a child penetrates his hiding place and points out the fallacy of attempting to find a peaceful moment within the walls of an overcrowded flat. One of the girls swishes through the room, hollering for mom. From the words that slip out in between gulps of air and shrieks of pain, he surmises that a daughter was bitten by one of the mutts that share the apartment. One son scoots closely behind, not for moral support, but simply supplying a commentary of the event, making sure that his father, equipped with a hair trigger temper, understands that he is not responsible for his sister's agony. The girl was playing near the dog's dish and sparked a naturally defensive reaction and a subsequent snap of teeth.

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He calmly rises from his seat and inexplicably strides to the bedroom. Within moments he emerges with a shotgun in hand. He discovers the hound cowering in a corner of the living room. He yanks it by the collar and drags it to the rear of the building where he shoves it down the stairs and out to the backyard. All of the brood trail behind, their fears fueled by the combination of an angry father prone to violence, a shotgun, and the dog.

He commands the kids to plunk their asses on the concrete steps of the back porch. Then, with their attention focused upon him, he holds the barrel of the gun against the head of the dog with cold indifference to the expressions we wear.

The scene immediately precipitates a chorus of sobs and dismayed cries, even from the victim of the attack. The volume of the collective emotional outburst increases as he stands firmly in position and promises to blow the brains out of the unsuspecting dog before the very eyes of his seven kids. A grin grows upon his face as he stares at his children, all weeping and howling. He takes pleasure in manipulating them as they yield to his power.

Finally, after bringing the dirge to a crescendo, wringing our tears from his children like water brutally extracted by twisting a soaking towel, he releases his grip on the collar and lets the dog slink away, with a kick in the ass as a sendoff. He marches right past the audience without a word, ascends the stairs, and returns to the throne-like chair at the head of the empty table.

He is the king of nothing.