

Mighty Man

Coming home was always the worst part. No matter who was there, it was empty.

Leslie Green stumbled into his kitchen late one evening, his body reeling with the echoes of the day's pain. He almost crashed onto the loveseat in the family room, but he veered away at the last moment. The couch was haunted, a burial ground where old memories lingered, cruel in their pleasantness. Best to leave it alone. Without turning on the lights, he opened the fridge and rested his throbbing head onto the top shelf next to the orange juice and the pot of last night's pasta. He stayed there for a few minutes, letting the chilly air soothe the ache in his skull. Then the bright kitchen lights snapped on and his headache returned.

"Dad?" asked Micah.

"Hey. I didn't know you were home yet." replied Leslie.

"Yeah, well, I am."

Micah frowned and moved his gym bag from his left shoulder to his right. He was getting older now, nearly a man grown. Leslie looked at the pot holding the pasta. It was a light, electric blue. He hated the color, always had, but buying it hadn't been his decision. Now it was precious.

"Dad," said Micah.

"No." Leslie's body sagged a touch. He didn't want to have this conversation again.

"Why do this to yourself? You don't need the money."

Leslie removed his head from the fridge, closed it, and looked at his son. "Don't worry about me."

“This isn’t healthy. You’re too old to--”

“Last I checked I was still your father. And you don’t get to tell me what to do.” Leslie tried to dilute his tone with warmth. He still had something he wanted to talk about.

Micah stared back, but he didn’t leave. That was a good sign.

“You, um, had a fight today right?” asked Leslie, struggling to keep the hope out of his voice. This was an odd thing to be prideful about, he knew. Who cares if his son understood how much Leslie craved one real conversation with him. It had been months, and each day they drifted farther apart.

“Yeah,” replied Micah.

“Did you win?” asked Leslie, grateful for the reply.

“Yeah, I did.”

“Again? How many have you done now?”

“Nine.”

“Nine in six months. And nine wins.” Leslie paused. “I’m proud of you.”

“Mmm.”

“How many rounds?”

Micah did not acknowledge the question, and the silence stretched too long to be respectful. He was so withdrawn lately. Micah’s gym bag hung loosely off his body. He wore a black hoodie with matching black joggers and dried sweat caked his face at his temples.

“Two,” replied Micah at last. Leslie breathed a sigh of relief.

“So quick. How did you catch him?”

“You’re pretending. You don’t care.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Leslie.

“It’s what you do.”

A wave of pain commanded Leslie’s attention. He knew he should sit, but he hated the idea of being forced into it. Taking his time, Leslie poured some water into his favorite mug, reached into the freezer for some ice cubs, dropped them into his mug one at a time, then, satisfied he was doing it on his terms, sat at the wooden kitchen table. He took a long sip, then looked up at his son slowly.

“C’mon Micah, talk to me. How did you catch him?”

Micah rolled his eyes. “He got me good near at the beginning of the round. I exaggerated how good though. He got greedy and tried to end it, but he got lazy too. I took one more to sell it, then countered when he opened to finish me. It was a pretty good counter too; I had been practicing that move with my trainer all week.”

“He caught you twice?” asked Leslie, concerned.

“Yeah.”

“Bad?”

“No,” replied Micah.

“Where?”

“That’s not the right question.”

“What? Let me see.” said Leslie.

“I’m fine.”

“Micah--”

“I knew it. You’re not listening. You don’t care.”

Leslie looked at his cup of water. “What do you want from me?”

“I shouldn’t have to help you do this.”

“Do what?” It always went like this. Every damn time.

Micah said nothing.

“I’m trying,” said Leslie.

“Only in the way you want to try.”

“What does that mean?”

A long minute passed. Micah smacked his lips and shook his head. “Ask me how I countered the punch,” said Micah. “That was the right question.”

As soon as he said it, Leslie saw that he was right. “I’m sorry, yes. How did you counter?”

Micah did not speak. Leslie was frustrated, but he didn’t react. He hadn’t yet broached the subject that was really on his mind. Maybe now was the time? It wasn’t, clearly, but when was it ever?

Leslie rested his head in one hand and sighed. “Did you email the Dean yet?” he asked.

“No.” Micah folded his arms.

“Classes start soon. You might want to get on that.” Micah’s transition into manhood had challenged Leslie in unexpected ways. He was never quite sure when to tell his son to do something or when to advise him to do something. After talking it over with Stan, a mentor of sorts, Leslie had decided to aim for advice.

“He launched a huge roundhouse, but he telegraphed that shit for miles. I slipped it perfectly and caught his kidney clean. Textbook. He bent a little and I followed to his chin. Done.”

Leslie took a sip, grateful and annoyed. “Thanks for telling me,” he said.

“I shouldn’t have to,” snapped Micah.

Leslie kicked himself. "I had to work," he said softly.

"No, you didn't."

"I did," replied Leslie.

"Sure. The video is online."

"I'll watch it," said Leslie. He didn't want to, but he knew his tepid reception to Micah's MMA competitions chilled his relationship with him.

"Whatever," said Micah.

"I promise. I want to see it."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry, Micah. I mean it this time," said Leslie.

"Okay."

"Tomorrow night. Let's talk about it."

"Sure."

A moment passed. "Are you going to email the dean, Micah?" asked Leslie. "The classes start in a few weeks."

"Are we done?"

"You've talked about college for years, Micah. I know you've been a good fighter so far, but one bad hit could rock you silly. Fighting pays out now but an education is forever. The mind is forever. I don't understand, what are you waiting for? Your mother would--"

"Still be here! If you--"

"Don't you ever raise your voice at me! Who the fuck do you think you are? This is my goddamn house and I'll be damned if you gonna disrespect me in my own goddamn house!"

Leslie was he was surprised to find himself standing. Micah silently glared back for a minute more before dropping his gym bag on the floor and walking away. Anything more and there would be no turning back.

Leslie watched him go, a tempest frothing inside him. He glanced down at the open gym bag and noticed his son's faded electric blue MMA gloves. Leslie sucked in a breath. He hadn't known; he had never seen the gloves before. A wave of regret slammed into him. Of course, he didn't know the color of the gloves, he had never seen Micah fight. He groaned and sank into his chair. He had cursed at his son, breaking one of the last vows to her that he still had the power to keep. Leslie drained his water and examined the white mug, chewing on the last bits of ice as he did so. Painted on the mug was a sailboat gliding before a fiery sunset, and two silhouetted figures held hands as they overlooked the bow. First this had been a promise, then it had been a memory. But now it was something different. Now it was a reminder, as haunted as the loveseat. Leslie flung it at the kitchen window.

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At work the next day, Leslie studied a new vase of gaudy plastic sunflowers as his arms and legs were strapped to the chair. He frowned at the overly harsh shade of yellow. The cold fluorescent light made the flowers stand out in a room of too much grey. Eleven grey chairs circled the room, each had darker grey straps hanging loosely off its sides and a bevy of wires connecting it to an adjacent computer. Leslie had been swapping here for about six months, and his status as the longest tenured veteran meant his chair was the closest to the door. Stan, the greying caretaker of the painswaps, checked the various instruments, muttering quietly to himself all the while. Leslie wondered how much more of this his body could take. Know yourself, all the experts warned. The body can only be pushed so far.

“Alright Les, let’s go over the prelims,” said Stan, carefully placing the final electrodes on Leslie’s bald head. Stan monitored and maintained swap health during a session, and was the only person in the company older than Leslie.

“I know the terms, Stan.”

“Do you, Leslie Green, freely consent to accept the physical pain of another person for-” he swiveled in his chair and squinted through his glasses at the grey computer monitor, “Nine hours and thirty minutes? Seriously Les?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Yes.” Leslie had chosen this client on purpose. Most sessions were over in a couple hours, and rarely went longer than four. But he felt terrible about cursing at Micah. He would never do that again.

“Do you understand that you will be given medication which will prevent you from blacking out, and, once your session begins, only your death can cause its premature end?”

“Yes,” said Leslie.

“The client is a firefighter injured on the job. She indicated that she is in excruciating pain in her-”

“I don’t want to know.”

Stan hesitated. “The intensity rating on this client is abnormally high, 9.1 to be exact. You don’t want a head’s up.” A question phrased as a statement.

“No.” Knowing where the pain was coming from would help Leslie manage it better.

“O-kay. Your death liability waiver has been filled out and all of your insurance paperwork is up to date. Are you ready to proceed?”

“Yes.”

Swaps had died before; Leslie had been in the room for the first one. Eric had been the epitome of traditional masculinity, all beard and mountain and quiet strength. He looked like every man ever casted for a whiskey commercial. Eric had also been an amateur weight lifter and liked to do his sessions shirtless. Tattooed on his chest were two bright emerald dragons in a bloody fight over a chest of gold drawn over his heart. Many people saw his death as heralding the end of the swap business. But as Eric's body had convulsed in the chair, as his full-throated screams sliced the air and the dragons on his chest writhed arrhythmically, Leslie had looked around the room and knew he would be back. This was his temple, and here he made his atonement.

Stan stood up. "Alright, lie back and try to relax. When it comes, let it flow over you. Be a river, not a wall." Stan paused, concern creasing his weathered face. He patted Leslie's shoulder twice.

"Wait, Stan. Hold up a second."

"Yeah?"

"I, um, I yelled at him last night. Cursed too. I've never done that before. I...think I'm losing him. Lost him, maybe. I don't know."

Stan ran his hands through his wispy grey hair. "Why?"

"He blames me," said Leslie quietly.

Stan thought for a moment. "You blame you. But I meant, why did you yell?"

"I don't know."

"What are you going to do?" asked Stan.

"Apologize, try again. But, what if it's too late? What if he's gone and I can't get through?"

Stan was quiet for a long time. “No ifs. You get through to him, Les. You got to. Some things, if not dealt with right away, you don’t get to come back from. No second chances.” Stan stopped suddenly. He looked old. “Good luck today,” he said finally, “with everything.”

“Thanks.”

Leslie constructed his mental analogy, picturing a sailboat gliding through a calm ocean. Then he brought in his usual companion while swapping, Mighty Man, a toy sized navy-blue superhero action figure. Mighty Man looked off into the distance. His left hand rested on his hip and his right hand shielded his face from the sun. A cape of electric blue hung from his shoulders and he bore a look of grim determination. Leslie marveled at how lifelike the figure’s face looked, as if a master sculptor had spent years just carving Mighty Man’s face. His cheeks were slightly pocketed, his eyebrows were thick and textured, and his nose was flagrantly wide. Leslie stood at the ship’s rudder, and he placed the figure on the railing next to him, drawing inspiration from the Mighty Man’s expression. His ship was named *The Monica*.

Something was wrong with his left hand. Leslie lost feeling in his fingertips and a throb built steadily in his wrist. Ocean waves knocked against the boat. Mighty Man also looked troubled, his hands cupped his mouth and his head turned back and to the right, giving orders to an invisible crew. The wind whipped around Leslie, and he pulled his sailor’s cap tight over his head.

Then his wrist exploded.

The storm came suddenly, the onslaught nearly toppling the ship. *The Monica* shuddered against the thundering waves, barely cresting one before another crashing into another. For the first few minutes, Leslie survived on the edge of failure, just able to keep the boat from capsizing. It was dangerous work, demanding his full attention. Sweat poured down his face,

his knees shook spasmodically in the straps, and blood trickled inside his mouth from where he had bitten off a piece of his cheek. The beginning of the sessions was the most difficult for Leslie, as his body struggled to adjust to an undeserved agony. His wrist felt like it had been sawed off and cauterized.

After a while, Leslie lost his sense of time. He could no longer discern whether the pain had just started, was just ending, or had always been there, lying under the surface. The sharp pain in his wrist blended with the echoing pain in his heart, drawing it out from him, filling it in and giving it texture, like coloring in an outline. Leslie drifted inside the pain; he explored it intimately, running his fingers inside it like a potter at the wheel. He needed this. Leslie was in pain all the time, had been in pain for months, but it was only during these sessions when he could touch it, could give it a name. Leslie started to cry, then the knowledge that he was crying made him cry harder. He was real again, grounded and in his body. Only during these sessions could Leslie truly feel again. And, above all else, he felt lonely.

Something else must have happened to Leslie's client because, without warning, the intensity of the pain spiked. For a moment, for the first time in a long time, he wondered if he would be able to see it through. Could he black out? No, no that was impossible. At least, he thought it was impossible. Now he wasn't so sure. The waves, once scarcely manageable, now seemed maleficent, looming over him like the pent-up fury of a vengeful god. Leslie feared what was happening to his brain. The pain compressed him with gravitational power; it shoved him flat against his chair and constricted his movements like pilot fighting centrifugal force. Even the water was heavy. The sail ripped away from the mast and fluttered away. Leslie watched it go, a butterfly flapping madly against the wind. It folded and spun and billowed and was gone. Then a wall of water slammed into the boat and swept him off his feet. He staggered back to the

rudder, manically gripping the wheel. He glanced at Mighty Man and saw him down on one knee, arms extended outward and his palms forward, his face distorted by effort.

Without warning, Leslie lost control entirely. He screamed and then slumped in his chair, system alarms distantly echoing in the room. *The Monica* shattered from beneath him and he was hurled into the raging ocean. Leslie's brain buckled under the uncut power of the pain. He clawed his way toward the surface, hacking up salt water and blood as he emerged. Dazed, he splashed around looking for Mighty Man. He dipped his head underwater and stared into the churning depths, but his eyes couldn't see through the blackness. Dizzying pain racked his mind, clouding his mental vision and jacking up his heart rate. He couldn't think clearly anymore; he could barely think at all.

Insanity was close. He could feel its nearness, the gentle pulse of its comfort as inviting as a fur coat on a snowy day. It would be so easy, he knew, to let it have him. As easy as slipping into bed after a long day and a hot shower. But no, not yet. Micah. He had to get back to Micah. He had to make it right.

Frantic, Leslie turned and twisted, searching for a glimpse of the superhero. His own urgency shocked him. He was not sure how he knew this, but he was certain that he would lose his mind or his life if he didn't find figure. Finally, he spotted Mighty Man drifting helplessly away about a hundred feet to his left. The figure's hands were raised high above his head, and Leslie intuitively sensed the hero's panic. Leslie swam to Mighty Man as fast as he could, struggling against the ripping currents. With one massive, final effort he surged forward against the waves and snatched the figure.

As soon as he had the action figure in his grip, he built a sturdy submarine in his mind. Immediately his whole world changed as he and Mighty Man now safely plowed through the

storm under the ocean. This was no priceless cheat, however. Mighty Man rested on the submarine floor. He sat down, leaning back on his hands and his legs stretched out in front of him. He looked relieved, but he was concerned. His face, so authentic on the boat, now seemed plastic. What had once been a sculptor's masterpiece now looked like as basic as a Ken doll. His cape was faded and frayed. Wild eyes looked suspiciously at the submarine. This submarine, this solid wall Leslie had put between himself and the pain, was wrong. Very wrong.

The refuge it provided was sweet, as if Leslie had muted the pain with a TV remote. But it was a false sweetness, dangerous in its intoxication. Leslie was numb now, somehow shut-in within himself. This was no sanctuary, Leslie realized horrified, this was a prison. This was his mind leaving the real world because it was no longer a safe place. He tried to build a new boat on the ocean, but it was like opening a door in the face of a gale—he only cracked it a few inches before the pain slammed it shut. Even Mighty Man tried to help, curling his little fists and raising them to strike on the submarine's walls, but to no avail. After a few minutes, Leslie started to wonder why he was so anxious to leave the submarine, this place of no pain. He glanced at Mighty Man, who had closed his eyes and grinned lopsidedly. How could Leslie had ever thought this figure was ever realistic?

Then it was over.

Leslie kept his eyes closed until he felt Stan undoing the straps that held him in the chair.

“Jesus Les! The hell was that? I thought I lost you!” Stan handed Leslie a bottle of water.

“I'm alright. I'm alright.” Leslie cringed. Taking a sip of water, he cautiously tested out the feeling in his fingers against the bottle. “I had to go deeper.”

“Deeper.” Another question statement.

“Yeah.” Leslie sighed. “I’m done for the week.”

Stan pursed his lips. “I wasn’t going to say anything, and I know, I know, it’s not my business. But how long are you planning to do this anyhow? You’ve worked this job 7 days a week for nearly six months straight. I’ve seen a lot of people get ruined by this job. A lot of good people. Maybe you should think about retiring, or at least not take on so much.”

“Has the money come in yet?”

Stan blinked. His eyes were cold, hard, and grey. Grey eyes on a grey face in a grey room with flowers that were far too yellow. He turned to face his computer and did some typing. “Yeah it’s here,” he said. “You sure you don’t want to know what happened to the client?”

“I’m sure.” Leslie stepped gingerly out of the chair. As he walked to the door, his knees knocked together a few times.

“Wait, before you leave. One more thing.”

Leslie paused, his hand on the door handle, but he didn’t turn around.

“You and your boy are wrong. You hear me? There was nothing more you could have done. Anyone who knows you knows that.”

“Goodbye, Stan,” said Leslie. He walked out of the room and shut the door behind him.

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Coming home wasn’t so bad today. Leslie sat on plush loveseat facing the TV and put his feet up. It was a thick sofa, inviting and honest. He was comfortable. As a bonus, there was no residual pain today. That was a first. Swaps always felt residual pain from their sessions, sometimes lasting for hours, sometimes lasting for weeks. It was there, he knew, hovering just outside his vision, lingering around his presence like a bee that never quite goes away. But

whenever Leslie turned his head to face it directly, the pain slid out of sight. Leslie was too tired to think on it more. He was nearly asleep when he heard the front door close.

“Dad?”

“Hey.” Leslie didn’t open his eyes.

“You’re on the couch.”

“Yeah.” Seconds ticked.

“Are you... alright?” asked Micah.

“I’m fine. Don’t you see I’m asleep?”

“Yeah. On the couch.”

Leslie opened his eyes then and looked his son over. Bandages flaked with dried blood covered both sets of knuckles. “What happened to you?” he asked.

Micah looked at his shoes.

“Well?” asked Leslie.

“I got into a fight at the gym today.”

Leslie closed his eyes again. “Who won?”

“Dad. I think I’m ready now. Can we talk?” asked Micah.

“We are talking.”

“No, that’s not what I mean.” said Micah.

“You mean what then?”

“Dad.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” asked Leslie, opening his eyes and focusing on his son.

Micah stopped, mouth open. Their eyes met. Micah seemed to reset himself and began again.

“I got into a fight at the gym today.”

“You said that.” Why was the boy repeating himself?

“They suspended me.”

“No shit.” said Leslie.

“Yeah.”

“Well, did you win?”

Micah didn't respond.

“You spend all that time training in the gym and you fucking lost?”

“They're...in the hospital.”

Leslie grinned. “That's my boy.”

“Dad.”

“Wait, 'they'? How many did you fight?”

“Dad.”

“What?”

“You're not asking the right questions,” said Micah.

“I'm asking questions. Taking an interest. This is what you wanted right?”

“But you never ask the right questions.”

“We're talking. I'm asking questions.”

“Ask me...ask me why I got into a fight today.”

“Fine. Why did you get into a fight today, Micah?” asked Leslie. He closed his eyes again, melting into the loveseat.

When Micah didn't reply, Leslie peeked at him with one heavy eye.

"Why are you crying?" asked Leslie.

"Why don't you know?" replied Micah.

"Man the fuck up."

"I don't even know you right now."

"I am your father," said Leslie. "What the fuck you crying for?"

Nobody spoke for a long while. "Why do you do it?" asked Micah, finally.

"Do what?" The question nudged Leslie awake.

"Painswapping. Why?"

"It pays well."

"That's it? You didn't do it before."

"Look," Leslie sat up a little. "You've talked about college for forever. Well, someone has gotta get the money so your ass can go. If not you then me. And you don't even have your shit together so you can start! Have me out here looking stupid asking my friend to give you a hook-up and you won't even fucking send him a fucking email!"

"Oh."

"What?" Leslie shouted.

"We don't need the money. The insurance gave us plenty."

"Boy, that's all you heard me say?"

"You haven't gone sailing in a while," said Micah.

That stopped Leslie cold, triggering something inside him. It was a lifeline, a way out of the submarine and into the ocean. Leslie tried, half-heartedly, to crack open the door and push

against the gale, but once again it crashed shut. Oh well. He didn't mind that much. This new place was cozy. He could stay here forever, him and his plastic doll.

"Don't want to," said Leslie.

"It used to be all you talked about."

"I don't have time," said Leslie. "I have to work."

"No, you don't. You should go."

"Can't." Leslie would never, ever go sailing again.

"It could help." said Micah.

"You don't understand."

"I'll go with you. How about that?"

Leslie closed his eyes.

"I...want to apologize," said Micah after some time had passed.

"Apologize for what?"

"For last night."

"Oh. Sure. Apology accepted."

"That's it?" asked Micah.

"Yeah."

"You don't want to talk about it."

"What?"

"We've never talked about it," said Micah.

"About what?"

"About yesterday. About everything."

"What's there to talk about?" asked Leslie.

“Dad. Can we talk? Please.”

“We are talking!”

A pause. A pause of months and years. A pause of bloody knuckles, unwanted pots, sinking ships, a room filled with too much grey, and pain. A pause of a once favorite color: a pause of electric blue.

“I love you, dad. I love you. It wasn’t your fault,” whispered Micah finally.

Leslie’s submarine started to leak. He had to rush to plug the holes.

“Did you watch my video?” asked Micah.

“No. I forgot. Sorry.”

“Oh.”

“Let’s talk about it tomorrow.” said Leslie.

“Okay.”

“I’ll watch it. Promise.”

“Okay.”

“Micah.”

“Yeah?” Micah was weeping, silent, still, and steady.

“Send that fucking email.”

Leslie fell asleep then. He had drawn a blanket over his body, had enveloped it around himself and felt snug in the safety of its cocoon. The blanket was old, preciously, thankfully old, and still smelled like happiness. It was the only thing left that did.