

2,300 words

But for the Buzzards

Mae was away at the time. She'd tore out of our driveway not a half-hour after our weekly therapy session, the radio blasting Grateful Dead, the muffled baseline pounding rhythmically at her iced-up windows. She had her full hippy on, rings on her fingers and bells on her shoes and all that, hell-bent for that chilly ashram in the Berkshires. It was a seven-day sit; said she needed it. When she finally called I didn't think to mention the dead guy. It's not like the news couldn't wait.

"Alright, Mae-berry, thanks for calling. Don't forget to eat your veggies."

"Not likely, it's all they feed us," Mae said.

"And don't sit too hard," I mothered.

"Hardy-har," Mae said. I heard her grin. I can hear the difference between my wife smiling and grinning. When she smiles her voice raises an octave. Her grins sound like a tiny engine bogging, her tone lowers and there's a momentary pause. Scowls and frowns are as plain as a belly laugh.

"Love you," I said

“Love you too,” Mae said.

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I might have missed him if it weren't for the buzzards. I'd seen plenty of turkeys and hawks around, but never buzzards. I was under the impression that the only buzzards in the suburbs had names, names like Dagny and Connie, with buffed skin stretched like plastic wrap across rebuilt cheekbones. We'd just had one of those mid-February atmospheric rope-a-dopes that dupe even us seasoned New Englanders from time to time. One of those fine, twenty-four hour thaws followed by an afternoon temperature drop that sent us all slinking back indoors, suffering from whiplash and disheartened, grumbling over the distance to trudge till spring. Real spring, that is, when the buds form on naked limbs like blisters set to pop.

But then came a freezing rain followed by an arctic squall that had us all seeing white by dawn. The snow plows had sailed by, though the squall hadn't amounted to much - four or five inches maybe - and so the frozen wake blocking the entrance to our driveway didn't amount to much either. I might have been happier about that as I set out with my shovel.

The buzzards hopped off him onto the road. The poor bastard was not ten yards from our driveway, but as far from home as he'd ever get. He lay there on the crumbling remnants of the “Sidewalks Save!” town safety initiative, a top priority long since re-prioritized. The buzzard's talons clicked on the icy road. The slow, deliberate clicks traveled fast through the brittle winter air.

Snow from the street curled along the man's side like frozen breakwater. I stood there and gawked, shovel in hand. His head and torso looked like a slab of dark limestone plugged in fresh white cement. They'd been at his belly. He lay and I stood. His was a bad death and I felt ill from fear and damned ashamed of my gripes.

The buzzards didn't care for the pavement and the runts who were denied a new purchase on the stranger retreated onto the low limbs of the old maple across the road.

I toed at his elbow. He skin stuck to the asphalt of the forgotten sidewalk.

But his innards were still warm and the buzzards knew it, each and all, just like they knew no squirrel or possum or deer ever steamed so good. Steam wisped from the tear in his belly like soup from a bowl. They'd made a mess of him, Nature's version of the old fuck-and-run.

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It's funny. We'd just touched on the subject a couple nights before she'd left. It came up after I couldn't, which wasn't so funny. Our consolation prize was to talk, an impotent substitute regardless of depth. And we went deep -- deep into that dark terra nullius where Mae nods with understanding, her eyes seemingly all pupil.

"It's like I can't find that place between satisfaction and self-destruction. Not so much a midlife crisis thing, more like a spiritual black hole, you know? It's that need, I guess... that irrepressible need. And by the time I see it coming it's too late." I stopped.

Mae drew me closer and held on tight, but there was no stopping me.

"Maybe it's a death thing. I don't know. I mean nobody wants to die alone, right?"

"Maybe you could find a way to put that in the positive," she suggested.

Or maybe she was wondering aloud.

#

It was late; the street lamps in the commuter lot dimmed and cut out. I hadn't noticed the electric buzz until it was gone. I kept on about him. Deirdre tugged off her long leather gloves and cupped her hands over the blowers. The diamond on her finger was worth more than my

Dodge.

“And there he was, stretched out stiff on the pavement in a wife beater and jeans, hands folded behind his head, comfy as you please!”

“Must’ve been drugs,” Deirdre said.

“Yup, but there he was, dead as Latin and I’m telling you, all I wanted was someone, a garbage man, a plow guy, a cop — hell *anyone* — to show up, you know?”

“Uhuh... You know, there’s really nothing more attractive than a man who knows what he wants.” Deirdre was adept at changing subjects and she’d had enough of this one.

“I thought there was nothing more attractive than a man who knows who he is.” Things went better when I followed her lead; I knew that much about her.

“It’s one and the same,” she said.

Ashley Madison women always seemed like they had it all together. They’re accomplished liars, one and all.

“So, does your husband know?”

She raised an eyebrow, jet black in the yellow dash light. “Beg your pardon?”

“I mean does he know who he is?”

She snorted, “Absolutely, that’s why I married him.”

“But...”

“But what?”

“But here we are.”

She rubbed her hands, “It’s so cooold! Is this winter ever going to end?”

There wasn’t much to say and I got fidgety. I flicked on the wipers. A clear crescent appeared above the dash and then the blades skittered over the rest of the arc.

“I know what I don’t want. I know I don’t want to die alone with buzzards at my belly. But I suppose that’s not the same.” The blades made noisy, turbulent passes.

“No, no it’s not.” She gave me a sympathetic look and traced my cheek with her fingertip.

“An exercise in futility,” I sighed and switched off the wipers. I blew into my hands as if they were cold.

“No, just a different exercise. You can’t approach it from the negative. It’s too... defeatist,” Deirdre explained. She was a sharp woman, a liar and a cheat, and sharp as a nail. It’s impossible to know why the smart ones choose what they choose.

“So are we just going to talk?” It was an honest question.

“Oh, God no!” She blurted.

She climbed onto my lap, her back pressed against the wheel. We had a few more lies for each other while we groped and tugged and shimmied and adjusted and then it was just hips in rhythm and then she was done and then I was done and then all there was to do was sit and catch our breath.

“I have to run,” Deirdre said.

I suppose I wanted that.

#

God as my witness, he didn’t smell - not even the steam - there was only that tin smell of February air. He laid there, his fingers intertwined behind his head, like he was chillaxing in a hammock with shaded, brown grass at his back.

Hunger emboldened the buzzards. I fended them off with my shovel.

I bent down and got a hold of his arm. It was thick, muscular, young and dead. It struck

me that, just hours ago, perhaps no longer than it takes to resolve a lovers' spat, he'd been stronger than me by a factor indeterminate.

I pulled, but my gloves slipped off his steely skin. His limbs were stuck fast.

Sure, life's unfair and all, and his was over, but that didn't mean I could just leave him there for the taking. I pried my fingers beneath either side of his elbow and pulled.

There was a peeling sensation and a hint of sound, like separating burgers half-thawed.

#

On Sunday morning I drove across town for my weekly with Varonika, my Lithuanian masseuse. She ran her business in the studio apartment she rented above a two-car garage. She's a proud woman; a big blonde, pretty, but not enough to intimidate and she's a real pro. Her hands are soft and strong and bigger than mine and she warns me if they're comin' in cold. She clears her throat from time to time because her place has mold. I like her and so I won't be the bearer of bad news — let some other Joe tell her. Besides, I'd more important stuff to talk about.

“...And where were the cops, right? How is it a man dies by the road not a half mile from the parkway — hell, not a mile from the Y — and there's not a cop on the scene?”

“Ees like dees evreevere,” she muttered and pressed the heels of her palms into my gluteus muscles with educated, well-oiled precision.

“It is, isn't it,” I exhaled.

“Turn over.”

Veronika kneaded my scalp. As usual, I wonder what she makes of my erection. My imaginings go supernova. Maybe this will be one of those mornings when her wrist bumps against it as she works on my hips. It's why I come.

“They came eventually,” I said.

“Vat’s da rush, yes?”

“Goddamn scavengers.”

“Keep eyes closed,” she said.

The air displaced and her footsteps sounded with a gentle creek like new leather softening, and then she was out of the room. It was difficult to keep my eyes shut.

“Keep eyes closed. I have some-sing that vill cheer you up.”

I felt her slip a shoe onto my left foot. The right was a better fit; my heel settled in with a puff of air.

“Okay... open!” I lifted a leg and inspected her black pump. The towel slipped to my waist. Veronika laughed in baritone, like a jolly Antonio Tamburini.

“Ees joke, see? See? Perfect feet!” Her smile was so big I could see the edge of her clear tooth tray above her glossy little teeth.

I toed off the pumps. They hit the floor with a heavy, oddly elongated thump-bump-padump.

“Black’s not my color,” I said.

“No, no! Black ees quite uhh... quite uhh... how to say... eet’s yours... it *feets* you.”

I had nothing to say. She started in on me again. I closed my eyes and tried to relax.

When the hour was up, I left feeling greasy and spent from all that wishful thinking.

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I had a good grip on his elbow when the buzzards returned. I swung at them. They dodged my shovel and mocked my assault with a sidestep and a slow flap of one heavy black wing and then the other. The plastic blade caught air and the shaft twisted the leather against my palm. The damn things refused to give him up, and that’s when I lost it.

“Get the hell away from him! Go on! Git!” I screamed.

“Git!”

The tears surprised me more than using the word.

“Git! I said git! GIT!” I swung the shovel as hard as I could and connected.

The satisfaction was fleeting, just a momentary weight on the blade. It lurched upward onto a limb and leered down at me. The others retreated and joined him. They didn’t fly so much as jump. And up in the tree they all slouched in unison, sulking as if they’d conceded to the natural order of things.

#

Our therapist had the heat cranking from the old iron radiator in her office. Mae’d returned from her sit late last night, revitalized and apparently raring to go. The morning sun cut through the window at her back and caught us up in a blaze.

“Go on, Todd,” Mae said, digging her elbow into my side. It was the first chance I’d had to tell about the buzzards.

“Yes, please, go on, Todd,” urged the therapist.

“Well, the thing of it was they looked, well... They looked forlorn.”

“Forlorn? And by that you mean...”

“You know, dejected, sad, fucking forlorn, okay? And pissed too, like they’d been robbed of their due.”

“The buzzards.” The therapist confirmed.

“Yeah, the buzzards!” I shot Mae my can-you-believe-this-joker face, but she was gawking at the therapist. Mae’s chin trembled and so I took a tone with the woman.

“Look, I’m telling you! What I saw was sadness, okay? *Christ!*” Between the sun and

that pinging radiator, I thought I might melt.

“Sadness? Sad how?” she probed.

Unbelievable.

“Sad how?” I scoffed. “Like a ‘how could you’ type sad, okay?” My undershirt clung to me, the cotton damp and chilly against my belly.

“And so?”

“And so... what?”

“And so the question becomes, how could you, right Todd?”

We were paying this woman a c-note every twenty minutes and she wasn’t listening. Unbelievable.

“They were *eating* the man’s *guts*.” I glared at the woman, but my contempt was watered-down.

“Todd, I don’t think you’re hearing our question.”

Mae said it. I didn’t have to look to know she was doing her best to restrain herself. Her voice was raspy, the words fuzzed and clipped. She knew all about the buzzards. I wiped my cheeks and turned to look at her anyway.

The End