

THE FLAME

The bedroom was a cool fifty-eight degrees, yet a bead of sweat formed on Greg O'Hagan's forehead as he sat motionless at his desk. His hands were frozen on his keyboard. Only his heel moved as it tottered up and down like a seesaw in a hurricane. Online photos of him and his girlfriend Kayla obscured his job application due in two days. He opened the application an hour ago, completing only the name and address portions since. Hidden behind his browser window was his online bank balance of \$43.57. Rather than view the balance or continue his application, he stared at a picture of Kayla with her arm wrapped around him.

Four days ago, the couple had fought after Greg's typical evening with Mary Jane. Higher than his ego, he had barked at her after she offered to help him with his application.

"Relax! I got it!"

"Baby, its due in a week."

"I know! Ya don't need to tell me for the billionth fuckin time."

"It's not done though!"

"I'll do it later."

"Right, then later comes and you're still on your ass."

"Fuck off!"

Kayla stood silent. She swung around and headed down the hall to the bedroom.

"Where ya goin?"

She had pulled her purple duffel bag out of the closet. "Leavin!" She had begun stuffing t-shirts and sweatpants inside.

"Leavin?"

"You're an addict Greg, a junkie, a real piece of shit!"

"Nice... ya know if it weren't for you, I'd be clean... uh..."

Kayla had come marching down the hall, bag in hand. "Your brain's fried Greg, ya can't even finish your damn sentences."

Greg had hung his head, rubbing his temples. "Get the fuck out."

She had opened the front door. "I will." She had swung around the corner as the door shut behind her.

Now, deep down, Greg wished she was here. However, there was a force within him that prevented him from taking necessary action—or any action. It was responsible for the near-empty bank account, the incomplete job application, and the argument. Deep down, Greg knew what it was. *Deep, deep down.*

I'm fine, he thought. This same force shook Greg's foot, kept his fingers frozen on the computer keys, and trapped his focus in happy memories with Kayla. *She'll come back*. His foot quaked at a rate immeasurable by the Richter scale as he looked over his shoulder to the joint and lighter on the bedside table. *I can quit whenever I want.*

The joint was one of Greg's best. Before the argument, he had picked up a half-pound of pricey product from his dealer. This morning, he had packed the joint as tight as he could, making it bound for a beautiful, lengthy burn. It showed zero wrinkles in its paper, appearing like something out of a TV commercial. Even the expert twist at the top seemed like the bright bow on a Christmas present. It screamed perfection and called to Greg, but he promised himself he'd finish the application.

He felt the bead of sweat glide down his cheek, falling towards the edge of his chin. He jumped out of his chair and leapt over to the window, yanking it up. The frigid winter wind carrying a stinky hint of trash from the dumpster below relieved him as he wiped his face dry.

Breaktime.

Greg looked for something to distract him from the joint. His eyes fell across the hall to the kitchen refrigerator and stove. *Perfect.* He ignored his unused pull-up bar hanging from his upper door frame as he left the bedroom. He headed down the hall, passing underneath the fire alarm.

Greg's kitchen was rudimentary aside from the scale and half-pound of weed scattered on the dining table. Across from the table, empty mac 'n' cheese boxes and Bic lighters filled his trash can. Beside the trash was the sink, the stove, and the refrigerator.

Greg opened the fridge door, home to a magnetic to-do list and a pleasant picture of him and Kayla at the beach. Finding nothing but an expired carton of milk inside, he shut the door.

He swung open the top cabinet to his last couple boxes of mac 'n' cheese, placing both on the counter. He grabbed a pot from his mother's old kitchenware in the bottom cabinet. He filled it with tap water and plopped it on the stove.

Greg cranked the knob clockwise to its highest setting. The clicking of the ignition comforted him like the sound of a lighter before a smoke. He dreamt of the lighter's flame kissing his masterpiece back in the bedroom. The deep inhale. The serene exhale. The stove's flame burst, raging under the pot.

Ignoring the weed, Greg sat at the dining table and peered at the fire. Each tiny blue flame curving up out of the burner danced the way a woman curled her finger when calling her lover over. The burner cap even appeared like the palm of an outstretched hand. However, despite his poor memory, he remembered from high school chemistry that blue flames were deceptively hotter than orange flames. The minute he took its hand, he'd use his charred fingers to dial 911.

His foot rattled as if it belonged to a baby. Knowing how long the water took to boil, he wondered if he'd last. His phone was in the bedroom. He knew if he went back for it, he'd return with something else. He took a deep breath and remained still like the water.

His eyes fell on the picture of him and Kayla on the fridge door. It was from the night of their January beach trip three years ago. After Kayla had expressed her deep yearnings for a tan, the sun, and the beach, Greg drove her two hours in moderate snowfall on the deserted New Jersey turnpike towards Wildwood, her childhood vacation spot. Luckily, the beach wasn't crowded; the water was a little cold. They had pranced around on the bright white shore with the sound of winter waves crashing beside them. They had walked the pier that stretched the length of a football field into the water, and gaped down at the dark ocean that stretched even farther, disappearing into the black horizon. Greg had pulled out his phone, held Kayla tight, and snapped the iconic fridge photo. Kayla had wrapped him in her arms, looked straight into his eyes, and whispered "I love you" for the first time. Greg hadn't smoked that day, but it was the highest he'd ever been.

As his sight drifted towards the to-do list, his foot awoke. The dry erase board read: job applications, ~~workout~~, haircut, groceries, cancel gym membership, CALL KAYLA. Exercise and haircuts were insignificant, but what would happen when the application deadline passed? When his bank balance hit zero? When Kayla met some other guy with a savings account, a job, and a life? As the flame roared under the motionless water, his foot oscillated with enough energy to break the San Andreas fault and send California plunging into the Pacific.

Greg catapulted out of the kitchen chair, dashing into his bedroom. He swiped the joint and lighter off his bedside table, leaving his phone on the desk.

Flicking the lighter to make sure it worked, Greg headed towards the front door. *This is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong. Maybe it'll cool me down. No, that's not how it works. I won't smoke the whole thing, just a couple hits. A couple hits? Good luck with that pal. I'll be fine. I can quit whenever I want.* These thoughts fully occupied his mind as he left. The door slammed shut and his keys jingled on the nearby hook. A bubble escaped from the pot's bottom, breaking the surface of the water on the flaming stove.

Greg swung the second floor apartment complex door open, stepping into the back alley parking lot. The weather called for thunderstorms, yet the sun still poked through the sky's thin shield of clouds. The small lot contained Greg's 1996 Honda Accord and Gus's monstrous 2017 Ford F-150. Gus was the owner of Limoncello Ristorante, the Italian eatery that took up the first floor. To the right of the apartment stairs was Limoncello's rear entrance where dishwashers would emerge with trash bags and toss them in the dumpster under Greg's window. Towards the end of the week, the dumpster overflowed, leaving an unattractive display of grounded bags torn by crows and stray cats. To the right was the building's corner where the alleyway led to the 9 North Street sidewalk. Standing under the apartment entrance canopy, Greg brought the joint to his lips. Behind him, the door swung shut.

Before the Limoncello incident, Greg smoked by his bedroom window. One Sunday evening, after a profitable business week for the acclaimed Italian restaurant, the mixed smell of days-old Alfredo sauce, clams, and shrimp had grown so overpowering that when Greg went to smoke, he shut the window after a single whiff. The pungent scent of burning herb had occupied the room, travelling down into the air vents, through the ducts, and into the first floor. Thankfully, the Limoncello was calm on Sunday nights. There had been seven couples enjoying an expensive, well-earned dinner before the stressful work week began. Soon, their noses had sensed marijuana, not marinara. Revolted, they had all left without paying. Gus had marched out back and pounded on the apartment door phone, intending to file a lawsuit. Greg had unlocked the door as if the floodgates of hell were not only opened, but demolished. "You fuckin piece of shit! Dirty, cocksuckin hippie! The fuck's the matter with you? I gotta fuckin business to run!" The longer Gus had looked at Greg, the softer his voice became. He had seen the deep bags under Greg's red, desperate eyes. His anger had turned to pity. "Smoke outside next time."

Greg lit the pretty joint under the canopy, took a slow inhale, and let it out. The smoke, along with all of his worries, lingered in the air before vanishing. The chaotic Wall Street atmosphere of his mind became a state of ignorant bliss. He drifted off from the left lane's bothersome traffic and took an exit off the highway of everyday life, finding some distant backwood road to joyride through. As he went in for another puff, he stuffed his lighter into his coat pocket.

A vague sense of confusion interrupted his second hit. Tucked away, his hand felt something, or a lack thereof. Usually, he kept his phone there. Greg checked the other jacket pocket. Nothing. His hand slapped down on his pants pocket where he kept his keys. Empty.

Shit.

He sprinted over to the apartment entrance and yanked on the handle. The door didn't budge. He repeatedly buzzed his neighbors on the door phone, waiting for a response. Silence. No neighbors, no phone, no keys, no hope.

Greg froze under the entrance canopy as the situation jumped out at him like a deer. During his brief woodland joyride, he had forgotten what he left on the highway. Now, a handful of bubbles must've been breaking the water's surface. Given enough time, the long-boiling water would evaporate. Then, the dry pot would burn and smoke. Regardless of whether that smoke burned down the building, it would set off the fire alarm. Not only would firefighters extinguish the smoke and possible flames, but they would also report that the tenant set the kitchen table with illegal drugs rather than silverware. The half-pound Greg bought from his dealer would lock him up for three years. The scale, making him a dealer in the eyes of the law, would be worth ten plus a possible \$25,000 fine.

A pool of sweat formed on Greg's forehead. Marijuana was a pleasant drug under easy-going circumstances, but when undeniable stress came into a play, the paranoia was unbearable. He stood with his hand against the wall as if he might fall over. His entire leg jerked like a fish that strayed too far from the bowl. Beads of sweat dripped past his eyes as he visualized the harsh consequences of his stupidity. Roaring flames eating up the kitchen cabinets. Firefighters sifting through his stash. Cops cuffing him and stuffing him in the back of a squad car. News headlines reading "Crazy Junkie Burns Down Building" or "Stoner Smokes Apartment." Wackos beating the THC out of him in prison. With all these horrors, he twitched at the thought of never seeing Kayla again. The sweat dripped off the edge of his chin, splashing on the pavement.

Greg placed the joint behind his ear, left the shade of the entrance canopy, and paced back and forth in the parking lot. *Fuck fuck fuck. What do I do what do I do.* He pictured the man who would batter him in prison. Tall, wide, tattoos instead of skin, probably a scar across his eye. He saw the man's boulder-like fists and wondered how they'd feel against his cheek. *Would I feel them at all? Would I blackout in time? Maybe I need a good punch in the face. Maybe then I'll snap out of it.*

A gear clicked in his complicated clockwork of a head. For most of his life, Greg idled by. He received below average grades in college, spending more time in Kayla's dorm than the library. Following graduation from Immaculata University, he took the first job he landed with Viasat, selling Internet service at the local Walmart. After a surprise round of drug tests, he was out within a month. *No worries, I'll find another.* Would he tell himself that with a criminal record?

Ok, ok. How do I get in? Front door's locked. Windows. Squinting his eyes as he turned into the pale February sunlight, Greg glanced up at his bedroom window cracked halfway open above the dumpster.

Phew!

He darted over to the dumpster and hopped on its lid. On his tippy toes, he was just able to wrap his fingers around the window sill. *Perfect.* As he pulled himself up, his upper body tightened like a tug of war rope between two high-flying commercial airliners. His fingers felt like pencil lead. His face tightened as if he was lifting the back-end of Gus's F-150. Approaching the window, he prepared to look down the hall to the pot, but all he saw was the top of his bedroom door frame. His legs dangled like spaghetti before they touched down on the dumpster.

Greg jumped off and paced around, wondering what condition the pot was in. He imagined a gushing hot tub with Kayla and her wealthy future fiancé laughing inside. Were they laughing at how filthy rich they were? At how madly in love they were? At how worthless Greg was? How much longer would it be before the water evaporated? Before tub time was over and the two of them headed to the bedroom?

As darker clouds erased the sunlight, he worried about Kayla's future husband. He was probably some hotshot lawyer with a perfect win percentage and a summer house in Florida. Some loaded business executive with more shares in Google and Amazon than cells in his body. Some computer engineer pretending to be a nerd throughout the week then dropping hundreds of dollars at Vegas casinos on the weekend. Greg took the sleeve of his shaking arm and swept it across his soaked face. He wished he had filled out that damn application.

With no phone or any clear sense of focus, Greg lost track of time. *Has it been ten minutes? Twenty? Thirty? An hour???* He envisioned a black, bubbling cauldron with a nasty witch bent over it, mixing some despicable potion with a large, splintery wooden spoon. Once complete, the potion's untamed flames would spread like gossip throughout the kitchen, shriveling up his beloved fridge photo. He heard the witch's evil cackle echoing through the air ducts, petrifying Gus's customers and the smoke detector.

The fire alarm in Greg's apartment was silent. He remembered its sound from grade school fire drills. Having a slight noise sensitivity, Greg had evacuated the building with both hands over his ears. Some kids had screamed in his face, mimicking the alarm's holler. Soon, that sound would return and Greg would cover his ears once again. He didn't want to hear it. He didn't want to know what that screaming and hollering meant.

Looking around the dumpster, he noticed a plastic bucket resting among the trash bags. Years of janitorial duties dimmed its bright orange color. The tons of trash tossed in it left a solid ring of scum lining the bottom. It had a small patch of dark green mold growing on the inner curved surface from the filthy mop water left sitting in it for months. Along half the length of its side was a thick lightning bolt-shaped crack from years of mistreatment. Regardless, Greg placed the bucket on the dumpster lid.

Off in the distance, thunder rumbled through the darkening sky. He vaulted himself up and planted one of his feet on the bucket. Testing its integrity, he pushed down on it once and stepped up. The bucket gave him an extra foot of height, but he was no Shaquille O'Neal. *I'll jump.* From the bucket, it was possible. He positioned his feet in a prime launch position and repeatedly bent at the knees to create momentum. With every up and down motion, the bucket's lightning bolt crack widened. *On three.... One, Two... One... One, Two...* He looked like some geezer performing a jazzercise routine for his daily aerobics hour. Greg fell to a full squat position, preparing to soar. *Three!*

SNAP! On Greg's final thrust, the lightning bolt broke up the full side of the bucket. The plastic on both sides split far apart, flattening under Greg like a squashed marshmallow. He fell butt first on the dumpster as the joint flew out of his ear. He rolled over on his front side in pain, his face dangling off the side.

He opened his eyes to the trash bags on the ground. Any second, that alarm would squeal. Any second, Greg would shut his eyes and bring his hands over his ears. Any second, it would be over. Suddenly, a strange clarity overtook him. This was it. No time to pace around. No time to worry. No time for excuses. There was only getting through the window. Greg hopped down from the dumpster and picked up a trash bag.

He hurled the bag on the dumpster. He grabbed more, chucking them on top. Soon, the finished pile, made up of four levels, formed the shape of a pyramid cut vertically in half, leading up to the open window like a stairway to heaven.

Yes! Greg leaped on the dumpster and stepped on the first bag. As he took another step up, the structure budged. He saw the portion of ceiling above the door frame. *Two more steps to go.* No pulling

up. No jumping. Just a simple duck of the head as he returned to his unharmed apartment. He took another step as the entire structure shook. *One more!* He lifted his right foot and placed it on the top bag, looking in the window. He saw the pull-up bar that hung from his door frame, the one he was too lazy to use. *Maybe if I put in some reps, I wouldn't be climbing trash mountain to save my apartment from burning down.* A look of terror consumed Greg's face as a bag slipped out of the pile. He fell backwards into the collapsing heap of garbage. As his back hit a bag on the lid, he swung to the right. The force of gravity slammed his ankle against the dumpster. Gripping it in anguish, he dropped off the side into a clump of torn bags. A couple more ripped bags landed on top of him, burying him up in a disgusting grave of rotten tomatoes, brown banana peels, and thick, days-old clam sauce.

He sat there in the trash, blending in with his surroundings. His vibrant energy vaporized like the stove water. He didn't even wipe the sweat and clam sauce off his face. However, this feeling was familiar. He had kicked responsibility out the doors of his mind, but Greg's younger brother didn't fit. He was too big. While at NYU, Brian O'Hagan had built a popular dieting app for college students that caught the attention of MojoTech, a New York application development firm. The company had loved his ambition and offered him a software engineering position with a starting salary of \$90,000. Brian had dropped out of school faster than the wheels on his future Ferrari. His success had been the main topic at every family get-together. *You're so talented Brian! Truly brilliant! Genius!* But what about Greg? He was the older brother. He was supposed to be leading the way. He sat in the trash, wondering why Brian had only recommended a job to him. Why he sent him an application rather than an invitation. Why he hid the secrets of success. Why he left him to rot with the tomatoes.

Greg grew to hate his brother. The success irked him, but the phone calls enraged him. They began with usual small talk of Phillies trade rumors before Brian started the dreaded nagging. Each call had ended the same way. Brian had brought up the pot, dished out its downsides, and suggested Greg quit asap, saying he'd help him with his "problem." Greg had cursed him out before hanging up. *Asshole.*

As booming thunder echoed through the air, Greg lifted his head from the bed of garbage, pondering his "problem." *I can quit whenever I want.* But could he? The drastic situation had granted him a newfound sense of brutal honesty, the kind that pierced through his frantic pacing and forced him to take action. *Can I quit whenever I want?* Would it be so easy? No. It'd take serious discipline, self-control, stoicism, patience, you name it. An overwhelming tsunami size wave of terror came hurling towards him. It'd be a long, painful routine of resisting sweet, smokey temptation. The dark blue wave broke, crashing down on him with the force of a thousand fire hoses. It dragged him across the rough seabed scattered with broken shells and biting crabs. He briefly opened his eyes to the sharp saltwater sting. Tumbling around in the water like the wheel of misfortune, he lost all sense of direction. The surface seemed lost. He hopelessly thrashed his arms and legs in the void. His lungs throbbed. The thrashing ceased as he stuffed the thought back into his subconscious. This was no task for any individual. Greg eased his neck, dropping his head on the trash bag pillow for a nap.

An elderly man hobbled down the back alley to catch his 5:30 bus. *What a mess,* he thought as he passed the dumpster. Spotting Greg's muck-lathered head poking out of the pile, he wiped his eyes to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. He knew he was old, but not *that* old.

"You need help son?"

Greg opened his bloodshot eyes to the geezer. He analyzed the man's bright yellow sweater and brown leather jacket. He appeared like a massive rotten banana, hunching over Greg with both hands resting on his cane. He looked at the man's wrinkly, concerned face. *From you?* Greg shut his eyes.

After failing to receive a response, the old man hung his head and turned away. He strolled down the alley's exit on his cane, joining the noisy flow of people on the sidewalk. The 5:30 bus slipped his mind.

The joint's high reached its comedown as Greg's paranoia faded away. He just wanted to fall asleep, but the old man's words lingered in his head. "You need help son?" Help. *I don't need help.* Suddenly, the absurdity of that thought hit Greg like the stifling smell of the clam sauce dripping down his cheek. *Holy shit.* He became aware of the rudeness he showed the man, the poor old banana just trying to help. *But what could he do anyway, lift me up to the window with all his strength?* Just then, the mumbblings of the busy sidewalk wrapped around the building corner and cut through Greg's eardrums. His eyes almost shot out of their sockets as he breached the trash grave's clutches.

He limped out the alley's exit to the sidewalk. The people zoomed by, covering their nostrils and shooting quick, frightened looks at Greg drenched in every rotten Italian ingredient imaginable. The critical vibe he gathered stunted his sudden optimism. His wide, fearful eyes realized how idiotic he looked.

As a light drizzle fell on the sidewalk, a buff man decked out in a navy blue suit and a shiny silver Rolex saw Greg, squinted his eyes, and approached him. He wore one of those bluetooth ear pieces. For a second, Greg swore he was Brian.

"You good?" the man asked.

Greg's statue stared at the man. The crowd's distress rippled through him, building into another tsunami wave of terror. Once again, it hurled straight for him. All he heard was its powerful roar. No alarm, no fire engines, no police sirens. All he smelled was its saltiness, or maybe that was the fish grease smeared down his arm. All he saw was its rapid movement, or perhaps the lines of people racing to get home to their husbands and wives. He wished he was with Kayla. He wished he could run to her, but he stood stuck on the sidewalk.

Wherever he was, it was better than that back alley trash grave. Greg blinked. Somehow, he had escaped that low point. It left its mark on him in the form of sour balsamic dressing mixed with crusty parmesan cheese shavings, but he had escaped nonetheless.

"Sir?" The man pulled out his slick Fulton umbrella.

Greg focused on the vague source of profound optimism that had risen him from the dead. *But what?* The joint had fogged his memory. The raging tsunami grew closer. *What was it?* A banana peel from the trash grave slipped off his shoulder, dropping at his motionless feet. The tsunami's crest towered over Greg as he managed to mutter a single word.

"Help."

The dark blue tsunami broke in front of him. He stood from a distance, watching the wave crash down in a magnificent, wet explosion of white. The diminishing remains flowed through him in an extinguishing rush of whitewater that washed all the filth from his body. The water ran to the beach, ebbed from the shore, and disappeared into the ocean.

"Help?"

"Yes. I'm locked out, I can't get in my window, and my apartment is about to burn down." Greg noticed an unusual assertiveness in his voice.

He spun and darted down the back alley. Stunned at first, the man followed and brought his Brooks Brothers shirt collar over his nose as he neared the dumpster mess.

“Jesus!”

Greg patted the dumpster lid. “Here, hop on top.”

The two vaulted up. Greg put the back of his right hand over his left palm.

“Do this.”

The man imitated Greg, who lifted his left foot high in the air. The man grimaced as the wet sole of Greg’s nauseating, scum-covered shoe stepped in his hands. He squatted down to give Greg some momentum and hoisted up. Greg let go of the wall and soared.

For a moment, he thought he’d fly away. He long thought of gravity as some definite force trapping him on the ground. Like a wine glass against the heavenly forte of an opera singer’s seven-octave-ranging voice, he felt this notion shatter as he latched on to the window sill and pulled himself in.

The pot smoked in the kitchen. Wobbling down the hall like the banana man, Greg tripped over his own feet, but immediately pulled himself back up. He stumbled into the kitchen and coughed as he approached the thick smoke swirling out of the pot.

Greg grabbed the knob and cranked it counter-clockwise. The raging blue flame disappeared into the depths of the stove.

The fire alarm flashed, screaming and hollering. Greg reached up, took off its casing, and removed the battery.

Greg waved at the dissipating smoke and stared into the empty pot. The long-burning flame had charred the entire base pitch-black. All this paranoia, all this stress, all this madness for this stupid pot.

Greg turned to the dining table covered in his half-pound of weed. For a moment, he froze like he did on the sidewalk, but the wave no longer hurled towards him. He dragged over the trash can and swept his stash inside. He lifted the bag, tied it shut, and strided down the hall. Confidence replaced the clam sauce on his face. He poked out of the bedroom window and tossed the bag out. It made a loud thud as it bounced off the dumpster and fell *deep*, deep down with the others. From above, he felt as high as he did on the pier. The only thing missing was Kayla.

Greg grabbed his phone off his desk and dialed. His heart rattled around in his chest with each subsequent ring. He let it free as he heard the click of her answer.

“Holyshit! I’m sorry baby! I’m such an idiot oh my god baby please forgive me you were right you were so god damn right I was so wrong please babe I love—”

She laughed on the other end. “Come over, I’m at Lily’s place.” She hung up.

A smile wider than the black ocean on that January beach night spread across Greg’s face. He swiped his phone from the bedroom desk, grabbed his keys off the hook, and limped out the door.

The flame would always lurk deep within the stove’s workings, but Greg would never let it burn that long again.

