

“The Bracer”

3176 Words

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Labeled items declare value and ownership. When John had pressed his name in deep black ink on the crisp brown paper sack, it felt unnatural. It also proved useless. The refrigerator was again vacant, no sign of the lunchsack or its ham sandwich with American cheese on white bread. The compressor clicked on and began its work, creating output with no concern for outcome. Air drifted down to uselessly cool his feet.

Hunger and resentment gnawed upon John throughout the afternoon. At 5:03 pm, he started the engine of his small, old, well-maintained foreign sedan and found the antics of the Dani and Danny Drive Home Show brought little respite, the banter of the co-hosts for the first time sounding trite and uninspired and banal.

*“What will you do when the intruder is IN YOUR HOME?!?”* the radio ad shouted.

*“Your wife is in danger, your children are terrified. They’re looking to you to save them.*

*Do you have the skills to brutally and effectively protect them from the threat of certain death! No? Then you need Krav Maga from the Mid-town Martial Arts Academy. These brutal and effective self-defense techniques of the Israeli military will teach you to disarm the attacker with brutal effectiveness. You need Krav Maga. Do you have what it takes?”*

John decided he did not. He turned off the radio and drove in silence. He sought comfort in the knowledge that a hot meal awaited him, made, if not with the deepest affection, at least a zeal for middle-class American cuisine.

John thought about how it was becoming more difficult to find the original shade of avocado green with each re-painting of the house. As he neared the cul-de-sac, he could see

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that the three-bedroom split-level was dark inside. He walked up the stairs and up the stairs again to the kitchen where he found a note:

“John,

Julie forgot about a school project. Had to run her to the store. We’ll grab something while we’re out.

Your dinner is not in the oven or the microwave or the stove or the fridge. It may be at KFC or the grocery store. Best of luck.

Jan.”

She would claim it was her own sense of wit, but they both knew better. And for the second time in a day John found himself hungry. He pulled the loaf of white bread from the pantry and squished as much as he could of one soft, bland slice into his mouth.

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“Disheartening,” John said to himself. He felt it was the word that best fit the situation of finding his lunch sack in the men’s room garbage. It was on top of the refuse, and the air faintly smelled of the permanent marker he’d used to clearly write “John Giloolley” in large black letters. The top was ripped off, the offender undeterred by the futile staples, and a ham sandwich was spilling out, half eaten and fully discarded. John sighed.

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“Johnny! How are we today?” Bevalaqua bellowed. The scent of a suffocating amount of Brut cologne bullied its way into the room.

“Hello, Richard. I really prefer John.”

“I know, Johnny,” Bevalaqua said, opening the door to a stall and pausing. “Listen, we’ve got to pull you off of that Keneely project. Too many cooks, if you know what I mean. Don’t read into it, though. There’s plenty we need you for around here.”

“That’s fine, I guess. Um, Richard, I’d like to talk to you about lunch. My, um, it seems my, uh...”

“Lunch? I don’t know. My schedule’s pretty tight. Can we talk about this later, Johnny? I’ve got some work to do in here, and you do not want to be around, my man. Okay? Okay,” he laughed. “Have a good one, buddy.” The stall locked behind him.

At 5:03 pm Dani and Danny were cooing to each other, using their tired and true ways to introduce road-related songs, usually “Life is a Highway” or “I Can’t Drive 55.” John recalled his father’s drive home, how it had always included a “bracer,” a stop at the tavern for a little something to ease the transition to the family. The idea seemed so masculine to John, another in a litany of actions perfectly suited to his father and impossible for him. He wondered what his bracer was and when he realized that Dani and Danny were the closest thing he had, tried to convince himself that he didn’t need one.

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He backed his car into a space at Jumping Bean Gymnastics and kept the engine running. Jake burst open the door and slid into the back seat, still smelling of middle-schooler sweat and moldering gym mats.

“How was it?” John asked.

“Fine.”

“Learn anything new?”

“No”

“Any closer to the next level?”

“No”

“School good today?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“Can we listen to the radio?”

“Sure.”

*“The world is a scary place. And I’ve got news for you guys: it’s getting worse, not better. What will you do when you wake up with a gun in your face? You don’t know, do you?!?! That’s why you need Krav Maga from the Mid-town Martial Arts Academy. Learn how to defend your family, brutally and effectively. What’s it going to take before*

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*you decide to take charge? Your wife murdered? Your daughter raped? Don't wait until it's too late.”*

“Jesus!” John said, punching the power button.

“Dad! You can't say that!”

“No, I didn't mean it that way.”

“I know what I heard, Dad”

“No, it was like a prayer. There was a question mark. You know, ‘Jesus?’”

“Sure.”

“But did you hear that ad? I mean, geez.”

“I think you mean ‘Geez?’”

“You don't think that's over the top?”

“I dunno.”

“And what's Krav Maga, anyway?”

*“A brutal and effective form of self-defense, developed by the Israeli military and now popular throughout the world.”*

“What?”

“They teach it next door to gymnastics. The poster's on the wall and I see it like every day.”

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“Oh. What else do you know about it?”

“It’s awesome and only super-tough guys take it. They have a class at the same time as gymnastics and I can hear them yelling and hitting stuff. It’s so cool.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” They drove in silence for a time.

“During every gymnastics class, Monday, Wednesday, Friday?” John asked.

“I think so,” Jake said. “Can you turn the radio back on?”

John spent Friday morning packing six banker’s boxes full of files. He marked them “Keneely” and set them to the side and wondered what he might next have to work with or on, then wondered if it mattered. At 10:00, he pulled his room-temperature lunch from his desk and ate it. At 3:00, he told Bevalaqua that he didn’t feel well. He backed his car into a parking space behind the Jumping Bean Gymnastics building, walked around the front, past Jumping Bean Gymnastics and into the Mid-town Martial Arts Academy.

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Wrinkled clothing was an uncommon occurrence for the sedentary man and an advantage of being married to one, Jan always thought. John would wear shirts three or four times before washing them, pants even more. In 23 years of marriage, she had never seen the

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amount of laundry that John was producing. His shirts looked like he'd slept in them and his pants like they'd been worn sideways. And here was a tear in the crotch seam of his khakis. She pushed her finger through it and frowned.

During dinner, the clinking of silverware resonated throughout the dining room. Julie rocked her glass from side to side, making a thunking noise as she dared the milk to break free of the lip. Jane focused squarely on her chicken which she cut into small bites and chewed to a pulp before swallowing. John looked out the window at the red cardinal hopping on the hill behind the house. Jake belched.

“Jacob!” Jane scolded.

“Sorry. May I be excused?”

“That’s probably best for everyone.”

When John came to bed, Jane was already there, rolled to her side. Her light was off, and his was on. He slipped into bed, trying not to wake her and she resented him for not realizing that she wasn't asleep.

John was finding that a pleasant side effect of his new training regimen was the deep, peaceful sleep of the physically exhausted. The equation seemed simple in retrospect. He found he had vivid dreams of running through forests and tackling grizzly bears and breaking their necks with his bare hands. Sometimes a rival hunter would appear and challenge him for his kill and John would use his superior Krav Maga skills to disable this challenger who was trying to take the bear meat out of his children's mouths. As a younger man, his mind wouldn't



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let him strike another person in his dreams. He would swing, only to be met with great, invisible resistance, like he’d suddenly been plunged into jello.

“You get out! You get out of my house! You dirty, dirty!” Jane was screaming from the kitchen. “Go away, go away! I’ll slice you open like Thanksgiving Turkey, if you come back! I’ll roast your giblets!!!!”

John ran to the kitchen, “What is going on?!?”

“Someone tried to break in!” Jane said. She was wide-eyed and clenching a butcher’s knife in her hand, her cotton nightgown flapping in the breeze through the open sliding glass door. “He tried to break in and I ran in here and scared him off! He was at the back door, fiddling with the lock and I yelled and screamed and grabbed the knife and screamed and scared him off!”

“Why didn’t you get me?”

“I tried, but you were asleep! I shook you and shook you and you wouldn’t wake up! Where were you when I needed you, John?”

“I’m so sorry.”

“How sorry would you be if I hadn’t taken charge? What if he’d gotten in? Then what? Maybe if you weren’t so tired from all your ‘work,’ you’d have been awake to protect your family!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

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“‘*What’s that supposed to mean,*’” Jane mocked. She stepped toward him, pointing the knife. “I’ve seen your clothes when you come home, all rumpled and wrinkled. How’d they get that way? Those Keneely’s must be pretty rough for that to happen.”

“I told you, they took me off Keneely.”

“Who is she, John?”

“What?”

“Who *is* she!”

“How about you put the knife down.”

“Fine.” Jane set the knife down and grabbed a rubber spatula setting on the counter, brandishing the white rubber blade at him. “Who?!” She jabbed him in the ribs with the spatula.

“Ow! It’s nothing like that! Ow! Quit it!”

“Oh really? Then explain your clothes, then? Twenty-three years we’ve been together and I’ve never seen this! You leave early, you come home late, your clothes are a mess. What else could it be? What else!” She slashed him across the chest with the spatula. It snagged on one of his buttons which popped to the floor.

“Jesus!”

Jane gasped. “Adulterer *and* blasphemer!”

“No, not like that! There was a question mark. Like ‘Jesus? Help me?’”

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“I know what I heard. And I know what I...”

“I’m taking Krav Maga classes!”

“What?”

“Krav maga! Krav maga!”

“What is that?”

*“A brutal and effective form of self-defense, developed by the Israeli military and now popular throughout the world.”*

“What? Like karate?”

“No, not like karate! I mean yes, yes, just like karate! Kicks, punches, self-defense. Karate. I go into work early so I can leave in time for class and it doesn’t get over until 5:30, so I get home later than normal.”

“And you do this in your work clothes?”

“I don’t have any gym clothes. And I was embarrassed and didn’t know what you’d think.”

“What’s going on,” Jake said. John and Jane looked over to see the boy and his sister standing in the doorway.

“Nothing. Go back to bed,” John said.

“Sure doesn’t look like nothing,” Julie said.

“There was an intruder,” Jane said, “but I scared him off.”

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“What?!” Jake said. “Like a *real* intruder?”

“It’s fine, honey. Everything’s fine, now.”

“That is so cool,” Jake said.

“What did he look like?” Julie asked.

“I didn’t see his face, but he was tall and thin with shaggy hair and a hoodie.”

“Oh,” Julie said. She looked at her toes and tucked her hair behind one ear and revealed a flash of latent beauty that reminded John of her mother.

“Dad’s taking Krav Maga?” Jake said.

“Seems that way,” Jane said.

“Then how come Dad didn’t scare him off?” Jake asked.

“Because he was sleeping.”

“You were sleeping?” Jake said.

“I’m a heavy sleeper,” John said.

“Too bad,” Julie said. “Didn’t even get to use your devastating skills.”

“Totally,” Jake said.

“Are you paying for those classes?” Julie said.

“Bed!” John yelled. The siblings went back to their rooms, chortling.

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Jane set the rubber spatula on the counter and looked at John. “So, you’ve been taking self-defense classes?”

“Yes.”

“Israeli commando karate?”

“Yes.”

“And you just slept through a home invasion?”

“It really wears me out and I’m sleeping so much better.”

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John continued to attend the classes because he’d made a commitment, and John thought of himself as a man who honored his commitments. He also honored the \$99.99 plus tax he’d paid for two months of classes.

“This is the biggest client we’ve had, the biggest account we’ve ever had, and I couldn’t be prouder of our team!” Bevalaqua bellowed. The staff in the conference room had migrated toward the walls, establishing an olfactory DMZ before him. “I’m so proud of everyone who’s worked on the Keneely account from start to finish: Hamilton, Bartolomucci, Stewart, Maggie, Jenny, Katie...” he continued to rattle off names of John’s co-workers, calling the men by last

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name and the women by first name and making no mention of John whatsoever. “Great work, guys!”

Jane served chicken and rice every night that week. Jake enjoyed a rare dominance of the conversation and marveled at his family’s interest in the social and political developments of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade of Adlai Stevenson Middle School, however passive. He didn’t know what he’d done to get himself noticed this week, but he thought he should find out and keep doing it.

John laid his head on the pillow. He reached to turn off his light and wondered if he’d dream about the bears. He didn’t.

He shook awake at a noise from the basement. Jane had been leaving their bedroom door open, as there was no need to shut it, and sounds from throughout the house ricocheted up the walls and off the aluminum windows. The noise was a rattle, like a door knob being jiggled and John knew there was someone at the door to the walkout basement. “Not in *my* rumpus room,” he whispered to himself. He crept out of his bed and down the stairs and paused. The basement door creaked on its hinges and shut again. “I’m going to crush his balls,” John whispered to himself and the pseudo-profanity made him feel tough.

The basement stairs were diagonal to the exterior door and John hugged the wall and peered across the room. He decided he’d use the lights to stun the intruder, then attack. He watched the intruder slink through the room, the moonlight from the window drawing his shaggy silhouette. He paused. John flicked on the light and sprinted across the room.

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“Julie?” the intruder said. The boy was tall and lanky and confused and the strings of his hoodie swung around as he raised his head. John recognized him as Luke Olaffson, a local basketball standout, and in that instant, two thoughts passed through his mind:

1. Good for you, young lady;
2. Perhaps I should stop.

But John convinced himself that his momentum was too great and his actions were justified and he flew at Luke screaming and grabbed the boy by his shoulders and brought his knee up hard and firm into his groin. Luke clutched himself and fell to the floor, whimpering.

“Daddy!” Julie said, popping up from the couch.

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John sat at the table and poured another scotch.

“I’m really sorry, Mr. Giloolley,” Luke said.

“I was young too, once, son,” John said. “But you can’t go sneaking into peoples’ homes, not these days. What if I had a knife, or a gun? How did I know you didn’t?”

“You’re right. I should have been quieter.”

“You might be missing the point.” John sipped his drink. He swirled the glass and watched the ice cubes chase each other in their own ethereal wake.

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“I just really like Julie. And there’s all this pressure about which school I’m going to and when and she doesn’t care about that.”

“I didn’t even know you guys were dating,” John said.

“Yeah. We keep it a secret. We don’t want to fit the jock-dating-the-nerd stereotype.”

“Ah,” John said. He looked at this earnest young man who was still sitting at his kitchen table. He fetched another glass from the cupboard.

“I dunno,” Luke said.

“It’s alright, son. A bracer, before you head home.”

Luke took a sip and grimaced and coughed hard and held his groin. “Ow.”

They drank silently.

“How are you, uh, feeling,” John asked.

“You’re in really good shape, sir.”

“Thanks.” He took a sip. “I’ll need Julie’s key back.”

During the night, three inches of snow fell. John looked out the kitchen window and sipped his coffee. Jane made him eggs over-easy the way he liked and the smell filled the house and reminded him of when the kids were small and making breakfast was an event. He thought about what he might say to Julie about the night before, how he might guide her in this new relationship. He wondered how far she and Luke might have gone. Then became terrified when he thought she might tell him.



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He saw the cardinal bouncing along a branch, knocking snow to the ground. It twitched its head and looked at him. John looked back and they were connected and in that moment John felt a certain peculiar kinship with the wild, beautiful bird.

The cardinal chirped violently and flapped its wings and launched itself in attack toward John. It hurtled with all its might and pelted the window with a mighty thwack, then fell dead to the ground.

John sighed.

There was a knock at the door, a boom-boom-boom that was not threatening but not friendly. John opened it to find a police officer with a notepad in his hand. He had the physique, demeanor, and mustache of an officer with enough seniority in the department to work the day shift.

“Mr. John Giloolley?” the officer said.

“Yes.”

“Sir, we’ve had a complaint that you’ve been serving alcohol to minors? May I come in to ask you a few questions?”

“Jesus!” John said.

“No need for that, sir.”

“No, I mean, *Jesus*? I mean, come in.”