

Calling Home

It shook his whole body.

The smoke burned the back of his throat. It scratched at his vocal cords, then his esophagus and when it reached his pristine lungs they reacted. Volcanically. From deep in his core a reflex set off a cough that nearly rocked him from his chair.

Embarrassed, he tried to keep it at bay, but couldn't. Holding it in pressured every orifice. He smiled sheepishly at the pretty woman behind the bar. The patrons in the café looked at Cliff and laughed. The college kids with marijuana cigarettes hanging from their lips weren't much older than his daughter, young American male tourists who came to Amsterdam for the things they couldn't get easily back home: drugs and sex.

Cliff knew he stood out in the coffee shop, even before the convulsing cough. There weren't a lot of forty-five year old men with graying hair and a folded Wall Street Journal under an arm. He was just another oddity in this city of accessible sin.

Most gazes, including his, were focused on the hostess, the young Fraulein with long blonde curls and a smile so bright he could see it through the haze of smoke in the air and the drugs in his brain.

The woman with the smile had advised Cliff on a blend of marijuana and tobacco. She selected a joint, and helped him light it. After the first puff nearly popped every muscle in his neck, he smoked slowly, the joint regularly extinguishing. Already wobbly from the drugs, he stood and stumbled the three steps from his table to the counter, where he steadied himself in place.

"I know what you want," she said, a knowledge she must have gained from watching hundreds of weekend drug users. But how could she really know what his muddled middle-aged

brain wanted? How could she know that this man, twice her age, wanted to take her to a bedroom he imagined existed somewhere behind the coffee shop. He saw the room in his head: a cold floor with bare walls, nothing but a small chair and a single bed where he would make love to her and then sleep the rest of the afternoon away in her arms, under a blanket of long curls that bounced off her full breasts.

But instead she picked up the remaining nub of this joint, placed it in Cliff's mouth, the cigarette so small now that her fingers touched his lips. She cupped her hands and lit it.

After a few turns he was too embarrassed to walk back to the counter again so he kept his buzz going with the small votive candle that sat in the middle of his round table alongside a miniature bottle of Coke Light. He lit the cigarette, took a puff and lit it again, smoked and re-lit, until finally the liquid wax rolled over the wick, extinguishing the candle and singeing a small spot on his hand.

His eyes stung, but he feared closing them and falling asleep in this strange place, alone and so far from a familiar face. "Stay focused on the pretty German," he told himself. Above average looks when compared to the general populace, but in this setting she stunned. All the gazes from the young men followed her, mouths gaping as she walked table-to-table asking if they needed drinks, wiping up their ashes, emptying the trays, making them want more...of something.

She stopped at his table, looking into his teary eyes and warned in a low voice: "Be careful."

He took a shallow breath.

"I need to call my mother."

The following morning the numbers bounced around Cliff's brain with each smooth stroke of the razor. How many squirts of shaving cream, how many whiskers, how long?

If it takes 10,000 hours to achieve mastery of a skill, how many days before you perfect a morning routine? How long before you get sick of the brushing, the washing, the combing, the dressing?

Cliff impressed himself with the dexterity and precision with which he completed his morning rituals. He knew how long it took him to shave, shower and whatever else. And he continued apace even as an advancing ache pulsed through his temples and down to the base of his neck. He bowed his head, fingers running through his hair as he watched the white porcelain sink fill up with black and gray strands. He could no longer rely on the things that defined him: His job, his family, his mane of perfect hair.

That previous night clogged his mind, but he had to get to the office. Every day another bit of his job seemed to transition to someone else. He could stem the flow if he got in early. At least that's what he told himself.

Drawers creaked open, slammed shut. Cliff's head shot toward the noise, his wife's taut frame passed between the small opening of the bathroom door. He froze, his thickening arms leaning heavily now on the granite countertop.

Rarely did he and Jamie cross paths before dinner. Most days he was out before she was up and when he returned from biking, she had already left for her early-morning fad followed by her daily necessities: kick-boxing, Zumba, all forms of yoga, spinning, private trainer, wax, color, blow out.

But he never varied. He was always on the bike. Regardless of the weather they met at the top of Rock Creek Park and rode for an hour, the younger ones longer. Sometimes on the

mud of the trail or through the dodge of morning traffic. Nothing in his day seemed right unless he'd felt the burn in his thighs coming up the final hill or the empty freedom as he sailed past stalled traffic on Massachusetts Avenue.

“What are you still doing here?” she said, catching sight of him, but not stopping. Her gaze stayed on him for a mere second before moving back to her destruction of the cabinet hinges, colored contents filling up the floor as she searched for something.

“I fell asleep on the couch,” he said, two fingers on his right hand grinding a circular motion over his temple.

“At some point you made it to bed because it was like sleeping next to a damn mule,” she said without looking up. “I’m surprised you didn’t wake the neighbors.”

They didn’t do mornings.

“You drank too much at that dinner, didn’t you?” she said, stopping for a breather. The bathroom door swung open all the way, her right arm clinging to the frame. Cliff admired the body he’d been sleeping with for almost twenty years. Although there’d been more sleeping than anything else in recent months. Recent years?

“Shit,” she said looking at her watch, returning to pick through her drawers of shirts and shorts, tanks and tops, sweatshirts and pants. She had so much stuff she couldn’t find anything. “Don’t forget about dinner tonight,” she said. “I don’t want to hear how you’ll be late. The deal is over. You did your job. You made everybody else money.” A final drawer slammed and she was gone.

Cliff walked to the closet, the door failing to latch from her force. She never managed to close closet doors since he installed automatic light switches. He knew better than to remind her of the energy-saving device. Alone in the quiet he replayed the discussions.

“If you leave it open the light stays on,” he’d say.

“This is what you’re choosing to argue about?” she’d answer.

“You’re wasting energy,” he’d tell her.

No reaction.

“It costs money.”

No reaction.

“Your clothes will catch on fire.”

He looked inside the closet, the heavy price tags hanging for dear life on threads above a sea of colored shoes. It wasn’t a closet as much as a clothing store, perversely reminding him of the back porch of his childhood home. After their “financial reversal,” as his mother called it, they were the only ones on the block without a dryer. And so on the days his mother could get out of bed, she would hang the clothes on a line. But mostly it was up to him, if he wanted clean, dry shirts for school. She warned him about letting the neighbors see their dirty laundry, a pun lost on young Cliff. She showed him how to hang a line close to the house, right inside the porch, making it invisible to the neighbors, but within reach of the breeze. It would take hours to dry a t-shirt, and by then the elements or an errant bird made a mess of it. So Cliff would do his homework straddling the back door, one leg in the house and one hanging out, half reading and half watching the clothes blow in the dead breeze, a stack of rocks on the table, prepared for a potential predator.

His wife’s huff had blown an ill-wind through the closet and all he saw were dancing price tags of every shape. Rows and rows of them hanging like opaque chimes from high-end blouses and over-priced tanks. He smiled. Yep, nothing to wear.

She was a buying, spending, consuming monster. But she was his monster. He took pride knowing he could afford to be her enabler. She was his and that was enough. But for her it wasn't. They had a shared history, if not a shared present. This knowledge helped him when he knew they were going in different directions, even if they were on the same path.

On the night before his wedding Cliff's mother told him to watch out for her. "I'm just trying to hold on, Ma," he said, a satisfying grin stretching like fat rubber bands across his mouth.

"She's a winner," Lila Thomson told her son, "I'll give you that."

"You say that like it's a bad thing?" he asked.

"It just means she's gonna win," Lila added. "It doesn't mean you're going to win. It doesn't mean she's right. But somewhere, somehow, by God, she's gonna find a way to win."

That was the team he wanted to be on. He was tired of losing.

The house shook as the front door slammed, urging him back to reality. He was late, when he noticed the blinking red light of his cell phone. A dying heartbeat from an unplugged device. He listened to the voicemail, a solemn message from Vic's wife, who quietly told Cliff they were at Suburban Hospital. Vic wouldn't be coming in today.

Cliff's morning rotation of bike rides, calls to his mother and commute hadn't varied in 20 years, so any interruption from traffic accident to weather threw a tilt into his mood. The trip through his neighborhood, rolling past two stop signs hoping to beat the traffic light that was responsible for the back up onto the main road, and then slowing for the speed trap by the school. He could drive it in his sleep. And there were days lately when he did.

The news about Vic shook him into focus, pulling off the main road toward Suburban Hospital, his hair still wet and a missed belt loop. Terry sat alone in the emergency waiting room.

“What happened?” Cliff asked before reaching her.

She burst into tears. He hunched over her, hugging awkwardly.

As couples they saw each other at the Christmas party and maybe one other time during the year if she came by the office. But nothing outside of that. She wasn't the kind of person Jamie would socialize with anyway. She held no appeal, sat on no boards, collected no art. If Terry wanted tickets to a traveling tour of Cats, Vic would ask Cliff.

Terry liked him though, right? Cliff assumed she was like most spouses, thinking her husband was undervalued. Vic was underpaid, worked too much, should be getting equity. But she must know how hard Cliff worked to help Vic?

Cliff found her pleasant enough, but as Jamie once said, “They're not exactly homecoming King and Queen.” Everything about her was practical. Her hair was no-nonsense, straight with bangs. “There's nothing to blow out,” Jamie once sniffed. Her clothes, mostly skirts, were simple patterned, large round glasses, and teeth that could have used braces.

Vic was askew. His hair had a sideways slant, his coffee-stained shirt. His glasses perpetually dirty, but he couldn't find the time to get them fixed. His appearance was as messy as his work was neat. So focused and devoted to the company that he'd forget: a missed spot of stubble, a wad of shaving cream behind his ear, a lost cell phone was a line item because it was part of Vic's quarterly routine. Vic was as unbuttoned as Cliff was buttoned up and this gave Cliff confidence that the board would never dump him. He managed up, Vic managed down.

Cliff pulled up a stray chair and sat next to Terry, his hands in his lap. She blew her nose in a square hospital napkin, stopping long enough to give him the important snippets. “Vic wouldn’t get up today. I found him on the couch. He took pills. Well, I think he did. I found an empty bottle on the coffee table.”

“Sleeping pills?” Cliff asked, trying to fit the pieces together.

“He must have taken a lot of them,” she said and the tears came again.

“He couldn’t still be jet-lagged?” Cliff said. “We’ve been home almost a week.”

She stopped crying and took off her glasses. Her eyes narrowed, a new crease formed between her thick eyebrows. “He wasn’t trying to fall asleep Cliff.”

Terry’s eyes turned dark, a small shake of her head.

“I just mean, at work, he’s doing so well, so much,” Cliff babbled.

“There’s a lot to do at home too,” she snapped.

Jamie often reminded Cliff of his blind spot for social cues, but even he couldn’t mistake what Terry was sending his way. He said nothing until the pause grew too big, the quiet of the empty room overwhelming him. “He seemed fine yesterday,” he said, replaying the previous night. Just before the closing dinner they had discussed the timeline for moving, the final documentation, the delayed visa application.

“What did you say to him last night?” she asked.

“Me? He left the dinner early.”

“You were the last call on his phone.”

Cliff’s eyes shifted away, trying to remember the late night call. The words were jumbled? He’d fallen asleep on the basement couch, surrounded by racks of Jamie’s out of season wardrobe. He couldn’t watch television in their room and disturb her perfect peace. The

call had stirred him. Until now he'd forgotten the whole episode. He couldn't understand what the caller was saying. Squinting in the dim light trying to make out the phone number, the television glow his only guide. "Vic, is that you?"

Cliff thought he recognized the voice, but not the words. The late hour and poor cell connection in his basement conspired to turn the words to mush. Or maybe it was the extra glass of wine that fogged his senses.

"Vic? Is that you? Whatever it is, can it wait til morning?" Vic was still talking when Cliff cut the connection. His head ached. He needed to pee.

Cliff winced when he bent his legs and moved them from the small chair where they had rested. He shifted each one to the floor with the help of his hands.

Was it 2? Maybe 3 in the morning? He clicked the television off and walked in the dark, the light from his cell phone leading the way upstairs.

Cliff slipped under the covers and was quickly asleep.

Terry's gaze drifted past him and she stood. A tall, too-young man in blue hospital scrubs, sneakers, and tousled blonde hair came out and gestured them back. Cliff followed through an electronic door that led to an over-lit hallway where the blonde man talked in doctor-speak.

"We performed a gastric lavage," he said. "The problem is we still don't know how much he took. We pumped his stomach, but there wasn't much left, most had dissolved into his system by the time we saw him. Do you have any idea how many pills were in the bottle?"

Terry shook her head. "I just know there were three left when I found him."

"Had he been taking them regularly?" the doctor asked.

"I don't know, maybe," she said.

“Did he take them every night?” Cliff asked.

“I don’t know Cliff,” she snapped back.

“We’ll keep him here,” the doctor said. “But I’m afraid there won’t be much to say until tomorrow. In the mean time, I want to set up a psychiatric evaluation.”

“Psychiatric?” Cliff said.

The doctor looked at Cliff and then back to Terry.

“Isn’t that a little premature,” Cliff said. “Let’s wait until we can talk to him at least.”

“Who is this?” the doctor asked.

“Vic works with me,” Cliff said, always careful to indicate his employees were partners, team members, co-workers. Terms that exasperated Jamie. “You’re their boss!”

“Look, I don’t know your husband, Ma’am” he said. “But I know what I see every day whether walking or being dragged through that door. A psychiatric evaluation will answer more questions than any medical exam.”

“It was an accident,” Cliff said.

“Whatever you think is best, Doctor,” Terry said, a sideways glance at Cliff.

Sitting in his car behind a blaring ambulance Cliff screamed: “Mom!” His car-phone programmed to call his childhood home in suburban Chicago.

Santianna’s Jamaican voice filled the air. She’d been answering his morning calls for as long he’d been making them. “Allo.”

“Santianna, hey, it’s Cliff.”

“Oh, you’re late. Traveling for that work again are you?” she said, her breathing sped up, sounding like she was running a lap around the house.

“No, I’m home. I mean in town, is she there?”

“She’s waiting. She won’t eat breakfast until she hears your voice. You know that. She was good this morning, but she needs to eat.”

“Okay, okay,” Cliff said. His need for routine came from his mother. And even with all the ravages her brain endured, the routine remained.

He heard static and movement of the phone and then the familiar voice, the first voice he’d ever heard.

“My boy, my boy!” she said as if welcoming him home.

“Hi Ma, yeah it’s me.”

“Who else is gonna call?”

“I don’t know really. Who else does call you?”

“It doesn’t matter who else calls me. It’s just good to hear your voice.”

“We spoke yesterday, Ma.”

“I know,” she said, although he was fairly sure she didn’t. “But I like to hear from you. Is it morning? I usually hear from you in the morning.”

“I’m sorry about that, something came up at work.”

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s okay, I know things come up. And things go down. And you know what. In the end, things end up in the same place where they started.”

“Yeah, it feels that way sometimes.”

“Why doesn’t my baby sound good?”

“Ma, I tell you this all the time, it’s the phone. I’m calling you from the car. Everything is fine.”

“Is your wife there?”

“No.”

“Always alone, always alone.”

“I’m not always alone, Ma.”

“When you talk to me, you are.”

“When I talk to you I’m in the car, and well, when I’m in the car, I’m usually alone.”

“So in my world you’re alone.”

“I guess so. But you’re not alone.”

“I’m never alone. They don’t even let me alone in the bathroom. The other day I woke up on the toilet and she was there.”

“You woke up on the toilet?”

“On the toilet...”

“Well, I’m sure it was for your own safety.”

“You’re so sure. Wait til you wake up on the toilet with someone staring down at you. It’s not pleasant.”

“You don’t sound any worse for the wear.”

“Maybe it’s that phone of yours. Maybe you can’t hear it in my voice, but I haven’t peed in three days.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I haven’t.”

“Are your eyes turning yellow?”

“No, but my bed is.” She giggled like a mischievous child.

“Oh Ma, are you doing that again.”

“At least I’m safe in my bed,” she said. “Okay, enough about me. Tell me a story. Where are you going?”

“Right now I’m going to work.”

“Always working, always working. Why don’t you come visit?”

“I’m coming in a few weeks, I hope” he said, though nothing was scheduled.

“You hope. Hope is not a plane ticket.”

“I know, I know.”

“You’re a big shot in that office. You’re in control of your life. If you want to come visit your mother I’m sure you don’t need a permission slip.”

“Well, I’m having some problems at work.”

“Opportunities, my love.”

“No, these are problems.”

“Your father used to call them opportunities.”

“I know what Pa used to say. For someone with Alzheimer’s you remember a lot of stuff.”

“Only what I want to remember.”

“There’s just so much that’s changing. Lizzie is a year away from college. My job at the office is different. Our friends are changing. Everything is changing.”

“Nothing stays the same, my sweet boy. If it did, then tonight I’d go out with your father and I’d have too much red wine and my teeth would turn purple. And your father would be alive. And you and your brother would eat dinner and we’d talk about your day at school.”

“Don’t do this, Ma.”

“And there wouldn’t have been any fire. And there wouldn’t be a place in the ground where a young man lies alone. Nothing stays the same. So try something new, before something new happens to you.”

There was quiet on the other end. He didn't want to have this discussion. Between Vic and his mom and his morning encounter with Jamie, there was nowhere safe to put his thoughts. To rest.

“What do you want to do?” she asked him.

On these daily calls he was twelve years-old again. A son. The kid who couldn't make a decision, but followed others. The child who went to work too young and had to endure the shame of a father's crime. And even at forty-five he still followed. He followed what the board said, what his wife said, what his mother said. No, she never told him what to do. She always asked what he wanted to do and he answered with something someone else told him.

“Ma, you there? Ma, Ma!” he shouted into the phone.

“She tired,” Santianna said. “She go lie down. Goodbye Clifford.”