

DOMINO EFFECT AND OTHER STORIES

by

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This thesis is a collection of six fictional short stories, all of which focus on strong characters and narrative voice. The stories also involve different narrative perspectives. They include a variety of writing styles, such as oral, minimalist, and fancy. All of these stories involve the themes of employment, desperation, domino effect, and moral judgments. The first three stories are episodic in nature, and thus connected. They chronicle the life and downfall of a serial burglar. The last three stories are not connected in any way to the first three. They involve life-changing moments that take place in the workplace, and focus on how the characters cope with these events.

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A Thesis

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I would like to thank my parents for providing me with the support and love needed to gain this tremendous education and the necessary tools to succeed in life.

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Tick Tock

There was nothing in this world that James Taylor wanted more than to wake up next to his girlfriend each morning, and to know that his son was sleeping soundly, safe in the next room. He'd listen, with a tired smile on his face, to his girlfriend complain about how he'd left the orange juice out the night before, about her asshole manager at work and how he would "accidentally" brush up against her, her friends with better jobs, and how different things would be had she not gotten pregnant and could have stayed in school. For James, that would have been enough. That would have been *perfect*. But he did his best to lose that chance the night he got high and misinterpreted a text message on her phone from a guy that she worked with, and threw her against the bedroom wall.

She left.

James had plenty of time to agonize about his missed opportunities, stupid mistakes, and shattered dreams while sitting in a cell, his head still pounding from his last Robitussin trip. Thirty counts of burglary, thirty counts of breaking and entering, thirty counts of grand larceny, five counts of felony identity theft. The public defender said twenty years if he pled guilty. That was the best the state was going to offer. In twenty years, James would be forty-eight years old. To a twenty-eight-year-old, forty-eight might as well be ninety-eight. He found himself wondering how it got so bad, so quickly.

This is the last time. I'm only going to trip one more time. That thought had gotten James fired from Walgreens five months earlier. Stealing cough syrup from the pharmacy was just another stupid decision in James' life. One of many. The new store manager had been keeping tighter control on the store's inventory, and James had begun acting erratically the past few weeks. He seemed scatterbrained, and unable to focus on the simplest of tasks. Two weeks

before he got fired, James showed up at work for the wrong shift, two days in a row. Company policy mandated a drug test.

The high that James felt every time he got to the bottom of a Robitussin bottle was unbeatable. His crushing feelings of sadness and guilt had a temporary remedy. It became a necessity. Before he was fired, it was a daily routine for him to grab a bottle off the shelf as if it were for a customer. He then would take the bottle to the break room, concealing it in his sleeve. Once in the privacy of the break room, the bottle made its way into his hooded sweatshirt stored in his locker. When it was time to clock out for the day, he would carry his sweatshirt under his arm, and no one ever noticed. This was how he supplied the poison for his addiction for the better part of a year.

It would start with some lightheadedness. James would begin to feel extremely tired, but he had to fight through that. Nausea would then set in; it happened every time. If he could fight through the nausea and keep from vomiting, his mouth would begin to foam a little, like some sort of rabid animal. He was used to this and used a small cup to spit in. Not vomiting was the most important part. He had to keep it down. James would lie in his bed and the overwhelming sensation of floating would set in. He felt as if he could roll over and look down on his body, which was sprawled out on the bed like a corpse. Weightless. Not sure if *he* was spinning, or if it was the room. This sensation was what James was hoping and waiting for. This was the sensation that he was willing to steal for. Death without dying. James' arms felt like they weighed a ton. *Stuck to the bed. Peaceful.* No collection agency or landlord could get to him here. No one else was allowed in these moments. These moments were his. Private. During these moments, he would imagine all the lives he could have had. They were beautiful.

* * * * *

James woke up the morning of January 5th, 2006, with a headache. The same headache as the day before, and the day before that. This wasn't your ordinary hangover. This wasn't alcohol. He knew he needed more to make the hangover go away, but cash was an issue. His free ride with Walgreens was over. He turned on the TV, but didn't watch. He never watched anymore.

It was cold, even for January. James sat on his couch in his living room, trying to put his mind elsewhere. He was ashamed to even think about what he had to do later that night. In his mind, James really didn't have a choice. The child support calls weren't going to stop until he paid them. The landlord's good grace was eventually going to run out when the checks stopped coming. The utility company hadn't even called before they shut off the power a month earlier. A few trips to the pawnshop had gotten the lights turned back on, but the notices still came. He had considered filing for bankruptcy, but didn't really even know what bankruptcy was, or how to do it. He had heard of bankruptcy court, but didn't know what that was either and definitely couldn't afford a lawyer. He was a mess. Numerous possibilities ran through his mind: get rich quick schemes, pyramid schemes, work-from-home jobs, stuffing envelopes, donating plasma, everything a person at the end of this rope would think of before he ultimately faced the one glaring fact: he needed money, and he didn't have any. James wanted desperately to be able to pay his bills every month. He didn't want to be a deadbeat. Normal people pay their bills on time, and if he could, he would have worked himself to death just to be normal.

As the day turned to dusk, James felt each tick of the clock reverberate in his body. The day progressed, and the butterflies in his stomach turned into piranhas. For him, each tick of the clock was a one tick closer to the moment he'd sell his soul.

James, restless, went to his closet and pulled out his old pair of football gloves. He thought about his dad. He thought about the day he made the JV football team and his dad came home with these gloves. A perfect day. Not like today. *What would Randy Taylor say if he knew what was coming?* James almost wished his dad could read his mind and come put a stop to this. But Randy didn't like being called "Dad," and Randy wasn't around anymore.

The phone rang. It was Ashley.

"James," her sweet, Southern voice said, "How are you feeling? Still sick?"

"Sick as hell," James mumbled into the phone.

Silence. The flickering of the TV in the corner of the room caught his eye. Silent static.

"You're killing yourself, you know that," she said, letting out a long sigh.

"You did this to me, so spare me your bullshit sympathy."

More silence.

"I don't even know why I call anymore."

"I don't know either."

"Look," she said sternly, "you still haven't paid me back the money I loaned you, and I have to call you on it."

"So that's why you called." James shouted, shaking his head. "I should have known. Always about the fucking money."

"James..."

"No, you asked for the money," James interrupted, "I will get you your damn money. I'm working on something right now that will take care of that."

Silence. He heard Ashley sigh into the phone.

"Just don't do anything stupid."

James didn't respond. There was nothing left to say or do except listen to her breathe, and wait for the click. Cough syrup always made him an asshole, and he knew it.

James sat in his living room all day, dreading what was to come. It wasn't his decision to make anymore. It had to happen. 1 A.M. came and went. 2 A.M. came and went. 3 A.M. came, and James couldn't stand it anymore. It was time.

Solemnly, donning all black, James made his way out the front door and towards the apartment complex at the end of his street. It was the kind of night where it was so cold that even a scream couldn't cut through the frozen, piercing air. The night air, although frozen, felt thick to James, as if he was on a plane, breathing recycled breath.

It was black outside, and nothing made a sound. All he could hear was the sound of his sneakers on the pavement. James was amazed at how empty the streets were. It was cold, and James could see his breath trailing behind him as he walked. He wondered where his breath went when he couldn't see it anymore. His mind was wandering.

The world was different at night. Calm. Frozen. Silent. The night air didn't care that he had back child support, and certainly didn't judge him for stealing. As James made his way closer to the apartment complex, he felt a sharp pain in his lower back. This was the kind of agonizing stress pain normally brought on by lifelong affairs, devastating secrets, and family shame. The pain hit him like a stray bullet meant for someone else. The cold did its best to numb the pain, but as he got closer to the apartments, the pain became more intense, more shooting. He was shocked he could feel anything at that moment.

He walked at a brisk pace, noticing every car parked on the street. He couldn't help but see people sitting in the driver's seats of each car, staring at him. Judging him. He knew they weren't really there, but it bothered him just the same. Who were these phantoms to judge him?

They didn't know James or the hell he was going through. They never had to deal with crippling debt or looming legal obligations. They weren't battling addictions. They had never lost a child in a custody battle. They weren't real. There was a war going on in his head. He was losing it.

Tar River Estates was in sight, and James slowed his pace, taking great care to take in everything around him. The parking lot was mostly empty, as college students had not returned from Christmas break. If there was ever a perfect time to hit his first apartment, this was it. He made his way through the dark, empty parking lot, and the occasional "kicking on" of heating units startled him. Each "bang" James heard was loud and jarring enough to stop him in his tracks, and might as well have been a gunshot. Maybe had it been a gunshot, he would have had fewer things to worry about and it could all be over.

As James approached the back sliding door of one of the apartments, he had a moment of pause. *What if I get caught?* Maybe that wouldn't be a bad thing. Maybe then he'd be forced to change. He knew that breaking into apartments wouldn't fix what mattered, but he had no other choice.

James entered the apartment. It was dark. He took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. His life was over.

Lament

I'm not going to sit here and bitch and moan to you about how I'm some tragic story, or how the world has got it out for me. You probably don't care cos you're sitting here too. Yeah, I did some stupid shit and got caught, but how many other people do the same thing I did, and are sittin at home watching tv right now instead of in a jail cell?

Lots of em.

Some people have all the luck, and that's the truth. You got the lucky ones, the ones born with the silver spoon up their ass, and then you got the other kind. The fuck-ups. You ever heard of a fuck-up? Well, I'm one of em. I should've stopped after the second apartment. I had enough cash to cover my meds, and to get the child support assholes off my back for at least a few months. Shit, things were starting to look up for me at that point. But remember how I told you I was a fuck-up? Yeah, that's important.

Look, before you go judging me over some things I did when I was on my meds, just know that I never hurt anybody. Yeah, I took their stuff and sold it, but am I some violent criminal? No. People do what they gotta do to survive, and for the lucky ones I was talking about, all they gotta do is go sit in an office all day. They're not better than me. The only difference between them and me is that they have money to take their kids out to dinner and to Disney and all that magical shit.

People don't need all of that shit anyway. One of the apartments I hit had a 52-inch plasma tv in it. Can you believe that? Probably belonged to some 18-year-old kid who doesn't deserve it. I bet that kid doesn't know the feeling of going to bed, not knowing if the lights are gonna work in the morning when you get up. You know they cut off your power at night sometimes? They are assholes around the clock.

You know, I don't even really care what happens to me. The only thing that really bothers me is that my son is going to grow up without me, and God only knows what his mom is going to tell him about me. I don't know what she's gonna tell him, but I know what she's *not* gonna tell him. She's not gonna tell him that I slept with my head on her belly the entire time she was pregnant. Or that I started working triple shifts to buy a crib that is nicer than my bed. Then, when money got real tight, I'm pretty sure she started cheating on me, pregnant and all. So yeah, I threw her against the wall one time. You know, to get the truth. Not even that hard, it couldn't have hurt the baby. Shit, I bet he's gonna be terrified of me when I get out.

She could have gotten me locked up for that, but she didn't. She didn't call the cops. Crazy, right? I guess there was probably some tiny part of her that felt like I was right for getting angry like that. Hell, she did cheat on me, even though she denies it to this day. For me, not calling the cops was proof enough that she did it. There was definitely some guilt in there. But seriously, if she cheated on me right under my nose, what would stop her from cheating on me while I'm in jail? There is no way in hell that I can ever trust her again. That's why we're not gonna work. I'll be damned if she's gonna keep me from seeing my son. But as far as James and Ashley as a couple goes, you can bet your ass that's over. God knows I'm gonna end up some pathetic jail pen pal to some middle school kid doing a project; or I'll get some love letters from some four hundred pound heifer who either can't get anybody else, or feels like *I'm* some charity case that will take any kind of affection thrown at me. Fuck that. I'm not that pathetic, if you can believe it.

Twenty years. That's only if I plead guilty. You remember the lucky ones I mentioned? Yeah, they could afford a lawyer if this happened to them. Not me. I get the public defender. Ever seen *My Cousin Vinny*? He's about like the public defender in that movie, with the

stuttering. I bet a real lawyer could get me out of here in return for some community service or a fine or something. But I'm not one of the lucky ones.

Nobody ever does their entire sentence anyway. Twenty years is actually more like twelve... Twelve years... I'll be forty if I get out in twelve.

Forty.

Morning Surprise

The sun snaked its way through the tiny slits in the mini-blinds hanging in my bedroom window, but was intrusive enough to cause me to stir. During the night, my mouth had been kind enough to stop producing saliva, and I awoke to a feeling that one could liken to that of a man who is lost at sea, clinging to life, and who contemplates drinking seawater just to quench his overwhelming thirst. The Rose Bowl festivities of the previous evening had left me sick, irritable, and extremely hung over, almost as if a freight train had stealthy entered my home while I slept, found me sleeping, and proceeded to repeatedly run over my unconscious body for the duration of the night.

As I emerged from my self-induced coma, I made my way out of bed slowly, and shuffled miserably towards the bedroom door. I stomped down the stairs, half hoping I would just take a tumble so that at least I could justify lying down past 1 p.m.; my noisy descent was halted by the tiniest of breezes that gently brushed past my face. I glanced to my right and noticed the back sliding door was open; the latch on the door was outstretched, as if it were desperately trying to pull itself closed, but was an inch too short. I assumed Mark had come home late from poker night and just forgot to make sure the door was closed, which was almost a weekly occurrence.

With my last, tiny bit of strength, I stumbled painfully over to my recliner and took a controlled fall backwards into its welcoming arms. This chair and I had been through war together. “60 Days Same As Cash!” was the line they fed the 18-year-old version of me at the furniture store, but even after a damaged credit score, rips, tears, beer stains and excessive fading, that chair was still worth more to me than some friends. I leaned forward to begin my daily hunt for the video game controller, and all I could hear was the clanging and straining of

the old rusty coils and frame of the recliner, almost as if they were singing out in chorus, doing all they could to stop me from realizing what had just happened.

The blood rushed to my head and my stomach sank like when upside down on a roller coaster when I looked up and saw an empty entertainment center in front of me. No video games, no TV, and the last vestige of my DVD collection sat disorganized on a nearly empty rack; it was almost as if they had disappeared in front of me. This was not your typical burglary where the house has been torn apart and ransacked, papers strewn about the floor, broken glass hiding in the carpet waiting for some unlucky victim's day to get even worse; the burglar had taken the time to carefully pick and choose what he wanted to take, as if he were at Blockbuster selecting his favorite movies. I noticed that he left *Face-Off*, *Gone In Sixty Seconds* and *The Rock*, which led me to believe that our suspect was not a Nicolas Cage fan. *Thank God I remembered to bring my phone to bed with me!* I thought, as I fumbled through my pockets until I found it. At least that was one thing I still had.

I nervously dialed 911 for the first time ever in my life, and felt a strange feeling of childish excitement come over me, because I had just become part of an exclusive group of people who have had to dial 911 in their lifetimes. I envisioned two bald, no-nonsense police officers dusting my house for prints, interrogating neighbors, and conducting a full-fledged investigation. They would undoubtedly utilize the full budget and manpower of the police department in tracking down the cat burglar that must have perpetrated this crime, as I had always figured it would take a consummate professional to steal from me. The phone rang twice before a surprisingly beautiful, melodic, Southern voice came on the line. "911, what's your emergency?"

Domino Effect

Oh God, I thought, as Rick took a deep drag from his Turkish Gold cigarette. *I'm about to be fired from a glorified fast food job.*

“I’m sorry, Brian, but there is just no way we can keep you on,” Rick said with a tired half-sigh. It was hot in his office, but not hot enough to warrant the glass-like beads of sweat that ran down his red, thin, bird-like face as he nervously put out his cigarette. His nose, if you can call it that, was more of a beak than a nose.

“We’ll mail you your last paycheck, and you can keep whatever tips you made tonight. I like you personally, but at Domino’s Pizza, we hold ourselves to a higher standard. I’m sure you understand.”

“I don’t even need this job,” I snorted. “I’m sorry that this is as far as you got in life, but I have way higher aspirations than managing a bunch of teenagers and dropouts in a shitty chain restaurant making shitty pizza. But hey, to each his own,” As I got up to leave, I smiled and said, “By the way, I know you are overcharging customers and stealing the difference off the top. I also wonder what your wife would think about you having sex and doing drugs with that nineteen-year-old girl in your office. Yep, I know about that.”

Rick stared blankly down at his messy desk. It was as if the answers he sought were among the round brown coffee-ring stains and the *We’re sorry we screwed up your order* coupons that littered his desk. I let out a short laugh, and left Rick’s office. I suppose I said that because it was one of those things I’d been rehearsing for months, and what was Rick going to do, fire me again?

Panic set in. *What now?*

I started working for Domino's Pizza when I was 17 years old. I was about to graduate high school, but hadn't gotten into any of the colleges I wanted to go to. My parents told me for the past three years that if I kept screwing around at school, there would be no way I'd get into college, much less a *good* college. I brushed that off like I brush off most things I don't want to hear, and had the best freshman, sophomore, and junior year of anyone who has ever been to high school. Hell, I came from money, and I just assumed that rich white kids got into college. Period.

I found out that having wealthy parents didn't automatically mean that they would share that wealth with their kids.

So for me, if I had any shot at going to college, I'd have to make enough money to pay for tuition at Forsyth Tech community college. I figured I'd go to "old people and poor people school" for a couple years until my grades were better. I mean, who in the hell can't make A's at a community college? Then I would go to a real college, with people a bit more my speed. That is when my life would really begin. It was settled.

"Well, B...", Dad said, "Your mother and I didn't have any money when you were born. There were months where we'd end up with ten cents left in our checking account. This whole not-getting-into-college deal is a real shame, but that's life. You'd better start learning how to deal with these kinds of things now, because it doesn't get any easier from here."

Rick Hilton and Domino's Pizza came into my life.

* * * * *

"1228 County Home Road. This one is for you, Brian!" Rolando shouted as the order ticket printed off in front of him. Rolando chuckled to himself, wiping his flour-covered hands

on his belly. Rolando was a husky Hispanic kid, and his shirt was too small. His B-cups bounced a little as he laughed, as if they were nodding in agreement. He laughed because he knew what 1228 County Home Road meant.

Oh hell, it's them again! I thought, as I watched the pizza they had ordered slowly creep out of the conveyor-belt oven. I could already picture it. It was an old two-story brick house with ivy growing out of control up the sides. They kept the nativity up in the yard year-round. Black Lincoln Navigator in the driveway. Mean dog. Jeff Gordon NASCAR flag hanging on the front porch. Pretty standard for this area. *The redneck rich*, I called them. Normally I wouldn't remember an address as vividly as this one, but 1228 County Home Road was home to a well-renowned non-tipping family. They obviously thought that we wouldn't remember them repeatedly stiffing us, or the several times they made us drive back to the store for exact change. One time, the man of the house stood there at the door with a smug, content smile, waiting for me to dig through my car to find the last three pennies that I owed him. "You don't think I got rich by giving all my money away, do you," he said from behind the safety of his screen door. Hell, they even lived five miles outside of our delivery range and Rick still made us deliver to them because they answered negatively to some Domino's survey. "It's good customer service," Rick would chime.

"Stick customer service up your ass," I'd mutter under my breath as he walked away.

I'll make sure this is the last time they ever order from us.

Rick was cooped up in his office with some girl who didn't look like she could have been 18 years old, and was completely oblivious to everything going on. *Typical*. I knew that in about fifteen minutes, Rick would emerge from his office, red-faced, shirt un-tucked, dodging eye contact from his employees.

On the floor, next to the walk-in refrigerator, I found some old pieces of ground beef mixed in with some lint and curly black hairs. God only knows how long they had been there. I carefully added them to the pizza, layering the hairs under the pepperonis, in an attempt to conceal them. I was an artist, and this pizza was to be my masterpiece. I noticed a large dead beetle in the corner of the room, next to the dough station, and thought it would really finish off the pizza nicely. It is uncanny how similar a dead black beetle looks to one of our gourmet black olives, and I was willing to bet 1228 County Home Road wouldn't be able to tell the difference. *Woah! This sucker is still alive!* The beetle fought desperately in vain to crawl its way through the mounds of hot sticky cheese and old hairy beef. I'm not sure if it died or just gave up, but it was going to be eaten in a matter of minutes.

It was hot standing next to the 485-degree oven, and I did nothing to keep the sweat from rolling off my face onto the pizza. Before closing the pizza box, I grabbed a bucket of "fresh" jalapenos that had been left uncovered underneath the flickering fluorescent light, and drained most of the old, lukewarm jalapeno juice all over 1228 County Home Road's dinner. This was the only real satisfaction I got out of this job. I couldn't stop thinking about the commercial I heard on the radio on the way to work. *Here at Domino's we use only the freshest ingredients, and all of our pizzas are handmade with care by our pizza experts.*

As I turned off of the tiny little two-lane highway onto County Home Rd, a sense of boyish excitement overcame me. I found myself drumming on the steering wheel of my Blazer like I was Neil Peart, and this pizza was my "Tom Sawyer." I looked to my right as I drove, and read the addresses on the mailboxes. I knew where these bastards lived, but I still mouthed the numbers, as if doing so would make me arrive faster.

1216...1220...1224...1228.

“Alright, you jackasses,” I mumbled, with a grin on my face as I got out of the car, “I hope you’re hungry.” I was sure any onlookers would mistake my devilish grin for enthusiasm for my job. Ironically, at that exact moment, they would have been right. I walked up to the door, narrowly dodging the Jeff Gordon lawn gnome that served absolutely no purpose in their yard. When I made it to the front door, I looked at the doorbell, and remembered another reason why I hated these people. The button on their doorbell was cracked, exposing a tiny little light bulb and a completely stripped wire. Every time I touched that doorbell, I was afraid I’d light up like Times Square.

Ding Dong... Well, I wasn’t dead, so I’d dodged a bullet again.

The door opened, and a forty-something, gray-haired, round little bowling ball of a woman stood before me. She wore a “Big Dogs” shirt and freshly pressed jean shorts. She looked agitated, and was red in the face. “Guess that thirty minutes or less guarantee just went out the window, huh?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” I said, “You live several miles outside of our delivery area, and those State Troopers are all over this highway. I went five over the speed limit the entire way.”

“Nobody gives a damn about givin good customer service these days. The whole damn country is goin to hell. I reckon I deserve something for free.”

Oh, you’re getting plenty for free, I thought to myself, smile still painted on.

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll talk to my boss and he’ll call you when I get back to the store. A thousand apologies for being late, and I really hope you enjoy your pizza. That will be twenty-one dollars and 94 cents.”

“You’re not gonna cut me some kinda discount for my inconvenience?”

“Ma’am,” I sighed, “I don’t have the authority to do that.”

“Well, you ain’t gettin my business again unless your bossman makes it right by me.”

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and, you guessed it, two George Washington’s.

“Don’t think you’re gettin any kind of tip from me,” the round woman blurted. “I aint tryin to be rude, but customer service counts. Now, where is my six cents? Nickel and a penny if you got it, I ain’t got much use for lotsa pennies.”

Being prepared this time, I reached into my pockets and wrangled six pennies and a piece of lint. I chuckled lightly as I saw the lint, as I would have loved to add it to her pizza.

“Here you go, ma’am, six cents is your change. You enjoy that pizza, and call us next time you’re hungry.”

The bowling ball of a woman snorted, and said something I couldn’t understand as she snatched the pizza from my hands, slamming the door in my face.

* * * * *

“Brian, I’m just going to be completely honest with you. Man to man. I am unbelievably stoned right now.” Rolando laughed, and looked like he had melted into the passenger seat of my Blazer.

“I’m happy for you,” I replied as I smiled and shook my head. “Just hold it down below the window when you pass it. I don’t want some old codger calling the cops on us.”

With his last bit of strength, he managed to pass me the blunt he had rolled in the bathroom at work. We rode around the long, winding roads of our little country town every day

after our shift ended. These after-work joyrides had become the norm. Smoking pot was really the only thing Rolando and I had in common, other than the fact that we both hated our jobs.

“Brian, I’m telling you,” Rolando said as smoke slowly trailed from his mouth, “Cops straight up don’t pull over the pizza delivery guy. You can do twenty over the speed limit and they won’t do shit, cos what if the cop’s wife or kid ordered a pizza, and you’re delivering it to their house? They let it slide, man...they let it slide.”

“I guess you’re right,” I said, laughing a little. “Next time I see a cop, I should just speed up and give him the finger, huh?”

“Shit yeah, man. Let’s go to Bermuda Glen and finish smokin this blunt.” Rolando licked his right index finger and ran it down the length of the blunt. I never understood why he would do that. It grossed me out.

“Nah, man,” I said. “Security is tight there, and I don’t need to get fired for lying to some rent-a-cop.”

“Dude, you still don’t get it,” Rolando chuckled. “You can do anything, man. You’re the Dominos guy. Everybody loves you and nobody questions you. Dude, you’re gonna miss the entrance!”

We pulled up to the gate of the super-exclusive Bermuda Glen Country Club. Now, I mean *super*-exclusive. I went to a friend’s birthday party at the Bermuda Glen pool when I was a little kid and saw their Nazi staff throwing kids and parents out left and right because they weren’t members. Seriously, if they threw out a bunch of elementary schoolers and their parents, I was afraid of being executed if I was caught in there without a good reason.

The elderly gate guard approached our car, saw the Domino's sign and a flood of relief washed over me as he waved us through. *That was easy enough.* He must have thought Rolando was a trainee or something because he didn't so much as make me roll my window down.

"Country clubs have lots of cul-de-sacs, and cops don't drive down cul-de-sacs," he would say. Always the paranoid type, I checked my mirrors for any sign of police. The only thing that I saw was an old man in a yellow sweater, walking some sort of dog that I could have sworn was a rat. Feeling safe enough, I put the blunt to my lips and inhaled. Apples. *Why do I taste apples?* I looked down to the floorboard on the passenger side, and next to Rolando's feet was the wrapper for the Apple Dutch Master blunt that we were smoking.

I continued to drive through Bermuda Glen. Almost instantly, I felt pressure building up underneath my eyes and felt like someone had wrapped a warm towel around my brain. *Holy crap I'm stoned.* I watched the pavement pass underneath my car and it all bled together like I was watching someone painting it in front of me as I drove. I had to keep re-focusing on the road because I was becoming enamored with and distracted by literally everything that I saw.

"Rolando... man..." I slurred, "I think the only reason we die is because we accept it to be inevitable." *Holy shit I really am stoned.*

"True." Rolando probably didn't even hear my profound statement; he was too busy staring at the passing porch lights as we drove, with his face pressed against the cool car window.

As my inspiring, thought-provoking drive in Bermuda Glen came to an end, my high did not. I pulled up to the stop sign at the exit of the country club. It had gotten dark during our escapade, and I sat at the stop sign, trying to gauge how far away the oncoming headlights really were. They looked like two tiny fireflies flying together in perfect formation. I continued to

stare, mesmerized by the oncoming lights, which steadily grew larger and moved faster. It felt like hours had passed. All at once, I floored the gas pedal and cut the wheel as hard to the right as I could. The fireflies had become as large as two suns in my rear view mirror, and that was when the blue lights came on.

My heart raced as I pulled over onto the right shoulder of the road. I began to panic. *I'm going to jail. I'm completely fucked. I'm still stoned off my ass. Play it cool, Brian...play it cool. It's probably just some stupid, fat deputy... nothing to worry about...*

I looked over at Rolando. He looked terrified, and just stared blankly ahead, as if someone was going to come down the road and save him.

Just my luck, it was a state trooper. I hoped he liked pizza, and that he'd be open to a bribe if things went south.

"You DO know why I pulled you over," the Trooper said with a frustrated tone.

"No sir! I was just heading back to work. Just delivered a pizza to Bermuda Glen.

Thirty minutes or less, you know," I replied quickly. *Nice save.*

"You pulled out in front of me and I almost hit you! Now, I want to see your license. Both of you."

"Yes sir. Here you are." My mind began to run in circles as my pulse quickened. *I wonder if he can smell the weed in the car? Oh shit, I have ash on my fingers...that's a dead giveaway! What is this cop's name anyway? Oh Jesus... A. Justice. Trooper A. Justice! I'm screwed.*

I held out our licenses with two fingers, doing everything I could to act naturally. I hoped that Trooper Justice didn't notice that my hand was shaking as he took the licenses from me. Justice took a long look at our licenses, looked Rolando and me up and down very

suspiciously, and leaned in closer towards the window as if he were trying to smell something. I was sure he was about to drop the hammer on us.

“Brian Stone. Well, Mr. Stone, would you mind telling me what I smell in that car? You boys aren’t smoking any marijuana, are you?”

“Absolutely not, sir,” I said, obviously nervous, “I don’t touch the stuff, and neither does Rolando here. We both take our jobs way too seriously to jeopardize it by smoking weed.”

I punched Rolando in the arm and angrily said, “I told you that you should never burn incense in the car! I told you it smells like weed, and now look, you are going to get me fired. You son of a bitch! I could kill you!” *I hope he bought that! Shit, that was a terrible lie.*

I heard a tiny crinkling of plastic to my right. I’m sure my face turned white, as Rolando very slowly moved his left foot to conceal the Apple Dutch Master blunt wrapper on the floorboard.

“Look,” Trooper Justice said, “I don’t buy for a second that anyone, anywhere makes an incense that smells like marijuana. I’m not an idiot. I might be the law now, but I used to deliver for Little Italy Pizza in Winston-Salem when I was a kid, so I know what that’s like.”

I slumped down in my seat, dejected, sure that I was about to be arrested, fired, and disowned by my parents.

“I already saw the cigar wrapper, son. Just give me the rest of it, and I’ll cut you loose. You don’t seem like you’re under the influence anyway. If you go bragging to your buddies about this, and I find out, you won’t be able to leave your driveway without me behind you.”

I nodded my head as Justice passed our licenses back to us. Rolando was crying.

* * * * *

I could tell it was Rick's hand that slapped me on the back as I was washing dishes in the back of the store. I knew it was him because he always wore this giant, gaudy gold ring and the edge of it connected with my shoulder blade. It sent a sharp pain through my back as I put on my smiling face and prepared to endure what was undoubtedly going to be a painfully stupid conversation.

"Hey Brian! Those dishes are looking good. Looks like you may have found your calling," Rick said with a stupid, nervous grin on his face.

"Oh, you know it. I was born to do this," I replied with a forced smile.

"Our numbers have been pretty good this month. We're coming into our busiest month of the year and I need everybody focused. We're going to be pushing our Specialty Pizza menu this month because we didn't sell too many the past few weeks. Management has been busting my ass, so I need you to nail these dishes." Rick hesitated. "You've been stealing Sprites."

I looked to my left at the sink where I had just been washing dishes. The tub that had previously held the lukewarm jalapenos slowly sank below the bubbles, and out of sight. It was like watching the Titanic sink from a distance.

"Are you serious? I haven't stolen anything," I replied. *It had been a hundred degrees outside for the past few weeks and I got thirsty. Sue me. But I'm sticking with my story.*

"Yeah... yeah you have," Rick looked down at his feet, as he motioned for me to walk with him to his office.

I followed Rick into his cramped, messy office and sat down. Rick began to sweat, and looked like he had to tell someone their dog just died. He lit one of his Turkish Golds cigarettes and leaned towards me. "I've got some bad news, Brian."

Until She Had to Pull Away

It had been nearly two years since Ryan's mother was killed. She was driving home from the bank on a rainy Tuesday afternoon, when she pulled out of a parking lot and turned left across two lanes of oncoming traffic. She didn't see the pickup truck coming, and that was it. Ryan hid behind the hospital's waiting room door, listening to the deputy tell his father that she was killed instantly, and that she didn't suffer.

"If it's any consolation," the deputy said, "many drivers accidentally look past oncoming traffic. It could have happened to anyone."

The deputy left, and Ryan saw his father standing in the hallway, silently sobbing to himself, head in his hands.

Ryan only remembered crying once after his mother's death. She had been a strong woman, and wouldn't have wanted him to spend his time crying for her. She was the family's rock when relatives passed away. Now, that rock was gone, and all that was left was Ryan and his father, who was seemingly emotionless since that day. He didn't show emotion anymore. The loss of his wife left him defeated, with little love left to give.

"Hold still," Ryan's father said, his clumsy fingers struggling with the bowtie. "If you want me to tie this for you, you've got to hold still."

Ryan had just turned 14, and was getting ready for his first day of work. He had taken a summer job as a waiter at the local upscale retirement home, because they were the only place in town that would hire 14-year-olds. The job required him to wear a tuxedo every day, which he dreaded, but he was excited to start. Something to keep his mind off his mother.

Farmington Village was a fancy retirement community. Residents paid a high price to live there. The radio played at a nearly inaudible level as his dad drove.

“You know,” Ryan’s dad said, breaking the near silence, “these rich folks could buy our house once a year for what they pay to live here. Just don’t get sucked into thinking that is the only way to live.”

Ryan didn’t respond. He’d heard that before from his mother.

His father dropped him off at the valet stand in front of the main entrance.

“Ryan,” his dad said, looking him in the eyes, “make sure you work hard, do what your boss tells you, and if you even have to think about whether something is right or wrong, don’t do it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ryan hugged his dad through the driver side window, and watched him drive around the corner and out of sight.

As he walked through the automatic double doors and into the lobby of Farmington Village, Ryan was instantly overpowered by the smell of food, and something else. He wasn’t sure of what it was, but it was strong and unsettling. Not a terrible smell, but it made him uncomfortable without knowing exactly why.

“You must be our new waiter,” a voice echoed through the marble-floored lobby. The clop clop clop of the man’s dress shoes reverberated throughout the room. “I’m Sam, the manager here. You must be Ryan.”

“Yes sir,” Ryan said nervously, extending his hand to meet Sam’s. “Just let me know what you want me to do, and I’ll do it.”

“I love that attitude,” Sam said laughing. “And was that a *yes sir* that I heard? Outstanding. I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

Ryan followed Sam towards the kitchen, but something caught his attention. Standing in the doorway of the dining room was an attractive girl in a tuxedo shirt. She looked him up and down and smiled a little as he passed by.

For the next couple weeks, Sam and some of the other employees trained Ryan on the various duties of a waiter. Ryan plated food, took orders, prepared desserts, cleaned tables, folded napkins into various different shapes to fit the occasion, and talked with the wealthy residents. One resident in particular, Mrs. Brown, stood out to him. She was in her late 80's and was thin as a piece of straw, but always carried herself with grace and elegance. It didn't matter if it was breakfast service or dinner service, Mrs. Brown always wore a dress and jewelry fit for royalty. She had a kind, soft voice and she took every opportunity to grab Ryan's hand as she told him about her life.

"Before my husband passed away, we used have a house in the eastern part of France," Mrs. Brown said, sitting at her usual table in the corner of the dining room. "I can't begin to describe how beautiful that part of the world is. Rolling hills as far as the eye can see, and tiny little towns and villages dot the countryside, each town with a church in the middle."

Ryan smiled and listened as he stood there, like he did every night. He didn't care if Sam or anyone else got mad that he and Mrs. Brown spent so much time together. She had done everything in her life. Mr. Brown had worked for NASA as a rocket scientist for the Apollo missions, and they spent summers on safari in Africa. She knew everyone. Winston Churchill had attended their wedding, and she had pictures to prove it.

"I haven't been back to France since my husband passed," Mrs. Brown said, her voice trailing off as she looked down at her half-empty coffee mug, "Oh, Ryan, you would love it there."

Ryan saw Sam glaring from the doorway to the kitchen with his arms crossed. He shot Mrs. Brown a quick smile. "Time to get back to work."

They did this every night. Mrs. Brown would grab onto Ryan's hand, telling tear-filled stories about her husband, their life, and his death. One night, a few weeks later, while serving Mrs. Brown's dinner, Ryan felt comfortable enough to share the story about his mother's death.

"My mom was killed in a car accident," Ryan said, holding back the deluge of tears that welled up in his eyes.

"Goodness," Mrs. Brown whispered, her eyes darting away for a moment, "I am so sorry, Ryan. I also lost my mother at a very young age."

Ryan started to step away, not wanting to let Mrs. Brown see him cry, but she wouldn't let go of his hand.

"She loved you, you know," she said. "Ryan, I mean that. Your mother loved you. She still loves you. She is so proud of you and of the young man you've become. You keep a lonely old woman company, even when her children don't come see her. You are an angel. My angel." She didn't let go of Ryan's hand until he had to pull away.

Several weeks later, Ryan was in the kitchen putting doilies on the coffee saucers like he did every night, when he felt someone pinch his butt.

"Hey cutie," a young female voice said directly in his ear, "I hope you don't mind, but I've wanted to do that since you started."

It was Sarah, the girl he'd seen on his first day of work. Sarah was a nineteen-year-old single mom who worked as a waitress.

"Oh...hey, Sarah," Ryan said, his face beet red with embarrassment.

“You better be careful, because eventually I might start grabbing the front,” Sarah said, walking away.

There was something different about Sarah. She wasn't like the girls at his high school. She smoked cigarettes, stole liquor from the bar at work, and had her own car. There were some girls at school that Ryan was sweet on, but freshman girls were inexperienced, as was he. Sarah had large, full breasts that had the buttons on her tuxedo shirt holding on for dear life. The girls in his classes definitely weren't built like that. Ryan had heard Sam suggesting that she buy bigger shirts, but she was a rebel. She'd just nod and flip him the bird when his back was turned.

The next day, Ryan was squirting red syrup onto the dessert plates before the cheesecake went on, and he saw Sarah coming this time. He pretended not to see her, half-hoping, half-dreading that she would make good on her promise.

He felt a slight breeze as she walked past him and out into the dining room. Ryan's heart was racing, and he felt a mixture of disappointment and a strange feeling of relief wash over him. He wouldn't know what to do with a girl like her anyway. The furthest Ryan had ever been with a girl was making out with Briana Cannoy at her pool party a year earlier, and she let him feel one boob over her bathing suit.

Ryan felt fingernails run up the back his leg from the top of his thigh to his waist. He felt something wet touch his earlobe.

“What are you doing tonight,” Sarah whispered in his ear. He hadn't heard her come back.

Ryan's mind raced. Should he make up an excuse and say that he had plans? Or should he be honest and tell her the truth, that he had nothing going on. He rarely did.

“Um,” Ryan stammered, “Nothing, I guess. Why?”

Sarah took his hand and walked with him around the corner, behind the ice machine. She cornered him so that her breasts pressed against his chest. He felt her hand move below his belt.

“Because I want to show you something. But it’s at my house. I can drop you off at home after if you want.”

Ryan agreed, only after Sarah shoved her tongue down his throat. Her kiss was drastically different from that pool party truth or dare kiss. It wasn’t clumsy. Rather, it was overpowering. Sarah removed her tongue from his mouth and walked away. He stood there for a moment in a daze. He tasted cigarettes.

He called his father from the phone in the kitchen, and told him that he was going to eat dinner at a friend’s house and that he would be back late. His father reluctantly agreed. As he hung up the phone, Ryan turned around, only to bump into Sam. He wasn’t sure how long he had been watching. Sam’s brow was furrowed; the lines in his forehead were exposed as he stared at Ryan with a serious look.

“Ryan,” Sam said sternly, “I don’t like the what I’ve been seeing with you and Sarah.”

Ryan turned white, but hoped Sam didn’t notice.

“What are you talking about?” Ryan said, his voice shaky.

“What I am talking about,” Sam said, “is that I’ve seen her rubbing your back and I saw her pat you on the butt once.”

“Oh,” Ryan laughed nervously, “she’s just goofing around. She’s really nice and has just been helping me learn the job.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed cynically as Ryan spoke.

“What I have been seeing is *not* the job,” Sam snorted. “What I have been seeing is the same thing I saw with your predecessor. He was about your age, and he and Sarah spent lot of

time together. I can't prove anything, but he started acting really strange and just quit out of the blue. I don't want to see that happen to you."

Ryan just nodded, looking down at the perforated rubber kitchen mat below his feet.

"If you ever get into a situation where you feel uncomfortable, just walk away," Sam said, touching Ryan's shoulder.

Ryan nodded again.

"Yes, sir."

Later that afternoon, it was time for dinner service, and elderly residents began filing into the dining room. The familiar smell of cigar smoke snaked its way out of the "Stag Room," the room for the widowers who enjoy a cigar and glass of brandy with dinner. For some, brandy and a cigar *was* dinner. Ryan prepared the doily and saucer for Mrs. Brown's inevitable coffee order.

The first few orders came in, but Mrs. Brown wasn't at her table. This was completely out of the ordinary. Farmington Village was a place of routine. Ryan scurried to the hostess stand and checked the reservation list. "Mrs. Brown, 5:30 PM, Table for 1."

She was supposed to be here. In the couple months Ryan had worked at Farmington Village, he had never seen Mrs. Brown miss dinner. She loved to get dressed up and mingle with waiters and other residents. Sam walked towards the hostess stand, undoubtedly to tell Ryan to get back to work, but before Sam could say anything, Ryan blurted, "Where is Mrs. Brown? She isn't in the dining room."

A commotion in the kitchen caught Sam's attention, and he walked past Ryan, seemingly undeterred by the question, but responded, "She's in the hospital wing."

Ryan made sure everyone in his section of the dining room was satisfied, and then he started down the long hallway towards the hospital wing. That smell from his first day of work

filled his nostrils as the carpet under his feet turned to tile. The beautiful painted yellow and teal walls turned to a pale blue, sterile color. It smelled like a hospital. All the glitz and glamour of the fancy dining room, the brandy-splashed white linen tablecloths and tuxedo-clad servers, came crashing down. They were a façade. This was what really happens at these places. Old people get sick, and they die.

Ryan approached a nurse and asked where he could find Mrs. Brown.

“She’s in 1B,” the nurse said without looking up from her clipboard.

He found 1B, pushed the door open, and took a few steps into the room. The smell of human waste made Ryan gag. At the far corner of the room, he saw Mrs. Brown. She was sleeping, some sort of breathing mask on her face, IV in her arm, amidst the rhythmic beeps of the heart monitor. Ryan was sure she was dreaming of her husband, of France. She was dreaming about the time she and her husband rode in a hot-air balloon over Munich and southern Germany. She was dreaming about the birth of her son, and the day he graduated with honors from U. Penn Medical School. About her last days with her husband, when she held his hand until it went limp. Until she had to pull away.

Ryan stood at her bedside for a few minutes. He felt his eyes welling up, as if he were about to cry. Before the urge to cry overtook him, he touched Mrs. Brown’s hand, and left the room.

Ryan slowly walked back to the dining room, his eyes searching the floor for consolation, but all he found was tacky carpet. He walked into the kitchen and started preparing desserts, like he always did.

8:00 PM came, and Ryan punched his timecard. He walked out into the warm summer night and towards the valet stand to wait for his father. Images of Mrs. Brown hooked up to all

those machines played like a slideshow in his head. He had flashbacks to his mother's face at the wake. It had been caked in makeup, but he remembered she looked peaceful.

Two bright headlights hit Ryan's eyes, blinding him for a second. He thought his dad must have made good time. It was Sarah's little white two-door coupe. She pulled up to the valet stand where Ryan sat on the curb. "You didn't forget about our date, did you?"

Ryan had forgotten. He then realized that his dad wasn't coming. He just wanted to go home.

There was a car seat in the back. Sarah took long, slow drags from her cigarette on the drive to her house. She grinned at Ryan and turned up the radio.

The brief car ride felt like an eternity to Ryan. He wasn't sure if he was aroused because he was sexually excited, or purely because of nerves. Embarrassed, he held his hands in his lap, trying to hide his excitement. They arrived at her apartment, and it was remarkably unremarkable. Drab brick façade over white vinyl siding, in dire need of a pressure washing.

Sarah jingled her keys a bit, and pushed the door open.

"Go back to the bedroom, I've got to pay the sitter and I don't want her seeing you," Sarah said with a hushed voice. "You know, I'm a little older than you and it might not look right to people who don't understand."

Ryan nodded and ducked inside while Sarah distracted the babysitter. He walked quickly to the rear of the apartment, stopping in the doorway of a small bedroom. A crib caught his attention. There was a wide-eyed infant staring up at him. Kids at that age made him nervous. They didn't yet look like a boy or a girl, and if for any reason their mother left, they wouldn't have the slightest memory of her. He didn't know any girls her age that had kids.

Ryan heard Sarah talking to the babysitter in the kitchen. He walked into the master bedroom, flicked on the light switch, and sat at the foot of the bed, not even taking his shoes off. Being nervous was not something that he was unaccustomed to, but the butterflies in his stomach were beating their wings against his rib cage to the point where he felt like he was going to throw up. It felt like they were helicopters, not butterflies.

Sarah walked into the room wearing a t-shirt that she pulled up slightly to reveal tiny, light blue panties. She must have changed in the laundry room. Ryan's heart started to race as she sat down next to him on the bed. She took his hand and placed it on her inner thigh as she slightly opened her legs.

“Are you ready?” Sarah said, with a devilish grin on her face, leaning in towards him.

Ryan nodded his head, ready or not.

The next morning, Ryan strutted through the automatic doors into Farmington Village, ready to prep the kitchen for breakfast. He was glowing. Sam was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, waiting for him.

“Ryan,” Sam said with a serious look on his face, “I just want to apologize for being short with you the other day when you asked about Mrs. Brown. I was in a hurry, but I was able to find out for you.”

“Oh, that's ok, Sam,” Ryan said with a smile. “I know she's in the hospital wing. I actually went to see her. How is she doing?”

“Well, Ryan, she passed away this morning. I'm sorry. I know you two were close.”

Ryan stood there, stunned, silent.

“I just called your father, and he is coming back to pick you up. We’ve got today covered,” Sam said, putting his hand on Ryan’s shoulder.

Ryan walked outside and sat on the bench next to the automatic doors. He watched as Sarah’s little white car pulled into the parking lot. Smacking his lips, he tasted ash. He didn’t even look up at her as she walked past the bench and into the lobby. She didn’t even slow down.

Ryan just hung his head low, and found himself thinking about his mother. About her scent. He remembered that she always smelled like flowers. Not like the smell from Mrs. Brown’s room. Not like the ashy smell of Sarah’s apartment. He wasn’t sure if it had been jasmine, but he had loved it. His eyes followed the crack in the sidewalk to a small, green weed trying to push its way up. He wondered if it would flower, or if it was just a weed.

His father pulled up in the car and motioned for Ryan to get in. He buckled his seat belt, and looked his dad in the eyes.

“I don’t think I want to work here anymore,” Ryan said, fighting as hard as he could to hold back the tears.

Ryan’s dad nodded, his face red, as if he had been crying himself, and pulled out of the parking lot. Ryan untied his bowtie, staring at the side view mirror until Farmington Village was around the corner and out of sight.

Joshua the Great

So they said that if I wrote down the facts, it would be therapeutic. The facts are these: My name is Joshua Stone. That is pronounced Jah-*shoo*-wah, to avoid any confusion from the get-go. I sometimes go by “Joshua the Great,” but I haven’t been able to get anyone to consistently call me by that name. It hasn’t caught on yet, I suppose. Age: twenty-nine. Committed at twenty-seven, but in good spirits! No kids, thank God.

I can thank my father for my strapping good looks and unrivaled charm, but I also give him credit for passing along his love of the drink. You take the good with the bad, I guess. The bat-shit crazy gene, as I like to call it, most certainly came from my mother.

Details: I was born in the harbor town of Huntington, New York, and moved twelve years later to Mocksville, North Carolina. I later found out that we moved to Mocksville because my father was run out of Huntington. A combination of bad debts and consorting with undesirables made our situation there impossible. One night my father came home with a broken arm that he claimed was from a nasty spill at work. That was nothing out of the ordinary, considering he spent his days working as first mate on a charter fishing boat. Accidents happen.

In reality, he had made a bad bet on the New York Jets and couldn’t pay. So we left. My mother never forgave my father for uprooting the family, and slowly slid deep into delusion. I’m not taking sides, I’m just telling you how it is.

I was young, and my father always told me that Huntington was no place to raise a family. That, and the taxes were too damn high. Of course, I didn’t know what that meant, but trusted him completely. I was told that this new place was going to be much better than the former. Mocksville and Huntington were like day and night. We went from a diverse coastal

community, to a small, country, predominately white town. I traded New York pizza for North Carolina BBQ. At the time, that was a trade I made kicking and screaming.

“You mean these people down here eat pig guts?!”

“It’s not pig guts,” my father said, seemingly annoyed that I was peppering him with questions, “it’s just like a hot dog, only chopped up.”

“It sure doesn’t *look* like a hot dog,” I said, wrapping my hands around my neck pretending to choke myself.

“Well, if you don’t want to eat it, then don’t eat it.”

“Joshua,” my mother said in a low voice, gritting her teeth and squeezing the life out of her napkin, “you’re making a scene.”

My father let out a deep sigh and read the advertisements on his placemat, presumably pretending he was somewhere else.

The local BBQ restaurant was full. As I looked around the room, I saw overweight farmers in their dirty overalls and flannel shirts, powering through their trays of BBQ, swatting at the dozens of flies that buzzed aimlessly around their tables. Athletic jerseys from the local high school hung from the walls, coupled with pictures of past athletes that had made names for themselves after high school.

“Well I’m not gonna eat it,” I said proudly. “I want a burger.”

Grudgingly, my father waved for the waitress to come to our table. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen, gorgeous, with greenish eyes and long brown hair tied up in a ponytail. She looked like Daisy Duke, which was about the extent of my knowledge of southern girls.

“My son doesn’t really like BBQ, he’s a little squeamish. Could we get him a cheeseburger?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, hun,” the waitress said in a sweet, southern voice, “I’ll have them make you a cheeseburger. Do you want chili and slaw on that?”

I sat there, stunned and confused. Why on Earth would I want a bowl of chili on my burger? Cole slaw? I looked to my mother for some sort of explanation, but she just sat there, quietly counting to ten and looking at the ceiling. One of Mom’s “episodes,” or at least that is what Dad called them. My father was looking down, mouthing the name of the law office printed on his placemat.

“Just cheese, please,” I said.

She flashed me a smile, nodded, and scurried back through the saloon-style double doors into the kitchen.

I glanced around the room again, but this time it was different. Old men would glance at me and quickly turn their heads. I spotted one of the cooks poking his head out from the kitchen, looking at me. I hated that feeling.

“Well, *honey*,” my mother said, trying to disguise her resentment and forcing a fake smile, “after we eat, are you going to call the man back about that job offer?”

“Ha,” my father scoffed, “job offer. It’s slave labor at the wage they offered. I don’t know a damn thing about running a combine or bailing hay. Besides, I made way more on the boat.”

“We’re in the middle of fucking nowhere, *sweetheart*,” my mother said quietly, unaware that I could hear her, “Do you see a boat anywhere?”

His eyes never left his placemat. In a calm, collected voice, my father said, “We’ll talk about it when we get home.”

That was the longest car ride of my life. Or at least it felt like it. Not a word was spoken. The constant hum from the tires on the pavement nearly put me to sleep in the backseat. Dad sipped on what he called an “adult beverage” from his customary red plastic cup as he drove. My mother pressed her forehead against the passenger window, quietly counting the cows and goats grazing in the seemingly endless rolling hills of our small town. I wished I could be out there with them. Out of the car. Out of this life.

* * * * *

Surprisingly, I made it out of that small town with my life. Once I walked across that stage with my high school diploma, I put a few hundred miles between my parents and me. It was quite an accomplishment, considering most of the kids I eventually went to high school with got married right away and went to work at the Jockey plant. That was not the kind of life I wanted for myself, and I was sure my parents didn't either, as indifferent as they both seemed. I always wondered why Mom and Dad didn't just get a divorce. They seemed to hate each other more with every waking moment, but I guess Mom just assumed that a divorce wouldn't do any good because she didn't work, and half of nothing is still nothing. I spoke to them maybe once a year. Dad told me that Mom's episodes were coming more frequently, but I was just glad I was out of there.

It wasn't long after I got to Atlantic Beach that I began to notice some subtle changes. I started to notice people looking at me. All the time. At the gas station. At the car wash. At the grocery store. Even through the dark expanse of the movie theater, I could tell. I wasn't sure if my fly was open, or maybe I had some food on my face, but I really started to notice others noticing me. It made me nervous.

I got a job at a local tourist trap watering hole called “Bubba’s.” Bubba’s was a place that locals loathed, and tourists couldn’t wait to try. They served cheap beer and crappy bar food. I sold t-shirts to never-ending lines of gawking out-of-towners. The shirts read, “Bubba’s at the Beach,” and had a cheaply screen-printed half-naked woman on the back holding a couple overflowing mugs of beer. It was a must-have for college drunks and novelty collectors. Fielding questions and drunken requests from customer after customer did nothing but exacerbate my anxiety and nerves.

“Hey, Josh,” my manager, Rob, said, “I’m gonna need you to take out the trash before your shift ends.”

“Joshua,” I mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Joshua,” I said, more clearly this time, “My name is Joshua, not Josh.”

“It’s the same name,” he replied, “don’t get your panties in a wad.”

I couldn’t let it go. As Rob walked away, I inexplicably shouted, “If I wanted to be called ‘Josh,’ I would have put it on my application, wouldn’t I?”

I wasn’t sure if he’d heard me. He just shook his head as he headed back towards the kitchen.

“Hey everybody,” Rob shouted loud enough for me to hear, “from now on, Josh is to be known as ‘Joshua the Great,’ because he’s the best damn t-shirt jockey at the beach.”

Laughter, and then some things I couldn’t quite make out. I knew it was at my expense. I grabbed an airplane bottle of whiskey that I had stashed away behind the counter, turned it up, and the familiar burn went down my throat.

As I unloaded a box of Bubba's t-shirts to put on display, a TV in the corner of the bar was airing the local news. I hated the news anchor. I had only been in town for a few weeks, and I didn't quite recall ever offending the man, but he had it out for me. He stared right through me every time he came on the air, and his eyes seemed to follow me even if I tried to move around the room. I swear I'd heard him say my name a few times while watching at home, but I didn't have any way to record it. I'd never experienced anything like that before.

In local news, an area man was arrested for exposing himself to several people on the pier. Authorities say the man was intoxicated, and was apprehended after a brief struggle. In other news, Joshua Stone was made to look like a fool at work today. Everyone had a good laugh.

"I fucking KNEW it," I yelled at the top of my lungs, looking around at a bar full of surprised looking people, "Did you see that? That son of a bitch is talking about me!"

Out from the kitchen ran Rob; apparently he had heard the commotion.

"Woah, Josh, what is going on? I heard shouting."

"Very funny," I said, snorting and throwing my hands in the air. "How much did you pay him to say that shit?"

"Pay who?? Say what??"

"That smug news anchor. What, are you guys buddies or something? You called him and told him to talk crap about me on TV. I hate this pompous 'I'm a local and you're not' crap!"

Rob just shook his head and pinched the skin between his eyes.

"How about you take a few days off and cool down. I don't know that guy, and I have been in the back the whole time."

A feeling of rage that I couldn't quite understand rushed from my feet to my face.

"How about *YOU* wipe your ass with one of these shitty t-shirts," I shouted as I threw shirt after shirt at Rob from behind the counter.

"Ok," Rob said, catching the last shirt and shoving his finger in my face, "if you don't get the fuck out of here right now, I'm calling the cops."

"Oh, I'm leaving, don't you worry," I said, laughing uncontrollably.

As I walked out the front door, with Rob's hand pressed against my back, I turned around and shouted into the crowded bar, "There are rat turds in the dough, so enjoy your pizza!"

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I know a lot of it has to do with genetics, and God must have hand-picked the worst genes in each of my parents to pass along to me, but I don't put all of the blame on them. The day I went to the hospital, which was about nine years later, things had gotten really bad. Fact: I couldn't even listen to the radio anymore because I was tired of hearing everyone talk about me. It got to the point that I would just sit in the dark, in silence. Government assistance kept the lights on, but I didn't use them. It was my twenty-seventh birthday, and the only reason I know that is from the police records. I was awoken from a shallow sleep by a noise outside my bedroom window. I rolled out of bed and put my finger between two of the slits of blinds, and saw what I thought was a familiar face rooting through my garbage. I stormed to the front door, threw it open, and began to shout.

"YOU! How the hell did you find me??"

The man looked disheveled. Dirty, clad in rough, worn clothes, he looked up, surprised.

"I'm sorry, sir," the filthy man said, backing away from the trash can. "I figured it was ok, considering you threw all of this away and all."

“Don’t play stupid,” I shouted. “You think I wouldn’t recognize you?”

“I’m sorry,” he replied. “I have never seen you before... I-I’m gonna get going. Sorry, again.”

“What, are you doing some sort of undercover news story on me?”

Backing away, the man said, “Again, I don’t know you. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m gonna go.”

I lunged for the man; my right fist swung towards his face in a huge, looping motion. It was such a wild punch I nearly fell down. I’ve never been much of a fighter. The punch landed, and the man let out a groan as he fell sideways, knocking over the trash can.

I straddled his chest, and tears streamed down my face as I landed blow after blow on his face and neck.

“You made me look like an idiot! You think it’s fucking funny now?!”

In a moment of clarity, through the man’s bloody, bruised face, I saw a man I’d never seen before. A man I didn’t recognize.

A feeling of dread washed over me as I stood up. He was moving, so I knew he was still alive, but I had beaten this man half to death. I looked to my right and saw the blinds on my neighbor’s window snap shut. She had seen the entire thing. I sat back down next to the man I had just beaten, and lit a cigarette. I offered him one, but he could only groan. Normal people didn’t live like this, and I suppose I had been denying that anything was really wrong since I moved out here. I figured it was time to get some help. I sat there, taking long, slow drags from my cigarette as the sound of sirens wailed in the distance.

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So I wrote down all the facts like they told me to. They say it is therapeutic, but the only thing I can figure is that they want an airtight confession to hand over to the police. They have been trying to trick me into things since I got in here. One of the orderlies has been stealing from me, but of course they're not going to listen to me. I told them to get that damn radio out of my room, but they say I need to come to terms with the fact that nobody is talking about me on there. They keep calling me Josh. I *hate* that.

