

The rubber soles of Mack's black, shiny shoes skipped like stones off of the linoleum floor of the Oswego, New York assisted living facility as he made his way down the long hallway. He whistled, high-pitched and warbling, while he walked to the common area for the north wing.

"Oscar! Good morning sir, how are you?" Mack exclaimed. Oscar was sitting in his wheelchair, plastic tubes running out of his nostrils. He looked up and grinned, answering in a low, rumbling voice.

"Mack, not bad. Yourself?"

Mack chuckled softly while he spoke. "Never better." He walked past the large TV to the windows, throwing both open. Spring air shot in the room, cold and fresh. He turned the TV off on his way back, going to the adjoining kitchen space, all with exaggerated, cartoonish movements.

"Whaddaya say we get the rest of the crew up for breakfast?"

He started with Phyllis, wheeling her out of the room and leaving her near the open window. He knew she liked the air. He proceeded, waking up Ken and Jerry with a slight knock on the door, followed by a bright "Up and at 'em!" Margot and Sandy were already awake, so he pushed both of them into the common area, and Rodrick followed with his walker, smiling as he watched Mack bounce.

As he gathered the twelve inhabitants from their single rooms lined down the hall, he whistled loudly so that everyone could hear. When eleven were out, he moved to the last room, his steps lighter and lighter and his eyebrows pulling up, making him smile.

Before he got to the door he called out, singing, "Is Miss Mary Elizabeth here? Oooh Mary Elizabeth?" He knew she was awake—she always rose before the others. She told him to come in. He exclaimed, "Good morning, beautiful!" as he walked into her room, and she smiled at him.

"Mack, it's good to see you." And it was. Mary Elizabeth enjoyed Mack's energy, the way the wing felt alive when he was around—it was as though everyone awoke from a deep hibernation. His whistling was fake and perfect, and for three days a week he made her forget that she was in the building until she died.

Mack forced himself to look away from her half-leg—amputated from a blood clot—

away from the wrinkles and age-spots and into her eyes, throwing a full-tilted smile at her as he did. His teeth were slightly crooked, but cutely so, thought Mary.

“Let’s go to breakfast,” he said. “I’m about to make eggs. Oh, and tell me, by the way, Miss Mary, how did you sleep? It sure *looks* like the beauty sleep is working, and we need you well-rested—big day today, big, big day!” And he went on, talking and talking to fill the spaces left by the buzzing lights and humming generator. He drowned them out, his words bursting out like electricity charging the facility wing.

“Mack, you know I can’t eat eggs, right?” interrupted Mary.

“Oh. Of course!” he said, although he didn’t. “Mary! You know I wouldn’t forget something like that!” And she smiled.

After serving breakfast, Mack took out the old CD player that he brought from home and plugged it in, leaving it on the circular table where they had all eaten. Checking his watch, he told them he would be back soon, and started the disc of classical waltz music.

“Now start dancing,” he commanded with a grin. “When I come back I’m testing everyone!”

He moved across the building to the east wing, and went up a flight of stairs to Marty’s room. He knocked softly and went in.

“Hey, Marty. How are we feelin’?”

Marty looked up from the bed; he hadn’t left it for close to a month. “Mack,” he noted.

“I’m just gonna clean everything up, okay? Cathy wasn’t feeling well.” Cathy, the volunteer at the facility, had been in the hallway when Mack went up. She thanked him again, explaining how the chore was one she didn’t feel like she could do.

Marty sighed, and Mack went over to the bed, stretching rubber gloves over his hands. He pulled back the scratchy blanket slowly, and lifted the old man’s legs with one hand. Marty tried to lift himself up, but didn’t give much help. Mack reached under and felt the warm plastic bedpan, wrapping his fingers around the receptacle and slowly pulling it out from under. He rested Marty back down on the bed, looking him in the eyes as he smiled assuringly. He took the bedpan to the bathroom where he dumped the contents and cleaned the bowl.

“Do you need me to clean anything else up?” Mack asked.

“No, thanks, Mack,” responded Marty. There was a pause, and both men averted the

other's gaze.

“Why are ya doin’ this?” Marty finally asked. “Why are ya here cleanin’ bedpans when you’re twenty-six? Shouldn’t ya be at school, or with a girl, or at a job that gives ya somethin’ more?”

Mack’s eyes were happy. “Don’t you worry, Marty. I’ve got all I need.”

Walking back to the common area of the north wing, Mack saw the twelve inhabitants seated randomly; some watched TV, while others read or dozed. The music was turned off, and the only sounds were soft and unobtrusive—feet shuffled, someone sniffed, grunted, a throat cleared, the clock ticked and the radiator hummed.

Wordlessly, Mack walked over to the speaker and turned the volume up as he addressed the group. “Alrighty guys, lets see how you do! Everyone up, c’mon.” All twelve looked up, embarrassed to move.

He skipped over to Phyllis in her wheelchair and bent in front of her, his spark-green eyes looking into her brown ones.

“Excuse me, Miss Phyllis,” he began with a touch of ridiculousness, “but may I have this dance?”

Without waiting for a response Mack grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and moved swiftly towards the speaker, away from the couch. He swayed idiotically in front of Phyllis, his head exaggaratingly following the violins. He took her hand and moved it along with him which forced the chair to sway gently, and he told her that she looked, “quite lovely this evening.” She blushed, and he smiled his crooked smile.

He really had no idea how to dance, and his long, awkward body didn’t seem programmed to learn quickly. But he grabbed Oscar’s hand and dragged him into the center, and Rodrick moved in on his own. Soon enough, the group was all scattered around the open space, spring air and waltz music filling the room. They all moved their heads and shoulders back and forth, those with rockers swaying their hips gently, and Mack passed between them dancing. He moved from person to person, chuckling and looking into their eyes as he twirled around tripping. They all laughed at him, first individually but then together, talking under the music about how ridiculous he was and how the whole thing was just silly, but they would go along with it just for Mack, just to see him smile and dance and be happy. Soon the disc ended, and

Mack told everyone that Mary Elizabeth was the best dance partner he had ever had, one leg or two. She blushed.

Eventually, after dancing and lunch, dessert-poker and time to hear stories from the inhabitants, five o'clock came, ending Mack's shift. He walked out to the lot, the sun now disappearing, and climbed into the red, rusted Pontiac. As he drove home he grew more and more tired, noticing how the reserves of energy he had were completely empty, and he slouched down in the seat. He felt a vacuous hollow in his stomach, a tiredness that sucked everything else from his body—thoughts, perception, movement. It was cold without the sun, and he turned the heat on, listening mindlessly to its whisper as he made his way home.

He parked the car in the driveway and stayed seated for a long time. He looked at the front door and sighed as his tongue ran over his crooked teeth. No thoughts came to Mack's mind, just exhaustion. Exhaustion and the feeling of not being able to do something, even he wanted to. Of not being able to open his car door, move around the car and up the porch steps and open the door and go on. He couldn't go on.

To start he had no money. He had no college diploma, no degree because he dropped out when he was offered a job at the facility. But it didn't pay enough. It didn't pay enough and he could only afford to rent a room like the one he had waiting for him behind the front door, behind the family that wasn't his own and the dog and the cooking and the cold house, behind all of the things he couldn't put up with anymore, all of the things that made him feel like he couldn't go in.

More than anything was the family—they expected a big brother for Jackie. They expected someone who could come home from work and keep the eight-to-five smile from five-to-ten, someone who would play cards and watch TV and teach him baseball, and at the beginning he did all of what they wanted. Now, though, he didn't think he could.

He would have liked to go to his room to sleep. Or even return to the facility, if he could get a room there. He would live there if it were possible, he thought, stay and make people excited from eight-to-five but then after five he could just go to his room with the window open and lay down for a while, or even stay up and talk to Oscar or Marty. Not the way he did earlier, though—in just a normal way, a conversation.

And maybe then, he thought, maybe then eventually someone would start to come in

some afternoons, would wake him up whistling and get him to dance and save him, too. He hoped it could be possible. Maybe it could be. Someone could save him.

Mack sighed. He had never been more tired. Without taking his gaze off of the front door, he got out of the car and walked into the house. Tomorrow he would go back to the facility.