

Sitting on the bus and staring out the window, I let the scene passing by turn into an abstract, opaque blur. I got lost in it. The texture of the buildings, the people with red wool scarves rapped around their face, and mounds of layers upon layers of sharp, cold ice; they all became one beautiful color.

Grandpa pulled the yellow cord to request a stop. He grabbed my arm as we departed from the bus because artificial leg was wobbling. Someday, the cheap thing was going to come clean off from under him. We walked into the seven eleven. The clerk rang up Grandpa's usual bottle of whisky.

"I'm hungry, Grandpa." I told him.

He grunted, "We got food in the fridge, boy."

At home, I helped him up the three flights of stairs to our apartment. On the journey up, we had to stop four times. Grandpa would grab the banister, and coughed until he was bent over and sweating. He pulled off his heavy coat and tossed it to me to. I slung the coat over my shoulder. As I helped him up the last flight, I noticed I could see every vertebrae through his shirt, like a reptile.

Our apartment was in an old house that had once been glorious. I had seen pictures in my history textbook of fat robber barons posing in front of houses like this. But now, the grand rooms were chopped into cubicles and rented to people like us, who were not grand. Our apartment, way high in the attic, had originally been the servants' quarters, anyway.

In the apartment, Grandpa flopped down on the couch and opened his bottle. I knew enough to get his medicine. I pounded on the bathroom door. My older sister was occupying it, as usual. Brandy spent her life in there. A sad life, for a seventeen-year-old girl. She was three years older than me.

Brandy spent hours upon hours staring in the mirror and reciting hopeless versus of poetry she wrote herself. I finally got her out. I brought Grandpa his prescription and a glass of

water. He just took the pills with a chug of his whisky. He told me, "I need to sleep, boy," and moved off the futon so I could make it for him. There was only one bedroom, which was designated for my sister because she was very pregnant. Grandpa slept in the living room on that old pull-out sofa.

After I finished, he laid down and coughed more, until his abdomen started to oscillate. As he was falling asleep he told me, "Now, boy, don't turn off this light. You understand?"

I grunted, "Yes." He told me that every night. He was prone to suddenly waking in the middle of a dream, and the light helped him snap back into reality. He needed to be able to see where he was. Always, the light on.

"Yes, what?" He corrected.

"Yes, Sir."

I turned away. As I left, he commanded, "Keep your back straight when you walk, boy!"

I squared my shoulders and repeated, "Yes, Sir."

I went into our kitchen and searched for the food we had in the fridge. It was a bag of baby carrots and deli meat that didn't specify the animal it came from. I scarfed that down without bothering to put it on a plate.

Brandy had to go to work. She was dressed in a green-grey janitor's uniform. She moaned and supported her lower back with her right hand.

"We need more food." I told her as she was walking out.

"I'll bring some stuff when I come back." She said. She slammed the door.

I looked out the only window in our apartment, which was above the kitchen sink. The sky was a color between grey and black, and the clocks said it was about the time of the winter dusk. I didn't want to be in this apartment, but I certainly didn't want to face the elements of nature. The cold hurt; but the icy sheets over the sidewalk was what kept me in.

I pulled my bed out of the closet. I slept in the kitchen on this fold-out camping cot Brandy bought at a bargain house. It was comfortable enough to sleep on, but what got me was that I had to disassemble it in the morning and reassemble it every night.

I laid down, but the fluorescent lights that were on made me squint and feel dizzy. I tied an old scarf over my eyes and tried to sleep. But, despite my best attempts to start a cycle of dreams, I was firmly shackled to reality. Eventually, I stopped trying.

I went downstairs looking to talk to anyone. There was a crazy woman across the hall who thought everything said to her was an insult. There was the old hermit man who never wore a shirt. Then there was the apartment of my friend, Alexander. He was in my grade, eighth, and we liked each other because we were both quiet and had similar roles to play in life.

Alexander was the oldest of eight kids. His mom was at work when I went down. I liked being there when his mom was home, because she cooked and laughed and kissed me on the cheek goodbye. But when she wasn't there, Alexander had to, at minimum, prevent injury in the seven younger children. I just couldn't handle watching Alexander grasping at the ropes in a whirlwind of too many people in too little space. Not today.

I went down into the basement, in the room with the boiler and heating controls. There was a stray black cat down there. She was perched on this top shelf purring. She was an Egyptian goddess. She had a regal presence and strong forces of empathy in her yellow, Siamese eyes. She looked into me with passion. I didn't want to bother royalty like her with me.

On my way out of the boiler room the landlady came in. She had fair skin and curly blonde hair. Her coat was navy blue. It gathered tightly at her midriff and fluttered loosely at her waist, hanging down past her knees. She looked very out-of-place. She reminded me of an heiress to a railroad fortune in 1904.

She was surprised to see a person in the basement, but then she regained her composure and greeted me. "Hello, son, how are you?" She lengthened her mouth and curved her lips so that her standard schwa vowel was "aw".

"Fine, ma'am, how are you?" I greeted without making eye contact.

She startled me by asking, "What's wrong? Why won't you look at me?"

I took me a moment to respond. I glanced at her, unsure, and then I stared with enough intensity to make her look away. She promptly changed the subject, "Which apartment do you live in?"

"Five"

"Oh, five. Yes. I remember now."

I nodded and smiled and tried to leave, but she stopped me again to ask, "Are you sure everything is all right?"

"Yes," I lied. She let me go past her this time. If I couldn't talk to a cat that reminded me of royalty, I surely couldn't talk to her.

"See you later, then, son!" She politely called after me. Why does no one address me by my name?

I started walking up the stairs to the apartment. I was angry, now. It was like the undulating blue flame of a gas fire. I could feel my heart beat in the pads of my fingers. I wanted to scream. I went into the apartment and shut the door impassively.

I didn't scream. I just shut off his light.

Give me strength, please, because I shut off his light.

The room only had the dim glow of the far-off street lamps. At first, Grandpa just started to fidget more. Then he moaned and rolled over and coughed himself awake. He couldn't see where he was. He started to panic. He sat erect and threw his pillow across the room at me. He screamed, "Come here and fight me, you coward!" He hacked and shook while he reached for his fake leg so he could stand up.

I immediately realized what I had done. I flicked the light back on and prayed. Not to God, but I prayed. Grandpa was already too deep in his own trauma for the presence of light to

help. He didn't get his leg all the way on, and when he tried to stand up he fell down and flopped like a fish. He kept screaming, "I'll kill you, you coward! Fight like a man!"

I wanted to rush to him and help, but I didn't know if that would make him worse. By now, he couldn't remember he didn't have his right leg. He was struggling to figure out why he couldn't stand up.

The landlady heard the raucous and pounded on the door, "Goodness me! What's going on here? What happened?" She intensely inquired, like she was in a movie.

The landlady got out her master key and fumbled with it before she barged in. She saw my Grandpa, and rushed towards him to help. Her intentions were good, but she had poor judgment. Grandpa was angry and crazy and she ran towards him. He grabbed a closed umbrella and hit her square across the jaw with the metal-tipped point. She shrieked and fell over, clutching her bleeding cheek.

Then Grandpa started to moan and grasp his chest. He dropped the umbrella and coughed some more phlegm. His diaphragm oscillated so he rhythmically gagged. He rolled over.

The landlady got out her touch-screen phone to call an ambulance and the cops. Again I prayed.

Grandpa started choking on his own mucus. It was seeping out of his nose and mouth and being caught in the stubble on his chin. He kept wheezing the words, "I'll kill you, you coward!"

Finally, I approached him. It was when he was weak and the umbrella was out of reach. I just got close enough to him to say, "Grandpa? Grandpa, it's me. It's your boy. I'm just going to roll you over on your side so you don't choke." I did it as gently as I could. He stopped talking.

"Grandpa, can you hear me?" I asked.

He mumbled, "Sorry."

"Grandpa, can you hear me?" I asked again.

Silence.

His body was limp and lifeless when the ambulance got there. They covered him with a plastic sheet. The police questioned the landlady and me about what happened. We both told the same story.

Alexander came upstairs to see the source of commotion. He had his sixteen-month-old sister on his hip, so I wouldn't look at him.

I sat down on the floor, leaning against a slab of ecru drywall. The feeling of loss was burdening, but the guilt was overwhelming. Guilt sucked on me like a bug. I was the one who turned off the light.

I quietly cried and couldn't move. Alexander sat down next to me and put his hand on my shoulder. I didn't have the strength to wipe his hand away. Actually, I needed the contact. It symbolized understanding.

He sat there next to me for a very long time, until after all the uniforms had left. Alexander left to give his sixteen-month-old sister back to his mom when she came home. Then he came back again. He sat with me through the night until Brandy returned. Alexander didn't say anything. He didn't need to. He was there.

I told Brandy about what happened, leaving out the parts I couldn't yet form into words. She started to cry. There was a lot to worry about. The loss of Grandpa was just the beginning. We couldn't afford the apartment. I would need a guardian. She surely couldn't keep the baby, now. That was better for her kid, though.

I pulled myself up. I walked down the stairs and out of that house. I was shocked at the bite of winter air and dazed by the lull between night and morning. The sky was transitioning from a pallid azure to a pastel blush. It was a beautiful color. I inched forward trying to keep my balance on the ice.