

Confabulation

A brief novel by Brandon Cole Phillips

Written for the 2010 3-Day Novel Contest

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1

It takes an unimaginable amount of effort to saw through the leg of a solid oak dinner chair. I had tried the hacksaw. The teeth – too jagged. The metal tines kept getting caught up in the little knots of soft wood that had been preserved so long behind the lacquered surface.

In the garage I had a set of clay-carving utensils. One – a toothed blade with a sturdy rubber handle – seemed to do the trick for only a little while. I had warped the aluminum through a combination of friction and my own inability to move my limbs in a straight line twice in sequence.

Fuck. I hadn't yet done the math on the beams.

A standard pine two-by-four can support sixteen pounds per square inch. A-beams run vertically would increase the stability three-fold. Usable surface area: thirteen inches. Thirteen by sixteen by three. Six hundred twenty-four. Nearly three and a half times more than would be necessary. Thank Sarah and her vegan bullshit for that.

Plonk-a-donk-bonk-bonk! Chair leg off – check.

Ativan standard dosage seemed to vary between six and ten milligrams daily. It was going to take much more than that. I knew I should have filled that prescription. Damn it, and I had the minivan all after-fucking-noon the day prior.

If you need help with your mental health call us! Call us now! If you're on drugs and impaired or feel like you have bugs in your hair then call us! Call us now! We're always here for you, Doctor Chomsky knows what to do, just call us! Call us now!

My God, I hated that commercial. Every damned interstitial break it played at double volume. Who phones a psychiatrist advertised on the boob tube? Not enough I was inundated day-in and day-out by ads for lunatic lawyers with low media budgets. Worker's comp, debt settlement, car wrecks, disability. I have no use for litigiousness, much less for the scumbags who try for 'pain and suffering'.

Never had I been quick enough to snap a look at that ridiculous ad. I would assume there would be a cartoonish mope of an actor portraying the classic preconception of 'doctor' – replete with shiny head-mirror and unusually lengthy stethoscope. Maybe a tongue-in-cheek graphic of a lunatic in a padded room would display next to the toll free number.

I cared not – the theme song was detestable. It was offensive. It was a calloused joke targeted at the foreheads of the unwitting and desperate by some repugnant dick with a PhD.

This is why bombs go off at abortion clinics.

You may protest – 'But Frank, that's because the fundamentalists are using terrorist tactics to try to scare doctors out of performing such abhorrent acts in the name of medicine!'

No way. I think something much greater lies beneath. I think there are rape victims brainwashed by surly stepfathers into carrying pseudo-incest babies to term. I think there are jealous, maniacal, and vengeful miscarriage sufferers. I think there are those whose twenty-year-stint community minister is more a political ally in their eyes than the mayor or city council. I think all those screwed-up, disheveled, and worn-down miscreants organize – maybe at a bunko brunch or a quilting luncheon or a Republican rally – and they come together in a swarm of flagellation and pity-party one-upmanship and the tide swells and churns. No one is around to help. No preacher man or Congressional district nominee or school counselor. They want the attention of the nation’s ire.

“Oh, the fringe few!” they might say, “Lest not their message be applied to our own. They needed help and support and got none! But I can promise, rest-assured, that I can play a part in stopping this from ever happening again. I just need your vote (tithes, bond issue money, time – all applicable).”

Gladly I found a nearly half full bottle of pseudoephedrine in the cupboard. Should do the trick.

The Home Depot was fresh out of nylon rope. Inexcusable. Polypropylene would be too slick. Manila would serve to suffice. But it also threw my numbers all off.

Manila rope at a gauge of nearly one inch would support one hundred five pounds per foot of length before possibility of rupture. Of course, sharp impact would greatly increase the breaking point. A shorter usable length would reduce that probability by disallowing the acceleration to terminal velocity. Though it would take almost six feet of

drop to reach such a break-neck speed. I would limit the space between knots to no more than twenty-four inches.

Ativan seemed to wick all moisture from my palate. Side effect or coincidence, it always annoyed the bejesus out of me. I tipped my mouth beneath the restroom sink's faucet. Chalky, chlorinated, and fluoridated – I guzzled the water without care as to the abominable flavor or an ounce of wonder as to the sheer amount of deceased bacterium or parasites that the city was trying to suppress at my behest. Usually my water came from a filtered pitcher or those obnoxiously wasteful plastic bottles. But to lap from a running fixture was to experience something scatological for the first and last time. For that, I was thankful – though I could almost hear the shudders of a mortician discovering that I had tainted my body with such filth.

“It wasn't the overdose or the noose that killed him,” he would say with head shaking in anguish, “It was the municipal water.”

One loop over, square knotted just at the apex of two-by-fours. Rope straight down, then looped up to eighteen inches, and dropped back. Thirteen loops around, through the hook at the top, tight tug. I eyeballed the drop length at about twenty inches. So close to perfection.

My cocktail was crude. A handful of Sudafed and my last six Ativan tablets, softened in the bottom of a rocks glass by two ounces of sixteen-month extra dry scotch. A splash of vermouth, dash of bitters, a maraschino cherry – and I had one hell-of-a Manhattan.

The oak chair wobbled beneath as I attempted to scale it. I should have cut off a rear leg rather than a front. As it was I had to cling much-too-close to the chair's back.

Though it was an inconvenience that caused only a few moments annoyance, had I the opportunity to go back it is the only error I would have exerted the effort to correct.

I teetered, placed the rope firmly around my neck, and bowed like an inconsiderate hipster douchebag at a hokey sushi establishment to tighten up the knot. The manila had an aroma of fresh cut straw that conjured memories of Tennessee summers with Granddad. A tip of my glass would honor his resting soul. The Manhattan burned with such vigor and vibrance as its smoky essence trickled down my gullet. Only the mushy lumps of pill capsules and chewables seemed to tarnish the drink's balance.

Oh, shit. I forgot to lock the doors. With nimble fingers, I set my glass atop the bookshelf behind my makeshift gallows, unbound myself, and trotted to each entrance to snap the deadbolt and secure the door chains.

Finishing, I peered back at my construction. With orange sunset light bathing the scene from behind, the air conditioner vent waving the rope with a ginger breeze, and the highlights of contrasting stark lines of the furniture – a calm rushed over me as I stood and simply marveled. The place was perfect; the scenario beautiful. My heart was heavy, but my soul at peace.

That was the Sudafed kicking in.

2

Ten milligrams of fluoxetine. Thirty of Adderall. I had my vitamin C supplement, acai berry complex, and antacids. I will have another ten milligrams of fluoxetine at lunch and fifteen milligrams of Adderall and a multivitamin with dinner. Don't forget the multivitamin. Can't forget the multivitamin.

For years I had struggled to keep balanced a healthy regiment of supplements as well as remember to consume the handful of prescriptions required each day for normal brain function. Having been diagnosed at twenty-eight with mild Asperger's syndrome, with acute obsessive-compulsive disorder at twenty-nine, and being a cancer survivor – I was quite clued-in to the organization and routine required to maintain my health and stability.

“What the hell are you doing here?” came a voice from my left.

Her jet-black hair made the pastel pink walls seem almost whitewashed by comparison. A Latina charm hid within her voice – as did a recreational, though non-habitual, smoker.

“I am here to see a doctor,” I muttered. Her eyes never looked away. Not even a second's dart.

“But you're a man. Why would a man need a fertility doctor? Where is your wife?”

“I have no wife,” my reply sputtered out.

“Well then,” she said with her pleasant, though slightly nerve-grating accent, “Your peepee must be broked.”

“My peep—” I caught myself, “I am just fine down there.”

She looked me up and down with a dramatic and purposeful disdain. “You can’t be just fine if your peepee is broked enough to need medical attention. What is your name.” She said it just like that. Not a question – a demand. Never before had a question mark been so carefully dissected and discarded on the fly.

“I’m Frank, Ms...”

“Ms. Marta Regina Teresa Lopez.”

“Regina?”

“I had a pasty white corpse of a great-uncle who had insisted that great-great-Gram’s name crop up in each generation. I’m a torch-carrier, Mr. Frank.” That heavy Spanish inflection was quite uncommon in Philly. Her words were so muddled – like she had a mouthful of marbles. And I should be damned if I could not keep up. “Do you carry any torches?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean, Frank,” she said with an enigmatic swoop at me. A grimace fluttered to a grin – she was toying with me. Flirting? Probably not. Bored and scouring for captivation? Certainly so. Her perfume had wafted with her lunge. Sweet notes of

lavender and sharp stings of citrus. A curiously safe choice for a woman of her exceptional... character.

I toiled for a moment before articulating a response, “Pulmonary hypertension.”

“Excuse me?”

“Pulmonary hypertension,” I repeated, “Granddad had it, Dad had it, I have it.”

“You telling me that your torch is high blood pressure?” Marta scoffed. “You don’t know a damn thing about women, Frank.”

The third street fertility clinic and OBGYN was a heartless and unwelcoming place. Quarters were cramped – the only free floor space cluttered by the wilting branches of unwatered wax plants and those insufferable little flecks of paper that result from ripping a page from a spiral notebook. The chairs were arranged into two L-shapes that faced each other like a square bisected diagonally through the corners. A condensation ring-laden coffee table played host to an array of two and three year old issues of *Guns and Ammo* and *Highlights*, all addressed to one Gilroy Jones of 222 Harkham Street.

And the coffee was cold.

I had a miserable habit that I never would share with a soul – perhaps a tick resultant of my OCD.

Even now I feel it may be unfair to attribute it to my disability, as I have come to believe it to be a desire innate to most of the members humanity. Only I ever seemed to make a point of it, though. A ritual of it. It was my embarrassed, private, and forlorn passion.

Definitions.

Each day we are lucky enough to awaken, we struggle to define what is around us. Marta to most would be Hispanic, lovely, charismatic, dark, mysterious, eccentric, couth, unabashed, clever, intrusive, and curious. But she could be none of those to me. Marta could have only one word. Everyone could have only one word. For it takes only a single word to encapsulate the essence of a person. The struggle and the game is not to discover that one precious word – but to speak it.

In a quick glance around the room, I saw five other people. I could name them like Snow White's dwarves: Distant, Pregnant, Troubled, Untoward, Brash. To my left was Marta. To define her would take more time than I had available that morn.

“A disease caused by too many bacon cheeseburgers is not a torch, Mr. Frank.” Marta nudged my elbow off the armrest between us. So soft was her skin that I did a double-take to ensure it was not a silken sleeve. But also was she cold. Frigid of flesh, warm of heart. My mother had been the same way. In touching her cheek one might think she just strolled out of a grocer's freezer aisle. But the fire of her smile as you reacted to her chill would soon fill the room. The Latina wonderer certainly carried a matronly air of her own.

“Well, then, I'm not sure what you expect of me. My family is not big on legacy. Hell, most of them have died in the last decade.”

“Well there you go!” Marta beamed, “The torch you carry is their memory – their tales, their struggles, their woes, their triumphs. You must have a child to whom you can relay the family wisdom. That, Mr. Frank – that is your torch.”

“I have to have a child, huh?” The idea brought on my first genuine smirk in ages. *Me* having a kid.

“Ugh!” a cry bellowed across the room. Pregnant had fallen to the floor. Distant shuffled awkwardly in her chair while Troubled and Untoward laid down their magazines and raised their brows. Brash came up from her chair to take a knee next to Pregnant who was moaning and stroking her engorged belly in belabored circles.

Marta leaned nearer to my ear, “What are you gonna do, Mr. Frank?”

“Frank. It’s just Frank, lady,” I whispered a response.

“Marta. It’s just *Marta*, Frank. Now what are you gonna do? That preggo is about to pop.”

Brash looked to me for guidance. Lucky me – being the only male in the damned waiting room. In standing I noticed that the office attendant had conveniently disappeared. Fantastic timing. Troubled and Untoward looked at each other, shrugged, and stood up to loom behind Pregnant. Clearly they had not the intention to aide, but more a morbid curiosity satiated only in part by their act of feigned concern. The women wanted front row tickets, not lead roles.

“I don’t know the first damn thing about this stuff,” I groaned to Marta.

Pregnant’s pants were ripped clean off by Brash. There are those odd and rare moments in life when things feel so very surreal. Sounds are amplified, sensations felt in fantastic detail. The moment can almost feel out-of-body.

My facial muscles went limp as my eyes caught sight of the crowning dome between Pregnant's crimson-coated legs. The shock on my face was felt and understood by my mind as if experiencing a set of two worlds at once. As the planes collided and reality struck, be it by rush of a adrenaline or the calm of Adderall, my brain leapt to action.

"The baby's head is already out!" I hollered obviousness into the vacuous space.
"Keep pushing!"

My sleeves were already rolled to three quarters, but it being an easily removable pearl-snap shirt –and a new one, at that– I tore it off and cast the garment to Marta's feet. She had very sexy feet.

I placed my hands at the apex where Pregnant's legs met her pelvis – just below the stranger woman's vagina. The oblong little infant head was only an inch out of the canal. Suddenly it suctioned back up, like one of those drive-through tubes at the bank.

"Push, damn it!" I yelled at the lady with a ferocity. And it must have worked.

With a sludging horrificness that could only be seen during birth or conception, that woman grit her teeth, buried her heels in the Berber, and spat that buttery little rugrat right into my waiting palms. And then something else. And the something else hit me in the knee.

"What in the shit is that? Get that off me!" I gasped, though with peace of mind not to drop the slimy infant as I darted back.

"That's the placenta, you pansy!" Brash dismissively groaned, "Now give the damn woman her child!"

Without haste I passed along the little tot. Miracle of childbirth? Horror movie material.

As Marta dabbed with a *Red Lobster* wet-nap at my afterbirth-drenched khaki pants, a familiar tune blared from the small TV affixed to waiting room wall behind me.

If you need help with your mental health call us! Call us now! If you're on drugs and impaired or feel like you have bugs in your hair then call us! Call us now! We're always here for you, Doctor Chomsky knows what to do, just call us! Call us now!

“Screw that guy.”

“Pardon?” Marta turned her eyes upward for only an instant.

“Doctor Chomsky. Screw that paddy-wagon chasing jerk.”

Marta grinned as she blotted at the deepest of the burgundy stains. “I like the jingle,” she admitted coyly, “It’s catchy. *Just call us! Call us now!*” She sang with purpose.

“It’s sick,” I growled.

“Says the weirdo who just caught a stranger’s baby,” the Latina charmer teased.

“Yeah? And what did you do?”

She paused for a moment, to shake her head with only the highest degree of disappointment, “I’m cleaning your pants, Frank. Everyone had a part – you’re the only one who felt the push to play the lead role. What does that say about you, Frank?”

I had no clue. Why had I run to help? A borderline agoraphobe delivering a baby. Masculine instinct? Fight or flight? Delusions?

“You’re ready to pass your torch, Frank.”

“Hell no, I’m not.”

“Yeah, Frank. That’s why you got up.”

“You told me to get up!”

“No Frank, I only asked what you were gonna do. You’re the one who decided to play catch.”

3

“What the hell happened to you?”

“Are you kidding?” I asked with eyes widened to dinner plate size. “How could you not have heard?”

The doctor lingered in the doorway staring at me as if I had just pulled a bouquet of tulips out of my ass or explained the origins of the universe.

“A woman gave birth in your waiting room not fifteen minutes ago.”

“Must be why my 8:05 was cancelled,” he moaned with an unobfuscated sense of loss for the co-pay.

Oh, how I felt like a buffoon. Covered in browning blood and flakes of dried mucous after having just played hero, here I was being considered a dolt for having become such a mess and costing the man a buck.

“Have a seat on the examination table,” the doctor sneered, taking his stethoscope into his ears.

Had I thought the waiting room was a tight space – that exam room could have been a broom closet. Oh, the discount that man must have been getting to lease out such a dump. Not a single cabinet lining the side wall had a door on its hinges. The sink was unseated from the countertop as if it had been pummeled up from below. A good sixty

percent of the plastic tiles had gone missing from the floor – leaving for bare the scarred and scabbed concrete of the foundation. The facility was a fucking wreck.

Aftershave was not a subtle pleasantry for the doctor, but more a cover for the faint odor of gin that carried on his exhale. And with those exhales was a frothy undulation in his diaphragm that resonated hollow behind his ribcage. He was aged, but not to perfection or distinction – more so to acclimation. The man was content to exist, but not obligated to be jubilant about it.

“Well, you seem healthy, Mr. Robbins,” he gargled his words through two jiggling, salt-and-pepper speckled hound dog cheeks. “Why are you here today?”

“I have a certain sort of dysfunction that I am hoping to get some help with.” *Just spit it out*, I thought. *He’s a damn doctor, he doesn’t give one iota about sugar-coating shit!*

The guy started fumbling with one of those crinkly little clear plastic wrappers within the pocket of his lab coat. “I don’t give one iota about sugar-coating shit, Mr. Robbins,” he moaned with the pop of a peppermint between his cheek and gums.

“I can’t ejaculate,” I choked on my words.

“Like, you can’t get it up? Or what?”

Get it up? Did he seriously just say that? A doctor? Had I any sense of self at that moment I would have simply considered him a quack and made my exit. But for whatever reason – probably my blindsided stupor, I remained atop the butcher paper-covered examination table. My eyes were briefly lost in the flowery decorations at the paper’s edge. My right arm rested lazily atop the leg stirrup at my side, though had I

presence of mind to realize what I was leaning on, I likely would have switched positions in a heartbeat.

“Mr. Robbins?” he snapped his fingers at me like I was a toddler caught thieving a cookie.

“No, like... I can't release sperm.” I had not even spoken those words to my own mother and father, much less a complete stranger. “It's a side effect of a surgery I had some years ago.”

The fertility doctor flipped open my medical chart – a mystery to me how he even had a copy. I had brought no records of any sort with me.

“Retroperitoneal lymph node dissection,” he read aloud, *“Patient's sympathetic nerves parallel to the spinal cord slightly damaged during procedure. Expect difficulty or inability to have or maintain an erection or ejaculate semen. Reduction in sexual sensation also possible, though unlikely. Sound like you, Mr. Robbins?”*

God, he was so close to my face with that musty alcoholic breath.

“Sort of,” I replied quietly, “I mean, everything works down there, I'm just firing blanks, is all.”

When I was twenty-two I was diagnosed with testicular cancer. After having one testicle removed in an orchiectomy and four months of chemotherapy, it appeared that I was clean. But in medicine, a doctor can never be too certain – or too profitable. So I was shipped to Indiana for a retroperitoneal lymph node dissection. The \$250,000

operation would be the only way, I was told, to be declared in remission. Thank God for health insurance.

Having had my sympathetic nerves damaged, I took home the souvenir of *retrograde ejaculation* – wherein the muscle controlling that specific sexual activity could not properly function. Rather than exiting the body as usual, my procreation fluid would instead be sent to my bladder to be pissed out at a later time.

“Well, if you’re looking to start a family, we have numerous methods of semen retrieval that can be very effective for use with in vitro fertilization,” the doctor explained, “We have electroejaculation, where you would be under anesthetic and have an electrified probe inserted in your rectum to stimulate semen release. There’s also a method where we can neutralize the pH of your urine, have you stimulate yourself to orgasm, then retrieve semen from your bladder using a catheter and centrifuge it out for later use.”

As one can imagine, I was more than delighted to know that I would need some off-limits orifice of my body invaded in order to create a family. Did I want extreme discomfort or just partial? Hard call.

My eyes resigned from his beady little peepers back down to the flowery paper. “I’m definitely not ready to start a family, Doc.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because I want to fix my body, and I was hoping there’s a surgery I can have or a drug I can take to get back on the road to normal.”

“Why?” he guffawed, “Any other man would see your assumed ‘predicament’ as a blessing! It’s free birth control, you lucky bastard!”

“It’s emasculating,” came a whimper from within me.

“Your male identity isn’t tied to your ability to stick sperm to a wall half a room away, Mr. Robbins,” the doctor shot back, “You delivered a fucking baby out there, now didn’t you? You saved the day, didn’t you Mr. Robbins? Did you need to be able to ejaculate for those ladies out in that waiting room to think you manned up? Hell no, Mr. Robbins. Take your fake cries for manliness out of my damn clinic right now. I have no time to waste on men like you. Sex-fetishizing douchebags who can’t separate identity from physiology... Fuck you, Mr. Robbins.”

“Fuck you! You alcoholic sack of shit!” I was enraged. How dare he question my feelings – my sense of self? “How dare you. From the moment I came in this building I could sense the complete lack of professionalism and care exuded by the staff. Then I sat on this God-forsaken table only to be ridiculed and dismissed by a retirement-age hack whose only ability to get a look between a lady’s legs is in the presumed sanctity of the gynecologist’s office! Go to hell, you snarling old drunk.”

“Out!” he roared, “Out this instant! You’re a withering waste of testosterone – fueled by loathing and driven to screw – stifled in thought only by the absence of your ability to defile the lovely flowers whom you walk amongst. Your obsession with ejaculation is not about emasculation or identity, Mr. Robbins – it’s about domination and control. Don’t you dare give me a talk about respect for women – you, sir, have none.”

And then I hit him.

Under roughly five hundred pounds per square inch delivered in the form of four calloused knuckles, those gigantic cheeks warbled like a Jell-O mold in the backseat of a station wagon on its way to Thanksgiving with the in-laws.

That day I learned two unimportant truths: the sound of a shattering jaw is eerily similar to that of snapping spaghetti over a pot of boiling water. Also, a thirty-two year old stockbroker with Asperger's can outrun a twenty-year old nurse who spends ninety percent of her day sitting on the sofa cushion that is her ass.

I have one embarrassed, private, and forlorn passion. I define people by a single word. That man? Prick.

4

“Are you hooking all that shit up to that kid?”

“Yes, Mr. Corman,” the young black nurse replied. Her skin was like melted chocolate – so smooth, creamy, and devoid of nary a blemish. She was Treasure. “He’s gonna be joining you in the B-lounge for a while. Franklin, this is Owen Corman.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” I replied with near-adolescent vigor, “Franklin Robbins.”

Treasure, or whatever her real name was, urged the elderly man to mingle, “Mr. Corman, this is Franklin’s first day of chemotherapy. It would be very kind of you to keep him company for a while as we’re getting things set up.”

Stealthily I surveyed about the rest of the room. The place was divided into various quadrants – each with two to five recliners positioned to encourage conversation. Some of the spaces had a television or stereo. Others were nestled around bookshelves stacked with classics. A warm, inviting, and humbling atmosphere permeated throughout – brightly colored accent walls and smiling faces of the staff serving to reinforce the hopeful vibe.

“How do you have cancer so young?” my new sitting partner asked pointedly. A little flap of flesh jiggled behind his chin as he spoke.

“It’s testicular cancer,” I responded with a brush of my fingers through my thick, loosely curly mop-top. God, my hair was so thick back then. “Testicular cancer usually hits in guys my age. Luckily, I’m not so bad off. We caught it early.”

“I tell ya,” Corman paused to cough into a moist paper towel. “I fought in dubya-dubya-two, nearly lost a leg in Korea, and lead troops in ‘Nam. Ain’t never suffered like when they pump this vile poison into my crusty old veins.”

Corman’s face was as yellow as bumblebee’s butt hole and wrinkled up like a damp paper bag. His left side never moved – which I guessed to be resultant of a stroke. The guy was in miserable shape. Of course, my twenty-two year old mind was far from concerned about that. I was all brains.

“What was war like? Did you kill people? Chop off their ears and wear ‘em on a necklace? Stab dudes with a bayonet?” Seriously, I was all brains.

“You’re one screwed-up kid,” Corman laughed – though that chuckle quickly became another heaving wheeze. He sipped at the brim of a small eight-ounce can of cranberry juice before turning his cataract-clouded eyes back toward me. “I killed sixteen men in combat. Not a single one of them tore me up as much as the two little twin girls and their famished seventeen year old mother I blew to smithereens by accident on my last night in duty. War is a clusterfuck of horrible, wretched, soul-crushing anguish, young man. But it’s often necessary and rarely avoidable.”

Corman had a knack for purity in his way of speech that I never would be able to emulate. Not even ten years later in Dr. Prick’s office. And I had really been trying.

“I’ve gotta run to the lab and get your IV bags, Franklin,” Treasure announced with the removal and disposal of her acrylic gloves. I glanced down to see an intravenous tube had been started in my left arm. That girl was smooth.

“So you have nut cancer,” Corman clarified with a rasp.

“Yeah, nut cancer.”

He and I exchanged what I figured to be compassionate half smiles. But a twitch grew at the right side of his mouth. The left side never moved, but the right sure as hell was. Then he burst into bellows of laughter.

“Nut cancer? *AH-HAHAHA!*” He jeered at my expense. The guffaws caused him respiratory distress that resulted in coughing fits of several minutes. But between the gagging bouts of hacking and whooping he found little moments of rest that he filled with his stifled chuckles. “I didn’t even know there was nut cancer!”

I began inspecting the other sectioned-off areas of the treatment facility for a suitable replacement company-keeper. Maybe Cougar over there chatting up the young male nurse. Or Pincushion passed the hell out between two IV bags in the next stall over.

“Oh, that’s a riot, Franklin,” Corman relaxed. “And what a gay name, too. *Franklin*. Hah! If you’re gonna sit in here bothering me the next few months, then you’re going by Frank. It’s either Frank or Fruitloop.”

“Frank it is, then,” I murmured softly.

I could not believe that I was being pummeled into shape by an old codger like—

Then it hit me. Corman, that busted down, bruised up sack of flab and bones was trying to break me apart boot camp style. Well played.

“So do you have a girlfriend, Frank?” he probed coyly, “You have a job? Go to school? What’s your story, kid?”

“I work at a paper mill during the week and at a hotel front desk on Sundays. I have no girlfriend, nor am I looking right now. I’m content with my status as a single socialite.”

“And school?”

“I dropped out my college freshman year. Not for me.”

Corman’s eyes narrowed. “Why not the military then?”

“Also not for me.” Do not think for a second that I did not regret that response the very moment it left my lips.

“Liberal, are ya?” he postulated aloud.

“If you have to put me in a box, then yes. Perhaps.” Hole dug: continue digging.

“I’m not gonna talk politics with you. No one wants to talk politics. Ever. Politicians don’t wanna talk politics,” Corman made the most sense yet, “But I will say this: keep your cockamamie little mind open and you just might learn something about yourself.”

Black beauty Treasure showed up in the nick of time. “O.K. Franklin—”

“Frank,” Corman interrupted, “He goes by Frank now.”

“Frank,” she smirked as she showed me two small bags of chemicals, “This one is cisplatin, this other is etoposide. After we get a bag of fluids in you we’ll get you started on these. You’ll get them in varying doses each day of the week, then your bleomycin during week three. Week four you get a break from us... And from Corman.”

Holy Moses, was Treasure hot. Yeah, her name tag said Shekeia. I cared so little about that. I just wanted to behold her.

“Thanks Shekeia,” I replied with a hopeful glimmer in my eye.

“You’re so welcome!” Her bubbly response consumed me. “I’ll just get this saline drip set up here and let you boys be!”

Her Twix-bar fingers made rapid work of connecting the series of tubes and channels together. With a final turn of a small valve, cold liquids began flowing into my vascular system.

“Smoke?” Corman suddenly had a pack of Camels in front of my face.

“No...”

“Well, at least come with me, then,” the old war hero sighed. He dropped his blanket to the floor to reveal the bright cherry-red tracksuit he wore with such pride. Dual white racing stripes adorned each of his sides. Pearly, untarnished sneakers completed the look in a way I doubt I will ever fully appreciate.

Though the irony of a cancer patient passionately sucking down a couple of back-to-back cigarettes while using the IV pole for balance had not been lost on me, I feel I could

have at least articulated the insanity of it. But instead I followed along and performed what I assumed to be my civic duty.

But Corman knew what was going on inside my thinking bean. He kept turning to me to smirk as we both stood stalwart beneath the covered patient drop-off just five feet east of the sliding glass doors in thirty degree weather watching Corman's tarry tobacco haze become lost amongst the dense morning fog.

5

Screw that guy. Challenge my ideas of masculinity? While he runs a doctor's office with flowered paper and pap smear stirrups? Hell no. I am better than that – and better than him.

Little teardrops of blood pattered the ground from my shattered knuckles as I trudged through downtown Philly toward the trolley depot. My hand reeled in a pain not unlike that of a strength-training workout – it hurt in a satisfying and cathartic way. I pummeled that screwball like he deserved.

At that moment I decided I wanted coffee. And damned if I did not deserve it.

Ponytail had been head barista at my favorite espresso dive for going on three years – it took only an approach of the counter for her to jot down my order and rattle off the total. I loved that girl.

But as I sat down to sip my soy mochaccino in solitude, the chair opposite of my own spun 'round and became occupied by a wholly familiar face.

“Well, I guess I should be thanking you, Frank,” said Marta with an eye roll accompaniment, “Here I thought I had finally made time for my yearly pap and you go and send the doctor to the doctor. Don't worry though – he's a sick old creeper. He won't bring charges 'cause he doesn't want to set a single foot in court.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cause over half his patients would love to start their own suit with sexual assault charges.”

The force with which my head reflexively kicked to one side jarred a dribble of coffee out of my steaming styrofoam cup. “Wait... Then why do *you* go there?”

“For the thrill of being desired, I suppose.”

Weird.

“Gonna tell me any more about your fertility problem?” she blurted from the silence.

“I’d rather not,” I replied with hesitance stressed, “It’s personal.”

Marta cleared her throat and leaned forward on her elbows. “I was raped two years ago. I know I’m not supposed to say that it’s any fault of my own, but I was probably asking for it. You can only go on so many internet blind dates before someone slips you a mickey.”

“How do you want me to respond?” I asked. What flavor of crazy was this girl? Something did not taste right.

“Just. Listen.” Marta flipped her hair over to her left shoulder. I spied a small black widow tattooed just below her ear. Above was some indistinguishable Español. “I got pregnant. I miscarried. And now my progesterone levels won’t go back to normal. So, essentially, I’m like a fertility-freaking-goddess. My womb is pretty much always ready to make a baby. Sexually, I have to be very careful so as not to conceive.”

“Why not regulate it with birth control pills or something?” I wondered aloud.

She sighed and stared from beneath a furrowed brow. “Men. Always trying to fix everything. I’m not broken, numbnuts. I’m even better than normal. Just, sometimes it’s inconvenient is all. So what’s your hang up? Can’t... hang up?”

“I can’t release semen.”

“You can’t squirt?”

“Eh... Right.” God, how I hated talking about it. Why-oh-why was everyone so interested in talking about my crotch? For ten years I had fielded questions about it like some sort of talking science experiment.

Marta was visibly joyous as she spoke, “Wow, that must be very handy for a good-looking young man!” I thought for sure she was about to break into applause at my good fortune.

“I guess...”

This woman was a lunatic.

“How did you get to be this way?” With that she flagged down a small boy selling newspapers. She handed him a crease-free ten dollar bill and told him to buy her a vanilla soy latte and to keep the change after. He quickly scurried off to oblige.

“I guess you’re locking me in for a story, huh?”

Marta winked. “Yes I am Frank!”

I sat hovering over my beverage – soon finding myself divulging nearly every detail of my episode with the world’s most deadly infliction. We talked chemotherapy, surgeries, family support structures, and even the sudoku that I became so captivated by while in the treatment center. She was interested. And not only in my illness and side effects, but in *me*.

Still, I kept feeling like I was juggling billiard balls in front of a puppy more than sharing an intimate experience with a beautiful woman.

And she was *beautiful* – refined, sculpted, and supple. Elegant and graceful. Though still not a single word captured Marta in the way that I so craved. Not in the way that I needed.

“You’re such an incredible person, Frank. So kind on the inside. Like a clam.”

“Like a what?” Her accent often got in the way of her words.

“A clam, Frank.”

I was lost. “A clump? A clump of what?”

“Clam! C-L-A-M! You’re hard outside but squishy and yummy inside.”

And so I found the metaphor to end all metaphors that day. I swore I would only use my newfound word power for good.

“Oh, a clam,” I bashfully laughed, “Thanks, Marta.”

She turned a sly cheek, “What am I like, Frank?”

“You? Let’s see...” I thought hard. “You are more of a platypus, I think.”

“A platypus?”

“Yes, because every time I look at you, I see something new and interesting. But still – you are quite the mystery for me to wrap my brain around.” *Good answer*, I thought. I would have high-fived myself if I could. In fact, I may have – I cannot recall.

“Frank,” she giggled into her bosom, “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!”

Anger or frustration might have been my response had it not been for the incredible transformation that her rejective –though amused– scowl had produced. A butterfly emerging from her chrysalis; Marta’s face suddenly displayed a new angular depth and transcendence that had not showcased prior to that interaction. Nor might I ever experience it again.

But I would never forget it.

That was Marta’s essence distilled in a single fleeting speck of time.

“I like you, Frank.”

Those were words so rarely uttered in my presence – and usually they were directed at some other guy named Frank. Or at a hotdog wiener.

“You’re pretty great yourself, Marta,” I said through a restrained grin. She was a complete nut, but hell – I could always use one more in my life.

6

Our heads hit the pillows at the exact same time. Exhilaration, exhaustion, passion, splendor, euphoria – never before had my body been so happy with me. If the sounds uttered in the bed next to me were to be any indication, I would theorize that Marta enjoyed herself as well.

Six months. It had been six whole months since she stalked me to that coffee shop. And we had spent every open moment of the day and every single night together. The sex was unimaginable, the discussions often fascinating if not profound, and in the quiet moments I still found aspects about the woman that I could adore.

I loved her. I loved her so, *so* very much.

She did not *only* have great skill in bed and fantastic taste in men – but her flair for décor was divine. Marta had turned an otherwise vanilla apartment into a place of luxury and celebration of form. Sweeping fabrics bridged the divides between spaces in an eruption of shimmering flow. Every wall was painted with an eye-popping earthtone – red clay, mocha silt, autumn sawgrass. Her home had a comfort that dwarfed that of my own.

She rolled over, her nude form veiled exquisitely by her kelly green comforter.

“It looks like an elephant in profile,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Your thing.”

I tugged the bedspread over my nethers. In ten years I had been examined in more sterile settings than I ever had imagined could exist. Not at all was that odd sort of clinical inspection going to extend into the bedroom.

“What?” Marta exclaimed while tugging at the covers.

“Stop,” I fought back, “It’s just weird to have you examining me like that. It’s inappropriate.”

Marta feigned disappointment. She could not fool me with her little performance. “I can’t admire your peepee, Frank?” She pouted with all the convincingness of that fat kid that is always cast as the tree in stage performances of *The Sound of Music*. Everyone knows he’s not really a weeping willow – who is he kidding?

“You know I don’t like that, Marta.”

“You are a gorgeous creature, my Frank. I just want to look...” Marta trailed off, “You admire my form daily, my dear Frank. I only want to do the same of yours.”

Surgery sucks.

Scarring sucks.

Deformation sucks.

Talking about it, drawing attention to it, and circling it in red magic marker and doing cartwheels around it with a road flare sticking half out your ass *really sucks*.

I got up to take a piss. Marta stayed motionless wrapped like a goddess in the silken sheets.

She sighed like the braying of a mule, lips fluttering heavy. “I don’t know what you’re ashamed about, Franklin. I love you and everything about you. You can’t admire Dali’s work without also admiring the brush hairs still stuck to the canvas, you know! Imperfections make us special!”

With a click I heard the television power on. Such had been Marta’s defense mechanism during any argument where she was not getting what she wanted out of me. She would flip on the tube and zone out until the dust had a chance to settle.

But over the resonating rumble of my urine into the toilet bowl, Marta had inadvertently subjected me to the most nails-on-chalkboard evil that hath been unleashed on our poor planet since Courtney Love’s first single.

If you need help with your mental health call us! Call us now! If you’re on drugs and impaired or feel like you have bugs in your hair then call us! Call us now! We’re always here for you, Doctor Chomsky knows what to do, just call us! Call us now!

“That commercial!” I shouted through the open bathroom door, “I hate that friggin’ commercial, Marta! Turn it off!”

“Jeez-whizzers, Frank! Chill out, my love,” she pleaded as she flipped to some Spanish-language telenovela. “It’s only a stupid advertisement.”

“It’s disturbed and wrong. Real doctors don’t have TV commercials, Marta. That’s screwed up.”

Hands washed twice, I made my way back to the bedroom.

“Come here, Franklin,” Marta urged with a pat on the bed.

“Frank. My name is Frank,” I childishly corrected her.

“Don’t be a stupid dick,” she laughed with playful theatrics, “Now come here.”

She placed my head atop her bosom – the silk bedspread pillowing around my face. I looked up to see her peering right back down at me in the sternest of loving looks Marta could give.

“I love you, Frank. But you’ve got to stop being so self-conscious and uptight. You are a special kind of man that any woman would be unashamed to be seen with. You are a charmer, a courter, a clever kind of suitor with eyes of sapphire, teeth of the purest ceramic, and a physique carved of the softest sandstone.” I had no idea what she was on about in that sentence. “But you are also mine, Frank. So you play by my rules, you hear? Stop being crazy. Love me by loving yourself.”

“I’ll try,” I whimpered. She knew how to break barriers – that’s for sure.

“You won’t try. You will do it. And if you don’t – just maybe I won’t *do* you.” The wink that coupled her punctuation indicated jest – but I knew that there was a sobering truthfulness nestled in her message.

“I love you, Marta. Just sometimes it isn’t easy being me,” I gave an openness she had grown to admire in its rarity, “I’ve been dealt a lot of crappy cards in my life—”

“And you have done wonderfully with everything life has given you, Frank!”

“Thank you,” I said with a half-grin and a sigh.

“Let’s just be glad,” she began as she lay me on my back and began running her fingers through my thin, feathery hair, “That you are your own birth control. Because it makes things so very easy...”

We made love the rest of the evening – but it was different. Less physical and heavily emotional. Something had clicked with us that night – something unique. But I just could not find the right word for it.

Unusual. I could call it *unusual*.

7

There is an alley near the south side bus depot where dozens of bums hang out during the warmer part of the year. Generally the place does not get a lick of sunlight – meaning that in the chilly Philadelphia winters it is a frickin’ skating rink. That alley leads to a passageway between two buildings that butt up against each other, with a row of businesses and other establishments tucked away in an area blessed with ridiculously cheap rent. Three doors west, just past the abandoned corndog cart and just before the flaming garbage barrel – that’s where Murphy is.

How long have I known the guy? I could not honestly say. Perhaps two or three years.

He is a fisherman, a musician, and a scholar. Murphy is both a lawyer and a doctor – as well as an established equestrian. The man is fascinating, engrossing, and my dearest friend.

Three quick raps on the door, followed by one in delay, and Murphy casually opened it for passage. Before I could utter a greeting he had turned to scurry back to his mauve recliner.

Murphy’s place was dark and wrapped in wood grain and brass. Journals, note cards, and various other scholarly detritus littered every surface without reason.

The side table was littered with other artifacts, though – small scraps of opalescent white debris. Some had a discernable form – others were simply cast away shards. I lifted one I knew to be in the rubbish category and gave it a sniff.

Soap.

“What are you up to, Murphy?” I asked in intrigue as his fingers worked with a paring knife to whittle down a bar of Dove.

“In the Great Depression shit was pretty boring, Frank,” said Murphy – his Jersey inflection booming within the dimly lit and claustrophobic space. “So people had to find something to do. Some people went fishing. Other people went west to mine gold and silver. Some people made dolls from crap around the house or gardened or invented or whatever. Other people carved fucking soap. Boats and horses and jewelry. Whatever they wanted to own, they carved it from their soap.”

“Alrighty...” I stopped to wait.

“So...” Murphy turned only briefly toward me, an unlit cigar mushing like a wet noodle between his chapped and marred lips, “I never got the chance to carve soap. I wasn’t alive back then. So I’m doing it now.”

“That’s cool,” I said with a tinge of forced enthusiasm, “What have you made?”

“All that crap right there. What you’re looking at, Bozo.”

“It looks like garbage. There’s no horses or boats, Murphy.”

“What? Screw you, my friend. Look – this here is a kayak.” He held up what appeared to be two slender soap scraps that had been mashed together to form a crude seam at the bottom. “I just haven’t made the paddle yet. I’ve always wanted to own a kayak, so I’m carving one.”

I nodded approvingly. “Nice.”

I considered for a moment what Murphy’s friendship offered me – nearly unable to come up with an answer, I decided not to pursue it further.

“What brings you to this part of town, Frank?” asked Murphy with an arm extended to suggest I sit. So I did – but not before shuffling his gnarly old cat off the cushions.

“Well, Marta and I had a bit of a disagreement yesterday and I was hoping to garner some advice out of you.”

Murphy replied in question, “Who’s Marta?” The eyeballs over the rims of his bifocal spectacles alerted me that the man was serious.

“She’s the girl I’ve been seeing for the last half year, ya crazy old coot,” I chuckled into the awkward and motionless void above my head, “The beautiful Latina girl.”

“Oh, that... Err, her, I mean,” he said – holding up a cotton swab-shaped piece of soap, “Check it out – kayak paddle. Boo-yah.”

“Very nice, Murphy.”

“Thanks.”

“So anyways, you have about fifteen years on me. Maybe you can listen and tell me what you think?”

He simply nodded.

“So we made love last night,” I began, “Afterward there’s this big blow-up about, essentially, me having body image issues.”

“Because you have one nut,” Murphy clarified with his own brand of eloquence.

“R-right...” Damn, this guy was a challenge to communicate with. “Anyways, she feels like everything about me is just fine – but honestly, Murphy – honestly, I don’t.”

“Is this the retroactive ejacu-mumbo-jumbo yet again, Frank?” Murphy grumbled, “When the hell are you gonna get over that?”

“Retrograde ejaculation. And I don’t know. Maybe never. I just...” I sighed, “I just want to fix what broke.”

“Look, I know you’re upset about this, my friend,” he said – setting the soap mess down atop the side table, “I know you feel broken. And I know you are even angrier because the doctors didn’t find a single sign of cancer when they were in there cutting up your sex nerves. I am well aware of how unjust you believe the whole thing to be – but sometimes we just have to let shit go and say ‘screw it’, ya know?”

“But I’ve read that it can be reversed in a large number of patients. And if mine can be reversed, then damnit – I want it to be.”

“What is so important—” Murphy yawned as he went back to work on his carvings, “What is so important about being able to naturally conceive? You don’t even want kids for another decade or so, do you?”

“I just want the ability. I should have it, and it was taken away.”

Murphy again dropped his soap – that time standing to his feet with a wave toward the study.

I followed him cautiously as I tried to dodge the odds and ends obstructing the cluttered little place. As I rounded the corner, my friend flipped the light switch. On the far wall were six elegant frames. In each was a side profile photograph of the most majestic golden retrievers one might ever set eyes upon.

“This first one here was my dad’s dog, Skippy. Skippy begat the dog in the next frame there, Skipper. Skippy was reportedly the proudest father in all the land when his single male pup was born. He fathered seven girls and one boy. The boy was the only pup that damn dog ever cared about. Skippy died, but years later his grandson Skipbo was born. Skipbo was *my* first pup. The line continued to Skooter, his son Skuzzy, and his son Skout. Skout was the finest in the entire line. Bred purely to be the finest example of golden retriever perfection. Skout was truly wonderful – the happiest damn dog on the globe.” Murphy beamed.

“So what happened?” I pondered.

“One day I had come home from the office and he was laying sickly on the sofa. I said to my wife ‘What’s wrong with Skout?’ and she says ‘I got him neutered today to

calm him the hell down, and I says ‘Fuck you, you wretched whore! Get out of my house and die of pestilence!’”

My eyes had to have been the size of baseballs.

“She cut off Skout’s six-generation pure lineage coz he humped the chaise every once-in-a-while. Wanted to calm him down. I never forgave her, Frank. And neither did Skout. That damn dog never ate again. Not even steak. I gave him steak, Frank,” Murphy exclaimed with tears welling behind his bifocals, “Skout died two weeks later of a broken heart. He knew he could never conceive a son. And that’s what’s happened to you. You’ve had your lineage cut right off. Snip snip.”

“So what do I do?” I asked. Full of questions that day.

Murphy sighed, “You’re not gonna just let the issue lay, are you?”

“I can’t, Murphy.”

“And if it’s fixed – what will Marta say? Huh?” He drove at me like a fencer.

“She’s gonna ask questions if you have to start using protection, you know.”

“I know... I’ve thought about it, Murphy. Believe me. I’ve thought a lot about it. But it’s my body, my choice, my future.”

“O.K.,” the old man moaned, “There’s a guy in my golfing circle. Michael Lebovitz is his name – nice guy, well-respected urologist. I can talk to him for you.”

“You’d do that?” I was ecstatic. Truly – the feeling of elation was remarkable.

Murphy – oh, thank God for Murphy.

“But don’t make a moron of yourself,” he warned, “This guy and I get along well. If he sees you, do not make me look ‘a-fool, you hear me, Franklin?”

“Oh, definitely, Murphy. You have my word.” What the hell was I promising? How am *I* a moron? But I had not a care about empty vows. It was happening.

Skout would live to hump another day.

8

When I was a kid I had a sense about electronics. I suppose most kids do – younger eardrums are far more sensitive than the worn-out ones adults possess. I could hear a TV if it was plugged in. Not on, just connected to power. A high-pitched and shrill whine pierced the silence. My parents and grandparents gave me numerous gripings over my insistence on unplugging television sets that were not in use. The same went for radios, computers – even some vacuum cleaners caused my ears to ring.

As an adult I no longer possessed such a sense. Rather, it had been replaced by a new one: phone call ESP. Kid you not, I could always predict a ringing phone about two seconds before it happened. Damn near always. Somehow I just knew.

But on that Wednesday morning – the one when Dr. Michael Lebovitz called to schedule an appointment, my sense had failed. Perhaps it was my having stared down the appliance in hopes it would make a sound since six o'clock that morning that dulled my ESP. Though I truly did not mind one way or another. Because I got that call and scored the coveted office visit.

Some might argue that flip-flops are inappropriate in conjunction with suit pants. I disagree. There is a certain dignified appeal to a man who can carry business casual.

And with my brown faux-leather flops, charcoal pinstripe pants, and white long-sleeved button-up shirt I looked just about as hip as anyone on the street. A thin black tie and rolled up sleeves said: I am young and I am worthy.

I hoped.

There was not much I knew about Dr. Lebovitz. From his social networking profiles online, I knew he loved to barhop, play mahjong, and eat sushi. He had a passion for American microbrews and things made out of soda pop tabs. A girl named Michelle spit on him after a skirmish at a nightclub then rubbed salt in the wound in the comments on his profile the day after. His mother joined the military at age fifty-eight. And he's allergic to the soap that comes on those little steel wool scouring pads they sell at convenience stores for a fifty percent mark-up.

I am well aware of the seriousness of golfing circles. You get booted out of a golfing circle and you might just find yourself alone on the course – or worse, riding sidecar to a bunch of Penn State undergrad foreign exchange students from Bali.

Suffice to say; I desired to do nothing to impair Murphy's golf game.

I researched. I practiced. I prayed.

And when I showed up at the sparkling offices of *The Lebovitz and Schwartz Family Practice*, I was prepared.

“Hello there!” A young man whom I immediately recognized greeted me as I entered – even before the secretary could!

The architecture inside was absolutely incredible. Columns of brushed aluminum swooped floor-to-ceiling in every corner. Crown molding was everywhere – even in the little financial office off to the side. I peeked through the financial supervisor’s little sliding glass window just to check.

Draperies of fabric, elegant furniture, candles, vases – and a koi pond! Holy cripes a koi pond. Dr. Lebovitz was hip – and witnessing his vibrant, young, and idealistic countenance in person was mystifying and exotic. I was shacking up with an authentic Latina beauty who could make salsa and tortilla chips in her sleep and this guy felt more otherworldly to me.

“I wanna guess that you’re Mr. Robbins,” Dr. Lebovitz said with glimmering teeth bared in full-on orthodontic majesty.

“I am he,” I laughed – trying desperately to think of a sweet movie quote to drop on him. My mind drew a blank. *Crap. Play it cool, Frank.*

He shook my hand. Sort of clammy, but not bad. Firm, but gentle. “Come on back, Mr. Robbins – you can take care of the paperwork afterward.”

Led by Dr. Lebovitz, I bobbed in and out of criss-crossing hallways to finally come to an open door at what seemed like the far rear of the office space. The young man strode in and plopped down in one of the patient waiting chairs. I took a seat in a chair on the wall opposite him, throwing my right leg over my left and brushing back my wispy locks.

“So what’s going on, Mr. Robbins?” he asked without wait, “What brings you in today?”

“Well, as you know, Murphy Spurlock recommended you. I have been looking for a talented and understanding urologist.”

He grinned, “Hey – you’ve come to the right place, my man. So what’s the issue?”

“Well I had an RPLND after my testicular cancer chemotherapy to check for cancerous material in my aortal lymph nodes. Luckily they didn’t find anything. However, they caused some nerve damage and now I have retrograde ejaculation. Which means I am infertile in the naturalist sense.” My God was it easy to talk to this man.

“All right, all right,” he thought for a minute, “Have you tried an antihistamine?”

“A what now?” I asked tugging calmly at my skinny little tie to loosen the knot a hair.

He chuckled and threw an arm leisurely across the back of the chair next to him. I copied the move. “Like a pseudoephedrine,” Dr. Lebovitz clarified, “Like Sudafed, for instance.”

“No... I did not know that could help...”

“Do you know how your condition actually works, Mr. Robbins?” he asked. I shook my head nervously. Jeez, at least I could have researched my own darn ailment.

He snatched up a little cross-section replica of the male abdomen. That whole time I had been thinking it to be a model of the inner ear – until he turned it ‘round to the external view.

Silly me.

He flipped it back to the inside. “This here is the sphincter of the bladder,” the doctor explained with a point at some indistinguishable organ or muscle amongst the mess of tubes and parts. I have *always* detested the word sphincter. “Usually, right before climax, this sphincter closes off so that semen is forced out, rather than in. But if it stays open, the sperm goes –*bloop!*– right down into your bladder. So we have to find a way to make that little muscle work – and pseudoephedrine often times will do that, once you take enough of it over a long enough time.”

“How much is gonna be *enough*?”

“Depends,” Dr. Lebovitz said, thinking. “I generally recommend two hundred forty milligrams a day, divided up into four doses each of sixty milligrams. Six weeks should start showing results.”

“That’s it? Ten years and I’ve waited for an over-the-counter decongestant?” My mind had effectively been blown with about ten kilotons worth of weapons of mass disbelief.

“Now I’m not saying it’s a sure thing, Mr. Robbins – and I want to have a look at your charts before we move forward on this,” young Dr. Lebovitz expounded, “But it’s the least expensive, safest, and most successful way of restoring that function in about a quarter of males with the condition.”

“Well it sounds fantastic,” my reply leapt from my lips. “If it works, there’s a six pack of Breckenridge Oatmeal Stout headed your way.”

“My absolute favorite stout!” announced a delighted doctor, “You, sir, have fine taste.”

“So how soon will I know if the pseudoephedrine is a go?”

He stood up and extended a hand for a parting shake. “I have about a half dozen patients to see before I can get back to my office. I’ll pore over your records as soon as I get an opportunity and I’ll give you a ring.”

That guy was one hell of a doctor – even if he did have wet hands. Almost made me wanna go back and deck Dr. Prick once more for good measure.

So with not a single probing question about my mental stability, light was finally peeking through at the end of the tunnel – no prescription required.

9

That tiny little near-insignificant speck of light was shrouded in the dauntingly insurmountable task of getting Marta on board with it all. The woman was hyper-fertile and unwanted of a child – I should not have been surprised that she would be attached to the idea of an infertile sexual partner. But I could not stand to be excluded from my own choice to revert my body back to functioning form.

After a few beers I might just be ready for the confrontation.

I sat at the table as she prepared our evening meal. That woman had an unbelievable prowess in the culinary domain. Just damn inconceivable.

Growing up I would not eat out with the family unless it was Mexican food. Still then, it was Tex-Mex or some other ludicrous variant. Over six months of being spoiled, I had a primed and tuned palate for México Auténtico – and I savored every morsel of hand-prepared satisfaction gifted my way.

To watch her dance about the kitchen whipping up this or folding that or kneading the other – pure, unfiltered sexiness. I liked her for her mind and body. I loved her for her food.

“Say we were driving through the forest in the winter and took a wrong turn and got stranded,” she floated a scenario while pounding out tortillas on the countertop, “We are

so snowed in the car that we can only get out through a window and we have no idea what is anywhere around us. It's been three days and we've eaten all out food, burned our tires and gasoline for warmth, and things are looking grim..."

"Where is this coming from?" I snickered.

"I heard something like it on the TV, now just play along," Marta scolded me, "Anyways, what do you do? Go out looking for help or stay with me and hope for the best?"

I had to wonder. "Why were we driving around out there in the first place?"

"It doesn't matter," she argued with a scrunch of her nose and a toss of the pinch of salt between her fingertips into the enchilada tray.

"It certainly does matter!" I pointed out, "If we were headed to a hotel by ourselves no one may know we're gone. If we're headed to visit someone –family or friends– someone might just be looking for us. That's a big factor."

"O.K. then, say no one's looking for us. Or we don't know if they are or whatever," she conceded.

"In that circumstance I am obligated to go looking for help," I replied confidently.

"Why?" she jabbed, "Because you're a *man*?" And she did those obnoxious little finger quotation marks when she emphasized *man*. I got it, Marta. But thanks for the clarification that you were indeed questioning my sincerity.

“No,” went a clear shot across her bow, “Because I love you and would sacrifice my own life if it meant sparing yours.”

“Lots of people say that, Frank. They don’t necessarily mean—”

“I do.”

“Really?” she wondered with a cocked eyebrow.

“Yes, really,” I said with a squint, “Would you do the same for me?”

“I can’t say either way,” Marta began – without skipping a beat in the rhythmic whipping of her enchilada filling. “I mean, how can one really know what he or she would do until that moment when your life really is on the line? Most people don’t want to die, Franklin.”

“Jesus, it’s not that I want to die,” I groaned, “But I have the sense to know what my priorities in life are – and your life is more meaningful and purposeful than my own.”

“Alright then – same scenario as before, but with a catch,” Marta became somber. “Say we have a baby at home with a relative or the sitter and if we die that baby will be parentless. *Then* what do you do?”

“Marta – I actually wanted to talk to you about that. Sort of.”

Her eyes went from smiling to concern to impending regret. “What are you talking about?”

“I spoke to a urologist today – a friend of Murphy’s actually. He suggested that taking an over the counter antihistamine like Sudafed might help to reverse the retrograde issue,” I explained with a bite of my lip.

“No,” she replied simply with a spin back to her cooking.

I rose from the dinner table, slurped down the remainder of my lager, and approached her. My hands fell gently onto her hips – my chin upon her shoulder.

“Marta, please...”

“No, absolutely not. Frank, you know I can become pregnant at the drop of a damn sombrero,” Marta said half in jest, “No way am I ready to take that chance.”

“What are you afraid of?”

She breathed a firm, stunted sigh. “Getting pregnant! What do you think?”

“I just...” I trailed off.

“You feel like less of a man because you can’t ejaculate. I know, Frank. I know that – but my body will not be the place for you to feel like a man if that’s what feeling like a man is to you. I’m not going to—”

“To what?” I interrupted on dangerous territory, “To go through the trauma of another miscarriage? Is that what scares you, Marta?”

“Frank! Shut the hell up this instant, you insensitive douchebag!” Her tears began streaming into the enchilada sauce but she just continued whipping. *Great, now it’s gonna be all salty*, I thought with disappointment. “You have no idea what it feels like to

lose a baby – even in the first trimester. It’s heart wrenching. It destroys your fucking life, Frank. It makes you a little crazy, to be... To be honest.”

“*To be Frank?* Were you gonna say ‘*to be Frank*’?” I laughed through my own eyes full of cloudy condensation. “I’ll tell you what it’s like to be fucking Frank – I lost some babies at an early stage too. About eighty-five million of ‘em, Marta. Think losing a nut is easy, Babe? I’d say it’s fairly comparable to your situation.”

I stopped. *Collect yourself Frank. She’s not gonna let you get the fancy decongestant if you make her upset. Don’t screw this up. Don’t let her win because you’re afraid to play the game yourself.*

“Look, Marta, I’m sorry. This is not how I wanted the discussion to go.”

She was crying profusely. Sobbing. Wailing. I took her into my arms, but it just felt hollow. Somehow I felt even more emasculated. And as long as she was bawling I could not utter a word.

10

“What’s nut cancer like?”

“Like hell. What’s liver cancer like?”

“Like I need another drink.”

It was our every-morning introductory exchange. I wish I could pinpoint when it began, but damnit if thirty-six hour weekend sleeps did not screw up my memory bank.

Corman and I had exhausted nearly two months of pre-noon ramblings on right versus left wing politics – him often taking a side I knew –flat out knew– to be devil’s advocate. But I cherished the man for it. Hell, I was young. Just a mouse’s dick over two decades. I needed a war-hardened son-of-a-bitch to challenge my beliefs. Corman provided that. Tenfold.

“Abortion. What’s the point?” he postulated with a sip of cranberry-apple.

“It’s not about the specific act – it’s about the right to choose,” I began a tirade.

“But is there a right to choose when a human lives or dies?” he challenged.

I knew the answer by heart. “In a courtroom decision with the death penalty at stake, there damn sure is.”

“But did not the offender make that choice?” Corman wondered.

“Did or didn’t he? Can one ever be certain of the guilt of the accused or only certain in his or her approximation of such?” I had him. I knew it.

“He or she can most definitely be certain. And assuming so, should he or she decide the fate of another, or leave it to karmic chance?”

Karma? Corman had assuredly lost his old haggard mind.

“But what of capital punishment?” rhetorically I queried, “A state’s right? Or federal? For if it be a state’s right than certainly the fed must turn a blind eye.”

“Federal jurisdiction is strictly outlined by the Constitution and her amendments. If a state abides by Constitutional credo and still finds opening for clause, then certainly her right it may be,” said Corman with a dignified nod.

I lifted a brow so dramatically high – my bald head was nearly usurped by my sweat-catchers. “And still the quandary stands. Is capital punishment a state’s right?”

“Yes, by decree of the Law of the Land, ‘every State shall be bound thereby, any Thing in the Constitution’ – article four. Therefore, since there is yet no decree regarding capital punishment within Federal Law, the justification of the death penalty resides only within the legislation of the states.”

Corman was good. And I was tired.

“Good game, sir,” I retired my three-cornered hat, “Perhaps we will spar again on Monday.”

“Wussing out on me already, Frank?” The guy had balls of brass.

“Afraid so, Corman. I am supremely exhausted.”

The old codger was pathetic, but endearing. “Guess I can’t count on you for a game of chess, huh?”

“Corman,” I sighed, “Maybe after a nap.”

Never did I think myself a political person – but when Owen Corman pressed me on my beliefs – I could not react except to defend myself. But even then, there was always a breaking point where I would just flat out give up.

“You’re a pussy,” the ancient war-vet announced. “You have yet to draw one of these ethics and jurisdictional bouts out to conclusion,” he argued, “Even when I know I’m wrong I keep prodding you. But you just fold as soon as crap gets tough.”

“What is it you’re trying to teach me, old coot?”

“You’re young and dumb. You’re foolish and naïve,” he complimented me, “And you have yet to learn that liberalism is the liquor of the weak while conservatism is the ambrosia of the aged and wise.

“Age begets wisdom?”

“Wisdom is blessed by age.” He said ‘bless-ed’. Pronounced in exactly that manner. Old people!

“So if age grants wisdom, does wisdom precede death?”

“Frank – I would rather die wise than live foolish,” said Corman with a smile. His grin grew wider when he realized that his chemo bag was a tad emptier than mine. He was winning double. Ugh.

The man had really progressed in my time at *Cancer Treatment Unlimited*.

His skin was pink rather than ochre.

His hair was silver rather than grey.

His cranberry juice can was half-full rather than half-empty.

His demeanor was forgiving rather than judgmental.

His wallet was open rather than closed.

I did not know what to think. Was he preparing for the worst or acknowledging the best? Corman was a spiritual man – though I was unsure what that meant in regards to my impact on his life. His health appeared to really be turning around – but at the same time he was coming out of that mortar shell-littered foxhole of his and showing a bit of heart.

“I think you should join the military, Frank,” he sputtered at me with a jiggle of his IV pole.

“Oh yeah?” I chuckled. An open palm rubbing circles against my bald scalp felt so good that early in the morning. “What branch, Corman?”

“I’m serious, young man,” he sternly warned, “It would be good for you to get some strong guidance and they’ll sure as hell pay for an education for you.”

“We’ve been through this a thousand times, Corman – I really don’t wanna go back to school.”

He curled his crusty old lip at me, “What are you gonna do, then? Make paper the rest of your life? Spend your dying days telling the maids which bed sheets need to be changed at the *Roadside Inn*?”

“I want to be mail carrier, actually,” I said with mustered candor.

“A what? A mailman?”

A smile widened my jaw line. Just imagining the freedom – so precious. Walking all day, listening to my iPod, petting dogs, holding babies, making eyes at all the Suzy-homemakers... God, someday that would be me.

“A mail carrier, Corman,” I argued, “They make about twenty bucks an hour with full government benefits. It’s a great job. I am on the interview waiting list, which can take like two years. It’s what I want to do.”

“Don’t get me started on the Postal System,” the old codger groaned.

“It’s what I want to do, Corman.”

He took a moment to straighten his bushy left brow with two fingers and a dab of spit. “I ever tell you about my first job?”

“Nope.”

“I was a bicycle courier in New York City,” he announced with a smirk.

“Corman, you grew up in Kentucky,” I interjected politely.

“Just shut the hell up and listen a moment,” he growled, “Anyways – at fifteen I ran away from home right at the tail-end of my freshmen year of high school. I was fed up with my dad beating the crap out of my mom and I every night. Tired of the bureaucracy tearing apart my small town. Tired of life there. So I hopped a train in ’39 and just took off for the biggest city I knew of.”

“What was your plan?” I stifled a laugh at the thought of a fifteen year old with Corman’s same head hanging off the side of a train, gums flapping in the wind.

“I had no plan,” he grimaced, “I just wanted to get away for a while. I got there, snatched up a flyer for a courier job, stole a bike outside a bakery, and applied for the position. I was hired on the spot – no paperwork, background check – none of that crap they do now.”

“So you delivered papers and packages all summer?”

“I delivered papers and packages for two weeks,” Corman moaned, his eyes lost in the IV tube he twirled between his decrepit old fingertips. “Then I made up some fake documents and went into the service.”

“Why?”

He sighed softly – a gentleness I had yet to see in the man. “God and country, my friend. Uncle Sam needed me and I sure as hell didn’t want to move shit from one place to another the rest of my life. Sounds enticing until you think about all the other options out there. Monotony ages you, Frank. Remember that.”

T'was a lesson already learned. I had been in chemotherapy for just two months and already I felt a decade older and a decade wiser.

11

Still I could not believe that some little cherry-flavored tablets might be the solution to my sexual dysfunction. My condition was supposed to be permanent. I was broken. Nerve damage? You are *not* supposed to be able to come back from that. What is done cannot be undone.

But perhaps a handful of pills could solve my dilemma and get me back to ninety percent. Then I would just need to work on correcting the thinned-out hair.

In my brain I knew that my masculinity –my male essence– was not tied to my ability to spread my seed. But it was something that I desired to have back. That was stolen from me. I was mugged by medicine and stripped of my ability to create.

How I longed for that sensation to come back.

The feeling of inadequacy that followed lovemaking was profound. Yes, the sex was fulfilling, engrossing – unfathomable, even. Though I could not help but always feel that the job was not truly done.

Fetishizing? Perhaps.

Desiring to fall into the mold of normalcy and fit snug as an Isotoner driving glove after running through the wash? Most likely.

Marta and I had been together for half a year. And yet I still had not fully experienced our love life to its fullest bonding capacity. I craved more out of sex and out of her.

My telephone rang.

“Hello?”

The voice on the other end was garbled amongst a cacophony of other noise.

“Hello? I can barely hear you. Is there a TV or radio on?”

“Hey, yes, hold on. My kid is in the office and screwing with everything in here.

Ricky! Ricky turn that damn thing down, Daddy’s on the phone!”

My eardrums damn near popped. That damn commercial was on in the background.

I could hear it plain as day as soon as Dr. Lebovitz fell quiet.

If you need help with your mental health call us! Call us now! If you’re on drugs and impaired or feel like you have bugs in your hair then call us! Call us now! We’re always here for you, Doctor Chomsky knows what to do, just call us! Call us now!

Then... *click!* The television racket silenced.

“O.K. Frank, I am so sorry. Wife is out job-hunting today, so I’m playing doctor and babysitter,” Dr. Lebovitz confessed.

“That’s fine... That’s fine,” I paused, “Hey can I ask you something?”

“Yeah – shoot.”

“Do you find it intolerable – that commercial, I mean? The one with the jingle about the psychiatrist.”

I could hear an odd distance in his voice, “Wait the one that was just on?”

“Yeah.”

“Honestly I wasn’t paying any attention,” Dr. Lebovitz admitted. “But hey, I was having a look through your charts and saw that you are on Adderall and a generic of Prozac right now? Looks like for Asperger’s and OCD treatment?”

“Yes sir. Why?” a coldness swelled in my stomach. Nerves mounted. “Is there a problem?”

“Well, I just really wouldn’t want to recommend a high dosage of pseudoephedrine mixed with those medications. I mean, it’s gonna make you really tired. Taking that and Adderall is really gonna mess you up,” the doctor confessed.

“Is it dangerous to try, though?” I was hoping he would give me a little verbal wink of sorts.

“I would suggest you not, Frank,” he sighed, “While you’re on those two drugs, it just wouldn’t be a good idea. But maybe if you switch medications or cease to need them, then we could get you on a pseudoephedrine regiment?”

I groaned – audibly and with exaggeration. Suddenly he was not so hip and cultured.

“I’m sorry Frank,” he said with a discernable sincerity, “I really wanted you to be able to try this. But I also want you to be able to perform in the more important parts of your life. Like work, driving, and communicating.”

“Thanks, Doc,” I sighed.

“Take care of yourself, Frank. Come in and see me any time.”

I threw the cordless on the couch without even hanging up. And then I yelled.

Just one long, passionate, guttural holler. I had to just get it all out on a single breath.

It did little to help.

When I was twelve I discovered my father’s secret stash of *Hustler* magazines. I had been searching for my pellet gun ammo, which the old bastard had taken from me after I terrorized the neighbor’s cat. But the war against the feline was yet to be over, so I became a Navy Seal in Spiderman pajamas and snuck into his room to retrieve my stockpile.

The pellets were not in his sock drawer with my confiscated Swiss Army knives – though I grabbed the red one with the key ring while I had the drawer open. They were not under his bed with mom’s sewing things. They were not even in the nightstand with the boxes of individually-wrapped rubber balloons.

But perhaps between the mattress.

Nope – not there either. But that was the first time I had ever seen a woman’s nipple. And it fascinated me.

What were they for? I pondered that to great length as I sat on the mattress edge and turned the centerfold vertical to drop the page all the way to my lap. Wow! How did they pee? Crazy.

What occurred next must have been by pure instinct alone, as twelve year old me had been separated from the things of the world by a careful father and crafty mother.

Feelings, thoughts, emotions, bewilderment – it rushed through me at top speed. My adolescent mind raced in a world of fantasy. I was surrounded by buxom babes who wanted nothing more than to dance their nude bodies about before me like some sort of Amazon-woman ritualistic performance. Boobies were everywhere. Nipples were plentiful. And my God – how did they pee? Such a mystery!

And then it happened. The most horrific, frightening, but satisfying sensation. I remember leaping up and yelling, “What the flip is that?” I stared in dismay and disbelief and disgust at what had just come out of me.

And then I did it again and again and again and again.

12

I hate *Walgreen's*.

What is it about filling prescriptions, developing photos, and selling cheap candy to sneaky movie-goers that makes the employees there such arrogant and pretentious assholes?

In 2005, section 711 of the Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act put Sudafed behind the pharmacy counter. Apparently it was being used as an active ingredient in the production of meth, which is like white people's crack.

Did it help in the grand scheme of things? Not particularly. The real good stuff was coming in from Latin America by the bushel. Really all it did was create a few back-patting local newspaper headlines in Trailer Park, America.

And it made it incredibly difficult for people in need of, you know, a good nasal decongestant to get a hold of said medication.

So there I stood, defiant of my urologist's preference and girlfriend's mandate, waiting in line to sign a paper saying that I had purchased nearly eleven thousand milligrams of cherry pseudoephedrine chewables. The haul would total up to a six week supply.

“I can help the next person in line,” a cocky, acne-marred punk invited me with a lazy wave toward himself.

Stepping forward, I nearly lost my cookies. Closer inspection of his cheese pizza face was disconcerting to say the least. Dermatologists do still exist, right? One would think his parents would have taken concern over such a situation.

“Do you have a *per*-scription?”

I stopped myself from correcting him. Sort of.

“No, I don’t have a *prescription*,” I said with a cordial smile, “I just need to get some Sudafed.”

“One box or two?” Pimples inquired.

I had yet to even consider that. “How much is in a box?” I asked.

“Two dozen tablets of thirty milligrams each,” Pimples replied with a dry lack of care.

“I suppose I’ll need,” I paused to do mental math, “Fourteen boxes.”

“I can’t sell you fourteen boxes of Sudafed,” the kid awkwardly laughed before turning his eyes to the counter. I knew he was preparing for a confrontation – the body language was all there: diverted eyes, shoulder cocked forward, jittery thumb.

I played dumb.

“I’m just stocking up. I’ve got a bed-ridden mother who takes a decongestant daily and I really hate to leave her bedside to make a trip to the pharmacy twice a week, ya know?”

“Sorry,” Pimples planted himself and fired a set of confident eyeballs right at my own, “Federal law prohibits it.”

“May I speak to a manager, please?”

“Sure,” he moaned and walked away.

“Are you making meth?” came a whisper from behind me.

A tiny, portly little black woman hugging tight her box of adult diapers stood with suspicious, though curious expression. An unidentifiable funk carried on her words. It was garlic – or perhaps shallots, mixed with something else. Guessing it to be some side effect of holistics or herbalism, I did not bother to make her aware.

“No, I just need the Sudafed,” I responded, though I could not say as to why. I had no need to defend myself to some stranger in line for her incontinence pills.

I met eyes with a man in the line at my right. He was tall – very much so. I would wager that he was two feet taller than the little doughy senior citizen in front of him. Thin-rimmed glasses and light tan sport coat dignified him only a hair above the rest of the *Walgreen’s* clientele. He smiled, nodded politely, and moved with a respectable calm to face the prescription counter. Placing one hand over the other at his beltline, he stood statuesque.

“What seems to be the problem?” the sniveling little wart-ridden manager asked as he and Pimples approached the register.

“I just need to get fourteen boxes of Sudafed, please.”

“I’m sorry, federal law prevents us from making that sort of transaction,” Warts replied.

“But it is very inconvenient for me to come up here twice weekly—”

“I am sure it is, but we literally cannot do it. The system wouldn’t allow it if we tried, sir.”

Shit. Defeated by technology.

“We do have a wide assortment of other—”

“Never mind,” I cut him off and sauntered away.

Almost to my car and feeling supremely deflated, I briefly considered robbing the *Walgreen’s* at gunpoint. But I figured I would fail at that too and then just look like a tool. So that was it – I was screwed. Hope was gone and unencumbered pleasure would simply remain behind door number two for the rest of my pathetic sexual existence.

“Dick’s broke, huh?” boomed a voice from above. God?

I spun ‘round. No, it was just Colossus from the pharmacy line. He looked only slightly more smug in his tan jacket and trendy spectacles out in the parking lot than he had before.

“How did you know that?”

“Been there, my friend,” he smiled, “I got retrograde ejaculation with my diabetes. It’s the worst, am I right?”

Holy terror – someone who knew what I was feeling, thinking, living, dreading...

“Here’s some advice, compadré,” he lowered his voice, “Amazon dot com.”

“Excuse me?” I blurted.

“Amazon, mate,” Colossus repeated coyly, “You can buy Sudafed by the friggin’ gross on there. And at half the pharmacy price. And with no paperwork or pimply pricks telling you otherwise.”

He had a firm and hearty handshake. I would not soon forget him – my abnormally large penile guardian angel.

13

Two weeks had passed since my overnight delivery of six pounds of pseudoephedrine in its glorious unmarked box. I had been downing two hundred forty milligrams a day religiously. Eight pills a day seems like a lot, but I had not noticed a significant difference in my demeanor or health.

I *was* increasingly lethargic, but I countered that in some part by upping my Adderall by fifty percent – which was not easy, as the pills were those little two-part capsules with the tiny beads of medicine inside. But even with my shakes, I managed to make some workable ‘half-pills’ by plopping the medication into dots of hot wax.

Marta had been acting oddly the last few days.

She seemed more irritable. She was avoiding intercourse. Her cooking was only slightly above average, rather than stellar.

Likely it did not help that I was sneaking away like a pubescent nitwit to check for any progress in my self-medication. We went from making love twice daily to me performing solo up to six times between sun-up and sun-down. I knew the Sudafed was going to work. I knew it.

But I was anxious.

A spot of black hair appeared above my newspaper. In lowering it, there stood Marta before me – print-outs of some kind tucked between her folded arms.

“Hey, Baby,” I grinned.

“Don’t fuck with me, Frank,” she spat her words like venom. “You’re taking the Sudafed aren’t you?”

“What?” I flew into full-on Hollywood mode, “What are you talking about, Babe?”

“Frank, I know! You’ve been acting *very* differently lately. I looked it up on the web – you have many of the side effects of Adderall and pseudoephedrine when they are combined. You’re strung out lately like a meth head.”

“I’m acting differently?” I roared, “You’re the one who seems to be PMS-ing all the time! You can’t be satisfied lately. All you want to do is read your damn books and talk to your stupid friends on the phone! We haven’t had sex in a week!”

Marta’s eyes glowed. “Because you’ve been out of the mood! I have tried, Frank. Yesterday I tried explicitly to see if you would perform. You fell asleep in the middle of my kissing your neck!”

I honestly had no recollection of that. Shit.

“I cannot believe you would be sneaking around behind my back taking a stomachful of snot medicine every day trying to get your peepee to work again!” she yelled, blubbing, “Part of the reason I love you is because your broked peepee makes my life so much easier!”

Yes, she really said ‘peepee’ twice in the same breath.

“Marta, you are completely wrong,” I lied, “Don’t accuse me of something when you have absolutely no proof.”

“I have all the proof I need, Frank.” Her eyes looked so big and beautiful when she cried.

“So what are you saying?” I floated the looming question.

She threw the print-outs onto the sofa. “I’m saying that we’re over, Frank. It’s over. I’m done.”

“You’re throwing away an incredible six month relationship because of some suspicion you have that I am trying to reverse my dysfunction?” I asked, flabbergasted by her audacity.

“Frank – what you’re doing could be harmful to *me*. Pregnancy could *kill* me. Another miscarriage could destroy me psychologically. Did you even think about that?” Fire burned in her glare. “Or did you just think about yourself and your own selfish needs, Franklin?”

“I am not taking anything I haven’t already *been* taking, Marta!” I protested. But why keep lying? I may have felt that I was saving face, but she knew. She knew.

“Adios, Frank.”

“Marta,” I warned, “Don’t do this. I need you, Marta.”

“If you needed me, then you would care about me, Frank. And your actions don’t show that you care.”

14

Impressive the beard growth one can get in two months without a shave. I sort of looked like one of those wax Neanderthals they have at the museum, but more gaunt.

The trembles in my hands had crescendoed over the previous weeks. Many everyday tasks had become quite difficult. From pouring a glass of scotch to aiming my pee to licking an envelope – though brushing my teeth had remained easy enough.

But I had to clear the brush that had flourished on my visage. I was scheduled to see Murphy that day and I had the most fantastic of news for him.

I dabbed some shaving foam on the tip of my beard. Fun. I smeared it around in large circles – trying ungainfully to synchronize my separate movements. Surprisingly I had great difficulty in doing so –but when I did– holy crap! Pure elation poured over me.

My damn hand was bouncing like I was trying to shave while riding a skateboard down a gravel road. One cut. Two cuts. Three cuts. And I had yet to remove a single patch of hair.

Bzzzzzz!

I flicked on my electric trimmer. Clumps of fur matted in shaving cream plopped onto the vanity countertop. When most of the beard was gone, I tossed the still-buzzing razor at the trashcan and strolled with a pep to my closet.

The day was special – important. In fact, I would declare it a red-letter day.

Naturally a tuxedo was in order.

But the tails were much too long, so I snipped them right off with the utmost care.

No one will unexpectedly sit on them now, I beamed to myself. Damn did I look good.

I counted my steps to the door: seventeen

And to the bus stop: forty-two

And to my seat on the bus: six – might have a winner there.

From the bus to Murphy's door in the back alley: one hundred fifteen.

So bus door to bus seat takes it – almost without contest.

Murphy snarled as he let me in. Was I so putrid a caller?

“Have a seat in the study, my friend,” he coughed up his words in a froth, “I’ll fetch us some iced tea.”

Making myself comfortable in the red leather high back chair opposite his Kennedy-style desk, I could not help but to drum out a happy beat on the edge of the pile of newspapers and note cards strewn about his workspace.

Ratta-tatta-tap! A-tatta-tatta-tap! A-ratta-tatta-tap!

I jammed at my uninhibited leisure. *Should have been a drummer*, I thought. *The drummer always gets laid.*

My pattering eventually rocked some of the papers off the desk and onto the floor at my feet. Not missing a beat with my left hand, I retrieved the documents with my right. Newspaper was old. Murphy should clean more. Picture of car wreck on the front page, body covered by a white sheet. Gross.

“Here you go, Frank,” said Murphy, returning with two large glasses of chilled green tea, “I hope honey and lemon are just fine?”

“Fine indeed, my old friend,” I smiled with a sip at the brim.

“What brings you over today?” he inquired, “It’s been months.”

“I spoke to Marta on the phone last night. I finally got the courage to call and I did it. And she answered!”

“Oh?” He seemed unsettled and surprised. Murphy shifted forward at his desk and leaned on his elbows with eyes narrowed. “But you two have been split up for two months, have you not?”

“Yeah, but I convinced her to give me one date. One shot.”

“And she agreed.”

I donned a toothy grin. “She did agree, Murphy. She did.”

“And what is your plan? A quaint dinner and a bit of chess, I assume.”

“I’m going to have sex with her,” I confidently stated.

“Are you still doing the Sudafed thing that Lebovitz warned you against?” Murphy aimed a finger at my heart.

I nodded slowly.

“Frank... Damnit, man...”

“It’s working, Murphy!” I proclaimed, “If I wait a few days between sessions, I can have almost full function!”

“Meaning that you’re fertile again,” Murphy clarified.

“Yes.”

He rolled his eyes prior to speaking. “You’re gonna get that poor girl pregnant if you bed her, Frank,” Murphy boisterously disapproved, “Don’t be an idiot.”

“I have to do this,” I protested.

“Why? Why, Frank?”

He stared condescendingly. The old shit found me loathsome, that much was clear. I came to speak to a sympathetic ear, not for that bullcrap.

“I can’t explain it. I have to.”

“You have to create, you mean,” Murphy corrected me in a slobbery slur, “You have to make something of your own. You’re driven to it – ethics be damned.”

“That’s not true!” I yelled. And at the time I thought it to be honesty.

“Then why do this, Frank? To keep her around? Lock her in with a lovechild?”

Murphy grit his teeth at me. “That only works short term, Franklin – you’ve seen it

enough times out there to know that. Couples try to make that work, but without love and mutual respect there is nothing. N-O-T-H-I-N-G.”

“That’s not true either! I love Marta. I need more than anything to consummate that. To *truly* consummate that!” He had caused me to question my understanding of the situation. Damn it. He always did that. “I need this with her. And she with me. She knows that or she wouldn’t be coming over Saturday.”

My tuxedo jacket began itching like scabies, so I tore it off and cast it to the side. Fuck that jacket.

“Look, Murphy,” I loomed over the old coot with my index finger an inch from his pulsating proboscis, “I can’t justify my intent – I can only stress my adoration of that woman and my drive to court her.”

“But you are throwing sense and sensibility out the goddamn window, Franklin!” Murphy snarled back with a finger point of his own. “All you do anymore is argue. You argue and fight and piss your pants when you don’t get your way! That’s why Marta left you. That’s why I’ve been avoiding you. That’s why your family never comes around, you sick son of a bitch! You’re intolerable and dejected. No one can stand you anymore, Frank! You’re a failure! A godforsaken failure!”

I felt like a pincushion of daggers in that moment. And each one had the name of someone I had wronged etched into the pommel. But rather than pull them out and lob the blades back, I chose instead to carry the burden.

I turned, covered in glinting shame, stabbed by knives constructed of impermeable discontent through armor weakened by stifling truths, and made my way out.

I could not force Murphy to love me – nor could I force Marta to take my hand. But, at the very least, I could make my case.

15

Rain seemed most common on Tuesdays.

And Thursdays.

Being a dreary Thursday, I opted to stay in from work and concentrate on making preparations for the Saturday evening date with Marta. Everything had to be perfect. In two months I had not seen even a glimpse of her. I had been living on boxed noodles and candy corn. It was high time I get back to burritos, chimichangas, and frijoles.

My spare time had been dominated the last month by a new and beloved passion: home brewery.

My vodka still constantly rumbled away in the breakfast nook – an unholy construction of stolen copper piping and crudely welded stainless steel stew pots I had picked up at swap meets for a quarter apiece.

The kitchen counter was occupied by dozens of wine bottles, each fermenting peacefully with a half-limp balloon secured at the mouth to lock in the powerful gasses at work. My fruit of choice had been blackberries, but given the relative obscurity of affordable berry fruits in Philly that time of year, I instead opted for freshly imported pineapples from the local Latino grocery market.

And in the bathroom was my beer brewing kit – a do-it-yourself big box novelty thing I had picked up at the liquor store. Though the contraption served the intended purpose, it was chintzy and lacking quality construction. I hoped to someday build my own –as I had with the still in the breakfast nook– but for the time being it produced a palatable India pale ale with unparalleled hoppiness to anything available in my immediate vicinity.

Marta would be quite impressed by my craftsmanship, I was certain.

Dinner would be characteristically American. She had so long treated me to her blessed gift of rapturous cuisine – the time had come for me to pay it backward.

Out of the fridge came a three-pound hen. I separated the skin from the breasts with impaired finesse – for my shakes had grown in crippling severity. But I succeeded in packing the bird with rosemary, thyme, and ample paprika. In the chest cavity went diced carrots, crumbled feta, and chopped pepper bacon. Legs sutured up, the fowl returned to the crisper from whence she came.

Dessert – damn! Forgot about dessert.

Digits cramping with wretched seizures I managed to grate a dark chocolate bar over a slab of vanilla ice cream. Folding, folding, folding. One, two, three, four... I folded the chocolate forty-eight times into the creamy, melting treat. A graham cracker crust purchased God-knows-when became the carrier of the concoction.

It was not with ease that I separated the crust from the aluminum pan after it had sat in the deep freeze for three hours, but I managed. I submerged it in pancake batter and deep-fried the entire beast in lard. Then back into the freezer.

Now that's a friggin' dessert.

My fingernails cracked and began to speckle the linoleum with a crimson spatter as I scrubbed away at every inch of open space and every crevice in every room. Eventually I donned latex gloves and sealed them to my wrists with duct tape to keep the blood from leaking out as I mopped my sweaty brow with my shirtsleeve.

My apartment was such a mess. And it had to be clean. It had to be as clean as when I moved in.

Marta respected cleanliness.

With handfuls of old hair and used tissues removed from both the bathroom and bedroom, I felt to be making a dent in the disaster. It fueled me.

So I cleaned harder.

Ammonia for the restroom fixtures. Lye for the kitchen. Bleach for the living spaces.

I scrubbed and scoured and drenched and mopped. I chipped and scraped and rubbed and buffed. I lost fingernails and hairs and I think a tooth. I coughed and wheezed and opened windows and cracked doors.

And then I finished.

The food was prepared – only the chicken required further attention on Saturday. Marta would have all the delicious wine she could consume. My bed never had looked more inviting – nor the rest of my apartment.

The day was an act not only of preparation – but also of self-improvement.

And of deception.

Jeepers – I had forgotten to take my meds.

The pill container was divided up by day and time. I pawed with my gloved, trembling fingers at the clasp for Thursday. The latex, degraded by the mixture of chemicals slipped and slid as I attempted to open the box.

Fuck it. I ripped the gloves off, scattering bloody droplets all about the restroom counter. All the fucking pills hit the floor and spread about like a Skittle eruption.

Shit.

Two pink ones, four red ones, and two green ones. Or was it six red and four pink and one green?

I snatched up a handful, grabbed a mason jar of vodka from the towel closet, and downed it all. Something had to work right.

16

“Given any more thought to what we talked about?” Corman was a withered husk in a flamboyant tracksuit.

“The idea of military service makes me very nervous,” I admitted. “I don’t know what I would gain for it. It’s different now than it was when you joined.”

Corman hacked out a minute-long cough before he could part his lips for a slurp of cranberry juice. He was forced to use a straw at that time, as his right arm would no longer scale to his face.

“They pay your education, numbnuts. You’re all convinced you want to be a stockbroker right now – make that happen, man! Do a few years in the Marines, travel the world, then come back here, go to school, and get a job where you make your own hours trading on the market!”

“I’ll consider it,” I conceded before changing subjects, “This is your last day here, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Corman sighed, “Doc has convinced me to throw in the towel on this thing.”

“How do you feel about it?” I prodded.

“Detached.”

“In what way?” I wondered.

“It’s surreal, boy,” he grumbled, “Every night I go home to drink beer and smooch my wife. Tonight I’m going home to die.”

“No chance to pull through, you think?”

Corman pawed at his pack of cigarettes. “Doc says my whole insides are covered in tumors. Like I’m full of grapes.”

“Or cranberries,” I muttered with a smirk.

He wheezed out a delighted chuckle. It was so nice to see him smile. Given his circumstances, I doubt I could have done the same.

“How *is* Irma?” I asked. His eyes lit up through the foggy pupils.

“She is holding up wonderfully. Like a champ,” he said as he shifted in his recliner, “She’s my inspiration, Frank. I gotta say, if you make it out of this nut cancer thing in one piece, you better find some inspiration for yourself. Don’t end up alone.”

Corman peacefully shut his eyes, though only for a moment. I think he knew that if he kept shut for too long it might startle me.

“Irma and I met in Kentucky after I came back from dubya-dubya-two,” Corman muttered through a sudden grogginess. He continued with eyes again shut. “It had been six years since I had seen my family. We had communicated through letters and telegrams, but I hadn’t actually seen them in, oh, so long. Mom and Pop had long

forgiven me for running away – hell, I went to serve our country. That demanded respect!”

Cocky to his last, that old patriot.

“Irma was the daughter of one of my mother’s friends. Tall, svelte, and a banging pair of legs. As gorgeous then as she is now. But now she’s more refined. Anyways they had this little soiree put together for me, and Irma had come to sing at it. She stepped out on the little wooden stage – some bowtied schmuck playing the upright for her. My God, I thought my cummerbund might snap under the rush of blood she gave me. That night I told her I was gonna marry her. Two years later I did. We haven’t parted since.”

He sat grinning away in damn near meditation for a few seconds. Just grinning ear to ear.

“She sounds like an incredible woman,” I offered with a smile.

But Corman just sat – chest motionless, eyes closed, still grinning like a love struck fool.

“Corman?” No response. “Corman!”

The nurses were in before I could hit the emergency call button, but there was nothing that could be done. Corman had fought hard, but it was time he be given rest. And deserved that respite be.

17

Either it was my head or the door – but something was pounding. I rolled over. The digital atomic clock was blurry. Or were my eyes? A squint revealed it to be only just after six in the evening.

On Saturday!

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Hello? Frank are you home?” That Latina accent – it was Marta.

“I’ll be right there! Sorry, I was in the bath!”

Hurriedly I splashed some water from the kitchen sink faucet into my hair, flipped on the oven, and slid in the chicken. Fuck pre-heating. Nobody knows why we are supposed to do that anyhow.

“Just a second! Just getting my shirt buttoned!” Crap – I was not even wearing a shirt. A pink button-up lay over the back of the sofa. In moments I had it on, buttoned, and tucked.

I flung open the door. She was more elegant and voluptuous than I had remembered. Her hair was so full and rich with espresso-hued depth. The woman had lips that could be used as flotation devices – plump and enticing. And her eyes smiled with glee to be gazing upon me.

“Frank! Oh my God, how are you?” she asked with bated breath.

“I am doing well, senorita, and you?”

“I have been so very busy,” she admitted, “I got a promotion at work and have been having to pull a few night shifts every week to get adjusted to the heavy workflow. But other than that I have been getting along well. I’ve even been finding time to get some sketching done.”

We were together six months and I never knew that she was an artist.

“That’s so great!” I cheered, squeezing her hands in mine, “You always loved to draw!”

She took a seat at the kitchen table as soon as she entered.

“Would you like some wine? I’ve started making my own,” I said with pride. Luckily I had a chilled bottle in the refrigerator door – having been passed out for three days I seemed not to find the time to cork the batch on the counter.

Marta quaintly nodded. “That sounds wonderful! What kind of wine is it?”

“Pineapple. And it’s so good!”

I poured the lady a glass and sat down with a mason jar of my handcrafted IPA. The woman was stunning. She was absolutely ideal.

“I remember a day long ago,” Marta reminisced, “You and I were at Hawthorn Park sitting on a bench eating empanadas. You were explaining to me how you like to find a definition for everything.”

“Yeah,” I smirked, “It’s an Asperger’s syndrome tick, I think.”

“There was a little boy,” Marta smiled, “You called him Smallfry. And a little girl you called Porcelain. A mother you called Broken. A nanny you called Snake.”

“My mind picks out features and distills it down wherever possible,” I explained.

She squinted a bit, “When you first saw me – what word came to mind?”

Jeez. It had been months upon months since I had even thought about it. Marta was so very different from all the other lame ducks out there. I would never venture to say indescribable – but in a single word? That was my challenge since the first day in that prick doctor’s office.

“I thought of at least a half a dozen words,” I recalled, “But if I had to settle... I would settle on *robust*.”

“Are you kidding?” she scoffed, “*Robust* is what you use to describe a barbeque sauce or a cup of coffee – not a woman!”

“I disagree!” I laughed, “Robust means rich, full of complexity, strong, powerful, admirable – everything you are, Marta. Everything you’ve shown me that you are.”

She reached out a hand and placed it upon my own. She was so soft. My heart began to race. The trepidation was outwardly palpable, I am certain of it.

“How long until the chicken’s done?” she asked with a familiar slyness.

“Hour, hour and a half maybe.”

She chugged the pineapple wine right down with a satisfied exhale as she slammed the glass onto the table. “Make love to me, Frank. Make love to me right here in this sparkling clean kitchen. Now.”

Eighteen thousand, nine hundred sixty: the number of milligrams of pseudoephedrine I had taken up until that moment

Six: the number of days since my last climax

Forty-nine minutes: the length of time our intercourse lasted from inception to completion

One third of an ounce: the amount of semen I deposited in Marta’s hyper-fertile womb

Four: hours from completion of coitus to conception

Three: number of months I would have to wait to hear from Marta after she realized what I had done

18

And so I waited.

But never did Marta call or visit or even write. She was carrying my child – I knew that she was – and yet she did not have the desire to inform me of the progress.

After three months had gone by and the sting had softened, I determined it to be time for me to pay the woman a visit. She had moved to a duplex on fifth – just a quick jaunt down from the market where I would buy my hops for beer making.

I had been off the Sudafed for over a month. My body was still completing the reverse of what the medication had caused – some changes more painful to revert than others. There were days when I could not pee if I tried. The pressure – God, such pressure. It hurt with a burning fire at the very pit of my abdomen. Other days my nose would just run to no end. I could burn through a box of tissues an hour trying to mop it up.

When I had divulged to Dr. Lebovitz just what I had done with his advice he nearly puked right on his desk. Never before had I seen a person so shaken up. He was mad – very mad. But he took a look at me, ran some tests, and even did an ultrasound. Doc said I had to immediately get off the pseudoephedrine, as I was wrecking my nervous system something fierce. Also, I could never take it again, or I could risk lapsing into a

comatose state from nervous shock. I had fucked up my insides to an irrecoverable extent.

The stroll to Marta's front door was maddening. But if I had learned anything in my service in the Marines in Afghanistan – it was to approach every friend as an enemy and every enemy with extreme caution. I was not afraid of her or the potential consequences of my visit. But it certainly took more courage to approach the mother of my unborn child than that required when raiding a refugee camp on the outskirts of Kabul.

There she was – as engaging and whimsical as ever, swinging slowly on the porch swing out front. Marta moved to get up as I came near, but at my calm urging, she settled back in.

“Sorry to spring a visit on you like this. I know that it's inappropriate,” I explained, taking my hat into my hands, like some kind of maneuver out of a damned 1950's drama school, “It's just – I had to see you. I had to apologize for myself.”

“I don't want to hear it, Frank. Look at my body. Look at my belly. You won, Franklin. You got what you wanted.”

She was showing something incredible. More like late *second* trimester, than late first. She had been wrecked on the outside nearly as bad as I on the inside. Her face was chubbed up, her arms had those little flab wings beneath them, and her ass – holy taco was it wide. She was still a stunner, to be sure. But with quite a bit more to grab onto than before.

“It’s not like this is what I wanted the entire time, Marta,” I prefaced, “It just became sort of...”

“Sort of what? A fetish?” the woman was outraged, “Look at me! You’ve *ruined* me, Frank.”

“You’re still as robust as ever...”

“Don’t go there, Frank. Don’t even – that’s not cute or funny.”

“Sorry.”

“Look,” she sighed, “I don’t want to fight with you. I’m calm. My life is now calm having left you. I am over fighting with you and I’m over you. I want my quiet. I want my peace. I want solace and silence. I’m carrying a baby now. My baby doesn’t need any stress from me.”

Our baby. I wanted so much to correct her, but I resisted.

“We can still make this work, Marta,” I pleaded softly.

“No, Frank. We can’t.”

My head cocked to the side, “Why are you so against working with me to figure *us* out?”

“Because there is no ‘us’, Franklin,” she stressed as much with her eyes as her tone, “I’m with someone else now. He respects me and my situation. And for the first time in my life, it’s a non-sexual relationship. I love him for *him*.”

“As opposed to what?” I wondered.

“As opposed to loving him for his crotch, retard.”

She loved me for my crotch? Was that insult or compliment?

“Where do we go from here?” I inquired. “I want to be able to see my child, Marta. That’s something I am just fine taking you to court over. Somehow we are going to have to have a working relationship – business, pleasure, or by the judicial system.”

Marta turned her gaze toward relative nothing a few front yards over just to not look at me, “Is that why you did this to me?” she asked. “To keep me in your life no matter the capacity?”

“No – I can’t explain why. Murphy said it was my innate drive to create – to have a lineage. But I... I have no explanation of my own. It was fucked up, and I wish I could do something retroactively to fix it, but it is what it is.”

“Go,” she said firmly.

I was baffled. “What? Like that, you’d just cast me away?”

“Yes,” she stated with a bit of spittle evacuating over her lower lip, “Make like a chupacabra and vanish into the night.”

I granted Marta her wish. If she did not want to see me I suppose I understood. In time she would see it my way. Life was tough and full of twists and turns, but ultimately, everyone finds the right path. Our path would be rocky –I was certain– but at some point we would come to terms. We had to.

19

All I wanted that evening was a drink. Murphy, kindhearted old soul he was, agreed to meet me at the pub. Granted, I had to offer to pay the tab, but he came nonetheless.

I had invited him to *O'Henley's* – one of those little hole-in-the-wall Irish-themed places with pretty much nothing but Guinness on tap and fucking folk music booming in the background. The place was a dive, but with an air of sophistication. The air smelled like dog poop and burnt marshmallows, but –hell– it was still classy.

“So let me get this straight,” he sighed into his double Manhattan under the dancing sheen of green-glazed bar lights overhead, “You say you cleaned up your place real nice, you had her over, you two knocked boots, she got pregnant, and now three months later she still doesn't want to talk to you but you approached her anyways?”

“That's about it, yeah.”

Even the bartender was shaking his head.

“Frank that's messed up, my friend,” Murphy grumbled, “But you're off the pseudoephedrine now, right?”

I nodded.

“Good. Adderall still helping with the sluggishness?”

“Yes sir,” I said snappily, “I’m feeling much better than I have in ages.”

“Good,” he grinned falsely under diverted eyes.

My hand. Damn my hand, it was pattering wildly against the bar top and I could not make it lay still. *Shit, I thought, Murphy’s gonna notice. Stop moving, damnit, stop moving.*

“I’m wondering if you shouldn’t take a little something else for your anxiety, Frank,” Murphy offered, “Look at your fucking hand bouncing all over the place. You’re a nervous wreck. Your disposition, honestly, worries me.”

“I haven’t had my second dose of Adderall yet today, that could be why,” I suggested.

“No, you act like you’re friggin’ strung out on Adderall, man,” he countered, “Let me write you another prescription for something a little stronger than the Prozac I have you on now.”

He medicated me. He always fucking medicated me.

“Murphy, I asked you here for your advice, not your drugs,” I said, batting away his ballpoint just as it made contact with the pad, “I need your brain, not your prescription pen.”

“Look, Frank, you’re a patient first and a friend second,” Murphy scolded me, “My advice might be sage to you, but when it comes to your mental and physical wellbeing, that’s what fucking matters.”

He pulled another pen from within his jacket.

“I’m writing you a prescription for chlorpromazine. It’s some strong stuff, but take one pill once daily for the next few days and your panic attacks and anxiety should decrease. In time we’ll phase out your fluoxetine with chlorpromazine in its place.”

I took the slip of paper – though with dramatic reluctance. I may have been a basket case, but I was not happy to be treated like one.

No one deserves that shit.

20

Vodka distillation is an art of practice, patience, and damn pure luck. I had only the first truly mastered.

Distillation can be repeated multiple times to increase the purity of the end product. Heat the liquid, gather the condensation. Heat it again. Gather the condensation again.

But each time you distill, there is a very specific action that must take place. You must remove the poison to leave the... Well it is all poison. Just – there are different kinds and intensities.

Ethanol is the good poison that humans love and crave. Methanol is the bad poison that kills. Distillation produces first methanol and second ethanol. A distiller must remove the first few ounces of methanol –called the head– that leeches out of the bubbling mash. Just before the end, the distiller will remove the good stuff and throw away the bad that is leftover – the tail.

All a red-blooded American (or Ruskie) craves, is the delicious, purified perfection that is created in the in-between. But for months I had been saving the heads, purifying the methanol, and storing the concentrated venom. I was crafting not just a refined spirit, but also a repugnant lethal cocktail.

“Get the fuck on the sofa! Sit the fuck down motherfuckers!” I screamed at the top of my fucking lungs, Remington Model 1861 revolver planted firmly in Marta’s snide little face. Fuck that whore and her jackass fucking boyfriend. “What’s your name, asshole?”

“Ah-Ah-Alejandro...” he stammered – sniveling little Mexi-stache wriggling in his agitated fright.

I had kicked in the door on their little tamales and queso movie night. A half bottle of cheap tequila sat before the pair on the coffee table. Marta’s sketches were framed and hung on every wall. A photo of the happy couple sat on the mantle. Home sweet fucking home.

I grabbed the man’s blushing neck and jabbed him directly in the jugular with a syringe loaded with two hundred cubic centimeters of purified, potato-derived methanol. It was twice the lethal dosage, but I had to be certain. His eyes rolled back to white. His Latino caramel skin drained to baby blue. He died so unbelievably instantly.

Powerful.

“What the fuck are you doing? Why are you here?” Marta screamed through blubberings of fright. “Get out! Get the fuck out of here!”

“Shut the hell up, bitch!” I roared at the pregnant slut. “You caused this. You! YOU!”

“Frank! Why? Why?”

“Why?” I boisterously cackled, “Look at your fucking boyfriend, dead and cold as a gazpacho in January! You had your choice, bitch!”

“Franklin, calm down. We can talk about this,” she cried. Her demeanor did not hurt me – though the fact that she carried my baby –my only chance at spreading my seed– now that shit stung like a motherfucker.

“Frank! *Fra-ha-ha-ank!*” Marta cried, “Frank, I *love* you – don’t do this!”

“Love me?” I guffawed yet again, “Love me, huh?”

She was ready to plea if it meant her life.

“I loved you, Marta!” I hissed, “I loved everything about you. Especially your enchiladas! You got knocked up and you immediately cast me away! I wanted to help! I wanted to be supportive!”

I kicked over the burgundy Barcalounger.

“What the fuck did you offer me, Marta? Fucking nothing!”

I pulled her close. From within my houndstooth sport coat came a little glass vial topped in pressure-sealed aluminum. I leapt to the rear of the beige sofa and placed myself directly behind her. With the revolver between my knees, I suctioned the vile fluid into a second syringe. The needle’s tip gently graced her neck.

“I’ll miss you,” I whispered into the silence, “I loved you.”

Her trembling was erotic. I wondered what it might be like to be inside her with all that fear rocking her newly plumped body. Writhing around beneath me. Begging me to grant her mercy. She would not be so lucky as to experience me again. She gave up her chance.

What a shame to waste such elegance with such arrogance.

I was impressed how easily the diabetic syringe from *Walgreen's* seemed to penetrate the woman's flesh. I swear it was like a hot knife through Crisco. Holy shit.

I injected the purified head into her veins and waited. Due to her blood pressure, metabolism, and rate of panic, it worked even quicker than the injection I gave *Ah-Ah-Alejandro*.

She became lifeless between my legs. It was done.

Only a single deed remained unperformed.

21

It takes an unimaginable amount of effort to saw through the leg of a solid pine dinner chair. I had tried the hacksaw. The teeth seemed to catch on the harder surface wood farthest from the leg's core.

In the hall closet I kept a set of clay-carving knives. One – a toothed blade with a sturdy rubber handle – seemed to do the trick for a little while. But I had to switch to a grinding blade to file through the pulpy crap in the middle. Fuck my gnarled fingers. Making the cuts was damn near impossible.

Fuck. I had scraped out all the ceiling material and fiberglass insulation in the roof, but still hadn't calculated the support strength of the beams.

A standard particleboard two-by-four used in low-rent apartment complexes can support twelve pounds per square inch. A-beams run vertically would increase the stability three-fold. So I had far more than enough support structure than would be needed to hold up my one hundred seventy-eight pound frame. Thank a month's worth of Top Ramen for the light weight.

Plonk-a-donk-bonk-bonk! Chair leg off – check.

Adderall bottle was damn near empty. It was going to take much more than what I had. I knew I should have filled that prescription for chlorpromazine.

If you need help with your mental health call us! Call us now! If you're on drugs and impaired or feel like you have bugs in your hair then call us! Call us now! We're always here for you, Doctor Chomsky knows what to do, just call us! Call us now!

My God, I hated that commercial. Every damned interstitial break it played at double volume. Who phones a psychiatrist advertised on the boob tube?

Never had I been quick enough to snap a look at that ridiculous ad. I would assume there would be a cartoonish mope of an actor portraying the classic preconception of 'doctor' – replete with shiny head-mirror and unusually lengthy stethoscope. Maybe a tongue-in-cheek graphic of a lunatic in a padded room would display next to the toll free number.

It is the kind of thing that could drive a person a little crazy.

The Home Depot had apparently received a fresh shipment of nylon rope on precisely the morning I needed it. Twenty-five feet would be more than enough.

Adderall seemed to wick all moisture from my palate. I chugged down a bottle of Evian and continued to toil.

One loop over, square knotted just at the apex of two-by-fours. Rope straight down, then looped up to eighteen inches, and dropped back. Thirteen loops around, through the hook at the top, tight tug. I eyeballed the drop length at about twenty-four inches.

Perfection.

My cocktail was simple. A handful of Sudafed and my last six Adderall tablets, softened in the bottom of a rocks glass by four ounces of triple-distilled, crystal clear, homemade vodka.

The pine chair felt sturdy beneath as I attempted to scale it. It had been a wise move to cut off the front left leg rather than one from the rear.

I teetered, placed the rope firmly around my neck, and yanked it tight. Down the hatch went the entire glass of vodka and medication. Delicious with a hint of cherry.

Oh, shit. I forgot to call Murphy. With nimble fingers, I set my glass atop the bookshelf behind my makeshift gallows, unbound myself, and strode to the cordless phone.

I was just going to let him know what I had done, so Marta and Alejandro could be laid to rest. That was the only intent. The taking of my own life was not something I wanted to divulge to him.

Six rings. No answer.

I hung up and turned back toward the noose.

And then it rang.

“Hello?” I answered, flipping on the speakerphone.

“Frank, it’s Murphy. You called?”

“Murphy, glad you called back,” I laughed, “Hey, I killed Marta and some dickwad at her house on Fifth. Can you call the cops and have them go ahead and stop by to clean up?”

“Wh—what?”

“I killed Marta. And some guy.”

“Frank, that’s impossible,” he muttered.

“Well, it happened. And it wasn’t that difficult.”

“Frank,” Murphy sighed into his receiver, “I should have told you this... Marta Lopez died in a car wreck two days after you guys split up. You’ve been living a delusion the last few months... The Marta you think you’ve been seeing and interacting with... She’s a figment of your desperate subconscious mind. I thought it might be dangerous to let you on about it – and now I know I should have just told you.”

I did not believe him. I killed her. I saw myself do it. I *enjoyed* it.

“Don’t try to make me feel better,” I sighed, checking the knots. “You can send the cops over here if you want – so you don’t look like an accessory in this thing.”

“You’re not planning to be alive when they get there, are you, Frank?” Murphy stammered. He was working on something in the background – I could tell. Dialing the police on his second line, most likely.

“I’m not gonna kill myself, Murphy,” I chuckled, “I will go peacefully with the authorities.”

“Take the rope off your neck, Frank.”

What was he on about? I had not even climbed back on the chair yet.

“Frank! Take the rope off your damn neck!”

“It’s not on my neck, Murphy!”

Murphy became livid. “Damn it Frank! Get the rope off your neck! Get it off your neck! Get the fucking rope off your neck! Take it off, Frank!”

And suddenly my vision blurred. A foggy television blared across the room from me. That commercial. That goddamn commercial.

If you need help with your mental health call us! Call us now! If you’re on drugs and impaired or feel like you have bugs in your hair then call us! Call us now! We’re always here for you, Doctor Chomsky knows what to do, just call us! Call us now!

My neck – it hurt. It hurt bad. Searing, swollen, choking.

22

My vision cleared. The man in the commercial playing the doctor – Murphy? The woman pulling bugs from her hair – Marta? And there was Corman. Lebovitz. Even Pimples and Warts and Colossus.

Fuck. What the fuck?

I was dying – wriggling at the end of the noose. I swung wildly and flailed just enough to grab the Manhattan from the bookshelf. With blunt force, I crushed it against the trophy case full of Julia and Henry's soccer and dance awards.

My hands had such little feeling or response. I could use them just enough to find the rope over my head and begin sawing with the glass shard.

Twelve strokes and the manila rope snapped. I crawled to the phone, dialed 9-1-1, whispered my address, and fell into a drug-induced blackout.

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Weeks later I was told it was called a ‘confabulation’ – a false memory or hallucination triggered by broken nerve firings in a brain that has experienced trauma. Sometimes the experience will manifest as a holy light or a vision of God or a waving field of wheat that extends as far as the eye can see with a peace so overwhelming that the fear of death simply fades away. It is a coping mechanism wired into us by nature.

As the oxygen depleted from my brain it grabbed visual and audible cues from the room in a final bid to bring the conscious me back.

Murphy, Corman, Marta, Lebovitz – all were aspects of myself. All were defining qualities. All were real and unreal.

I had come away a changed man, blessed and better off for having had nearly a year’s worth of time to figure out who I am and what I need – all in the span of a single second.

But what was my one word? What was the single, triple-distilled term that best encapsulated my very essence? Who was Frank Robbins?

What was Frank Robbins?

Alive.