

A Man Alone

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V

Rage

Face to face, so to speak, with my toilet bowl. It looked like someone dropped a high explosive scatter bomb inside. I breathed through my mouth like I did every day I had algebra with Mrs. Kettelsen. She was this ancient thing who must've layered the perfume on in coats from head to foot. Every day of my sophomore year I would have to sit in her musty classroom and breathe through my mouth so as not to get sick. I'd sit directly behind the overhead projector so a little fresh air would circulate around me. On occasion, I'd inhale through my nose to see if it was really as bad as I thought. It was. The first day I had to excuse myself to go to the bathroom for fresh air. She had the most disgusting habit when she made a mistake on the overhead; she'd lick her nicotine-stained finger and wipe off the transparency leaving saliva streaks larger than life projected on the screen, and then she'd write over the saliva and it would smear the pen's ink and she would try to trace over it again and again to make it legible, but in the end all there was was a nasty green mark with wet outlines.

She retired after that year.

I pulled out the Soft Scrub with bleach from under my sink and went to work on my toilet. I get right in there with my hands using a rag. None of those scrub brushes for me. Not enough power. I got my anger out that night on my toilet. Then I wiped down the side of the tub where vomit had splattered as well.

By the time I finished, I was sweating and my hands were shriveled and raw. I drained a lot of water into my body very quickly and had to lay down as it unsettled my stomach.

I turned on the TV and caught an episode of *Star Trek* that I hadn't seen in quite some time. I fell asleep before Geordi could save the day.

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My phone rang. I was so tired not having slept more than two hours at a clip in days that I couldn't read the clock properly. I saw the numbers, but didn't register what time it was.

"Hi Scott."

"Hi." I had no clue who it was.

"I haven't heard from you in a while. Been keeping yourself busy?"

"Yeah, things have been hectic." Who the hell...?

"Have you been to see your family recently?"

At this point I got annoyed. Annoyed that I didn't recognize the voice, annoyed that this female was getting personal, annoyed because I was still sick and tired (of being sick and tired), annoyed for whatever reason, I had to ask, "Who is this?"

The voice became just as annoyed as I: "It's Kelly."

I exhaled disappointment. I feared she heard the moan and I paused before saying a lie: "You sound different. Is anything wrong?"

So for the next hour I mostly listened as she complained about her boyfriend Jerry. I would pipe up with "Uh-huh," "Really.(.)(!)(?)," and a dozen brief inserts to show I still listened while I half-dozed. I shouldn't have asked if anything was wrong. There was always something wrong. Everything with her was a Greek tragedy, from her troubles with Jerry to her co-workers conspiring against her to the drive home where she was nearly killed by a crazy driver.

It's mean, but every time I heard about how somebody cut her off and nearly caused an accident, I thought about what if she did die in an accident. I know I wouldn't be sad. I wouldn't be happy, either, but I'd shed no tears. I just don't care.

"I used to love you?" I wanted to scream into the phone a million times. I don't know what love is. I loved her and now I despise her. Maybe love and hate aren't that far apart, or maybe I have never been in love. I want to be.

I do.

The reality was, she didn't call to complain about Jerry and I didn't stay on the phone to hear it about it. We were too afraid to say what we should have.

I hate you for cheating on me.

I hate you for being emotionless when I cheated on you.

* * *

I couldn't sleep. I rode out the rest of the week at work on fumes and light slaps I gave myself when I thought nobody was looking.

My water bottle was still at my side with next to nothing in my stomach. On Friday someone told me that water is nauseating. I looked at her with puzzlement until I got that she meant not overall, but when you're ill. Water is nauseating. Crazy, if you ask me.

I avoided her when I left work that day and I drove around. I passed McDonald's, Burger King, Hardee's, Wendy's, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Applebee's, Olive Garden, TGI-Fridays, Chi-Chi's, Red Lobster, A&W, Dairy Queen, Subway, Cousins, Jack in the Box, Popeye's, and Boston Market. The smells made me queasy. I wondered if I'd ever eat again. I had been sustaining myself on a minimum of soup and crackers since I was sick. My stomach always felt empty and twisted like I had slight heartburn. The stabbing pain in my temple that rocked me at my dad's house kept hitting me at odd intervals. I assumed it was due to stress but I had no idea what caused it—well, I just didn't want to pinpoint it.

I drove by Kelly's apartment and looked to see if she was home. A light in her window told me nothing substantial. I thought about stopping by for almost a second before that pain in my head brought me back to reality.

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I paced my apartment. It just wasn't the same as pacing a home. All I had was a bedroom, living room, galley kitchen, and bathroom to wander around in. The halls were out of the question—I had some freakish neighbors and I understood that they probably felt the same about me, by the way. I get it.

If I had a gun...Don't finish that thought.

Killing in the name of...

Then it hit me: I missed Kristy's birthday. I knew in my bones that she shared her birthday with my mom. This year I forgot. I don't know what pissed me off more, that I forgot it or that nobody reminded me—they didn't even have to be polite. I don't deserve such treatment. Granted, I was drunk, but I should have at least remembered when I bought the bottle.

I grabbed my keys and some music off my dresser and decided to hit the mall.

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Not until I reached the mall did I realize that I had no idea what to get her. I thought she liked rap and R&B—you know, the shit that all sounds the same. Especially through a wall.

I walked up and down the hallways of the mall, more people watching than anything. I looked at the teenage girls to see if I could see my sister in any of them.

Ever look at teens? Bunch of little whores getting more sex than me—and I've been getting around. And they're not even pretty, most of them. They wear belly shirts, exposing tummies with stretch marks caused by their first child they had at thirteen or they're chubby and jiggly. They all wear fuck-me pumps, and makeup that poorly covers bad skin is layered thick and hurriedly.

I won't even go into the saggy jeans wearing, pimp walking, bad haircut having, beeper and cell phone posing, pierced, dyed, idiotic boys that these girls walk around with. Their posturing made me want to grab them all by their nylon collars and shake the collective shit out of them.

So, you can understand this would not be the time for a girl I knew back in high school who I never liked to come up to me.

"Scott? Scott! Hi."

I recognized her, Amy something. We had gym together junior year.

"How have you been? It's weird running into you after all this time. My God, it's been so long. You look great." Then she holds out her left hand to me showing off her engagement ring.

"Congratulations." Pavlov. "Do I know him?"

"No, he's from the west coast. Nick is his name. We've set the date for early next year, February."

"That's great." I stared down some white kid with a tongue stud who walked by.

"Nick actually asked my father before he asked me. Isn't that insane? Well, you know my father..."

I never met your father. "Sure."

"Yeah, it was strange, but it all turned out all right. We're having the ceremony performed in a Protestant church. Even though I'm not Protestant. But I'm okay with it. I've come to terms with a lot of things in recent years. Back in high school I was so self-centered and naïve, but since then I've come to understand that Jesus loves me and I'm only as beautiful as God intended."

I leveled her with my eyes. "But you're wearing makeup."

I'm happy to say she ended the conversation abruptly, apologizing for leaving in such a hurry.

I walked around some more feeling better, my crucifix swinging behind my shirt. I stopped to look at myself in a store's window. Usually, I don't do such things as I would be embarrassed if people saw me gawking at myself, but today was different. I looked different. I was gaunt. My face was noticeably thinner and my eyes were dark. My clothes hung off my body.

A look of disgust passed over my face. Water alone can't sustain a man. And five saltines a day isn't much help.

I continued on when I saw Kelly walking toward me—fast. A smile spread her cheeks and she walked right into me and wrapped her arms around my frail body.

My arms hung at my sides, now crushed into me by her power. "Okay," I said faintly, "that's close enough."

She thought it was a joke and laughed as she let go. "I'm so happy to see you. Did you see Amy Markaby?"

"Yeah."

"She got all godly all of a sudden. Hey, are you okay, you look—"

"Peaked, I know. I'm fine."

"Well, what are you up to?"

"Doing a little shopping."

"Really? For whom?"

Like saying "whom" made her sound intelligent. She emphasized it so much so there was no way that you could miss her use of it. Whom: the sound of my fist as it sailed through the air towards the bathroom wall in that bar. It was possible that I broke a knuckle. "Who are you here with?"

"Jerry just dropped me off at the door and told me he'd pick me up in a couple hours. Honestly, I get so mad at him. I just don't know what to do."

"Why don't you break up with him for another day? It seemed to set him straight last time."

A chill rushed through the mall—or maybe just me. Kelly's jaw dropped before her eyes got mean. "How dare you talk to me like that?"

I looked at her and the chill was too much: my body shivered. My eyes got angry just like hers and I turned and walked away. I didn't look back, but she followed and said: "Do you have anything else to say to me?"

"Oh, I have plenty to say, but I can't. I don't think that you'd really appreciate it. It wouldn't matter anyway." I kept walking.

"Oh, now you won't even talk to me?"

"There's nothing to say."

"There's plenty to say. Like where did all this come from?"

I spun. "It comes from you treating me like shit," I said way too loudly. People started looking. Sorry, but the angst caught up with me. "You cheat on me and then we break it off. You cheat on your boyfriend with me and I come this close to getting you back, but in the end you ditch me again. You break up with Jerry for one day but I suppose that's the least you could have done after I get you off four straight nights."

I saw it coming. Her hand sailed through the air (whom), chopping it, connecting with my cheek. I'm the bad guy.

"Go away."

She looked at me shocked that she hit me.

"Seriously," my voice was so calm it scared her, "go away."

She turned on her heel and power-walked away. People averted their eyes quickly, afraid to get involved.

Now you're under control.

Bunch of bastards and bitches. Bitches and bastards. Lay waste to them all and I wouldn't blink an eye.

I walked into a jewelry store and browsed for a while.

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I had a brilliant idea. I rushed to a pay phone and called my dad.

"Good evening." That was how he answered the phone. He couldn't say hello like a normal person.

"Hey, dad, are you guys doing anything special for dinner tomorrow night?"

"Scott?"

"Yeah." Not Lance.

"Not that I know of. I think we're just having dinner here."

"Do you think it would be all right if I came over for dinner? All right with Helen?"

"I'm sure it would be no problem. I'll be sure to tell her. We'll be expecting you by six. Is that all right?"

"That's just fine, thanks."

"Okay, goodbye."

"Wait! Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Is Kristy home right now?"

"Yes. Did you want me to get her?"

"No, no. I was curious. Will she be there tomorrow night?"

"I'm sure she will."

I paused feeling very uncomfortable. Sweat beaded on my forehead. I felt as if everyone who walked by was listening to my mind. "How is she doing?"

"How do you mean?" He wanted to know if I knew anything he didn't. How could I possibly?

"How is she doing at school? Is she happy? Does she have a boyfriend? Things like that. I haven't been around much and I just don't know anymore."

"As far as I know she's doing great in school. She better not have a boyfriend, though. But she seems pretty happy, overall. Why the interest?"

Because we have nothing to say. I could never ask her myself because she'd spit at me. I miss hearing her talk about the first time she realized something she thought was "profound." That was her favorite word: profound. I taught it to her when she was seven—so long ago. "Just...curious. Look, dad, I'm gonna go. Remember to tell Helen I'm coming over."

"I will. Goodbye."

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It was late and I knew the party would be going—Friday night, what else would college boys be doing. I was a college boy once—for awhile. They liked it when I still dropped by their parties, my friends from those days. Hell, they even waived the entrance fee and placed a Silo plastic cup in my hand, the same kind my family used at cookouts.

The music was loud, the basement was crowded and hot and humid. The girls were all skanks and I ignored them in favor of beer. I drank a lot quickly. Before long I was leaning against a pole with a cup in my hand and drowse on my face. I ignored everyone. I barely noticed the guy impolitely tapping my arm.

Now you do what they told ya.

"I want your pole."

I knew I didn't hear it right. "What?"

"Give me your pole."

Guess I did. Only one answer to that: "Fuck you; I need this pole to stand up." I thought about adding a "bitch" at the end, but it seemed like overkill. Or how 'bout: "Back up before I put my nuts in your mouth," like Kid Rock says. It's amazing the things you contemplate when you're tanked.

I stared him down and he walked away. I forgot about him immediately which is why I didn't think too much of the hard taps on my shoulder.

Three guys in khakis stood there. "Hey, man, we want your pole."

"I need this pole."

"Give us your fucking pole!"

"You don't understand," I started using my hands to gesture, "I need this fucking pole to stand up."

"You're not gonna give us your pole?"

Shit, it wasn't even my pole, but still: "Nope."

Fuck you; I won't do what you tell me!

They just started wailing on me. They each threw maybe three punches that spilled my beer and made me mad. I hate to make it sound like I'm some big, tough motherfucker because I don't see myself that way. But that rage filled me and overflowed. I dropped my beer and (not really needing the pole, after all) threw punches and grabbed at throats. I have no idea how long it took, but people jumped in to break it up between the one guy still standing and me.

Somehow they all sorted it out without a word from me as I leaned on MY pole. The three guys were thrown out bloodied and complaining as I waved goodbye to them. One of the guys in the frat saw the whole thing and told his Greek brothers that I didn't start it and they let me stay.

I rubbed my face and dragged my palm down my throat to find my necklace gone. I searched inside my shirt, but it wasn't there. I panicked briefly and pushed everyone back before realizing it was at my feet. The little Jesus on the crucifix pendant looked up at me with outstretched arms asking me to pick Him up.

I snatched it up and walked through a crowd of people who kept congratulating me—more taps on my back and shoulder. Outside I sucked in the cool air for several minutes while looking at my necklace under the streetlights. It wasn't broken, but the loop that attaches to the clasp was opened, that was why it fell off. I fixed it right there with my bare hands and put it back on. But my hands.

My knuckles were cut up in several places and my right hand throbbed worse than ever. Almost every fight I had ever been in was broken up. I was glad for that. If it was just me and the other person, I wouldn't know when to stop. Whoever pulled me off or slid in the middle did the other person a favor. But there was that one time no one else was around. My sister knew about it. She saw my hands when I came home, and I couldn't lie to her.

I got in my car and drove to the elementary school I used to go to. I drove around to the back where lights from the streets were blocked. I turned off my car and reached in the glove box for my lighter and a cigar. I suppose I jumped on the band wagon of smoking big, nasty, stinky cigars, but I didn't care. I got out and lay on the hood so I could look up at the sky.

The clouds had a break that looked like a corridor directly above me. I looked at the section of stars thinking about Steph. I puffed on my cigar and ashed onto the ground. The smoke drifted from my lips and mingled with the air. After a time I couldn't tell what was smoke and what were clouds. Steph. I first met her at a party like the one I came from. She didn't think much of me at all. I don't even remember how we got to be friends. Maybe through a mutual friend.

Where was she tonight? I thought I heard a car driving around to where I was. I wished it was her. No car came. I thought I saw a figure walking toward me. I prayed it was her. No one was there.

Why was this all happening? My hand ached so bad. I liked the physical hurt, it was much easier to understand than emotional pain. I slammed my fist on the hood twice and sparks of pain danced behind my eyelids. Steph was driven from my mind.

I went straight home and straight to bed and slept until two in the afternoon. I woke up still tired.