

Mission

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Part One

It began on that Saturday morning in early February when John Cassidy sat in his room, his bag packed, his winter boots on, and waited for his father. Every once in a while, he'd stand up and walk over to the window and look out, not because his father was the best father a child could ever wish for, not because he was heroic or even ever-present, but because, in spite of the absence, he *was* still his father. Now, John, at five and a half years old, didn't know what that meant. He couldn't find words to describe it, but it was there all the same.

His mother, Margaret, and Dwayne, the usurper, stood in the kitchen downstairs. They looked up at the clock. They made drinks. They watched the snow begin to gather on the neighbours' rooftops. And, as time went on and one cup of coffee melded into the next, Margaret began to plot. At first, it was just a reaction to the lateness. It was plain and ordinary bile, a vent of frustration only. But then, stoked by the disdain that'd started in courtship and grown through pregnancy, childbirth and the few half-hearted years of rearing, it twisted. And, by the time Jack arrived two hours late, at 12.30, with no better excuse than he'd risen late, Margaret's plan had hardened into something altogether more brutal. She stood on the sidewalk; a coat draped around her shoulders. From somewhere close by came the sound of a wood-saw piercing the frosted air. The car window was halfway down.

"Where is he?"

"He's upstairs."

"Is he ready?"

"He doesn't want to go," she said.

"Because I'm late?"

"No," she said, the snowflakes starting to fall around her, "... ever. He doesn't want to see you anymore, Jack. He's had enough. And he's got Dwayne now. Why would he want to suffer you for a day every few weeks when he's got a real man here?"

The wood-saw wheezed to a stop and, in the sudden, white silence, Jack didn't know what to say. He was tired. He was hung-over. He'd had a week of fruitless travelling from one town to the next where one person after another had shaken their heads at his shirt boxes and now the situation that he dreaded the most, the crushing monthly exchange of his only child, had just got a thousand times worse.

"Can I speak to him?"

"There's no point. You'd make him feel uncomfortable. Just go and don't come back. Let him get on with his life. That's what he wants. That's what he said."

"He told you that?"

“Yes, he did.”

“He said that?”

“Yes. Now go.”

The neighbourhood was turning white. Driveways and roofs, lawns and sidewalks, the hoods and trunks of cars. Jack sat there for half an hour at least, the layers of snow forming on the windshield. The window stayed halfway down even though Margaret had turned and walked away after she'd said her piece. The side of his face was cold, his gloveless hands whitening on the wheel. Sometimes he looked over towards the house hoping to see his boy run out, across the snowy path and into the car, but he didn't. He saw no-one and nothing, because the three inhabitants of the Cassidy household, Margaret, John and new kid, Dwayne, were upstairs.

“I don't know the whole reason, honey,” she said, kneeling in front of him as he sat on the bed, “he just said he didn't want to see you anymore. He said it wasn't working. He was going away and it would be a whole lot easier for him if you weren't around. That's what he said. He didn't explain.”

John felt like he'd been punched hard in the stomach. He looked down at the winter boots, at his packed bag next to them on the floor. At just before one o'clock his father drove away from the house for the last time and two hours later, with the snow still falling, his bag still packed and his boots still on, he went downstairs.

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By the time he'd reached his mid-teens John, his mother and Dwayne had moved house no less than four times. The theme of the moves was always hope. Hope for something better, something more solid, whether it was a job for Dwayne, a good neighbourhood or an increased quality of life. And why so many? Because the difference between their version of hope and their reality, in every single case, was always greater than they imagined.

Firstly, they moved out of the house where John'd grown up because, for his mother, it reminded her of Jack. And she didn't want that. She wanted somewhere she couldn't see or feel the presence of her shirt-salesman mistake, no matter that John looked like him, walked like him, and even ate like him. So, based on a job opportunity for Dwayne as an instructor in a fitness centre, they moved. But Margaret didn't like it. Margaret didn't like the morning birdsong, or the church bells, or the way the quiet seeped into the house. Margaret got bored and when Margaret got bored, she drank. And when Margaret drank it was to escape whatever reality she found herself in. So, they moved again, to a neighbourhood thirty miles away which meant that Dwayne had to get up an hour earlier just to get to work and where, in the larger bedroom that got the sun in the morning but the glue factory at night, they tried for a child of their own. But it didn't work out, and when they went to find out why it was, they discovered that Dwayne, for all his fitness regimes, was firing blanks. The news changed them. Margaret started to drink again and Dwayne's toned façade began to creak under the strain of his impotence. So, they moved again.

And then again. And when John was just short of his sixteenth birthday, they were living in a small suburban house on the edge of an industrial city out east.

For Dwayne, with too many hours to fill and not enough things to fill them with, John was only ever Jack's son and until that day in the doctor's surgery, he treated him as if he was an attachment only, a piece of machinery that served little to no purpose. But that afternoon changed everything. From then on, instead of ignoring the boy the way he had, Dwayne started to drag him into the wake of his own resentment. He criticised him. For everything. The way he looked, the way he spoke, the friends he had, all kinds. By the time they'd been in that small suburban house for a year, baiting John was a sport.

On John's sixteenth birthday, there was a party in the house. As it was August, it was hot and so the party spilled out into the garden. There were a good thirty guests, including a handful of school friends, neighbours and some of Dwayne's work colleagues. After the first gifts had been handed out, the fake-marble chess set, the local history book, the T-shirts, it was Dwayne's turn.

He walked slowly towards John, a thin pall of barbecue smoke behind him and, with a smile that to everyone else there spoke of kindness and the selfless nurturing of another man's child, handed him a box. Inside the box, wrapped in tissue paper and smelling deliciously of every gym he'd ever walked into, was a pair of nut-brown boxing gloves. Dwayne undid the laces, squeezed the leather into his fingers and suggested there was little point in having a pair of man-sized gloves unless they were tried out, properly. John knew what was coming.

A makeshift ring was set up. Towels were fetched, stools brought out from the kitchen and one of Margaret's garish gold belts was offered up as the prize. The MC, a car salesman neighbour, announced the two contestants who nodded they understood the rules, removed their bathrobes and stood face to face in the middle of the garden in shorts. Now, even though Dwayne was at least seventy pounds heavier, though he was bedecked with ranges of body-hair and he himself had a visible rib cage that looked like one of his collected fossil prints on a chalk-white surface, John was prepared.

The first round he ran. His guard held abnormally high, he watched through the gap between his forearms and gloves as Dwayne pursued him, shoulders hunched, and as the glass was chinked for the end of the first round of three and the crowd laughed and cheered; not one punch had been landed and John's gloves were as shiny and as squeaky as the day they were bought. He sat on the stool and drank water. His coach, a bespectacled chemistry student called Kyle, dabbed the beads of sweat from his face with one of the towels and offered what he considered to be sound, logical advice into John's ear: "You can run, buddy, but you can't hide."

The second round was the same. John ducked and dodged and Dwayne's pursuit was reduced to a turning of the upper body to whichever direction the boy was running in. He got close to him once, just as the timekeeper was checking his watch. He moved forward and, at the very point that he was about to penetrate the guard,

John closed his eyes and threw himself forward onto his chest and held on as tight as he could. The timekeeper picked up the glass in one hand and the fork in the other, Kyle grabbed the towel and the onlookers smiled. This was, wasn't it, the stepson holding onto the man who'd stepped up to the plate? This was a big thank you, not only for the birthday present that he quite patently didn't want to sully, but for the party, for the whole day, for everything. They cheered at the end of the round as both man and boy separated themselves with an audible click of sweat and they cheered again as the two fighters emerged for the third and final round with not a single mark on the judges' scorecard.

After a minute of the third, though, with a calmness that belied the fact that he'd been running around his garden half-naked for the last seven minutes, John stopped. His guard dropped. He looked at Dwayne, Dwayne looked back, and for that moment, they understood each other clearly. They understood the dislike, the disdain and the monumental lack of connection between them. John moved a step closer. He took a breath in and, with the audience keening in and the sunlight beating down, he began to pummel into his opponent. He pounded into the terrain of his chest and the paunch of his belly for what seemed like a whole minute until that point where he felt Dwayne ease himself away. He was ready.

The blow hurt less than he imagined. Yes, his head did rock back with a jolt that made the back of his neck jar up into his skull. And his nose, both flesh and bone, did feel like it had been sliced and spread like a banana split. But he knew it would happen. And it *was* only pain.

As he lay there on the ground looking up at the sky, he could sense the blood sliding across his cheeks and down into his mouth. He could feel his hands ringing inside the casing of the gloves and, as faces loomed goofily over him, partially blocking out the sunlight, as his mother never moved from the door of the house, cradling a tumbler of something clear in both hands and Kyle the corner-man draped a dampened towel over his nose and mouth, his frontal lobe, that storage area of so many of his better chess moves, began to pound like a piston. But he was calm. And, through the pain, through the sense of jagged bone somewhere below his eyes and above his mouth, the invaluable lesson was slowly seeping and trickling into him; that expectant pain can do more damage than actual pain, so that at just sixteen years of age he learned something that would stay with him – the ability to detach himself.

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They moved again after the fight. There were patterns by then. From the house where they'd tried and failed to have their own children onwards, they'd gone gradually smaller. They'd also gone further east, more industrial, and Dwayne's working hours had got fewer and fewer. This time he worked weekends only as a doorman in a downtown bar. The rest of the time he either spent drifting through the TV noise of the house looking for projects or down at the gym. When he was home, he checked out the mechanics of the car, or the aerial on the roof, the guttering, the tiling, or the

masonry. And when he was doing the twisting and the tapping and the tweaking, he was thinking about anything that existed outside of Margaret and the old sofa he'd find her in when he got home from the bar, head at an angle, the skin on her sallow face as though dragged by gravity and pinned.

One of the first things John did after they'd moved was to make peace with Dwayne. He apologised. He was contrite. It'd been hard, he said, to accept another man into his life. He hadn't given Dwayne enough of a chance. He'd judged him. He would speak to him more respectfully. He asked if he could go with him to the gym, to help him fix things around the house and to eat with him when his mother was passed out on Prozac and peppermint gin.

Over those first few weeks his connection with Dwayne seemed to blossom. In fact, John told him one morning, as they ran through those neighbourhood streets tinged with the russets and golds of fall, that he'd actually helped him; that, in life, he realised, you get what you deserve, and that that short, counter-attacking uppercut that'd disfigure his nose for the rest of his life had shown him a way of becoming a young man who could deal with things. It'd taught him a lesson, he said. And for that, he was grateful.

They had similar regimes; running and rowing machines, followed by weights, upper body work, and punch-bag. An hour-and-a-half altogether. Then the warm-down, the energy drinks from the vending machine and the mile run home. In a move suggested by John and picked up readily enough by Dwayne, they got into the world of proteins and supplements, some purchased by recognised suppliers, some not, some with listed ingredients, others not so much. Each day, morning and evening, they'd sit at the breakfast table and open up those packages of powders and pills that'd come in the mailbox. Dwayne'd sort out the tablets and John'd make up the drinks. And then, with Margaret either asleep or blue-lit from the TV, they'd put those cocktails away.

By early November, John had bulked up by almost twenty pounds. He looked like a different kid from the one who'd celebrated his sixteenth birthday with a broken nose and a visible rib cage. Mainly it was the upper body, but the arms and legs too had grown more muscular and, if you looked closely enough and weren't distracted by the general adornment of bulk, you'd notice the eyes: where once was that adolescent lack of conviction, that teenage roam that went nowhere, there was purpose and direction and, in a matter of weeks, he began to walk those neighbourhood streets not like the freshman he was, but as if he'd lived there all his life. Some nights he just walked. Some nights he stood on the bridge and watched the traffic. And, on those weekend nights, he hung around the line of downtown bars. He found a street corner where he could stand and watch without being seen. And watch he did.

He watched the neon signs splash the sidewalks, the cigarette smoke, the steam of the hydrants, the whole thrum and buzz of the place. But essentially, he watched Dwayne. He watched him rooted to his spot by the door, chewing gum, cling-filmed

in black. He watched his assertion, his decisiveness quick and economic when it came, and how some nights when the bar had closed, he walked over the disused lot to his car with one of those many sleek girls clinging to him like a mollusc to a rock. He'd see the back door open and close, his hands clawing at the curve of the shells. Then he'd see no more.

John could, at any point, have done a number of things. He could've just told his mother about the girls, for one. He could've taken photographs, shown them to her and watched as her face melted even more than it had already. That would've been easy. It would've been chicken-feed. Or, he could've hit him, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a nose for a nose. He could've stolen from him, cut up his clothes, sabotaged his car, his ladders, his weights. He could've found anything from the boxing match onwards. But he didn't. Instead, he chose something that used that frontal lobe of his, something subtle and nuanced and that fucked up Dwayne in a way he could get to see, every day.

Buying the amphetamine sulphate was easy. You take some money from your neglectful, forgetful mother's purse and stand on one of those street corners long enough someone'll come along and find you. The painstaking part, the part that needed the most care and attention, that took place in those early hours when Dwayne wasn't there, was getting it into the individual supplement drinks, lining up Dwayne's containers next to his own and making sure they didn't get mixed up. Then, when the morning came and the evening came and Dwayne had set out the protein pills on the table, they took their drinks together, as was their routine, and Dwayne and his chemical descent was none the wiser.

Around Thanksgiving things started to get a little different. Or, should that be that Dwayne started to get a little different. For one thing, when they got to the gym he would concentrate almost entirely on the punch-bag, beating into it, his teeth bared, his eyes tight shut, an occasional deep growl coming from somewhere inside of him. The run home, too, was faster, the words between them fewer. There was a violent incident outside the bar and a rumour that one snowy night in early December a young woman was seen running and screaming from his car on the lot.

He got edgy. He couldn't take a walk down the street or drive his car or go to the corner store without being edgy. He couldn't stay home without something, whether it was Margaret, the TV noise, the untidiness, making him unable to sit still and do regular things. The only time he found solace was at the gym, so he went more often, sometimes with John, but usually without, so that by mid-December he was there every day. He knew something was going on but he didn't know what. He couldn't explain it, not the edginess, not the surges of violence. He couldn't say why by seven o'clock on Christmas morning he had, with his bare hands alone, been the first in the neighbourhood to build a snowman; man-sized, hard-packed, carrots and coal. Then, at the request of some of the kids, built three more just the same in less than an hour. Or why on New Year's Day, while Margaret lay on the sofa, he'd ripped every sheet of wallpaper from the upstairs of the house. When he mentioned

it to people, they suggested all kinds: too many pills, too much protein, not enough sex or fresh air, no father figure, no son, no best buddy, no therapist, no love. And some of them may've contained grains of truth in them somewhere. But none of them were the real reason.

By the time John left on that January night, with his packed bag and his winter boots, Dwayne was pacing the sidewalk outside the bar non-stop. His mouth was dry, his shoulders jerked and the first onset of chest pains were pressing down on his sternum like an anvil. He couldn't think straight. He'd lost weight. His heart rate had boosted, so too his blood pressure. He wanted sex all the time. Any kind, blowjobs, hand-jobs, anything. And still he couldn't figure any of it, even if he could've sat down long enough to try.

At eight o'clock the following morning, with the snow having coated most of the neighbourhood, Dwayne would walk downstairs and sit at the breakfast table. After less than five hours' sleep, his eyes would appear small and bloodshot and he would rub them incessantly. In the quiet of the day, he would listen out for John to come down so that they could take their proteins and drinks together. After almost an hour of waiting, with his teeth beginning to grind, he would stand, shuffle over to the refrigerator and the small kitchen cupboard and take his own pills and supplements. He would go upstairs then. He would wait outside the young man's room and, with his pupils dilating with the passing of each second, he'd look inside. The bed would be slept in but no longer warm, the pillow lacking indentation. The wardrobe door would be slightly ajar, with some things missing, some things moved. Dwayne didn't know. He couldn't think. Close to the window with the drapes still drawn, the boxing gloves hung on the wall, almost as shiny as the day they arrived.

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To begin with, John drifted. He rode the freight trains. He slept wherever he found himself, in the rickety cars themselves, in barns, outbuildings or beach houses he broke into if they were empty. Sometimes he found work; mostly outdoors, fruit picking, or farm labour, mostly for money to live on alongside what he'd stolen from his mother's purse, but in those places where something to eat and somewhere to sleep was part of the payment, it was as much to fill the hours of the day, and for those days to fill his week, and the weeks to fill his months. And so on.

Sometimes he found somewhere and stayed longer. He found rooms in run-down neighbourhoods, or small, cheap apartments he shared often with vermin and bugs. He lived simply. He practised his chess moves, got to know most constellations and where and when to find them. He could remember the periodic table, the presidents, the states and, on a good day, the capitals, alphabetically. He could distinguish a male rat from a female, delineate birdsong, chronicle rust. He could, with his crooked snout, ascertain foodstuffs to a high level of precision. He collected an assortment of objects that might someday be of use to him, usually those small enough to keep in a pocket or a shoe. And he read, often for hours at a stretch, often

through the night with the sounds of chaos all around him, gorging on one encyclopaedic page after another.

He was almost wordless, like an animal.

He headed south to the Florida sun, got work cleaning cars on beachfront forecourts, making them spotless inside and out. His hands smelled of cherry wax and damp leather, his clothes of industrial soap. He was, also, over a period of time, an assistant lifeguard, a croupier, an Everglades guide and, for a short time only, at a number of Disney or quasi-Disney locations whose noise, colour and show he grew to quietly despise, he was a hot, large-headed, roly-poly bundle of Mouse-, Duck-, or Dwarf-like jollity.

Until he moved again. This time across country, to California where work and places to stay were easy to find. He spent an entire winter in one empty beach house after another, never for longer than a week at a time and always leaving them as he found them, even down to washing the towels and sheets. He waited tables, tended a string of bars and clubs along the strips, and then one night, a quieter than usual Monday in one of the downtown places, he was offered permanent, if unusual, work from a silver-haired man in a black suit who sat at the counter.

“You don’t give anything away, do you?” the man said, leaning in.

John looked at him, and raised, minutely, a single eyebrow.

“I’ve seen you,” he said. “I’ve seen you work. Nothing you have is shown, nothing slips out. If there is anything there, and I’m assuming there is, then none of it is for public consumption, not what you think, not what you feel, not what you know. And I like that.” He checked no-one was listening, lowered his voice to a purr. “How would you like to come and work for me? I’ve just got rid of someone for smiling too much. I need a Buster Keaton. Do you know Buster Keaton? Are you familiar with his *modus operandi*?”

John nodded, once, remembered the encyclopaedia page. He served another customer, then went back to the man whose long, slender fingers drummed on the counter.

“What’s the work?” he said.

“My name is Mario. I’m a magician. And I need an assistant.”

For John Cassidy and his lizard-like stillness, it was second nature. He became, comfortably, that unflappable, stony-faced assistant that Mario was looking for. After a probationary month of practice and rehearsal, the performances began, weekly certainly, sometimes daily and occasionally twice daily during which time, black-suited, white-shirted, bow-tied and wordless, he was, amongst other things, pinned by knives, spun on a wheel, mesmerised, and sawn in half.

They played up and down the strip mostly; bars, private gatherings, weddings and birthdays. He was the silent figure from whom Mario would remove a host of watches and coins, of necklaces, bracelets and keys and a myriad of other audience valuables. He was the storer of rabbits, doves and mice, the cache of floribundas, real or otherwise. And he didn’t smile, didn’t break. He never once gave anything

away, not even the deep and quiet relish for the blindfold as it chicaned over his crooked nose with a slide of warm cloth.

After a couple of months, he moved into an annexe of Mario's house up in the hills. He ran errands for him, drove him around. He fixed things. He answered any fan mail, slipping the signed photographs inside the envelopes. He cooked for him, using his crooked snout for his mixtures and blends. Sometimes they'd have days together, they'd spend whole evenings in the house watching silent, black-and-white movies to see how people moved, how they communicated without speaking, how the audience knew what was happening without a word being spoken. They worked on moves, on stagecraft and blocking, on the perfectly executed mimes where meanings were gauged by gestures the other understood, like a language they had between them. They spent two Christmases together, New Year, Thanksgiving Days, and the four birthdays. *But* there was a stipulation. They were not to become friends. They were not to get to know each other, and on those Christmases and birthdays, they were not to give presents. Mario was insistent. "The act," he said, "will suffer. You are my assistant. That is what the audience believes. The spell is lost if they don't. It's called persuasion."

And that was how it worked, for two years. A professional relationship. They were not noticeably elder and junior, nor master and servant. They were neither companions nor confederates. But there was something John felt in the buzz of the magician's presence, in the sensation of trust he had as the knives flew towards him, that took him back to the feelings he had when his father was there, when he reached up for his hand or scampered alongside him, those feelings he could never put into words as a child of five years old.

That was until, one late summer day, without any word of warning, Mario perfected the ultimate act and disappeared, without trace. As if in a puff of clear, white smoke, he was gone. Gone from the house in the hills. Gone from the strips and the bars. Gone from the city itself. There was no letter, no explanation. The house was left the way it was. Nothing had been taken. The car was still in the garage. And the wheel and the knives and the menagerie of rabbits and doves and mice were untouched.

There were rumours of tax evasion, of sex scandals, Mafia links, illness, wagers, rivals, magic itself and even suicide, but whatever it was, John Cassidy, stony-faced and whey-toned, standing outside the annexe with some of its contents stuffed into his pockets, felt abandoned, again, felt that same punch to the gut he'd felt all those years ago.

He moved out of the annexe as soon as the place had been searched and foul-play discounted. He bummed around the city awhile. On the day he left he had the words *Restless* and *Fearless* tattooed on each shoulder blade and, without the stability that being rotated, dismembered and put back together again brought, he became random again.

His hearing was out, his sense of smell scrambled. Breaking into those beach houses got beyond him, in spite of the hatpins he'd acquired. The barns and outbuildings he slept in were riddled with animals he caught only glances of. Most of the time, day or night, he was a just a figure in the landscape, a shambling, shuffling shape with old boots, a packed bag and a peacoat, making his way from one place to the next against skies bellied daylong with snow and rain. The money he had, saved or stolen, he rarely used. He stitched it into the bag he carried, as if it was there for something other than living with.

As the months passed, so, given the long days and nights and the absence of Mario to wordlessly guide him, given the ache of that abandonment, he began increasingly to think of his father. Actually, he didn't *think* about his father. It was more that the thoughts that started to *happen* around the misty, half-remembered image of him, like where he was, where he'd been to, what he looked like and why did he leave him behind so easily, wouldn't go away. And neither would that curdle in his gut.

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One evening in the mid-March of his twenty-fourth year, he was on the empty parking lot of an industrial park somewhere on the edge of a mid-eastern town. His face, arms and back were bruised where he'd been half-beaten and his own knuckles and fists were cut and skinned where he'd fought back. His pockets felt laden with watches and coins, with locket and keys that rattled with each step he took. A light, brick-dusted rain started to fall. There was a phone booth on a street corner and he shuffled towards it. He gathered his coins. Outside a scrawny, three-legged dog sniffed at a dumpster. As he stood there, he wanted only for the blindfold to be pulled down over his eyes and for the world to go soft and dark and quiet.

"Mom," he said, "I need help."

His mother wheezed, and then spoke as if seamlessly trailing a conversation from somewhere beyond that seven-year absence.

"What the hell do I care?" she said. "What do I care what you need? I don't. And that's the truth. You put me where I am. You steal from me. You make my life a misery. You put a spoke in it the day you came out, you little bastard."

A car drove past the phone booth, slowed up a little.

"And what did you do to Dwayne? You fucked him up, that's what you did. I don't know how, but you did, and now they give him all kinds of names and lock him away and won't let him out because they say he's got too much shit in his system. I know Dwayne, and Dwayne never had too much shit in his system. So, whatever it is that you want, you won't get it from me. I don't have it. And if I did, you would be the last person I'd give it to. So why don't you try that old, dying father of yours? Why don't you try him? Did you know he'd got land up in the north-west? He never told me once he'd got land. And if he's got land, he's got money, so try him for whatever it is you want. Go and ask that fucking shirt-seller I wish I'd never met for it," she said, and wheezed again like a spent balloon.

John closed his eyes. He went back to that same winter's day when he was five years old. He got the snow and the swollen glisten of the sky. He got the winter boots, the packed bag at his feet. He got his hands on his knees and the sore, drying saltiness of his face and the crunch of the tyres through the padded whiteness. He got the faint smell of the coffee and the thought, loose-formed, but intact enough, that from those moments on, his life would never be the same.

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He hung around the town for a few days, walking the neighbourhoods with the randomness of a dice-roll, not because he liked the place, or because of all the people he'd come across, worked with, slept with, shaken large, bloated hands with or been sawn in half by, the people of this town were kinder and showed him more understanding than anywhere else, but because he didn't know what else to do.

He tried to figure how such a young life had been cast into a wilderness from which he struggled to return, to figure why it was he didn't have enough warmth in his heart or how he'd driven Dwayne into that world of derangement with such calculation. And he tried, more than anything, with the haul of his packed bag and the rattle of chains and pins, to figure how he could even think of seeing, never mind speak to or share time with or be in the same room as, the man who'd left him behind, who'd walked out of his life on that winter's day almost twenty years before and left him to rot. And no, he didn't know he'd got land.

On the fourth day, when the reasons to stay had become as threadbare as his old, frayed laces, he started to walk out. And if the direction happened to be towards the north-west of the country, towards the foothills of the Cascade Mountains and the town of Mission, if that was where he was drawn, like a moth to a flame, then so be it.

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Heading west across the north of the country you'd start to leave the towns and the cities behind. You'd forego the power plants and the car factories, the acreage of business parks, the urban and suburban neighbourhoods, the relentless noise and movement you might only notice had gone in the hush of dusk somewhere. You might start to notice that all the goods and the freight, the people and the cars were all going in the opposite direction and you'd sense, in the slow curve north, the lengthening hours of light and the broadening of sky and the starlit bowl of night so vast and open you felt like you were right there in it.

You'd catch the great patchworks of earth then, the squares of rich-red soil stitched next to those smaller shapes of Indian land upon which little had ever grown. And, strung onto those rough-edged sections of land, like velvet next to sackcloth, would be the miles and miles of prairie that would stretch as far as you could see. You'd make out the start of the low-lying hills, like lions' paws lounged across the land so that the single highway that the network of roads from the east had become,

would move a long arc around them, sometimes rising, sometimes as flat as a pan base.

Sometimes the rains would come, blown in on stronger winds. The clouds would move in over the land like mobsters, smothering it suddenly in predatory shade. Hours of rain would be deposited, heavy to begin with, hardly visible through, veiling the corn and wheat-fields like the trawling of stained lace, hammering the land, pounding like fists on any fluted rooftop of any outbuilding, holding or barn. The old, dried riverbeds and creeks would start to run again, coursing clear or clay-brown under rook-black skies, scuttling in rivulets, loosening scree and wood until those hours would pass and the squalls of rain would ease and lighten and stop.

And when those hours had stopped, whether it was day-break, noon or dusk, or whether milky stars were blinking out in the darkness, you'd be further out. You'd be in places it was rare to travel to, places you wouldn't go to just for the sake of it. And the further out you were, towards the sandstone and granite foothills of the Cascades that stood between land and eventual sea, you'd have to have reasons to be there, you'd have a particular purpose in mind.

After three days of cars and trucks and station wagons, next to workmen in overalls and caps, to college kids, salesmen, off-duty firemen, medics and dogs, in no particular order, and to whom, if they ever asked him where he was heading and why, he said little in terms of direction and nothing in terms of reason, he took the last hundred miles by train. The closer he got to the town of Mission, the more his heart rate began to increase. The moisture lessened in his mouth and gathered instead on the palms of his hands. His synapses began to zing, the serotonin levels, the endorphins, the dopamine, all thrown into a mounting chaos. His gut swam and his vision blurred. By the time he got there, hungry, thirsty and tired, in the early evening of light rain, his system had more or less closed down. He became a heap, a sack, a bag of bones retching up little but strings of acid bile. He couldn't walk out of the station, which is how come he was on the floor of the waiting room when they found him, the packed bag as a pillow, the old coat not worn, but draped over him.

*

The old hatchback bumped its way over the unmade track that skewed from the end of the homesteads to the highway, its headlights jerking through the dusk. It took a right then, heading clockwise on the half-circle of road, running along the base of Rupture Hill and arcing south past the tended spread of the Mallender estate, the wooded girth of Blessings Point and the Indian burial grounds until it sidled up to the rail-tracks that made the same symmetrical curve from the prairies to the east.

It made the turn into the rutted side-road, the rove of its lights picking out diners in Sizzlin' Steve's steak-house, including, on that spring evening, amongst others, Ted Mallender, head of the Land Management Agency and the most influential man in Mission, his considerably younger wife, Lily, Ned Scarratt, Chief of Police, and Rita Mahoonie who sat in the corner with her friend Delilah with one eye on her rare

to bleeding steak and the other on the two young law enforcement officers sitting with Ned.

The shacks of the migrant houses were single storey with asbestos roofs and walls no thicker than Rita's 8oz steak. Built as part of a scheme to attract extra workers to the town over fifty years ago, they had scarcely been touched since and so had the perennial look of temporary shelters for people made homeless by an elemental force rather than places to be proud of, to house decent furniture that could stand the test of winter and electrical goods that didn't zap the fuse-box at least twice a day.

Not only that but the shacks were but a frisbee's throw from the timber mill which buzzed and boomed and whose siren twice a day was louder than an air-raid warning and shook most things in the shacks that weren't pinned down. So, decades then of broken glass, smashed plates and ornamental keepsakes sent tumbling, not to mention tinnitus, fractured sleep and anything that could be damaged by the constant inhalations of dust. But, for Sophie Li, driver of the old hatchback with its backseat full of cleaning fluids, mop-heads and brushes, it was home. Inherited from her Oriental great-grandmother who, once upon a time, had worked at the laundry, she kept it as neat as she could on cleaners' wages and with a cleaner's eye for the enemies; dirt, dust and wayward food.

She unloaded the mop-heads and detergents, shook loose her jet-black hair with its hint of goose fat and bed linen and sat on the striped deckchair of her living room as the smell of steaming, root vegetables and rice drifted around the shacks. She lit a cigarette, closed her eyes and thought once again of the old man sitting at his kitchen table, fingering his deeds.

*

The timber mill siren had sounded already and a cluster of the workforce, including the new boy Jake Massey, had gone straight into Harry's bar across the bridge from the mill and five hours later the young Massey man with the short and chequered biography had talked himself into a night in the town's cooler. Not for the first time.

Born of a sizzled Vietnam vet and a slave of crystal meth who could no more hold onto him than they could a dutiful dog, he'd not had the best of starts. And, raised on the outskirts of Mission by a single aunt with a propensity for the tremors, he'd also received little in the form of guidance, giving him a radically short attention span, a desperation to please and a general absence of judgement. What he also had was a dogged persistence that made him difficult to refuse, so that even though he'd worked and fucked up on a regular basis from the age of sixteen, he would always appear like a tongue-wagging spaniel knocking on someone's door for work and that someone, knowing they were being foolish and sentimental, would always offer him something.

At the end of his first working week at the timber mill, he'd overstayed his welcome in Harry's bar again. He'd got bumptious and loud and instead of leaving

when the other mill workers did, to fill those empty stomachs, he'd decided to stay and that lack of judgement had careened into a loss of self-control. It wasn't that he was a danger to others. He wasn't. No, those nights in the cooler were there to protect him, to prevent him from going home, drinking himself into a hazardous oblivion or falling out of a window he'd opened to smoke. And even though it happened four or five times a year at least, he was never charged, only told with that mixture of warning, advice and a hint of resignation by whichever Desk Sergeant was on duty, not to be so damned repetitive.

That Friday was no different. He was informed of his situation by the two young law enforcement officers smelling of aftershave and relish. His belongings were transferred into a transparent zipper bag and he was led down the stone steps into the cool vaults of the cells that had barely changed since the days of the panhandlers.

Within a minute, he was asleep, as per usual in his three-by-four-yard suite with the springy mattress and the blanket the colour of maize. And, within another minute, he was snoring like a piglet trapped in a squeeze-box. Back upstairs, the two officers played pinochle and talked about Rita and her friend Delilah while the Desk Sergeant, Frank Bellow, ironically a cousin of Jake's single aunt, studiously wrote up the night's events, including Jake and his 'exuberance', and, on the sheet next to him, the appearance of the ragged young man with the old peacoat down at the rail station, incapable of giving his own name and with no word to say on why he was there.

*

The following morning of a bright, spring day, with the crags of Rupture Hill veiled in mist, the town of Mission with its fifteen hundred souls, tucked neat into the crook of the flat lands and the granite bluffs, began to busy itself: The baker shovelled his breads, while Ike, the barber, sharpened his cutthroats. The chandler laid out his wares on the corner of the covered boardwalk and, over in Sylvie Buckle's Beautician's, Mrs Lily Mallender was having her weekly treatments and talking, with a curled, but beautifully shorn lip, about her husband's gastric entrapments to Rita Mahoonie whose eyebrows were being plucked to near extinction.

Jake, meantime, rearranged his belongings at the desk, trying both to lick moisture back into his lips and to manage the eyes that strained to open and whose lids felt like they'd been sandpapered by a bored child.

"So, listen," Frank was saying to him, leaning forward to deliver his periodic and pointless sermon. "Give yourself a break. Get your head down. Keep off the booze. Go home when the others go. Find yourself an interest. You get my point?"

"Who's the guy downstairs?"

"He's none of your business."

"He said my snoring was a fucking noise. Who is he?"

"No, Jake."

"I want to apologise."

“He’s a guy they found asleep down at the railway station, turns up here with nothing to say as to why. No I.D. Vagrant. He’s on the midday train back east. Or at least he’d better be.”

Jake looked down into the last few dregs of the zipper bag.

“Where’s the pool chalk?”

“There was no pool chalk.”

“Is that all the money there was?”

“That’s it.”

The zipper bag lay empty on the desk.

“You got any spare cash, Frank? I’m clean out of milk.”

“No, I haven’t. Now go home.”

“What kind of day is it?”

“Bright.”

“Fuck.” Jake blew on the bones on the backs of his hands.

“How old are you, Jake?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Don’t let’s see you for a while, huh. Let’s see if we can have ourselves a summer of love.”

“Where’s his zipper? The guy downstairs. He’s got a zipper, right?”

“Leave. Go home. Learn some lessons.”

“What’s he got?”

“Jake.”

“Few bits and bobs...Uncle Frank?”

“He’s got a packed bag.”

“How packed?”

“Packed.”

“And he’s new to town?”

“As far as I know. Now go. And watch yourself. He shakes, he sniffs. I don’t know, Jake, there’s something.”

Jake sat and waited on a low stucco wall, the brightness making him squint, ironically, like a man in the throes of concentration. He’d gone across to Parker’s general store and bought gum, keeping his slitted eyes on the doors of the Police Department building and the three stone steps that led to the sidewalk. But, while he spent his sticks of peppermint gum, chewing hard and trying with all his might to keep watching that door, to wait for those vagrants’ shoes to walk down the steps and to see just how packed the packed bag was, he missed him. Snared both by Rita Mahoonie crossing the street in a dress too thin and summery and the sudden, excitable whirl of the key-cutting machine next to Parker’s, he never saw the doors of the building open those first few inches, or the man stand in the doorway, drop his packed bag to the floor and stoop to tie the laces of his worn winter boots.

*

At 11.45 John Cassidy was in the small, square waiting room at the railway station, the packed bag down at his feet, the coat unfastened and the efforts to restart his same failed system seen in the rapid blinking, the movements of the mouth and the jerks of the fingers and feet.

Sometimes he lifted his head to look at the woman and the young boy who sat close to the opened door. Sometimes he stole glances at the boy, at the excitement when his mother looked his way, and the uncertainty and tension when she didn't. He caught how she tidied him up; the way her mayfly fingers adjusted his collar or pushed the flick of hair away from his face. Sometimes, in his half-listening to them, he got snippets, pieces of the puzzle: The boy was going to see his father. His father had been away for most of his life. The boy's memories of him were so isolated and brief they hardly made sense and in spite of his mother's insistence, in spite of her attempts to generate something upbeat, he remembered little that moved of his father. John could see in the way his face played its animations like piano keys that he was working the scale between hope and disappointment and back, between a good day and a bad day, between what he might resent and what he might forgive.

"Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison," he whispered to himself. "Monroe, Adams, John Quincy, Jackson." He stopped. His crooked nose took an inhalation, his head tilted a few degrees to the right. "Are you checking on me?" he said.

The woman and the boy glanced up. They looked first at John and then towards the doorway which, from where they were sitting, framed nothing but the prairie land beyond the tracks.

"I said are you checking on me?"

Slowly, and in incremental shuffles, Jake presented himself in the frame of the waiting-room door. "How did you see me?"

"I have a nose and a pair of ears."

The young boy looked quickly from one to the other, and his mother, fearing the imminence of bloodshed, whispered for him to stop.

"I came to apologise, for the snoring."

John stared at him a good ten seconds. "You want to make some money?" he said, still staring.

"How much?"

"Ten dollars."

"What for?"

"Information."

"What kind of information. Some might be ten dollars, some might be fifty."

John licked his lips. "Where are the homesteads?" he said.

"That's fifty."

John narrowed his eyes, heard the soft implosions around his mouth, "Van Buren, Harrison, Tyler, Polk." He unzipped the packed bag, took out and counted the fifty dollars, held it between his fingers.

"You first," Jake said.

John handed over the money.

Jake looked down at the bag. "Over the rickety bridge, beyond Coronation Point. Why do you want to know?"

"That's my business."

"You looking for the Cassidy man? That's where he lives. They say he has land. And money."

The woman brushed at the young boy's coat, at the collar and sleeve.

"You want to make some more?" John said. "Five hundred dollars."

He stood then, his worn winter boots squeaking as he did so. "Do you know these people?" he said, nodding towards the woman and the boy.

"No. Do you?"

"No, I don't. So, here's the wager. We'll guess the boy's birthday," he said. "What's your name?"

"Ben," the boy said, tapping his polished tan shoes on the floor.

"We'll guess Ben's birthday. You can have one guess and I'll have two. Odds of two to one, right? Right?"

Jake nodded.

"Except...I'll give you odds of a hundred to one. If I get closest you give me five dollars, but if you do, I'll give you five hundred."

"Let's see it."

John crouched down again to reach into the bag and unpicked a small compartment at the side. Then, looking between Jake, the boy, and the five hundred dollars, he counted the notes out and held them rolled in his hand. The clock showed six minutes to twelve as the two men faced each other.

"Who goes first?" Jake said, slavering.

"You do."

Jake, a slight whisky sweat rising up on his skin, looked away from where the money was and over towards the boy, who glanced up at his mother, then back towards Jake. "He looks like a summer child. I'll say June...seventeenth."

"That's your guess?"

"That's it."

The boy and his mother switched their rapt attention to John. They got the old navy coat that hung from his shoulders, and they got the scuffed boots with soles as thin as ham slices. What neither of them got, though, as the train sounded in the distance and the station bell rang out, was that the young, dishevelled man with the dog-legged nose and the pale-yellow bruising around the eye, whose ear visibly twitched as the train sounds got closer, was getting his system back. He looked hard again at Jake and tried to weigh up more than his stab in the dark. He leant in towards the boy, took a ten-dollar bill from behind his ear and put it, folded as small as a stamp, in his hand.

“That’s for your help, Ben,” he said. Then he turned to Jake, picked up his bag and said, “June sixteenth, June eighteenth. Now give me the five dollars, I’m getting on the train.”

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