

Chapter 1

They got me good

I am moved outside. Legs, not working. Face, punch-numb. A number in my pocket. The scrawl says Dakota. They got me good tonight. I shouldn't have touched. I know that. But the truth is she grabbed me. Grabbed my hands, started moving them up and down. That should tell you all you need to know about me, about my luck. I'm always getting singled out, beaten on, always getting bullseyed for a whipping. Karma has a hard-on for old Huck.

I had walked in, past the big burly bone breakers—juicers just itching for a reason—paid my entrance, politely ordered a bourbon. A few rounds later, I was getting oiled up, and trying to cultivate a bit of privacy, when everything started to tornado, engulfing me in its naked, self-loathing madness. In its venereal prostitution. I hated these places. But I came a lot. City brothels, filthily milling out questions as directives. Destroying you with them. *Buy me a drink, buy yourself a dance, another drink, mind if I sit down? THAT'S TWENTY DOLLARS.* Let me save you some money, if you don't already know, aren't wise to it: if you want somewhere to sit, wait, brood, if you want somewhere to regret and

better yourself, a strip club is the wrong joint. There is no nursing your drink, killing time. There is only twenty dollars a button. They take your finger, press it for you. Then repeat. And more when you're in blackout. I've seen continents of wealth swiped clean away from the unconscious. That's why I keep my credit card in my shoe, and pay for everything in cash.

Head resting on sidewalk, everything spinning (I've been at it heavy, even for me), left eye closed, right on taxi detail, I need an escape from my current mess. (Just so you know, that's how it is with me: new ground, becomes current mess, requires a taxi, to new ground, becomes more mess, and on and on. Taxis are how I deal.) I hustle to my feet, trying my best to look like a citizen, flag a ride. It doesn't appear to be working too well. Not today. A hundred yellows fly by, ignoring my hands, my obvious need. At last, one takes pity, unlocks his doors, takes my address.

Safely tucked up in the back, I try closing my eyes, catch a little shut-eye, but the spinning picks up speed and almost lands me in trouble. I open them just in time to save myself extra for the cleanup. I am known for vomiting in cabs. Among other things, that is what I am known for. And fighting. On the North side of Chicago, I am known as an aggressive, shitty brawler.

The driver pulls up to my apartment, quotes me a fare. I reach into my pocket. Aside from my cell phone, cigarettes, keys and Dakota's number, I have nothing. I wonder where

all the money went. I must have had a hell of a time. I clap my hands together to get the driver's attention.

“Look here, friend, I'm not going to insult you and tell you I have the money. The truth is I had a bunch of it, loads of it, probably enough for a hundred taxis, but somehow and along the way I've managed to blow it all. Maybe I got a hand job out of it, maybe I didn't, I don't want to speculate. A girl called Dakota, she might know. Anyway, all that's beside the point. What I'm trying to say is: let's work this out the old-fashioned way, like men. Forget calling the police. The fucking paperwork makes them edgy.”

So here I am: outside my apartment, me swinging wildly, trying to land the sleeper.

The driver is old school, pure technique. Sticking and moving, jabbing. Lots of jabbing. Skin splits, blood pours, eyes close. He punishes me bad. He turns on the style and really lays it on me. You should know, I have a knack for that. For picking fights with natural fighters. From down on the floor, wheezing, through what I'm certain is a punctured lung, I see him smiling. He's got his money's worth, *double* probably. I try smiling back, but my lip's busted, and I can't. I start coughing, coughing up a storm. “You okay?” he says. “Fine,” I say. It would be good to be able to fight. Properly, I mean. It would be nice to feel more involved—in the fighting process. I make a mental note to learn, maybe take some private classes.

Three in the morning, I enter the house. A letter from Lipton has been slipped under my door. *Not tonight*. I put it to the side. I make straight for the painkillers, double dose. It's five, and the birds are taunting, pecking away at my spirit. Each chirp punches into the middles of my brain. The pills have done their work, numbed my left eye, giving me one pain-free screwed-up socket. I try to think of anything else, anything aside from my left eye, that I'm okay with. I decide no. And like always I think about "the other thing"—you know, about hitting the goodbye button, flicking the sayonara switch. Just thoughts though. No razorblades. Not tonight, not tonight, no razorblades, not tonight. I fade out.

I wake up, still on the bathroom floor, curled up with a glass of lemonade and a cheese sandwich, half-eaten and placed on the tile next to my left cheek. I check my watch. It says nine. Somewhere in the four-hour blackout, I must have gotten up and made myself something to eat. I'm good like that. I have a blackout work ethic. Not a lot drunks can say that. I think it's because if I didn't I wouldn't get things done, meaning I wouldn't survive, wouldn't exist. I look around for the plate. No plate. I try to get up, using the toilet bowl for leverage, but my legs aren't cooperating, and I fall back down, hitting my head on the porcelain. Unable to take another beating, I stay down. I drain the lemonade, and it's not enough, and I try to flush the cheese sandwich, but it doesn't go down. I watch it a while. Watch the bread bloat, break, float on the surface. And fetal position, eyes closed, I pass out again.

Purple means blood

Two days later. I've picked myself up, and had one of my *fatal recollections*. The kind I get when I come out of a drunk, and remember what I'd planned on doing, before booze got me sidetracked. Like turning up to a first date. I'd made one, but missed it, meaning that needed cleaning up. I drag myself into less-stained clothes, dunk my head in a basin of ice-water (to cool the sickness off me). Then I exit my apartment, and flag a cab.

"There were three of them," I say, "black guys."

So here I am, lying again. And although it's to a new girl—meaning one who doesn't know my bullshit *personally*—I'm still nervous. That's because *every* woman, by the age of sixteen, has been dumped on enough times (by guys like me) to have formed a general suspicion against men. Meaning, even if you come at them with perfectly acted sincerity and well-manicured lies, the chances of them buying what you're selling is at best a coin toss.

"I didn't want to mention that they were colored. What with racial profiling being the way it is. But they *were* black. And they *did* snatch the white lady's purse. And there's no escaping the facts. Even when they *do* leave a bad taste in your mouth."

This girl—a waitress called Rumi—isn't saying anything. Not a goddamn word. She's just studying me, eye-

grinding, cranking up the pressure. Making me sweat like a rapist.

“The point is,” I say, “I *had* to fight them. Even if it meant getting beaten up and missing our date.”

Obviously, I can't tell her the truth: that I'd missed our date because I'm an alcoholic. And I've difficulty staying sober enough to remember plans. But defending a woman, outnumbered three to one? She'd have to be twisted not to like that, to get off on it even. Of course, I have to sell it first. And my sweat-dripping, voice-shaking, eyes-shifting isn't helping.

“So that's why you didn't show?”

I don't say anything. Instead, I point to the bruises. The ones on my face. Then I lift up my shirt. I show her the purple banana across my ribs: the cab driver's work.

“They did that to you?”

She brushes her fingers across my side. There is no pain. It looks bad, but only because I bruise easy. Still, I take the opportunity to wince, clutch the bruising, squeeze my eyes.

“Shit,” she says.

“It looks worse than it is.” I make a half-turn, giving her a full showing of the purple, hoping she knows that means blood under the surface.

“Did you file a report?”

“The police?” I suck in air like an old person. “There's not much *they* can do. I'm not saying it's their fault,” I say. “No, I blame the system.”

Let me tell you about the system. I use it a lot, lay things on its doorstep a bunch. Everyone understands the system, understands getting beaten up, picked on, singled out, fucked over.

She studies me some more, but thankfully not for too long, before nodding her head.

“All right,” she says, “meet me here at eleven.” She checks her watch and frowns. “I got to get back.”

I pocket the card

I’ve got a couple of hours to kill before eleven. So a few Valium, to smooth things out, and off I go in search of somewhere to kill time. I pass a couple of bars. But they’re not for me. They’re places I’ve caused bother, broken things, probably owe some money. So I give them a miss. I step into the road and force a cab to pull over. I climb in and hand over the name of a place, a snooty four-room box, up in the Gold Coast. It’s a hard-to-find, and cool-because-of-it, hole, stinky with pretension. I hate this place, and all places like it. There’s nothing worker-bee about them, nothing honest. They’re a stopgap for bankers, lawyers, for legal thieves (the big robbers) itching to scratch a dirty itch.

I enter, sit down, order myself two fancy beers with silly names, and set my alarm for ten thirty. I look around. It’s too early for the real animals, but already the place is

peppered with yawning girls—heads sitting on rib cages, sitting on stilts, sitting on five-hundred-dollar heels—sniffing out the good bets. Yes, yes, I know: I loathe this joint, yet here I am. *Because* I'll be safe here. With beers, bad company, I will not get carried away, I will not lose myself in a good time, and miss my second shot.

A bloody-nosed emaciation comes over to the bar. She sits down—next to me, but almost on my lap. She asks if I'd like to buy her a drink. I close my eyes. The answer is no, yes, no... back and forth. Because she is annoying. Because she is hot. My problem is I am weak. I'm not good at stopping when I need to: at flirting. I see a light, I see green, I take it too far, I get slapped, or worse. That's my M.O. My downstairs runs things, gets me into all sorts of trouble. But when I turn she's gone. Probably looking for a better benefactor.

I finish the bottles, pick up the menu, choose a country. The Sudan. Even though the menu says otherwise, I'm almost certain they don't make beer over there. I call the bartender over, and order two. I know I'll be sober on beers—yellow, fizzy water. I know I'll be dry, bored, awake. I know I will keep my mind right. I glue my eyes to my wrist. I watch the second hand. I avoid the erupting bustle, the comingling of importantly chic, chiseled, gaunt, with the aging, gut-hanging, chauffeured, fat-dripping moneyed types. I take another sip, disgusted. Look at them: oiled prostitutes and the vinegared rich—them that need to pay, and them that demand payment. It's not the prostitution that upsets

me. Hell, everyone sells something to get by. It's the not calling it what it is—that's what gets to me—the nineteen-year-old marrying the sixty-year-old for "love," the sixty-year-old marrying his could-be granddaughter for "companionship."

"Change your mind?"

The clothes rack from a minute ago is back from the toilet—from a nose job, from powdering her nose—and she is pressing me. It's the cocaine. Women do that on coke. They act like men. They get all belligerent. That's not for me, that kind of obviousness, so I ignore her. She handles the small of my back. She does it like a pro, her fingernails trailing, suggestively.

"About buying me a drink," she says.

I don't want any trouble tonight. Tonight I want to make my date.

"I never considered paying for your company."

Ignoring my fuck-you, she tells me that she likes me.

I want to buy her a drink. Ten drinks. I want to take her home, to the toilets, to the alleyway. What I *really* want is to tie her up. I want to break some laws. Some big greasy laws.

"Look," I say, "you don't like me."

"How do you know?"

"Because you don't know me."

"Yes," she says, starting up again with the fingernails, "that could be why I do."

"What's your game?"

“No game. Just thought you looked okay.”

“Well I’m not.”

“Buy me a drink.”

“I’m engaged.”

I am not engaged. I will never be engaged. I think marriage is for suckers. For people committed to not getting ahead.

“Liar.”

“I am,” I say, “and she’s the jealous type.” I raise my shirt. “Purple means internal bleeding.”

“Your wife did that to you?”

“Fiancée.”

“Kids?”

“What?”

“You have kids?”

“Look,” I say, “I’m not being rude...” I point for her to leave, but she remains where she is.

“You’re full of it,” she says.

“Excuse me?”

“I said: you’re full of *shit*.”

She’s right, of course. But I wonder how she knows. I must ooze it. It must be coming off me something rotten, like a stink, like an obvious stench.

“If I’m right”—she slides across a card—“then call me... But not if you really *do* have kids.” She stands up, adjusts her tights. Brilliant legs. I can feel a rise. “I can’t stand the little shits.”

And with that she's gone. Peach hair, velvet skin, eyes emerald.

I pocket the card.

Drinks, The Conversation

I do not use the card. Not that night. Instead, I stick it in my pocket. I sit and sip and finish my beer, then drink another, and another, and more, but only beers. And I make my date. Then more drinks, proper drinks this time, with the waitress. And I'm on fine form. I make her laugh. She has a nice laugh. I like hearing it, like knowing that I did that. I forgot I could be funny. I've been kind of serious for a while now, really in the dumps, depressed. She turns to me, once we're deep in the swirl, once we're half-blind, and slurring, and sexual. And she tells me she has a small mattress. She blushes. "Not many guys know that." She's indicating that she doesn't sleep around, that her offering herself to me makes me special. She takes my hand and we take a cab and no one throws up in the back and we go back to hers and no one throws up at hers and we have sex and no one throws up. And it's nice. And she passes out. And I lie there. I don't sleep too good, so I think, because I think a lot, until it gets light, then I stop thinking and pass out. And when we awake, she smiles at me, like she's not embarrassed, so I

smile back, because I'm not embarrassed, and we go out for breakfast and it feels good and not forced and I tell her all about the book I'm writing. How I'm writing it. And the creative process. Then I tell her all about Kafka. She seems interested in what I have to say. She is a good listener. She asks questions. Like if all writers are tragic. She says she's a small town girl, and just a waitress and she doesn't know these things, and she apologizes. She is embarrassed and it is endearing. I tell her not to be embarrassed. And I tell her yes. All writers are tragic. "Even you?" she asks. "Even me," I say. "You're sad?" she says. I nod. She says she's sorry. And we have more drinks. She's not working for two days so after breakfast we go out for drinks. For two days. We drink for two days after breakfast. And it's nice. I need a woman who drinks. A woman who drinks like me. A woman who will not judge how much I drink. She has lots of questions about my book. And it's hard keeping the lies straight. So in the end I tell her I don't want to talk about it. That makes her sad. And that, making her sad, makes me sad. So I drink. And she drinks. And we both talk less, and drink the same, maybe I drink a little more. But I'm bigger, and not much more. And not enough to make a difference. Not enough to let her judge me. We don't talk much, and we have sex. A lot of sex. From really late to really early. After her shift we go at it for hours. Mouths everywhere, flesh everywhere, rolling around. I take to sleeping at hers, and do so every night, save two, over the next four weeks. Last

night we had “the conversation” so now we’re officially an item. I like that. I like that she is my girl.

Some girls get sloppy. It normally takes about a month for them to stop putting the effort in. Then they start slipping, start acting loose. I dated this one girl, a real girly girl, until we got about a month in. Then she started belching, farting up a storm, taking dumps with the door open. I mean, Christ. Masculine women slay me. They kill me in the downstairs. I couldn’t fuck her after that. As hot as she was, I just couldn’t get the engine running. I dated this other girl who was perfect. Smart, funny, hot, tight, clever, considerate, beautiful feet. She had it all. Until a month in. Until I took a look at her hands. Not just a cursory glance to make sure she was holding ten. No, I mean, like a proper investigation of her knuckles to tips. I found this one loose hair on her right index finger. A big curly dirty number. It was the most disgusting thing I’d ever seen. So I had to end it. Then I met this other girl. And she was great. Except she had big feet. I couldn’t deal with that. I like small feet, dainty feet, doll’s feet, Chinese feet. So I had to sit her down. Then another girl, her problem was that she snored, and not in a cute way either, but a proper wake-you-up, old man horn. There were other girls too. Other deal-breakers... I hope you’re getting my point. It’s not that I want to be alone. No, no it’s not that. But it’s karma, man, it has me noticing things. It points out line-crossers, then rubs them in my face. Karma, I’m telling you,

karma has a hard-on for me. Like it *needs* me to be lonely. Like it feeds off it.

But right now I don't feel lonely. Not with this girl. No, this girl is perfect. Without getting into it, I really feel like, well, like I could be, you know what I'm trying to say... I've stopped going to strip clubs, stopped feeling their pull. That's how I know. We hit two months and I couldn't be happier. I think about saying the words. I've never said them before. But I'm honestly considering it.

Done

It's a normal day. She heads off to work. I am in love. I head back to mine. I can only shower at hers. I like to take long baths, do some thinking, but she's lost the plug, so I head back to mine. I have a nicer apartment—hers is a shoebox with cockroaches and other creepy crawlies—but she's funny about sleeping over so we always stay at hers. On her small mattress. Watch TV, eat hot-box pizza, fuck, laugh. We both find the same things funny, we're both into observational humor. So normally I meet her at the diner, after her shift, then go back to hers. But the day I spend at mine, getting drunk, taking baths, listening to records, not writing. And today is a day like the other days. Today is a normal day.

I am in the bath. I hear noises. Fuck. I must have left the door open. *A man is here. He has come to kill me.* My bones freeze. I'd checked the door, and rechecked, and kept rechecking to make sure my checking was right. I have big time OCD. Somehow I must have fucked up though. Because I can hear him, tiptoeing about real quiet.

Let me tell you about OCD... In fact, let me ask you this: Have you ever done that? Done what I've just done? Checked something four times, and by the fourth time you know you've checked it at least once, but then for some reason this thing inside you, this driving force, gets you to check again, even though you don't want to? And when you're sure you've checked it enough, you leave it alone. But then after a while you start to doubt all your checks and rechecks. So you check again. Have you ever done that? Well that's OCD. It's hard work. It adds to "the cloud." Have I told you about "the cloud"? That's what I call my sadness. I call it "the cloud" because that's what it is. This big mass of grayness, hovering over me, following me around, making everything seem drab and pointless and dull and dark. It's been around for forever (I had a tough childhood), but it's gotten worse since I got my inheritance, quit my job...

He's in the hall. I'm sure of it. I keep the water turned off for the longest time, my ears pricked, tuned in for a pin-drop. Nothing. He knows I'm listening so he's staying perfectly still. I psych myself up, slam my head into the wall a few times just to get the blood going, and then, courage up, I climb out of the bath and creep around the apartment, like

an intruder, dripping soap, knife in hand, ready to stab, and keep stabbing. (It started three months ago—keeping a knife at hand. It began innocently enough, with just one, under my bed. Now I keep them in the kitchen—on top of the fridge; in the bathroom—by the side of the sink; and in the living room—down the back of the couch.) The locks haven't been tampered with. Everything is secure. Everything is always secure and the locks have never been picked, and that surprises me every time. On the way back to the bathroom I fall on the wet floor, bang my head on the corner of the hall table, on metal. Head throbbing, bleeding too, I rinse off and lie down. I know falling asleep after a head injury is dangerous. But I'm feeling kind of dizzy, so I let myself pass out. I am always doing stuff like that. Banging my head on purpose. Banging my head by accident. This is a normal day.

Ever have your entire world come crashing down? That ever happen? And I don't mean, do you know someone it's happened to? I mean, has it ever happened *to you*? Because if not then you'll have no idea what it feels like next.

I never thought I'd fall—in love. With drugs, with booze, sure. But not with a person. Not really. As a rule, if I'm with a girl it's only because I've managed to curb all my natural impulses to run. And I can only manage that for about a month. Then it's "we need to talk." I've never been told that, never heard "we need to talk." Not once. I am always the runner.

I go to the diner to pick her up. And everything's the same, same as normal. On the way back she tells me about her day—her co-workers, her stupid manager, the funny things that happened, the good customers, the rude customers—same as normal. We get back to hers. She says we need to have a chat. "Cool," I say, and sit down. I like having chats with Rumi, but when we sit down she looks, I don't know, edgy, and she's not normally like that. So I take her hand, because, you know, I love her, but she pulls away.

"I don't think you're a writer, Huck."

"I love you."

"You keep saying you're a writer—"

"I *am* a writer. I love you."

"But I haven't seen you write a thing."

"I love you."

"In fact, I haven't seen *anything* you've written."

"I—"

"Do you know, I doubt very much you've even read Kafka, or if you have, you've read one book, maybe not even that, maybe you just know some lines, quotes to make you look clever. But *you* know you haven't read him, and you hate yourself for it. Well... now you know I know..."

"Look—"

"I can't be with someone who lies to me," she says. "It's over."

I feel like crying. I feel like crying hard. I feel like getting on my knees, and begging her not to do this. But I know girls. I know what they go for. And what turns them

off. So I keep my feelings to myself. Instead I stare at her, blankly. I stare at her like she stares at me. If this was a movie, the screen would show two strangers in a filthy shoebox room, staring.

“Look, this is for you.” She hands me an envelope. I take it. “Don’t read it until you get home,” she says.

“Okay,” I say.

“Please go home,” she says.

There’s not much I can say after that, so I say nothing. I stand up, pull on my pants, socks, shoes, shirt, grab my wallet, keys, phone, cigarettes, weed, papers, and I go. I catch a cab. When I get home I open the letter.

Huck sleeps with me

And I sleep alone

You lie

You drink

That's all you do

You are not a writer

Rumi

Chapter 2

The day after

“You’re a liar,” she said, then she kicked me out. Out of her life. Like I was nothing. Like I was dirt...

Today is the day after. And I want to kill myself. The cloud is black today. The cloud is not gray. Some days it’s gray, some days even cream. On cream days I can be jovial. On cream days I can be a real laugh. My problem is those days are rare. See, *things* set me off. Small stuff pulls me down. Trivial shit shakes me. It shouldn’t be that way, I know, but I have bad wiring...

I’d considered the words. I’d fucking considered them, then said them, then not heard them back, then got dumped. That’s a lot of shit to deal with for a man with bad wiring. Meaning losing her devastates me. It leaves me thinking about the other thing. Again. About razor blades. And bathtubs.

You think I’m fucking around? Well, I’m not. It’s in my DNA. My father, his brother, an uncle. It’s in my fucking genes... This is biology. Not a cry for help... I hate those jerk-offs looking to get famous. Slicing sideways, parked outside the emergency room. Wrists held out, so the cameraman gets his angle. That noise is Hollywood. That’s

not me. I am not an actor. I am real. And I am sad. And my sadness is authentic... I'm seeing if things shift, if the cloud eases up. If not, then like I said... the other thing... And that's definitely real. The other thing is as real as it gets.

Not that I'll be missing much. If I go. The world is so full of shit, no one can breathe anyway... Have a look. A *good* look. See everyone running around, fake-smiling, plastic-laughing, praying the curtain won't slip? Just going through the motions. Dinner parties, promotions, drinks after work... vitamins on line, quality time. Billions of people, shuffled into boxes, medicating through the madness... Trying to find a fix.

If I *was* a writer, I'd write about that, about the fix.

If I was a writer.

Rewind three months

I'd stumbled into the diner where she worked. An all-hours joint, designed for people who kept strange feeding times. You know, eggs at four in the morning. One of *those* kinds of places. Drunk, as always, I'd been strong-armed through the doors by a good-time girl, a dayshift laborer at one of the handier gentleman's clubs, one of the seedier numbers. I'd been trying to get my end away, off the clock, free of charge, but she wouldn't let me at it. Not without pie first.

And even though I was three sheets, and I never notice anything, I noticed her, the waitress, Rumi.

For days after, I'd come in and watch and get real mad. The way some of these assholes talked to her: get me this, change that, where's my coffee? swearing, no thank you, bad tip, no tip. Several times I wanted to follow her tables out into the lot, for a friendly word, introduce them to a hurting. And if God hadn't stricken me with such a crippling lack of ability, I would have. This one guy, a trucker probably, turned real nasty when she wouldn't give up her number. Called her a vagina. He called her the V word. I couldn't believe it. I'm a cunt but I've never called a girl the V word. The V word is off limits, and everybody knows it. Anyway, she just moved on to the next table, paid him no mind, like "fuck you, you can't hurt me." She had me after that. I almost called her over, told her she was amazing. But I didn't. That's not my style.

... My head held its usual tenderness. The mornings were getting steeper. I carried myself—everything throbbing—down sidewalks, past the downtrodden, the highflyers, crack houses, skyscrapers, bars, shops, street vendors. I walked clear across town, hoping that my lungs would fill themselves and push out the poison. Down a back alley I had to stop, throw up, spit, wipe my mouth. A sudden downpour of rain hit me. Karma working its usual. By the time I got to the diner, I was shriveled. I considered going back and changing but when I entered she was there, and

smiling, and calling me over. She had never done that before: call me by my name. She. Knew. My. Name. Soon I had hot coffee, and a towel. She smiled at me. I smiled back, my chest thumping, hurting, thumping. “Listen,” she said, “I’ve seen you, come in here, pretending not to watch me, and I admire your persistence and you seem like a nice guy—polite, tipper—so if you want to give it a shot, I can meet you outside at eleven, and you can buy me a drink, and tell me why I should go out on a proper date with you.” She said it in one long breath. Then didn’t wait for a reply. She just turned, and left.

... And you know the rest. I’d missed that date, lied about it, gotten a second chance, managed to fuck that up. Now here I was, the day after the letter, depressed, alone in my apartment, and thinking about the other thing.

Red (and Ed)

It got worse. After Rumi. I nosedived into the abyss. The hurt went into my bones and stayed there. I had never felt this before. This soul-crunching, heart-ripping madness. It ground me down, and sucked out my marrow.

For two weeks I was on autopilot. All I could do was go from bed to liquor store to couch to bed. I couldn’t handle bars. I was too depressed for people...

There is an alleyway next to my apartment: a shortcut to the liquor store...

I met Red falling down the alleyway, drunk, tripping over bags of rolled-up essentials: of cans, old trousers, flat batteries. He had packed them for a war—for a battle with wind and rain and stealing. And I had spilled them with my legs, broke open his tied plastic bags with my clumsiness. You're in my house, his eyes said. Dead eyes that held my breath.

I was drunk, and he was drunk, and who was drunker I don't know, but I fumbled sorry (no eye contact and didn't mean it) just so I could be on my way, back to my apartment, bottles in hand.

But he stopped me... I got to my feet, checked the bottles for cracks. No cracks. I wanted to leave, needed to, but he stopped me. He put his hands out in front, saying stop, saying I had to, so I did.

It was noon, maybe a little before, and I'd had whiskey, and he'd had whiskey. And it came on me strong, hosed down on me, as he spoke: "You need to watch yourself," he said.

"Sorry," I said, intimidated. He was old and out of shape. And I was pretty sure he could take me.

With dirty fingernails sweeping the ground, he invited me to take a seat and spend time... And because I had nothing better to do, and my head was tired, and the way he

said it was lonely, and I was too, and mainly, and above all, because he was tougher than me—that's what I did.

We got to talking over a bottle. We drank from it, me and him, passing it, back and forth, me and him, in a rhythm: talking and drinking, getting into it: him about the world, and what a cunt it was, me about Rumi, and how hard I missed her. And although listening was tough—I just wanted to talk, I didn't want to listen—connecting made me feel human. For the first time in a while.

And I didn't say it, but I was glad of the company. I had no other friends. And I was glad of the company.

... Red's company. Not Ed's company. Ed is Red's friend. He is skinny and black and about fifty and has wild hair and buck teeth. Ed is not my friend. Ed does not like me. I meet Ed a few hours after I meet Red. He has a spot all the way over in the financial district, far away from here, where he says the begged money is okay—first thing in the morning, at lunchtime, and after five. By seven, he says, the place is dead, and he gets to run his spot. "No one bothers me up there. There's nothing worse than being bothered. And no one bothers me up there." He asks me my name, so I tell him, and he tells me I have a good name, a strong name, that he read *Tom Sawyer* when he was a kid, and that he liked Huckleberry more than Tom, and that I have a good name. I tell him thanks. He tells me not to take it personal, but, he says, I'm weak. He says he can tell I'm weak just by looking at me, and that he doesn't like weak people, and

that he doesn't like me. I don't know what to say to that so I say nothing. I look at Red, but Red says nothing, so I say nothing. He tells me I look sad. I tell him I am sad. He asks me what I am sad about. I tell him about Rumi.

"I met a girl. She's a waitress. And a good girl. And I met her. And we dated for two months. Then she dumped me. She said that I was a liar. And that she couldn't be with a liar. So she dumped me." I show him the letter.

"A girl dumped you?"

"Yes."

"A girl you dated for two months?"

"Yes."

"Because she thinks you lied to her?"

"Yes."

"Did you lie to her?"

I don't say anything. I don't like how he's asking me what he's asking me.

"Did you lie to her?"

"Yes."

"What did you lie to her about?"

"That's not the point."

"Listen," he says, "you're weak." He turns to Red. "I'm going to go, Red. This kid isn't for me." I look at Red, and Red doesn't say anything, so I don't say anything either. Ed stands up. "Listen, kid, you got any money? I want a cheeseburger."

I reach into my pocket and pull out five dollars and give him five dollars.

“See here, why don’t you give me ten?”

“I’m not giving you ten, Ed.”

“Well, fuck you then.”

I do not like Ed. And I am happy to see him go.

That night I sleep in the alleyway with Red. It is cold and dark and mean and bad. But it’s colder and darker and meaner and badder in my apartment on my own. We drink whiskey all night. I pretend to listen. And when he stops talking—to take a swig of whiskey—I talk about Rumi. Until I take a swig. Then he starts up again. No one is listening. But we pretend to listen. It’s just like real life. But at least I am not alone. The morning comes. And I am cold and I am wet and I can’t take any more. Being homeless isn’t like I thought. It is hard goddamn work. And I am not made for it.

“Listen, Red, I’ve got something to tell you, and you’re going to think that I’m lying, then you’re going to get angry, then you’re going to want to hit me,” I say, “but don’t. Just listen.” I’m still sore from a couple of rights—Red’s one of those natural fighters—he hit me with last night: because I wouldn’t give him the bottle, because he was finishing it too fast, and we were running out, and the liquor store was shut, and it had to last us until eleven, when I could buy more. I tried to reason with Red, about the drink, but Red’s an alcoholic and you can reason with an alcoholic, just not about the drink.

“What is it, kid?”

“I’d like a promise first—that you’re not going to hit me.”

“Kid, I’m not going to lie to you. I could tell you that I’m not going to hit you, but we both know I’ve got no control over it. If it’s any consolation, it’s nothing personal.”

I scurry back a little on my heels, to give me some distance, but he shuffles forward, keeping me in range.

“See this building, right here?”

“I’m not blind, kid.”

“Well, I live in it. Apartment 606.”

Red grins, then grins wide, then starts to shake, then starts to laugh. “You live in this building?” He slaps the concrete with his hand.

“Yes.”

“And you slept out here?”

“Yes.”

More laughing.

“And why would you do that?”

And I tell him. “Because I’m lonely, Red.” And he stops laughing. And we don’t say anything. Not for a while. We sit there in silence. I’m not good with silence, so I play a song in my head. I play Dinah Washington’s “Me and My Gin.” I only have one Dinah Washington CD, *The Best of Dinah Washington*, but I know all the songs on it, word-perfect. “Me and My Gin” is my favorite. Which is strange because I don’t much like gin. But the song is great and her voice is great and it’s a song I play a lot in my head. I like to play music in my head. Especially when I am alone, or nervous.

Which is most of the time... I start to get dizzy. My stomach only has the whiskey in it and that doesn't feel too good and I throw up and my stomach hurts and I know I need to eat. There is a pizza joint a block over, next to the 7-Eleven, and it's a stand-up place. The pizza is good and cheap and by the slice and after closing, if they see homeless people milling around outside, they come out and give them free pizza. It's run by an Italian family, immigrants, and they are real stand-up. For some reason, though, they don't like me. When I go in, I get a look I don't like, like they don't like me, and that makes me nervous. So I hardly ever go. Maybe my head makes my world small. I don't know. All I know is I can't handle them staring at me today so I sit here with my stomach hurting. I drink more whiskey to make it feel good. But it feels worse... I decide that I want Red to move in with me. I know he'll be hard work but being alone is hard work and I'm lonely and I'm not doing too good on my own, so that's what I decide. I tell him. "We'll be on easy street, Red. No more sleeping rough. I have money, drink, everything. We'll be on easy street." I figure he'll be happy to be off the street, but instead he gets suspicious, and that upsets me.

"Shit, kid," he says. "I don't know you," he says. "How do I know you don't want to get me somewhere, do something, kill me or worse like something sexual?... Could be a serial killer, could be a sex-crazed, sick, stabbing, madhouse, crazy boy... what do you have to say to that, huh?"

"Nothing, Red. I don't have nothing to say to that."

“Well, work with me, kid, for Christ’s sake, it’s no good for me out here, I’m an old man.”

He says *old* like he’s saying *dying*, and I feel sorry for him. But I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do to convince him I’m not a sex-crazed, sick, stabbing, madhouse, crazy boy.

“How about you give me the key, let me check things out first *then* you come up five minutes later? Let’s do that, okay, kid?”

That sounds like a good idea, and I didn’t come up with it, and I wonder why I didn’t come up with it. “Fine, old man.” I hand him the key. He asks me the number again and I tell him “606” and he stands up, collects his things, and goes.

I wait the five, and another five, then go into the building, and head for the elevator. It’s stationary, stuck on seven. I keep pressing the button but it won’t budge. Someone has the porter key and has locked it off. *Fuck*. The tenants here rotate. A lot. This building is a game of musical chairs. I am in a game of musical chairs. And I hate it. There are always new faces appearing and smiling. New people to avoid. It is tiring.

While I wait for the elevator, I go to the mail slots, put my key in slot 606, jiggle it around—I have a bad key—and turn. Everything inside pours out like gravy, smothering me—flyers, bills, nothing handwritten. No love letters, or letters of any kind, just automated reminders, reminding me

that no one cares, that I don't matter. I stick them back, cram them in as they laugh at me. "You don't exist," they say.

The elevator comes. When it opens a girl walks out. And not just a girl; she is someone I know, someone I used to talk to, a girl I had dinner with once... I remember we drank a lot of wine. I remember that. And I remember her getting upset, but I don't remember why. It's been weird since then. Between me and her. Whenever she sees me, she puts her head down, and pretends *not* to see me. Like now.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi," she says. No eye contact. To stop her leaving, I block her way.

"Listen, about that night—"

"I don't have time, Huck. Got to run."

She puts her hands on me, and pushes, makes a little room, and squeezes past.

"Fuck you then."

Shit. I wish I hadn't said that. I'm always doing that. Acting hotheaded and regretting it right after. It's like a trait, like part of my makeup.

Elevator up to six...

I'm still feeling dizzy, struggling to walk, so I use the corridor walls to reach my door. When I get there I knock. I

envision Red with the breadknife. I wonder if he would stab me. I mean *really* stab me. I think he probably would. But I need the company. I knock again. And again, and again, and again... Knocking, calling out, waiting, knocking, getting mad. The angrier I get, the louder I become. I get pretty loud. I give myself a headache. I put my ear to the door. All I can hear is the sound of the wood. Wood is pretty quiet. Red has the only key. Without Red, *I* am homeless. I am homeless and Red has a home. The irony isn't lost on me. There is a spare key, but it's with a girl. A girl I dated a year ago. That relationship ended badly. Because of my temper. Now I am legally obligated to stay away from her. So her key is not an option.

My homosexual neighbor, the one I hate, opens his door, and mutters something. I can feel the anger rising. Muttering is for cowards. It is a violent form of cowardice. (I think about concepts, like cowardice, about what they mean. During my alone time, I work a lot of things out...) If he were smaller, and wasn't in shape, I'd have swung for him by now. *Look at him*. With his perfect teeth, all toned and tan. Check him out with his condescending helpfulness—always offering me this and that, and “we should catch up soon,” every goddamn time he sees me. You can't catch up with someone you've *never* had a conversation with. I should say that too, right after I punch him in the face. He throws parties all the goddamn time, but has he ever invited me to one? No he hasn't. Not one, in all the time I've lived here. I didn't always hate him—his name is Chuck, by the

way—I didn't always hate Chuck. I thought he was okay at first. But when he never invited me to his get-togethers, I figured him for a fake. I'm good at reading people...

“Everything okay there, Huckleberry?”

“Fine and dandy, everything's A-Okay, tip-top Chuck, see you soon.”

I turn away and carry on banging. He closes the door, but no footsteps follow. I can feel him peering through his peephole. Eye-raping me hard.

The banging continues until Mrs. Lipton (I'll tell you about her in a minute) opens her door.

“My dogs are asleep, Huck, you know their schedule. If you've lost it I have copies.”

“No need, Mrs. Lipton, I have it.”

I am updated regularly about Lipton's dogs. About their kidney infections, upset stomachs, nap times. She writes it all in letters and posts them under my door. When I'm drunk, I read them. I like the way she writes. Sometimes I'll come home drunk, hoping to find one of her letters, slipped under my door, and if there isn't one I get bummed out, then settle for reading one of her old letters. I save them in a drawer.

“Sorry, Mrs. Lipton. My friend has the key. And he's inside, asleep probably. I can't get in.”

“I can't have you banging, Huck. You know I like you, drunk that you are, but my dogs...”

I smile. She always brings up the drinking. But I like Mrs. Lipton, and I need her letters, so I let it slide.

“Sorry, Mrs. Lipton. I’ll stop.”

“They’ll be awake in an hour—you can try banging then.”

She waves, and goes back inside to her shows and knitting... Sometimes I think about Mrs. Lipton, on her own, and I get sad. She misses her husband. He’s been dead twenty years. Sometimes we talk in the corridor. Even though I don’t like making small talk, I do it. Hung over, drunk, or just not in the mood, it doesn’t matter. I do it anyway. Because she is a good woman. And because there aren’t many of those.

My back against the door, eyes closed, I drink, drink, drink until I drift.

Chapter 3

Not a man

I get hit. I get hit hard. I scream out. I touch the back of my head. I brush it with my hand. No blood. I am lying in my doorway. I look up to see Red. He is smiling.

He is wearing my robe—a gift, although I don't remember from whom... I have never worn it. It is too beautiful. I would worry about ash, burns, spills... but he does not worry about these things, and he wears it. And without underwear. I say nothing. I can see ash on the robe—and grime and grease and spilt scotch.

“You crying?”

I ignore him. I recheck my head.

“It looks like you've been crying,” he says. “Listen boy, enough of this crying bullshit. Crying doesn't get you anywhere. It just makes you to look wet and stupid and like a girl. You a girl, boy?”

“No, Red. I'm not.”

I feel embarrassed. I mean, Red's been to war. He's been to Vietnam, for fuck's sake. What have I been to? Fucking psychologists is what. I tell Red that too. He says *that's* my problem. At a hundred and fifty an hour, it's taken

the man out of me, he says. And I have to agree with him. Because Red's a proper man. And proper men, well, they could teach me a thing or two, you know, *really* sort my head out. I wonder about the army. Maybe I need to join up. Or the marines. I've always wanted to say I was in the marines. Or special forces. I bet even Red wasn't man enough for them. Getting in there, now that would be something. I make a note to check them out, have a look at their online brochure. Everyone's got an online brochure these days.

I put my hand out and motion for him to help me up. But he stares me down. So I use the door handle, which is hard because I'm still dizzy.

"Where've you been? I've been knocking."

"Inside." He yawns. My shirtsleeves ride up his wrists. I don't remember giving him my watch. "I took a nap," he says. He puts his arms back down. My watch disappears. He has scotch in his hand. A bottle.

"You found the scotch okay?"

He takes a swig, finishes the bottle and hands it to me.

"And my clothes?"

"Hey, fuck-nuts, *you're* the one who wanted me to come up to your apartment. Now you want to be a wiseass? Make cracks at my expense? Listen, if that's how it's going to be then I don't think—"

"You're right. I'm sorry."

I walk in and close the door. Red's things are steaming on my father's sideboard. That's the first thing I see, and it

affects me pretty bad. The sideboard was my father's. He wanted me to have it, when he died. And then he went. So now it's mine. I don't have anything else of his—not a watch or a pen or a tie, or anything—except for a bunch of money (that threw me onto easy street, into oncoming traffic) and this sideboard, this woody shrine. And although it is ugly, and it sticks out, and it stares at me, I love it because it was his, because he wanted me to have it: because he loved me. I never put anything on it. Not when I'm in blackout, or feeling sorry for myself, or ever. Not *ever*. And now Red's things are pressing their mark, their decay, into its wood, and it kills me, overwhelms me with a sadness, a real deep blueness. I don't say anything though. He didn't know. He didn't know about my dad, about him dying or the significance of the sideboard. So I let it slide. Instead I just move his stuff off the top, and place it on the floor. Then I walk over to the couch. There's nowhere to sit. More of Red's things are smothered across it, flowing out of bags, stinking up the place. *It's smearing street grime all over cream fabric—at a million dollars a foot.* That's Mrs. Lipton's voice. It gets into my head a lot. More than I want. I block it out. It's a decent voice, but it's sad and mothering, and I block it out.

At the counter, I pour two glasses, big boulders, and bring them over. Then I go back and get the bottle. I sit down on my floor next to Red. We drain and fill. Drain and fill. Drain and fill.

I run a bath. Playing the host, and meaning it too, I give him first on the tub. I even offer fresh towels. I impress myself.

“Baths are for girls,” he says. “I’m fine how I am.”

I do not mention the smell. It hurts my nose and I do not mention it: tagging along, clinging, holding onto his clothes—my clothes, his skin—layers of it, climbing on top of layers, welding filth with filth, creating a monster. It is vile and wretched and rotten. And I do not mention it. Even though we are inside, and boxed in—and there is no outside to dilute its concentration; even though it jams itself into my eyes—I do not mention it. A man must have his dignity. Red must have his dignity.

“You crying again?”

“Sorry, Red.”

“Jesus Christ, kid.”

I do not say anything. I turn and enter the steam. I peel off my jeans and T-shirt, and brace myself. I am in. *Fuck*. All the water is sucked out of my body. The pain is relentless and heartless and all-consuming. I have entered hell, I am at its center. But I do not scream or squeal or cry. I do not want more abuse. More branding me a girl. Judging my backbone. I promise myself that I won’t talk about Rumi anymore either. Red’s getting tired of that, I can tell. He rolls his eyes whenever I bring her up—which is a lot, so he rolls his eyes a lot. I’m going to keep that sadness inside, keep that blackness bottled up, and add it to the rest, to that big pile of fuck-you. (It’s getting bigger, too—the pile. It’s getting

out of hand...) I grab the bottle, tip it hard, swig, glug, force it down until the burning is outside and in, and equal. I close my eyes, exhale long and hard, and catch my breath. I take another drink, and keep my eyes closed, and more breathing, and another drink. I do not think of anything. Not the emptiness. Not nothing. I just close my eyes, and drink. Close my eyes, and drink.

That night we go to bed—filthy and drunk and huddled together—him snoring, both of us clutching bottles, CD player on. The Dead is playing... Have you ever listened to The Dead? I never have. Not until a few months ago. And then it was an accident. I bought the wrong CD. I got it from a shop. I'm no good at returning things to shops. So I kept it. The album is called *American Beauty*. It got me from the first track, a track called "Box of Rain." It is one of the most magical tracks I have ever heard. Now I listen to the CD all the time. I'm getting kind of bored with it now. I always do that, overplay the albums that I love until I ruin them. And I'm almost there, almost at that tipping point with *American Beauty*. I still love it, but I very nearly hate it... I lie here and listen to Red. He is passed out cold but he mumbles along. He knows all the words. I wonder if he's seen them, seen The Dead live, I wonder if he's a Dead Head. Me, I'd like to catch more shows. I always mean to, and I buy tickets sometimes, but crowds scare me, energy scares me, so I never go... I can't sleep. His smell makes my chest wheeze. It acts up my asthma and keeps me awake. I lie there,

wondering how to get Red to like me. I've told him that I like him. I knew it was the wrong thing to do, even before I did it. I knew it was creepy. But I couldn't help myself. Most of the time, I don't have a good filter. And I've lost a lot of friends because of it. When I told him, he just gave me this look, like I was pathetic. Eventually, head spinning, I pass out...

"Huck!"

"What?"

It feels early and my head hurts and my body hurts.

"Wake up, boy, you ran out of scotch."

I rub my eyes, stretch, scratch my arms, my legs (I'm always itching), and let out a yawn. I always keep an emergency bottle, always. Just so I'm safe—you know, for protection purposes. In a cupboard, behind some pots, it is well hidden.

"There's a bottle—"

"There *was* a bottle, behind some shit in a cupboard. I found it and I drank it."

I look at my wrist. No watch. "Hey, give me my watch back."

He ignores me.

"It's six in the morning."

"Okay."

"7-Eleven serves at eleven."

"Okay."

I try to go back to sleep, only he won't let me.

"Huck!"

"What?"

“What else is there to drink?”

“There’s beer in the fridge.”

“Anything else.”

“No.”

“Hard liquor?”

“No.”

“I like hard liquor.”

“That’s cool.”

“You have some? Because if—”

“No.”

“Then what’s cool?”

“That you like hard liquor.”

“Listen, you little piss ant: when you were—”

“Red?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m really tired.”

He ignores me.

“How about the neighbors?” he says. “They’ll be awake soon, getting ready for work. They’re probably already up. They’ll have liquor. *Everybody* has liquor. Except the Moslems of course. And even most of *them* drink. So I wouldn’t *not* ask them, just because of their religion. I think that would be racist—the not asking, I mean.”

“Red?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m really tired.”

“Will you at least try for me? I’d do it myself but my leg...”

I know about the leg. It was injured in the war. “And not just any war,” says Red, “the Vietnam war, against those Vietcong sons of bitches.” He spits on the floor after he says Vietcong. He has friends that died over there. Lots of friends. But he doesn’t like to talk about it. But he talks about it a lot. For a man who doesn’t like to talk about it, he sure does mention it, and more than now and again. I wish I’d have fought in the war. It must feel good to come back and be a hero. And I say that too. But Red tells me it wasn’t like that. He says there was a lot of bad blood, a lot of bad blood when he came home. I feel sorry for Red. But I can’t wake my neighbors up. And I say that too. But Red doesn’t like hearing that. And he spits on the floor again.

“Can’t or won’t?” says Red, wiping the sides of his mouth with my shirt sleeves.

“Red, I’m really sorry but I don’t know any of my neighbors. I’ve made a point of making sure I don’t know any of them, apart from Mrs. Lipton, and she’s a good Christian so I can’t ask her. Besides,” I say, “it’s six in the morning. I can’t ask a neighbor for liquor at six in the morning, Christian or not.”

More floor-spitting.

“I don’t appreciate your tone, son.”

“Sorry, Red.”

I feel shitty for saying no, especially because he’s a war veteran. An old war veteran with a bum leg, and I just told him no. I don’t feel good about that at all. I ask him if a case of beers will do him. I tell him I can manage that.

He thinks about that. For a while. He takes his time.

“Okay, Huck, make it happen.”

I get out of bed, pad to the kitchen. The fridge kills me when I open it. The light jack-hammers into my eyes, and into my skull. Half blind, I grab the case, and stumble back into the bedroom.

“Here you go.” I pass Red a beer.

Red guns the beer, and another, and a third. Then tells me he wants to watch a film.

I have a lot of movies. Over four hundred. Somewhere between four hundred and seven hundred. I’ve never counted them so I could be way off. There are a lot of them. I know that much. I have more movies than anyone I know. The only place you can find more is at a rental shop. I’m pretty proud of my collection. I need a big collection because for a while now my day has consisted of drinking, taking drugs, watching movies and being alone. Movies are great because they stabilize my moods. When I feel *this* way, I watch *that* movie. I know exactly what to watch and when.

Red rummages through my library until he finds something he likes. It takes a while. We watch *On the Waterfront*. I’ve had it for years. Had it filed away in my classics section, along with all my Newmans and Hepburns. I never watch any of them—“the classics”—I just own them because they’re important to own. I tried to watch *On the Waterfront* once, but I ended up watching porn instead. I like porn. Way more than I like black and whites. They’re hard to get into—black and whites, I mean, not porn. It’s

not cool to say that though, so people don't. Still, it doesn't mean it's not true.

So, here I am, trying to watch my favorite movie, for the first time. And I can't. Not properly. Every few minutes, Red has me checking my watch. He gave it me back. Eventually. And every few minutes he has me checking it. As you'd expect, I miss important plot points. See, that's another plus for porn: there's no story line. You don't get nuances that slide by you. It's always: mechanic, teacher, repair guy, pizza boy. And the ending is always money... I ask Red to catch me up. He doesn't like that. He gets angry and tells me he's not my keeper. "Fend for yourself, kid," he says. "You got to learn to fend for yourself." Then he drinks the last two beers. Just guns them down like I don't exist. Oh boy, did *that* get the blood up. Yes sir. That's like stealing a man's fries. You just don't do it. I stand up for myself, though. I tell him it's not right what he did, that he'd better start treating me correctly, or else. "Or else what?" he says. "Or else," then I point to the door. He can tell I mean it too because he apologizes, and everything's cool after that. For about a minute—until he starts talking about Ed, *saying* he's a good guy, *saying* he needs a place to stay. "It's cold outside, Huck," he says. "You should let him stay with us." He looks around. "Plenty of room." But I tell him no, no way. I tell him I don't like Ed and Ed doesn't like me and there's no way he can stay. Red says that he's disappointed in me and I say that's okay and I say that he should drop it

and, because he knows I'm serious now, he drops it. Yeah: living with Red is going to be hard goddamn work.

Dead on eleven, he's got me throwing on jeans and running out the door. *Hard goddamn work*. I look like I've just been caught banging the neighbor's wife. I'm pulling on clothes, zipper undone, shoes in hand, panting to the lift. I look guilty. "Hurry Huck! I'm going to time you. One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand..."

I feel like a bum walking into the 7-Eleven. I always do. It's a block from my apartment. And they know me in there. They know I'm a drunk. They've smelled it on me in the morning. Loads of times. So now they look at me weird. Like, down at me. Especially the main guys: Asher and Tom. I don't mind Tom. He hit on a girl once, a girl I was with. I was at the back of the store, and she was at the register, and I heard the whole goddamn thing. Heard him trying it on. I did mention it to him. I didn't let it slide. And he said he was sorry, but not *too* sorry, he said, because she was *really* hot, and he had to try. And she *was* really hot so I didn't hold it against him. Tom is a good guy. A straight shooter. At the very least he's okay. But Asher. Fuck. Something about him just reeks of bad news. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something not right there. There's something very wrong.

Walking in is embarrassing. A lot of it has to do with the bell above the door, the alert that another deadbeat is here—buying gum, cigarettes, BEER, hotdogs, LIQUOR—cuts into me every time... Fridge first. Then counter.

Without eye contact, I ask for four bottles of scotch. “Bag?” I don’t look up. It’s Asher’s voice, calling me out, calling me a nobody. Of course, it *had* to be Asher, didn’t it? I’m not surprised. This is how it always is, Murphy’s Law following me around, going wherever I go, muddying my waters. Fucking Murphy and karma and Asher... *and* fucking Red: he’s the one who pushed me out the door, the reason I’m here in the first place. Why do I let people order me around? If I don’t reel it in, my kindness will do me over, mark my words... Anyway, Asher: without looking up, I can tell he’s eyeballing me, just trying to start some shit. But I’m not playing. No fucking way. I’m not getting involved. That’s what he *wants* me to do—but I’m not that stupid. Leaving the bag on the counter, I hand over some notes, grab the scotches, turn and leave. I leave the change, dollars too, on the counter, like I can’t be bothered, like I’m *too* rich. The dollars restore the balance, telling him *you work for me*; telling him... *and watch your step, son*. As the door closes behind me, I hear: “Huck, you left your...” But I’m wise to it and, refusing to get drawn in, I keep on walking. But it’s difficult to carry four bottles and a case of beer. And I drop one of the scotches. And it smashes on the sidewalk. It’s far enough down the block that Asher won’t have seen, so no harm done... Let me tell you about the 7-Eleven: it’s a daily struggle, beating it. Every day it looks down at me and pisses on my lifestyle. I hate it. I tell myself that tomorrow I’ll go to the liquor store four blocks down. It’s a discount store. It only sells liquor. It has everything and it’s all lined

up and it's all on offer and there's no judgment and they give you trolleys so you can buy a lot. I'll take Red. We can worship together.

Stocking up

We wake up naturally and at the same time—and within ten minutes we're out on the street, flagging down a cab to take us the four blocks. Four blocks is not four blocks. Not to an alcoholic. No, to us, four blocks is more like twenty-five or thirty. Throw in a bum leg and we're talking sixty to seventy blocks. Easy. There's no way Red can walk seventy blocks, and there's no way I can walk thirty, so we stand outside my apartment, arms flailing, until we find a compassionate driver who'll stop for us.

Our driver turns out to be one of the crazies. You know, one of those nut jobs you wish you didn't get, but are stuck with, so you just grin and bear it, and hope to make it out alive. And it's touch and go today because he keeps turning round to address us, as he steers with his knee, coin-tossing with our lives.

“See the problem, what you Americans...” he says, jabbing his finger at the air an inch from my face, “what most of you don't understand, is that it takes effort, it takes charisma...”

Christ. Not today. I am worse than normal today. The road is bumpy, and there's too much movement, and I'm not doing good. I'm close to throwing up. I wind my window down, just in case, then touch my forehead, mimicking an explosion with my fingers.

“Hey guy, I have a monster of a headache. And I don't mean to be rude but I just want to get to where I'm going. I don't want small talk, or to make friends or whatever. Please. Sorry. Thanks.”

“Guy? What the fuck? Why you acting like we don't know each other? I sold you weed last time... You don't remember that? Are you fucking with me...?”

I am not fucking with him.

I've never seen this guy before. Guaranteed. I can feel myself getting angry. I hate these tricksters, always trying it on, trying to get a rise, or work an angle. I'm about to tell him that, too, about to tell him that I got his number, that I'm wise to it, when all of a sudden he sticks his head out the window, and starts going nuts on a cyclist. He terrifies this scrawny library-looking girl. First with the threat of grievous bodily harm. Then with a promise of forced sex. It's all very unnerving. I do not like this kind of confrontation and it shakes me up. I look at Red, but he's staring dead ahead, his face relaxed, like this is nothing. Like this is just a day at the beach. That reminds me: I need to check out the army, see how the sign-up works. The driver winds his head back in but his venom is still thick like yucca.

“Goddamn motherfucking deathtraps, endangering everyone,” he yells. “I mean, shit—you can’t hardly see them, then they’re on you, you know? All that zigging and zagging...” He takes a couple of breaths. “You got to *breathe* from your diaphragm—really take it in *deep*, hold four, then out four. Do like ten of them, on four counts, got it?” I tell him I got it. “Good. Hey...” Then, oblivious to oncoming traffic, screeching tires, horns, my pleas for safety, he rummages around, desperate to find something. Over my protests, he patrols the ass cushioning underneath me, giving my cheeks a good going over—taking this ride from bad to worst. “Here it is,” he says, “this is it right here...” He pulls out his phone and... he reads out my number. *Fuck*. “I tried calling you,” he says, “you know, to see what was up, hang out, no big deal, but no one picked up, and I’m like ‘whatever—I don’t give a shit.’”

I hear Red chuckle.

We pull up at the destination.

“Here’s fine,” I say, thrusting ten dollars at him. I just want to get out, leave, be gone, but he’s having none of it. He pushes my hand away.

“Your money’s no good here.”

So I give him twenty, cementing my generosity over his.

While the old timer groans and stretches and straightens his junk out, I make a note of the registration. I cannot do that again. So I take a mental plate shot.

If you're not an alcoholic, I don't know how to explain what it feels like walking in. Imagine there's something you care deeply about—but more than that, like you *need* it, and lust after it, and can't live without out it, and don't want to. And I tell you there's a store that has a limitless supply of it, and I can take you there, and it's all affordable. Imagine how happy you'd be... Well, walking in, that's how it feels.

I spot Jackie at the register. Good old Jackie. Reliable Jackie. She never judges. Not for morning visits, not when I'm shaking, not when I stumble, or fall in the aisles. She smiles and scans, and thanks me. And puts me on my way. Jackie makes me feel better about being an alcoholic. And for that I consider her a true friend... Today she sees me enter—cap low, shades on, Red by my side. We nod to each other. Jackie is apple pie. Me and Red get carts. One each. “Listen up,” I say to him. Then I give him a layout of the shop floor—wines, beers, scotch, vodka, tequila... I tell him where everything is. And to get whatever he wants. Then we go our separate ways. I head straight for the tequila. That's the one I always forget, the one I always want, when I'm sat at home with bottles of everything but. Karma can do that. It can get psychological on you. I get my tequilas, and move over to the scotch aisle. There's an old man, tweed coat, patches on the arms. He gives me a disparaging look. Like a really bad look. Like I've done something horrendous. Like I shouldn't be in his aisle. Like scotch isn't for my kind, like it's not for people like me. Keeping eye contact, I reach into the trolley. I grab a bottle, open, and drink, and keep my

eyes locked on his. He doesn't look away... he doesn't look away... then he looks away. Then he moves on. I should feel good, like I've won, but I don't feel anything. Not bad, not good, not anything. I just feel like he was here and now he's not. I keep filling my trolley, until I can't, until it's full. Then I look around for Red.

I see him in the far left corner, cozying up to a purple rinse in French wines. His hand gestures, his relaxed manner, the way he takes her card, caresses the hand, then kisses it—is all very Don Juan—*very* impressive. I'd not seen this side to him, so I hadn't considered Red as sexual. I'd figured the drink had drunk it out of him, dried up his lust, or stowed it away, left it somewhere waiting for a glimmer of sobriety to reawaken... But I'm wrong. Like I often am. (And more and more these days.) I watch Red, watch as he pummels the old girl—slapping her with the verbals, manhandling her with charisma. She's practically purring. He's doing a good job, a *great* job, and women eat that up. I watch him, see how he circles and closes. I take pointers, mental notes. I think about Rumi, about how much I miss her. I bet he wouldn't have fucked up with a girl. No. Red's a winner. Red's a goddamn superstar.

We get outside and hail a cab. I check the license plate. For ten bucks extra, the driver says, he'll help with our bottles. There are lots of bottles, and it's a good deal, and we shake on it. The driver wipes his hand. My palms are clammy. I need a drink.

There is twelve hundred dollars of booze in my apartment. We unpack it, and lay it all down in the middle of the room. We stare at it. I am happy, Red is happy. When an alcoholic takes ownership over this much alcohol, something magic happens. A feeling of safety washes over. The relentless tightness in the chest disappears. Everything becomes manageable. Everything becomes *okay*. We sit and drink and smile and stare at the stock.