

### *Mission for Someone*

I met a racoon on a walk back from double overtime at WinCo in the alley between a McDonalds and the halfway house that used to be a YMCA. He was half-stuck half-crushed under one of those big commercial dumpsters, tipped over and bleeding trash guts onto the pitted asphalt. Underneath the mountain of discarded Filet-O-Fish wrappers and ambiguous slimes wriggled the little guy, his torso terminating where the metal met the ground. My dragging feet halted, my body postureless, positioned under the light of yellow arches that gave us both a performative feeling, and I watched him. Like a bandit buried in treasure he struggled, and I indulged in the obvious, that it was more than a bit ironic for a scavenger like him to meet his end suffocated by exactly what he wanted most. At least, that was what I assumed. There was something assuring about the assumption that this racoon somehow deserved what he got, but for all I knew, he was a victim of circumstance. The smell was too strong even for me, and I was about to leave, but the thing looked up at me wearing a Combos bag for a hat. Those black eyes hid behind his natural robber's mask, two mirrored orbs that picked up a tinge of blue with my work apron reflected in them. I didn't know what he wanted from me. I had an abnormal feeling. It was like self-pity but directed at another.

The trailer I lived in hadn't moved for fifteen years, according to Rob. He was a hulking man with a bearded face laced with silver. It was a testament to his age, both the streaks of white

in his hair and the mass in his body, accumulated over years of roughing it on Salt Lake's periphery. I never asked, but if I had to guess, he was flitting near fifty, maybe older, making him twice my elder. Every so often he made a visit to my isolation. He called these visits "pilgrimages", and whether he did so out of respect for the place he spent most his life, or as a reference to the park's ironic nickname "Eden", I never knew. Regardless, it was bizarre to find him smoking a cigarette on the step stool that led up to my door, especially at so late an hour.

"What do you want Rob? I'm not in any kind of mood." It was the truth, and I liked being honest. A sixteen-hour shift at WinCo eroded the soul.

"Is that really how you want to greet the man who gave you this bachelor pad?" responded Rob with that frat boy smile. Of his approximately fifty years, Rob spent thirty in my trailer. He never married, never had a kid who wasn't a bastard. He locked himself in time in his tiny hitcher, and you could tell when you talked to him. Never bothered me though. He felt familiar.

I stepped up to the door on the same stool Rob sat on and ignored him as I fiddled with my keys, all two of them: one for the trailer, the other I found in the parking lot of WinCo a year or so ago. I felt his weight shift from the stool, and a large hand encompassed my shoulder. I turned to face him. Our eyes met dead on, our heights matched with his feet on the ground and mine on the stool. I repeated:

"What do you want?"

"Just wanna talk."

I shook his hand off.

“At three in the morning? Light’s not even out yet.” There was no satisfactory answer to my question. The man was a living manifestation of my overtime, come to steal even more of my life force. All I had to look forward to in that trailer was a bottle of oxy and the absence of others; couldn’t he at least grant me that?

“It’s about your rent.”

And that sent me. Suddenly I shook off the WinCo brain rot, I was aware of a million reasons why I couldn’t, shouldn’t pay for rent. My lips mouthed the words but my body entered the trailer at last and autopiloted a crash onto the sticky suede couch. Oxy cluttered the cracks between cushions; I picked the pills from their ravine while Rob welcomed himself in.

“You know that shit makes your dick limp.”

“Then it’s a good thing I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Robbed plopped down next to me, and the trailer shook under the impact of his enormous ass. Hidden pills shot out from under the cushions and found new homes in the green forest of shag.

“Oh, come on,” said the hulk, inspecting an oxy between his thumb and index. “We both know you don’t need a girlfriend for that kind of thing.”

Rob was a rampant misogynist, but it was a cowardly kind of hatred, one I just couldn’t admire. Stories of sexual conquest would run from him like rivers until a member of the opposite sex happened to be within earshot. Then he’d hush down, only to rev back up when the threat of consequence had passed. Still, the stories were fantastic, injected with enough truth and lie to entertain me at least. Once, he mentioned a widow in Wasatch Hollow who lived in a big empty

mansion right next Robert Redford's house, whoever that used to be. In his words, "She fucked me raw and begged for babies. Said the house was lonely without someone in it, but the old bitch always kicked me out afterward." I knew it was true because that week he bled money like a broken piggy bank, and when he stopped talking about her, I heard at Squatters that he begged the owner for a loan. Some weren't rich widows, sometimes I'd see his truck parked on the road outside the shelter or in front of Donda's trailer, and I'd wonder if any of these women knew, and if they knew, did they care? All those seemingly intimate moments, inevitably filtered through Rob's mouth and projected at a captive audience of losers, rejects, addicts.

"...And now I have her calling me every ten minutes, can't get rid of her." Rob released a sigh, the sigh of a long story told well to a brick wall.

"Why are you still in my house, Rob?"

"Your house?" Was that a grin under his beard? I couldn't tell. "Don't forget who put a roof over your head."

"Eight months ago. And now you want-"

"What I want, TJ, is more than you can give."

So he summed it up for me. The total accrument of my debts, imagine and real, for all manner of things related to my living there. The constant smell of pot, the littered beer bottles around "his" property, the angry swearing at neighbors passing by, none of it was abnormal by Eden standards, worse had been done. But Rob listed them anyway, alongside my cardinal sin, that of being an anomaly.

“You would fit in around here if you tried, you know.” He plugged a nostril with his thumb and shot a black glob from his nose. It blended into the shag. “But people fucking hate you. Want you gone so bad they asked me to get rid of you. The skinheads hate living next to a Mexican kid, and everyone else only knows you cause you’re blaring music at night and waking up hungover in their backyards by morning.”

I just looked forward. “All valid complaints.”

“Could start by sharing those prescription pads.” He earned a sideways glance, and that was definitely a smile under his beard.

My stomach grumbled to the tune of sixteen hours without food. I stood and walked to the stovetop cabinet five feet away without addressing Rob. He meandered a bit but if money was a part of the equation, he’d get to the point eventually.

“You’ve gotta find a roommate. Not just to pay the new rent I’m charging you, either. Find someone to keep your ass in line.” Rob got up. The couch remembered the shape of his ass and slowly forgot as it sprung back into form.

“Or what?” I knew the answer.

“Or else everyone turns a blind eye when I ransack your shit and make you homeless.”

I turned his words over for thirty minutes after he left. By that point I finished the ramen and popped an Oxy. It felt like mother loved me, but mother wasn’t there, and I was on a pill. A lit cigarette materialized in my fingers and rum vanished from the bottle. Then, at last, dreamless sleep.

The first place I thought of was the halfway house. I needed someone desperate, preferably homeless, who would just be grateful to live somewhere without a curfew. I wasn't picky; I'd hate them all the same anyway. But on the other hand, they needed to pay rent. The ideal specimen would've been someone with low standards and high income, someone who didn't mind living in abject poverty for the price of a lower-class household, and, most importantly, someone who would get along with the neighbors. No such man existed. Rob had given me an impossible task. I went anyway.

My teeth chattered while I walked through alleys and thought about how much I hated Rob. It was a week away from Halloween, so even if he gave me until the end of the month, it would only be a week. I tried kicking garbage cans over, but I couldn't work up the energy. I hated Rob like you'd hate a dog who shit on your carpet. It was inconvenient, it felt deliberate, but in the end, could I blame him? It was in his nature, human nature, after all, and I knew exactly what he was before I ever knew his name. I liked to think I was different but that was a lie, whoever I abducted would have to deal with me, and I'd suffer them. All our miseries would mix and coagulate into something worse than a thousand years of isolation. I dragged my feet through alleyway slime.

My head was swelling from the four bars of Xanax I popped on my way out the door. It was no fault of the drugs, I'd never blame them; the swelling was the result of pre-impact anxiety from waiting for the effect to kick in. Xanax was the anxious cure so I knew waiting was a virtue, but it couldn't hit soon enough. My heart ricocheted off my ribcage, my hands were slick with sweat, I felt like every pedestrian could see my toxicology report, but I knew I wouldn't care in thirty minutes. I knew in thirty minutes I'd have a high and from there. The promise of a

high got me through minutes of sobriety before arriving at the halfway house. It confronted me suddenly, and just as quickly the drugs activated.

I was trapped in the revolving door for two revolutions. When I got through a small crowd was staring at me. The room was for waiting and filled to the brim; parole officers, women with children, men without shoes, some who I recognized as Squatters regulars and others who looked like me, nobodies. I tried the guy on my right.

“Hey.”

“Fuck off junkie.” I looked at him with one eye closed and my mouth open. Once the message registered, I moved onto the next. This pattern repeated three times, at which point two things happened: the full effect of Benzodiazepine hit my nervous system, and I vomited the previous night’s rum dinner onto the floor.

The room I woke up in was unfamiliar and drained of color, and for a moment I thought I permanently fucked my brain up. There was an empty bed across from mine, white sheets to match the white walls and florescent lighting. I made the slow motion to sit up, but the Xan’s had altered the gravity around me, and my arms weighed a hundred pounds each. The doorknob to the room clicked open and a nurse-like woman walked in with a black band shirt and jean folded in her hands.

“Mom?” The lady looked at me like she got that a lot.

“Oh, you’re up.” She draped the clothing, my clothing, I realized, over the back of a metal fold out chair in the corner. “We washed your clothes.”

She dug into the pocket in her apron and produced a Slim Jim. “Eat this when you can move. I’ll be back with water.”

When the door closed behind her, I willed every muscle in my body to move; I felt it working once the ambient pain of living sober returned to my skin, stomach, teeth. I tore the sheets off to reveal my body wrapped in a medical gown, saturated with sweat and sticking to my skin. I ripped it off, balled it up, and threw on my own outfit. Somehow, they managed the scrub out months of unwashed beer stains and cigarette smell, it was like an entirely different shirt. I inhaled into my collar and exhaled OxyClean freshener. I never asked them to do shit. I stuffed the Slim Jim into my pocket and left before the nurse came back with water.

The hallway was yellower than the room or reception, that sick kind of yellow, like pus or jaundice. It smelled nostalgic, like a doctor’s office. I followed the hallway, and it opened up into a sort of common area. Screens covered the walls that surrounded a dozen or so people who paid me no attention. They played cards at tables, ate green and brown gruels from TV dinner trays, read books, watched Seinfeld. A sign at the door opposite to me pointed with red arrows to various places of interest: reception, B Bloc, the pool, the med wing, the cafeteria. Another’s eye caught my own, one of the card player who beckoned me, but I turned to the sign and made a break for reception when I heard:

“Hey junkie, sit down.” He pointed to the seat next to him, and I remembered rent and Rob. I took a seat.

He dealt me in and explained Ninety-Nine. It was an easy game that a few at the table struggled playing, but the beckoner swept every round. We played in silence three times, and then I asked him,



“Tryna get out of here?”

“And go where, exactly?”

“I have a trailer off I-80, just a forty-minute walk from here.”

“You gonna give it to me?”

“We can... share.”

He placed a four of spades on top of the pile, a reverse card, fucking over the guy to his left, but they both smiled and reshuffled. He turned to me with the deck in his hands.

“Rent too high for just one junkie?”

“Look, yes or no.” Endless questions. “It has to be better than living like livestock.”

“Does your trailer have a pool?”

“No, but-“

“How about three meals every day?”

“Well Donda sometimes-“

“Sorry man, I think you came to the wrong place looking for a roommate.” I noticed we stopped playing, the others listened and smiled. They weren’t as skinny as I imagined. Sure, the guy across from he had a cleft lip, and the one to the left of the beckoner hadn’t closed his mouth for the duration of the game, but they lacked the hungry look that everyone in Eden had. They had a pool, and washers, and people to check in. And they were happy, happy to sacrifice every freedom they had to the altar of comfort.

“Fucking disgusting.”

“What was that?”

I stood up and targeted the door with the sign. I left in a second. More yellow walls and doctor smell, until I reached reception. It was empty except for the nurse from the room. She held a clipboard to her chest and stood up when she saw me.

“Sign here to leave.” She extended the clipboard and a pen to me.

“I ain’t signing shit.”

“Then you ‘ain’t’ leaving.”

I pushed past her, and a hand grabbed my wrist, not hard but tight enough to make me hesitate. I turned around ready to spit in whoever’s face, but her eyes, they were empty. No pity, just the dead gloss that came from seeing this exact situation pay out hundreds of times. My arm yanked free.

I broke through the revolving doors and into the night city’s air, clogged with gasoline fumes and piling garbage. I inhaled deeply to scour the scent of fresh laundry from my nose. There was no telling how long I’d been inside, but my internal sobriety clock told me I had gone long enough without a controlled substance. But they had taken it all, the Hulks in my back pocket were nowhere to be found, and the panic of an addict without his affliction took the wheel. Rob hadn’t mentioned when he’d find me, he might have already gutted my trailer, and I was no closer to finding a roommate. I balled my fists. I bit my cheek, grinded my teeth into the soft, gummy flesh of my inner mouth. I walked for ten minutes or an hour and found a guy asleep on the empty sidewalk. A trifold board was his blanket.

“Wake up.” Nothing. I kicked his ribs and forgot to hold back. He woke up coughing, but I saw the awareness in his eyes when they met mine.

“Come with me.”

“The fuck you want man?”

“Just, follow me, OK?” I extended a hand to him. For no reason at all and to my eternal surprise he took it. He tucked the trifold under his armpit and followed me down the street.

I saw the lights on in my trailer once we passed Eden’s fence. The trash around my plot was gone and a truck was parked on the lawn. The bum followed at an arm’s length behind me and didn’t say a word when I cop knocked on my own door. The sound of my bed creaking was audible through the wall and stopped seconds after the knock. Rob opened the door, clad in jeans and a wifebeater.

“Holy shit TJ!” I heard someone escaping from the back window. “I thought you skipped town, what’s up?”

“I-” Couldn’t find the words. I pointed behind me. “Roommate.”

Rob peeked behind my shoulder to take a look of the sidewalk sleeper. When he saw the scraggly, unwashed, unshaven candidate I had selected, he laughed. At first a short bark escaped his beard but then came the hearty guffaw that was expected of a giant. Rob asked about rent. I said I’d figure it out. He asked where I found him, and I refused to answer. He asked where I had been for the past two days, and I revealed too much.

“Two days?”

“For fuck’s sake, TJ, were you on another bender all weekend? Is that where you found this guy?” He shook his head. There was real pity in his eyes and I hated him for it. He cleared his throat.

“I know I’m exploiting you and all, but this is just sad.” He braced his arms in the doorway. “So I’ll give you till the end of the month. Get better.” He slammed the door and before I could protest, he was back, cardboard box in hand, and without another word he turned the keys to ignition and left Eden in the dark. My captive remained behind me, my back still turned to him. He coughed into my attention, so I finally faced him.

“What’s your name?”

“Casper.” Direct and honest.

“Do you take Oxy?”

“No.”

“Do you want to?”

“Sure.”