

Main Story

Mike never liked the sub shop on the corner. Reviewers seemed to disagree with him, but he never stopped saying their bread tasted like “Maggot crap dipped in yeast.”

“What’s your deal with Pipo’s, anyway?” I said, chuckling to myself.

“You already know.” He grunted, scowling.

“Just because it’s local doesn’t mean jack shit. Doesn’t mean people gotta lie about the food.”

“What if they just like it?” I replied.

“And what if Jesus H. Christ blows up the fucking sun?”

“Whatever, dude.” I scoffed, elbowing him in the side.

“Next time we’re in the area, I’ll get you a sub.”

“Yeah, because the dumpster really needs your money.” He said, slamming his fist into the crosswalk button.

The intersection was incredibly busy.

Mike didn’t seem bothered by this, though. He dashed across the street to a cacophony of horns and furious drivers.

“What the hell, dude?” I said, scurrying after him as I tried to avoid becoming a pile of red sludge on the pavement.

We walked in between cars, hurriedly apologizing to those whose bumpers we had to squeeze past. Near the end of the street, I noticed a pissed-off looking man in a beat up Honda Accord. His eyes seemed to fill with rage as he saw us run by, and his face grew red as he rolled down his window.

“Get out of the road, you stupid hoodlums!” He yelled, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth.

“Fuck you!” Mike yelled back, tossing a middle finger over his shoulder while we hustled off the road and onto the sidewalk.

“That guy needs to take a whole bottle of chill pills, and wash it down with hard liquor.” I wheezed, laughing so hard my stomach hurt.

“Damn right.” Mike grumbled. We slowed our pace, resuming a leisurely walk down the busy street. We continued in silence for a minute or two, the noise of traffic making a familiar drone.

“So, you ready to head back?” I finally asked, checking my phone. It read 12 AM. “I gotta work tomorrow.”

He took a second to reply.

“Yeah, alright. In 15 minutes.”

I shrugged. “Good enough.”

Mike pulled out his phone, starting to text someone, before looking back over his shoulder again.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“My mom.” He said, though he didn’t sound very convincing.

“I thought your mom had the night shift on Thursday.”

“She’s on break.” Mike snapped.

Looking up, I followed his gaze to a nearby alleyway, wrinkling my nose.

“Not this again.”

“Just this once.” He said, turning on his heel and beginning to walk towards it.

“C’mon man, you said you were quitting.” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. He brushed me off, continuing towards the dark fold of the alley.

“I am. I just need a little boost.”

“No, you need a high. You’re addicted. Remember what happened last time? The judge won’t let you off so easily this time.”

He whirled around, his face twisted into a mix of anger and regret. “I can do whatever the hell I want. I’m a grown ass man.”

“Not if-” And just like that, I felt his hand across my face. A sharp, stinging pain ripped through my body, as I felt my knees buckle. I fell over onto the sidewalk, stunned. Mike disappeared into the shadows, his face cold. I hoisted myself back up, gingerly holding my hand over my cheek. Mike was impulsive and rude, but this was new, even for him.

He came out 30 seconds later, with a lump in his pocket. He looked at me for a moment, before quickly averting his eyes and walking away, gruffly mumbling “See you later” under his breath. I sighed to myself, turning around towards home.

"Motherfucker..." I said, blinking as I stood there in the cold night air.

My face ached. Mike would meekly apologize in the morning, swearing to quit. Tears would roll out of his bloodshot eyes, and he'd look at me, desperate to have someone actually believe he could. And a little part of me would die. It wasn't uncommon to see someone hospitalized over much less, and I wasn't seriously injured. So why did everything hurt? I walked in silence for a few minutes, rubbing my jaw. The pain subsided after a while, but the hit did not.

Why would he do this? I couldn't answer my own question, despite its simplicity. Tears formed under my eyes, and I could feel my face begin to swell. I refused to let them fall.

"No. Get it together, man." I said to myself, wiping my face with my shirt sleeve.

It did little to quell the aching lump that was now forming. Mike had chosen drugs over me, again. It'd happened before, and every time, he said he'd get his shit together. I couldn't stop myself from going back to all the times he said he'd stop. Did they mean nothing to him? Did I mean nothing to him?

"Apparently."

The thought was cold, and frightening, though it was hardly the first time it'd entered my mind. I sighed.

"Tomorrow is another day."

The noisy streets and shady storefronts of downtown San Francisco at night may have frightened some, but, having lived there all my life, it seemed like home. A dead quiet street is scarier than a noisy one. At least, I thought so. Mine was not quiet. The hum of neon lights from dive bars that had somehow stayed in business my entire life incessantly droned on. Engines rattled down the dark roads. Music from parties in near condemned buildings blared. It was home.

I tried to be as quiet as possible while walking into the apartment, but the door wasn't having it. It stubbornly creaked and squealed with every movement, as if the hinges were about to snap off. After a few agonizing seconds, the door finally relented, silently clicking back into the frame. My dad lay passed out on the couch, an empty bottle of whiskey in his hand. The contents seemed to have leaked out while he slept, and the stench of cheap booze reeked from the floor. I gently pried the bottle from his grasp, laying his hand back onto his chest. He didn't stir. Walking over to my room past the kitchen, I saw the result of his latest tantrum. Glass shards lay all over the floor, and many of the kitchen cabinets had fist sized holes in them. My father wouldn't say anything about it. He'd futilely try to fix it in the morning, and put his head in his

hands when he realized he couldn't afford to. Collapsing into my bed, I fell into an exhausted sleep.

It seemed like only a few minutes before I was awakened by the sound of shattering glass. Sitting up, I glanced over at my alarm clock, realizing that it was 1 PM. "Good morning." I muttered, walking over to the window to see the source of the ruckus. Several lowlife children were hurling bricks at a parked sedan, and seemed to show no signs of stopping anytime soon.

"*Whatever.*" I thought to myself.

Crimes were not uncommon in the area. And besides, I had to get ready for work. Rifling through my drawers, I groggily fumbled in grabbing my thick work jeans. Their stench was both recognizable and repulsive- cooking oil, raw meat, and bleach. Slipping on my shirt and pinning my nametag as I walked out of my room and into the kitchen, I saw that my father had left for the day. The glass shards were gone, and the cabinets feebly boarded up. The room still reeked of cheap whiskey.

I checked my phone- the time read only 1:05 PM. I didn't have work until 1:35.

"What to do..." I said absent mindedly, opening the fridge.

Nothing except a couple cans of stale beer and a plate of obviously rotten liverwurst remained. My stomach growled with anticipation, despite the fact that I had nothing to give it.

"Nothing like an old beer at 1 PM." I muttered to myself.

It had a distinctly chemical, cheap smell, clearly made for the alcohol percentage and nothing else. The bitter liquid burned my throat with every sip, and did not solve my hunger.

"*Uggh.*" I thought, crumpling the empty can and tossing it into the garbage.

My phone read 1:15. Time to leave.

The car lurched through the folds of busy city traffic, weaving past obscenity-shouting cab drivers, thoughtless pedestrians, and all manner of motorists alike. My vehicle was ancient, but I didn't mind. The ride was fairly routine, and I'd repeat it every day until I could finally leave.

"Just a couple more weeks." I said, taking a deep breath as I closed my eyes for a second.

The side of the building was moldy, with overflowing dumpsters flanking the back entrance on both sides. As I pulled the door open, the familiar scent of the kitchen flooded my sinuses. Coworkers looked up from whatever they were scrubbing or burning to briefly greet me, before immediately returning to their tasks.

The heavy, industrial pair of dishwashing gloves was in the same place it always was: hanging up on a coathanger, dripping with dirty water. After shaking them out for a couple seconds, I carefully slid my hands into their folds, trying not to get burned if the last dishwasher had left them in the sink and allowed the boiling water to stay inside. The mountain of cookware before me rose at least 3 feet from the huge sink's base, and more seemed to be coming by the minute.

"Henderson!" My supervisor yelled from the kitchen's entrance. "That pile's not getting any smaller, fatass! Get to work!"

I grabbed the first dish and started scrubbing without another word, knowing that arguing with him wouldn't get me anywhere except out the door. The work was grueling, and my arms, which were covered in burns from boiling water, showed proof. Everyone in the kitchen did, although it was more or less the norm to ignore your injuries on the job.

"Eluggh." I said, removing my gloves for a second and shaking at the dirty water that had collected in them.

My hands felt like they were about to split open. No matter how many times I worked the same shift, I never got used to the burning sensation that seemed to set in after the first couple hours. Sweat poured down my back, and all my clothes suddenly felt in need of adjusting. Steam hissed. Metal cookware slammed against griddles and ovens.

"This is my life." I thought, closing my eyes for a second.

It was a depressing thought, but the truth. If I had to guess, I'd say most of my coworkers felt similarly. However, one of the line cooks, a heavyset man named Dane, didn't think in this manner. At times, it almost appeared he liked the nigh-impossible workload the job presented. His joy was a bit stifling at times, though I'd have been lying to myself if I said I didn't appreciate it. As I was pondering this, Dane actually walked out from behind a cloud of fumes, smiling just as widely as always.

"Speak of the devil." I said, raising an eyebrow.

"Dick, my boy!" he bellowed.

"Dane."

"How are the dishes?"

"You know. 3 feet tall in a huge pile."

He laughed, and the resounding noise was something everyone recognized. "Watch yourself on that faucet. Not too long ago, I got quite the singe on my hand there."

Sure enough, a wicked, purplish scab covered a disturbingly large section of his hand, snaking up to nearly his wrist.

"Huh. Did the sink just explode?"

He chuckled.

"No, but it probably will one of these days. Anyhow, I'll get out of your hair now." He said, laughing to himself as he strolled away.

Time crawled by, and my mind began to wander. I thought about what awaited me at home.

"Nothing, I guess." I thought.

It was times like those that really made me think; When I couldn't just distract myself so easily. The city had so much to offer. And yet, I was stuck here. In a dirty, dead end kitchen, scrubbing dishes until my palms peeled off.

"Hopefully, not for too much longer."

Money was by no means easy to come by in my neighborhood, and even harder to hold onto. Rent, car payments, and food seemed to cut everything to a razor's edge margin, especially for my "family." Booze isn't cheap, so sustaining my father's endless thirst almost always drained everything I had. He always had a reason not to work. His back, or his depression, or something else. Even when I physically stopped him, my paychecks always seemed to land somewhere in his pockets. But painstakingly slowly, I'd managed to hide them away. He'd had to take a job in a car factory, which only served to exacerbate his alcoholism.

"Piece of shit."

"I'm his son."

I kept thinking this over and over, in part because I knew it should have meant something. But for whatever reason, it didn't. It didn't matter anymore, anyway.

"Soon, I won't even be here."

This thought brought a joyless smirk to my face, as I pictured a future without him. I'd have my own job and my own apartment. I could do what I pleased with my money, and I didn't have to fear his erratic fury any longer. It was a nice moment, standing there in that kitchen. And then reality set back in.

"We're not there yet. But we will be someday."

I wanted to believe it. For a second, I did.

My stomach ached from hunger, and was furiously growling by the time I finally clocked out.

“Calm down, Jesus fuckin’ Christ...” I said aloud, stepping out of the kitchen and into the night air.

My engine thrummed to life the moment I turned the keys, almost like it wanted to leave, too. Pulling out of the parking lot, I was one of few cars on the road. Everyone else seemed to have the good sense to be asleep at this hour.

“I guess we’re going for roller dogs, then.” I said, putting on my signal and turning into a decrepit looking BP.

As I got out of my car and walked inside, I could see that the cashier was about to close the place. He was locking up the cash register, looking just as ready to go home as I was. I opened the door, peeking my head in.

“Y’all still open?”

The man nodded. “Go ahead sir.”

I grabbed a couple hot dogs off the roller, hastily putting them in a box before grabbing a gatorade.

“Will this be all, sir?” He said, warily.

“Yeah.”

“Look, I was about to throw those out. Just take them.” He said, returning to locking everything up.

“Thanks.” I said, taken aback a little bit. I wasn’t going to question a free lunch, though. The drive home felt a lot longer than it was. By the time I walked into the apartment and finished eating, it was 12 AM. My dad still wasn’t home.

“Where the hell is he?” I muttered, checking my phone.

I dialed his number, and, after a few rings, it went to voicemail.

“Probably drinking.”

Stripping off my disgusting clothes, I tossed them in a wad at the foot of my bed, sighing. I tried not to dwell on what my father did in his free time, since it was really no use. He’d never get

sober, not for anyone. With this depressing thought swirling around my mind, I went to sleep fitfully, dreading what would happen when he arrived home.

This was the second time in a 24 hour span that the noise of something being destroyed had awakened me.

“Shit.”

I sat up quickly, silently creeping towards a crack in my door. My father stood on the linoleum floor, grabbing the remaining plates and glasses we had in our cabinets. Glass already littered the floor, and the expression on his reddened face showed he had no intention of stopping.

“Dad, stop it.” I said, walking over to him and grabbing his wrist, stopping a plate from being hurled at the wall.

“You stupid, worthless little shit!” he roared, attempting to slap me.

It was a pathetic attempt. His arm went so wide that he nearly fell over, stumbling over the pointed bits of shrapnel on the ground. Crashing to the ground, my dad let out a horrifying yell, as dozens of shards of glass lodged into his feet and side.

“You... You did this...” He choked out, tears streaming down his face as he weakly tried to pull out the shards now buried in his flesh.

I didn’t respond, simply pulling out my phone and dialing the cops.

“Yeah, 911? My dad dropped a couple plates and fell over trying to clean it up. He’s in bad shape.”

I rattled off our address before hanging up, staring down at the broken man who was my father. I didn’t say anything. Just went outside the apartment and waited for the ambulance. They arrived in a little under 10 minutes, rushing into the apartment and putting my dad on a stretcher. He kicked, yelled, and threatened the paramedics like a petulant child, insisting he didn’t need help.

“You’re dead, Dick! Dead!” He screamed hopelessly, the ambulance doors closing behind him.

And just like that, my dad was gone. Everything went quiet. No drunken destruction. No sleeping on the couch like a deadbeat instead of buying food. No whiskey fumes invading every corner. Just quiet. Quiet I hadn’t known my entire life.

My dad’s endless exploits never looked or sounded logical on the rare occasion he’d recount them. He bitterly rambled on about life giving him a bad hand, or how the police didn’t like people enjoying their night. Everything had to be put through a filter of irresponsibility and pettiness before I could piece together the truth about what actually went down. The end result

painted an ugly, saddening picture, one that made me think less of my father every time I looked at it. He was a foul, self important man, one who rarely took a step back to see the destruction and hurt he left in his wake. I'd never truly liked him, but seeing my own father grievously injure himself was a disturbing wake up call. I'd felt little for him, aside from a small thought of satisfaction at finally reaping the rewards of his deplorable crops.

"Is that wrong?"

The answer came to me almost instantly.

"No."

All the times he'd left nothing more than a \$20 bill for me to feed myself while he disappeared and blew his entire paycheck on booze and whores came back to me in a blurry rush of resentment. All the times we'd have to skip dinner because he couldn't hold a job to save his life. All the times he'd destroyed anything nice because he couldn't bear the weight of his self inflicted brokenness.

"Tomorrow is another day." I said, my voice shaking.

But as I climbed into bed and stared at the ceiling, I looked at the horrifying scene that lay just a few feet away. This was my life. It was suffocating.

When I opened my eyes the next morning and walked into the kitchen, I half expected to see my dad snoring away on the floor, still as parasitic as ever. He was not. Bloody bits of glass still covered the floor, evidence of his furious rampage. After cleaning it up, I sat down on the couch, looking over at the microwave. It read 9 AM. I checked my phone's texts, and, just like I thought, there were 6 texts from Mike, sent yesterday.

"I'm sorry." 10 AM.

"I mean it. I don't want to do this anymore." 10 AM.

"I'm done, for good." 11 AM.

"I really mean it this time. I know I've said that before. But I'm done." 2 PM.

"Just let me prove it to you. One last chance." 6 PM.

"I'm sorry." 10 PM.

"I'll deal with that later." I thought, rather grimly.

The disconnected stream of thoughts made me want to look away, like a kid looking away from a homeless guy crying in the rain. I had no desire to feel that way any longer. I switched off my phone, looking over towards the living room.

Little rays of sunshine slipped through the cracks in the blinds, casting a striped pattern on the floor. I pulled back the blinds, allowing the sun to fully shine into the small room. A small smile slowly spread across my face. I tossed on a pair of sweatpants and a plain white tee, grabbing my house key, wallet, and phone on the way out. It was the first in quite a while where I felt at peace. As I exited the lobby of my building and began to stroll down the street, I happened to glance over at a park just across the street. I hadn't been in it in years.

"Huh." I said, crossing the street and looking into the park.

Large trees cast a friendly shadow over the grassy expanse where people sat on picnic tables or the ground, enjoying a peaceful morning. I wandered around the area for a couple minutes, before eventually sitting down on a park bench that was just behind the shade cover of the trees.

"Mind if I take a seat?" An elderly man said, leaning on his cane and smiling warmly.

"Go ahead." I said, scooting over and gesturing my hand.

"Aah." he said, slowly setting himself down. "A beautiful day today, huh?"

"Damn right." I said, without really thinking.

He chuckled to himself. "So, you've got a mouth? I used to, when I was your age."

I looked at him quizzically, caught off guard. I expected someone of his stature to lean back in horror and preach about the evils of foul language.

"I suppose most people do at one point or another."

"Indeed, indeed."

The conversation stalled for a second.

"How old are you, son?"

I was caught off guard by this odd question, raising an eyebrow.

"18."

"18." He repeated.

"You've got a lot in front of you when you're 18. College, your first real job, a new family..."

"That isn't guaranteed."

"I guess not. Nothing in life really is, though."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far."

"And why not, exactly?"

"Well, there will always be tomorrow."

"Will there? Maybe for you. Not when you're like me."

I paused, weighing my response.

"Yeah. That's true."

"Eventually, you won't have a tomorrow, and neither will I. It may be in 40, 60, or even 80 years. But everyone's got a time."

I shifted a bit on the bench.

"I don't say it to scare you. I say it to say that you can't abandon today for tomorrow."

I didn't say anything for a second.

"Yeah. I think I've gotta get going."

"Well, what's your name?"

"Dick." I said, without really thinking.

"Well, Dick. I hope you enjoy the rest of your day." He said, still smiling as he rose from the bench and walked off, humming.

"Well. Meet someone every day." I muttered aloud, looking over at the empty space where the man had been sitting just moments before.

His odd statements were obtuse at best, and nonsensical at worst. I was tempted to tell myself he was just a crackpot old guy who belonged in a nursing home.

"Everyone has a time."

That sentence rang in my head for a few minutes as I walked out of the park. I didn't know how to feel, which in and of itself was a strange feeling.

"We've got other shit to do."

This thought snapped me back to reality, as I realized I hadn't eaten anything in quite a while.

"I guess it's time for some breakfast." My stomach was rumbling again, and I really didn't feel like drinking another one of those stale beers.

I looked to the neighboring streets in search of a place to eat. I settled on a cafe called "Happiest Days Coffee Co." A few students with laptops congregated around tables, but aside from them, the place was relatively empty. I walked up to the counter, quickly scanning the menu.

"What can I get for you?" The barista said, smiling. She was a cheerful, college aged woman, with short hair cropped around her neck.

"I'll do the sausage, egg, and cheese sandwich."

"Alright." She said, tapping a few times on an iPad. "That'll be \$8.54."

I nodded, pulling out my card and tapping it on the screen. It came just a few minutes later, steaming hot. I ate in silence, chewing slowly as I took in the sights passing by the huge glass window near the entrance. Every manner of people hurried by it, from businessmen looking down at their phones to mothers pushing their children in strollers. It was strange, as I was usually the one hurrying.

"That's just life." I said, correcting myself. "Don't shit on people for feeding their families."

My train of thought was interrupted by my phone ringing in my pocket. A call from Mike. I looked down at it for a couple seconds, wondering what good answering it would really do. Likely none, if I was honest with myself.

"Hey, Mike." I said, finally answering warily.

"Hey man. I just wanted to-" He started, before interrupting himself. "Look, I know I've said this kinda crap before."

"Yeah. You have."

"I wanna be done. For real."

"No, you don't. You want me to tell you that you wanna be done."

Mike let out what sounded like a strangled, choking noise on the other end of the line before speaking again, his voice shaky.

"No, I really do this time. Just believe me, dude."

"I'm sorry Mike." I said, recalling my Father lying on the floor the previous night. Nobody had ever stopped him. "I can't let myself continue this."

"What'd you mean?" His voice quaked, as if he was about to cry.

"I mean we're done, Mike. Don't call me again." And with that, I hung up.

I myself let out a shaky sigh, mopping my brow with my sleeve. I knew he'd call again. And again, and again. And eventually, he'd realize I meant it. I hoped it would help him, but every part of my brain was telling me that it'd destroy him. To call him back, and assure him he could really do it this time. But something, in the very darkest corner of my mind, refused to give.

"I'm sorry. I can't." I whispered, putting my phone away and looking outside again.

Everyone seemed oddly fast now. Aggressive, impatient, and rude. I quickly left the shop, looking up at the sky as I let the door swing shut behind me. The sun seemed harsh in its glare, scorching everything below. I squinted my eyes, forcing a wrinkled frown over my face.

"What the hell...?" I said, stumbling back across the street.

A car honked as they swerved to avoid me, rolling down its window.

"Watch where you're going, jackass!"

I looked back at him, before continuing to jog away from the sun's malicious rays. I finally came to a stop under the shadow of an office, putting my hands on my knees as I allowed my breathing to slow. Everything slowed down for a second. And just like that, the sun wasn't so hot. Everyone wasn't so rushed.

"Okay..." I said, slowly. "Just, slow down."

I stood there for about a minute, leaning against the building's brick wall. People went about their days as normal. Odd.

"What to do..." I said, realizing I didn't have much of a plan for the remainder of my day.

I slid my phone out of my coat pocket, happening to glance at a notification from the calendar app. It was two words: “Reminder: Tour.”

“Right.” I said, snapping my fingers as I remembered why I even took the day off in the first place.

Today was my day to look at apartments, a plan I’d had for several months now. With my father out of the picture, it made today an even better opportunity. So, turning around back towards my current apartment, I broke into a jog. The feeling of excitement wasn’t one I was super familiar with. It was a strange tingling; an infectious smile I couldn’t stop from spreading across my face. Rounding a corner, I could see my apartment just down the street. It didn’t seem gloomy or inescapable as I took the steps two at a time into the lobby.

The idea of “leaving” had always been more of a pleasant fantasy than a dream I ever saw myself fulfilling. I didn’t have a great education or a reference point from which to rebuild my life after a move, especially not with my dad invading on everything and trying to rob me of what little I had. But now- Now, I could leave. For the first time in years, I could leave. That feeling was the most wonderful one in the entire world.

“Afternoon.” I said, grinning at an sour-looking old man waiting for the elevator.

I dashed past him, zooming up to the fourth floor. My door was on the far end of the hallway, and, as I pulled my keys out of my pocket and unlocked it, I wasted no time grabbing my car keys off the wall. Slamming the door back shut, I didn’t even bother to lock it. I just sprinted back down the stairs and into the resident parking lot, starting my car with a giddy sense of anticipation.

“Now, where to go?” I said, opening my phone’s notes app and looking through several links of studio apartments across the city.

The closest one’s rent was about \$1100 per month, somewhat manageable. It was only about 150 square feet with communal bathrooms, but I didn’t care. It wasn’t far from work, which was all that really mattered.

“Alright, then.” I said, putting the address in the GPS. “I guess it’s time to leave.

Chapter 2

The place stank of mildew.

“With luxurious in house accommodations...” The landlord droned on.

The apartment I was standing in was not for the faint of heart. It was clearly only meant for one person, and had pretty much nothing but a microwave, sink, and floor.

“Okay, good to know.” I said, clenching my jaw. “Just to confirm, rent is \$1100 a month?”

“Yes, that’s correct.” He said.

“Alright, good.” I said, looking around the grim room. “I’ll be sure to take it into consideration.”

The windows were caked in grime, and although it looked like black mold made up the vast majority of the “carpet”, it was a far cry from the suffocating space I’d lived in most of my life. I could have lived in a mansion, but if my dad was there, he’d manage to make it feel like a broom closet. His ability to make my life revolve around his own angered and saddened me to no end.

“Fuck him.”

What would my life have been like with a father who actually cared about me instead of disregarding me like garbage? I wouldn’t have had to get a job at 14. I wouldn’t have had to drop out in the 10th grade. I’d still have a mother.

“You okay there?” The landlord said, his tone cautious.

“What?” I blinked a few times, realizing I had been standing at the window in silence for almost a minute. “Yeah. Just zoned about a bit. My bad.”

“Imagining yourself in the place, huh?”

I forced an awkward chuckle. “Yeah. You got me.”

He smiled. “Well, you have my number, right? Just call me if you plan on moving in.”

I wouldn’t say it, but the idea of moving in made me so excited, it hurt. Sure, the room smelled like crap and was smaller than most people’s garages, but that didn’t matter. Nothing mattered as long as I was on my own.

“Absolutely.”

Walking past him and into the hallway, I pulled out my phone to see my next choice, another studio, although this one was nearly an hour away.

“Who knows? Maybe the distance will help.”

Any distance away from my father was good distance.

Just as I walked out to my car, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. The caller ID said “Dad.”

“Speak of the devil.” I said, pondering whether or not to answer it.

I ended up pushing receive on the second to last ring. Before I could even greet him, his voice came through the speaker, as abrasive as always.

“Where the hell are you?” he yelled. “Didn’t I text you and tell you to get your ass over here 20 minutes ago?”

“No. It must not have went through.”

“Then start driving over now. I’ve got shit to do.”

I sighed, seeing my fantasy slip away. The thought was unbearable.

“Like what? Drink yourself into a stupor?”

The line went silent for about 5 seconds, before my dad absolutely lost it.

“YOU UNGRATEFUL LITTLE BASTARD! I’LL TEACH YOU TO TALK ABOUT MY DRINKS, NOW GET THE FUCK OVER HERE!”

“No.” I said, matter of factly. “Get your own ride.”

“I swear to god, I will throw you out a goddamn window the second I get back, so-”

I hung up, getting into my car. I had to beat him home before he could ravage everything I owned.

Although I wasn’t surprised by his outburst, my father’s threats only confirmed what I already knew: He was entirely devoid of any love for me. A hollow sensation tingled in my hands, making it hard to grip the wheel. It didn’t make any sense.

“I hate that dickhead.”

So why was his total hatred of me hurtful? Maybe it’s a son’s instinct to look for his father’s approval. In this case, looking for something he knew, deep down, that he’d never get. Tears stung at my eyes as I swerved into my parking lot, slamming the car door as I rushed inside. I ran full tilt up every single stair, unlocking the door to the apartment faster than I’d ever done in my entire life.

“Just grab as much shit as you can.” I said, doing just that as I sprinted into my room.

I grabbed a random cardboard box on the ground, shoveling as much stuff on the shelves and my desk as I could fit. My laptop, a few books, my legal documents, and anything I could see.

Time seemed to slow down as I looked around the room I'd grown up in, which I was now reducing to a shell of a living space. Over a decade of memories, crammed into a box. It didn't seem right. But it was the only choice.

"Damn you, Dad."

I gritted my teeth as I reached behind my bed, grabbing a shoebox. It was my stash; a couple thousand bucks in cash. My father would have ruthlessly pilfered anything he could see in my bank account, since, for some reason, he'd convinced the bank to allow him to manage my funds.

"Alright, anything else?"

I took one last look at my room. My sanctuary, my only solace for so long. And I was leaving it. It was less of a pain and more of an aching sorrow; knowing what I didn't take would be completely and utterly destroyed.

"There's no time for that now."

I dashed out of the apartment, not even bothering to close the door. There was nothing left there for me, except eternal grief.

My breathing slowed as I put my stuff into my car, and I leaned back in the seat. I'd managed to escape for the first time. Now, I needed to pull it off again. Now that I had to pay my own rent, every day counted. There wasn't a snowball's chance in hell I was ever going back.

"Okay. I've got a few more days before I've gotta make a move." I thought to myself, turning my keys in the ignition.

I pictured my dad, storming into my room, expecting to find me cowering in fear like a little boy. His face would contort into rage, then confusion, as he realized I was really gone. He'd destroy what I'd left behind until my room was nothing more than a pile of scraps. I thought about whether he'd look at the pictures on the wall of a proud father and his son at little league games, in the park, and at the zoo. If he'd look past himself for a few moments and remember what was, before seeing what is.

"No." It was wishful thinking.

Maybe it was a last, dying hope to believe that my dad still had a soul, a little twinge of love for his own son. No matter how much I thought over the years, or even talked, it never happened. My father's heart was frozen over, completely encased in dirty, black ice.

Night was falling quickly over the city, blanketing everything. Stars twinkled faintly in the distance, and the moon cast a pale glow over the streets. My engine thrummed as my car rolled down the road, rocks and pebbles crunching underfoot. I reached into my pocket, pulling out my wallet.

"Should I?" I said, biting my lip. A room wouldn't be cheap, but I really didn't feel like sleeping in my car and risking being robbed in the night.

"Fuck it."

I turned into a fleabag motel called "Slumber Inc." The walls were stained with a weird looking green substance, which looked oddly fuzzy. It only had about 10 rooms, and one of them had its door kicked in.

"Looks cheap." I thought to myself, grimly smirking.

As I walked into the clerk's office with my single box, I got a weird feeling. A man who appeared to be homeless was sleeping in the spinning chair, his dirty, bare feet propped up on the ancient computer monitor.

"Hello?" I said, tentatively ringing the bell.

The man didn't stir.

I rang the bell again, louder this time. He still didn't awaken.

"Are you dead?" I said, rubbing my temples. The man coughed in his sleep, opening his eyes for a second.

"What...? What now?" He sat up, nearly falling out of the chair.

"I'd like a room." I said, relieved that he was not, in fact, dead.

"Oh." He said, stumbling over to the peg board and grabbing a room key. "That'll be \$50, cash only."

"Okay...?"

"Oddly specific." I thought.

I pulled two twenties and a ten out of my shoebox, handing him the crumpled bills and taking the key out of his hand.

“Check out is at 9 AM, no exceptions!” He yelled after me as I speedwalked out of the office.

“Note to self: Put a chair behind the door.”

The key had the number 8 crudely written on it with a sharpie, and appeared as if it’d been used thousands of times. Room number 8’s door looked like the incredible hulk had fallen on top of it. The wood was warped inward, and most of the paint had peeled off. The number 8 was lying on the ground, probably having fallen off years ago.

The inside of the room wasn’t much better. The door hinges wiggled and creaked loudly enough to wake up an elephant, and the wall where it came to rest against had a huge hole in it. I carefully closed it, locking both the door lock and chain.

“Alright. Glad that’s over.” I said.

The television, which sat on the floor, for some reason, appeared to be around 20 years old. The bed had no sheets, and a blanket that smelled incredibly unwashed.

I sat down on the bed, allowing my body to relax for what felt like the first time in a month. I pulled out my phone, only to see 16 missed calls. All from my dad.

“Why, dude?” I tossed my phone onto the night stand, sighing.

I knew exactly why.