

GOT HIM

Not even 11 on a Thursday night and Pat's fucking teeth are on the sidewalk along Kennilworth Ave, glinting like lucky pennies under the streetlights. No blood on the pavement, which rings like a miracle in the moment, most of it sopping into his scraggly beard and coagulating in the November cold. *Jayzus* I can hear him saying if he were the one watching this happen to some poor bastard. But seeing as he's just been through an impromptu dental procedure, all he gets out is "whatha fuff juth haffened..."

And, okay, I don't even really *see* it happen. Billy D spins me out of conversation as I'm getting on good talking to this girl studying graphic design at the rich-kid art school downtown. Fucking timing on this guy. But anyway, *he* sees the whole thing. Pat's jawing at some big dudes, boxy-looking guys with shiny frozen hair, filing out of the bar. "Well, maybe Pat's doing a little more than jawing" Billy admits. I press him and suddenly the story is: Pat pecks one of these alpha-types on the cheek after this dude calls us *tight-pants-wearin' fags* and Pat gets an on-the-house tooth removal for his display of affection. I don't hear *any* of this. Doesn't help that the guy's several beers deeper into the evening than we are, and Pat's never been in a real fight in his goddamn life. You make due with the hand you're dealt, I guess.

So I'm getting wind of everything, but Pat's not on the scene anymore. When I catch up with him, he's sitting bundled on the curb doing his best to sound sober for the cop he's got on the phone. "*Yeth*, da guy *punct* me inna *mouf*!" he's saying all worked up. He conveniently leaves out the provocation bit but, fuck it, we're not gonna correct him.

In the mess of the whole thing, only Billy and I seem to notice one of the cronies hurriedly making his way north on Oakland. He's actually hunched over like that'll hide him or something. All I have to do is look at Billy and jab my head toward the dude like *follow him?* and we're trailing seven or eight steps behind him while he's on his phone.

He's speed-walking, talking more quietly as he plows up the sidewalk. We drop the pretense of "sneaking up" on the guy, gaining on him just to see what we do once we get there. Two or three more steps and the night's rye shots conspire with the lousy grip on my knock-off Chuck Taylors and a patch of ice to send me horizontal on the pavement. Big reaction, peels of laughter from the drunks spilling into the street behind us. The icy sting in my elbow registers before anything, and I scramble to my feet looking for our target. Empty fucking street. I shake it off and we duck around the next building into an alleyway expecting him there and - nothing. Vanished like a fart in a crowd.

No fair. It was my turn to dole out punishment. My turn to visit some righteous violence on a bully's head. I pound the side of my fist into my thigh, planting the seed of a bruise that'll bloom tomorrow. Clouds of breath billow off of me in the cold, as I root around the alley when I hear the flick of Billy's lighter behind me, effectively calling off the search. A buzz rattles my pocket. Pat: ER at St. Mary's. Gonna be here a minute. I grit my teeth, feeling the mist of pre-tears stinging the corners of my eyes and glad for once at Billy's aloofness.

"I gotta go. Pat."

“Yeah” Billy exhales, flicking his cigarette and straightening out the denim jacket over his hoodie. I already know he’s heading home, so we just nod and I tell him “get home safe” for the first time since we’ve known each other.

I get through the sliding doors to the ER and some wasted twenty-something dude is propped up in a wheelchair he doesn’t need, front and center like he’s been hired to greet people. The guy is truly shit-housed, stains on his pastel polo, belting distorted versions of a Johnny Cash tune - “Imma goinna *Jackson*. I’m goin get drinka more *druuuunk*.” Another banner night in the Cream City. I’m hoping he gets wheeled back for an I.V. soon - for his sake and ours.

I spot Pat. He’s sitting in a chair, his back to the floor-to-ceiling windows that look out on North Avenue. He’s aimless, looking down at his hands and it takes him a second to notice me. I sit in the chair to his right.

“You guys get him?”

I don’t answer him straight away, looking at the floor. “Yeah. Got him.”

Pat nods vacantly, quiet for once. Rare for him. I finally glance over and notice he’s been holding his three teeth in his open hand, inspecting them. *Like the doctor’s going to be able to do anything with those*, I’m thinking, but I don’t say anything. We sit like that for a while, watching nurses run back and forth between the few other patients. Nothing serious. I flip out my phone reflexively, scrolling to give my thumb some exercise before stuffing it back in my pocket.

I scan the room, bobbing my leg, picking at my fingernails. Pat sits with his eyes closed, leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest, breathing steady. I try to think

of some shit to crack to get a rise out of him, but my mind wanders and I drop it. I'm tired and sobering up. I think of putting my hand on his arm, feeling some solidity to him, convincing myself he's okay. But he's still trying to doze and I don't know what the hell he'd say. Instead, we sit listening to a couple more slurred verses of "Jackson", waiting for a nurse to call his name.