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2

This is the first day J, and I have walked together since his return. I need the distractions. The past three years have infected my mind, hurting it, fracturing it, as I feel like I'm running from the light; darkness is around every corner. I'm either going to rise or perish.

Darren, Tyler, and Todd hurt my family. They did it just because. Fuck them. J is my family, along with some of the fabulously flawed people who stroll through my life most days, like blackbirds painting the sky with frowns. I derive joy from my friendships.

I'm happy to say I haven't felt like collapsing lately; it's a nice respite.

I'm trying to drown out my thoughts with emptiness.

I must think.

I must plan.

I must find a way to fucking survive.

Do you know what it's like when you don't have the opportunity to face your demons? To call them out for what they are and for the disgusting things they've done?

3

It hurts. I won't lie. I can't lie. I hate the lie.

I must plan. What?

I'm turning 63. Do you know how much energy planning takes? Do you know how much energy it takes when you realize you don't relate to more and more people every day? Customers in restaurants no longer look like you. Your skin is becoming leathery. The sun doesn't scare you; however, you are being told the outside temperature is coming for you. You are now in the demographic where you love the comfort of warmth, but you must fear it because it will suck every ounce of hydration out of you. But yet, your demons don't care; they've used you up and are on to their next mark.

I write a story.

I write another line.

I am writing another novel.

I create.

I give words back.
I try to express pain.
I crave honesty.
I must be honest with myself.
I'm in trouble.
I don't see the way out.
I'm walking a fine line between survival and death.
I want to survive.

Today, J offers a respite from the thoughts bashing back and forth through my cranium. I longed for J's; "Are we getting ready?" while J was away. I used to pretend they annoyed me; it did anything but. J's company tears the dark thoughts from my mind and deposits me where I know what's most important, loving and caring for those you hold dear. This is my family. This is where beauty lives. I mustn't let the demons win—I don't think they even care. They took what they wanted.

We walk. Our mind fills with the comfort of words never needing to be spoken. At least for the day, we're safe and can fend off the lingering doubt and uncertainty circling us.

4

I need to protect my family.
I apply for several positions I likely don't qualify for. At 63, there isn't much one qualifies for anymore. I need to keep writing.
We keep moving.
We must keep moving.
We've been in each other's company for over thirteen years now. How blessed am I?
I stop for a visit with friends, and Jay moves on.

FH

The Mayor and I meet up most days. We banter effortlessly back and forth. Somehow, the Mayor gets me. We laugh often. He's turning 80. I never thought I would ever have a friend who's turning 80. I'm blessed.

Rob joins us. Rob occasionally goes by Hee Haw. You've met Rob before; he's 68 and has Parkinson's disease. He feels life is slipping away. A few days ago, Dean had secured Social Housing for him. Dean expressed how he's upset Rob doesn't seem as grateful as he should be for Dean's help?

The Mayor suggests this is an excellent thing for Rob; it will save him over \$1,000 per month.

I tell the Mayor he's wrong; I tell him Rob is depressed.

I tell the Mayor just because he hasn't had the same challenges doesn't mean the money is what matters. This isn't about the money. For Rob, giving up his home of the last ten years at 68 is more like an ending than a fresh beginning. It represents everything he can no longer do, like travel.

The Mayor says he can save up for travel now.

I'm adamant that life doesn't work that way, and Rob isn't considering saving up for travel. Instead, he's thinking about dying and the end of his life.

I join us.

I need to find a way to a fresh beginning.

I must make the demons pay.

They've willfully hurt me and my family without remorse. I know they don't care. They should; what's coming their way is going to be...

FISHBOWL



6

The Holding Plant is in a building in an industrial area with thousands of buildings, all spitting images of each other.

The white van screeches to a stop.

The gate is rolled up.

The three men in hazard suits toss the incapacitated Darren through the gate.

Tap. Tapitty. Tap.

Darren bounces down an aluminum ramp and at the base of the ramp his head slams into the legs of the receiving bench. Blood trickles from above his right eye.

A claw is attached to the back of his jacket, and he is raised in the air like a crane machine, where the person working the crane is trying to win a stuffed animal.

First, TJ, Harold, Mark, and Rod, and each time, drop Darren violently on his head.

Rod, I don't think you are even trying. Leo says.

Rod smiles. Can I have another turn, and another, and another?

Hey Darren, do you remember when you lowered our wages from \$10 to \$9.62. I want another turn.

The Hired Man wants a turn, clawing Darren by his now bloodied skull, raising him to the rafters.

Darren wants to scream. He can only scream to himself. *What are you doing?* His eyes are pried open, and he can see the fishbowl below him. He can see Tyler and what he makes out to be a seemingly lifeless Todd floating in the fishbowl. Todd's eyes appear to be vacant. Tyler looks as if he's wondering when his father will drop another \$100K to buy his love. *Please, Daddy, I'll try harder.* Spare us. We aren't using human suffering for our own personal gain. We were giving the suffering people a purpose, a reason to live.

The Hired Man drops Darren into the middle of the fishbowl.

A single piranha darts between Darren, Tyler, and Todd's legs.

Leo picks up the talking stick. He touches the water with it, and it electrifies the water shocking Darren, Tyler, and a lifeless-looking Todd.

The reason I brought you here, I mean, we brought you here today. It's time for payback? Did you really think fucking people over would never come back to haunt you? If you remember being jabbed. We jabbed you with a cocktail filled with almost every recreational drug cocktail imaginable. You killed the love of my life. And. You. Didn't. Give. A. Damn. Now it's... anyway, to kick up your insanity, the last ingredient, the kicker, we found a way to turn meth toward infinity. This dosage won't kill you; you'll wish it does; but it will keep you laser-focused on everything in your life that torments you. Us.

7

The Hired Man wants to say something.

Darren, I'm here because you stole from my boss. I wanted to use the gun. But Leo convinced me this would be more enjoyable. And so far, I must admit, he's right.

TJ adds, hey Tyler, you should try to get off the crack. And then, laughs.

Oh, Darren, Tyler, Todd, focus. I want to tell you about the liquid you are now living in. It's a combination of embalming fluids, distilled water, a watermelon-flavoured sports drink, tabasco, and a dash of battery acid, not enough to kill you, but without question enough to turn your outsides into the ghouls you three most certainly are, on the inside.

If you turn your heads a little downward. Oh, you can't turn your head. Jodi, will you turn their heads for them?

There you go. Look, you will see an IV hooked into Darren, funnelling into Tyler, and then coiling into Todd. It serves several purposes. It allows us to administer your nutrition plan. And as it courses through Darren and floats into Tyler, it will leech impurities from each of you and share them with each other.

Mark, can you hand me the Banana Bag? It's time for a feeding; actually, give me two.
Drip. Drip. Drip.

You are going to feel a warm rush. It's feeding time. Relax. Enjoy. Looking closely, you will see the liquid gurgling through your veins. Look. Do you see how it is bubbling in places?

Are you guys screaming? I can't hear you.

The liquid will pool in about ten places in each of your veiny body maps.

No. We're not crazy. The Hired Man thinks what we are doing is brilliant. He wants us to live stream this.

Anyway, what we've injected you with, are parasites. Think intestine eating. The ten pooling places are where the queens are resting and about to give birth to thousands of offspring, offspring that will eventually eat away at your ghoulish insides in a laborious, slow fashion.

8

To make a long story short, Darren, Tyler, and Todd, you are being colonized. And the colonization will not be the thing that kills you, but it will most certainly show the world the monsters you really are.

Are you still trying to scream? We can't hear you. Gotta run. But before we go, Jodi, grab the Banana bag with the meth concoction. Attach. Drip. Drip. Enjoy the paranoia.

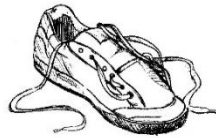
Hey, Hired Man, let's leave them be for a few hours. Can you make sure to place the strobe lights on a three-hour timer?

Grammarly Readability Score = 86

OPAP: TYING SHOES

Damn it.

My shoe has come untied.



What's wrong?

It's not that simple.

Tie it.

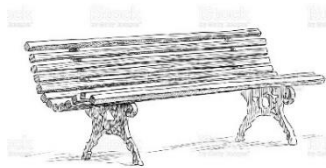
I gotta run.

See you later. 

I need to tie this shoe.

I could bend down. Gosh darn, the curb is too low.

I'm not stretchy enough. Great. A bench.



I will put my foot up.

Hey, stranger. Can you help me?

What do you need?

Spot me.

Why?

I need to tie my shoe.

Okay.

I will put my foot up on the bench. Place your hand on my back. I don't want to fall.

Mister, you are just tying a shoe.

I know. It's not that easy.

I don't understand?

One day you will.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT
HUMAN SNAPSHOT

BACK TO THE LADY PROTECTING HER KIDS
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I'm afraid we're going to lose this park. Our kids park.

Your kids don't own the park.

Lady, they're giving them homes not homelessness. YOUR. FUCKING. PARK. IS. SAFE.

Studies have shown poor people + children → poor people were once children, too.

I'm not lacking compassion. My father had a heart attack. He's poor now.

Tiffany, Jeremy, no Grandpa can't live in the new housing. Poor people don't exist. I'm protecting you.

From Grandpa?

Yes.

Why?

He's poor. He's coming for the kids.

Why?

Because he's poor. Poor people feed off children.

Mommy.

Yes.

I think you're lying. Can you provide me with some data.

I love you, Tiffany.

I'm Jeremy.

Whatever.

We don't want our housing values going down.

I thought it was about the poor people.

They don't exist.

Mommy, are we rich?

No.

Can we move into the housing?

No. We're not poor.

Mommy, can I go stay with Grandpa?

He'll eat you.

I'm not hungry.

You.

What?

Grandpa is hungry.

Mom?

Yes, Jeremy.

I'm Tiffany, you compassionless troll.

Whatever, Jeremy.

Mommy, I don't think I love you anymore.

Then, you can move out.

Mommy, I'm four.

London Drugs is hiring.

Jeremy, lets go, Mommy is scary.

I know. She just got an email saying her next transaction is about to be declined. And daddy is spending a lot of time with Melanie.

What's a homeless person, Tiff?

I don't know. If mommy has her way, we'll never know.

That should serve us well in life.

It won't.

Hey Mr. DJ, play us a funky song.

The thing is: being fired, replaced, whatever the bleeps want to call it, at 59 is terrifying. Life threatening. Devastating. Nobody wants to just survive. Especially after being loyal and working hard for someone for a long time. Only to find out, they don't care. It's all about the dollar-bills y'all.

Turning 62 (turned), with a court case moving at whatever is slower than the Grand Canyon, I'm not sure I'll survive → and hearing people who have decided compassion and empathy aren't →

Like that lady?

Yeah, like that lady → aren't the most important things to teach her children. Well, let's just say, when you are terrified for your future, ladies (people), like that, don't comprehend how cutting her selfish vitriol is to those who are less fucking fortunate than her.