

Friends
by Eric Cecil

Rand was leaving. He sulked up the blue stairs, pale and hard in the overhead light, and felt the basement's humidity wither into the staid dry heat of the night above. It was the end of summer, but Rand knew there would be several more hot and immobile nights ahead, and as he opened the maintenance door and stepped into the acrid air, he cursed.

He was already sweating when he locked the door and lowered and secured the gate. He wiped his hands on his pants and pushed his keys into damp pockets. Caramel-colored lamps led him down a quiet street to the subway, where yet more stairs descended into more humidity still. I'm trading basements, Rand thought, but this one moves, and he smiled at the absurdity of his workday. The smile quickly faded when he realized that someone was hiding behind a nearby column, one of many broad pillars on the long platform.

Hey, Rand, it said to him. Rand.

He stopped, looked around. There was no one behind him, and aside from the obscure figure, no one before him, either. They were alone. He leaned forward, trying to sight around the beam without nearing it.

What do you want? he asked flatly.

The voice continued. You don't recognize me? it said. It was high, effete, impish. It pitched and whistled where it should've clipped, and its cadence was tuneful, almost sweet. Taking the train? it said.

Rand slid back, then turned and tread expeditiously to the stairs. He could see the night, stale and sere, fuming above. He climbed toward it. The voice cloyed after him. R-a-a-a-a-nd, it called. It collapsed into a thin giggle, slipping at his heels.

He didn't bother to check behind him once he reached the street. He doubled back past the lights, walked by the gated entrance to the basement. The basement. He would be back there tomorrow. Its stink, wet and putrid, would be waiting for him, as would the cat, and the utility sink, and the mop, and the woman complaining about the hallways. You'll have to keep these clear, she would bark at him, it's a fire exit, and he'd have to lug the boxes back to the service elevator, then carry bags of refuse and fetor outside, and the woman would be at his heels with her tinted glasses and bottle-blond hair, hair that would probably clog her drain again, and she would be at his heels and on his back about that, too.

He rounded a corner and cut diagonally through a deserted intersection, heading directly to a wide and leaden pavilion hemmed by a number of towering trees. Just beyond it, he could see the sign of another underground station. He kept the park to his left, passing a line of oaks along its perimeter.

Psst, the voice said from behind them. Psst, hey. Rand.

He averted his eyes and crossed the street again, edging close to the storefronts crowding the other sidewalk. All were shuttered, dark. He stayed close to them, quickening his stride, and dared to look at the park again. He saw nothing there.

Rrrrrrrrand, the voice suddenly trilled, and a banging report sounded against a window to his right. He shook his head and stepped briskly toward the stairs at the end of the block.

A figure emerged from behind the lamppost at the subway's entrance. It wore a long trenchcoat, its collar up and around a bush of blonde hair. Its hands were in its pockets. Rand, Rand, Rand, it said. Ra-and.

He winced in disgust.

Look familiar, Rand? it said. It cocked its head in coquettish flirtation. I hope you like what I've done with the hair.

Move, he said. He tried not to look at it. At her. It was a woman tonight.

Might need help with my drain later, Rand, she said.

Move.

Rand, I can't do it.

I figured you couldn't, he said.

I just can't do it, Rand, she said. You know I can't. But I can do many other things.

You can bug the hell out of me, he said. I know that. You can follow me all over town. But you can't leave me the hell alone, can you? And he looked at her, or it, and it parted the big collar to reveal a high, smooth forehead, and a slight hump where the nose should've been, a subtle divot

where, on a real woman, on a real person, lips would wrestle to form a mouth, and a mouth would open to speak his name.

No, Rand, she said hoarsely. She tittered through the invisible lips, batted imaginary lashes. No, I can't. But I'll tell you what I can do, she said. Do you know, Rand? Do you know what I can do?

She leaned into him. He smelled the gilded lilac of her perfume. Its scent brought to him a panoply of ideas and images: exclusive nightclubs, extravagant dinners, troubled men mooning at devious women.

I can be killed, she said.

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She could be killed, or it could, and he obliged it. He always did. But it was a matter of diminishing returns.

The first time had been a thrill, or as close to one as Rand had experienced in years. It had begun in the basement. Rand had pulled about a dozen boxes from a high storage shelf, just as the tenant on the third floor had asked, and he'd stacked them, four by four, against a wall near the door to the boiler room. He stood at the edge of a ladder, wiping his brow with a purple handkerchief, when he heard steps. Then the voice.

Rand, it said, Rand, what is this? He turned to see a balding man, an older tenant from the fifth floor, gesturing to the rows of heavy boxes.

He clenched. It's Mrs. Jordan from three, he explained. She wanted me to get her files from storage. The man interrupted him, wagging his head: But I can't open my cage, he said, and he pointed to his own storage unit. The boxes blocked its swinging doors. I can't open it, he said.

He was right, Rand knew, but he was a whiner, too, and a whimperer besides: one of those guys who looked like he'd never, ever worked before, or had never worked with his hands, and he had a pinched face that said things like The Customer's Always Right or That's Not My Problem. Rand folded the ladder and forced a smile. Very sorry, Mr. Allen, he said. I'll get those out of the way now. And he began lifting the boxes, muscling them into a cramped gangway knobbed with electrical meters, webbed with pipes. It took about ten minutes. Mr. Allen complained the whole time, and Rand went from affecting sheepish humility to a stony silence. Allen went on whining and mewling at him anyway.

The rest of the day was unremarkable, but Rand couldn't stop thinking of Allen, and his pasty face, and his spoiled pout, and his thin neck, and his skin: so pale and fragile, almost glassine. Rand could even see the veins pushing blue blood at his temples and on top of his delicate hands, and it disgusted him, and he hated it. He hated his job.

He hated drinking in bars, too, but that night, he went to one anyway. There, he nursed a third solitary beer and considered his options for outside employment. There were none. There weren't any women in the bar, either. Just a man yelling HE CAN'T BAT, HE CAN'T BAT at a game playing on a corner TV, and a disinterested bartender who watched the same game without expression or evidence of thought.

Rand finished his pint and walked to the restroom, which he could smell from his seat, and stood before a toilet in an open stall. As he began to go, another man walked in and stood at a urinal two or three feet away.

Guy's annoying out there, the man said.

Rand didn't say anything. He just grunted in guarded irritation.

Yeah, he continued, an annoying guy like that. He just won't quit, y'know.

Yeah, Rand managed.

The stranger flushed the urinal and buckled himself. He walked to the sink and lathered his hands, still talking over his shoulder. It'd probably feel good to just unload on a guy like that, y'know?

Rand admitted it would. Not worth the trouble, though, he said. He knocked a palm into a lever above his toilet, which surged with water, and buckled himself while walking to the next sink over.

But what if there were no trouble? the stranger asked. What if you could just fix him?

Rand considered the idea for a moment, kneading the soap into his hands. The stranger stepped behind him and hit the dryer. Its blast filled the dank bathroom, but the stranger continued talking as if there were open and available silence. His voice was a puzzling murmur. Rand grew irritable again. What? he said.

He shut off the sink and turned to dry his hands, too, but by then, the machine's whirl had receded into nothing, and the thin hiss of the stranger's voice unfurled clearly: I said it'd feel real good to make a man of your problems and just fuckin' choke him to death. Wouldn't it, Rand?

And when Rand looked at him, the man's face was empty, gone. There was nothing there.

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The stranger was right: It did feel good. It felt great, in fact, as far as Rand could recall, but it had happened so quickly, he couldn't remember much of it. He knew he'd stared in terror at the stranger's featureless face: he'd lumbered there, hands dripping from the sink, his mouth moving emptily around words that wouldn't come, and the stranger's nothing mouth had hectored and bedeviled him with sadistic ideas that frightened Rand, and puzzled him besides. Then the figure's high, whistling voice had begun to slide into the charred alto of Mr. Allen, and in Allen's voice, he barked arrogant and impertinent complaints: I can't open my cage, Rand, he said. You're blocking my storage unit. You're always in the way, Rand. Why don't you make yourself useful for once?

Mr. Allen, Rand said dazedly. Mr. Allen?

The figure walked to the sink and turned both faucets. Rand watched it stare at him, though it had no eyes, and speak to him, though it had no mouth. Its voice had returned to the choked and nauseous tones with which Rand would later become quite familiar. You could drown me in this sink, Rand, it said, and it pointed a long, thin finger at the water pooling in the basin. You could knock my head against the shitter, it said, or slam the stall door on my neck until it snaps like a twig. No one would know. You could kill me, Rand, couldn't you?

And after more and more goading, Rand could, and Rand did.

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In the days thereafter, he didn't dare walk by the bar again. He anxiously checked the papers and was relieved to see nothing of note. Despite his nervousness, Rand actually laughed when he happened upon a supplementary article that mentioned a recent drop in violent crime. He sobered again after reading an anecdote about cold cases and statutes of limitations.

What if it was all a dream? he thought to himself. A drunk hallucination? Or what if the mysterious figure told the truth? What if, by some strange occurrence, it had been a manifestation of Rand's frustration and bitterness? What if it had come to life only to yield to

Rand's untapped potential for violence? Well, Rand thought, then I'd have little to worry about there. Certainly not the cops, at least.

He went on worrying anyway. He worried about his mind. He considered a shrink, but he quickly brushed the thought aside. What could they do? he rationalized to himself. Commit me? Put me on medication? Tell me to quit drinking? Maybe, he thought, maybe I'll just do that.

And he did, at least for a while. He even began working out, performing light exercise, eating healthier foods. And after two weeks of sobriety and cleaner living, he began to feel a bit better. A lot better, actually. Then he saw Mr. Allen.

Rand was in the basement, directing one of the elevator repairmen to an electrical box on the other side of the room, when Mr. Allen rounded the corner by the stairs, whistling. They nodded to each other. When Allen entered his storage unit and began to wheel out a ten-speed bicycle, self-consciousness and anxiety seized Rand, and he busied himself by spraying a mop, staring in forced concentration as the water swirled into the depths of the sink. He didn't stop until Allen had jogged his ten-speed up the stairs and out onto the street, at which point Rand dropped the hose, trembling, and stared at his shaky hands. Jesus, he thought. What's wrong with me?

Days passed. Weeks. Rand spent less and less time canvassing the paper for any information on a murder, on a body found inside the bar. After several months, he even returned to the scene of the crime. There was the same man yelling at the TV, the same disinterested bartender leaning against the counter. The same dank bathroom with the roaring hand dryers. Had it even happened? He wasn't sure. But still he felt profound unease. He wondered if he might attribute it to guilt, but he had to admit that he didn't feel all that guilty about it. He'd enjoyed it.

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If he enjoyed the first one, then the second had thoroughly intoxicated him. And it came exactly when he needed it.

He didn't mind work or the building so much anymore. Mr. Allen had retired, had moved out and away to a lakehouse in another state. And after watching Allen pester the movers as they lifted his belongings onto a large orange truck, Rand knew he'd never see the old man's sour face again, that he'd no longer suffer his nasal whine. And for that, he was thankful.

And he was thankful, too, for the experience of remodeling Allen's old apartment. The unit had been a drab old widower's den, but the hired contractors made short work of gutting its interior, replacing its tired and worn fixtures with sleek, contemporary designs. Rand assisted them in

clearing licenses, in arranging for the disposal of metal, or even, when the foreman wasn't looking, in light demolition work. Rand was proud of their effort, and he was pleased with his minor part in it. For once, he had collaborated with a team. And when the job was finished, the apartment looked sharp, and it appeared ready for a bright, young, new tenant.

The foreman personally thanked Rand for his help. For keeping everything running smoothly, he said, and he slapped Rand's back and winked. One of the older contractors chided him as an equal when they wrapped up at the end of the last day. Place looks good, he said. When do you move in? Rand smiled and waved him aside. Out of my price range, he replied. The contractor nodded in solidarity, laughing, and Rand watched him and the rest of the men taunt and mock each other in good humor as they stomped down the street toward a happy hour somewhere downtown.

Rand wasn't surprised that they didn't invite him along, but he was a little hurt, and more than a bit dejected. His dejection shifted into distant excitement when he realized that, through his weeks of overtime, he'd set a fair bit of money set aside, and the entirety of a three-day weekend lay before him. He hurried home, showered, and wandered to his closet, where he selected a particularly colorful shirt that he'd purchased some months back. He'd never had the gall to wear it, but he decided to give it a shot that evening. Maybe, he thought, maybe I'll meet a woman. It had been a while since he'd met a woman. Hell, it had been a while since he'd met anyone. He was long overdue for some company, and he considered that this was likely his night.

His night didn't go as planned. Rand wandered down wide boulevards and tightly packed streets, peeking into bars and restaurants. He eventually stopped at a dank tavern for a drink, but there were no women around, and all the men seemed sad and despondent. He finished his beer quickly and popped out into the street again. The evening was lively with hordes of men and women: brighter, younger, more attractive than he remembered the city ever being. And more talkative, too, with buoyant crowds gabbing and hustling toward exotic places that must've been very nice, very exciting. Rand wished he had a destination even half as exciting as theirs. Or any destination at all, really. But Rand had nowhere to go.

Look out, a voice barked to his right, and a tall man, flanked on either side by two brunettes, shouldered past him and off into a stream of other, taller men and even prettier brunettes. Rand was so startled that he couldn't even work himself into anger. When he finally did, he found that he was only angry at himself for his stunned silence. He stood there, the bodies forking and streaming around him, and watched the faces drift toward and away. He cut behind a young couple in sunglasses, moving to a nearby doorway. As he did, he heard the man clearly: Nice shirt, he said, and he and the woman laughed. Rand turned to glare at them, or maybe to make a comment about people who wore sunglasses at night, but they were already gone.

This is why I don't go out, Rand said to himself, and he weaved through the intersection and into the narrow path of a side street. He'd written off the night fully at that point, but he thought he might head to a diner and get a late meal, then make his way back home.

The side street had other plans. It narrowed into a long, low block that slithered like a ravine between towering buildings. Rand had never been down that block before, but he was surprised to see how dark it was, there in the early evening, and how secluded and quiet it seemed to be, even though he was right in the center of downtown. He could see lights and more activity where the block opened onto another wide boulevard ahead, but he drifted aimlessly, aggravated and scornful of those who had just spurned him. He was in no hurry, and anyway, he still had no real destination.

One very nearly appeared next to him. To his right, he noticed a blurred window faintly aglow with dull lighting. It looked to be a shopfront. Piles of forgotten antiques cluttered its display. He saw stacks of chipped teacups, broken plates, disassembled electronics and chipboards sooted with dust. Behind those, he could barely discern cheap clapboard furniture, gouged and torn, gossamer with cobwebs.

He stopped, looked up and down the street, and seeing nothing else of interest, went inside.

More antiques littered the interior of the store, if one could even call it that, and Rand wasn't sure he could. It looked like someone had dragged the contents of a landfill into a long and narrow room. A ceiling hanging with old lamps seemed to narrow into a distant back wall, which showed several racks of stained and torn clothes. Just next to them, Rand noticed a counter. There were no employees in sight.

He turned his attention back to the stock before him, where a nearly impenetrable column of desks, stacked one atop the other, rose to a tiled ceiling. Rand studied the desks intently. Their dimensions were elusive, nonsensical, and as he pulled out a drawer and peered inside, its edges planed into awkward angles, its lines suddenly collapsing or intersecting at odd or impossible intervals. A madman couldn't have designed such a desk and gotten away with it, Rand thought.

I think there oughta be a law against following someone, a wheedling voice suddenly nagged from the back of the store. Rand looked away from the desks and squinted into the depths of the room. He saw that a figure now stood by the counter. Its voice was nasal, sexless, but he could see that it belonged to a woman. I think there oughta be a law against it, don't you? she said.

He pushed the drawer back gingerly and stood at attention. I'm sorry, he said with deference. Are you closed?

Don't you think there oughta be a law against following someone? she repeated.

He stammered. I'm not following you, if that's what you think. I don't even know who you are.

The woman nodded, her straight, dark hair bobbing at her chin, a curtain of bangs brushing over a pair of dark glasses. Well, she said. Maybe you'll recognize me if I come closer. And she suddenly shrieked, her warble sounding off like an alarm in the storefront, and she ran toward him, leaping nimbly around the columns of mangled furniture.

Rand retreated, his mouth gulping at the stale air, and stumbled over a pile of debris. He turned and steadied himself on another stack of antique desks and bolted toward the door. A second figure emerged from behind a rack of old clothes. It blocked Rand's exit.

Shouldn't've followed her, Rand, he heard a man's voice say. Shouldn't've followed me. Us.

I'm not following anyone, Rand frantically exclaimed. I'm sorry, he said. I'm sorry. He tried to search the man's eyes, but mirrored glasses obscured them, and the only face Rand could see was his own, limp and white and stupid with terror, reflected in their lenses. The man's face, he realized, was gone. And as he turned to look at the woman standing at his back, he saw clearly that hers was gone, too.

You're not getting out of here, Rand, she said, until you bash our heads in. You're not getting out of here until you slit our throats, until you bludgeon us with a baseball bat. And do you know why? she said.

I haven't done anything wrong, Rand responded weakly.

And the male figure, exuberant and angry, screamed at him: Because we can be killed.

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They could, and Rand did. His hands shaking, glistening with sweat and blood, he stood in the odd storefront and looked at the two figures he'd left cold and dead on the dirty floor. He was fairly sure, this time, that no one would find a body, but he went through the pains of hiding them anyway, dragging them both to a distant corner and covering them with some mangy fur coats.

He didn't expect to see anything about a double-murder or a pair of corpses in the news, but he checked the papers for a few days anyway. Nothing. After the third day, he endeavored to walk by the store again, but it proved impossible. He couldn't find it. Rand figured maybe he'd forgotten where exactly it had been, so he made every block in the area, and still he saw nothing even closely resembling the shop window as it appeared to him that night, smeared and crowded with ruined antiques. He gave up after a couple hours of searching.

It was, he had to admit, almost too good to be true, but here it was again: There will be no repercussions, he thought to himself. Just satisfaction, relief. And the relief was palpable. In the nights following the episode in the storefront, he'd never slept better.

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Other incidents followed. And they followed, in all their peculiarities, a pattern. Typically, Rand would have a rough day at work, or suffer a night of failed appeals to his fellow man, or endure an awkward and doomed overture toward the opposite sex, and he would then feel a fury coming: a deep and boundless anger welling somewhere inside him. His frustration mounting to a boiling point, a faceless figure would suddenly present itself, taunting, mocking, laughing, ready for a painful death. And in increasingly brutal and effective ways, Rand would indulge them.

They usually appeared in secluded spaces, like alleyways, or at a blind turn in a dark and vacant underpass, or seated near him in an otherwise empty movie theater showing a re-run of some forgotten film that didn't seem to interest anyone. Not even Rand. He didn't know what interested him anymore, but the murders had somehow invigorated him. He felt younger, livelier than ever.

But another feeling nagged him. It wasn't guilt. He knew that now. He was far beyond that, and he wasn't sure he ever felt it to begin with. It could've been fear, he considered, or self-doubt, but those had always been with him, had always prevailed in him where they seemed to subside in others. Whatever the case, he thought to himself one night, I can't keep on like this. For one, it's not good for the mind. And furthermore, he mused, what would happen if I made a mistake?

A mistake. It was bound to happen if he continued. Because while these faceless figures approached him in seclusion, they had never entered the privacy of his home. They had never accosted him in an environment totally under his control. They had, instead, always followed him to the fringes of public spaces: quiet or remote areas that abutted parks or sidewalks or bars, that bordered communal grounds teeming with life. Real life. Real people, and with real faces.

He thought of it often. The images plagued him just before the sleeping hours, as he lay awake, staring at the ceiling or the wall. The visions and scenarios were myriad, but like his inconsequential murders, they followed a distinct pattern. He would be walking in an odd cityscape that mirrored his own, charging through interminable crowds of strangers, all of them faceless, distorted, unstable, impossibly variant. A man would shove him, or a woman would taunt him, or someone would try to steal his wallet or slap at a vague and amorphous possession that he held to his side, and he would pursue them up or down a flight of stairs, possibly into the suffocating confines of an abandoned building. After much difficulty, he would finally corner them, in that flighty and drifting way of dreams, and move to strangle them, to kill. And after releasing a thin neck, after feeling the knob of an Adam's apple falling under his thumbs or strands of long, blonde hair whispering out of his slackening fists, he would scrutinize the victim closer, and he would see it: a face.

Faces. There were many of them. There was a girl, a beautiful woman: her lips soft and large, her cheeks rouged, her eyes heavy, lidded, deep blue, staring over Rand's shoulder as if she, too, were dreaming. And there were old men, their tongues red and protruding from colorless and weathered lips, and young men, whose vigor drained from their faces the moment they appeared to Rand, and there had been a teenaged boy, and an old neighbor, and a man who had officiated his junior high basketball games, and many others besides.

The visions got to him. The fear. Malaise set in. But the faceless figures kept coming, inveigling him to murder. And though he met their requests with less zeal than before, and with more trepidation than ever, he honored them just the same.

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Rand reached a definite turning point one night as he slid off the edge of a parking lot, cursing aloud about what had been a particularly lonely and depressing Sunday. He'd spent the day reading, paging through a novel until his eyes nearly crossed. When that grew tiresome, he tried watching TV, but the shows reminded him too much of mistakes he'd made as a youth, or painfully missed opportunities of early adulthood. They illustrated a life he could've been living then, if he hadn't been such a worrisome or sensitive or angry person. If only he'd been as carefree and easygoing as the people he saw on the TV, he thought, or as breezy and open as those he saw walking around the city, life might have turned out differently for him. He might be one of them, smiling and strolling about on a bright Sunday, instead of Rand, sitting in a chair, dreaming, frowning.

Eventually, he turned off the TV. The living room went entirely dark. A whole day had passed, though he had no idea where it had gone, and he just sat in the dark like that for a while, a long

while, with no idea what to do or where to go, his eyes slowly adjusting to the shallow depths of the living room, its sparse furniture gradually defining before him, his mind racing over the similarly stark contents of another weekend spent in joyless isolation.

He suddenly stood up and walked out of his apartment and down the stairs. The night seemed to be pushing against the windows paneling the heavy front door of the building. He opened the door and nearly tripped over a man reclining on the front steps. The man was young, probably in his early 20s, with dark, curly hair. He paid Rand no mind. He stared forward, lightly humming and smoking. Rand stood over him and glowered.

He thought about pointing out the no loitering sign that a neighbor had hung in their streetside window, or maybe simply asking the young man if he lived in the building. But Rand said nothing. Instead, he stepped over the man's legs and continued walking down the stairs. And the young man, in his all his speechless impertinence, just went on humming and smoking.

The night had lost the usual crowd of daytime pedestrians, and in its cool and empty spaciousness, Rand did his best to forget the loiterer. He gave himself wholly to the evening instead. He breathed deeply as he walked, looking, for what felt like the first time, at some of the older buildings that towered over his neighborhood. He passed the lobby of one and peeked inside, where a doorman in a suit and hat lounged against a reception desk. They nodded to each another.

Maybe he could be a doorman, he thought, instead of a super, or maybe he could try to go back to school. They were only ideas, but neither seemed realistic. And neither of them, he conceded, were very promising. He had to admit that his days of promise were long gone anyway. Life was weaving itself into a perfectly familiar and heavy canvas, and that canvas was slowly taking the form of a straightjacket.

Work, for example, had reverted to its former degradation. Even in all its remodeled glory, Mr. Allen's place had gone to yet another sour and nagging tenant, and in her first few months of occupancy, she had already proven every bit as disrespectful and overbearing as Allen had been. With her harsh, blonde-white hair, and her high, shrill voice, Rand found it difficult to even look at her, and harder still to work under her yoke whenever she needed his assistance. There were days when it was so bad that he had to simply resign himself to silence, for fear that anything he might say would betray his complete and total hatred for her, his job, his life. He rarely spoke at all on the clock anymore.

He didn't bother to go out after work anymore, either. Drinking had lost its appeal again. Its attendant feelings of abandon and surrender no longer thrilled him. In fact, they scared him. He

worried obliquely about drinking too much, possibly saying the wrong thing to someone at a bar. But really, he had to admit to himself, he worried that under the slippery recklessness of a few highballs, or in the casual indiscretion of eight to ten beers, he might see a lack of features where a real and well-defined face existed.

He felt hopeless as he walked. He looked up from his shabby boots and saw that he'd unwittingly circled back to his apartment. As he stood at the disused parking lot at the end of his block, he spied a thin plume of smoke rising from his stoop. The loiterer. He was still there.

Anger seized him. He walked faster, stumbling a bit where the nap of the blacktop met the sidewalk. It would be this way forever, Rand thought. There will always be a new tenant, there will always be a loiterer, there will always be isolation and disconnection and a scarcity of humility in others. There was no respect in sprawling on another's front steps, he told himself. Nor was there grace in smoking and leaving discarded butts all over the sidewalk, in scraping one's feet against another's stoop. There was only impudence. And there was only the purity of Rand's hate.

Sir, he said, barely holding back, Sir, do you not see the sign in that window? And still walking steadily, Rand pointed at the no loitering sign, jabbing at it with his index finger. He felt his heart jumping, his breath increasing rapidly. The man, meanwhile, remained lounging on the stairs. Sir? Rand repeated. And just before he heard the voice, he saw the figure bring the cigarette to the place where its mouth should've been, smoke pluming from the vague area of its invisible nose. It was already speaking in that way, like a tire leaking: Yeah? it said. Why don't you fuckin' do something about it, Rand?

He did more about it than usual. The figure had scarcely finished its harangue when Rand lifted a stray brick from the lid of a garbage can, cocked it back in a shaking hand, and hammered the loiterer's head to the stoop like a ten-penny nail driven into a wall.

He swung, cursing as the brick knocked deep red into its nothing face, its arms flailing at Rand's shoulders. The figure laughed, as they usually did at this final moment, and Rand aimed it swiftly to where its mouth should've been, pounding the masonry into its rubbery head: over and over and over again, as if he were trying to galvanize or forge human features onto its blank appearance, as if he meant to knock in two sockets for eyes, to dent in a gasping mouth, to concuss a pair of divots where an amphibian nose might breathe its last.

Rand lost himself in the task. By the time he finished, the head was nothing more than a formless red skid on the stairs. The cigarette still burned on the bottom step. Rand crushed it with his heel and kicked it away.

He didn't bother to move the body. He gave that up many bodies ago. He knew no one would see it, anyway, even if they were staring directly at it, and it would be gone by the morning. They always were.

There were many examples. Later that night, awake in bed, he counted them. Eleven. The twelfth figure appeared to him at the subway station, the night after he left work. And he killed that one by simply choking it and leaving its lifeless body in the park. He did it without joy or satisfaction. He was empty of it. But he knew it was not yet empty of him.

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Rand sat on the taupe plastic bench in the subway car and tried not to look at anyone. It was much too late for most sensible commuters, so there weren't many people to look at anyway: just a young drunk couple necking in the middle of the car, and a gaunt man in a black and gray security uniform who sat farther down, near the other end of the compartment.

The train, he knew, had a way of conspiring against him, and it wasn't long before another man, shabby and unwashed, limped through the door adjoining the two cars, yelling for change through the hood of a soiled gray sweatshirt. The end of a long, dense beard tufted from its opening. I DON'T WISH TO LIE, the man shouted in a monotone dulled by routine. I DON'T WISH TO STEAL, AND I DON'T WISH TO CHEAT. And he shook a palmful of coins in a sunburned and calloused hand.

Rand's palms were slick and clammy by the time the train slid into the next stop. He stood, fairly composed, and walked out onto the platform, then subsequently ducked into the next available compartment. This one was empty. The doors shut.

He breathed and lowered into another bench. It was dank inside, and cool, too, and Rand luxuriated in the air that pumped from the vents above. Perspiration chilled at his lower back. Basements, he thought, tunnels: underground, and he checked his imagination. He did his damndest to forget the basement he'd have to visit for work tomorrow.

He'd already come close to forgetting the figure in the park when the train slowed to its next stop. Its doors thrust and clattered open, and the voice barged in after them, bounding from the other end of the carriage: TO CHEAT, it said. Rand slowly turned to regard the man who entered behind it. He saw the same soiled hood, the mossy beard, the dry, red hand still shaking scant change. The man dragged his right foot behind him, as if it were a small and insolent dog, and his head dipped and wobbled as he lapsed into his refrain. I DON'T WISH TO LIE, he began

again. I DON'T WISH TO STEAL, I DON'T WISH TO CHEAT. And after approaching and passing Rand without acknowledgement, he swept into the space between cars and disappeared a second time.

His words, however, remained. They circled Rand, dizzied him: lie, steal, cheat. Rand thought cynically that if the man had deigned to do any one of those things, he would probably be up above, asleep in a warm bed, instead of down below, hobbling through a deserted train, begging change from those who had none to spare. This, Rand considered with increasingly furious pity, a sort of sympathy bordering on disgust, this is what those beholden to grace and humility suffer. And all the other callous and selfish and petty people of the world, the so-called decent people, are at peace with themselves, and here I am. Here we are.

Rand was overwhelmed with anger by the time the train pulled into his stop. He felt a palpable frustration rising in his throat. He was revolted by the man's lack of self-worth, and he was consumed by hatred, furious with those who made such a world even possible. Worse still, he was ashamed with himself for entertaining so many sophomoric and adolescent opinions, for languishing in hopelessness like a sullen teen. And at the root of it all, the subway still reminded him of the basement to which he would be chained tomorrow, and it all loomed above him, like a dirt sky. These thoughts sent pains to the small of his neck.

He saw himself scowling in one of the train's windows as he rose to depart. He shook his head and walked onto the platform. The train huffed and brushed away, pulling litter in its wake, and Rand continued toward the stairs, where the passenger in the security uniform suddenly sprung past.

Only Rand remained. Rand, and the beggar. He had also disembarked the train, and he now lingered on the platform, crouched in a low huddle by the ascending stairs. He spoke again as Rand passed. His voice was a hoarse whisper, a tumbling wheeze. Change, he said. It was all he said.

Rand saw him shudder, faltering toward the ground, and stretch to steady himself. A gnarled fist scraped against the concrete, and his hand, slipping on the tarred and wet surface, opened to release a small collection of coins. Many glittered as they spiraled and rolled away, chiming off the edge of the platform. Others bore the length of the corridor and swarmed past Rand's feet. Rand paused and lowered to grab one. A quarter.

He approached the man with the coin and offered it to him. The beggar shuddered again, reaching to collect it, and again, he fell to one side. This time, Rand reflexively caught his arm,

and the man followed his guiding hand, which led him back to his feet and into a standing position.

The two men were nearly the same height. Rand looked at the beggar, or tried to, without shame, without the pity he felt moments ago.

He registered little surprise when the beggar pushed back his hood to reveal a blank face. And Rand didn't flinch when it asked, in the unmistakable voice: Wouldn't it feel good to chuck one of these lazy, good-for-nothing bastards onto those tracks, Rand? Just to put them out of their misery?

No, Rand said impassively.

It might do you good.

We've done this once tonight already, Rand said. An hour ago. Maybe less.

The body'd fry on that third rail, Rand. Or it'd break itself on the other two, maybe lay in wait for the train to come and roll it to hell. It paused. Lay it all to waste, Rand. It ain't worth a damn.

I'm not wasting anyone. I'm not doing anything. Still holding the figure's forearm, Rand searched the subtle imperfections in the otherwise dull and featureless face. And then with sudden assurance, he said, I'm going home.

The figure began to laugh. You're holding me awfully tight, Rand, it said.

Rand's mind raced. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to himself, the figure was right: he had tightened his grip, taking its other arm into his left hand, pulling its body closer. Its stench of offal and sweat came to him, and he smelled the pungent mix of deterioration, cheap booze, and something like rotting produce, a faintly honeyed stink of decay. Obscurely, Rand watched it speak, though its face made only perfunctory and vaguely quivering movements, as if it talked to him under the cover of a skintight mask: Go on, Rand, it said. Toss me down there.

But Rand only stared where its eyes should've been. And finding nothing there, he then hugged the figure and pushed his chin into its shoulder.

I'm going to hold you now, he said through gritted teeth, whispering into its absence of ear. I just want to hold you for a moment.

As he spoke, Rand felt the figure do something that none of its predecessors had ever done. He felt it resist.

It recoiled, squirming under Rand's grasp. Throw me, it said impatiently. Throw me down onto those tracks.

We're going to be close now, Rand said. Friends. We're going to be good friends. He dug his chin deeper into its shoulder. He felt taut and sinewy muscle there. The figure pulled up its arms, trying to shove free of Rand, who steeled his grip. He curled both arms around its torso and joined them behind its back.

Let go, it said.

Rand ignored it, speaking through its protests. I'm going to know you, he said. He began to laugh. You and me, Rand said. We're going to know one another. Intimately. We'll go everywhere together.

The figure gathered its reserves and shoved Rand again. Harder, this time, as if fending off an attack. Rand stumbled backwards and fell onto his ass. He made no motion to rise. Instead, he remained on the ground, as if pinned to it by the incredible sound that the figure then loosened. The sound was woeful, almost indescribable, and it would come to Rand for weeks, months after he heard it. It was a low and desperate groan.

Rand leaned over the floor, supporting himself on the damp concrete, and watched the figure stagger, convulse. It hunched forward and brought both of its hands to its face. He saw a small horizontal slit form just below where its nose should've been, but wasn't, and looked on as the slit trembled and opened into the shape of a fetal mouth.

The figure threw its head back on its shoulders and used its new mouth to shriek like a wild animal. Large, crooked teeth showed inside.

It lowered to all fours. Then it ran, howling up the stairs and into the night.

And Rand followed.