



New York City Marathon
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By
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Byron sat on his barstool, a pen in one hand. His white button down shirt was rolled up at the sleeves so that his bare arm rested on the wooden molding along the edge of the bar. His other arm was bent at the elbow, the hand attached pressed against his forehead, his fingers buried in his black curly hair. The fingers holding the pen were holding it loosely while his thumb flicked the end making the point bounce and tap on the bar. "They come," he said, "every year to run. They come to show what they are made of. They run to..." his voice stumbled to a halt. "Jesus," he said, the slightest hint of Irish brogue in his voice almost twisting the word into "Jaysus." Byron looked down at the notebook in front of him for a couple of seconds, then he let his elbow slide out until his forehead bonked down on the edge of the bar. It sounded loud enough and solid enough so that there might have been some actual pain involved. He curled his arms around his head almost like he was going asleep. Then his muffled voice shouted up from somewhere under the bar. "Why the fuck do they run?"

Will, standing next to him, trying to get the bartender's attention, glanced over at Byron. Will momentarily gave up trying to order another round. "You know there's an actual marathon not ten feet," Will pointed, "out that door. In fact once you're at the door there's nothing but sidewalk and a bit of a crowd and then, right there in the street, there's a real marathon. I'm thinking maybe you should go take a look at it. Might help you write about it."

Will was a big guy with a head that was almost square and a haircut that suggested he might have played some football back in school but that he hadn't lived for it and didn't want to talk about it.

Byron slowly raised his head, waving off Will's suggestion. "I've seen it every year since college. That's seven years now, ever since I moved to this city. It's the same thing every year." He was fully righted on his barstool now, and while he took over trying to catch the bartender's eye, he counted off on his fingers, "some Kenyan wins, a jack-ass running in a rhinoceros suit for some cause or another barfs, and the guys in wheelchairs make me feel lazy."

The bartender was finally captured and two new beers in pint glasses were placed in front of them.

Byron looked around the bar. It was early, still barely noon, and the bar looked mostly empty. This was misleading, though, as it was a large bar, especially for New York, taking up a whole corner of a block with two entrances and another back bar in an alcove towards the rear by the bathrooms. The main bar itself was a good thirty yards long and Byron and Will had barely managed to grab the last two empty stools. If you stopped to listen, a light buzz of conversation swam through the space.

"So who's coming today, anyway?" Byron asked.

"I think everyone."

"Yeah? Damn. I can't really stay, though. I'm going to just have this drink, maybe one more, then I gotta get home and finish this assignment for tomorrow." Byron flicked his pen a few times, hard, against the notebook. "It's fucking ridiculous. It's like the entire class is expecting something special out of me." He looked over at Will with incredulity on his face. "You know? It's like I'm always supposed to bring the goods. It's fucking unfair is what it is."

Will took a cold gulp out of his glass and nodded in charitable understanding, then with a slight tilt of his head he weighed the balance of the situation. "Well you *are* their teacher, Byron."

"Fucking criminal." Byron took a gulp himself. "I should never have agreed to keep pace with them. Anyway, just this one and then maybe one when people start showing up."

"I'm not people?"

"Lord, no."

Byron paged through his notebook, shaking his head as he looked, then flipped it shut. "I can't write in this stupid thing," he said. "And what I do write I can never read because my handwriting sucks." The notebook went into his rear pocket and his cell phone came out. "I've started trying to call my own voicemail when I get a thought. That way I can make sure that," he looked over at Will and the pace of his sentence jumped in an entirely different direction, "and you don't care in the slightest."

"I'm still stinging from that, 'I'm not people' comment." Will said, feigning hurt.

"Right," Byron said. He gingerly set his cell phone on the bar as if he were posing it, then folded his hands on the molding and lowered his chin to rest on them. He sat there and stared at the phone.

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The bar was more full now, the walls were all occupied by little groups of sixes and sevens forming circles that were starting to make walking from one end to the other more difficult. Will was holding four bottles of beer and behind him, following the path he was carving, walked a work friend of his with another five.

Will passed by a head of long blond hair that smelled of some nice perfume. He could only see the back of the girl's head and the back of her pink golf shirt and little cargo pants and Will shook his head then he was past her group and on the left was another head of nice smelling hair and the process resumed.

Will stopped at a group of seven guys towards the back and deposited some of his beers amongst his friend. He had rallied a number of people into going out but had called together such an eclectic group of friends, college, work, some of the athletic groups he belonged to, that they had all circled up and formed their own mini-groups instead of one larger "Will group." This meant that Will had forfeited nucleus status and would have to mingle today.

Will didn't care; he didn't feel very much a part of any of these groups anymore. He didn't feel like a part of this city anymore. He felt detached. Something was missing from his life recently. It wasn't like he had ever craved huge flashy excitement, he had always found a simple joy whenever his favorite seasonal sandwiches reappeared at his local fast food restaurants, but he never remembered the appearance of those sandwiches making his entire month. It seemed sometimes that the last thing he remembered clearly was college, and since then he had sort of let his gaze drift as one foot continued to step in front of the other and now he barely recognized where he was. He didn't understand his apartment. He didn't understand when getting through three Netflix movies started to constitute a good week. He had never wanted much, never wanted to travel, never wanted to be famous, never wanted to live in a penthouse. But he had never wanted to feel numb all over either. And it was this city, this city allowed it to happen. You never had to say, "Hi," to your neighbor, you never had to acknowledge anyone or anything; you never had to even leave your apartment. If you had a good selection of take out menus this city could turn into your own private island. If you lost your focus on the future in this town then the town would let you walk blithely along so that you didn't notice a damned thing you were walking past. Days could melt into one another until you barely bothered to distinguish July from April. And he didn't understand why he was bothering. He didn't want this. He didn't like sushi *that* much.

And, hell, when he had gone back to Ohio for his ten year high-school reunion he had decided that the sushi out there had been pretty good.

Will chatted briefly, listened to a joke, stared around the room at various girls being pointed out, and then exited the circle.

He made his way to the rear entrance and poked his head outside where some chairs were set up in the bar's sidewalk seating area. This was where all the smokers were congregating. This entrance was around the corner along 83rd street about half a block in from First Avenue. Looking to his right Will could see the crowd lining the avenue and the occasional flash of a runner. There was a large sign arching over First Avenue notifying everyone that this was mile seventeen. He stepped outside and past a couple of people and spotted Byron.

"Just one more drink and you're out of here, eh?"

Byron looked up, a little bewildered, from where he was bent over the railing trying to balance two beers and a Bloody Mary while he got his cigarettes out of his pocket. "Wha?" he answered back. Then he looked down at his hands. "Fuck you." He looked up again. "Give me a hand."

Will took a few drinks out of Byron's hands and Byron got a cigarette out and lit. "I forgot what happens when I'm out with your work friends. I got through saying hi to half of them and I had six more rounds in my hand." Byron was still holding the Bloody Mary and a bottle of beer and he was looking around with a lit cigarette dangling from his mouth trying to puzzle out how he was going to proceed.

"Just put them down on a chair," Will said, eyeing Byron, like this was something he should have pieced together.

"The chairs are wobbly and I was planning on sitting down at some point. Here," he said and he forced his bottle into Will's hands. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Byron watched the marathon spectators walk past towards the avenue and smoked, enjoying the fall sunshine while behind him Will wrestled with four drinks and a wobbly chair.

Will looked up to see a brunette walking by with a tan that gave her a farm girl-look.

"What is it about this day that makes getting stupid drunk in the daytime something that attractive women suddenly want to take part in?"

"It's cause I'm here," Byron said without even thinking.

"Funny."

Byron shrugged with an eyebrow.

"Seriously. They come out of the woodwork today. It's like they bus them in from some hot-girl farm upstate somewhere."

Byron took a long pull from his beer. "Amen," Byron said, extending his hand with his now empty beer bottle in it.

He burped.

"Why do they run, Will?" he asked, patiently holding his arm out, his empty bottle in his hand, staring down the street at the crowd. Will caved and replaced the empty bottle with a full one from the chair. The Bloody Mary spilled over in the process.

"I think because it's there," Will answered. "Isn't that how it goes?"

"Nah," Byron said, staring down the street suspiciously, the cheers of the crowd coming back to them warbled by the distance. "I'm not buying it."

Will stared with Byron and they both contemplated the question.

"Oh," Will said, changing the subject, "I saw Calvin inside."

"Calvin?" Byron looked over. "You got Calvin out of the restaurant? Wow, you really did get everyone to come out today, didn't you?"

"I know, I don't think I've seen Calvin since... well since he broke up with that girl... I forget her name. But that was almost a year ago."

"Yeah," Byron said, "I don't think he took that too well."

"And I think I saw one of your little friends."

"I gotta learn to stop talking in front of my students. Which one is it?"

"Very light brown hair, kind of short. Freckles."

Byron's face became tense. "You sure? How do you know she's one of mine?"

"I recognized her from that thing you brought me to."

"Right. Fuck."

"Is there a problem?" Will asked, curiosity on his face.

"Yeah. I've got a *very* big problem with that one."

Will took a few steps closer, his head angled, trying to catch Byron's eyes. "Did you... did you sleep with her?"

"Worse." Byron's face froze over.

Will stopped, his head pulling back as he tried to figure out something worse. "You... you started to sleep with her and it turns out she's a dude?"

Byron turned slowly to look at Will, managed to hold it together for a second or two, and then burst out laughing. "No, somewhere in between that."

"What on earth is in between those two?"

Byron sighed and turned away from the street. He took another cigarette out. "You ever get the feeling that you and your job are in direct competition for your soul?"

"If that were true," Will answered, "then me and complete and utter boredom would be in competition for my soul. And I don't particularly like the sound of that."

"Hey," a voice said behind them, and Will turned to see Calvin coming their way. Calvin gave off an air of being groomed and well put together, but Will had roomed with him for a couple of years and Will knew for certain that the clothes Calvin was wearing that seemed to go together so well had been picked up off the floor at random and put on because they smelled okay, and the black curly hair that seemed styled atop his head was actually just how Calvin's hair looked when he woke up in the morning.

Calvin gave Will's shoulder a friendly squeeze and they greeted each other. Then Calvin walked past him, squinting a little, his trip through bar having taken long enough to make the sunshine seem bright now that he was outside.

Calvin walked across the sidewalk to Byron, who was still staring at the crowd down the street, his cigarette lit, his cell phone out but unopened.

"Disgusting," Calvin said, looking at the cigarette in Byron's mouth. "You know those things are destroying your body."

"The fuck you saving yours for, its resale value?" Byron said without taking the cigarette from between his teeth.

Calvin made a move to slap the cigarette out of Byron's mouth, his arm snaked out, but Byron ducked his head back easily, dodging without even looking over at where Calvin was standing. His only mistake was after he had dodged when he overcompensated and had to take a quick step back to rebalance.

"And here's a cliché," Calvin said, "a drunken writer."

"Cooking is for homos," Byron said, tucking his phone back into his jeans.

Calvin shook his head and chuckled. "Unbelievable." Calvin stopped paying attention to Byron.

Will had watched all of this intently. He had studied the way these two interacted for years and never understood it, but, in this one particular instant, Will thought he actually knew what was coming next, he thought Calvin had disengaged too early, had misjudged Byron. "Calvin," he called out, wanting to level the field, "Byron's actually been here a few hours, I think he's a little drunker than maybe you-"

Calvin was half turned, listening to Will, when Byron swung a sloppy drunken arm and slapped Calvin clean across the face. Will heard a gasp

from a group of people a few chairs over and a couple of conversations stopped as Byron stood poised on the balls of his feet, clearly pleased. Calvin stared at him. Byron stared back.

"Mom says, 'Hi,'" Byron finally said.

"Moron," Calvin said, dismissing the entire interaction and shaking his head. "Yeah, I know, I swung by there before I came here. She said I just missed you." Calvin was glancing at the beers in Will and Byron's hands. He held his empty hands up, questioning.

Byron pointed down at the mess on the chair. "I bought you a Bloody Mary," he said.

Calvin ignored him.

"These are ours," Will said, pointing at some beers on a different chair. He found a full one and handed it to Calvin.

"One of Byron's female students is here," Will said, this information clearly something he thought Calvin should know.

"Really?" Calvin said, turning to Byron. "One of your little pets showed up?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Byron said as he walked past the two of them and dropped his half-smoked cigarette on the ground. He disappeared into the bar.

Calvin stared after him. Then he looked over at Will. "What did he do? Sleep with her?"

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Calvin and Byron were sitting on bar stools against the wall towards the back bar where a dead spot between the bathrooms and the storage room allowed them some space. The crush of the crowd was overtaking the rest of the bar and after saying, "Hi," to some more of Will's work friends they had retreated here, both somehow holding new drinks.

"I got one of those robots for my shower," Calvin said, picking up a loose string of conversation from a few minutes ago. He leaned on his chair towards Byron so he wouldn't have to shout. "You push a button and it spins and sprays stuff, keeps your shower clean."

Byron was interested. "Yeah? That thing work?"

"Not even close, no."

"Oh," Byron said sadly, the notion of never having to clean his shower again obviously having been appealing to him. "I finally got one of those vibrating razors."

"Ah. Congratulations," Calvin said, "you've left the world of twentieth century shaving behind."

"I don't like it."

"What? How do you not like it?"

"I dunno, I just don't like it. It doesn't shave well."

Calvin looked wounded by this betrayal. "You're not using it right," he said, not making eye contact with Byron.

"Don't tell me I'm not using it right, it's a razor, you shave with it."

"I've seen you shave, you're not doing it right."

"Fuck you."

"No, I'm serious. You hack at your face. You need to take your time. And with these new ones you need to just slide it slowly across your face. You basically let the vibrator do all the work."

"Like you with a woman?"

"You know it bugs me, go to hell by the way, when people don't use blades right. I see it all the time, knives, razors, whatever. People cutting onions wrong or screwing up tomatoes." Calvin started gaining momentum and the feeling wasn't comfortable, it was like he was sliding down a chute greased with his own words and he couldn't stop himself from talking, he could only hope to slow himself down. "People cut their fingers and think it's because their knives are too sharp. *Dull* knives cause more accidents than sharp knives. And you get people just *asking* to be cut, slicing away with their fingers sitting right there. It's ridiculous. I work with knives. I know what I'm talking about. Take the clumsiest sous chef and if he's got the proper foundation of knife skills," Calvin saw that Byron was looking around the bar, barely listening at this point, "he won't so much as nick a finger. There should be a city run knife safety program or something. Some sort of training campaign to teach kids proper knife handling skills."

"Oh absolutely, Cal. That'll catch on like Kwanzaa." Byron hopped off his stool and placed his beer precariously on a small ledge that ran along the wall. "I'm going to the bathroom."

Calvin watched him walk away. He felt like his tongue had just turned into a slinky and had come spilling out of his mouth, one endless stream, and now there was a pile of himself sitting embarrassingly on the ground. That had been happening more and more often, one strange little concern spooling out of control while he talked until he knew he was babbling and knew he was being boring but he couldn't stop.

Then Calvin realized he was now alone in the bar, and he hunched down into his stool and tried to fade back into the wall. The only

movements he made were to periodically lift his glass with both hands and take a drink while he stared, eyes rarely blinking, out over the crowd. All alone in New York.

He wondered how a city where you could find a bar full of people at four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon could make you feel so alone.

It had just been a matter of deleting her from his cell phone and she had no longer existed. No trace of her, no trail, no evidence, no nothing. She just sank down into the sidewalks of this city and was never to be heard from again. The apartment he had known her in was no longer hers, now it was full of strangers. How could something that was so damned real empty itself out so that he had to wonder sometimes if she had even existed?

And he had to admit that things had ended badly and maybe he had wanted her to disappear, that much was true, but his accomplice had been a city where it took the simple action of closing your eyes to make a person cease existing. And that was what had finally rattled him. That a disappearance like that was possible. Rattled him enough to make him start to feel on shaky ground wherever he went. A relationship that had seemed like a growing foundation had simply not been there when he went to lean on it again. And then he had started sleeping badly and he had started seeing little black spots with weird phosphorescent edges floating at the corner of his eyes. He had been standing in the shower one day, thinking he was swatting at gnats when he realized he was swatting at figments of his imagination. A couple of trips to the doctor had told him nothing, there was nothing physically wrong with him, but he hadn't believed that, something was clearly wrong with him. And he had quit smoking, he had stopped going out, he had wanted to get *healthy* damn it, he had started gripping his life so hard it left bruises on his psyche and he felt like he had broken loose on deck and was just slamming around against everything around him, battering himself apart while struggling to stay safe. He hadn't even noticed it at first it had felt so natural. That had been the strangest part. How accessible crazy had turned out to be. But slowly, over time, over the better part of a year the feeling had begun to feel foreign and he, only a week or so ago, had finally come up with a question to give it some sort of reality, to attempt to make it into something he could maybe get his hands around. One question.

When had he started living in fear?

Calvin saw someone in his peripheral vision that didn't pass by like the rest of them. He turned and saw a girl staring at him. There was a

familiar feeling of ice cold water splashing into his stomach and his first thought was to hide but the girl stepped over. "Do you know Byron?" she asked.

"I'm his twin," Calvin answered.

The girl nodded a quick staccato of short nods that seemed to stem from her chin as she agreed with herself, "Oh, yeah, I can totally see that now."

"Calvin," Calvin said, giving up, extending his hand.

"I'm Jenny," the girl said. "Byron's my teacher. Well," she corrected herself, "my TA anyway. He doesn't let us call him an assistant, though."

"Nice to meet you," Calvin said. He was trying to be noncommittal, his stomach was only barely starting to feel under control and he had the strange feeling that he was sweating even though he couldn't feel anything. The girl just continued to stare at him. Finally Calvin waved an open hand over Byron's empty stool. Jenny moved, too fast, clearly showing that she had been waiting for just such an offer, and took the seat.

Calvin took a deep breath and hoped that his body would calm down. It didn't. He turned back to Jenny and forced himself to start making small talk. After a few minutes he saw Byron heading outside and as casually as he could manage he parted himself from Jenny and headed towards the door, focusing on the square of daylight and just taking one step at a time. When he got to the doorway he stood there, taking a breath of the outside air. He could feel it, the bar, behind him, the crowd swaying and curling up like some massive animal at his back. He could feel it staring at the back of his neck, could almost feel it breathing, but he forced himself to take another deep breath and began to let his eyes wander over the small clusters of people outside, trying to find Byron. He found Will instead, out by the curb.

"Is Byron out here?" Calvin asked as he approached Will.

"He went teetering off that way," Will answered, pointing down the street towards the mile seventeen marker. Calvin caught sight of Byron behind a group of three girls coming their way.

The girls passed and Byron stopped next to Will and Calvin while he stared off after them. "All I want," Byron said, "is to be drunk and surrounded by beautiful women for the rest of my life." He looked at Will and Calvin each in turn, his head overshooting his neck with every turn it made, a slow sway in his stance. "Is that really so hard?" Byron didn't bother waiting for an answer and turned back towards the race on the other end of the street.

Will looked at Byron, at Calvin, at the crowd and the street and then at the three girls walking away. He wasn't a part of this. He suddenly understood. Not anymore. Maybe at first there had been an excitement, when he first came to this city. But it was different now. The excitement was gone and none of this was his. It was like he was walking through a museum or trundling along on a ride at Disney World, watching all of this happen but not able to take part. He decided then and there that he had had enough. He could get decent enough sushi in Ohio. And a second bedroom. There was no need for him to be in this city anymore. He would move back to Ohio.

And that was it. It was decided. And Will, for the first time in months, maybe years, felt the absence of pressure on his body. He would tell everyone in a day or so. Right now, with that decision firmly in his head, he just wanted to go home, maybe get a good night's sleep. He was tired.

"I'm heading out, guys," Will said, getting a wave and a smile from Byron and a couple of words of goodbye from Calvin. Then he turned and started walking down the street.

Byron was staring intently at the race. There was something strange in his face and Calvin was about to ask what was going on when Byron spoke.

"Ah, shit," Byron said, "I saw this start to happen while I was over there." His voice was very different, lower, heartier, a gravel filled bed of humanity running underneath his usual bite. "I hate to see this."

Calvin watched Byron swallow slowly and then turned to see what he was looking at. Coming towards them from the race was a group of three people. Two were obviously not runners, they were dressed in jeans that didn't fit right and t-shirts that were too busy. They were flanking the third person, a woman, who was slowly making her way down the street. This third person was dressed in full racing gear, teal shorts and a stretch tank top. She was favoring one leg as she walked. Her shoulders were covered in a foil blanket. She was sobbing.

Byron was staring at her, one of his hands up at his face, his first two fingers lightly rubbing up and down his jaw line. "I actually saw the moment when she decided to quit," he said slowly. "She saw her two friends on the sideline, she had forced herself to make it to them, then she just veered off and stepped out of the race." He pulled at his lower lip. "I'm not sure when she started crying." Byron and Calvin watched the woman let herself be guided to the other side of the street. She stopped near a car parked on the other side and they could hear her crying change

pitch as some new pain flared in her body. Her two friends turned and started walking back to her.

"Come on," Byron said, staring across at the scene playing out, the volume of his voice soft but the force behind it strong. "Come *on*," he said again, rooting her on, his energy strong enough that Calvin felt himself getting caught up in it. "Let yourself do this much at least." As they watched, the woman waved her friends off and gathered herself together. One of her friends moved toward her again but she, with finality, put her hand up and forced her friend away. She stood up straight and started walking again, slowly, nodding as her friends asked her if she was sure she was okay.

Byron stepped into the middle of the street and watched them make it to the corner, now barely visible. The crowd was on the move at this point in the day with people migrating over to the park to catch the tail end of the race where the runners were still thick. People were moving all over the street and Byron watched as the trio stood on the corner and began to hail a cab.

Will passed in front of them, making his own way around the corner, the distance superimposing his body over the runner's for a brief second before he disappeared out of sight. Eventually the trio hailed a cab and Byron watched them get in and drive away.

"They'll be alright," Byron said, sounding happy that he could say that with conviction.

"It's weird to see you caring about people like that."

"Ah," Byron waved him off, "she's not people anymore. She dropped out. She's just a tourist now. Good luck to her."

Byron started walking back towards the race, his beer in one hand, his arms stretched out while he tried walking one foot in front of the other along a crack in the pavement. Calvin walked along the sidewalk watching his brother, a row of parked cars between them. "I talked to your little friend inside," Calvin said. "Jenny."

"Yeah?" Byron said, leaning his head back and walking with his mouth open as he stared up at the sky.

"Yeah. She doesn't seem so bad." They walked along past either side of the parked cars. "So, really, I have to ask, what's the deal there? What did you do to her?"

"I told her to quit," and Byron stopped walking. He righted himself and lowered his head and glared out at the mile seventeen marker down the street. He raised his bottle and took a slow swig.

"So?" Calvin asked, knowing he was missing something. "You tell me to quit all the time. You tell everyone to quit when you're not busy telling them to go fuck themselves."

Byron laughed, his shoulders hunching up in a spasm as he did so, but his lips curled up like he was swallowing something bitter and Calvin thought for a second that he was going to vomit. Then he spoke. "No," he said, and slowly began shaking his head back and forth. "It's not that I told her to quit. It's that I talked her into quitting. I'm her teacher and I talked her into holding off on submitting two of her stories for publication to an editor I know."

"So..." Calvin said, walking forward a bit so he could see his brother's face, trying to feel his way towards the thing he still couldn't see. "So her stuff needed some work and you told her... what... to hold off? Give it a couple of more read throughs? So she's not that good of a writer?"

"Nah," Byron said quick and sharp, like he was biting the head off something. He lifted the bottle up and took another pull. Calvin could hear the beer inside the bottle slosh against the glass. "She's not a good writer, she's an *amazing* writer. And I, her teacher, talked her out of submitting because I know that this particular editor has one slot open and that he's leaning heavily towards picking one of *my* stories for publication."

There were a few moments of silence. "Jesus, Byron," Calvin said.

Byron stood still for a few seconds. His head resumed shaking, slowly, back and forth, his eyes fixed on the distance, the shaking clearly disagreeing with whatever was running through his head. "It's just this city," Byron said. "It's this fucking city," and his voice started to get mean. "You go up against every single person the writing world vomits up every three seconds. You butt heads with every pimply faced little kid with a college resume and every aged veteran with a lifetime of credits and they're all scrabbling for the same piece of real estate that you're digging your claws into and it's not fucking enough because you're losing ground and you're losing time and you start to claw back, not at the real estate but at the people," and Byron's teeth were set and his eyes were glaring out down the street and it was like something inside of him began to take form and strike with energy against some plate of steel that had grown up in his gut. "And you sit there drowning, completely swamped, and it gets to a point where all you can hope for is that just one fucking tiny little bubble that you let out during your last gasp will make it to the top of the flood you're fighting against and break on the surface and just let out the smallest sound." He took another swig and

the thing inside began to take shape, began to take form, began to gather strength from him speaking the words aloud. "And then you start seeing easy ways out, easy paths, and they used to look like nothing but giant fucking jokes to you, only now you catch yourself stopping and reading the signs on these paths and letting yourself think that maybe this isn't so bad after all. And you know the city won't care, hell the city will take care of you, the city hugs heroes and maggots both to her chest, keeps them both warm, feeds both of them," and the thing was a head and shoulders and two fists and two feet and it was pounding, howling, slamming against the steel and Byron took deep breath and it wound up and pounded and then steel was shattering everywhere and it was through and the hard part was over, now it just needed a way out. "And so you do it," Byron shrugged, his voice simple now. "You just do it."

He turned to Calvin and there was only Byron looking at his brother. "I told one of my students that her writing wasn't good enough because I wanted her to withdraw it so I could get a story of my own published. And that's it. Actually, no, that's not it, because I made it right with her a few days later. I told her I had gone back over her story and I had misread her and I gave her some bullshit and I apologized and made her submit her stuff and I probably apologized too much and that's why she's here because she maybe thinks I was coming on to her a little but fuck her that's her problem, the thing is though, I haven't told anyone what I did. I haven't told anyone that it took me three days to set it right. That's the thing." Byron's lips curled and then his jaw and throat began to work like he was trying to suck a piece of hair off his tongue. Then he stopped and everything calmed down and with a quick turn of his head he spit something into the street. "For three days I was a piece of shit."

Calvin watched as his brother smiled, a tepid shaky smile, like a fawn just learning to walk. Then Calvin almost thought he should jump over the hood of the car in front of him because Byron swayed backward crazily, his body leaning far enough that Byron stuck one leg out in front of him to retain his balance and then his arms were out at his sides, his beer bottle dangling between two fingers, palms facing upwards, head tilted back. And as Calvin watched, his brother slowly began to right himself. His leg came down and his back straightened up and then Byron was leaning too far forwards but he was coming back around and to Calvin it seemed like he was watching a ship capsize in reverse. Byron straightened up further and then there was a slow roll of his shoulders. Byron took one last swig of his bottle, finishing it off. He bent over and set it down on the street.

And then Byron had his phone out and flipped open and it was dialing and he was rolling his head around on his shoulders while he waited. Through the thin fall air Calvin heard Byron's own voice coming out of the cell phone; he couldn't make out the words but the tone and pace and timber made it clear that it was Byron's voice mail.

Byron lowered his head and with piercing eyes he glared down the street at the mile seventeen marker while he waited for his own beep.

And Calvin saw it, in the toothy almost wolf like smile that Byron was flashing at the world and in the eyes that had always been able to cut through anyone they wanted to.

The phone beeped.

Calvin saw it in the easy poise and fighter's stance.

"They come here to run," Byron said, "because it's the only race big enough to hold them."

Calvin felt a small rush over the back of his neck as he realized he hadn't seen it this strong in years. It was beaming off of Byron like liquid metal.

"They come because it's the only race big enough to challenge them."

That thing inside of Byron that sometimes made Calvin wish he had been the one born two minutes later because maybe something as magical as that had been its source. That thing that Calvin never acknowledged aloud, partly because of a fear that admitting it was there might somehow diminish its effect on him, and partly because Byron was such a contrarian bastard that to bring it out in the open in any way would most likely make him shut it off on purpose. Calvin had spent his life, for the most part, ignoring it because he knew it didn't exist inside of him, not anywhere close to the same strength anyway, so he had quickly forced himself to disavow this thing inside of his baby brother lest he grant it too much presence. But there had been times, like when Fat Jimmy Druthers, four years older than them, had decided to give them both bloody noses every chance he got when they were in the third grade, there had been times when Calvin had allowed himself to peek, secretly, over at his brother and wait and wait and finally get a glimpse of this thing at its strongest. This thing that most everyone misunderstood as craziness or anger but Calvin knew was nothing more than his brother making a conscious decision to not duck when life threw shit at him. Calvin knew it was nothing more than a fierce brand of down and dirty courage. It was the thing he loved most in his brother.

Calvin had never allowed himself to lean on it, had never allowed himself to ask for it, but sometimes, like right now, he let himself take a

good look at his brother and let himself breathe a little easier, let himself believe that if this person could exist in this world, then at least there was the possibility that things could turn out alright in the end, and Calvin let himself smile, a foreign feeling, but he let himself do it anyway. And just like that there was hope.

"They run," Byron said, now completely at ease, his words containing no question, his smile draped casually across half his mouth, "because they know they can."

And he flipped his phone shut with one hand. He clicked his tongue softly against his teeth a few times, then turned away and looked at Calvin.

"I'm hungry," he said, "let's go get cheesecake."

"You don't want to go back in?" Calvin asked.

"Nah."

"Okay," Calvin said as Byron made his way through the parked cars. Calvin handed his bottle over and Byron walked the empties over to a chair, set them down, came back wiping his hands on his pants.

"Where should we go?" Calvin asked.

"Beats the fuck out of me, I haven't been on this side of the park since these pants were new."

"Well," Calvin said, "there's Samson's."

They started walking down the street, slowly and casually, chatting as they went.

"They have strawberry cheesecake?"

"I think so."

"They have hot waitresses?"

"They've got cheesecake, Byron. That's not enough for you?"

"This is the island of Manhattan, Cal. We've got a street named after Senior Wences. If I want cheesecake served to me by a supermodel in a halter top I'll get it... at three in the morning," he jabbed his finger in the air for emphasis, "*while* doing my laundry."

"I guess we could try Georgi's."

"Ooh, yeah, I like that place."

They walked under trees barely holding onto the bulk of their last green leaves, the forms of the brothers getting smaller as they covered the distance to the corner. "I owe you a slap, by the way," Calvin said.

"Yeah, all right. But that's only good for six months."

"I was thinking maybe Thanksgiving."

"That's not bad. I was thinking you might... "

Their voices faded into indistinguishable vibrations set adrift in the thin fall air. The conversation went on. Then there was a playful shove by one against the other. Then a shove back. Then one stopped and played defense, the other giving a quick stutter step and stopping as well. There was a pause and then a flash and a lunge and a dodge and a loud cackle of laughter.

And, finally, with the mile seventeen marker at their backs, the two brothers turned and began to run.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.

Spotted A Typo?

Let me know about it and you could win a signed copy of one of my books. Details are available at JosephDevon.com or email me at joe@josephdevon.com.

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From the same author on Feedbacks

The Letter (2000)

Naming your main character Tom means something in American literature. The Ghosts' of Sawyer and Joad haunt that character from page one. But in *The Letter*, instead of hiding behind the memorable characterizations of past 'literary Toms,' Joseph Devon attacks this notion of the proud, stoic, and resourceful hero in modern times. After an unspeakable accident leaves Tom Quint without a shred of hope, he must reluctantly explore not only the world he passes in his ragtop, but the life that has passed him by. And like his literary predecessors, Quint's reluctance to adapt is what makes his struggle to survive so compelling.

Black Eyed Susan (2007)

True love can develop in a number of ways. Sometimes it happens at first sight. Sometimes it takes warm beer, teenage nights at the beach, misunderstood conversations and a lot of persistence. A little luck never hurt either.

He'll Always Have Paris (2007)

Dorian is the head of a lab researching a breakthrough technology for the treatment of those suffering emotional trauma. But one night he decides that this not-quite-ready-yet treatment would be the perfect thing to fix his failing marriage. Mix *The Matrix* with the set from the original *Frankenstein* movie, add a dash of couples therapy, stir, then pour into a tall glass made out of old *Twilight Zone* episodes and you'll have a sense of some of the flavors this story calls to mind.

Liquid Calling (2007)

This story examines the obvious connection between aluminum foil, a Manhattan real estate broker approaching his seventies, and the Cold War. Follow Micheal Morzeny on the last sales call he'll ever make.

The Rags (2007)

It's not often that you get to see what happens when a modern day writer attempts to rewrite a literary masterpiece using a laundromat as his setting and talking clothes as his characters. This is

probably a good thing. But for those of you who ever wondered what that might look like, this is your story.

Private Showing (2007)

A simple story about a man struggling to deal with loss. This is one of the shortest pieces I've ever written. This description will be equally short.

Jacob Checks Out (2007)

A confused narrator tries to piece together the life of one of his oldest friends, Jacob. Various parts of Jacob's life are held up to the light, from childhood through present day, as friends try to find the cracks that eventually led to Jacob's unconventional exit.

Scarface's Burden (2007)

A reworking of one of Jonathan Coulton's songs. Explore the various inner workings of a mad genius's compound through the eyes of his most loyal assistant, Scarface. Between maintenance on the golden submarine, keeping the various departments happy, and getting his boss back on his feet, Scarface has plenty to keep him busy during a long winter day.

Light-Years Ahead of His Time (2007)

This story was published out of sequence because I got somewhat derailed during the Holidays by family and then I got sick and blah blah blah. At some point leading up to this story I decided that I wanted to write something about "worm-holes and mor-ons." This is the result of that wish.

You're Allowed to Order Takeout (2008)

This was a strange story in a lot of ways. I had to carve this out of very little. It's short and it's minimal, but for some reason I can't stop thinking about it. Basically we visit with Neil, who has just welcomed his second child into the world, and watch as he tries to find his emotional footing again.

Continental Drift (2008)

Two people visiting Europe under some not very ideal circumstances wind up brushing up against each other's lives ever so softly on the moonlit beach of Cannes.

Knots (2008)

In the course of my job I've given a lot of baths to little girls. There aren't a lot of jobs where this can be considered a normal thing, but as a nanny that's how it goes. Over the past few years there are few things I've come to dread more than having to comb out my girls' hair once bath time is done. I put myself in their shoes one day and the idea for this story came about. Simple and touching.

The Donkey of Vincento (2008)

I have absolutely no idea how to describe this story. I read a lot. And I've read a lot of translations. And they always strike me as being just a little off and missing just a little something. Somehow, with this story, I wound up trying to capture that odd sense of not quite understanding what is happening while reading a classic story from another language. A donkey, a village, a festival, and a simple stupid story of love.

Uneven Shading (2008)

Marshal finds himself unable to concentrate at work, and what's worse, he's come to realize that he's disappearing from view entirely. When his boss takes note Marshal is sent home to try and figure out where the rest of him is.

The Pea Pod Gambit (2008)

Atticus and Seth have the perfect setup: a three bedroom apartment with a third roommate who is never around because he is always over at his girlfriend's house. But when their roommate's relationship ends Seth and Atticus decide to take matters into their own hands in order to get things back to just the way they were.

Probability Angels (2009)

Matthew Huntington's problems seem to keep growing. Not only is he seeing things in garbage cans but his mentor doesn't think he's working up to his full potential, his best friend can't offer any solace but drunken confusion, and his wife is dying in Central Park. Of course, the fact that Matthew himself died over two decades ago isn't helping things. And then things start to really go wrong. Come explore the world of Matthew and Epp and see

what a samurai from Feudal Japan has to do with the course of modern physics, what a two-thousand year old Roman slave has to do with the summit of Mount Everest, and what a dead man from Brooklyn has to do with the fate of the world.



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