



**Homesick**  
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It happens now, the sirens and the silence. It happens now, the sirens and the silence and the thunder. Later, then and always, rain.

The darkened house swallows thickened woods and shadows edge out walls. The sanctuary of home blurs into a stage set for intrusion, fear, and death. The windows melt, liquid flow against the ground littered with broken glass and mud. The sky is purple, a swollen bruise that leers across the horizon and bleeds against the safe, white clouds.

With the rain, the growl. With the rain, the restless howl splits into a nightmare and a safe return. The paths converge: the fall from consciousness to dreaded sleep a steep, jagged drop. The moment of impact is amnesia; the moment of resurfacing is praying to forget.

Marcus never notices the scene shift, never catches the sideslip from sanctuary. At ten or eleven or two-fifteen, lights over the city popping, he swigs his bourbon at the balcony door. He cracks his knuckles and stretches puppet hands to hang in the arch. He oozes between the sheets and snaps off the halogen light. He lies with hands clutching elbows across his chest, playing taps and counting sheep. An hour on a good night, he drums himself to sleep. All night on a bad night, he pinions limbs against Scylla and Charybdis.

Asleep. Awake. The line smudges and breaks in his floating recital of wishing to rest, wishing to run. The shortest arc between two polar points warbles and fades. Liminal illusions are tie-dyed anarchy, the haze of benign daily grind lurching into registered, remembered shock.

He only clicks that he's in trouble when the gangrene of the forest floor recoils under pounding paws. Both are running, and the wolf's rancid breath dribbles across Marcus' skin.

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Five-thirty wake-up as the clock-face sun crawled across his legs, which were bent up against his chin. His ankles cracked as he unhinged himself from the womb-seeking pose, scraping his toes against the covers and circling his worn joints. He bathed the cave of a desert-dry mouth with his caterpillar tongue, tugging on the inside of a dry left cheek.

Marcus ferreted out his glasses with his eyes snapped shut, sweeping his hand under the pine frame futon. Before grasping the lenses, he washed across invisible grit on the hardwood floor and slit a searching thumb on an errant piece of glass. He jammed both arms into the grungy

sweatshirt hanging on the end of his bed, opened his eyes, and scanned the damage.

Sheets a tornado of flannel in the corner. High-shine floor a floodplain from the capsized tumbler of ice water on his dresser. Two drawers a car wreck against the wall, clothes thrown clear of the collision in heaps of broken color. Keys and wallet, planted at midnight on the bedside table, torn from their roots and discarded in the gloom under a corner of debris.

Pulling one plug from the nest of his ear, Marcus looked around for its mate. It took him sixteen minutes to locate the other tiny glob of cheap yellow foam, wedged behind the computer desk against the floor-to-ceiling window in his bedroom. Forced air whistled into the unprotected canal, jostling for attention with the other noise that filtered through: neighbors, elevators, water pipes, TV.

The mirror, bolted to the wall, said the same thing every day. Its semi-gloss obsidian frame cloistered the pool of reflective shimmer in geometric perfection, belying the flawed echo that stood before its impassive gaze. A square bunker of concrete black-pebbled gray hair waved at gravity. Fault lines in brick-jawed face without relief of a smile. The nominal whites of Marcus' eyes streamed in rivers of lava, crusted with veiny exhaustion.

The world shuddered when he concentrated, boulder black eyebrows joined at the crevice on the land bridge of his nose. His eyebrows out shouted every other feature. They stomped around his face—embedded deep in focus and jiggling along his hairline when rare humor struck. Profile the most promising, a sentry at his wartime post. Only his irises, otter slick brown, were soft.

He always started reconstruction with a cold shower, twisting his height under the nozzle. The water skinned him of the nightmares and drained the dark of its power. Marcus leaned his tall, wet bulk against the wall, willing his hands unclenched. Count to fifty, count one hundred, count to five. Numbed feet told him it was time for breakfast and then work.

At forty-eight, Marcus could still do sixty one-handed pushups before his essential double espresso. The aluminum crossbar above his kitchen threshold, scratched and padded, bore his palm print DNA where he gripped, hoisted, and swayed. That Tuesday he skipped muscle burn and drank his coffee in his bathrobe in the study. Marcus sat in his leather recliner and scrunched his toes against the plush Persian carpet before tilting back.

Rosario had left his dry-cleaned clothes hanging at the entrance to his walk-in closet. White shirt, border-funky crimson tie, a pearl and navy pinstripe suit, mirage shined shoes. Down to matching socks. She'd remembered, and reminded him, court today. She was worth the next to nothing that he paid her.

The walk to his office was only bearable in spring. Stiff against the sharp silver wind, Marcus hiked across the six blocks. He grabbed a second bolster shot of caffeine from the waiting security guard and landed in his office behind three locked doors. It was six-fifteen.

As the top criminal defense attorney in the Tri-County area, Marcus been the target of some nasty infighting when rival underworld bigwigs got an inkling he'd helped acquit the wrong guy. It had been quiet for months now though—even the criminals agreed that having Jerry 'the Pinochle' Portovecchio on the outside was critical to family understanding.

Closing arguments, this Tuesday in May. Headline show day, and plenty of time for prep. It was just on eight before the small office contingent gathered for instruction, and by then Marcus had it all laid out.

'Beth, you observe from the back. Notes on every juror reaction, presented to me at each break. Pretend that this is the bar and *everything* you see will be on the exam. If Juror number seven scratches her armpit or number three picks his nose, I want to know. It's a war out there—I'll adjust my game as we go. Got it?'

Twenty-year-old Beth Friedman, law intern, nodded. She was used to Marcus' barrages—but he was the best, and she came to learn from the best. If he said perfect juror notes, he'd get perfect juror notes. She tuned in to hear him firing commands at Terry Porter, junior partner in the firm.

'...and that means no possibility of a comeback. If we're high and dry by three p.m. today we're gonna lose this case. So I need to know that you'll pitch me testimony page numbers on time, every time. It's a dance and it's time to get down. You with me?'

Court started at ten, which meant time for a cappuccino on the way southwest. Cook County's courthouse at Twenty-Sixth and California had never seen the backside of a scrubbing brush, and the peeling beige corridor paint showed khaki had been the color choice of decades past. But Marcus didn't see the walls, and he didn't register the scuffmarks on the blotchy blue linoleum floor.

He was a missile, firing himself through the dark, smooth doors of the courtroom at the end of the hall. He pistoned to the defense table in the

empty courtroom, throwing thanks to the officer stationed at the door. Terry ambled after him and waited before easing into his allocated spot. Beth followed with the audience as the gates swung wide.

Some attorneys were rocking horses in their chairs as the courtroom filled up, playing out their nerves in the roll. Others—tappers, swivelers—rhumbaed their feet on the polish or pirouetted to watch the audience gather. Marcus just focused on not hulking in his chair. He forced his frame into the rounded wooden seat as if he belonged there, taking up no more than his share of the space. This posture was a coiled spring, not a defeated slouch. Just demure enough to invite belief, and just dangerous enough to scare the crowd. He crossed his thumbs on the dead surface of the table, responded to the judge, rose, and began.

The metronome of working claimed the day. Marcus held the time step through the morning, and by mid-afternoon was preening for victory. At the pause that was lunch, Beth had pointed him to a juror or two who needed jostling. Marcus had nudged and cajoled and catered to each one in turn, practicing his grin on one old lady and running his hands through his hair at the bald guy with a beard. They were just about ready for decision. Marcus didn't have to be an insect in that jury room—he could hear the rustle of their choices rattling around in their heads as he stood before them, slinging buckshot into the prosecutor's case.

Beth took the 'el' home. Terry and Marcus shared a cab and some tactical triggers for day two. Marcus was clear.

'Probably an hour left in it, no more than ninety minutes. We'll be late for court tomorrow, fifteen minutes max, with a line on unraveling evidence.'

Terry tugged on the shopping list in his pocket and calculated how much spinach he'd need for that new recipe he was going to try. He checked off the other items in his head, a domestic liturgy complete with the rosary of 'butter, milk, and eggs.' Grocery store, gas station, dry cleaner. Tuesdays and Thursdays, dinner was his family deal.

At the corner of Michigan and Lake, unfolding from the cab in his stainless suit of armor, Marcus debated another few hours in the office before TV and take-out. He glanced at the sky, warming to the prospect of exercise and fresh air in lieu of greasy Thai and the idiot box. He fell on the side of the sailors, who'd had their sunny day in mid-May, after all. The wind brushed his stiff lapels and coaxed him to the shore. Laptop in hand, he diagonal-dipped through the parked cars and snaked to the lakefront green.

An unremembered oak grove, dense and matted with spring wealth, sidled up to Marcus on his shortcut route. The moss green blotted out the blue sky to blue water boundary, seeping across his vision and enfolding him in cool, moist undergrowth. The comfort of dim respite lasted a double-blink too long.

The teens were a pack upon him. He should have heard them coming. He knows he should have heard them coming. But there were only four of them, and this time he's not ten. This time he has ten years of the Corps behind his drop kick and a decade of dark service on his mind.

The leader snarled a demand and flashed a silver butterfly knife. Marcus tripped the weakest of the herd and broke his neck. The alpha gang male slashed a bloodline cheek to cheek across Marcus' face, forgetting that flesh wounds are more dangerous than clean kill, any day. Before the wolf boss had a chance to snap his blade, Marcus collapsed the kid's lungs with three broken ribs.

Shattered, half their strength, calling for witnesses, two ran.

It happens now, the sirens and the silence and the screams.

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Ten years old. Johannesburg, a wealthy suburb built on bones. Marcus is asleep in the room closest to his parents; Lynette, his toddler sister, is curled warm and snug next door.

Outside the fortress, armed with bullets and hatchets and rage, the vengeance merchants pretend to hunt for riches. They know the real worth of what white South Africa keeps from them: family, security, and dreams.

They clip the barbed wire fences with their anger. They scale an eight-foot wall of desperation. They set upon their victims with red glee.

It happens now, the sirens and the silence and the screams. Marcus, used to false alarms, waits with hands on ears for Dad to tuck him back in bed. He waits, and hums a lullaby to keep the boogiemer away. The blaring klaxon cracks, and he knows something's not right, because there's yowling in his parents' room and hushed no-breath next door.

Everywhere, the world is breaking. Impossible shafts of light down the hallway as flashlights find their mark; vowel-dropped shouting of voices that make Marcus think of seagulls at the beach; and the no-return whimper as his father begs for life.

Marcus rocks and moans, stuffing his eyes and his ears and his mouth with dirty socks and t-shirts in this suffocating cave of hope. He hears them anyway, the strangling laughter and exultant conquest. He wonders how Lynette can sleep through this, until the thud of bone to wall

crush opens all he wants to know. The last voice he hears in the bedlam is his mother's, wailing for her lost ones as the predators play.

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It happens now, the sirens and the silence and the thunder. Later, then and always, rain. Later, then and always, in the morning of the massacre, as soft hands find his haven, hold him up to light in darkness, promise silence out of madness: rain.

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