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Useless

by Bill Bellington

“Come on, man. When are you gonna learn a different play?” Darrie said, as he shook his game controller, then slammed it onto the coffee table.

“When you know how to stop that one,” Bryant said with a raised eyebrow. “And not one minute before.” Bryant paused the game, then continued as he got up to grab a drink from the refrigerator, “You might also want to run another defense besides that stupid Dime. That shit hasn’t worked since like ‘Madden 2000*.’*”

“And do you mind not chugging down all my iced tea?” Darrie said.

“You invited me over,” Bryant said. “Maybe you can shake that mood you’re in and we can just chill for awhile. I didn’t come here to get bitched at; I just thought you might want some company, that’s all. Just like the old days.”

“As you can see,” Darrie said, “this is nothing like the old days.”

“Please don’t start that shit again,” Bryant said, instantly sorry for the way his words came out. “I mean, come on Darrie, I’m just trying to help, that’s all.”

“You can help by leaving me alone for awhile,” Darrie replied, making his best effort to look anywhere but at Bryant. “Maybe I’ll call you next week.”

On the way out the front door, Bryant remembered he was supposed to pick up Darrie tomorrow morning and take him to his specialist. “Well, what time am I grabbing you in the morning?” Bryant asked, after a few seconds of awkward silence.

“Never mind,” Darrie said, “I’ll get there myself.”

“How are you gonna get on a bus like that, Darrie? You’ve never even tried it yet. It’ll take forever to get there.”

“I’ll manage,” Darrie said, and maneuvered his way toward the living room window overlooking the playground. He didn’t acknowledge Bryant’s goodbye as the door thumped closed.

###

Darrie slammed the snooze button on his alarm clock at 7:00 am. He popped up and tried to swing his legs off the side of the bed—an instinct that wouldn’t go away. Realizing after a moment of clarity, he braced his left hand on the bolted-down night table, then clutched his pajama-pant leg with his right, struggling to swing his legs off the bed, one at a time.

The light aluminum chair leaned against the night table, securing it while maintaining his balance was the first challenge of the day. Pulling the chair toward himself sideways, he reached over the chair with his left hand, and then pushed off the bed with his right to glide onto the seat, landing on the right-arm rest first before gaining a sitting position. He wiped his saturated forehead with his pajama shirt-sleeve before continuing to the bathroom for the morning wipe-down. It was 7:10 am, and already he was exhausted.

###

Darrie pushed his way down the long corridor to the handicapped door, and the outside of his apartment building. *The easiest part of any trip,* he thought. One continuous, smooth concrete ramp stretched eighty feet in front of him toward the playground area. On nice days, he would just pull up at the end of it and watch the kids scampering through the play sets—something that would have bored him to tears before his injury. Now, it gave him comfort to watch them run around, strong and healthy, without a care.

Not twenty feet from the playground on the left side of the ramp stretched a four-lane street. This busy thoroughfare ran parallel to the ramp, and adjacent to the playground. Only a three-foot wide sidewalk separated the activity from the ever-moving stream of cars and SUVs.

The ramp dumped him off onto the narrow pavement that led almost one full block to a big intersection. As he rolled down the sidewalk, he could feel the forced wind of the cars flying by him—the speed limit of thirty-five miles an hour was often ignored by drivers in this part of town. To his right echoed shouts and non-stop chattering from the junior high school kids, waiting in the playground for their bus to pull up. Nearing the gate, Darrie saw a flash of something sailing toward him. Before he could turn to face the projectile, it bounced off the side of the open gate and smacked him flush on the cheek. He saw stars, as a kid named Ty approached him, gathering up the football as he watched the man in the wheelchair squirm with discomfort.

“Are you okay, Mister?” The young boy said with a hint of sympathy for the man who simply could not get out of the way in time. “I’m real sorry. I hope you’re not hurt.” On the other side of the gate, the children roared with laughter at having nailed the guy in a wheelchair.

“Damn, Joe, you hit that crippled guy. You’re going to hell!”

“You could not have thrown that ball more perfect,” said another kid, doubling over with laughter.

Ty stood silent, his face turning a bright violet with embarrassment and pity. Embarrassment not for himself, but for the man in front of him. “I’m sorry Mister,” is all he could think to say. Ty gathered up his football and headed back into the playground, glancing back over his shoulder at the vulnerable man just sitting there in his wheelchair, staring up at nothing.

The sting on Darrie’s cheek soon dissipated, but something else brewed inside of him. Since the injury, he hadn’t cried once, not even when he was first told he may never walk again. Maybe it was the humiliation of being the brunt of so many bad jokes, or realizing that he was no longer a guy that demanded respect in the neighborhood. Before, kids would come up to him all the time for advice. Advice on girls, playing ball, and even on looking for a job. Everybody knew and looked up to him—now, he was just the guy in the wheelchair.

As the tears poured down Darrie’s face, he could only use his t-shirt to stop the torrid stream. He hoped that the sweat from a hot September morning would help cover some of the emotions plastered on his face. He finally straightened up and made his way toward the busy intersection, crossing over to wait for the bus. *Not many people on the corner this morning*, he thought, *less people to get through*. It was going to be a challenge to maneuver through the parked cars to the side door of the bus, and he wasn’t quite sure how the chair lift worked. About five minutes later, a number sixty-six bus came down the street.

Raising his hands, Darrie caught the attention of the driver as he pulled to a stop at the light. The driver jammed the gear shift into park, and then hit the hydraulic button to lower the bus on the right side. He motioned for Darrie to meet him at the side exit. Once the lift hit the ground, Darrie spun his chair backward and set the wheels in place. Three minutes later, Darrie was situated in the handicapped section of the bus. A discontented silence spread across the other passengers as the bus finally pulled off. One man sighed; another man folded his arms across his chest in a clear gesture of impatience. Toward the front of the bus, a woman checked her empty wrist to indicate that if she had a wrist-watch; it would show she was late for work.

Darrie sat erect in his chair motionless, staring straight ahead, desperate for the next stop to be his. When his stop was approaching, he pressed the red button to signal the driver—more assistance would be needed.

###

“Can I help you?” The receptionist asked with a courteous, but not too personal voice.

“I’m here to see Dr. Saul; my name is Darryl Holland.”

The lady took a moment to pull his file from the morning’s appointment folder. “Upper Endoscopy, correct? 8:30 am is your start time.”

“It’s an upper-something,” Darrie said, more out of confusion than to elicit laughter. “I just know my stomach has been hurting real bad lately, and that other doctor said my EKG was fine. So they sent me here for some kind of scope or something.”

“I see,” said the receptionist, still staring down at her paperwork. She made a gesture toward a hallway to the right, “Just make your way down that way and someone will take you inside.”

The doctor and a male nurse helped Darrie up onto the table, then positioned him on his side.

“What is this for?” Darrie asked, as they prepared the camera scope. “I mean, what does it do? You know, I don’t ever even remember going to any doctor as a kid. I was never sick. Now, it seems like all this stuff is starting to go wrong, and not just my legs.”

“Well,” the doctor said, “your condition does tend to leave a body vulnerable to other problems that you may never have experienced before. This procedure runs a camera through your esophagus, stomach and part of the small intestine. It should tell us where the root of your stomach and chest discomfort lies. Now,” the doctor continued, “you’re going to feel a slight pinch on the back of your hand…”

Darrie interrupted, “What’s that for?” and pointed to the thin tube connected to an IV bag on a steel pole.

“It’s propofol, to induce sleep.” the doctor said.

“Ain’t that the stuff that did-in Michael Jackson?”

A light chorus of chuckles filled the room. “Yes, in a sense,” the doctor said. “You have to monitor the dosage at all times. That doctor did not follow procedure.”

“So you’re saying the doctor got what he deserved?” Darrie asked.

“In my opinion, yes. The conviction was justified.”

Darrie stared ahead at the apparatus sitting two feet from his face, a rectangular metal box called a “propak.” He did not feel sleepy at all; his new-found fear of strange places made it almost impossible for him to close his eyes anywhere but home. When wasthis stuff going to kick in? How long did he have to lie here and…?

*Where are you going Tommy? I thought you needed a ride to your brother’s house?*

*Wait in the car Darrie, I’ve just gotta pick something up here real quick…drive, Darrie, drive! Step on it man, come on.*

*What did you do Tommy, I’m pulling over…Let go of the wheel, man. Jesus Christ, what did you do?*

*Stay on the highway, Darrie. Keep your foot on the pedal, or I will pull this trigger, I swear to God I will.*

*Why are you doing this, Tommy? We’ve been going to that store since we were kids…*

*Shut the hell up, Darrie. Watch the road! Shit, look out!*

*Has he opened his eyes at all?*

*No, and I don’t think he will regain use of his legs, either. Poor bastard—his so-called friend put a gun to his head, and made him the getaway driver.*

*What happened to his friend?*

*D.O.A.*

###

“Mr. Holland, can you hear me?” the medical assistant asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m cool. Where am I?”

“We just finished your endoscopy; you are going to feel disoriented for a few hours. Who is taking you home?”

“What? No, I mean, I took the bus here.”

“Do you have any relatives that live nearby? I’m sorry, but we can’t let you go home by yourself.”

Darrie let his thoughts gather the correct answer. “I can call my sister Tina, she’ll come.”

“Good. Let me have her phone number. I’ll be glad to make the call for you Mr. Holland.”

Darrie hadn’t considered how he was getting home. He knew his sister would come whenever he called, but avoiding lengthy conversations with her became routine since they were teenagers. Tina was a devote Christian, an old catholic school girl to a fault, as far as he was concerned. Most kids grew up talking about how much they hated going to church--being made to listen to the priest ramble on and on about life lessons, and God being with us every step of the way. Not Tina, she absorbed every single word preached. She attended every church event, and never missed an opportunity to volunteer at church-sponsored charity events. Her whole world revolved around Jesus Christ—it drove Darrie crazy. But after this morning, Darrie chose a little bible-beating over an excruciating bus ride home.

###

“Darrie, honey, over here!” Tina shouted from across the street. “Here, I’m parked over here.”

Darrie peeked out between parked cars, and then impelled his way to Tina’s car as the on-coming traffic slowed.

“Careful Darrie, you’re going to get yourself killed,” Tina said as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pressed an enthusiastic kiss on her brother’s lips. “Why didn’t you call me before, I would have picked you up this morning and brought you here.”

“Just trying to do for myself,” Darrie said, trying to keep the greeting as short as possible.

“Well, next time, try and remember my number,” she said as she grabbed under his arms and aided him up into the passenger’s seat. “Although, you are right. The Lord helps those who help themselves.”

###

Tina made herself comfortable on Darrie’s worn IKEA couch, waiting for him to finish rummaging the cabinets in hopes of locating the last box of macaroni and cheese. Dinners weren’t fancy these days; whatever was easiest to prepare.

“You know, I can run to the store real quick, maybe grab some chicken breasts and broccoli. I don’t mind cooking, Darrie,” Tina said, trying hard not to make him feel impotent.

“I’m alright if you’re alright,” Darrie said. “Just grab some dishes for the table when it’s ready, okay?”

Tina gathered the miss-matched dishes and cups from the cabinet, setting them on the low, folding table. “I know you don’t like to talk about this, Darrie,” Tina began, “but have you been praying lately? Darrie dropped the wooden spoon into the boiling pot of macaroni.

“Not today, Tina, please. I had a real long day.” He paused to face her, “I appreciate you coming to get me like you did, but I don’t want to talk about what God has done for me. Nothing--that’s what he’s done. Not a damn thing.”

“All asked is if you’ve been praying, Darrie. That’s all. You don’t know what good it could do you if you don’t try. I’m living proof, Darrie. I have never had a bad day in my life. I know it’s because I believe in him. And when you believe, and you ask for his help, he will be there for you.”

“Easy to say when you can walk,” Darrie said, feeling his temperature start to elevate. “You have no idea, Tina. What’s praying gonna do for me? None of this was my fault. If your God gave a shit, maybe it wouldn’t have happened in the first place.”

Tina stood silent for a moment, staring at her brother, feeling a mix of sympathy and determination. If anyone needed God right now, it was Darrie. He was losing hope. No, he had lost it altogether. She could see it in his face—he was about to quit on life. Her determination suddenly transforming into desperation, she resorted to the one thing that was ever-present in her heart and mind. “Return to the Lord your God,” Tina recited, “for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and great of kindness. Joel, verse 2:13.”

Darrie covered his ears tightly, flabbergasted, as she continued…

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all. He guards all his bones; not one of them is broken. That’s Psalm 34:19.”

“I don’t care what Psalm it is this time,” Darrie said, uncovering his ears to hear himself vent. “All you know is bible, Tina, that’s all. You don’t know anything about life. Don’t go pushing your teachings on me until you know what it’s like to be fucking useless. Until then, keep that shit to yourself.”

“You’re not useless, Darrie. God put you on this earth for a reason. But until you start praying, you’ll never know what that reason is. Please, stop. You’re just feeling sorry for yourself right now.”

Darrie’s throat hurt from the heated exchange. He fought back the urge to cry in front of his sister, and rolled around to her side of the table to confront her. He counted to ten in his head, just as he was taught growing up. After he was sure that his words were no longer meant to hurt, he said, “I’m sorry, Tina. I can’t be around you right now. Could you please just give me a call tomorrow? I need to go to bed, I’m exhausted.”

Tina paused for a moment, then obliged Darrie by gathering her pocketbook and heading toward the door. A tear began to carry mascara down the left side of her face. “I love you, Darrie. Please promise me you’ll pray.”

“I’ll think about it Tina. I’ll think about it.”

###

Darrie leaned on the pile of pillows propped up against the headboard, unable to sleep. Five months of barely being able to get around. Five months of looking for a job, one that suited his condition, with no success. Five months of sitting in his apartment, looking out the window at the playground he once ruled as a young athlete. Five months of watching beautiful girls walk by, knowing he would never have a chance with any of them. As if a switch had been turned on in his head, Darrie began to talk to God. “Dear Lord, I know you only give us things that we can handle, but I can’t do this anymore. Please, I’m not as strong as you think.” His face welled up with tears; he was now sobbing like an injured child. “Please, just give me one more chance to walk. Let me live with a sense of purpose again. I know I can make you proud of me. I didn’t deserve this, Lord. I never would have done something to hurt someone.” Darrie paused in the silence of his darkened bedroom, trying desperately to retrieve an actual pray from his childhood memories. “Our father, who art in heaven, hollowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is…”

###

Darrie awoke with a start, gasping for breath, like he had been submerged under water for too long. His shirt was still damp from last night’s torrent of tears. A rhythmic pounding enveloped his head, as if protesting a long night of drinking. *Funny,* he thought. A hangover is not something he’d felt in a long time. The sun pierced through his bedroom curtains like a thousand illuminant knives; forcing Darrie to shade his eyes to make out what the clock said: 7:35 am. If he didn’t already know better, he would have thought that today would somehow be different than other days. But he knew better. What lay ahead was another day of ESPN, reality show reruns, and endless bowls of sugary cereal.

He shifted over to reach for his chair, and felt an ease of transition from his upper body to his lower body. Something didn’t feel right. It had to be his imagination. Both legs, as if guided by their own sheer will, shifted with the rest of his body. He slid them onto the floor, landing his feet flat for the first time in what seemed like forever. He tested them with one, two, three kicks upward at the knees, and then stood up to stand on his toes. “My God*,”* he said aloud, his entire body trembling with astonishment. It happened. The prayers really worked. He could walk again.

Darrie stumbled around the bedroom like a toddler taking his first steps, not sure how far his legs would take him without faltering. He glided into the living room, jogging laps around his coffee table like a giddy school boy. It was a miracle, and honest to God miracle. His sister had been right for all those years. You just had to have faith.

He swept a stack of bills and food circulars off the kitchen counter, fumbling for his cell phone. He had to call Tina right now. No, he would run to Tina’s apartment, a mere eight blocks away, and stand right in front of her. Darrie scrambled for a pair of jeans lying on top of the hamper, and then squirted a shot of toothpaste in his mouth. The tube shook as his hand twitched with nervous excitement. There was so much he wanted to do—and right now. He snatched his keys from the table and trotted through his front door and into the hallway.

The smell of bacon and coffee brewing hit him as he made his way toward the exit. He never noticed how wonderful that smell could be. Maybe he would take Tina out to breakfast, it was the absolute least he could do. He felt his stomach rumbling for food—it was the first time since the accident that he felt such hungry. No need to push the handicapped button on the way outside this time. He jumped, and, with an exaggerated karate-kick, popped the panic bar to make the door fly wide open. Exhilaration pulsed through his veins. He lifted his legs as high as they would go, running back and forth, up and down the concrete ramp. As he turned toward Tina’s house, and his eight block sprint, he noticed that little boy, Ty, standing at the school bus stop in front of the playground, clutching his football.

“Throw me the ball, little man,” Darrie said, waving his arms high over his head.

The boy narrowed his eyes from the sun to recognize the man calling him. He looked like the man in the wheelchair from the other day. The same man that the other kids made cry. Confused, but feeling unthreatened by the request, Ty throw the ball just over Darrie’s head. Darrie leapt in the air and pulled down the pass, instinctively cradling the ball to secure possession.

“Over there,” Darrie said, as he pointed up the sidewalk for the kid to run a pass pattern.

Suddenly, a tremendous smack of metal on metal made Darrie turn toward the street. A speeding Ford F-150 had side-swiped a bus, and careened out of control. The frantic driver struggled in vain to regain control of the vehicle. Tragedy was imminent—Ty stood wide-eyed and paralyzed with fear as the three-ton machine carved a path right to him.

Darrie dropped the ball where he stood and bolted up the sidewalk, feeling a rush of adrenaline that carried him faster than his legs seemed ready to take him. In one manic motion, he scooped up the young boy and cradled him, securing Ty’s head against his saturated heaving chest, just as the air-born truck barreled through them. In the split-second Darrie had jumped with the boy in his arms, the windshield impacted him with a sickening thud, catapulting them twenty feet in the air toward the thick oak tree that stood adjacent to the playground entrance. The collision of bodies and wood shook hundreds of leaves to the ground, where Darrie lay, lifeless. He never let go of the boy.

There was a short, eerie silence, as stunned on-lookers crept toward the intertwined bodies of a man and a boy. Ty crawled out of the dead man’s arms, and scooted back on his rear, as if trying to detach himself from the horror. He frantically checked his arms, legs, and body for injuries. There wasn’t a scratch on him.

“Oh, my god,” came a yell from the now larger crowd converging on the playground. “That man just saved that little boy’s life.”

The End