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**DON’T BE AFRAID**

a short story by

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I want to see the look of understanding sink into their faces as slugs rip through their friends. The understanding will seem to be masked almost completely with abject terror. Fear for the lives that they are losing consuming their fear for the people they loved. Sammi will see her dog and her mother before she dies, and feel the blinding white rush of her subconscious taking over her mind. Jim will feel for a moment, the truth of the void of life, as he sees his girlfriend reduced to a doll soaking in human blood. Vincent will feel the purity and madness of fear taking him by the throat and throwing him behind the next scrap of cover. Rayu will clutch his neck and feel for the bullet holes, only to find that he had forgotten entirely about his grandmother whose sincerest love begged him to find truth and happiness in the world. As Rayu remembers his grandmother, tears roll down his cheeks, and a blush of anger wells up behind his eyes. As they are thrown about by fear, every one of them will glimpse, if only for a moment, the blackness of a life dominated by terror. They will see the great animal fear take them over and transform them, and they will run or freeze or drop blindly with the terrible burden of that animal inside them. Perhaps if they are lucky, they will just see the beast right next to them, dragging them by the throat. As thunderclaps rip the air at 200 cuts per minute, every last one of my friends will know what it means to live without love. Maybe they will remember.

I’m not going to do a school shooting. It would be in bad taste considering all the school shootings recently. I smirk as the thought passes through my head. It sounds like a bad joke, but it’s true. Rather, I am not going to do a school shooting because it *seems* like it is in bad taste. Well, not that there aren’t other reasons not to shoot up the school, not the least of which is the national guard, but that is beside the point. The point is that I don’t want to get bundled up with a bunch of shooters just so the news can say “Yup, we got another one. Another crazy. Another kid who wasn’t loved and isn’t special and had nothing more to say than ‘Die’.” Well I *do* have something to say, and it is a lot than just “I can’t take life anymore so here is the LD50 of copper coated lead.” I smirked again. Something about a suppository flits through my mind. No, there is something personal about a shooting that is lost when everybody and his Uncle-who-hasn’t-been-invited-to-thanksgiving-since-1998-and-God-knows-we-tried-with-him-for-so-many-years-but-we-just-couldn’t-be-expected-to-sully-every-holiday-for-everyone-just-to-keep-him-in-the-family is shooting people. I don’t want Americans to be afraid to send their children to the grocery store; I want Sammi to know for just a moment that she will never feel puppy-dog Chaz’s tongue across her face again.

Alone as always, I am sitting on a designer slab of cement just outside Tollan hall. I am privileged enough to attend the four year program at Lettner College in Washington state. I get to chase my passions and build my dreams here. I am *finally* in a place that fosters who I really am and makes me sixty-thousand-dollars-a year-worth of happy. I take another hefty drag of air and exhale. Watching the little white cloud tumble and rise into the night is one of the more relaxing sights of which I know. At times like this, I wish I was a smoker. I wish I could always have a little pack of clouds in my pocket instead of having to wait for bitter cold. But then again, there is something poetic about-

–my phone buzzes rudely-. Sammi, I thought. I laboriously squeeze my phone out of my pocket, resenting the relative sizes of the former and latter. The android shows me a new text message from Sammi:

“Hey, have you eaten yet?”

I sigh. The unexpected little cloud relaxes me by surprise. I realize that I have been frowning, and reset my face. I sigh again, this time, with a hint of relief. “Alone as always,” I murmur to myself.

“I’m eating in the bunker at 8.”

The Corbin Dining Center is one of those buildings that got built back when the only way to properly insulate something was to have it carved into the earth. It has more of a hollowed-out feel than a constructed one. The stone and brick and columns everywhere betray the immense weight of the earth on all sides and the rest of the building above. This place was built back when construction materials could only barely hold their own weight. This building felt incredibly heavy. It continually reminds me of how much a building weighs, and how completely unable I would be to claw my way out of ten thousand tons of rubble. At least it would be quiet. -Not the collapse-; that would be a deafening cacophony. The deafness that followed, however, would be sublime. And the knowing that nobody was thinking about trifles anymore. Everyone would be their animal fear, writhing and honest.

Sammi joins me at my table-for-ten-now-for-one. Now it is now supposed to be a table-for-two, but is still now really only a table for one and for one other. Sammi is supposed to be my girlfriend. I don’t mean that I want her to be my girlfriend but she won’t, I mean that we are technically contractually boyfriend and girlfriend. My half of the relationship is a calculated, solid, dependable lie. Her half is a chaotic, suffocating and confused truth. To be honest, the whole thing is an exercise in confusion for both of us, and for us as a unit. One minute, she will leave me if I looked at another girl, the next, she will forgive me if I make a personal harem of her friends. I, on the other hand, am very careful not to express what I feel. I feel the same whirling high highs and low lows as she does, but I carefully knead them together into what usually amounts to just a few shades brighter than apathy. What an asshole.

As Sammi goes through, in detail, what she hates about group presentations, I ponder my turpitude. Why am I having such a problem listening to her? Probably because she is boring. But then again, how can someone be boring? We are all made of the same stuff, we are all part of the same experience, we are all just trying to get by and find solace in one another-

-right. While that thought may have the face of profundity, the idea that we are all the same is pretty close to the definition of boring. Actually, it is closer to the definition of boring because I am hearing about suffering, and I do not need to be reminded. It was getting to be that tipping point in the monologue where every sentence contained at least one permutation of the work “fuck.”

“I gotta go.”

“…”

Hesitantly, I ask, “Should I come over tonight?”

“If you want to.” There is a hint of a challenge.

I spend a few tenths of a second too long looking into her eyes for the response. She knows I am a lie. Maybe.

“Yea, I’ll see you at like 11 or 12. Will you be there?” I seem maybe just a little bit too enthusiastic.

“Yea.” Her, flatly.

“Ok. Bye.” There is a hint of a question in the ‘bye’. She is having none of it. I lose again.

“Bye.” This time I speak with finality. As I walk away, down the brick-and-stone tunnel to the exit, I wonder how it is I always manage to fuck it up. I briefly consider just saying what’s on my mind all the time. Something in my mind rises in revolt:

“You see how she talks? You see the way she makes you feel? You see that incredible inconsistency that trusts you then faults you and just keeps stringing you along with just your nose out of the water? That’s what you would be. That’s all that you would be; an even more miserable excuse for a human being.”

“You would deserve it.”

“Now, then, there’s no reason to be so mean, and no reason to be so defeatist.”

“Jesus, I have to get out of my head.”

I don’t drink to forget. I drink to remember. I drink to remember that life isn’t so bad. Well, I don’t start drinking to forget, anyway. I am not even sure why I continue to drink once I start, but for whatever reason, I feel compelled. It all ends the same, anyway. World tumbling, shower drain an inch from my face, drifting in and out of sleep and watching piss and vomit periodically but only momentarily disturb the color and texture of the draining warm water. There is nothing wrong in this little world. Everything that is happening is so wrong outside this world, but in here, there is only me and the water and the drain. I can do whatever I want in here. I am severely handicapped by what may or may not turn out to be a lethal dose of alcohol, but the weakness and fatigue makes it so that my strength and desires correspond perfectly. My greatest desire could be to turn over. It takes all my strength, and almost a full minute. I can feel my muscles failing. Maybe there is poison in the muscle fibers, or maybe the poison is making them unable to communicate with my mind. When I am done, the water runs through my hair and I toy with the likelihood of me drowning as I fall asleep with a blissful satisfaction of a job well done.

I am not drinking tonight. Not heavily at least. A few warm beers with Jim, Vincent and Rayu while playing video games brings a smile to my face as my body sinks deeper into the couch and my soul seeps across the room into the Xbox. As I get up to leave, I look around the room with weighted eyelids. I feel about as real as the whisper of pixels pretending to be figures on the TV. I say absent goodbyes as I leave the room. I halfheartedly expect someone to get up and say, “Max, sit down. Tell us what is wrong.” Nobody does. Why should I expect anyone to go out of their way to help me, especially if I am acting all the time. Besides, as far as they are concerned, I am just a funny, vaguely distant guy who is a lucky SoB because he has a girlfriend to go fuck right now.

I am not feeling so lucky. As I walk across campus, I feel dread sloshing around, leaden, in the hollow that is now my stomach. I am not going to get to sleep tonight. It had been so many nights. I desperately want to, for once in my life, wake up feeling refreshed and ready to challenge the day ahead.

When I arrive at Sammi’s, I am pleasantly surprised. The lights are already out. Sammi is not asleep, but she is in bed and gestures for me to come snuggle. ‘Snuggle’ is her word. It is not that she doesn’t use the word in the standard manner; it is just that I would never choose to use that word. I like it. It feels like home. It feels like home in a way that home doesn’t even feel like home. I didn’t get roped into it like I had been roped into home. You just grow up and then all of a sudden you find out that you are supposed to be home, and everyone is looking at you like you are supposed to feel at home.

I start to drift off to sleep and Sammi nuzzles against my neck. I am so glad to be home. To think that I had forgotten. To think that I had felt such dread. How silly of me. I smile and fall asleep.

“Max.” I hear softly.

It is five minutes later. I am jostled from sleep.

“Why do you always just fall asleep? You never listen.” She sounds hurt.

“I thought we were just going to sleep. I thought we were agreed. I thought we were having a good time. What do you need?” I am heartbroken.

“Why can’t you ever just listen? Why does nobody here ever just listen? Everybody always just acts like you have to solve everything. Why can’t you see that you are just supposed to share the burden with somebody else?”

Of course I had felt dread, of course I had forgotten; because home isn’t real. Of course you would end up with someone who isn’t strong enough to help you without demanding that you help them in return. And of course helping can’t come naturally.

I hope that a long silence will end the conversation.

“Why can’t you just tell me what is wrong?” She is demanding now.

I allow another long pause. I can feel the tension in the room in the stillness of the bed, in the lack of a hand lightly touching mine. The tension stiffens the room, ominous, until I realize that I am already speaking.

“Because you can’t help me.”

“How do you know I can’t help you until you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong?”

I wish my dread could swirl inside of me with such intensity that I would flit out of existence. Not die, not teleport, just be absolutely alone until I choose to be otherwise. It never does, and it never will be able to. Not that it would, in its nature, help me anyway, but I figure it owes me for being such fertile ground.

Suddenly, something somewhere breaks. The mind is, after all, just a huge electro-chemical system. Somewhere, a switch finally feels enough pressure to allow the passage of thoughts. In a little area of memory, an idea had been neatly quarantined. I allow it to drive my voice.

“I was not raised to live. I was raised to prepare to live. I make decisions based on a theoretical Max and a theoretical life. You have been given the terrible burden of an actual life, and the idea that you are actually in control, and that can tear you apart. I, however, feel like I am trapped in here, going through the motions of a life in the hopes of someday taking the wheel when my life is in full bloom. I see that this is an absurd way to live my life, but I am trapped.”

I wish I had the courage to leave right now. I wish, but I know all too well that no force of will can push me out of reality. The conversation is not over, but I am. Eventually, she lets me fall asleep for good. By now it must be 3AM. So much for that sleep I wanted to get. Not like it matters anymore.

It is two PM the following day. I have missed all 4 of my classes by now. I am still in bed. I think about the pixels making a figure as I take another swig of vodka. Fear grows blurrier by the minute. The great beast is at once inside me and across the room. The drunker I get, the less he is inside me. He doesn’t disappear, but he becomes an intruder instead of a possessor. Fear grows solid and blurry. It transforms from an intruder, to a stranger, to a guest. It transforms from a great hulking mass, to a man, to a huge, fluffy dog. Fear is no longer just my guest. He is a dear friend. It seems like it’s about that time. He accompanies me to the shower. Dogs don’t judge.

I turn on the water and lay on my side as the warmth runs over my poisoned body. I watch the water swirl down the drain as fear pants and looks at me from the tile floor outside. He wants to come with me on my new adventure. I reach one arm out of the shower and rifle through my pockets, casually resenting the relative size of the contents and the pockets, for old-time’s sake. As I pull out the shining contents, I think to myself that maybe fear isn’t so bad. He comes over and licks my face as the vortex over the drain glows pink then crimson. I close my eyes and feel the rivulets of water run through my hair like a tongue trying to clean everything away.

I am alone for always. There is no more anger, no more pain, no more desire to see friends or enemies suffer or fear. The shower will clean itself. I feel vaguely sorry for whoever has to find me. But at least they will know this peace someday too. The crimson fades to black.