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Murphy Gaines	Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309 Printed in the United States of America		
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mediocre anticipation, the stick was passed, received, entertain and enthrall duties moving on down the line.

"OK, what?" His assignment after all, as chronicler he was paid, poorly, to engage the passengers, interact and anonymously ingratiate, in the vernacular to distract and obfuscate from system breakdowns, as they waited for their scheduled shuttle. Like these seven semi-circled around the Memphis depot had been for two and a half days. "What manner of story should I..."

"Don't really care," the same response to every question posed sneered from plaid fleece guy at the end, name Aday Anand according to the luggage tag gossip, apathy hunched alongside his anger, "Never take my suggestions anyway."

"The one with the submarine, snake pit and exploding heads. That guy took out everybody with just his..." and took Jin right off his suitcase, the boy barely into double digits felled by overly enthusiastic initiated whip action. "Yeah, that one again, please!"

"Oh, god, no. Mindless drivel all of it," so said four-piece suit and gold watch guy, his bulging packed trip provisions yet to be offered for a communal meal, "why am I being forced to participate in..."

"Right, thanks, got it." Not helpful, you snooty prick. "OK, then," the chronicler's gaze queried the others, "anyone else?" - The newlyweds, Berry and Blu, the retired doctor returning from her son's funeral - "Any ideas? Any other..."

"I have one." The solitary man, sandy-haired grey, worn shoes and torn soul, "a love story, an honest one."

Memory's library overrun, any tale can with a few tweaks unfold the heart, and this request a surface skim at best - basic plot of A meets B, sparks, a flowery language flourish or two, a misunderstanding, brunch, danger for the climax all ending with a kiss, the chronicler anticipating an untaxing afternoon.

"A love story it is, sir. I accept for praise or pardon." With calico isadora nap curled up in his lap, the traditional tallman, The Stick, rubbed to dark shiny by countless storyteller hands, twirled through fingers uninspired yet willing to play. "All right, everyone, settle in," passengers adjusted, even the disgruntled and disinterested, to more comfortable and long-haul positions for this 5th round - "Here is a tale of adventure, intrigue and romance. It has and revenge sought for a father's death."

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ed for honest, not some fake, made up bullshit!"

"Language, sir," the retired doctor a bit of a mixed company stickler, "the child can hear." He could hear, repeat and ironically offer into the conversation other more, say, imaginatively descriptive words that form the basis of a boy's founding school vocabulary. Jin just smiled at her sweet.

"I rather like the setup, actually," Blu's opinion seconded by her wife's nodding, the soft tinkle of their matching earrings, "especially the part about the..."

"I asked for bones," Solitary man's stare ignored all the room's rest to nail the chronicler in place. "A genuine love story," the demand specific, almost intimate, "you tell that one."

"As you wish, sir."

Eyes never wavered, his confidence cocky, there's a solid reason his depot one of the network's most traveled. So, instead of simple, a challenge for today. That's good, it's great really, here was a golden opportunity to flow and stretch, bring in props, a few sketches even, his words as warmth or weapons. Apologies to the "voluntary" tag-alongs in the group, Solitary Man had asked to climb up there, view the desire and despair, and the chronicler was keen to act as guide, mentor and champion. They all would hear a real story.

"It all began on a day in January..."

As to whether it was the truth, well...

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Saturday - present. My sister will kill me if I don't - too old for Lego, too young for - Xbox? Switch? After work, on the way home, Game Stop right across from Ace Hardware - light bulbs, furnace filters, patch the screen where Leslie - litter, Qi, paper towels, almond milk, some chicken maybe, could grill out, unless the damn No See 'em's are -

For the first time in six months, I stopped. Not because of traffic, a common problem usually passed around. Not because of a sudden weather change either, I'm an all-season marathon wannabe masochist. No cramp, no blister, no side stitch pulled my rutted routine up short. No, it was the bench.

This bench. Something about this plain, ordinary city maintained. Inna neta

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he kind of grave walking, creepy shiver.

But no one is. Right?

There's nobody watching me, even passing glancing me. A quick scan... all I see are milling souvenir suckers, boujee wannabes, and - oh, here comes a panzer baby stroller division ~~blowing~~ through the crowd - but, by design, nobody notices me sitting on this -

Except...

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What the hell do I do now?

Don't know his name, too busy for small talk, too busy for pleasantries, too busy with the most dangerous, most uncharacteristic, most ~~quickest~~ sublime sensory sensual sexual instinctual brain stem apothosis of FUCK to ask that basic question. Bodies busy, names not important.

Don't remember where he lives. Didn't pay attention to the route, uber forplay, hands and tongue and hips and creativity had a more delicious terrain to map, just got out when the car stopped, his apartment I guess, a return trip to my house backseat encore. To hell with real estate rule number one. Location didn't matter.

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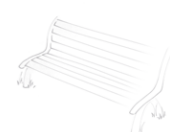
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BENCH

I sit. I'm sitting. Just sitting. Sitting and staring. Sitting and staring at... what? Cobblestones... candy wrappers... crass commercialism. Staring at two blue hairs arguing over their afterbugged Snapchat filters. An elementary school teacher shuffles by - one harried adult followed by seventeen uniformed and uniformly disinterested students. Then there's the soccer mom, her gated community privilege wearing children, while their dad, loaded down with bags, beach tote, and middle age meh, schlepps two paces behind. I sit on this bench and watch American exceptionalism bump and grind with no fucking clue as to why I'm here.

I should be running. I guess running, on the fifth mile of my daily dozen. Route predetermined - MK to Gaston to Broad to Bay to home, then shower, then Lean Cuisine, then internet porn. Always the same, always the same. Except the porn. I was running along, dodging tourists and trolleys, sidewalk art and dog shit - subjective differentiation between the two - heart rate steady, breathing calm, the comfort of a Nike on pavement lullaby, mind switching into neutral, a mental RAM sift booted up:

Weeks come Friday... still missing the data

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Saturday - present. My sister will kill me if I don't - too old for legs, too young for - Xbox? Switch? After work, on the way home, Game Stop right across from Ace Hard - light bulbs, furnace filters, patch the screen where Rosie - litter, OJ, paper towels, almond milk, some chicken maybe, could grill out, unless the damn No Lee Tera one -

I stop. For the first time in six months, I stopped. Not because of traffic, a common problem usually stopped around. Not because of a sudden weather change either, I'm an all-season marathon wannabe masochist. No cramp, no blister, no side stitch pulled my rutted routine up short. No, it was the bench. This bench. Something about this plain, ordinary, city maintained, love note, and gull crap decorated wood and concrete structure that snatched my attention away from consciousness' banality stream and down the narrow stone cut steps to...

Why?

Why did I go down there? Down here? To the Riverfront, to the bench, to this bench - why? Uh... I got nothing. Nothing from the professional column, ditto the personal. Nothing to recommend this particular Riverfront real estate to either tourist or townie, so let's go with a textbook example of 'why not?'

I mean, it's not like my services were needed elsewhere, or matters busy pressing, or my temporary absence from today's agenda could be keenly felt, by anyone, by life, general affairs are certainly flexible enough to yoga in a little smell the azaleas time, thinking now it was the Universe's suggestion, telling me to jump off the hamster wheel once in a while. So, I abandoned the normal, climbed down and here I sit. Sit and stare.

And contemplate the late afternoon sun as it hugs me close, a spring preview in January, its sparkle dance upon the river. And marvel at the sensations - the tickly snakes between my shoulders, the drop drip diamonds from spiky hair, the Rorschach patterns spreading dark across my t-shirt. And panic - out here without adequate SPF, I'll burn, or worse, freckle - and what the hell am I doing? Waiving philosophical about sweat stains? Sitting, staring, contemplating and panicking on this goddamn bench in the first place must mean a psychotic break, scrambled by abnormal impulses, right over the edge, too much stress, too much caffeine, too much everything. Except porn. I know, stroke, Alzheimer's, glioma tumor, brain aneurism, dead in an instant, right now, here it comes, any second, and I'll never know -

What? What was... that?

In shiver. River breeze dead calm, and yet I just shivered a-from-the-

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the kind of grave walking, creepy danger 'cause someone is watching you shiver.

But no one is. Right?

There's nobody watching me, even passing glancing me. A quick scan, all I see are milling southerners, wannabes, and - oh, here comes a panzer baby stroller division through the crowd - but, by design, nobody notices me sitting on this -

Except...

Eyes. Where the fuck did - wasn't there a second - so confused as to how - why didn't notice when - staring at - intense, infinite - oh, my fucking god, he's staring at -

Eyes attack mine. Trapped without a struggle, he holds me captive, chained to those immense baby blues as he walks forward - cue epic dramatic entrance music, think across the field walking urban D'Arcy - by the soccer mom and whiney kids, through a teaching moment, round commerce and Riverfront, through my life, all of it, everything parting, making way, for him to stand before me. He looks at me. Two seconds and 2 gazillion tingles - who the hell is - all the other people around and he approaches me? What the hell does he - something innocent like directions, just ask the local looking guy the way to -

Or nefarious like - oh, shit, am I sitting in a wrong "right" place, does he think I'm here to score some -

Religious fanatic, looks the type, wearing the arrogance of irrelevant questions belief, he wants to share his delusional fantasy stories with - well, back off, buddy, not buying, not listening, don't care, move right along 'cause I'm -

Oh, sweet Jesus, he's smiling.

"I choose you."

Want to sob for joy, plead for mercy. For I am lost, and I will follow wherever he leads. This bench brought me here. This bench brought me him.

"I choose you."

That's it, those six words, well, technically only three, is all he ever said. First as an invitation - accepted without hesitation, then again breezed across my naked and sated skin, soothing his lover's mark.

"I choose you."

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What the hell do I do now?

Don't know his name, too busy for small talk, too busy for pleasantries, too busy with the most dangerous, most uncharacteristic, most convoluted, sublime sensory sensual sexual instinctual brain stem hypothesis of FUCK to ask that basic question. Bodies busy, names not important.

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Nothing, only him.

And it's nothing without him. Took the sunrise and 5 seconds to add a fresh layer to my scabbed raw alone. Don't like it, hate it, fucking despise this ache of without him. This me without him.

So, the next day, I go back to the beginning, the end, I go back to the riverfront looking, for answers, for more, for him. And the next. And the next. And the next. Every day I go down there, to that bench, my bench, our bench. Same place, same time. My eyes lock on the same spot - 1.5 feet from the quarter eating binoculars, paddle boat tours in the background - the exact spot where he stood and I wait.

That's all there is for me now, the ache, the alone, waiting for him. Hiatus from social life, leave of absence from work, half-assed excuse misplacing the chain of command. No sleep, eating by rote. I don't answer unwanted familial calls, don't return superfluous friendly concerns. Life circling the drain, I leave it all, I MUST, to wait. And the next day I go down to the riverfront, stay until the shadows devour and see me home safely.

Back in my bathroom, the place where I wait until I can wait again, I look at my face in the mirror and try to understand what happened, what's changed, compare and contrast, then and now, before and after, the me before to the me now, from thought whole to what's missing, the piece of me that's disappeared, highkicked, the part that should fit snugly into the uncharted gaping hole within. I stare at my reflection for hours, the dark hours in between, seeking to grieve the loss of that vital chunk that I never knew existed. Three months and I'm still staring. Three months and the mark he made still burns. Three months of waiting.

Waiting...
Sitting and waiting...

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With a grande black coffee in one hand, and the fuzzies from a Jose Cuervo induced 'nap' the night before hanging about my mood, I wind my way back to my cubicle. Around a barnwood Builders' discussion, back by large mylar balloons screaming 'happy 30th birthday!', around a misaima of White

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June's Sunday dinner two weeks ago. A hollow rubbing fills ears, my mind as I blindly punch at the down button, sweaty fingers leaving greasy marks on the shiny chrome. Falling into the empty elevator, allow the unforgoing steel walls to shelter as I gig and retch.

Get out now.

Four months, eleven days, nineteen hours and thirteen minutes since the last time I heard that voice. Four months, eleven days, nineteen hours and thirteen minutes of hell.

Get out now.

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phrase, Get Out Now, has a very limited and move your ass.

Misheard, perhaps? No, those three words crystal clear, and my heart's newest tattoo.

A faulty or false memory, then? No, that bouncing Expo marker sharp. *Rubs sore spot behind left ear* Newton did irritate, I did answer the phone, the call did happen, so where, or what, or why or...

An explanation of any variety as to why I'm just standing with no apparent motivational purpose of a mid-morning Monday is quickly needed,

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"Ah, hell?"

So, about face and double time drill out to my car and an early lunch - just passing through grounds crew, excellent leaf blower skills, by the way - seeking a consult with a cookie dough Blizzard about a potentially battered work reputation needing an early retire -

"Shit."

Keys. On my desk. Car keys, iPhone, wallet, sunglasses, briefcase, my everything left behind on my desk when he, and then I -

No need for a receipt of this morning's thought conserved co-