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THROUGH A HOLE IN THE WALL

THEY WERE AT THE EDGE of the rooftop patio when the car finished going through the windows, shaking the building like an earthquake. It had come from behind them, so they hadn't seen it approaching over the low bridge. They had maybe heard something, an engine pushing too hard, but hadn't paid it much attention. Then an explosion of glass and wood and several long sections of the concrete barrier cracking like ice. Shawn knew the intersection was a bad one. The lanes narrowed quickly off fast parkways, squeezing suddenly into older, trendy neighbourhoods. Smaller accidents were not uncommon. The building they were standing on squared out the corner, coming flush against the sidewalk. In late spring, a soft breeze would bring shad flies up from the banks of the shallow river and they would blanket the walls with their wings. This time of the year, however, the wind was bitter with cold and the patio had been closed for several months. One of the waitresses sometimes brought them up here for a cigarette or a joint when it wasn't busy downstairs. Shawn didn't see her around and couldn't remember when she'd left. He called over to his friend and then leaned carefully over a bowed section of railing to see.

“Holy fuck. Look at that.”

Allan came up beside him to see where he was pointing. Heavy black skid marks arched through the intersection, ending suddenly where the car had jumped from the road through the wall. Shawn noticed how oddly quiet the street seemed in the wake of the sudden commotion. A standstill of dull yellow street lights. Then, from inside the pub, the bartender started screaming.

Shawn and Allan came down the steep flight of interior stairs with Shawn in the lead. Neither of them was hurrying. In fact, Shawn was starting to think of reasons not to push through the door into whatever was waiting. There would be a certain amount of carnage to witness. The pub hadn't been that busy any longer, but there'd been at least a dozen people still milling about.

He must have stopped to reconsider because Allan was suddenly at the bottom of the steps waiting for him by the doors. For a moment, neither moved.

“The waitress,” Shawn said finally, coming down. “We can’t leave. We need to find out about her first.”

Allan nodded slowly. The expression on his face was something close to fear. He’d seen accident victims before and hadn’t liked it much. Some crash out on the highway and he’d arrived first to help. It wasn’t a memory he talked about often.

Shawn entered carefully, cupping his mouth from the dramatic change in smells. There was the familiar aroma of beer and cooking grease, but behind that was a rush of wind and behind that the musk of gasoline and hot rubber. They had come in at the back corner of the pub and a high partition wall curved to meet them, blocking in the bar and a half dozen high backed stools. Flying debris had smashed chunks out of the stained glass riser and the big mirror behind the bar had spider-webbed. Half-finished drinks littered the counter, but no one was drinking them anymore. Everyone was on the other side having a look around. Shawn could just make out their silhouettes bobbing around like shadow puppets.

“Come on,” he said to Allan, stepping awkwardly around a series of broken table parts. “They may need our help.”

The room on the other side was in chaos and Shawn couldn’t help but think of a movie scene. The car was a monstrous blue shape tucked against the kitchen wall where it had come to rest, moaning and clicking like a stomped insect. The momentum had thrown it across the main dining area, pulverising tables and chairs and gouging a deep, black swath into the flooring. Most of the front wall was gone. Wood and cement hung like splintered teeth around the gap and across the street the line of trees was visible. Many of the overhead lights were flickering. Some had jarred loose and were throwing criss-crossed patterns of light around the room. Mounds of glass and rubble were scattered everywhere and the particles were glittering in the air. A war movie, Shawn thought. But without the added sentiment.

Most of the crowd had gathered around the bartender a little ways back from the hole. A semi-circle of middle-aged men in jeans and pullovers, standing around with their arms at their sides quietly looking down. Every now and then one of the faces would look up and their eyes would dart around the room searching for the something that was going to come and wake them. Shawn figured they weren’t panicking because of the booze. At this time of

the night, they had certainly stayed to drink. They seemed complacent and more eager to watch than participate. Some had even broken off into smaller groups to smoke.

Corey, the bartender, was yelling but no longer screaming. He was crouched on his shins cradling a woman's head in his arms. His body was soaked with blood and at one point he must have pulled his hands through his hair. From where they were standing, Shawn couldn't make out the face of the girl, but he had a feeling it was their waitress. He figured she had probably come back to clean those tables along the wall. If so, she'd taken the full impact of the crash. Corey was saying things to the people in the room while rocking her gently against him. He was begging for help.

Shawn made his way through the group to get a closer look. He turned to say something to Allan, but found his friend had stopped at the edge of the crowd. His tall, boxy frame was held back by the men who were constantly shuffling to keep the growing pool of blood away from their feet. He was staring at the hole.

Shawn saw that it was the waitress. Parts of her clothing were still recognisable. Her arms and face had been badly lacerated. Big chunks of her skin had been sliced away and Corey was angling her neck back to keep the airway open. Both of her legs had been crushed and one lay folded neatly beneath her. She was breathing, though. Her chest shivering in sporadic intervals, pushing pinky bubbles through what remained of her teeth. Shawn knelt beside her, wondering if she would hear him or if she would even care anymore.

"We were still on the roof," he said, ignoring the rawness of her face as best he could. "We came down. We're here."

He pulled back quickly feeling foolish for not knowing what else to say. He had never learned that much about her. He reached out over Corey and squeezed her hand. Her eyelids flickered and for a moment it seemed she was looking at him.

"You're beautiful," Shawn said, hoping something like that would help more. "I don't think you're going to make it."

The waitress winced as something happened inside of her. The crowd moaned and Corey starting rocking her faster. Shawn let the hand fall back to the floor as she began to shake. He stood up, brushing his pants mindlessly of dirt, glad the blood had not touched him. A few feet away, he caught a glimpse of a socked foot poking out from under a section of toppled wall. No one seemed particularly interested in discovering more bodies.

Shawn made his way back through searching for Allan. The wind had picked up and was blowing little tornadoes of dust around everyone's feet making them stamp at the cold. Outside, a trickle of vehicles had begun to coagulate at the intersection. People were starting to slow down to have a look. Strangers were getting out of their cars to take pictures.

Across the room, Shawn noticed a young kid hunched near the wreck of the car holding his chest with both arms while a group of men jostled around him. A man wearing a white apron folded down off his hips was taking punches at the kid when he stumbled within reach. Shawn guessed this was the driver. The men weren't much bigger than the kid, but he wasn't fighting back. He staggered like a drunk when he moved, but that could have been the shock. Or the violence. When someone got him in the stomach, he fell to his knees and started vomiting. The group reluctantly backed away.

Shawn felt drawn to the prostrate figure. To speak with a man who had almost surely committed murder seemed a rare and morbid chance. But there wouldn't be much time. The place was going to fill up pretty fast.

The group of thugs said nothing as he came right up to the kid and crouched beside him. The car was pungent this close. A greasy heat coating the back of the throat and nose.

"Want to know what's funny?" Shawn began, whispering close to his ear. "My wife asked me not to come here tonight. My friend and I only get together about twice a month and our wives still don't like it. What's even funnier is that we come here to get away from them and all we end up doing is talking about them."

The kid was sitting now with his face clasped between his hands. It was a lot for him to take in all at once. For a long time, his life was only going to get worse.

"My little girl would be looking at her glass of spilt milk right now telling me that everything was okay because it was only an accident," Shawn continued, "and I'd been inclined to agree with her. But here I don't know if that applies. There are different kinds of accidents. Different levels. See what I'm saying? I think you owe us at least something."

The kid lifted his head and looked around the room. His mouth was bleeding at the corners, the lips swollen and cut, and the left side of his face was yellowing with bruises. He was maybe twenty, nice clothes, good haircut, and he smelled of musky cologne. Water ran from his eyes in steady streams and he didn't even seem to notice. His face was rigid and fixed. The tears were merely reflex.

“It’s not real,” he started repeating, shaking his head. “So stupid and dumb and fucked up it just can’t be real. It can’t be. I only lost control for a second. I have my brother’s birthday this weekend. We’re taking him out for supper. My dad’s going to kill me. He’s going to kill me.”

Hearing him speak, Shawn knew he could not hate him. Not even if everyone else did. Not even if the waitress didn’t make it. The kid’s fear was palpable and nothing was going to carry that for him anytime soon. That was his cross. His life, in a sense, was finished, too. The world was filled with random dumbness.

There was a loud snapping from outside and Shawn rolled to his knees to see out the hole. Two cars had sucked together across the street and the drivers were arguing. It wouldn’t be long now, Shawn realised. He sat back down.

“My sister wanted four kids,” he said, holding up the fingers. “Always did. That was her number. Everything she’d done in life was planned around the eventuality of that number. But when the second baby came out funny, she decided she didn’t want anymore. The risk, you see. The doubt and the guilt. It really took it out of her. So, what did she do? She bought a couple of dogs, a smaller house, and stopped coming to family gatherings. A compromise, I suppose. Things changed. But she survived. And time eats the rest of the shit.”

The kid suddenly jerked rigid. His eyes went wide and black.

“I’m going to prison,” he said, addressing himself matter of factly. “Jesus Christ. I’m going to prison.”

His hands started to shake and he balled them into fists, punching them into the sides of his head.

“I just want to go home,” he yelled, gaining the attention of the group again. “I just want to go home. Why did all of you fucking drunks have to be here tonight? All you pieces of shit. You’ve destroyed everything. Everything.”

Just as suddenly he went limp again and began to sob quietly. His chin fell against his chest like a ragdoll.

“It was me,” he said. “It was me.”

Red and blue lights flashed into the bar like an explosion. Both Shawn and the kid looked up startled. Sirens cut through the scattered conversations and the room fell still, everyone waiting for whatever was going to happen next. It was finished. Shawn extended his hand and palmed the back of the kid’s neck as men in dark uniforms began to swarm the bar.

“You’ll do all right,” Shawn said, standing. “You can’t be the same person anymore, but you’ll do all right. Not all of us here are without forgiveness.”

The kid's head snapped towards Shawn as if he'd been stung by a rubber band. His eyes pinpointed into little dots and for the first time he seemed aware of his surroundings. His body began to shudder and then Shawn was moving away.

Paramedics rushed towards Corey as patrons excitedly pointed the way. More fingers waved and cops in black uniforms moved towards the kid, hauling him roughly to his feet. He wasn't looking at Shawn anymore. They were dragging him along with his legs trailing behind. Everyone else seemed relieved and began drifting apart. Pretty soon they would all be home with a good story to tell. They seemed almost happy.

Shawn walked around the pub a little more still searching for Allan. Customers were being escorted out onto the street where they were wrapped in white blankets and herded aside for questioning. Out of habit, Shawn used the side exit, avoiding the greater mass of people and overall confusion. Police had sealed off the intersection and officers setting red flares were redirecting traffic down side streets. Ambulances and fire-trucks had wedged themselves over the sidewalks and everyone was shouting to be heard over the din.

The waitress came out strapped to a steel gurney and was fed into the back of a brightly lit ambulance that immediately drove away without sound. Somewhere behind him, the kid was also being whisked away and Shawn wondered what that would be like and shivered.

He moved through the commotion undisturbed, coming up to the hole from the outside the way the car had come. He ran his hands along the cold, jagged edges of the building and realised that something was wrong. Shawn looked up. No, they hadn't been on the roof. Not this time. He and Allan had been here on this side of the building where the protection from the wind was better. They'd been sharing a cigarette and watching the waitress through the glass. The car had just appeared. There'd been no time for anything except its sudden bulk of colour and the childish impulse to jump. Shawn shook his head and stopped because it was pointless now. There was nothing more to do with it.

He spotted Allan on the crest of the bridge staring off over the river at something hidden behind the line of darkened trees. The waitress was with him, too, standing slightly apart looking in the same direction. Shawn made his way towards them taking his time because he knew they would wait. They met in silence and Shawn was glad to see that the girl was beautiful again. Then he too turned to see what it looked like.