

No In Between

By Kevin J. Broom

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*All or nothing at all!
Half a love never appealed to me.
If your heart never could yield to me,
Then I'd rather have nothing at all!
If it's love, there is no in between.
Why begin,
Then cry for something that might have been?
No, I'd rather have nothing at all.*

— Jack Lawrence

One

As best I can remember, it was the first time I'd awakened naked and face down in a pool of my own blood. I lifted my head. Well, tried to really. Stuck. Painful stuck.

On what, though?

I gave it some thought, which turned out to be more challenging than normal. An idea would coalesce and then go skittering off just beyond reach. I felt the carpet around my face and came up with the formula: congealed blood plus hard gray carpet equals face stuck.

An involuntary giggle arose. Always sucked at math.

I lifted harder, but the math won. Or the chemistry. Physics?

I called for help. No response. Again, louder. Still nothing.

My kingdom for a bucket of water. I gave some thought to how I might break loose. Rock back and forth like trying to free a car trapped in the snow? Why not?

It hurt like hell, but didn't break the iron grip of math. Maybe I wasn't rocking hard enough.

"Keep on a-rockin' me baby," I warbled.

I thought about Captain Kessler, the ex-Marine pilot who'd taught me algebra in the tenth grade. Seemed like a hundred years ago. She used to talk about her morning workout routine. She'd put on a football helmet and jump until she'd tapped her head on the ceiling a hundred times.

What would she tell me to do? Probably what she always said, "Get to work." Or her other favorite: "Don't be a dumbass."

Too late for that.

What I needed to do was obvious. Whether I could do it... My eyes pre-teared.

Finally, I gritted my teeth, placed both hands flat on the floor and shoved hard. With a percussive rip, my face tore free. Felt like I'd left a good chunk of it on the floor, but "feeling" wasn't the same as reality.

I rolled onto my back and tried to remember where I was. The walls were bare. Nausea-colored sheets were twisted on the bed. Everything hurt.

I struggled to my knees and then to my feet. So far so good.

It started as a jiggle. Then a wobble. And then the room was full-out spinning. I lurched and scrabbled for secure footing, but there was no such thing.

I fell.

I told my arms to come up and break the impact, but my body stayed slack and somewhere in the back of my head, I heard a voice saying, "It's not the fall that'll get you, it's the landing."

My torso bounced on something soft and springy and then came still on that softness. The bed. I'd fallen on the bed. I rested there without moving or even trying to, legs dragging to the floor, chest and arms splayed across the mattress. Just stayed and let the room swirl.

There was a dark spot just left of center in my vision, and it moved when I tried to bring it into focus. I tried to shoo it away, but it turned out to be inside my eye. That seemed bad.

"Get to work," I told myself.

I staggered to the bathroom and peered into the mirror. And wished I hadn't. My face was a bloody mess of gashes and bruises. My left eye was a slit. There was a lump over my left ear.

I could remember only one blow to the face and I wondered how it had done so much damage. It came to me kinda slow, but Pudge hadn't stopped hitting just because I was unconscious.

I rinsed my face and still looked like Rocky.

Back in the bedroom I discovered Pudge and Ingrid had taken everything. Clothes, shoes, wallet — gone. I checked under the

mattress, but the extra money wasn't there. They'd taken my underwear, too. I sank to the bed. Keys had been in my pocket. Had they taken my car? Of course. No money, no credit cards, no clothes, no transportation. I glanced at the bathroom. At least there was a pot to piss in.

Why'd they take my underwear?

I wrapped a blanket around me and left the room. The spinning room expanded to the entire building, which added rocking when I was halfway down the stairs. More math: sturdy railing plus iron grip equals not falling. Captain Kessler would be proud. When it passed, I went down. The old black guy who'd checked me in was sitting behind the check-in desk reading a Star magazine with one of the Kardashian sisters on the cover. He didn't look up.

I waited. The desk was cobbled together with scrap plywood and Formica that looked like it had been applied by someone missing his thumbs. The old guy still didn't look up.

"Mind if I use the phone?" I said. He jumped. When he focused on me, his eyes tightened.

"Did ya bleed on the carpet?" he said.

The prehistoric wooden chair groaned when I settled into it, but held. The parking lot was visible through the window. My car was gone.

"Ya did, didn't ya?"

"'Fraid so," I said.

He cursed, then clambered to his feet and stiff-legged it around the corner. "Betsy," he called. There was no answer and he shouted louder.

"Whatchoo want?" a woman bellowed back.

"Some dumb bastard got his ass kicked." He hobbled back and grunted as he fell into his chair. Something came toward us that sounded like a limping hippo, but turned out to be an obese woman in a torn housedress and slippers patched with pink duct tape.

"Did he bleed on my rugs?" she asked. The old guy pointed at me with his chin, but didn't speak.

"White people," she said like it was an epithet. "Need to leave those 'hos alone." She opened a door and pulled out a steam-cleaning machine for the carpet. Dragging it behind her, she grumbled up the stairs. I remained where I was. Movement hurt.

Stillness hurt too, but not as much as movement.

"Your phone," I said. "May I use it? Please."

The old guy said, "Who you gonna call?"

I resisted the urge to say Ghostbusters. "A friend."

"Your friend ain't no cop is he?"

"No."

"Ain't no reason be callin' no cops."

I clenched my jaw and a pain seared through my head. The room spun and I had a falling sensation that stopped only when I put my arm on the desk. Wouldn't do that again soon. The pain subsided and I pushed myself up in the chair. The old guy didn't seem interested in lending a helping hand.

"Won't call any cops," I said. It was getting hard to talk.

"What's gonna stop you from callin' after you gone?"

"I give you my word."

He snorted and said, "Then there the rug."

"What about it?"

"There a charge for cleanin'."

I stared at him in wonderment. It may not have come off well since one eye was swollen shut.

"Let me get this straight," I said, my voice low. "Someone assaults me in your establishment, steals everything I have with me — including my underwear — and you want to bill me for bleeding?"

His expression approached cheer. "For cleanin'. This a business we runnin' up in here, not no charity."

"On second thought I will call the cops."

"Then you can't use the phone," he said, and he smirked. My head felt heavy, and when it drooped his smirk contorted into a victorious sneer. The room was quiet. I forced my good eye open and twisted a little to face him.

"How about I give you back your blanket and go out on your front steps," I said. "Think someone might notice a butt-naked bleeding white man in Northeast DC?"

The sneer was eroding. He said, "How 'bout I get my gun and blow your brains out?"

"Make a terrible mess on Betsy's rugs." I was hoping he wouldn't remember there were no rugs where I was sitting. Would

linoleum stain?

"Think I won't do it?"

I dragged myself to a standing position, steadied myself on the chair, and tossed the blanket on his desk. I hoped my nudity was as embarrassing for him as it was for me.

"What's it gonna be?" I said. For some reason, I was holding in my stomach.

He gave me a hard stare to which I responded by not falling down. Would I have to go outside? Would I actually do it? I still hadn't decided the answer to either question when he reached under the desk with both hands. By the time I'd thought of ducking, he came back up with a phone.

"Thank you," I said, wrapping myself in the blanket again.

He glowered.

I dialed, and Mike answered on the first ring.

"I need your help," I said.

"You're just now figuring that out?" he said.

"Come get me."

"What happened?"

"Got robbed and beaten. With a club. Not in that order."

"You okay?"

"I'll live." I heard a voice in the background and wondered who was with him.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Hold on," I said. Then to the old guy, "Where are we?" He took the phone, wiped it with a paper towel and gave directions. When he was finished, he handed the phone back. I resisted the urge to wipe it with the blanket.

"Got all that?" I said.

"No sweat," Mike said. "Give me a half hour. I'll bring Nate."

"One more thing," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Bring me some clothes."

Silence. "Do you need shoes?"

"Yeah."

"No problem."

I hung up. Betsy came back down, muttering something about stupid white people. Under better conditions, I might have engaged

her in a conversation about the perils of generalizing from personal experience, but somehow it didn't seem like a good forum for a discussion on logical fallacies. She put away the steam cleaner, came back around the corner to glare at me, said something profane, and did the limping hippo thing in the other direction. The old guy and I waited in silence. No customers came or went.

Mike and Nate arrived in exactly half an hour. Nate entered first, and the old guy had a sudden need to moisten his lips and crack his knuckles. Nate had that effect on people — he was six-foot-seven and built like Samson. Wearing a muscle tank top and ancient work pants, he stood in the doorway. He might have been flexing a little, but it's hard to tell with him. Mike was somewhere behind him.

"Looks like someone shoved you in front of a bus," Nate said. The old guy sat rigid, taking care not to look directly at Nate.

"You got a place to change?" I said.

"Round the corner," he said. "You see the room." Polite. Solicitous. Just like a good innkeeper.

I tried to rise, but didn't make it. Nate crossed the room and yanked me up. I staggered and started to fall, but he caught me with one arm.

"Nice catch," I said.

"Just hold onto that blanket," he said, his voice rumbling. It didn't seem much work for him to keep me upright. I clung to his arm until I was steadier.

Mike handed me the bag and I shuffled around the corner. They'd gotten an old sweat suit from my apartment and moccasins I'd purchased last time I was in New Mexico.

I put on the clothes and went back to the lobby. I searched for something to do or say that would have communicated the disdain I had for the old guy, for Betsy and for the motel they operated. Best I could come up with was to drop the blanket on his desk without folding it. I'm gangster like that.

Mike drove and Nate sat in the back with me. I slumped against the window, the cool glass pleasant on my face. When we turned out of the alley, Nate looked down at me.

"How'd you end up there?" he asked.

I kept staring out the window. "Should've taken that left at

Albuquerque.”

“What did he say?” Mike asked.

“Musta got hit harder than we thought,” Nate said. “He quotin’ Bugs Bunny.”