

"Swu dwu hur decaul?" I heard through a mouthful of bagel as Morrison rose from his chair in the kitchen.

"I can't hear you y'fat fuck. C'mon, we gotta go."

Not everyone could talk to him like that, but the eight months we'd worked together day in day out had bred a kind of asymmetric fraternity. Drew was the big brother but I could give it back just a little too. Gallows humor had kept better men than me sane, and it was my older partner who'd taught me how to cope.

Morrison held up his palm toward me as he forced down the undercooked wad of dough. It could have used another few minutes in our crappy toaster oven but he'd never wait that long. He smacked his lips before continuing. A second bagel sat on the paper plate, waiting its turn.

"I said, did you hear the call? What is it? I was chewing when it came in" he explained as though this was helpful information.

"We've got to move. It's a house fire, occupied. We have to be there now."

Drew Morrison remained less than spurred by my newb exuberance, regarding the limp meal before him, licking off the cream cheese before tossing the plate into the garbage. In the lot he checked on the equipment in back while I fired up the truck. All gassed up, no warning lights. I signed us out and we were moving by the time Morrison clipped his seat belt. I maneuvered the meat wagon out of the garage and lit it up.

"So who's there?"

I shook my head.

"A family. I don't know, definitely some kids though. I got that much from the call."

"No. Who's there?"

"I told you, I don't know."

"Jesus, it's like talking to a fucking wall. I mean who *else* is there? Fire, police? Tell me we're not first. Please tell me that at least? Because we're gonna need the fire guys to be first."

I'd heard nothing since the acknowledgements of the other agencies on the radio. It was a straight race between first responders.

"I don't know" I told him. "You know everything I do."

An accident of proximity brought us first to the scene. We hadn't needed much in the way of directions. It was a beautiful, clear winter's day with the North Carolina sun just strong

enough to warm your face but leave the shadows cold. There was no breeze and the smoke rose straight into the blue sky before convecting into a black and red mushroom cloud above the house. Four thousand square feet of dry Victorian wood was releasing every calorie of chemical energy it had stored for more than a century.

We parked the truck on the edge of the habitable zone. Any closer and it would be impossible to work. We were still over three hundred feet from the house. Everything smelled toxic, the air almost opaque with ash. The fire actually roared, drowning out all other sounds, more like a slow motion explosion than a burn. We had to yell at each other even though we were standing just yards apart. Even this close there were crowds, neighbors and rubberneckers milling around not knowing what to do. Now we were here, and we were supposed to be in charge.

*But I don't know what I'm doing.*

There was no patient to treat, no way of knowing what came next. What came next was a shrieking that cut the rumble and crack of the fire like lemon juice in the eye. The sound of children's terror can reach in and twist your stomach. They place their trust in you for no better reason than your age. You're an adult, you make things better, you know what's happening and what to do.

And you always get them when they cry.

There were children trusting us that way right now. I set myself to enter via the sagging front doors of the house and sprinted off before turning back just yards from the door, seared. There was a fence around the side of the house I could maybe get over, but that would get me no closer to the screaming choir. I moved back and forth with no purpose before turning back to the truck.

"Morrison. MORRISON. It's not possible. I just tried. It's too fucking hot."

As my protests continued he began suiting up. He pulled a foil sheet normally used to treat hypothermia around himself and soaked a towel in water, draping it around his head and face.

"Oh C'mon Drew. No man."

But he was gone, smashing into the place, disappearing in the smoke. I stood as close as I could, listening for anything, any sign at all. Twenty seconds later I heard a train coming as Drew approached holding a child under each arm, kicking and screaming his way through the debris. Morrison got thirty yards clear before pitching forward involuntarily, dropping the fragile, limp shapes he carried. He remained on all fours as I approached, the air barely respirable.

One of the girls was clearly breathing but out cold. I could get no pulse on the other. I began to drag the kids away from the fire and had reached the edge of the habitable zone before Drew rallied and crawled out of the toxic shroud after me. He shoved me away and began chest compressions. The little girl began coughing and rasping and the first comprehensible sound she made was to ask about her brother. One screaming voice remained. Morrison could no longer stand. It was hard to gauge the extent of his burns with his uniform on but he needed treatment as much as the girls he'd rescued.

"Take this."

He handed me the foil wrap.

*A man like Drew Morrison trusts you. He actually thinks I can do this. Me.*

My mentor cut into my overthinking.

"The wet towel helps, get more for your hands."

He held up his palms and I saw the blistering. He hacked a cough.

"The hallway splits at the end. Go right. Straight through a day room into a narrow passageway. The kids were in the first door on the right. Go on. GO ON."

I pulled the foil around myself and screamed at the onlookers for more wet cloth. A woman came back quickly with a pile of soaking wet towels and a large, thick linen sheet. I covered every inch of exposed skin and steadied myself, looking like a frightened ghost. There was going to be no help. The only blue lights were our own, and though sirens were wafting in the distance there'd be no other response before the fate of the child left inside was settled.

We'd been onsite for around two minutes. With my armor in place I got set to run.

*Through the door, to the right, straight through, on the right. Doesn't matter how much it hurts. You ignore that. You suck that shit up and BEG for more.*

I hyperventilated for a few seconds to minimize the lungfuls of smoke I'd have to draw down before charging at the door. The temperature increased exponentially, and as I closed on the entrance I felt a giant hand trying pushing me back to the edge of its reach. As I punched through the forcefield I understood that this wasn't about sheer determination, it was about accepting that you might have to die today.

Passing through the doorway I felt each tiny patch of exposed skin blistering as I writhed as I ran, trying to find a way to completely cover myself in wet cloth. But some part of me was always burning so I was always pulling towels down over my eyes, around my neck, my

wrists. And the smoke, every inhalation bringing me closer to collapse. I took the right fork into the day room as instructed and I heard the screaming growing closer, but I couldn't get through the doorway on the other side.

No. That's not right. I could have gotten through, but I would probably have died. More than ninety percent likely maybe. Perhaps there was no chance at all. Point is I folded where Drew would have doubled down. And the piteous howling went on.

Allowing my head-towel to fall open I cracked my eyelids briefly to keep my bearings. The doorway hung suspended, a portal from this smoky place into a magnesium-bright tunnel. The corridor churned like the surface of the sun.

"OUT HERE. COME TO MY VOICE. RUN TO MY VOICE. I'VE COME TO GET YOU. COME WITH ME."

I continued to avoid acute eye injury by blinking rapidly and when the boy appeared it was in stop motion, taking four or five flicks of the page to fill the door frame. Six year old Shelby Halliver strobed as my eyelids flashed open and closed. He screeched and keened at me to help him as he fell to his knees and began to burn. I reached for him. But he was a few feet further than I could go.

*Than I was prepared to go.*

No. I'd rather die than watch a child burn. Right?

*Then go.*

The closer I got the harsher the burning and my voice joined the screaming. Not scared screaming. Real, agonized screaming as I burned. But I was still too far for Shelby to fall into my arms. I'd hesitated and now it was all too late. A window blew in and the fire blazed nuclear white. I was pulling the towel over my closed eyes as I blinked more time, capturing a final still frame.

The corridor behind him was now an imaging machine. The boy's silhouette was an x-ray as he dropped to his knees, just the fuzzy pink translucent haze of flesh draped over black bone. He was boiling away.

I shook off my burning rags and bounced and span sightless out of the house and into the street, a demented, whining pinball. Morrison lay on the ground next to his two charges, all of them burned and sick. I didn't look any better.

Within a few minutes the street was blocked by fire trucks and police cars and we were laid out next to our truck and given treatment. My hair was burned away and my wrists were cooked. The skin on the right side of my neck was sloughing off. My pair of damaged retina

would require surgery. I was given an oxygen mask, the gas beginning to displace the suffocating poisons. A comfortable feeling spread through me as the morphine kicked in.

Not Drew. No amount of first aid could get the evil chemicals out of him and he died minutes after dropping to the the floor. He was quickly covered in a sheet as though he were something indecent.

People moved all around us, around the two little girls Morrison had rescued. Both girls were now asking about their brother. I was glad for the bandages over my eyes.

There were choppers and news crews and later on TV I saw that people were pointing at us and nodding their appreciation. A cop fended off the press as my oxygen therapy continued. I looked like a hero. Drew was ignored under his white sheet.

Andrew Morrison was given an honor guard at his burial. Cable news milked the tale of the hero paramedic, coaxing prefabricated statements from genuine kids, manipulating and exploiting at every turn before exhausting the story and throwing it away.

The parents on TV spoke of how they'd swap their lives for Shelby's, and of how they thanked God and Drew for getting the girls out. And they never failed to thank me for trying to rescue Shelby. They even sent me a card. They thanked me with no accusation in their voices, in complete faith that I'd done everything possible, taken every risk, thrown out every precaution and barely escaped with my life. Only I knew, and that kind of self knowledge washes the color from your life.

The autopsy recorded that the little boy died from smoke inhalation.