

E C H O

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For Natalie.

It was always yours.

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1.
Wasting Time

“I don’t have the right. What else should I be? All apologies—”

SMACK!

“Looks like the grunge band from Seattle aren’t going anywhere any time soon! That was Nirvana, holding strong at number four on the charts with *All Apolog—*”

SMACK!

“Have a couple of updates concerning the March 1st shooting on the Brooklyn Bridge—”

SMACK!

“President Clinton’s strategy of fiscal discipline and open foreign—”

SMACK!

“Creator and artist, Jack Kirby, who passed away last month, creator of superheroes such as Captain America, Hulk, Thor, X-men and many other Marvel—”

One last SMACK and I’m finally up. Figure after hitting the snooze for over an hour, it’s about that time. The boss will be pissed as usual for me being late. That man must love the taste of ass, I swear, because he seems to live for mornings like these so he can ride mine the whole day, threatening me with my job. So, being the responsible guy I am, I sleep for another half hour—have to at least make it worth the ass chewing.

Slumping out of my bed, the wash of disdain smacking me before my feet hit the floor, I slide down the side—surely the movement is more graceful in my head—and just sit. Waking up and going to the place that reminds me of everything awful that has happened in my life is not my favorite Monday morning activity. Hell, it isn't an activity I want to do on any day of the week. Guess that's why it doesn't really bother me to hit the snooze...repeatedly.

“Why?” I ask myself, my head in my hands, “Why do I do this to myself day in and day out? Where's my break to do something more with my life?” Heaving a big sigh, I lift my head and stare through my bedroom window to the building across the street, which is under construction.

Something is always under construction around here—trying to get rid of all the bad spots on this big ole apple. Don't think that will ever be possible. This place is a shithole of sin. Building up a few blocks isn't going to be enough to create the world the architects and contractors collaborated about. But who am I to judge? Once I'd thought that my life was going to be great. I just knew it. Never ever expected it to be...*this*. This life is definitely not the one I'd planned for myself so many years ago.

Wish I could find the motivation to go back to my writing, my love, to try again, and, this time, to not give up so easily. Sounds good in theory, but then that means I'd actually have to get my ass in gear and make some major changes. Ugh. I hate change.

Talking to myself has lately become quite the habit. There's not really much intelligent conversation going on at the job, so I save those talks for myself—use them as motivation to keep on keeping on no matter how crappy my day seems. It's not like I'd share all my bullshit with those guys, anyway. It's bad enough that it happened, why would I want to talk about it with people who don't know me from every other Tom, Dick, or Harry on the site?

Everything across the street blurs into one massive, gray blob before I realize I haven't blinked in a while.

“Well, time to get at it,” I mutter.

Digging through some of the crap on my bedroom floor, I grab a t-shirt, give it the sniff test—it passes—and slip it on while continuing to push through pizza boxes and empty soda cans looking for my work jeans. Yeah, my work jeans, just the one pair. Figure, why trash up both pairs of my jeans, so I keep one for work, which never gets washed, and one for play, which never gets worn.

One boot is lying almost upside down by the bedroom door, kicked off in a drunken stupor, I'm sure, but the other was nowhere in sight. Shit, sure hope I didn't lose that thing last night.

There's not really much I remember after my ninth, maybe it was my tenth beer, whatever.

Either way, I sure don't have the money to buy a new pair. Lucky to have even made it

home, I guess. But now it's time to hop back on the reality train, and both of my damned boots are needed to do so.

As I begin to creep down the hallway, a hazy, scruffy face stares back at me from the bathroom mirror. *Damn, that mirror could use a cleaning*, I think for a split second, but then having a clearer view of the stranger looking back at me is not something I want, not now, anyway. That face, actually, is a face I don't care to ever see again—the face of a pathetic loser. Yay me.

Shaking my head at, well, myself, I continue on my mission to make it out the door before lunchtime, and head to the kitchen kicking my way through piles of clothes and trash. Surely there has to be something in there to quickly grab and stick in my rumbling belly. Maybe I'll find my other damned boot while I'm at it.

An unrecognizable voice blares to life when I hit *play* on my stereo. Music usually helps to wake me up, but this dude's voice just irritates the shit out of me this morning. Where's Casey Kasem when you need him? There was something soothing and uplifting about his voice. Guess change isn't my thing, in even the smallest aspects of my life. I hit the *off* button.

A foul odor coming from the kitchen overtakes my nostrils and sends my stomach into convulsions. Sniffing around, I determine it's coming from my fridge, which I open, like an idiot. Full of to-go boxes and leftover food that doesn't quite look edible, I grab one of those boxes and find the culprit. No telling how long it's been in there. Opening it, still an idiot, I'm blasted again with a horrific stench, like spoiled seafood that's been sitting in the sun for days.

Disgusting doesn't describe it. I stick it back in. Don't feel like cleaning out the fridge right now, that's for sure.

Yesterday's slightly burnt toast and a cold cup of coffee is my usual breakfast of champions. No change today. Burnt toast with some jelly. Not even the good stuff. Nope, the jelly is not the kind you get in a jar, but rather some leftover packets from the corner deli. Ketchup packets, mustard and mayo packets, jelly...anything I could pocket from the corner deli.

Why pay for that fancy stuff when the deli has it all for free?

Damned microwave is on the fritz, again, and again, I don't have money for a new one. Maybe I should just start setting the timer on the coffee pot for later. By the time it makes it to my mug, it's always been off a while and is nice and stale, anyway. I keep telling myself, though, that it's a constant in my life...a small one, but one I can rely on every morning. Plus, I'm not really sure how to reset it, anyway.

My friend, John, keeps telling me to dip into the reserve set aside for my kid's college fund. But I'm not that desperate...yet. That's TJ's money. I just can't be *that* dad.

Looking around for my boot, I take a sip and trip over something on the kitchen floor, spilling coffee all down my shirt. Guess it's a good thing it's cold. Hot coffee would've sucked. But, now I have to go dig around the mess of a floor and find another damned shirt that is halfway non-pungent with body odor.

Shit, this is going to put me even further behind.

"Hey, there's that damned boot." At least my clumsiness helps find my boot!

Trying to put it on and make my way back to my room, fumbling over the trash in the hallway, I bout slip and break my freaking leg. Should really clean this place up instead of constantly adding to the mess. One day.

Sniffing through a few shirts, I finally find one with minimal stains that doesn't reek of the job. Swallowing my last bite of toast, I pull the shirt over my head as I run for the door.

Since oversleeping and having a fun morning of hide and seek with my boots, I miss my bus, and, of course, don't have money for a cab either. This is becoming a habit. Having to walk will put me another hour behind. The old man is really going to be pissed at me. Maybe I can put him on a leash to control how far his nose goes up my ass when he's pissed at me. Down boy!

The mental image of my boss on a leash with his head up my ass is too much, and I let out a little snort of a laugh. If only. Been a while since I've found anything funny.

My hungry stomach complains as I smell the bakery right down the street. The noise of all the people hustling and bustling down the streets is drowned out by the grinding and whirring of machines, the hammering, drilling, creaking, cracking and crashing sounds of construction.

Usually, I only pull it out on the job since its batteries don't last too long, but I've got a hell of a walk ahead of me, so out comes my Walkman from my back pocket. It's cracked from accidentally sitting on it one too many times and has a missing button. A button I wish I could use for my life sometimes—the rewind button.

The face of my Walkman is all cloudy and scratched up from using it on the site, but it still works like a champ. That's all that matters. At least something works like it's supposed to. Digging in my jacket pocket, I come across two cassettes, pop one in, put on my headphones, and begin my trek to the hellhole.

Music has been my new cathartic release, now without my writing to turn to, and Kurt Cobain is a lyrical genius! Next time they come in concert around here, I'm definitely getting tickets. Walking and singing, as off-key as one can get, I get looks from people who just don't understand. Seriously, if you don't know the lyrics, you have to live in a closet...or on the street like some of the eyes on me.

"Come as you are, as you were, as I waaaaaant you to be...as a friend, as a friend, as an old enemy. Take your time, hurry up, the choice is yours don't be late..."

Don't be late.

Ha.

Construction is definitely not the most glamorous job, but it pays the bills. The shittiest part of my job, though, is that my boss is my ex-wife's father—if I forgot to mention that part. One could say I once had the world on a string...or so I'd thought—married, the father of a son, and although working for the father-in-law, I was still writing on the side. Then one day I came home early from work to find my wife studying more than biology.

That anatomy and physiology professor, or so I'd thought, must've been really good at his job to give at-home, up close and personal classes. At that time, I had just assumed he was a sleazebag with a degree, since the studying consisted of a lot of nudity. Sure, the University would frown upon that, but then again, they would've frowned upon me at one point, too.

It's like I couldn't even get mad...to a certain extent. It was almost cosmic. Karma sure is a bitch, right? That's what they say. Never had it happen to myself on such a level that I wasn't sure I'd ever come back from its punishment, though. And, at the same time, I wasn't shocked because of what I'd done, so my life was always waiting for the other shoe to drop. I mean, you get what you give, right? Back then I should not have given a fuck, but being the hopeless romantic I was—reiterating *was* because that man is dead—my life fell apart, completely.

The day I caught my wife, the only woman I'd loved, cheating on me, was probably the worst day in my life...until the day she moved out. I thought for sure my job was down the shitter, too, being the boss's son-in-law and all. Can you blame me? With a kid to support, though, I guess the old geezer just didn't have it in him to get rid of me. After all, my son, Ted Jr., is his only grandchild.

My ex-wife quickly moved out of the city to live with her new “professor” boyfriend—whom I found out is actually a literature professor and a published author, which made me hate him even more—and took our son with her. So I get to see my son twice a month when she brings him to the city for the weekend. Two weekends a month, that’s all I get with my own kid because my wife decided to screw her professor. Yep, guess karma really is a bitch, because even making two weekends a month happen is hard between her schedule and my lack of a car...well, you get the idea.

There aren’t words enough to describe my love for my kid, and I always pay child support on time, which basically takes half of my paycheck. So lazy I may be, but I’m not a deadbeat dad. My boss knows this, and deep down, the old man still loves me like a son. Maybe it’s wrong, but I get a kick out of the fact that he knows that I know that he can’t ever fire me now. Well, I guess he *could* fire me if I screwed up enough. But it’s not like I go in late every day. Okay, so maybe it is every day. Fire me. Oh well, I just don’t seem to give a shit these days.

The settlement from my parents’ death has helped me survive for the last ten years, including buying this brownstone so I’d always be rent-free. That was probably the best thing I did with the money, besides setting up TJ. The settlement could only make it so long, though. Pissing away my inheritance was not a smart thing to do, but, at the time, I was careless and hopeless. TJ changed all that, and that’s why I put the remainder of the settlement into a tuition fund for my son. He deserves better than what I had.

There may possibly have been a transaction to hide some of it from myself, also. Right now, I'd love to just take the money and run, but it's not in me to shun my responsibilities and especially not to walk away from my son.

As I pass an antique shop on my way to catch the bus, emerald eyes inside the shop catch my attention. Back stepping a few feet to look again, I see the woman has turned away, and I watch the curls of her brunette hair bounce away as she walks. Her eyes are so striking that I sit there for a moment, taking her in. She comes out from the back of the store and we catch eyes again. Oh God, I must look like a creeper. Smiling, I begin to turn to walk away, and I catch her smile back. I keep going.

As if someone like her would be interested in me. Keep dreaming, bud, keep dreaming. Maybe one day...one day when you win the lottery and don't look like a hobo walking to work every morning.

My buddy, John Bailey, turns the corner just in time to and see me strolling in.

"Ted," he says with a laugh, "Frank is going to rip your head off when he sees ya, man!" Shaking his head he looks over his shoulder for the old man.

"Relax, man. He's all bark and no bite," I say.

"Today he's acting different. I'd go easy with the smart-assed remarks, bro," John replies, cautiously.

Whatever. The guy always has good advice, I just don't care to follow it. Although, through all the years we've been friends, he has never steered me wrong.

John has been my friend since the first grade. He was playing with a G.I. Joe action figure that I wanted, so he shared with me. We haven't left each other's side since. Throughout junior high and high school, we always had each other's backs.

Even stood behind him after he earned himself one hell of a nickname! Being dared, sorry, double-dog-dared to eat a live cricket probably wasn't his best day. Oh, John. He would do anything for attention. I stuck by his side, though. Throughout college, we were always there for each other. There's not a thing either of us wouldn't do for the other, so I know his warning is sincere. Again, I just don't care this morning.

"Thanks, man, appreciate the heads up," I say and leave John to face my doom. Walking up a couple of flights of stairs to the office, needless to say, I can hear my ass chewing coming a mile away.

As soon as I open the door, he starts. "Three hours! Three hours late you stroll in here acting like you own the place! Who do you think you are? No, don't answer that. I'll tell you who you are. You're a good for nothing, low life, lazy bastard!"

"Well if I didn't have to pay all that money to your daughter, I might be able to afford a car. Then I could get to work on time." I just have to get a dig on his daughter any chance I get.

Serves as a good reminder that although I am the one who filed for divorce, and regret it sometimes, she is the reason our marriage fell slap apart.

“That’s been your problem, and it’s your problem alone. Never taking responsibility and moving on with your own life. She’s moved on,” Frank says, taking a deep breath and calming himself down.

“Did you get the papers?” he asks.

“What papers? All I ever get is bills and junk mail,” I reply, feeling uneasy since he obviously knows something I don’t.

“You stupid son of a bitch. If you only checked your mail once in a while you’d know! Sara’s getting remarried. Brad is filing papers to adopt Ted Jr.” I feel all the blood rush out of my face. “Jesus Christ, Ted, don’t you pay attention to anything anymore? You’re wasting away your life,” Frank says.

With my knees buckling beneath me, I fall into a chair, breathless. It feels like a bomb has dropped on me, exploding away all the excuses I had piled up for myself. Speechless, I just sit as Frank comes over and puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Look, I love you like a son and you know this. I know my daughter messed you over real bad, but that’s in the past. I’ve been covering for you long enough and your actions have delayed construction to the point I can’t cover for you no more. Get your act together. Starting tomorrow, you have to make some changes. Now I understand if this news has hit you like a sack of bricks, so if you need to take the day off—”

“No. No, Frank,” I interrupt, “I came to work, and I’ll at least finish out the day. It’ll be okay.” I’m not sure my words are believable.

“Come on, go home, Ted,” Franks says, helping me to my feet, “Come in tomorrow.” Obviously, he’s not buying my protestations.

“Frank, just let me work. Work is the only thing other than alcohol that helps me forget. I ain’t got any money to buy the one, so at least let me have the other,” I say, looking him in the eyes.

“Okay. Just take it easy today,” he replies.

Leaving the office and heading back down stairs, I meet up with John.

“Everything alright?” he asks.

Shaking my head, my heart pounding in my ears, I give him a simple, “Yeah,” and we continue our work day, as usual.

Even though the fifteen-story low-rise we’re working on has some heavy steel beams holding it together, none are as heavy as the beams that hold my heart together. And, for the first time in a long time, I feel those beams may break.

Glass Half Full

Lucky me, feeling sorry for myself may hit me hard but doesn't last as long as some who have gone through similar situations. It helps that I'm not and never have been a heavy drinker. Growing up watching my father kill himself a little bit each day by the bottle really helped me realize that's not what my life would be when I grew up.

"I know my limits," I say and snatch the bottle of Jack from my cabinet. I try to save the heavy stuff for the really bad days. Those have been coming on too frequently lately.

Many people who grow up with an alcoholic use it as a crutch to be one or just be a f-up all their lives. That was a path I'd already determined would not be mine. It wasn't going to be the reason I was a loser. There are plenty other reasons for that. I take a shot.

My father's liver finally had enough and called it quits when I was seventeen, which was just over a decade ago. I was never really close with the man. He wasn't the type of father anybody would look up to. My mother, on the other hand, she was an angel on earth and I miss her terribly. Ironically enough she died in a car accident with a drunk driver. Ironic, I suppose, because the driver of the other vehicle was my father, on his way home from an AA meeting.

The guilt of that accident drove him closer to the bottle and that's what truly killed him, the guilt, you know. Even experiencing such loss at a young age, and all my dad put me through, I don't blame him for how my life turned out. I used to like to believe we each have a say in our own lives. So with the idea that a man can shape his future no matter his past, I went to college and graduated with a degree in English.

English! What a crock!

My dream of graduating and becoming a writer became a pipe dream. It drove me crazy that any time someone heard my degree is in English they'd ask, "Oh, you teach?" Like that's the only thing someone can do with an English degree?

As it turned out, they were pretty much right. The only job I could get was working at private schools as an English teacher. You don't even want to know what they make. Even though I was determined to stick with my passion of writing, after everything, I just lost motivation. It was in my later college years that laziness reared its ugly head at me. Guess that's why I ended up taking the path of least resistance.

That path has not always been so kind to me, especially when I met Sara. Funny how easily you can remember the day you met someone.

We were both young—it was my first year teaching and her senior year of high school. I had just finished teaching my last class of the day when she caught my eye. Actually, the way she would tell it is that she saw me first. A few shy hellos and smiles later and we began what we thought was a secret relationship, but, by the end of the year, she was pregnant and I was without a job. Private schools have this thing about dating students, much less getting one pregnant.

Now before you get the wrong idea, she was held back a year when she was younger and when I met her she was almost nineteen and I was only twenty-three. Okay, maybe I was a scumbag. She was still a student, after all. Think what you will, the heart wants what the heart wants, right? Thought it was fate and all that bullshit. Thought she was the love of my life.

You know, life has its way of finding you in attempt to give you what you need in the right place at the right time. But that's it. You're on your own from that moment on, whether you recognize and seize the moment or let it pass you by without even an inkling that it was right in front of you. It finds you.

Sometimes I am not sure whether Sara was my life calling or my doom. She came in and changed my life in so many ways—some good and some not so good. Her latest endeavor, however, has left me with a bad taste in my mouth for time “finding me” when it did.

Of course, I still wonder how different my life may have turned out if I'd never caught her eye. My son wouldn't exist, and that's something that I won't change for the world. He is the greatest thing in my life, I just wish I had him in it more often.

Guess I can't go blaming her when it was me who had given up on myself while in college. My motivation to stay on track was null and void after writing paper after paper on things of no interest to me, only because I was forced to by my professors. Don't get me wrong, I'm not blaming my professors for my laziness, but I went to college to write what I wanted to write. By my junior year, I was burnt out and just prayed to make it to graduation.

Not trying to say that all my writing was award-winning and my future was down the drain now. I wasn't perfect, far from it. Writing used to be cathartic for me, though. I've been writing since, well, as long as I can possibly remember. Whether it was a poem, a song, a short story, my brain craved every chance to put my thoughts, and my heart, on paper.

In high school, I knew I would go to college, graduate, then become a famous author! Oh, how the tides turned on me. Life may have its funny way of attempting to give you what you need, but it also has a funny way of kicking you when you're down.

Anyway, after losing three things in my life—my job, my motivation, and my pride—the years that followed were hard on us both. Local teaching jobs that paid enough to raise a family were not plentiful. I found myself on the road, traveling miles upon miles just to find anything that would pay the bills.

Sara didn't want to move around with me, especially with the baby, so she stayed with her family while I went wherever the work was.

By the time I gave up on traveling and started working for Frank, Sara had moved out from her parents and on with her life, which didn't seem to include me. We were still married, living together, but there was no connection there anymore. The passion that she and I shared, the desire for my dreams just...died.

I'm not sure if it was because of my tendency to be an unhappy jerk every time we spoke or if it was my obsession with having money and trying for a better life that drove her away, but I didn't give my marriage my all. Still, it takes two and I can't help but be angry about her giving up on me, too, especially the way she did it.

Giving up caused us both a lot of grief. We just handled it in differently. Where I went, turning into myself and shutting everyone else out, she did the opposite. She became more outgoing, putting herself out there, making new friends, seeing new people...sleeping with new people.

Now, the biggest thing going through my mind is that I know this new guy is better than me and I hate that feeling. But, I'm sure it doesn't take much nowadays to be better than me.

It eats me up inside that Ted Jr. will grow up calling another man besides me "daddy." That is a sore spot in my heart I'm not sure I'll ever just be ok with.

In my life, the bottle's half empty. I'm usually not so woe is me. It's just a shit day, so sure, I'll play the minimalist card. Can you blame me, though? While I'm at it, let me throw in the sympathy card, also. Pathetic, right? Which turn in my life was it that threw my life into this?

Looking at the bottle in my hand, tears streaming, I question how it ended up like this. Fuck it, though. Can't change it now. Just a few more swigs of Jack and maybe I can fall asleep without any more tears. I hate being so alone. And I hate more admitting that it's all my fault.

Sleep, Ted. Just sleep, God damn it.

Waking up with a hangover and nothing to put in my stomach, not even a cup of cold coffee, ain't the best of mornings. Don't even have any more bread to burn. *At least let me get to work on time this morning*, I think as I'm digging around for clothes and my boots, again.

Even though my job sucks, I hate putting Frank in a bad situation even more. He always has been there for me, even when Sara was right. Such a good man Frank is and though I bitch about him, about the job, I'm grateful to him and for him. Any other guy probably would've tossed me on my butt when I divorced his daughter. Not Frank, though. He believes in tough love so I know he's hard on me just because he knows I can do better.

Digging in the sofa cushions, I recover enough change to take the bus. No hoofing it for me today. That walk is a bitch. Wore me out by the time I got to the site yesterday, and then all the drama in Frank's office was even worse than the walk there.

Oh, to have enough dough for a car without taking away my son's future!

Being on foot could actually be faster than taking the frigging bus, and it would smell better, too. If you ever take the bus in the city, don't plan on getting to your destination on time. Still, it beats walking.

Why is it always one damned boot that I'm looking for? Heading back towards my bedroom, I catch a glimpse of myself in that hazy mirror, go over to it grasp the sides of the sink, and lean in to stare at myself.

Barely recognizing the man staring back at me, I wipe my hand across the grime and am disgusted by the face staring back.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the most pathetic of them all?” Don’t need a mirror to answer that question—I’m staring right at him, staring at the face of a loser. “God, how did I get here?” I yell, eyes towards the sky like He’s going to answer me.

The thing is, I really don’t need anyone to tell me how pathetic I’ve grown. I’ve known for a while. It’s just hard to admit it and still look at myself in the mirror each day.

My knuckles are mottled and the pain and anger begins to rage through my blood like lava down the volcano. The veins in my hands feel as if they may burst, and before I can think, my fist is flying and glass shatters everywhere. The hatred I feel for myself is unleashed on a thin piece of glass and shatters into a hundred little pieces, matching my heart.

It takes me a minute to realize what I’ve just done. The blood drips around my feet and it’s then that the pain hits. My hand, bloodied and busted, has thin shards stuck between my knuckles. Pulling at them, more blood begins to slither out, and I grab a towel to wrap my hand.

Shit. This is all I need right now. Trying my damndest to get to work on time for a change, I quickly clean up my hand. There’s no gauze or big bandages here, so I improvise, wrapping a t-shirt around it and securing it with duct tape.

Making one last pass through my room and, yes, there’s my boot! I head out the door. I’ll just clean up the murder scene when I get home...maybe.

Slipping on my other boot, I fly through the door and out of the building, take a quick left, and head to the bus stop. Thankfully there are still people there. I didn't miss the bus.

Walking towards the stop, I pass the antique shop again and notice they have quite a few mirrors inside and in the display case. Maybe I'll stop in on my way home from work today.

As I slowly pass by, however, I'm mesmerized with the same emerald eyes I'd seen yesterday. We both pause, and then she turns away, so I decide to enter, having just a few minutes to spare before the bus is scheduled to arrive.

The inside of the store looks like a museum and though they have plenty of mirrors, the only thing I'm interested in is finding the brunette with the eyes that took my breath. After passing just a few aisles, there she is. She turns and our eyes lock, momentarily. She's speaking with an elderly couple and I don't want to be rude and interrupt, which is probably for the best because words evade me in this moment, anyway.

The bus should be arriving soon, so I turn and walk away without a word spoken. Way to go, Ted. Way to show her the confident and positive man I'm not. I probably look like such a fool. Can't even talk to girls anymore, winner? Has it been that long?

Unfortunately, yes, yes it has.

Exiting, I can't help but look back and I catch her looking at me. This time she smiles and shies away. Again, my feet keep moving forward. She was probably just being nice to the stalker who's stared her down two days in a row.

Geez, Ted, nice going.

A woman like that wouldn't be interested in a loser like you. What could you even offer her? Your black hole of an apartment? I laugh internally at how sorry that sounds, but I also thank God that I purchased a place then, because I wouldn't be able to afford one now. Prices seem to keep rising on all things...except my pay.

She's probably married to a doctor or a professor and just works the antique shop to have something to do while her big-money-making husband is at work. He's probably banging his secretary while she's here, looking so sweet, working her tail off. They probably have kids and she's probably an amazing mom who would never cheat on her husband...*Dude, you gotta get a grip and get out of your head. Focus, man, and get your ass to work.*

Thank God, the bus finally pulls up. Looking about during my ride, it hits me—I've never really paid attention to all the little "mom and pop" shops around here. It's a shame they're all getting bought out, or pushed out would be a better choice of words, by all these big box companies coming up. This used to be a quaint little spot of escape in this big ole city, but now it's all starting to blend together—like when the sun sets and you can't tell where the land ends and the sky begins. This city is turning into one big horizon.

From inside the bus, I gaze through the window at the people on the street. Those trying to get somewhere important are distinguishable with their hustle and bustle, maneuvering through all the construction mess to get to where they need to be, whether on foot, bike, or hailing taxis. The air carries the strangest combination of scents—hot tar along the miles of construction mixing with the freshly baked bread from the bakery across the street. Oddly enough, it is actually quite an inviting combo.

Then again, I've gotten quite used to dirty smell of construction, so the freshness of bread and fresh-baked pastries overpowers the smell of crushing concrete, welding machines, and that sticky, nasty tar going onto the roofs of some of the shops we pass on our journey through the cement jungle.

Traffic today isn't as horrendous as usual, so I make it to work earlier than I have in a long time. That is a mistake.

"Holy shit! Anyone got a camera? Ted is actually here early!" John cries out, laughing.

"Go ahead and laugh it up, boys, but I'm still late a half an hour," I shoot back, unimpressed with John calling me out.

"That's early for you, man," he smiles, "Come on, let me show you what we got going on today," John continues as he motions me towards the construction site "elevator," and I mean that lightly. A little tin, a few two by fours, and a control mechanism that literally has two buttons: one red, one green. I'll let you put that together.

“Geez you stink, Ted. Did you shower this morning? Never mind, don’t answer that,” he says, and jokingly holds his nose. My face must’ve sported one intense go-to-hell look because his smile drops as the elevator halts at the seventh floor.

“Look, I had a rough night,” I start to explain and brush my wrapped hand through my hair. “This shit with Sara and everything else has got me...down. You wouldn’t understand.”

John grabs my arm, looks at my wrapped hand, gives me the stink eye, and shakes his head at me. “Hey, Ted, if you need to talk, I’m here for you, bro.” The sincerity in his eyes and voice let me know that he is still truly my best friend and only has my best interests at heart, but I can’t get into talking about my problems while at the job or I’ll never get any work done. So I just shrug it off.

“Thanks, man. I’ll manage. So we’re on seven today?” I ask changing the subject.

“Yep. But do you think you should or can even work with that hand?” he asks. I know it’s out of concern, but I’m a big boy and can handle a little pain. Hell, after all I’ve been through, Lucifer himself couldn’t torture me more.

“Yeah,” I answer, “I’m fine. I’m sure. Besides, could you imagine me telling the old man that I can’t work because of a cut on my hand?”

“He’d understand...after the fall and all—” John starts, but I quickly interrupt.

“That’s it exactly. I’m not going to be ‘that’ guy who calls in every time he has a tummy ache...or every time he finds out his wife is getting remarried!” I grin sarcastically. “Plus, I don’t want Frank telling Sara that I couldn’t make it to work after he told me the news.” Not giving her the pleasure.

Truth is, work’s all I have anymore and I can’t imagine where I’d be without it right now. Can you say straight jacket?

“Hey, if you didn’t bring your lunch, Lucy packed extra in mine,” John says as we step out of the elevator onto a platform and then make our way across a beam to where we’re going to lock-in and sweat our balls off today.

“I appreciate that, man, a lot. Tell Lucy ‘thanks’ for me.”

Sometimes, I wouldn’t even have lunch if it wasn’t for Lucy thinking of, or feeling sorry for me. Either way I’m grateful my best friend’s wife didn’t turn her back on me when Sara did.

There’s some girl code of ethics: no matter who does the wrong, the guy always ends up being the asshole. I’m just glad Lucy knows me better than that and knows how hard all this is on me. John probably told her about Sara getting remarried...maybe she cooked something special for me last night! One can hope. Although I appreciate it, one can only eat turkey sandwiches so many days in a row before beginning to cluck and shed feathers.

“It’s no problem, bro,” John responds. “You’re family, and Lucy will do anything for family. She’s pretty amazing, that wife of mine. Guess I got one of the good –”

John stops mid-sentence when he realizes what he is saying. The look on my face probably helped to shut him up. I love them both. They *are* family in my book, but I surely don't want to hear about the perfect little doting wife at this time.

John and Lucy are one of those annoyingly loving couples. They met sophomore year of high school and have been stuck at the hip ever since. It makes my heart happy that my best friend found true love, a best friend, someone who loves him as much as he loves her. I'll admit, I'm a little jealous at times.

Although getting married young and having a kid wasn't in my plan, once it happened, it changed my life. And for a little while, life was happy. Now I wonder if I even truly know what happiness is, what true love is, what it looks like, and how does it really make you feel?

"Uhm, we're this way today," John says after I turn left out the elevator, my mind not on the job. "We finished up the last of the welding out there yesterday after you left."

We turn and walk the beam out to the opposite side, set down our work equipment, tie off, and get to work.

Good Lord, it is hot as Hades today. What's worse than working in the heat? Working in the heat in jeans, an undershirt, and a long-sleeved over shirt, welding apron, mask and gloves.

Are they trying to give us heatstroke out here?

My headphones fit under my ear muffs, so I crank up the volume, slip on my respirator and get to the grind.

“With the lights out, it’s less dangerous. Here we are now, entertain us. I feel stupid and contagious. Here we are now, entertain us. A mulatto, an albino, a mosquito, my libido—”

In the midst of singing my third round, a tap on my shoulder makes me jump. Now, I’m not a jumpy person, it was because of being really into my music with a wandering mind.

“John, fuck, man, you scared the shit out of me. Don’t sneak up on me when you see I have my headphones on!”

“You always have your headphones on. Screaming your name doesn’t work. It’s like nothing else exists in the world when you’re into your music. It’s the only way I can ever get your attention. Shit, you should be used to it by now.”

“I am,” I say, it’s just...today. Man, I just don’t feel it today.”

“Don’t feel what?” John asks.

“I don’t know. Can’t describe it,” I continue, “it’s like everything that’s ever gotten to me is sitting on my shoulders today. Shit that bothered me in high school, I’m harping on it in my mind for some reason.”

“High school bullshit,” John laughs, “Man, how old are you?”

Punching him in the arm I laugh back. “Not just high school shit...it’s just *everything*.”

“Come on,” John starts, “it’s lunchtime.”

“I’ll be there in a second,” I say while pulling off my gloves. John really helps me keep up with things since Sara left. He’s like my work wife. I laugh out loud at the thought. He is always looking out for me, even though I’ve let him down numerous times. It’s just difficult to find passion in construction when I want something to ache for again.

Sitting down next to John, he hands me a bag with a sandwich in it. “How’s the turkey today?” I ask John with a laugh.

He smiles, big. “No turkey today, man. Lucy made meatloaf last night. You’re in for a treat! She makes the best meatloaf in the northeast.”

“Meatloaf, eh?” I ask, opening the bread and taking a whiff. Smells delicious. Could be because I haven’t eaten anything today so I’m starving or she really does make amazing meatloaf. Either way, I start eating, shutting my mouth but not my mind.

“So you gonna tell me what you did to your hand?” John asks as we eat.

Looking at it, I shrug my shoulders. “It’s nothing man, just a little tiff with the mirror and it may have won.”

“Damn, Ted, what’d the mirror ever do to you?” he asks, jokingly.

It makes me face myself, I think. It forces me to face the man I’ve become. The man I don’t even recognize anymore. Makes me face a life wasted.

“It looked at me funny,” I try to say in a joking manner, but John sees through my façade.

“If you think this is bad, you should see the other guy!”

John gives me a condescending look, takes a bite of his meatloaf sandwich, and then stares straight ahead. “Fine. You don’t have to tell me. But if you ever want to, I’m here. I mean, I know you’ve been through a lot, but you can’t just keep it all bottled up. It’ll end up killing you, man, and I ain’t ready to lose a friend over bullshit.”

Shaking my head in agreement, I mouth through a bite of food, “Yeah, but I’m good. Really. Just a bad morning.” Just can’t get into my “fight” with the mirror conversation while we’re seven stories above the pavement and eating cold meatloaf on white bread.

“If that’s what you need to say to get through your day, I won’t bug you about it anymore. You can keep that conversation between you and ‘the other guy’ if that’s what you need.”

“Thanks,” I simply say and we go on eating and staring out towards the city.

People bustling the streets below look like a network of ants all bringing food back for their queen. These are people with lives, people who live their lives. Smiles adorn faces and, honestly, it kind of makes my stomach turn. Why do they get to be so happy? What did they do differently with their lives that they enjoy walking the city streets? Some have briefcases or files piled high in their hands. Bet they’re living their dreams.

Now there’s a bastard that I can level with. He’s frantic, running out of an apartment complex with a crying baby in his arms, chasing down his wife – who is in stilettos and beating him – as she hails a taxi. I nudge John’s arm.

“What you think he’s saying to her?” I ask.

“Who?” John asks, looking around.

“Down there, the guy with the screaming baby.”

John snorts a laugh. “Oh, the one whose wife looks like she can’t get away fast enough?” The way John said that struck a chord within me – *she couldn’t get away fast enough*. But I play it off, give him a laugh back and agree.

“You can’t leave when the baby’s crying,” John says, mocking the frantic man.

“It’s your baby, too,” I reply, playing along.

“You had just as much to do with making him as I did!”

“Yeah, but I’m a man. I don’t know what to do with a baby!” John says.

“Give him a bottle and put him to sleep, you moron. He’s just a little baby. You’re the dad. Get control.”

We could see the argument getting heated and the baby was so loud we could just barely hear its screaming way up here as we butted into their lives without their knowledge.

“Think he should try breast feeding him,” I say with a smart-assed attitude. Won’t admit why, but in this moment, I hate that woman. What I see is a mom abandoning her baby and a wife turning her back on her husband when he needs her most.

John busts out laughing at the thought. “Yeah, that’s something I’d pay to see!”

My laughter fades and John looks at me. “You alright, man? You’re looking a little pale.” It feels like vice grips are squeezing all the air from my lungs. My head begins to spin and pound, and, all of a sudden, I don’t feel so good.

“Let’s get out of here...” John starts talking but as I begin to stand all I hear are the “waah waah’s” of Charlie Brown’s teacher.

The outside heat hits me hard as we begin to walk across the steel, and out of nowhere, a rush of blood fills my head. My vision rapidly blurs, and in the blink of an eye, everything goes to black.

THIS HAS BEEN
AN EXCERPT OF
“ECHO”.
NOW AVAILABLE
ON AMAZON.