EVERY BREATH IS A CHOICE

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SOMETIMES TOM PULLS his tie so tight he can't breathe, and he refuses to let go, even when the world around him begins to dissolve and his vision introduces black dots like cigarette burns on a film reel. He tells himself he'll keep pulling until the oxygen has fled his lungs, until his heart's thrown in the towel and collapsed, and sometimes he even gets close. He can feel the reaper's hand on his shoulder and he knows any second now it'll all be over, but he can't quite make it, something always makes him let go of the tie. Thoughts of Diana, maybe. Fantasies that she'll move back into the house, the house they shared together for ten years.

Ten years.

You can't forget time. You can't block a decade from your memory. They'd had good days. They'd been in love. But only he seems to remember that now. Diana's memory's topsy-turvy. Diana only remembers David. Tom remembers David, too, although he tries his best to forget.

Tom straightens his tie and goes to work. On the train, he stares out the window and fantasizes about being anybody else in this city but himself. He wonders if any of them have had to make the type of choices he's made. If any of them understand true pain. True horror. Then he fantasizes about bashing his head into the window, over and over, until the glass shatters and impales his skull.

"Tom, you look unhealthy," his coworkers say when he's roaming around the office.

"Tom, when was the last time you slept?"

"Tom, are you eating okay?"

"Tom, you look like shit."

And Tom says the same thing each time, smiling sadly, staring into a cup of cold coffee:

"Sorry."

"Sorry."

"Sorry."

"Sorry."

Always apologizing, but none of them know what for. Tom knows. Diana knows. Somewhere, David knows, too. And that's all that matters. He's sorry. So fucking sorry he can't stand it anymore. In his cubicle, he hides and calls Diana. The ring lasts as long as a penny falling into hell. She won't talk to him anymore. Won't even acknowledge he exists. It doesn't stop him from calling her every day, every hour, every heartbeat, hoping she changes her mind, hoping she decides to love him again.

It's been five years since she moved out. Five years since Victor Waterman entered their lives, and five years since David left.

The last time Tom saw Victor, the judge was sentencing the monster to life imprisonment, with no chance for parole. Tom sat in the stands, listening to the audience around him applaud, listening to Victor scream obscenities, and realized it wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

During his lunch break, Tom stands on the edge of the roof, staring at the traffic moving below like ants. He debates stepping forward and seeing if his body flies or falls. A part of him's convinced he'll just float, stagnant. This is all a dream, he's been asleep for the last five years and this is what it'll take to finally wake.

He takes out his cell phone again and calls Diana. Straight to voicemail. He speaks into the recording, tells her their lives aren't over, there's still time to make things work. Tells her he's still the man she fell in love with.

Although sometimes he has trouble deciding which is stronger, his love for Diana or his hate for Victor.

Maybe they're the same thing.

The first time Tom saw Victor was a Saturday. The fact that it's a Saturday sticks out clearly, because Tom never worked on Saturdays. But that week, Stuart Jackson called in sick at the office, so Tom wasn't given a choice. He had to cancel his plans to take David to the park, even though he'd specifically *promised* him they'd play basketball that afternoon. Tom hated breaking promises to his son. Hated that look of disappointment, of distrust. It's one of the few faces Tom can remember of his son these days. He tries to remember what his smile looked like, but every time he thinks about it, all he sees is a distorted orb, a universe of blood where his mouth should be, a sea of tears and screams begging for help, for his daddy to save him.

That's what daddies are for, after all. Saving their sons. Making sure no harm comes their way.

Bad daddy, bad daddy, bad, bad, bad.

The first time he saw Victor, the monster had been stepping out of Tom's bathroom. Diana was on the ground with blood leaking down her thighs and David was tied to the radiator across the room. Both their

mouths were duct-taped. Victor exited the bathroom, walked into the bedroom and caught Tom standing there, staring at the scene, not understanding any of it. Then Victor reached on top of Tom's nightstand, picked up a gun that Tom'd never seen before, and pointed it at Diana.

After Tom's lunch break is over, he returns to his cubicle. Coworkers are talking about last night's football game. They ask him if he watched it and he shakes his head. He doesn't even know who's in the playoffs this year, or, for that matter, who's won the last five Super Bowls. He has to be honest. None of it matters anymore. That's the thing nobody at this office can understand. Nobody here understands loss. Nobody here knows what Tom has gone through, what he's sacrificed. They're all still protected safely inside their little bubbles. Sometimes Tom imagines coming in with a knife and popping all of them, one-by-one. *This is what life is*, he would scream. This is what you've been missing.

He sits down in his chair. He stares at a computer screen. On his desk, there's photos of Diana and David. These photos are the only way he passes the time.

He wonders how Victor passes the time, if he's allowed photographs in his cell, or if he has to stare at his cock for entertainment.

When Victor walked out of the bathroom, fumbling for the pistol on the nightstand, his pants were still unzipped, cock hanging out like a defeated python covered in blood. The sight of it froze Tom, made the realization of what was happening sink in.

Then Victor pressed the gun against Diana's skull, smiling, licking his lips, looking at Tom like he was nothing.

After work, Tom drives straight home. He sits in the living room, in the middle of the sofa, imagining Diana on one side and David on the other. He opens his arms, hoping he'll feel their bodies, but only their ghosts welcome his embrace. He would cry if there were still tears left to produce, but his soul hollowed out long ago.

For dinner, he eats two slices of toast. He pours a pot of coffee down his throat because being asleep is worse than being awake. He stays up until three in the morning watching television, not hearing what anyone's saying.

Tomorrow's getting closer and he can't avoid it. The five-year anniversary. He tries to push it away, like seaweed in the ocean, but it's too late, it's stuck to his skin, clinging to his flesh, eating at him.

Tomorrow, tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

Five years ago tomorrow, Tom stood in the bedroom, shaking, staring at his bloodied wife, his terrified son. "Please," he whispered, "please don't."

"Please don't what," the man named Victor said, although Tom did not know his name yet.

"Please don't hurt them."

"I think it's too late for that."

"No. No. No."

"Yes."

Tom had never met Victor before. No one in his family had ever seen him until that Saturday. Later, Victor would admit that it was simply the first house to let him inside. He'd tried others, giving them that classic "I've broken down and need to use your phone" line, but nobody was dumb enough to buy it.

In court, Victor turned to Tom and grinned before saying, "Nobody until her."

Tom lost it. He wanted blood. But even blood-for-blood would not be enough to quench his hunger. Five years he's fantasized about getting revenge, about cutting Victor open and wearing his flesh, if just for a moment, only to feel what it was like to be a monster.

Monster, monster, monster.

On the fifth anniversary of David's death, Tom calls in from work. Instead of dialing Diana, he drives across the city to her parents' house, where she's been living the last half decade. Her father, well into his seventies, gives Tom one look and tells him to get off his property.

"You're no longer welcomed here," he says.

"I just want to see Diana."

"Well, she don't want to see you, so beat it."

"Just one minute. Please. Not today."

"I'm going to close the door now," her father says, "and if you're still out here when I reopen it, I'm gonna do what I should've done fifteen years ago before you ever married my daughter and introduce you to my sawed-off."

He closes the door.

Tom returns to his car, crying, sobbing, clawing at the steering wheel as he drives away into the fog. He is always driving into fog.

All he wants is his family back.

"Who are you?" Tom asked Victor, unable to take his eyes off the gun, off Diana's face as she silently screamed through duct tape.

"Me?" Victor said. "I'm nobody. I'm unimportant."

"Then please don't do this."

"It's already done, friend."

"Why?"

"Maybe this is punishment."

Tom fell to his knees, digging his nails into the carpet. It was all he could do to prevent his body from flinging forward and causing the gun to go off. "Punishment for what? *Punishment for what?*"

The man with the gun paused for a moment and shrugged. "I don't

know. Punishment for not looking after this sweet piece of ass? Punishment for being born? Not everything has a reason, you know. Not everything needs to make sense."

"What?"

"Look, it doesn't matter. What's done is done. Now what happens next, that's what we need to discuss."

Tom trembled. "You raped my wife."

Victor nodded.

"You fucking piece of shit."

"I am."

"I'll kill you."

"We'll see."

Victor raised the gun and shot Tom in the chest. He flew onto his back, skull bouncing against the floor. Diana screamed through the duct tape. David cried for a guardian angel who never received an invitation.

In the car, Tom listens to the local conspiracy theorist on the radio rant about black helicopters and 9/11 cover-ups. Years ago, he'd have laughed at the kind of lunacy. Now, on the other hand, it sort of makes sense. Maybe the government is hiding things from them. Maybe they know what makes a monster a monster. Maybe nothing is as it seems.

He pulls into a gas station for a pack of cigarettes. A boy who barely looks old enough to drive takes his money. The boy could be anybody's son. He could be Tom's David.

Except this boy behind the counter, he ain't dead.

It was after the letters began arriving that Tom realized their marriage was doomed. Maybe it'd been doomed as soon as that last breath left their son. But Tom had managed to stay delusional until the letters started coming in. The letters from Victor. He'd missed the first couple. Diana had been hiding them, burning them, whatever, before Tom had a chance to see them. But one day he came home early, happened to stop and get the mail. Normally it wasn't his business to open his wife's letters, but he decided to make it his business once she started receiving postage with a penitentiary as the sender's address.

The first few sentences in the letter threatened Diana harm if she continued to ignore his letters. The rest of the message consisted of him professing his love to her.

Victor. In love with Diana.

Tom's wife.

Victor.

Their son's executioner.

In his rage, he'd ignored the early comments in the letter pertaining to Diana ignoring Victor. Just the fact alone that she'd been hiding the letters from Tom had been enough to raise suspicion. He'd started breaking

things, hitting the bottle hard, playing Russian roulette with him and David's cat.

Eventually the cat lost.

Diana didn't sleep another night in that house. Still hasn't.

The letters continued to arrive. Tom read them all.

The motherfucker was head-over-heels.

Tom didn't know how Victor had found out he'd impregnated Diana. Maybe Diana told him, then freaked out, decided never to contact him again. But it didn't matter. The damage was done. Victor knew he now had a son.

Take one out of the world, bring another in.

Tom told her he didn't even want to know the kid's name.

"That doesn't belong to me," he'd said.

"He should've taken you instead," she'd said back.

"That wasn't an option."

Tom drives to the preschool, parks where he has a clear view of the playground. He lights up a cigarette, sits and waits. Eventually the kiddos pile out of the building and embrace the slides and swings like reunited lovers. He watches them, wondering which one is the spawn of his wife and his wife's monster.

They all look the same.

They all look like David.

They all look like corpses.

Eventually he finds the boy. He doesn't know his name, but he's seen photographs on the few occasions he was crazy enough to push past Diana's father and enter the house. Tom gets out of the car and approaches the fence. He raises his camera and snaps a few pictures, then returns to the car and drives away.

He has work to do.

The last night Tom and Diana and David were together as a happy family was the Friday before Victor introduced himself to their lives. They'd gotten a pizza and rented a movie from Blockbuster. David was thrilled because the next day they were going to play basketball at the park. Basketball was his favorite thing in the world. Pizza was his second favorite. Tom remembered clearly how David was insistent he take off all the toppings from his slice, even the cheese. It didn't matter that David could eat a pound of cheese by itself—just not on pizza.

"No toppings, Daddy. That's disgusting."

That night, Tom and Diana made love for the last time.

He remembered holding her afterward, the blinds still open, moonlight showering their naked bodies. The world had felt perfect then.

He thinks about this night now and it is so far away.

He reaches out and only touches air. It is just him now.

Him and Victor.

"Please don't hurt her," Tom had pleaded, his chest bloody and pulsating from the gunshot. "Please, God."

Victor couldn't stop grinning, like they were playing some fucked-up game and he was winning. He pushed the gun deeper into Diana's skull. "I gotta admit, of all the fine lookin' bitches in this world, I think I may have struck gold."

"Please."

"Just think, man. Fuckin' anybody could have opened up, invited me inside. It could've been *anybody*. And that anybody just so happened to be your wife."

"No. No. No."

"You must have the world's shittiest luck." Victor laughed. "And me? I must have the best luck. *The best*."

"What do you want?" Tom said. "Dear God, what do you want?"

"I already got what I wanted, man. But shit. I guess a man's not a man once he stops prospecting, don't you say?"

Tom was silent. His body shook like an avalanche of sweat and tears and urine.

Victor grabbed Diana's hair and dragged her over to the radiator, leaving her next to David. David continued to cry through his duct tape. Victor took turns waving the gun in front of Diana and David.

The power of a firearm.

The magic of insanity.

The delusion of safety.

"I tell you what," Victor said, staring at Tom with wide, gleeful eyes. "Since we're having so much fun, I'll be nice. To let you in on a little secret, I was planning on killing both your girl and your kid here after I was finished with my business. I hadn't expected on anyone showing up and interrupting us. But that's okay. You didn't know."

"Please."

"But, *but* given that you've been *such* a good sport about all this, I figured, hey, why not throw you a bone?"

Tom was past the point of wanting to kill this intruder. He wanted to spill the blood of God and the rest of the universe. Fuck this whole existence.

"So here's what I'm gonna do," Victor said, still waving the gun back and forth. "I'm gonna tell you right off the bat. I can't leave here without at least killing *somebody*. That'd be cheating, and I'm a fair player. But I don't have to kill you all." He giggled. "You see what I'm saying? Not everybody here has to die today."

"What do you want me to do?" Tom's chest was on fire and he wondered how long it'd take until his heart surrendered. "Please, what . . . what do you *want?*"

Victor took a while to answer. He just started at Tom, smiling, in on a joke without a punch line.

Then he said, "I want you to choose."

And even though Tom immediately knew what he meant, he still said, "Wh-what?"

Victor pistol-whipped Diana and she fell on her stomach. Then he pointed the gun at David, Tom's boy, his own flesh and blood.

"I said, I want you to choose. It's pretty simple, you know? Who do you want to live? Who do you love more? Your wife, or your son?"

"Fuck you." Tom tried to stand, but his body was numb, useless. The volcano of blood pumping out of his chest had paralyzed him.

Victor laughed. "Look, dude, I don't have to be nice. I can just kill them both and leave. But I'm trying to do you a favor here, letting you pick one to keep. So come on. Don't make me regret this."

"No. Please. *No*."

Victor shrugged. "All right, whatever. No skin off my back. The both of them it is." He aimed the gun at Diana.

Tom screamed. Blood poured out of his mouth.

Victor paused, looked at him. "Have we come to a decision?"

After Victor was gone and Tom had managed to untie Diana, she started slapping him across the face and screaming, crying, calling him the worst names imaginable.

"Why didn't you pick me? *Why didn't you pick me?*"

All he could say was, "I love you, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I love you, I love you . . . "

Tom doesn't know if it's Victor's way of fucking him over even in prison that he's listed Tom's name under the allowed visitors, and he doesn't care. He hadn't even considered the possibility of not being allowed to see him. He'd driven the three hours to the prison in a daze. He'd driven out here before countless times, but he'd never had enough balls to actually get out of his car and walk inside.

Not until today.

Five years.

Fuck.

He sits behind the glass and waits a century. Eventually Victor walks out of his hiding spot and joins him on the other side of the glass. He's lost a lot of weight since the last time Tom'd seen him. He also now has a new scar across his face, as if one of his cellmates had tried extending his smile to his ears with a dull blade.

They sit in silence for many minutes, a wall of glass separating them. Tom can't bring himself to talk. After all this time, all the hours of practicing what he'd say, and he can't bring himself to even open his mouth.

Victor picks up the phone on his end and begins speaking. Tom doesn't know what he's saying, and he doesn't care. Today isn't about excuses or apologies. Today is about punishment.

Tom reaches into his pocket and pulls out two photographs, then presses them against the glass. As Victor leans forward for a closer look, Tom picks up his own phone and nestles it against his head.

He waits a good long while, allowing Victor time to stare at the photographs, one of Diana, the other of her new son. The son Victor had given her. Tears form in his eyes and drip down his cheeks. He looks away from the photographs and stares Tom in the eyes.

"No, man. No. You can't do this. Please. Oh, fuck. Please."

Tom says one word. The only word that matters anymore:

"Choose."