

Clean

by

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The surface of the bed was uneven on his back. The ceiling above him was stained, with a few of the panels slightly out of place. The sprinkler system had a slightly brighter coat of paint than the rest of the room. After a few minutes on his back, he reached into his pant pocket and found his lighter, and then into the other pocket for the nearly empty pack of Marlboros. Within seconds, he had a smoke between his lips, but it was several minutes before he found the strength to flick the lighter and bring it to the tip of the cigarette. Once it was lit, he inhaled deeply, held in the smoke, and then let it rise slowly from his nostrils.

Several drags into the smoke, he realized that the ashtray was out of reach, but he did not want to get up. His desire to finish his cigarette was greater than his lack of desire to move, and so he quickly stood, fetched the ashtray, and was soon again on his back. The cigarette finally done, he butted it out into the ashtray and closed his eyes.

Alone on his back on the uneven bed of a rundown hotel room over a pub, his bones ached, his eyes burned, even the strands of his hair were heavy on his scalp. While he was not trying to force other thoughts from his mind, other thoughts simply did not make it into his imagination. When he lit his second cigarette, he started to envision a cloud of almost blue smoke. The smoke did not obscure his vision too much; he could still see the vodka through the smoke and glass.

He reached into his pocket, looked at the display, and realized he did not want to answer, and so pushed the phone under the pillow above his head. When the phone stopped shaking, he tried to recall to his mind the smoke again, but they would not return, and so he floated through the blackness there instead.

It flowed between his atoms like a soothing bath of India ink, washing through him and taking with it his pain. Any glimmer of hope and light in him found a peaceful rest in the ocean of nothing that surrounded those remaining sparks of life. Only when he let the darkness take over was his life not at risk, and he knew well enough that even the stars of the winter night sky above the hotel needed the void around them in order to not burn into cold lumps of coal. The darkness was a refuge, safer than a shot of vodka or a hot drag from his cigarette. The darkness was not smoke; it did not obscure his vision, but allowed the light a medium through which to travel, so that he could see himself more clearly. Only on the darkest of nights could one really see the moon and stars.

The constant thud of the music from below his room resonated through the floor, the bed under him, through his shirt, through his ribcage, into the chamber of his lungs, and past his exhausted heart. He could not make out the song, but that did not matter; the beat shook the dust inside him and as he exhaled that dust out, into the stale air of the room, he felt himself begin to feel more clean and clear. Only a little bit, but still, cleaner.

It was then that that he needed to try to be clean again. He lifted his hands to his shirt buttons and slowly started to unbutton them without opening his eyes. After his shirt was completely open, he reached down to his belt buckle, undid it, and undid the zipper of his pants. He kicked off his shoes with two quick jerks of his legs, throwing them so far that they bounced off the wall. He needed a bath. He stood and his pants fell down

past his knees and he kicked them off the rest of the way. He was in his boxers and socks only now, standing before the mirror hanging five feet away directly at the foot of the bed. The filth that covered him, that poured out of his skin, was not the darkness; it was the grime from outside trying to get in, trying to slither between his atoms like acid rain would try to corrode a statue. He wanted it off.

As he walked to the bathroom, he slid off his boxers and pulled one sock off and then the other. The bath was old and the paint on it was flaked. He turned the tarnished tap, trying for hot water, but the water that poured from the hot faucet was cold. He did not care; the grime had to be removed.

As he placed his left foot into the freezing cold water of the tub, his chest began to shiver from instinct, but he did not relent. Soon, he had both feet in the icy water, and eventually, he was sitting in the tub. His teeth were chattering, but he eased backwards into the water until only his nose and mouth were above the surface. With his right hand, he rubbed along the left side of his ribs, and then with his left hand he did the same along his right ribs. He clenched his teeth tightly together so they would not shake. The knives of the cold water began to relent as his body became used to the temperature. With the small bar of generic hotel soap, he scrubbed the layer of skin covering his pubic bone, and then along his inner thighs, and finally down the crack of his ass. He wanted it all gone; no grime from his past would stick to him. His ablutions would be complete. He wanted the freeze of the water to touch him to the bone.

He had no shampoo and so instead used the bar of cheap soap on his head. It did not lather well, but all that mattered was that he be clean. He shook his fingers through his hair until the soap was completely rinsed out, and then sat up. Coming out of the

water caused his body to tremble against his control once more. He stood, bent over, removed the plug from the tub, and then stepped onto the linoleum of the bathroom floor. With the towel, he rubbed himself down until he was completely dry. He did not want to put his old clothes on, and it occurred to him that even the clothes in his suitcase would be filthy and he was afraid to put them on.

He walked back to the bed, but did not get under the covers. Instead, he lay naked on top of the covers, on his back, his eyes closed, and slowed down his breathing until he was breathing half as quickly as he might normally. His pulse raced as the goose bumps formed everywhere on his exposed skin and his body shuddered.

Clean, he returned to the blackness in his mind, and the cold no longer bothered him, even though he sensed that his body was still shivering from it. Inside, however, he was swimming in the warm bath of nothingness. It oozed through him like freshly freed blood and he could not help but wonder if he was bleeding out onto the covers of the bed under him. Part of him wished he was bleeding out, but what was left of his common sense knew that he was simply naked, shivering from cold, and probably suffering from not having had a good meal for over a day.

When he fell asleep that night on the covers of the lumpy hotel bed, he was completely alone, with only the darkness between the solid parts of him to keep him company, but he was not at all lonely or sad. He was too tired and broken to be either of those things. He was numb and clean. Finally clean.