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Sylvester and Arturo

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I waited reluctantly inside the train station as the windows changed from blue to grey. Specks of rain began to pelt the exterior of the old hub, ticking away some forgotten measure of time. Each globule splashed pity upon the sulking structure, teardrops protesting the desertion of our once important temples. I grew wary as the storm progressed. Water seeped through peeling stucco, tracing elaborate faux ivory pillars before streaming passed my feet toward puddles in every corner. Paper mache tiles sagged from elaborately crafted walls, revealing beneath them the stress of ages. Arturo was always late. I expressed apprehension on grounds that the station was dangerous. Artie scoffed over the telephone at my uneasiness, assuring me he’d show. I believed him and suffered for his lack of punctuality, waiting among the cracked and potted archways of a more affluent era.

When constructed, Michigan Central Station was the colossus of all transport centers. The tallest depot in the world, she stood eighteen stories high, the first of which was modeled after a Roman bathhouse. The same architects who envisioned Grand Central Station designed mcs, but Detroit warranted something bigger and more expansive than even New York City. Right up to the footsteps, artisans manicured Roosevelt Park to fit the beaux-arts style of the building. My grandfather showed me pictures taken back in the twenties; images of meticulously landscaped grounds and blooming lilac trees that canopied the circle drive were reminiscent of Versailles. Ninety years later, I had to duck beneath chain link and razor wire to glimpse the remnants of her splendor. I found a dead hooker wrapped in a carpet roll the first time I walked the arcade. I kicked her a couple times and ran home. Just like me at fifteen to run from a helpless woman. Artie was a half hour late.

Graffiti over the mezzanine read ‘fuk jews’ in blue spray paint. Nothing emphasizes a point like phonetically spelled curse words. Red aerosol swastikas to my left hovered over the bathrooms and complimented the phrase nicely. One summer a group of high school kids painted the same Nazi insignia downtown, on Joe Louis’ forearm, with homemade wheat paste. At least Henry Ford’s influence was still alive somewhere in Detroit. I pictured gangs of Neo Nazis rounding every corner, pounding their fists in empty palms. My heartbeat mimicked their imaginary steel toes stomping on my
chest and temples. The fear of physical violence outweighed my other phobias, and the graffiti inside Michigan Central Station only intensified my paranoia. It’s a shame what they did to Michigan Central Station.

“SIL! You’re still here!” Arturo’s voice sent me a foot up before he snapped me back with a hand to my left shoulder. He looked disheveled, even for him. The shirt he sported hung partially untucked from his trousers, buttoned only halfway from the breast down. Instead of his usual designer blue jeans, Artie was wearing work pants stained with large ovals of dirt and oil. His clothes clung fast to him with the weight of rainwater. A small pool was forming around his boots.

“Where you been, Artie?”

“Oh, you know – I got caught up with a couple guys form the neighborhood over by Grand Circus. I kept telling ’em – old Sil, he’s down in Corktown, waiting. You know Rudy and Mike, from Hamtramck Assembly. We stopped at Jacoby’s for a sandwich and they bought me a Black Velvet.”

I waited almost an hour. Sadly, that’s not bad for Arturo. If we hadn’t come up together, if our moms hadn’t stuck us in front of Bob Barker day in, day out for the better part of two decades, I wouldn’t have bothered showing up.

“You really did it this time, Artie. I’ve been alone – in the train station, with god knows what. Jesus, it’s getting bad out.”

Artie fingered his hair, which stood straight up in front and jutted every direction otherwise. Normally, he plastered it down flat to his skull like some Mexican Clark Gable who fell head first in a vat of pomade. He paced awkwardly, twiddling his thumbs in rhythm with distant cracks of thunder.

“Something happened today, Silsy. I needed to be in the right mind state to tell you. Rudy said hi, to say he’s sorry for keeping me. He thought I needed a drink.”

“Man, Artie, that’s great. I’m glad you guys had a laugh over cocktails while I walked laps in a condemned building.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Blame it on old Artie. I can’t do nuthin’ right,” said Arturo.

“You called and asked me down here, Artie. This isn’t necessarily my idea of a good time,” I said.

Arturo gave me a blank stare and fiddled around in the pocket of his Dickies. He searched frantically for a few seconds before producing a knotted baggie.

“Jesus Christ, Arturo! Is that an eight ball?”

“Told ya, Sil. I needed to be in the right mind state. We’re celebrating – kind of.”

“Do I have to remind you that we’re both parents?” I said. “You have three kids, man. Not the best example to follow, the dad who snorts coke in empty train stations.”

“I’m sure our kids have seen worse. Now, lets find that spot we liked back in the day. The one by the statue with her titty smashed off.”

I trailed Arturo unenthusiastically down a marble hallway, under the cracked dome in the grand concourse then around a toppled desk at the Amtrak terminal. Cocaine was never my drug of choice. Sleeping and intact tooth enamel seemed more important than artificial pep. Funny thing is, Artie never liked uppers either. I ignored the white powder, opting instead to attempt to recall the location of the sculpture – past the arcade, up an enormous flight of stairs, down a lengthy hallway, through a set of doors on the left bigger than Grosse Pointe.

“I used to think this place was messed up when we were young,” I said, “look at this rubble. How did they overturn the reception desk? That thing weighs more than my house. Man, Artie, my grandpa must be turning over in his grave.”

We made our way to the far wall by the ticket windows and found a corridor leading to a stairwell. Not a big wrap around job like I recalled, more of a service stair or emergency exit snaking two hundred feet into the sky. Scrap metal thieves cut out the steel support beams between the cement platforms and disassembled all the railings. The rest of the skyscrapers in town met similar fates. Desperate times. What remained of the old case had cement debris and garbage laid over it like carpet.

“Dunno, Artie. This doesn’t seem like the way. I remember something bigger, more out in the open. And either way, this shit ain’t safe. It’s all busted and skewed.”

“Don’t be stupid man. Yer memory’s just foggy. You haven’t been here in a long time, you just – ag…grand…ized it, is all.” He drew the big word out to keep pace with his recollection. Artie tried to seem smart, even if he ended up sounding like a moron.

“Yeah, this must be it,” I said, “we found it easy enough. You’re right.”

He wasn’t. The staircase we were actually looking for was a big, stone monster, flanked on either side by statues of Venus. No amount of decay can move a staircase. I hesitated for a moment then followed Art as he climbed the first flight of shaky steps. At the top hung a big off kilter sign that read Beware! Unsafe Structure. Premises Monitored By Motion Sensor. No Trespassing By City Ordinance! Artie stepped over the sign without glancing down at the words.

“Hey, Art, that sign said something about motion detector monitors. I think we oughtta turn back. Like, now.”

“Don’t be stupid, man. If they monitored this place they’d be out here every couple hours. Look at all the trash and graffiti. The rats in here would set off any kind of motion whateveres.”

I kept behind him, jogging through each turn until we reached the fourth plateau. Neither of us cared much for fitness and had difficulty regaining our
chest and temples. The fear of physical violence outweighed my other phobias, and the graffiti inside MCS only intensified my paranoia. It’s a shame what they did to Michigan Central Station.

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breaths. Arturo doubled over with a hand planted on each kneecap, panting like a marathon whore on New Year's Eve. The stairwell smelled like sulfur and standing water. Someone drew a big swirl-eyed cat face with devil horns and a yellow 666 above the door on the interior wall. Paint chips made little pigtail curly cues on the ground all around us. Without a second thought, Artie straightened up and walked unfazed beneath the mark of the beast. I paused, but the prospect of standing alone with the devil in that foyer pushed me through the entry door. I rushed to catch up with Art.

“Alright, Sil. She’s up here somewhere. She’s too damn big to have got up and left.”

With that we shot down the narrow corridor to our right, hobbling into the shadows like two eighty-year-olds on crutches. Artie’s pomade caused just enough light through the broken windows to form a silhouetted specter ahead of me. I could make out the sneaky movements of Artie’s walk, each arm flailing off rhythm from the rest of his body. He looked like two rubber bands knotted in the middle, casting intermittent shadows as we marched by offices and reception areas with open doors. All the second floor windows were smashed out. Some still held onto small, splintered shards, but most were completely bare. Not sure exactly how that happens. But, the mob looted all the copper wiring and brass fixtures from most of the abandoned buildings downtown, so a bunch of shattered glass is a meager feat by comparison. Not to mention what those steel scrappers did to the stairwell.

“We’re close, Sylvester. I know it. She’s hiding around one of these corners. I just hope she hasn’t had another mastectomy.”

Light dissipated as we crept further down the hall. I reached out for Artie’s shirt to prove he was more than an apparition. The wind shrieked in the shadows like a banshee through empty rooms as we passed. Shrill cries filled the air, each voice like when we were young, Artie. You think we had it bad, nowadays these kids barely have schools to go to.”

Arturo stood staring at the vestiges of his statue.

“I haven’t touched the coke, Sylvester. Rudy gave it to me. I didn’t even want it. I got laid off. They were talking buyout around the shop, but I didn’t get an offer. Not enough seniority. Seventeen years isn’t enough. I’m off for at least two while they get the plant ready for some new crossover. Maybe forever.”

Laughter echoed from somewhere down the hallway cutting our conversation short. The interruption came as welcome relief from Artie’s confession. I eased over toward the door and attempted to zero in on the commotion. The clatter of breaking glass accompanied footsteps and cackles as the group neared us. I couldn’t see very far down the hall, but I guessed the voices came from at least three people.

“It’s Nazis! Or the cops! Get up!” I said. “Someone’s down there, didn’t it? Yer gonna give me a heart attack, I swear.”

Arturo stopped flat and I hit him at full speed.

“Watch it!” I said.

“They killed her!”

“Who?” I pictured the prostitute in the rug when I was fifteen. Her sunken eyes staring up at me, the desperate gape frozen on her lips. My spine shivered at the thought of her.

“The statue. Look. They killed her, Sil. They fucking killed her.”

Artie pointed to her remains with a shaky hand. A million white shards scattered around the floor of the office like a pile of broken dinner plates. As if someone took a succession of smaller and smaller hammers to her until there was nothing. No recognizable parts aside from a granite base and a set of porcelain feet broken off at the ankles. The white slivers stood out amongst other debris like stars in the night sky.

“What’d you expect? I mean, look at the rest of this place. And it’s not like when we were young, Artie. You think we had it bad, nowadays these kids barely have schools to go to.”

Arturo rolled past an overturned shaker office chair then high stepped to the wall and sucked him toward it. I kept with him as he spun around a ramshackle baby grand, mashing the keys like chopsticks. We kicked up dust, shuffling through strewn garbage, glass and broken terra cotta ceiling tiles. Artie rolled past an overturned shaker office chair then high stepped another as I struggled to keep pace.

“Slow down, Art. You already tried to kill me with those stairs. Now you wanna run this room like a track meet,” I struggled to catch my breath, “some of that powder found its way up your nose already, didn’t it? Yer gonna give me a heart attack, I swear.”

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Arturo didn’t move. Instead he knelt down like a nun in church. I panicked and hid behind a three-legged lamp table at the back of a cracked closet. The voices got louder as the footsteps neared, clacking down the final
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“Watch out for brick walls, Artie.”

“Easy, man,” he said, “I don’t see you leading the way.”

“I don’t have to navigate. I’m only here because you begged me. Remember?”

The big door at the end of the hallway was propped open, flooding the hall with overcast light. We stalled for a while to admire elaborate crown molding, and to bask in the refuge of total illumination. An oil painting of a family, standing next to a black Model T under the awning at mcs, hung off kilter on the wall in front of us. Artie chipped gold leaf from the weathered frame with his fingernails.

“Don’t worry, you’ll appreciate me by the time we’re done here,” said Arturo.

The sun glinted briefly through the stone block doorway over his left shoulder and sucked him toward it. I kept with him as he spun around a ramshackle baby grand, mashing the keys like chopsticks. We kicked up dust, shuffling through strewn garbage, glass and broken terra cotta ceiling tiles. Artie rolled past an overturned shaker office chair then high stepped another as I struggled to keep pace.

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seconds of our lives. My life flashed before my eyes as I waited to die. Aside from my daughter's birth, and my wedding day, the movie wasn't too impressive. I clenched my fists, accepting my final resting place inside a wardrobe at the abandoned train depot on Vernor Highway. As I prepared for the worst, a gang of black kids, no older than ten, walked into the room wielding sticks and ran back out screaming when they spotted Artie. That was the first time in my life I'd been relieved at the sight of children. I'm not even sure Artie noticed. I dawdled a couple minutes before exiting the closet, making sure they didn't return with their older brothers. 

“Artie, stand up. I think I pissed myself. Man, I thought for sure they were Nazis. I think I'm having a panic attack.” 

No reply. 

“Artie, seriously, I can't breathe.” 

Art curled up hugging his shins with his back against the doortframe. He panted under his breath, and I could see tears welling in his eyes as they reflected dusk from an adjacent window. The poor bastard was breaking like his stupid statue.

“C'mon, Artie, it's not the end of the world. Technically, you still have a job. Look at the bright side, all that time off with pay, you can fix up the basement, or knock down that beat up garage and build a new one. A new home for the ’57.”

Artie buried his head in his knees.

“Not really, Sylvester. I got a ’maybe I go back in two years’. Esperanza wants me to work with her dad at the Mercado in the meantime. Fuckin’ seployed? We'll be divorced in a year.” 

I felt older than ever. Who gets that tired running up a couple flights of stairs?

I led the way through the shadows, past squares of dissipating light from haunted mailrooms and vestibules, until we found our way back to the broken stairwell. I recalled the stench of standing water and weighed our options.

“Let’s look for the big staircase, Artie. We made it this far. Let's take a classier route out of this place. The way we used to go. I can't imagine I'll be back any time soon.” 

“Like old times. But I'm still pretty sure you made that shit up. I don’t – rec…oll…ect it.”

“Trust me, buddy. I still have dreams about this place, about that stairway when we were kids. Sliding down the railing, running from Amtrak security, before they completely shut her down. It’s just around one of these corners.”

Artie nodded, walking slightly behind me as I began navigating the second floor. We only needed to find the landing on the mezzanine and we were home free. Since the mezzanine sat smack in the middle of the building, all we had to do was backtrack and locate the center point. We entered the room directly across the hall from the office with the broken statue. Artie tapped the Model T frame again for good luck. The space had semblances of a conference room, with glass art deco doors leading out to a foyer. Artie jumped ahead and flung open the glass exit, holding it as he waved me through. The mezzanine was solid marble, crumbling and piss soaked. Up close, the skeleton of the dome poked through plaster like ribs from withered skin. Another of the Motor City's fallen Jazz era goddesses, fragile and emaciated skeletons didn't return with their older brothers.

The thought of Central Station at night. Whoever painted those swastikas and devil cats weren't likely to be children, or content playing with sticks. I grabbed Artie by the armpits and dragged him to his feet.

“Let's get going, Arturo. I can't imagine this place gets less creepy in the dark.”

“Yeah, I know, Sil. I thought mcs would remind us of being kids. Instead I feel older than ever. Who gets that tired running up a couple flights of stairs?”

We walked toward the railings and the giant staircase unfolded before us. I jogged to the first step, barely beating Artie. I slapped his shoulder in triumph before making my descent down the cascade of polished stone. The edge of each stair sported a Roman mosaic pattern. Under the dust and grime, all the ornate details were still visible, each stair veneered with a solid piece of hand tooled granite or limestone, the railings fully worked and as wide as three hands.

“Who's making shit up now, Artie?” I said.

Artie didn't answer. His eyes darted around the massive concourse, finally soaking up some of the beauty laid before them.
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“Well, Arturo. I got a ‘maybe I go back in two years’. Esperanza wants me to work with her dad at the Mercado in the meantime. Fuckin’ employed? We’ll be divorced in a year.”

“Don’t remind me. I could trade her closet for a whole neighborhood in Sterling Heights.”

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Artie nodded, walking slightly behind me as I began navigating the second floor. We only needed to find the landing on the mezzanine and we were home free. Since the mezzanine sat smack in the middle of the building, all we had to do was backtrack and locate the center point. We entered the room directly across the hall from the office with the broken statue. Artie tapped directly across the hall from the office with the broken statue. Artie tapped his head up and rubbed both eyes with the sleeve of his work shirt.

“You got that right,” he said, “at least my wife doesn’t wear Gucci.”

“Don’t remind me. I could trade her closet for a whole neighborhood in Sterling Heights.”

Evening began to cast its shadow over the building. Until then, grey skies and strobes of lightning lent us the security of daytime. I cringed at the thought of Central Station at night. Whoever painted those swastikas and devil cats weren’t likely to be children, or content playing with sticks. I grabbed Artie by the armpits and dragged him to his feet.

“Let’s get going, Arturo. I can’t imagine this place gets less creepy in the dark.”

“Yeah, I know, Sil. I thought mcs would remind us of being kids. Instead I feel older than ever. Who gets that tired running up a couple flights of stairs?”

I led the way through the shadows, past squares of dissipating light from haunted mailrooms and vestibules, until we found our way back to the broken stairwell. I recalled the stench of standing water and weighed our options.

“Let’s look for the big staircase, Artie. We made it this far. Let’s take a classier route out of this place. The way we used to go. I can’t imagine I’ll be back any time soon.”

“Like old times. But I’m still pretty sure you made that shit up. I don’t – rec…oll…ect it.”

“Trust me, buddy. I still have dreams about this place, about that staircase when we were kids. Sliding down the railing, running from Amtrak security, before they completely shut her down. It’s just around one of these corners.”

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We walked toward the railings and the giant staircase unfolded before us. I jogged to the first step, barely beating Artie. I slapped his shoulder in triumph before making my descent down the cascade of polished stone. The edge of each stair sported a Roman mosaic pattern. Under the dust and grime, all the ornate details were still visible, each stair veneered with a solid piece of hand tooled granite or limestone, the railings fully worked and as wide as three hands.

“Who’s making shit up now, Artie?” I said.

Artie didn’t answer. His eyes darted around the massive concourse, finally soaking up some of the beauty laid before them.
“Even with all the graffiti and wreckage, this place is still amazing,” I said, “shame they built it so far from downtown, maybe we could still use it instead of that shithole on Baltimore. Nobody rides the Pier Marquette or the Greyhounds these days anyhow.”

“I can’t imagine how they built shit like this back in the day. Manual labor, man. Manual fucking labor. Everything we build these days is so cookie cutter. That’s why our cars don’t sell, why we get laid off for two years. Because we don’t build things to last, not like this place,” said Arturo, “not anymore.”

In my excitement over locating the staircase, I’d forgotten about Artie’s dilemma. The station was a relic, like ruins in ancient Greece – Detroit’s very own Parthenon. The sheer scale of the masonry rendered me speechless. But Artie had more important things than sight seeing on his mind. He walked ahead of me, taking the lead again as we made our way toward the mangled front entrance. I glanced back to the Amtrak desk leaning half-cocked against the wall, covered in cement and waste. People bought tickets at that desk in my lifetime, yet it looked as though it lay in that toppled position for a hundred years. Artie walked out first, almost tripping as he sprinted down toward the park. I kept a relaxed pace, trying to soak up the craftsmanship of the crumbling palace.

“Our cars, Sil. Where the fuck are our cars?”

I hadn’t even noticed. I surveyed the parking lot on the other side of the chain link fence before panic struck me. No sign of either vehicle apart from two piles of broken glass. Dammit. In less than an hour the sun would vanish completely beneath the horizon over Michigan Avenue. Keeping my composure was the best course of action, for Arturo’s sake, so I took a deep breath and tried to play it cool.

“Well, looks like we’ve been had Artie—my—man. Nobody will buy the cars we build, but at least people still steal American. If only we could catch a train somewhere we’d be all set. Here, let me hold that razor wire for you.”
I separated the twisted cables like a trainer whose prizefighter was stepping into the ring. “In this corner, Arturo ‘Coño Estupido’ Gutierrez.”

“Shut up, man,” Artie said, “you can’t take nothing seriously. I drove Esperanza’s Equinox down here. I’m done for. Now I’ll be lucky if she lets me bag groceries for her father. Coño.”

The city planted a new flowerbed at the foot of the station the year prior, and that’s as far as Artie made it. I walked up after him and took a seat on the curb. He broke a yellow tulip off at the stem and held it to his nose before mashing it on a rock. I put my arm around his shoulder.

“Well, I guess now is as good a time to tell you as any. I got the buyout, Artie. I’m not going to tell Gwen. I took the money. All my benefits are gone. No pension either. Twenty years until I can collect Social Security. They forced me to sign.”

“Our fucking cars are gone, Silvester. I’m sorry they bought you out, but fuck you. I’m laid off and I lost Esperanza’s car. I’m screwed. What the hell we gonna do?”

“I dunno,” I said, “pretend I’m still working for a while, play it by ear. How ‘bout you?”

“That’s not what I meant. What are you gonna do about your car? We need a ride, and I can’t go home until I find that goddamned truck anyway. First, I gotta do that.” Artie’s face sunk as he rescanned the empty parking lot, eventually settling his gaze on the two heaps of turquoise glass. “Then, I’ll probably collect unemployment until they call me back. If they call me.”

“Our wives are going to kill us,” I said.

“I’m already dead, man.”

“Should we call the cops? We’re adults, we didn’t do anything wrong, we might as well, right?”

“For what? It’ll take at least an hour for them to respond, if they even show up.” Said Arturo. “A couple of dumbasses at Roosevelt Park with no cars are the least of their worries. We’d be better off to steal a car ourselves, we could get one from the parking lot of that shithole bar down the street. What’s it called? The Corktown Tavern?”

We laughed for a second looking onto the massive pillars that framed Michigan Central’s main entrance. Once a symbol of strength, the decrepit building slowly acclimated itself as a tombstone. Detroit’s epitaph should read No Comment. The sun peeked briefly again through the clouds, casting our shadows out past the turnabout, and vanished beneath Michigan Avenue.

“You know, old Tiger Stadium is just past the Corktown on Trumble.” Said Arturo. “Wanna go stroll the diamond?”

“Sure thing, Artie. Just like old times.”
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