

*The Psyche is much more fragile than anyone can imagine. Remove security from a human being, and he seeks comfort. Take away food, water or clothing, and he becomes a more base self; an animal. He fights and grubs for food. He will steal to clothe himself. He will lie for water. He will cheat to obtain food to live. But if you take his dignity, you create a monster.*

*-Roger Werner, MD*

Blood looks like tar in the moonlight, but streams faster than a river through a ravine. Some blood flows only after violence has fallen. Thus was the case this night. A crack, like the strike of a bat against a ball, echoed down the dark alleyway. The last of four friends hit the pavement his head split wide open in the moonlight. A meandering pathway of blackness trickled and dripped from a jagged sliver of glowing white bone sprung through scraggly and blood-matted hair. The victim's face looked skyward in shock and surprise as a dark hunched-over figure heaved its back with extreme effort to stand and stagger away toward the brick wall of the alley.

The specter gazed at the carnage around him and began to sob at his handiwork. He dropped the metal pipe to the pavement which clattered and danced over and over until it finally rolled against a hand missing two fingers. He looked down at the remaining skin, muscle and tendons protruding from the severed digits. The tissue spread out grotesque as if stripped by a pair of pliers from the bone and rolled back toward the rest of the hand to expose two cartilaginous knuckles. Yellow tendrils stretched toward the missing fingertips as if searching for a way to reattach the misplaced flesh. Blood spread away from the hand in all directions forming a small pool that reflected the moonlight straight back at the ghoul standing over it.

He scuffed his foot into the pooling blood causing the moon's reflection to flicker, disappear and then reappear again. The moon, shining bright, would not leave him alone. It was ideally positioned exactly over the chasm of the alley to expose his deeds. The phantom stared upward at the haunting orb as the light lit his blood streaked face twisted in pain, sorrow and grief.

"Why?" he sobbed as clouds slowly strode across the surface of the moon briefly shrouding his crime in darkness.

The pungent metallic smell from the growing pools of gore hit the assailant's nose and mixed with odors of urine and feces, all present and all exuding from each

body, a final gasp of tension released upon death. He bent at the waist, his stomach reacting to the stench, wretched and spewed a full night's jolly upon the pavement. It was a fitting end to years of confusion and pent up rage. His sickness only added to the acrid odor of the alley.

Standing after ridding himself of the grease which oiled his act, he wiped his mouth only to smear more blood across his twisted face. He looked toward the top of the alley. Curtains fluttered from a window just overhead driven by a breeze filtering through the tall buildings around him. The killer let out a low mournful cry that grew until he howled like a primordial beast. The moon suddenly appeared from behind a cloudbank and then again hid as if afraid of the monster below. Over and over, the lonely and murderous howl rang into the dark sky beckoning through eons of time. Hounds across the city answered back singing an ancient song as they knew from the sound what had just transpired. The sudden avalanche of sound and fury burned the banshee's ears as he sank downward into silence gripping his head in agony against the greasy wall.

From behind the man, or what was left of him, came a rhythmic *thump, thump, thump, thump* vibrating from the other side of the mold-ridden brick. He let loose his ears and turned to the wall feeling the vibrations with his hand. Slowly he pressed the side of his face against the sweaty stone listening and grasping for the sound. As the monotonous beat continued, the remnant of what he used to be wiped tears from his dark gray eyes and bit his lip tasting pungent, metallic gruel, maybe his own, but surely also that of his former companions.

He hefted his body, heavy from toil using the slick wall to brace himself before turning and staggering toward an oversized metal door to his right. When his claw ratcheted the handle downward and swung the door open, blaring dance music and searing, flickering light hit the fiend pounding sense into his awareness. At first he shrank and cowered from the spectacle, but then stood upright. Still timid, frail and covered in jagged flesh and liquids from the beatings outside, he glanced back and spotted a hound lying with its intestines spilled into a puddle of blood.

*Strange. The dog wasn't there before,* he thought.

As the man entered the club through the service entrance, the crowd turned in unison, stopped dancing and stared in horror at the zombie who approached. Only the music continued, *thump, thump, thump, thump*, multicolored lights pulsating in time to the beat.

The man's eyes began to shed tears as he looked from face to face recoiling from the sight of him as he shuffled, dragging an injured leg behind. Horror entered

his own eyes as he held his hands up, colored light accenting his blood-soaked fingers now sticky, clotted and coagulated. His mouth opened, gaping like a wound spread for all to see, but only silence came with trickles of tears which formed lightening-like streaks of pinkish flesh down his bloody, grime-smeared face.

The frail man shook his head back and forth until his eyes could handle no more. They whirled in the pits of his skull as the lights danced all around him. An eerie silence enveloped him as he staggered and finally fell into a woman by the bar who screamed and pushed him away onto the floor.

The man curled into a fetal position and mumbled over and over again, "I didn't mean to kill 'em. I didn't mean to kill 'em. I didn't mean to...."

You see, a man is a sum of his parts; good, bad and otherwise, all pieced together in a puzzle-like mesh which can be torn if not believed in enough. This man, with his pieces and parts exposed, frayed and threadbare, lay hearing growling from his primordial psyche. He quivered and twitched as the curious, who were brave enough approached and peered at the rag-doll lying torn at their feet.

He finally whispered one last sentence almost like a final gasp from a drowning victim searching for air, "I have nothing...."

Then the frayed and torn pieces of the doll that were left turned inward and silenced the horror.

*When someone gets in your face, you knock 'em down. If someone touches your shit, you break their legs. And, if they should happen to insult you...well, then I would kill 'em.*

*-Kevin Minatore*

A gnat flitted into the dull, clinical light driven more by the motion of air coming from the overhead vent than by anything else. The insect's motion, in and out of light, stood in sharp contrast to the only other lonely figure in the room. Beneath the light was a despicable man in pajamas and a robe, which hung off one shoulder draping to the floor; his uniform. He was almost motionless except for his right hand that held the butt of a cigarette long burned to the filter. His fingers were blackened, charred by smoke and smoldering fire, but he didn't seem to notice. A red oozing blister from too many burned cigarette butts stood testament to his habit. His hands were swollen and festered, puss-filled puncture marks stood out on the hand that held the cigarette. The bandage, which once covered the hand, lay on the floor next to his chair.

His hand suddenly shook, almost vibrating, stopped and then started again. It was alive, but barely. The man, well, that was another matter entirely as he sat almost motionless except for the hand keeping the gnat company in its endless journey back and forth into the light. The man wasn't particularly good looking or even ugly. He didn't seem large or small or thin, fat or muscular. In fact, in his forcibly comfortable clothes, he wasn't much of anything in particular. He was an empty shell much of his being stored elsewhere even unbeknownst to him.

The room was similar, lacking all amenities that normal rooms usually have, except for two things: a large mirror occupied almost an entire wall adjacent to a handleless door that had a small wire mesh window, and another chair, which sat in the shadows just below where the gnat traversed back and forth. The man's reflection held steady as if painted on the mirror. Even if he were to look up and smile, the mirror wouldn't reflect anything. The man had no capability to gesture or to express emotion. He had no humor or soul and no want or care for anything left in his world. He was devoid of everything that once occupied his now empty skin.

A low hum began somewhere deep in the building that held the room. The shell of a man lifted his chin in recognition of the noise. The imperceptible sound stirred something deep down inside as he turned his head to look into the mirror.

Nothing stared back at him for his eyes were dead, gray lumps long burned out like the butt held loosely in his fingers. He dropped the remnants of the fag to the floor, rubbed his one finger over the other massaging the blister, and winced. He was still capable of pain. The pain didn't last as he collapsed back into lethargy and stared at the flecks in the industrial tile.

Each square was its own little world, all different, all two-dimensional landscapes full of hills, valleys, rivers and gorges. They were alien landscapes flat or nearly flat traveled daily only by dust, streaks from the soles of shoes and the occasional dropped scrap of paper. Nothing else really existed in the tile world. Everything else stood upon it not noticing the intricate flatness that the man now stared at below him. But he saw more, much more.

The handle less door clicked open and in stepped an invader who strode upon the man's landscapes. A fire suddenly sprang into his eyes, a burn that told of something more, something separate from the man himself. Something was awake within the shell and did not appreciate the trespasser. He looked up, his chin set and prepared for battle.

"Hello Charlie," Dr. Roger Werner cheerfully said as he placed a hand lightly on his patient's shoulder.

Charlie flinched. He then clenched his hand into a fist, which shook, and then relaxed again. The blister between his fingers popped and light yellow lymph trickled down his digits dropping a single drop into a two-dimensional gully in one of his little worlds. The burning pain of the blister reached a pitch of intensity that matched the hum way down deep in the gullet of the building, tuning itself to throb in time with the drone.

Dr. Werner walked over into the shadow and dragged the chair, scraping it in a loud whine across the tile worlds tearing at each landscape scaring the intricate shapes that surely were inhabited by something or someone.

*Another insult,* Charlie dully thought.

But Charlie didn't respond this time. His look was blank again, but at least he stared up at his psychiatrist who finally thumped the chair onto the square universe slightly in and slightly out of the shadow cast by the overhead light. The doctor sat crisply in the chair, his posture perfect in a short white coat with hands clasped on one knee waiting for Charlie to acknowledge him.

Dr. Werner was roughly the same age as Charlie, distinguished looking with a small fluff of white goatee at his chin with dark hair graying a bit on the side above the stems of wire rimmed glasses. His frame was smaller and thinner than Charlie's, but revealed a once athletic build beneath his clinician's coat. His dark gray slacks

over perfectly polished black wing-tipped shoes foretold a steadfastness in the doctor's demeanor.

The gnat suddenly spun out of control wavering from its redundant journey and flew in front of Werner's face. The good doctor whacked at it over and over, but the gnat was too elusive. The tiny, almost weightless creature somehow missed the leviathan fingers of the doctor and lofted above his head to resume its perpetual journey.

"You know, the police spent almost two hours trying to communicate with you over at Swedish," the doctor said. "I would have thought in all that time, you might have told them about your night, told them a little about what happened."

Charlie said nothing remaining silent about the night before. It wasn't that he was hiding something. Charlie honestly didn't remember anything.

"I'm here to try and figure out what happened to you Charlie," the doctor continued trying to make eye contact by bending at the waist to follow his patient's eyes which gazed once again downward at the tile floor.

As Werner bent fully at the waist, suddenly Charlie's eyes fixed on his and then quickly danced away wandering to the landscapes below.

*Ah, there you are,* Werner thought to himself. *You're alive in there or just hiding.*

"You know Charlie," Werner said straightening. "Trauma can have a funny effect on a person. Sometimes we block out the events as a sort of protective mechanism. It's a way of dealing with problems which seem so horrible at the time we don't want to remember them."

Charlie said nothing continuing to stare at his little worlds totally impervious to the doctor's overture.

"When something changes your life, you feel alone and isolated like you're the only one in the world," Werner continued his recitation. "Sometimes you just need someone to hear you and understand how you feel."

A deep, long silence echoed back to the doctor who took a deep breath only to finally be interrupted.

"No—o—n—e—w—ants—to—l—isten," Charlie slowly murmured emitting a heavy sigh after each word with one final gasp after the last utterance which whistled through his teeth.

The words were barely audible and caught Werner off guard. To his knowledge, these were the first words that his patient offered since his confession

in the nightclub the night before.

"I'll listen to you Charlie," Werner said as he placed his elbows on his gray slacks cupping his cheeks in his hands bending perfectly at the waist somehow keeping his back straight. "That's what I do, you see. I listen to anything that people want to tell me, and it stays only with me."

A tear formed in Charlie's right eye as he took a deep breath saying, "I don't know if I want to talk about it. It's too horrible."

The tear trickled down his face and poised itself on the jaw line, waiting. There was more in this man than his dull expressions and empty shell after all. There was more than the sudden fire after the insult to his tile empire over which he presided minute after minute. The tear dropped, but was caught this time by his slipper. Yes, there was much more.

"Charlie, the police said you were with four friends last night," the doctor said as Charlie raised his hand wiping another tear before it could fall. "What kind of pals were they? Were they visitors from out of town? People you knew from your past? Work?"

Another long silence reverberated back to the doctor interrupted by the low hum, which the doctor didn't seem to notice, but which tortured Charlie's blister covered finger causing it to throb even harder.

Charlie's eyes sagged to the tile suddenly picturing little woodland creatures wandering in and out of some foreign landscape. He breathed deeply following the little beings with his eyes.

"College," Charlie muttered.

Werner looked up, surprised.

"They were college buddies?" Werner pressed.

"We all lived in the freshman dorm together," Charlie mumbled. "We were, I mean, we partied a lot together."

"I did a bit of that too when I was at Brown," Werner smiled, pleased with the beginnings of progress. "Where did you go to school, Charlie?"

"Wyoming," Charlie said a bit more engaged. "Nothing like... Brown probably."

Charlie swallowed hard, his dry throat still aching from the screams the night before.

"Oh, I don't know," the doctor said. "Not too many cowboy boots in Providence, but there was still a lot of beer."

Charlie's lips curled slightly upward to a smile.

"Do you want to tell me about them?" Werner probed gently seeing the first

opening to understanding this man, trying to find his friends for the police and relatives that surely missed them.

Charlie came to Werner's facility in Seattle overlooking the Puget Sound early that morning. At first, his patient was in a vegetative state, strapped to a gurney not responding to verbal or physical stimuli. After the sun came up, however, he seemed to awaken and tried to sit up, but was held by the restraints. He didn't protest or call out. Rather, he turned and took in his surroundings almost as if he was plotting his next move.

Werner watched him carefully from down the hall for about ten minutes before he approached and took off the restraints. He chose to replace the straps with leg irons and handcuffs. Werner took no chances with this one. Three orderlies stood by just in case Charlie became violent. Mukrake, the detective in charge of the case, was nowhere to be found having left to investigate the crime scene. So one of Werner's orderlies, Ron, guided his new patient, after another few minutes, into an observation room.

Charlie shuffled into the room bound by the irons and handcuffs, sat calmly for over a half hour staring at the floor before Werner had the cuffs and irons removed. Nothing seemed to reach the 40-something, neuroscientist from the University of Washington who staggered into a Seattle bar the night before mumbling and covered in blood. He was given an exam and remained motionless. He was offered food, but refused to eat. He was also offered a blanket in the sometimes cold psychiatric ward, only to nudge it off onto the floor. And now here he sat.

The doctor continued to focus on Charlie's college buddies, "Do you know what happened to your friends last night?"

"I'm not sure," Charlie burred through unswallowed spit.

"Not sure?"

Charlie swallowed, took a breath and said clearly, "It wouldn't be fair to...."

He stopped suddenly and looked up at the mirror, his reflection showing hair beginning to recede, black circles under his eyes, and wrinkles which appeared over the last couple of years. He was quickly growing old.

Charlie turned away from the mirror and began his tale about the night before in bars around Seattle, a night he was supposed to start his life over.

"They just wanted to take me out for a night on the town," Charlie said as a smile crossed his face.

The doctor sat back in his chair a bit surprised, but listened intently to Charlie's tale, somewhat pleased with himself that his patient had crossed a hurdle



so rapidly.

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Kevin entered the martini bar down on First Street directly adjacent to the historic Pike's Place Market area. The streets, bistros and bars were full of young professionals who spent money freely, wandered home at night to rest for their jobs in the morning and repeat the cycle again night after night. Only a couple of decades before, bums had wandered among prostitutes and drug dealers locked in a stench of despair on the former skid row. Skid row had originally been just that, the end of the line where huge logs cut from the wilds of the Northwest forest came to rest or skidded to a stop from the hills above before they were purposely plunged for storage and transportation into the deep green waters of the Sound.

Charlie looked up and waived his friend over to the hi-top. Kevin smiled, and then scowled, as he literally plowed his way through the crowded nightspot, pushing people aside as he approached the table. Several patrons shoved to the side started to protest angrily until they saw the size and build of the man.

"Hey, watch it!" a tall blonde intoned shoving back against Kevin's tall, muscular and threatening physique. "What's your problem?"

Kevin looked down, even a couple inches taller than the model-like statue before him and said, "I'll be back for you later, skank. Then I'll show what I'm really like."

She flipped her hair in anger followed by the back of her hand as she strode away to the rear of the bar heading for the ladies' room. Kevin watched her go and licked the inside of his bottom lip as he thought about pushing her up against the bar and pressing himself into her. His stare was finally broken by Charlie who tapped him on the shoulder, which caused Kevin to spin violently around.

"Whoa!" Charlie said holding his fists up instinctively to defend himself. "A little on edge today, Kev?"

"Yeah...a...,on edge," Kevin stuttered as he glanced back one more time just as the blonde disappeared into the restroom. "I'll get her sometime."

Charlie waited patiently for his friend, a construction worker who had wired most of the new, gleaming sky scrapers added to Seattle's landscape in recent years, to turn around. Kevin was distracted and continued to look for the blonde as she reappeared in the back of the bar and began to speak with several other women. They all laughed the same way, they all tossed their hair the same way and they all had the same plastic personas that Kevin hated. He muttered something under his breath and bit his cheek before he turned, smiled and happily shouted, "How the fuck are ya, man?!"

Kevin wrapped his muscular arms around Charlie and lifted him off the floor. Charlie gasped as air was forcibly expelled from his lungs for a few seconds before his larger friend dropped him.

“Jesus, Kevin!” Charlie grunted as the air reentered his lungs. “We’re not freakin’ dating. Not that I wouldn’t be interested in a tall, handsome construction dude like you.”

Charlie laughed.

“I always knew you were a fag, Chuck,” Kevin said as he turned to look once again around the bar for his prey. “Did you see the legs on that blonde?”

“You mean the one who almost decked you for elbowing her boob when you plowed across the bar?” Charlie cracked grabbing his beer off the table and taking a long swig.

“She’s a fuckin’ bitch anyway,” Kevin returned. “But can you imagine those knees thrown up over your shoulders, can’t ya?”

“I tell you, Kevin,” Charlie said almost disgusted. “You have a one track mind. Do you ever want just to get to know a woman before you sleep with her?”

“What would be the point of that?” Kevin chided. “They’re only good for one thing anyway.”

Kevin motioned to the bartender as he pointed at Charlie’s half empty glass. He raised two fingers and slapped his friend on the back shouting, “I’m going to get loaded and laid tonight! And, so are you!”

Several young businessmen and women moved away from their table giving Kevin wide latitude. Kevin didn’t care. In fact, he relished intimidating everyone around him.

“Not if I get laid first!” a voice said from behind both Kevin and Charlie.

They whirled to spot Dennis, the plastic surgeon, standing in his typical garb, topsiders, polo shirt with the collar turned up, of course, swept back blonde hair and cream colored slacks. It was like the guy was stuck in the 1980’s.

“Dude!” Kevin shouted wrapping his arms around his old drinking buddy. “How the fuck are ya?”

Kevin let go leaving Dennis staggering against the table. Dennis straightened his collar and backed away.

“You have got to get off the roids, dude,” Dennis said holding his ribs. “He break your ribs too, Charlie?”

“Naw,” Charlie said smiling as he held out his hand to his old study partner in the dorm. “But, he did fail with his first encounter of the night.”

Dennis pulled him in for a hug and whispered in Charlie’s ear, “Is he drunk

already?”

Charlie let loose and shook his head while glancing up at Kevin.

“She just didn’t know what she’s missing, I tell you,” Kevin said taking his beer from the waitress who walked up at that moment. “Thank you darling. What are you doing when you get off work? Or, should I say, do you want to get off when you’re done working?”

The waitress looked him up and down evidently liking what she saw in the tanned, roughed up, blue-collar worker and smiled, “You never know.”

She turned and smiled at Dennis, “And, what would you like?”

Dennis looked over at Kevin who nodded encouragement and said without thinking stealing a line from an old movie, “I’ll have what he’s having.”

“Aren’t we frisky tonight, Skippy,” the waitress said exiting stage right to retrieve his order while making fun of his pinkish polo shirt.

Charlie and Kevin fell against the table laughing at the waitress’ accurate one-word characterization of their friend.

“Skippy!” Charlie shouted pointing at his friend who looked confused. “She has you pegged.”

“What was she talking about?” Dennis asked dumbly.

“You’re a doctor, huh?” Kevin roared still laughing.

“Fuck you, Minatore!” Dennis finally said getting the joke and feeling a little hurt. “You could hope to do as well!”

“By the end of the night, she’s mine and you go home empty handed again,” Kevin said taking a swig of his beer. “I’ll do better than you just like always.”

“I’ll bet you that I pick up two to your one tonight,” Dennis countered.

“Come on you two,” Charlie said clanking his glass against Kevin’s. “This is supposed to be a celebration and I’m not going to have you brooding and you picking a fight.”

He pointed at each of them as he spoke.

“Besides, this is my night, right? You’re supposed to be cheering me up so I can move on.”

“Fine. I’ll let it go this time,” Kevin said to Charlie. “It’s your night.”

“It took you long enough to finally come out with us,” Dennis chimed in, echoing Kevin’s sentiment.

“I’m here aren’t I?” Charlie said smiling.

Somewhere in the back of his eyes though, sorrow rose up. He suppressed an urge to cry as he took a long drink of his beer. Charlie swallowed hard, pushing his feelings of hurt down below the surface.

Kevin and Dennis clasped hands and then jammed their fists together, a handshake that started over twenty years earlier in a hallway of a dorm that smelled of cow manure from the feed lot just outside of town. They arrived in the same order, first Charlie stumbling up the stairs carrying two large duffel bags and a 10-speed bike on his shoulders, then Kevin, the boisterous and inappropriately self-confident Wyoming native, followed by Dennis, the preppy kid from Boulder, Colorado who never wanted for anything. Now they were just missing Bob and Tyler who walked in at that moment, just like they had together so many years before.

“Hey!” they shouted in unison as the crowd seemingly parted to allow the two friends through the middle of the bar. Once reaching their buddies, the two gave high fives, hugs, shakes and fists all around.

“Charlie, how’s it hangin’?” Tyler asked as he released his friend. “Little to the left, if I remember correctly.”

“You ever get tired of that joke, Ty?” Bob asked punching Kevin in the stomach.

Kevin didn’t flinch or bat an eye to the ritual began back in college.

Bob punched him harder, but still Kevin was unfazed. He stood with his hand on his hip drinking his beer.

“Solid as a friggin’ rock, Kev,” Bob said admiringly.

“Same shit, different year,” Tyler said just as his cell phone rang which of course he picked up to try and do another deal. “Yeah. Well, I don’t care what their offer was. We got time and I’m not itching to sell. I’ve got four I’m working on that will get me twice as much money downtown. Punt it, Mary.”

Tyler hung up the phone after finishing his brief conversation with his assistant and glanced up only to find his four friends staring menacingly in his direction.

“What?” Tyler said raising his phone and turning it off. “See, it isn’t attached to my head, especially when I’m around you guys.”

“Right!” said Dennis. “You sleep with that cell phone more than you do with your wife.”

“I get more satisfaction from the phone than from her,” Tyler said laughing. “I can turn the phone off. She, unfortunately, just keeps yappin’. Blah! Blah! Blah!”

“I’d bust her mouth if she did that to me, Tyler,” Kevin said downing the remainder of his beer before slamming the glass onto the table. “God, that tastes good!”

Tyler stared at him in amazement saying, “Jesus Kevin! Don’t you ever think

of anything nice to say?"

"You forget, I've met your wife," Kevin said. "In fact, you'd be surprised how familiar I am with Rhonda."

Tyler had had enough. He reached for Kevin's neck only to be stopped by Charlie and Dennis. Tyler strained against his friends yelling, "Fuck you Kevin! You psycho!"

"Fuck me?" Kevin asked opening his eyes wide. "I'd watch yourself, Tyler. I've been kickin' your ass for years. You must like it, 'cause we're still friends."

Bob grabbed Kevin's shoulders and pushed him back against the table asking firmly, "Why do you always have to do this shit Kevin? Why you always gotta push him?"

"Fine!" Kevin said throwing his hands up in the air. "I'll leave him alone! He's not worth it anyway."

Kevin shrugged off Bob's hands, turned and strode angrily to the back of the bar where he entered the restroom brushing a waiter aside as he slammed the door open.

"What's his problem?" Tyler asked relaxing in Charlie's arms. "You can let go now, Charlie. I'm not looking for a date you know."

Charlie chuckled and let his friend go. He backed up against the tall table and took a drink of his beer.

"You know," started Charlie. "He always does this to you. Why do you fall for it every time we get together?"

"I don't know," Tyler answered. "He just gets under my skin."

"Don't let him," said Bob as he motioned for a waitress. "Besides, he'd kill you if you took a swing at him."

"Yeah, someday I'm going to kill him," Dennis joked straightening his jacket. "Okay, maybe not."

He paused for a moment and then smiled, "We could do it together, Ty?"

Dennis wasn't serious or at least he didn't sound serious. Kevin wouldn't hurt Tyler of course. He just liked getting his goat like he had for years. Dennis stayed away from confronting Kevin. But Tyler always went straight at his larger and stronger friend like he had no good sense.

"Just let it go," Bob said chucking his friend's shoulder. "Besides, I don't want to spend the night breaking up fights."

"You're right," Tyler said. "We're here to celebrate independence."

He raised his glass to Charlie who looked down at his shoes a bit forlorn. Charlie was thinking of his ex-wife, his ex-girlfriend and his ex-life. Charlie had many

ex's in his life, especially when it came to love, something he was never lucky in from the start.

The waitress came by setting several beers on the table as Bob, standing behind Charlie, undercut his chin with his flattened trying to tell Tyler to stop.

Charlie glanced back wondering what Bob was up to as Tyler pressed, "I mean, when someone has the good luck of getting rid of baggage that has held them back for years, it's time to move on with one's life."

Bob once again crossed his neck, his eyes widening urging Tyler to cease. Charlie glanced back at Bob and then at his shoes again thinking about his two little girls who he wasn't allowed to see anymore.

"You want me to run a tab?" she asked.

"I got it," Charlie said glumly rummaging in his wallet and eventually pulling out a credit card to hand to the young woman.

"Thanks," the waitress said. "I'll have this behind the counter."

Kevin returned to the table smiling broadly and slapping Tyler on the back. He spilled his beer down the front of his pants and began to choke.

"Shit!" Kevin stated. "Man I really didn't mean to do that."

He held his hand out to Tyler who hesitated and then took the larger claw in his own. They shook and smiled.

"I'm sorry, dude," said Kevin sincerely. "I just had a bad day. Yelled at my boss and got kicked off the job site again."

"It's okay, Kevin," Tyler said as Bob glared in his direction. "I guess we all make mistakes."

"You know what guys?" Charlie said trying to smile before turning toward the back of the bar. "I think I'll head for the can."

As he made his way across the crowded bar now full of young professionals, construction workers, sales people and businessmen, a tear rolled down his face. He ducked into the bathroom just as Bob shoved Tyler backwards.

"What were you thinking?" Bob asked facing up to Tyler. "There's celebrating and then there's supporting a friend, someone who's always been here for us. I can't believe that you couldn't shut up."

Bob looked at Dennis, Kevin, and Tyler before sternly saying, "All of us. Each of you has had your ass saved by him."

Bob pointed over his shoulder toward the back of the bar.

"He's the reason we're here."

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Charlie sat quietly staring at the floor where the gnat had swooped down

and landed next to the doctor's leather shoe. Perhaps it had grown tired of its endless path in and out of the light. Maybe the air from the vent overhead didn't drive the tiny creature as Charlie thought. Possibly, the gnat was just worn out and ready to give up, like him. Mundaneness was sometimes equal to madness as he wandered through his daily routine, drifting in and out, back and forth through life.

"They sound like good friends, Charlie," the doctor said watching his patient's eyes focused on his shoe.

He adjusted his foot and mistakenly slammed the heel down on top of the gnat. Charlie jerked in his chair wanting to save the tiny creature, but then realized that it was no use. Some lives weren't worth saving. Some were simply mistakes or occurred by happenstance, which God permitted, but man crushed like the frail little gnat.

Charlie's hand shook again and something rose in him. When he looked up at the doctor, anger stood squarely in both eyes.

Dr. Werner sat back in his chair sensing something just below the surface in his patient. There was a fire in this morose being.

"You didn't like that your friend Tyler brought up your divorce in that manner did you?" Werner asked looking for what caused the sudden change in his patient. "It made you angry."

"No." Charlie said flatly as the anger leaked from his lips dripping between them.

"No?" Werner asked surprised.

Charlie's back slumped as his eyes dulled once again. His whole being seemed to suddenly collapse in upon itself. He sighed and then said, "I was sad. I've been sad for a long time for what I did."

"The divorce?" Werner asked knowing a bit of his history while he searched, probing for a key to unlock the truth from his lethargic subject.

Charlie shook his head and stared once more at the floor until Werner moved his foot to reveal the tiny, dead gnat. Unblinkingly, Charlie tried to will the twisted little form back to life. Will was something he hoped for, a handle of sorts for him to hold onto even when he felt hopeless; just a little hope that the weakest could rise again if he wished for it. Charlie's will was almost gone.

*Nothing*, he thought bitterly as Werner reached over and placed his hand on Charlie's shoulder.

"I think that's all for now, Charlie," said Werner massaging his shoulder. "I'll have the orderly come take you back to your room."

Charlie moved not a muscle so transfixed was he on the insect flattened into

the tile world full of intricacies that only he seemed to notice or understand. His world was two-dimensional as well, subsisting solely on routine, until last night, of course.

The doctor stood, crossed the room and rapped his knuckles on the metal door. The sound echoing through the room made Charlie cringe with each reverberation.

As Werner looked back at Charlie staring at the floor, he felt sadness for this man in his care. Like himself, Charlie was highly educated, but had sunk somewhere into himself, or worse, completely lost. He hoped that he could revive the life within his patient, retrieve something left of his soul. He also had an imperative to get as much information out of this man as he could. The day was young, but Mukrake would be returning soon for answers.

The orderly appeared at the wire mesh and opened the door for the doctor who said, "Take him back to his room, Ron. We'll try again in a little bit."

"Yes, Dr. Werner," Ron answered. "There's a detective Mukrake waiting for you in the kitchen."

"Thank you, Ron," Werner said sagging in anticipation of confronting the detective. He glanced over his shoulder and observed Charlie slouch and then slowly slip purposely off the chair.

He whispered to Ron as the orderly passed him entering the room, "Make sure you keep a watch on him."

Charlie slid downward and bent as if in prayer to examine the gnat splayed across a flat canyon. As he tried to pick it up, Ron bent and lifted Charlie off the tile bringing him to his feet. The gnat at first clung to his new two-dimensional world in death, but then the currents of air caused by Charlie's motion blew him across the landscapes and into the air. He flew again in death, back and forth, in and out of the light settling ever lower until the gnat finally disappeared into a corner of the room. Charlie closed his eyes, grieving for the obscure little creature as Ron escorted him out of the room and down the hall to his own dark place of obscurity.