

The 24 Hour Book Project
“Longfellow's Poker Chip”

Vol.1- September 2011

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The idea for the 24 hour book project was a simple one. I was wandering around the streets of Portland one fine sunny Summer afternoon, and remembered a conversation a friend and I had about her working on the “48 hour film project.”

Filmmakers are given three elements that all must be included in their short film. They then have to shoot, edit and present the finished project within the 48 hour deadline. Hard work, strong coffee and excitement are what get you through.

So I thought to myself, “Why not a 24 hour BOOK project?”

An article in the Portland Daily Sun later, and I had my perspective victims. All jumped in ready for some serious rock and roll.

I gave them the following. Part of your story must take place on August 27th, 2012. One of the scenes should be in “Longfellow Square” here in Portland. There is a “prop” item of a \$50 Portland Riverboat Gambling Casino Poker Chip, with a bullet hole in it.

So here, for your enjoyment is what was produced. I've done MINOR editing, to make the words fit the page and correct any glaring grammatical errors. Other than that, what you see is what I got. If you are intrigued by these stories, make sure to remember the author's name. The whole point is to get the name out there, and have fun in doing so. Pass this on to your friends, and enjoy!

Bob Higgins

My Heart is in Portland

Chris Allen

Eventually we are moving back to Portland.

When we bought a house back during the boom everything was too expensive around here. Auburn was our only real option. Sure we could have afforded something a little closer to Portland, Windham perhaps, but there would have been absolutely no wriggle room for emergencies. We chose Auburn where we could afford to pay extra every month and it was okay for awhile. Now, six years later, I hate to drive. In fact, if I never drive again it would be perfectly fine with me. Back and forth on the turnpike, fighting with all the F150s and Escalades that never yield and always try to get one car ahead at the toll booth.

Sometimes at work I daydream about riding on the bus whenever I need to get somewhere. I could just sit there and stare out the window or read my book or doze in and out of sleep. Then when the bus stops I could just shuffle down Monument square to my job.

So far this dream has yet to awaken as we are unable to sell our house. It's a nice house in a nice neighborhood but no one is buying houses right now. We have fixed it up and gotten rid of most of our stuff so that we can leave at a moments notice. We had a big yard sale and most everything sold. The furniture that no one bought got left outside all night and in the morning it was gone. That is how quick it will be when we move; one day we will be in Auburn and the next we will be in Portland and the things that used to matter to us will all be different.

At least that is what I hope will happen. Lately, I've felt so attached to Portland that when I get in the car to drive home my heart and soul stay behind. My body is an empty husk in Auburn. I hope someone will remember to pack it up and bring it back to me. I have taken precaution however for the alternative: If I cannot have my body in Portland I may have found a place for my soul to reside.

At the last Friday Art Walk we were up in Longfellow square wondering where to go next.. It was only a half hour before the studios started closing up. Most of all the free beer and wine was gone probably. We weren't sure which location to finish the night off in as there were several in the square; a bookstore, two art studios, a coffee house. People milled about everywhere and an impromptu parade was going down Congress street with bikes and banjo players.

Over by the statue of Longfellow an art student was selling various objects with bullet holes in them. Whether or not they were real bullet holes or not, I cannot say. There were greeting cards, poker chips, playing cards, coffee cups all with at least one "bullet hole" in them. I bought one of the poker chips for five bucks. The bullet hole was almost in the center. Around the hole I was able to make out that it was a Portland Riverboat Gambling Cruises chip worth \$50.

"Hmmm. Five dollars for a fifty dollar chip?" my wife wondered aloud.

I shrugged my shoulders. "That's art I guess." I looked through the bullet hole and watched various people walking up and down Congress and State. The bars were starting to fill up as everyone began to abandon portraits in favor of pints. We had to drive back to Auburn so we kept ourselves satisfied with a couple of shots at El Rayo to start the walk and then small, free samples from various galleries. I turned around and saw my wife looking up at the statue of Longfellow.

"He's looking right at the place over there," she said. "Let's go check it out."

The Katherine Smith gallery was crowded and dark and everyone had a little white cup with wine in it. When we stepped to the center of the room I noticed the table with refreshments on it. There was a little stack of white cups and several bottle of wine. There were also a couple of old, refurbished clocks on either side of the table.

I walked up to the table and grabbed a bottle of wine. "Hey do you want white or red," I said

turning to my wife.

Instead I heard a voice to my left say "Excuse me but you better look at the whole piece." I turned and saw a short woman with a black skirt looking up at me. My expression must have been one of puzzlement because she repeated herself: "Look at the whole piece."

Then she said "I'm going to be nice to you this time..."

I looked at the bottle in my hand and at the table and I realized that the refreshment table was one of her pieces. "Umm" I said and put the bottle down. There was a tag above the table that said \$500.

"You're lucky I don't make you pay for it," she said

I quickly turned and got out of there. My wife was already out there smiling. "500 bucks?" she said. "We could have got that same stuff at the Hannaford for ten."

I turned and looked back at the gallery and noticed that the proprietor was at the window staring at me. Customers buzzed around her in the gallery. I held up the poker chip and looked at her through it and she stood alone and looked pissed off. I moved the chip farther away from me until just her face was framed in the bullet hole. She became a disembodied head with an angry face. All of her artwork, her customers and her gallery disappeared behind the face in the poker chip.

"Let's check this place out" I heard my wife say from behind me. I turned in time to see her entering a brick building near the bookstore. I gave one last look to the Katherine Smith place but it now appeared empty. I did not see the artist or any of the customers anywhere. I shrugged it off and hurried over to where my wife went.

It was called the Orange Cat Gallery and a couple of people were leaving as I got to the door. Inside was crowded not with people but with paintings all over the walls in a small space. There were also two large bookshelves that were packed with books and smaller standing portraits.

The first painting that caught my eye was of an elongated person staring straight back at me. It was like looking at someone through a glass globe and their features had all been stretched. The person in the painting, a man, stared at me with an extremely puzzled expression as if he too wondered why he were stretched in such an unnatural form.

Looking closer at the painting, I noticed the same bookshelves as were in the studio. I moved further into the studio and saw more portraits. All of them were done in the same style; one or two people with elongated features staring out from the canvas at whoever was painting them. The expressions on the portraits were varied, some were puzzled and others were amused, but there were several similarities - all the faces were looking up at something high on the wall as if the artist who painted them were sitting very high up and looking down on their subjects. Also the overall painting has a yellowish tint as if they were being viewed through a strange filter.

My wife had come to stand beside me and we decided to go. It was almost nine and the gallery seemed totally empty except for the strange portraits. As we moved toward the door my wife froze in her tracks and tugged at my hand. "Look," she said pointing up.

Up on one of the bookshelves was a huge orange tabby cat staring down at us. The tabby stared at us intensely and we stared back at its rigid little form. For some reason it unnerved me terribly to have this cat staring down at me; I felt like it wanted to launch itself at me. The tabby was up on all fours as if it had been ready to jump down when we had noticed it. Either that or it wanted to get a better look at us.

It was then that I realized that the portraits were all done from the cat's perspective, perhaps in the very spot where we stood. My wife seemed to come to the realization at the same time and she grasped my hand harder. On a whim I pulled out the poker chip and stared back at the cat through it. The tabby's orange face changed in the bullet hole from one of intensity to that of surprise and fear. There was a clawing scramble as the cat ran over the top of the book shelf and jumped down into a dark corner. Then, silence.

We left and drove back to Auburn. We knew that the portraits could not have been done by the

cat but they were certainly done from the perspective of it. How on earth the artist pulled it off bothered me all weekend.

I went back to the studio on Monday after work and it was closed with an “By Appointment Only” sign in the window. It was dark inside and I saw no signs of the tabby but I felt like it saw me just the same. As I was turning to leave, I noticed a small canvas on an easel. It looked like the artist had just started a new painting . There was a bright red circle in the center of the canvas.

I walked over to the other side of the window to get a better look and my heart skipped a beat when I saw that the red circle was my poker chip with the bullet hole in it and in the bullet hole a hazel eye stared back at me. I got out of there as quick as I could.

That was about a month ago. It has taken me some time to come to grips with what happened. We have talked it over and we have decided to go back to the studio next Art Walk and let the cat finish the portrait. This time though I will hold the poker chip closer to the cat so that we will be in the portrait together.

Chris Allen

Longfellow Speaks
By Alice Levesque

The day was humid and had not decided what it was going to be. The weather in Maine is always fickle, especially this August. We have had a lot of rain, clouds, super hot, and in some parts a brief snow flurry.

At 7:15 in the morning, the city of Portland was waking up to a quiet Sunday. Most people were still reading the Sunday Telegram and sipping their morning coffee. It was one year ago that the city was bracing for Hurricane Irene. Folks were racing around stocking up on water, ice, food. Lawn furniture was tacked down, boats hauled into dry dock, and tarps draped over everything else in preparation for on heck of a storm, as if a Boy Scout Jamboree was in full mode. Mainers are prepared for anything at any time of year.

Today the Dudley family was having a special visitor. She had been away for a year and by her side was her best friend and husband. Walking down Congress Street, hand in hand and with eyes for nothing but each other was Dia and Ian. The salt scented air drew all the memories of her childhood as they were strolling by her old haunts. Dia wanted Ian to understand how his bride became the strong, proud and adventurous she woman was today. Each of them had vivid imaginations and often laughed at the simplest things then wrote about them on their travel blogs.

It has been a year since their wedding at St. Luke's Church on State Street. Dia wanted to see the church, the glory of its beauty, and heritage after Irene had battered its walls, flooded its cellar, and rattled its stained glass windows. She and Ian had flown off to Ireland on their honeymoon just hours before the hurricane blew in to wreck havoc on her hometown.

"Who is that a statue of down there?" Ian asked as they were approaching the square.

Dia took her gazing eyes off of Ian and looked up. "Oh, that's Henry Wadsworth Longfellow" The closer they got to the statue the more the it seemed to be coming alive. Dia blinked and stared, and then heard Henry speak to her.

"Did you hear that?" she asked Ian.

"What?"

"The statue just talked to me!"

"You forget your pills again?" he joking laughed.

"I'm serious Ian. Old Henry just asked my name and who my family was." She was wide eyed with disbelief and doubting herself. Dia never told him that growing up she had a gift of communicating with objects that had a connection to her family. She often her the walls of Deering High tell her of relatives and the escapades they pulled. She hadn't had this happen in years and was still in shock as if it was the first time it happened. Did she need to tell Ian now, or was it just her mind playing games?

Again the statue stared down at her and spoke, "Are you a relative of Ben and Nellie Dudley perchance? You look so much like her." Ian looked at Dia whose eyes were as large as a deer's glazed over by a headlight. Her hands were and shaking and sweaty. His look of worry was wondering if she were ill. He had never seen her like this before and panic was creeping over him like a fog.

"Miss, please tell him your secret before he calls 911 before I can tell him about your family."

"Honey it is alright but I need to tell you something. Let's have a seat here on the bench and talk. Ian saw she was calm now but it was he who was in distress. She was so serious and he rarely saw that side of her.

"When I was little I use to play a game with the statues, buildings, and some trees. They would tell me stories of my family. It started one day when I was doing inventory at Grandpa's drugstore and

found an old poker chip. It was an ordinary looking chip but I felt a strong connection to it.”

“You mean the one you wear around your neck? I never thought to ask why you wear such a silly thing. I just figured it was one more thing I had to love about you. All you ever said about it was that it was your lucky charm.”

“Well it worked didn’t it? I found you!” She took his hand and the air was suddenly filled with a sea-salt infused fog. It engulfed both of them and Old Henry.

“Hello, I am Henry. To whom do I have the pleasure of talking to?”

“I am Dia Dudley Wilson and this is my husband Ian. Yes I am Nellie and Ben Dudley’s relative. I am their grand-daughter.”

Ian kept a tight grip on Dia’s hand as the two talked. He wasn’t sure what to believe at this moment but was intrigued as he was having serious doubts on the state of his sanity.

“Have seen many families come and go but I remember yours fondly.” Henry had a chuckle .

“Ian, Dia is one of the special folk. Dia do you mind if I explain how you were destined to be chosen?”

“ Please do, since I’m not sure how I was chosen.”

“One day back in the mid 1800’s a young man named Harry Milton moved from Ireland to Portland, to make his way in the world. His mother had given the chip you found with the “Portland Riverboat Gambling Cruise” printed on it. It was to be his lucky charm. I think it was about 1888 when he arrived. That was the same year I became the statue you see before you today. In 1920 something Harry met Ben at the Annual Cunner Club meeting. Ben won that chip in a poker game and keep it for luck. It fell out of his pocket in the basement of the old Dudley-Weed Drugstore that was up the street on the corner of Pine and Bracket streets.”

“ So that is how it got there. Grandpa Ben said it was junk and to toss it. It was way too cool to do that so I took it home and used Dad’s B-B gun to put a bullet ole in it so I could wear it as a necklace.”

“Did you know Nellie had your gift also? She would talk to every day as she made her rounds delivering her roasted peanuts to the shops”

“I had heard stories about her beliefs and the luck she had during the stock market crash in 1929.”

“She came by one day and had that poker chip with her. When she said good morning Henry I gave her a worried smile. She wondered what I was frowning about but all I could tell her was to go and get her tea leaves read at the Puritan Tea Room. She did then went to the bank to collect all of her “PEANUT MONEY” as Ben would call it. He would not let her sell her stocks though. Men handled such money affair at that time. She was so mad at Ben she made him pay rent for the other half of their building in case the renters could not afford to pay. Since the drugstore was doing well it made sense to her to protect their home.”

“I still have the suitcase she stashed the money in. She hid it under her bed and didn’t tell Ben until he came home for lunch on that October 29th. He was a wreck trying to find the words to tell her that all their money was gone. Family stories say he was the happiest man around town knowing she had hid \$50,000 and told nobody.”

“That sounds like Nellie.” Henry laughed as he stroked his pet dog.

“Can you tell me if the story about Carl was true? The time during prohibition.”

“That Carl was quite the rascal in his day. Yes, Carl on a dare took one of Ben’s thunder jugs full of home made whiskey and one of Nellie’s goblets and placed them in my lap here. The goblet broke as he climbed up though. People walking by would either point in horror or snicker as he wandered off. Ben heard about it from his customers but Nellie was told by me. She was fuming! For such a petite woman she had the fire of a giant that day. I hear tell Carl took his next few meals standing up at the mantle piece. She was so worried what the woman of the Portland Diet Mission would say at their next meeting at the Neal Dow house.”

Dia and Henry laughed heartily at that. They continued to talk for what seemed hours. He told her that her mother also had the gift but not from a poker chip but a toy bird. Alice would march in the parades on Veteran's Day and Memorial Day playing her trombone or twirling her baton. She would give me a wink every time and tease that she wished she could sit on my lap instead of marching down Congress Street. We would talk every time she went to help your dad at the drugstore.

Just then the bells of St. Luke's rang out and they knew their visit was coming to a close. Ian clapped his ears just as Henry was telling her to go to the doctor soon. She was going to be a mom and her daughter Tegan will need that chip. Then he went silent.

It was only 8:00 in the morning on August 27, 2012. People were filing into church for the early service. Ian was still confused by what had just happened. He looked back at Henry and could swear he saw it wink at him. He tripped over a loose brick and there was a \$50.00 bill. Ian dusted himself off and smile at Dia. She was lucky and his. She smiled back and said this is great we can use this to buy a pregnancy test at CVS on our way back to the hotel.

Ian was dazed from the fall but got the breath knocked out of him with this news. They both glanced back at Henry with a big smile.

Dia grabbed his hand and as she grinned asked, "What else can I tell you?"

Scavenger Hunt
Pat Larrabee

Glancing at her Timex, Nancy hurried past “Henry’s Corner” and on up Congress. Could she make it to Bramhall and up the hill to the hospital in 14 minutes and not be late to work? Her sturdy white clogs went even faster than her mind that was still on last night’s frivolity. She grinned to herself as she sped past the Mobil station, remembering the instructions of the game - “you must have all the items returned by 7pm Friday to be considered among the winners - and good luck to all!”

Yikes, she had been lucky so far. She had taken the kids to a Sea Dogs game only last week so found the ticket stub still in her bag. Charlie was such a man about town that she could get any number of drink coasters from him, she was sure. The toughie might be the Sinatra record but she would call Pat to see what she had in her collection. The really hard item to find would be the poker chip.

She pushed open the glass door of the Medical Center and hustled to the elevator, glancing at the telling clock, reminding her that she was late once again. Mr. Pierce is not going to like this she muttered to herself but took a deep breath and punched the button for 3R.

The cafeteria was buzzing with the noon activity as usual. After grabbing a sandwich and chips, Nancy parked her tray near the drink machine and snapped open her cell phone. She scrolled down to “Charlie” and punched the button. “Hey, Nan,” he responded. “What’s up?”

“I have a huge favor to ask,” she replied. “I know you are a frequenter of various establishments about town on a regular basis - would you happen to have a Sea Dog coaster or a Shipyard one handy?”

“Woman! You astonish me! Whatever makes you think I would have such an item!” he mocked. “But, wait. I’ll check my jacket pocket and the debris on the car floor and get back to you. There’s a very slim possibility I may have pilfered, er retained one in a recent visit, rare as they are. The visits, I mean....”

“You’re a life saver, Charlie! I really need them for a scavenger hunt I’m doing. The prize is a \$100. Gift certificate to LLB which I can really use for Howie’s birthday coming up. Gotta get back to work - thanks!”

As Nancy was waiting for the Metro her phone tinkled. The name listed was “Charlie”. “Hey,” she answered.

“You’ll never guess what I found, Dear Lady!” he remarked.

“Tell me!”, Nancy replied.

“Indeed, I did find a Sea Dog coaster as well as a Shipyard one in the console crevasse, much to my amazement! Oh, you don’t happen to need a Portland Riverboat Gambling Cruise poke chip, do you? I couldn’t cash this one in as it has a bullet hole in it....”

The Funeral

Maggie Knowles

I didn't cry at the funeral.

I saw him in the casket. I was aware of the speeches and sobs and overwhelming scent of lilies that gave me a pounding headache. People ballooned around me and I just wondered who they were and when they would tell me to leave. The dress wasn't even mine. It was wool and covered in white dog hair. If it wasn't for the small clench of my son's hand above my knee, I may have laughed from the absurdity of it all.

Between two fingers in my right hand lay a limp tissue, dry as sand. I wondered if anyone noticed I hadn't even pretended to dab my eye. Maybe I should? But my arm curled in my lap as if held by lead. In the left hand, (damn that I didn't make time for a manicure yesterday. The chipped coral polish was embarrassing) I rubbed a poker chip with a small hole through the middle. I hadn't shown it to the police when they came to tell me Robert was dead.

I found it by the mailbox the night he left. The startling green, a color reserved for casinos (pseudo-optimistic yet enough off-color that people forgot it represented their paycheck), caught my eye by a withered hydrangea plant. Its empty eye peered up at me. It looked so smooth I immediately picked it up to run my fingers across it. It was worth fifty dollars, but I wondered if the hole meant it had been discarded.

It wasn't necessarily shocking to find a casino chip; Robert had been addicted to gambling long before we met. He never knew I knew. Then again maybe he knew but didn't care. He certainly didn't make excuses for the hours he spent locked in the bathroom playing odds or whatever the fuck he did. He probably assumed I told my friends he was in there watching porn, since God knows the last time we had sex. Anyway, he made it clear it was *his* money, so calling him out on it would have been another battle I didn't have the energy for.

He, hell, *we* were far from perfect. I often imagined life with him gone. How easy things would be: I could breathe fully again, be myself. One night, (it was always raining in the fantasy) he would go out to get a pizza—no, Chinese—and simply never come home, no drama or suffering. Just like when one in a string of roommates moves out and the only wave of emotion is when you realize the bigger bedroom is free.

Then one night, it wasn't raining and he left to get envelopes of all things, he left and never came back. Dinner came and went, as did bedtime and the eleven-o'clock news with that anchor he thought was "so classic" with her efficient bob and unspectacular gold earrings. I awoke at 4am and realized I was sleeping in the middle of the bed. The sheets were flat and cool as I swam my legs across the expanse.

Miles asked the next morning, with sleep-tainted breath, where Daddy was and the phone rang so I didn't have to answer him. His four-year old mind had already moved onto a spider dangling from the light as I turned to the phone by the oven.

"Yes?" I had never answered the phone like that before.

The police asked if they could come over and I said not until I dropped my son off at day care.

Day care had always been an issue between Robert and me. He said he wanted me to have more time for my art, so of course my infant should be raised by twenty-two year olds at the Hugging Dolphins School. (Names for day cares irritate me only slightly less than hair salons. Sheer Madness, A Cut Above, Hair Force One...shut up.) But I knew he didn't trust me to raise our (*his*) child. I hadn't painted a damn thing since I dropped out of school and all of a sudden I was going to open a studio and spend my days inhaling acrylic?

Robert and I met when he walked into a garage where I had set up a canvass for a duet-painting idea I had. My occasional-lover Stephan and I would alternate minutes painting on the same canvass.

The twist was that we had to be blindfolded and stoned. After an hour we would unveil our shared masterpiece. Then Robert, in his custom-made flannel suit, wandered in asking if Camilla was available. Stephan and I laughed so hard that Robert was frozen in humiliation. It was when he turned to re-check the address that I got a flash of us married.

In retrospect he probably married me because I was the first person to make him feel like a stupid shit and he had to ensure that never happened again.

But there were enough things to keep the marriage stringing along. For instance, we both referred to mutual acquaintances by the shitty wine they drank.

“No, not that Daniel. The one that brought the Yellow Tail Shiraz that had the Rite-Aid price sticker still on it.”

“Did you hear Jesse is dating that tacky woman who actually brought her own blueberry wine to your cousin’s wedding?”

Etc.

Our shared hatred of the human race and their shortcomings kept us the couple that was never silent on date-nights. Over shared appetizers, we would make up scenarios about fellow diners.

e.g. “Definitely first date. Look at how nervous he is. Ok, so he works at the coffee shop she goes to and finally his co-workers said if he didn’t ask her out they were going to do it for him—I bet they did, too.”

“They are so having an affair. She spent four hundred dollars on those shoes and isn’t wearing panties. He has his toes up her dress...”

These stories were a bizarre form of foreplay for us. Not that the sex was great but eventually it worked well enough to get me pregnant.

I always assumed I would love being pregnant but I couldn’t get it over with fast enough. Pharmacy wine would have been good enough by the fifth month, just let me drink something. I was so bored. No sushi, really? That must be how Japanese women stay so skinny. I would stare into the fridge waiting for a combination to appear and sate this drive to eat something terrible. At least I could be the woman who was like, “I could not get enough salami, bacon and butterscotch fudge dipped in pesto.”

Maybe if Robert got in the car and made the late-night Taco Bell runs that women like to brag about something would have changed, but he stayed locked in the car with his laptop until my water broke and even then it took two hours to get him out.

Miles being born was the grossest and most gorgeous thing I have ever experienced. And it was in the moments afterward my first fantasy of Robert dying began. I didn’t need him. I did this whole baby thing by myself. He stared at the nurse with the huge boobs while I brought life into this world.

Why not just divorce him? The same reason I didn’t want a wedding. You get so caught up in the details that you never remember the taste of the cake, or why you hate them in the first place.

Am I really going through this torture because he gambles in the bathroom? I actually liked the peace and quiet, so maybe it wasn’t that bad.

The mind plays tricks.

I was sitting in Longfellow Square in front of that statue wondering if I just had one cup of coffee if that would be like an alcoholic having a shot of Patron. I had been a seven cups a day gal who rerouted her drives to hit Starbucks. Robert bet me \$100 that I couldn’t go a week without it. I did. He never paid me.

But on this particular extra-hot day in August, August 27th it was, I really wanted to scald my tongue on a dark roasted cup of coffee.

As I stood to walk to the café, a man wandered up and asked if I was Kate.

“Sure,” I lied.

Turns out “Kate” had hired this guy to take care of things. But the target hadn’t gone to work

that day, and then fate stepped in.

I redirected “Jon” to the guest bathroom on the second floor of my house. I cannot say what transpired but Robert never came home. That poker chip with the hole through the center was the only sign that something even occurred.

“Hey. Hey. It’s green, Sharon.” A finger jabs my tricep. “What the hell is wrong with you today?”

I blink hard twice. The line of cars with the headlights on and with white flags marking a funeral procession had passed through the intersection.

“Sorry,” I mutter.

Robert sighs and stares out the window as I turn down Congress to head back home.

The Long Night
Zachary Brockhouse

He told the driver to keep going. He could see inside the hotel, just up the stairs where they had hung a banner for him. “Icome ho” was all he could see. He saw several men in dark suits sitting on the stairs. They looked tired. He saw his brother and his wife out on the sidewalk. He was sucking hungrily at a cigarette and momentarily raised his eyes hopefully as the limo passed.

The driver looked back at him in the rear view mirror. Just keep going, he said.

He watched out of the window as the storefronts slid by. He saw Five Guys and asked the driver to stop.

He stepped out and the humidity washed over him. He took a deep breath. The driver had his ditty bag from the trunk and placed it at his feet. He reached into his pocket for a tip.

You’re all good. Welcome home, Corporal Pembroke. You want me to wait?

Pembroke shook his head, thanked him and watched the limo pull down Fore Street.

Five Guys was closed. It was late. He looked inside and saw a few teenagers mopping. The manager looked up from where he was counting his cash. He walked over and unlocked the door.

What can I do for you, son?

You closed? he asked.

Well, yessir. But, if you’re hungry we can fix something up for you.

He nodded and the manager let him in.

What would you like?

Pembroke looked at the menu. The words distorted in the light and he blinked to clear them.

Long flight?

You could say that. Yeah.

I’ll take a double with everything.

Coming right up. The teenager that was mopping looked up and moved towards the cooker. The manager waved him off. I got this, Pete.

The kid looked at him, then to Pembroke and resumed his mopping.

The manager brought the food over with a heaping bag of fries. I gave you everything that was left in the fryer.

Thank you.

You were in Afghanistan?

Pembroke nodded.

Welcome home. He held up his hands refusing payment, took the money from his wallet and put it in the register.

That one’s on me.

Pembroke walked over to Congress and up the hill. The bay spread out before him and he sat in the grass and watched the boat lights twinkle on the water. A buoy bell clanged in the distance. The sound made the air around him feel very big.

He hadn’t slept in ten days and sometimes the lights would flicker in a way that resembled fire. Street lights would leave long arcs burned into his eyes the way phosphorus rounds would. Sound would flutter at his ears like a moth’s wings and his nerves would stretch and recoil with the effects.

He watched the black silhouettes of birds flying in formation. He unwrapped the cheeseburger and ate it in silence. When he was finished he wiped his hands on the digital camo of his pants.

Two Latino kids walking on the path behind him stopped.

You a soldier? one asked.

He turned to look at him and squinted so his eyes could focus. He nodded.

You have a gun?

Nah. You turn in all your hardware before they let you leave.

You just get back?

To Portland? Yeah. About an hour ago.

One of the boys, tall with his hair parted in the middle, sat down on a nearby bench and leaned forward, an earnest look in his eyes.

Can I ask you something?

Sure.

Are you glad you joined?

He nodded. Best decision I ever made.

You shoot anybody?

Pembroke nodded again. That's part of the deal, he said.

You feel bad?

Don't feel anything at all.

Why are you out here just sitting in the grass? the other kid asked, digging at the asphalt path with his sneaker.

I was hoping you could tell me.

The boys looked at him. The tall one on the bench nodded.

I don't know that answer to that. I hope you find out.

You will. I know it, the other kid said at him and smiled.

He watched the two of them leave.

A car drove by and he could hear music pulsing from inside. It made his spine tingle and he involuntarily made a fist to resist the temptation to yell out loud. The sound pulled at him with invisible strings.

The car passed and a slow kind of silence fell around him like snow. He watched a bird, flying alone, climb into the cloudy sky and loop in a complete circle before continuing on.

He saw a man in a wheelchair struggling to move down the road to the beach. The man was moving slowly, using his feet as brakes to keep from tumbling down the steep road. He picked up his bag and walked down.

The man watched him approach. His eyes glittered beneath his wild, gray beard.

I'm just trying to get down the hill, he said.

I'll help you. Pembroke grabbed the handles on the back of the man's chair. A trash bag full of cans hung from the right handle. They clattered as they bounced against his knee.

Don't you get that shiny uniform dirty, the man said.

You out collecting tonight? Pembroke asked.

The man was watching their progress down the road. He pulled his feet up. I've been collecting cans all night, he offered.

They crossed the narrow gauge train tracks and into the parking lot by the boat landing.

How's this look? Pembroke asked him.

Good. Good, the man said.

You hungry?

I could use a drink, the man said.

I don't have anything to drink, but I have a bag of fries that I'm not going to eat.
I'll take that.

You reach down to the bottom of that bag and pull my bottle out, will ya?

Pembroke dropped the bag of fries into the man's lap and reached into the trash bag. It was wet and sticky, but he found a bottle that felt full. He pulled out a glass bottle full of clear liquid. There was no label on it.

What's this, old man? he asked.

That's a rare liquor. They only make it in Maine.

Pembroke unscrewed the top and sniffed it. It smelled like rubbing alcohol and bologna.

Damn. That smells awful.

Yeah, but it ain't meant to be smelled. Have yourself a little taste.

Pembroke tipped the bottle and took a big swallow. Almost instantly every light burned brighter. The bay glowed like it was daytime. The wind sounded like a pipe organ. Under the water he could see thousands of fish glowing bright as they swam. The world sparkled with electricity.

My, god, Pembroke whispered. I can see everything.

The first time will change you. It's called Grave Whiskey. Goes for a thousand dollars a bottle. You'll spend time in jail if they catch you with it. It's made with the skulls of dead men.

Pembroke held the bottle up and looked. The liquid glowed. Bits of things floated in the liquid. How do you mean?

I mean that it's fermented in casks with the skulls of dead men. In China they use snakes. In China, they use it to make your pecker hard.

What do you use this for?

This turns on the lights so you can see. You know?

Pembroke nodded and handed the bottle over. The man fit the bottle into his beard beneath his nose and tipped his head back. The liquor fizzed like bacon frying as it slid down his throat.

He handed the bottle back to Pembroke who took another drink.

I feel like I'm floating, he said.

The man in the chair nodded. He opened the bag of fries. Hard to chew with no teeth he said and smiled, smacking his lips.

Pembroke reached into his mouth and with a gentle tug, pulled one of his front teeth out.

He dropped it into the man's hand. You can have my teeth, he said.

Thank you, the man said.

I haven't slept in ten days.

I know, the man said. You should go see my friend, The Baron. He could help you.

The Baron?

Yup. He's right over there. He pointed to the far end of the parking lot, just past the stacks of kayaks. There was an RV parked there. The lights were on inside. The rims of each of the windows crackled with purple fire.

Pembroke moved towards the RV.

Hey, the man in the wheelchair called out to him. You'll need to give him this. He held up a red, plastic chip.

Pembroke took it and struggled to focus on it. There was a dark hole in the middle of it.

Bullet hole, the man said. Shot by Annie Oakley herself in 1892.

Pembroke could read "Portland Riverboat Gambling Cruises" along the circumference of the chip. On the other side he could see what was left of a fifty-dollar symbol.

Really?

Not really. It was manufactured with the bullet hole in it. Not really sure why. Suppose, so people could sell them as collectibles. Make sure to give it to him.

Pembroke knocked on the door. Music was coming from inside of the RV and the notes fluttered around him like fireflies.

A man answered the door. He wasn't wearing a shirt. The overwhelming smell of formaldehyde washed out from the room behind him.

I've been expecting you, he said. Come in.

He moved his immense girth so Pembroke could step in. The curtains had all been drawn. Even the windshield had a curtain on it. Aside from the drivers seat, there was no furniture. The walls were lined with shelves. Dead animals were in posed along them in rows. Strange creatures floated in glass jars.

Pembroke watched the music fluttering around him. Each note fell onto an animal and glowed there.

I haven't slept in ten days.

I know. Do you have something for me?

Pembroke handed him the chip. The Baron held it up to the dim light in the ceiling. Perfect, he said. Follow me.

The Baron moved with a pronounced limp. They moved past the bathroom into what used to be the bedroom. There were several trash bags stacked in what should have been the shower. Flies hovered around dirty piles of bones.

The room had been converted into a workshop. The tools of taxidermy lined the walls. Animals in various states of assembly were scattered across a metal work table. The Baron rummaged around in an egg crate and pulled out an enormous Sheepshead. The fish had human teeth and a thick, pink tongue. One of the teeth was gold. The Baron popped the chip into the fish's left eye socket and adjusted it with a pair of needle nose pliers.

Perfect. He held the fish up so Pembroke could see. Both of the eyes were red chips, each with a bullet hole in it.

He placed the fish on the table and sprayed it with shellac. The Baron sat down on a folding metal chair and looked at him expectantly.

Today's your first day back?

I deployed four years ago today, August 27th, 2008.

The Baron looked at him. His bald head came to a point. His eyes were very far apart and pointed in separate directions. The dark bags beneath them looked like melted wax and descended towards where his chin should have been. His chin looked as if it had melted into his shoulders. You could only tell where his immense chest began because of the thick coat of fur that marked his chest and shoulders.

Pembroke noticed that one of his eyes was a different color. He looked closer and saw it was made of glass.

A vertical scar ran up his chest where no hair could grow. His left leg was wooden below the knee and held in place with leather straps and buckles.

There was a squirrel, dressed like a parade leader, wearing a shako hat with a long tuft of purple feathers. It was wearing a white cape and posed in the middle of striking a great drum it had attached to its chest.

The Whistling Colonel, the Baron said. It was my first piece.

Pembroke saw a ball of black fur in a cage. He thought he could see it rising and falling with breath.

That one's real, the Baron said. He rattled the cage and a small monkey blinked back at him. When it noticed Pembroke, it sat up and watched him with interest. It's small hands grabbed the bars of the cage.

You need to learn about sleep, that's all that monkey does. He could show you a thing or two.

The Baron opened the cage and the creature climbed onto his arm. It made a series of signs with its hands.

Its left hand moved from its mouth. Then it pulled both hands together like it was imitating a bird, then pulled them apart again. It bumped its two fists together and spread its hands, palms up. It looked at him and repeated the gestures. Pembroke watched the creature and began to move his hands the same way.

The Baron laughed. The monkey is signing a song to you. Do you know this song?

Pembroke watched the monkey's hands moving. The hands began to strobe and move in slow motion. He blinked and watched them, concentrating to understand their meaning.

The Baron translated with his own hands. He moved one hand from his mouth.

Sweet, he said.

He moved his hands together and fluttered them apart.

Dreams, he said.

Pembroke looked behind him to the shelves lined with animals. The music pulsed in every one of them, a glowing light from the dried fur and formaldehyde filled jars. Their glass eyes were fixed on him.

Are made, the Baron said.

Pembroke heard the wind on the ocean. One by one, each animal closed its eyes. He could hear breathing. He could see the Styrofoam body forms expanding and contracting under the animal skins.

Of this, the Baron finished.

The small monkey watched him from his lap. He saw that The Whistling Colonel had closed its eyes.

Do you understand?

Pembroke nodded.

Remember this. Pembroke signed the words back to them both. The monkey pulled at tufts of the Baron's chest hair and wrapped its arms around his thick neck.

Goodnight, Pembroke said. Thank you.

The Baron nodded regally, one eye matching the movements of his head.

He stepped outside. The man in the wheelchair was gone.

Pembroke grabbed his bag from the asphalt and walked up the hill. Dew had collected on the grass, but he felt the air anticipating something. At the top of the hill he turned back. In the distance he could see the smokestacks of the old power plant. There was a pulsing light coming from behind Great Diamond Island. He knew it was the sun rising. He could feel it. He could hear it. It sounded like the ocean.

Far off in the Atlantic he could hear the waves crashing against the rocks. Whales called to each other in the dark.

To the right of Fort Gorges an oil tanker was sleeping. It huffed a strange hollow engine noise every now and then, exhaling and inhaling. Its lights shimmered through the fog across the bay. Birds circled overhead, leaving glowing trails wherever they flew.

He watched two men push a shopping cart across the empty parking lot. They moved like they were sleepwalking, their joints hanging loosely from tired shoulders. Cans and bottles tinkled in their bags as they moved across the parking lot, scraping duct taped shoes as they walked.

He saw shapes moving in the bushes and a young child in a diaper stepped onto the asphalt. The child looked up the hill directly at Pembroke. A woman stepped out and stared up at him before picking the child up and retreating back to the dark bushes.

Pembroke watched the sun rise. He felt the earth turning. A tugboat called from somewhere in the bay. Through the fog, another answered it. He thought of Morse code and signed the words to the song. The rhythm of his hands reminded him of cleaning a rifle. The series of exact movements

reassured him and as he repeated them, he felt the veil that had been around his head beginning to lift.

He walked back into the Old Port. He walked past the Portland Harbor Hotel and paused there. His family was sleeping inside. He could feel them all sleeping, the rhythms of their breathing bound together like an orchestra in his head. He breathed with them, trying to regain the syncopation of sleep that he had understood for so long but had so recently forgotten.

He watched his reflection in the glass doors of the hotel. His desert fatigues moved like an old video game. The digital camouflage flickered across his body. His bright red hair, shaved close to his scalp, stood in stark contrast to the darkness beneath his forehead. His eyes looked like the two deepest holes that he had ever seen. A blank spot that drilled from the front of his head to that moment ten days ago.

He breathed again and made the signs, watching himself in the glass. The sun was up and the mist all around him glowed orange. He walked to State Street. Commuters were beginning to drive by him in packs. Subarus by the dozen whisked past him.

He found himself in Longfellow Square and put his bag down against a bench. He sat on the ground and leaned against it. He looked at his watch. It read 7:14 AM.

He watched the golden light come up Congress. It burned the mist off and it rang loud as a bell against every building and brick he could see. The light crept up the statue there and he watched it until the old poet was completely golden.

Pembroke made the signs to himself over and over. The people walking by looked at him, but no one said anything. He didn't mind. The motion felt good. He repeated the signs over and over again.

On Congress he noticed a homeless man in a dress. The dress was blue with white flowers that radiated light. The man had on a dirty captain's hat and was sleeping in a rusty wheelchair. His skin was bright red from the sun. His big belly hung across his lap. He was wearing old deck shoes and no socks. One toe poked out from his left shoe. The light from the sun hit him at that very moment, and the wild hair that tumbled out from beneath the cap glowed like a halo.

Pembroke's eyes watered a little and he closed them. He listened to his breath moving in and out of his chest. He listened to his heart beating.

He opened his eyes again. The captain was still sleeping in his chair. Far away a tugboat called, but there was no answer. Portland was asleep.