

A New Life

Everything was still, but moving; everything was calm but chaotic. It's the life of every New Yorker no matter how high or how low you are to bustling streets and rampant crime. I'm not high enough to breathe in the clouds that mask the crimes of the city, but not low enough to drown in the darkness that is common in the people's hearts and bodies. I look out on the city to see the beauty in what appeals to people to the area, the fresh faced prey of the criminals of the city. None of them have had to walk in shadows so deep that you fear getting entangled in the monsters that lurk within. None of them have their own father being yelled at by racists screaming their many slurs for people like me, people who are different than the perfect white men that are in power, the people ripped away from their native lands. As a young black boy, Papa told me not to react, to not ignite their souls, to not be their activity for the night because as my fate would have it, I would end up shot, or worse, be alive and my story stuck in violent 35 cent tabloids that are not sold for the information, but for the pride they give some. The pride of killing people of another race and those who love another of the same gender, is becoming more widespread, like the virus that's been getting around in the homosexuals. I feel the newspaper in my hands crumble and begin to shrink under my fury for my brothers and sisters of all kinds living in fear, suffocating from the hate.

1....2....3.....4....5....6. I count my breaths to attempt to cool me off in my lonely apartment that the air is mine due to me putting \$648 into rent and covering my roommate's behind, again.. I think back onto a good day in this apartment as my roommate, Jared, had disappointment written all over his face and I could tell that something was wrong, that that audition didn't go well for him. He could barely look into my eyes when he mumbled something about him not being able to pay the rent this time of around, but he didn't know— until I told him, of course— that I had just gotten a raise that could help us and our rent situation for the next year. The look on his face, the smile he had! It was so great to someone of a different race to actually be happy around me and wrap their arms around me for a change. You see, Jared was willing to live with a person like me, regardless of the fact that he would get attention and the fact he didn't know my whole story. At least he didn't mind the fact I was African which has me wondering how far our friendship goes, what Jared can withstand. Honestly, I think it was the desperate Jared wore on his face with many attempts to be the best in this large city. Of course there's a risk of living with someone of a different race nowadays, but never once did he leave or threaten to. We depended on each other to pay rent to the old Russian man downstairs who would love to get his wrinkled hands on an African American who lives the , the life of a black man, the life of a photographer at the Times, and the life of loving a fellow —

My thoughts are interrupted by a firm, calloused hand on my shoulder slightly shaking me, "Daniel!" My eyes find the pale face and the flaming red hair of a concerned friend, "No dilated eyes, no blistered lips," he grasps my head making sure his observations are correct, " I thought the crackheads from A13 got to you, man." He drops my head.

"Now why would I do that?" I asked, my voice laced with sarcasm.

“That’s a really good question, you know the stress and stuff of being the only black person in your department, being in a head position of your department, living in a crime-infested city, you know, just the normal shit for you to drink out of.” Jared was starting to stalk away. “You read the newspapers all the time, at least you would see my concern here.”

I was in the wrong and I couldn’t let him be angry, not right now at least, “Alright, alright,” Jared paused in his strides, “My bad, I didn’t mean to upset you over your concern for me,” He turns to look at me, “**Very valid reasons why I would turn to drugs right now.** But never mind me, how was your day? How’d the audition go?” Maybe pestering him would distract me.

“The usual - the confidence,” he used his hand to demonstrate by angling it upwards, “nerves,” the hand goes down slightly, “hitting all the notes accurately, but then...” his hand plummets down, “some nig- I mean, black man comes in and shows me up. I mean the nerve on that club owner to tell me it has nothing to do with my ethnicity, I’m trying to be the nice white guy here once.” Stewart - the club owner - was a friend of mine who doesn’t like white people thinking they can take everything for us, and honestly, I’m siding with Stewart now.

“Things happen for a reason, man. There’s a nice white, I mean a nice country club you can audition for.” I mocked him for trying to call a brother a racial slur, even while living with a black man, I guess you can’t really take the slurs out of a native tongue.

Jared notices the reference to his slip up, “I’m sorry, old habit.”

He looks down and catches the crumpled newspaper in my right hand and the tense fist I’m making with my left. Jared slowly reaches his hand out towards the paper, like it’s going to lash out, I don’t do anything to speed this up, but to attempt to slow it down even more. Jared takes the paper out of my hand which leaves me begging for an anchor in the middle of my mind’s ocean of possibilities. This only brings me back to the the headline a couple years ago that really got to me while I was at work, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals.”

My roommate smooths out the paper with delicacy, despite the weight of the words on the page. Once it’s smoothed out, he reads the headline, “Black Youth Is Killed by Whites; Brooklyn Attack Is Called Racial.” I hear his sharp intake of breath as he continues, “*The victim's father, Moses J. Stewart, told a radio station, WLIB, that his son was "very, very intelligent" and had recently been accepted at a technical high school. "He was reaching his goals," he said. "He was putting his dreams behind him because he was achieving his task." "To see my son's life wasted," he said, "because of some discriminatory fool with a gun in his hands who saw nothing but a black man is a very, very vile thing to me."*

The weight of the words cannot be relieved with anything on this earth or the next one and beyond. Jared mumbles a lengthy curse that doesn’t shock me, I could see where he was coming from.

After basking in the silence Jared speaks, “You didn’t leave the house today, did you?”

“How could I? A kid was killed for being in a white neighborhood and killed out of rumors from some damn teenagers!” I shot up out of the numbness and fury was racing through me, “In case you couldn’t tell, I’m black, and from here down to the basement, white people live here. There are three other black people in this building, damn it, I don’t even want to step outside my door!” I was beginning to shake violently.

Instead of fighting fire with fire, I could hear Jared come closer to me with gentle steps that were so soft, our old floorboards didn’t even scream. I stopped him from coming to any closer by growling at him every time he tried to come closer with each step. His soft voice barely registers through my anger, “You need to calm down, okay? You were like this before, at work remember?” I nodded, recollecting that day, “Breathe through your nose and out. There you go.” The soft voice was calming, I’ll admit, but it was useless as he completed his thought to try to calm me, “This could be way worse, you could have that gay plague that’s been getting around in the homo men, but not us heteros.”

“You really think it can’t get to us?” He smiled, attempting to reassure someone who was hiding another person, like a child tucked into their parents shoulders, but I was tired of hiding behind the mask of a successful African American, “Could it not get to us?!” My uproar shocked him and it broke through the dam around my heart, and he reached towards me and hugged me, the most affection he ever showed me. I sobbed like a baby and he held me as I cried for myself and for the souls being lost right now.

Tucking my head in his shoulder, I let the words go in a hushed tone, “Maybe not for you, Jared,” his grasp loosened, “but for me though, its reality.”

His grasp was barely there, “What?”

“Jared, I’m not like you in more than the obvious way.” I mustered up my courage, “I am gay, Jared. I love the company of a man like you like the company of a woman. I am a gay man and I’m proud of it, in spite of the consequences.”

“No, you can’t be. W-w-we lived together... is it because we’ve lived together?” Jared was timid as he backed away, he fell into the chair, scared of everything he touches as if anything is going to give him this killer inside me.

“No! I have been gay long before you man! And I will die the way a gay man dies, with the gay plague coursing through my veins.” I think about the headlines infiltrating this city and then the next one and the next one and so on.

As a rebuttal, Jared, barely using anything to hoist himself off the couch, timid after this news, decides to not speak, but comes closer and uses his body as a way to express his feelings by winding back his hand and punching me in my nose, blood spurting out of me, knocking my head back making me lose my footing and I land on the ground— the wind and hope being knocked out of me.

As the numbness from the physical abuse sets in, Jared leans over me with tears in his eyes, letting the blood on his hand drip, and says, “Why did you have to tell me?” One of his tears drops onto my chest, right over my heart, burning right through me.

Jared escapes from this infected apartment with a few shuffles, mumbling, and a door slam. The note of anger and loss echoes through this lonely apartment as a part of me died here today. The seemingly heterosexual African American who was safe with his secret and could be murdered for one apparent reason died today, August 26, 1989. Someone else was born today; a plague-infected, gay man who was born out of anger, hate, and hopelessness.

Jared’s question infiltrates my heart accompanied by remnants of who I was with his tear. I put my hand over my heart, ignoring the pain from my face, and think about what I told him. I could’ve lived my life with no cure and live with constant fear of walking in front of the wrong crowd, but either way, can I sit idly by as I’m conquered for who I am or can there be light?

I will not live in fear of being killed for who I am or who I love.

I rise from the skeleton of a person who is long gone and get on my own two feet as a newborn in this city. I look around the old life of Daniel the African American, and look out to the terrace and I see the life of Daniel, the free gay man who just happens to be black. I want a new life of peace, a life where I can guide and protect those who were like Daniel the African American. On my own two feet, I make a hasty exit out of this life and into the New York skyline.

I count the floors as I descend into a different light of life filled with those who came before me.

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