

[From *Shaming the Devil*]

SOMEWHERE NEARBY

I am a corpse being dragged to shallow burial. My heart is hammering in my chest. My eyes are open. I smell trees above me. Branches that are too slender to climb, by the fragrance of them. He is dragging me backwards through bramble by my open mouth. I imagine spots of blood welling on my exposed legs and hands. I had put on long sleeves to protect me from the mosquitoes and other biting things here. Small blessing now. I am screaming stifled cries into a palm that smells like weed. I am terrified. My fatigues must be filthy—full of dead leaves, twigs, cigarette butts and dirt—by now, being drawn at my ankles as they are.

It is the end of June. The full moon is there above me. Snatches of light among the leaves. It is obscured by night clouds, my sweat and the tears seeping into my eyes. I am wondering whether words can pry their way between calloused fingers like his. Whether my groans might take purchase on the humid night air and find ears that would help me. Whether I would be successful if I could kick him with my teeth, the only appendages I have that are not trembling, and run.

“Shut the hell up, bitch ass!” he whispers loudly. I feel his deep voice vibrating at the back of my head. The blood in my veins seems to scatter in all directions when he speaks. My heart empties. Useless in this rising terror. My eyes roll back in my head.

Yet still I want him to fuck me as he’d promised wordlessly. Earlier. Cupping my ass, as he did. Pressing his finger into the seam of the seat of my pants. Denting my buttock’s starvation in the June heat. The shadow of Brooklyn on his brown-skinned face in the night had made me hard and moist for him. I was over-easy for his silhouetted build and the dark well of his eyes.

Had I known that there were two of them, I would have walked back into the semi-light. Sat on a bench in the Rose Garden and waited near one of the round, in-ground fountains. There were other skulking, bulging things to choose from under the stars in Prospect Park. Some cruising the silence like predators and others so willing to be violated that sneakers seemed stitched into their jeans at the knees.

I am one of those last men and the former. My knees had already been soiled more than once tonight. My breath must smell like skin and the dirty friction of palms oiled by lips and saliva, but still I didn’t want to go home. Until. I vaguely remember that there was some “until,” before now.

“You wanted it, right?” he asks sarcastically.

I did and do. So much so that I’d followed him down the stairs from the Rose Garden, through the Vale of Cashmere, over Nellie’s Lawn and across East Drive. I’d followed him South and West far past the well, if invisibly, demarcated lands of *my people*. I’d left the safety of the other cruising black men who have sex with men in order to be more alone with him.

When we’d arrive at Lookout Hill, I scarcely knew where I was. Location was everything to him, though—to them—as I found out all too suddenly when he tilted me and the terrain that had looked out for me, George Washington and his revolutionary forces, once again became on edge. My conquest touched my shoulder and abruptly I found myself in a suffocating choke hold from behind. I struggled uselessly against the

asthma of his grip. He was taller and much stronger. I suddenly had to admit to myself that my days at the gym had been solely for aesthetic reasons. He, on the other hand, had probably never set foot in a Bally's. Still his life had left him thick with utilitarian muscle that he was using to inexorably crush the bones in my throat.

He had almost lifted me off the ground with his asphyxiating grip, when one of the trees nearby suddenly began to move towards us. His cohort materialized like unchecked debt out of the darkness. My entire life suddenly seemed less accomplished, a thousand times more discouraging. A trap had been sprung. The substance of me deflated. I could no more gnaw off my own neck to escape than miraculously turn into a version of martial arts wielding Wesley Snipes. Instead of harming myself in futile resistance, I relaxed as much as I could. Hardly able to breath. Waited for them to demand some form of ransom.

That, though, was moments ago, before he'd begun dragging me backwards by my mouth. They have still not asked me for anything.

He is erect there behind me now. I feel it. A protrusion pressing at the back of my head as he lets me fall slightly to reset his grip. The muggy night is making me slippery in his hands. He is holding me by my mouth and throat just below his chest. They have dragged me under a dense canopy of trees and shrubs into a tiny clearing that no one would have known was there.

It is dank, where they have taken me. I can almost hear the leaves, damp and rotting on the ground. Worms, beetles and all manner of crawling, slithering, undulating things wending their way among the sheets of detritus. There are fragrant flowers somewhere nearby, though. I remember smelling a perfume similar to them earlier, as day was waning into night. I remember trying to place the aroma. To give the flowers the respect they are due by registering them in my mind as they are named. I failed, and promised to come back during the day tomorrow.

The flowers reveal a tiny reservoir of peace and calm inside me. They remind me of the possibility of sunrise. Panic-stricken though I am, I become reminiscent within this fragile vesicle of hope. Remembering mundane instances. Trying to compose myself by toying with familiar images broken into puzzle pieces, questions and random thoughts.

I recall the bats I'd seen darting, angling under the lamps like tiny fighter jets as I'd crossed the Nethermead just after dusk. Their chirping sounds of echolocation. Their feeding on flying insects I couldn't see in the dimming light. I thought how bat-like I was there in the park, hunting semi-invisible men. Wondered how I must seem to the occasional nighttime jogger. Did they stop to think of me? Consider me a natural part of the park's nocturnal ecosystem? Was I to them another documented yet mysterious animal on a mission predetermined by biology, seasonality and evolution? Another of precious few wild lives that encroaching development has made increasingly worthy of preservation?

My leisurely stroll across the Nethermead was at least a full five hours before now, though. The coconut rolls I brought with me have long since been eaten. The wax paper sleeve I'd held them in long since thrown away. I was a hunter when I arrived hungry. Now I am captured, bleating prey, wondering how to scroll this night forward into salvation.

I try to nod my head in response to his rhetorical question about my desires, but cannot. The arm around my throat is too well built. His grip on my mouth, marijuana and salt flavored as it is, is too strong. I am urgent for this abduction to have been a game. I will cum twice for them both if they will let me live. My sweat is running cold now like some dying thing. It is terrible to feel my heartbeat and to know that I am probably not long anymore for this world.

Thinking that I am about to die is especially worrisome when there are important things that I didn't do before leaving home. Like folding my laundry, or logging off of Adam4Adam. I realize that I don't want to be referred to as "Hngbttm4Hng" in the media. Some names can be much too telling, and there are many things I believe very few people need to know. I didn't close my Winamp player either. I'd left it adult film prepped and waiting just in case, as often happens, I returned to my apartment unsatisfied. Prepared to masturbate with a mixture of baby oil and lotion, and go to bed.

I don't want anyone to discover the seventy-one full length gay porn movies that I downloaded and stashed away in layers of nested folders on my drive. The Treasure Island Media films alone are enough to shatter most people's useful illusions about my character.

I don't want the police questioning my roommates about how I spent my nights. I don't want them to find my anti-retroviral prescriptions hidden in my paper files, or the tablets disguised by vitamin bottles. I don't want them contacting my job or my mother with the sordid, surprising details of my demise. I don't want to be unearthed and demystified after I've expired.

The cold of a gun barrel against my right temple is unlike anything I have ever felt. It is a shunt against rationality. My mind instantly fills with an even deeper dread than I have been feeling these last few minutes. Like falling from a high building, I am ill-equipped for the myriad sensations that may follow if I'm forced to live this particular cruising experience to its end. The increased awareness of inescapability and helplessness are far worse than the gun itself, I recognize. The figure that emerged from the trees is gouging my temple with the weapon, as he pushes it gangsta style against my head. My brain hurts. My heart beats in racing stutter steps. My breath catches. It is the not knowing which of several terrible things will happen that causes me to swoon.

—TO BE CONTINUED—