

Always Ourselves in the Sea\*

Interstate 35 drones a baseline of gray noise as predawn commuters crowd each other's taillights, and tractor-trailers roar past in great Doppler vortexes of motion. I wake with the sounds washing over me, float to the surface and open my eyes. Across the highway, the roof line of the downtown Hilton glistens with a premonition of sunrise. The air is cool and heavy with moisture; my sleeping bag is spread like the night sky for a starfield of dew. Overhead, leaning stands of foot-high grasses hold droplets like sparkling galaxies at their tips, poised to splash onto my face and hair.

I feel better than usual, well-rested in spite of alcohol thirst, hunger, and the bullshit disrepair of homelessness. I lie still and listen for murmuring voices, the snap of a lighter, or the telltale misstep of someone straining at silence. It pays to be cautious—crackheads gather on this hillside, meth freaks, and honorless thieves. Most are harmless, though, common drunks like me, but you can never be sure of a stranger's intentions. I sense no threats and sit up to stretch, alone on my urban hill, as guileless and innocent as McCartney's fool.

A spot-check inventory reveals no damage or loss: reading glasses ... yes, in the grass nearby, unbent. I've got half a pack of smokes. My wallet's tucked in my sock. The Chevron must've shut down before I'd drunk all the cash; I'm holding seven ones and two-fifty in silver. If I do without coffee, it's enough to finance a couple of pints of Kamchatka. There's an unexpected weight in my pack, and I'll be damned—I'd mustered the blacked-out foresight to

hoard the last tallboy.

With no agenda beyond liquor store business, I slide into my shoes, tighten my belt, and kill the beer in three merciful swallows. My shoulders relax, and each breath reaches deeper into my core. I stow my sleeping bag behind a bush, climb aboard the morning like she's a rudderless ship, and drift downhill toward the edge of the world.

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Consciousness rises in waves of cold violet light. I lie still and heavy, immobilized by my own weight. Whirlpools of low-voiced laughter swirl nearby, and distant clatters ricochet off tile and glass. Dry air rushes into my nostrils from a tube draped across my lip.

I blink, and overhead an IV bag gleams. The needle stings under my skin.

“Welcome back, Mr. Maxwell.”

The nurses smile. I'm on a gurney at their station, parallel parked like a stalled car. “Am I okay?”

“You'll be fine,” the elderly nurse in blue says.

The younger woman, in wrinkled Hello Kitty scrubs, reassures me: “You behaved wonderful, too. Not a lick of trouble.”

“I'm a wreck.” The sheets are littered with tobacco from a broken cigarette. My tongue is sluggish and desiccated.

“Brackenridge ER,” Nurse Blue says. “Do you remember anything?”

“I've been here before,” I say, and shake my head. “Not like this.”

Hello Kitty asks how I feel as she examines the IV bag and jots a note on an aluminum clipboard.

“Am I okay?” I ask again.

Nurse Blue leans over the counter and whispers, “You just had yourself a little too much fun, Mr. Maxwell.” She untangles the oxygen tubes and stows them, pulls the IV, and applies a cotton ball and Band-Aid. She plops my pack on the gurney, reaches into her pocket. “Your glasses.”

They’re intact, and I thank her.

Hello Kitty brings a packaged sandwich and two cartons of apple juice, and they’re gone before I taste either. The juice makes me queasy, but it’s cold and nourishing.

“You know you could *die* acting a fool like this.”

“I’m sorry.”

It’s barely midnight, and I wish I’d rolled back into sleep without letting on, because once Kitty and Blue turn me out, I’m *out*. They hand over my paperwork, administer a rote lecture on acute alcohol intoxication, and direct me to the exit.

“You steer clear of trouble, Mr. Maxwell.”

“Thanks,” I say. “For the sandwich and all.”

On the sidewalk, I peel off the blood-spotted Band-Aid and toss it into the shrubs. It’s still seven hours till sunup, and I look forward to some rest, but I worry if someone has claimed my spot, if my sleeping bag is still stashed on the embankment, and where I’ll score a drink this time of night. I worry as I drift back toward home, if I can take another day of freedom.

\*From the poem “maggie and milly and molly and may” by E. E. Cummings.