Hope through an Empty Pack

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The world never shined its light too heavily upon his face, and the dark aspect of this earth greeted him every day with a wicked grin. There was nothing that could steer him away from the eyes of those who chose to persecute, there was no hole that was deep enough to hide in forever. So he went about his business, following his nose deeper and deeper into depravity and vice. Blurring the sharp edges of human relationships with complex chemicals and starving his core that ached for love and even the most miniscule shred of humanity. But humanity too long forgotten or denied becomes humanity lost. Continuing on his self-destructive path, the man never turned, never looked too hard for a way out of his vicious circle of pain and deceit. He got lost somewhere in the middle world between Hell and Earth, and his story was a story of pain and woe.

And maybe redemption as well, but that's up to you to decide...

It was the second Tuesday of the month again, and waking up was always the hardest part of the day for Jacob. Instead of being reaffirmed of the value and worth of being alive for another day, gloom settled over the outskirts of his soul. He reached up onto his nightstand and grabbed for his pack of Lucky Strikes, shook it once, and, hearing nothing, reached inside. His probing fingers touched nothing but air and the sides of the box. His addiction got him to his feet and he picked up his clothes that were strewn in a haphazard pile on the ground. After donning his gear sufficiently to go outside into the world, he opened his door and began his walk to the nearest store.

The chill biting air of a crisp September morning shocked Jacob's system, and he bundled his clothes a little bit tighter around him. He looked at the gray sky above and wondered if the sun still existed and if the day even had a right to be called such. The store was about a mile away, and the walk was a much-needed respite from the inactivity of the past evening. He had spent all evening smoking joints and watching bad TV just to deaden the realization of the inadequacy of his life. But every morning, his life as it was stared at him straight in the eye through the mirror. Unkempt, unloved, unneeded in a world that used him like a gear in some malevolent machine. As his walk continued, his muscles grew sore from the depravations of the previous night. Drugs used to fill a void that only grew with their continued use until the void became a permanent, and all the drugs could do was dull it temporarily. He trudged on, his inner monologue a stream of discomfort and self-loathing.

He got to the store, and looking in he saw a face he had become familiar with over the countless cigarette runs that occurred in a very regular pattern. Man is a creature of habit, and habits have a strange way of becoming life. Instead of new ideas and experiences every day, there is only the repetition of old ideas and experiences, until life becomes a comfortable haze to drift through. For Jacob, life had become a pattern of comfortable and meaningless actions in a set order. Get up, throw on clothes, buy cigarettes, go to work, come home, fill his body with mind-numbing chemicals, watch television, sleep. Go through that every day, with a thousand other smaller habits and patterns thrown in, until life becomes so predictable that one can outrun the meaninglessness. That was and is the theory, and maybe it works, at least for a while. Sooner or later though, the pattern becomes the integral part of the depression and self-pity, but once one is locked in, it might be too late to change... it might be. But sometimes the hand is forced.

He said his usual "Hello" to a somewhat attractive, middle-aged woman behind the counter; her nametag read "Sally," but Jacob called her Sal—half because it was one less syllable to utter and half because he figured since he saw her every day he should become more personable with her. He moved to the counter, half-looked at Sal, and half-looked away from her and pointed towards the Lucky Strikes, saying "the usual" as he did so. She didn't respond and was focused—tension readily apparent in her face—on something over his right shoulder. Jacob heard quick footsteps and turned to face a man all in black, with some brand of menacing pistol clenched in his hand. Jacob heard, "Get on the floor;..."
now, or I swear I will shoot you! Do you believe me?" Jacob nodded but didn't drop to the ground. Instead, he said, "Go for it, kill me, do you think it really matters to me? Alive or dead is hardly a distinction anymore. Shoot me if you want to." Through his black stocking mask, the gunman's eyes widened, then narrowed to little slits. As the gunman's finger tensed on the trigger, Jacob jerked his head quickly to the side ...

**BANG!**

Jacob felt a concussive force of great proportion on the left side of his forehead, waves of intense pain filled his mind, and blood flowed down into his left eye. As he dropped toward the ground, he saw the world through a red filter and heard only faintly through the roar of the pain that filled his mind. The gunman looked down at him with wide-eyed fear and then quickly pointed his gun at Sally. "Open that f***ing cash register now, b***h, or I'll kill you too—do you believe me? Huh, do you f***ing believe me?!!!" Sally nodded, wide-eyed in fear and with shaking hands reached down and pushed the release button on the cash register. Pulling out wads of tens and twenties, she handed them to the gunman with as much speed as she could muster in her state of petrified shock.

Jacob looked up towards the face of Sally and felt something that he had hidden in himself, something he had buried for most of his life. He felt emotion, actually a veritable stew of emotions. At the forefront of his mind, anger burned towards this man who would threaten people with death for a small pile of green paper. From his prone position on the ground, he kicked the side of the gunman's knee with all the force he could muster. There was a small pop and a quick tearing noise as the man's knee bent inwards at an angle that it never had before. As his knee buckled, the gunman fell to the ground beside Jacob, and his gun slipped out of his hand and skidded across the floor, coming to a sudden stop against the bottom of a display case. Clutching his useless knee, the gunman began to crawl towards it, pulling himself with his hands.

Jacob was filled with adrenaline, and his rage cast even more of a red haze to his vision. Staggering to his feet, he stood over the crawling gunman, then stomped down with all his force on the back of his outstretched neck. The gunman stopped moving, his arms and legs twitching, and blood began to spread outwards in a semi-circle from where his nose must have been. Jacob felt for a pulse and found one, albeit a weak one, and felt relief that he had not killed him. He turned to Sally and said, "You should probably call the police, then could you get me my pack of Lucky Strikes?" Sally nodded, handed him a pack and reached behind the counter and gave him a clean towel, then dialed the police.

Feeling the shape of the pack in his hands, Jacob opened it and pulled one out, squatted down, leaning against the counter and lit his cigarette, looking at the prone body in front of him. He inhaled slowly, at the same time pressing the towel against the gunshot wound across his temple and tried to get ahold of himself. He heard Sally's voice over his head and behind him, saying, "Ya know, those things'll kill ya." Jacob laughed a deep laugh, a laugh that had not been a part of his life for a long time, and said, "Yeah, they probably will." He sat down on the ground and in the most unlikely of circumstances, and in the most unlikely of times, waiting for the police to arrive, with a gunshot wound over his eye and a cigarette in his hand, and laughing, he began to feel hope.

Michael Schultz