

## A Grown Man Crying at Dawn

By Dylan Houle

“She’s my girlfriend!” I said. Then Keith drew his arm back, lunged forward and punched me in the jaw.

Time slowed so that I could see the hair on his knuckles. It bowled me over and I could hear Jen crying and Mitch saying something like, “Hey man!” My palms hit the ground first, then the back of my head and I threw up on myself. It dripped off my parka into the snow, steaming. Keith straddled me, swung again and broke my glasses into my face. Blood sprang from the new cut below my left eye, down my cheek and into the corner of my lips.

Are we done? Keith said. I barely understood that I was still fighting. His words came to me as an echo and my lungs felt like boxing gloves. Looking past him, under his muscular arms and sweat-stained armpits, I saw Mitch’s hand wrap around Jen’s shoulder. A taxi pulled up. They were leaving. Are we done?

“Alright, man,” I said.

“Mah dude.” He stood and yanked me up. He rubbed the right side of his face. His eye was purple, shiny, swollen. “Your glasses broken?”

“What do you think?” I left the broken lenses and the broken frame on the ground. My mind was seething. Blood had seeped down the collar of my neck. The scent of vomit drying and caking on my clothes was nauseating. I needed a glass of water.

“You hit me first, fucker,” he said. I started walking away. “Then I’ll see you at home,” he called after me. I turned the corner, ignoring him.

I walked back to Happy Ending, the Lower East Side bar where the magazine I wrote for was throwing a party. A group of cigarette smokers stopped shivering and stared. One said, “I saw what happened, bro.” “That guy’s an asshole,” a girl said.

The bouncer that had kicked Keith out earlier in the night—Keith had tried fighting some frail boys wearing v-necks—mutely admitted me in.

“Jesus,” said Ed, my editor. He took a picture. “Do you know what the fuck you look like right now?” He got me a glass of ice water and told me to go to the bathroom. I cleaned my face.

Ed followed me in. “Do you want another bump?” he said.

“No.” I continued to look at myself in the mirror, seeing my reflection under the scrawl of graffiti and stickers. Besides the cut, Keith had given me a black eye. “But thanks.”

He huddled behind a stall. I heard him scrape a key into his bag of rough, white powder. I heard him snorting, exhaling. Ed snapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth and left.

Behind the bathroom door, the music seemed dulled to a simple drumbeat. The fetid smell of urine clogged my nostrils. My rabid heart was finally slowing and my knuckles felt loose. I blew my nose into a wad of thin toilet paper and called Jen. Her phone went straight to voicemail. Having nowhere to go but home, I wrangled myself through the crowd and out towards the 6 train.

I exited the subway at 116th in East Harlem where I lived. Except for a few gray-stubbled Puerto Ricans eating in Wendy's, the neighborhood was empty. Manhattan's permanent glow was giving way to the sunrise crawling over Brooklyn and Queens. It was 5:00 a.m. I knew Keith would still be awake, waiting, but I never expected that he'd have a gun.

He was sitting on the threadbare carpet of his bedroom. I'd have to walk past him to enter mine. Our railroad apartment never seemed more a curse than then. I saw the glint of metal only after I closed and foolishly dead bolted the door. The thin streaks of sunlight through the window turned Keith into a mess of half-shadows, but I could see the gun pointed fatally at my chest.

"This isn't California," he said. He let each word hang. His voice was low, almost depressed.

"Keith, man—" I said.

He stood up and I took a step back into the kitchen. His crew cut hair was matted with blood and dirt and I knew something terribly wrong had happened since we'd fought.

"This isn't California, you stupid fuck. This is New York. This is New York fucking City."

This wasn't the first time he'd said something like that. Keith was of the mindset—derived from a misguided pride—that only people born here should be allowed to live here. He was twenty-nine years old and had lived in East Harlem his whole life. Even though he was damn smart, could talk a woman out of her clothes in the space of a drink, he worked at Gristedes, apprenticed as a plumber, and I think he hated the City for giving him so little.

He took slow steps towards me. He wouldn't miss if he shot at me from this distance. Plus, he served two years in Iraq as a sniper. The fact impressed itself upon me with urgency. Was I dealing with Keith, or some gruesome memory he was reliving?

"Your friends jumped me," he said, pointing the gun at his wounded head for emphasis. "Is that how you handle shit in faggot-ass California? Get all your friends to fight your fights for you?"

That was a lie, of course. In New York I had no close friends that would fight on my behalf. Even Mitch, a good friend at the time, had left me pinned under my military monster of a roommate just one

hour ago. My social circle was a hodgepodge of co-workers and interns at the magazine and my girlfriend Jen who'd moved with me from the West Coast. Not one of them would've bothered to follow Keith around the Lower East Side to jump him. Whoever did beat him was putting me in one hell of a position though.

"Keith, bullshit. You know that's—"

I didn't see him pull the trigger, but what felt like a bullet crashed into the soft muscle just below my right nipple. It hit a bone—my rib? I screamed. He shot again. This next one hit me on the collarbone. I had fallen to my knees expecting to die. I touched the two parts of my body that should've been bleeding, where bones should've been shattered, but found them dry and whole. The skin was bruised, that was all.

"What the hell, man?" I said. "What the hell'd you shoot me with?"

He wrapped his right hand around my throat and pulled me up. I was too exhausted—too relieved—to fend him off. Holding me inches off the ground he brought our faces close. My breath sputtered hot and moist across his face, but he didn't relent. I inhaled the stale scent of whiskey and cigarettes wafting from his pregnant pores.

His eyes were wet. Tears welled in them and dropped. Their globular shapes flattened as they sped down his cheeks. His bottom eyelashes clung wetly together.

"Keith," I wheezed. "Please."

When he let go, I landed on the balls of my feet and stumbled backwards, finding my balance before falling. He slumped onto the small sofa that had been stuffed beside the kitchen table by some forgotten tenant years ago. Burying his head in his hands, with the gun pointed aimlessly, Keith sobbed. The muscles on his back shook through his white undershirt. A few of the tears landed on the toes of his black boots; others splashed and pooled together on the upswept wooden floor.

I stared at him, quiet and unsure. The sun alit on his heaving form. I felt its heat on the back of my neck. We stayed that way for minutes.

"I'm sorry," Keith said. "Listen, mah dude, really, I'm sorry." He didn't take his face away from his palms. His words sounded like mush.

I sat next to him. He let me unwrap his fingers from the gun. I shook my head in disbelief. He had shot me with a BB gun. Putting it aside, I placed the palm of my hand softly between his damp shoulder blades. The violence and the tenderness that connected us then seemed powerful, incomprehensible, somehow disgusting.

"Your girlfriend... I shouldn't have gotten involved." With the back of his hand he wiped the clear,

viscous snot that had crusted on his clean-shaven upper lip. He looked at me. "You know?"

"I know," I said. "It's okay."

What I really knew was that Keith's mind wasn't right. I'd blamed the fight outside of Happy Ending on a dirty cocktail of Bacardi 151, blow and a romantic misunderstanding. Now, sitting between a grown man crying at dawn and a hot BB gun, I knew all that had happened that night was beyond me.

After Keith had fallen asleep, I called my landlord and arranged to get my security deposit back. I told him what happened. That I had hit Keith first. That Keith kept guns in the apartment. That he was unpredictable, dangerous. What I needed to say I never did and I moved out the next afternoon.

© 2011 Dylan Houle