

Contest

By Houston T. Hale IV

Jonathan Rydell awoke from what felt similar to a hibernation like state. As he slowly stood up he rubbed his eyes and gazed to the distance. He inhaled heavily and ran his fingers through his hair. Jonathan took five steps forward and looked down towards the dirt. Had he taken another, the plummet of countless feet would have been a rather unpleasant start to the day. When his eyes adjusted to the dull brown light, faint through a film of dust, to could see the landscape around him. Plateaus. Thousands upon thousands of mesas and cliffs as far as he could see. All of them were empty and bare as the dust swirled aimlessly. A small noise behind him made Jonathan turn around.

A tall, slender man in a black suit stood behind him sharing the space on the stone spire. Jonathan was not startled by the sudden appearance, rather somewhat comforted by the sudden company. They stood facing each other for some time before one of them spoke. The lanky stranger was first to break the silence.

“What brings you here Jonathan?”

The man spoke with a deep and somber voice, the kind where one could only find a glimmer of emotion if they so wished to dig far enough.

“Well...I –“ he started.

“You seem tense, John” he was interrupted, “tense and confused.”

“No,” John sighed, “I don’t know what I feel anymore.”

“Well now,” the man chuckled, “why do you think you are here. Better yet, what exactly do you think here is?”

“The creative spirit never dies” John said solemnly.

The man nodded his head and looked down with a smirk.

“This is true, John. Yes, true. However,” he sat on a green park bench that had found its way to where they were, “you have yet to answer my question.”

Jonathan again ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. This was John. Not the shell housing the soul of Jonathan Rydell, but this. The landscape, the man, the dust, this. John lifted his head towards the nearest mesa. Where was just dust and stone not ten minutes prior, there was now a tree.

“It has been awhile, John.” The man said.

“Yeah,” he replied, “yeah I know.”

“Now why is that, John.” The man never looked down, but always straight ahead, as a blind man might. Yet the thing that John found most unsettling was the fact that what he said sounded more like a statement than a question.

“Don’t do this to me. You know what it is”

“Yes,” the man smiled, “I just like hearing you say it.”

“Its because,” John started, “because it doesn’t work for me.”

The man lit a cigarette. “That hurts John. I refuse to believe you would rather have things this way.”

“And why do you say that” John spoke without moving from the edge of the cliff.

“I say this, John, because you realize that you hate this. You hate seeing me here only. You hate never coming here. I mean look at this place, John.” He stood and paced around the bench. “You remember the day when this wasteland was beautiful. It was bright. Fantastic. You,” he exhaled a stream of smoke, “were at home.

“And now, look,” he put a hand on Johns shoulder, “Well wait now, there seems to be some life left.” He motioned towards the lone tree which had since sprouted sparse and pathetic leaves.

Jonathan chuckled. “What do you expect. They were only doing what they thought was best.”

“Really now. What they thought was best?”

“Please, don’t go through this again,”

“Oh no, John, I think we need to. Because you know as well as I, that as soon as we’re done here, you’ll dwell on it for maybe what? A week at most? And then you’ll forget this ever happened.”

“Look, I mean its not-“

“Not your fault, right? Really now, John. Who’s fault is it now?”

“I never wanted it to-“

“Answer me this John,” he said as he sat back down, “You’re a grown man. You have been for some time. Your parents. They’re the ones who didn’t like this amazing place. It didn’t fit into what they wanted for you. The white picket fence had no room for a mind with some wiggle room.”

This made John slightly irritated. “Now listen. They did everything they could for me. The least I could do was try to make them proud.”

“John, those people. The trust fund brigade. They’ll never be proud of anyone. They think of themselves. Their money. Their power. Their good name. It’s a vicious cycle that makes me sick. You wouldn’t know anything about that though would you, John?”

John suddenly became incredibly somber. “That’s low and you know it.”

“You know very well I’m not saying anything that you haven’t thought yourself. The person you turned into is the exact thing you wanted to get away from all those years ago. You hated it. The self righteous martini sippers that somehow found their way to your house. They never liked you.”

“They grew to like me.”

“After,” he sighed, “this, you, us, had been repressed and cast aside.”

“You were never gone forever.”

“It might as well have been. Ten years. That’s how long. Look at me. Look around. Both have wasted away to almost nothing.”

“But why now? Why did this come back now?”

The man laughed in such a way it chilled Jonathan to the bone. “Therapy and medication only go so far, John. They don’t work miracles. Besides. I never went anywhere. I was here the whole time, just not where you were living.”

“That doesn’t answer much.” John said raising himself to his full height again.

“As well it shouldn’t. I don’t need to answer your questions if you already know the answer to them to begin with. Its been so long you lived without yourself you don’t know how to feel anymore. You hate this corner life you backed yourself into so much, that, well, we’re back to square one.”

“But this cant happen now. I’m not a child anymore. I have responsibilities. I have a family, a child that depends on me. I can’t be chasing my wild dreams I had back in the day you know.” With a sigh Jonathan Rydell sat himself on the bench.

“Do these,” he waved his cigarette around, creating a string of smoke, “responsibilities, include anything for your benefit?”

“It’s not that simple anymore.”

The man stood up with amazing speed, and put his arm around John. “Look at this John,” he pointed towards the tree with two fingers clamped around his still burning cigarette, “In ten years, would you believe this is the only thing I’ve seen grow? Sure I’ve seen your kid grow up and hell man I’ll admit he’s turning into a fine young man but this, this tree. This pathetic excuse for foliage on top of a dirt mound, is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I mean really man, do you remember when this place was paradise? You used to sit in church and hear of heaven and laugh to yourself. All the people yelling and singing about the Garden of Eden, and you had one. All for yourself. You dreamt. Dreamt of things, of times and lands unknown. This was your playground and it was infinite.”

A single tear fell down Johns face. “Everyone has to grow up.”

“But they don’t have to fall apart.”

“I understand why they did it. You remember school. I didn’t talk to anyone. I found no need for people, especially my age. They were scared.”

“Oh sure. Scared of the quiet one. The one who wrote in his notebook instead of party in high school.”

“Look man, it wasn’t that simple. They didn’t like that I wasn’t normal for my age.”

“Who defines normal, John, you know,” he took a drag, “I would love to see where those kids who found joy in no part of their shallow lives but alcohol. And this, all before they turned eighteen.”

“It’s not fair, I know.”

“John, I don’t want to argue anymore. Look. The fact that I actually see you again is a small glimmer of hope. So I’ll take what I can get. But look here.” He pointed John to the tree again. “I want you to see this.” The man flicked the cigarette at the tree and it burst into flames. “John. I want you to repeat after me. I get up at six. Drive to work. Spend my nine to five. I drive home. I take my children to soccer. I eat dinner with people that don’t know the real me. Lather, rinse, and repeat. John, this next part is very important. Say it with me, I am happy and things are better now.”

Johns tear fell from his face. “I am-“

A shrill buzzing grabbed John’s attention. He opened his eyes again and saw a small glowing. It was six in the morning.

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