

Brothers

9:10 PM, September 13th
London, England

Rupert squinted in the fading sun. The last rays of the day caught his eye as he hung upside down, the railing of the Millennium footbridge gnawing into his side, the brown River Thames rushing and splashing a hundred feet below.

Two large men, whose names he'd never know, held him there. Not a cartoon character, ankles held aloft, coins and papers falling from his pockets into the wind. This was much more menacing, his torso hanging askew, the bridge rail digging into his side. A pain, intensifying with each squirm, the full thrust wouldn't be felt until the next morning. He adjusted himself so his thick brown belt protected his nerve ending, crushing into his hip against the weight causing a dent in his waist. But the nameless men were too strong, their girth too much, immovable. He let his head fall back, which is when the sun hit it, streaming past the Gherkin, through the buildings and into his eyes.

He could see the dirty water below. Some evening tourists passed by hurriedly. The businesspeople had fled the city, a smattering of out-of-towners still crossed when the water struck the 45 year-old American expat. He watched the water rush toward him as it ran quickly over the rocks and waves of history. He feared the fall, the cold impact. Drowning always seemed the worst way to go. Suffocating in the cold and dirty liquid. Everything dumped in there, now filling his lungs, it was too ghastly a thought. One man balanced him on the rail, the other reached into his pockets trying to find what they were looking for. And when they didn't –

after-all who could hold 20,000 pounds in their pockets anyways -- the nameless men took what was there and let go.

For a moment there was relief. Relief from the pain in his side. The blood rushing through his temples. Relief that a bullet didn't sear his skin. Or that a knife wasn't carving out his belly, his innards erupting onto the sidewalk.

The relief ended when the sensation of falling met with the cold rush. And the pain in his head when it slammed the hard water. The current grabbed him in strong pulls down away from the city. He coughed trying to expel the water and murk that flowed into his body. Arms flailing, hitting rocks and other hard objects.

The coughing subsided and then started up again, inhaling more water. His glasses, lost in the crash and the world was a blurry mix of liquid and light until he felt his hand slice open, the rocks, glass and mix that lay across the side of the river. He reached out and they grabbed him, all sense of direction was lost, arms flailing trying to stay afloat, and then the world stopped.

The world of water and soaked breathes ended. The tumbling through space pushed along by a great force froze. He was cold and wet and cut and bleeding, but no longer tumbling or drowning. Laying on the side of the river in the gray, his feet still feeling the push in short bursts downstream. His head down, sinking into the muck, rocks and shells, gasping for more air. He turned his head and threw up whatever was still in him. Then he inhaled. Everything hurt.

For Rupert there was always enough money, until there wasn't.

The others at the Pub where he worked must have wondered how this guy made it. Always enough cash. Always had money when others were short. When people went to pay the tab he had a wad, at least early in the month, that exceeded anything the others had seen.

Even rent. The man who ran the rooms always wondered how this part-time bartender could pay his rent in crisp pound notes.

He told them it was Ladbrokes, the betting parlor.

He said he played the American sports games and his background in New York gave him an edge against the Brits.

It wasn't true. Instead on the first Wednesday of each month Rupert would get up early and be the first person in line at the Post Office at 19a Borough High Street. Rain or shine, cold or morning warmth, he'd be there. Hidden by the early hour and the crashing train track noise over-head he wanted to be invisible. Didn't want to have to explain what he was getting, why he was there. The gap-toothed woman behind the counter, the one with necklaces and the long painted nails seemed to recognize him, but acknowledged the anonymity he sought. She didn't make a big deal when he came in. She didn't make any comments about how nice it was to see him that morning, the same morning every month.

It would have been very un-British to break the quiet with a conversation. She must have recognized how ill-at-ease he was on these visits. They were fraught with emotion about his family, why he left and what he left behind. It was only here that he crept back into their lives for a monthly handout.

Over time the guilty feelings subsided and he was convinced he deserved it. The money was payback for the pain that his parents inflicted. It was reward for his bravery of leaving. It was compensation for all the crap that rested in the back of his brain.

The Wednesday before his drop into the Thames was unseasonably cold and seasonably wet. The sky was spitting when he got up. In all the years he'd been there he still didn't own an umbrella. He threw on a windbreaker and left without waking Siobhan who snored in the bed next to him. The stairs were creaky as he made his way to the courtyard and out into the bustle of the morning commute.

People who work at Pubs don't deal with rush hours. They wouldn't know they existed since they miss the morning discussion and evening news. Instead they wake well after the sun is up, they get to work just before lunch and they leave as the street lights convert to flashing red.

Rupert loved Wednesdays because it was Payday. He hated them because he had to deal with what the rest of the world called life: lots of people, cars, noise.

The flip flops on his feet weren't sufficient in the weather that day, but he assumed, as it had been, that he would be able to recover his package and be back in bed before his toes had a chance to turn numb. He'd timed it out over the years, knowing that if he left his room at 7:45 he could be back in bed by 8:20.

But it was no ordinary Wednesday.

"What do you mean?" he told the woman with the gap-toothed grin. "I get the same thing every month."

Even though they didn't acknowledge each other he knew she knew him, and her coyness grated on his as he shivered in the cold.

"There's no package for ya, fella," she said in a voice scraped raw from smoke and lungs tarred up with nicotine.

"Can you check again?" he asked. "You have to check again."

"Do you have a job?" she asked.

“I do.”

“And do you do it well?”

“Sometimes,” he answered.

“Because I do my job well,” she said, her voice getting softer as she tried to breathe through the wheezing. “And my job is to get people their packages promptly. And so I know who the regulars are. I knew you were coming in. Not because you ever talk to me. Hah, acknowledge me. Not because you treat me with any respect or dignity. But either way, I knew you were coming in because you always come in the first Wednesday of the month. You know how I know that? It’s my job.”

A line began forming behind Rupert.

“And so in preparation I check for the regular packages. And you know what I knew at four o’clock this morning?”

“No.”

“That while you were sleeping, or probably still out drinking, I was sorting my mail. And I knew that you had no package today. So I’m a little surprised to see you. I assumed, no package, no visit. But I know what today is. And since you haven’t missed a first Wednesday of the month in all the years I’ve been working here, I assumed you wouldn’t miss this one. But whoever sends that package from America. They ain’t around. Because they didn’t forget. People don’t forget these kinds of things. And I don’t have to check again to convince myself. Now move along.”

Rupert looked behind him as the rest of the early morning patrons stared with disgust. This was a stop on their way to somewhere, not a destination, like him.

Rupert walked out into the splash of increasing rain. He needed to get back into bed before Siobhan woke up. The wind blowing down the narrow lane was fierce. Someone must have died.

The large Oak structure was the centerpiece of Adrian's office, as it was since his great grandfather used it. He couldn't remember a day at work without his father. Sure he wasn't there as much physically, spending much of the winter in Florida, but he was always available. Not a business decision of consequence in the previous ten years, that he could recall where his father wasn't at the center of it. Whether he took credit or not wasn't the point. Adrian felt comfort knowing he was looking over his shoulder. Even if he never told his father, or admitted it to himself.

Sitting low in his chair, he eyed a stack of slides he would soon show the board, his strategy would not change in either the short or long term. But it was easier to convince the board, the shareholders, because they wanted to believe it would okay. It was harder to convince the family. Harder yet to convince himself. The family didn't want to believe that it was over, that it was different, that his father's era had passed.

The office was unusually quiet. The noise he often heard wasn't the bustle in the hallway, but instead his father's chatter on the other side of the wall. Now there was no one.

"Would you like some lunch," broke his reverie. It was his father's assistant, Bagley. She looked like she'd always looked, fresh, prepared, buttoned.

"You're here."

"He seemed stable and there are still things I need to take care of," she said.

"Things or people?" Adrian asked.

"Both."

"When do you leave?"

Adrian said nothing.

"When are you going to London?" She asked again.

"I think the business needs me here."

"Your family needs you to get your brother," she said.

"My wife and kids don't even know I have a brother," he said. "We haven't seen him in 20 years. I'm sure my father wouldn't want to be seen in this condition."

"He would want him to be here," Bagley persisted.

"We don't know that."

Bagley came inside Adrian's office, setting a different tone. Rarely would she leave her perch at the doorpost and actually enter. She even closed the door and pulled up a chair. He was confident she'd never been that close to his desk.

"I've known your father longer than you," she began.

Adrian didn't say anything against the immutable facts she listed.

"Everyone. And I don't just mean your father. But everyone, at the end, wants to know. They need to know, that their family is OK. That there is peace in the house."

Adrian looked down. He couldn't have this conversation.

"I've buried two parents," she said. "Two in-laws, a husband and a son. We all die alone. But when you leave your family behind, you want them together. I don't know if your father has a day, a week, a month or a year. But before he goes he needs to hear from his son. Both his sons. He needs to know that Rupert didn't leave because of him. He needs to know that you've all made your peace, so he can rest in his."

“I wouldn’t know how to find my brother.” he said. “It’s not like he left a forwarding address.”

Bagley sat quietly, her chin raised, but looked down her glasses past her nose.

“Do you know when your kids need you?” she asked

“My kids? Yea, they cry,” he said of his toddlers.

“But do you know. Can you tell a real cry from a fake one? A cry where something is broken and a cry when someone is broken.”

“Sure” he said, unsure of his answer.

“Parents know. Your mother knew. Your father knew.”

“Knew what? They found Rupert in London because he needed them.”

“Yes.”

“Bull,” Adrian said, having never spoken this way to Bagley before. But when it came to Rupert he lost all sense of propriety.

Bagley's face told Adrian the depth of the hurt he put on her. She stood. Out of habit, he did as well. She walked around to the side of his desk and they were face to face, although she was a good 18 inches shorter. She looked up at him, tears forming in the corners of her wrinkled eyes. And then with a force outsized by her physical stature she swung an open hand around and caught his unsuspecting cheek, which stung and glowed red for the rest of the afternoon.

The tears in his eyes were a physical more than an emotional reaction. His body responding to the shock.

“Was it money? He asked.

She said nothing

“He needed money, didn’t he?”

“He was alone,” she said.

“And so he sent him money?”

“Money was sent.”

“After all I did? All the humiliation. After being second choice. All I did for this family. And he took what I made and sent it to him.”

“He didn’t,” Bagley said.

“What do you mean?”

“It was your mother”

“My mother? Then he must have known.”

“He didn’t know,” Bagley said, now shaking. “He didn’t do anything wrong. He didn’t do anything to hurt you. Stop blaming him for everything.”

“What money?”

Bagley's shoulders sagged. Like a Thanksgiving Day Parade float, the air leaking out. Her arms went down, then her shoulders, her head not far behind. Deflating, getting smaller and smaller. She went back to her chair and sat lightly into it.

“Every month your father put money away into a fund,” she said.

“What fund?”

“The trust.” She looked up from her lap. “A portion of that money was sent to Rupert.”

“Until when.”

“Until last week.”

Now it was Adrian’s turn to stand. He paced toward the window, his hands pushing back through his hair like a farm tractor plowing the fields. First he saw his reflection and then over his shoulder Bagley slumping in her chair. He looked past their shadows and into the street.

No one ever spoke of Rupert. Now that wasn't true. They never spoke of Rupert, to him.

Adrian had set up the trust at his father's request to fund the education of his grandkids.

And now that money was being used to fund god knows what habits for a son who ran away and abandoned the family, the business.

“Your mother needed to find her son. She couldn't stand not knowing. Not knowing how he was doing. Was he healthy? Did he find happiness? Was he dead or alive? Surely you can understand that.”

He couldn't understand. Nothing but anger filled him, betrayal.

“So she hired someone. And they found him. She never talked to him. She just sent money.”

“And what did the money buy her?”

“A connection.”

“And they never spoke?”

“She blamed herself.”

Adrian didn't want to hear it. “And you made it happen?”

“I did,” Bagley said, quietly now.

“Behind my father's back?” Adrian said, becoming the aggressor. “It's stealing, you know.”

Bagley said nothing. She showed no fear, never did. What was he going to do, sue? She saved the letters, made notes of the phone calls. There must have been a time all those years ago where she worried about it, something happens and she can't send the money. Someone finds out and it looks like she's diverting money that's not hers. How many laws would they break to know he was okay?

Adrian had more questions, needing to know all the gory details, perverse pleasure in the pain.

How much? How often? The process?

“Oh Jesus Adrian, what does it matter now,” she finally said.

“It matters.”

“How much?”

Bagley fidgeted, her finger index finger running up and down her thumb as if an itch needed not a hard scraping scratch, but a slow massage rubbing it out.

“Ten thousand dollars a month,” she said.

“Jesus Christ Bagley. Who came up with that number?”

“You're hurt. Blame me. Blame your mother. But not your father. He didn't do anything. It is time for this to end. It's time to bring him home.”

Adrian rubbed his closed eyes. Slowly shaking his head. The street scene below in the increasingly cloudy day blurred. Wondering if there were more. What other contact was there. Did they spend their nights plotting when they would take off to London? Maybe those trips to Florida and other locales were covers so they could see their other son? Were there quiet conference calls amongst the three of them? Bagley and his parents talking about money, how to shift it, how to sneak it by him?

Something about it made him want to get on that plane. Get away from all of them. He didn't believe Bagley. Another lie to cover up ten years of lying.

She turned to leave, only stopping at the door to remind him that Friday was his mother's birthday. “Don't forget, visiting hours end at six.”

“She doesn't know who I am,” he said.

“She knows when you’re there,” Bagley said.

“Maybe I should tell her I’m Rupert,” he said.

“Maybe it’s not about you,” she shouted.