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Hypothetically

I.

Four in the morning. My friend Simon sits at his desk looking at the damp pavement shining on the other side of the dirty window. There's a cup of cold coffee on top of a book. Simon has stopped writing a draft of a lousy article about film, and is bored. The room is on the second floor of a house like all the others in this miserable, damp and dark neighborhood. It has old formica floors, stained walls that were once gray and a worn out electric burner. The unmade bed is in a corner, a light bulb hangs from a cord over the desk.

On the other side of the window, under a frigid city winter, there is a street where garbage accumulates and drunks vomit, where fighting dogs shit and everything quickly freezes. On the other side is the city of London. City of miserable men where the sleet never stops. City of mad old women always walking, endlessly. City divided by an immense river, black and slow.

Simon is 25 years old, thin, hunched over, long hair, a white face with green eyes. He's now playing with the ash tray, distracting himself thinking of how he will use the pounds from his monthly salary as an editor of boring articles for a mediocre magazine. He's thinking of the coming winter, the many days before spring. All of a sudden a man screams.

He focuses his ears like the poor dog he is: more screams, blows. He gets up and walks toward the window. It's from the house next door. It's a Barnes fight - the Barnes brothers, his neighbors. The older one, Freddy, is 220 pounds of muscle and the pride of the neighborhood because one year he was a member of the champion national youth rugby team, and he can drink 17 pints of beer one after the other. He can also roll a car over with his own hands, just him, and every time he does it, every time he rolls over a car parked in the wrong place in his street, the whole neighborhood applauds and whistles like only the English know how to applaud and whistle, that is watching with their heads bent forward, spitting out what saliva they haven't swallowed, their English eyes with a slight smile, their mouths issuing an indistinct sound.

Freddy's brother Teddy is considerably drunker – a cow of more than 250 pounds. He's disabled by a double hip fracture from a car accident caused by his constant drunkenness, an accident that also left him with one bad eye, slowness of movement and speech, and a constant drooling that his brother Freddy diligently wipes from his mouth.

Simon hears Freddy Barnes shouting obscenities that scatter against the walls as Teddy groans. They're in a room that Simon has seen from the street of broken down sofas and photos of nude women. He hears what sounds like Freddy breaking a chair against the wall and a plate being smashed. He listens to poor Teddy, with a voice that seems to have been chewing his cud for a thousand years, lost in a wetter and less organized time, defending

himself as he can by repeating senseless words in an infinite litany. The shouts and blows against the walls lessen, silences grow, making the air tense before each explosion.

After a half hour of violent and soundless battle, Simon understands. A complete sentence from his Freddy Barnes' spittle-filled mouth explains: Freddy wants to break every piece of furniture in the house and shout at the top of his goddamned lungs, and if he needs to, to kill right then and there that mass of useless flesh that is Teddy Barnes, because a wad of bills that had been growing thicker in a sealed cookie tin on the white refrigerator has disappeared.

Teddy groans as he crawls along, pursued by Freddy's curses; as he whimpers before falling heavily, perhaps on the yellow sofa. Now he speaks again, but louder. He strings together more words now, sentences without meaning that have been sunken in his huge and wet, cow-like brain since his mother was alive. And he says things like you must not not not not drink so much tonight, Freddy, go back to Dorham that your father would have done Freddy not drink so much.

Simon, my friend, on the other side of the wall is listening to this, paralyzed by his curiosity for the poor dog, but also by his morbid fear that makes him smile. Suddenly he remembers the new gadget, a prodigy of technology that has been lying in a drawer in his room. He takes out a tiny microphone and proceeds to hang it from a nail inserted right next to the Barnes window. Five meters of cable run from the microphone to a CD recorder in which a laser beam will burn a diskette and clearly record every scream and blow and tearing limb from limb of the brutes in the house next door. Two small speakers will allow him to hear everything better.

Simon looks at the set-up with a smile, presses the required button and installs himself next to the window.

Freddy is very drunk. The twenty bills lost amounted to two thousand pounds, the entire capital of the family to buy a new refrigerator and a damned motorcycle; to live for the rest of the month. And the only thing left is a box with an empty tin that smells of the oranges on top of the refrigerator. Freddy knows that even if Teddy didn't take the money, he saw who did. He is quite sure that his brother is hiding something, that if from the beginning of the whole thing he doesn't say anything, groans and sways from foot to foot looking at the floor like a child, like an idiot, it's because he knows something. And if it isn't Teddy, somebody else in the neighborhood now has the damned bills, and Freddy Barnes is going to find out who. And so he has to thrash Teddy and drag his body through every room in the damned house.

At regular intervals, as it comes out of the black recording box, Freddy's voice lowers and he attacks something and screams obscenities, very drunk (he must have a bottle in his hand, must be pacing around Teddy looking into his eyes, shouting right into his face, almost spitting at him). Then there are large periods of silence. Perhaps Freddy sits down to rest in a corner, to look at the red walls and his brother's body. And every day for the rest of the month he'll have to make do with a single pound.

Sitting in his corner, Simon – scared, cold, almost smiling – imagines that Freddy found out early about the tin, that he was looking all over the house and didn't find anything. That he asked Teddy until he started to scream at him, that Teddy kept his mouth closed and retreated into an autistic state. He imagines that Freddy then went to the pub, sat down at the bar, growling, and orders all the gin he can drink before closing time, unable to come to terms with the lost savings. That because of all this that Freddy is an animal, that now he's going to find the money or kill his brother Teddy Barnes once and for all.

Freddy Barnes' words, like desperate knives, now scream of the past: the accident that left Teddy crippled. The goddamned drinking mania. The money. The goddamned money that has to turn up before he wakes up, for Christ's sake.

He talks, to himself, almost sobbing, for more than a half hour. Until it seems fatigue gets the best of him. Through the miniature speakers he hears exhaustion, impotence, on the verge of tears. It seems he's finally fallen asleep on the carpet like a drunken corpse. Simon imagines the two brothers waking up the next day: even more tired, and just as lost, poor, fat and like animals. Hungry, alone, but more tired.

It seems that now everything is coming to an end.

Simon imagines Freddy sitting in a corner, dead drunk, crying like he's never cried in his whole life, defeated by that shitty life, that shitty house, by that brother who's now making an idiot of himself, bellows words to himself, words that are not his own but are those of his dead mother, buried in a cemetery between two highways in the fog – words that won't bring back the twenty 100 pound notes in a tin of cookies that smells like oranges.

What Simon doesn't expect is that Freddy suddenly gets up from his silence, that he crosses the wooden living room floor with long strides, that he knocks over a table with plates along the way. That without any warning, saying nothing, he picks up the massive early 1980s television set with his rugby champion arms, and with that stone box above his head, crosses into the bedroom, concentrating seriously like a drunk, and throws it out the window. And that that stone box again becomes a television the instant it smashes on the ground, and that all its little glassy circuits, wires, red and green bits, crystal fuses are smashed to pieces.

And then there's another silence. My friend Simon is now even more scared. Through his window he could see the windows in the house next door shaking. Now he is looking at the shards of the television in front of his door getting wet on the sidewalk. There is a minute of silence. Simon imagines Teddy beginning to understand, slowly, very slowly, that there will be no more television, that the television is gone. There's a continual crying – long and low.

And then all of a sudden a desperate scream like a bear pierced by a spear, like a dog hit by a car, like Teddy Barnes, the monster who has lost his head. He is almost like a whale when he rises on his two little legs that haven't been able to support him for ten years, and he waddles across the room and launches himself down the stairs.

And then Freddy begins to scream goddamned Irish dog Ted Barnes don't even think about running away rat coward because I'll blow your brains out fat son of a thousand damned

bitches idiot, you've already done enough damage. And he keeps on with his litany while he goes down the stairs, following his brother's racket, very slowly, sacredly remaining upright in his drunkenness. Simon knows the house next door, it's identical to his, and so he knows that Teddy is going to the kitchen. Through the little bathroom window, standing on the toilet, Simon can see Teddy Barnes is opening all the cabinets, hopeless, breaking everything, knocking everything over, before his brother gets downstairs preceded by the few insults that he has left before exhausting himself. Simon sees how Teddy is able to open a drawer and how his shaking hands take out something black that he weighs between his fingers, how he goes back to where he came from, in the direction of the hall.

There's another instant of silence.

Later there's a Freddy Barnes battle cry that scatters across the garden and is heard through the black speakers. The sound of a chair being destroyed. And then, suddenly, an explosion. Huge, heavy, echoing throughout the whole neighborhood in the frozen silence of four o'clock in the morning. Simon feels his knees hardening from fear, he puts one hand on the edge of the sink. There are five seconds of sharp, tense silence. Another huge explosion that makes him tighten his grip even more. The noise rushes out, losing itself in the empty streets, again leaving everything in total silence.

Simon remains still, lost. Then, slowly, with his eyes clouded and unbalanced like a drunk, he is able to go back to his room. As he does so he imagines, without knowing why, the empty streets of the city, the traffic lights blinking yellow in the mist. The smoke rising from a chimney.

Below, at the Barnes' door, the lock is turning. Simon slowly moves away from the desk, approaches the window. A huge man opens the door; Simon can see his blond, round and half-bald head. The man groans, staggers. He takes a few sluggish steps toward the street. It seems that he's about to fall face down. He has on a dirty white shirt that covers his immense belly. He has a revolver in his hand.

It's the younger Barnes. From above, his body seems larger, fatter, balder and paler. He shakes, stumbles. He reaches the edge of the sidewalk and lets himself fall on his ass, with his feet in the street. With both hands, he's clutching the gun between his legs. He rocks back and forth, back and forth, with the gun tightly in his hands, between his bent legs. He only looks straight ahead, rocking back and forth, with his back to Simon. He looks at the billboards, the garbage, the school wall. He understands nothing.

No one has emerged to look at what is happening, no one wants to know. The police will take an hour to get there. From his window, Simon keeps looking at the man rocking back and forth, groaning out loud, getting soaked and crying in the rain, now completely lost. Simon sits at the desk, looks, and can't do anything. He doesn't think, he can't think anything.

Then he begins to think about that man, about the police who will arrive, about himself, sitting down in that house, in that goddamned neighborhood, in that city that is not his, looking at that spectacle, hearing through speakers the groans of a murderer waiting for his fate.

II.

Teddy Barnes has been sitting for a half hour on the sidewalk in the drizzle, observed by Simon from the closed window. A neighbor shows up, perhaps someone has called the police. But the policeman must be busy that night, because Teddy continues to rock back and forth from his waist in the drizzle. And Simon continues to watch him.

Simon has had time to think about many things. Without realizing it, looking at that man on the sidewalk from the window, Simon is thinking about himself. He's realized he's alone in the world sitting there. And he's also realized that he is free, and always has been. And that he can do whatever he wants. He can leave that whore of a city, and can become someone live, real. If he wants. Someone real. He thinks now that he's finally going to get up from that desk.

That he's going to put all his clothes in a backpack, that he's going to get the money from the bank, that he's going to go out walking, going to pass by that bilious body that is still trembling on the sidewalk. That he's going to walk to the train station and leave and finally dedicate himself to what he has always wanted to do. He will live by stealing, he will sleep in the parks. And perhaps it would be best for him, too, to buy a revolver. To use it to hold up a store, to go on surviving.

Or to go to Australia, where every meter of land that he steps on will be unknown territory. And to dedicate himself to stealing. And to walking. Until they kill him. Perhaps he will also make love to a large, brown woman in an abandoned cottage in the desert. He will get drunk with truck drivers at a gas station. He will gamble all his money in a card game and sleep in an Australian jail one night with an aborigine.

Or he will leave, right now, to where that woman in the office lives, the one with blue eyes and big tits, who still hasn't woken up yet. It won't be difficult: enter her house slowly through the garden balcony, open the little glass door, walk into her room. Silence her with one blow, put tape over her mouth. Leave with her in her car in the morning, cross the Channel. Go to Spain, over to Africa. Cover every kilometer of road, until the last death, with that bound slave in the car.

Suddenly he hears the noise of sirens outside.

The immense, lost man now shakes more slowly, soaked by the constant drizzle. With his neck stiff, with the pistol between his legs, clutched fast by his fingers. The rain continues. A policeman stops ten meters from the murderer, he know that there are thirty guns pointed at the man's head. He spreads Teddy's his legs and cries out: throw away the weapon and puts your hands behind your neck.

When the policeman is a meter away, he strikes Teddy's temple with the barrel of the pistol, he takes a very good look at him, he begins to kneel down next to him, to put his free hand under the bent legs of the giant. He grabs the weapon in his fingers. The giant won't let it go. The policeman manages to loosen the fat fingers from the murder weapon. He throws it on the pavement, far from the body.

Teddy Barnes looks into his eyes, slowly, not yet knowing anything more. Who is he. What is he. What is he doing there. And again looks straight ahead.

A small truck approaches noisily on the street. Ten armed policemen are trotting behind it. Simon sees how they hoist Teddy up, a dead weight, how they bend his neck and place him in the back seat of the car. Two policemen get in with him.

III.

A month later now. Simon is sitting at the dining table of a friend, across from a plate of fish and a tall glass of white wine. He smiles. In his right hand he holds the hand of his girl friend, who's not particularly pretty. He looks at her eyes for a moment. Then he gets up, clearing his throat and asking everyone's attention to tell the story of the big news of the night.

The big news is that the week before his contract at the academic journal where he works was extended for two more years. They will continue to pay him the same salary for the same movie reviews. He and his girl friend are going to rent an apartment in Mainstream, very close to the house where he had his bachelor pad. My friend is thinking about applying for English citizenship.

When he finishes he looks at all of us, radiant. He proposes a toast. To his girl friend. To us. We all stand up. I look at his smiling mouth, a shine of saliva on his lower lip, his small eyes, sweet and happy. Like a street dog. When he sits down, he removes his little hands from the wine glass and from the skin of his girl friend to again hold the fork and eat another piece of fish. He lifts it up to his lips and takes a brief horizontal look around the table, without blinking, never letting go of his smile. He looks at me, smiling, as if he wanted to ask something.

I can only bend my head and lift my glass. To congratulate him, with the glass raised and trying out my best smile.
