

The creaking floorboard in the hallway woke him. It instantly made him think of the boys. For twelve years it had been the boys' banked turn at the hallway intersection. They would fly from their rooms at full speed and as they tried to navigate the corner they would plant a foot. That spot on the floor, right next to the wall, gradually wore with the incessant pounding of the young boys. It hadn't improved when they became teenagers. The wood had only grown more aggravated. It moaned and whined whenever the boys would turn that corner with too much speed. Headed for the dining room or, more likely, the kitchen.

These days the only time the weakened board complained was when boys were home or when Bryan and Joanie walked down the hallway side by side.

The Calvin and Hobbes book slid off of his lap and wedged between the cushion and the armrest of his big leather chair. The den was silent. The floorboard out in the hallway creaked again.

"Joan?" He mumbled through a yawn and rubbing his eyes. "Joanie, you up?"

He scooted forward to the edge of the cushion, still trying to fully lose the sleep that had taken him. The floorboard creaked again, more quietly this time, as if it didn't want to wake anyone else.

"Joan?" He repeated, more alertly, and not expecting to hear a response. Bryan rose from the chair, knees in full protest. He moved to the door, ignoring the pain and placed his hand on the open door of the den. He eased it inward and stepped into the hallway, letting his eyes adjust as he peered into the darkness. He half expected to see his wife moving back from the kitchen with a glass of water.

The figure that stood in the hallway was neither that of his wife nor his rambunctious boys. It was tall and pale, edging toward translucent. The figure stood with its back to Bryan. He could just see past the figure into toward the kitchen. Which is where his holstered gun laid uselessly on the table next to an empty fast food bag and some used napkins.

Bryan licked his lips and assessed the situation. He could feel his toes twitching. The head of the figure seemed to be lowered. And looking at family photos that adorned the wall. Bryan tried to reach from the doorway, to where one of his son's baseball bats leaned. It had been signed by his Pony League All-Star team and now resided in the den. The figure hadn't heard him yet, or it was ignoring him. Either way, Bryan was beginning to think he might be

able to get position on the intruder. His hand clawed silently in the den, trying to remember where the bat was. Bryan didn't take his eyes off of the figure.

At the same instant the finger on his hand touched the bat's nob, the ghostly vision turned. It moved with a grace and ease that Bryan couldn't place. It reminded him of something from his youth. A painting, an image, a strange photograph. Something. He only knew in that moment that he'd seen this before.

His finger slipped off of the edge of the bat and danced wildly in the safety of the den trying to relocate the bat. The glow from the study reflected off of the hair and the impeccably white shirt of the being in the hallway. It was the illusion that had given the figure a ghostly aura just moments before. Bryan's fingers once again found the top of the bat and wrapped around it just as the figure's face became clear.

The figure was Silas Abram.

Except he looked much younger than he had a few days earlier in the interrogation room. "Mr. Abram. What are you doing here?" Bryan could feel his pulse slowing, a skill developed over years. Good for masking anxiety. And fear.

Silas shifted his weight, the floorboard groaned its displeasure. "These old houses, they do make some interstink noises sometimes...no?" Silas' voice was smooth and easy. Bryan thought he sounded like an old friend that he hadn't seen in years.

"Mr. Abram. I'll repeat..." Bryan's hand squeezed tighter around the butt of the bat, "...what are you doing in this house?"

Silas seemed not to hear Bryan or maybe he just didn't care. "I can't help but wonder why your officers are so very concerned with my business, Captain Dreyfus. Maybe you can explain...?"

Bryan completed a quick scan, the old man did not seem to be holding a weapon of any kind. "Mr. Abram, you are currently breaking the law." He drew the baseball bat across the floor to his side. The noise wasn't the same as cocking a gun, but it was effective in the silent house. Bryan let the bat rest against his thigh.

Silas' eyes widened, but not with concern, as Bryan had hoped. They seemed to grow *excited* at the sight of the bat. "Captain, surely we can have a conversation about our issues without needink to resort to..." his eyes drifted back and forth between the bat and Bryan's face. "...to any sort of violence."

Bryan could feel himself being drawn in. Being seduced by the easiness with which Silas spoke. He lifted the bat about an inch off of the ground and dropped it back onto the wooden floor. Bryan was relieved to see the flinch. Not a big flinch, but at least a reaction.

“Mr. Abram...”

The flinch, which had only lasted until the echo of the bat dissipated, was gone. “Silas, please,” the old man interrupted in the most even of voices.

“Mr. Abram,” Bryan reiterated, “I do not know how or why you are standing in my hallway tonight, but I’m going to go ahead and call my office now, and we will have a squad car here to pick you up in a few minutes.”

“I believe I told you about my childhood in Krakow...yes? But did I tell you that I was shot when I was a boy?” Silas took a half step forward, deceptive in the ease with which he moved. The floor creaked in relief.

“Don’t take another step Mr. Abram.” Bryan could feel his pulse wanting to increase, feel himself losing control of the situation. He scrolled through the contents of the den. He had left the phone on the table, next to the chair. Could he get to it? Even with his bad knees, he felt confident in his ability to out maneuver the old man. (But he moved so easily...not like an old man at all).

Silas brought one of his hands up to his chest.

“No more steps and no more movements.” His words remained even and calculated. Bryan brought the bat up from its position on the ground. He held it in front of him with one arm. The tip pointing down the hall at Silas’ chest.

“I was shot by my own father. Shortly after my twenty first birthday.” Silas began undoing his shirt. He was able to do so with one hand, pushing the ivory colored buttons nimbly through their corresponding holes without ever taking his eyes from Bryan’s. “This was my welcome to manhood.” As Silas undid the third button he pulled the shirt open. The scar was striking, a deep red. Standing out even more being surrounded by the whiteness of the shirt and the old man’s pale flesh. It seemed to glow and pulsate.

Bryan was transfixed. The scar was just above the man’s withered nipple. How had he survived that kind of a gunshot wound to the chest? It was not a small scar. It was the size of Bryan’s fist.

“Please, Captain Dreyfus, you wanted to get your phone? To make a call?” Silas relaxed his grip on the buttons and the shirt fell back into place. Mostly. The crimson edges of the scar still remained visible. “What could have made my father want to shoot me? I can’t even imagine.” Silas’ voice maintained the smooth silkiness.

Bryan pried his eyes from the scar and back to Silas’ face.

“Please. Your phone. I’ll wait.”

Bryan understood what Detective Washington had been through. Could see how a conversation with this man could last for seconds...or hours. He backed into the den. No longer needing to keep Silas in his line of sight. Bryan took his eyes off of the old man, lowered the bat and spotted the phone. He had no concerns that Silas wouldn’t be standing right where he left him in the hallway. Silas wouldn’t run or have a weapon. The old man had a simple style. A confidence. The same confidence he oozed that first day in the police station. He would be waiting for Bryan.

Bryan thumbed the phone on and punched 9-1-1. He could still see the shadow of the strange old man in his hallway. It hadn’t moved.

The 911 operator answered. Bryan gave him the information as he walked back to the doorway of the den. Silas was waiting patiently (politely) in the hallway. When Bryan finished his call, Silas continued.

“What kind of man shoots his only son? Please, don’t answer that.” A wistful smile crossed his face. “After he shot me, he turned the gun on himself. I saw it happen from the floor. It was not nearly as upsetting as I thought it might be.”

Silas’ face clouded, briefly overcome by something Bryan couldn’t quite define as grief, but it was something.

“I was sad that I wasn’t sad.” Silas’ deep blue eyes wandered over Bryan’s face. “He shot me in the chest and watched me fall to the ground. He stood above me crying. I could see his tears. They ran down his cheek. I had never before seen my father cry.”

Silas stood silent, breathing shallowly. When he spoke again, his voice was still silky smooth, but had become *more*. Had become heavier. “He turned the gun on himself. Then he was lying next to me on the floor. I do not know if he was crying for me...or for himself.” He smiled, a thin smile at Bryan. “You’ve seen a man kill himself? No?”

“Yes.” Bryan couldn’t help himself.

“It is beautiful. You would agree?” Silas’ thin smile fluttered away and his eyes dropped. “I am sorry to have disturbed you in your home. It is a beautiful home. One of the great curses in life is to be a man without a home. To be lost in that desperation.” His eyes moved deliberately to the closed doorway of the master bedroom. “We seem not to have awakened your wife. That is good fortune.”

Bryan raised the bat and leveled it squarely at Silas’ chest.

Silas cocked one eye. He shuffled toward Bryan. But the shuffle was deceptive. It looked like a shuffle, it looked like an eighty year old man walking...but the movement was so smooth, so effortless. Silas closed the remaining distance between himself and Bryan in the blink of an eye (an impossibly blue eye) and took hold of the thick end of the bat.

He placed it on his chest, near the edge of the scar that was still just visible. Silas leaned into the bat. Bryan tried to resist, but the old man was strong. Bryan had a fleeting thought that if the old man wrenched the bat away, he could do a lot of damage before Bryan could escape.

The knob of the bat touched Bryan’s chest and the breath rushed from his lungs. The weight of the world came through the polished ash and Bryan could feel nothing but heaviness. Those weighted blue eyes and the unbelievable mass of a polished piece of ash. Bryan wheezed, fighting to draw in even the smallest gulp of air. There was sorrow in Silas’ face now as the two stood in the hallway, Siamese twins joined at the chest.

“It is not the time.” Silas smile only a wisp.

When Silas dropped his eyes, Bryan could feel a weight lift. He gulped in air. He was reminded of the day in the precinct. The first time he saw Silas and *felt* his eyes. The normal heft of the bat returned to his hand. Outside the faintest siren could be heard. Bryan stared intently at the old man standing in his hallway. But the old man would no longer return the gaze.

Silas spoke to the floor. Much of the smoothness gone from his voice, just the raspy sound of an eighty-year old man. “I suppose I should take my leave.” He took a half step to turn in the hallway, his easy movements also gone.

Bryan gripped the bat, once again firmly in his control, “Do not take one more step...”

“I would very much like it if you had your policemen leave me alone.” Silas shuffled another step, his back almost completely to Bryan now. The siren’s wail drew closer.

“Mr. Abram, do not take another step, or I will be forced to detain you.”

“No,” Silas spoke without looking back at Bryan, “you will not.”

Bryan tried to step from the doorway, intent on bringing an end to the invasion. His feet failed to respond. Held to the floor by some unseen force. Bryan pulse quickened and he felt something he hadn't felt in years.

Silas shuffled away. Toward the darkened kitchen. The siren was almost outside. Closing in but still taking too long.

“Stop!” Bryan tried to walk again. Movement and time slowing in correlation with the old man's creeping gait. Panic and fear. From a long forgotten place in Bryan's brain. “STOP!” His voice came out much louder and with more fear than determination.

“STOP!” He repeated, unable to think of anything else to say (scream).

He tried to jump, to give chase. His feet didn't (couldn't) move. There was nothing. He pushed himself against the door jamb, trying anything to release his feet from whatever held them. Nothing about this was right. Panic flooded the hallway now, he tried to keep his mouth above it. So he could breathe. Breathe the air of sanity that was quickly being replaced by the rising tide of terror. Bryan writhed, trying to free himself from the floor, from the fear.

The pale aura that followed Silas faded and the kitchen was empty. The sirens sounded closer, but not close enough. Surely they could catch the old man shambling from the house. He began to scream. Nonsense syllables to keep the old man from leaving. Even though Silas was already gone.

Bryan now could no longer swing his arms. His torso tightened as the paralysis devoured his freedom. It crawled up his spine like worm looking for some place warm to burrow. His neck froze and he could no longer speak.

From behind the closed bedroom door, his wife began screaming.