

THINGS TO DO IN BALTIMORE WHILE HAVING A HEART ATTACK

By Isaac Green

“What can I do for you t’day, *HON?*”, the waitress said in her best Baltimorese as she shifted her shoulder length orange tinted hair nervously.

I put my hands on my head trying to make a decision over the people talking in the stools next to me at the counter. I desperately needed some comfort food with my stomach tied in a knot for the last two days, and soup fit the bill. Stupid Baltimore virus. I quickly perused the menu. ‘Pork and Bean Soup with Cabbage and Lentils’... Fuck the cabbage and lentils, too healthy. ‘Lemon Grass Soup with Diced Chicken’. Lemon grass sounds like something dogs take a dump in. “Curried Crab Soup...”

“Don’t you have any ‘regular’ Crab Soup?” I asked timidly over the noise of the market filled to capacity with holiday shoppers.

“We made that two weeks ago...whatever’s on the menu.” She said, ready to walk away.

Great, now all I need is a time machine to get what I want. I finally relented “Okay, the ...Crab Soup.”

Mom used to make the regular vegetable crab soup by the gallon when the family went to the eastern shore. I would wake up four in the morning to put the chicken necks in the traps, and by noon would have a bushel of crabs. We had spent the weekend eating them. All I simply wanted was a seven dollar reminder of those days in a bowl of soup and I even can’t get that.

The waitress hastily slid the bowl at me from across the counter, and then aimlessly started to chat with the cashier. *What the fuck is this?* The soup had an orange tint. *Orange* was color of the kitchen of my old house. I got into hock buying a fifteen hundred dollar *orange* refrigerator, and one thousand dollar matching *orange* stove. I spent a whole weekend wallpapering the master bedroom with insipid *orange* flowers. My ex-wife divorce lawyer’s Porsche was *orange*. *Orange* was the color of her victory and of my defeat. I hated fucking *orange*.

I stirred the soup with the spoon, half expecting the waitress’s hair to be in it. I brought it up to my lips, and was a second away from my first sip when I was jostled from behind, and the soup splattered on my grey Brooks Brothers slacks and white cotton button down shirt. Out of reflex, paper napkin in hand I shot off the stool and took awkward swipes at my clothes, trying to remove the orange. No luck, all I did was spread the stain. The black boy who shoved me didn’t apologize, he just stared into my face like I was some space alien. *Haven’t you seen a six-foot three white guy before, kid?* His mother whispered something in his ear and protectively put her arm around his neck as he went back to slurping his soup.

I hate the crowds. I hate the holidays. It wasn’t even one week after Thanksgiving, and I wished they were over. Needing a distraction, I pulled the cell phone/organizer/address book/typewriter/music player/video player from my coat pocket. In the silver metal box gizmo everything was in its place and predictable. No orange soup, no kids, no holidays. A telephone icon appeared in the corner. I pressed it and heard a woman’s nasal voice that said, “Dr. Schwartz would like to see you, tomorrow.”

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Oh fucking great. I call with stomach problems, and now I'm going to spend half a day in the doctor's office. Well, screw the fat HMO parasite. The last time I was there all he did was spend five minutes complaining about my 230 cholesterol and the 137 over 95 blood pressure, as the nurse strapped an EKG monitor on me as if I was some fucking, near death, heart patient. He had left the room looking at my gut saying 'Loose the twenty pounds, Mr. Sullivan.' *Yeah, you first, doc.*

I went into the organizer and started a 'To Do' list for tomorrow. December 3: 7:30 Management Meeting (Discuss overdue jobs). 9:30 Reed Subdivision Construction Plans (Baltimore City will not approve) 12:00 Lunch with Partner of Firm (Talk about Reed) 2:00 Site Meeting with Davis (his building site was closed by the inspector) 4:00 Building Permit Meeting (Beg Howard County to issue a permit for Davis) 6:00 Write Proposal (Need more money from Davis)... I realized that all the schedule items related to client complaints and potential lawsuits, with all the projects being late or over budget. Screw the job. Construction was my life, seeing buildings rise from the dirt. I used to take satisfaction in the job, but now I seem to be just a 'fireman' trying to control problems and pissing on the flames.

There was going to be no escape in the silver box. I was ready to turn it off when the organizer displayed today's 'to do' list. The last thing on it was "CALL MARY". I remembered her as I sat back and took sips of soup. I had met her last Friday night at the wine bar a few store fronts away. She was a very plain looking thirty-something; wearing a generic blue business suit with a spotted red tie. I think she was some sort of interior designer. After a few minutes of talking; her professional status didn't matter. It was her blue-green eyes that got me. She was very serene, self confident; unlike most of the neurotic women I typically meet. When she looked at me she seemed to understand my problems, my emotions.

At the end of the night she had scribbled her phone number on some scrap paper. I went through the organizer searching for all the 'Mary' names, even the ones resembling 'Mary'. Not there. I quickly got off the stool and thumbed through my wallet. Not there. I turn my pants pockets inside out. Not there. I shook out my overcoat. Not there. I put my head in my hands to think. Maybe I had put the slip of paper in the red leather address book. When was the last time I had the book? Was it at the office? No, not that simple. The last time I had the address book, I was visiting my daughter, Beth.

Oh shit! It was back at the old house with her. I would have to wait for my visitation day next weekend to get the book. Fuck that. I needed to talk to her...tonight. With some warm soup in my stomach I can do anything. I got up from the stool and slapped the money on the counter.

A few minutes ago I was a bum drinking soup at a counter feeling sick. Now, I'm a knight on a quest. It was then I realized that before I get the fair damsel, I would have to face the 'dragon'.

I walked briskly through the food booths and out the double doors to the parking lot where my dented brown BMW awaited me. The dark cold rain felt like bullets on my face. I quickly got into the car, started the engine and spun my wheels as I surged out

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towards York Road. I rode south past the Senator Theater box office where a throng of people shivered in the damp cold waiting for the 7:30 show. Even though it was early evening, the business district had an eerie, desolate feeling to it, with only the grimy street people braving the night rain. As I turned down Cold Spring Lane, the area gentrified with upscale colonials lining the road. I flew past the Loyola College dorms. I tried not to think that it was there where I had met my ex-wife at a dorm party as I felt the nausea start to come back.

After a couple of miles I was back in Roland Park where I grew up. Where I played football and stickball in the streets. But having moved out three months ago, the neighborhood seemed different, and I felt that I was in hostile territory. I pulled up in front of a three story victorian house with white wood siding. I could see a dim light in the house beyond the christmas ornaments. Through the screen of mist and rain the house seemed quiet, almost too quiet.

I search for a blue Mazda. Could not see one. Great, she's probably not home. Maybe I don't have to face the dragon. I strode up the wooden steps and inserted my house key into the front door lock.

Shit, the key would not turn. The bitch changed the locks on me. I scoured the flower beds on my hands and knees for five minutes for the spare. After making myself a muddy mess, I noticed two large rocks piled on top of each other next to the steps. I flipped the top rock, and underneath the front door key shined under the front light like buried treasure.

I tentatively open the mahogany door. As I walked in my soaked leather shoes made a telltale 'squish' on the wooden floor of the foyer. I hear a faint TV from the basement. Good, whomever was in the house is harmlessly down the basement. No need to announce myself. I figured no one would care if I quickly check the living room coffee table. Nothing, the living room was immaculate. I'll have to go upstairs to Beth's room and look. I flicked on the hallway light and slowly slosh up the carpeted stairs. I reached the landing when I saw Beth's door to the right. I was six inches away from it when I heard footsteps from behind... I was about to turn around...

Bam...

A fist slammed into my back. Arms flew around my shoulders, throwing me to the carpet. The hands quickly wrenched around my neck and I was being held in the steel grip of a choke hold with my face pinned down to the floor. In my agony the only thing I noticed was a overpowering sickly flower scent, combined with the acrid odor of a armpit. A husky voice said "Move and I will break your fuckin neck. I'm calling the police. Hear me sonoabitch?"

In between gasps of air I was finally able to say, "I'll call them... for you ...if you let go my neck."

No response. I helplessly felt my body being dragged towards the hallway phone as I heard another set feet tromping up the carpeted stairs. I recognized my daughter's legs standing beside me. She asked innocently, "Hey dad. What you doin on the floor with Debbie?"

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The hands loosened and I felt dizzy. I grabbed my throat trying to get my wind as I looked up at the woman who pinned me to the floor. She was short, all of five foot three, if that, with blonde hair, and a awkward squat nose. I had let a woman half my size wrestle me to the ground. *I must really be fucking sick.* She continued to stand over me, wearing a Loyola College tee shirt hanging loosely over striped boxer underwear that went down to her knees. I felt a deja vu and realized the shirt and underwear were both mine, comfort clothes I wore when I lived in the house.

"I coudda killed you. What the hell you doing here?" Debbie said as Beth stood next to her.

I sat upright and said defiantly, "Its still my house for another two weeks. I needed something."

I heard the dragon's voice from downstairs. "Its alright Beth, come finish your homework down here. Mommie needs to talk to Daddie."

My daughter leaned over and kissed me on the forehead, as she helped me off the floor. Still feeling out of breath, I watched her scamper back downstairs. I savored Beth's affection as I noticed the dragon glaring at me from the downstairs landing. She looked more threatening in the harsh downstairs light making her painted lips look bloody red, and elongating sharpened red fingernails hanging tensely at her side.

"You promised to give notice before you came over." she said dryly.

I decided to go on the attack. "Its' still my goddamed house. Its' my goddamed furniture. Its' my underwear your pet dyke is wearing!"

Debbie came over to me playfully and put her fingers in the waistband "Oh. So sorry I got YOUR property. Want your fuckin' shorts back, asshole? Giveem back to you right now..."

"No...No...you keep them." I said as I tasted bile from my stomach.

The dragon wanted to show that she was in control, and could handle me by herself.

"Debbie, honey, why don't you go watch TV and give me a few minutes with Alex."

"Whaddaprick." Debbie said as she stomped back into the bedroom.

I went downstairs and followed the dragon into the kitchen, her nexus of power where we had all our talks, all the fights. Out of breath, I sit in the glare of orange appliances.

I notice my address book on the kitchen table. I nearly lunged for it, turning the pages. She looked at me with a amused look, "I found it while I was cleaning. Is that why you're here? You could've just called me. You didn't have to break in here."

There was no paper with Mary's phone number. "There was a piece of paper in the book!" I nearly yelled in frustration.

"Don't blame me! That's the way I found it." She shouted back. She was about to say something else when she stared into my face and said with fake empathy "You alright? You look like crap."

"No thanks to Debbie the Dyke. "

She quickly grabbed a glass of milk and relaxed on the chair in front of the orange refrigerator. She nearly smiled as she said "Same old Alex...it took all of thirty seconds after you saw her to mention 'dyke'."

"What's wrong with that? She's a dyke."

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“You’re jealous she that got something you don’t have.”

“That’s crap.” I responded. When women want to get under your skin they talk sex. I wasn’t going to admit to her that I haven’t had sex for nearly three months and horny enough to rape a mannequin in a store window. But I still wouldn’t touch her. Not for a million dollars. Not that night. Not again.

She started to ramble on. “You want things the way they used to be. It ain’t goin’ to happen. You think you’re going to come back here to play house. Well, one thing for certain is that you never loved me and you sure don’t give a shit about Beth. I don’t think you ever loved *anyone* in your life.”

What do you say when someone says that? I didn’t have the energy to slam her against the orange refrigerator so I stuck up both my middle fingers instead.

“That’s so mature...” She said nonchalantly.

“I never thought that you would sleep with a woman to humiliate me.”

“You don’t need me to humiliate you. You do it to yourself...”

‘...That’s bullshit..’

“Have you looked in the mirror lately? You’re white as a sheet and look twenty years older. All you are is a worthless ghost walking the ruins of your life. Well, did you find what you came here for? Is that slip of paper more important than anything else?”

I didn’t want to give her any more satisfaction. Instead, I turned and went for the door. As she shut the door behind me I heard her say “Take care of yourself, Alex...no one else will.”

All my heroics were for nothing. As I got back to my BMW I realized the day began misty and miserable and knew it would likely end that way. I was happy to navigate through the rain soaked streets back to Federal Hill where my real home was. As I turned onto Charles Street a pain shot through my arm, and I clutched it in surprise. As I went past Johns Hopkins University, I put events together. Nausea. Pain in the Arm. Shortness of Breath. Could it be my heart?

No.

I laugh at my anxiety. I’m only thirty-seven. I’m being over dramatic dreaming it up to feel sorry for myself. I’m just in a slump. Nothing to be worried about.

My luck, no parking spots. I have to leave the car two blocks from the house. Now I’ve got to walk in the rain. I felt the lump in my stomach surging towards my throat. I move on making a conscious effort not to throw up on the red Cadillac parked ahead. I proceed up the hill lined with brick townhouses illuminated with christmas lights, my knees getting weak. I subconsciously put my hand on my chest. On the other side of the street a bum with his matted hair and dirty raincoat pulled a shopping cart through the gutter.

I swear the bum was following me. I heard the wheel of the shopping cart rattle as he got closer. *Get Away! I’ve got no money for you.* The bum put his hands in his charcoal gray coat. Oh no, he’s going for a gun. I’m going to be robbed. Instead, he withdrew a small bottle filled with white pills. Five feet away he extended it to me. I strained to focus my eyes...It was a aspirin bottle.

Keep the fuck away! I want nothing out of your filthy hands!

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I kneeled in the street, pain coming from my chest. He stood there with his hands on my overcoat. I felt his hard calloused hands in my jacket as the rain soaked my shirt. *What do you want from me? Take the wallet. Just leave.* I couldn't utter a word as he withdrew the silver organizer from my jacket. I saw him open it and tap a few numbers in slow motion.

The pain and nausea hit like a hammer coming down on my chest. I spewed out a wave of orange on my overcoat and pants as I hit the wet pavement. I saw the orange rivulets run down the asphalt as I lain in the street with the rain on my face.

I finally had no worries. Everything was bullshit: my bullshit job, my bullshit ex-wife, my house, my possessions. It's all meaningless. I was going to die in the street covered in my own vomit.

I heard the muffled sound of sirens through the rain get closer. The ambulance with flashing lights seemed to park on top of me. A voice from above said "Can you hear me?"

I saw a hand go through my jacket to find my wallet. As the hand searched, a piece of ragged white paper with a scribbled name and inked telephone number flew out of a leather compartment and got caught in the wind. Before I closed my eyes to greet eternity, I could see the numbers run from the rain, as the paper gracefully flew out of reach, up towards the light of the streetlamp.