

Nostalgia, Pt 1

//william pauley III

There is a prison, of sorts, hidden deep within the belly of the Eighth Block Tower. In this prison, only one captive resides: the Lieutenant.

From somewhere inside his cramped cage, no bigger than a kennel [and just as cozy], there came a barreling sound, perpetual thunder, like bullets hurled through a baritone snare drum. It came slow at first, with long pauses between each beat, but steadily the drumming resounded more frequently, and with such ferocity it almost felt violent, growing so loud the Lieutenant had to hold his ears to mute the madness of it all.

Because this was madness, right?

Well, that's what the Lieutenant had always been told, at least, from *the man* who came to feed him, his only visitor—but *the man* hadn't come around in some time now. Thinking of him now reminded the Lieutenant just how hungry he was. Without *the man*, there was no food, and without food, death would come creeping. However, with the return of the soul-stirring drumming, he couldn't help but think that maybe *the man*, at that very moment, was on his way down the long dark hallway that led to his room...

Pounding thunder. His eardrums felt close to bursting.

...as this wasn't his first experience with the mysterious rapping, not even close. He'd heard it many times before, and whenever the pain grew so great, too much to bear, he'd finally scream out, begging for the drummer to stop, to toss out his gong mallets and free him his mind. And the drumming *would* stop, and in through the door would come *the man* with a tray of food, and he'd smile and slide the tray through a slot in the Lieutenant's cage, patting him on the head like a good doggie before leaving again. On rare occasions, when the Lieutenant's hunger was curbed, by either sickness or an increase in the frequency of his feedings, he'd manage to stammer a few questions before he turned to leave and *the man* always graciously answered:

"It's your madness, my friend. That's why you must be contained," he'd say, and always with a smile. This response was the answer to every question.

Something felt different now though. Many days had past, maybe even a week or longer, since *the man's* last visit, and the Lieutenant feared he was dead. He was elderly, after all, and during the last few visits the Lieutenant noticed something was off. *The man* was weak, frail, and barely able to carry the tray of food, no bigger than ones served at elementary schools. He was dying. And the death of *the man* meant the death of the Lieutenant. He'd accepted his fate, until now, with the rolling thunder, the furious pounding buried deep inside his eardrum. Someone was there, walking down the hall, and the louder the drumming became, the closer the body moved toward the door.

Almost loud enough now to howl...

Suddenly the Lieutenant felt out of breath, as if the origin of the drumming was right there in his chest. It was terror. It was a fear of the unknown. If *the man* was dead, then who was it now walking the dark hallway? Best-case scenario, this was his savior—but *had he truly wanted to be saved?* What would he do outside his cage? Where would he go? Even beyond the bars, he'd always be a slave to the tower...

Then the thought occurred to him that perhaps the drumming had finally led him astray. Maybe it was only madness after all. It was just as possible that the drumming would peter out and not a soul would enter the darkened doorway that led to his room. Perhaps he was working himself up for nothing.

But, man, was he hungry. So hungry... He hoped if it *was* somebody that they at least brought something for him to eat.

The Lieutenant's heart was racing, keeping rhythm with the rapid drumming pulsing wildly in his eardrums. He counted the beats in his head while staring longingly at the doorknob, waiting for it to turn...or not to turn.

one... Shadows seemed to move across
two... the room, though the dim light
three... from the lone window
four... hadn't changed.

For a moment he thought he could hear footsteps coming from deep down the hall, but with the rolling thunder, it was hard to tell. He was getting his hopes up. Hunger stirred. *Something was moving around out there*, he thought. *Had to be.*

five... Before he could count to ten,
six... the silver knob on the
seven... door turned, and with it
eight... the drumming stopped,
nine... along with his heart.

He couldn't breathe. He thought he was dying. He found the silence was even worse than the noise, and somehow just as painful. He clutched his chest and fell back against the far wall of the cage, pushing himself against it in a panic, as if his strength alone could've set him free, but he only wished to distance himself farther from the door. He was conflicted. Part of him couldn't wait to see another soul, yet part of him would rather die. He didn't think he could handle the sight of another human, not this far along anyway, after already having accepted death with open arms. His time in the cage clouded his senses. He couldn't tell if he was thinking rationally anymore.

three...
two...
one...

The door cracked open. He thought his heart would burst... or his lungs, something, but his organs remained in tact. A small hand appeared at the edge of the door, and as it swung open, a child was revealed. It was a little boy, standing just a hair over three feet tall and dressed in a pair of denim overalls with no undershirt. In his hand he held a white shoelace, the other end of which was fastened to a wooden pigeon on wheels. He dragged the toy along the floor behind him as he stepped into the room. When he spotted the cage and the crumpled body of the Lieutenant, he was not scared, or even cautious. No fear.

Such innocence.

He sat in front of the cage.

"Hello, mister," the boy said. He seemed sullen, looking down and picking his fingernails along the splintered edges of the floorboards. Somehow his moodiness calmed the Lieutenant.

"Hello there, boy," the Lieutenant muttered, tasting dust on his lips. It was the first thing he'd said in weeks. Speaking had him realize just how dry his mouth had become. His lips cracked and bled as they bent the air that formed his speech. Strings of white mucous clung to the corners of his mouth as it lifted and closed. His tongue felt thick and stiff, like overcooked meat, and it brought him a moderate amount of pain to move it.

"Are you a dog?" the boy asked, finally lifting his head to make eye contact.

The Lieutenant paused for thought.

"Yes, I suppose I am," he said.

"You don't look like a dog."

"Well, no. I guess not," said the Lieutenant. "Still a dog, I remain."

"Where is your owner?" the boy said, running his warm little fingers along the cold steel bars of the cage. The Lieutenant focused on the plumpness of the child's flesh, the soft rolls that made up his arms and face. Suddenly his mouth was no longer dry.

"I'm afraid he's gone. I have no owner now," the Lieutenant said. He smiled wickedly, but the child found it friendly. "Would you like to be my new owner?"

The child smiled and nodded with great enthusiasm, all traces of his sullen mood now vanished completely.

"Good," the Lieutenant said, staring deep into the child's bright blue eyes. "Now that you are my owner, what will you have me do?"

The child thought for a moment, then held out his hands, palms facing up.

"Let's play Red Tomato," the boy said.

The ends of the Lieutenant's mouth curled upwards, revealing a set of decayed teeth, broken and riddled with large cavities. He now resembled an old wolf, tiptoeing circles around his final meal.

"Oh, what I would give for a red tomato," the Lieutenant said. Dribbles of saliva poured from his mouth as he spoke.

The boy laughed.

"No, not a *real* tomato. It's just a game!"

"Is that so? Well then, I don't know this game. You'll have to teach me," the Lieutenant said.

"Hold out your hands. Put them over mine, but facing the floor."

Being the dog he was, he obeyed every command. He slid his slender arms through the bars of the cage and placed them over the boy's open palms.

"Now I'm gonna try to slap your hands. You have to pull away before I do. We keep going till I miss, then it's your turn," the boy said.

"Ah, I see. Why is it called Red Tomato?"

The boy smiled and slapped the backside of the Lieutenant's hand.

"Cause when the game is over, you're gonna look like one!"

The boy laughed and quickly repositioned his hands beneath the Lieutenant's. A tingle of cold blood rushed into the Lieutenant's hand. He was ecstatic to feel his body working again, even if it was just a small involuntary reaction. There was still a little life in him yet, and he was happy knowing it.

The boy swatted again and this time the Lieutenant pulled away, but he wasn't quick enough. He connected with the man's bony fingers, and a fantastic chill fluttered up the Lieutenant's arms, causing a wave of neurons to fire up in his mind. The boy's touch was like electricity, as if his tiny hands were some sort of biological AEDs, breathing life into his weary and decrepit bones with every tap.

"Red tomato!" the boy exclaimed proudly, and all at once it was as if a dam had broken inside the Lieutenant's mouth, sending gushes of saliva flailing to the floor.

"Do it again!" the Lieutenant commanded, his eyes wide and bright. The boy laughed and struck him again.

Electric!

"Again!" he repeated, and he did it again and again, cackling in fits.

Electric! Electric! Electric!

"My god," the Lieutenant muttered, then latched onto the boy's puffy arm with the grip of a wildcat.

The boy stopped laughing and watched helplessly as the Lieutenant pulled his arm between the bars and into the cage.

"What are you doing?" the boy asked. "This isn't how you're s'posed to play, mister."

The Lieutenant tightened his grip and smiled.

"Ah, but I am no 'mister,' you see," he said. The boy stared at his black teeth, the cavernous holes burrowed throughout them, and the sight frightened him. There came a slight tremble in his upper lip as he spoke, as if he was an animal preparing to strike. The boy let out a piercing shriek and desperately tried to pull his arm out of the cage, but he was too weak to get away. Tears streamed down his chubby cheeks.

"I am simply... *a dog*," the Lieutenant said, and with his free hand he pulled the boy's head close so it pressed against the cage. He ran his dark tongue along the edge of his cheek, aggressively lapping up the child's tears. The taste was surprisingly unfamiliar. Instead of the mild saltiness he expected, there was a sharp sting to it, bitter and revolting—the tears of a child born inside the Eighth Block Tower. Still, he dared not spit it out. *Anything was better than nothing*, and it was this thought that circulated around in his mind as he stared at the plump rolls of flesh wrapped around the bones of the child's naked arm.

The boy screamed and spat and hammered his free hand against the bars of the cage, doing all his tiny body could do to free himself of danger, and failing.

The Lieutenant's broken teeth sunk into the boy's tender flesh, right at the center of his forearm, and as the blood seeped into his mouth, that sharp and bitter taste returned, but even sharper and more bitter this time. He'd been poisoned. The tower, its very essence had soaked into the boy's skin and had been marinating for years, ever since the day he was born, and now it was leaking inside the Lieutenant's open mouth.

He let loose of the boy's arm and immediately fell to the floor, curling into a fetal position. The boy, choking on his own snot and tears, removed his arm from the cage and fled the room in a sprint without even bothering to examine his wound. Vomit spewed from the lips of the Lieutenant as his body convulsed and contorted, and his body became so weak he couldn't even whisper, let alone shout.

All along he thought he was dying, starving, so close to death he thought he could taste it, but now as he felt this, the poison rushing into his bloodstream, engorging and disintegrating his veins, he could see he was wrong. *This* was dying. *This* was death.

The Lieutenant's eyes rolled back inside his head and he fell into a deep coma.

Just before death, he'd dream of astronauts.

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