

Orange Soda

“Jonathan? Jonathan!”

My mother called my name. I was distant.

There was a slurred sky above me, the white smoke of clouds getting harder and harder to see as I heard the shriek next to the mangled Volkswagen. There were bright lights, roaring oranges, yellows, and flickers of car lights coming from all around in the thick air. Suddenly, I felt a pulsing, throbbing sensation I weakly could place. It was coming from a little up each my of my ankles, had to be some place on my legs, which laid flat against the wet-hot pavement with the rest of me. *Is this pain?*

The “pain”, seemed to stop once I heard a long string of sobbing. Other voices, ones I didn't know in the slightest, sent sharp commands back and forth. If I tried to listen, some were distant and deep, while others cracked in frustration. I stared up at the dusty sky, unsure if this was morning or night thanks to the sudden dark flashes coming along my vision, and tried to speak. My own sound seemed to break softly through the jumble of voices and out of my throat in a sand paper dry way. I felt some iron flood my tongue.

“...‘sokay...‘sokay...”

A long blackness, then a pristine prison is what I remembered next. Nurses and doctors with big egos and mouths to match would march in on my too clean bed promptly at nine thirty at night. When I wanted to sleep. Everyday, I would croak that I was doing good. Which, I wasn't sure if that was the right answer, because I had school work to do and a hamster named Benny to feed. I was a very busy kid genius that could not be bothered by the confines of a hospital bed or minor flesh wounds.

However, since I had no choice, being eleven at the time, common activities in the all white room included trying to spy anything that was not white (a near impossible task), creating nicknames for my usual caretakers, and thinking of how to glorify my stay at the hospital into a story. Jonathan Oizaf was not only a smart cookie with lots to do, he also loved to tell stories. Usually, involving himself.

Okay, I always was in my stories.

Besides this routine, I choked down revolting hospital food that consisted of pudding and baby carrots. The carrots had moldy gray stuff around them that always left a gritty taste in my mouth, unlike the pudding. The pudding was not much better considering it seemed curdled at the top, but at least it was sweeter. That I was very thankful for.

If I had to break the day down into percentages, it would be something like this: ten percent the strange naming game, story, and spying game, thirty percent lunch, and sixty percent thinking of my family.

Yes, I was very intent on my survivor story, for my classmates likely were just dying wondering where the best kid in the class was, but my family were the only people in my life that I knew were just as great as I thought myself to be. They deserved some thought.

My father, a tall sort of guy who looked like a lumberjack without the plaid, worked as a construction worker. He was super strong, a masculine man at heart, grinning and laughing as he carried out work. He had defined muscles, formed from working out, and popping blue eyes I wish I had inherited. Also, you could find him fishing, hunting or playing baseball any day of the week with his square face full of joy. I also had a older sister, Jessica. Tall and elegant, she was the complete opposite of my rough rugged dad. Her hair ran down her boney back in a long silky waterfall of blonde, and the brown of her gaze was warm when you looked at her. She was honey. Smooth and sweet. Almost forgot, she was also the brains to my dad's brawn.

Then lastly, there was my mother.

I didn't admire my mother the same way as I did my sister and father. She was my hero because she told me she loved me above all else and love was the strongest word I knew as a child.

I never noticed until later the shifty look about her at all times. She would always get home late from the office, around eleven at night, but when she did she would always kiss my head, before clunking up the stairs to bed in a rushed manner. Dark eyes with dark hair, she rarely smiled.

When she did smile, it was a small curve to her face, not a large one like Jessica's and it never showed teeth like my father's.

But she loved me more than anyone else, and that's all that mattered.

Always, she would have time for me. Always, she was sincere. I didn't know everything about her, however.

So I sat in the hospital bed clueless, and thought about how glad everyone would be when I came home. I could imagine it perfectly. James, Cece, Camille, Jordan, Mia, Lauren, Valery... All of their big smiles as they hugged me during snack time. Mrs. Fall would throw my name on the board in foam letters and give me a star for the day just because she had missed me so much.

Days went by as I elaborated my fantasy, and before I knew it, I was back at the countryside. Home.

Even though the accident did not take my pride, it had taken my legs, and my mother couldn't be sorrier when I arrived at our tiny house in my wheelchair. She helped me and my new mode of transportation across our small stone path and stairs with gentle, but shaking, hands.

My wheelchair was silver plated and looked exactly like the one Charles Xavier, my favorite mutant from the crime fighting superheroes known as the X-Men, rolled around in. Sometimes, I'd pretend I was him. After all, he and I were really smart, and we now both had wheelchairs. It seemed to me I could call myself "Charles."

I quickly grew to love the fact that I could be a mock super hero more than worry about my "handicap." I'll admit, getting used to almost always sitting was a bit overwhelming, and considering I'd never be able to feel the run out of the car to the Saily's Comics store with my dad, I was more than disappointed. But with my wheelchair, I could do different cool stuff I had never been able to do before, even if part of me still was a little upset. The kids at school almost erased my negativity completely by telling me I was lucky for being able to play all the time without getting tired, and I realized that they were partly right. Besides time, I was

invincible to the normal tiring of play. I soon made a hobby of exploring the forest near our house so I could get used to operating and also take advantage of the extra stamina the chair provided me.

As I thrust my hands over the wheels one day on a grand adventure through the forest paths, “takin’ a spin through the forest”, as my dad called it, I saw a figure lurking behind the trees. Watching me.

Now, I had grown a bit since the crash. My ego was no longer an over pumped balloon, however, I will say I did puff my chest out a little when I went by girls. I was thirteen after all, an official teenager. Maybe that's why I didn't keep going along my merry walk. Maybe, I stopped and stared back at the shadowy tree guy because of that leftover arrogance.

When I locked eyes with him, he tried to shirk back behind the elm.

“I see you.” I told him, feeling tough.

Still staring at him, I could pick out some of his features through the cracks of light coming down through the break of tree leaves. He had messy, black hair. Charcoal colored. A black leather jacket on his shoulders made him blend into the shadows almost perfectly, if not for the light giving him away.

He was about twice my standing size.

A rustle from the tree, and I saw a combat boot take a step towards me.

“Alright, ya got me.” A hoarse, but young voice came from the man. I glanced up from my wheelchair at his face. What I saw was never what I thought to see.

Round brown eyes, a small stubble. Dirty brown hair, not black as I initially thought. His lips parted into a smile that looked just as my own did when I got a perfect quiz grade at school. He had my dimples and everything, right down to my freckles. He was just a twenty year old clone of myself!

How could this even be real?

I remember telling myself it couldn't be, but my heart and gut felt much differently than my mind had.

“Y-you're me...?” I cried, wide eyed as only a kid could be.

The young man laughed, another dry sound. “Kinda.”

Kinda? My mind was panicking! I can recall going through every supernatural book I read, every Marvel comic, trying to recount a situation like this. Nothing came to mind.

Then, I had an idea. I thought I had him pegged.

“You're a time traveler!” I exclaimed, the conceited quiz smile now coming from my own face.

This made him laugh. He grabbed his stomach and bent forward, almost sounding like he was choking the way he was laughing so hard.

“We read waaaaay too many comics!” He said through his laughter. We? I tried again.

“Hey, don't laugh at me! Are you my twin?”

“Naw, sorry, Johnny.”

“Then who are you?!”

The man took another step into the grassy path, first taking a glance both ways before he did so. I now could see a red heart tattoo on his hand with an eagle's face in the middle and a stained shirt under his jacket.

“I am you, Johnny. Give you that much.” He grinned.

I ran my hands down the sides of my chair nervously. I couldn't let this biker who claimed to be me see fear cross my features. But I had to admit, I was scared to death.

I must have been making some kind of face because his eyes sparked with recognition.

“You look terrified! Anyway, I can go then.” He chuckled, took another look down the path both ways, and tramped back through the woods.

“W-wait! Don't leave!” I said, curiosity eating up the last ounce of fear I had. I began to pump my arms over my wheels vigorously.

The older walking version of myself moved fluidly through the dense forest. I saw his shape. The broad shoulders. He was moving much faster than me, already about five feet away. I hadn't a clue where he was headed, and I knew if I were to stray off the path into the forest, my wheelchair could get caught someplace where I could not pry it out.

With a gulp and a blink, he was gone. My eyelids literally had shut for only a second, and all I saw from my place on the path was greenery. No black jacket. I stopped my wheelchair chair and headed back, now in no mood to go exploring.

That was the first time I saw him.

The years passed and went by with little to no complaints. When I turned seventeen, I conquered my grades in all subjects, just as I initially knew myself of being capable of, but was still learning to control my cocky attitude. In all honesty though, I hadn't seen it as a problem. The time I finally saw the light, was after my overconfidence got between me and my mother. That day, my confidence was snapped by the neck, and it died on the spot.

“Jonathan, we need to talk about your schedule for junior year.” She told me in a serious tone as she sat down on our small checkered couch. Jessica and dad were out at the store.

“Kay. I'm gonna do what I wrote down.” I dismissed her lazily wagging a finger as I sat in my chair near the other couch, this one with the same pattern but longer.

“Jonathan...,” She looked at me with a frown that wrinkled at the edges. “Stop that. You have to focus on your future here.”

I blinked, staring up at the ceiling. It was white with scratch marks. Plain.

Boy, was my attitude acting up like a rash that day.

“Future? Heh. I know. I'm gonna be a comic artist. The rest, I'll just figure out. So stop getting nosy.” I said.

My mother shuffled and put dark hair behind her ears. “I love you, Jonathan. Please just listen. Your father and I have been thinking, and we aren't convinced that what you want to do is very... practical.”

“Practical?” I echoed. Rage clawed up my stomach slowly. Every handful of my being it took burned. Comics were what I adamantly wanted to be a part of. I had decided it this year.

“Yes,” My mother continued. “You love to write, don't you? We can find you another career I know you'll love *and* make a good income off of.”

“No.” I said firmly.

With a sigh and weak movements, my mother knelt to my height and looked at my eyes as I tried to avoid her altogether. “Please. I only do what's best for you.” She whispered.

In less than a second, I whipped around and slashed her gaze with my own. There was still a little bit of poison in me from the accident. “Is that why you took my legs?”

I was blunt and careless. I hadn't an idea how I plowed my mother's heart over. Too tired, too moody, too busy with my own lazing. I made the mistake any teenager would make, letting their words fly like daggers just so a conversation could be over with. We always would pick the sharpest one.

I heard a stamp of feet on the ground. She was up and was looking down at me. Her hands were pinned to her hips and the makeup on her eyes seemed to darken to the color of her hair. A stormy look on my mom's face towered over me with an unreadable expression.

“Jonathan, rethink what you said and apologize. I appreciate when you talk like an adult. Please.” Her tone was so brave as she held back the sadness.

I looked back at her sad face, complemented by the simple navy of our wall, to discover that I had struck a nerve. I preyed on it.

“Please? Please stop talking to me. I don't need you.”

Mom never had been the disciplinarian. I saw her mouth open slightly with hurt. She was speechless. I never wanted to torture her like this with the past, but my tongue and heart were teaming up into a monster as my brain didn't process a single word.

Soundless steps, then clicking ones, told me that my mom had traveled from me, to the living room carpet, to the hard kitchen floor, where she would likely regroup herself. I didn't care like I should have. I didn't go apologize either.

Instead, I went outside to get away. I made my way to the front door, so as not to pass my mom in the kitchen, and creaked it open. I didn't plan on going to the forest paths, but into the backyard.

The backyard was my own little section of the forest, a fenced in square surrounded by thick pines. Unlike the grass outside it, I remember it being neatly trimmed just for my wheels. My mom and dad spent the entire day mowing it when I had first gotten my wheelchair, while Jessica and I stayed inside the cool air condition putting together a puzzle.

Entering the seclusion, I stared at the only bald patch of dirt with a sigh. Wind stroked my face like my mother used to when I got hurt, with the pads of her fingers.

Thinking of her and what I said inside made me freeze. I was frozen for minutes that felt like hours, the previous anger I had finally washing off of me, allowing my brain to think of how nasty I'd been.

Suddenly, my eyes blurred with salty warmth. I knew I messed up big time. My mother would never tell me how much the accident pained her. Whenever our relatives would bring it up by some chance, she would immediately leave the room. I loved her, like I said, but was too careless to think. I just had wanted the conversation to end. Why hadn't I just paused for a second, and thought of the weight of my words?

My mouth curled and scrunched. The wind grabbed at the tears on my face.

“Johnny.”

My rehashing was put to a halt. In front of me, suddenly stood him. The twin who wasn't my twin from when I was eleven.

“... I don't know who you are. Get out of here... Get out...” My voice quivered.

I wasn't looking up, still absorbing the disappointment of what I did. All I saw was the big dirty combat boots and jean tatters dangling.

“Johnny boy, you reaaaally messed up.”

“I know.”

A snort. “You do?”

I nodded, feeling another wave of tears coming on.

“Hey, don't you cry,” He said. “You were the one who said what you said. And sheesh, so quickly. You attacked her quicker than the Flash himself.”

I winced at the comic reference.

There was a smoky scent in the air as the man continued. "I'm not your clone. Not your twin, don't come from any future. Do you know who I am?"

I couldn't bring my eyes to his face through my own tears and the overtaking smoke smell. It smelled similar to the wreckage of the accident.

"I told you, I-I don't. Leave me alone..." I whined.

The sickening smell seemed to intensify.

The man's voice got raspier and more serious. "You really think since mom was at the wheel, your legs got messed up?"

This captured my attention, the tears turning into sizzling anger. "Shut up!"

The ratty look of the man's face had never even changed from six years ago. His mouth frowned, but his eyes twinkled in an indistinguishable way, the brown parts that normally melted into the black seeming to glow. Now that I could see him in all of his raggedness, I saw his fingers wrapped around a cigarette. It wasn't large, small enough to be hidden by the grubby hand it was in, if not for the white swirls curling from the end.

He took it from his lips for a moment and fixed me with a stare. "Well, do ya? Huh, Johnny?"

"W-well, yeah... I-I know she didn't mean to be drinking so late---"

The man cut me off.

"It wasn't her fault your legs are gone, mini me. But let's back up a second. I want to introduce myself so you know I'm not pulling a fast one."

As I look back now, I realize the man was awfully dramatic as he pushed back the greasy hair. He threw the cigarette to the ground, and the combat boot silenced the blaze with a crackle.

"My name is Jonathan too. Jonathan 97680. No, not a robot," he smiled for a split second here, "but I was made by you and you were made by me. We're parallels."

I couldn't figure out what he meant. The anguish for my mom still pulsed through me as he explained.

“I'm the day your mom crashed the car after a drink or two. I'm the result of you keeping your legs.”

I swiped the tears from my face, still feeling small.

“W-wait, so, I-I... I could have kept my legs? How? Why me? Why couldn't *you* have lost your legs instead?” I blubbered.

Older Jonathan raised his foot from the cigarette and turned his head to the car in the dirt, away from me.

“Fanta. Orange soda.”

“Wh-what are you talking about...?” I quivered as sadness, jealousy and anger drifted around me as the cigarette fumes had moments ago.

“Your mother, our mom, let you get something at the gas station while she was filling up, right?”

He asked.

I nodded, but I was impatient.

“So what? Why does my choice of getting that soda affect anything? How do I know you're not some creepy guy who's been stalking me?”

He walked toward me and grabbed my hand firmly. The unexpected touch made me struggle, almost cry out, until a coldness only the dead would know chilled my bones.

A series of images, first the shattering of glass and an all too familiar bottle rolling out of the car, then a reach for the colorful Fanta orange soda label in the gas station. My hand had almost went for the smiling dog holding the root beer, the Mug brand.

When the contact with the orange was made, I saw an image of myself in the wheelchair. Boney, skinny, but with a tentative smile on my face.

The scene of orange plastic to skin played again. This time, I picked the Mug root beer instead. I made my way to the counter. Then all of a sudden, a man in a Captain America shirt caught my vision. He was waving at me with a sleazy

grin, saying words, but with no sound. His orange ponytail swung cheerily and his glasses were too small for his pudgy face.

His big figure magnified as I approached him. More words were said, and I nodded. He pointed down at the root beer with his index finger then broke his grin into a bigger one. He was missing a tooth.

He then raised his left hand, his flabby fingers around a pack of cigarettes. I saw him say more and an excitement went up my body. I didn't like it.

He handed me the pack, gave me a thumbs up and then approached the shelf where I had gotten the root beer, picking up a case himself. The scene cut off, and I felt the aroma from the elder Jonathan's cigarette rushing up my nose. More concentrated. I could actually taste some kind of gasoline, oil and residue building. My heart seemed to curl up, and I felt my lungs shriveling. Crackling sweetness of root beer rained down my throat too. My vision was black, but with hazy fumes dancing in front of my eyes.

I couldn't breathe.

Air flooded into my lungs suddenly as I saw my mom next. Her head was in a toilet, hair spread, knees bent sorrowfully. I could tell she was throwing up because of the way her stomach sucked in. The carpet underneath her had dots of tears.

And then, I was back with older Jonathan. I was back in my forest backyard with the dirt spot, and the clipped grass.

Jonathan breathed slowly. "Did you understand...?"

"I don't want to say I did."

"If you hadn't chosen what you did, you would've picked lung cancer, death, and your mom's drinking problem intensified by depression."

I was tired. My skin was regaining the warmth of the day still and the earlier feelings I had were replaced with even more confusion as he told me what I saw.

He coughed, a hacking noise. Then he spoke.

“I’m not supposed to be here, as you can guess. But I wanted to show you, pickin’ what you did, losing some legs, and saving your mom...”

Tears glinted at the corners of his eyes, catching the sun.

“You were a hero, Johnny, and you didn’t even know it. There’s still a chance to be one today.”

I could see my vision blurring again. In that moment, I knew he was me. We both loved her.

“You came to tell me that...? Why were you here before? Why not a different time..?” I whispered.

Putting his hand to his eyes in order to rid the tears, a habit I always had and still do today, he sighed.

“I-I... needed to make sure you were here. If I broke the rules, I wanted to do it one hundred percent right..”

I sniffed. “We were destined to be a loving mother and son...?” He laughed sadly, less of the choking sound he had when I first met him.

“Don’t be so sappy. But... Pretty much. Somewhere. Somehow.”

A crumpled smile crossed my face. “I-it... Makes sense... When I lost my my legs... Mom stopped drinking.”

The older Jonathan rustled my hair with his hand. “That’s right, hero.” I saw him smile bigger, and as I blinked, I saw a grey haired version of my mother behind Jonathan. The wrinkled woman took his other hand, the one not sitting coldly in my hair, and in the next blink, the two were gone. Just as he was when I first saw him.

A moment of silence passed, and I could have sworn the wind was colder. An ice box had been poured into the breeze.

The scent of a cigarette slid into the air briefly.

Then suddenly, when it was gone, I grabbed my arms in with sharp fingers and cried. I cried with a smile, the oddest type of crying, where you know you’re happy, but your heart is still heavy since it’s dealing with about fifty emotions at once.

I was into it so hard, I didn't realize my mother's touch until I heard her voice. Through squinted eyes, a bit red from crying I will admit, I saw her hand.

"I heard crying from the kitchen... Are you alright..?" Her voice was filled with soft concern, as it always was.

"Yeah," I said. "I... I'm sorry for what I said."

"Oh, thank you, Jonathan..." She said warmly, surprised.

I started to shake a bit, no tears coming out this time, and I suddenly realized in depth how much she did for me. Mowing the lawn. Helping me with my chair. Asking about my day.

Before I knew what I was doing, my limp legs were touching the dirt and my arms were around my mother. I held her tight, realizing that we both could be dead. *We both could have been separated, broken, and dead.*

"I-I love you."

"Get back into your chair, sweetie... I love you too, no need to feel so bad about what you said. You've apologized."

I shook my head like a five year old into her flowered shirt. "It's not..." I raised my head for a moment. "I... I'll do the schedule with you today." My mom seemed a little puzzled. She smiled awkwardly and nodded. "Alright. Feeling okay?"

An achy gulp went down my throat and I swear my eyes almost burned with salt again.

"After I thought about what I said... I thought... I realized..." I trailed off with a shake.

Mom plopped me back into my chair. "Come on. Let's go inside and talk it over a comic."

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