STRUCTURAL FAILURE

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I ALWAYS LET PETER go through the door first. You never know who's on the other side. It could be a man with a gun. Peter bangs on the door and shouts, "Anybody home? We got to inspect your apartment! It's just me, the janitor, and an architect!" Silence follows.

Peter, a short and wiry man with close-cropped gray hair, unlocks the door and pokes his head into the room. "Nobody home," he says, with a grin. "All safe. We can go in."

I start breathing again. It was Peter who told me how he once had entered a dark apartment and found a revolver aimed at his head. He has plenty of stories; he's been a janitor in these Boston projects for twenty-two years.

The temperature inside the apartment is stifling. Peter turns

on the lights and we watch the roaches scuttle for cover. I take out my clipboard and we start the inspection: Sagging floors indicate structural failure; green stains on the walls are mold; buckled tiles hide water leaks.

The worst part of the inspections involves the stained toilet bowls. You sit on them and rock from side to side. In deference to my status as an architect, Peter checks the toilets. "This one's loose," he says.

"Hey, you see the cricket match, man?" Peter asks.

He and I are cricket fans. He's Trinidadian. I'm Indian. We both are immigrants, both brown men. Brown men have to do the worst work. It's what we have in common. We understand this.

It's late afternoon now, and the winter light is fading. The apartment we're inspecting is furnished with bare mattresses, and crimson-stained sanitary pads litter the floor. On the wall are rows of framed photographs of children. The glass in each frame has been shattered, and the cracks cover the kids' smiles. In this dim, fractured space, I think about my wife, and how the fights have worsened. Last night she tried to kill herself by emptying a bottle of sedatives into her mouth. I had to stick my fingers into her mouth and pry out the pills. Then we fought, with whispered threats, tortured breathing, the thud of her fists on my chest. I just prayed that our son would not wake up.

"Ooof, man, I'm tired," Peter says. "Let's get us some coffee. We got 185 apartments to do. Gotta pace ourselves."

I want to tell Peter that I'm tired too, tired of this shit. But Peter is a Jehovah's Witness, and cursing upsets him. So I just nod instead.

Outside, it's almost dark now, and freezing. I walk bareheaded beside Peter toward the coffee shop.

"Peter. Can I ask you something? You've been married a long time, right?"

Peter, his face half hidden beneath a thick knit cap, nods.

"Yup, thirty-seven years. You want to know the secret? Young guys always want to know the secret."

He chuckles and looks up at me.

"The secret is you got to talk. Talk about everything. And sometimes, to get the right woman, you just got to be lucky. Luck, that's all there is to it. Your wife, she Indian?"

"Yes, we met in India. She doesn't like it here."

"Yeah, it's tough here. This cold—all this." Peter spreads his arms, motioning to include the cold, gray evening, the garbage piles on the sidewalk, the junkies nodding on the stoops. "She'll get used to it, man. Just be kind, be gentle."

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The coffee shop is warm and filled with the rich smell of burnt coffee. Ray and Chuck have a table by the window and wave us over. They're both janitors, both older men from the Deep South. Chuck is still handsome and wears his blue overalls with fighter-pilot élan. Ray has a long, sunken face and a raggedy goatee.

"So," asks Peter, straddling a chair that he has turned backward, "what you two been doing today, slacking off, now that I ain't there to bust your lazy asses?"

Ray and Chuck grin and blow steam off their coffees.

"Well, there was that one busted screen we repaired," Chuck says.

Ray raises two fingers in a V.

"Make that two busted screens," Chuck says with a smile.

I drink my coffee and listen to them talk about broken windows, rat problems, and illegal washing machines. I've been having coffee with these men for weeks now. I've heard Ray and Chuck's stories about traveling from Alabama to Boston in the early '60s, desperate for work, and how janitor jobs were the only ones available for a black man. They dream about someday returning home. They want to spend their old age dozing and fishing. The present for all of us is just something to be endured until we can get back to our real lives. Ray turns to me and in a gravelly voice says, "My man, I gotta talk to you. These boilers you people is installing. They're no good."

"They're high-efficiency," I say. "Good for the environment."

"Yeah, man, but how you expect me to get up a head of steam with a twenty-pound boiler? I need me a fi'ty-pound boiler—at least." Peter and Chuck smile into their coffees. Boilers are Ray's life. We call his lament the Boiler Blues.

"I have to pick up my son. See you guys tomorrow," I say, gulping down my coffee. I hear a murmur of farewell as I head out the door to run for the bus.

At the day care center I stop in the doorway of my son's class and search the room for his round, dark head. He is in a corner, building a tower of blocks, concentrating deeply. My son has his mother's eyes, but his round cheeks come directly from my brother, and the way he frowns reminds me of my mother. I walk over to him, pick him up, bury my nose in his hair, and smell the world.

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It is getting very cold. I spend every workday in the South End with Peter, surveying apartments. We have become like an old married couple, communicating in gestures, finishing each other's sentences.

We go into the top-floor apartment of a brownstone that is settling. Jagged cracks appear in the foundation, and the stairs lean drunkenly. This whole area of the South End is landfill, and the houses have been built on centuries of garbage. "This baby's funky," Peter says. "It's a six, for sure."

"Yup," I say, knowing he means a total gut: new ceilings, new floors, new Sheetrock on the walls. But because of the slant of the floors, I'm also thinking there's structural failure. While I try to imagine how we're going to fix this building, Peter stands stock-still in the middle of the room. His nose is quivering like a hunting dog's.

"Something's wrong," he says, gesturing to the kitchen stove. All the knobs are missing.

"What? We're going to need a new stove?"

"Shhh, listen."

The room is quiet except for the gurgle of heating pipes and the scratch-scratch of pigeons on the windowsill. Then I hear it: a faint, high-pitched keening sound.

Peter flings open the door of the living room closet. Cowering inside are two little boys. The older one—he's maybe five—is clamping his hand over the younger one's mouth, trying to silence his crying. They are both filthy, with snotty, crusted noses.

Peter kneels in front of them.

"It's okay. It's okay. We're not going to hurt you. Where's your mommy, at work?"

The older boy glares up, but the baby—he's no older than three, no older than my son—nods, still crying. Peter gently takes the little boy into his arms, fishes out a handkerchief, and wipes his face.

"Call social services," Peter says. He reels off a number, and I dial it on my cell phone. A woman tells me someone will be there in half an hour.

We sit down on a battered couch with the kids, the baby in my lap, the five-year-old in Peter's. Both the children fall asleep, exhausted from crying. It feels so familiar to have a warm child in my arms, sleeping peacefully.

I remember the first morning in the hospital after my son was born. Cradling him, I looked out at the city and whispered, "Baby, I'm your father, and I will always take care of you."

And I have. I pick him up from day care every day, take him home and bathe him, dance with him in my arms until he falls asleep. When my wife returns from work she scoops him up and croons, "Oh, my baby, my poor baby. Never mind, your mother is home." Then she takes him into another room.

Later at night my wife and I argue about my low-paying job, about the money we do not have to buy a house. Ignoring our finances, my wife plans a trip to India. She wants to get off the plane like a movie star, with suitcases full of presents for her relatives. She retreats into her three-hour-long Hindi movies and when I touch her, she snarls at me. I have become the symbol of her unhappiness.

In the apartment, the baby's face is pushed into my chest, soaking it with drool. When the social services woman arrives, the baby wakes with a start and looks up at me. His eyes are big; he's afraid. I feel as though I'm handing over my own son.

The woman departs, the children crying all the way down the stairs. Peter's face is ashen.

"I knew it, from the stove," he says softly. "When they leave the kids alone they take the knobs off."

I'm still sitting on the couch, looking at the wet spot on my shirt

where the baby's head had just been. "What is happening to this world?" Peter continues. "These little babies left alone. And you can't blame the woman. Her husband's gone, left her alone. She's got to get a job, feed those hungry mouths.

I close my eyes tight. My breath comes in ragged gasps.

"Hey, you okay, man?" Peter walks over and touches my shoulder. "These things happen. You gotta let it go."

When I open my eyes, they are filled with tears.

"Let's go get us some hot coffee," Peter says. "That's what we need."

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We take our usual seats at the coffee shop, by the plate glass window. My hands are shaking so badly that I scald myself.

"What's going on, man?" Peter looks at me over the rim of his coffee cup.

"Peter, it's bad. We're fighting all the time. She says she'll kill herself."

"Your wife? She serious?"

"I don't know. It's killing me."

"You talk to her? You try, whatchamacallit, counseling?"

I nod dumbly. We tried a therapist, an Indian woman who told us smugly that Indians don't get divorced, that we would just have to learn to live with each other.

"My wife's like a kid. I can't trust her alone with my son."

"Slow down, man. Drink your coffee. Breathe."

The coffee is burnt and hot. Its sourness coils my stomach.

"I want to leave my marriage. I can't handle it anymore."

I've never said these words before. I would never dare say this to my family or to my Indian friends. Nobody in our family has ever divorced. *Indians don't get divorced*. Divorce is failure. Divorce is the destruction of the home. Divorce is to become like the Americans who are barbarians and abandon their families.

Peter's eyes widen.

"You sure you want to leave your wife?"

"I know it's completely wrong. I know it's a horrible thing to do and . . ."

"Listen to me."

I look up at Peter, at his calm eyes. He speaks slowly, carefully choosing his words.

"Listen. You're a good man. I know that. You love your son. But you got to look after yourself first. Understand? If you're no good, there's nothing you can do for him. You hear me?"

I nod again. I have heard him. They're the first words I've heard in a long time.

"I'll finish the other two apartments," Peter says. "You finish your coffee. Then take a walk. Clear your head, man. No arguments."

I watch Peter leave, a small man in his olive drab janitor's uniform, hunched against the cold.

. . . .

It is deep winter. When I leave work now, I don't go home. My boss, hearing that I had no place to live, found me a studio apartment in the projects. It's on the ground floor and it has bars on the windows. All day and night I hear sirens, screams, muttering. I keep the shades tightly pulled; all that separates me from the street is a few millimeters of vinyl.

I call in sick and sleep all day. In the evening I take the bus across town to pick up my son at day care. We go to a coffee shop. To entertain him, I make men out of coffee stirrers and straws. My son gurgles when he laughs. Then his mother comes and takes him away. He is confused and looks back at me over her shoulder.

I call in sick the next three days, and on the fourth I wake up, put on my hard hat and go to work, to the town house where Peter and I had found the two little boys. The structural engineer is coming today to evaluate the building.

The inside of the house is unrecognizable. The walls and ceilings have been stripped of their Sheetrock cladding. What were once rooms are now only wooden cages. The place smells of freshly cut wood, power tools, and workmen's sweat.

The structural engineer and I walk through all four floors, noting the slant of the stairway and the slope of the beams.

"Wood never fails catastrophically, like steel," he tells me, pointing to places where the beams are sagging. "It just sags for years before breaking. It gives you plenty of warning."

Peter clambers up the stairs, wearing a yellow hard hat that is too large for him.

"Hey, stranger. Haven't seen you this week. How ya doin'?"

"Fine, fine," I say, but Peter sees the dark circles under my eyes.

"Ray and Chuck and them was asking about you. Come by the coffee shop later, okay?"

I nod and carry on working with the engineer. As soon as I can, I hurry to the coffee shop. It is just past three, but the afternoon is already sliding into night.

The coffee shop is empty except for Peter, who is sitting in a corner. A few minutes later Ray and Chuck amble in. They insist on buying me a Boston cream doughnut. Chuck looks as handsome as ever, with immaculately barbered hair, but the winter has been tough on Ray. He's had pneumonia, and he still coughs hollowly.

"So," says Chuck, looking at me. "How's your new place?"

"It's OK," I say. "There are mice and stuff. But it's temporary, you know."

"Mice. Shit. Keep all your food inside the fridge. Coffee, sugar, everything. Then they won't bother you. You got a date yet?"

I must look confused, because Chuck continues. "I mean a court date. Peter told us."

"Umm, no, we're just separated. We have to reach a settlement first. She doesn't want to let me see my son as much as I want."

Ray leans in, coughing. His cheeks are gaunt and covered with a day-old beard.

"That shit is tough. Been through it myself. Married this gal down South. She was no good. Had to cut her loose. But it tore me up. Still tears me up."

"Yeah," Chuck adds. "How's your son?"

"He's okay," I say. "Hard to tell."

"Kids are tough, man. They survive. Important thing is, you keep

seeing him."

There is an awkward silence. Then Ray clears his throat.

"Those boilers, man. Those new boilers you put in. They're killing me. Three buildings down already."

Peter and Chuck nudge each other and start laughing.

"Ray, you like a broken gramophone record, man," Peter says. "Give the boy a break."

"Gramophone? Shit. There're no gramophones anymore. All CDs these days. You all still got gramophones in Trinidad?"

Ray laughs so hard at his own joke that he coughs and has to thump his chest to stop.

It is almost four now. Time to pick up my son from day care. As I've done so many times before, I take my leave of the three men. I shake their hands, and as I walk out the door, Peter waves farewell.

I wait for the bus at the corner. Across the road is the leaning town house. It is barely visible in the twilight, but I can see a red X above the front door, a warning that the building is structurally unsound. The building will never be plumb and square, but we're going to lift up the framing with hydraulic jacks, reinforce the beams, and rebuild most of the cracked facade. In a year's time, the building will be transformed, reclaimed from decay.

The bus arrives, and as we pull away from the curb, I try to imagine what my life will be like in another year. A knot forms in my stomach. Then I remind myself that a year from now, my three friends will still be here, sitting in the coffee shop. As the bus gathers speed and roars off into the darkness, I close my eyes and hear Peter, Ray, and Chuck telling stories. I hear their slow voices, their deliberate pauses, their full-bellied laughter.

On any dark day, I'll be able to walk into the coffee-scented warmth and they will welcome me without a word, without questions. I can pull up a chair, sit among them, and slowly sip my burnt coffee. In this cold, foreign city filled with pain, I know there is one place that will take me in.