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A Grave Situation

The human body contains about seven liters of blood. By the time the ambulance arrived, I had lost more than six and a half. When it happened, though, I didn't think they were real bullets. It was a fortunate fallacy, really. I'm convinced my ignorance kept me alive long enough to reach the hospital to receive last rites before the all-night surgery that saved me. What you don't know can't kill you, but it's really no way to live.

In my mind, I figured he was firing rubber bullets. Or, more likely, he was shooting at me with a salt gun, the kind of weapon my friends and I believed the nighttime rent-a-cops carried while patrolling Moravian Cemetery, where we sometimes got high. It was located at the intersection of New Dorp and Oakwood Heights on Staten Island. Cornelius Vanderbilt's colossal tomb, erected on a finely groomed hilltop, was situated a quarter of a mile behind the rest of the cemetery. The largest private tomb in the United States, it was five times the size of the homes that most of us lived in. Landscaping legend Frederick Law Olmsted designed its grounds. The rest of the cemetery covered more than one hundred pristine acres. If we didn't feel like walking up to Vanderbilt's at night, we would hang out in the cemetery, leaning against the headstones or parading through the infinite rows of graves. Everything was meticulously managed; barely a single weed grew beside any burial site. Ancient elms and oaks lined winding roads that went to other, less impressive mausoleums. A decent-sized human-made lake anchored the entire place. It was truly a magnificent place to be dead.

Lots of kids went there to fish, play exhausting games of hide-and-seek,

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and get stoned, on weed, acid, cheap beer, sickly sweet wine, or all of the above. Some shot heroin, although I didn't realize that at the time. A few kids wandered around so stoned they resembled zombies. I suspect now that some of the living dead were having sex in the bushes, although I didn't realize that at the time either. Other kids simply went there because it was somewhere to go, something to do, a juvenile delinquent field trip of sorts.

This was especially true when one took the long uphill hike through wooded terrain that went directly to Vanderbilt's tomb. Taking the path avoided passage through the main cemetery grounds, where the chances of getting caught during the day were likely. During daylight hours hardly a soul hung out there. "The Tomb," as everyone called it, was the daytime destination. It seemed kids from all over the area knew where, on a dead-end street, to find the hole in the fence that protected the cemetery from trespassers. Past it, a rather steep path that wended its way through the woods led to a second fence that surrounded the tomb. That one had to be scaled. Once you were inside, it was pretty easy, as long as you didn't suffer from vertigo, for anyone to climb onto the tomb's roof from the back by slowly walking on all fours like an ape along the slanted surface toward the front. You could then sit safely and comfortably at its peak by straddling its extravagant cornice. From there you could see the Atlantic Ocean and much of Staten Island's South Shore, as well as look down on the countless dead buried in the valley below and those paying their respects to them.

Everyone knew not to be afraid of the cops, who came out only at night. They were fake cops carrying fake weapons loaded with fake ammunition. Reputedly, the function of their salt guns went something like this: When fired at their target, they slowly immobilized the person. At first they created a slow-mo effect on the victim if he were running, causing increasing paralysis, until he finally collapsed onto the ground, rendered completely incapacitated by the salt's effect on the bloodstream. However, the cops rarely, if ever, bothered coming up to the tomb, many of them finding it too creepy in the first place. Second, it was virtually impossible for the cops to do anything more than make us take flight into the surrounding brush when they showed up (we could see the oncoming headlights long before they arrived), only for us to resurface and reclaim the territory once they'd left. Sometimes we didn't need to hide because they frequently didn't unlock the fence to get a better look at who was around. As long as they could report that they'd gone up to the tomb, I guess they could say they had done their night's work. What they did

do mostly was drive aimlessly around the cemetery grounds below, perhaps even getting high like the rest of us, a prospect that was quite scary. Stoned-out males performing thankless, boring jobs can be a volatile lot, itching to pop off their pieces, even if they are only “fake” guns.

Mind you, none of us ever saw any of these guns, let alone one discharged using Morton Salt bullets. But neither did anyone want to put the rumor to a test and get shot at. That’s why whenever we were in the cemetery instead of at the tomb we scattered like rats through the rows of gravestones if we saw an approaching vehicle. If you see these half-assed Barney Fifes, we’d tell each other, duck behind a tombstone. And don’t move. You know they’re too terrified and too lazy to get out of the car and give chase, so they’ll probably pretend that they never saw you. Whatever you do, don’t run. Then it’s like sport to these assholes, like they’re hot-shot safari hunters who shoot “Wilma beasts” or whatever the fuck it is safari hunters shoot from their jeeps. *That’s* when they’ll spray you with those salt guns. So be cool.

And that’s the conversation that was inside my head the night a real cop with a real gun with real bullets shot me. I wasn’t in the cemetery, so I guess I should have figured otherwise. But I was fifteen years old, so what did I know? And unlike the cemetery, there were no tombstones to hide behind, so when he yelled, “Freeze, you assholes,” I did at first. I didn’t want to be a sacrificial Wilma beast for his amusement. Dougie and I had been hiding behind a boulder in an empty, unkept lot across the street from the house where the driver was making his delivery. We had called earlier to order a pizza to be sent to that address, just as we had done twice before at that same address (really dumb), and just as we had done the first time at another address. As soon as he stepped out of the car, we’d rob him—me holding a water pistol spray-painted black and Dougie clutching a knife he’d grabbed from his mother’s kitchen drawer. But when we charged out of the lot toward him, it was evident he wasn’t some pimply-faced college kid as had been the case the other times.

Instead, a man was holding the white cardboard box, and when he saw us rushing forward he dropped it. A gun that looked as big as a howitzer was aimed right at me. It had magically appeared in the very same hands that had previously been carrying the pizza box, and he was cupping it with both hands, just as the professional cops on TV and in the movies did. Still, it didn’t make any sense that he’d be a real cop himself. Being faster than Dougie, and the one taking the initiative, I ran out first, so I was standing in front of Dougie when the cop ordered us to stop in our tracks, which I did. When I turned around, though, Dougie was racing

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along a tiny path that cut down the middle of the empty lot. When I saw him running, I decided I had better run too.

And I ran like hell. And I kept running, even after the cop unloaded his revolver, hitting me three times. Shots must have rung out, but I don't remember hearing them. Nor did I feel any pain when I was hit. One bullet ripped straight through my shoulder. The other two struck me in the back, one lodging itself permanently below my collarbone, the other slamming into my right lung and bringing me to my knees. It felt like a kidney punch. But they weren't real bullets, I thought, so I immediately stood up and continued running, breathing heavily as my lungs filled with blood. *Shit, the salt is already circulating throughout my system. So this is what it feels like. Wait 'til I tell everyone. It won't be long before I can't move.* As I ran, I saw Dougie running straight toward Guyon Avenue. He never looked back. I had watched enough westerns and cops-and-robbers stuff to know not to follow him. Divide and conquer. I turned left. As I did, the policeman's footsteps faded in the distance the farther I went. He knew he had hit me, so he chased Dougie, hoping to catch him.

After I made my turn, I ran another two blocks. My labored breathing had grown so intense, and I was gasping so much for air, I thought I was choking on all of the salt I believed was in my body. I had no idea I had nearly been shot to death right then and there. I was so deluded I planned on eventually walking home, as if nothing had ever happened, once what I thought were the toxins passed through me and dissipated. *As long as I can get to a place to rest and wait it out, then it'll all be over.* Three blocks from the shooting, I found a thick row of front-yard shrubs to crawl under. The house was owned by an elderly widow who lived alone. I knew it would be safe there at that time of night. It was after 11 o'clock, so she was probably fast asleep. *If she's anything like my grandmother she didn't even hear the shots. I'll be okay here until the coast is clear.*

I don't know how long I was there. It seemed like only a few minutes, but I must have passed out for a while. Later I learned from a friend who lived nearby and had come out of his house after hearing the uproar—from dozens of police cars, their screaming sirens filling the usually quiet night—that the cops had been searching for me for more than an hour. By then, they were mostly canvassing the area on foot looking for me, undoubtedly wondering where the heck the one who'd been shot had vanished to. Dougie was long gone, having outrun the cop who shot me and then disappearing into the night by sneaking along the train tracks until he reached another station. By the time they found me, he was already staying with a friend who lived across town, in New Dorp.

From my hideaway, I could see Guyon Avenue, the main road where most of the police cruisers had been scrambling up and down looking for us. Only a few vehicles lingered, the sirens turned off but the rooftop bubble gum machines still spinning like carousels on speed. I figured it was all right to head home. I wasn't breathing so heavily anymore, although my vision was blurry, almost to the point of blindness. I figured that would pass once I started walking.

I stood up, still holding the water pistol. I tossed it into some bushes across the street. I had taken no more than three or four steps when I heard a voice shout, "Freeze, asshole!"—the exact words hollered by the guy who'd shot me, except it wasn't his voice. This time I didn't think I had it in me to run. "Don't fuckin' move or you're fuckin' dead," another voice said. Sure enough, I couldn't move. I stood there as frozen as I'd been commanded, swirling in place. "Get your fuckin' ass on the ground or I'll blow your fuckin' head off," added yet another voice. *Where are they?* I couldn't see more than a cloudy few inches ahead of me. When I looked down at my feet they appeared to be at a great distance, minuscule, as if they weren't even mine. "Get the fuck down—now!—asshole," the last voice thundered. It sounded like the voice of the one who'd promised to decapitate me with a blizzard of bullets. I dropped to the ground, plopping on the widow's front lawn. She still hadn't come out. At least I had chosen the right spot.

But I couldn't believe I'd been caught. I still didn't realize how seriously shot up I was. Why would anyone want *me* dead, especially over something as unimportant as sticking up pizza delivery guys with a water pistol and a kitchen knife? For Christ's sake, we were so unprofessional and harmless that the knife probably still had butter on it. And the water pistol wasn't even loaded. It didn't make any sense for someone to shoot me, with real bullets no less. But its unreality turned out to be a lifesaver—in more ways than one. It tricked me into believing I hadn't nearly bled to death. In the end, getting shot was the best thing that ever happened to me.

Almost dying saved the rest of my life.

Interestingly enough, precisely the moment I believed I *was* going to die was the moment that changed my life forever. If you want to learn how, dear reader, skip ahead to the last chapter, as long as you promise to read the rest.

Now, if you don't read the rest, you won't find out how I arrived at that moment in my life, being administered last rites in the ER and all that cosmic jazz related to it. You also won't find out how I got out of there

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too—metaphorically speaking—and became, of all things, an English professor. It seems as if everything before the shooting led up to that event and everything after the shooting led away from it, including my typing these very words. Like the surgery to repair my collapsed lung, which required doctors to cut me nearly in half, my life seems divided by that one incident. I guess that's all it takes. One event can turn things around, if you're lucky, rather than ass-backward, if you're not. I'm sure I'm not alone in believing this, or alone in having experienced these flashpoints that take over our lives, including the past. And what I mean is the *perception* of the past, not necessarily the actual past. Most of us can trace a certain point along our life-maps that can be seen as an end and as a start of who we are, of what we've become. Or what we could have become but didn't. It's a dividing line. Not quite a fork in the road—more like a knife's edge. My father's absence probably had much to do with the first half, of how I got to that point in my life, while my mother's presence probably had much to do with what I did—and didn't do—after it, along with becoming a “fake doctor.” It still seems strange to me that I eventually became a college professor, one who taught English no less. Imagine that. It was pretty stupid what I did, all right, but I was practically illiterate the night I was shot. Now I'm at the top of the literacy heap, so to speak. It's as if I've led two very different lives. But a person has to live a whole life. For me, accomplishing that felt divided too, almost as soon as I started “living” again.

That night in the ER I became internally centered and whole. Externally, I felt dislocated and incomplete, to rectify that I had planned on doing big things with my life, saving pieces of the world, or perhaps saving other lives, as mine had been saved. I wanted to remake myself, to better myself, for the betterment of humankind. I had really big plans in mind. My life didn't turn out that way. I'm not dissatisfied that I didn't become a life-saving surgeon, a famous scientist, a constitutional or literary scholar. Instead, I became a really good teacher—a “gifted” one, in fact. I think that's a pretty big thing, really, as big a thing as being a “real doctor.” It's not something to be disappointed about. And I don't mean just for my sake; most of all, I mean for the sake of my students.