

Tabula Rasa

As you wake up, the first thing you notice is your pounding headache. It's all encompassing, dulling your senses and preventing you from focusing on anything but the pressure surrounding your brain. You rub your head, not because you expect it to ease the pain, but because you find the motion soothing. Something warm permeates through your scalp: blood. You cough twice and more blood exudes from your lungs. Your knuckles are scarred and bloody. Your left eye won't open. Your feet are bare and blistered. You can't breathe.

Your body curls in on itself uncontrollably as you throw up on your legs. You're lying in a dark alley against the sharpest brick wall you've ever had the displeasure of meeting. It's cold outside and you aren't dressed for this type of weather. You're wearing a white button up shirt, opened at the top, a light brown jacket that does nothing to protect your arms or chest against the attacking wind, and jeans that are a little too tight around your waist. Your jeans are stained by blood, but your shirt is nice and clean. It's been raining recently, but you're fortunate enough to not be wet. You button the top three buttons on your shirt and wrap your coat tightly around yourself.

"Where am I?" you ask the alley – but it doesn't respond. Talking is harder than you remember. Your lungs and throat burn. Your mouth is dry. You smell alcohol on the clouds your breath is forming. Standing up is even harder than talking. Your legs don't want to move. You use your hands to crawl up the wall behind you, forcing yourself against your will to slowly stand. You rest against the wall because your legs won't support your full weight. Two cop cars drive down the adjoining street, sirens

blaring. *You must be in the bad part of town.* You listen to the voices in your head without really comprehending what they're saying.

Ignoring the feeling that you have a reason for being in the alley, you decide you ought to be getting home. *It's not safe for you to be on the streets after dark.* You hobble out of the alley to get a better look at where exactly you are. In front of you is an unfamiliar, sparsely populated street, four lanes wide with a double yellow line painted in the middle. The street is quiet, save for the occasional car's engine or blaring radio. Heavy cloud cover dims the light of the moon. Street lights flood the gray sidewalk with an eerie yellow glow. All around you buildings tower like a forest of brick, steel, and glass. Looming above the apartment complex across the street, the Empire State Building welcomes you to New York City. One of the cars driving by splashes a puddle of water all over your pants.

You keep limping down the street, ignoring the pain, focusing only on getting home. A homeless man on the other side of the road gives you a dirty look. At the corner of 7th Avenue and 22nd Street you stop to think about what direction you're headed. You allow yourself to be absorbed by your thoughts. *You must have drunk more last night than you think. Seriously concentrate here: what's the last thing you remember?* Everything around you fades away as you dive deeper and deeper into your head – but your mind comes up blank. *That's freaky.* Your stomach gurgles a low sounding bark of annoyance. All you can think about is food. *How long has it been since you've eaten? You don't know, do you? You can't remember anything.*

You really look yourself over now – searching for any detail that will help you realize who you are. You start at the bottom. Obviously your bare feet are a clue to your

identity, but you don't know what they mean. As you look yourself over, your mind begins to question what happened to your body. *My God, what the Hell happened to you? Were you mugged or something?* At this thought, you instinctively move your hands to your mouth. No bleeding – just a little sore. All your teeth are in place. You are extremely thankful for this.

You continue to examine yourself. You untuck your shirt. You run your hands over its buttons. They feel foreign. You don't know what you're looking for and that frightens you. You hope for any type of familiarity with something around you. You grab the cross that hangs around your neck. You turn it over and over and wonder what significance it holds for you. *Are you religious?* Suddenly you hear a beeping sound emanating from your wrist. You can't make out the time because the glass frame of your watch is shattered.

Now you plunge your hands into the pockets of your jeans which are hugging your thighs like wrapping paper. Your left hand pulls up nothing but lint while your right hand finds a white box labeled 'Crest.' *Floss?* You laugh. *You must really care about your teeth. That's funny.* Discovering that you have an abnormal obsession with your teeth momentarily relieves the tension. You begin to feel a sense of self for the first time you can remember. You check the rest of your pockets and find three dimes, two pennies, a handful of lint, and a black leather wallet. *Thank God, you're saved. Hmm, thank God. You are religious. Now open it up and find out who you are.*

You unfold the three flaps of the wallet, eagerly searching through the contents hidden in its myriad of slots. No money remains in the main compartment. A picture of a beautiful brown haired woman stares at you through a clear plastic pocket on the right

flap. She's smiling lovingly, showing off her perfect set of teeth. For a moment you allow yourself to be captivated by the depths of the pools in her emerald eyes. You are comfortable. Until you realize that you don't know who this woman is. She could be your mother – *how weird would that be?*

You remove the picture and flip it over. The back reads, "I'll love you forever. Yours Truly, Jessica." *Well, now I really hope it's not your mom.* You return the picture to its sacred resting place and continue examining the contents of your wallet. Three credit cards – a Visa, a Mastercard, and an American Express – rest in one slot. A set of business cards are folded into another: Jack's Urban Eats, Dr. Meinert's Dentistry, Petey's Pizza Parlor, Empire Comics, Wells Fargo Banking, Bob's Liquor Emporium. *Do you think someone at these businesses would recognize you?* You shove the cards into your jeans.

Finally you find what you are looking for. Tucked away behind a Kaiser Permanente card and a Borders gift certificate is your driver's license. The face that smiles at you is not familiar – yet at the same time you know it belongs to you. Underneath your beard and five years ago, this is what you looked like. You read all about yourself, confronted with a life that you know nothing about except that it is your own. Your eyes carefully take in every letter: J-A-M-E-S-P-A-R-K-E-R. *Your name is James Parker. James Parker. James Parker.* Your head repeats the name, over and over, trying to familiarize you with how it sounds – how it feels. *This is your name; this is who you are. James Parker.*

"James Parker." You decide that you like the name.

After reading a description of yourself, your eyes catch sight of an address. *You live in Apartment 14b at 505 Tanager Avenue in New York, New York. Great – now all you have to do is find out where the Hell that is.* You wander down the street again, heading towards the Empire State Building. Something draws you to it. Maybe because it is the only sign of familiarity you’ve seen since you woke up in that damn alley. Without the sun, you can’t tell if you’re going northwest, southeast, or somewhere in between. Another cop drives by, this time without its sirens. You consider asking him for help, but something in your gut persuades you otherwise.

Then you see it: salvation in the form of a glass box which holds the magic of telecommunications inside. You sprint to the end of the street, determined to not let anything get between you and your phone call. Out of breath, you lift the receiver. It shakes in your hand as you carefully pull your driver’s license out of your wallet and dial the phone number written next to your name. A cruel old lady tells you to deposit thirty-five cents for the first fifteen minutes. Once again you plunge your hands into your pockets and once again all you find is your floss and thirty two cents. Then you remember an ad you had seen once: *dial down the center, with 1-800-CALL-ATT.*

“At the tone, please say your name.” *James Parker. James Parker. James Parker.* You spend so much effort rehearsing your name that you jump backwards when a voice calls out from inside the telephone.

“Hello?” *Oh God, what should you say?*

“Hi, um, Jessica?” *Please let this be Jessica.*

“Yes, who’s this?” *Good question.*

“It’s me.” *God that sounded stupid.*

“Jim? Is that you Jim? Are you okay?” *Jim, eh? I wonder why you go by Jim.*

“Yeah, yeah, it’s me. I’m, uhm, okay. How are you?” You have absolutely no idea what to say to this person. A million questions run through your head, any one of them capable of scaring her away. You have no idea who this woman is and the only reason you believe that she cares about you is a picture of some beautiful stranger that you have in your wallet. *Why should she care about you? What have you done that’s so worthy of winning her heart? You can’t even remember why the two of you are together.*

“I’m worried, Jim. What’s going on? You’ve been gone all night. Where are you calling from?”

“I’m, uh, not sure exactly. It’s a payphone.”

“Come home Jim. It’s not safe to be out on the streets this late.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’d like to come home.” You don’t want to worry her. She sounds so sweet and loving and you just want to hold her in your arms and tell her that everything is okay. But everything’s not okay. At a loss for what to do you reach for what comes naturally: you lie. “I’m fine, Honey. I’m just a little lost. I got drunk and I’m not quite sure how to get home from here.”

“Well do you know what street you’re on? I can look up directions.”

“Um... no. I’m sorry.”

“Why don’t you ask someone where you are?”

“I, uh... yeah. I, uh, guess that’s a good idea. I’ll do that then.” *Careful James.*

“Okay. Well then... I’ll see you soon, okay Jim? I love you, Sweetheart.”

“I love you, too.” You say those three little words instinctively without actually meaning them. How can you love a voice on the phone or a picture in your wallet? It

seems like you care for her, but love? *What will you tell Jessica when you see her? She's gonna be pissed about what happened. Why did you go off and get drunk tonight, anyway? How could you have been so stupid as to get yourself mugged?*

Realizing there is no one around to ask for directions, you walk back in the direction of the cop cars. Your steps become quicker and quicker as you anticipate the possibility of finally going home and having this ordeal over with. Not far from that damn alley you see an ambulance, a fire truck, and three police cars all with their lights flashing. The street alternates in a glowing red and blue haze. You slip past the yellow security tape and walk up to three officers in blue jackets standing over a body in the middle of the double yellow line. You call out towards the three men, "Excuse me officers – I need your help."

One of the officers turns to you and says, "You can't be here, Sir. This is a crime scene." *Leave now, James, while you still can.*

"I'm sorry, but I really need your help. My name is James Parker. I... I only know that because it says so on my license. I need help getting home." You hold out your wallet to the officer in front of you. He takes it slowly, pulling out the license as if it will break if he handles it too roughly. He turns away and walks back towards the other officers. You stand waiting, barely able to hear what they're saying.

"Does this look right to you?"

"Are you sure it's him?"

"That's definitely him. Look at the nose."

One of the cops turns and looks you up and down. The bad feeling in your stomach returns as you think about fleeing the scene. *For the love of God, James, I'm telling you to run!*

“What happened to him?”

“He definitely looks like he was in a fight.”

“And he thinks he's James Parker?”

“Yeah, because of the wallet.”

“Of all the crazy things I've seen in this city, this is going straight to the top of my weird list.”

“Do we have a motive?”

“Doesn't matter. Look at the picture on this guy's ID. That's not him. That's our John Doe.”

The officer holding your wallet pulls out his gun and points it towards you as quickly and with as much precision as if he actually wants to shoot you. Confusion swirls around you like a hot shower. Your hands are sprawled out in front of you, pressing you up against one of the officer's cars. You notice something odd about your fingers; every single knuckle is bloodstained, but there's no scarring, no cuts or abrasions on them. It isn't your blood. And your fingers are bare – especially your left ring finger. One of the officers reads you your rights, “You're under arrest for the murder of James Parker. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have a right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney then one will be provided for you.”

You don't listen to the words. All you can think about is how much you want to see the woman in the picture, hold her in your arms, and tell her that everything is okay. Now, as you're being driven off to jail, you're more confused than when you woke up. All you know is that you've done something horrible and unforgivable – something you will never forget. You don't know anything about yourself. You don't know your name. You don't know what you do for a living or why that floss is in your pocket. You don't know if you're married or if there's anyone left in this world who cares about you. You don't know what drove you to do such a horrible thing. But you know that you did it. Even though you can't remember, somehow you can feel it deep down that the policemen are right. *You killed James Parker.*