

Me and Graves

By Swade Best

He was always scowling, face set in a stony grimace, his hands at his side or in his pockets or maybe fiddling with the remote on the TV if we were sitting inside. When it was warm we'd go out on walks and when none of the nurses and orderlies were around, his hands would point at me and he'd ask for a cigarette. I'd pull them out of my pocket and give them to him, even though I wasn't supposed to, and then his hands would be silent.

He was born one Jeremiah Montelaro, but he told folks to call him Graves. I'd come in on Tuesdays, and start cleaning up his place a little, putting odds and ends together and I'd say "Mornin' Mr. Montelaro" and he'd scowl at me and spit into the Folgers can at his feet and tell me "fuck off with that goddamn nonsense."

"I'm Graves," he'd say, "Always have been and always will be and it don't matter what any goddamn name-tagged asshole ever told you to call me, yah got that?"

And I'd nod and go to pick up the Folgers cup and he'd spit in it one more time for good measure and then give me a steely look and ask me how I'd been.

"How the fuck you'd been, Charlie?" he'd ask.

And I'd nod once and say I'm doin' all right and then I'd pick up the coffee can go dump the mottled phlegm into the toilet.

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Graves and I didn't talk much. He was a man of few words and even fewer conversations. But when he did want to talk, it was always hot. When it was cold—or as cold as it could get in South Louisiana—he'd just shut down, often didn't even leave his bedroom and if I tried to go inside he'd look at me and start to shout and holler and tell me to fuck off; tell me that he didn't need no snot-nosed prick cleaning up after him like he was a goddamn child. He was seventy-eight years old goddammit and if he needed some asshole to clean up after him he'd rather be dead.

So I'd nod my head—even though he couldn't see me, all wrapped up in blanket after blanket—and I'd clean up his living room as best I could.

Then I'd leave.

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Once, we—me and Graves—were walkin' around the complex and he was smoking his L&M and thinking about something serious. Everyone could tell when Graves was thinking about something serious, cause he'd set his jaw real hard-like and grit his teeth till you could hear them creak in his mouth.

We were walking when he looked at me and gave me this strange half smile and pointed to a bench.

“Sit over there Charlie.”

So I nodded.

I nodded and I sat down and Graves shuffled over and sort of collapsed down next to me. He took a long drag off his cigarette and leaned back and I could swear I could hear his teeth creaking, only I didn't say anything cause I knew it would only make him more ornery and he'd never done this before. He let the smoke go and float away and I could see him watching it blow off into the distance, almost.

“Charlie,” his eyes were unfocused, “Charlie, you ever do something you regret?”

I said yes.

“Charlie, every man has done something he regrets. It's what separates us from children.” His hands were folded in his lap, fingers intertwined. “And I'm old, Charlie, older then this goddamn place they put me in, older than the Goddamn Winn-Dixie you figure always' been there, older than most things around here.” He squeezed his hands and I could see the veins running up his arms like always, little road ways clambering up pale skin covered in sun spots.

“You wanna hear a story Charlie.” Graves said it like it wasn't a question, like he knew the answer. It was hot in the Eunice sun and I could see beads of sweat forming along the crusty wisps of grey facial hair. His Adam's apple sorta jumped up and down with each breath. His teeth creaked in his jaw.

He was waiting for me to say something. So I just nodded.

And then Graves nodded too and flicked his cigarette butt into the grass a few feet from a wilted fire ant nest and stuck out his hand at me. It shook softly. “Gimme another cigarette Charlie and I’ll tell you a story, goddammit.”

I dug into my pocket and fished out his pack—they didn’t let the old folks keep cigarettes on them, not lighters neither—and handed both to him. He brought the filter to his lips and lit the other end, and his hands quit shaking for a moment while he did it. His knuckles looked all kinda swollen next to the thin roll of tobacco in his hands.

“You’ve been young and in love Charlie, right? You’ve had a woman, right? Not a queer, right?”

I shook my head yes, even though I’d never been with a woman.

Charlie smiled, but he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at the anthill.

“I been with plenty goddamn women Charlie, and I’ll tell you, the first one is always the best. It’s like a cold beer, the first is the best goddamn sip in the world.”

I’d never drank a beer neither.

“And the first is always the hardest. And I’m not talking about no primary school bullshit, not kissing under the bleachers. I’m talking about fucking. And I mean real fuckin’. Not fumbling around with bra straps, not necking when your goddamn folks aren’t around, looking over your shoulder so your family doesn’t catch you with your pecker inside someone’s mouth.”

A bead of sweat fell off his chin and onto the soiled white t-shirt wrapped around his sunken chest. It was covered in white hair—his chest I mean—and it poked out of the sweat stained shirt.

“I’m talking about real fucking. With someone you love. When you hold someone and you can feel them and you don’t think about much else and afterwards nothing else really matters either but just basking in the fucking and the one and all that goddamn bullshit.”

The cigarette slowly dwindled in Graves mouth. A warm breeze blew the crown of white hairs that clung to his scalp. Somewhere in the distance cicadas whined; a sound that meant the end of summer.

“I had one first.” Graves was still looking at the Ant Hill. “I had one and she was beautiful and real and she was mean as a two headed snake and *basse classe* as they can be, from goddamn Ville Platte, but she was mine and I was hers and we fucked like goddamn hogs.”

He turned to me then. Graves turned to me and he wasn’t smiling, but he wasn’t frowning. He looked lost. His eyes were cloudy from cataracts and age. His hair was all grey and greasy at the sides and he had a long scar running from nostril to chin that you could only see when he started to sweat. I never asked him how he got the scar, but I wondered some times.

“I loved her, Charlie. I loved her like any idiot draft dodging sonofabitch could.”

Then his face was all stone and sweat and he turned back to the anthill. It was drowning. The whole thing was drowning from the hot wet Louisiana rain that never left the ground and always came back. Some ants floated around it, but most just sort of cowered at the top and waited for the rain to go away.

“I wanna go back inside, Charlie.”

His voice was quiet.

I nodded.

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It was two weeks later and I came in and looked at Graves.

“Good morning Mr. Montelaro” I said, and he told me to fuck off only he sounded subdued. He’d been at the clinic a week earlier, stayed over for tests. I wanted to ask, to prod, only I knew Mr. Montelaro, knew that Graves would rather cut off one of his own toes then tell me about the Doctors and the needles and the test and that big thick purple bruise on the side of his face and the new cane resting at the door to his room.

“I wanna smoke. Gimme the cigarettes.”

I told Graves he couldn’t inside and he told me to fuck off, only it was stony and quiet. He told me to fuck off and then he turned and looked at me and he wasn’t smiling and he wasn’t frowning and I knew I should make him wait but I also knew that old and lonely men don’t have much but tobacco and beer and they made Graves stopped drinking after he sucker punched the orderly who told him he could only have three beers—screaming that no fucker counts his goddamn beers but God and John Fucking Wayne.

So I gave him a cigarettes and turned off the fire alarm and opened the window and then Graves, he had the cigarette in his mouth and he was drawing in big thick clouds of smoke and I wanted to ask him what was wrong only I knew, I knew that if I’d ask he’d hit me or cry and I didn’t want either.

Not from Graves.

So I sat down next to him. And he looked at me.

He looked at me and said, "Charlie, I have three regrets. Three things I did that I could never take back. The first was making love to a Ville Platte woman. The second was worse. I was angry." The bruise on Graves' face looked hot to the touch, and I could hear his teeth creaking so loud I thought they'd burst and little bits of teeth would fly into my face and bury themselves in my skin.

His fingers dug into his leg. His knuckles were stark white. The bruise on his face crawled up to his eye.

"I was angry and drunk and so was she and she said she was leaving, said she was done with a Eunice man like me, said we were just trash that fixed boats and I would never be anything but a drunk who was afraid of the Viet Kong." Graves was shaking and his voice was getting higher and his Adams apple bobbed up and down in his throat. "She said I was nothing, just like the rest of my family, and then I did it."

The cigarette was all ash but it was still in his mouth and he was screaming now, screaming and he looked at me and the bruise on his face seemed to flex and his teeth were creaking and I wanted to tell him to stop, just stop Graves but I didn't and he kept going. "I hit her. Just once," he was screaming, "just once, didn't even think about it. My hand shot out. Her head hit the wall and her nose was bloody and she was crying and screaming, telling me I was Eunice trash and that I was just like the rest and that I was nothing and then she walked away."

Then his voice fell. It sounded like he was almost laughing. Almost. "I didn't say anything, Charlie. No last line like goddamn Bogart. No running after her. Just

sat. It was done. I'd done something real bad and I could never undo it. That was the thing I've always regretted."

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Three weeks later Graves fell again, only this time it was worse. Broke a leg and a hip. Doc said he had to quit walking. They gave him a chair.

The goddamn chair. That was what Graves called it.

He was different now. Quieter. Softer. Smaller. His chest hair seemed to wilt under the oppressive heat of South Louisiana. His eyes were socketed in shadows and he stopped smoking or watching TV. He just sorta sat in the goddamn chair, waiting.

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The last time I talked to him, he was small, smaller than any man I'd ever seen. He was small and weak but he told me he wanted to go outside. So I took him outside. I took him outside and he pointed me to the bench we sat on a few months ago and I pulled him next to the bench and sat down.

He motioned at me. Didn't say anything just motioned to me, thin fingers beckoning, trying to not shake.

I gave him the cigarette and the lighter, but he gave the lighter back to me. Just shook his head and gave the lighter back to me. I lit it for him.

Graves was looking at the anthill again and smoking and it sounded like gravel in his chest I knew he shouldn't be smoking but I let him. "Charlie," he said, "Charlie I done three things I can't take back and you know the first two, but the last is the worst. It's the worst and that's the truth." His voice was flat. Tired. "I was mad.

She left. I was mad and she left so I drank. I drank and I was mad and I was poor, so goddamn poor and I was mad that she left and that I was so goddamn poor. So I drank and I swore and I drank and I swore.”

Graves was whispering.

“And I then I was at the liquor store all the sudden and I had daddy’s old gun—the one he left for me—and I was shouting at the lady in front of me, shouting *Put the goddamn money in the goddamn bag before I put you goddamn brains all over this goddamn counter top* and she was crying and I was drunk and there was piss running down my leg and I was so mad.” He wasn’t looking at anything but I could tell he could see something. “I remember looking at daddy’s gun. It was beetle black. Shining in the light.”

Cicadas sang in the distance. “And I was mad. Then the trigger got pulled and I’d done what I’d said I’d do.”

Graves sighed. His breath was thick and wet in his lungs.

“Brains and blood all over the wall of smokes.”

He dropped the cigarette from his mouth onto his lap.

I didn’t pick it up.

“Went to jail for eight goddamn years. Shoulda’ been longer. But it’s Eunice and everyone knew me. So it was less. Should been more.”

He was looking at me and he wasn’t crying but I knew he wanted to, only he couldn’t. Not with me there. Not with me or anyone there. I knew Graves hadn’t cried since the women from Ville Platte had left, hadn’t cried since he’d shot another woman dead. I knew that at once. Graves knew I knew it too.

I wheeled him back to his room and left him in there. Small and smelling like smoke. Sitting in the goddamn chair, hands hanging at the wheels, dangling all thin and still.

“Good bye Charlie,” he said.

I nodded.

“Good bye Graves,” I said. Then I shut the door.