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Escape from the Cancer Ward

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I slipped out of the stairwell, crept across the corridor, and past the abandoned nurses' station and the broken elevator door that opened and closed like a mechanical mouth, mutely chewing the iodine-soaked air. I ran across the hall and into my brother's hospital room. Joe looked up wearily from his bed, probably thinking it was another intrusion from the technicians who constantly took samples of his blood.

He saw my face and grinned. "What the hell are you doing here?" he asked, slipping to the edge of the bed and planting his feet on the safety bar like a diver ready to launch.

"Let's go!" I said and gave him that creepy old look from one of our more infantile brotherly games as I peeled off dad's huge plaid raincoat and threw it on the bed. Not a word from him as he threw on the raincoat and pushed his pale white feet into the carpet slippers that mom made him wear for his chemotherapy treatments. *What a stupid, poisonous term for a medicine to kill the leukemia by slowly dripping poison into his veins like murderous dwarves looking for an ogre to kill, I thought.*

He giggled like an imbecile as I shushed him. We tripped the exit door alarm momentarily before entering the stairwell and running down

twenty flights of stairs to the lobby of the hospital. Out we went, scurrying through the crowded lobby, with Joe's pajama bottoms peeking beneath dad's raincoat, spinning through the revolving door and into the blistering heat of a New York City summer's day.

In dad's oversized raincoat, Joe looked just like Mr. Toad of Toad Hall in the *Wind in the Willows* the first time he saw a motor car; the smog black fumes of First Avenue offered a heady wine to Joe's fevered soul. He was drunk on freedom, ready for anything that would get him away from the daily death knell on the Juvey Ward where today's best friends became tomorrow's empty beds.

He's grown up too fast, I thought, as we ran across the street, dodging Yellow Cabs and itinerant mopeds. After the first round of chemo a few weeks ago, he'd become a veteran of the great war on cancer and, with that thousand-yard stare, a stranger in my 17-year-old brother's flesh. For now, though, we were out and free on the streets! Just like old times when we'd sit all night yakking under the huge samovar at Café Wha? down in Greenwich Village, sipping espresso until our tongues got fat and swollen with the caffeine shakes, our brains roiling with too much thinking about existential philosophy overlaid with the morbid fatalism of Irish Catholicism. Or the time we cut down to the dive bar, Sammy's Bowery Follies, and swilled pitchers of beer at the long tables filled with college girls, ridiculously pretending to be hip while singing ragtime ditties to the accompaniment of a Roaring Nineties banjo band.

We were just like all the other nerds out for a cheap drunk.

That was last year, before he got the verdict from the docs. Joe found out the hard way that you all you can do when fate throws you an upper-cut is to bob-and-weave and punch back, take what's dished out, and hope that you'd do it with dignity and not look stupid. That was a lot to learn for a teenager. Joe was a tough little bugger, so when he got sick, he chomped down on the bit that God harnessed him to and pulled hard against the sweat-slathered warhorse of mutagens racing through his bloodstream.

But today! Man, today he was free!

I'd sprung him and we were out on the town. No one to tell him to take his meds, sleep out his fever, or talk to some social worker who only saw him as a case file. It was *Fuck You!* time and we were out.

We headed across the street and went into a school playground where I pulled a joint from my pocket and lit it, flamboyantly, with a flick of a steel-jacketed Zippo. Joe pulled it greedily from my hand as he sat down on a playground hobby horse and the two of us sucked the bone down to our bare, singed fingertips. Joe's eyes got bigger as he stared up at a big and blue mural that loomed over the park, a depiction of the man in the moon painted on the side of a brick apartment building.

"You know, this is the first time I really can use this stuff," he said.

"What do you mean?"

“You take that chemo crap; it tears your guts up! The marijuana helps you put the sickness down. But go figure, they won’t let me have any inside. This is the best my stomach has felt in days.

“With my compliments,” I said as I bowed. “What now?” he asked, looking greedily at all the people rushing by on the street. They walked the way only New Yorkers can move, zigging up the sidewalk, zagging across the middle of the street. They looked like crazed ants, on a speedway to get nowhere fast, probably thinking something amazing was about to happen and they didn’t want to miss it.

On seeing a lighted marquee projecting over a sidewalk right up the street, I said, “Let’s go!” We headed out of the playground and up Lexington Avenue to Bloomingdale’s department store. Due to our marijuana induced state of mind, its revolving doors and flowing crowd of shoppers beckoned us like a Ferris wheel and the chance to ride the escalators.

Bloomies! We were in every housewife’s *Fantasy Island*. First floor: select lingerie to delight hubby when he gets home. Second floor: a place to register the flatware and silverware for the daughter’s wedding. Third floor: pick up a riding toy for the baby. Then up the escalator to the fourth floor, where Godiva chocolates and sweet-scented coffees await, that Olympian nectar, which we assumed suburban housewives crave on their shopping sprees. Alternatively, you could take the escalator to the bargain basement, where bright multi-colored scarves and cheap handbags awaited in bin

for the city-born working girls, native New Yorkers and recent immigrants who spoke Spanish, Turkish, or English with a Caribbean lilt.

Joe and I felt like strangers in a strange land with the buzz of the reefer on us as we goofed around the women, moving from escalator to escalator. We wore the moonshine madness of our escape like a crown of smoke, reveling in the wonderful anonymity of a New York City department store. We gaped and we gawked, giggled like children at the most improbable parade of shoppers that cruised the aisles in all their seriousness. We went up to the perfume and cologne counter where Joe took the raincoat off and draped it across his arm like a Matador, standing there in his pink striped pajamas and carpet slippers. He asked a saleswoman if the store carried the men's aftershave, Brute.

The diminutive blue-haired saleswoman dragged her eyes up and down both of us, then tilted her head to one side as if it was too heavy to deal with yet another day of foolishness on this earth. She said, "What! They lose track of you two at Bellevue Hospital? I'll have the booby squad in here in a minute, chase you both back uptown," which sent the two of us into paroxysms of laughter.

"Lady!" Joe said, "No truer words were ever spoken."

"Yeah," I added, "we escaped the nuthouse and thought we'd come down here and spray ourselves with Brute."

"Can you spare us some Brute, ma'am, for my last rites?" Joe said. "I'll gladly pay you on the flip side of the pearly gates."

“Boys, security is coming,” she said kindly and nodded past our shoulders.

Looking back, we saw two security guards making their way through the midday crowd, so we hit it!

“Joe zipped and dodged past a couple of young pretties with teased hair a mile high above their penciled eyebrows. Broken field running was never my forte, so I plowed into the shoppers, knocking them and their packages into the stratosphere as I trailed the fading pinstripes of my brother’s PJs. At the exit, we jumped down the stairs two at a time and hustled out onto Lexington Avenue before the company cops had a chance to nab us.

“What now?” Joe asked breathlessly.

Looking up and into the distance, I noticed a theatre marquee on 59th Street with the word Woodstock flashing in the early evening twilight.

“How about a movie?” I asked.

In 1969, my brother had been too young to go to the Woodstock Music Festival when the counter-culture youth rumbled upstate on the New York Thruway to mingle, copulate, and writhe to the devil rhythms of Rock and Roll in the muddy pastures of Max Yasgur’s dairy farm. I had missed that seminal event, too, as I’d heard a huge ship had run aground down the Jersey shore and had broken in two. I headed south to Spring Lake that weekend rather than grooving with the hippies in Bethel. I hitch-hiked to the Jersey shore where I climbed into a busted freighter and spent the night blissfully contemplating the destructive power of the sea from deep within the broken

bowels of a bouncing ship as it sloshed about in the surf.

We were equally clueless as to what had gone on at Woodstock, so we went into the theatre to see what we'd missed. After climbing up the stairs to the balcony, we discovered that the sight of Joe in his PJs was no more unusual than the other denizens of Woodstock Nation. Next to us sat a man wearing a brightly-colored, floor-length Kenyan dashiki. A girl beside him wore an indigenous headdress with feathers running down her back. Beside her sat a young woman wearing a metallic blue halter top and red satin hot pants, her entire body painted gold. Joe sat down next to her as she bounced up and down in her seat, her long, raven-black hair flying to some unknown rhythm in her head.

Finally, the lights went down and the flickering rays of the projector came on. The dulcet voice of Joni Mitchell rose up into what was then an unknown song about a celebration we had missed; one that, in a way, was about to change the way the world saw itself. Joe and I melted into our chairs in the darkness and slowly watched the myth that would soon define a generation unfold. Woodstock Nation, a belief that good music and good vibes, with true Panglossian idealism, could make the world stop being bad.

We really began to see the thing materialize as we watched The Who sing "Pin Ball Wizard," a song about a disaffected youth struck deaf, dumb, and blind by his own will, simply to ignore the world and its misery and the war machine that raged around him in Vietnam.

We watched as Carlos Santana stepped up and played “Soul Sacrifice,” fresh and as new as the first day of creation. A lit hash pipe was passed down the aisle and I took a toke, suddenly believing I could understand Carlos speaking directly to me through his guitar, sensing that all the Latinos uptown in Harlem were with us, too, in that east side movie palace.

Then Jefferson Airplane came on and played “Volunteers.” The whole theater audience jumped to its feet, climbed onto the seats, and sang along at the top of their lungs, believing we could make the moment last forever, if only we could hold that final chord.

Incredibly, my brother Joe grabbed the golden, painted princess beside him and kissed her as deeply and as hungrily as if they were two long-lost lovers, his hand groping beneath her halter. All emotions were on display now; some of us were weeping. That’s when Jimi Hendrix came on and played the “Star-Spangled Banner” with such ferocious guitar feedback that we thought bombs were bursting around us, the horror of the Vietnam war being exorcised as we cringed with the ferocity of his guitar attack, seeing and believing that the power of music could make the world change.

Finally, the lights came on and we all shuffled sideways towards the exit, eyes meeting other eyes with familiar knowing looks in the too bright lights, hands reaching out and touching others as if we didn’t want to lose the moment before we got outside. But too soon, there we were back on the street again.

Joe looked at me and said, “What now?”

I could see he was tired. His body, sustained by the adrenaline rush, had simply run out of steam. We walked back to the hospital and went through the revolving door. The lobby was empty that late at night and the receptionist was busy with a security guard, so we merely strolled to the elevators, got out on the children’s floor, and crept across the hall and into his room.

Entering the darkness, we were surprised by a voice that said, “Well, where you boys been? You had me scared a bit!” Flipping on the lights we saw a duty nurse named Junie who had been taking a nap in the corner chair.

Joe broke out into a grin and said, “Oh, Junie, we went to the Woodstock Music Festival. It was amazing!”

“I’m proud of you, darling,” she said in an Irish brogue that made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. “I’m so proud that you and your felonious brother here escaped this dragon pit for a day. But now it’s time for your meds and for you to get into bed and get some rest.”

Joe went into remission after that and was released from hospital. Like most leukemia patients back then, he had his ups and downs, some normalcy at home for a few months after chemo and then a relapse as his blood cells reverted to their malignancy. He spent five years fighting the cancer, living his life unencumbered for a while, healthy enough to go to college, drive cross-country with

some friends to LA, or sleep out all night in the Appalachian Mountains, watching the stars glowing overhead and wondering what role he had to play in their flickering.

Eventually the cancer and the side effects of the anti-tumor drugs wore him down. I didn't know it then, but his generation of cancer patients were guinea pigs in the early days of the war on cancer as doctors tried to figure out the right dosage and combination of drugs to keep the disease at bay.

Of course, today's leukemia patients live a lot longer as a result of Joe's suffering, as new treatments like immunotherapy arrived to encourage the body's own immune system to fight the cancer instead of poisoning it to death.

That's fate and it's worthless to speculate on what was possible then versus now. The night we escaped from the cancer ward is what I like to think about. When Joe was alive and not sick.

Taking a chance at escape into the unknown streets for a laugh, a kiss with a beautiful stranger, dancing in the aisles to a movie soundtrack, believing for a few moments that we were on a field in upstate New York with half a million other kids partying like there was no tomorrow. I remember the passionate, dreamy expression on his face when he looked up from kissing that gilded girl in the balcony of the movie theatre. That's the image I held against the back of my eyes when I walked up to his coffin as it sat suspended above that dark hole in the ground a few years later.

I imagined him standing in a crowded farmer's field upstate, with my dad's raincoat draped across

his arm like a matador's cape, laughing his ass off while Jimi Hendrix played the national anthem on an electric guitar that sounded like some antediluvian monster screaming from the La Brea Tar Pits, and Jimi saying, "Don't mind us man, we're just jamming!"

About the Author

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