

HALFWAY TO NOWHERE

By J.C. Henderson

One

It was the sunlight coming through the window that woke Alex up; Mother Nature's own alarm clock rudely snapped him back to consciousness. The white light poured in so arrogantly that it was too much for his eyes to handle. Squinting did not seem enough to defend against it and the light slipped between his fingers when he held up his hand in an attempt to shield his eyes.

Where the hell's my window blind? He wondered. Fucking thing must've fallen down again.

He sat up and let his eyes slowly adjusted to the overwhelming light. He attempted to look for the window shade, but from what he could tell, it wasn't hanging over the window at all, nor was it beside the bed where he lay, resting parallel under the window.

He groaned and thought, *each day seems to start earlier and end later than the one before it.*

He sat up with his bare feet on the floor, cleared his throat and did not really feel up to starting the day just yet. He scratched his head, stared at the floor and yawned. He looked out the window on his right that overlooked the street. The sky was an egg white with no cloud in sight and, rather strangely, no sun either.

Wait a minute, he thought, rather baffled by this sight. He turned around and looked out the other window behind him. Nothing different there, just more of the same: white sky, no sun. Maybe it's just early morning and the sun hasn't peaked yet...Which means I'm lucky I got three or four hours of sleep.

He got up and walked to the bathroom that was straight across from his bed by about ten feet. He urinated; yellow piss flowing into the stained toilet while he briefly closed his eyes, then opened them again to stare at the nicotine-stained ceiling. When he was finished, he walked over to the sink to look at his reflection. He noticed the dark rings around his eyes and began pulling his skin back around them to examine his face up close.

My eyes get darker and darker every day, he thought to himself gloomily. Looking in the mirror only makes everything more depressing. I should probably just avoid it altogether.

He turned on the faucet to get some water. He stood there waiting for close to thirty seconds for the water come out eventually, as it usually took that long because of the crappy plumbing. However, no water would come out. Nothing came out but air.

He double-blinked, feeling baffled and frustrated. *Someone jam up the plumbing again?*

The day either was pulling a very cruel joke or was becoming a strange set of circumstances. He decided to ignore it all and go back to bed, maybe stick a pillow over his face to defy the God-like sunlight for waking him up in the first place.

He walked out of the bathroom, rubbing his face and thinking about how good sleep sounded, when he noticed something strange, something peculiar that stuck out like a bruise: the clock Joey got for him years back as a last minute Christmas present. That damn clock was sitting there beside his bed like some taunting devil, as it wasn't displaying the correct time— or any time for that matter, but instead a scrambled mess of color that used to resemble red numbers.

Now that's bizarre.

Alex scratched his head, not feeling fully up to trying to figure out what was going on. He sat down on his bed and looked out the window. It was then that he noticed that the street was completely void of people, only parked cars with no one to drive them. Even in the early hours of the morning the street usually had innumerable passersby, so not seeing a single living soul is truly a strange sight. Even with the sun currently absent, the extreme light exposed every nook and cranny, not even a hint of a shadow anywhere. The more he looked, the more it appeared to be the whole city was deserted.

Then it hit him, and he groaned.

I'm dreaming again, I should have seen it coming. It's happening more frequently now. When was the last time I was here, in my very own apartment, so real it didn't feel like a dream? It wasn't long, maybe a few days or so ago.

A noise started blaring from somewhere nearby, sounding like an upstairs neighbor getting overzealous with the stereo. The melody was muffled and echo-ridden at first, as if it came from the bottom of a hollow well. Then it came clearer and clearer until Alex recognized what it was. The sound was coming from the alarm clock beside the bed. The blaring music escalated, louder and louder in volume until it woke him up.

The melody of 'Ode to Joy' continued playing on the alarm clock while Alex stumbled face-first out of bed onto the hardwood floor. Which wasn't a very far fall since his mattress and the bedspring underneath rested on the floor of Alex's tiny studio apartment. He grunted from the rude wakeup call and slowly got back up with a small tinge of a headache around his forehead, either due to the fall or due to the hangover.

"Fucking hell..." He grumbled and stared angrily at the alarm clock, the red numbers flashing at him as Beethoven's melody continued unabated. The noise was an attack on the ears so up close.

He slapped the button to shut the alarm clock off, partially out of spite and partially cause the silence button didn't work all that well. He yawned and sat up on the edge of the bed, rubbing his eyes. It was currently ten o'clock at night. The sun was down and gone and there was the faint orange glow of streetlights silhouetted around his windows and on his walls. The most prominent thing was the rain. The pounding rain was strong tonight and it gave Alex some security in knowing he was no longer dreaming. The other remaining light was coming from the television, which he left on all day while he was sleeping.

"Son of a bitch." He muttered angrily, thinking about the power bill as he turned it off.

Time to start the day off with my favorite last minute thing to do, He thought with a tone of someone absolutely bored with the routine. *Laundry time.*

The floor creaked with age as he walked over to his tiny closet where his clothes lay in a messy pile. The pile completely covered a faded purple basket that was hidden somewhere underneath it. The clothes at the bottom of the pile hadn't been washed in nearly a month or more. The clothes were practically screaming at him to be cleaned with their horrid smell. Most of the clothes were in fact his work clothes; the black slacks, the often-stained orange shirts with the blue collars and the small logo "Pump N Go" on the left side just over the breast. His nametag that he will pin to the shirt was in its usual location, which is on top of the television set.

He stepped out of his apartment hugging the basket to his hip. He locked the door and stood in the hallway for a second as he checked to make sure it locked completely. To his right was the wide staircase leading down to the first floor and to his left the remainder of the apartments on that floor with another set of stairs at the end leading to the floor above. The last paint job (which was decades ago) so aged it left the walls in a faded green color. The cracks from the paint peeling were an ugly reminder of how time had passed. Several of the ceiling lights weren't working again so he was mostly in shadows.

I'm pretty sure replacing the light bulb is an easy fix, Alex thought briefly before turning down the hall towards the stairs, *but then again I don't own the place.*

The laundry room was on the first floor, tucked in a corner beside the main office and the door leading outside. It was a small rectangular room with plumbing exposed over the ceiling and water stains on the walls. The ceiling lights shined against the glossy dark green tiles causing him to squint a little more as his eyes were not ready for such light. There was the faint sound of dripping water coming from somewhere. Inside there were three dryers and three washers, two of each were no longer operable and just sat there, collecting dust and cockroaches.

Alex placed the basket over one of the inoperable washers and started putting in his load of laundry. He moved with a sense of casual timing that came from routine. He knew that if he worked efficiently enough he'd be able to walk to work without having to walk in a hurry and his work clothes still hot from the dryer, a nice little reprieve when walking in the cold, winter rain.

He put a cigarette in his mouth and as he reached for his book of matches from his pocket, he heard laughing coming from the hallway, followed by the sound of a door closing.

The landlord appeared, smirking and readjusting his pants as his belt wasn't on. He was a big, burly man with a wide beer belly and a white wife beater shirt with several coffee stains on it that look like not even the toughest bleach could penetrate. His mustache was thick and his hair balding, with a large brown mole at the top left corner.

"Well well, if it isn't Alex Smith, my *favorite* tenant." He said to Alex sarcastically, as if not expecting him to be there. Alex suddenly felt like fleeting.

"Good evening, Mr. Gonzalez, looking splendid as always." Alex said sarcastically with the cigarette still in his mouth.

"Alex, how long have you been living here?"

"I can't remember. All the years have blended together. You tell me."

Mr. Gonzalez leaned against the doorway. "Nearly *five* years. Can you believe that? Yet you still pull the same shit."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Alex said, digging for a match.

"*Of course* you don't! Well let me enlighten you my friend: you've been running up the electricity again this month." Gonzalez said, pointing a finger in Alex's direction.

"I don't own anything to use up any electricity." Alex said in his defense.

Gonzalez laughed. To Alex it sounded slightly sinister.

"You know what Alex? I've been working here for fifteen fucking years and you're the only tenant that has really been like a thick fucking thorn in my ass *every* month. Every time your rent is due you excuse your way to sneak out of it."

Glad I'm consistent.

“I don’t even know why I don’t just kick your skinny ass out into the street like the fucking bum you are.” Gonzalez said as he scratched the side of his enormous belly. Alex tried to act as if he didn’t notice, and scrapes an unused match against the rusty washer machine behind him.

“I don’t believe you.” Alex said after taking a drag from his cigarette and blowing the smoke into the open air.

Gonzalez laughed a belly laugh, walked into the smoke, and eyed Alex down as the haze surrounded him. “You really want to bust my chops, boy? I’ll break your fucking neck before you can even count to dos, payaso.” Gonzalez said with the grin he reserved for when he started speaking in his native Spanish, a slightly victorious-like grin that always made Alex feel the need to study up on the language before engaging in a battle of words with the Mexican proprietor.

Alex paused a moment before deciding to keep quiet and put the cigarette back in his mouth.

“But since you don’t believe me amigo, come with me. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Alex followed him into the main office, which was technically the landlord’s bedroom as he also lived there. There’s a huge queen sized bed in the corner and Alex could see a figure laying in the sheets. There was a lamp with a red sheet over it drenching the whole room in blood red. The desk and filing cabinets by the door are cluttered with helter-skelter papers, files, and reports.

The room smelled of an odor that Alex, at first, couldn’t place. It was a very human scent, a bodily odor like mixture of sweat and armpit stink that belong in gym bathrooms; it was the smell of sex.

“Here, take a look for yourself. You’re room 12, ain’t ya?”

Alex nods his head as he scans over the paper. It was his room on the paper all right and the bill had increased by twenty bucks or so. Alex tried to think of what might be the cause of it, what might be the issue. But before he could think of anything, the figure on the bed moved.

It was a girl. He couldn’t make out her face all that well, beyond the long dark hair and big brown eyes. But what caught his eyes most of all was that she was completely naked, completely exposed are her apple-sized breasts. They were the first breasts he had seen in person and weren’t on television in many years, but something about it bothered him deeply. She looked young, *very* young. Sixteen? Fifteen? She was somewhere in the early teens by the looks of it.

Somehow this isn’t much of a shocker. I always knew he was a scumbag, but...

“Do you have another cigarette?” The girl in the dark asked Alex, who was still dumbfounded and couldn’t think of any words to say so he simply shook his head. She was

eyeing the cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth in a slightly similar way that he was staring at her breasts.

“See? Told you it went up. Now you must pay up, gringo. Your rock n’ roll attitude won’t help you here in the real world. Sooner or later life is going to beat the shit out of you and you won’t be able to look so cool with a cigarette no more.” Mr. Gonzalez said, pointing at the numbers on the bill with a big round finger, bringing Alex’s attention back to the bill.

Alex opened his mouth to say something, but Mr. Gonzalez pushed him through the doorway with one thick meaty arm before any words escaped his lips. “Now get the fuck out. Pay up by the end of the week or I’ll see to it that I go through with my threat.”

Mr. Gonzalez slammed the door in Alex’s face, knocking the cigarette out of his mouth. As he bent over to pick it up, he heard the girl moan from somewhere inside before silence again. Alex flipped off the door with both hands before going back to his laundry. The experience left him angry, incredibly infuriated and frustrated, as he felt incapable of doing anything to stop it, of doing anything heroic. Alex thought about busting in there, busting Mr. Gonzalez up with all sorts of martial arts moves he saw in the movies and saving the girl, but Alex knew no martial arts and had no physical prowess whatsoever. He knows Mr. Gonzalez carries around at least a few knives on him and somewhere a gun or two. He felt powerless, weak and guilty, as there was nothing he could do but try to forget about it.

Alex got dressed and ready for work an hour later. He put on his black hooded sweater and walked outside into the cold night. The rain had lightened, but both the street and the sidewalk were still completely soaked and the gutter completely flooded as it had been for the past week. The orange light from the streetlights (or any light, for that matter) reflected off the street in a distorted, blurry reflection.

He walked two blocks, passing by the usual places: the pizzeria, the bakery that has been long out of business, the Planned Parenthood clinic, and the fast food burger joint with the best chili-cheese fries this side of town. He never raised his head to see these usual places however; he walked by them every night on his way to work, and every morning on his way back to the apartment, they are as everyday as the cracks on his apartment walls or his dingy bathroom sink.

He lifted the hood over his head when he reached the gas station, which had so many lights installed that the entire corner where it was located illuminated everything similar to his dream. It reminded him of it for a brief moment even though the light here was entirely artificial,

but he blinked and did his best to push it out of his consciousness while hearing the noise from the lights buzz over his head as he walked under them.

He walked past the cars and the busy late night people coming and going, filling up their empty tanks and talking on their cellular phones and making eye contact with no one except their own reflections. Alex knew these strangers all too well; they were all the same, nightly. They were somber, mellow and hopeless people who were nocturnal by choice or profession, and not in the mood to smile or hold common manners to other human beings. Here, there was no one but you and the shadows.

Alex cleared his throat, as the cold air was getting to him, and hurriedly walked inside the gas station store where he would remain for the next six hours.

Just as Alex stepped inside, Carl was nodding at him from behind the counter. Carl worked evenings, was seven or eight years younger than Alex with a large, obese stomach and cavity-ridden teeth. To Alex, Carl represented everything he resented in America's contemporary youth; lazy, ambition-less and ignorant. Alex only waved back at him as a response, not bothering to look over in Carl's direction.

"Hey Alex, the boss just asked about you. You're late again." Carl said as Alex entered the back of the store.

Alex hung his sweater up, clocked in and got to work.

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