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by Michael K. White

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"We gotta find a way to get high!"

"Shh! My parents will hear you Tommy! Their bed is right above us."

"I'm dying!"

"I know."

"God I wish we had some beer."

"I know man. I'm dying."

Richard and his friend Tommy dug around through the mess that was Richard's basement bedroom. It was a typical teenagers bedroom in that it resembled the scene of an earthquake, or a mass murder. It was late, and Richard and Tommy had just finished watching "The Great Race" on Channel 7's Midnight Movie. Now they desperately rooted through the piles of dirty clothes and junk, looking for anything that would get them off. Tommy came across a large economy size can of aerosol spray deodorant.

"Hey check this out!"

"So what?"

"It can get you high!"

"Fuck you man. That can't get you high."

"Todd Minerich said that the spray stuff can give you a hellacious buzz. I'm going to do it."

"I ain't going to do that."

"Well I am. I'm gonna get high. I'm dying!"

Tommy took one of Richard's dirty socks and rolled it up into a ball. Then he sprayed the sock until it was soaked with the

antiperspirant. He jammed the dripping sock into his face, inhaling deeply; as deeply as is humanly possible. meanwhile Richard was reading the can intently.

"Tommy! This says CAN BE HARMFUL OR FATAL IF INHALED OR SWALLOWED! You just did both!"

Tommy lowered the sock from his red face, his eyes glazed and unfocused. He took in what Richard had just said and the redness in his cheeks disappeared. A bolt of fear ran down Tommy's back. They could hear Richard's dad snoring loudly in the room above them. They spoke in low and solemn tones.

"Fatal if inhaled man."

Tommy sat there with the sock halfway between his face and the floor. His eyes were still unknowing and confused.

"Oh fuck.." he whispered.

Currents of blind terror were coursing through both of them. Richard looked at Tommy as if he would drop dead any second. Tommy too, feared imminent heart failure, cringing at the thought of the hammer blow to come. So they sat, silent, staring. Then the moment passed.

"You gotta drink some milk." Richard said finally. "It's like poison. They make you drink milk."

Tommy nodded, still too grief stricken to utter a word. They went into the filthy, cluttered kitchen, where they opened a crusty fridge and took out a plastic jug of yellowish milk. Tommy took a greedy swig then retched.

"It's sour!"

"You gotta drink it anyway! You might die!"

The urgency in Richard's voice triggered the fear jolt in both of them and Tommy took another huge swallow of the thick milk.

"I'm gonna puke..."

"No! If you puke you might die! Your guts might come up! You can't puke!"

Tommy looked at Richard, his eyes filling with tears. They waited. Tommy kept the milk down. His head was getting light and the fear was making him dizzy.

"Richard I think my brain is shutting down. I'm dizzy..."

Suddenly Tommy wheeled and vomited into the sink. Richard tried to quiet him so his parents wouldn't wake up, but Tommy wasn't concerned with that right now. he was sure that he was vomiting up all of his guts, instead of the cherry Slurpee and rancid milk he had drank.

"Oh my God! " Richard said when he saw the foamy bright red vomit. He hustled Tommy back down into the basement, his mind screaming all the time. Tommy seemed dazed and was trembling like a scared dog. They sat down on the bean bag chairs in Richard's bedroom. They turned down the lights and put on a Harry Chapin album. They didn't know what else to do. They sat, listening to the quiet music punctuated by the faint syncopated snoring of Richard's father coming from the vent.

"How do you feel now?"

"Kind of queasy."

Tommy had settled into an infinite sadness. he was resigned to his fate. He was going to die. They'd all be sorry now. Richard thought about how he would tell Tommy's parents. What would he say? That he just woke up and found him dead? Was there a way they could trace the poison to his antiperspirant can? He knew he had to throw the can away. Destroy the evidence. He began to hate Tommy for leaving him in such a mess. Sure, he gets to die, but Richard's left holding the bag. What an asshole.

"You can't die here."

"What?"

"You can't die here. I'll get into trouble. You have to go outside and die in the backyard. Or go to the park and die there. Not here. I have to sleep here you know."

Tommy started to cry. It was all so sad. So sad. He was young. He hadn't even gotten close to getting his dream of becoming a gentleman lyricist off the ground. And now it would all be over.

And his best friend, his best friend, was abandoning him. It really was true. You die alone.

"You're only chance is if you can stay awake and stave off the coma." Richard said authoritatively referencing all the medical shows he had ever been forced to watch with his father. Tommy's tears had unnerved him. The best way to deal with them was not to notice. That was always the best way.

"I don't want to die! I don't want to die! Tommy cried, appealing to God. Richard felt the shock of true fear and embarrassment. He just wanted to turn back the clock. Anything to go back. Please.

"Okay," said Tommy, pulling himself together. They faced each other, each trying to keep the other awake. But as the minutes passed a sense of resignation crept in. Richard was getting tired of waiting for Tommy to die. It had already been an hour. He wished he would just get on with it. Why did he have to hold so tenaciously to life?

Tommy too, was getting impatient. He was starting to like the idea of dying. He envisioned his funeral with Lisa Huser crying over his grave, sorry that she had treated him so badly. He would achieve teenage immortality and would get a full page photo n the yearbook.

"I can't make it. I'm falling asleep."

"That's not sleep that's a coma Tommy!"

"I know. But I can't do it. I just can't."

"Yeah. There's nothing else we can really do."

"I'll go out on the backyard if you want me to."

The room fell silent. Even the snoring had stopped.

"No. Stay here."

"Thanks."

Again the silence was as dark as the night. Richard took one last look at his friend and turned off the bedside lamp.

"Richard?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. (Pause) is there...is there..."

"What?"

"You know, is there anything I need to...tell people?

Anything you want me to say tomorrow?"

Tears sprang to Tommy's eyes. This was really happening.

"Tell them I...I...look I want to leave you my albums and that watch my grandma gave me, the one we broke with the hammer. And you can have my money..." He dug into his pocket but all he had was a Quarter. He passed it to Richard in the dark.

Richard felt the Quarter in his hand. It was warm and smooth.

Tommy floated off, his throat constricted from grief and fear. he would never see the sun again, never see a TV again, but he was ready. Already he could hear people crying at his funeral. And that made him fall asleep with a smile on his face.

Richard felt hopeless and braced himself to waking up with a dead body in the morning. In the dark, with his father's dull snoring a rhythmic background, he strained to hear Tommy's breathing, which slightly followed his father's until they seemed to form a third sound, an echo, that went onto include his own breathing. As he felt himself falling into sleep amid the chorus of sonorous breaths surrounding him, Richard let the Quarter drop from his hand onto the floor.

It was five hours until morning.

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