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Who's Crazy?

What couldn't be saved would be tossed out into the street. Lenny packed each box tight with his belongings and placed them near the door of his apartment. He had less than a week before a sheriff would escort him away unless the VA could convince his landlord to drop the Judgment of Default. The thought of stepping into their clinic got Lenny trembling, but even his lawyer thought there was no other way. Pins and needles danced along his arms; his hands shook. He could not work for very long. Already the boy dashed across the edge of his vision in a blur of tan shorts and brown limbs, taunting him with his presence. Lenny pressed a palm against his brow. He refused to see.

In the bedroom, pill bottles were strewn among piles of unopened mail and empty take-out containers that littered the floor. Lenny searched through the trash for his Seroquel. Each month the VA shipped him a box of antipsychotics, despite his repeated requests to cancel the medication. Dr. Milstein was not one to be challenged. Lenny found an orange vial and screwed off its lid. He felt better without the drugs in his system, though their withdrawal was hard to endure. But it was never long before he found himself turning to them again. He sat against the edge of the floor mattress and placed one of the white, oblong-shaped pills beneath his sneaker, smashing it to pieces. Then he swallowed a fourth of the drug and lay against the bed, waiting for it to take effect. It was enough to calm his nerves, make the boy disappear from the doorway. Look at me, look at me, the ghost seemed to say. He was a willful little shit, just as his own son, Marcus had been at that age. Three maybe four or five—Lenny couldn't tell without really looking at the kid. But instead he turned his face into his pillow, away from the mess of the boy's head. A dank, animal stench filled his nostrils, the unwashed, despairing smell of

Lenny's person that lived in the sheets. Everything slowed inside of him; a sleepy indifference took over, steadying his thoughts. Soon he'd rise again, have to clean himself up for the meeting with his social worker. Look presentable. Even if he hated leaving home. The government monitored his every move outside. They'd kept him under surveillance from the moment he left Iraq. He could feel it.

Lenny carried the Judgment of Default with him to the VA clinic. Jamaica Plain was a brief subway ride from his apartment in Somerville, but he detested the area—the urban grittiness of the broken-down neighborhood, complete with street-corner thugs and frequent shootings, lured him back into near-combat mode. The medication could keep him calm for only so long. But the outpatient center was only a short walk away, and this much forced him into check. Big Brother was watching. Soon Lenny found himself before the building's grand entrance—a multi-story circular complex made of glass and steel pillars that gave an unnatural light to the rest of what resembled an ordinary municipal building with the Department of Veterans' Affairs aglow in somber blue light. An American flag snapped to the wind in furious accord. He'd not been here for a good six months, and then the heavy scaffolding had been up for a good two years. The dramatic contemporary design didn't sit well with Lenny; it seemed out of place with the rest of the ghetto that it surrounded, and he wondered how long the structure would last unvandalized. He passed through a number of security clearances before making his way through the lobby, also sleek with new renovation; the marble floors and cherry wood panel walls made Lenny wonder if he was underdressed for the occasion of meeting with his social worker. He checked in at the front desk and then took the elevator to the second floor. The waiting room was filled with others like him—clean-cut men in casual dress who appeared to be in their mid to late twenties. Men who, by society's standards, appeared normal and wholesome. Then there were the others who sat apart. The ones who dressed in rags and appeared to have rolled around in their own filth. Their stench overwhelmed the room. Even if they were also veterans, how could these people be allowed into a facility as nice as this? It seemed criminal, Lenny thought. He'd always believed himself to be better than those he saw slumped over on park benches, reeking of piss, or pushing around a shopping cart full of trash bags and empty soda bottles. He'd seen them outside of the VA medical center before, broken men talking to themselves, probably doped up on heroin. He could never imagine them in uniform.

"Why don't these sad fucks get a job?" he said to those closest to him. He waited for them to smile and nod, as if to affirm that they weren't the crazy ones, but everyone ignored him. Lenny settled back into his chair and studied his feet. He

felt stupid for not bringing something smart and important to read like the *Boston Globe* or a Tom Clancy novel. In his pocket lay the Judgment of Default, but he wasn't about to bring that out to pass the time. The decree weighted on him, as if he'd instead defaulted on the entirety of his life, and not just the rent. Elizabeth had taken Marcus to live with her parents in Plymouth, several hours south of Boston. It'd been months since he last saw his son. Marcus no longer wanted him to visit.

"Maybe you're not my real father," he'd said. "Maybe I have another daddy somewhere."

An old bruise of anger flared up within Lenny. Who were these men to ignore him? Weren't they still brothers? Or had the meds and civilian life been enough for them to block out what they'd all once known? Life moved through an endless desert pit where everything was suspect. Any perceivable human enclave or piece of trash in the road could be rigged, could engulf you in a sudden blast of fire. Then the incredible heat. The ten thousand degree Middle Eastern sun soaking through heavy layers of combat gear. A heat that made breathing hard, the mind slow. But to lose a degree of focus only promised death to you and your brothers. So you pushed through the shit and did what they told you to do, "to kill, kill, kill," if that's what it meant to survive. Everyone was suspect. Civilians too. That boy. No one told Lenny how to turn it off. He did what he had to do to get out. His second tour ended in ambush, though he made it out with all his limbs intact. But before they could send him on another tour, the nightmares started, and bled into his waking life. They sent him home.

When his name was called, Lenny made his way through the corridor to the private quarters of Marge, his social worker. Beaded throw pillows and oversized floor plants surrounded the new oak furniture in her office. She gazed at him from behind her iMac desktop in a pair of heavy browline glasses, her steel-colored hair framed close around her birdlike features. Lenny unfolded his Judgment of Default from his pocket and rested it before her. She scrunched her nose as if he'd shared the contents of a soiled tissue.

"What's this?" Marge said.

"They're throwing me out of my apartment. I missed this court date a while back and now they sprung this on me. I need a copy of my medical records for an appeal," he said.

She squinted hard. "An appeal? That's something you need to discuss with your lawyer, Mr. Ortiz."

"I already did. He told me to come here. He needs my medical records as evidence that I've been under Dr. Milstein's care and all," he said.

“Why is that?”

Lenny bit his lower lip, resentful that she was making him have to say it aloud. “To show that I haven’t been in my best mental facilities. I haven’t been able to pay rent, look for work.”

Marge typed something onto her keyboard, then made a few clicks with the wireless mouse as she searched through his medical records. “I see here you are still receiving military benefits.”

“Yeah, but most of that goes to child support. And then I just fell behind some. Just got bogged down by other stuff.”

“Are you still taking all of your medication as directed?” she said.

Lenny shook his head, and could not help but get a bit flustered over it. Each time he met with his social worker, he found himself explaining to her what the cocktail of anti-psychotics and sleeping pills did to his system. How the drugs stunted his ability to care, though he couldn’t function well on them for long. Maybe he’d get five or six hours of sleep throughout the week and then crash hard on the weekends. And each time Marge would sigh, a tired impatience blossoming over her aged features. She’d recommend an alternative group therapy treatment offered by some facility in Oregon that wasn’t covered by the VA, but offered the only therapy of its kind specific to PTSD. The right treatment awaited him if he could only get the money together for the airfare, hotel and treatment services. That much killed his desire to investigate further. He couldn’t afford to be curious.

“How do you expect us to help you if you don’t take your medication as directed?” Marge said.

“I do take them, but I can’t everyday because they make me so sick. I’ve spoken to Dr. Milstein about this, but he won’t lower the dosage,” Lenny said.

Marge shook her head, her fingers clicked away at her keyboard. “You aren’t taking the medication as directed,” she said.

“I need a lower dosage. Or a different prescription. What he puts me on makes me crazy. I was so doped up all the time. I even thought about killing myself.”

His social worker gazed at her computer screen, unimpressed. “Did you make an appointment with Dr. Milstein recently?” she said.

“He won’t see me for another couple of months. He only sees patients six months at a time,” Lenny said.

“Well, I advise you to call his office directly. It’s best to be careful with the management of your illness, Mr. Ortiz. Unless you wish to lose your benefits.” She handed him back his Judgment of Default. “Now you said you needed to see me due to a medical emergency.”

“Well this is an emergency,” he said.

“This is hardly a medical emergency,” Marge said.

“I’m going to be homeless in a few days if I don’t get that paperwork,” Lenny said.

Marge curled her lips, unable to conceal her disgust. “I will have to put in a special request for your medical records, considering the unfortunate set of circumstances. But don’t expect anything immediate,” she said.

“How long will that take?”

She sighed, as if he should already know the time frames under which the VA operated. “Up to four to six weeks, depending. We don’t normally discharge patient files. It’s a matter of confidentiality.”

“But they’re my records. I’m the patient asking them to be released,” he said.

“Mr. Ortiz, do you really think I make the rules around here?” she said.

Lenny signed off on the necessary paperwork and left the VA center feeling the same mixture of shame entangled bewilderment he always experienced after a visit, as if he’d been misunderstood or unheard in some profound way. How could he describe the way in which the trauma lived on, replaying itself in an endless cycle of flashbacks and hallucinations? The boy trailed his every step. When they sent him home a few years ago there were no parades celebrating his return, no welcome home party, save for Elizabeth and Marcus waiting for him at the airport. His transition into civilian life consisted of an online questionnaire asking him to rate the degree of any potential trauma he felt he may have suffered during combat duty. He couldn’t remember how he answered those questions at the time. He was too shocked to be at home at last and staring into the bright, expectant faces of his wife and son. It was the tension he could not let go of. As if his nerves could never fully accept that he was really here, back on civilian grounds. The tension gave way to outbursts over the smallest things—a meal overcooked, Marcus’s toys left scattered on the floor. Every conversation with Elizabeth became a shouting match.

He never hit her. He never touched either of them, even if his hands reached for other things. That one day on the highway when he was still allowed to drive. They’d been humming along Route One North, headed back from a dinner at her parents’ on the South Shore, when a tire came bouncing toward them from out of nowhere. Why did it trigger him so? He almost drove the car off the side of the road to avoid it. And then Elizabeth was screaming and Marcus crying in the backseat, and Lenny tore out from behind the wheel, away from them because he knew that if he didn’t something horrible would happen, something he would never forgive himself for. He punched at the hood several times, hard enough to break the bones in his fist. Sounds of explosions echoed between his ears. When he looked up at

his family through the windshield, he saw neither of them crying, only dopey-eyed with terror, taking him in like they'd never really seen him before. He knew then that he'd lost them.

Lenny returned home and collapsed in his room. His hands shook so hard that he could not twist off any of the caps to his pill bottles. He went to where he had crushed the Seroquel with his shoe and tried to force the bits into his mouth. But his fingers trembled; it still hurt to use them. So he bent his face down close and licked up the remains with his tongue, gathering also a sampling of the floor's grime and lint, and swallowed hard. The boy ran barefoot through the rooms in tan shorts and a stained white t-shirt. His thin brown legs pumped with ferocious energy. Lenny tore his eyes away from the dark mass of the kid's head. He squeezed his arms around himself and waited for the hallucination to pass. He heard the child climb atop the bed, sensed the presence of his face hovering above, to make him see.

He slept hard. When Lenny awoke late the next morning, his muscles throbbed from sedation. His situation was the immediate thought. Who could he turn to now? Elizabeth would never accept him back in this condition. His own parents abandoned him on account of his divorce, the loss of their only grandchild. Then there was Brett. Sometimes he could talk to Brett. He was one of the few veterans Lenny met up with on occasion, despite the decades between them; the fact that they'd served in different wars. Brett had done several tours in Vietnam. They'd met at a gathering the VA hosted a year or so back, an event Lenny attended in a desperate attempt to connect to others, after Elizabeth and Marcus left. Most of the men Lenny knew from his unit lived in different parts of the country. Correspondence dwelled in the recesses of Facebook, where Lenny was reminded that, unlike him, most still had families. He reached for his phone and tried to make his voice sound as normal as possible.

In an hour, Lenny was on a train out of South Station to Worcester for the Mohan family barbecue. He wore yesterday's clothes, with the Judgment of Default still nestled inside his jean pocket. Brett picked him up in a red Chevy Ranger, equipped with a montage of Support Our Troops decals adorning its bumper, that Lenny found intimidating, as if his own patriotism would be interrogated.

"Kid, you look like hell," Brett said, his thick Southie accent at once harsh and paternal.

Lenny smiled. The comfort he felt in the man's presence was overwhelming, and inspired him to explain why he needed a place to stay for the next few weeks, just

until he could get back on his feet, but Brett waved his hands away. He didn't want to hear it.

"We're going to have a good time today," he said.

The Mohan family occupied Brett's expansive backyard. Grandchildren of various ages played water volleyball in an inground pool, while his adult children stood to the side, speaking in a domesticated tongue that Lenny had fallen out of practice of. He's seemed to have lost his place among family gatherings or regular holiday events that demanded a degree of normalcy to attend. Brett gave him a cold Heineken and introduced him to the family as one of our boys. What did that mean exactly? Our boys? The people drank Lenny in with the kind of reserved New England friendliness that made him feel that much more alien. He stayed close to Brett as the man cooked sausages and hot dogs on his enormous Broil-King Monarch 40 grill. Lenny watched Brett, who still, even in his late sixties, carried a stout physique and administered over an assemblage of barbequing instruments that he took obvious joy in handling.

"So you were at the VA the other day? They certainly fancied that place up for good, didn't they? It's nice to see where all my tax dollars are going," Brett said, a certain meanness imbued in his grin.

Lenny returned the smirk. Brett always made some snide comment over the clinic's shiny new renovations. He couldn't help but share his own experiences with Marge, to which his friend shook his head in perverse amusement.

"I swear that seventy-five percent of VA expenses go toward denying veterans their benefits," Brett said. "But hey, you're certainly better off than some poor bastards. You remember what happened at the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center a few years back? That Marine who ended up losing both his balls when they removed the wrong one? Now that's a tragedy."

"I keep seeing him," Lenny said.

Brett's smile hardened with disapproval. He placed a sausage into its bun, aligning slivers of fried onions and peppers along the sides of the meat.

"You want onions on yours?" he said.

"It's like it doesn't matter how much meds I take. He doesn't go away," Lenny said.

"I asked if you wanted onions on your sausage or not," Brett said.

"Sorry, man. I'm just not that hungry."

Brett nodded and his expression became very serious. "It's not something we can talk about here," he said, his voice low. One of his granddaughters, a freckle-faced eight-year-old in a green bathing suit raced over from the poolside and demanded a hotdog with ketchup. Her grandfather was quick to oblige, a fresh smile returning

to his face. Soon other small children gathered around the grill, and Lenny stepped aside and sipped his beer.

Before the last train rolled out of Worcester, they went for another round at an Irish pub nearby. It was an old watering hole of Brett's, one he often passed through after work. Lenny again expressed his gratitude over having a place to stay, and how he'd get his things in storage the next day, but Brett silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"I know you're game," he said, smiling.

"Excuse me?" Lenny said.

"You little bitch, you just wanted to get your benefits so you don't have to face a real job," he said.

"Is that what you think?"

"You're Goddamn right that's what I think. You think you could pull all this bullshit talk about seeing dead kids over me? You know I was in a real war myself once. Only they drafted in Vietnam. You chose this, soldier. So man up already," he said.

"You really think I had any idea what I was getting myself into? Did you?" Lenny said.

Brett squinted hard at him. "How did your sorry ass even make it through training? Christ, you're lucky I'm the kind of guy I am. I know you've got a son to support and all. Believe me, I'm doing this more for his sake than for yours."

He broke Mohan's nose after that. One clean shot across the face. But Brett laced into him hard, soon getting the upper hand. Lenny was in no condition to sustain much of a fight. The bartender rushed over to split them up and pinned Lenny against the side of the bar.

"You want me to call the cops on this guy?" he said to Brett.

Brett glowered at Lenny, the skin above his lips wet with blood. "No, this crazy piece of shit isn't worth it," he said.

Lenny backed away toward the exit, spooked by the sudden awareness of how quiet the bar had gone. The few remaining patrons leveled him with their fear, as if he might also strike at them too.

The fight cost him his train, so Lenny spent the night in the station. He sat away from the few homeless others, and found it impossible to doze off for an instant, lest they tried to mug or assault him. His hands trembled. A startling loneliness overwhelmed the empty station, and Lenny felt the familiar chasm of abandonment split within him, as he had the day Elizabeth took Marcus away from him. He'd

enlisted when they were both so young, for the same reason as most others he'd known: he was poor. Service time equated to a practical solution to that condition, or so he thought at the time.

He returned home only to find his belongings on the curb, already picked through. Lenny approached the entrance, where his landlord stood in the doorway. He was a wiry man in a nylon jumpsuit and running sneakers, who looked as if the eviction had interrupted his morning's jog. A cop stood beside him. The landlord held up a duplicate copy of the Judgment of Default at Lenny and pointed to some numbers marked in red.

"Do you see this date? "Do you know what this date means? It means you're out of here," he said.

Lenny gazed at his belongings and wondered what could be salvaged. He took a step forward and his legs turned to jelly. He slid down to his knees. The boy stood at the edge of the curb, among the boxes. A small Iraqi boy maybe four or five years old. A thin, agile body in tan shorts and a stained white t-shirt. Black caterpillar eyebrows, a wide startled mouth. The top-right portion of his head gone. Lenny lowered himself into the grass, married his forehead to the touch of each blade, wet with dew. Then, after a moment, a tentative hand gripped his shoulder.

"Is there someone you can call?"

"Some family?" the policeman said.

"Yes," the administrator said, checking her computer screen once more. "There's a place for you."

Lenny filled out the necessary paperwork, overcome with tired relief. He'd waited for hours in the lobby of the VA shelter, among a crowd of others, for an available space. The sleeping quarters were as he imagined them to be: one large, congested room packed with twenty-something cots occupied by bodies. Heads turned, eyes sizing him up, and the look of them reminded Lenny of the horror stories he'd heard about the shelters—how they clumped together all veterans, stable or unstable, drug addicts and ex-cons, even sex offenders. You could not make it through a night here without being robbed or assaulted in some way. How, like prison, gangs formed in shelters. There was always someone to answer to.

But exhausted and devoid of most of his possessions, Lenny felt immune to the probable risks at hand. He entered the mass of bodies, a pungent, unwashed scent greeting him, and took his place among them in the lone empty cot. It was a short while after stretching himself out against the prudent bed, his strained muscles relishing every ounce of available comfort, that he noticed one of his neighbors

talking to himself. A tall black man, maybe around Lenny's age, described the same muddled combat scene over and over, as if he was retelling the story to his closest friend instead of the air surrounding him. Lenny couldn't make out what he was saying, only the fury that compelled his endless stream of words. He sat up slow and met his neighbor's eyes, breaking the spell of his monologue.

"Brother, talk to me," Lenny said. "What is it you're trying to say?"



OLIVIA KATE CERRONE earned an MFA from New York University. Her fiction has appeared in *New South*, the *Berkeley Fiction Review*, and *The Portland Review*, among others. She's recently held fellowships at the VCCA, Ragdale and the Jentel Foundation, where she completed *The Hunger Saint*, a novel. Contact her at: Olivia.Cerrone.com.