

Bad News and Good News

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Caesar's seventeen with fresh acne branding canyons into his tan face, though the Laughing Gas' crowd sports thin crowns and slipped discs before him. The boy leans reluctantly on the stand of the two-step stage, his voice scratching the popcorn walls of the cellar when he says,

I got a new dog last week... 'cause the old one died,

And the boy's words shake just a bit in the novelty of it all, the tinny microphone for the nine-strong crowd, the puffy-cheeked old man erupting from his lungs a dry, pneumatic cough, an almost-laugh that almost seems to spill all the life force out of him. And no one knows if the old man is laughing or dying,

It's the same difference, really,

The old man hacks, pulls a tissue from his jacket pocket, wipes down his loose mouth like a magic trick—or maybe it's coincidental that the old man stops hacking with a tired smile left behind. Noticing the progression of all that led to the smile, Caesar says to the man, breaking routine,

What, you got a dead dog, too?

And there was no laughter, only the semi-circle leaking half-smiles, the schadenfreude of the open-mic-nighters, the widening eyes of the broad-faced woman, the only woman, her head cocked sideways, fighting the offhand humiliation and enjoying it all the same. She smiles barely through bared teeth, feeling the breach in the words, the gap between what Caesar said and the way he said it, her slight smile stinging his skin, absent laughter trapping in the dead air, when the old man says—

The old man says nothing, waving his knuckled hand as if to say, don't get me started, he doesn't want to start talking because talking means coughing. Caesar thinks, this hobby of his must really be killing him—going to open mic nights and laughing then coughing, spitting and wiping—and Caesar wants to say this but decides he shouldn't, so instead,

Well, I took the new one to the park the other day...

As though it's the natural thing to say, the ordinary thing to do, what he'd rehearsed, *And this girl, she says to me, 'Oh, that's such a cute dog, what's his name?'* So the boy bends up his voice for the sake of the girl's voice, the fate of his shaky bit, a man and a park and a dog and a girl, the dog and his man and a girl in the park; the neutrality turning to fear in the Laughing Gas, the cock-eyed man leering through his bad back, delightedly fearing a joke without a punchline. Then comes the second-hand fear, the boy succumbing to the two-step stage with the mocking spotlight, one woman and eight men against the boy's routine thumbing through nine imaginations, his blunt words too bored by their very own order when he tells the girl,

The dog's name is *Otto*, and the crowd all imagines it to be so, save for the Vietnamese man—the fast-talking man who never once spoke out of turn (which is why he always spoke so fast)—the man whom Caesar was afraid to look at, who sat so still and lacking expression. And so the Vietnamese man in dark slacks and beige Ralph Lauren thinks to himself, *Auto—why name a dog Auto?* The man has conquered English in a very persistent way, precise to a fault in the way he puts his fast-talking words together, but *Otto*, O-T-T-O is a circumstantial thing, and so he thinks, *automobile, autozone, auto-what?* And he's right for all the wrong reasons when Caesar says,

The girl tells me, 'Oh, I love that name,'

And the boy's voice lifts, then crashes from the weak impression of the every-girl in any park petting the breed-less dog of the nothing-man. When his voice cracks, the woman smiles loosely while the pneumatic man swallows, and now there's a touch of momentum, a rushing to the end to all the mundane means of this man and the nondescript girl; a closure, or perhaps nothing at all, what the herniated man feels so acutely between his bouts of leering, the Vietnamese man thinking *auto auto auto*, when Caesar finally tells the crowd, he tells the girl,

His full name's actually Automatic Rifle; Auto for short.

The man with the cough coughs, all that trapped air exploding through the nervy silence,

And this little girl's mom yanks her away from Auto and carries her off, Now Caesar's girl splits into the two-faced noun, and too, the Vietnamese man frowns, his patience wearing thin. The man likes comedy just like how he likes his language, how he rehearsed his own set in his head, how he was up next, how he would speak certainly of his daughter and her

endearing misuse of language, not so aloofly like this confused young man. All the while, the old man coughs and wipes his mouth, a trick dictating the long pause before Caesar's final line, when Caesar says—so *aloofly* thinking the wide-faced woman and smooth-slacked man alike but totally unlike at the same time— *Man, that mom was not a fan of Rottweilers,*

Embodying an almost version of himself, the boy shakes his head through the tilted silence, the conspiratorial resolve collapsing from a line with no punch. Caesar sees the woman's eyes crease along the lines of her smile while stifled laughter eclipses the hacking, the room inflating faster than the leaks can spill it all out, the pressure knocking the boy's flatness from his raw face; he smiles wildly in the success of his imagined Rottweiler, his Automatic Rifle. Bid by the bouncer to film from the stairwell, Caesar's friend tucks his phone in his pocket, expecting Caesar to be done, the punishment to be over and conquered, when the boy leans into the microphone—

To tell the truth, I tried to get in here last week, but the bouncer upstairs said seventeen was too young—so I came back with a new ID, and now I'm twenty-five. And there was a subtler, funnier way of putting these words together, Caesar's sure, but even so, even the Vietnamese man smiles a bit at the banal gall of his automatic dog, the pretended misdemeanor to be heard at an open-mic on a Tuesday night. Satisfied, the straight-slacked man only wishes the young man would quit while he's ahead; the boy's bit could only possibly go *down from here*, thinking the punitive friend and the well-dressed man alike and totally unlike at the same time.