

Hamartia In Monochrome

By Joseph Rutledge

In the vaults or on a computer backup of a police precinct between here and the seventh ring of Hell is a video of me naked, legs tangled in the remnants of a torn paper gown, vomiting bile decorated with thin ribbons of blood in the stark square confines of a concrete cage. I am probably wallowing in a puddle of urine as well. The urine I am not clear on; the urine could be an added detail. Embellishment.

The memory is now as hazy as dirty piss.

The time stamp ticking by in the lower right hand corner of this video should read October 19th, 2009 in digital white, big and fat so no one gets it wrong. October 19th, a time for leaves to yellow and swirl in their death dance to the ground, a time for tragedies, for mishaps, for the slow dissipation of dreams. October 19th, my son's birthday. The day life as I knew it ceased to exist.

The events on screen take place six days after I tried killing myself with an industrial strength orange extension cord, a handful of Percocets like speckled oval Easter eggs embossed with partitions and numbers, and a twelve ounce bottle of Nyquil.

They say if you try and fail the feeling goes away, that somehow, someday, every suicide attempt is a cry for help and if the attempt fails, the act itself provides a sort of redemption and concession to remain living. They say once you truly understand finality, the understanding will scare you away and provide a lasting and enlightened epiphany. This is a lie. On this recording the thick bluish green bruises from the cord circle my throat like a snake and I still wanted to die. Only now the need is more intense than it had ever been.

My cry for help led me to this: Some filthy cop in a control booth laughing over his cup of cheap wholesale coffee while he watches me wallow in piss that may or may not exist, shaking violently in the throes of my withdrawal, my junk kick, my habit relinquished by force, not by choice, on closed circuit television.

I hope he laughed long and hard. I hope he was thankful he was not in my place. I hope he knew, given a few wrong turns, he could have easily been. I hope he told the story to his wife when she asked how his day was and I hope he told his children as a precautionary tale. Most of all I hope he remembers every single fucking detail, I hope he never forgets. I hope somewhere deep in his traded soul my uncontrollable retching and the disgusting shades of my bile and blood haunt him. Because I called for help, I *cried* for help, but he never came.

He played witness to the evidence of my hamartia and chose not to intervene when intervention was all I needed. Intervention would have changed my entire perspective, not only of police, but of people in general. People and the world they create. A world where entertainment means more than compassion. I've been right all along though: a person only cares when they are on the receiving end.

Write that down and memorize it.

Saints only exist in books, hell is 'round the corner, and the bad news always gets worse.

Hamartia is the Greek word for 'sin' or 'error'; it derives from the verb 'harmatanein,' meaning 'to err' or 'to miss the mark.' A light way of saying 'dead wrong' and 'you do it to yourself.' Aristotle said the hero's reversal of fortune in a tragedy usually results from mistaken judgment or a weakness of character, in other words, his hamartia. Even in the fourth century they knew everyone was a fuck-up, heroes, villains, and all of us in between. Maybe heroes especially. Maybe someone should understand their own weakness, should be forced to watch it on videotape, and save themselves before they can be allowed to save anyone else.

Maybe that was why I was left alone, so I could play savior to myself and wash my own sins away. My mistake, my error, my hamartia.

On screen my lips should be blue and frothy white with saliva spiked with pink veins. Tiny beads of sweat should cover my skin like goosebumps. I should turn from my stomach onto my back, then my back to my stomach and repeat, eyes rolling and trying to focus on cracks in the ceiling and floor. My penis should hang shrunken and scared between my legs like a wrinkled and featherless bird peeking out from a nest.

This is me deciding whether or not to run head first into the block wall with all the force I can muster, deciding whether or not the future is worth the trouble. If, fundamentally speaking, there could ever be anything positive after this is over, there will still be court: arraignment for a menagerie of crimes, then prosecution, pleas, witnesses, and countless other things I will have no control over. Something masquerading as justice in a welfare Halloween costume. There will be a prison sentence of at least three years hidden away from society in cells a lot like this one, and what comes after that? Hell if I know. One thing can be said for sure though: it won't be good. So even now, an eternity after the fact, I have yet to arrive at a concrete conclusion on the whole 'worth the trouble' business, but who has?

You?

Liar.

These questions are answered with a fit of dry heaving. I turn again, bury my eyes in the crook of my elbow to shield them from the harsh fluorescent light above. Try to sleep and dream of better days. But sleep fails to come.

The hours on camera slide by like slow dissolves in a Warhol film. One minute bleeding into another into another into another until all the moments are the same, until you find yourself wondering if it is ever going to end, until you ask yourself how you got tricked in to watching this shit in the first place.

The family I left behind floats from my memory. My son, his mother, my sister, and my parents all drift into the further landscapes of my thoughts, to the tundras and deserts and lifeless nuclear wastelands to be sought out once seeking out becomes an option again. For now, the search is subversive; another rule to break. The people I love break and fracture into smaller pieces, shattered crystalline shards of memories defined by situation and circumstance rather than character, personality, need, or love. This is not their struggle. They have helped all they can. I am in this little foxhole alone and will be until the battle is won.

After the initial shocks, after the earthquake seizures and violent trembling, after the vomiting and heaving, after all this is over, I can stand up on the monitor. Stand up and stumble about. The junk embodies itself as a slight tremor now and then, a cold chill, a promise of comfort whispered in my longing ears. The drug has begun its final evacuation from my cells, the separation. Given up its symbiotic parasitism in my body and taken refugee status in forgotten back alleys looking for someone else to steer toward street corners and darkened dens, to push through the broken windows of stranger's homes.

But it will always call to me from just behind that wall. It will always wait for me to turn the corner, slip and fall into bamboo traps, to capture me again and transform me into a vehicle for covert warfare against myself and the surrounding townships and cities.

But hey, it be's what it be's.

For now, I have survived and all I want is sleep. So instead of practicing my newly revived motor function, I lay down on the filthy concrete floor that hasn't had so much as a napkin ran over its surface since I was locked inside, a floor stained black from my blood and brown from splotches of dried stomach acids. I curl up in the corner as I did in the womb and try to drift away. Try to pretend. And try to forget.

Sleep is a foreign concession, alien, an equation for which I cannot form a solution. A prayer in a world overrun by sin and deviance. My conscience slashes at it like razors, cutting like sharpened knives, ceaselessly reminding me of my tragic flaw and all of the people who have played its victim, including but not limited to: myself and everyone I have ever met. There are probably others, victims of my victims victimized by their lovers victimization and so on, but that is really too much to think about. What I know is knowledge enough.

Three separate scenes, each with hospital room set design, recorded and stuck on repeat, like the misery in my cement room played back on loop, in flashbacks, skillful cuts, and artful fades, flash side by side in my fucked catastrophe of a brain. The scenes overlap, three reels projected onto the same white screen illustrating everything, every detail, every wrong decision, every dirty thought like building blocks to now, to me, to this displaced and subverted version of me, this hollow shell spilling tears come far too late from closed eyelids distorting the reddish light shown through thin membranous flesh.

Each stage are too bright, too white, sanitized versions of real places. They smell of sterilization, latex, blood, and pain. The sheets are starched to card stock stiffness. There are wires and tubes. Plastic as a recurring motif, a representation of broken promises and lies in white, black, and gray, a false theme.

In the first I am nine years old, the same age as my son is today. My head lolls from side to side. My mother grips my hand tight as though she never intends to let go. I can feel her touch but the feeling is filtered through dimensions of reality separated by innumerable degrees of waning anesthesia and awareness. Tubes jut from my emaciated little body like an experiment in better living through polyvinyl chloride. Pins, pricks, and needles like a doll in a voodoo ritual. Under the sheet, a gray plastic toothpick is inserted securely into my urethra so I don't piss myself, so all the urine finds its way into a bag attached to the end of one of my tubes, this one snaking from my rib cage.

My child's mother is the focus of the second reel, her knees bent, ankles fitted securely into stirrups. Doctors and nurses dance around the room like actors in a dadaist play, calling out orders to one another in some gibberish version of English, a slanted, biased language concerned only with the collection and implementation of instruments.

"Forceps!" The lead actor yells, playing his part in full regalia: starched lab coat, pleated khakis, stethoscopes, and pockets full of pens. The word is passed from actor to actor as though they are attempting to dissect its meaning, to define it more fully, to build the term into sacred object, the way we did 'crucifix', 'salvation', and 'love.'

Metal gleams in my eye.

The woman in the stirrups is groaning, screaming, speaking yet another language, this one concerned only with curses and malcontent.

"Fuck," she screams, "Fucking motherfucking shit."

I can't imagine her pain, nor do I want to.

Birth.

Motherfucking shit.

Her voice lowers to a squeak and she says, "Please God don't let me shit on myself."

"Everyone shits their selves during birth." The lead actor replies calmly. "It's natural."

I laugh under my breath even though it isn't very funny.

A security guard in the third scene sits prim and official outside my room. The bruises on my throat left by the extension cord are fresh, not yet faded from red and purple to the greenish blue they show on the control booth monitor, here they are, to speak colloquially, brand spankin' new.

The police are on their way to arrest me but I am not privy to this information yet. Otherwise escape from the untrained eye of the guard charged with my suicide watch would have been my one and only focus. Here I am comfortable and unconcerned, content with watching the reruns flickering on my television under the influence of heavy, prescribed, thus legal, doses of opiates and sedatives.

The girl standing next to my bed like a lost puppy is a twenty year old playground named Candy. She is plump and soft and has eyes the color of a swimming pool full of cyanide.

She kneels over me, whispers slow and sultry in my ear, "Follow me to the bathroom." A stray tear slides down the curve of her cheek. "I'll do whatever you need if that's what it takes for you to stay with me."

I follow her because I lied before, I am tired of Law and Order reruns, I am sick of drinking ginger ale, and

because I don't know to escape, and even if I did, the probable success rate is zero.

We shut the bathroom door behind us and lock it with a faint click of metal on metal. The guard shifts

uncomfortably in his chair.

Back on the current recording I shift uncomfortably as well. I try to cover my cold naked body with the tattered piss stained (perhaps) paper gown. I despise these fucking memories, this fucking concrete floor, this fucking torn paper and the thin fucking scrap of a body it attempts to cover.

I despise every fucking thing that comes next.

In Hamlet, Shakespeare evolves the idea of the tragic flaw, furthering the meaning of Hamartia to a singular pinpoint cause for the fall and reduction of a man to a mere mass of cells and blood and bones rather than what we want to believe we are:

So oft it chances in particular men,

That for some vicious mole of nature in them,

As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty,

(since nature cannot choose his origin)

By their o'ergrowth of some complexion,

Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,

Or by some habit that too much o'erleavens,

The form of plausible manners, that these men,

Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect.

Being natures livery, or fortunes star,

Their virtues else, be they as pure as grace,

As infinite as men may undergo,

Shall in general censure take corruption

From that particular fault. (1.4. 23-36)

My mother grips my hand as I fight my way to full consciousness, wave the clouds in my little head aside. The fluorescence above is blinding. The pain under the giant bandage on my left side is a horrendous winged thing shadowing all else around. The only focus of my one tracked child mind.

The surgical war wounds of a battle with my own heart.

She gazes at me lovingly, a relieved smile painting her face like a mask. She whispers, "Hey honey."

"Hey." I choke out in cough and sputter.

She wraps my fingers around a gray plastic cylinder with a white button at its top. "When it hurts real bad," she says, "press this button. It will make you feel better."

I do and suddenly I am overwhelmed by the wave, soft fingers massaging my entire being, washing my every thought in pastel to soft-edged watercolor. I feel better than I've ever felt in my short life. I feel cleansed, feel the way Pentecostals do when they speak in tongues and collapse between church pews.

She said, "If that doesn't help baby, tell me. I'll get the nurse. She'll do whatever she has to do to make you all better."

The infant is in the canal, struggling to come into a world it will eventually want to leave.

Right now it doesn't know.

Right now it is Innocence Immaculate.

Metal instrumentation and blood abound. Fall sunlight spills in through cracks in the closed curtains.

I sniff hard. Scratch my reddened nose. Remnants of the last snorted Dilaudid drain down my throat and with it, my panic, my apprehension, disappears. I close my eyes, listen to the ruckus, and wish I was anywhere other than here.

In the bathroom, Candy's eyes lock onto mine, her mouth molded perfect around my cock, a luscious O of protruded pink lips. Everything is there, the visuals flawless. Degradation in still frame: she's kneeling on pale and knobby knees, prostrated before me sitting on a porcelain toilet, my hand gripping the back of her hair, auburn curls spiraled around my fingers, saliva falling away in a slick waterfall to a puddle on the tile floor, mixing with the tears dripping down her cheeks leaving scraggly deltas of black mascara on creamy white skin. She's begging for me to cum, she's pleading for me to stay.

Only life isn't dictated by fellatio.

I can't feel a thing, numb as I've ever been, morphine drip drop drips clear and fine in my IV penetrating my withdrawal until I am properly segregated from the decent citizenry, the innocents. The doctor knows, I told her. She cares just enough to keep her job. It's all you can expect.

It won't be long now. Not long at all.

Her solder flame eyes pierce into mine. Sparkling clear.

She pulls her head away, whispers, "My jaw," the sadness in her voice a tapered edge. "I can't do it anymore."

“It’s okay. The moment’s passed anyway.”

She smiles, so do I.

We pretend this will not be the last time we see each other, our imaginations extending like rubber bands to somewhere long past now when we’ll snap back together and wonder if it ever happened like that at all.

She will eventually be a figment dancing on the edge of my consciousness like a ballerina pirouetting on a contrived and sentimental stage.

The cop watches me in my starring role. He’s bored now. All I can do is lay there, toss and turn. The last of the opiates escape in pinprick sparkles of sweat on my pores, evacuates in dirty yellow streams of urine. I can breathe without cringing. I no longer moan or wail or plead. Now I only cry. My entertainment value has dropped to nil. Him and I, we are resigned to each other. I am a still lump under shredded paper in chiaroscuro. A Caravaggio of life gone awry. He is the same. The difference is, I am aware and he is not.

My mother asks, “Are you okay honey?” She slides her soft palm along my forehead.

And the truth is, I feel wonderful wrapped in my little junky womb, a morphine bubble shielding me from all negative forces, from pain, from suffering.

I force tears out of my hazy eyes, they drip clear and wet down my cheeks. I inject a hint of desperation to lace the sadness in my voice and I say, “No mommy. It still hurts.”

The very first lie I ever told. A lie specifically designed to get what I wanted. Tiny and white, no doubt, but a lie nonetheless. The first sign blinking neon bright and pointing the way to my lifelong defect.

Her vagina dilates fully, like some weird reverse tunnel in the hereafter, showing the first purplish hint of new life. A life I played an obscure role in creating, being half there and half not, a life I will attempt to form and mold like clay in my inept fingers. A life that, with any luck, will not turn out as fucked as mine.

The doctor waits like a baseball catcher behind the mound. Nurses scramble, tending to the smaller incidentals of birth: incubators, blankets, scissors.

The mother groans a final groan, pushes a final push, covered from head to toe with sweat and pain.

Then the child comes.

My son.

Film is clipped from his mouth and nose.

His first sound is a scream.

The umbilical cord is severed.

I am too high to recognize the joy.

The nurse brings lunch to my room. Mashed potatoes with no salt, roast beef and gravy, a roll. Candy is curled on the bed flipping through channels, each with a click: soap opera, sitcom, talkshow, bad news. The background chatter of our lives. I'm in a chair doing a crossword puzzle: four letter word, opposite of win.

I fumble with my food until the cops finally arrive, an old man all badge and thumbs hooked in belt loops and a gun he'll never use. "Eat your lunch," he says, "it'll be a long while 'fore you see anythin' that appealin' again."

Candy cries.

My hands are clasped behind my back in cold steel finality.

I mouth, "Wait for me."

She says she will but I know she won't.

They never do.

On video, I stand calmly, paper gown hanging languidly between my fingers. I wave my hands back and

forth at the blinking red light I know is a camera beneath a shiny black inverted dome. It can see me. I cannot see it. I can only see myself reflected in the shell like a curved mirror. Nice because I can get an idea of what I look like there, naked, waving my hands in surrender, my piss stained flag curling through the air like a banner for years and years worth of mistakes.

Aristotle had it right, we are all just fuck-ups trying to play hero. Held still and helpless in our mistaken judgment and weakness of character. All of us caricatures of crucified saviors too late to save anyone from anything yet basking in the glory of sacrifice nonetheless.

Shakespeare, who knew this world was nothing but a stage, antics for the audience, who described our false feelings as misshapen chaos in well seeming forms, he knew one singular error in man could bring him tumbling to the ground like a tower hit by a plane at a crucial point, crumbling and vanished in clouds of dust and rock. He knew that “by some habit that too much overleavens... their virtues else, be they as pure as grace... Shall in the general censure take corruption from that particular fault.”

And me, standing on a grainy screen, blotchy white skin framed in murky gray with my crumpled surrender flag in hand, I have stared down my sin. Gone face-to-face with my Hamartia, my addiction, and survived. Maybe now I have overcome my error, maybe now I have put it behind me and can build something new from the pieces. Maybe now I can renew myself, play savior to someone else who has yet to understand their flaw and in doing so, become the fuck up hero we're all striving to be.

Maybe.

But in the end life is merely a series of scenes we replay in hindsight trying to figure out how we could have saved ourselves.

The End

