

## Direct Action Chronicles - Rob's Story

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### Part 1: One

It had pissed down rain and temperatures dropped overnight, so that the gravel was frozen together like slippery sandpaper.

His fingertips were pinching from the cold, his breath swollen around his face on each exhalation. He stood in the bitter parking lot like a bonfire.

He came to eat fire. He was ready for a fight and it was waiting for him inside.

He didn't have any former training. He came not to spill blood, but to prevent blood from being spilled.

They were already inside. The killers.

There were 3 vehicles parked out back, and Rob recognized each one of them. He was certain there were at least four inside, maybe even five.

They all had weapons “you can bet your ass, they do” thought Rob.

His hands and pockets were empty. He looked around toward the road, traffic was picking up, getting thicker like insects do. He realized he was grinding his teeth and he stopped. It was almost time.

He was just going to go through that door, ignore the insults, ignore the stinking fucking slob with mop hair and acidic breath that always got in his face.

“Whatcha gonna do, queer-bait?” was a favorite of mop heads. His jagged sweaty smile stretching across his vile face.

Rob heard their cries before he could see them and his pace quickened instinctively as his heart sped up. The smell inside determined to crush his lungs with ammonia and fresh blood.

He saw her. There were two men surrounding her and her children. He could tell by the look on her face that they had been tormenting her for some time. The skinny one was laughing, mocking her.

Rob knew the fucker in the baseball cap. He had had many violent encounters with him before, today wouldn't be any different.

He had what looked like a skinny board resting on his shoulder. His filthy hands had left marks indicative of where he had held it. The end was rusty and dirty. Dried blood and shit. He saw Rob and he smiled. Sadists like to let you know how much fun it is for them. Rob held his breath.

“Look who's here, did you miss me?” he yelled.

Rob's eyes shifted to the her; she was bracing herself, her body shaking as she cowered. There was no place she could hide from the blows. She was already badly bruised. Rob could see her panicked breaths from across the room.

His eyes darted back to baseball cap and the weapon he was holding. Rob tried to keep his eyes off her, hoping to divert attention. It wasn't any use. She was, after all, the reason Rob was here. Baseball cap knew it.

Skinny guy kicked at her-missing, she cried out and tried to disappear into the wall. Rob felt his jaw tighten. He wanted to kill that skinny fucker. He had dreamt about it. A smile spread recalling the dream-skinny guy pleading for his life...

“What the fuck you smiling at, fag?” Baseball cap yelled, snapping him back to the moment. He had a nervous look. Suddenly, Rob knew his smile decentered him. These guys thought he was fucking crazy. For as much as they bullied and threaten him over the years, they were all visibly intimidated. Rob had that effect on people.

He lucked out in May.

The slaughterhouse worker that had beat him with the same 2x4 used to kill the mother pig and all but one of her babies was in jail for assault. The witness testimony by the others was priceless. Most compelling was the slaughterhouse camera footage. They had to show the entire 28 minutes. Because Rob was there.

The fucker wielding the 2×4 swung it mercilessly down over the mother's head and back. Her screams. Frantic babies darting to their mother all the while she was being mauled. One guy punting a tiny piglet. Rob standing - helpless - watching. Then the mother stopped screaming. A bloody mangled heap. He turned his slab of bloodied wood onto the piglets. One by one. Splattering their brains and guts- tiny teeth flying and breaking on the filthy, gore covered floor.

Then, there is was. 26 minutes in - the one.

A tiny piglet-speckled with her family's blood.

She was about 2 feet from Rob. The 2×4 raised, Rob dove.

He fell around her. His arms surrounding, covering her with his neck and shoulders.

Whack.

That one blow, intended for the wee baby, hit him in the back of the head.

A flash of white, then black. Sounds faded and slowed. A kick to his side. It quickly registered that this man was trying to get the piglet out from underneath him. Another kick. Rob felt the air erupt from his lungs. The smell of blood and ammonia. The screaming terrified baby he was trying to protect.

Rob looked up-the same way he had seen animals look before slaughter. He looked up for mercy.

None.

It seemed to only enrage baseball cap.

The 2×4 came down hard on Rob's right cheek. White, then black again. He could only recall a blur after. The footage showed two of the other workers grabbing the plank and tackling the guy. Rob, still laying, protecting the piglet. The rest is history.

MRI, stitches, a hell of a headache, and, a little girl piglet he named Dove.

## **Part 2: Blackie's Fur Farm**

In the pitch darkness, his adrenaline was pumping his blood loudly in his ears. The dumpster in front of the tree line they emerged from stunk with the smell of death. Mink corpses stripped of their skin, tossed with careless hands, lay lifeless and decomposing inside. The long cheerless metal building was positioned at the end of an industrial cul de sac. The handful of the warehouses and factories didn't run 3rd shift, so they sat darkened & vacant.

Across from the fur farm, down a small slope, was a plastics warehouse that ran two shifts, the parking lot empty. The front of the fur farm was flooded with dim iridescent lighting from tall poles. Five days a week, people apathetically punched a clock right across a street from hell. The back of the building, and entire right side, was saturated in blest accommodating darkness.

He ran, hunkered down, quickly shuffling behind Joe. The smell of the cooling asphalt was similar to a field of wildflower, compared to the dumpster They were quietly making their way to the back side of the

fur farm. The muffled sounds of metal on metal chimed in his backpack in cadence with his thick, rubber soled boots on the pavement. Carla was already around 25 feet ahead of them, pressed into a corner of the building, all in black. Her silhouette giving the illusion that the steel siding rose and fell with each deep breath she took. They hurried to catch up with her.

Their plan was to enter the building using prybars, dislodging the battered door that the parking lot lights failed to reach. One by one, once they were inside, they would open the cages, freeing the imprisoned death row mink. They were here to liberate. More than a thousand minks, were being held captive inside, slated for a horrific fate of anal electrocution. Their crime? Born mink; their fur a hugely coveted luxury item of the blood fashion industry. Rob felt homicidal just thinking about it. His internal temperature continued rising. He wanted to get inside, free the prisoners.

All three of them had previously liberated animals on multiple direct-action operations. They all knew the score, knew that there were risks involved. Carla had been on her own since 2008. Her fiancée, Tad, had been charged and imprisoned in North Carolina after a bobcat liberation bust. Along with two other unlucky bastards, they'd thrown the book at him, and tossed his compassionate ass in jail.

As they reached the yellow parking blocks, a loud cracking sound stopped Rob in his tracks. Joe slowed, turning as he shouted, "Someone's shooting."

Rob turned toward the dark tree line, squinting his eyes, trying to make out any human shapes in the shadows. His bated breath caught in his throat as his eyes quickly darted from tree to tree. Another flash and more crackling noise came from the dark tree line.

Rob's shoulder was on fire as he felt an impact that knocked him off balance. He staggered several steps backwards, everything seeming to stand still. He heard muffled shouting.

Another bright flash from the trees, Rob clutched his shoulder and looked toward the building for Carla. He couldn't see her.

The fire in his shoulder was fervent and spreading. He gripped it, wincing, he could feel a hot slick wetness running through his fingers.

He looked at his hand in the glow cast by the pole light. A shiny and dark liquid was covering his palm. He turned his hand over slowly, his brows furrowed as he inspected the dark syrup covering his hand, seeping through his fingers.

"Joe...I, I'm shot." He rasped, his breath was quick and shallow. He felt like he couldn't get enough oxygen, as his legs began to numb.

Rob suddenly felt a dizziness, he collapsed to the pavement sitting. His mouth was dry, he felt as though he was trying to swallow a napkin.

"Joe, the mother fuckers shot me."

Rob grimaced as he laid back onto the pavement of the unforgiving parking lot. Him. His body felt like it was falling through a cloud as he stared up at the night sky.

He swore that he could hear sirens in the distance.

With each jagged exhalation, he felt as though he was sinking further and further into the pavement.

“I can’t feel my arm.” He breathed.

His heartbeat was thrashing in his head in tandem with his shoulder. He rolled onto his side, as he tried to get up. Searing pain brought a wave of nausea. He tried to ignore it. The sirens were getting louder.

“Joe?”

He laid back again, frustrated at his inability to get up. He rotated his head toward Joe, stopping when he saw the body.

He fell thirty stories inside of himself, shattering into a million pieces.

The air escaped his lungs slow and steady like an innertube deflating. His eyes were locked in place, fixed on the hole in Joe’s forehead.

Suddenly, as though disturbing an ant hill, he was surrounded by many moving bodies. One was talking to him, though Rob couldn’t seem to make his jaw move. Another was shouting over their shoulder.

The body.

He heard engines idling as he watched red and white lights reflecting over the trees. Two people knelt beside him on the pavement. He looked up at their faces and saw maggots swarming over their bulging eyes, boring into their mouths. He saw a large, faceless man pick one of them up by their leg, he watched them thrashing, trying to free themselves. It was no use. The faceless man was stronger. He tasted the burn of bile in his throat, bubbling and threatening to erupt from his mouth. It wasn’t real. The EMTs faces were normal. There was no faceless man. The shock of the body, and the pain from the bullet caused the break in reality.

He felt a pinch in his arm as one of the ambulance workers slid a needle into his vein. His eyes closed. He heard the rattle of wheels before he felt himself being lifted onto the gurney. He was covered with a warm blanket as the injection barreled through his veins.

He opened his mouth, trying to eject his heavy tongue.

“Joe.”

He wasn’t answered.

He felt like he was floating as he was pushed toward the ambulance. His brain felt like warm, wet cotton. The clouds had dissipated, and he laid watching the stars moving. He felt his body being jerked, then lifted. It was suddenly very bright.

I’m dying. There’s life after death. He thought, grimacing from the glare as his eyes squinted.

The noise and garbled radio voice assured him he wasn’t dead.

“white male. Gunshot.”

He felt pressure against his chest as he tried to sit up and couldn’t, his eyes widened in panic as he struggled to free himself.

“Sir? Sir. You’re going to be ok.”

Rob turned toward the voice. He could see maggots falling out of a gaping mouth. He closed his eyes, head shaking, as he tried to dislodge the vision. The loud tear of Velcro being ripped open and the hiss of high pressurized air invaded his ears. He thrashed his head side to side desperate to shake the noises from his head. He felt slight pressure surrounding his nose and mouth, as if a giant cupped their hand over his face. The sound of his own breathing inside of the oxygen mask created a trancelike state. He focused on the rhythm. The moist warm air filled his lungs as he felt himself slipping into unconsciousness.

The distinct smell of hospital filled his lungs. He heard beeping, in the distance, that would have been grating had it not been so perfectly spaced. He exhaled deeply, relaxing into the soft give of the hospital bed. He felt a hand touch his, and he smiled.

“Joe.”

Rob opened his eyes. Joe was sitting cross legged on the mattress beside him. He looked strange against the sterile setting in a t shirt, jeans, and converse. He felt a wave of relief when he looked at Joe’s smooth forehead.

“I had the worst dream ever.” Rob whispered, his voice hoarse.

“I know.” Joe smiled slightly, his eyes downcast.

Rob knew that smile. “Why are you sad?”

Joe lifted his eyes, shaking his head softly.

“You just rest, Rob. Just rest & heal... the war is coming.”

Rob nodded as his eyes closed, he reached his hand toward Joe, his fingers only touching blanket, as the wave of sleep pulled him under. As he sank into unconsciousness, the beeping faded into static nothingness like being inside a cocoon.

### **Part 3: At the Hospital**

Rob awoke, slowly opening his eyes.

The fluorescent light above hummed dully as a nasal woman’s voice paged someone over the intercom. The astringent air was warm and forced the smell of latex gloves into his sinuses. He squinted, his eyes crusted with salt, & sleep.

He reached his fingers to his eyes. Roughly rubbing them. He opened them wider, the pale room slowly coming into focus. The white cotton blanket on the bed was empty. Joe wasn’t sitting next to him.

It had all been real. The gunshots. The body. The ER. The police officers. He had thought that it was a dream... well, he had hoped, anyway.

He sat staring out of the window, seeing past the parking lot with trees sprouting from the concrete, past the horizon. Motionlessly he stared at nothing.

“How’re you feeling?”, the nurse asked as she walked into his room. Her tone was positive. She cast a quick glance around the small room.

She checked his dressing, leaning in close to inspect his shoulder. Rob’s nostrils were filled with a mix of antiseptic & hyacinth.

“You didn’t touch your food again”, she said benignly, checked his pulse, her eyes watching the hands on her watch ticking into the past. Time that would never come back.

She wrote on the chart quickly, the pen scratching the paper, and set it down. She paused, her face thoughtful, before walking around to the other side of his bed. She picked up the receiver of the phone on the small nightstand and pressed it to her ear.

She looked at Rob. “Your brother, Michael? has been calling your room”, she wiggled the receiver a little before replacing it. “The phone works.” Her voice chastised in sing song.

Rob closed his eyes. He wanted her to go away. He had his fill of people & talking, their demands of engaging. Yesterday, he had to answer badgering by the police with their constant reiteration of the same questions.

“Did you see anyone?”

“Anyone at all”?

“How many shots did you hear?”

“How many shots did you hear before you were hit?”

“after?”

“Who was with you?”

“What were you doing there?”

“What were you planning on using the bolt cutters for? the pry bar?”

Rob wasn’t completely clear on exactly how long he had been in the hospital. He was sure of yesterday, as 2 officers had come in both together and alone. Two days, probably. He hadn’t turned on the television, nor had he answered the phone. He felt the weight of guilt inside of him. He swallowed hard, his throat constricting. He had planned the fur farm raid. Joe was dead and it was Rob’s fault.

“Hello?” Her hot breath touched his face, smelling like nicotine, & cavities.

Rob popped his eyes open, brows furrowing as he realized the too close proximity of the nurse. She was bent at her hips, scrutinizing him, her expression conveying feigned concern. Rob blew out of his nostrils, she remained oblivious to his cue, as she continued to search his face. He stared directly at the center of her forehead, he had read that is a surefire way to make people uncomfortable. He hated her. She wasn’t a

Master, but she worked for them...and if you put them into a bag, shook them up; wouldn't matter which one you pulled out. They're all the same.

Slowly, she finally stood and began to unnecessarily fiddle with the television remote cord. It wasn't tangled, clearly, though she acted the part as her hands worked to furiously untangle the cord.

"Dr. Grant will be in shortly. I am sure you will want to talk to him." She paused, clearing her throat, before continuing, "He works with a lot of patients recovering...physically and mentally...like, helps with coping." She seemed to ask, rather than state.

Rob sat unresponsive to her, staring at the pale washed wall.

"Well, okay. If you need anything, you let me know". She hesitated at the end of his bed as if waiting for an acknowledgment that would never come. Finally, turning on her heel, "Ok then," and she walked out on her soft-soled shoes.

Rob closed his eyes. Joe's face, the hole in his head. Joe's glassy eyes, frozen in time. The bullet had ripped through his brain. One shot into his forehead. Just like the countless farm animals that Rob had beared witness to. A singular hole in their forehead. Boom. Gone. Rob plead for the release on one... Please, just one.

The final moment. Boom. One shot. Dead. Hole in the head. Glass eyes. All dead. he felt their blood covering him. Suffocating him with impunity.

Rob shook his head hard trying to rid it of the images of Joe and dead animals.

He had spent over a decade fighting for the liberation of animals. Several people that knew about Rob said that it was a great sacrifice. That wasn't how he characterized it. He was dedicated because he felt obliged. He couldn't live knowing that other beings were being enslaved, abused, raped, exploited, murdered. He knew societal changes took time. Hell, slavery took hundreds of years to be abolished. There are so many social programs, so many advocates for human rights. Rob's voice was for non-humans. His hands wielded tools to break their chains. His body was a vehicle for their liberation....

The fact that people turned a blind eye to the suffering of animals when they were directly a cause in it incensed Rob. How fucking dare they?

"Hi there." the saccharine voice filled the room, "I'm Dr. Grant."

A Master had arrived.

His tone was like tree sap. Pure sugar. Rob's teeth ached just hearing it crawl out of his mouth.

Rob blinked, opening his eyes in the direction of the voice.

Dr. Grant smiled without showing his teeth. "Hey there," he cooed.

"Ants must fucking love you," Rob thought.

"If you'd like," he began to say as he pulled the chair to the side of the bed, "we could just"...he plopped his ass on the seat of the chair as he finished, "talk."

Rob exhaled a long breath loudly through his nose.

The sugar man pulled his lips tightly together and raised his shoulders. “Do you want to talk about the night that you were shot?” He seemed to inhale as he spoke.

Rob shook his head, slowly, back and forth.

He smiled, “Ok”... he sighed, trailing off for a moment...”We could talk about something else.” He held his hands out, palms up, and continued, “Grief has five stages, and there is depression during recovery time. I’ve seen a lot of patients that were very down on themselves after a physical injury, or an accident like yours,” he nodded toward Rob’s shoulder.

Rob didn’t flinch. “Accident,” he thought, “Try fucking murder.”

Rob’s unresponsiveness was making the sugar man visibly frustrated. He tapped his fingers on his knee, trying desperately to read him. He cleared his throat and sat back into the chair, rubbing his chin. “The nurse mentioned to me that you haven’t eaten, could we talk about that, maybe?”

Rob inhaled deeply. “They got me on meds, messes with my stomach. Not hungry.” Rob looked at the sugar man. “Look, I’m tired. I just want to get some sleep.” That was all he was going to give the master. It never failed to amaze him how people in positions of power and authority had never lived through what they were experts at. It was all talk, and talk was the cheapest you could get.

Dr. Grant perked up noticeably when Rob spoke. He nodded emphatically. “Ok, yeah. I’ll let them know you need something to settle your stomach. Definitely,” he affirmed in a casual take-charge way.

Rob nodded toward the door.

The master blinked quickly several times, it hitting him that he had just been dismissed.

Rob closed his eyes, rolling his head to the side of the pillow. It sent a sharp pain through his shoulder, the burning travelling to his fingertips. He winced, quickly turning his head back and flexing his fingers in a slow groping motion. He was uncomfortable so he sat up further in the bed, looking at the Doctor.

The master gave a glacial smile, “I have to go now, other patients.” He stood and quickly left the room, his head held high.

Rob sat glaring at the tray of untouched hospital food. The portioned vegetable medley of carrots, peas and corn placed in little square wells in the tray catapulted him back to his middle school days. Rob closed his eyes and allowed his mind to wander back to the day he had met Joe....

“Is there a problem, Robert?” Mr. Wilmet asked. He sounded bored. His shoes creaked as he approached the end of the long charcoal-colored lab table where Rob was sitting. His tight curls, packed pocket protector, and hunter green thick cord pants screamed “science teacher.”

Rob stared at the latex glove in his hand. He pulled on it, watching as it clung to his fingertip and stretched until it snapped back. Mr. Wilmet knocked on top of the lab table impatiently.

“I’m not cutting this dead frog,” Rob stated.

“You want a failing grade?” Mr. Wilmet asked, crossing his arms and staring at him.

Rob shrugged, looking down at his hands, as he snapped the latex glove again.

Mr. Wilmet reached out to pick up the scalpel near the tray. He rested his elbow on the table and sighed.

“It’s easy. You make a quick incision here,” he held the blade over the dead frog’s stomach, making a slicing motion, “and, after…”

“I’m not cutting the dead frog.” Rob felt his teeth bearing.

Mr. Wilmet stared at him blinking several times until finally looking over his shoulder at the other students. He set the scalpel down next to the frog corpse. “Does anyone else refuse to dissect today?”

“Would anyone else like an F for this project?” he asked, pointedly looking at Rob.

A few of the students giggled, but none of them answered him. A few seats up a tall, blonde-haired boy whispered “pussy.” He looked down the length of table at Rob and made effeminate gestures with his hands. His limp wrist made the friends he was sitting with laugh.

“Quiet.” Mr. Wilmet ordered. “It appears that Mr. Heidrun is refusing to follow the class syllabus today, and therefore will be asked to leave.” He addressed the students with pious authority.

Rob grabbed his backpack, pausing to look at the lifeless body of the leopard frog. It’s once slick skin, now dried and rubbery. It’s tiny arms and legs stretched iron-cross style exposing its tan neck and belly. This frog had no chance against a human.

“Fucking medieval,” Rob uttered, disgusted.

“What was that?” Mr. Wilmet’s voice raised. He took a few steps toward Rob and touched his ear as if to suggest he hadn’t heard correctly.

Rob stared at him unmoving.

“It’s fucking medieval,” a voice said from the middle lab table in the center of the room.

Rob looked and saw the ruddy-haired boy wearing an anarchy T shirt. The frog corpse spread eagle on the lab table in front of him had also not been sliced into. Rob knew his name was Joe, he had one other class with him. Joe sat back on his stool defiantly as he smiled at the science teacher. There was a rush of giggles and whispers amongst the group of fourteen-year olds. It’s not every day that you hear fuck twice during lab class.

“You have both just won yourselves a trip to the principal. Go!” Mr. Wilmet pointed toward the door. His cheeks had turned red.

“Stop wasting my time.”

Several of the students made ooh sounds and a couple that were slightly bolder echoed the teacher shouting “Go.”

Joe sat heavily on the stool as he slowly pushed it back. The metal dragged on tiles and filled the class with an obnoxiously loud ringing sound. He walked toward the door and as he exited, he stopped to smile and wave enthusiastically at Mr. Wilmet before disappearing. Rob swung his backpack over his shoulder and walked past the middle and first tables filled with giggling students. He opened and closed the door behind him. The hallway was quiet and empty. As he walked he heard Joe yell “Hey.” He turned to see him jogging to catch up with him.

“I thought we were taking a trip to the principal?” he asked, mocking Mr. Wilmet.

“Go where you want.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Cool.” Joe said nodding, “Hey, we should start a petition or something.”

“Petition?”

“Yeah,” he quickly turned, walking backwards as he talked to Rob, “we can have all the students that won’t dissect sign it, and...”

Rob stopped abruptly as he watched Joe trip, tumble backwards and land on his ass. Joe laid back, covering his face with both hands as he laughed loudly. Rob laughed as he offered him his hand. Joe reached up, grabbing his hand and jumped up quickly.

“Holy shit, I can’t believe I just did that.” He laughed.

“Quiet in the halls.” The art teacher poked her head out of the art room door. She held her index finger in front of her lips and exaggeratedly furrowed her brows.

“Look lady,” Joe said laughing, “have some compassion. I just fell on my ass out here.”

Rob couldn’t help but laugh along with him. His laughter was guileless and infectious.

They continued walking down the hall toward the exit.

“Your parents’ home?” Joe asked, adjusting his bookbag.

Rob shook his head. “Why?”

“We can work on the petition,” Joe said, as he tapped back and forth from his chest to Rob’s arm feverishly.

Rob walked silently as he thought it over. “Just my Ma,” he finally said.

“Cool.” Joe nudged him.

The double glass doors finally came into view as they rounded the last stretch of hallway. A custodian was pushing a cart of cleaning supplies. He saw them and slowed his cart.

“What are you boys up to?” he asked.

“We won tickets!” Joe answered excitedly.

“Yeah,” Rob laughed, “We’re going on a trip.”

Joe burst out laughing as they pushed the doors open. They ran down the slope of lawn together toward the tree line and disappeared into the woods. They lingered on the path, talking for hours, before finally making their way to Rob's house to write the outline of their petition opposing dissection. Rob quickly learned that Joe was a vegetarian and that his father often made fun of him for it. Joe said he didn't really care, but Rob sensed that it bothered him. Joe explained how he loved martial arts and had read, when he was eleven, that ninjas ate vegetarian diets and that he'd been vegetarian for three years.

Rob didn't understand how quickly or deep the bond between them was developing. He didn't really care how, because he was profoundly drawn to Joe. He was rebellious, funny, quick witted and kind. The friendship that formed on the path in the woods that day led to an intense and fiercely loyal love for one another. From that afternoon forth, they were nearly inseparable. Rarely did you encounter one without the other.

Their petition had been successful. 89% of the middle school student body signed it in opposition to dissection. Change happened. No longer would students receive a failing grade for their refusal. Alternatives were offered.

They quickly realized the power of their collaborative efforts. They both felt alive and fully aware. They continued direct action and activism in middle school. Joe became vegan and they liberated 2 guinea pigs from a math classroom and an English class. Their 10x10 wire cages were cramped and barren save for an exercise wheel, water bottle and a chewed-on toilet paper roll. Joe helped Rob convert his entire bookshelf into a tri-level guinea pig paradise with ramps leading up to each level. They used plexiglass to make see-thru barriers across the front of each level that were just high enough to ensure the Guinea pigs' safety. Each morning Rob would wake to hear his younger brother Michael whispering to them and laughing as he played with them.

Rob squeezed his eyes shut as tightly as possible, his fists pressed into the hospital bed. His stomach felt like it was filled with wet gravel. He would never hear Joe's laugh again. Not ever, and it was his own fault. He felt like someone had hollowed him out and dumped his empty body in the middle of a wasteland. He was lost, alone, and his insides were gone.

It just couldn't be real. He kept his eyes closed and listened for a change in the surrounding sounds. Maybe he was just waking up. Maybe he dreamed that he dreamed it was real and he was actually still dreaming. A voice sounded in the ceiling speakers paging someone to the 2nd floor lobby. He opened his eyes, once again, to the sterile and punitive truth. The off-white walls stared back at him.

There weren't any dreams left for him.

He had killed Joe.

The phone on the stand rang, startling him. He could feel it was Michael. This time he answered.

"Robbie. Someone killed Joe. Don't trust the police, man. This isn't the first time that they've set someone up, only to finish the job later. If they come in the night they'll stick a needle in your arm, it's to finish the job. They're killers, Robbie. They'll kill you."

Mike's familiar rushed rant filled his ear. His pressure of speech was quick and sharp.

Rob could immediately tell that his brother was amidst a full-blown episode. "Slow down. No one is sneaking in to kill me with a needle," Rob assured.

“Not what I heard.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Get out now, they said...and it’s true. They’ll be in sure as soon. What I heard, man.”

Rob listened to the stressed voice of his younger brother. He was obviously hearing voices again. Mike lied about taking his medication, even going so far as claiming to love his schizophrenia.

Over the years, Rob had heard a lot of wild shit, so this paranoia was no shocker. It would take a lot to jar him when it came to his brother’s psychotic episodes. The voices, that he heard, he called them “the big 5,” or, the “tellers of all truths.”

“When’d you last take your meds, Michael?”

The phone was silent.

“Mikey?”

“You have to get out,” Michael whispered quickly.

Rob nodded. “Okay. I will get out, Mike. No one is going to kill me. I promise you.”

“Not what I heard. Could be any second now and then. Who has Joe?”

Rob stiffened. “...His body?”

“They got him. They’re going to get you.”

Rob pressed his fingertips into his temple. “...No one is gonna get me...”

“Robbie, you have to get out now! They’ll jab you, needle you, pump you full, too. What I heard.”

I gotta get the fuck out of here, Rob thought.

“Michael, look,” Rob whispered. “I’m fine. I’m safe...I’ve hired armed guards. See?” he lied.

Silence.

“Ok?”

“And, you trust these guards?” Michael sounded skeptical.

Rob sighed, closing his eyes. “Yeah, completely trustworthy.”

“Good to hear, man.”

“I’ll be home soon, k?”

“Righto.”

“See ya soon, Mikey. Bye.”

His brother hung up without saying anything more.

Rob sat for a moment, holding onto the phone. He leaned forward, face grimacing as pain radiated from his shoulder into his neck. He set the phone down and pressed the call button to the nurses’ station. As he sat back, the nurse walked in.

She smiled at him, “What can I do for you? Would you like me to bring you something for an upset stomach?”

“Where’s my shit?”

Her expression changed. She looked confused.

“I’m leaving.”

“Oh,” her eyes widened, looking at the door, “Mmmm, let me just get the doctor so”...

Rob interrupted, “I’ll sign myself out.”

[Next episode coming soon!]