

It was the nagging fly that triggered a series of events that got Clay to eventually take off his shoe. He had been allowing himself to succumb to exhaustion and fall asleep, but every time he did the fly would land on his face and tickle him awake. He wished he could stay asleep—the time not only passed faster that way, but it would also stave off the hunger pangs and the pounding headache, which seemed to get worse every time his eyes opened.

The headache was caused by emptiness, he knew. The absolute mind numbing effect of having *nothing to do*, and nothing to look at but a daunting escape hole in the ceiling and the twisted purple appendage he called a leg.

Then there was the issue of not having anything to eat or drink in what he guessed must have been—*holy shit, a whole day?* Clay would get headaches after just going a few hours without eating, and he tried not think too hard about how long it had been since some form of moisture passed his lips, even as his mouth got drier and stickier each time he swallowed.

Whenever the fly woke him and he gripped his temples, trying hard to massage the pain away, he found it hard to drift off to sleep again. He'd keep himself occupied by pounding out beats to his favorite songs on the floor, which echoed and reverberated all the way up the elevator shaft, and that often had the added benefit of easing his headaches because he was actually using some part of his brain and keeping it from thinking too hard about his situation.

He'd do this until his eyelids got heavy, and when he allowed them to shut he concentrated on his hands and the tapping of the beats, until they, too, stopped, and soon his mind was getting as quiet as the elevator around him and he'd sleep.

*Bzzz*, but not for long.

He'd snap his eyes open and swat the fly, and the whole cycle would repeat itself.

The fly followed a pattern—it would land on his face, wake him up, avoid his hand swatting through the air, and then land on the control panel to the elevator where Clay would try to sneak up on it as quietly as possible, cupping his hand and moving it close before suddenly bringing it down as quickly as he could.

Each time, Clay would think he got it—but opening his hand revealed he had not, and he'd spend a few minutes looking around the dark elevator, trying to identify a black spot on the wall that was darker than the rest, or watch for a spec that flew in front of the light.

Soon after, he'd give up and start tapping out a beat, sometimes even sing a little, and he'd fall back asleep soon enough.

This got tiring, so sometime later he decided enough was enough and it was time to fight the stupid little thing with some kind of higher firepower.

He looked around the cab for something to throw. He shuffled through the wreckage of the light but there was nothing really he could get a good grip on and use for swatting. The pieces were either too big or too little, and those that weren't were connected to something else and he just didn't have the patience or strength to figure out a way to break it off.

The only piece he found that didn't look like it would do more harm than good was a long, thin piece of plastic that ran about the length of his leg. It looked like it was probably piece of the plastic that covered the fluorescent lights that had somehow broken off rather neatly, though it did have jagged prongs on one end that made it look something like a giant fork. Though he couldn't think of any use for it in terms of fly killing, so he set it aside.

Then he looked at his shoes. He remembered how, every fall, Beth would often chase flies down in their own apartment like a mad woman, wailing and holding one of her old flip-flops high in the air. His shoes, he thought, would be a perfect weapon against the menace.

The shoe on the right—the good foot—was tightly laced but still infinitely more attractive an option than the other, looser one on the left. Even though he undid the laces to it hours ago, it was causing his foot to throb with pressure and he couldn't bare the idea of slipping it off—though somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he'd likely have to.

But at that moment, he decided leaving it on was the right thing to do. The image of his foot falling apart when he removed it was still a major concern. Besides, he figured, every injury he'd ever heard of needed to be wrapped up and bandaged somehow. Why remove the bandage, even if it was a shoe? The pressure was good... it meant the shoe was keeping the swelling down. *Right?*

He began to lean forward and reach for his right foot. He could have bent his good leg at the knee and brought the foot closer to him, but moving just that little bit was enough to rock his bad ankle in such away he'd rather not.

Instead, he stretched forward, feeling it in his hamstrings, and quickly undid the laces of the right shoe.

Once the laces were undone, cool air rushed into each side of the shoe and it felt good. He leaned back and rested against the wall. It felt like taking your shoes off after a long day at work only much better because, as Clay knew, he had been wearing them for much longer than a regular day at work by then.

He considered his other foot, and how warm it was getting. It felt sticky, too. Perhaps taking the shoe off would be good—letting the cool air sooth the pain.

*Icy to dull the pain, hot to soothe it away. Isn't that how it goes?* he thought. *Or is it hot to dull the pain, icy to sooth it away?*

Either option sounded good at that point. But there was another *buzz* near his ear and he remembered why he was taking off his shoe in the first place.

He reached down to his side and picked up the long piece of plastic. He used it as sort of a shoehorn, and inserted the end of it between his ankle and the shoe itself and pushed down. The shoe popped off his heel, and then used the jagged end of it to hook the laces and pull it upward and off.

He pulled the plastic toward him and the shoe dangled on the end, then fell around his knee. Glad that he didn't have to lean forward too much, he eagerly picked it up and gripped the toe end of it and started looking around the cabin for the fly again.

It seemed lighter than it had been in the beginning, but Clay knew this was only because the rods and cones in his eyes had adjusted. *Rods and Cones*. He chuckled a little, remembering how he once tried to get his friend at college to start a radio show with him on the University owned station. The name of the show would be *Rod and Cone*, just because he liked the way it sounded the first time he heard it in biology.

*This is Rod, cumminatcha', and this, he held up the shoe, is Cone, dear fly. We got a very special request, dedicated to you, my friend.*

"There once was a woman who swallowed a fly," he mumbled, scanning each panel of the elevator with his eyes and taking in each crevice and faux wood stain, making sure it was not the body of an intruder.

He imagined the fly responding, in a little high pitched fly voice, "I don't know why she swallowed a fly..."

"Perhaps she'll die," and then Clay was coughing. He dropped the shoe and pounded on his chest, trying to knock whatever it was loose. Then he realized it was the dryness—the incredible, overwhelming dryness—and he forced himself to stop coughing and just swallow whatever he could to moisten his palette.

He had never experienced anything like that before. When he was done he realized he had a lump in his throat, but it wasn't the kind that preceded a good cry, it was some kind of sticky mass that was trying to come up but was too dry to do so.

Suddenly he noticed how *hot* he was getting and wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

He continued looking around the elevator and felt around for the shoe he had dropped. He picked it up and slid his hand back down so it gripped the end of the toe, the bottom rubber side facing out, and held it in perfect swatting position again.

It was just too damn dark to see the fly, even with his *rods and cones* the way they were. So after a few minutes he gave up and set the shoe down within grabbing distance in case he needed to pick it up quickly again.

As he relaxed as best as he could, he kept an eye toward the ceiling of the elevator because for some reason he felt his attention should be up there.

One side of the hatch door was lit pretty well given its proximity to the solitary source of light, and he pictured it flapping up again, slamming shut and then falling open, over and over again, making a *clang clang clang* each time, like some demented form of laughter.

*Clang clang clang, come on out, Clayton, come on! That fly just did it! Clang clang clang I'm wide open! Open and waiting for you to put your big self into, doesn't that sound nice? What's wrong, you some sort of faggot?*

"My knee," Clay whispered, clutching it without really knowing why and barely recognizing that he had spoken anything at all. "My knee hurts."

*What about your ankle, hmm? Clang clang clang. Looks to me your ankle is in worse shape than your fat knee.*

It occurred to Clay that it was ridiculous to try to minimize his injuries to an elevator, or any kind of inanimate object. But for some reason he tried to ignore the pain in his ankle so as not to appear too weak to the elevator, and he picked up the fly-swatter shoe again and clutched it close to his chest for comfort.

Knowing it was his and it belonged to him, just him, sort of felt good, and he smelled the tip like he would often smell his stuffed animal—the one he had brought back from his dad's house one weekend, the one he never remembered actually getting because it had always been in his life.

When his parents separated, he began to visit his father on the weekends and slowly, over time, Clay began to see that house as not his own. He had been born there, but it became "daddy's house" as soon as he made friends and went to school and developed a little life at his mother's. As a consequence, the objects in "daddy's house" began to feel as if they weren't really his any longer but something his dad had put in the house to make him feel more at home, like some kind of hotel.

One of the objects was a raggedy old yellow teddy bear. It wasn't as raggedy back then, but in his mind he pictured it as such, though it was probably a lot more fluffy and a lot more yellow. Trying to

compensate for this memory discrepancy gave the bear a kind of angelic aura in his mind as he tried to color the bear up and imagine what it looked like naturally as he held it in front of him and made it cough.

He was trying to give it Robitussin or some kind of cough medicine, though it was Clay who had just gotten over a cold but wanted to nurse the stuffed bear and nurture it back to health.

That was back then, and now it's fur was matted down and stained in parts and reminded him more of the color you might see in an old lady's car where the sun had hit the upholstery one too many times.

Clay had taken the bear with him after one weekend, back to his mother's, buried deep in his duffel bag, and it felt like stealing so kept it hidden from his parents in his room.

When he moved out and in with Beth, he set it next to all of her similar childhood companions on a dresser in the bedroom, and it collected lots of dust sitting up there.

But it still smelled faintly of that medicine, of healing.

And Clay would smell it whenever he was in a bad mood. It was something that was just his, his alone, even as it sat there threatening to be forgotten in the crowd of Beth's childhood toys. He wouldn't smell it too much for fear of ruining the smell by sucking it all up at once—though, if he was honest with himself, the smell was getting weaker each time. He tried to remember to shake the dust loose more often, to clean it up now and then as if the dust was stealing the smell, but life, as they say, always seemed to get in the way and he'd only remember the bear even existed the next time he was having some sort of crisis and he'd walk into the bedroom and it would be there for him, one among many, his own and on his side.

Clay tried to make the fly-swatting shoe give him that same feeling in the elevator, but the smell was nothing like healing. It smelled faintly of rubber and office, whatever that smell was. So before too long he realized he was only making himself sadder by pretending the shoe was his little yellow medicine bear and set it aside.

He folded his hands in his lap and allowed his head to slump forward one again, ignoring the taunts of the hatch and he fell asleep thinking about the bear and how it smelled sitting on top of the dresser back home.

*Bzzz.*

The sleep didn't last for long. The damn fly was back, and Clay absentmindedly smacked his face as it woke him.

He grabbed for his shoe and threw it in the general direction he thought it traveled, which was a stupid idea because it hit the wall and immediately bounced back, colliding with the tip of his broken foot.

Clay screamed, quite loudly, and it occurred to him he better not scream too loud else he wake up the hatch, which seemed to be sleeping as well, peacefully above him.

"Fuck," he mumbled instead, and his broken foot pounded inside it's confines, and sent wave after wave of intense heat up his leg. It felt as if at any moment it might rip through the shoe itself.

If he left it alone, the foot would only crush itself more against its own swelling pressure, he was sure. So he reached for the plastic strip next to him and took a few deep breaths.

It was time it came off, too.

Since the laces had already been undone, all he needed to do was slide the plastic into the shoe and push the shoe off like he did with the other one, but the swelling in his ankle blocked his view. He'd have to feel around with the plastic strip and slide in where it felt right.

He took a deep breath and started this process. He'd tap gently at first, then realized he could barely feel it, so tapped harder. The pain was so sharp he could almost hear it in his ears, the high pitched, sweaty hot sound.

Eventually, he found what he thought was the small opening between his sock and the shoe, so he pushed into it.

He screamed, but kept pushing. Sometime during the struggle he realized he very well might be pushing *into* his foot, and soon he'd be pushing hard not knowing he was actually tearing the muscle from the bone and all of the sudden there would be a big *release*, and that's when he'd look down to see his foot against the wall and blood spurting out of a severed ankle.

Luckily, he had it right, and before too long he did feel a release. He saw the tip of the shoe shift it's angle over his swollen ankle, and then an incredible rush of fluid and coolness.

He gave himself a minute, feeling the blood and other body fluids rushing to his foot. He felt that balloon sensation again as it did so, and it felt as if the fluid was in such a hurry that it was pouring out of him, but he looked and didn't see any blood or fluid on the floor just yet so he finally held out the plastic strip again and in one motion hooked the shoelaces near the top and yanked it off.

The pain from this was intense, and he ground his teeth as he threw the piece of plastic with the shoe dangling off of one side into the pile of wreckage next to him.

He was pleased to see, too, that the broken foot did not appear to be losing cohesion as he had feared earlier. It was not spreading out into a pile of bone fragments and flesh. He craned his neck to see around his big ankle, but he swore he could see toes under his socks even though the foot itself lay crooked and sideways.

Clay considered that maybe a tendon or two was the only thing holding it into place, but remembered the way his foot looked when it got hooked behind the railing as the rest of him lay on the floor. On second thought, he determined that the tendons probably snapped just like the bone and he was lucky it was still connected by skin.

*Bzzz.*

His hand felt around frantically for the fly-swatting shoe next to him as he kept his eye on the flying black pin point inside the cabin.

“There was an old lady who swallowed a fly,” Clay croaked again. He licked his lips with what was beginning to feel like sandpaper.

It occurred to Clay that *he* might as well be the old lady and swallow the damn fly. It might hold him over until—*rescue*? He hadn’t felt his stomach grumble in a few hours, which was nice, but he was still hungry.

“I’m gonna eat you, little fucker,” he said with a sing-song voice. “Fee-fi, foe-fum, I smell the blood of an...” He paused, and then pounded the shoe against the floor of the cab, frustrated he couldn’t come up with a clever rhyme.

He sat silently then, listening for the buzzing noise but hearing nothing. He grew hotter as his anger swelled—he refused to resign himself to being woken again by such an annoyance. *The fly is here somewhere and I will find it!*

And then, he saw it.

Clear as ever, there was a black spec on the control panel, on the other side of button 4, right above B1.

Clay suppressed an urge to laugh—*the fly has no idea!*—and stayed as quiet as possible. He moved the shoe slowly and had to grimace through stretching out and leaning a bit to reach. Soon, the sole of the shoe was positioned just inches away from the insect. Just a little tap, and it would be crushed to death.

He paused, still trying to think of something to rhyme, some sort of death poem he could recite to the only other living creature he had seen in so many hours, but he could not. So he brought the shoe down with a firm *smack*, and held it in place.

Then he listened. With the shoe still pressed against the metal, if the fly were to have escaped, Clay would have heard it buzzing back up, probably escaping through the hatch Clay had so graciously opened for him.

But he didn't hear anything.

A smile came across Clay's face—*victory!*—and he laughed as he peeled the shoe from the aluminum. He held out his other hand beneath it, hoping to catch the fly in his palm.

*I smell the blood of an...* but nothing was there.

He checked the bottom of the shoe, checked it in all different angles and held it up close and far away, even looked at it sideways. He thought about licking the bottom of the shoe to be sure, but didn't.

Wide eyed, he studied the panel itself. There was no indication of anything, not even a shoe mark. With one hand he leaned over and stretched his arm out, feeling around, trying to feel slimy residue.

Nothing.

He let himself continue to slide downward until his shoulder hit the floor. He rolled over as easy as he could and let his hands rest on his stomach. The shoe tumbled over and came to rest about a foot away.

Clay tried to make sense of what had just happened, looking up into the abyss. *Clang clang clang*. Soon after, he fell asleep again. He was still thinking about it and started the onset of an unusual feeling.

He woke up again a while later not to the *bzzz'*ing of an angry fly, but to that feeling. The feeling made him uneasy, and he had to wipe his forehead again.

The feeling was that maybe there wasn't any fly to begin with.

*No food, no water, in how long? Headaches? Isn't that what made people crazy?*

His mind reeled as he considered the consequences.

*"I don't know why there is no fly..." Clang clang clang. "Perhaps he'll die..."*