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JEREMY

Pain made people do horrible things: kick their cats, beat their kids, swallow a fistful of pills. But whether it was physical or emotional pain that made Jeremy Harjo Barton want to snatch the gun from his grandpa's hands and blow the ex-soldier away, he couldn't say. On that afternoon, he had plenty of both.

A bullet would shut the guy up, no doubt. Stop the fat-bashing once and for all, not to mention leave a gaping hole in his hangdog face, a face far narrower than Jeremy's own moon-pie mug and one that hadn't seen sunlight in five years, other than from a window.

Do you think I like being fat, Grandpa? Don't you think I'd lose weight if I could?

From the plaid sofa, Jeremy watched his grandfather polish the gun, the cleaning cloth twisting and flapping around the barrel. It was Wednesday's ritual. First the old service revolver, then the Beretta, and finally the Bowie knife. Richard "Dick" Barton cleaned each piece while seated in his ratty recliner, a nearby side table holding the waiting munitions.

Who am I kidding? Jeremy thought.

He was no more likely to handle a weapon than he was to climb Key Tower in downtown Cleveland. Rescuing overturned beetles and petting stray dogs was more his style.

A smile crossed Jeremy's lips when he pictured the sniffing mutt who'd wandered into their yard the day before, his matted fur the same dull brown as the summer grass. Despite a throbbing, walnut-sized boil

near his groin, Jeremy had shuffled outside to pet the dog, the cool licks on his face worth the pain in his thigh.

A bellow from his grandfather broke his reverie, and the pleasant image faded. “What the hell are you smiling about? If you’d get off your butt and exercise, your mom wouldn’t have to race home to take you to the ER. How the hell did you get that thing, anyway? It’s not like you’re slogging through the jungles of Nam. Like you kids today would know anything about that.”

Jeremy considered telling the recluse that present-day soldiers were as competent as GI Dick had been four decades ago, but he didn’t have the energy. Nor did he have the energy to get off the couch and go to his room, although he wanted nothing more than to return to his online game. But his mom was on her way, and the effort of waddling up the stairs, combined with the pain in his infected groin, kept him glued to the sofa.

“Huh? You listening to me? I asked why you let it get so big? You think your mom’s got time to haul your ass to the ER every month? Your asthma wouldn’t act up if you lost weight, and you wouldn’t get a dirty boil either.” His grandpa coughed and cleared mucus from his throat.

Jeremy poked a cuticle-bitten finger through a hole in the cushion fabric. His eyes teared. He blinked the moisture away, hoping his grandfather hadn’t noticed.

“Oh, I don’t know.” GI Dick’s tone thawed a degree. “Maybe this clinic thing she took you to last month will help. You think?”

The chewed finger found its way back to Jeremy’s mouth. “I hope so,” he said softly. But he didn’t believe it. According to his grandfather, Jeremy was born fat. And one way or another, Jeremy knew he would die fat.

The front door banged open, and his mother, Connie, rushed in.

“Hey, kiddo,” she said, crossing the small living room to give Jeremy a peck on the head. Jeremy returned her hug, grateful to have her home.

When she stepped back, her leg struck the coffee table, sending an empty bag of potato chips wafting to the floor where it joined two

cola cans and a torn gaming magazine. “Sorry it took so long. I didn’t get done until three thirty and missed my bus. Did Rex get here yet?”

Jeremy shook his head but held back a comment. He didn’t care for his mom’s boyfriend any more than his grandpa did, but he didn’t like giving her grief about it. His grandpa and Rex hassled her enough.

Dick put the gun and cleaning cloth on the end table and picked up the smaller pistol, peering at it through his reading glasses. “You counting on that ass to drive you?”

After rubbing the sting out of her shin, Connie pulled a cardboard container and some napkins from her bag and handed them to Jeremy. The scent of baked crust filled the air. “Here, sweetie, it’s all I had time to grab. We’ll get something else for you later. How’s your thigh? You doing okay?”

Jeremy’s mood lifted the moment he saw three slices of pepperoni pizza from Sandy’s Italian Eatery nestled in the grease-stained box, and despite having a hot poker near his left testicle, he nodded.

To her father, Connie said, “Come on, Dad, how else am I going to get there?”

“If you’d kept up the maintenance on my Buick, you wouldn’t have to rely on that crap boyfriend for his car.”

Connie stepped behind her dad and rubbed his shoulders. “I took care of your car just fine. It was old. It died.”

Dick grunted but said nothing, his face going slack from the short massage.

“I’ll run and freshen up.” Connie abandoned the back rub and sprinted up the stairs to her bedroom, brassy blond ponytail swaying back and forth over her blue cashier’s smock.

She and Jeremy each had a bedroom upstairs along with a small bathroom they shared. Dick slept in the master bedroom on the main floor. A green Formica kitchen, cluttered living room, and layers of dust completed the small Cleveland home.

The neighborhood was crappy, too. Rundown houses, abandoned buildings, neglected yards. But it was less than a mile to school, and Mr. and Mrs. Duong, the old couple next door, were pretty nice. They paid Jeremy to mow their tiny lawn and shovel their sidewalk, which required at least two puffs of his inhaler to complete.

As Jeremy polished off the last of the pizza slices, the doorbell rang. Before either he or Dick could respond, Rex burst in, dressed in his usual snug T-shirt and low-slung jeans.

“Hey, Eating Bull. Dick. How’s life?”

Jeremy balled up the greasy napkins in his hand and squeezed. Not only did he hate the nickname (*thanks for that, Grandpa*), he hated that Rex spewed it, though the guy was careful not to say it around Connie.

“Why don’t you let my daughter use one of your cars?” Dick asked, forgoing all pleasantries, his grip tightening on the pistol.

“Not mine to give. Belongs to the company.” Rex eyed the threadbare chair next to Dick as if it were covered in turds and took a seat on the edge.

“Hmmm, seems to be available whenever you want something from my daughter.”

Awkward silence cloaked the room, broken only by the air conditioner kicking in. Despite the cool blast from the window unit, Jeremy’s pits felt moist and sticky. He shifted his position on the couch, triggering an involuntary gasp of pain.

“Connie, hurry up now. Jeremy’s hurtin.” Dick turned to look over his shoulder at the stairwell behind him. Soon Connie came flying down. Though she was overweight, Jeremy would take her mild plumpness over his whale body any day. Rex bolted up when he saw her. “Let’s get moving. I gotta be somewhere in a half hour.”

“You’re not waiting there with us?” Connie smoothed a loose-fitting blouse over her jean shorts, sending a whiff of drugstore musk Jeremy’s way. He could hear the disappointment in her voice.

“No can do. But call me when you’re done, and I’ll pick you up.”

“Yeah, right, just like last time,” Jeremy mumbled.

“What was that?” Rex’s smile twitched.

“Nothing.” The last thing Jeremy wanted was to get Rex worked up. If the guy stormed off, they’d have to take a bus to the ER, and Jeremy wasn’t up for that. He pushed off the flattened cushion, grimacing as he stood.

Connie rushed forward and grabbed his arm.

“I’m okay, Mom,” he said.

But he wasn't okay. His groin pulsed and burned, the pain of the red lesion second only to his mounting fear over its treatment. He didn't like needles. Especially needles near his junk.

The three headed out to a red Camaro, Connie's arm around a limping Jeremy and Rex sighing in impatience behind them. Dick remained housebound as always.

Jeremy hoped the wait wouldn't be long. He wanted the thing done with. He wanted the pain gone. He wanted to get back to his room. Back to his game. Back to his dinner.



An hour later, Jeremy sat on a puke-green chair in the ER waiting room, his trepidation mounting. His mom perched on a yellow seat, its plastic base mottled by a brown stain the shape of Florida. Jeremy worried about its origin and hoped it had nothing to do with the dirty-diaper smell permeating the muggy summer air.

The room was packed, kids all over, coughing, sneezing, retching. Every time the door to the main unit buzzed, a nurse darted out to yell the next name, and everyone hushed and straightened in anticipation.

After a few cycles of patient-in, patient-out, each seemingly longer than the last, heavy sighs surfaced behind Jeremy. He turned and watched a woman he knew approach the triage window. A teenage girl with a cradled arm trailed behind.

"I'm Sue Fort, Kayla's mother. This is ridiculous."

With her nearly shaved head, impressive stature, and ear full of studs and tiny hoops, Jeremy would have recognized the woman even if she hadn't identified herself. She looked like an African warrior from his online game. Strong biceps underneath a purple V-neck tee only strengthened the comparison.

Jeremy shrank down in his seat, praying his fat-clinic nurse wouldn't see him. Considering his girth, the attempt was laughable.

"We've been waiting for almost forty-five minutes. My daughter clearly has a broken arm. It doesn't take a doctor to diagnose that." Spittle flew from the warrior's red lips, spraying the plastic divide that separated the sick from the healers.

The young secretary maintained a blank face, as though she'd heard it all before. Her goth vibe clashed with the pediatric-themed setting. "We'll get to you and your daughter as soon as we can. As you can see, it's very busy in here."

"Well, as you can see, a broken bone is very busy in *here*." The fat-clinic nurse pointed to the lump in her daughter's arm. "One that can lead to neurovascular compromise."

At that, goth woman raised her heavy-lined brows. Her gaze traveled to the daughter, a thin, pretty girl with a complexion lighter than her mom's and clearer than Jeremy's own pale skin. Rows of beaded braids wrapped around her skull.

Way out of my league, Jeremy thought.

"So tell me," Sue said to the ER secretary, "do you have your testimony ready for when you're sitting on the stand explaining why you let my daughter's arm turn gangrenous in the waiting room?"

Though Jeremy wasn't a doctor, and unlike English, biology wasn't his best subject, even he knew the warrior's words were extreme. But it worked. Goth secretary stood, took a few steps backward, and reached for the arm of a passing guy in scrubs. Jeremy wasn't so sure Supermom would be happy with what appeared to be a sleepy resident. But after a short whispered exchange, goth woman pushed a button and buzzed in the warrior and her floor-gazing daughter.

Jeremy glanced at his mom. She raised her eyebrows in response and adjusted her stringy ponytail, then gave his shoulder a squeeze.

Behind them, the outside door whooshed open, and the smell of nearby fast food walloped Jeremy. His mouth watered. Like a dog in search of a bone, he longed to scamper after the scent. He was about to ask his mother for a buck or two for the vending machine when the buzzer to the main unit sounded and a scrubs-clad, elf-sized nurse popped out and barked, "Jeremy Barton."

Jeremy nearly jumped off the seat at the sound of his name. Pain blasted his upper thigh, and between the boil and his sweaty bulk, it took a few seconds to propel out of his chair. He could feel the silent stares.

Once inside the main ER hub, he saw a central work station surrounded by four counters. Textbooks, papers, laptops, boxes of gloves,

beverage containers, and other debris littered the surfaces. Some staff members sat at the counters, others whizzed around, in and out of curtained-off examination rooms. Some carried papers and clipboards, others lugged medical equipment, and one big guy carried a vial of blood.

Jeremy's knees buckled. His pace slowed.

"Hmm, this scale should work for you." The waifish nurse pressed her lips together and gazed at Jeremy's belly. The top of her head was level with his chin, and he could see dark roots in her frosty, cropped hair. "It's a high-capacity scale, goes up to five-hundred pounds."

Neither Jeremy nor Connie spoke.

"Go ahead. Step on it. We need your weight and height to add to the triage vitals." She offered a transient smile. "I'm Gloria. I normally work in the ICU but got pulled to the emergency department tonight."

The way she said the word *pulled* made Jeremy think the move hadn't thrilled her. He imagined she preferred cooperative kids in comas to fat teens wielding pus-filled boils.

Jeremy stepped on the scale, heat shooting through his groin.

"Three hundred and ten pounds." Tinker Bell slid the adjustable measuring rod down over his head. "At a height of five-nine." The nurse tsked her tongue and shook her head as she jotted the numbers on a form attached to her clipboard. Before Jeremy even stepped off the scale, she spun down the hall like a skinny tornado. She touched down at the second curtain from the end and held open a pale blue drape, waiting for them to catch up. "Go ahead and have a seat on the bed."

Jeremy gritted his teeth and hoisted himself onto the exam table, sweat beading his forehead. His chest tightened when he pictured the needle coming his way, and he checked his pocket for his inhaler.

"You okay, hon?" Connie rubbed his back a few times.

"Yeah, I'm—"

"Here. I'm not sure if this will fit, but it's the only one that will come close." Gloria tossed a speckled gray gown on the exam table. "You'll at least need to take your pants off so the doctor can see your leg. And if you have any bandage covering the boil, you'll need to remove it."

With that, the tiny nurse was gone, leaving nothing in her wake but the tinging of curtain hooks over a thin metal rod.

“Well, she’s certainly efficient,” Connie said. She lowered her voice, covered her mouth, and added, “But kind of a bitch.” Her giggling did little to ease Jeremy’s nerves. “Pretend I didn’t say that. Here, let me help you get those pants off.”

Normally a fifteen-year-old would rather die than hear those words come from his mom, but by then Jeremy’s pulse outpaced even the beeping machines down the hall, and he allowed his mother to help him remove the XXXL black sweatpants. His sweaty boxers hugged his crotch like a Speedo. He hated needles. He knew everyone said that, but he really hated them. He looked up on WebMD what they did with boils, and he was damn sure he wasn’t going to like it.

Each moment Jeremy’s mouth got a little drier, palms a little moister, throat a little tighter. He passed the minutes listening to wailing alarms and crying kids, neither of which inspired confidence.

He heard the warrior woman walk by with her daughter. “I knew that arm was broken.”

Finally, the doctor entered.

“Jeremy? My name’s Dr. Sneeker. Nice to meet you.”

Despite his anxiety, Jeremy smirked, prompting the doctor to add, “Yeah, not the coolest of names, is it?” Dr. Sneeker’s dark hair plastered his forehead and stains soiled the pits of his scrubs. Silver-rimmed glasses rested on a linear nose. “So, I understand you’ve got a nasty boil.”

Indicating with a gesture that Jeremy lean back on the table, the doctor snapped on a pair of gloves. Jeremy jumped.

God, please make this go quick.

For the next few minutes—*hours?*—Dr. Sneeker tended to the festering wound, Gloria assisting him, the Vanna White of pus. All the while, Dr. Sneeker chatted merrily, distracting Jeremy with school and video game talk. When he inquired about Jeremy’s favorite game, Jeremy’s answer of *War of the Wilderness* made Dr. Sneeker’s head shoot up. “Hey, I just started that one. What level are you?”

“Forty-nine.”

“No kidding. I’m only at level seven. I’m new to this massive multi-player online stuff, but man, I love it. I like any kind of puzzle or game. What’s your character?”

“A shaman. Kajika is his name.”

“A healer, huh? My kind of guy.” Dr. Sneeker winked at Connie. “Plus, those guys are lucky. They don’t have to worry about getting sued.” He paused and a shadow crossed his face. After a moment, he asked, “What does the name Kajika mean?”

Jeremy hesitated. He picked at a loose thread on the gown. “Walks without sound. It means one who walks without sound.”

Dr. Sneeker half-smiled, half-frowned, then resumed his procedure. When he finished, he capped a big Q-tip wand saturated with pus and handed it to Tinker Bell.

Happy birthday, Jeremy thought.

Leaving Gloria to bandage the wound, Dr. Sneeker donned a serious expression and pulled up a stool. Jeremy wondered if he was about to tell him his leg would turn green and fall off.

“I’d like to talk about your weight. I know this is the ER and I don’t have much time—” As if on cue, his pager trilled. Dr. Sneeker read the message and frowned. His speech quickened. “Look, you and I both know you need to lose weight. Am I right?”

Jeremy saw Gloria give a sharp nod as she finished wrapping the wound, as if the question was addressed to her.

“I probably don’t need to tell you that extra weight you’re carrying around puts you at risk for chronic disease. Your blood pressure’s a little high, not terrible, but it’s in the at-risk zone. Plus, your arteries are probably already thickening, and that’s only going to get worse as you get older. I know you’ve been seen here before for your asthma too. And the friction from your skin rubbing together? Well, that’s a setup for infection.”

He finally took a breath, and Connie jumped in, her lips trembling. “I know he needs to lose weight, Doctor. *I* need to lose weight. It’s just so hard, you know?”

Judging by the doctor’s fit body, he didn’t. Jeremy put on his pants as his mother continued.

“I work two jobs, I’m a single mom and, well, there isn’t a lot of time to cook for Jeremy. I end up bringing food home. But I did take him to a weight management clinic last month.”

“Excellent. Glad to hear it. There are always things we can blame, but it’s ultimately on us.” Dr. Sneeker stood up, ready to leave.

“That’s right. Time to make some better choices.” Gloria opened the curtain and moved out of the way to let Dr. Sneeker by.

Jeremy sat on the table, head down, gaze on his tennis shoes, the laces wide and loose to accommodate his feet. He barely heard as Gloria gave Connie the discharge instructions and antibiotic. He wanted to go home. Tuck himself into his room. Eat.

He wondered if the Dr. Sneekers and the Glorias of the world knew what it was like to lie on an exam table, looking every bit a beached whale with a red, angry boil, and hear someone talk about making better choices. Choices they themselves never had to worry about. He doubted Gloria, in all her petite pixie-ness, knew the feeling of craving food so badly all other thoughts ceased. Or the feeling of not being able to stop eating, being so out of control that it was as though the food ate the person rather than the other way around. Or hearing bullies toss out names like “lard-ass” and “fat-ass” like they were confetti.

Jeremy bet Tinker Bell had never experienced any of those things, so who was she to talk about choices?

“Let’s go, honey,” Connie said.

Jeremy inched off the table, relieved to feel much less pressure and pain in his groin since the pus was gone. As he and his mother exited the curtained space, Jeremy spotted the girl with the broken arm. A bright pink cast covered her limb. She and her mom were in the room across from Jeremy’s. Judging by the way the warrior woman looked at him, he knew she’d heard the recent exchange. Jeremy turned away from her pity smile and headed out with his mother.

“Wait,” the warrior called out. “Ms. Barton, Jeremy, can I talk to you? I’m Sue, the nurse from the public health weight management clinic.”

She caught them as they were about to exit the main unit and motioned them to step away from the door, into the corner of an unoccupied room.

“We remember you.” Connie fidgeted with the strap of her knock-off purse. “I’m sorry we didn’t keep our follow-up appointment. Between work and not having a car, well, it’s tricky, and we don’t have insur—”

Sue waved her hand as if dismissing the matter. “I know. I understand. Please call the clinic and reschedule. Our social worker can meet with you. Remember, we’re open ’til seven on Thursday, so that should work better for you.” Sue shifted her gaze to Jeremy. “I want you to know, I heard how that nurse treated you and I don’t like it one bit. She has no idea the obstacles you face.”

The warrior stared at Jeremy, hands on her hips, jaw set. He shuffled his feet, not sure what to say.

“I work with kids like you all the time. I know how hard it can be, both from my work and from my own past experience.” Her voice rose in volume, and she leaned forward. “Everyone blames the individual. ‘Eat less,’ they say, or ‘take more stairs.’ Yes, those are important things to do, but what these people don’t understand is how hard society makes it.”

The warrior’s stance was wide, feet planted, and with the way her nostrils flared, Jeremy feared smoke would shoot out of them.

“Tempt us with sugar, fat, and salt. Tell us to eat this product and that. Tell us to visit this restaurant or that ice cream shop. All the while, they make money while we as a nation grow fat. Plus, overweight people are belittled and ridiculed. That’s not okay.”

Jeremy was relieved that for once people weren’t staring at him.

Kayla approached her mother and pulled her to the door. “Come on, Mom, let’s go.”

Sue blinked a few times and then nodded. To Connie, she said, “Please, schedule Jeremy’s follow-up. We’ll talk more. It’s time someone did something about this. In fact, I have a proposal for you.”

And with that, Sue and Kayla left the ER, leaving Jeremy to wonder what exactly that proposal was.