

## *Oasis Motel*

by John Waterman

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*Chapel, then onward, to the Oasis ...*

Chapel consisted of a one-hour sermon. It was held in the large dining room with us, the homeless (the hopeless), at our round tables, waiting to be fed. If you missed Chapel, then The Mission wouldn't let you have dinner. A very Christian thing to do. The sermon was performed by a pastor in training, his sermons monotone and as engaging as watching grass grow. Before he could run a successful church, he had to work on his presentation. He needed to grow as an entertainer and salesman, earning his own obedient flock that would follow his regurgitation of the Lord's word. This pastor was a long way from being able to have his own holy business.

Throughout the entirety of the sermon, I felt embarrassed for the practicing pastor. A few times he asked a question to be arbitrarily answered by anyone with an answer. No one would respond; no one was paying attention. Our minds were far off from the words spewing from a man calling himself the tool of God—tool indeed. Even the Almighty couldn't help us—we thought passive aggressively—or the Almighty put us in this position, as if we drew the short straw; or the Almighty was unconcerned, too busy to worry about our plight; or the Almighty was getting a morbid pleasure from our suffering; or the Almighty wanted us

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*This story contains frank discussions of violence and drug use. We feel these kinds of stories are necessary and true to experience, especially if they are redemptive in nature.*

to learn from our suffering; or, and most probable, the Almighty was just not there in the first place.

A Santa-looking old man impatiently tugged on his suspenders, ending the sermon five minutes early. He peeked his head into the kitchen, asking, "Is the kitchen ready?" I could not hear a reply, but the steel gait to the kitchen window was lifted. It was dinnertime. Round table by round table, we were lined up: drinks first, then our dinners splat upon the plate by the kitchen staff. The staff comprised other homeless men that were relegated to the task, whether they knew how to run a kitchen or not. They were not happy about the numerous dishes they were bound to do, so they displaced their aggravation upon those they served. This is a very common relationship between server and the served.

The meal was leftover breaded and fried fish donated from a local fast-food restaurant, canned veggies and instant potatoes. We ate until all the food was gone, some filling their plates indulgently three or four times. It was there, it was offered freely, so they took every stitch. Personally, I skipped the fish for neurotic reasons, not consuming much at all, though extremely hungry.

Our bellies full, it was time to smoke our cigarettes and cigars. We huddled outside underneath a canopied picnic table, the strong night wind nipping any exposed skin with frostbite. Some of the more anti-social men chose to smoke in solitude on the outskirts of the huddle of homeless men. Those on the outside were the first ones to go back in. Soon, others followed, the ring of men despondently dissipating as they entered into their sanctuary of despair. But I, in my ugly but warm jacket, stayed out in the cold, stiff Kansas breeze that chilled me to the bone, chain-smoking, watching my escaped breath float away as a slow-moving, frozen cloud. I wanted to spend as much time outside as I could. I felt free in the night air; the boundaries were endless.

I stared up at my escaping breath, thinking about how screwed I was, having no place to go or means to help myself. The longer I sat there reflecting, the more my brain worked on the problem. And resolution was on the tip of my tongue when a short figure swung upon the backdoor of The Mission, heading straight for me with his arms open and a friendly smile. It was Shitake, one of the young Puerto Rican boys that

shared the jail cell with me. He had been released forty days before me and must have ended up at The Mission—everyone that leaves jail goes to The Mission.

Let me tell you about Shitake. His real name was Angel, but because he couldn't stop farting from the jail food he shoved down his gullet—farts nasty and deadly—the inmates started calling him Shitty. And being a very small man, a coward to boot, he'd cry rather than defend himself. One night he came over to my bunk and plead for help. He had become worried that the disrespect would eventually turn violent toward him or that he'd be forced to commit preemptive, covert foul play before they could get him.

The next day, while playing dominoes with the highest of the pecking order, those that ran the cell with the authority and fairness of the streets, I convinced them to call our tiny, farting Hispanic "Shitake." Not as a term of endearment, but as something new and creative to hurt him. But in Shitake's perception, this new nickname made him feel accepted by the others. He started buddying up with those that hated him, doing special favors, like washing their underwear and giving them back massages. At first, the inmates hated his attempts, finding his pathetic, passive brownnosing abhorrent. That loathing soon simmered, and the highest of the pecking order started protecting him, as if he was their loyal puppy.

One week before Shitake got out, his mother sent him an Xmas card. Shitake was overjoyed to get mail, especially from someone that he knew he had severely betrayed and abused. He was hoping for forgiveness from the woman that had once let this now horrible child suckle milk from her. By the end of reading the card, this sad, sorry boy began to weep. I was curious, so I asked why.

His reply: "My mom sent me a card. It has frosted, silver trees with presents underneath. She says she hopes all is well, but that she never wants to talk to me again. I can never go home or talk to my sisters or play with my pooch or be part of the family."

Harsh, I thought. I said nothing in return.

And here he was before me, wearing some kind of factory outfit, walking gleefully toward me. Our shared imprisonment forced an

association with one another that I did not want, but I knew was there. This is why I shook his small, outstretched hand and slapped him playfully on the back.

“You’re out, Snowball,” Shitake blurted.

“Yes. I know,” I replied.

“Oh, man. We’re going to have a ball tonight. A real party for my old pal, Snowball.”

Then he asked, “Did you get out today?”

“Right before lunch.”

“How was Chapel?”

“Boring.”

“Sure fuckin’ is.”

“How come you weren’t there?”

“I have this job across the field there.”

“Can you get me a job there?”

“I guess. I clean up the killing floor after they slaughter the cows. It’s a cool job.”

“Well, maybe I should see what is going on with probation first.”

“You got probation?”

“You didn’t?”

“Of course not. I ratted my way out. They gave me unsupervised. Just got to get these cards filled out at meetings and show them to some asshole at the town clerk’s office.”

“What? You ratted on someone?”

“Yeah, those bastards had it coming. I was happy to narc on ’em. The investigators even gave me twelve hundred dollars for each dealer busted. That’s why Snake City is so dry. I sort of took down all the big wigs, huh?”

“What ’bout the repercussions?”

“I live for the now.”

A few more men exited the building to smoke, so we both knew we’d better change the subject.

Starting to shake from the cold, looking over his shoulder at the approaching men, Shitake spoke rapidly. “Hey, come to A.A. with me. I got a surprise for you. I just got paid and I’m getting a room for a week at the Oasis Motel. Ten bucks a night. There’s bugs in those rooms, but I can’t argue with the price.”

“I don’t know about the room, but I’ll go to A.A. with you. It will look good to show my probation officer that I’m already trying to find coping mechanisms to avoid further legal complications. Do you have extra cards to sign?”

“Sure do, Snowball.” Shitake laughed out loud. “Boy o’ boy, we’re going to have some fuckin’ fun tonight.”

“At Alcoholics Anonymous?” I sarcastically asked.

“No, not there. Follow me. We’ll tell Old Fat Saint Nick that we’re going to meetings and that I’m not coming back, but you’ll be back around eleven tonight. That is, if you don’t want to stay at the Oasis with me. I’ll sleep on the floor. Not that we’ll be doing much sleeping.”

I could tell by his demeanor that he was using some amphetamine or another, but I was already bored of The Mission and its regulations. I hadn’t been out and about in a long time, and maybe it would be a good idea to go enjoy my freedom. Suck on the marrow, but don’t choke on the bone, I thought. So I said, “Okay, Shitake—lead the way, my man.”

“You’re my hero, Snowball. You saved me. Let me repay the favor,” Shitake explained. “Walk around the side and meet me up front. There’s some people in a beat-up white car that are going our way.”

Shitake darted into the building like a playful squirrel zooming around the yard, up a tree and out of sight. I headed for the wind-protected side of the building to wait for the people “going our way.”

From the corner of the building, I observed the idling car in the parking lot, bellowing smoke into the black, frigid air that was speckled with slowly descending snowflakes. There were two fat people up front: the girl driving, passing over a joint; the boy in the passenger seat, shoving potato chips into his greasy mouth as he tried to grasp the j. Both wore Xmas pajama tops that fit sloppily and loose around their three hundred plus-pound bodies. I could tell they were harmless,

surely duped into a ride by their annoying coworker that worked his magic charm on them. Shitake instinctually had used their sympathy for him against them. That was his only apparent, inherent talent—to con through guilt and pity. It made me wonder if he was going to use me, not that I could imagine anything he could use me for other than protection. Of course, we did have that jailhouse brotherhood, and maybe he felt like I was his big brother or something.

When Shitake jogged toward the car, my worries were thrown on the back burner to stew secretly someplace in the subconscious realm. My need for entertainment and excitement demanded to be fulfilled, and I guess, in a matter of speaking, I was going to use Shitake for this. This hideous self-recognition made me sad and shameful yet did not stop me from going. I have trained myself to recognize strong waves of guilt and immediately associate the erroneous feeling with my Catholic upbringing. This enables me to instantly forgive myself. Forgiveness is an exercise of letting go; I suggest you try forgiving someone or yourself someday. Even if you can't fully do it, the practice will be good for you.

The white car sped through dark, empty city streets, ignoring stop signs and traffic lights. Sitting amongst the debris inside the car, I felt germophobic, trying not to touch anything, sniffing at what wreaked of fast food, gasoline and bologna. What a stench, yet it still could not deter me from seeking the thrill I needed. Not even twenty-four hours after my release back into society, I had this “need,” this itch, and I knew it wasn't good . . . that it would bring me to the Iron Bar Hotel again. In the back of my mind, that was a lie I couldn't not deny. I knew the truth of why I got in that car. I wanted to relapse, and I knew Shitake would take me there.

Merely thinking about using made my body quiver. I could taste the bitter sweetness upon my salivating tongue, tingles up my spine that made my knees weak, some sort of change in my pupils and chemical shift in my frontal cortex. But thoughts about having nothing, being cruelly locked inside a steel and cement box, crept in, diluting the wish to be high. Consequences weighed heavily upon me, and another, different kind of chemical shift emerged in my frontal lobes. It felt like a gentle moonlit tide that lulled my brain, distracting me from the stifling fear

that eventually took me over, gradually drowning me and my decision-making process. Fear was there, and it wouldn't go away for many years. It took a long time to realize that I was conditioned that way. Not only by jail, but by school, church, parents, football, poverty, etc. . . . but for the time being, I suddenly had a strong urge to get out of that damn car.

My first chance came while in the A.A. parking lot. I opened the car door, the wind whooshing without remorse, causing Shitake to ask, "Where you going?" We weren't on the same page.

"What do you mean?" I responded.

"You thought . . ." Shitake laughed, ". . . we were going in there? No way, Snowball. I'm just running in there, getting our cards signed, and then we go to the Oasis."

"Okay. I'll wait in the warm car."

Without hesitation, Shitake ran across the parking lot, the gaunt gusts nearly sweeping him away. While waiting, the two obese people up front occasionally gave each other quirky looks, giggling until looking back at me. Upon viewing my miserable expression, they'd become silent. To pass time, because I knew Shitake was not a focused young man and would take longer than expected, I started to imagine the chubby boy and girl comically crawling under the Christmas tree, shaking presents, gorging themselves on giant candy canes. I too formed a quirky look upon my face, causing me to slightly giggle. Upon noticing them notice me, I erased that look of strange, inexplicable enjoyment. This made me think, What are they imagining about me to make them giggle?

Twenty minutes passed before Shitake skipped back to the car. His mood was ecstatic and buoyant, as though he planned on this being the best night of his short, pathetic life.

"Onward, to the Oasis, my good lady," Shitake yelled to the driver.

*At the Oasis Motel . . .*

Urine-colored stains covered the walls, sink and bathroom. There was a lingering rank fragrance so I used my eyes to search for the source of the odor. I noticed damp, black mold was accumulating in every corner. Sprawled in the middle of the room was a limp mattress with no

box spring for support. The mattress and pillows were bare, decorated with sporadic yellow spots; the blankets and pillowcases were folded and stored on a metal shelf. Fumes of heat rattled out of the furnace, which seemed to be the source of the horrible smell, as if there were a dead rat rotting inside. However, the rattling furnace warmed our extremities and subdued the pangs throbbing inside my bones. I peered out the small window the size of a porthole on a cruise ship, only able to view blackness with occasional white flakes and distant headlights zip-ping horizontally by. Air got caught in my throat, my heart momentarily skipped, because of the intuition of being ensnared. I felt claustrophobic, nervous, anxious. It was reminiscent of being in jail. So I stayed close to the door, the only readily available exit. I felt calmer near a quick escape, but I knew the walk back to The Mission through the unrelenting Kansas cold would be downright dreadful. Hell, I probably wouldn't survive it. Nature was a determining factor in my decision to stay, and once again, I had indisputable evidence that I had no control.

With a solid plop, the fat boy landed on the mattress. It would be too much physical exertion to lower himself gently. Truthfully, I've allowed myself to get to that point a few times in my life. The large boy was sprawled out, leaving no room for anyone else, so the girl sat on the sticky, crumb-covered carpet while Shitake and I remained standing. We watched as the round boy pulled out a crack pipe, pusher, syringes, a spoon, cotton swabs, and a squished Twinkie from his *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* pajama pants pockets. Shitake threw a baggie of crack rocks onto the pile, causing an instant temperature rise in my forehead. It was not my drug of choice, but a drug just the same. Temptation made me squirm inside, my stomach twisting as my mind tried to replicate the feeling of being high, and not liking what it produced. But, having only an eighty one-day hiatus from my unyielding poison consumption, my impulse switch was easily turned off. Jail, though providing all the time in the world, never taught me how to cope with these symptoms of addiction. Want and desire were pushed back behind reason, so I knew I was not going to shoot up, but I assuredly would not turn down a free blow—though I knew shame would follow—on that glass dick.

With a devilish smile, Shitake joyfully asked, “Who wants the pipe, and who wants the needle?”



The girl and boy grabbed syringes. Shitake followed suit.

“Just give me the pipe,” I said.

Shitake seemed disappointed with my choice but exclaimed, “Snowball just got out, so he probably wants to take it easy. He’s on paper now.” He then broke off a piece of rock, placing it carefully atop the pipe before delicately passing it over to me.

Sweat beads forming, the boy and girl stared impatiently at me because they knew Shitake had paid for the party and wanted his dear friend Snowball to go first.

“Don’t wait for me, guys,” I blurted. “You guys can go first.”

They shrugged their shoulders and without hesitation went at it, filling their spoons with crushed crack, purifying it with vinegar, soaking up the concoction with cotton swabs, finally pulling the liquid from the cotton into the syringes. Veins were found, blood drawn, and the plungers dropped. The three sat pie-eyed, mouths open, moaning with a mixture of pain and pleasure, trying to stand up, but not able to. I wanted to cry for them and, conversely, to join them. I desperately wanted an escape from my dire disposition, too. I just didn’t want to do it that way.

Throughout the next hour or so, Shitake tried convincing me to “go to orbit,” but I found it hard to put my lips around that nasty, black, tarred-up glass dick. Long-suffering, I watched as they shot up three times, changing for the worse with every stick. The big boy began searching the carpet for imaginary crack rocks. Crackheads call this carpet surfing. He would find a crumb, maybe a piece of popcorn or something, seriously studying it until he realized it was not what he was looking for. A few times, the boy actually grabbed the pipe from me, igniting some of those mystery crumbs, coughing and spitting from the repugnant taste. The fat boy’s desperate search made no sense to me, because there was still a considerable pile of rocks left on the bed. He would then hand the pipe back to me as if it was mine to hold—my responsibility, my destiny.

Since their first shots, the petite Shitake and the large girl hadn’t taken their hands off each other. Kissing quickly escalated to groping as they injected more cocaine into their systems. Eventually they disappeared into the bathroom together.

There I was, crack pipe in one hand, some unknown fat dude crawling around on the ground looking for invisible drugs, and a tiny Puerto Rican bastard fucking a mammoth woman in a minuscule motel bathroom. I asked myself, Will I be like them soon? My hands began to shake. I wanted to forget about everything—past, present and future—and I knew it would only take one hit off that glass pipe to at least forget about the present. With desperation and despair, I pushed the filter to the other end of the pipe, collecting all the resin within the stem. Then I carefully put the rock on top and sparked the flame of my lighter. I twisted and rotated the pipe with my fingertips, held the flame close enough to melt the crack, which began crackling. Smoke filled the pipe, and I started to gently inhale. But I stopped. I don't know why, but I stopped.

My whole body shuddered with self-hatred. I couldn't believe I was about ready to throw away my second chance. I had already proven to myself that drugs could not help me obtain enlightenment, excess did not lead to clarity, self-medication could not cure my eccentricities and insecurities, and the scene was not the experience that should drive my curiosity. My resolve was fortified as my mind suddenly grasped that the consequences of my drug use would not end until I ended the use of the drug.

My aura shined bright white. My resolution and the triumph over this particular demon made me smile. I could finally work on the other demons that haunted me, such as alcohol ... or cheese, my original addiction. All other addictions were to appease that original one. I thought, I better get the hell out of here. I don't belong here. Not anymore. This place is not for me.

I asked, "Hey, Big Boy, you think I could get a ride back to The Mission?" He simply stared at me stupidly and did not respond. He had remained mute throughout the night, and I should not have expected him to speak then.

I decided to wait for Shitake and the girl to finish in the bathroom; then I would pleasantly ask them to take me back to The Mission. I could hear them in the bathroom. The mental picture, which I could not help myself from producing, made me cringe. It was difficult not to vomit in disgust.

I cupped my hands over my ears, but I could still hear them.

It was when I heard Shitake fart that I couldn't take it anymore. His boisterous laugh made me want to knock him out. Naked, the fat girl ran screaming into the room. She hid behind the fat boy on the bare mattress.

She screamed, "You son-of-bitch! Why would you do that when I'm sucking your dick?! You're fucking disgusting!"

Shitake exited the bathroom, a sadistic smile on his satisfied face, his shirt on and pants off, sporting an unimpressive erection. "Come back in here and finish the job, you fat, ugly bitch."

"Why should I?" the fat girl wanted to know.

"Because I'll cut you off. No more crack for Miss Piggy. Now get over here and suck my dick, bitch."

To my utter surprise, she walked over to him with her head down, sobbing so hard that her spit and tears intertwined, covering her face with a translucent mucus. Shitake viciously grabbed her by the hair, dragging her to the bathroom, demanding her to "suck my dick you Pillsbury, bloated whore."

RED . . . I saw red.

I stood up and headed straight for the exit. I turned the handle yet hesitated. Growing up, I had been accustomed to walking away, but I couldn't do that in jail. I learned to deal with problems face-to-face. (It is true, there are life lessons to be learned behind bars.) I knew what I had to do, so I turned around and marched toward the bathroom. Peering inside, I saw the girl on her knees. Shitake had a fist up in the air, waiting to punch her in the face as soon as he came. But it wasn't the girl who was punched.

Shitake saw me approaching. He said, "Snowball gets his knob polished next, you stinking whore."

At the conclusion of his sentence, my fist hit him in the mouth. I could tell by the way his jaw caved in that I jarred a few of his teeth loose, maybe broke his mandible. Unconscious, his body involuntarily trembling, Shitake lay there bleeding profusely from a split lip and whatever damage was inside his mouth. I found no sympathy for him.

This was the only time I've ever hit another human being.

The girl looked at me amazed yet quickly forgot about it, going straight for the remainder of the crack rock. As I had earlier, she too wanted to forget about her past, present and future.

Before leaving, I looked back at the boy carpet surfing, then at the naked girl already preparing her next fix. I found a special place in my heart for *all* of humanity, though merely on existentialist terms. The absurdity of it all made me shake my head with disbelief yet acceptance. Then I turned my back on the scene. I thought, Only to a few, maybe a mother or father, did these people matter. But to the rest of us, they were lost and forgotten, and we had no time to waste on them.

When I was a few hundred yards down the road, I looked back at the Oasis. Within the darkness was an island of surreal lights and misty winter windows. A false lighthouse in the darkness, I realized.

My anger (and ugly jacket) kept me warm enough to stay alive as I walked to The Mission. It was two miles through frigid temperatures, but I made it back before my eleven o'clock curfew.