

## GREAT REMEDIES

It was a quarter past the new day. Night was being tucked in by an air of impending snow. Remy, unprepared for the cold, snuggled into his coat, leaned up against the side of his truck, and waited for the Foxy Tail to close. The manager was running late. Last week, when he cased the joint, the guy was out the door by midnight on the dot. The burglary would be a subtle affair.

He had told his voice, in and out. The riches were on the walls: Welch, both Hepburns, Monroe, Loren. Artsy autographed cursive, various colors of pen, adulterated curlicues and besotted dots. It was Brigitte Bardot for him. She glowed against the grimy, maroon bar wall, frozen in sultriness. He had decided not to sell her away. She reminded him of *her*.

His getaway truck was a beat-up old thing. A Ford with two dents on each door, as if hugged tightly by a giant. It was his father's, that monster of a man. The driver's side was open a sliver and the interior light cast a warm yellow glow. Remy pined for the inner light. A fine snow began to fall, waltzing toward the pavement. Remy looked up and opened his mouth for a taste. The Foxy Tail's manager walked out looking a little murky—a few more shots perhaps than normal. With a wobbly tug of a cord, he turned off the neon sign then patted his coat. Remy crouched behind the car and peered over the hood. His eyes were as gray as the slush. He worried the manager would notice the clouds emanating from Remy's lungs, so Remy took a deep breath, tightened up, waited. The manager drew a Lucky Strike from his puffy coat and lit it with the strike of a match, adding another five minutes to the whole affair, surely.

*Shit.* A bone cross that hung from Remy's neck ticked then tocked. He took it in his hand to stop it from swaying, and examined it like he hadn't in a while. The bones were thin and delicate. The cross was a spine tied to a femur. Snow was melting into it. *Remy, you can't hold your breath that long, mon frere. He's coming*

*for you. Kill him.* The headvoice, as Remy called it, was squelchy, harsh, like a fire from someone's throat.

Remy slowly exhaled, hoping the heavying snowfall would occlude his breath dying into the night.

"Quiet," Remy told the headvoice.

*Aux grands maux, les grands remèdes.*

"Please."

*To the great evils, Remy...*

"He won't approach. He won't."

*There are great remedies.*

He crouched. Allowed his ears to do the reconnaissance. Behind his truck a picture formed: A half-paunchy manager, drunk, bumbling his feet across a wet, rotted porch. *Where is he going?* The manager's heeled boots against the hollow wooden terrace made clear, rhythmic knocking sounds with every step, like native drums. Then a new sound pierced Remy's ears: Crunching snow. He was approaching in fact, much to Remy's chagrin. *He's coming for you.*

Remy denied himself a looksee, until, that is, he realized the space between the ground and the bottom of his car had an ideal view that would keep him hidden. He laid out onto the snow like he was prepping for a pushup, and peered through the bottom to see where those boots were. They shuffled across the snow-dusted parking lot, kicking up specks that seemed to float for a moment before falling back to earth. The boots stopped, pointed one way, then shifted toward another in a lost manner.

*He doesn't know where he is parked.*

The boots ambled quickly toward Remy, and his heart gave pause. He rose slightly, knees holding his weight, and clenched his fist.

*One in the head, Remy. Hard. Then one more to make sure he's out. Drag him to his car, toss him in, throw away the keys. No. Take the keys. We won't have to break into the bar then, no?*

The manager stumbled a couple more steps toward Remy before the pavement got the best of him. His back cracked against the cold asphalt just a few yards from Remy's truck. He cursed and propped himself sideways, flicked the mop of his hair to one side so he could see, then trickled out a chuckle at the comical way he had fallen.

*NOW!*

Before the man could turn, Remy kned him in the head. Devastatingly so. He thought he cracked his skull, just by the sound of it, like an egg against a bowl. The bluntness caused his leg to weaken and slip on the slush. He fell backward at the same time the manager's head met the hard ground. They were eye to eye. The snow cascading through the indigo air seemed to mollify the violence, but it was there. It was undeniable.

The bone cross was splayed on the ground.

*One more to make sure he's out, I said.*

Remy peered into the man's eyes for twitchiness, for an awareness of light or life. He seemed to be out cold—as cold as the asphalt. Blood began seeping from the man's ears, slow like lava. Remy peered into his eyes. His dark pupils engulfed the retinal greenness. Then, darkness.

"Is he dead?" Remy asked.

*One more.*

"No."

*You thought the same thing about me, mon frere.*

Remy's breathing slackened. He raised himself, hand to knee, before peering into the man's eyes. He dabbed at the blood-sopped snow with his light gray gloves. They were thick and made his palms muggy. He removed one and dipped in again, penetrating the manager's ear this time, digging deeper for darker and more telling blood. He slipped his glove back on.

*Drag him to his car, throw him in, then take the keys. Don't dawdle.*

"He's not dead."

*Il est mort, Remy.*

"No."

*Happened just like this, Remy, you know? Except your knee was spindly then. You recall? I mewed. I whimpered. But you kept bashing. Chopping until the log split. Over and over until I mewed no more. Until my gray head was a melon for dessert. Until my blood was your finger paint.*

*Over and—*

"Arret!"

Remy boxed his head. Then again. And then again. Until he saw pricks of blue dancing with the snowfall. He spat out the memory. Walked over to the manager and brusquely hooked his arms around the shoulders and hoisted him up. He looked around for a car. The parking lot was empty save for Remy's red truck, its interior still glowing from the opened door, but dimming, just like his soul. Remy walked backward toward the side of the building with the unconscious man's feet dragging against the snow, creating shaky lines.

It was a full whiteout now. Remy thought he heard thunder rolling in from the pines behind the billboard for a local dentist. The night had closed in on itself, capturing this frenzied moment, this snow globe of quick-pooling blood, remorse, and white falling freckles. There was the thunder again. Remy turned the corner of the Foxy Tail dragging the limp manager. He laid him against a cold green metal dumpster then rested his arm over the side, catching his breath.

*Take the keys, Remy. Don't dawdle.*

He opened the man's coat and took his keys, the pack of Lucky Strikes followed. He tiptoed toward the entrance. He started flipping through the keys. *Try the door.* Locked. He feared the angelic portraits had locked him out for what he had done.

One of the keys had a red rubber covering on its head. He inserted it into the keyhole with a satisfying click and turned the lock. *Open sesame.* He bee lined it to Ms. Bardot. Her top lip slightly coaxed upward almost made Remy lean in for a kiss. He

was about to pick it off the wall when he heard thunder again from right outside the parking lot. Then lightning. Piercing the darkness that seemed to surprise even the empty barroom. But it was neither of those things.

The intruding car was a junky old thing, a relic from an earlier century. With a thunderous muffler, it pulled right up to the front. The high beams shot through the dusty bar's windows. Remy squinted. Startled, he ran to the register and grabbed what he could, stuffed his pockets and coat, his hands holding their own. As the door creaked open, he high-tailed it to the back and into the men's room.

"Tate?" A woman's voice echoed through the empty bar space. Her timbre straddled anxiety and exhilaration. Remy felt his chest crystallize. He sidestepped to the furthest corner of the restroom, like a fox surrounded by hounds. A single fluorescent light flickered to the rate of his heartbeat.

*No. Get behind the door. If she enters you can jump her from behind. Tie her up.*

"But my face."

*Et?*

"It's not covered."

*Then blind her.*

He was a toe into hyperventilating. He quickly rolled out a few feet of toilet paper and mummified his head—a makeshift mask. He tore three holes for eyes and a mouth then hid behind the door and waited.

"Tate? You better not be slumped over that toilet again." The woman's voice grew in volume and anger. Remy reached over the door and felt the wall frantically for a switch, the facemask blocked his peripheral lines. *You are without sight with this silly sort, mon frere. Blind her and be done.* He shut off the light, hoping for some miraculous reason that if she were to see the men's room dark, she would not enter. He heard her walk past him and toward the back wall where an exit sign lit a narrow

entryway. He crept toward the bathroom door and nudged it open, wincing at the creak it made. Through his paper peepholes he saw a thin figure cut a hard left into what he mused to be the office, perhaps with a private bathroom.

"This is my chance."

*We can't let her go. She will call the police if she finds him outside.*

"And?"

*And they will come for you.*

"I'm leaving."

*A mistake. A mistake, you know.*

"I will remove my mask so to not frighten her."

*This is no mask. This is a farce.*

Remy broke from the bathroom and walked briskly toward the front entrance, the bone cross danced with each stride. *Run, you fool.* But part of him felt he should stay. An inexplicable warmth drew him to her. More palpable than any portrait. He had been alone for so long—an unlit votive candle amongst a rack full of light, melting sorrows and empty prayer. But this woman, perhaps any woman, her slender nature, her vulnerable voice, evoked something he hadn't felt since the night he was spurned. The night he had lost the hope of love and had taken the hope of life.

*They get what they deserve, don't they, Remy?*

His cross was fabricated from a feline. Ten years since, at the age of seventeen near a creek that ran adjacent to her farmhouse he'd visit on nights when he felt alone and beaten by this young, new world of his. Naturally, it was a girl he courted. Angela her name. She'd sit out on her porch after a rain and read by oil lamp light. An oversized rattan chair hugged her reposed body as she flipped through poems. Remy startled her when he approached. She startled him when she refused his proposal—shook her head in a veiled disgust that cemented itself in his soul.

After she spurned him, he ran to the creek. His heart stripped away, petal by petal. He grew rancorous. A gray feline,

Angela's, was mewling for a morsel of food, but to Remy it sounded as though it were laughing at him, at his inadequacy. He called the thing over from the creek's edge. As it pressed against his leg in a relaxed, almost relieved push, he grabbed it by its hindquarters and did what he never thought he could. That's when it all changed.

"Hey! You!" The woman called out, startled. Which, of course, startled Remy even more. He felt a pellet of urine escape from himself, his back tightened and he thought he'd keel over. "What are you doing?"

Remy became a statue. He was inches from the door. He could've made it. Run to his car and never looked back. But he turned, stonily, to face the woman, and all the women on the walls behind her. He stepped into the light. Her eyes widened as she came to a realization. His tissue paper-covered head made him ghoulish, the uneven slits cut for eyes exacerbated his murderous mien. She took a step back and made a very unpleasant pleading whimper, "No."

Remy stepped forward with a hand up, as though easing a wild horse. But she bolted nonetheless, toward the narrow entryway with the lit exit sign.

Remy sprinted for her. He had always been fast. Children would call him *écureuil*. Squirrel. It was his only way to escape Papa at night. He had always thought that he had two residences; his small terrifying home off a dusty road, and the night, *his* night, which had no roads at all and all roads at once.

The night was where he thought he belonged. He wouldn't even return home for days at a time, but rather roused beneath the stars, lying on wet grass in the field beside Angela's house, hoping she'd join him with her oil lamp, her anthologies. They'd read until sunup. But the sun was far behind the curtain of earth at the moment.

He ran into the back office and found her behind a chair. She had a stapler in her hand and threw it with vigor. It met

Remy's forehead with a square knock. He wouldn't feel the sting until much later. He grabbed the chair, but she held it firm, her sole protection. It shook between them.

*We can't let her go. She will call the police if she finds the man outside.*

"Please... Please, I am not going to hurt you." He tried stilling his voice, flattening the sound to a whisper, but his blood throbbed, some seeping through the toilet paper on his forehead. He ripped off his mask. "I thought you were someone else. Please. Please. Calm down."

From its wide-eyed terror, her face scrunched to a furrow, and she loosened her grip on the chair. The room was ringing with tension. The only light beaming into the tiny office was a blood-red glow from the exit sign. It illuminated half of her milky face, and Remy couldn't help but stare at her slightly opened mouth.

"I... I was to play a joke on a friend, but he never showed up."

"Who? Tate?"

"I do not know. Know this Tate. No, no, a friend here at the bar. He never showed up. Please, let go of the chair. This was just a, em, a farce. You see?" He offered the shredded toilet paper to her. "I didn't mean to scare you." Remy could have grappled the chair away in a blink, but allowed the tension to fall giving the woman an unsteady reassurance of safety. "Please. You scared me more."

She released the chair legs but stood still and defensive. She nervously folded a strand of her hair over her ear and released a soft sigh. Her body was shaking. Remy wanted to hug her.

"But the bar is closed," she said.

"Yes, I was waiting for... a long time."

Remy noticed the turn in her face, in her voice, a shift to believing his tale. Her eyes opened from their skeptical

narrowness. Remy yearned to notice their color, but the room was still very dark and very red. She put both her hands on her forehead, pulling the skin back from her temples to further widen her eyes upward. Her beauty uncompromised.

“You know, Halloween was two months ago. Man, I need a cigarette,” she said walking toward Remy in relief, like a friend would after you hadn’t seen her in a while and divulged an open secret. Remy reached into his pockets, felt through the wads of cash he had just stolen, and found the pack of Lucky Strikes.

“Yes.”

The snow had stopped, though the air remained full and dark and glittery. Remy withdrew two cigarettes and handed the woman one. He lit hers then his, and tossed the match after three shakes. She took a deep pull, filling her lungs to ease her nerves.

“My brother smokes the same brand,” she said after exhaling.

Remy cleared his throat and flicked a fingernail’s worth of ash onto the wooden terrace.

“Hm,” he said, looking at his shoes.

“I was supposed to pick him up. You see him anywhere? He’s the manager.”

“No,” Remy said. He shifted from leg to leg, dabbed at the stapler-wound on his head with the back of his hand, and took a quick puff. “Maybe he leave early.”

“Sorry about that,” the woman said, addressing the cut she had caused.

“This is nothing.”

“He should never have leant his car to that whore. All she does is leech.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen him.”

“But I haven’t even told you what he looks like.”

Remy’s heart murmured. The bone cross jostled through. *Blind her, Remy. You must. This has devolved, mon frere.* Remy twitched

his head, kicking away the headvoice. The woman noticed, but kept it to herself.

“What’s your name?” She asked.

*Don’t!*

“Remy. And you are?”

“Angela.”

*Help us all.*

Remy’s thighs weakened. His stomach lost the feeling of gravity, and a gurgle came from his innards. He did not extend his hand, he did not turn and nod. He just raised his cigarette to his mouth, took an earnest drag, and dropped the remainder onto the snowy wooden terrace, “This is a very pretty name.”

“Thank you,” she said. “So, are you, like, French?”

“Oui.”

Angela laughed, lightly, through her teeth, smoke escaping from the space between her luxuriant lips. Her smile made Remy fall in deep. A well of light and warmth.

And so it came. From somewhere inside. Another headvoice. Something new. One that made him want to cry with an overbearing love he knew needed a taker.

*Remy, she likes you I think! You are a lucky man, je pense.* It was high and clear, as though it came from the very edges of the earth’s stratosphere. It sounded much like that of Ms. Bardot on wings of eagles. He loved it, Remy did. But then, an interruption, deep in the recesses: *This has devolved, mon frere. Something must be done. Take her throat into your hands. They require a tightening.*

An unyielding nausea or light headedness, Remy believed, arrived on darts. All the while, Angela was finishing her cigarette looking for something to say.

*Say something to her, Remy. You are smart enough to say, well I don’t know, something about her eyes? Her lips? Something! Something wondrous!*

But before Remy could say another word, Angela bent down and inserted the Lucky Strike into the soft new snow. It

hissed out with a wisp and a curl up her hand. She shot straight back up and hugged herself for warmth.

“Ok, I’m officially worried,” she said looking around the empty parking lot, dancing away the cold. “Am I overreacting? He says I do that sometimes. I can’t change, I tell him.”

“This may be.” And yet today was Remy’s day for change.

“He would’ve called, right?”

*Remy, take her hand! She is not wearing gloves. Warm them with your breath, yes?*

*Take her, mon frere. Turn the valve of life over now before we are caught and left to rot, no?*

Remy took Angela’s hand. He was shaking, but not from the cold.

*Yes!*

*No.*

He brought her hand up to his mouth. “You are without gloves. Please. Take mine.”

Remy removed his woolen gloves and slid them over Angela’s hands. Her eyes widened for a moment, then they turned to Remy, smiling in a burst of warmth. But they turned back to the gloves then. Something was splotted on the fiber. She squinted.

“What is that?” Angela peered into the wool of the glove’s left index finger. “Blood?”

*Now what are you going to do you mangle?*

*Remy! Kiss her. She’ll forget everything with a soft touch, a prolonged tryst. Kiss this beautiful woman!*

“That’s not from your head is it?” Angela asked.

Remy, burdened by the angst and the voices and the love, muttered out a yes. When, in fact, it was a long way off from his head. No, the blood that perplexed this angel was that of her brother’s. The man that may or may not be fighting for his life fifty yards away, behind a green dumpster quietly fattening with snow.

“There’s a first-aid kit in the office.” And that was when it hit her. The revelation that neither of them knew was coming, until it arrived fully formed, heavily throated for a beguiling, like the opening scene of an opera. Her eyes furrowed and she said, “Wait.”

*Kill her.*

“Why do you have Tate’s keys?” She asked.

*Kiss her!*

There came a susurrations from the side of the Foxy Tail as though someone was rousing from a great long sleep. Angela had not yet heard the scraping of shoe and metal and snow near the green dumpster, but to Remy the sound had been going on in his head for a decade.

*You should have run, mon frere. You should have run. Now you are cornered like a fox.*

*You are no prisoner Remy, except to her love!*

Remy scratched behind his ear—an attempt to shake out a subterfuge for her. Confuse her, perhaps, leaving enough time to run away, never look back at her oval face again; or softly kiss her neck and make her forget about all the noise that there ever was in this world. Sadly, none of that was tipping over, just an inescapable anxiety that made his stomach hurt and his head buzz. It was then that he looked at her. Deep into her. Saw the snow dancing against her eyes, the light shimmering around her. There was a moment he thought he could go in, move toward her lips, even with Tate fumbling about, but it was cut short. It stilled itself before it gained any true fruition. And he sighed.

She ran toward the noise, saying “My god, Tate?” Remy hunkered down, he deepened his now-throbbing head. He knew it was done. He turned to his truck and felt himself dissolve into a ghost.

*Finit, mon frere. Never look back. Drive away, with only a head wound. This is fine.*

But she called to Remy then. In her heartbreakingly distraught voice, she asked for his help. Her brother was just too limp and too heavy to be carried off alone. She needed him. Perhaps even wanted him. Perhaps even more.

*You run to this woman, Remy! You run in this grand moment in time. You run with all the love you've contained. Soon you will fly.*

So Remy ran. He was always fast. Like a squirrel. But tonight he was lightning. The bone cross jangled about his warming chest. He snapped it off his neck and threw it like a disc toward his car. It was one last thrust of violence in his life. But for good. It flew in the night like a falling star and he didn't care where it landed. The inner light of his truck now seemed to be glowing brighter than ever before.

*Soon you will fly.*