

Red & Rust

Prose — Alexander Rainier

He was late to his daughter's volleyball game. He knew this. There was no need to check his watch or phone for the time. Somehow he knew this meeting went on much longer than planned. They never went long in the first place. His boss always liked a brief meeting. He needed to leave now, he knew how upset his daughter would be if he missed it. His boss was preoccupied anyways. But he lingered there for some time before finally leaving.

He slipped into the elevator, staring at the point where the doors met the floor. It had been a long day for Joe. Stressful beyond belief. Had to come in on a Saturday of all days. Him and his team to work on God knows what. He was not even sure what his job was anymore. Day in and day out. Coffee and a dry ass bagel before crawling to his car. Sitting in that car for years before finally getting to the building. Sliding through the front doors like slime before he took the elevator up, up, up. A general disgust as more and more people filed into the elevator as he went. More and more miserable faces taking up his space when all he wants is one trip up or down alone to breath.

The elevator doors open and Joe heard a gasp. Joe spotted the man's wrinkled and year-torn shoes before he looked up. David Bauer. Ex-drinking buddy, easily startled, and one of MaryJane's favorites. Used to be, however.

"Off to the game," Joe said with a cracked smile. He was feeling light-headed.

Their daughters go to school together. His never made the volleyball team. The doors closed without Bauer moving an inch. He dropped, falling to his knees and grasping at the elevator door. He rested his head there for a moment. It had been a long day for Joe.

It was close to six. He needed to be there twenty minutes ago, but his boss kept talking. Joe was suppose to stay until much later in the day. Eight o'clock if he was lucky. Nine if she was in a good mood. But, Mary-Jane was surprisingly open. Her red lipstick, the same shade Joe's wife loved to wear on dinner nights with the neighbors. Rosewood, maybe. Or was it rosy? That deep red smiled as Joe walked in, the way it always smiled when disruptions come knocking. She was in the middle of filing. Mary-Jane was organized like that. Kept the place running smoothly thanks to it. Or, so she claimed.

Joe could not remember if she offered a seat. She never did so

outright. She wanted to make sure the conversation was a long one before she offered anything. It was a long conversation, so he had to have sat down. Right? But it has been a stressful day for Joe. Five days of work only for a sixth to be tacked on right before he hit the button for the elevator. Those red lips loved to tack sixth days onto the weeks right before you call the elevator.

Joe's heels echoed through the lobby with a sort of emptiness to them. It feels like one can always tell if a building is empty just from the lobby. Not closed, but *empty*. Devoid of life. A hollow echo. Joe pushed the glass doors open, hand pressed up against the glass and leaving a distinguishable mark. Someone, Joe did not know who, would have to clean that up later. He did not really feel sorry for them. They needed to wash the doors anyways. What was a little slip up every now and again? Besides, window cleaning must be an easy job compared to the hell he has to go through every weekday.

He slipped into his car and tossed what he had in his hand to the passenger side. The inside was roasting and so was he. It was that time again; cold as hell when you get to work, hot as hell when you leave. And it was always cold in the building as if the owners could barely spare a few extra dollars to keep the place at a decent temperature thought the day. Normally he would throw the coat on and off throughout the day because no one seemed to care about a constant and comfortable temperature. Today, however, he suffered through. He folded up his jacket and tucked it away at his cubicle, putting it on again when he wanted to talk to Mary-Jane. He knew it would send the right message. Joe was boiling in his skin. Granted, it was much better than when he first stepped in, but he was still sweating. The car began to stink as well, but he refused to crack open a window. He suffered through it.

It was a twenty minute drive and he had been driving for about five of them before he reached some traffic. The music on the radio cut out in favor of an announcer's voice depicting grave news. Joe got into the left turn lane and managed to slip to the very front before needing to stop. He was lucky enough to need to take a left. The lanes in front and behind were clogged with angry and depressed drivers trying to get home for a beer. Maybe a car crash ahead.

"... If you are on the roads, keep a look out for a silver Toyota Camry and a man inside with..."

The light turned green and he crept into the intersection, waiting for an opening. The truck in the opposite turn lane did the same and the two drivers made eye contact for a moment. At first the opposing driver looked away, before his eyes shot back, and then to the radio. As soon as the light turned red Joe sped out of the intersection where

the road was much more open and Joe began to speed. He wished his manager had not talked for so long. Those fucking, red lips going on and on about his conduct and attitude. The ignoring whenever anyone said good morning. The upturned nose at bad (and sometimes good) comments during meetings.

Joe's hands continued to ice the whole conversation as he stood there like a brick. She never offered for him to sit down. Now he remembered that. She was too busy talking about him. His work ethic. That was why she called him in today. He had apparently been falling behind because he was "far too overqualified for this shit". She just kept talking and talking. Those red, fucking lips kept moving and moving, never stopping or turning around just enough.

Until they did. Until they turned so their back was to Joe. Joe revealed the rusty and weather-worn ax from his jacket and swung it in a single movement over the low backed chair. And then he did it again. And again. Those red lips did not scream, although Joe wished they did. Blood splattered his face and his coat. The walls and desk and filing cabinets dripped with that sanguine fluid.

Joe finally reached the gym that seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. He grabbed the ax from the passenger's seat and stumbled in. As he stepped in he could hear gasps around him and sirens behind him. He hurried a little, finally gaining the urgency he needed all along to burst through the gymnasium doors to a delayed but expressive bout of gasps and screams. The volley ball slapped the hardwood flooring as Joe stared straight ahead at his wife at the top of the bleachers. She was horrified. His daughter sat on the sidelines in front of him and screamed when she saw him. She was crying as the police burst through the doors and lifted their guns yelling what they always do. Joe lifted his hands above his head, the bloody ax dropping to the floor beside him. Joe's knees hit the floor about the same time the ax did and the police apprehended him, shaking him and dragging him out of the place in handcuffs.