

Meow at the Dog

I nudged the guestroom door open and braced myself in the jamb, scared to set my right foot down and worried about the strain of keeping it up.

The whoosh of the door startled dust into beams of sunlight that seeped through the blinds. Our best efforts for a comfortable guest layover had succumbed to amateur-level hoarding. The bed was piled with clothes we'd lost track of somewhere between the master closet and Goodwill. Boxes of keepsakes hugged the walls. Idle sports equipment and artwork we'd changed our minds about crowded a sanctuary vibe deep into the corners.

What I looked for failed to greet me at the door. I swung to the bed on one leg and landed with a whimper in a nest of coats we'd collected on unexpectedly cold trips north and forgotten to pack again each time we'd gone back. From there, I peered hard in every direction to sort the tangible from the shadows.

Yesterday, I had gone to the gym for the first time in three months and tried to pick up where I'd left off. High-volt pain had shot from my navel to my right nut, and a lump had mushroomed low on my abdomen. I'd taken it easy today then stood up from the sofa and been racked with pain in the pit of my groin when I put weight on my right foot. By limps and staggers, I had reached the guestroom in search of Franco's crutches from a skateboarding stunt some years earlier. Instead, I curled into my pain and gently wormed higher onto the bed in a fetal position. I dozed off before Franco came home.

"What are you doing in here?"

I jerked awake and wearily described my pain.

"That doesn't sound like a hernia," he insisted. "You wouldn't feel it in your leg."

“I feel it when I put weight on my leg,” I explained, “but it’s not my leg where I feel it. Do we still have those crutches?”

Franco exhumed them from a thicket of skis and vacuum attachments behind the door then helped me sit up on the edge of the bed. He was still sweating after a five-mile run, and his musk disoriented me as I stood into his arms. He hung me over the crutches, nothing of passion or even sympathy in the way he handled me.

He said, “I called Aspen,” then left me like a scarecrow in a field.

“And?”

“He might be your half-brother,” Franco said, “but Aspen’s a Wayne through and through.”

He stripped down in the Jack-and-Jill bathroom that connected to the bedroom we used as the master. I ditched one of the crutches then hobbled in after him and argued Aspen wasn’t to blame. Franco turned the shower on and made his case as the water warmed up.

“Every time your dad can’t keep straight which of you’s Buff Wayne and which of you’s Aspen Wayne, it costs us. More and more every time, it costs us. Did you hear Aspen bought a condo in Key Biscayne? Here we’re barely getting by...”

“We’re fine.”

“...paying rent in Coral Gables, and your little brother who’s only a few years out of high school...”

I reminded him what the doctor said. “The best we can do when Dad mixes things up is go along with it. There’s no good to come of correcting him.”

“Good?” roared Franco. “What’s good about the great Curtis Wayne telling in interviews how his boy Aspen used to put on plays with the neighborhood kids growing up? How his boy

Aspen's a natural-born actor? The best of his generation, your dad said. Got acting in his blood. Everything nice the old buzzard's ever said about this mean world is you, baby, *Buff* Wayne. Now, his brain's fooled his mouth into saying Aspen, who he never cared a..."

"That's enough!"

Franco escaped to the shower, but I threw the curtain back.

"This isn't Aspen's fault. Dad's either, and nobody's going to start correcting how he remembers things. It just upsets him."

Water ricocheted onto me from Franco's neck and chest. Rivulets traced well-muscled mounds and sinewed ridges then pooled and sloshed, satisfied, down the drain between his feet. I let my gaze off its leash, and Franco swiped the plastic curtain closed with a zing.

"It's settled." I swatted the curtain to show how easily I could come through it. "We've all agreed Dad won't do another interview, but nobody's going to correct how he tells things around family. Now, drop it!"

The master bedroom at the back of the house was always dark – lights on or off – but my shadow tracked me in the shimmer of mirrors, gilding, and satin. Franco had taken a firm hand decorating and claimed Elizabeth Taylor for his muse. He'd packed big Hollywood glamour into 300 square feet, and we'd lived ever since like baubles in a little girl's jewelry box.

I took my shirt off then opened the front of my jeans and dipped inside to hold what hurt. With my free hand, I braced against our bed and lunged – slow and shallow – to the left. Resistance ached from my right ankle to high up my thigh. After a few minutes, I leaned carefully farther and planted my palm in plush white carpet for balance. My hamstrings began to twitch. I held the position and breathed deeply.

"Do you need me?"

Franco dried off with a towel at the bathroom sink. I hadn't heard the shower turn off, but I couldn't hear it still running either.

I shook my head. "This might be helping."

"That's not how hernias work," he said.

He tied the towel around himself and got busy from the waist up. Moisturizers. Scents. Sunscreen, even though clouds overhung the day. I edged upright again on one leg and a crutch and caught Franco caring about me through the mirror.

"Did you put the decorations up?"

"I tried."

"You tried or you did? Balloons and streamers aren't much to ask, Buff."

"I did it."

"I'm sorry you had to decorate your own party," he said, "but since you've been laid up I've had to..."

"It wasn't a problem," I interrupted, strong voice, careful tone. "And I didn't mind decorating my own party."

Franco rubbed lotion into his shoulder and trained a reproachful glare on me.

"An hour from now, everybody will have forgotten it's your party anyway."

"That's fine," I said.

"An hour from now," he repeated with an edge, "it'll be Aspen everybody's congratulating."

"Good for Aspen," I said. "If there's anything to congratulate."

Franco brought his body into the master but stored his attention in a drawer of designer underwear.

“Why wouldn’t there be?” he asked. “You said the audition went well. Playing Brick Pollitt onstage is your birthright.”

“Being born doesn’t give me special rights.”

Franco slammed the drawer closed and dropped his towel.

“Spare me how much you don’t care about your advantages.”

He stepped into a pair of white briefs and took his time straightening the elastic band and tucking the leg holes into place at the top of his thighs.

“Saying you don’t care about your advantages only proves you’ve got them.”

He threw footsteps like direction was dumb luck, but he wound up at me. He snatched my crutch and sat me on the bed.

“Nepotism,” he said. “It’s on your side, amore mio. You know that as well as I know you don’t care.”

He patted my face once but hard. I took his hips in both hands, but he straightened his arms against me and resisted my pull.

“Not caring if you don’t get cast, though, or if Aspen’s applauded for it if you do...”

I insisted, “I care about that play.”

“Men don’t go after the lead in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by skipping the gym for three months. Brick’s not perfect, but you can’t tell by looking.”

“I’ve worked hard for *Cat*.”

“Ha!” Franco tried to pry loose, but I held on. “Reading the script every day and making notes all night?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Disappearing inside Brick,” he continued, “resenting me like Maggie, and letting yourself go as soft as Big Mama.”

He smacked my pecs to watch them jiggle, but they flexed instead as I tipped his balance in my favor. His full weight laid me flat out in bed. I realized too late my spine hadn't been fully extended since my injury. A cold shock seized in my groin. A moan from my core unraveled up my throat, and I was lightheaded in its wake. When the room stopped spinning, Franco lay beside me. He watched to see if I was okay, but his expression doubted it.

“See where all your note-taking's got you, Buff?” He stood between my knees and offered help just beyond my reach. “Give me one sit-up.”

“I can't.”

“Show me all your studying and scribbling didn't cost you that. One lousy sit-up.”

“I'm hurt!”

He yanked me upright on the edge of the bed and walked away as I screamed.

“Some kind of big, strong Brick Pollitt you turned out to be!”

My neck and jaw clamped down against the pain, but I snarled through: “Brick's more than that.”

“He's beefcake, baby! A one-legged slab of grade A, closeted, meat.”

“He's saddled with everybody else's expectations of him,” I argued. “That takes more than muscle to bear.”

“Is that where you landed, Buff? All your study? Poor put-upon Brick?”

“There's more than that. Do you want to hear it?”

“No!” he shouted, bent forward for effect. “It's all just a fantasy you've concocted out of something that was fiction to begin with.”

“It’s backstory I made up to get deeper into character.”

“Obsession’s what it is.”

“Actors obsess. Good ones do.”

“Not for three months, Buff.” He stomped into a pair of jeans and continued under his breath. “Not at the expense of everything else.”

“What expense? What’s this cost me?”

“Look at you! Look at...!” He choked then took a different tack. “Like a dog with a bone, I swear. How you’ve studied over Brick, you’ve been just like a dog with a bone.”

“Well, I am that! A dumb old dog with a bone.” The confession earned me nothing, but my mouth gaped and spat like a wound. “I box up my notes and walk away, but it’s no use because it’s still here.” I drummed my head. “The box and every page in the box and every word on every page in the box.”

“Quit!”

“How?” I pleaded. “Tell me how to stop, and I will. How do you get a dog to drop a bone, Franco?”

He came through the top of a t-shirt and punched into the armholes. He looked at me like I was a hopeless dimwit.

“Just meow at him enough, I guess.”

We’d been on opposite sides of so much bigger lately, we took comfort when the worst between us was a dirty look. But then the air erupted in a cacophony. Two bells clamored for our attention in conflicting tones and rhythms. First, we ducked them, then we scrambled to track them. The doorbell was one; my phone the other.

“Everyone’s here.” Franco left to answer the door.

I said, “Right behind you,” but I answered my phone instead. “This is Buff Wayne.”

The director of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was calling with his final casting decision, but the arrival of party guests down the hall rattled between my phone and ear. My dad’s wife had a loud speaking voice, and their swarm of loin gnats were always screaming over something. As I closed the door on it, Aspen’s voice rose up, too.

“Dad can’t wait to congratulate the family’s newest Brick Pollitt. Isn’t that right, Dad?”

Given a choice, the single memory Dad would retain longest was his own turn as Brick onstage. The production had been extended twice and bolstered his career. One of the last memories to slip free before that, I feared, would be whether I did him proud tonight or let him down.

The director gushed over the fresh interpretation and natural talent I’d brought to my audition. My Brick Pollitt made him wonder what lurked behind lines he’d never questioned before, and he’d found himself reciting them afterward as others might *It’s like a switch clickin’ off in my head*. He didn’t complain I was too soft physically, or he hadn’t noticed. But a bigger name than Buff Wayne had shown last-minute interest, and the producers couldn’t be dissuaded from his box office potential. Franco returned as I told the director, “Thanks anyway. I understand.”

Franco quietly closed the door behind his back and seemed briefly absorbed by it.

“Buff, no.”

I tucked my phone into my back pocket and plucked a shirt from the closet. Already, I had the idea to run. The house was over capacity just counting the ghosts of my disappointments alone.

“You can’t leave me with your family,” Franco complained. He blocked me from the door and grabbed my crutch. “You want to feel better? You want to shake this off?”

“Yes,” I growled. “I want to shake it off.”

“Drop and give me twenty,” he said. “Take it out on a punching bag. That’s what you need. Get your heartrate up again.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Fine,” he said. He yanked the shirt from my hand. “I’ll leave you alone, baby, but tonight’s party is come as you are. Go let them see what you’ve made of yourself.”

I abandoned my crutch to him and lurched off furniture toward the bathroom. Franco snapped behind me all the way.

“Forget everything your dad gets wrong in interviews. Forget stories with family. People still call on him every week. Important people.”

“Friends!”

“Important friends. Ones you want going back to work with *you* on their mind, not Aspen. You’ve always been the good-looking one, Buff, but lately Aspen looks more like you than you do. No wonder the old man mixes you up.”

Through the bathroom, I staggered to the guestroom and climbed onto the spare crutch.

“I’m not washed up yet.” I reminded Franco, “I get cast in better roles than Aspen all the time.”

“No!” he insisted. “Not at his age you didn’t.”

He blocked my exit from the guestroom, too.

“Aspen’s coming up fast behind you, baby. He’ll hitch a ride on your dad’s good name and run you over with a smile on his face.”

I pounded on the door over Franco's head and yelled for my family.

"Bring that party in here! Come on, now!"

I howled, but Franco filled my ears.

"You wouldn't look less like Brick Pollitt with a briefcase and a three-piece suit."

"Shut up about Brick! Can't you understand I don't want you talking about him?"

But he wouldn't be quiet or let me pass, so I shook his shoulders to rattle the door behind him. A knock on the other side silenced us both.

"Everything all right in there?"

I buckled and held my breath against the pain I'd brought myself. My forearms on the door caged Franco between them. He panted, wild to escape me at first, but he quickly stilled. Unspent savagery lifted out of him and curled up warm beneath my chin. I feared the agony a single breath might cause, so I nuzzled his neck instead and took his shoulder between my teeth.

He said, "Go ahead, amore. You're nothing a shot won't cure."

Behind the door, "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" sprung of nothing in a civil tone. We composed ourselves and opened the door to my family warbling in the hall. My dad's wife was centered behind one lit candle stuffed in a sheet cake. Flanking her, my dad and the only man I considered a brother put on like backup singers looking for their big break. The loin gnats screeched off-key in front. When the song was over, the wife returned everyone up the hall.

"We can't all fit in the guestroom, for heaven's sake."

I hobbled after them while Franco retrieved my shirt.

In the hallway, the bathroom door creaked gently at the whim of air through an open window inside. The living room, when I reached it, was unusually dim for the time of day, and our landscaping stirred in heavy wind beyond a picture window as I lumbered past.

The wife cut cake for the kids in the kitchen, and Aspen tried to coax Dad off his feet. The balloons I had filled that afternoon overhung the dining table where I'd sat with the helium tank, a joyless cloud that refused to drift. Streamers I had draped under the kitchen cabinets dipped sluggishly onto the countertops where the tape had given up. I forced a path to the patio slider and found empty hooks where our car fobs usually hung. Franco joined us with my shirt and a satisfied grin.

"You going somewhere, Buff?"

He offered an armhole to thread myself through, but I escaped to the backyard with only Dad trailing me.

"I practiced on crutches, too," he said, "before my *Cat* audition."

"It's not for the audition," I said, unable to meet his eyes. "I hurt myself."

"The uh, the uh, the uh..."

I'd given him too much information at once. He'd lost the end when he doubled back to recall how I'd begun.

"The audition was yesterday," I said. "I didn't get it."

"No?"

"No, sir, I'm sorry. You're this family's only Brick Pollitt. Long may you reign."

Wind made a clatter of whatever wasn't heavy enough to defend itself in our yard and others nearby. I called for Aspen to take Dad inside, then I quit a corrugated fiberglass awning and teetered along the side of the house in rain I only just noticed. It was a fine, Florida drizzle, the kind that can only be seen against shadowy backgrounds or windshields at high speed. My phone was still in my back pocket, and I'd remembered I could start my car with an app.

Dad called as I left, "I was Brick, too."

“I remember,” I said. “I was privileged to share the stage.” I told him, “Go inside,” without even a glance.

“Did you?”

“I was a no-neck monster,” I boomed into the storm. “When you were a hit, you insisted they cast me.”

I pushed through a gate at the front of the house and found my car blocked by Aspen’s in the driveway.

“Aspen!” I called again.

Behind me, Dad laid one small step at a time and reached for balance between the garage and property fence. He retained the more distinguishing features his fans recognized him by, but they were an awkward fit now, as though he had once undressed a layer too far and couldn’t fill them out again quite like he used to. I helped him to surer footing in the driveway.

“You’re him,” he said. “You’re Brick now.”

“No, sir. Not me.”

“Why not?”

“Not good enough, I guess.”

The house opened, and my family huddled under scant cover at the front door. Aspen called him in, but Dad followed me to Franco’s car at the curb. I tried to unlock it with the app, but my phone was wet and wouldn’t register my touch. Dad insisted with relentless refrain that Brick Pollitt was my reason for being.

“He’s under your skin!”

“You’re right about that.” I let Franco and Aspen catch up and asked them all at once, “What if I wrote Brick instead of played him?”

Dad rumbled from within, every bit as coarse as the threat in Franco's eyes and the skew of Aspen's grin. In that moment, and if only by my toes, I crossed the boundary of everyone's expectation of me. Had I quickly fallen backward, I'd have been buoyed on by my family's confidence and surely acquired by old age a rap sheet of bad luck to ascribe their disappointment to. I might've extended my run as heir to the family name in supporting roles, cameos, and walk-ons until I retired early to safe and blameless waste. But I leaned in.

"I've studied him," I explained. "Brick, I mean. Imagined little extras to draw on for my audition, beyond how Tennessee Williams set the stage but in sync with it, too."

My process rang true with Dad. He refused when Aspen tried to turn him around and gestured for more from me like I'd said already.

"I got carried away," I confessed. "I developed so much backstory, it became story itself. I imagined if Brick had gone to Skipper the night he phoned, had left with him instead. It started off as words Skipper might've said, whatever he might've designed from hope and imagination to lure Brick out. Next thing I knew, they were barely scraping by through a Chicago winter and using different names. They were on the run in my mind, away from Big Daddy first but then Tennessee, too. It wasn't *Cat* anymore. I couldn't put it back, and I didn't want to."

A kink in the wind smacked us sideways and panicked the trees. The canopies hissed.

"So, is it okay...? Would it be so bad...?" What I wanted to say was worthy of announcement – good news to fit between a countdown and popping corks – but I asked permission for it instead. "What if I'd be happier to write like Tennessee than act in his plays?"

Dad tried to find the rumble of thunder in a flight path to Miami International and got lost coming back down. He would never really know me again.

"Take me home, Buff," he said to Aspen. "It's starting to rain."

“That’s not Buff!” Franco commanded center stage in Dad’s scene and played it for the back row. “Buff’s right there!” he yowled. “That’s your boy right there! Your memory’s goddamn shot, old man!”

I reached to stop him, but Franco jerked me almost off my crutch.

“Here’s Buff here! Your favorite son, and you hurt him every time you waste his name on a wannabe!”

Aspen shoved equal parts Franco and frustration into me hard then pressured Dad up the driveway.

“Nah,” Dad groaned. He watched me hop into balance again. “You’re Brick Pollitt.” He winked and underscored it with a smile as Aspen turned him away. “I know you.”

The wife and kids met Aspen at his car and carefully folded Dad inside it. Within seconds, tail lights chased them down the block. When they disappeared around the corner, Franco pried the stick loose from under me and kicked it to the gutter.

“You don’t need that now,” he purred. “You’ve got me, amore. I’m enough.”

He laid my arm across his shoulders and walked me up the driveway.

“We’ll come back stronger,” he said, “together. How you carried on today will be seen for what it truly was – symptom and sickness. The old man won’t remember what you said, and you see now where that writer talk gets you. Squarely nowhere.”

Rain had dampened my hair enough to drip. I felt it down my back and arms like ink washed from written words. Leaves tumbled from the trees like pages blown loose of binding.

At the top of the driveway, Franco punched a code into a keypad on the garage. The door moaned open slowly.

“A month is all I need,” he soothed. “One month to stack your gorgeous debris upright, strong, and proud again.”

He stashed me in the garage next to boxes marked with his name, a slumping monument of books, hobbies, and goals he’d given up after meeting me. He yanked a dusty tarp from a loaded weight bench in the middle of the floor.

“We start tonight,” he pledged, a hand outstretched. “Come, amore mio. Nobody’s really strong who’s never built himself from ruin.”