

Black and White

*You can buy the means to live, and the means to feel pleasure. But try as you might, you really
can't buy more time.*

In the south coastal plain of Texas, nestled quietly within the amber sea of wheat and sorghum fields that surround the urban peninsula of the Rio Grande Valley, is the small, modest farm town of Queensland. It's an honest place, humbly accepting of its role as a simple blip on the map to which travelers heading north to San Antonio could temporarily escape from the endless and unforgiving highways. Built on the prosperity of the fruits of the land and the principles of hospitality and hard work, the town is truly a testament to the honest Texan.

But just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so too is loathing in the hearts of the resentful. At the far edge of town, where amber waves of grain dance harmlessly in the gentle caress of an autumn zephyr, the ruins of an abandoned movie theater sit in utter disarray. For the citizens of Queensland, they are but an obscure and often forgettable remnant of another short-lived fad. But for Ian Delgado, they served as a bitter reminder of modernity's last sad attempt to encroach upon the monotony of the rural hellscape.

Queensland had a tendency for this sort of thing. Grand ambitions for something greater than the life of a simple country bumpkin passively dismissed until the promise of chasing a passion turns into nothing but a misguided dream. Ian was an artist, or so he would like to believe. The sensation of simply holding a paintbrush was euphoric, his imagination running wild as he held the key to endless possibilities to be unlocked within the canvas. But if the quality of one's art was solely the product of an artist's passion to create, every child would be an amazing artist – a reality that Ian would face very soon in his artistic endeavors. Perhaps his vision had been clouded by the overwhelmingly mundane aura that loomed over Queensland, an aura that everyone else seemed to turn a blind eye to. But if Ian was going to be overlooked as an artist, perhaps his imagination could run wild in the written word - a black and white dichotomy, void of visual media to distract the eyes, relying purely on the imagination. Black and white,

black and white. How ironic, he thought, that the absence of color was the only way for the mind to see vividly. Perhaps the only way to escape the mundane was to embrace it enough to loathe it. Writing requires one to escape their reality, and nobody wants to escape reality unless they hate it enough to remove themselves from it.

Ian did try to escape his miserable reality. He was relatively successful too, his stories and poetry capturing the awe of his peers (two or three supportive friends), and making his insignificant existence as a nine-to-five insurance salesman less insufferable. But while Ian could escape his reality for a time, reality has a way setting its lethal snare when you least expect it. He could find himself in a whole new world, molded from the ground up with nothing but his imagination. But his imagination couldn't distract him from the unfortunate and undeniable truth – his time was limited. Very limited.

“Mister Delgado...” Doctor Wagner adjusted his stethoscope for a moment, his bony fingers idly shifting to the stack of loose papers on his desk. He had an awkward presence about him, stoic in his demeanor, yet stressing the urgency in his tone while his hands struggled to find a way to stay preoccupied.

“Mister Delgado, I don't think you fully understand the severity of this.”

“Of course I do” Ian scoffed. “I mean, I guess I sort of figured when I realized that the Christmas tree on your desktop was actually just my MRI scan.”

“Ian...” Doctor Wagner sighed. Even in his years of delivering somber news, it wasn't something he'd ever become accustomed to. “Ian, I'm sorry. Truly. Had we caught it sooner-“

“Well, we didn't.” Ian interrupted. “Not really much we can do to change that.”

The remainder of the conversation was hardly eventful. Palliative approaches to making the inevitable decline less degrading were discussed, as was thinking positively, and anything else one would find on a Hallmark “get well” card. But nothing would change the fact that Ian, like everything and everyone who had ever dared to challenge the doldrum of Queensland’s rural cesspool, was doomed to fade into obscurity and be forgotten – just like anyone or anything else that dared to break away from what was accepted as “the norm.” Perhaps in time he could appreciate the irony of his physical existence slowly marching away from the town that he despised so much. But time was not a luxury that he could afford to spend on optimism.

“Six months, give or take” Ian thought. The day had gotten away from him as he trailed off in his thoughts. As he sauntered hopelessly down the quiet sidewalk, he caught a quick glimpse of his shadow beneath the flickering streetlight at the edge of the abandoned movie theater. “How long has it been nighttime?” he thought. His train of thought was quickly interrupted by the subtle clanging of an empty aluminum can hitting the pavement. It wasn’t difficult for Ian to locate its source, as the pop of another can being opened by the thrower of the empty one essentially gave it away. Ian paid little mind, as it was not an uncommon sight for the less-fortunate pack in for the night in the proximity of bus stops or convenience stores. Like anything else that could be deemed “out of place,” they were simply disregarded until the public grew blind to their existence. Ian was guilty of this too, as his intuition only implored him to keep walking.

“Ey, Delgado!” Ian stopped in his tracks. “Come on Ian, don’t be like that!”

Ian turned around as he attempted to locate the source of the voice that had called out to him. Surely it couldn’t have been the bum from across the street... Yet aside from Ian, not another soul was present. The wind grew still, and the distant, idle hubbub of the surrounding

freeway had been reduced to an unnatural silence. Without a word, the caller raised a single gloved hand, the sleeve of his ragged overcoat falling just enough to reveal that the caller was in fact human. A windless chill resonated within the brisk autumn air that compelled Ian to approach the man who had so familiarly called out for him.

“Do I... Do I know you from somewhere?” Ian asked. It was an honest inquiry; he was not a sociable person and was prone to forgetting faces. But this beggar was more out-of-place than the theater at which he resided – yet perplexingly forgettable. He was not the typical dip-chewing, Natty Light-guzzling out-of-work hick that often found their way stumbling into Queensland any time a drought hit. His jet-black hair cascaded flawlessly down the sides of his wool knit cap, while the beard beneath his chin conversely remained completely disheveled in an almost intentional manner, almost like a bohemian Che Guevara.

The man only smiled, then proceeded to take a swig from his beer can, motioning toward the curb with his other hand. “Why don’t you have a seat, Ian?”

“Look, if you’re asking for money, I don’t carry cash. Nobody does anymore, except for drug dealers and-”

“Ian...”

With that, Ian sat. Something about this man seemed off, yet enthralling. “Look, you obviously know me from somewhere, could you please cut the mystical crap and tell me who you are? Or at least what you want?”

“Who I am is of little importance.” The man put his drink down, wiping his lip as he did so. “And there is nothing I want from you... nothing I need from you. Nothing I need from anyone. No... I am a charitable man. And you are but a beggar, whose pleas I shall answer!”

Ian was dumbfounded. “Ah, I see” he answered insincerely. “Well, you’re either wasted or insane, and I don’t really care to stick around to see which. Now if you’ll excuse me...”

But try as he might to get onto his feet, Ian found that even the task of moving a finger was as strenuous as trying to breathe after running a marathon. Yet his heartbeat slowed, as did everything else. Almost as if time itself began to slow entirely.

“Now don’t you think it would be more polite if you listened to what I have to offer first?” The man grinned, effortlessly taking another sip from the aluminum can in his grasp. “I guess at this point you don’t really have much of a choice.”

Ian tried to speak, but whether it was physical inability or the overwhelming toll of everything that had transpired, his voice remained unheard.

“We aren’t as different from each other as you think, Ian. Sure, we may definitely *have* differences, but we’re the same in the sense that each of us is an anomaly in our own right. But that’s the nature of this town, isn’t it? The black and white. The ones who conform, and the ones who stand out. No in between, no spectrum, just a color-blind herd mentality so the simple-minded can bond over the trivial similarities that they mistake for personalities. And true individuality...” crushing the now empty can in his hands, the man unceremoniously tossed it behind him toward the theater, almost in scorn. “True individuality can never survive. And they’ll do everything in their power to ensure that. You think the solution might be simple, to just up and leave, maybe in a few years when you’ve finally worked up the courage to seek what’s beyond the horizon. But then you find yourself with no time, and you’re doomed to face the cruel reality that you’ll forever be just another cog in the machine of mundane mediocrity.”

Finding his strength, Ian shot up, his thoughts racing once more. “Just what the hell are you on about? I have had one hell of a day, and I don’t need some random bum off the street lecturing me in some fit of drunken delusions!”

“But you could use more time, Ian.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re a ticking time bomb, Ian. And the thought terrifies you. The thought of a meaningless death. The thought of fading into obscurity, or the fear that you’ve already done so.”

Ian’s heart sank. He had only been informed earlier in the day about his condition, as well as the expected prognosis. Unless Doctor Wagner wanted a HIPAA lawsuit on his hands, it was highly unlikely that he would have discussed it with anyone else, let alone a random beggar on the streets.

“Even if that were true, just how the hell can you offer ‘more time?’” Ian asked. “I swear to God if this is all a ploy to get me to buy colloidal silver or some crap, I’m going to kick your ass.”

“Oooh, touchy, are we!” The man stretched lazily before getting onto his feet, dusting himself off before facing Ian. “Regardless of whether or not you believe me, we both know that more time is what you want. And what you desperately need. But the real question is... will it be at a cost that you are willing to accept?”

“That depends on the ‘cost’ that you’re proposing.” Ian said. “Does it involve performing ‘favors?’”

“Oh, God no!” the man replied. “I’m referring to the conditions laid out by granting additional time. The conditions dictated by this accursed place. The conditions met by those who are deemed worthy of being allowed to continue in this vicious cycle we call life.”

“What exactly do you mean?”

“What I mean...” The man pointed toward the theater. It had been deteriorating for years, yet even the grass had yet to reclaim it. As if it refused to give the city any reason to acknowledge its existence, even if it were to create enough of a public nuisance for them to send someone to do a quick pass with the zero-turn. “What I mean, is are you willing to accept the terms for which Queensland will accept you? Are you willing to embrace the mundane? To accept your own insignificance, for your name never to be spoken again the minute you draw your last breath?”

It was then that Ian realized the gravity of the situation. He had spent his entire life tirelessly circumventing the expectations that Queensland had of its citizens. They had tried to prune his creativity, and they had tried to prune his individuality. But the stone with the brightest color serves no purpose in a black and white wall. And its individual uniqueness is what brings about its downfall, and its lack of utility leaves it discarded and forgotten. Much like Ian was cursed to be discarded and forgotten by a town whose rules he refused to play by.

“You want to know something?” Ian said, taking a step back in defiance. “I would love nothing more than to have more time. After all, who wouldn’t? But I’d much rather let Queensland quell my flame and acknowledge that it was a threat, rather than to sit idly by and watch it fade. And yet you speak to me while failing to acknowledge that the flame still burns.

And with what little time that remains, I will make sure that this town remembers me. Because when I burn out, this entire hellhole will burn with me!”

The man said nothing. Ian only stared, defiantly and with nothing to lose or gain.

“Suit yourself.” The man said. And with a flicker of the streetlight, he was gone, the silence broken by the distant droning of a police siren, while the street that had been otherwise empty was suddenly filled with passing cars that ignored everything but the path in front of them. Ian wasn’t sure how much time had passed; what seemed like a few seconds and simultaneously several hours had culminated in the faint light of the sunrise upon the horizon. Perhaps everything he had witnessed was purely his active imagination’s way of attempting to escape the harsh reality that was so suddenly bestowed upon him. But reality is not truly escapable. One can distract from it, at least temporarily, but like the text of the written word, reality is a colorblind dichotomy of black and white, and like an enlightened man among peasants, it does not take kindly to those who notice their own brilliance instead of settling for utility.