

COWARDS AND CAPEES

by
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The same energy of character which renders a man a daring villain
would have rendered him useful in society
had that society been well organized.
Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

A PRELUDE

there was a time, long ago, when superheroes lived amongst us

it began and ended in Chicago

when the last one died, they say it sounded like the entire city had gasped all at once. it wasn't the fallen superheroes that stole their breath, however; four decades had proved sufficient time to transform the city's pride unto shame. what gave them pause was another mystery entirely – electricity had died, too

the first night was lit by candles and reassuring whispers. *tomorrow things will return to normal.* but then tomorrow came and the food in the ice boxes began to turn and every passing day was a little bit darker than the one that had preceded it

twenty years later, the people left to tend to the remains of Old Chicago finally exhaled and faced up to the truth: the lucky ones had already suffocated

CHAPTER ONE

1984

Well. Now I know what being struck by lightning feels like.

It hurts. During and after. The mouth fills with smoke. Not literal smoke, just the nagging flavor of it all. A hot vibration buzzes through every fingertip and toenail. An odd sort of exclamation point feeling, like you're going to burst, like your skin is too tight for the blistered meat beneath it. And right before your heart skips a beat and you black out?

Right before I blacked out?

It occurred to me that the lightning had come from nowhere at all, that the sky was cold and empty and the street long abandoned and left for dead.

But Glenn's poking me with his foot, so I guess I'm still alive. For now.

"Charlie, you got to wake up, you got to get up, you got to-"

"Stop." And Glenn does. Always.

One eye opens before the other, my brain still a half step behind the pain. I think I bit my tongue. There's blood in my mouth and my spit's laced with the taste of copper. My hair is different, too. I can smell it. My fingers-

They still work-

They're laced with a web of cracked eggshells and strands of translucent goo. I wipe it off on my dirty, black slacks, heaping one stain upon another. They were born blue – *Chicago cop blue* – but the color and the man who wore them are extinct.

I touch my hair, walking fingers through familiar stubble. Stopping at an unfamiliar bubble of blistered skin around the crown. The smell of burnt flesh always sours my stomach, but at least this time it is my own. When I lift my head, my stomach rolls a second time. Everything I'd loaded into the basket on my bicycle was flung free when I fell. All of it, ruined:

1. Two loaves of bread, ripped clean from the yellow, phone book pages we'd wrapped them in. Spackled in street grit from heel to heel. Inedible. Undeliverable.

2. A rectangle of butter, oozing through tears in its thin, wax paper binding.

3. Five apples, in various states of sullied distress. Bruises and scrapes and two split straight to the core. Each one staring at me like a pair of wide, frightened eyes with tiny black seeds for pupils. *What have I done?*

"Charlie, you have to get up." He's scared. Six feet. Five inches. All coward. His fear's not entirely misplaced, though. Not here, out in the open like this.

I'm scared, too.

The man who had the job before us was stabbed to death, gutted in broad daylight, in front of a home where a mother stood waiting on his delivery. With a child on her ankle. Both of them watching while the deliveryman stained the concrete with gobs of red blood that has since turned black. The thief lifted all the groceries from the man's bike that he could handle and then cut the mother's cheek open as he left.

That could be either one of us if I don't get up.

I turn over in the road and pain whistles like a kettle. I've cut my palms in-

4. A puddle of milk and broke glass. A half gallon's worth. Gone.

Crimson tentacles of blood wriggle out around my fingers and spin through the thick, white liquid. Life imitating art. I must have cut my hands in a dozen different places. I push out of it and stand, powdering the air with-

5. An entire sack of flour.

The sack's gone, torn to pieces light enough to catch the wind and leave us. The white dust remains, settled atop just about everything in sight. The frame of my rusted, fallen bike. The asphalt. Even my toes, five little pink bones forever peeking through the tear in my thin-soled shoes, look absolutely confectionary. There's a lump on my temple now, too, throbbing like an alarm when I pull my gun out of the holster.

It's always heavier in my hand than I remember it-

The literal and figurative weight of a cold-steel killer.

"One story home, twelve o'clock. Door is just off the middle. To your right." Glenn lays it all out verbally, guiding my barrel towards any spot where someone might be waiting to pick us off. Because I can't see for shit. "Clear!" Because I got a single pair of busted-up glasses to my name and I don't wear them unless I have to. "Okay." Because I don't know where and when I'll find another like them. "Three o'clock. It's just the frame, it's all burnt up. But there's still a fireplace." I turn when he turns, matching his footsteps in the grind of broken gravel. We're dancing in defense of our lives. "An inch more." I get both hands around the grip of my gun and straighten out my arm and point it at the fireplace-shaped blur. "Clear!"

Glenn lumbers through a turn, keeping tight behind me, like it matters any.

He's got a foot on me and a hundred extra pounds. A year younger but twice my size and probably not done yet. If someone wanted to pick him off, they'd have done it by now. They'd have aimed for a puff of his big green jacket. Or his headband. It would be easy to set their sight on the shiny, metal plate mounted in the middle of it and bag themselves a giant sissy. It would be my fault, too. For indulging Glenn and his hangdog face and his pug nose and his missing tooth and his new black eye.

"One more house," Glenn says.

The last house on a dead end street that smells like wet socks and keeps its fog well past sunrise, clutching it in the brittle folds of weeds and rotten trees around the edges. Like fangs in a nightmare.

People avoid this street - Malum Street - as passionately as they spread its rumor. The ghosts of electricity are said to haunt the windows at night. Not candles, people swear by that, but honest to God electric light. It's bullshit and Charlie loves bullshit. He's asked to come down here a thousand times and nine hundred and ninety nine times I've told him 'no.' But I finally broke. Because that new purple bruise on his face is shaped like his father's fists.

"Oh shit..!" Charlie cowers behind me, peeking only ass and face around my slender frame. Someone's here. With us. At the last house on the street. The ghost house. I aim at the two-storied shadow and hope it's enough, because I can't see the target set against its crooked, weather-beaten frame.

"I'll kill you." I shout it, but I couldn't possibly mean it, not from this distance. It would be an accident if I hit someone. A wish granted from the stars. I whisper to

Charlie while I hold the empty threat between my hands. "*How many? Where are they?*" Every second that ticks is likely to be our last. We are alone and with food.

There is no riper bounty.

Charlie straightens up.

"Did he leave?" I ask.

"Umm... He's waving."

"Waving how?"

"Waving us over," Charlie snorts.

"Is he dangerous?"

Charlie moves alongside me, an answer in his action. "He's super old."

"I'm armed," I bark at this old man, digging inside my satchel for the glasses.

"Well I'm not." His voice cracks like a phonograph. Like it's been a while.

"He looks nice," Charlie says. Charlie thinks the smell of skunks are nice.

I need to see for myself. There's only one arm left on my glasses; I've got to balance it on an ear just-so. And I've still got to squint behind the cracked lenses to make the 'nice' old man out. He's bent like the columns of his crooked home, his hands perched atop a wooden cane. He looks nice enough, I guess, but it's relative to his surroundings. To a home that's peeled of its sun-bleached paint and a broken driveway whose jags of crooked rocks look a little like tombstones.

He points. "You're bleeding."

The cuts on my hands have gloved my palms in red.

The old man waves for us again. Irritated. "You coming in or not? I'm going to catch pneumonia." And then he coughs, a thick, wet sound that makes me think he might already have it. "Come on, I'll fix you up."

Charlie put his hand on my back, cupping my neck with his big, soft fingers. It's a rare thing, skin like his. A delight to feel those hands, each one big enough to cup my face and soft enough to make it seem like everything is okay, even when it definitely completely isn't. Charlie whispers into my scalp. "*He might have electricity.*"

"He doesn't."

"What did he say?" The old man strains for inclusion. Squeaking like a gate. I shake my head. *It doesn't concern you.*

The old man teeters on his cane and offers a final temptation. "I have food."

Charlie squeezes my neck. The giant must always be fed.

The old man shrugs, no longer content to wait, and turns inside the shadows of his porch. The front door creaks and closes and Charlie and I are back to where we started. Almost. The street stinks of sour milk and mistakes too grave to undo.

I bunch my pants inside my fists, stemming the bleeding long enough for reality, our new reality, to set in. Our job is gone and with it our ability to bring food to our table. I consider the dangers a house can hide. The old man inside of it.

Charlie squeezes my neck. "Well?"

"Pick up our bikes. He's going to clean up my hands and feed us. That's it."

Charlie picks up both sets of handle bars and I grab him by the elbow.

"If he tries anything else, I'll kill him."

The old man turns the sewing needle inside the flame. It's threaded for stitching; two of the incisions on my palms are too deep to simply bandage and glue shut. His eyes, pale blue and circled by a milky yellow color and tired red veins, find me over the top of his glasses while he works. Making conclusions just as I am about him. There's a scar in the middle of his forehead, a tiny circle that becomes more pronounced when he frowns, framing his crooked nose in a deep fold of skin.

"You do this a lot?" I ask.

"Do what?"

"Invite strangers into your home. Seems dangerous."

The old man pulls the glowing, red-hot needle away. "So does coming inside my home."

Maybe so. I've been keeping watch, though. Waiting for the wolf in sheep's clothing to suddenly appear. Through a door, just off the kitchen, that leads out into the yard. Through the ornate doorframe to my left that leads into a dark and dilapidated living room. Through the closed pantry door behind the old man. Anything could be waiting just out of sight. Waiting to hear us give up something of value and then rush out to take it.

Charlie's mind is elsewhere. Sitting next to me at the moldy kitchen table, his stomach gurgling. Eyes on the broke down fridge. He stares at the dark brown splatter flung across the front of its broad, white door. The same stain that's

stomped into the boot prints beneath it. Charlie's own boots are pulled up on the crossbar of his chair, as if he's afraid that any sort of contact will mark him for death. There's more dark stains scattered across Old Chicago than there are people. One inevitably becomes the other.

I wave my gun at the old man. "You going to stitch me up or not?"

Spires of flame dance between us, set inside a cast iron pot on the ground. The yellow linoleum underneath it is burnt down to a charred circle, the ceiling cut through to the roof for ventilation. The old man tilts his head, splitting his face in shadows and a wave of orange, flickering light. "Your father the one who taught you to wave that gun at old men?"

I give something away in my stoic defiance. A question.

"That's a Colt .38, Official Police," says the old man. "The bluish hue is a dead giveaway."

"So?"

"So it belongs to your father."

I resist the urge to say '*belonged.*' Like my glasses and my pants.

The old man reaches underneath his chair and picks up a brown, porcelain jug. He uncorks it. The smell of sour, tear-inducing mash wafts through the damp room. "You seem a little young to have been with the Chicago Police Department in the sixties."

My father's initials are etched into the handle, pressed beneath my thumb. If I squeeze hard enough, it stamps my hand like a cattle brand.

"I'm old enough to know when to shoot." Carrying since fifteen. Two years since has been time enough to figure out what might need an introduction to my gun and the only bullets I own. Three to protect myself, my mother and Charlie. Three more if I cannot.

"Well," says the old man, "is this one of those times?"

Charlie's chair creaks and he straightens up beside me.

I tuck my elbow and punch the gun inside its holster. It's time to hurry up.

The old man smiles, a thin, grim line of victory. He points at Charlie.

"I got some candy in the cabinet over there," he cocks his chin. "It's yours."

Charlie stands and hesitates. There's only one working cabinet. The others look as though they'd served as a prison for the things once kept inside of them, as if the food had staged a breakout. Shattered wood, twisted nails and screws, lengths and links of busted chains.

"Go on," the old man urges.

Charlie gives the fridge a wide berth. He opens the cabinet and pulls out a twisted, plastic sack. Gives it a spin to free up the candy; it's a dozen or so tiny brown discs, wrapped inside crinkly, translucent yellow paper. He can't help but grin, missing tooth and all.

Candy, the all-encompassing umbrella of it all, is his favorite vintage food.

I nod at the old man. "I thought you said you had food."

He shrugs. "It's an appetizer."

"We need food."

"Then you shouldn't have spilled it on my street." He chuckles.

Charlie brings the sack back to his seat and unwraps a candy.

“Wait.” He freezes with one halfway to his mouth.

“What?” Charlie is practically drooling. He’s like an animal when it comes to food. Zero discretion, everything welcome. I don’t blame him; his father monitors everything on the shelves at home. Not because there’s not enough, though. His father's job in New Chicago affords them a near-limitless parade of indulgence. He just thinks his *fat fuck* son eats too much of it.

“Make him eat one first.” I point to the old man.

“It's a Brach's Butterscotch Disc,” says the old man, as if that’s the be-all, end-all when it comes to matters of life or death. And poison.

“I don’t care what it is.” I check the doors and shadows again. “Eat it.”

The old man shrugs and offers his hand. Charlie drops his unwrapped candy inside and the old man wastes no time popping it into his mouth, sucking out the flavor as it clacks behind his teeth. “These are my favorite, you know.”

Charlie’s gets two open and fills his cheeks with the discs. “Me, too.”

Everything he eats is his favorite when he’s eating it.

“If I was going to kill you two, I would have done it by now.” He slurps up another mouthful of butterscotch and shakes his jug at me. “*Hands.*”

I put mine out and he pours the liquor over my wounds.

“You want a drink?”

I shake my head.

“It’s not poisoned,” he says.

“Isn’t it?”

He smiles and drops the jug, sloshing a fat droplet that spreads a film of dust into a clear, circular pattern on the floor. "Good. Good for you. I don't drink, either."

He picks up the needle and points his needle. "Ready?"

I nod and he jabs it into my flesh. The pain's sharp enough to make me bite my lip and Charlie to cough his candy into a frantic palm. He pops it back in and squeaks his chair sideways. Anywhere but the exchange between the old man's needle and my hands.

It's not painless work, but it is precise. This in spite of liver spots and pronounced knuckle bones and fingertips that are cracked and charred. He weaves, in and out, pulling my ragged skin closed like a seasoned medic.

What does he do inside this house all day to keep those hands nimble?

"You good?" he asks.

"I'm fine."

He grunts and ties a knot around the first incision, splitting the thread with his teeth. "You sure you don't want a candy?"

"No."

He shrugs a wave of folds into his sweaty, nylon jacket and fits another thread into the needle, inches from his glasses. His eyes aren't as able as his hands.

I look back at the barren cabinets again. Aside from the candy, nothing about this home seems habited. There's no plates, no bowls. No crumbs on the table. No wash basin. If this is a property for horses, and certainly it is a job that's busy enough to keep his hands working, we'd have heard them by now. We'd have seen the men he'd need to assist him with such a laborious operation.

The only thing he has here in spades is dust.

It's curdled in the corners of the room and beneath the legs of our chairs. It's spread in a near-even coat on any surface flat enough to keep it. Except where it has been scuffed away by busy feet; there is an almost spotless stretch of floor from front door to the closed pantry one.

"What's in there?" I ask.

"Where?" He jabs my other hand, wrenching the thread through the hole in my flesh before doing it again. His speed is picking up and my breathing with it. Tiny, seething exhales between my teeth.

"Your pantry."

Charlie gives the door a harmless glance, crushing candy between his teeth.

"It's a pantry." The old man lets go of his work and the needle dangles along the length of the string, swinging between my fingers like a puppet. He's trying to remind me whose roof I'm under and whose charity I am indebted to, but I don't care. His secret, and I know he has one, moves my hand, stitches and all, to the grip of my gun.

The old man counters with his cane, held aloft like a sword, and I'd laugh if the house didn't suddenly feel incredibly heavy, like it had snuck up on us in the tension and dropped all its worried wood upon our backs.

Just beside us, in the empty, conjoined dining room, there is a grandfather clock. The glass door is smashed out, the brass pendulum long ago pulled and melted into something with post-power purpose. But the clock face is still pristine

and preserved, frozen in the moment of its untimely death. Back when there was a time and place for a boy like me to trust the words of a man like this.

Charlie clears his throat and shakes the remnants of his candy bag towards me. Nudging my gun hand. "You really should try one, Glenn."

A hunch in the old man's back straightens against his chair and he lowers his cane back to the floor. "*Glenn.*" He's trying it on, seeing what it feels like. The weight of its worth. "Nice to put a name to a mouth."

God damnit, Charlie.

He doesn't know what he's stepped in, but he can see it on my face. "*What..?*"

The old man closes both hands atop the cane, transforming it into a peg from which to hang his smugness. I want to kick it out from under him.

He closes a fist on his chest, hacking through a thick cough. "You seem upset."

I pull the hanging needle taught, draw my half-sutured palm to my mouth and bite it free, severing the tie that binds me to him. "Let's go, Charlie."

Charlie sits heavier in his chair. The picture of a petulant man-child. "Why?"

The old man crosses a leg. It's crippled and wrenched at an angle that illicit an audible hiccup from Charlie. Everything this mystery man does is calculated.

I grab Charlie under the elbow and whisper against his face. "*Now.*"

"I can't hear you," the old man taps a long, loose earlobe. "It's deaf."

Charlie pulls away and I burst out. "What the fuck are you up to?"

It was meant for the room and the man, but Charlie takes the brunt of it and cowers. Yelling can break him in two; a grumble from his father is enough to put a shake in his hands. And it pisses me off that I took him to that place and that the old

man pushed me there, so the gun comes out and the barrel takes aim. "What are you trying to do to us? You want to rob us? You want to eat us?"

I look at the pantry door again.

"I don't allow that kind of language in my house."

"We're leaving." Charlie sat with the dead weight of a stubborn dog. I could level a threat all I wanted, but Charlie's feet wouldn't move without his heart.

The old man's voice is almost a whisper. A siren's song. "I want to help you."

The plastic bag crinkles inside a prayer that Charlie folds between his hands.

"We don't know him, Charlie." Another name given to this house and the man who calls it home. I double down on the gun and take another step towards the brittle antagonist. "We don't *know you*."

"Well." He bends forward like he means to stand and pauses. "Permission to stand, Sheriff?" I lower the gun. A bit. *Sheriff* hits close enough to home to give Charlie a twitch. Everything is fragile now. From a harmless detour on our bikes to the edge of a razor.

The old man grunts and wobbles to a spot atop his cane. "You want to know who I am, Glenn?" I could spit. "You want to know who I am, Charlie?" Charlie nods. "Take that gun off me." The frown leaves his brow and he extends a finger my way. "This is my home, I don't..." Another cough. I'm not sure if I believe it now. "Please," he wheezes. "Put it away."

I can't.

Charlie stares at me with those sad, helpless eyes. *God damnit, Charlie.*

The gun goes away. Again.

"My name," says the old man, "is *Karl Kant*."

It fazes me for a second, but it's enough-

"Alliteration," says Charlie.

Karl smirks. It's another bait, and his biggest one yet-

Alliteration is the gateway drug to superheroes.

The Superheroes.

The Four.

Goliath was Nok Novak.

Golem was Caleb Cohen.

Jet was Jordy Johnson.

Mouri was Kamali Kulu.

And I am Glenn Goodwin and Charlie is a Chambers.

I rush to the thin, pantry door and throw it open, rolling waves of orange firelight inside. There is no one here. A naked bulb hangs from the ceiling in the middle of the compact space and every wall is stacked with shelves as bare and dry as the ones inside the kitchen.

Charlie gets up from his chair; he thinks I'm messing a good thing up. "Stop."

"He's hiding something."

"Maybe *you* are." Karl lays into his heels and lifts his cane to point it at me.

The heat of anxiety wafts my mother's perfume from the collar of my snow vest, spiking this standoff with the smell of burnt flowers. She takes it as a pillow when she comes home in the morning and I let her sleep on it as long as I am able.

This is the kind of morning that makes me think I should have just curled up right beside her.

"Well?" The old man awaits my defeat.

Something still tugs at me. A touch of Charlie's stubbornness rubbed off between our sheets. The firelight has exhausted the strongest shadows inside this pantry and beneath one shelf in the back-

I squint and duck my head.

There is another door, painted black to blend and built flush with the boards around it. I reach out and find it heavier than it should be. There's bolts around the edges, signs that it's been reinforced. It's where he lives and keeps his hands busy and it is why we are here. It's the itch I've felt at the back of my neck since the beginning. I turn around so that I can illicit defeat and a confession. "What's behind this door?"

"The same thing that is in this room." He tucks his chin against his chest, trying to hide a smile in the folds of his loose, reptilian neck. "*I am the truth.*"

Charlie looks at me. *Did I hear it?* I did. It's Golem's slogan. It was. Passed down and uttered across time, surviving both his death and a whole generation of children who have only ever experienced that dark, masked man in story.

Charlie points at his own headband, as if it isn't the most obvious thing in the room. The old man has been using it as fuel for his conversational fire the moment we set foot in here. It's the signature ingredient in the pot of shit that he's stirred beneath our noses.

Charlie made the headband himself, from the sleeve of an old black sweatshirt, a bit of hardware from a gutted television and a rivet gun we'd dug up beneath the ruins of a hardware store. He said he did it to help me in case we ever got in a fight. In lieu of his aversion to guns, he had promised to start doling out headbutts. Like Golem used to do.

Superheroes are what brought Charlie and I together. Drawing pictures in the margins of our books, trading for relics in the market. Plying old men for stories and wrenching immaterial hope from the bones of our hopeless society. It's the glue that holds us together, bonding my dark pessimism unto Charlie's unwavering light. And Karl's twisting it for all it's worth and I've had enough. "What's - behind - the door?"

"What else?" The old man sighs. "Superheroes."