

All We Can Do Is Run

John Jesse McHugh

You were always high in Denver.

He handled the glass as he'd hold an infant; delicately and slowly. His palm grazed the beaker while the sink water ran over and around the edges. He cradled it back and forth under the faucet, baptismally; carefully removing any residual marks. He wanted each glass to gleam under the white lights. Then he'd move on to the next.

An older woman walked into the store and up to the counter. She looked around for a minute before saying anything, at the jars full of the herb and then back at her watch. It was clear she had to be elsewhere.

"Hey," the woman said as Charles continued with his back turned.

"Can I get some help here?"

Charles didn't respond, taking great care of the glass.

The woman's eyebrows rose. Her face contorted as she looked up at the clock. Her fingers like falling dominoes; clicking rhythmically against the counter. The manager noticed her standing and waiting. He quickly and nervously wove through the aisles, approaching Charles from behind.

"There's a customer here," the manager said calmly to Charles.

He didn't answer, hunching over the sink and towel drying the paraphernalia.

"Charles!"

He turned, startled, and the beaker slipped from his hands and shattered across the floor.

"Careless." The manager scolded Charles. "Just careless."

"Third time this week."

Cleaning the beakers was hard work with the haze and bloodstained eyes. Any work was hard. Charles had a hit or two before each shift. Then he'd have one at lunch and one on his break,

and finally, three at home before he'd pass out on the can only to be awoken by a sobbing wife. Wake up, weed, work shift, weed, Doritos, weed, sex, weed, TV, weed, sleep, repeat. Most days made no new memories, only solidified routine.

Once a week, Claire's parents would grace their daughter with their presence at a dinner party which consisted of a steak, potatoes, and two bottles of red wine. Her parents always brought the wine. They had money; they lived in the suburbs of Boulder, where there were no duplexes and the people were made of stone. This week, they paraded over on Monday night and their performances were on cue.

“Dear,” her mother squawked. “Where should I hang my fur?”

“I'll take it,” Claire said as she took it upstairs and threw it on their single bed. Her father, black hair slicked back, unraveled his knit scarf and proceeded to inspect the house. He loved to look for mistakes and loved even more to blame them on Charles. Wallace hadn't pictured Charles Stanley Jr., a cashier of Western Pennsylvania, as the man his daughter would marry.

“When's he going to fix this?” he sternly asked his daughter. Both of their chins were touching the ceiling when Charles stumbled in and stomped his feet off from the snow.

“It's getting pretty bad out there,” Charles shivered and rubbed his hands together.

“Not much better in here,” Claire's mother quickly added. Charles didn't speak again until dinner. As Claire's two aunts and their husbands arrived, Charles went more and more unnoticed. The women flocked to the kitchen to gossip and cook; the men gathered in the front room and talked of expensive cars, cigars, poker and other women. He sat in the living room and listened to both, disgusted. He called Claire into the living room.

“I don't feel well,” he told her. “I'm just going to go up to bed.”

“Fine.”

After dinner, Claire walked upstairs and knocked on the bathroom door. It was thin wood and didn't lock; she knew what he did in there. She turned the knob and leaned up against the door but it was blocked. She began to push anxiously, but it was a familiar feeling; she'd done this before.

“Charlie?” she called. “Let me in.”

Finally, she managed to loosen him and the wasted man fell slightly to the side, against the hamper, just enough so she could crack the door and fit her thin waist through. She knelt down in front of him; her face level to his. The stench of alcohol and smoke poured from his lips; the skunky breath receding with each tired drag.

“Hey,” Claire whispered as she cupped his right shoulder. It was three o'clock in the morning and his head bobbed from side to side.

“Charlie,” she said gripping him harder. “Charlie.” He began to tip. She caught and straightened his trunk. His eyelids were heavy.

“Charles!” His wife shook him.

“Wake up.”

He didn't budge.

“Please.”

For a few minutes, Charles muttered nonsense until his bagged eyes creaked all the way open. Out of focus, he peered over to the sink; a half bottle of pills, painkillers he'd smuggled from work, spilled out around the hot and cold handles. The bottle and the bong both lie on the floor near the window, worn and spent. He'd usually do it in the dark, but the lights were on tonight. Smoke lingered, trapped in the room by walls and the ceiling. Claire opened the window and switched the fan on to swallow the fog.

“Charles, we missed you downstairs,” she said putting his arm over her shoulder and walking him toward their bedroom. She was small, but she'd grown strong over the years.

“I’ve had a few drinks, so I don’t care. I don’t feel like handling this now,” she told him as they reached the bedroom.

“I couldn’t handle your parents,” he finally slurred.

She shoved him and he tripped over one of her red pumps, sinking into the sheets.

“Just fuck me so I can fall asleep.”

It took no time at all. They tossed their bodies around, slipping through the darkness and passing out.

A few months passed, where every night worsened from the last. One morning in late May, Charles, awoke early by Claire standing next to his bedside. There had been an early heat wave in Colorado and their house was warmer than usual. The light hum of the air conditioner was the only sound covering the silence. He looked up at the ghost; she was pale and a stranger. Sweat beads or tears ran down her cheeks. She wasn’t right.

“Are you sick?” He asked.

“I’ve been throwing up all morning.”

“Did you take something? Something off my dresser? Something from under the bed?” He started to scramble around the room, rooting through old suitcases overflowing with orange prescription bottles.

“No,” she nodded.

The couple had scares before, but none that had worried Charles enough to consider driving her to the E.R. Their lifestyle never had many opportunities to meet and entertain worry. He packed her a bag of clothes, and swerved out of the driveway toward the heart of Denver. They passed through their neighborhood; all the duplexes and the Laundromat, just as they would if they were going to the grocery store.

The park near their house was alive; dandelions and crabgrass bloomed in the warm Wyoming air blowing down from the North. It was spring. Behind the chain-link fence, the black and white boys fought over a basketball and who scored last. Meanwhile, a scraggly man slept on the bench with a newspaper over his head and a couple fist fought on their porch.

“It's beautiful day,” she said, dry-heaving into a paper bag. Charles stared straight ahead.

Once they reached the hospital, they immediately carted Claire back to run some tests. He sat in the waiting room. The sterile white lights stung his eyes. He remembered his younger brother, Tommy; the reason why he hated hospitals. He walked out into the parking lot and lit up a joint.

Two and half hours later, Claire was wheeled back out into the waiting room. Charles saw from outside, squeezed in his last hit, and ran back through the sliding glass doors.

“Is she alright?” he asked the nurse.

“She's more than alright.” She paused with a smile, examining the clipboard. “She's pregnant.”

The three women in the room cheered while the man with kidney stones continued to yell. Claire started to cry and then proceeded to call her parents and her best friends. Charles' face was expressionless. He sprinted back outside, down the street, and turned the corner to search for a liquor store. He made one phone call.

“Hey man,” he greeted his hookup out of breath. “Do you know anybody?”

“I need something stronger.”