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Hotel Alabama

It's 4 a.m. I wake up. I cry. I take three Advil and rub my face. The clock reads 4:10. There is no need to get up.

4:53. The crack on the ceiling seems to grow as I watch it. I am amazed by its perseverance. It etches its way above me while I sleep. The next time I see it, something small has developed into a pattern created by no understandable motivation. I wouldn't have chosen this place to begin something. When you're here, you're here for good.

7:26. I wake up again. Mozart is playing. It must still be on from last night. I like to listen to classical music when I sleep. I didn't notice it earlier. It has become part of the regular background noises, in addition to the couple above me trying to pulverize their bed each night and the occasional small explosions from the crystal meth lab down the hall. I've been here for over twenty years, and nothing much has changed. In the past year, I have regularly made attempts at escape, but there's always something or someone in my way. Last week, the landlady was just walking in the door, with her stiletto-heeled boots and fur coat, while I was on my way out. Of course I hadn't paid my rent for the month, so I was stuck in a tough spot. With my bags in my hand and a hat on my head I didn't look like I was walking to the corner to grab the morning paper.

"John, where the *hell* do you think you're going?"

"Down to the corner, Ms. Leceer."

"Why do I doubt that? Get your ass back into your apartment."

She lifted a heel towards me.

"Yes ma'am."

8:15. That wasn't the first time she had caught me trying to leave. I once traded three vinyls for an electrician's suit and tried to walk out the back door. It was a decent disguise, and if it wasn't for my slip-up, I'm sure I would have made it.

"Goodbye, Ms. Leceer."

She put out her cigarette.

"Going somewhere, John?"

I stopped in my tracks.

I had forgotten that the electrician had a mustache. Now I keep a fake one handy, just in case.

8:32. I eat some stale wheat flakes.

9:00. I place another mark on the wall with my black crayon. This is the 50th mark. It signifies my last attempt and the day I will finally make it out of this place.

10:45. I make sure everything is going as planned. I walk the hall of my floor, checking off each potential snare as I pass the rooms. Morgan Kinney in 304 and the herd of stray cats that follow her have already left for the park. The cats like to follow me too. They make a lot of noise. Kyle Harding in 313 hasn't been seen around in over a week. I owe him at least 50 bucks for toilet paper, cereal and milk. Ms. Leceer at the end of the hall in 330 is gone for the night to the country with some new hotshot she met at a bar. Everything is unusually quiet. This sets me on edge.

11:37. I'm all packed and ready. I trash the remaining stuff in my room in the hopes that someone might be fooled into thinking I was kidnapped. I peek into the hall. No one is in sight. I make a dash for the stairs. One flight, two flights, ground floor. I go out the back door. No Ms. Leceer smoking a cigarette. No cats following me. I don't turn around again until I'm two blocks away.

12:13 p.m. A bum stops me.

"Got any change for a brother?"

"Umm."

I had saved over 300 dollars this year. All of it was for my escape.
"Here."

I give him a dollar. I feel as if I should share my happiness.

1:40. I arrive at the Holiday Inn, my final destination. I check into a room on the third floor. I'm comfortable with that. I've never had a television before, and this one even gets HBO. There is no crack on the ceiling, and there are no black marks on the walls. I hear no small explosions, nor do I hear any banging above me. I feel alone for the first time in a long time.

5:30. I am mesmerized by the television. It has become a black hole for me and I am trapped in its seductive dance of gravity. I twirl and spin into it. I begin to feel like Dorothy, flying away to another world, but I have no Toto.

10:34. I stand up. I feel sick and deposit my dinner in the toilet. The room is spinning, and the sheer volume of maroon and hunter green makes my stomach roll over. I lie back on the bed and try to steady myself by looking only at the white ceiling. I begin to feel better, and I just want to sleep now. I reach over to the nightstand to turn on the Mozart. There is no Mozart here. There are no vinyls either. I am frustrated and pull the covers over my head. The odd, foam-like blanket rubs along my skin. Chills of repulsion send goosebumps down my spine. I jump out of bed and stare in awe at the light pink-colored blanket. I question the sanity of the person who developed the device. I rip it off the bed and throw it into a corner. I look around at the rest of the room. I decide that the furniture pieces have no souls. They aren't individuals. They are mindless and unaware of the tired construction of their being. They lack even an ounce of character. They are all the same. I continue to be repulsed.

10:45. I call room service.

"Room service, how may I help you?"

"I'd really like some cereal and milk, please."

"Yes sir, what kind would you like?"

"Cheerios and 2% milk."

"We'll be there in five minutes, thank you."

"We?"

He had already hung up.

12:50 a.m. I am still not asleep. I yearn for violins, cellos, flutes and the percussion accompaniment from above. I want to watch my crack grow, and I want to tell him that there's no better place than home. This has been no holiday.

It's 4 a.m. I have finally finished putting my apartment back into order. The black marks have been erased from the wall, except for the last one. It signifies my first success at remaining in this place. I hear a cat's meow, heavy feet shuffling down the hallway, the clip of stilettos against the linoleum. Mozart is on, and trumpets sound my climbing into bed. I look at the ceiling and am startled at the progress the little crack has made. In one night he has managed to creep across the width of the room. Looks like I have a roommate. I wonder how he knew that this was a good place to start. The clock reads 4:24. I take three Advil and rub my face.

[Jamie Drinan]