

# The Leftover Man

When I saw the white box truck pulling into our overgrown driveway, I knew it had come to take something away. That's what trucks were for, their role in the phylum of vehicles. Besides, if we ever had visitors they took the bus down to the end of Center Street and walked past the abandoned trolley yard. No one we knew drove. My friends were all still kids, and Ty's friends were all comrades from his organizing days. A couple of them lived down the street. They held drum-making workshops for neighborhood kids and wore dashikis on special occasions, and struggled to maintain their nostalgic radicalism against the inroads of pragmatic liberalism and outright apathy.

Ty's apartment was on the second floor of an old, yellow triple-decker. From the back porch we could see Washington Street where the orange line used to run back when the subway was elevated. There's an old photograph of us on the platform. My mother took it in the fall of 1983. Ty is in the foreground, wearing his typical summer uniform; green army shorts, boots, a Pravda t-shirt and a black army vest with pockets everywhere. He isn't smiling. I'm not smiling either. We don't smile when there aren't strangers around.

Ty's afro is bucking the trends in black men's hairstyles, but it's well shaped and neatly picked. My hair is big, curly and awkward. I'm wearing green and white shorts and the brown New Balance shoes we just bought at the outlet. They're proper shoes to wear at fundraisers or school events. I know how stupid I look in shorts and shoes, but Ty insists on making me wear them home. I am not looking at the camera. My face is tilted down towards the tracks, following the hustling figures beneath us. Back then Ty

was still with my mother, I was eight years old and we were failing together along the early fringes of gentrification.

When I moved back to Boston for the summer it had been ten years since that photograph was taken. The rainbow flags that populated the warm side streets attested to the progress that had been made. There were more white faces like mine. The Irish bars that had survived the influx of the darker poor peoples had been rejuvenated with new clientele. The lesbians were free to walk their giant dogs in Franklin Park, and “Hat Offs,” the ramshackle mecca of lottery tickets and cheap cigarettes, had closed forever. Its remaining clients would have to gather and talk number dreams elsewhere, or as my Mother had put it, “No more reverse welfare for the masses.”

Not everything had changed though. Franklin Park was still off-limits after dark. From our front porch I could see untrimmed trees hanging over a low stonewall. Occasionally young lovers from nearby projects could be spotted dragging old mattresses into the green. They left behind the remnants of their lovemaking, empty forty-ounces and half-filled condoms.

I noticed the box truck as soon as I turned the corner onto our block. It radiated alien-ness, and filled me with a sharp anxiety that, in turn, informed my gait, and I swung the gate shut too strongly as I walked through the open driveway. It crashed against the fence, and two Cubans jumped out of the truck’s cab as if on cue. They started banging on the first floor windows.

“Hey-yo! Kevin! We here... What you doin’ in dere? Wake up! We here!”

It was early evening, the light swung low behind the trolley yard and cast chain link shadows along the sidewalk. I was coming home from a day camp in the suburbs

where I worked as a counselor shepherding five year-olds from one activity to another. I gave them superhero names, comforted them when they cried, and slept off hangovers on their plastic mats during naptime.

“Hey what’s up?”

I walked up to the two men, tilting my head to the side. I exaggerated my motions, conveying the fact that it was my building, my driveway. I didn’t cut it as an intimidating figure, but I made up for what I lacked with a heavier accent, dropping my ‘r’s, aping the cadence of the purebred Boston Irish.

Sometimes when I passed the projects, kids still yelled out at me, “Hey! Where’s your skateboard?” It was the definitive accessory of whiteness.

One gave me his attention while his partner continued rapping on the windows.

“Yo... you know Kevin? He home?”

“I don’t know. He’s probably passed out or some shit.”

“What the fuck. He said to come here right away, yo.”

“Yeah. What you here for?”

“He got some stuff for us... we come to pick it up... he said come right away.”

I could imagine Kevin lifting his head from a kitchen table littered with empty bottles of bourbon. I wanted to sketch the situation with a few words. I wanted to tell them that they were getting involved in some bad business, but I wasn’t ready for it to come to a head right then. Without Ty, I wondered if my bluff would hold up. Ty had taught me and tried to teach me many things. He used to wrap me up, spar with me, and push me until I flushed anger, but the lesson never really took. Instead, I had developed the false sense of superiority of the bullied. When I got jumped in the playground I

blocked as many punches as I could, fell into revenge fantasies on the long, bus ride home and retreated into a pile of comic books.

I tried to explain in my poor, high school Spanish, my lack of vocabulary thinly veneered with a Puerto Rican accent.

*“Jo... nosotros tenemos un problema con Kevin. Yo y mi...”*

Then I realized that I didn’t know how to say my Mom’s ex-boyfriend in Spanish. It was a difficult relationship to explain. I sputtered, lost my rhythm and my front broke down. The moment flowed against me. The guy at the window turned to me, his neatly carved mustache framed an exaggerated smile.

“Talk English... talk English.”

“I don’t know if you want to get involved with this shit... that’s what I’m sayin’.”

“Yo, we just came cuz he said to come right away...”

“Word... you said that shit already.”

I was trying to convey a comfort with the moment that I didn’t have, and a capacity for confrontation that I had only played out in fantasy. I knew men were coming to take something away, but I wasn’t sure that they were there to take something of mine.

I gave up on the direct approach, and started towards the back porch. Kevin popped out just as I hit the stairs. He smiled broadly.

“Hey.”

“What’s up?”

“Yo... you seen Ty?” I asked.

“Yeah... he just left.”

The stairs were crooked. Brown paint revealed rotting timber. I climbed up to the second story porch, and stood in the corner looking down at them. I wanted to advertise my presence. I wanted them to know that I knew. I dug in my pocket. My pack of cigarettes were all crumpled, and pressed deep against my hip. I pulled out a cigarette and lit it one-handed, like a film noir detective. The match head broke apart and hot meteorites shrapnelled my arm. I started laughing. It felt like a movie for a long moment and I had the impression that I wasn't myself, that I was this character, and as long as I played this role I might be capable of anything.

Kevin and the Cubans disappeared into the house. They were gone for a long time. They talked, formulated a quick plan. When they reemerged, they were carrying a coffee table I had never seen. It was covered in plastic, but I could see the bright, red wood. One of the Cubans counted out about one hundred dollars and handed it to Kevin. They stood in a loose triangle, and spoke loudly for my benefit.

“So... we some back tomorrow, right? Two o'clock.”

“Yeah... Two o'clock.”

“Okay. Two o'clock... we see you then.”

It had been three days since our stuff had disappeared. I had just gotten home from work. I walked into the kitchen, poured myself a glass of mango juice, and went into the living room to watch *The Simpsons*.

“What the fuck!”

I stomped the floor and let the shock shake out of me. Ty's TV and my VCR were gone. It wasn't a VCR. It just played. I didn't have a video store membership anyway. Luckily, the stereo was still there. All the doors and windows were secure... no

signs of a break in. I wrote a long note to Ty, and went over to my friend O'Toole's apartment.

When I got home later that night Ty was sitting on the couch lighting his little Moroccan pipe with a match. He never used lighters.

"Those cheap lighters are poorly manufactured. They'll blow up in your face," he warned me.

The Swiss throwing knife and a bottle of Haitian rum were a still life on the coffee table. He projected his typical after work serenity. Ty put the pipe down and turned to me.

"He took all the liquor too. I had this bottle in my room."

"Who?"

"Kevin."

"Ah, dude. I didn't even think of that. It's obvious, huh? I'm retarded... not exactly detective material."

"Who else would steal all the liquor, but leave a stereo? He must have known that I'd kill him if he messed with my music."

Ty spoke that way without irony. It was always strange to me. He could make some complicate argument about the origins of institutional racism and all your cultural argument would shrivel up into nothing. He delivered his lines like an action hero and was purposefully efficient with violence.

"Did you talk to him?"

"I talked to him. I talked to the gay guy upstairs. He got robbed too. When I went to talk to Kevin he tried to run this line about how they must have come in

through the back porch window, the one that leads to the pantry. Come over here. Take a look.”

He jumped up and let me through the kitchen. Red rice bubbled in one pot, black beans in another. The refrigerator was plastered with photos and leaflets. His grown daughter smiled in cap and gown. His current girlfriend, Veronica, held her infant son. A flyer for an upcoming meeting read: *Alternatives to Public Housing: A Community Caucus*.

The pantry wasn't much bigger than a closet. Some empty shelves along the wall had held a collection of rum, and a bottle of bourbon someone had brought over as a gift. A low cabinet pushed up against the windowsill. Wine glasses stood in neat, military rows waiting for the occasional party when Ty cleared the front room and former *companeros* and *companeras* danced with something less than perfect precision to old Ruben Blades tunes.

“There's no way anyone would be able to jump over all that glassware. You'd have to leap, roll and come up standing in the kitchen.”

“Yeah, that's some ninja shit. I don't think Kevin has any ninja in him. Just the curse of the Irish and some other shit.”

Kevin was one of the few Irish guys left in the neighborhood. The Irish had lost the neighborhood, or given it away a decade before, leaving behind a legacy of worn pubs and old parishes that were forced to adapt to the new parishioners or close their doors. Most closed their doors, and many of the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans took the opportunity to drop the faded teachings, the Latin Mass. They chose stricter, more communal worship in Pentecostal storefronts or reinforced their children's education with the study oriented Jehovah's Witness. Many dropped it altogether. Sometimes you

have to lighten the cultural load. Sometimes it's better to travel light, to pick up things as you go. But there are always some of the old guard left behind.

The leftover men fail to or refuse to leave the neighborhood. They are paunchy and sallow, red-faced and slouching. They hole up in bars like fugitives, drink to the past in bars dark and warm like wombs: Doyle's, O'Connors, and Longhorn's. The walls are decorated with black and white photos of Irish boxers and old politicians, softball teams and navy ships. They tell stories, and long for a simpler time, an imaginary time. They vote Democratic locally, Republican nationally. They are easily seduced by the promises of conservatism—the return to a past that never existed. If talk turns to how the neighborhood has changed they complain about the noise and that Spanish music. They bring up welfare and affirmative action. They tell whatever short version of Irish oppression they picked up from family gatherings and the History Channel.

Inevitably they break into, “When my grandfathah came heah there was signs in all the stores that said ‘Irish need not apply’.”

If they are lucky that sign hangs behind the bar. They point to it and say, “We had ta fight discrimination when we came heah. We made it without extra help from the guvahment. We nevah had it easy neither.”

Kevin was one of the leftover men. He used to manage the building, but then he became a ghoul, emerging only to greet drinking partners at the door. They drove in from working class Irish suburbs, drank more than their fill, and left while the building slept. He was on the spiritual lam, hiding out from whatever plagued him. Rent hadn't been paid in months, but the landlady knew his family, was sympathetic to his “problem.”

Ty explained it to me like this. “He stays drunk for days. I think he likes guys too. That’s his issue. He used to have his shit somewhat together, but then...”

“Yeah but it can’t be easy for these classic Boston Irish types to wake up, realize they’re gay or bi or whatever. They can’t be like, ‘Hey Sully, I think Ray Borque is kinda hot.’ I guess they don’t just ship them off to the seminary anymore. “Nowadays they just leave them where they fall.”

After the truck had left I finished my cigarette on the back porch and flicked it onto the tar roof of the neighboring building. I could see one of the old, green trolley cars through the lightly wired windows. That was where they went for repairs. It was the last step before they retired them to the yard where they rotted red and leaked their vital fluids into the cracks made by the steel tracks that still veined the city. Now both the trolleys and the tracks were without purpose, they rusted away as the city evolved around them.

I opened the back door. The kitchen was neat and spare. Ty’s heavy cast iron pans hung above the stove. He didn’t believe in Teflon. I had learned to hand dry them, spread a little oil on the pan’s surface and turn the heat on low before putting it back in its place. A note lay on the little formica table:

*Alex... I went over to Veronica’s for dinner. Be back tonight.*

So Ty had broken the watch to go see his girlfriend. That was understandable. I had only met her once, riding my bike over to O’Toole’s. They were coming out of the natural food store. She was surprisingly fine, all coffee-colored and glossy-haired. She had two kids, one was three and the other was a newborn. After dinner one night Ty told me how her milk spilled out when he kissed her breasts, how sweet it tasted.

“I don’t really need to be hearing that shit, man,” I told him.

“It’s the most natural thing in the world... Mr. Moore.”

“Mr. Moore? I ain’t five no more. And you need to ask Doctor Freud about your breast milk fetish.”

I had only taken a woman home once that summer. She was from Spain. I met her at the treehouse, some spot in Mission Hill where they always threw parties. It was the same scene from my high school days, all bike couriers and punk rock girls that had grown into mediocre artists. I didn’t realize she had green hair until the next morning. Ty caught us coming out of the shower. I made polite introductions and walked her to the bus stop, half worried about what the project kids would say if they saw us. When I got back all he said was, “Green hair, huh? Green hair?”

I usually stopped at O’Toole’s apartment on my way from work. We drank \$1.50 twenty-two’s of Colt .45, and concluded that making them so cheap and colorful was a marketing ploy for underage drinkers. We didn’t consider ourselves underage. We’d been buying liquor for years. At fifteen, we thought forty ounces were pussy and opted for sixty-fours of Private Stock that came with a handle. We drank them down, the warm half-backwash remains and all. The difference now was the venue. We didn’t have to rely on the apartment of some alcoholic mentor.

We had our own place, directly across from the South Street projects. We smoked blunts and listened to Wu-Tang. O’Toole was always loud and hyperactive. He argued intelligently and with equal enthusiasm about infantile and intellectual topics, jumping from the relative skills of various MCs to our secret love for Led Zeppelin to the impending apocalypse and the merits of various Muppets.

Dave Silly lived there too. People said he was a little slow because he had been dropped on his head as a kid. But he wasn’t really slow, just wired differently. He stayed

on in that apartment for years. One day he came home, a crowd of cruisers and an ambulance crowding the street. When he asked what was going on, a detective told him that there was a guy hanging out the window.

“You mean hanging out by the window?” Dave asked.

“No, there’s a guy hanging outside the window.”

“You mean, he’s by the window?”

There was a long pause. When they both realized that they had exhausted the possibilities of language the cop led him around the side of the building. His roommate had hung himself from some interior hook and jumped out the window. Apparently, it took some work to get him back down.

O’Toole and Dave were cool with a bunch of the project kids. One of them was such a notorious drug dealer, that they had banned him from his unit. His mother had to walk down to the street to talk to him. He slept on O’Toole’s couch more often than not. Once when I fell asleep in their recliner I kept waking up to find him feigning sleep, just watching me, waiting for something. It was clear Angel and the other project kids considered me an outsider, a white boy, an easy vic.

“Yeah, Angel asked what you was and he said if you ain’t Puerto Rican you can’t go up in the bricks or they’ll jump you. He said I’m an exception cuz I grew up like them,” O’Toole warned me.

“I don’t really give a fuck, kid... fuckin’ dirty ass public housing orphan-ass motherfuckers.”

A couple of years earlier O’Toole got busted with a bunch of dime bags in the projects. The DT’s let him go and called his mother. They knew her from back in the

day. These ironies were lost on everyone but me. I believed that I was past any of the class-consciousness the city bred. Boston was only temporary, a working vacation.

Ty decided to stake out the building from the inside. He figured that Kevin probably hadn't had the chance to move any of our stuff. So he sat in the living room, read, and sketched in front of the TV like he always did. He caught power naps on the couch, and ran downstairs whenever someone rang the bell for Kevin.

"Kevin can't see you now," he told the two heavysset men who showed up carrying a six-pack.

The hostility flowed upstairs. I could feel fear in my ribcage. I washed it down with some rum. It was only after two days of non-stop vigilance that he took a break, and went over to his girlfriend's for dinner. That was when the box truck showed up.

As soon as Ty got home from Veronica's I told him about the Cubans. I was in the middle of reheating the red rice and beans he cooked the night before.

"There's no cornbread left?"

"I ate it for breakfast. Veronica made paella tonight."

"With sausage and shrimp?"

"Shrimp. No sausage."

"Word... that's how I like it. There's like a quarter of a blunt in the ashtray if you want it. My friends were all going to see Tribe Called Quest, but they didn't have a ticket for me, so one of them hooked me up."

"Nah. You know I don't smoke those things. What's Tribe Called Quest?"

"Some hip-hop. I don't know. You might like it."

Ty listened to old salsa and merengue, maybe some jazz late at night. Since he found out his great-grandfather was Cuban he started exploring his Latin roots, stopped

dating heavy white women and started going out to Spanish clubs. He even started dressing up in a pair of Dominican slacks that he bought too tight and wore all wrong.

Later that night we were drinking rum with mango juice and listening to NPR. All the windows were open. It was a cool night. The crosscurrents made the hair on my arms stand up. I leafed through a copy of *The Nation*, half-read an article on youth gangs in El Salvador. Most of the men had died in the civil war and now the fatherless children were coming of age. They invented American style gangs and turned the leftover guns on each other.

“Remember I used to have that FMLN bandana in my room? I wish I still had that.” I spoke half to myself.

Voices floated up through the back hallway. I sat up from my sprawl. Ty sprung out of his chair. The air got dense. Some internal barometer started dropping like it would never find the bottom. I felt queasy. My stomach turned ugly, but I snapped to attention. The remains of the blunt eyed me from the ashtray. *You can't do this right now*, it said. *How are you going to match his pace?*

Ty's voice snapped me up.

“Let's do this...now.”

He snatched up the knife and moved quick and silent into the kitchen. His boots drummed the stairs.

“Aw... fuck, man.”

I slapped my face, and grabbed a pair of Timberlands from my room. I slipped on a wife-beater and flexed my skinny arms in the mirror. The homemade tattoo on my arm was laughable. There was-n't anything hard and sharp in me, just a small collection of comic book heroes and tough talk clichés.

By the time I got downstairs Ty had already burst through the door and was inside the kitchen. He had Kevin backed up against the far wall, his face level with Kevin's chest. I marked the knife behind his back, the agitated crouch. Kevin was trying to protest, but he was trembling, not really making any sense. He was caught between different voices; trying to speak calmly as if to a rabid dog, then pleading and whining. He reminded me of that kid on the playground; like some oversized golem, he cringed and flailed his arms. He tried to cover the stink of his fear and guilt with play-acted indignation.

I stopped in the doorway and looked around. Half finished bottles—some lain out, others still standing—occupied the kitchen table. Newspapers lay piled up on the chairs. The blinds were closed, but the room was brightly lit. It seemed like a room that might belong to an old man who had lost track of how to care for himself.

Then another man came out from the adjacent bedroom. Ty shifted his body, so that he could face both of them. He looked back at me, and I knew that I was going to have to handle him. The man radiated confusion.

“Is this some foul play? Is this here some foul play going on?”

Apparently he thought that he had walked into an episode of *COPS*. I held back a smile.

“Damn straight this is some foul play. This is somewhere you don't want to be,” Ty responded, without fully acknowledging him.

A woman emerged from behind him. They both looked bedraggled and scared. She was wearing an old leather jacket with fringe on the shoulders. Her hairdo was big and she would have looked right at home in a Van Halen video. He looked like the high

school baseball star who had impregnated the wrong girl in a post game haze. They turned to me.

“We just came over to hang out. We didn’t know there’d be trouble. Kevin didn’t tell us nothing. We didn’t know...”

I cut him off, “It’s business, it ain’t personal.” Now I was quoting *The Godfather*. Their fear put me at ease.

He went to shake my hand, and they looked at me anxiously. I gestured my head toward the door and they rushed out without glancing back at Kevin. Maybe they held hands and rushed through the driveway like frightened children. Maybe they stopped for a moment and held each other in the tired blue van parked across the street. After a while, when they had gotten far enough away they must have come back to the problem that faced them every Friday night: Where can we go to do the things we do when no one else is looking?

I hadn’t really thought about why they were there until I opened the door to the first bedroom. Two bare mattresses met at the corner of the nicotine stained wall. A TV and a VCR completed the triangle. Piles of videotapes peppered the room. The shades were shut, the lights too bright. I didn’t have time to imagine what went on in there. I didn’t feel the allure of the grotesque. The smell of fermented sex kept me from reading narratives into the strata of bedding, underclothes and videotapes, from seeing all the desperation that had marked that ugly tableau. Maybe now, I might have stood in the doorway and tried to imagine what brought them to that room. Probably, they just needed a door that closed and something to cushion them from the floor.

The second bedroom was only a slight variation on the same theme. Or rather the room was themeless. The space wasn’t set up for elaborate play. They were purely

utilitarian, just rooms to fuck in. I cleared the rooms like a soldier, scanning for our stuff, and keeping my feet behind the threshold. I tried to keep the imagery to a minimum. I didn't want to wake up, mulling the potential scenes that had taken place in those rooms over a cup of milky tea.

Meanwhile, the action had shifted to the living room. Kevin seemed to take up most of the narrow room. He flailed his arms like a doomed vampire victim. It was hopeless. He might as well have sat down and lived out the episode with some dignity.

Instead, he stumbled in front of Ty in some desperate attempt to slow things down. There wasn't much left of him. Ty put two hands on his shoulder and tossed him into a side table. The lamp fell down, didn't break, and sent an unfortunate spotlight on the action. Kevin's face was red and contorted. I looked away. There was another pile of videos next to the couch. I glanced at a label. Someone had put a big red X over the title, but it was still completely legible: *Nasty Cum Drinkers*.

I looked into the next room and spotted Ty's TV and my VCP. They were all set up on a cheap aluminum TV stand as if they belonged there. I called out to Ty, playing the beat cop who just discovered the murder weapon.

"Hey! There's our stuff."

Ty shifted his face into a deeper gear of angry, but Kevin cut him off before he could deliver his lines.

"I found it! I found it!" He chanted in a half scream.

"Where did you find it?" Ty asked.

"On the front porch."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

Ty shifted into a crouch. The front porch had been under construction for weeks. There was no front porch to find them on. Kevin swayed above like a tree in a strong breeze. He shook all over. His eyes were wild and vacant. I looked away again.

Ty exploded out of his crouch with an uppercut that hit flush on the chin. Kevin rocked backwards into the wall. He steadied himself against it. When he looked up I saw that his hands were cradling a set of false teeth. His mouth formed a bloody O. Red saliva pooled into his hands. The teeth looked like the walls of a castle, the mixture of blood and spit a rising moat. Then he started mewling.

“I have AIDS. I have AIDS.” Bubbles formed and broke on his lips.

“Oh, shit.” Ty stepped back and brought his hand up to his face. He had left his glasses upstairs.

“Yo! I’m gonna carry our shit upstairs. I’m done with this.”

I disconnected the VCP, swung it under my arm and walked past them without looking. Ty followed soon after. I had already poured myself a glass of rum.

Ty called the police and gave them the bare bones narrative. He spoke cop-speak and saved them the trouble of translation. I had halved my pack of cigarettes by the time they showed up. They were two young Irish cops, non-descript, no-nonsense. They looked at me, and then looked at Ty, tried to figure the relationship. Ty and I read their question. I let him do the talking.

“This is my *stepson*, Alex.”

“Officers.” I greeted them with a respectful head nod.

“So, what’s going on here? You reported a burglary?”

“Yes. Three days ago. Two pieces of electronic equipment. Namely, this TV and this VCP...”

“What’s a VCP?” the cop interrupted him.

“It just plays, it doesn’t record,” I explained.

Ty continued, “Anyway. There was no sign of break in. The gentleman downstairs has the keys, and he is a seriously degenerate alcoholic who made it clear from conversation that he was responsible. So, after ascertaining that he was in possession of our property, we went down and retrieved it.”

Ty knew how to keep it vague but succinct. The taller officer took out his notepad. “So when you went downstairs, his apartment door was ajar and you could see your property.”

“That’s what happened,” I said and we all shared a smile at the law’s expense.

After they left, Ty poured me a drink and sat down in the big chair. “You did well tonight. I felt like you really had my back.”

“Thanks. It wasn’t a big thing. You know. A little acting...”

“Well, you acted well.” He paused. “You’ve really become a man.”

The next morning Ty pulled me aside as I was waiting for the kettle to boil.

“Come here. There was a tape in the VCR.”

He handed it to me. I turned it right side up. The label read, *The Lifelong Enjoyment of the Male Orgasm*.

“What the fuck is that? It’s not a porno. It must be a documentary on jerking off or something.”

“Are going to put it in?” He laughed.

“Hell, no. I’m not watching that shit with you.”

The kettle called out steaming, so I walked into the kitchen and took it off the stove. I dropped a tea bag into the mug and slowly poured in the water. I took my time,

watching the watermark rise, slowly drowning the bag until dark tendrils began streaming from the filter, muddying the water. I spaced out for a while, just like that, standing over my tea like a half-asleep kid who has just woken from a dream and is still lost in the pleasure of forgetting himself.