

Just Another Day*

Martin

Every time Martin Mills closes his eyes, he sees blood. The smell of it coating the insides of his nostrils, the thick, coppery scent strong enough to make him gag. The sight of it soaking into the sand, covering his hands like crimson gloves, dripping lazily off the left cheek of the man lying dead beside him. The sound of it splattering the desert floor with each new explosion or rattle of gunfire, followed closely by the sickening thumps of bodies or parts of bodies lifelessly collapsing. It's always during one of those explosions, much closer and louder than any before, that Martin awakens, suddenly and all at once, drenched in sweat with the chalky taste of bile at the back of his throat. He turns in bed, shivering despite the thick comforter tangled around him, the fabric damp from his sweat, to peer out the window. The faint light of the rising sun reflecting off the ever-rippling surface of the Suwannee River assures him that he is no longer in Afghanistan.

The rest of the morning plays out normally, devoid of further episodes. Martin gets up, showers off the fresh night of nervous sweats, and runs a razor absentmindedly over his face, his head. He can't abide hair and has enough damn things to worry about without needing to ensure every strand is in place. Making toast and coffee to make it through the rest of the morning, he seats himself in his usual chair at the breakfast table and says good morning to his kids as they wake up. Tara, his eldest, is the first up, hurriedly running a brush through her tangled hair as she knocks on each of her siblings' doors. Chandler bursts out his door like a bullet, certain as always that he is the first one into

the bathroom (consistently oblivious in that thirteen-year-old way to the fact that Tara was always up before him and had beaten him a while ago).

Maggie takes her time, emerging slowly and hesitantly from her dark bedroom, her close-cropped hair plastered to her head from a night of fitful sleep. She'd never slept all that well, for any of her ten years, something she and her father have in common. She smiles at him and he smiles back, forgetting just for a moment about the horrors of his past night.

The rest of the morning passes in a rush of school bags, sweaters, and sweet rolls, and after a hurried "goodbye see you later staysafe," Tara, Chandler, and Maggie are out the door for another day of school. Martin can see out of the front window from the table. He watches as Tara slides into the driver's seat, Chandler into the passenger's, and Maggie behind him, the quick succession of slamming doors and the roar of the engine signaling their imminent departure. He settles back further into his chair as Tara backs the car out of the driveway and eases into the slow morning traffic of their quiet forest road, the sound of tires on gravel reminding him of the work day that would begin all too soon. Martin knew the garage would fall apart without his presence, but that knowledge didn't make him enjoy the work any more. A quiet office job would suit him better, the quiet contemplation doing him more good than the heavy labor, but no firm is interested in hiring people like him. Still, he doesn't enjoy the garage: messy and chaotic and hostile. The noise is oppressive, the work unrelenting, and the smell coats the inside of his nostrils, the thick, oily scent strong enough to make him gag. Inevitably, the blood returns.

Tara

Tara wishes one of her siblings would say something, but they never do. Her own attempts at conversation fall on deaf ears. Maggie keeps to herself, reading in the backseat for the entirety of the twenty-minute ride to school. Chandler, never much of a reader, scrolls on his phone or watches videos. Both are content to be somewhere else as often as possible. Tara attempts to turn on the radio to give her something to do besides drive. Maggie lets out a soft sigh from the backseat and Chandler promptly turns it off, never taking his eyes off his phone screen.

It's a long twenty minutes.

Tara pulls up in front of the school, unlocking the car doors with her left hand and waving her siblings out with her right, with the usual exclamation amounting to "Have fun, meet me at the car by 3:30." She knows Chandler won't, though; he rarely comes home before dark, staying out as long as possible with his friends. Unsurprisingly, he exits with a sullen look not much different than his usual sullen look. Maggie at least has the decency to smile and say goodbye before closing her door, far gentler than her brother's slam. Tara's been trying to coax the aggressive streak out of him since he learned to walk, to no avail. Nature wasn't just crushing nurture, it was throwing it around and stepping on it a few times before slamming a door in Tara's face. She worries for him. At least Tara had Mom for a few years, and even then some decent nannies after dad returned overseas. Chandler didn't really have anybody but her, and she has never really known what to do. Tara pulls the car around to administrative parking and finds her usual spot beneath

the overhanging oak, the only part of the parking lot that won't spend most of the day baking in the Florida sun. She had graduated from high school last year by some miracle, yet found herself at the joint elementary-middle school she had attended, just across the street. This was the product of maintaining a friendship with her 4th grade teacher, who had been more than happy to ask management if a former student could interview for a desk job while saving for college. While she has no intention of actually going to college, Tara had accepted the position anyway; a little extra money couldn't hurt, and it keeps her close to her family. So here she is, answering calls from exasperated parents for a few dollars an hour so she can be nearby if Chandler gets into another fight or Maggie has another one of her "moments."

She puts the car in park, cuts the engine, and gets out, measuring each movement to take up as much time as possible. Eventually, she's out of the car and seated behind her usual desk in the school's main office, not likely to move much besides the occasional dash to the bathroom during slower hours. She does her best to maintain her outward smile, but isn't anywhere close to ready for all the bullshit the day throws her way. After years of caring for her siblings, she understands why mom left. Nobody is ready to be a parent at nineteen, least of all her.

Chandler

Taking another triumphant drag of the stolen cigarette, Chandler smiles his first real smile of the day. That taste of victory, of forbidden pleasures made his own, was always so sweet, even when it was someone else's success. As he exhales an acrid cloud, he silently thanks Noah's dad's smoking habit

for the umpteenth time, as well as Noah's quick fingers. These little retreats behind the school's cafeteria also give him some much-needed incentive to come to school besides escaping from his nosy older sister. These days even that doesn't count for anything, with Tara so close by. She could be anywhere at any time, a fact that keeps Chandler constantly on edge. It feels like she watches his every move and could appear around any corner. Not that he has ever seen her outside of the office, but still. Only back here, in the ditch between the cafeteria and the neighboring high school's football field, is he truly safe. Just him and Noah against everyone else, like his dad would always tell him about his time in the Army. "It feels like just you and your squad against the world, every day just another day. Being all you can be, just like they tell you. Once you find that, don't ever lose it." *Maybe that's why Dad's so fucked up*, Chandler reflects, as he flicks away the smoldering butt. *He just doesn't have anybody anymore.*

Maggie

She sets her book down cover-up on the bed and sinks back into her pillows, defeated. Her usual methods aren't working. Counting sheep does nothing. (They keep escaping in a way that's keeping her engaged.) Reading until her eyelids begin to droop does nothing. (They refuse to droop.) Even a particularly busy day at school did nothing to exhaust her anxious mind, only her body. She knows Chandler doesn't have this problem, due to his incessant snoring, and she doesn't want to bother Tara with something as unimportant as insomnia; she already has enough on her plate making sure the four of them always have something to eat. So instead she

goes to Daddy; he knows a thing or two about not sleeping.

When she enters, he is sitting on the bed with his back to her, gazing out over the river that serves as their backyard. At least that's how Daddy refers to it, usually following up with some quip about not having to mow it. Doesn't matter, Maggie thought. It'd be Tara who would end up mowing it most of the time anyway. She's aware Daddy doesn't do most of the things other daddies do, but she understands it. She knows he has the dreams, too.

He notices her and gestures to the bed beside him, smoothing out a spot with his hand as though it'll make a difference on a mattress. She goes over and sits with him, and he gently rests a hand on her shoulder as the pair look out over the dark water, its movement only faintly perceptible in the light of the halfmoon. They stay like that for some time, each enjoying the other's presence on a lonely night. Maggie has always felt connected to Daddy as the one constant in her life. She knows something happened to her mom, and Tara, despite her best efforts, can't fill that motherly gap. Maybe it just came from their being less than a decade apart in age. And she knows Chandler is "a pain in the ass," as she's often heard Tara refer to him under her breath, and not someone she can go to for support. He always came home smelling faintly of smoke, but she doesn't think Tara ever notices. It must just be one of those things that happens when you turn thirteen. At least that's what Daddy said after Chandler came back from school with scrapes and bruises he didn't want to talk about. Maggie doesn't want to turn thirteen; it looks horrible. Ten is such a nice, round number, and she never smells like smoke or comes home looking like she had been

in an accident.

She does have dreams, though. Usually she just hears loud booms that startle her awake, but sometimes they're really scary. One night she woke up screaming after seeing heads on sticks, like the ones she'd heard Daddy telling Chandler about when he had asked for war stories. Maggie has always been interested in his stories, too. They make her feel closer to him, and she likes that. He doesn't usually let anyone very close, but she knows she is special.

She doesn't want to like the scary ones, but she does. They make her feel closest to Daddy, since he usually cries after, and then she hugs him, and he hugs her back and kisses the top of her head. He rests there atop her hair, cut short like his, until he stops crying. She can always smell the oil on his hands, even after a thorough scrub, and feel their calluses gently pressing into her back. In the morning he takes her for ice cream, which is definitely the best part of the routine. They don't need any of that tonight, though. They just need to know that they are there for each other and that nightmares always end. Especially ones they don't really understand.

by Ryan Murphy

**Content Warning: Descriptions of War*

