

Adam snapped awake in his bed. He was covered in sweat that stunk like tequila. The neighbor's flood lights poured into his room, and he could hear the leaves of the palm trees outside being whipped around in the wind. It was the same nightmare, the elevator, that street, he could swear he smelled cigarettes but he hadn't smoked in years. Not sober at least. "Who the fuck?" He said aloud, quickly reconsidering the volume of his voice. The smell hit him like a brick, as if someone had blown smoke in his face. Goosebumps crawled up Adam's back as the neighbors flood lights turned off. Hangxiety he thought, but there was something in the air, a presence that scared him.

He slowly got out of bed, leaving his safe space, his hair stuck to his face. His stomach was screaming for sustenance. He ignored the cry and walked to the windows in his living room. He had to stifle a giggle wondering how he ended up here. A half drunk beer sat on the windowsill, the neighborhood palm trees swayed in the breeze, the sun was setting and the cotton color skies appeared, he didn't deserve it. Adam grabbed the beer as he looked out of his window, half looking for a potential smoker and half hoping he didn't find one. The alleyway was empty, no one was on the street.

A faint buzz broke his concentration. Adam looked at his front door across the living room. Locked. He began to let down his guard. He reached for the television remote and played some cartoons. Animals and inanimate objects interacted on the screen, he lowered the volume, a headache was looming. Adam slugged his toasty, warm beer as he made his way to the kitchen for another, before the hangover had a chance to set in. He opened the fridge and, standing in his underwear, let the frigid air cool his bloated face. Three beers left, another buzz reminded Adam he could order beer from his phone, the future was fucking incredible.

After evaluating his fridge and cracking open a cold one, Adam looked to his right, hearing a soft hiss coming from the stove. A burner was on. He couldn't remember turning that on, how he got home, or when he last ate. Normally, he wouldn't bat an eye, normally, he'd be ashamed for an hour, laugh just a little bit and have another beer. But there was something off about tonight. There was ash on the stove top. He must have come home with Billy to have a few more beers after the bar, and in their stupor, lit cigarettes on the stove. Years of partial blackout had given Adam the ability to piece the blurs together, a mosaic of memory that smelled like old beer and a little bit of piss. He clicked off the stove and exhaled deeply.



Adam turned on a few soft lights in his apartment and made his way back to his bed in search of the source of the soft buzz. The buzz had gone dull for a bit as he pulled the blankets off of his bed, the phone fell out of the blankets, still warm and moist to the touch. The phone buzzed again. A picture of Billy's face appeared on Adam's cell phone screen and he smiled, a call from Billy always meant drinks on the beach. Free drinks.

The two decided to meet at the Rough Break. Adam scrolled through his phone. He called Her, again. Multiple times. His fingers began to write an apology as he realized none of the past thirty six texts he'd sent had gone through. The shame was back. He deleted the message thread, out of sight, out of mind. It was easier than therapy, and drinking was cheaper.

Adam finished his beer, tossed his empathy to the side and threw on a Hawaiian shirt. After a few minutes a cab arrived outside his apartment complex. It was full of geriatrics and yuppies but it was a pleasant neighborhood and he wouldn't be robbed or arrested if he drunkenly stumbled through the houses. He got in the car and texted Billy. Adam felt the jolt of the car as it moved forward, he snapped his head up almost instinctively and before pulling onto another street, Adam saw it. A small orange glow under the trees outside of his apartment caught his attention. For a second he thought it was just a reflection of his car's brake lights. It wasn't until the brake lights lit up that Adam saw the source of the glow. Someone was smoking a cigarette.

Adam knew this wasn't just someone enjoying a smoke. Those same goosebumps crawled back up his spine.

There's no way, he thought. The apartment was locked from the inside. It had to be. She was the only other person with a key, and she threw hers in his face months ago. Could this person, this figure have been in his apartment?

Adam imagined Billy grabbing his backpack, fully equipped with 2 packs of cigarettes, a lighter, and a bottle of white wine, screw top of course, no need to fiddle around with a bottle opener. By the time the pair would open the bottle on the beach, they'd be three sheets to the wind and utterly helpless in opening a corked bottle. Adam had moved here with a ring on that special finger, however, after getting friendlier and friendlier with liquor and Billy, all he had left now was Billy and a quarter inch tan line that broke his heart.

Billy and Adam were beach bums, who'd found the sunshine in Key West particularly appealing. After working together for a few months the two became close friends, evading arrest, bar fights, and giggling in Billy's cramped studio apartment as the air conditioner blew stale air into the room avoiding any conversation that didn't touch upon sports or what was in the movie theaters that weekend.

The Keys were empty this time of year, season was over and the snowbirds had returned to their concrete cages in the North. The tourists loved the soft times, and it infuriated Adam. His home was someone else's playground. The place where all he'd seen was pain was someone's childhood nostalgia. The scenery of his tragedies were nothing more than a vacation spot for those rich assholes. Beach bums like Billy and Adam were committed to a life. The squalor and the sand gave them the freedom they sought out in their past lives.

Tied to a corporate job and hating every day, Billy began to drink before work, then at work. Eventually came the day he was so drunk at work, he told everyone in his company's Human Resources department, of which he was faithfully employed for 5 years, to "fuck right off". He squandered his financial success. But he gained a friend in Adam, and they played tit for tat drinking at the beach. The two would often scam college kids at the Rough Break's pool tables when they felt they weren't financially equipped to continue drinking. There was no season on frat boys and they always seemed to have enough money to lose. Maybe there was some cash in their future.

Adam arrived at the Rough Break, sure enough, Billy was chatting up a couple young guys at the pool table. It was going to be one of those nights.

After a few rounds of drinks, purchased with trust fund money, Adam was drunk enough to ask Billy for a cigarette.

"Nothing feels better than getting those kids' money, hey Bill?"

"Yeah."

"You alright?" asked Adam, knowing full well his friend was *not* feeling alright.

No sooner than he asked was Billy throwing up all over Adam's shoes. It wasn't the first time. A buzz in Adam's pocket reminded him that life wasn't always this way. It was a private number, he answered. All he heard was sobbing. A woman. But not into the receiver, she was a ways away but he could hear it.



It was her voice.

**“Hello? Is that you? I’m sorry. I’m sorry and I mean it.”**

**“Sorry for what?”** Billy asked as he caught his second wind, throwing up the rumplemintz they bought with their winnings.

The person on the phone hung up. Adam looked at Billy, his eyes wide and welling with tears. Adam had squandered his love.

**“Nothing, don’t trip, it was a wrong number.”**

**“I know you’re smart enough to know that I’m smart enough to know that contextually you wouldn’t say that to someone if it was a wrong number.”** said Billy, the sly fuck.

**“Next bar?”** asked Adam  
**“Absolutely.”**

After a bit of a walk the two ended up on a sketchy looking street. It was grossly familiar to Adam. He knew the street. He remembered the Goddamned street. Every cell in his body wanted to run. But Billy wouldn’t shut up about this place. A speakeasy opened by some restaurant group, owned by who the hell cares. It was another bar and another cocktail away from reality.

The pair walked down the street until they arrived at an abandoned mechanic’s shop. Adam turned on his phone’s flashlight and walked through an aisle of hydraulic lifts until they found it. The office. Billy pushed Adam aside and slammed his fist on the door with all the grace of a rookie cop. A sliding peephole opened up revealing a pair of eyes, neon blue light illuminated the room behind the doorman. The blue slit of light shined on Billy and Adam as the doorman asked for a password.

**“Fidelio”** Billy barked confidently  
**“Isn’t that cool? It’s a Kubrick reference.”**, he giggled.

The peephole slid closed and the door opened. The pair walked into the office and an elevator door opened up as the doorman closed the window to reality behind them. Adam’s phone buzzed again. He denied the call as they walked into the elevator.

**“Apparently this place was used for bootlegging back in the twenties.”**, said Billy as the two traveled into the crust of the Earth.

Adam was surprised to see a full bar and a beautiful woman behind it. Small groups of people gathered around small lanterns on their tables as women in fishnets brought

Shaft. Written by Juan Carlos Fernandez. Illustrated by Jorg de Vos.



them drinks. Cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air and it gave Adam the chills. After a few cocktails his anxiety had ceased and he allowed himself a bathroom break. He relieved himself at a urinal as a bathroom attendant stood by in case anyone was in desperate need of cologne or a condom. He received a phone call. He didn’t have reception. But there it was as he answered clear as day, **“you were never sorry”**, again from a distance. And more sobbing.

**“I am”**, yelled Adam at the urinal.

Half expecting a reaction from the bathroom attendant, Adam looked around. No one was in the restroom. There he stood, dick in one hand, cell phone in the other, clueless. He hung up, then using his free hand tucked away his manhood. Silence. He washed his hands for twenty six seconds with hot water and exited the restroom.

Again. Silence.

As he exited the restroom the sobbing began to play over the bar’s speakers. It echoed against the walls. The patrons didn’t seem to notice or care. Adam ran to Billy, he grabbed his friend by the shoulder pulling him from the bar only to see there was a square bottle of bourbon shoved into his mouth. His jaw had split, exposing all his teeth and the entirety of his tongue in a bloody mess.

Adam looked around noticing all the patrons had bodily injuries. Some had only small wounds and looked relatively alright, save a stab wound or missing appendage, but others... others had blood on their necks, black and dry on their gray flesh as if they had been dead for months. Adam ran to the elevator. The car had risen up leaving only the exposed elevator shaft. Adam pressed the button as if his life had depended on it.

In unison Billy and the corpses in the room twisted their heads in Adam’s direction. The mob began to approach him. Adam was sweating, out of nowhere his phone buzzed. The corpses crowded around Adam at the open elevator shaft. They pressed him closer and closer to the edge. The heels of Adam’s shoes hung over the edge, his back to the abyss. The crowd of undead stopped moving. Adam’s arms were stretched out across the shaft exposing his torso. The crowd split. Billy’s corpse walked through the dead and stopped a few feet in front of Adam. Slowly, painfully, pulling the bottle of bourbon, and a few teeth, out of his throat. Quickly, for a dead guy, Billy swung the bottle at Adam’s head and connected.

Adam fell down the shaft. As he landed his left leg and right arm crunched beneath him. His phone landed a foot or two away from him. Buzz, Buzz, Buzz. He tried to move. His nerves screamed **“fuck you”**.

He looked up, as a humm grew closer. The elevator slowly descended on Adam. Every bone breaking before his skull finally shattered, fragments splintered into his brain, all of which he felt.

**“Ahhhhh fuck”** Adam screamed. He snapped awake from a nightmare. He was on a couch, Billy’s, thank God. He must have blacked out. Adam laughed to himself and shook the blanket off himself scanning the room for his friend. He stood up and checked his pockets, all accounted for, phone, wallet, keys. And what’s this? A matchbook. Great. Where the fuck was Billy? A studio is one room, it’d be hard to lose someone, there isn’t even a stove in this place. Adam checked his phone, nothing, there was a chance Billy had left early to go grab a few “breakfast sammiches”. Adam grabbed a bottle of wine from the fridge and waited for his friend to return with food. After two hours of watching reruns of a cartoon canceled in 1997 Adam started to worry. He examined the matchbook, a likely clue to Billy’s location, for all he knew Billy had gotten arrested. Adam loaded his backpack with essentials, a phone charger, a fresh bottle of wine and a small knife, just in case.

Adam walked to the Rough Break and started to retrace his steps. And there it was, that street, the street from his nightmare, from his death. He walked to the mechanic’s shop. The office was unoccupied, the door was unlocked. He let himself in and he stepped to the elevator. Pressing the button solemnly, he stepped in and opened his backpack. He grabbed the knife and held it tightly in his right hand. The door opened and the bar was empty but for the bartender, and a few figures scattered throughout the room. Adam made his way towards Billy, fear pushing him towards the only familiar face in the bar.

The blood on Billy’s hoodie was now dry and black, it climbed up from his shoulders to his exposed jawbones like scales. The bottle was still lodged in Billy’s throat, the corners jutting out sharply.

**“Sff dff bffy”** slid from what was left of Billy’s mouth.

**“What?”**

Billy pulled the bottle from his throat. His cold hard flesh popping, cracking and flaking away from his head like dandruff.

**“Sit down buddy.”**

Adam sat at the bar next to his dead friend. The bartender approached with two short glasses, one large ice cube in each.



*"Oh and you can drop that knife, it won't do you any good here."*

Adam's head dropped as he placed the pocket knife on the bar.

*"What did we do?"* Asked Adam, *"Why do we deserve this?"*.

*"I know why I'm here Adam, and so do you, you just don't wanna accept it."*

The hair on the back of Adam's neck stood at attention. The smell of cigarettes wafted into his nostrils. He looked up and saw them. The figure was covered in black from head to toe.

*"Ignore them, that's the owner."*  
*"Were they in my home?"* asked Adam.  
*"It's likely, but you're in theirs now."*

Billy poured two fingers into Adam's glass and the two toasted.

*"All you did was get fired from your job?"*

Adam finished his drink in one go.

*"I had to get home after work didn't I? I hit a kid. The next day I moved to the beach. But that's old news for me. Now you, they've told me what you've done. You were a bad boy, buddy."*

Billy drank from his glass.

*"I told her I was sorry."* Adam breathed quietly.

Billy smashed his glass on Adam's head.

*"What do our apologies really mean, man?"*

Adam fell to the ground, blood began to pour from his head. The alcohol stung as it worked to disinfect his fresh wound.

Adam looked up at his friend, the color gone from his flesh, his skin now gray and blue.

*"That kid is still gonna be dead, and she's still gonna be hurt by you."*

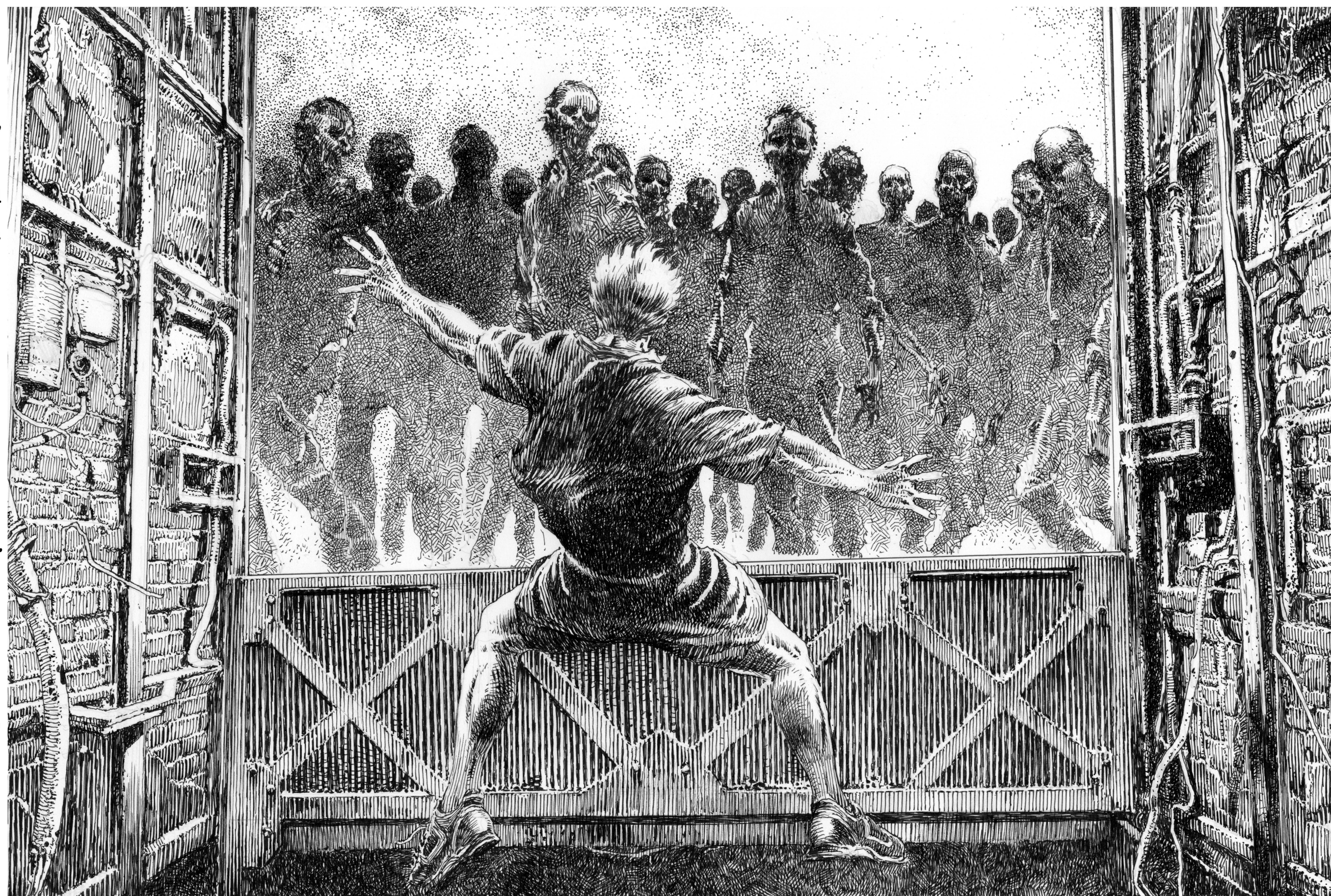
*"Then what can I do? I didn't mean to say that...I didn't mean to do that."* Adam responded, knowing the time had come.

*"Oh come now Adam, en vino veritas, right dude? Oh I said it when I was drunk."* Billy mocked. *"Who the fuck cares, that is you, that is who you ARE, Adam."*

*"Then what do I do? How do I fix it?"*

*"This is it for us Adam, this is the rest of time for us. But hey, it's an open bar."*

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Suddenly, there it was again, the crying blasted over the speakers. The figure walked towards the two men. Adam couldn't make out a face. The few patrons in the bar in unison looked at him. He rose to his feet, sweat now covering his face and burning the cuts on his head.

Blood was flowing from the top of his head and into his left ear. The crying grew louder on the speakers. Adam ran to the elevator, the shaft was exposed but the call button was already glowing.

Billy poured himself another drink and followed the crowd towards Adam. The elevator was moving but Adam couldn't see it above him. The elevator car arrived, it rose from the blackness beneath him, and Adam was not in any position to question it. The speakers went silent and Adam looked behind him, half expecting a scene from a horror movie standing at his back.

The crowd stood there, motionless, their dead eyes locked with Adam's. Billy had a drink in his hand, the dead split like the Red Sea and he walked towards Adam. Adam closed his eyes as Billy was so close he could now smell the death in the room mixed with whiskey on his breath. Billy extended the drink to Adam.

The doors of the elevator split open. Adam solemnly grabbed the drink and backed up into the elevator, a lump sat in his throat as he knew it was now time.

Billy looked at Adam, a half smile formed by his shattered jaw, a smile composed of jagged bones and rotting teeth.

*"It won't hurt that bad, buddy. I'll see you soon."* said Billy.

Adam shut his eyes and took a drink as he heard the doors of the elevator close. The sting of the drink hit his throat as he felt himself now dropping down deeper into the Earth. He was ready for his absolution. Adam felt himself getting hotter, but soon he'd back at the bar with Billy, and the drinks were free.

**The End?**

## **Dive into the twisted mind behind Shaft**

**Q: What inspired you this story?**

**Juan Carlos:** *I was born and raised in Southern California in a big city and recently made the move to Central Florida; in both places there is incredible natural beauty but with big cities there is always a lingering darkness. Something that lives in between sunny days and empty beaches that scares the shit out of me. I often find myself writing about outcasts, people who are displaced and the two met, and somewhere along the way Shaft was born.*

**Q: What can you say about the underlying themes of this story?**

**Juan Carlos:** *I didn't think too deeply about this story's thematic implications when I was writing it. I was just interested in writing something I felt was truly scary. However I think that this story in the current social climate is fun and scary, this is a contemporary campfire story. It's a lot about regret as much as it is about acceptance. However at the end of the day the story is about two guys paying the piper.*

**Q: Any works which informed your writing?**

**Juan Carlos:** *On the list of inspiration for this story are films like Hellraiser (2022), Zola, and A Nightmare on Elm Street. As far as literary inspirations, the works of Neil Gaiman have been close to my heart since I first laid my eyes on the Sandman graphic novels. His short stories were in my mind when putting pen to paper on this story.*

**HAPPY**

**MISFITS**