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My first memory of death is the day my grandmother died. She had a massive stroke and suffered terribly, and now it's my turn to suffer.

I'm strapped to a chair in an airtight room. There are a bunch of windows surrounding me and people gawking at me. One lady is smiling and another is crying. A priest clutches the rosary tightly and is saying a meaningless prayer over and over for my soul.

It won't help.

A stethoscope is attached to my thorax so a doctor can listen via headphones outside the room to make sure everything is carried out.

In a few minutes this room will fill up with cyanide, prohibiting my respiratory enzymes from transferring oxygen from my blood to body cells. Undoubtedly, I will hold my breath, prolonging my suffering, and then I will start to bang my head uncontrollably against the pole behind me.

And then my life will be over, snuffed out in the gas chamber. I'm not a rapist or even the murderer they think I am. My only hope is that some day somebody figures out the truth.

The truth -- that's funny as hell, especially when you consider none of this is real. It's all something in my head and the sad part is I can't get anyone to believe me.

Let me start at the beginning. Try to remember what I tell you now,

because it all comes into play later. My name is Scott Hampton, and this is my story – a story about suffering. It starts 30 years ago when everything was fresh and new, or at least it was supposed to be.

Actually it all started on a playground at Owen Brown High School. I was just an average guy, about five foot eight, no more than 160 pounds, brown hair, brown eyes – just average. Like most teenagers, confidence was never my strong suit, but I did a good job of faking it and that's what usually got me in trouble.

Today's trouble was named Bobby Palmer. He was hardly average. In fact, he was my exact opposite. Bobby had that appeal that only a few people were lucky to have. The looks, the luck and the talent, Bobby seemed to be good at everything, including throwing a picture-perfect punch as I had just found out. He was good at everything all right. Including whooping my ass. I struggled to push myself up off the ground.

“Get up. You want to lie about sleeping with my sister? Get up.”

I struggled to my feet and threw a wild right hand. Bobby side stepped it and walloped me in the jaw with a left hook, knocking me down again. I could taste blood in my mouth.

“What's up you don't got anything to say now?”

He hit me again, the crowd cheered him on as if he was a gladiator in the coliseum. There was always a crowd whenever there was a fight. It seems that as soon as someone throws a punch, people appear out of nowhere begging for blood. So this is what it was like when the Christians were fed to the lions, people cheering on your pain just so they could be entertained. But I didn't see the crowd cheering for Bobby. I saw them laughing at me.

I had to save face. I struggled to my feet and grabbed a broken tree limb. I swung blindly at Bobby, backing him up, hoping to gain some advantage and, even more, some cheers.

He ran out of space and had his back to an old tree. I closed my eyes and swung as hard as I could. The limb shattered into pieces, but somewhere between me closing my eyes and swinging the limb Bobby ducked.

The tree had a huge gash where the limb hit it. If I had hit him I would have killed him. But he did not go too far I felt my nose go sprawling across my face from his right hand knocking my feet from under me.

He dove on top of me, and I knew the fight was over. The last place you want to end up in a fight with a big guy is on the ground. On the ground, the big guy always has the advantage. Then again, I had no advantage anywhere against Bobby.

“Lying piece of --”

Before Bobby finished the sentence Mr. Welles yanked him off me. Bobby fought and kicked to get back at me. I just lay there with my eye swollen shut and a mouth full of blood. I ran my tongue across my teeth and miraculously they were all there.

“Knock it off, Palmer.”

Bobby was in a rage. All he wanted was a piece of me. Mr. Welles could barely contain him. Coach Kozlowski grabbed him.

Coach Kozlowski was a big guy with no neck. He was easily a solid 300 pounds. He had been an NFL linebacker. The football players called him “Sarge” and when Sarge spoke, people listened. He didn’t really talk; he barked.

“Palmer, knock it off or you’re off the team. I mean it.”

Bobby froze in his tracks.

“Don’t you move. I mean it.”

He stared at me, but there was still rage in his eyes. I could see it from the ground. Mr. Welles looked at both of us.

“Take that one to the school nurse,” he said to Kozlowski. “Take Palmer to the principal’s office and if he gives you any trouble—”

“Don’t worry I can handle him,” said Kozlowski as he tightened his grip on Bobby. Then he turned his attention to me. “Get cleaned up and then join Palmer in the principal’s office. Don’t make me come looking for you.”

High school nurses are more like walking medicine cabinets. All they really do is take your temperature and apply some antiseptic and call your parents. I was beyond all that so I just headed straight to the principal’s office.

I hated the principal’s office. It was cold and uncaring, like a hospital. Everything seemed so clean and sterile. It was as if every paper clip had a place, and if you moved one some little guy with a bushy moustache would run into the room and put it back in place.

On one side of the room were pictures of all the former principals. Another wall was adorned with the alumni’s motto. “Go and take your knowledge into the world and teach others all you have learned. For they will be better having received it, and you will be greater having given it.”

The far wall was adorned with pictures of the school’s athletes. The Owen Brown High Mustangs had not lost a league game in 11 years.

I sat there and stared at the pictures. The kid in the pictures was as close to perfect as you could get. He looked like some type of warrior, a perfect specimen of American youth. Someone had captured a photo of him scoring the winning touchdown in the state championship last year and in the background in the crowd there was me, buried in his moment

of greatness.

They kept the trophy in a glass case underneath the photo, and next to that was the newspaper that told of the miraculous come-from-behind victory.

“Mr. Hampton.”

I snapped back into reality. “Sorry”

“I asked you a question. Did you say you slept with Bobby’s sister?”

Mr. Walker was one of those guys that spit all the time when he talked. You needed windshield wipers over your face to talk to him.

“No, I never said that.”

Mr. Walker stared at me for a few seconds and sat back in his chair. He ran his finger across the edge of his desk.

“Bobby, why don’t you go back to class?” Spit flew everywhere and I knew I was in for it then.

I could still feel Bobby’s rage as he walked by me.

After Bobby left, Mr. Walker went back to the edge of the desk, but this time he tapped his finger instead of moving it back and forth.

“Do you have anything to say Scott?”

“No,” I said as I looked away.

“Just for the record, do you see anything wrong with what you said?”

Mr. Walker leaned forward and waited for an answer.

I glanced at the picture of the kid on the wall again and shrugged my shoulders. I thought, “What the hell. If you are going down you might as well act like you don’t care.”

“You seem to have a penchant for lying Scott,” Mr. Walker said.

“What was it last time? Oh yeah, you claimed your dog ate your book. The time before that you skipped your finals because you claimed your mother was dying.”

I snickered and left the smirk on my face. A smirk is a clear message of defiance and I had a perfect one. I kind of let the left side of my mouth raise up a little and then I let my right eyebrow raise a little. It was a way to say “Go to hell” without ever opening my mouth.

“You think it’s funny?” Mr. Walker turned and stared at the boy in the pictures. “You know the difference between you and him?”

“What’s that?”

“He has character. That’s why your brother was able to lead the Mustangs to the state championship. And I am sad to say, character is something you lack. Your father is a great lawyer. There is even talk he’ll be a judge after the next election. Your mother is a published college professor. I just don’t understand it. I guess sometimes the apple does fall far from the tree,” he said as enough fluid flew from his mouth to water an

entire apple farm.

“You better wise up. You’re a C student at best. You know where C students wind up? They wind up sitting in bars drinking the years away and lying about their accomplishments.”

I chuckled a little louder.

“Exactly what is so funny?” screamed Mr. Walker.

“I thought all C students turned out to be high school principals.” I said with a smile.

Then the spit really flew. “Oh that’s it. You are out of here for three days, and you’d better come back with your attitude right. You’d better think about this because, if you keep lying, something bad really is going to happen.”

“Something bad really is going to happen,” I thought as I walked home. Actually something bad already had happened. It wasn’t my black eye either, although that hurt like hell. No, this was something worse.

I stopped and stared at it, a two-story colonial house built in the early part of the twentieth century. Inside this house was something a lot worse than 10 Bobby Palmer’s and two black eyes. It was something evil, and I could never hope to stop it.

The house was immaculate, the lawn was perfectly manicured and the hedges looked like green blocks strategically placed on the lawn. The house looked more like a painting than anything else. It was absolutely perfect.

At least that’s what it looked like on the outside.

I opened my backpack and put on my shades, and then I walked inside the house. It was time to face the evil that awaited me.

I closed the door and stood in the foyer and listened. At first I heard no sign of the evil. It was too quiet, especially for this house.

The place was immaculate, black and white tile on the foyer floor, a winding staircase, six bedrooms, three bathrooms and a game room. But there was always a chill in the air. People think Hell is hot. Let me tell you right now, anyone headed to Hell better wear a jacket because it’s going to be like Pluto.

I took a look around and wondered where the evil was. I listened again, and then I just leaned back against the door. Then I heard it, a small explosion, and then another and then I heard a sea of them. I walked through the kitchen and went into the living room through the back sliding door. The downstairs was a circle. In any room you could enter from the front of the room or the rear.

I watched curiously and tried not to draw attention to myself. The flashbulbs hurt my eyes even though one of them was swollen shut but

even through one eye I could still make out the object of everyone's admiration.

"How does it feel to be voted the best high school football player in the country?" shouted one reporter.

"It feels great. I've worked hard and I've had a great four years."

He looked like the pictures in the principal's office, square jaw, broad shoulders and a stomach so tight you could bounce quarters off it. He had a look like one of those pretty boys from the 40s. Never had a pimple or a hair out of place. The room was adorned with trophies and framed articles. Kevin won his first trophy when we played Pop Warner football. He was nine and I was seven. The only reason I played was because the coach believed every kid should play. I gave up after the seventh game. He took the team to the championship.

His name was in the newspaper for the first time when he was twelve, and every year it appeared more and more.

I glanced over at my father, Elias. He was tall and handsome, with a touch of gray. He had on the perfect suit, the perfect cuff links, the perfect watch; he even had the perfect pose. He was like Moses at the edge of the Red Sea with a haircut, a shave and wearing a \$2,000 suit. All he needed was a staff. He had invited all the right reporters from all the right newspapers. He was in control. He paid attention to every detail in the room – except me.

"Have you heard from any colleges?" shouted a second reporter.

Kevin smiled and thought for a second.

"UCLA, Miami, Washington, Nebraska, Auburn, Alabama, Penn State, Washington State, Iowa State and ..."

I smiled Kevin always forgot Notre Dame.

"Notre Dame," he exclaimed.

"Signed a letter of intent?" A reporter asked.

I watched in envy as Kevin answered the questions and received all the attention. I slipped out of the living room the same way I came in, and of course, no one noticed.

I flopped down on the bed in the only sane room in the entire house, my own. It was a typical teenager's room. There were a couple of comic books on the floor, all Batman. An entertainment center with a CD player the speakers were on shelves above the television, a DVD player and a video game console.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the suspension slip. I took off my glasses. The air seemed to do my eye some good. I glanced into the mirror hanging on my door. The eye was swollen shut. It looked like a big ripe blueberry, black and blue with some fluid flowing in the corner.

There was a rap on the door. I dove onto the bed and grabbed my glasses. I grabbed a math book and opened it somewhere towards the middle of the book.

“Scott?”

It was my mother.

“Come on in, Mom.”

She had that “mom” look on her face. I didn’t know if it was because of the room or me.

You could always see beauty in my mother’s face. There was just something about her. Wrinkles and lines had appeared where they weren’t before, but they didn’t age her. They dignified her and made her more of a mother. It was as if it was the role she was born to play. I could not remember her when she was younger and it was hard to imagine she was an English professor.

“You want to tell me what happened?” she asked.

“What?”

“You can stop pretending. I know you were suspended today.”

She sat on the bed and waited for an answer.

“They called?”

She didn’t say a word. The answer was obvious. “What’s the use, Mom? All you’re going to do is tell me I should be more like Kevin.”

“Boy, who are you talking to?” she asked in that black woman tone. You don’t mess with black women when they have that tone. Black women have a respect beacon. It scans your words for tone, inflection and intent — and they better get the right signal.

“I’m sorry, Mom. This guy is always starting stuff. I stood up to him.”

“Take your glasses off,” she said without missing a beat.

I sighed and complied. I could lie about anything. I could convince Columbus he was headed the wrong way, but I couldn’t fool her. She shook her head and took a closer look.

“Are you going to tell Dad?”

“Leave your father to me, and come up with a better story. I don’t want to know what it is. Just make it good.”

She started to leave the room and smiled.

“Oh, and I’m not your father. I love you for who you are. Stop trying to live up to your brother’s accomplishments.”

“Mom, what do you think happens to people who lie all the time?”

“They usually end up spending more time in their lies than in the truth sweetheart.”

“What do you mean?”

“They end up living in a fantasy world.” She said it almost as if she were warning me. “Come on downstairs so we can celebrate with your brother.”

I put the shades back on, but I wasn’t ready to deal with my father yet. So I opened the window and slowly climbed out. The best part about my room was it was so close to the guesthouse that I could walk across the balcony to the guest house and climb down the trellis to the ground.

It was a beautiful night. A huge Indian Moon filled the sky. It seemed like it was so close you could touch it. The smell of pinecones filled the night. The leaves were starting to change colors. Fall would be here soon. Our backyard was huge. After you crossed the stream, the woods were on the other side. We called it the park.

I leaned against a tree in the park and stared up at the moon. I could finally breathe. There was something about that house that suffocated me. Out here I could breathe easy and not worry about who was watching me or what I was supposed to be.

I looked back up at the moon. It seemed like it was even closer.

“A fantasy world,” I thought. I turned and started walking back to the house. It was time to get dressed and go out to dinner. I dreaded it. Don’t get me wrong I love my brother, but my father would go on and on about how great Kevin was. It was almost as if he wanted to be on the field with Kevin.

“Where you off to, mon?”

I turned and looked for the source of the voice. It was a huge Rastafarian man with dreadlocks down to his waist. He had a graying goatee and a heavy Jamaican accent. He was wearing a brown trench coat and had shades on. I stopped for a second. Not because he spoke to me, but because it seemed like it was getting darker.

I didn’t answer him. I just kept walking. I was used to seeing crazies in the park. They were usually homeless people looking for a handout.

“I said, ‘Where you off to, mon?’ ” he repeated. I still did not acknowledge him.

“Oh, you like the fantasy world. Don’t you mon?”

I stopped and turned slowly. The words fantasy world had captured my attention, but there was no way the Rastafarian could know what I was thinking.

“Now I got your attention, mon, I said ‘You like the fantasy world. Don’t you mon?’ ” He smiled, and his gold teeth sparkled against the moon. I stared at him. There was something strange about him.

“I can make all the fantasies come true.”

I chuckled to hide the fear, shook my head, smirked and walked

away.

“A doubter? Why don’t you come and sit with the old Rastaman.”

“No thanks,” I said sternly without looking back. I kept putting one foot in front of the other. Maybe it was because the Rastafarian kept saying fantasy world or maybe because it was dark, but either way I was scared. I just kept walking and thinking about the distance each step put between us.

Then without notice I stopped. I was breathing so heavily I could hear my lungs expanding in my body. My heart raced and every instinct in my body yelled for me not to do it, but I had to. I had to look back.

He was gone. Not just gone, but vanished. As a matter of fact, it was like he was never there. I took one quick step and started running like hell.

After I had run for a long time, I stopped. I wheezed more out of fear than fatigue. I leaned against a tree and tried to compose myself.

“Where you off to, mon?”

The Rastafarian was sitting right next to me. I ran even faster, I zigged and zagged through the trees. I almost fell a couple of times, but I think I got up before I hit the ground.

I looked back to make sure I wasn’t being followed, and then my foot hit a rock and I went sailing into the air. I didn’t fly very far, maybe about five feet, but there was only one problem. The ground ran out about two feet earlier.

I fell 10 feet and bounced another five. The only thing that stopped me was the rock that I hit my head against. I tried to push myself up so I could continue my escape, but it wasn’t happening. The last thing I saw was the Rastafarian walking towards me.

“You like the fantasy world. Well, mon, I can make your dreams come true.”

My mind parted that black curtain called unconsciousness. I climbed back into reality with a pounding head and confusion.

I had no idea where I was or how long I had been out. The room was adorned with snake skins, raccoon pelts and something huge like a bear. There were deer antlers everywhere. The other side of the room looked like a combination between a Caribbean pharmacy and an artists’ studio. There were herbs, incense and jars of things, including something that looked like a dead bat and homemade flutes and pipes.

The pounding in my head seemed to be getting worse, but it wasn’t my head at all. The Rastafarian was playing the bongos.

He had his eyes closed as he moved and grooved. It was like music was escaping through him. He never sang or hummed. He just moved. It

was like he was a cobra being led by some unseen snake charmer. Then he stopped and opened his eyes and looked directly at me.

No one spoke for about thirty seconds. I looked away and looked back. The Rastafarian's stare was still locked on me.

"I-I've never been in this part of the park before."

The Rastafarian let out a loud howl of a laugh.

"This ain't the park, mon," he said with a smile.

"If it isn't the park then where am I?"

"This is my home, mon."

"Home. Yeah, I got to be getting home myself," I said as I pulled myself out of the bed.

"Don't you want to know about the fantasy world? I can make all those fantasies come true."

"Yeah right. No thanks."

"You got big dreams, Scott, big dreams in your eyes and emptiness in your soul. I can fill it up, Scott. I can give you the world and everything in it."

My fear was gone. I knew if the Rastafarian was going to do anything to me he would have done it by then, but my eye still throbbled like hell.

"Don't dismiss me, Scott," he said as he stared right into my eyes.

I didn't see anything in his eyes, but then it hit me. This man should be feared big time.

"How do you know my name?" I asked as I backed towards the door. "Where is this place?"

The Rastafarian walked over to a jar and took out some incense. He slowly walked towards me and all the time that look was in his eyes.

I would not look at him. I was too busy praying for God to intervene.

"Light one of these tonight," he said as he shoved two sticks of incense into my pocket. "Then light one at a more opportune time. Truth and lies, mon. This is truth and lies," he said more calmly the second time. He pulled me close to him.

"Now you have all you need," he said.

I looked into his eyes again. This time, I saw something sinister. I pulled away and bolted out of the house. The Rastafarian laughed as I clawed my way back up the hill. The laugh seemed to fill up the park as I careened through the trees and the fog.

I stopped and took a breather. I could see my house. I didn't realize I was that close. I reached it at last. I was too tired to climb the trellis, so I tried the guest house window, but they were locked. I tugged at it two or three times as if it would make a differ Then I did the one thing I didn't want to do. I went to the front door.

I opened the door slowly and backed in pulling the door up slowly behind me. It was the only way back inside.

“Where have you been?” a voice asked.

I didn’t even have to turn around. I knew it was my father and I knew I was in trouble. Sure enough, there he was — Moses standing against the mantle with his arms folded. Mom and Kevin sat across from him. It seemed like a war tribunal. My guilt had already been determined. Now it was just a matter of what the penalty would be.

I tried to think of a lie, any lie, to get out of this, but when I opened my mouth the truth came out.

“I was in the park.”

“In the park?” my father asked as he stood up straight. He always had picture-perfect posture. “Boy, you spend way too much time in that park. You need to spend more time in the books like your brother.”

“Yeah, Dad,”

“Yeah, Dad?” my father said as if he could not believe the statement.

“Boy, do you know how long we’ve been waiting for you? We were supposed to be at the restaurant two hours ago. You’re selfish, Scott. Tonight is about Kevin, and you’re running around in the park.”

I had to say something to get out of that room, but I had no idea what would do the trick. Maybe if I played on the fact that they were late.

“I’ll go get changed. It won’t take a second.”

I started to walk off, but I could feel my father’s eyes on my back.

“Don’t stop me, don’t stop me,” I said over and over as if the thoughts would travel from my mind and hypnotize him.

“What happened to your eye?”

Damn, I had forgotten all about it, and as soon as he mentioned it, my eye started hurting again.

“Bobby Palmer started a fight with me.”

“A fight over what?” He asked in a digging tone. I hated that tone.

I looked at my mother nervously. I could read her. She hadn’t told him anything.

“Guy was just looking for a fight I guess,” I said as I shrugged my shoulders. Whenever you lie, you have to stay cool.

“And he just picked you?” He asked.

I could see that he did not believe me, but I went down this road and there was no going back now.

“I guess,” I answered casually.

Now it was the stand off. We stared at each other. It was the same look that the Rastafarian had except for one thing. My father was an attorney, and his stare could make that Rastafarian cry.

He cut his eyes down at my feet. My eyes followed. I only had one shoe on. I must have lost the other one as I tumbled down the embankment in the park.

He stared at my bare foot for a second. The mud was a giveaway. It was obvious that something had happened when I was in the park. Just as I looked back up at my father, he looked up at me.

This was classic courtroom interrogation technique. He was leading and I was following. Time to take control again.

“I’ll go get dressed now.”

“Don’t worry about it. I think maybe you should put something on that eye. You don’t want it to get infected.”

I stared at him for a second. My father simply turned his back and walked away. The case was closed, and I had lost. He had shown me exactly who was in control.

I started up the stairs.

“And then maybe you can find your other shoe,” he said with a parting shot.

“Let’s go, we’re late enough,” he said to my family. He looked away like he had forgotten all about me.

“I’ll be there in a second,” Kevin said. “I have to use the bathroom.”

“Take your time son. We’ll be in the car.” My father stopped and looked up at me and smirked. “On second thought, why don’t you just meet us there? We’ll take the Lincoln you take the Mercedes.”

“Okay Pop.” He smiled as he caught the keys.

Kevin waited for the door to close and headed up to my room. When he entered, I smiled at him. The one thing I did that Kevin was afraid to do was battle our father. I never won and I never talked back, but I got under his skin, and every time I survived I got a little braver.

Kevin tried not to laugh when he looked at my eye.

“Jesus look at that. It looks like a big roach is on your eye.”

“Yeah whatever. It’s not that bad.”

“So you got into it with Bobby. That guy is twice your size. You sure a cheerleader didn’t do this?”

I hit him upside the head with a pillow.

“I won the fight.”

“Yeah right,” Kevin said as he smiled. “No way you beat Bobby toe-to-toe.”

“I beat him down with a stick. I chased him out of the school yard.”

Kevin laughed, and adjusted his tie.

“Sorry I won’t be there tonight man.”

“It’s okay. I’ll be glad when it’s over,” Kevin said as he watched his

reflection.

“I guess it’s all for the best though. Dad will just go on and on about how I should be more like you.”

Kevin turned his attention away from his reflection.

“I know that hurts, Scott. I’m sorry if being my little brother has caused you grief.”

“It’s not your fault. I just wish I could be the star for a day.”

“You already are a star little brother.”

We exchanged some dap and Kevin began to leave. He turned around and smiled.

“Even if Bobby Palmer did whoop your behind today.”

He grabbed the pillow and hurled it at me and ran out of the house.

I listened as he drove off in the Mercedes. I was finally alone.

I grabbed the remote and clicked on the television. I scanned through the channels and landed on “Batman.”

“Yeah, the Bat.” Batman is the man when it comes to heroes. I don’t care what anyone says. Superman is just an idiot in long underwear, and he’s way too sparkley. To him the world is some great place, but not to the Bat. The world cheated Batman, and he knows what darkness is. It was the mask. We all wear masks.

An hour and a bowl of popcorn later, the Caped Crusader had vanquished the Joker and all was right in Gotham City again. Then I noticed the incense sticking out of my shirt pocket.

I leaned over and grabbed it. It had an alluring scent, kind of like a woman’s neck. I stared at it for a few seconds.

“What the hell. Why not?”

I put the incense in my Batman Slurpee cup and looked for a book of matches.

“Truth and lies,” I said softly, without realizing that it had lit.

Then I noticed the smoke from the incense grew thicker. The smoke had a weird blue tint to it.

“How did it get lit and why is the smoke blue?”

And then almost as if on cue the smoke began to change color. Now it was red.

“Red?” I thought this was some cool incense.

I inhaled the scent and smiled.

“Smells good.”

The smoke returned to a normal color. I let out a yawn and fell back onto the bed. I rolled over onto my side and stared up at the stars. It felt good to be alone in the house.

There was something about this house. It was cold, dark and

foreboding. I appreciated moments like these. In these moments I was free. In these moments the evil was gone.

There was something evil in the house, and it had a name. The evil was called father.