

Me, Myself

By John Rethage

And just like that, it is starting again. The ear-shattering train horn alarm from my nightstand signals the beginning of what already feels like the worst day, but that's the beauty of it. It feels so typical now, routine in a way. I tend to let the alarm go off repeatedly. It's comedic to think how many times I've been here. The rhythmic annoyance coming from my phone continually goes unnoticed as I struggle to gauge the who, what, and where of my life up to this point. You get used to living in moments like this to some extent, like every day before this one, unceasing in endless monotony and the profound discouragement of what that could mean and bring. There was barely any light coming through the closed blinds. I never bothered or had a reason to open them in the past, and I surely wasn't going to start now.

Staring at the pale white dimly walls of my darkroom, it begins to hit. I laid there frozen, not in the sense where I couldn't move, but I just couldn't will my body to go through the motions or operate as it had once before. A familiar voice chimes in, "Maybe you should start with the alarm." I roll my eyes, shift my gaze from the walls to the pillow next to me. I embrace it, pressing my face into it harder and harder. I remember I lived alone, minus my dog Lil and she didn't develop the ability to communicate verbally overnight. I hear the voice again. "You should probably get that ass moving or could just keep laying in this bed and get to work late like you do every day. Someone will do your job for you." I had considered the notion many times, and it was correct; someone would assume the duties and responsibilities covering for me. That's what the brotherhood is for. I mean, I have done it for others in the past. "I deserve this," I tell

myself repeatedly. "We deserve this." "You deserve this." The voice comes again.

"Hello...Charles...Hello."

I still haven't made the slightest advance to turn off the alarm as my body feels heavier than it has in the past. Why have I been feeling this way? "Charles, it's because you're lazy." "Shut up, shut up," I mutter from inside the pillow. The muffled words vibrate my head in an uncomfortable manner. At this point, Lil has started moving about, and she gets antsy because she wants to be fed. She jumps into the bed and lays her head by mine. She will wait for an acknowledgment before she moves again. "Even the dog wants you to get up, Charles" "Fine, hell, I'll get up," I lie to myself. I had no intention of moving, but this dog does need to eat. I committed to love and care for her, and I must fulfill that, at least until one of us dies. "Charles, you know you can't lie to me, right?" the voice asks. I responded, "Can you just, for a minute, shut up."

I shuffle myself to an upward position but sit there in a zombie-like state. It's still so hard to keep doing this every morning. I think of my parents and how they had to get us up every day when we were younger, and I wonder how they managed. I can barely do this and remain functional for any portion of the day. "Those were the days, Charles." I ignore the comment and finally reach for the alarm. I was smacking it hard, finally stopping its incessant chirping. I notice the time is now half an hour later than the original time set. Shit. At this point, I've leapt out of bed and am hurrying to set up for the task ahead. Lil, excited by my newfound energy, has been on my heels, ready to eat and go outside. "Charles, I told you this would happen." The voice says smugly. "You said nothing of the sort, so I think you should just shut up like I've been telling you."

Time is still passing, and I haven't gotten finished with half of the morning rituals. Lil seems content as I shovel her food from the container to her bowl. The kernels of kibble seem stale and smell awful like cardboard. Her head bobs up and down as she grabs mouthfuls with a satisfying crunch that devours them. She pauses to glance at me, almost trying to assure me this is the most fantastic thing I could have done for her. She acknowledges me this way every day, and by far, it's the best and only part of my day I look forward to. "She is a good dog, Charles. She probably saved your life, you know?" "Yeah, I figured this much."

Back in the bedroom, I have come to terms with how this day is going, It is still dark out, and the false sense of hope that comes along with that is in play. I stand outside the shower and increase the temperature to scalding. I don't feel much anymore, and the less time I'm in there, the better. The steam fills the room and blankets the mirrors, and I am thankful because I hardly recognize myself anymore. Opening the shower curtain, I dread what is next. The shower is when he comes, it is his time, and there's no stopping it. "Charles. Charles. Charles, step into my domain and let me help you." At this point, I don't have a choice. I step in, and it starts as the water rolls from my head to my shoulders.

"Charles, remember that time?" he quips. In a flash, I am taken to another place. All semblance of thought and control is lost to him, to me, to it all. All the embarrassment, all the awkward moments, all of it comes rushing back. The overthinking, the underwhelming experiences, the anxiety floods every part of my body. It's as if there was a key to my past, and this is it. The feeling of fear and panic is enough to keep the grip on me as I go through the motions of trying to rinse the soap from my body. Hints of smells and the items in the shower are triggering more and more memories to the surface. "I could have been a better husband." "Yes, but remember that one fight?" The battle between us rages.

When I thought I would be stuck in this rut forever, I felt the cold, wet nose of Lil poking the back of my calf as she peeks in the shower. She can tell some things off, that or she was ready to go outside, either way, thank you, sweet pup. It shakes me back to reality, and now I'm left wondering how long I've been standing there. "Charles, it's been a while, my friend." I hear as I step out. The cold hit me, and I glanced over at the mirror. It's beginning to defog just enough to see the reflection of eyes. "Hello Charles, good to see you."

I'm dressed now. Lil has been outside and has gone into full emotional comfort mode. She continually bops me with her nose and rubs on me in the same way a cat would. I push her aside, brushing the clumps of hair she has left off my trousers. Back in the bathroom, I must come to terms with seeing him, with seeing myself. "Charles, you have to shave." He says, "I know I do." I try to do complete the task as quickly as possible. At this point, I've taken my time, and still, I know I'll be late. In the back of my mind, it's there, the notion of it all. Hidden and harbored coming up to the surface like a pesky mole to say hello and eat your vegetables. Today is different. He keeps quiet, the voice stifles. He's saving for something big, and he must be. What does he want me to think about? I thought he hit his mark in the shower, or maybe he's giving me a break. Who knows? Brushing my teeth is the last thing I'll do before gathering my things and attempting to fight Lil as she tries to get into the car. "Are we flossing today?" I hear it. "We never floss. I never floss." "And you wonder why the dentists loathe you" "This is the only conversation that gets old. The rest are daily reminders of failure and have become welcomed additions to my life now.

I make my way into the kitchen, pour my coffee, the smell of which elaborates to my overuse of flavored creamers and grab some breakfast for the road. Living with this type of anxiety is always an adventure, and this day is unlike any other. I forget multiple items that have

been meticulously placed as not to forget them specifically. At this moment, I know. I know this is where he will attempt his last hurrah. The rest of my day will be distracted by work and tasks. I must fake it to make it, and no one knows how I am on the inside. I won't let them see me like this.

At that moment, I passed by the bedroom mirror—one last check before I go. I gaze at myself rather quickly, knowing what we both know. "Charles, Charles, Charles, you couldn't leave without saying goodbye?" he says, and I reply, "You know, what I was hoping." "I guess we will do this all over again tomorrow then, huh, Charles?" "I suppose so." "Remember you gave me this power." "I know, I know."