

It happens now, the sirens and the silence. It happens now, the sirens and the silence and the thunder. Later, then and always, rain.

The darkened house swallows thickened woods and shadows edge out walls. Marcus never notices the scene shift, never catches the sideslip from sanctuary. He only clicks that he's in trouble when the gangrene of the forest floor recoils under pounding paws. Both are running, and the wolf's rancid breath dribbles across Marcus' skin.

Five-thirty wake-up as the sun crawled across his legs, which were bent up against his chin. Marcus ferreted out his glasses with his eyes snapped shut, sweeping his hand under the pine frame futon. He jammed both arms into the grungy sweatshirt hanging on the end of his bed, then opened his eyes and scanned the damage.

Sheets a tornado of flannel in the corner. Hardwood floor a floodplain from the capsized tumbler of ice water on his dresser. Pulling one plug from the nest of his ear, he looked around for its mate. It took him sixteen minutes to locate the other tiny glob of cheap yellow foam, wedged behind the computer desk in the corner of his bedroom.

The mirror said the same thing every morning. A square bunker of concrete black-pebbled gray hair waved at gravity. Fault lines in brick-jawed face without relief of a smile. The nominal whites of Marcus' eyes streamed in rivers of lava, crusted with veiny exhaustion. The world shuddered thundered when he concentrated, boulder black eyebrows joined at the crevice on the landbridge of his nose. His eyebrows outshouted every other feature. They stomped around his face—embedded deep in focus and jigging along his hairline when rare humor struck. Profile the most promising, a sentry at his wartime post. Only his irises, otter slick brown, were soft.

He always started reconstruction with a cold shower, twisting his height under the nozzle. The water skinned him of the nightmares and drained the dark of its power. Marcus leaned his tall, wet bulk against the wall, willing his hands unclenched. Count to fifty, count one hundred, count to five. Numbed feet told him it was time for breakfast and then work.

At 48, Marcus could still do 60 one-handed pushups before his essential double espresso. That Tuesday he skipped muscle burn and drank his coffee in his bathrobe in the study. Marcus sat in his leather recliner and scrunched his toes against the plush Persian carpet before tilting back.

There had only been one thing wrong with this highrise apartment on the Lakefront, and that was that the building was too new—no open windows. Still, the 22nd floor left enough of a view, from the empty space of Northwestern's campus on his left to the dunes of Indiana past the city on his right. Looking due east across Lake Michigan, he watched a few early sailors cast their lots with fair May weather. He wondered if they could feel his eyes on them, following the wakes of their yachts.

Rosario had left his drycleaned clothes hanging at the entrance to his walk-in closet. White shirt, border-funky crimson tie, a pearl and navy pinstripe suit, mirage shined shoes. Down to matching socks. She'd remembered, and reminded him, court today. She was worth the next to nothing that he paid her.

The walk to his office was only bearable in spring. Stiff against the sharp silver wind, Marcus hiked across the six blocks. He grabbed a second bolster shot of caffeine from the waiting security guard and landed in his office behind three locked doors. It was six-fifteen.

As the top criminal defense attorney in the Tri-County area, Marcus had learned to be careful. Although the Chicago mob network had waned in recent years, he'd still been the target of some nasty infighting when rival underworld bigwigs got an inkling he'd helped acquit the wrong guy. It had been quiet for months now though—even the criminals agreed that having Jerry 'the Pinochle' Portovecchio on the outside was critical to family understanding.

Closing arguments, this Tuesday in May. Headline show day, and plenty of time for prep. It was just on eight before the small office contingent gathered for instruction, and by then Marcus had it all laid out.

'Beth, you observe from the back. Notes on every juror reaction, presented to me at each break. Pretend that this is the bar and *everything* you see will be on the exam. If Juror #7 scratches her armpit or #3 picks his nose, I want to know. It's a war out there—I'll adjust my game as we go. Got it?'

Twenty year-old Beth Friedman, law intern, nodded. She was used to Marcus' barrages—but he was the best, and she came to learn from the best. If he said perfect juror notes, he'd get perfect juror notes. She tuned in to hear him firing commands at Terry Porter, junior partner in the firm.

'...and that means no possibility of a comeback. If we're high and dry by three p.m. today we're gonna lose this case. So I need to know that you'll pitch me testimony page numbers on time, every time. It's a dance and it's time to get down. You with me?'

Shrugging, Terry ducked his head and scribbled across the yellow legal pad. Just as well Marcus couldn't read the scrawl—it was a reminder to stop off and pick up diapers and formula for the twins. Although they'd been partners for 6 years, Marcus was still stumbling around with the impression that Terry needed the straight or narrow. In fact, Terry had collated all the highlights, excerpts, annotations, bullet points, evidence trails, witness quotes, and technical errors as they went along. The foolscap folder sat on Marcus' desk, a sleeping hippopotamus of clear defense success. Still, his boss needed revving before the game, so Terry revved. Cheerleader, partner, what's the difference? This would be a good win.

Court started at ten, which meant time for a cappuccino on the way southwest. Cook County's courthouse at 26th and California had never seen the backside of a scrubbing brush, and the peeling beige corridor paint showed khaki had been the color choice of

decades past. But Marcus didn't see the walls, and he didn't register the scuff marks on the blotchy blue linoleum floor.

He was a missile, firing himself through the dark, smooth doors of the courtroom at the end of the hall. He pistoned to the defense table in the empty courtroom, throwing thanks to the officer stationed at the door. Terry ambled after him and waited before easing into his allocated spot. Beth followed with the audience as the gates swung wide.

Some attorneys were rocking horses in their chairs as the courtroom filled up, playing out their nerves in the sway. Others—tappers, swivellers—rhumbaed their feet on the polish or pirouetted to watch the audience gather. Marcus just focused on not hulking in his chair. He forced his frame into the rounded wooden seat as if he belonged there, taking up no more than his share of the space. This posture was a coiled spring, not a defeated slouch. Just demure enough to invite belief there and just dangerous enough to scare the crowd. He crossed his thumbs on the dead surface of the table, responded to the judge, rose, and began.

The metronome of working claimed the day. Marcus held the time step through the morning, and by mid-afternoon was preening for victory. At the pause that was lunch, Beth had pointed him to a juror or two who needed jostling. Marcus had nudged and cajoled and catered to each one in turn, practicing his grin on one old lady and running his hands through his hair at the bald guy with a beard. They were just about ready for decision. Marcus didn't have to be an insect in that jury room—he could hear the rustle of their choices rattling around in their heads as he stood before them, slinging buckshot into the prosecutor's case.

Beth took the 'el' home. Terry and Marcus shared a cab and some tactical triggers for day two. Marcus was clear.

'Probably an hour left in it, no more than 90 minutes. We'll be late for court tomorrow, fifteen minutes max, with a line on unravelling evidence.'

Terry tugged on the shopping list in his pocket and calculated how much spinach he'd need for that new recipe he was going to try. Tuesdays and Thursdays, dinner was his family deal.

At the corner of Michigan and Lake, unfolding from the cab in his stainless suit of armor, Marcus debated another few hours in the office before TV and take-out. He fell on the side of the sailors, who'd had their sunny day in mid-May after all. Laptop in hand, he diagonal-dipped through the parked cars and snaked to the Lakefront green.

An unremembered oak grove, dense and matted with spring wealth, sidled up to Marcus on his shortcut route. The teens were a pack upon him. He should have heard them coming. He knows he should have heard them coming. But there were only four of them, and this time he's not ten. This time he has ten years of the Corps behind his drop kick and a decade of dark service on his mind.

Homesick

The leader snarled a demand and flashed a silver butterfly knife. Marcus tripped the weakest of the herd and broke his neck. The alpha gang male slashed a bloodline cheek to cheek across Marcus' face, forgetting that flesh wounds are more dangerous than clean kill anyway. Before the wolf boss had a chance to snap his blade, Marcus collapsed the kid's lungs with two broken ribs.

Shattered, half their strength, calling for witnesses, two ran.

It happens now, the sirens and the silence and the screams.

Ten years old. Johannesburg, a wealthy suburb built on bones. Marcus is asleep in the room closest to his parents; Lynette, his toddler sister, is curled warm and snug next door.

Outside the fortress, armed with bullets and hatchets and rage, the vengeance merchants pretend to hunt for riches. They know the real worth of what white South Africa keeps from them: family, security, and dreams.

They snap the barbed wire fences with their anger. They scale an eight-foot wall of desperation. They set upon their victims with red glee.

It happens now, the sirens and the silence and the screams. Marcus, used to false alarms, waits with hands on ears for Dad to tuck him back in bed. Then the blaring klaxon breaks, and he knows something's not right because there's howling in his parents' room and hushed no-breath next door.

Everywhere, the world is breaking. Impossible shafts of light down the hallway as flashlights find their mark; vowel-dropped shouting of voices that make Marcus think of seagulls at the beach; and the no-return whimper as his father begs for life.

Marcus is crawling now. His legs have forgotten how to walk. He reaches his half-shut door and slumps to the laundry room, the only place to bury himself. The wicker basket is off limits in their daylight, past life games of hide-and-seek; somehow Marcus knows his mother can no longer care.

Marcus rocks and moans, stuffing his eyes and his ears and his mouth with dirty socks and t-shirts in this suffocating cave of hope. He hears them anyway, the strangling laughter and exultant conquest. He wonders how Lynette can sleep through this, until the thud of bone to wall crush opens all he wants to know. The last voice he hears in the bedlam is his mother's, wailing for her lost ones as the predators play.

It happens now, the sirens and the silence and the thunder. Later, then and always, rain. Later, then and always, in the morning of the masscre, as soft hands find his haven, hold him up to light in darkness, promise hope out of the madness: rain.

WORD COUNT: 2008