

This time, it's raining. Rain in the city is almost always a sticky and unpleasant thing. It slaps the pavement and collects in dusty puddles—both of which spatter into his socks and make the rest of the night uncomfortable. Discomfort though, he can endure. It probably won't last long anyway.

The rain isn't the worst part of it, but the place itself, even though he's gotten used to the grimy feeling that this part of town always gives him. It's the kind of neighbourhood that people don't walk their dogs in. The people here don't own dogs anyway—and the cats that wander the alleys don't have owners either. There are more grease-oozing air conditioners than flowerpots, and the sound of a far-off argument always lingers in the air (and isn't that far-off, actually). Somehow, no matter how many times he comes here, the air is only ever coloured yellow, orange, and dark brown. If the rain is what makes his feet unhappy, it's the air itself that makes his spirit sink. What a shitty place.

It's not a long walk from the parking spot he was issued, but on he goes. He turns the shittiest corner on the shittiest block, past the shitty neon and the shitty garbage bags (he really didn't care anymore), and through the shitty door. That door. The one that's the only reason he ever set foot here in the first place. If you've ever gone past it, you didn't notice it. That's mostly because the street itself is more frightening than some door on it, and you were paying more attention to your wallet or your back. But anyone who's walked through that door can never, ever forget it. It's the kind of door that, well; it's tough to describe, but it haunts your dreams and waking life alike. You can't shake the memory of the first time you entered it – the squeak of a doorknob you'd've guessed would be locked and the smell of rust and (surprisingly) peppermint – and yet you know that you long to enter it again. That's the whole reason you joined this club. You paid for that chance. And finally, you swear to yourself that the next time you leave the club'll be your last. "I guess," he thinks, "that sooner or later it will be".

It was a little under a year ago that he joined the club, but not if you measure with a calendar. A person changes when they make the lifelong commitment to it, and yet you don't share that fact with anyone else. Even the patrons that you meet don't need to be told—they feel the same way, and anyway, it wouldn't matter if you told them. A person changes each time they go in the door, and they're not the same when they come out through it. You're usually in a desperate place when you join, and somehow a massive weight lifts off your shoulders when you pay that steep membership fee. \$30K, man. But you only need to pay it once. Soon after that, your problems sort of stop being your own, and everything in your life feels like it's someone else's mess to clean up. And that's because it is. Your bills? They get taken care of. Your enemies? They can't hurt you anymore. The invisible things, the undeniably suffocating *things* that make your heart race and keep you up at night? Believe it or not, even

they lose their power too. Once you drop that chunk of change, you've bought one shitty door's worth of invulnerability. And it changes a person. It always does.

This was a night like any other. Like all the other times he'd come to the club. He was never really told the club's name, but there was one word painted on the outside of its door: Release. It kind of looked like that word made some functional sense; like maybe this door was once part of a warehouse or a foundry or a factory floor, and "Release" made sense in that context. Here, it didn't make much sense at all, if you thought about it. Why would a dirty door on a filthy street in a shitty neighbourhood have the word "Release" painted on it, anyway? Nobody who ever stopped to think about it would've made much sense of it. And nobody did. But, he thought, it makes all the sense in the world if you're a member of The Release Club. He felt that distinct feeling of invulnerability again—it was the only perk of membership.

So how did he hear about this place? It was, after all, exclusive as hell. It only ever had a few active members at any given time. Two or three, he'd've guessed. It was serviced by a select few administrators, none of whom he'd ever met (and once again guessing: he figured he never would). No, it was his therapist who mentioned it. In a hushed tone. Not so much a whisper as a guilt-ridden tip. You know how a doctor might prescribe you a pill that they *know* no one wants to take but will almost definitely be a cure if you just stick with it? Maybe one they were paid to prescribe? That was the way that Dr. Martin mentioned the club. He shifted in his seat and uttered: "It's a dramatic increase in the quality of life, you know, for folks living with the anxieties that you suffer from. If ending it all has really been on your mind that much, well, I can refer you." He never made eye contact again.

Squeaky doorknob. Rusty smell. Peppermint anomaly. Behind the door was a dimly lit upward stairwell, as shitty as the world around it. It was clean, in the no-dust-bunnies sense of the word, but it was stained, creaky, and had no railing whatsoever. You'd think that, given the cost of access, it'd be sleek and tidy. No need. Up the stairs he went, knowing he was the first one here tonight. He always was.

You see, he'd learned throughout his whole life to be punctual. "Better ten minutes early than five minutes late", and all that. It was funny, having something as mundane as early-over-late pass through your mind in a place like this, but he supposed your imagination wanders when it climbs this particular stairwell. He often found himself thinking about his whole life while going up these creaky stained steps, and he'd bet his entire savings that everyone else did too.

Back in the day, it made him great at work presentations; this never-being-late philosophy. He could recall dozens of times he'd show up early to a meeting, only to spend half an hour exploring the space and preparing for his clients. Looking at the pictures on the walls. Gazing

out the windows. It armed him with advance knowledge of whatever that room was, and it made him great at what he did. So great that he managed to work his entire life as a self-employed man, the kind that could “call his own shots” and “answer to no one”. He’d become successful—that lucrative career was what afforded him a spot in the most exclusive club in town, and he was thankful for that. But that career wore him down; wore him down so badly and so thoroughly that he’d simply gotten tired of it. Fell out of love with it, and with life in general. He struggled for a while with forcing himself to be happy, living with that exhaustion, and it simply drove him further downward. He kept working hard, but he was nearing his end, and he knew it. Yeah, suicide was often on his mind then, but he knew he could never go through with it. Never with his own hand. Talk about hopeless, man. How powerless a scenario is that? Wanting to do it, wanting the end to arrive, but being too chickenshit to just make it happen. It guilts a person, and it makes for an awful downward spiral. It was around that time – successful, tired, and struggling – that Dr. Martin prescribed the pill called The Release Club. And nothing had ever been the same after he’d committed to the club. I mean, once you were a member, you were a member for the rest of your life. That was never in dispute.

“Why am I thinking of Dr. Martin?”, he wondered. The mind performed strange acrobatics on the nights that he climbed these stairs. Of course it did. But, before you knew it, you were at the stairs’ end—facing one more door. The second last one. From here, you either went through the third door at the far end of the room inside, or back out the door that let you in.

This one was locked, but he had the key. He didn’t keep it on a keychain or anything—it was loose in his pocket, nondescript, and brown. This key, he knew he’d never lose. Hell, it cost him enough.

Unlock the door, step inside, and lock it behind you. No problem.

When you join The Release Club, you only get a couple artifacts to call your own. A brown key. A parking spot in Shittytown. And, every couple of months, an invitation to the green room. That was the room he’d just walked into. It wasn’t exactly *called* “the green room” or anything, it was just a room and it was green. It wasn’t very big; maybe about the size of an average living room from suburbia (which seemed a very far-off place), and it was as dingy and depressing as the rest of the club. It featured a table with two chairs that were set up to face each other and a locked door on the far wall. On the table were the usual items: a tumbler glass in front of either chair, each with an exact couple ounces of clear honey-coloured liquid (no ice), and a single dice in the centre of everything. The dice was yellowed and had its big, stupid, red “one” face pointing up. The table, the chairs, and the glasses were the first intimation of quality; they were rich, smooth, unblemished and unused. He’d been to the club a handful of times, and he’d tested these items’ newness—he once made a tiny scratch in the

expensive-looking table with his thumbnail, and that scratch was never on any other table since. He'd checked. Thoroughly. This is the kind of thing you get to do when you show up ten minutes early every time. The table, the chairs, and the glasses were sparkling and new, each and every time he walked into the green room.

He hated the green in that room, but green was actually his favourite colour. Not the moldy forest green he saw here, but the fresh lime green that he saw whenever he thought of his childhood. Like newly-grown grass in the springtime, or the leaves of a bright & healthy tree after it's had a fresh washing by a summer's rain. His family used to have a cottage, which was on a forgotten rural road. The road used to belong to a community that had long-since passed away, and the building used to belong to his grandparents, likewise gone. You know how, when you sometimes think of a particular thing, you think of it in a very, very specific scene? That's the way it was with the colour green and that cottage. Being stuck inside it (the cottage, not the colour) on rainy days, which were always desperately boring—but seeing that shining, vibrant green on the beech leaves out back as they got rinsed of their pollen and pretence. He hated the green in the green room, but he liked the things it reminded him of. Kind of an odd paradox, but again: mental acrobatics for sure. Odd that he'd think about that cottage here in this shitty neighbourhood, but then again, not odd at all. Not tonight.

And then there was that door, that final door; the locked one at the back of the green room. It wasn't so much that it was locked (which it definitely was), but it didn't have a handle or a knob or anything. It was steel, once had a coat of paint on it, and there it stood. That was just about all you could say about it. It didn't budge if you leaned into it (which he had), and there was no sound coming from beyond it. He wasn't brave enough to knock on it, but he'd bet one of his late mother's pecan pies that no reply would come. It was probably where the tables and chairs and drinks came from, and surely some lucky club members had been to its other side—but not him. Not yet, anyway. Hey, maybe tonight was his lucky night. Who knows.

And that was it. You just got the grand tour of The Release Club and what \$30,000 got you. Not once had he heard music playing here. Never had anyone ask him if he needed anything. No girls, no cigars, no valet parking and no coat check. The shitty "Release" door, the rusty peppermint staircase, the brown key and the lock that belonged to it, and the green room. He'd never seen anything else there. But every single time he was invited to visit, he'd met another solitary patron. And he'd met five of them so far.

Sometimes they were nervous (first timers, maybe?), sometimes they were chatty, and sometimes they were completely in tears. None of it surprised him—this club had a high price, and a luxurious reward. They were all there, in spite of (and because of) those two things.

Once, he met a woman here. She was eight or nine minutes late, and when her own brown key rattled the green room's door, he understood why. She was extremely overweight, and was rendered pretty breathless from those stairs. She was the only one he'd seen in tears here, and she never once stopped talking about all the things she collected. Newspaper clippings, housecats, carpet squares, nail clippers, crossword puzzles, remote controls, souvenir spoons, porcelain dolls, casserole dishes, playing cards, dental floss, heel-less slippers, burnt out lightbulbs, and family members who never came to visit. She collected garbage bags (although she can't recall having bought them), mixing bowls (although she never cooked), and antique paintings (although she only had one, by the sounds of it). She barely made eye contact with him as she sat down, fingered her glass, and picked up the dice in her nearly-trembling hand. From there, it was the same ritual as it always was. When he left through the brown-key-door, she was still in her chair behind him. She had sobbed quietly and muttered something about a drawer full of rubber bands she should organize, and then she went quiet. He envied her tonight, and the end of that rubber-band sentence, but he knew that (in a way) the end of his sentence was coming too. He just had to keep on playing the game.

She had been nervous, that night. He could use a lot of words to describe how he often felt here, but "nervous" wasn't one of them. There was always the initial disgust and distaste at the place itself, and there was always some demented mix of anticipation, thrill, exhaustion, nostalgia, and peace. Tonight? All those emotions were there, but dialled way down. Tonight, he felt exhaustion more than anything else on that list, and tonight, he felt a small sense of hope too. That was a new one, but it'd been growing since his third or fourth visit. He hoped, more than he thought he'd ever admit, that tonight would be his last visit here.

Checking his watch, he saw that tonight's patron partner was due in exactly one minute. Had he really been here for almost ten minutes already? He hated losing time, and a night at the club was a rare place for him to lose track of nine whole minutes. But his father's watch was ticking smoothly (this watch that his father would wear everywhere—an image of him at the marina casting a fishing line out to the waves came to mind unbidden), so that was that. He chose a chair – another perk of always being early – and awaited his fellow member.

He sat calmly and ran his hands over the table's smooth grainy surface. Flashes of his past flew through him: the rough feel of a pine tree's bark, the soft feeling of sudsy dishwashing soap water, and the texture of the crisp fibres within a book's pages. This feeling, this endless torrent of memories that the green room brought on, he was used to. His first night at the club, he couldn't take anything but the shallowest breaths, thanks to the overwhelming rush of memories. But he was used to that now, and rather liked it.

He hoped that tonight's partner wouldn't want to talk.

Just as his mind was wandering down the driveway of his youth, a brown key turned in the door's lock. The door opened swiftly, with a particular brand of confidence and impatience, and in walked a woman. She was of average height, had fogged-up glasses, and was dripping from the hot sticky city rain. She took a moment to look around the room (he had the distinct impression that she'd been in here at least once before and was re-familiarizing herself with its moldy green), and made for the vacant seat. She caught herself; and spun to lock the door behind her. Then, she was in her chair. Planted, and still. He'd only known her for about seven seconds, but he gathered that sitting motionless did not come naturally to her. He tried not to analyze her – he really didn't care – but he found her shy, quick, and brusque in her movements. She might have seemed confident and cocksure if she'd ever raised her eyes up from the table's surface. She didn't. He was used to that too: not to people being awkward, but to people being someone other than their usual selves in here. He was the same.

The two of them sat in silence, each enjoying this final moment of reflection. If there was any sound in the green room at all, it was the thrum of a fan on the roof, and the odd plap-plap of rain dripping from the hem of her jacket.

He felt the smooth glass beneath his fingertips (and thought of the dog he had when he was fourteen), swirled its clear amber liquid, and watched her. In an all-too-short moment, she took a breath that seemed to help her make up her mind, and raised her eyes directly to his. She seized her glass, and they beheld each other for, oh, ten seconds that felt like a lot more. The condensation on her lenses reminded him of his high school girlfriend, the one he'd only kissed once, and he savoured every nostalgia-infused dewdrop. He wondered who he might be reminding her of. He didn't want to ask.

His feet were uncomfortable alright, in their swollen wet socks, but they told him a story of sand between his toes.

The woman reached out (a little slower than she had for her glass) for the dice in the table's centre. Neither of them dared a breath.

He was reminded of poker night with his neighbourhood buddies.

She tossed it, and it landed (clickity-clack) on a three.

He remembered a childhood secret handshake.

They both exhaled, and they both adjusted their grip on their glass.

Memories of an airport bar in Chicago.

He picked up the dice (for the sixth time in his life).

Monopoly with his younger brother when they were kids.

He tossed it, and it tumbled through space.

Sledding in a schoolyard with best friends.

The dice came to a stop.

Coloured lights on a vacation dance floor.

He'd rolled a two.

Leaves, blowing in a breeze.

Time sort of held there for a moment.

Rolling a lower number? This was a first for him. But one thing about The Release Club was its fateful sense of inevitability. I mean, if you received a private & secret invitation to meet a stranger to roll a dice, you knew that eventually you'd roll the lower number. It was a risk. And it was a reward. You knew it would come to this; hell, the lower number was exactly what you paid for. From that toss onward, nothing was your decision. Even though you rolled it, that dice bounced and danced to fate's design. It was pure chance. It was not by your own hand.

Finally, here was the side of the club that he'd never seen before, (not that he'd be seeing it now, of course). Before his mind pictured the other side of the green room's back door, the woman opposite him let out a small sigh of pain, and wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. Her glasses not yet clear, she pushed her tumbler aside. She then stood up and turned to leave, but instead abruptly circled behind her chair and stared intently (regretfully?) at him. She, like all club members, knew the ceremony: she had to witness him take his drink.

And he had been ready for it for quite some time. "Cheers to you, Dr. Martin" he announced, surprising himself with the only words spoken tonight. It wasn't exactly easy to bring the poison to his lips, but it wasn't exactly hard either. His life had lost meaning for him a long time ago. And he knew what would happen next, having watched it five times now. The drink would disappear smoothly (it did), relief would wash over his face (a gentle relaxation swept over him), and he'd sink into his chair, finally in a place where no exhaustion would ever reach him again. Peace.

By losing, he'd finally win.

The toxin killed his body instantly, but his mind experienced a slow exhale for seconds that felt like, well, like maybe a minute; but longer than the seconds that they were. He thought of his job (who'll finish that campaign report now?). He thought of the rain outside (hot and sick

but he'd miss it nonetheless). And he thought of his wife, and their daughter (too young to be able to have any memories of him). They'll never know what happened to him.

He wasn't aware, but the woman had left. Soon enough, the back door – the holy third door with no handle – would open and two men in fine suits would retrieve his dead body. They'd bring it to the club's cremation incinerator, and they'd lock his car away in their long-term storage. His money ensured that his assisted suicide would wipe his death from any record, and it paid for a replacement set of glasses, chairs, and a new table too.