

The Body Problem

by Rick Marcou

The blood gurgled out, small lumps of liquid emerging from the chest. But only for a few seconds. Blood had already been spitting out of the side of his head, so maybe the pressure was dropped. The body was motionless. Dead. Blood was the only movement now.

Terry walked out of his apartment building, did a couple cursory leg stretches, then started running. This was new for him. Something to get out of the house, get some exercise, break a sweat. He needed it. He was only 23, but he knew once you start working a nine-to-five the years would pass and the muscle would go away. Or at least the fat would come. Too many fat lazy-ass guys in his hood, he didn't want any part of that. Even if a black man running down the street usually meant he was up to no good. Times gotta change.

He ran, or maybe it was more of a jog, down the middle of the street since there wasn't a sidewalk. Not on the next one either after he turned left at the end of the block. But after two more blocks like this he came to an empty lot, mostly just dirt and some scrap. He ran across it toward the woods at the far end. He knew there'd be paths through the woods, softer footing than concrete and asphalt.

The woods were just that, woods. Trees. Not really a park. A park seems intentional, planned, planted. No, this was just an area in his neighborhood which hadn't yet been bulldozed. Maybe it was due to the uneven terrain, since it dropped down like five or ten feet in some areas and then back up in others. Wasn't huge, maybe a few blocks square, but worthwhile to feel like you were not in the hood anymore, not in the city.

Until he saw it, and he knew he was still there.

The body was back off the trail, maybe a few feet, but he happened to be looking left as he was running through and the bloody body caught his eye. He tried to stop on a dime but his right foot slipped and he had to awkwardly save himself from wiping out. He walked a couple steps back and stared. Black man, probably about his age, but hard to tell, the head was beaten in and bloody. And his entire chest was covered in blood, probably stabbed. He grabbed his phone out of his shorts pocket and started to take a pic, but then stopped.

Six years ago

"Listen Terry, I'm doin' you a favor here. I know you were there, your buddy gave you up. Gave all of you up. And I know how much you stole from that store. Between the cash and the electronics, that's what, fifteen, maybe twenty thousand dollars worth? That's a serious felony. Boy, you're gonna spend a shit-ton of time in prison. But you take this deal and we're talking two years, maybe three. And with good behavior, you're probably out in eighteen months."

Terry looked at the detective, an old white man with tiny red veins all over his nose and a belly that he liked to rest his hands on when he spoke. When he wasn't leaning in across the table to make his point. Looked like every other cop in Terry's neighborhood. White, and using the word 'boy' too much.

Terry then glanced at his Mom, sitting next to him with a look that reeked of mistrust. She taught him not to ever expect any favors from white people. Look out for your own, and for yourself. In that order. And rely on yourself and your own, in that order. No room in that structure for white men who hated black people.

“What do I do, Momma?”

She leaned in close to him, trying to keep what she said between them. “I don’t trust this man, believe me I know he could be full of it. You think Darnell ratted out all of you?”

“I can’t believe he would do that, but I don’t know, I guess he did. They grabbed him yesterday. And they got us all here now.”

“Darnell’s 18, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And the others, they all 17 like you?”

“Yeah, Moochie just turned 17 on Saturday I think.”

“So Darnell would be charged as an adult. That’s a lot more time. He musta made a deal.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Son, you done made this bed, you gonna have to sleep in it.”

Terry ended up serving 17 months in prison. The police convinced Terry and his Mom that he was facing a much longer sentence if it went to court, as well as court fees which they couldn’t afford, so Terry pled to a lesser charge of possession of stolen goods. He did manage to graduate from high school eventually, not with his class of course but through correspondence courses. But the time inside made him grow up fast, and learn to defend himself. And not to trust cops. Turned out he probably could’ve avoided prison time altogether if he had an attorney. Cops didn’t mention that.

He continued to look at the body. He then noticed something he hadn’t seen at first glance. Above the guy’s right eye. A nasty scar that cut across the eyebrow and halfway up his forehead. Ronnie Dupree. No doubt. Aw, Ronnie, what happened man?

Eight years ago

Terry went to every high school basketball game his freshman year. Went with his crew. The team was good, and had a couple guys that might go on to college ball after this. Ronnie Dupree was one of them. On one particular night, first round of the district playoffs, tie score, last minute. Ronnie locking up the other team’s shooter. Ronnie always drew the scorer because he could glue himself to the guy for 32 minutes. The shooter was working in the lane, trying to get through screens to pop out for an open shot, but he couldn’t lose Ronnie. Finally he darted out around their big man, who stepped over into Ronnie’s path with a pick. Ronnie got around him quickly though, and just as the point guard sent his pass towards the shooter, Ronnie dove out and managed to get his left hand on it, sending it back towards mid-court. Where his teammate who’d been guarding the point picked it up and bolted down the court for the go-ahead layup. But Ronnie didn’t see any of that. He went flying into the bench area, smacking his face into a metal folding chair. It opened up a gash in his eyebrow and forehead and blood gushed out. Thankfully the other team’s assistant coach forced a towel into Ronnie’s face to slow the bleeding. But the resulting scar was a permanent tribute to Ronnie’s hustle. No plastic surgery in the hood.

Ronnie was a really good basketball player, could’ve played in college. But he was also best friends with a drug dealer, ever since they were kids getting into small-time trouble on the streets. But his senior year he got into big-time trouble, and ended up doing time. The drug dealer friend was dead now, so maybe Ronnie got the better deal. But by the time he got out he was 23 with no high school degree and basketball out of the picture. He managed to get a job fixing cars at a gas station, and stayed clean. He now had a girlfriend he lived with, along with their 1 year old daughter. He’d

become a stand-up guy. Terry respected him, since he ended up following in his footsteps. Was trying to do even better, use his degree to go a little further in the world. But looking at that stand-up guy lying dead, he was torn. In many ways.

Ronnie's girlfriend needed to know that her man wasn't coming home anymore. Life-altering news, life-shattering news to be honest. Maybe not unusual for this neighborhood, but still. And the sooner she knew the better she could start figuring out the future for her and her baby. Terry wanted to call 911, he owed that to Ronnie and them. But he knew the police can track the calls. And he knew what that would mean. He crouched down, head bowed against his phone, eyes closed.

A minute later he got up, slowly, still unsure. He took a last look at Ronnie, said "Sorry, I just can't do it", and started off, running down the path. Sweat started dripping down his forehead, into his eyes. He wiped at them, but he wasn't seeing as clearly as before. He made his way out of the woods, down a street with some old mom-and-pop stores and a gas station.

And then he noticed the pay phone out front.

The End