

Shot for Shot

Somewhere off a little hiking trail outside Reykjavik, a little stream sprouted from a little spring and fell from a little rocky knoll. Little birds cheeped. A little grassy hill rose in the distance. You know what it looked like? Like a paid upgrade to that Windows XP background you hated, Bliss. You would've said it was a place to "commune with nature." Seemed to me like just grass and water.

A man, the littlest thing around, sat before the scene. That was me. It's where I first played my game. I didn't really have any qualms or issues with life, but perhaps that itself was my issue with life. Perhaps that was why I played.

I pulled my game pieces from my backpack: a shot glass, rye, and a Colt six-shooter.

The rules are simple: a shot for a shot. I chose a .38 because it's supposedly painless, rye because I was homesick.

I poured myself a brimming shot. I raised the glimmering rim ceremoniously, touching it to the sun's corona as the rye ran over the rim and dribbled down my fingers. A little cheers between me and the world. *Communing with nature.*

I drank it down, burning and horrid. Then I placed a bullet in the revolver's cylinder, closed it, and spun it, sending the cylinder *click-click-click-clicking* away, singing with the birds.

The clicking faded. I raised the gun to my head, pulled the hammer.

Tick.

I waited. And waited. And waited. And squeezed.

Click.

I hadn't recalled inhaling, yet air escaped from my lungs, a long, laborious, and luxurious breath. Birds cheeped outside Reykjavik. "You're okay," they told me. "You too," I replied.

I opened my eyes. The greens were greener, the browns richer. The stream, splitting on rocks, glistened in the sun. That'd have been good for a postcard.

The last time I played was the night after you made me promise to quit drinking. "After tomorrow," I promised, and that night I got shifaced, listening to Nick Mulvey and Fleetwood Mac, like we used to. Confident and surely slurred, I sang:

*And I saw my reflection in the snow-covered hills
'Till the landslide brought me down*

I played the next night. I crossed the river into Quebec and got bloated on cheap poutine and cheap booze. Once I was bored and drunk enough I walked to the nearest woods and waded through the thick, powdery snow, which fell in my shoes, biting my ankles. Still, I continued, step by frigid step.

The sky was matte and grey as though an endless cloud was the whole world's canopy, but the moon was shining through the thin bare branches of dead trees. Evergreens dotted the forest, their shoots hanging low and limp under a blanket of silver snow.

Half a kilometer in, the ground began to lift and fall and roll. I stumbled through the snow, catching myself so often that my hands became wet and red and raw. Eventually, I came to a stop at a very special place I didn't know existed. Etched in silver moonlight, I found your coat hanging upon a branch.

Not yours, *literally*, but the exact same kind. Dark brown with that strangely textured, thin outer layer, like a windbreaker, and that fake wool on the inside that poked out the collar. *Exactly* the same.

It had no reason to be there, and yet it was. It was fate, or kismet. Whatever the fuck you would have called it. I wish you were there to see it. I took a photo. Perhaps I'd send it to you on a postcard.

I sat down, removed my game pieces, and poured myself Fireball. I raised the glass towards your coat. "Cheers, Dad."

I downed a warm and violent draft, the sweetness and spice singeing my throat. A few minutes passed in the silent woods before I slid a bullet into the revolver. A breeze blew and your coat swayed gently. Warm-bellied and giddy, I swigged another shot of cinnamon and loaded another shot of silver.

My third round came only a minute later.

I sneezed, booming and violent. *Our* sneeze. And I swear, when I did, your sleeve fluttered in the still air, rustling and rubbing against itself. A little wave my way. "Hello, Sammy," it said.

I waved back. "Hi, Dad."

"Please don't do this, Sammy," you said.

I chuckled. "Why not?"

"What will you get from death?" you asked me.

I stirred in my snowy seat. "The same I get from life: nothing."

"Sammy!" You flapped like a flag in a sudden, angry gust. Then your sleeves stilled and calmed. "Then why does it matter?" you asked me. "Alive or dead, if it doesn't matter, why do you play this game? Every bullet you put in that thing— it's death, Sammy."

I stood up, brandishing my revolver, swirling and swinging like a conductor. "You're focused too much on what's in the gun. If a bullet is death, then what does that make the other five sixths of the cylinder? If I lose, nothing changes. But if I win, I feel— normal again. I've got nothing to lose, all to gain. One-in-six are odds I'll take."

"One-in-six is a lot," you said.

"It, statistically, isn't."

"But you're not at one shot!" The wind whistled furiously against your coat. "You're at three!"

"And I'll make it four," I said, giggling. I stepped sluggishly towards you, laughing like an idiot all the way.

"Why are you *really* doing this, Sammy?"

But I ignored you, taking your sleeves in my hand and dancing you around, singing Fleetwood Mac. I laughed and asked you to sing with me, but you hung in seething silence, so I let your sleeves fall.

"I thought I raised you better than this," you told me.

"Did you?" I asked, "you wanted to play too. I know you did."

"Never, Sam."

"Bullshit!" I hissed. I felt the heat rise from my gut to my face. I turned away, focusing on dark trunks and silver snow. "Remember when they discharged you from the hospital and you came over, and I told you about Iceland? And all you said was, 'oh.' You looked so weak that

night. You were brooding. Not yourself. And when I went to get a drink and take a piss, you asked to see my gun. You think I didn't know why? So I pocketed every bullet in the house and gave you the gun before I left. When I came back the revolver was sitting on my coffee table, and you looked as bitter as ever."

"I never wanted to play your game, Sammy."

I stomped through the snow back to my pack. I poured another shot and drowned it. Warm air rose from my throat. "You've been playing the same game all your life, just with different shots."

"Not all my life," you said.

"Well, all my life! I don't have a single fond memory of you without whiskey in your hand."

"Is that how you remember me?"

"I remember your smile and your sneeze and your laugh! I remember when I was a kid you'd come watch TV with me and talk to me about the— the stupid kiddy things I liked. I remember how you'd make me laugh and when I was smiling like an idiot you'd call me your 'sunny sonny.' Only with whiskey in your hand, though. Only with whiskey. And I remember since I was ten, you were the only thing in my life that wasn't dull. You were interesting, and *real*. And then when you left the hospital the doctors told you—"

I wrung my fingers in my fist and drew long, chilly breaths into my lungs. With a handful of snow I wiped my face to try and calm me down. I must have looked so stupid. Wish I had taken a picture then, for your postcard.

Then I said, quietly croaking: "and you say you don't play the same game as me?"

You watched as I took the fifth shot for my belly and the fifth shot for my brain.

"And when you went back to the hospital," I yelled, "you were treating it like a game. So don't tell me— You were fucking laughing! I had to look at you, bedridden and frail and yellow! The nurses— fuck— they told me your stool was bloody. And you were laughing! I was trying so hard to keep from crying." I kicked the snow and sent white mist through the air. It fell to the forest floor with me, and on my knees I sobbed. "Laughing!" I cried.

I slid the sixth bullet into place and poured my final Fireball. "I promised you in the hospital: tonight's the last night I drink."

I lifted the glass to my mouth. Liquor wet my lip and cinnamon stung my nose.

"Do you remember why I laughed?" you asked.

I pulled my lips away. The liquor lapped over the rim. "I asked you what you'd do, and you said, 'not much I *can* do now.' And then I asked you what I'd do."

There is nowhere more silent and still than snow-draped woods. You didn't sway or say a word, prodding me to continue. So I spoke: "And you said, 'well, you could pour a drink out for me. And if I get to heaven, send me a postcard.'"

I clenched snow, but it burned cold in my palm and melted away. "And then you laughed. A lot."

"Well, if you play, you can't send me a postcard," you said, "so at least pour one out for me."

I shook my head, pondering over your words. I thought of warm whiskey. Your warm laugh. Your sneeze, and my sneeze. I thought of the money you gave me for Iceland, and all the times you'd come to my room after a nightmare and run your thumb through my hair. I thought of yellow skin.

I let the Fireball fall to the snow beneath you. Upturning the gun, I let the sixth bullet fall. The revolver clicked as I closed the cylinder.

“Alright, old man. One-in-six. That’s a lot, ain’t it?”

You laughed at that. I heard you laugh. And I’ll admit, I laughed a little too.

I slapped the cylinder hard and sent it *click-click-clicking* away. I raised the gun with a shaking, life-longing hand and an indifferent mind.

Click-click-click-click, it spun.

“Wish me luck.”

Click-click-click.

“Good luck.”

Click, click.

I shut my eyes, pulled the hammer.

Tick.

My hands never steadied. I squeezed the trigger slowly, more, and more, and more, and more.

Click.

The hammer snapped close. Breath fell luxuriously from my lungs.

I opened my eyes, expecting something more, but all I saw was dark trees and grey skies and silver snow-covered hills. And I laughed. I laughed at the fact I thought I’d find a world better and brighter before me. A snowy forest at night? There are no colours to *be* brighter! I keeled over, howling like a madman. I dug my camera out of my bag and took a photo of my face, all red and frigid and stupid and snotty. Beet, rich red. I wish you could have seen it yourself, Dad. I thought of printing that picture, putting it on a postcard.

But, I think, a postcard would be too small, too fake. Like that \$2.99 Bliss in Iceland. But I’m learning to live, day by day, and I figured the least I could do is write you this letter and say thank you.

I got my one month chip today, Dad. Wish you could see that too.

Love,

Your sunny sonny Sam(my)

P.S. The hospital mailed me back something of yours. Said the nurses found it tucked within your sheets but weren’t sure what it was. It was a firing pin.