

Counting to Zero (0.3745)

Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

I'm in some restaurant. One of those chains they have in every single outpost of suburbia. Outback, Longhorn, Applebee's, Chili's, Ruby Tuesday, Folks, Sizzler, Peddler, Olive Garden, Provino's, Ryan's...I've been sitting here, a table to myself, for so long now I can't even remember which one I walked into. Once you're inside they all look pretty much the same. I'm trying to calm myself down; I'm looking for a fight. I'm doing both.

I remember when it all started. I was at the office. I opened two boxes of pens, five pens in each box. One box had red, one had blue. I looked at them on my desk and saw two sets of five. Then I counted them. There were nine.

I miscounted, I thought. Surely. I scanned my eyes over them again. Five blue pens. Five red pens. Nine pens total. Impossible.

I separated the pens into two groups and counted them individually, slowly, out loud. One, two, three, four, five blue pens. One, two, three, four, five red pens. I pushed them back into one group and did the same thing, moving a pen from the right half of my desk to the left half when I counted it.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. Nine pens total. Five blue, and five red.

For the next two hours I counted and recounted those same pens. There were nine every time. I finally freaked out, snapped them all in half, and shoved them into the wastebasket. Zero pens. I got two boxes of new pens, opened up these, and counted them. Five blue, five red, ten pens total. Everything was fine for awhile after that. That was the beginning. The beginning of what? I have no fucking clue. The beginning of zero.

Back in the restaurant, back in the now, I can feel all the muscles in my body tighten. I'm ready to explode. I know it, and I can't do anything about it. I'm waiting for

the mark to come in. It doesn't matter who he is. Just some guy. He's going to sit at the bar, and he's going to be a complete asshole. And I'm going to egg him on. I want to fight, and I want someone to punish.

Finally he's here. A big fat bastard redneck tosses back his one drink too many, and he's flirting with the waitress stuck doing bar tonight a little too hardcore. He calls her boyfriend a cocksucker. He grabs her ass when she turns around to help someone else. He's mine. He just doesn't know it yet.

I stand up. I'm not tall; I'm not short. I'm skinny. I don't look muscular. The guy has two hundred pounds or more on me, and looks like he's seven feet tall. I walk up and tap him on the shoulder anyway. He turns around, and looks at me with bleary eyes.

“It's time for you to go,” I say. I know he won't.

“You mind your own fucking business,” he says.

Too late I realize he's got friends. Three of them, as big as he is. While he's been drinking away a month's pay hitting on some high school girl who wants nothing more than to go home and smoke a bowl to forget about all of this they've been devouring the majority of a side of beef by the looks of the plates. I don't care.

“My business is what I want it to be, and right now, my business is you acting like the fat cunt you are,” I say. It's not one of my better lines, but he didn't give my much to work with. I'm wittier when I have something to play off of.

“What did you call me?” He stands up. He's not afraid. He towers over me. His friends are getting up too. I look at the high school girl. So pretty, but I can tell she's not worth doing this for. She has the vapid expression of one of the girls who lives for nothing other than attention, normally in the form of the popular guy of the moment

fucking her wherever is convenient. If I was truly doing it for her, I would back down. But my hands tighten into fists, my muscles scream with energy. This is for me.

He doesn't give me the chance to redeem myself with something more biting than what I said earlier, just as I knew he wouldn't. I go flying backward from a sloppy drunk punch to the chest. He hits hard, I give him that much credit. But it won't save him. I take one last look at the hollow girl behind the bar, try to tell her with my eyes that I am sorry for what's about to happen, and then I roll onto my feet and lunge at the fat bastard.

My first punch is to his jaw, which separates. I kick him in the gut. He goes backward into the bar hard enough to bend the metal edge into the wood. His friends are up. I turn and launch myself at them.

They realize something has gone wrong when I run through a table to get to them. The part my body touches shatters like balsa wood. Splinters lodge in their arms and faces. The table goes flying at them; it hits Redneck #2 in the face. Nothing in the bar weighs more than a Fischer-Price playset to me; everything breaks like glass. I can see the reaction in their eyes. This isn't supposed to happen. This isn't right.

“God damn it!” Redneck #3 screams.

Redneck #2 has a broken nose and is unconscious. I look at Redneck #4. He's on the ground, crying, clawing at his eyes. Splinters. I'm disappointed. I wanted more of a fight than this.

Redneck #3 runs.

I hear something behind me. Fat Bastard McBrokenjaw is back up and running at me. He tackles me like a freight train, all of those years of beers and burgers finally doing him some good. I start to fall. He's on top of me.

My hand brushes the floor and I shove off with my fingertips with all the force I can muster. It's enough. It's more than enough. I'm back on my feet and he's hurtling in the other direction, back towards the bar. He hits it again the same spot. The wood snaps, and I hear vertebrae crack. The girl behind the bar screams.

Everyone is looking at me. Staring at me. They're trying to remember my face, but they won't.

I've overstayed my welcome. I glance around as I walk toward the door. The energy is gone from me now. I don't hurt. I can't feel any of the punches or hits. I look down at the man I blinded. I hear the man I paralyzed scream. Did they really deserve this? How do I know I didn't just destroy the life of a good man?

I think of his drunken boasts. The eyes sliding over the girl at the bar, poking at her every crevice. Her tits. Her ass. The drunk devoured it all, imagining what was underneath. I know what he desired.

Did I punish him for that, or because I needed someone to punish? I was looking for someone to mess up. I was looking a release. Did I only see what I wanted to see?

The moment's gone now. I'm in my car. I see that the restaurant is Outback. I hear the screams.

I leave.

I'm thinking about the pens.

Five blue pens. Five red. Nine total.

I wanted there to be ten. I wanted five plus five to equal ten. I wanted it so bad that when I grabbed the two fresh boxes I felt something slip inside me, begging it to be ten. And it was.

Or was it?

Were there really nine pens to begin with? What if five plus five always equaled nine before, and I made it equal ten? Given an infinite universe, with infinite possibilities, everything that can ever happen will happen an infinite number of times.

The pens. The first time I felt the thing inside me slip, just a little. Just enough. Just enough to make it ten.

Ten from nine. There was no extra pen. There was no missing pen. There were five red, and five blue. There were nine total. There were ten total. All of the above were true. All of the above are true.

That's where it started, back at zero. At zero pens. Before I opened the first set of boxes, before I opened the second set, before I ever tried to make nine into ten. But once I felt the slip, I couldn't go back.

I drive. I am home. I sleep.

Five plus five.

Ten.

Zero.

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