

The piano needed to be tuned. It still had some play, but Mercy knew that unless she wanted to avoid certain keys all the time, she would have to scrape up the greenbacks for a professional to come in. She was experienced at many things, but tuning pianos was best left to the experts. It was enough of a challenge to play it.

Her sister was far better at it, but that didn't stop Mercy from playing and singing when the mood struck her, and lately the mood was hitting her like a kung fu hero on fast forward. Mercy's performances were for her, she never cared for an audience, and rationalized that they wouldn't care for her.

Raine was sprawled on the couch in her nick and nora PJs reading one of the many motorcycle magazines littering the living room. The pajamas looked comfortable, and their power over Raine's sentiment was always welcome. Raine's attitude softened, and her stress seemed to go away. The fireplace was running and the soft cracking of the flames added to the calm they were both experiencing. Mercy starts to lightly tap the piano keys as she looks out the window onto Farmingham's main street. Softly, to gather her thoughts, she begins to sing . . .

*When you feel you're done in,
And you've decided you can't win.
Tell yourself it won't be for long.
You're between dark and dawn. . .*

Mercy was uncomfortable in the blouse and skirt she selected from the dark side of her closet for this particular event. At 17, Raine sat across from her in the hospital conference room dressed in jeans, leather jacket and black shirt emblazoned with a Sleazy Weasels logo. Mercy would have switched places in an instant, but at 35 she had to be the responsible adult.

The doctor blabbered on and on about the various side effects of Danny's medicines and the things that the caregivers for Alzheimer's patients should be aware of. Mercy assures the doctor that they would do fine.

“Remember to choose simple words and speak in short sentences with a calm tone of voice. Minimize distractions, like TV or radio, to help him focus. Maintain eye contact and use positive, friendly facial expressions. This is something that will affect you and Raine substantially. You will find that your own habits and schedules will have to change.”

“Between the two of us and the visiting nurse we should be able to keep him on a regular schedule.”

“You sound confident. That is a good thing.”

“I used to be a paramedic in Boston. I know my way around medical hoo-ha.”

The doctor’s eyes lit up. She looks down at the chart she was holding and points a finger at Mercy. “You’re THE Mercy Johnson!?, I worked Mass General when you were out there . . . what was it they said about you back then?”

Raine looks up somewhat interested in this little nugget from Mercy’s past. Mercy stays quiet hoping it will be over soon.

“Oh yeah . . . no one dies on Mercy’s watch!” The doctor turns to Raine. “Mercy was a hard worker, and the folks at the ER started saying that none of the patients Mercy treated ever died. No matter how bad the wounds or situation, somehow Mercy kept them alive until the doctors could come in and finish the work. “

Mercy rises and picks up her bag. “C’mon honey, we have to check in on DannyMac before we stop at the pharmacy.”

The doctor finishes signing off on some papers on her chart. “What happened Mercy? Why’d you stop?”

“Someone died.”

*You’ve got too much time, you can’t kill.
Your wheels are spinning,
But you’re standing still . . .*

Mercy was going to miss the energy in the Boston air. Despite the complaints and hassles, the lights, traffic and now the Big Dig were all part of the Boston experience. It had been home for the last five years, since she gave up pretending to be straight and decided to live her life and take her chances as a gay woman. Now she was moving back to Framingham. A move she thought would put her sexual preferences to the test, but Danny needed her and he was a constant in her life through thick and thin.

Chloe was livid.

Raine and Kamiko didn’t have any problem carrying the piano out of the apartment. They chattered as they did it without losing their breath or missing a step. Kamiko had been filling Raine’s head with all sorts of Japanese words of wisdom . . . most of which seemed to revolve around the many ways an opponent could be taken down. Kamiko was making Raine recite muscles, body parts, bone structures and weak points. Despite the subject matter, they treated it as a game. Every now and then they would laugh at an incorrect answer and Raine would try again,

Chloe must have adjusted her prim and proper business suit seven times while standing on the steps looking at the furniture she had grown accustomed to going away. “Don’t they already have furniture?”

Mercy looks up at the agitated auburn haired anchorwoman on the steps. “Yep, but this is mine.”

“And so is the angel of Mercy tattoo on my butt. You think of that?”

Mercy heard the girls giggle in the moving van. This was not going to be easy. Chloe steps down to the sidewalk and starts walking down the street with her briefcase in hand. Mercy follows her. “Why do we have to do this, Chloe?! That tat was your idea. I’m going to help a sick friend; his daughter doesn’t have anyone else. It’s called compassion, caring, and BIG WHOOP... just maybe thinking about someone other than YOURSELF. You familiar with ANY of those concepts?”

Chloe stops, puts down her briefcase and straightens her suit out again. “You THINK I’m self centered?”

“Just thick.”

“You THINK I can’t see how you look at her? Dammit Mercy, we’ve been together for three years. I’ve had to deal with you zoning out to those pictures on the bookcase and knowing you thought of her more than me. You THINK it’s easy to love someone who is in love with a memory.”

“You’re not being fair. I never. . .”

Chloe points down the street toward Raine who is bring two lamps into the moving van.. “Then you make friends with a carbon copy of her and expect me to just stand around and watch. Who’s self-centered, again? Remind me again?”

Mercy leans up against a lamp post. “You’re going to miss your train. I’ll call you, we’ll settle this, but I need to do this. Please. I’ve known that girl since she was born. It’s not what you think. I’ll keep up my part of the rent . . . Chloe. Help me here. ”

“Who is she Mercy?”

“Raine. Raine MacEnroe.”

Chloe rolls her eyes back. “MacEnroe, as in George MacEnroe, the woman in the pictures in our bedroom? Oh this just keeps getting better.”

Mercy puts her head down. “Chloe, I’m leaving Boston... not you Chloe . . . I’m not leaving you.”

*It's all flat and forlorn,
In between dark and dawn . . .*

MacEnroe Motors had been closed for a week. Bobby took care of the repairs that were remaining, and all other appointments were set back a week while things settled down. Raine turns on the lights. Mercy admired her for a moment. Despite everything, Raine seemed to have a good head on her shoulders about what needed to be done. In the last few month's the girl's sense of responsibility seemed to grow in leaps and bounds.

"I thought we could keep the place open. I can work on cars before and after school, Bobby could handle the daily stuff and some of the maintenance. Maybe we can hire another mechanic a couple of days and weekends."

"You're customers will be comfortable with that? A teenage girl fixing their cars?"

"The regular ones know I do it anyway, and the new customers will have to decide for themselves. I can do this." Tears start to well up in Raine's eyes. "I can right?"

*You're so blue.
You can't see.
One day all this will be history.*

The barn behind MacEnroe motors at one time sported a life time of nick nacks that Danny kept "just in case". Raine had no problem sorting though it all and arranging it outside for a garage sale. With the help of her friends, Raine had the bottom of the barn set up as a makeshift dojo, and the top level of the barn was cleaned up and set up as a gathering place for them. Raine wanted to stay close to home, and apparently that meant setting up desks, computers, two refrigerators, a conference table, and several locked armoires in a huge space that sported a map of Farmingham on one end, and several bookshelves of encyclopedias and other standard reference guides. These kids either were an extreme study group, or terrorists. Mercy let them do what they wanted. She always favored the idea of a secret lair herself. Someday she might even show hers to Raine.

Like clockwork, at 4:00 am, Mercy hears Raine come down from her room in the attic and make her way out to the barn. This time, Mercy decides to follow.

It appeared that Raine's boxing gloves were more for the protection of the punching bag. The girl danced to the electronic beats of Sparks while slamming the punching bag among other props with everything she had. Some of the moves included

flips, kicks, and one particular high kick to a target well above the human norm. At what point did Raine think she'd ever have to kick something eight feet high. Mercy watched with interest, mentally cataloging the number of stunts that would have required far more training than high school gym.

Then Raine pulled out two stakes and started a multiple of maneuvers that favored the wooden stakes. Under her breath, Mercy couldn't suppress her shock . . . "No. . . no, no."

*Now I've been a fool,
But I'm not wrong . . .
You're between dark and dawn.*

“I have to get to school, dad. You going to have a good day?”
“Good day. TV.”

Raine looks at Mercy with a sneer. Mercy raises her hands up in the air. “He likes soccer and I could use the break.”

“How much TV? Mercy? You know it makes him angry when his team misses the net.”

Mercy gets up from the table and goes for the refrigerator. “Shows how much you've been paying attention honey,... he gets pissed off when ANY team misses the net.”

“TV!”

Mercy and Raine both turn to Danny. “Shut up!”

Danny throws his plate on the floor.

Hmm, you're between dark and dawn.

Mercy gets down on the floor and starts cleaning the mess. Raine joins her, both women are on the verge of tears. Raine puts her hand on Mercy's. “Hey, I'm sorry.”

“Raine, I changed my schedule so that I could do the morning traffic reports during the week. The nurse gets here in an hour and I leave a half hour after that. I don't care if he's watching porn, I need to be dressed and ready to fly. “

“ I know, I know, but I can beat that. Did you know that there was a murder at school? Some kid got sliced up and packed into lockers. “

“I did know that. I’m in the loop remember. But I can beat that . . . I also know that you and your friends have been asking a lot of questions. You the Farmingham secret police or something?”

“Oh, I can beat that, Mercy darling . . . it’s my business.”

“Well honey, you and your dad are mine now.”

*Between Dark and Dawn,
That’s where nothing’s always going on.*

Boston, Channel 10 Newscenter. Mercy heads up to the helicopter pad. She had to rush through traffic and on the way remembered several things she had forgotten to tell the nurse. Stopping at a phone to fill her in made her late anyway despite the rush.

“Mercy, better hurry. Gary’s waiting.” Claude was one of the station managers he liked Mercy and gave her a lot of slack, but Gary was something else altogether. A young upstart who felt that right out of college he should be covering Iraq instead of Interstate 93.

“Mercy?”

Dammit, another interruption . . . she turns with a ready snarl . . . it’s Chloe. Mercy keeps quiet. Chloe hands her a book. “I hope you’re okay. . .and I know you’re in a hurry. Take this, please.”

Mercy takes the book. “Thanks, C. I think we’re both running late.”

“Yeah.”

*You’ll be on the phone,
Before too long,
But right now . . .
You’re between dark and dawn.*

The fireplace was a nice touch. Instead of the TV, Mercy enjoyed listening to and watching the fire. She felt awful after her words with Raine, but she needed to establish some sort of authority. Raine seemed to think that she suddenly was completely out on her own. Mercy took her role of guardian

much more serious than that. It was 7:00 PM, Danny was finally in bed after a rough bath, Raine was off with her friends now for an hour, and Mercy had the place to herself.

The book was titled *The Worst Day of My Life, So Far: My Mother, Alzheimer's and Me*. Mercy smiled. Chloe had a heart after all. Mercy pulled the bookmark out, it was a picture of kitten. Inscribed beneath the kitten . . . 'I'm ready for that call'.

Mercy took a sip of her tea, a habit she picked up in London and refused to kick out with the others she had collected and dismissed over the years. The phone was soon in her hands.

"Hello? . . . Thanks for the book, hon. I miss you."

*Wait til the sun comes out.
You're gonna wonder what the fuss was all about*

The Guidance counselor looked at Mercy with a microscopic leer. She was a large black woman with cornrolled hair and the sort of glare that caused her eyes to expand out of their sockets. "So. You? You are the guardian."

Mercy didn't like the woman immediately. She waves a hand toward Raine who sits disinterested nearby looking out the window. "Yes, the court says she is my ward, so that makes me her guardian. Her father still lives with us, I'm his primary caregiver."

"I see. Are you aware of Raine's record?"

"She's a good student."

"She's also a good brawler. She has half the boys in school keeping their distance and other half carrying around icepacks."

"That's my problem how?"

From behind, Raine raises a fist limply. "Yay, Mom."

The counselor gets physically bent out of shape. "You see that. Sooner or later she is going to get into real trouble. I hate to tell you Ms. . . umm . . . Johnson, this school has had some unfortunate incidents this year and your girl . . ."

"Ward."

"Whatever. Raine is bound to attract undue attention."

Raine raises the fist again sarcastically. “Cool, I’m attractive. Can we go . . . Mom?”.

Mercy walks over to Raine and in a harsh whisper . . . “Stop the crap Raine. And don’t call me Mom. I’m not replacing her, I can’t. Ever.”

Raine is taken back by how serious Mercy sounded. “Okay, I’ll stop.”

Mercy turns to the counselor . “You’re doing your job I know. I intend to do mine. Just change the paperwork over to my name. Raine’s father isn’t able to handle this anymore. “

The woman turns her glare toward Raine. “ Hmmphh, how long will you?”

*You’ve been standing in the rain,
But pretty soon, you’re gonna be,
On your way again . . .*

4:00 Am. Mercy makes no secret of walking into the barn. Raine stops pounding on a punching bag. “Mercy . . . did I wake you.” Mercy walks in and puts on a pair of boxing gloves. “May I?”

Raine laughs, “Sure. Don’t tell me, you used to be a pro-boxer or something?”. Mercy hits the bag with precision and intent. “No, but I spent lots of time at the YMCA when I was a girl.”

“I can beat that.”

“I know you can. Your training doesn’t come from school does it?”

Raine stops punching the bag. “Training? I just . . .” Mercy punches the bag, this time simply to get some of her frustrations out. “Don’t tell me. You’re self taught huh? I can beat that, honey . . .you’ve got moves that that would make Jet Li blush. Someone is training you to be a powerhouse, they are turning you into a weapon and whether you think so or not . . . you’re not ready for it. “

The bag takes another blow.

“You’re seventeen. Find yourself friends you can hang out with at concerts and down at the diner, without somehow taking sidesteps into street fights and back alley scuffles. What’s that all about anyway. You come home with black and blues on your black and blues. You think I don’t notice?”

Raine puts her gloves down and sits on a bench. She picks up a waterbottle and takes a liberal drink from it. Mercy perceptively stops pounding the bag and sits next to her. “You have something to say?”

Raine looks at the room around them, the makeshift equipment, mats, punching bags and rafters with ropes and hoops hanging down for various special maneuvers. “Man, this place still needs work. Mercy, remember Eagle Lake? The trains?”

“How could I forget. That was the day I met my new best friend.”

“You told me a story about a vampire killer in California somewhere. A young girl.”

“Yeah.”, Mercy feared what was coming.

“Well I can beat that . . .”

*Between Dark and Dawn . . .
You're between dark and dawn.*

The conversation lasted until Breakfast, then continued when Mercy got home at six. Raine didn't go out on her “patrol” and instead chose to stay in with her. When Mercy got home, there was a banana split with four scoops of different flavored ice cream, nuts, sprinkles, whipped cream, four cherry's and Mercy's name literally written on it with chocolate syrup.

After Danny was in bed, they gathered themselves in the living room and continued the conversation. All about demons, vampires, sanguinaries, evil cosmetics and all the pain and confusion Raine had been holding in. Raine told her about the vampire that almost killed her, and about how Danny truly ended up on the Alzheimer's fast track.

And all about Slayers.

*Between dark and dawn,
You're between Dark and Dawn . . .*

Mercy finishes the song, managing to finish the last few notes without shedding a tear. Raine had fallen asleep. Mercy tenderly takes the magazine out of Raine's hand and delicately covers her up with a quilt.

“Goodnight Sweetness”

Mercy picks up her tea cup and heads to the kitchen to refill it. She stops at the door and looks at her young ward, sleeping angel like in the glow of the fire. Her face the exact duplicate of her mother’s. “About your story, honey. . .”

“I can beat that.”

Tales of the New Slayers

Between Dark and Dawn

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