

The room was silent but for the shuffling footsteps of a man dressed in wrinkled khaki pants and a collared white button-down shirt. His sleeves were pushed halfway up his forearms, revealing tanned skin and dark curled hair. The man approached a stage and ascended the three hollow steps. He moved to stand behind the podium. His eyes scanned the room, the sparse audience before him. The walls were white, the carpet red. Wooden pews occupied the majority of the room, and in the first few rows sat an array of people, eyes fixed on the man. He took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. It was clear he hadn't shaved, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

His fist was clenched, fingers closed tightly around a silver ring. He could feel his sweat slick on the smooth, cool edges of the metal. He leaned toward the microphone on the podium. He cleared his throat.

“Um, hi everyone,” he started, wincing as his voice echoed through the room. “My name is, um, Mike.”

“Hi, Mike,” the audience responded in a chorus.

“I'm here to, um, I mean, you all know why I'm here, of course...” He let out a nervous laugh and ran his fingers through his hair. “I mean, I'm here to talk about something that I did a few years back, and, um, I've been waiting to talk about this for a while. I guess I just wasn't... I just... I'm three years sober now and I need to talk about this tonight, I think.”

He paused, and a few people clapped in the audience.

“Thanks guys, it means a lot to me. Anyway, I, um, I'm just gonna get into it. This was maybe three-and-a-half years ago. Three or four of my buddies and I had been drinking out by the beach, by that pier that they took down last summer. I remember we were drinking this

strawberry vodka my buddy Kyle was going to sell to some high school kids, but they didn't show, so we were drinking it, and I was definitely, um, drunk, but not so far gone that I can't remember. I can still remember." He pinched the bridge of his nose between his index finger and thumb. "I still remember everything."

Mike's breath was audible in the microphone. He shoved the ring into his khaki pocket and wiped his hands on his thighs. "I was drunk, and so were my buddies. And we saw this old man sleeping on the sidewalk. He was all bundled up, must've been wearing four jackets, and he had long hair and a long beard. You could barely see his face, but he was sleeping." Mike was speaking quickly, now, the words coming fast and breathy through the speakers. "There was this shopping cart next to the guy. It had all his stuff in it. There were bottles of water and boxes of cereal. I remember there were two framed photographs of this little girl, and there was a blanket and a folding chair, and I think there was a dog collar, but I'm not sure about that. And there was a bunch of other stuff. The cart was full, and it was heavy. This man's entire life, everything he had, was in that cart."

Mike rolled back his shoulders and ran his fingers through his hair. He took the ring out of his pocket and began to slide it between his fingers. "I remember, I wanted to see how much the cart weighed--I was curious--and the guy was sleeping, so I started to push it. It was heavy. I laughed, and then Kyle came over. And he started going through the stuff in the cart. I know he put something in his pocket, but I didn't see what it was. Some of the other guys came over, too, and were looking through the cart also."

He rubbed his hand along his jaw, the beginnings of a beard rough against his palm. His voice had softened to a near-whisper. "Then the man woke up. I don't think he really knew what

was happening. Not completely. But he started to say something. He said no, or stop, and Kyle went over and... Kyle, he--" His voice broke. "Kyle kicked the man in the throat. Then again in the stomach. And I... I just stood there. And a few of the other guys went over, too, and they were just *beating* this poor man and I didn't do anything. I just stood there. I just stood there and... I laughed." He choked on the last word, then broke into a coughing fit, turned away from the microphone, bracing himself on the podium.

A deep, weighty silence filled the room. In the far corner, the air conditioning unit kicked to life, and a member in the audience flinched.

Mike ground his teeth together and locked his jaw. He swallowed, and his Adam's apple moved up, then down on his neck like a buoy. "I remember the man was groaning, and they all finally left him alone. Except Kyle spit on him, and he called him a faggot. Then we all spit on him." Mike's heart thudded unevenly in his chest; he could feel his brain pounding. "Then one of the other guys, Jeff, he started rifling through the cart again. And then we all were, and we all took something. I still have the ring I took from him. It was in a velvet blue pouch. I remember thinking it was too nice for someone who slept on the pier.

"And then we were done, just looking at this shopping cart, and we were standing on the pier, and I had this idea." Mike's eyes were fixed on a spot in the ceiling. The words spilled out of him like thick hot oil, and he felt them tumble off his tongue, and he couldn't stop. His breath came rapidly, and his voice continued of its own accord. "I don't know why. Because I wanted to see what it would look like, maybe. Or maybe to see how fast I could push it. Probably because I was a mean drunk bastard. But I took this man's cart and I just started pushing it down

the pier. I remember how it bounced up and down on the wood boards. And I was running with it, and I ran to the edge of the pier and I pushed it over the ledge.

“And I watched it fall. And all of the things in the cart flew out, and it all scattered on the water. For some reason, I thought the cart would float. But it didn’t. It sank right away. But the other stuff. Clothes, food, a blanket. That floated on the surface. I remember the water was black that night.”

Abruptly, the words stopped flowing. Mike closed his eyes. “That’s it. That’s the worst thing I’ve ever done in my life. I’ve never spoken of it until tonight. And I was jogging down by where that pier used to be the other day. And I saw this shopping cart on the sand.” He conjured the picture in his mind. The seaweed, the rust, the algae. He had thought, for a moment, it looked as if the cart had grown from the sand itself. “I don’t know if it was *his* cart, but I knew it was time I talked about it. So, that’s why I came up tonight. Thanks, everyone.”

A beat passed. People began to clap, not especially boisterously or softly. Mike turned and walked off the stage. He took a seat in the second pew near the aisle. He noticed sweat stuck his white shirt to his chest, and he felt the ring press against his leg from his pocket as he sat. He fished it out and slipped it on his fourth finger. It was a snug fit. Mike twisted the ring near to his knuckle. To his side he heard a whisper, and he looked to see an older man with kind eyes kneeling next to him. The man wore a worker’s jumpsuit and sported a nametag daintily displaying the name Joseph. Mike opened his mouth, but said nothing.

The man’s lips quirked up into a small smile. He leaned in close, and Mike could feel the man’s breath on his ear. “I’ve been sober three years now, too,” the man said. “I was living on the streets. I decided to get clean the night some boys pushed my shopping cart off the pier. I

realized I hit rock bottom. Turns out that night was the best thing that could have happened to me.”

Mike’s heart seized in his chest. He felt pricks behind his eyes.

The man looked pointedly at Mike’s hand, laying limply in Mike’s lap. “Now,” the man said, “I’ve been looking for that ring for years.”