

*The first drink is always the hardest to get down. Your throat isn't accustomed to the sting, one almost feels violated as their chaste throat is then defiled by whatever dense alcoholic beverage pours down it.*

“Pour me another, won't ya?” Matheus shouted to the bartender, watching with hazy eyes as the man poured drinks for those further down the counter. He scrutinized the man much like one would a questionable figure in a grocery store, stalking around and eyeing the patrons more so than items sitting on the shelves. The bartender looked carefree, something Matheus felt almost envious of. How it must feel to have a life so together and be content with what's going on. The feeling of even being partly put together was something he wished he had, something he craved for.

“Don't,” a man said from beside him, his voice familiar but Matheus' vision was becoming more and more fucked up by the minute, this man could be anyone, and he would believe him to be his best friend.

“Sorry, bud,” the bartender sighed as he refilled the cup in front of him, “he's paying, so I'm pouring.” Matheus could kiss the man if he had the energy to even lean forward. No, all he wanted to do was let the rim of the cup meet the fullness of his lips.

“Matheus,” the voice growled, resting his hand on top of his. With a sight that was focused on everything but the man's hand, he glared down at it, as if his gaze would cause it to disappear. “Do you even know where you are?” The voice turned Matheus so that he was now looking at their face. This familiar stranger had the same color eyes as him, the same fat nose. Matheus could vaguely remember always having his nose pinched by his mother, bless her soul.

“Donovan?” Matheus questioned, squeezing his eyes together, “what are you doing here?”

“I followed your drunk ass,” Donovan sighed, releasing Matheus. On instinct, he raised the cup to his lips and took in the alcohol, stiffening before relaxing as it surged through him, warming him to his core. “Rosina wouldn't have wanted you to end up this way.” Donovan braced, ready for whatever alcohol-induced rage was about to head his way, whether that be a fist or a sloppily put together sentence. But nothing came. Instead, Matheus gazed into his cup, his brother's words repeating in his head.

*Rosina wouldn't have wanted you to end up this way.* The words confused him. He was pretty sure Rosina didn't want to end up dying during childbirth due to the incompetence of a doctor, and yet, she was laying in some overpriced coffin in the fucking ground.

"Don't worry about me, love. Save our child." Those were her last words to him before the light faded from her eyes. Matheus loved that gleam. She had the deepest brown eyes ever. She hated her eyes actually, always complained about how ordinary they were and how dark. He would listen to her talk about getting contacts that were another color, and he was always firmly against it; he loved those eyes of hers so much.

In the end, he couldn't even fulfill her dying wish. The baby was delivered and, after about two breaths, seemed to just quit. Something he was reasonably close to doing as well.

"Matheus!" Donovan shouted, tapping the side of his arm harshly to get his attention, "come on, let's get you home."

"Get off me," he growled lowly, shrugging him off as he called over the bartender once again. This time the employee brought over an extra cup, earning him a tip in Matheus' book.

"You've had enough," Donovan insisted.

"Don't you have a child and a wife back home?" Matheus asked. Though his tone was emotion-free, his inner thoughts weren't. How jealous he was of his little brother. A healthy child and a loving wife to go home to. For him, Matheus was the only problem.

"Don't do this, Matheus. It's been months since the accident and –"

Matheus snorted, disallowing Donovan from continuing, "is that what you're all calling it now? An accident? I always thought that was murder, but it might just be me." Donovan leaned in, only to back away when he got a strong whiff of the alcohol on his brother's breath.

"Let's not discuss that here."

"Then, where?" Matheus asked, his voice louder than he wanted. He took a deep breath in and slid the now empty glass back and forth between his hands. "I can't talk about it here or at home. I couldn't talk about it at the doctor's office or even at the funeral. I open my mouth, and everyone decides to instantly pity me. I close my mouth, and everyone thinks I'm a depressing drunk contemplating suicide."

Donovan stiffened as he looked his older brother over, “every time I ask if you’re okay, you make it seem like it’s no big deal.”

“Of course I fucking do, pendejo. If I say anything else, then you all tell me to see a shrink. I don’t need no damn shrink,” Matheus shouted, slamming the cup down, “I’m not loco en la cabeza!”

With a smile that didn’t dare reach his eyes, Donovan leaned in, “your Spanish is starting to slip through.” It was true for his entire side of the family, the more emotional they got, the more they would revert back to their language of origin, well that was true for everyone but him. The older Donovan got, the more he slipped away from the tongue. He only spoke it now when he spent prolonged periods around his father.

Silence set in as Donovan tried to figure out what to say, his brother was eyeing the bartender once again.

“I won’t respond. Tell me, how do you feel? Are you okay?”

Matheus stared ahead, that was the million-dollar question. The one that would win him the game. Frankly, he wasn’t scared of getting the answer wrong as much as he was at what it meant. He’s been playing this game for what seemed like forever, what would he do when it was finally done?

“I’m numb,” he finally said, “my life is on an infinite loop. I wake up, go to work, go home and stare at pictures, I drink, and then I go to sleep. I keep replaying that moment in the hospital over. I’ve experienced every feeling and emotion there is. And now,” he raised his hand to call over the bartender, much to the chagrin of his brother, “and now I just want one more drink.”

*Once you get the hang of it, you don’t taste anything anymore. Beer, tequila, vodka, it didn’t matter, alcohol was alcohol. It all gave you the same sensation in the end, and that was all that was really needed. The impression that life was more minuscule than you initially presumed, a comfortable tingle that made you feel everything and nothing.*

Matheus wasn’t what one would describe as being present in the moment. It was more like he was still in his dark house, three or so months ago. A half-drunken bottle of whiskey in one hand, and a series of items in the other. On his better days, it was a picture or the remote to

the television. And on his worst, it was a 22-caliber pistol or combat knife, both of which he kept buried under useless papers in his end table. At first, it was only the pistol, the cold metal awakened his senses, for a time. Now, he didn't know the difference between that or a heated-up plate. He switched to the combat knife soon after, finding that the cold steel combined with the sensation of its serrated teeth against his skin always pulled him out of his numbness.

But of course, it only succeeded in doing so for a handful of minutes.

The day was ironic, nothing like what entertainment says funerals should be like. The sun was out, the birds were chirping, the wind was harsh, and the clouds crawled across the sky at a pace he was accustomed to. His fingers would twitch, strumming against his pants leg as he imagined the bottles waiting for him back home. He had almost quit, a foolish thing, really. He had prayed to God for a sign. He got a sign; he just misinterpreted the meaning. He thought God was saying to stop when he was really telling him not to, to head straight to the liquor store and grab as much as his wallet could carry. He started labeling the bottles, each one for a different day and a different time. He gazed at his watch, five o'clock was his next one. He doubted he'd be late.

He felt a tug at his pants leg and looked down to see his now-deceased brother's only child. The look in the child's eyes was far away, and he almost felt like they were kindred spirits. *If this kid could drink*, he thought to himself. Birds of a feather they were. Both lost everything due to the faults of others.

"Tired of all the strange faces, niño?" he asked the child. They didn't nod, they didn't shake their head, they didn't speak, or make any sort of cue that would answer his question. They just gazed up at him, their eyes asking questions he was still searching for. The problem was that the bottom of bottles held nothing but see-through glass and reflections. And so, he stopped looking for answers a long time ago.

"Want to go stare at the wall together?" he asked next. Again, the child, Roe, said nothing. They only entwined their fingers with his, clutching hard like they might be yanked away. They left the funeral, and Matheus drove them both back to his place. They said nothing as they walked into the living room and sat on the sofa, both staring blankly at the wall in silence.

"Monsters are trying to get me," the child finally spoke, drawing no outrageous reaction out of their uncle.

Matheus hummed, "my monsters already got me."

“Did you fight? They told me to stop fighting and to give in. I didn’t listen, and so they took mommy and daddy.”

“I didn’t fight.”

“Is it better?”

“Yea, it is.” He turned to face the child sitting on his sofa, the closest thing he now had to family. He watched as they swung their legs, ignoring the loud thump that sounded whenever their heel hit the bottom of the couch. If Matheus was of sane mind, he would believe that Roe didn’t understand what had just happened. That they didn’t realize that they would never see either of their parents again. But he wasn’t, and for that reason, Matheus saw deeper. He slowly turned back to the wall.

“Do you see them?” Roe whispered. For a time, the only sound originating from the house was that of Roe’s heels hitting the furniture.

“Yes,” he said, glancing up and looking around at the darkness, “I see them.” It was minutes later that he helped Roe up to the bedroom that was going to be his unborn child’s. He made sure Roe was comfortable before walking to his room, his feet sliding across the carpeted flooring until he was safely within his room. Instinctually, he went to his end table and grabbed his trusty knife, holding it in his hands.

His eyes went to his scarred arm, a series of partially healed scars resting there. His grip tightened as he held it to his arm.

“Just one more,” he whispered to himself, rocking back and forth as his hand shook, “just one more.”

*Everything after the first couple of times is all for sanity. Your senses are floating in a sea of whiskey or vodka, or whatever the hell your poison is. It urges you to keep going. It pressures you. That bubbly feeling is paradise, bottled love that’ll you’ll never want to escape from.*

Ironically, Matheus was back where it all started. *An endless loop indeed*, he thought, though it was much more intricate than he had believed. It began in the hospital, and for him, it would end there. Unlike his wife, the doctors and nurses that came to his care were at least competent enough to know how to sew up wounds and stop bleeding. This was the most he had felt in a long time, but it didn’t make him feel any better. He wanted to be numb, to go into the afterlife, and feel nothing.

“Is this what you wanted, Rosina?” he asked the fluorescent lights overhead. He heard shuffling and jerked, looking to his left to see Roe sleeping peacefully. The color drained from his face as he wondered what he had subjected this child too, a child that was already struggling with their own demons. The law would consider him unfit and would move Roe to a foster home. They would be without family, understanding, or hope. He found himself craving the bottle once again, anything to make this feeling of sincere regret and guilt vanish. Would alcohol even make this go away? The pit that he felt opening in his stomach felt like it wasn’t going to close easily. It would continue to grow until it finally consumed him.

Would anyone be able to help Roe like he could? Did Roe even expect such help? Looking at them, anyone would think Roe was unphased by the events. But Matheus could see the tiny particles of sweat. He noticed the twitches and the trembles regardless of the temperature. He saw it because he had experienced it. Each night, he closed his eyes to the madness and allowed the darkness and demons to loom closer. He invited them in. He didn’t fight, but he sure as hell should’ve.

A tear fell down his face, and he squeezed his eyes shut. The bottle whispered to him, telling him that they would be reacquainted soon, but he shook his head.

“Just one more.” A hand reached out and brushed the tear away, Matheus opening his eyes to see Roe giving him a small smile.

“Fight,” Roe said, squeezing Matheus’ hand. Without another word said, the child returned to the seat and laid down, facing him with an inscrutable expression. It was like they were waiting to see if he would actually do what they suggested. If he would fight or continue to let the monsters take him. Matheus clenched his eyes closed, he needed to get a grip on life, to take back everything he allowed those bottles to take away. Roe was right.

“Just one more chance,” he whispered.