Shake It 'Til It Comes Down

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Title inspired by Rob Thomas – Hand In My Hand.

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"Yeah, and then he—" His phone to his ear, Jasper unlocks the door to their flat. Well, Carl's flat. Jasper doesn't technically live here anymore. "—said that was the daftest thing he ever heard. I mean, that—"

He puts his coat on the coat rack but then stops mid-sentence when his eyes glide over to the kitchen. He takes another few steps closer, frowns, then he says into the phone, "Hey, uhm, sorry. I'll have to call you back."

Malik at the other end asks, "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, just something came up. I'll talk to you later."

He hangs up, then goes into the kitchen. Carl is sitting there, his fingers idly gliding over the rim of a whisky glass next to a bottle that's already missing most of the amber-coloured liquid. Carl's face bears more than his usual sullenness. There's a sharp, grim edge, clearly tinged with sadness.

Jasper's forehead is already in a frown. "Carl? What's going on?"

Carl looks up in the way of someone who was caught off-guard, although surely he would have heard Jasper come in. His voice is a little aggressive but lacks its usual fervour. "What are you doing here?"

"Just picking something up. Are you alright?"

Carl slips on the mask. The one that he learned to wear so well over the years and seldom lets slip. Jasper's seen what's beneath a few times, in rare moments when he's let down his guard.

"Yeah," he says in a tone that might fool a stranger, but not Jasper. Not anymore.

"Please don't lie," Jasper gently calls him out, because the direct approach is often what Carl responds to best. He sits down in the chair across from his stepfather.

Carl sighs, letting the silence that follows speak for itself.

Jasper tries to imagine what might have happened. Carl isn't the type who flees into the bottom of a bottle. And then something dawns on him. He checks the lock screen of his phone.

April 30th. There it is. Shit. He should have remembered.

Carl lifts up the glass and downs the content in one swift motion, then looks at the bottle for a refill, but Jasper reaches over and slides it towards himself. It makes a scraping noise on the wooden tabletop.

Carl's look on him is sharp and accusing, but Jasper holds his gaze and softly says, "He wouldn't want you to get drunk."

It immediately shifts the mood, Carl's expression turning from hardened to deflated, like Jasper just found the gaping wound and ripped open all the stitches. And maybe that's exactly what he did.

"Yeah," Carl says in the smallest of sighs, resignation already having set in.

"Why didn't you call?"

Carl's tone is all cynicism now. "And what? Ask you to get sloshed with me?"

"Ask me to be here."

"Looks like I didn't have to, did I? You're here anyway."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it."

"Can't even get fucking drunk without being reprehended. Just my fucking luck."

Jasper lightly shakes his head. "Is this really the right way to remember him?"

Carl's expression shifts again to something more akin to disdain. "Give me a fucking a break, will you?"

Jasper looks into Carl's eyes again, sees the grief and the pain there that's a lot more raw today, freshly surfaced. He wishes he could reach across the table, put a hand on Carl's and tell him he doesn't have to be alone. But he knows he wouldn't let him. He'd lash out and then withdraw entirely, and that won't serve either of them.

"How much of this have you had?"

Carl scoffs. "Not enough."

"Look. I know the solitary isolation thing is your go-to. But it doesn't have to be."

Carl's mouth forms a grim line, all hardened edges and denial.

Jasper tries to remember the letter that Carl showed him last year, tries to remember what it said. In a low voice, he says, "Let someone give you a hug or two. Isn't that what he said?"

That punches where it hurts, he can see it in Carl's eyes, how he lifts his head and looks at Jasper, then averts his gaze. He draws in a breath that catches on something, then gets up from the table to walk into the living room.

And that's Carl, too. He flees when things get heavy and intense. He hides and deflects, like a skittish animal, wraps the pain and anger around him and clasps it in front of his chest like a second skin he both needs and wants to shed at the same time.

Jasper knows he should give him time, but that doesn't always work with Carl. Sometimes he needs a person to barge through his defences, who isn't intimidated by his caustic bullshit, who will push in there and break down the walls. Jasper thinks Paul must have known how to do that. Jasper is trying to learn how to be that person, because sometimes Carl makes it hard to be reached, to be loved.

Carl is now sitting on the couch, hunched forward, his head in his hands. He looks too small for his tall and lanky frame.

Jasper gets up from the table and sits down next to him. Right next to him, their legs almost touching. He lightly places his hand on Carl's back, feels how he stiffens under the touch but then silently accepts the comforting gesture.

Carl draws in another heavy, hitched breath. "I didn't wanna do this today." He stalls, then says with the desolation of someone who already faced loss and hardship one too many times. "I miss him so fucking much."

Jasper's thumb gently rubs back and forth on Carl's back. "I know. You're allowed to miss him. Especially today."

They sit like that for a long while, Jasper feeling the small tremors under his palm that he thinks might be Carl silently letting the tears come. And that's probably a good thing. Carl may wear his heart on his sleeve when he gets vocal with frustration or tells people to fuck off, but he struggles with the things that go deep. The things that make people see that he's vulnerable, that he, too, is human.

He eventually straightens up, leans his back against the backrest and scrubs his hands down his face. Jasper lets his own hand sink into his lap. Neither of them know what to say because they never learned how to give each other the space for these things. Not until last year, at least.

Jasper finally breaks the silence. "Tell me something about him."

Carl sighs. Maybe he doesn't want to, maybe he'd rather hide and bury, but he inhales, then says in a gravelly voice, "He was a big music buff. He loved the *Beatles*. Had every album. Wouldn't shut up about it sometimes. Even played in a band."

"You like his music?"

"Yeah. Saw him play live a few times. Nothing big. You know, local clubs, that sort of thing." The memory makes Carl smile. "Had some good times."

Jasper nods, and there's a part of him that wishes he could have been there for that, could have seen Carl when he was younger—more carefree—without the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Carl's gaze wanders over to the corner shelf where Paul's framed portrait is standing. "He also loved fantasy. *The Hobbit*, *Game of Thrones*, that sort of thing. He could get totally lost in it. He'd read up on all the lore and the background. Even read the fucking… what's it called? That Tolkien book everyone thinks is shit."

"*Silmarillion*," Jasper offers.

"Yeah, that one. He dragged me to a *Lord of the Rings* triple feature once. I fell asleep partway during the second movie." Carl smiles. "He wouldn't let me hear the end of it."

"Yeah, I can see how that's not your thing."

"Don't get me wrong, I liked the movies. Just maybe not twelve hours on end in the middle of the fucking night."

"You ever read the books?"

"As a kid, sure. Didn't we all?"

"Not sure I did."

Carl chuckles lightly. "You were never big on reading."

"Yeah, I don't get the appeal. It's just words on a page."

That prompts Carl to look at him, a frown on his face like he's actually personally offended. "You play video games all the time. How is escaping to a whole other world in a book any different?"

Jasper frowns. "Whole other world in a book? I don't even know what that means."

Carl looks at him. "You know, wander around that world you see as you read…"

"Wait, you see things when you read?"

Carl now looks puzzled. "Yeah. Don't you?"

"No. I see descriptions and dialogue."

"You see nothing?"

"No. I'm supposed to see something?"

"Yeah. You know, like a movie in your head. Isn't that how it works for everyone?"

"No, I don't get that. It's more like… a concept of things, I guess."

"Huh," Carl says. "Well, maybe that explains why you've never liked books."

“Certainly explains why so many people are crazy about them. Because that sounds kinda cool.”

“Also explains your dismal marks in English. How did it take us over ten years to figure this out?”

“I guess we need to thank Paul for it.”

The smallest of smiles appears on Carl’s face. “Always the fucking saviour, even in death.”

“Hold on to him, he’s good for you.”

“Yeah,” Carl sighs. “Always was.”

“Just don’t forget that there are other people here too that you can lean on.”

“You mean solitary isolation is not what it’s cut out to be?”

Jasper smiles. “Can have its perks. Just maybe not on the anniversary of your best friend’s passing with a bottle of whisky as your sole companion.”

“Was a very good bottle of whisky, though.”

Jasper nods towards the kitchen. “Did you drink all of that tonight?”

Carl shakes his head. “No. You caught me on the second glass.” He meets Jasper’s eyes. “Kinda glad you did.”

“Yeah, so am I, Old Man.”

It makes Carl smile. Jasper has been using that on occasion for a while now, especially since Carl seems to actually like it.

Jasper’s phone rings and he looks at the display, then declines the call. Carl looks at him. “You have somewhere you need to be?”

“No, not anymore.”

“No, Jasper, you should go. You probably had plans.”

“It’s fine, we were just gonna hang out. I can do that some other time.” He unlocks his phone and sends a quick text to Malik.

“Please. I don’t wanna keep you.”

“Too late.” Jasper holds up his phone and waves it a little. “It’s all sorted.”

Carl sighs. “Alright. But don’t blame me afterwards for missing out on something more fun than sitting with your ‘Old Man’,” he puts it in air quotes, “and swapping sob stories from the past.”

Jasper gets up and fetches another glass from the cupboard in the kitchen, then takes the two glasses and the bottle of whisky over to the coffee table. He pours both of them some of the golden liquid, then hands Carl his glass.

“This something you used to do with Paul?”

Carl shakes his head. “No. He was more of a beer guy. Bourbon on rare occasions. I was the one with the drug problems.”

“I thought that was just once.”

“Yeah. Well. Until they put me on opiates after the fucking shooting.”

“They didn’t know?”

“Guess it wasn’t listed in my file, or maybe they missed it.”

“So you had to detox in the hospital?”

“No, not exactly. They just put me on something else when I told them. Wasn’t as strong, but I was out of it for most of that time anyway. I dunno. Wasn’t like the first time.”

“What was that like? The first time.”

“Honestly? A week from fucking hell.”

“And Paul helped you with it?”

“Helped me? He fucking pulled me through it. Dragged me to his flat and locked us both in. He had a sister with a heroin addiction, so he knew what he was getting into. Probably saved my life because I’m not sure I’d have gone off that shit on my own.”

“I wish I’d known. You know, when you got shot. I could have told them not to put you on opiates.”

Carl looks at him, stays quiet for a moment, then says, “Yeah. That’s something we never talked about.”

“Your drug history?”

“No. Me getting shot…”

“Yeah. But I get it. I get why you kept that stuff away from me.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. When you heard, you… You must have been… pretty scared.”

Jasper looks at his lap. Yeah, that isn’t a day he wants to relive. Carl prompts him, his voice soft. “That day, what did they tell you?”

“Nana did. I think Mum called her. She drove me there. You were in surgery.”

“Your mum said you stayed the whole time.”

“Yeah, of course I did. Because, what? Did you think I was just gonna leave?”

Carl shrugs. “I don’t know. You were barely seventeen.”

“Carl. You and Mum fucking raised me. You had sole custody. You were practically my bloody father.” In a gentler voice, he says, “You still are.”

“Yeah,” Carl says, then swallows. “I don’t know why it’s so hard to remember that some people do actually give a shit.”

“You never knew any other way. Not when you were a kid, at least.”

He closes his eyes, leaves them closed for a long moment, then whispers, “No.”

“I wish I’d known that, too. I think some things would have been different if I did.”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t tell you. Not then. You were a fucking kid. You didn’t need my childhood drama in your life on top of all the shit that was happening.”

“You know, I’m not sure I agree. I get that you always wanted to protect me. Me and Mum, even. But to go through all that crap on your own. The PTSD, the depression. That’s fucking harsh.”

Carl’s look on him spells surprise. “You knew about that?”

“Are you seriously asking me that?”

“Yes, I’m seriously asking you that.”

“How do you think I missed the panic attacks? The nightmares? The antidepressants? The repeated padding around the kitchen at 3 fucking am? You weren’t as good at hiding it as you think. You still aren’t. Because that shite doesn’t just go away. Especially if you try to just ignore it.”

“Yeah. I know that now.”

“You always knew that. You just didn’t want to admit it.”

Carl stays quiet and the silence stretches on until Jasper asks, “That why you didn’t tell Paul? Because he would have made you do something about it?”

Carl stays quiet for a long moment, then says. “Yeah. Probably. He was also six hundred fucking miles away. Not like he could have just turned up and dragged me to see a shrink.”

“Oh, come on. You know he would have booked a flight and come up here. When you were in the hospital, at the very least. He’d have checked in with you afterwards. Did he even know about the divorce?”

Carl slowly shakes his head. “No.”

“Christ, Carl.”

“Yeah, I know. He didn’t tell me he had fucking cancer though either, did he?”

“So what, that’s poetic justice? You ever think about why he didn’t?”

“Yeah, of course I did. I think he knew I’d go fucking crazy. Because our thing was always to pull each other through the worst, to come out the other end. But this one had no end to come out of, did it? Just a terminal fucking one. Worst part is, I can’t decide if that was for the better or for worse.”

He lightly taps his fingers on his whisky glass. “I just wish… I wish I could have said goodbye, you know? Tell him how much he meant to me.”

Jasper looks at him. “Carl. He knew.”

Carl’s eyes are shining with tears and he blinks a few times, then drags in a heavy breath. “I can’t believe it’s been a year already.” He looks over at Jasper, lets his gaze linger there for a long moment. “And look at you. All grown up. Us having actual conversations like fucking adults.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s not. I like this.”

“Yeah, me too.” Jasper lets his gaze go to his stepfather’s face. “You miss me, don’t you?”

A mischievous little smile creeps into Carl’s features. “Maybe, but you know I’d never admit it.”

Jasper can’t help but grin, too. “We should do this more often. With or without the whisky.”

“So you actually like whisky?”

He shrugs. “Not that much. A little too smoky for my taste. But this one’s not bad.”

“You’ve had bad whisky before?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t when you were my age.”

He just said that in jest, but then Jasper thinks about it. Because maybe Carl hasn’t. His childhood wasn’t exactly like most kids’, and Jasper now figures maybe he shouldn’t have made that comment.

But Carl just smiles a lopsided smile and says, “Yeah, I was young once. You know, a million years ago.”

“Come on, you’re not *that* old.”

“I’m going on fucking fifty.” He points at his beard. “And have the grey hairs to prove it.”

“Come on, you’re still pretty spry.”

“Spry, yeah?”

Jasper chuckles. “Shut up.”

He pours what's left in the whisky bottle into their glasses and they keep talking over the next hour or so. Nothing of great consequence, but they're having a good time, sharing a few laughs, arguing a bit about the *Star Wars* franchise and the latest and greatest in football.

Time flies and with his head nicely buzzing from the alcohol, Jasper realises at some point that it's getting late and he should get going. Carl nods in understanding.

Jasper goes to his room to look for the video games he originally came here for, and while Carl is hovering in the doorway, Jasper suddenly realises that the room has been largely untouched since he moved out. He turns around to face Carl. "You gonna leave it like this?"

Carl lightly shrugs. "What do you want me to do with it?"

"I don't know. Rent it out? Make it into an office for you? Or a guest room."

"Yeah, one lodger is quite enough, thank you very much."

"I can come back some time, pack my stuff up in boxes and put them in storage."

"It's fine, Jasper. I don't need another room."

Jasper thinks there's more to it than that, but they'll have to have this conversation another time, perhaps. He puts the video games into his rucksack and Carl lets him pass into the hall where Jasper grabs his coat.

Carl is standing there, watching. Jasper can't help but notice that his edges have gone softer. Less jagged, less repellent. He's also a little less dishevelled and a bit more put together. Closer to the version of him before his wife cheated on him and a bullet tore through his throat.

It comes a lot more easily, and they wouldn't have done this a year ago, but Jasper steps into his space and pulls him into an embrace. "More hugs. Paul's legacy," he says.

Carl lightly pats Jasper's back and says, "Hear, hear."

They separate and Jasper steals a last look at Carl before he closes the flat door behind him. He's got a hint of a smile on his face and he looks… almost content. That's a whole lot of steps up from how this night started in the kitchen.

Yeah, Jasper thinks as he turns to walk towards the stairs. They really should do this more often. Because if he's being honest, he misses Carl, too.