

I'm not your friend 2.

Inspired by The Alan Parsons Project, "Breakdown."

July 1980.

"I'M MICHAEL Blumenthal." He stuck out his big-boned right hand to Codell as if they'd never met and pumped his hand from the elbow, stiff-armed, for multiple seconds too long.

"You can stop shaking hands with me. You do that every time."

"Okay," said Michael Blumenthal.

"You can also stop telling me your name. How about if I call you MB?"

"Okay.

"What can I call you?"

"Codell."

"Is that your name?"

"Of course it's my name. Who else would it be?"

"Where are you going, Codell?"

"Going to the Bronx for a beer. Want to go? It would do you good to get out."

"Okay."

"'Okay'? For real? You shock me, MB! This is a first."

"Are we going right now?"

"Yeah, right now. You need to get anything?"

"No."

"Do you have money?"

Written by K.G. Jones.

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“No.”

“Great. I ask so I guess I’m buying. I’ll get you a bomber.”

“What’s a bomber?”

“The biggest beer they have. The most bang for the buck. It’s a quart Mason jar.”

The two neighbors went back and forth down the four flights of steps, like switchbacks on a narrow mountain road, at the rear of their Prentis Street tenement. The Bronx was a block east. Codell led. They took a sharp right out of their building into the adjacent alley. At the end there was a blind corner where the buildings on either side of the alley blocked your view up and down the street. MB walked like he wasn’t sure where his next step was going to land.

“Why are you walking funny?” Codell asked.

“It’s my medication.”

“I should’ve guessed.”

“It’s not funny.”

The Bronx was empty but for two people. Codell nodded to the fixture of his buddy on his usual stool near the entrance and exchanged acknowledging glances with the bartender. “Pick a table,” he told MB. “I’ll get the bombers. Stroh’s,” he said to the barkeep.

Codell set the two huge beers on the table and sat at a right angle to MB. MB rested his chunky hands on the table, fingers above and thumbs beneath. As if it would fly away if he didn’t hold it down.

Codell raised his jar to his lips and sipped. MB, both hands around his bomber, mimicked Codell and then returned his hands to hold down the table. They sat in silence.

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“Where do you go when you go out, Codell?”

“Work. I’m the best damn beer vendor Cobo Arena has. Get to see shows and fights for free.

“Where do you go when you go out, MB?”

“I don’t go out.”

“I noticed that. But you must go someplace. Farmer Jack’s?”

“The library.”

“Where do you get your food? Your money? From your mother?”

“Social Security Disability.”

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“Why are you nice to me, Codell?”

“What? Where’d that come from?”

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“What do mean, you ‘used to’ have friends?” Codell asked.

“They always wanted something from me. That’s why they weren’t friends.”

“Good news, MB, I don’t want anything from you.”

“That’s why we’re friends.”

"We're not friends."

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"If you never see someone, you're not friends. If someone's kind to you, you are friends."

"Not always."

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"Sometimes people I've never met are kind to me," MB said. "My friends weren't."

"No wonder you're confused."

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"Why don't you have friends, Codell?"

"I never said I didn't have friends. I'm happy with my own company."

"You don't say much."

"That's right. You don't say much, either."

"That's right."

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"MB, don't wait on your beer. You hardly touch it. It's going flat on you."

"Sometimes you smell bad," MB said.

"We never know where the conversation is going to go with you, do we."

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"My friends always told me what to do," said MB.

“You did what they said?”

MB clung to the table and stared straight ahead.

“No one made you,” Codell said. “It’s not like you had to obey them. This is America. Freedom.”

“Can we leave now?” MB asked.

“You hardly touched your beer.”

“I don’t like beer.”

“You let me buy you a quart of Detroit River water and now you don’t like beer. Thanks. Really, thanks. Yeah, we should leave now.”

Codell pushed himself away from the table, hard enough to shake MB’s beer. MB got up like he was getting up from a toilet, pushing both hands down on his chair.

“This has been a bust,” Codell announced.

“It’s been good.”

“ ‘Good’? I bought, we sat here with awkward silences, and you didn’t drink your beer.”

“No one made you buy it,” MB said. “This is America. Freedom.” He led the way out.

“You can stop telling me we’re not friends, Codell.”

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