

## Second Prize

### You Flinched

*By Barbara Purbaugh*

I was running on a treadmill in the gym when he appeared for his annual shakedown. What was he doing here? How did he know where to find me? We were supposed to meet at Mahoney's, a small, dark bar, perfect to hide my brother's identical face. The twisted funhouse version of my face, I'd always thought.

"Oh my God, Mateo, you have a twin brother," one of the women in the row of treadmills next to me said. She turned to her friend. "Oh my God, there are two of them."

They started laughing.

"Hello, ladies. I'm Max," he said with a wink.

I stopped the treadmill and walked toward my brother. Best to get rid of him quickly, I thought.

"Let's go, little brother."

I was only five minutes older, but it made Max angry when I mentioned it.

"But of course, big brother."

We walked toward the locker room. I unlocked the locker and took out my checkbook. "How much, Maxi?"

I refrained from calling him Maxipad, as I'd done in our teen years after I got bigger and stronger. Why, whenever we were together, did I revert to being a fifteen-year-old? Why did I always feel weak and small around him?

Max was a cop, a corrupt one at that. And like it or not, he had me by the balls on this. I had done the crime but didn't want to do the time, and Max had evidence against me.

It was Christmas Day. We were ten. That morning, my father had punched me in the face. I was sure he was going to kill me, though I found out later he'd only broken my jaw.

Max had bought my parents a camcorder, one of the big ones with a videotape inside of it. No one questioned where Max got it, but they were thrilled to record everything that day, including me holding a bag of frozen peas against my jaw. Max and my father called me a pussy.

"I'm teaching you to be a man, boy," my father said.

By 5:00 p.m., my father was deep into a drunken rage. He threatened to lock me in the basement, a place I was terrified of. There was a struggle at the top of the stairs.

Max accused me of shoving our father down the stairs. He worshipped my dad and was furious with me.

The police ruled it an accident. My father died of a broken neck due to an accidental fall.

Except Max recorded it. He kept that tape. But he never showed it to me or even mentioned it until I became a successful businessman. When I asked him why he hadn't shown it to the police during the investigation, he said he didn't realize until later that he'd recorded it. And I believed him because like my father, he was cruel and manipulative.

This annual shakedown always made me replay that day over and over in my head. Had I really shoved my father?

“I want to see the tape,” I said. I had no idea why I’d never asked for it before.

“What?” Max said.

When we were young, Max and our father liked to play a game called You Flinched.

They’d pretend to punch me. If I flinched, I got two real punches instead of one. Later in life, that torture helped me as a businessman. I knew body language, and when someone flinched, I had the upper hand.

Max definitely flinched.

“I want to see it,” I repeated.

“Why?”

“I’d like to watch the bastard die again,” I said.

“Geez, Mateo, you’re a sick fuck, aren’t you?”

There it was, the tiniest flicker along his jawline. Max was definitely flinching.

“I want to see it.”

“Jesus, Mateo, where are we going to find a VHS player these days?”

“I’m sure we could find one.” I felt every muscle in my body becoming granite. “But surely you’ve moved it to better technology by now. I bet you have dozens of copies of it.”

“Sure, sure, but not on me. Just give me the money now, and I’ll send you a copy,” he said it in the tough-guy voice he used when he felt weak. He was trying to regain control.

All these years, all these fucking years, I’ve played that moment over and over. In my memory, I held the door frame to keep him from shoving me down the stairs. In my memory, one hand slipped and I would have fallen if my other hand hadn’t still gripped the door frame. My father lost his balance and fell forward, tumbling down the stairs. In my memory, my hands never touched him.

But Max had rewritten the story, so I came to believe I had shoved him.

A therapist once told me that Max had been a victim, too. His cruelty to me was his way to survive our father’s abuse.

He may have been a victim of abuse at the time, but now he was a perpetrator.

“You don’t have a tape. Do you?”

“Give me the check or you’ll find out,” Max warned.

I turned my back on him, shoved my checkbook back in the locker, and slammed the door.

“If I were you, Maxi, I wouldn’t be here when I turn around.” I had expected my voice to come out sounding like my father’s, all the rage in my body pushing out like his did. But my voice was quiet, eerily calm.

“Mateo,” Max tried again to be tough.

“You flinched, Maxipad. You flinched, and now you’ll get two punches instead of one. If I were you, I’d just run.”

Mateo heard his brother’s footsteps move away and listened to the door close behind him.

*Barbara Purbaugh is an academic advisor living in Las Vegas, NV. Her books Crossties and Ms. P's Guide to Going to Hell are available for purchase from Amazon and Barnes & Noble. For more information, contact her at [www.barbarapurbaugh.com](http://www.barbarapurbaugh.com).*