

Good as New

Ray lived alone in a one-bedroom apartment that was more or less cheap, both in regards to rent and quality. He had settled for a smaller apartment than he would've liked, operating under the logic that he could just make his living room his bedroom and keep the bedroom for his hobbies, which were many, and odd, and hobbies only in name. Ray was not the productive type he'd imagined himself to be. The majority of tenants in the complex were students, loud but not too loud, occasionally rowdy but not overmuch, and generally just unpleasant enough to merit late-night under-breath remonstrations, but never more than that (though one night, during a particularly boisterous end-of-summer pool party that lasted for days and seemingly evaded the scope of the management, Ray had become so agitated that he actually got out of his bed, robed himself, and opened his front door to let fly a piece of his mind. On seeing the menagerie of youthful, vibrant bodies Ray turned back in, shuffled to bed, and after weeping silently for a half-hour, had a series of dreams involving a variety of objects withering through time, the most depressing of which was simply a glass bottle in a meadow, the landscape visibly changing through the seasons and the bottle unchanged and unmoved. Ray awoke with a feeling of insignificance).

His rooms were sparsely furnished; his walls were nearly bare except for one old painting that hung crooked and off-center above the opening of his bar. He recognized it as crooked but had so few visitors he never bothered with getting it level. It wasn't even that great of a painting, a sort of re-mix of something an old friend turned stranger had created from a thrift-store landscape displayed in a cheap frame. What had once been a simple mountain scene was now a pseudo-psychedelic experience wherein the sky was a curtain pulled back to reveal the strings

that held the universe together, all illustrated in shaky lines of thin black ink. A film of fine dust had formed on the canvas. Most of his furniture had been acquired from various second-hand shops about town, purchased solely for function, aesthetics not even factoring into the decision. None of the furniture matched and only one piece, a small table that Ray could never find a permanent place for, making it a sort of all-in-one nightstand/coffee-table/ottoman, was fully intact and had not required a quick repair. His bookcases all had shelves bent at various levels of concavity from the weight of too many books forced to cohabit. The smaller books of certain shelves had been left with textual imprints of the neighboring pages from the pressure of such cramped space.

Not long after the night of decaying dreams, Ray woke at exactly 3:57 AM, his sheets as wet as if they'd been retrieved from the wash pre-spin and immediately placed on his bed. Ray could feel the thick humid air in his mouth with every inhale, but every exiting breath was dust. Every breath a drink that didn't quench. The unmistakable sign of a dead AC unit in the middle of Texas summer. It took several oscillating fans arranged around his bed to make even a restless night's sleep possible; two weeks passed before his landlord made a move to fix it.

Ray weathered the situation with an impuissance that was mistaken by everyone else as a sort of Zen-like calm. When he spoke to co-workers about the situation, he shrugged, mumbled a such-is-life sentiment when they began to get angry for him, detailing just how they'd assert themselves to whoever was in charge. And then, one night he woke to find his apartment was a frigid cave. He had been lying sheetless and shifting in vitruvian poses, naked to fight the oppressive heat. All coverings had been neatly tucked away in the bottom drawer of a dresser he kept in the closet. He skipped and shivered to retrieve his sheets and Ray felt the frost tingle in

the small of his back every time his feet touched the floor. Back in bed, with his sheets stretched tight as drum skins, pulled up to his chin and tucked under his heels, Ray managed to find comfort at last. He watched the fans take turns trying to send waves through the sheets, counting the small temporal dunes that rose and fell, lost in the geography of his form. The fans remained fenced around his bed for weeks.

Sleep was hovering over Ray and had it not been for a sudden scratching within the walls that seemed to cut through the din of the mechanized breeze, he would have finally found a decent night's rest, possibly even without the haunting dreams of his own finite nature. What struck Ray as peculiar about the scratching wasn't that it had happened at all, but that he'd heard it through the noise of the room. Ray had always been one to sleep with some kind of background noise, be it the same album on repeat or some boringly enjoyable late-night programming, but due to the fan fence had found such sleep-inducing activities next to impossible; the whir of fan blades had become his new lullaby. Add to that the new voice of air-conditioning and he found that even the unruly neighbors were largely absent, auditorially speaking. But the scratching seemed to bypass the fans, the air from the vents. He was suddenly aware that the scratching was not coming from the small dividing wall of the bar that separated his living room from his kitchen, but from his head, just behind his eyes, above his nose, definitely in the center of his skull, like an itch beneath the skin that is impossible to assuage.

The next morning, after a night of dreamless, restless sleep, Ray went to the property manager, an ambiguously foreign individual with a steeply sloped nose and eyes that implied a sort of mischievousness that had been eclipsed by prematurely forced adulthood. The two had become almost-friends due to the number of repairs and maintenance requests on the part of Ray,

and while both were cordial, and both had their own private opinions of the other, neither knew the other's name (which is particularly interesting considering the frequency of Ray's visits to the office and the requirement that he fill in his name and apartment number on every request, even though the handymen knew Ray on sight, his name, his apartment, his employer, and also interestingly, the exact number of books in his apartment; one imagines a sort of tally while the glue dries, a scavenger hunt for books stacked in odd places). Ray got the feeling the manager had been a real shit when he was younger, but the gray that tinged his mustache had had a mellowing effect. Ray almost felt guilty, appearing at the office door so soon after the AC request—not that it had been even close to hastily resolved—but he figured the man must be busy with other tenants (he wasn't). Still, this scratching, even after one night, was unbearable, had to be taken care of, couldn't go one more day.

“There's a scratching in my uh...in my, in my walls.” The office was nearly identical to Ray's own apartment, only better furnished, cleaner, and overall better kept. “It might be rats but I haven't really had a chance to look for signs. But there is the scratching.”

“Okay then, let me just find the form. You'll need to fill it out completely.” which is what the manager said every single time.

Ray filled out the form the same way he always did.

“I'll send this to the main office and they should send someone out in the next couple of days.” It was always a couple of days promised. Ray nodded and thanked the manager.

Ray had come to expect a certain nonchalance from the men that were sent for the various repairs of his small apartment. He often found himself waiting far longer than promised only to find the job hastily finished, the problem not really solved so much as paused. But then at

6:45 AM the very next morning Ray heard a loud knock at the door that didn't let up until he answered, an incessant, rapid drumming that seemed to switch between the palms and the knuckles. The sound was obnoxious but Ray still opened the door with the same non-anger of an old dog that just can't be bothered to care about the bites of horseflies or the claws of young cats.

"Hello?" Ray's voice thick and sleepy, scratchy.

"Mornin'." The man at the door—the boy at the door, really—was staring at the purple early-morning sky in a manner that suggested he hadn't just roused Ray from sleep at such a rude hour. "Nice out here." He sucked his teeth as if struggling with some remnant of breakfast, a shred of spinach, maybe, a bit of sausage.

"Are you here about the rats? It's kind of early—which is fine, I mean—but, well I guess I hadn't expected you for another few days." The two were hovering in the doorway. The young man was in remarkably clean clothes for one performing maintenance type tasks Ray noticed, but still did not seem to be paying much attention to the man whose door he had rapped before the sun had even finished yawning. He just stood there, looking at the sky, sucking his teeth, and making noises as if in deep thought. At one point he rubbed his chin.

"Beautiful." The young man shook his head in a hopeless, admiring way, and then walked right past Ray, nearly pushing Ray into the empty dining room as he entered the apartment uninvited and suddenly in a rush to perform his job, as if he were simply waiting for the right time to begin his work. The young man, whose embroidered cursive name read Derrick, Ray could see, sat down on the couch, propped his feet on the nightstand/coffee-table/ottoman the same way Ray had done so many times. It made Ray feel like a guest in his own home. He

shuffled his feet, shut the door, and stood awkwardly in the center of the room looking at Derrick while Derrick sucked his teeth.

"Can I get you a glass of water?" Ray didn't know what else to do but offer the man a drink. He'd never thought about offering a drink to any of the other handymen. Not to Hector, not to Ryan, and not to Gustavus, whom he liked best of all the men that worked in the complex, but still had not even considered being hospitable towards. Mostly he just let them work, found some excuse to leave the house, always slightly paranoid that he would come back to find something missing. He never did (though Ryan did once help himself to a bowl of cereal but Ray was too preoccupied with the shoddy workmanship to notice the milk-line had fallen below the UPC or that his cereal box was slightly lighter).

"Actually, Ray, a glass of iced tea would be fantastic if you have it, but if not, yeah, I'll take some water." Ray handed Derrick a plastic souvenir cup of tepid water, having neither tea nor ice cubes. Derrick put the water on one of the shelves without sipping.

"Ray, tell me one thing about yourself. An anecdote, a hobby, a fact; tell me something that you and only you would know."

"You aren't here about the rats are you?"

"Rats? No sir, I don't mess with that. Ray, before we get started here, I'll need you to answer my question."

"I uh...oh I don't know. That's a tough question. Look, Derrick, what exactly are you here a—"

"Well first, my name's not Derrick. Look, Ray, just tell me one thing. Think of it as like a verification or something."

“But your shirt...? What are you talking about? Verification? For what?”

“Thrift store. I just threw it on this morning.”

“And how do you know my name? Who are you?”

“Manager sent me. It was on the form. I came from the main office.” That sucking noise again.

“So, you are here about the rats.”

“Ray, for the last time, you don’t have rats, man. Not one. Not even mice.”

“Then what are you here for?”

“Tell me something, Ray. What do you do?”

“I work for—well right now I work in customer service, but I’ve got plans for a radio show with—”

“How long, Ray? There’s no radio show in your future. You know perfectly well as I do that you’ve held the same position, and a stagnant one at that, for well on 25 years.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that!”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that, Ray, except that you can’t admit to yourself that this is your life.”

“I...you need to leave. I think I want you out of here.” Ray didn’t make a move to the door, only kept standing in between the living room and the dining space shaking his head.

“Do you realize this is maybe the first time you’ve asserted yourself since you were 14 and you knocked Norman’s teeth out because he wouldn’t quit bouncing his tennis ball off the back of your skull? Do you remember that? How you went home and your mom asked you what happened at school today, and so you told her and then she scolded you, but later your dad came

in and gave you a short speech about how violence isn't the answer, but then he winked as if to say 'but you did good, son?'"

"I...who the hell are you? How did you know that?"

"Like I said, I'm from the main office. I'm on a repair job. Name's Eli."

"His teeth were all bloody on the pavement. He moved away after that. My hand hurt so much; I'd never hit anyone before. I couldn't believe how much it hurt to hit someone." Ray was rubbing the knuckles of his left hand, which was clenched in a tight fist.

"Can I tell you something, Ray? That didn't happen."

"What? Don't be absurd. Sure it did. I remember. My dad sat next to me on my bed. He smiled at me. Hugged me."

"Nope. You didn't knock Norman's teeth out. He fell out of a swing. You tried to hit him and missed. He gave you a bruise the size of an apple on your chest. And your dad watched football replays until he passed out on the couch. Your mother wasn't even home that night, Ray. You walked home from school and went straight to your room and cried into your pillow."

"That's impossible. I was there. Of course it happened. I know exactly what my dad said to me. You can't just come in here, prop your feet up and start telling me nonsense like this. I know what my dad said." Ray started to recite what his father had told him but Eli raised his hand and interrupted him.

"Ray. Don't. Just, trust me. It didn't happen like that and you know it."

"No. No, I hit him. Only time I ever hit someone though." Ray sat down on the floor as he spoke. "I, I, I..."

"No, Ray."

Ray was on the floor, legs splayed out in a V, his back slouched and his arms slack in the empty space between his thighs like a doll propped up for imaginary tea only to be forgotten. The muscles in his face had given up; minutes now passed between his blinks. For a while, things had been silent in the room. Even the fans seemed to have acquiesced to the situation, whispering at a quieter level so as not to disturb Ray, who found himself confronting the false memory of what he'd always considered to be the truth. Eli stood up, walked past Ray and took a small hammer from his belt. Ray hadn't previously noticed a tool belt on the man and did not notice now, only kept staring at the floor muttering barely audible, unintelligible phrases.

“Here. I want you to look at something.”

Ray showed no sign of having heard Eli.

“Ray, come on man, you need to see this.”

Eli took his hammer and put it through the small dividing wall that separated the kitchen and the living space. The sound had no effect on Ray. Eli began tearing at the dry wall, breaking small support beams that held the bar, but the space in the wall did not reflect the damage that the pile of rubble forming on the floor would suggest. Instead, a void had appeared, a black space absent of wires or broken wood.

“Ray, I know you can hear me. Just turn and look this way.”

Ray scooted around the way a small child resigns to obey a parent. Eli had managed to make a perfect rectangle within the bar, the edges smooth and square at the corners. The void seemed bereft of depth to the eye, but if Ray had wanted to he could have stepped into it and never returned, could have disappeared entirely into the dark space of his bar.

Of course, Eli didn't tell him this; he was a professional and his job was not to send Ray into oblivion. Eli had signed up to work as a Memory Stabilization Specialist as a way to try and help people. As the recruiter had put it during the close of Eli's first day, "So many people are lost and they don't even know it. This is where we come in. We find those lost souls and we get them where they need to be." The recruiter, whose honest-to-god name was Adonis, had put his hand out for a shake and given a shark's smile of white-painted teeth. "We do great things here, Elias. Welcome to the team."

"Okay, Ray, buddy, here's what we're gonna do. I want you to look at this black rectangle right here. Think of it as a projector of sorts. I know what you're going through right now and trust me, you're gonna be fine." This wasn't necessarily true. While most of the jobs that Eli had been sent on as an M.S.S. had ultimately concluded successfully, it was always a gamble. It was well-known that patients occasionally reacted poorly to the treatment, unable to cope with the requisite levels of trauma necessary for complete stabilization. These situations typically resulted in death. Eli knew that at least 4 of his patients had died, a fact on which he did not dwell.

"Are you ready, Ray?"

Somewhere between Ray reconciling his memory of Norman's teeth sailing through the air and landing in a red pool on the dusty playground gravel and the actuality of Norman's fist striking Ray right in the chest just above his small, pink, baby-soft nipple, the truth layered over the falsehood like two television stations competing for reception, Ray only faintly heard again Eli sucking his teeth. The sound had now become a part of the ambient noise of the apartment; just like the fans, and the scratching, and the cool air propelled from the vent. Ray nodded to Eli with a grunt of affirmation.

“So check it out Ray, what’s gonna happen is you’re gonna see here in this black rectangle just exactly what went down that day you got hit by Norman. We’re gonna move pretty quickly past that because I’m pretty sure you’ve nearly accepted the truth of that memory. Nod for me if that’s the case.”

Ray nodded. He looked about to drool.

“Okay. So you realize that I’m not here fucking with you, Ray. I’m only here to just set some things straight, get you back in the game, right? Once you see this first memory—and try not to think too much more about it Ray, it really isn’t worth it, man, trust me—once you see this first one we’re gonna move into some deeper, more problematic stuff. Just keep with me and you’ll be fine. Ray, whatever you do, don’t get stuck on just one and certainly don’t try and fight what you see here. Everything I show you is the absolute truth.”

The purple yellow bloom of a bruise appeared in the middle of the void and soon after the retreating fist that caused it receded into darkness. The child-Ray wept into a pillow, alone. The first memory came and went. Thick curls of red spread out from the pillow, lovely pre-chemo tresses flowing from a lively, round face now on the same soft, sky blue-white pillow, the weeping child replaced by the face of his sister. She’s sleeping and peaceful and her hair is still full and falling off the bed in loose coiled springs. Time passes over his sister's face like the dream meadow. Bones poke through sunken skin. Familial faces stand in a line, a procession to viewing that is incomplete, lacking. Tears streak the time-lined cheeks of the old. They curse the day they bury one of their young. Several scan the pews in disbelief for a face they know to be absent. They speak words of consolation and mourning to one another but in the void there is

only silence. Ray sits alone in the corner of his sofa staring at the blank walls and he never sees his mother fall into the silk-cushioned box that holds her daughter, never sees his father cry. He doesn't hear the excuses they make for his absence. Where Ray once was on the sofa he now sits in his empty cubicle and accepts the silent sympathies of co-workers fooled by false bereavement. The entire scene washes away and Ray is young again, in front of a swinging backyard gate. The clouds are full and dark with rain that won't fall for another few hours. He stands at the swinging gate bracing himself against the wind.

A catatonic adult Ray watched the younger version of himself flinch in the void and though the images were silent, he knew what was happening though he struggled to accept the truth.

Child-Ray slinks away from the empty backyard without closing the gate and walks next door to his house. From his bedroom window he sees Mrs. Mundy, his neighbor and teacher, wailing in the street. Ray tries to ignore the carnage below but he is fixed on the limp tail of a dying retriever.

With every new scene that appeared in the void Ray shrank into the floor, as he was force-fed large chunks of his memory that he had somehow altered.

Eli stood next to the window watching both Ray and the wall, careful not to become too engrossed by the memories displayed in the void. Some of the M.S.Ss., when they came back from their service calls, they sat in small groups and shared the memories they'd collected throughout the day. Some of them even had little notebooks that they'd sketched their patients in, adding thought bubbles filled with mocking words. Eli had always found this practice disgusting. And though frowned upon, it was largely ignored by the higher-ups. When taking a job, one

complete memory was attached to the patient's file, which the M.S.S. viewed multiple times. This one memory was typically from the patient's youth, guaranteed to provoke the patient and begin the dismantling process necessary for successful stabilization. Aside from this one memory given in complete detail, the M.S.S. was, more often than not, unable to comprehend the images in the void. It was nearly impossible to determine the truth of the memory that was altered; the scenes shifted rapidly like still photos in a flip book. The memories were designed to resonate with the patient.

“Now, Elias, we call them patients but do try to distance yourself from them.” Adonis had this way of speaking without moving his jaw. “You won’t be following up with them. Think of them more like service-calls. You’ll come in, check your boards and your route for the day. The nature of the job requires you to stay on-site for the length of the treatment. When it’s over though, just leave—don’t worry about the mess or locking the door, we have clean-up crews that come in after and see to it the patient wakes in a normal environment. All you have to do is arrive, administer the treatment, and be on your way. When you get a little more experience, you’ll get more patients. In the beginning though, you’ll just have one patient a day. Now how does that sound?” He grinned his words through perfect teeth. The two shook hands; Adonis always closed with a shake.

Eli left Ray’s apartment. The void had closed and Ray was propped against the sofa in a deep sleep. Wires and broken wooden beams poked through the perfect rectangular hole in the low dividing wall. When Ray woke up, it would be patched. Good as new. As he drove home from work Eli imagined himself as a pink dusk-stained cirrus cloud spread thin through the fast approaching night, the last light from space shining through a small half-haloed parhelion.

