

Out of Place

Mud. Soot. Sewage. Haze. It is not the prettiest place. Our protagonist is taking a short vacation. They could have chosen anywhere to go, but they chose to come here. Lips pursed as they head through the hustle and bustle of the city in front of them. Animals are everywhere, either obstructing the path in front of them or in the road adjacent. It is not of huge bother to our protagonist, who acts like it is a sort of second nature. The key word is “acts”. You see, they are not in their own town, state, or country. Those who surround the protagonist speak the same language, but their own inflections create a dialect unlike any other.

It is not like it matters, as they feel like an outsider in any setting whatsoever.

Our protagonist checks their watch, and notes the numbers written on it. The watch itself is far from snappy, but such conditions necessitate it. It is around afternoon, and per their instructions, they can only allow themselves forty more hours. At that time, they absolutely must return home to avoid drastic consequences. They also pull out a sticky note. It is a bulleted list of items to complete before their vacation is over. After a quick review of their personal affairs, they arrive at their destination.

It is a small bank, and it is nothing special in comparison to all the other ones at every street corner. Minding the security guard at the front of the entrance, they proceed to a desk. Our protagonist calls for the teller, who is quick to come out of whatever crevice they were hiding in. “Good after-noon. How may I help you?” the teller greeted them. It is a man with a clean haircut, and a loose suit. The protagonist nods and hands a piece of paper over to them. “You aren’t from around here, are you?” the teller speaks. The protagonist thinks on how astute the teller’s skills of observation must be but responds by leering in with a low growl. This does the

trick, as the teller remarks “Right.” and proceeds to do whatever it is that tellers do. There is a bit of internal amusement from the protagonist on how well it seemed to work. There is no imposing height to them, they are about as well built as a runner, and their outfit mirrors that of the well-dressed teller. Playing the silent role has its own merits. There is a candy dish on the desk in front of our protagonist, but they are sure not to be appetized by their colors. They aren’t more concerned about their weight than anyone else, but it’s still important to not consume food when it can be helped (and it can’t!).

The teller returns with a parcel wrapped in twine and brown paper. Our protagonist has to bite their inner lip to not laugh on the conspicuous appearance brought on by the box, when the person who wrapped, it was trying to achieve the opposite effect. “You’ll need to sign here.” the teller states, handing them a fountain pen.

As the mundane paperwork practically completes itself, the teller once again tries to strike up some conversation. “I haven’t heard of your home address before.” Our protagonist pays it no mind, “In fact, isn’t this just a short-stay hotel down near the river? Next to-.” This statement forces the protagonist to stop the work of the pen and to stare into the pupils of the teller’s eyes.

“Right.” The teller says. The pen works itself again, flying through each blank and box. While flipping the sheets of parchment, the only word they can think of is “home”. They have a home in a town, and it’s certainly a house. They don’t have a house in this hot vacation spot (maybe something to addend to their sticky note), but it would never be a home. You have to fit in to call something a home.

The paperwork all completed; they depart the bank.

You may be wondering what was in the parcel. I, personally, do not know. There were some pens and pads of sticky notes involved, as well as some further notes of currency. The parcel was left in the bank's vault for some time now, so they were pleased to be able to open up another box.

This sort of strong-but-silent behavior bleeds through every encounter they have on a day-to-day basis. Whether they're on vacation or not, nearly no words are exchanged. Cold body language filled with expression combined with guttural vocalizations known to any human. is their *modus operandi*. Those "conversations" allow words to be stuck onto them, but all words are shrugged off by the end. It's an interesting way to tackle the challenges of life, and that's what they do.

In the space between the buildings, our protagonist comes across a person on the street singing a song, in the hopes of gaining some coins. It is not a song familiar to the protagonist, but it sounds good regardless. They drop a coin in their hat and move on. Yet the further away they get, the louder the song plays. It is coming from within our protagonist's brain, the song-worm firmly lodged.

Yet, this sort of worm isn't the type that you'd get a silly pop song affixed to your mind. It's a specific genre of music, a type that makes your heart soar, one that makes you want to start picking up someone next to you and dancing. The type of song that relationships are formed over. The worm is only something picked up and kept there by our protagonist's brain, where it swims with all the other thoughts. It's a swan in a pond with its brethren, but it's black. Unfortunately, our protagonist's heart is still trapped in its boney cage. It wanted to fly, but I don't know if our protagonist mused on the words of the song. They may have just attributed the feelings in their chest to hunger.

As they proceed through the next few days, the tune keeps replaying itself in their mind. The next forty hours contain but are not limited to: a delivery box opened, a tower toured, real estate papers signed, court proceedings witnessed, vehicles driven, and pawn shops scavenged. Each activity completion results in a solid black line on their sticky note of Vacation Activities.

At the end of it all, they find themselves back where they came from. It is close to where our protagonist lives, and it is definitely a place familiar to them. It is a transit station. The protagonist's transit station. From here, there's connections to airports, buses, trains, ferries, parking lots, and direct access to their hometown (albeit a bit larger than a town). It's a hub to it all, but also bit more than just a hub. It marks the end of their vacation, and it is time to reflect on where they have been, and where to go in the future. Food is probably one of the largest concerns.

They are greeted by Alex. Alex is interesting. No matter how far the protagonist goes, it seems like Alex is always there. Sure, our protagonist has regular contacts, but Alex is the only one who's at "home".

Alex gives them a proper 'bear hug' as a greeting and asks "How was your journey?" The protagonist gives a short grin. "Come ooon, spill!" Alex replies. The protagonist shrugs their shoulders and proceeds to walk with Alex. Our protagonist is absolutely famished, to the point where they just want to get some food, any food at all. They trot up the clean stairs, to exit into a park. It is overcast, but the only thing surrounding them are trees. Not a sound is to be heard beyond that of birds chirping, and the occasional scamper of a squirrel.

Alex hands our protagonist a granola bar, one with semi-sweet chocolate chips and loaded with peanut butter. A treat to anyone of any age. Our protagonist is quick to scarf it down.

One solid, lengthwise tear to separate the plastic and paper covering the confection. Bisected pieces of litter fall away on the path the duo are on, but our protagonist figured they would pick it up once their meal was completed.

“You’re pretty peckish, aren’t you?” Alex says as the compressed oats travel down our protagonist’s throat. A bit hurriedly, and in a slightly light matter: “I could have laced that with poison, you know. Maybe if you just paid a bit of attention...” The protagonist, however, is licking their fingers.

Our protagonist looks at Alex, and nods. After a few seconds of silence, Alex wheels on the protagonist. “What is it with you?”, in a sort of non-friendly, but also non-accusatory tone. “You always do this! You say... no, you leave a sticky note under my front door telling me you are going on ‘vacation’. What sort of fu-...” Alex is quick to stop the tirade, as although trees may not have ears, there may be children with ears in the trees. “Vacation”, Alex air-quotes.

“You work a respectable job, and every-so-often you leave to go on ‘vacation’. You’ve left stuff at my house. What ‘vacation’ has you opening bank accounts, serving jury duty, buying real estate... Why do you even need real estate? Why do you even need any of these things? All of that isn’t even...”

As Alex goes on, our protagonist tunes them out. Their lips are totally pursed, just a motionless rock against the waves of this tirade. They open their ears once again to hear “...displacement. I figured out why you are always hungry when you come back. It’s because you can’t eat because otherwise...” and off the ears go. It is not uncommon for Alex to do this, but this one seems a bit more pointed than usual. Even though our protagonist has totally stopped paying attention, it’s hard to ignore fingers jabbing themselves into your ribs. The words are not

puncturing to our protagonist, but they can notice Alex's face getting noticeably redder. This was unseen. Our protagonist quickly realizes this isn't their normal bickering, but something much worse. Whatever food they have in their stomach quickly sours.

If only our protagonist can figure out what happened before the situation gets even worse. They aren't a specialist in emotions, especially that of other people. The air hangs heavy around the two of them, as the sharp words of Alex attempt to pierce through our protagonist's shell of armor, but to no avail. Our protagonist didn't know what was about to happen, but it should surely come to a close-

"Are you even paying attention?" Alex angrily asks. "You don't have time for *me*, you don't have time for your family, but you have time to run off. Run off for no good reason at all. You can make a killing on every investment you've made, but you choose not to. I would understand it better if you just spoke to me, but you just will not speak to anyone. What happened? What changed? Why can't you be *normal*? I can't do this anymore. Goodbye." Alex storms off into the lush, dense park. The wake generated by Alex's movements sweep some trash particulate away with it. The long branches of the trees obscure any chance of our protagonist catching up to Alex.

Normal. What's normal? Alex certainly is far from normal. Family. What's family? Our protagonist is the last one they care about. Killing on investments? Why are they so blind?! It's not about the money! It's about... It's about... finding a place to fit in.

It feels odd to think it out loud, but it's been thought. It's the truth. The incorrigible truth.

Our protagonist is hurt, deeply wounded on the inside. However, their exterior is about as still as a statue. Our protagonist takes a seat at a nearby bench and muses on everything that just occurred. What did change? Alex wasn't a central part of our protagonist's life, but it was a part, nonetheless. Our protagonist thought they spoke plenty enough, and any more was wasteful. Why couldn't Alex see that?

Alas, what's said (or unsaid) has passed. Our protagonist understands the true value of time, as that always seemed to be important to him. Our protagonist, however, will never be able to explain why the things they do are done. Even if they chose to speak, all of their inner thoughts and emotions are an enigma to even themselves. Maybe Alex would come back around? No. Should our protagonist call on Alex's house the next day? A dark cloud of thoughts, emotion, and predictions swamped our protagonist's mind.

As a gust of wind passes through the park, a flash of paper catches the sight of our protagonist. They look down at their feet and find one half of a torn piece of paper stuck to their shoe. Slightly muddied with a crinkled texture. As our protagonist exerts themselves to pull off the piece of paper, it becomes painfully clear what it was. Our protagonist turns over the piece of paper, and the only blue-inked words visible are as follows:

“Don't fill up on

I've heard you

Do you want to

The appetizers

P.S: I love

-Ale”

Poison. Delectable emotional poison. The type that can burn off your eyebrows if you leer in too close. It’s paradoxical in this scenario, an emotional gesture turned caustic. The label on the wrapping should always be heeded before you jump head-long.

The song worm decides it’s an opportune time to hum out the tune picked out from their vacation as tears well up in their eyes. If you needed to know, it was a sort of love song. Maybe their heart will open up eventually, but not right now. The sky seems to cry along with them as the first few drops fall from the heavens. They dab away these errant particles of water out from their eyes and walk back towards the transit station.