

The Remnants of Things at Eye Level

We will start at the end. At the end there is a nightstand and there are remnants. We will start with the mug.

It is eggshell white, tall, tapered, worn from coffee stains, and cracked. It is the kind of mug that has been given, a token of love, with one of those personalized photos on it. A couple. They look happy and they are smiling. The photo is worn down from years of coffee cup use. The couple preferred to drink South American dark roast but it occasionally varied. They do not look the same now, if you knew them. The photo captures a single moment, a display to show the world a promise. They have perfectly chosen wardrobes, perfectly styled hair, and almost perfect smiles. Now, there is no more promise; there is only a disassembled story. It starts with a mug. The mug is cracked. It has been glued back together but the pieces do not fit exactly right and there is a small chip in the rim, revealing the rough ceramic underneath the polished veneer.

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She wakes, hazy, droopy-eyed, and squints slowly, cracking her left eye open. She sees the mug on the nightstand first. She remembers the mug, remembers who glued it back together. Chris had picked up the pieces, one by one, quietly. His fingers were hesitant at first, not sure if he should leave them, to be forgotten along with the promises they had made to one another long ago. He could not do that, she knew. He would fix them. He always tried. It was his default. He had crouched down to pick them up. She was not watching him because she was in the bedroom, pretending to be remorseful. But she heard him crouch down: the heavy footsteps, the shuffle, the creak of his knees, the slight pause as he debated, and the slow sigh as he decided. Then the clink of the ceramic, one by one, four pieces in total. She listened as he moved over to his desk, clicked on his lamp, fumbled around for the superglue he kept in the middle right drawer, and sat down, exhaling the chestnut brown leather chair. And then there was silence as he focused. She had fallen asleep then, tired of waiting for him.

He woke her later, after it was dark. The view had been different then, the bed positioned on the north-facing wall, and she was able to look out the window. The moon was in its waning phase, its grip slowly releasing, leaving room for apologies and tidying up. She took its cue, used it to her advantage. He was sitting beside her on the bed and reached over to softly pull the tendrils of

her reddish-brown hair off her face. She awoke as his fingertips brushed her cheek and almost shuddered in horror at the sweetness of it. He was a pathetic man, predictable and needy. Somewhere along the way he had changed. Perhaps she made him this way, she did not know. She also did not care. She remembered the shattered coffee cup and started her game.

She turned her face slowly towards him and gave him a sleepy doe-eyed look.

“I’m sorry baby,” she said. It was her usual spiel.

He ran the back of his hand down the side of her cheek, his thumb stopping at the edge of her mouth. He wanted to touch her lips, she saw his eyes linger ever so slightly on them, but he wouldn’t dare. He knew to expect rebuff from her. It was rare he even tried these days.

“It’s okay,” he mumbled, taking his eyes off her face and staring blankly at the wall.

She knew he was hurting and secretly hated him for it, hated his weakness.

“I fixed it,” he said, momentarily proud of himself.

“Thanks,” she replied and smiled back at him. Then with a slight frown, “You know it’s just so hard for me these days. I don’t mean to do things like that.”

“I know.”

And then she turned on the pity, the tears. She could force them on command, had learned quite young. This was the fun part for her, to see how much she could bend him, like a social experiment. She would pull and push and see the effects, hone her skills, or sometimes just test the limits, watching the results over time, seeing how much more she could weaken him before he would break. He wasn't looking directly at her so she raised her hand to her face, conveniently brushing his hand in the process, disrupting his gaze and causing him to glance at her. He saw the tears and immediately responded.

“Oh no, honey, don't do this to yourself. It's not a big deal, it's just a mug and don't worry, I put it back together.” He wiped a tear from her cheek and looked at her with concern.

“I know,” she managed to croak out, starting in on the quick intake of breath and sniffing, “but I feel bad for doing it.”

“It's not your fault. These things happen.”

She looked at him and let the tears fall, studied his face to see if she could predict the reaction she would get. She grasped his sympathy. It angered her that he had sympathy for her, like he was better than her. She felt no remorse; she simply switched gears, like a mechanical pull. Her face contorted into anger and she glared at him.

“What are you doing in here?” She asked him in a low voice, raspy.

“I-I-I just came in to check on you.”

“I don’t need to be checked on. I am a grown woman. I don’t like you. I don’t want to smell you and I do not want your dirty feet in my bedroom. Get the fuck out,” she screamed at him. She watched the flinch that always came. Sometimes it was worse than others, depending on the day and her choice of words. But that flinch, that was her gold.

In the beginning, it was different. Their eyes would meet over their matching coffee cups and they would smile, happy to be in each other’s presence. There were small gestures, appreciative words, and lingering kisses. But she could not sustain it. The smiles were eventually traded for quick furtive glances and dark stares, accumulating ammunition. He had put up a fight in the beginning, did not let her win all the time but she adapted quicker than him, learned which buttons were the most powerful, the tricks that brought him to his knees. And she did not hesitate. It became fun for her.

The broken coffee cup had been boredom on her part. It was a usual fight for them. He was working at his desk, scribbling away on graphs and papers, clicking keys on his computer, engrossed and unavailable to her. He had made them coffee first, served her at the table where she was silently gazing out the window, lost in thought over the futile nature of her fifth finger and what it

would be like to reach over to the kitchen counter knife block and just chop it off in one full swoop. His key clicking was interrupting her thoughts. If there had been a pattern to it then she might have overlooked it, but he kept pausing and hesitating, occasionally letting out a small sigh or humming noise. So the pitter-patter of keys came out in small irregular bursts, spattered with his annoying habitual noises. She contemplated actually reaching for the kitchen knife but instead opted for a less dramatic approach. With a simple and smooth move of her right arm, she swiftly and forcefully threw the half-empty coffee cup at the kitchen wall, aiming for eye level because she wanted to watch the coffee drip down. She hoped it would stain and leave a mark on the drab white paint. Things at eye level were harder to conceal.

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She turned her attention to the second object on the nightstand: the tall red pillar candle, half burned, wax forever paused in mid-drip. It was cinnamon scented, her favourite. Chris hated the smell of cinnamon. She bought it on purpose to irritate him. When she first brought it home, she would light it and carry it around with her to every room to signal its importance and worth to her, to make him feel small. She would constantly comment on its smell, how wonderful it was, “Mmm, doesn’t this candle just smell wonderful, baby? I can’t get enough of it.”

He would look at her with annoyance.

“You know I don’t like cinnamon.”

“Oh right, I forgot,” she would reply absent-mindedly and continue to carry around the lit candle with her, leaving it close to him when she could, feigning constant ignorance, watching him bite his lip, furrow his brow, and swallow his words. More ammunition.

Then there was the day of the fire. Boredom again. She was feeling itchy, caged in. It was raining outside and she had watched the droplets all morning hit the front bay window of the living room and slowly roll down, forming consistent pathways, blurring her vision of the outside world. Her candle was with her, lit, on the floor beside her. Chris was working, as usual, in the other room. They had barely spoken all morning. He was starting to avoid her unpredictability. She traced the raindrop trails with her fingers, contemplating their simplicity, their ease of existence. They had one mission, to fall, and it required zero effort. It was so easy. She wanted to burn them, instinctively did not like them. So she raised the candle up to the window and, in doing so, brushed the curtain on her left. Chris’ mother had bought the curtains when they first moved in. She said the place needed some life to it. So, now they had curtains and one plant. She didn’t mind the plant most days but the curtains were ugly. They reminded her of vomit. The solution was easy. She let the candle flame lick the curtains until they yielded. She watched the small flame grow, watched the blue burn

brighter and the orange and yellow dance and smile. It was almost orgasmic, the destruction. She stood there and watched, feeling satisfied as the flames grew and swallowed up the curtain.

He panicked, of course, the second he smelled the smoke. He burst out of his office in alarm and in the hallway mirror she caught his eyes widen at the sight of her. She frightened him in that moment, the way she stood stock-still with a smile pasted on her face, taking delight in the chaos. He recovered quickly and grabbed the fire extinguisher, pushed her out of the way, put out the flames. He didn't even attempt a reproach, knew it was futile. She simply walked away and didn't say a word. After that, they were strangers, forever changed. He was afraid of her. And they both left the charred ceiling as it was, to serve as a reminder.

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She took in the third object on the nightstand: the paperweight. It was smooth, triangular in shape, and iridescent, changing its colour depending on your perspective. She had added another colour to it, blood red. It looked better that way, in her opinion. It interrupted the rainbow. It was his paperweight. He had it since college, treasured it because a favourite professor gave it to him. To her, it was a reminder of her inadequacy, her inability to access him, his dismissal of her intelligence. She

frequently caught him staring at it, holding it at eye level, observing the reflections of light and moving it around to see how the angle of illumination changed the colours. He did it in an absent-minded way, when he was absorbed in thought. She was envious of the attention.

They had been avoiding each other for days and she could feel the tension building inside her, a need to lash out. After the fire, he gradually moved his things to the guest bedroom, claiming sleep problems. She had been happy at first to have the space, the privacy, and the lack of interruption. But it became harder to reach him. He was more distant. It required more effort to get a reaction out of him. He was guarded and suspicious of her and would mask his responses, not wanting to cause conflict. She found his passive compliance frustrating.

That day anything could have been a trigger. She was waiting for an excuse. She was reading, something stupid and unintelligent, something he picked out for her, probably a cheesy cottage romance novel. She stopped reading and asked him a question, broke the silence, attempted an interaction. She wanted to see where she stood. She can't remember the question she asked. It was irrelevant. He was so absorbed in his work that he did not answer. It was not a matter of him ignoring her. She could see he simply did not register her question. She coolly repeated herself, needing to confirm her suspicion. Again, no response. He kept working. She put her

book down and rose out of the navy armchair, her regular reading spot. She walked over to him, completely calm. Still, he did not register her presence. She reached his desk. He was sitting a few feet away at the drafting table where he often worked, his back turned to her. The paperweight was on the desk. She picked it up. It was perfectly heavy. She hit him across the back of the head with it, hard. He yelped and spun, shock in his eyes. His hand flew to the back of his head and she knew he felt the warm trickle of blood. She saw his fear and felt pure satisfaction. That was what she wanted, what she was seeking. She would aim for fear now; it was more interesting. She stood there and simply looked at him, betraying nothing on her face. Her arm fell to the side of her body, her right hand still clutching the paperweight. She let it go. It hit the hardwood floor, breaking the silence. She turned and walked to her bedroom. She had made her point. He needed to pay more attention.

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That morning when she woke, the morning of the end, the air was different in the house. She could smell it. His normal annoying and fearful presence had shifted. The house was quieter. There was no typing, no sounds of working, no smells of coffee. Perhaps he had gone out, to escape her. She thought about what it would be like if he left her. She wasn't sure if it even mattered anymore. He was becoming uninteresting. Her dominance was clear and he was no longer a challenge for her. He started locking

his bedroom door and had repositioned his workspace so that he was always facing the entranceway. He was cautious. She saw fear every time she looked at him. She didn't even have to say or do anything to get it. It was no longer something she had to work for. He had lost his appeal. She contemplated this for a bit and then hazily fell back asleep.

When she woke later, she noticed a fourth object on the nightstand: a 9mm Smith & Wesson.

She wondered how it got there. Did she put it there? Or had he? Was he testing her? They had purchased it a long time ago, when she started staying home more often and he could not always be there with her, before he started working from home. It was for her safety, he said. She cannot remember putting it on the nightstand, although these days everything was hazy, with the medication she was taking. Its presence was a curious thing. Perhaps she had been planning to scare him with it. She wondered if that would be the last of him, if she did. She realized then they would either go one of two ways: she would kill him or he would kill her. She would push them there. There was no other route. She wondered if he had a chance, if he could still surprise her and catch her off guard. Perhaps he was suggesting something to her with the gun, challenging her, forcing the end. She doubted it. He had always underestimated her intelligence. Although, lately she knew he was beginning to realize she was smarter

than he thought, to see how she manipulated him, and how in control she was. It made her feel invincible.

She reached over and picked up the gun. It was smooth and powerful, beautifully heavy in her delicate hand. It was magnetic to her, to hold it, to feel its weight. She wanted it to consume her. She wanted to swallow its power, to meld with it. She sat there, at peace with it in her hand, wanting it to become an extension of her body, to possess its fierce dominance. Slowly, everything inside her, all the rage and hatred she buried deep within started to boil, responding to the presence of the weapon. It was asking for the gun, wanting to exact punishment, begging to be used, to extinguish, to triumph. She turned it over in her palm, ran her fingers over it, feeling its smooth polished surface, registering its coolness. It was automatic, her response, like it was commanding her. She raised it up to eye level and pointed it towards her, examining its exquisite detail. It would be her last move, her checkmate.

She called his name, "Chris, can you come in here?"

She put the barrel in her mouth, curious about what the metal would taste like. And she waited.