

Hanged on the Decision Tree

In some conspiratorial way that dodged my notice, night and day have switched places. The room is dim, but not dark. Light's leaking in grayly from the kitchen where I never turned it off, allowing the furniture to keep its shape but stealing all the color. City streetlamps peer in at everything from my blind-less windows.

For some reason, the city is red at night; red neon, blinking red on cell towers and telescoping radio masts, red that disguises itself as green and yellow to direct the traffic that isn't there. There are two lamps I can put on, but I know that'll just cut into my sober clarity. The clarity shows up unannounced sometimes after the sun has gone down, as daylight and population and necessity have all gone home for the night, giving me temporary license to understand what's going on in my head.

Soon, it's been half-an-hour, and in my stomach some malingering imp tugs at tendons and lets out strangled groans. It's been all coffee since noon, and I can tell I've let it get too long. As I stand, my eyes tunnel and the world kaleidoscopes for a second. I stay still and hold onto my balance for dear life, wondering idly what the results would be if I toppled slowly forward into the Ikea TV stand I built for a TV I don't have. I leave the itchy blue couch behind me, knowing already what I'll find in the kitchen but obligated by habit to look.

In there, the light is cold and clinical, exactly what I'd hoped to avoid. It streams from a long bar on the ceiling, left burning the last time I danced with Mr. Coffee. He's burning, too; an orange eye glares out at me from his base, and I know I've left him on too long. A thin veneer of brown sludge is melting into the glass pot as I turn it off, boiling down like fat from a Thanksgiving bird.

If anything, at least it explains the smell.

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Elsewhere on the faux-stone counter, a plastic case of rotting grape tomatoes lurks in the shadow of a toaster I've never used. It was a gift for me and the other one, and it's black, and terrifying in the way it creates only the most mundane meal imaginable. Such single-mindedness is a horror in and of itself. Some of the tomatoes are blackening as well, so into the bag they go. There's bread in the pantry, Jewish rye from a sale, and spices that accumulated one by one in their green-topped canisters, but not much else. Way back, shunted into a corner, is a paper-wrapped tin that shows in red-and-color a steaming bowl of chili. From experience, I know that its contents are more akin to something you'd set out for Fido when he's been a bad dog.

The fridge holds no more promise; I know this before I go to it, but as with everything the opening is ritual obligation. Sterile white floods out and comes with my overworked fluorescents, but it doesn't make things any brighter. Some destructive interference actually dims the whole scene. There's a red pepper in a translucent grocer's bag, with one hearty-looking lobe sliced off and stored separately in Ziploc. Beside it sits a self-satisfied onion sporting some green progeny, there because I'm never sure what really needs to be kept cold and what doesn't. Other than these two holdouts, the desert shelves are lone and level. The punctuation marks on the inner walls are a glass jar of pitted Greek olives and a bottle of hot sauce I don't remember buying. I shut the door with a rattle. In my mind, there is a soda-fizz sound as the light regains its homeostasis.

Gloves had been necessary the last time I left the building, but mine seemed to have come down with stage fright. I stick my hands in my pockets instead as I ride down the elevator. It opens onto the building's blunt shabby lobby, a twelve-foot stretch lined in metal mailboxes, only about half of which are numbered. Putting my shoulder into it, I push the door open and my body shakes in rejection as the winter air hits my face like a poorly-thrown punch. My coat doesn't have a hood,

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but I zip it up all the way with trembling fingers and try to bring the collar over my mouth. I have to hunch my shoulders to accomplish the feat.

To the left is the mainstay of my hungriest days, Enrique's. Quite possibly the worst Mexican place in America. Reflecting on some distress it caused last week, I take a right. I pass on the first few options, because I go to them like clockwork. It's been pointed out to me that I treat life like a decision-tree.

Hungry? --> Enrique's.

Not good enough? --> Gyro Hero.

Not good enough? --> Pizza Hut.

Not good enough . . . and so on.

I resolve to try somewhere new, to avoid the spiral that will start seconds after my last bite of something delicious I've had fifteen, twenty times before. I can't stand stagnation; it drives the people away. But most of the time my life is standing water anyway, no matter what I do. And thus, the people are gone.

There's a Japanese place at the corner that always smells great, but I've never been there. Right now, it's full of people enjoying themselves, and every table I see through the glazed window is set for two. Candles sit glowing on pink paper lace. I move on.

I pass the next few chains, figuring they're just as bad as my regulars, even if I haven't set foot within the brick-and-mortar of that particular location. Down the next street, red and blue flashers sit on top of a fire truck, spraying loud water into the second story of what I think is a police depot. The whole block's a wash; I pass along.

The third block is Foundation Street, and it's lined with holes-in-the-walls. Some are hairdressers, some are cellphone repair shops, but most serve food. Delhi Deli is closed. There's a

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taco shop that I ignore because of my memories of that issue with Enrique's. Pizza, burgers, etc. all seem so repetitive. Those vegan places are full of nuts. And everywhere there's neon staring me down, trying to make the night feel vivid and significant when it should just be left to its dark wont.

Eventually, I've walked myself back to the building. It isn't deliberate, at least not consciously so, and now I've finished the loop it gives me the option try the road not taken. A rare opportunity.

Instead, I struggle my keys free from my pocket, and let myself back inside. The apartment, once I've arrived, is still a blank canvas. No meals have brown-bagged themselves on my counter since I left, no companions oriented themselves appealingly on the stained white couch.

In the kitchen, I drop some bread into my toaster for the first time, and wonder how it would look slathered in hot red Cholula.