

An Impasse

Allen's goal, at one point, had been to make the Parthenon out of Mountain Dew cans. Part of this was for lack of anything else to do with them, but most of it was because he really loved the Parthenon. His goal had been to build a perfect scale model of its outside, using these literally hundreds of cans he managed to amass over the course of a year of working from home. It was basically the only thing he didn't do over the internet: besides his job, it was also the source of his groceries, news, movies, TV, porn, video games, basically everything. He spent his days hunched over that laptop, curtains drawn so he could sleep whenever he felt like, in his room. The first few months, he told his friends about his Parthenon-related mission, and they'd laugh, but then his friends one by one stopped showing up, and the whole concept was scrapped because fuck it. Anyway, it couldn't live up to the Real Thing's structural intricacies or awe-inspiring beauty, no way, not a bunch of Mountain Dew cans. He got to be seven-eighths done with it when he decided there was just no way he could bring himself to putting the capstone on the project.

Eventually, he figured out he was better off returning those cans and getting the deposit, so he spent two or three hours cramming those cans in a plastic bag, taking one or two hour breaks every ten minutes because there were just so many of them and besides, he had work to do. It took him a grand total of three days to bag all of these cans, which had to be getting in the mid-to-high hundreds, and three more days to work out which grocery store was the closest and had the most convenient hours and would give him the best deal (ignoring that the cans had a universal ten-cent return value printed directly onto them), before he decided where he was going to go. And then he had to take three or four Xanax before he felt comfortable with even the fact of opening that door, and they'd all have to fully kick in before he left, and maybe he'd take

the whole bottle along just in case he had to get back. Then there was the complicated issue of how he'd move all of these bags. He'd take the car, but the car might be low on gas, and if it's only three blocks away he might as well walk regardless of gas. But *then* there was the issue of wandering around town with three or four big garbage bag full of cans, the fact that people would see him and make certain assumptions that were neither true nor at all wanted, thank you very much. Eventually, he decided he'd only do one at a time, because one was a hell of a lot easier than three or four, and he was finally starting to feel those Xannies, but just to be sure he popped one more, because he had dosed so long ago he was starting to forget whether or not he'd dosed and how many he'd taken and hey there's no possible way it can hurt, right?

He'd always figured people were exaggerating when they talked about how much the sun hurts your eyes that first time you leave your house in almost a year, but the damn thing almost blinded him for several minutes, and he just sort of stood there like an idiot, holding onto this bag, his head swimming on account of the anti-anxiety pills. He was having trouble even grasping the full extent of what his being outside and making this three block journey of his bore, which all things considered was probably for the best. So he walked his way over to the grocery store, panting more than he should have on account of the walk's brevity, starting to get really bad cotton mouth, but at least it didn't occur to him that maybe people were staring, at least he wasn't putting together ideas about how everyone was giving him a wide berth as he walked down the street, and he got to his destination, took his huge drink of water from the fountain, and once and for all deposited those cans. Made a cool five bucks off of them.

"How are you?" asked the young woman at the counter. She's maybe twenty-two, twenty-three at the absolute oldest, a pale skinned blonde with sea-green eyes and full lips with a natural redness to them and a great figure that her loose-fitting uniform and apron just absolutely

cannot hide.

“I’m great!” he replied. “First time I’ve left my apartment in nine months, you know, because all of my friends just sort of stopped hanging out with me, and because I lost my job at Radio Shack and my other job at Macy’s and am now doing work over the internet, and because I don’t have the money to go to therapy and can barely even pay for rent or groceries, but other than that, fine! I’m out of my place, right?”

“Um, yeah, good to hear,” she answered. “I guess, well, good... luck?”

And she handed him his five dollars and thought well at least I’ll probably never see him again, but he was back the next day with more cans, exact same time right down to the minute as the last day, and he headed right over to her register and she tried to put up the “register closed” sign. But she dropped it, and he bent over and picked it up and put it right where it should have been and apologized profusely. He also got a look at her nametag, which hadn’t occurred to him the previous day. Jenna was her name.

“No, it’s okay, thanks for the help,” she replied. “My break just started.”

“Oh,” he said, trying his hardest not to let his face fall. He turned and got ready to head over to the next register, his receipt bent in half and crumpled in his massive hand.

“Wait,” Jenna called. “I’ll get you your money. Then I’ll go on break.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “I mean, you’ve been working hard all day, I wouldn’t want to interrupt anything.”

“It’ll only take a minute,” she answered, and it did. She gave him an awkward sort of half-smile and added “Glad to see you out of your apartment again,” and maybe that was against her better judgment, but what would you have her say?

“Only until the Xanax runs out,” he told her, in the sort of voice where it was hard to tell

if he was joking or serious. And the next day he was back with another big bag, and this time he told her that it was the first time in he doesn't even know how long that he's left his house without the aid of Xanax or Klonopin or any other chemically induced courage, and she let out a single "heh" at the phrase "chemically induced courage," and his face, with those big brown eyes and that full but sort of uneven beard, well it just lit up.

And he just kept coming back, but she noticed that not only were the receipts growing to be worth less and less – ten cents, twenty cents – but he was buying these twelve packs of Mountain Dew with the returns. It's not as though he wasn't helpful, though. He spent an hour out of several days packing the bags of the customers behind him and started covering for her on her breaks before a supervisor told him to please stop, and when she asked if he wanted a little of her paycheck as a reward, he politely but firmly refused. And she knew she couldn't get her shift changed, because he'd just find out when the new one was and start coming in then, and besides, while okay this might technically qualify as stalking, it's not exactly *her* she's worried about him hurting, let's just leave it at that.

And he kept on showing up. Occasionally, he'd look over at her and ask what was on her mind, and she would keep up the most professional of all professional smiles, and she'd tell him there was nothing, and asked if anything was on his. And he'd tell her that a lot of things were on his mind. It got to the point where she knew what was coming, and she knew what she'd have to say. It wasn't as though she thought he was creepy, it was just that saying yes to the sort of man who showed up uninvited, day after day and hurled his life story at your feet and never even properly introduced himself was one of those things a woman shouldn't do. And for as shallow as this sounded to her, it wasn't as though he was ugly, but his features did seem a little too large for his body, and all things considered, that was a bit of a deal-breaker. It flitted through her head

that he probably had masturbated to her at least once, and while she confessed that could turn her on in a different set of circumstances, with him, the answer was no thank you. Incidentally, he had masturbated to her, or at least had tried to; he got somewhere between two-thirds and three-quarters in before he had to stop.

And one day, after not having missed a single day after several weeks, he just quit showing up. Jenna had no way of telling why, but she'd assumed that he'd somehow or other worked his way through one or another of his problems and only didn't come back because he was embarrassed about the whole affair, which let's all face it was probably an appropriate reaction. It was too bad, really, because he was helpful in his own way, and she had to admit she found his presence flattering. What she wouldn't ever find out was that Allen had taken an unusually high dose of Xanax the day he just sort of disappeared on her, intending of course to ask her out. The problem was that he not only took twice his normal dosage, but he hadn't touched the stuff in weeks, and he ended up collapsing on his floor. Luckily, his downstairs neighbor heard the crash, forced the door open, and called the hospital immediately. After he was successfully resuscitated and the Xanax was pumped from his stomach, he was transferred to the suicide ward immediately, although he insisted vehemently that suicide wasn't at all part of his plan, that things were actually just starting to go well for him and that there was this girl, and yes, admittedly, there was a lot of Xanax in his stomach, but he hadn't meant to take it.

Well, not all of it.