

## THE DEATH OF CECILIA

Beyond the cracked sidewalk, the telephone pole with layers of flyers in a rainbow of colors, and the patch of dry brown grass, there stood a ten-foot high concrete block wall, caked with dozens of coats of paint. There was a small shrine at the foot of it, with burnt out candles and dead flowers and a few soggy teddy bears. One word of graffiti filled the wall, red letters on a gold background: Rejoice!

It made me think of my ex-girlfriend and my best friend Hector cheating on me with each other; my dad smacking me on the ass with his belt after every holiday party because, “You can’t lock yourself in your room when there are guests in this house!”; and the night my brother and I picked up our white lab Rocco from the street only to watch his head fall off. Rejoice!

What a joke. I picked up one of the flowers and brought it to my nose so that I could smell death in all its glory, and just as expected, it had no scent, as if to remind me that nothing happens when you die. That no matter how much work I put into suffering, none of it matters. Rejoice!

Say rejoice three times and make a wish. It won’t come true either. Build a ten-foot high concrete block, sprinkle it with flowers and tchotchkes, then call it art. That doesn’t mean that it is, because a thing is a thing, not what is said of that thing.

What a way to make a living, man. Fifty-bucks they charge to let a man walk these grounds and this is what he gets? Probably would’ve been better off dropping that fifty in a collection plate, and that’s saying something.

I put the dead flower back and noticed the “Do not touch!” sign as I did. I tried to pick up a teddy bear but all three of them were glued to the shrine. Smart, I thought, this artist knows their audience.

Below the “Do not touch!” sign was a placard with the name of the artist and the piece. It read: Leon Ferdinand - *Rejoice!* Odd how much that reminded me of Jen and the cheating; clear red flags displayed in bold acts of treason, like her getting a ride home with Hector on prom night and asking me to trust that it was because he needed counseling on a girl that he liked, and then finding out about the cheating through text.

I should’ve brought someone here with me. Or not come at all. But to come here alone, when it was Jen’s idea to do this in the first place? I learned the meaning of the word masochist in fourth grade when I stumbled over it as I read aloud in class, but I hadn’t used it in a sentence until I came to this damned exhibit.

It was time to move on to the second piece. I unfolded my arms from behind me and turned to do so, and only then realized that I was in the exhibit by myself. Except for the ticket-taker outside, I’d not been forced to interact with anyone –one thing to be grateful for.

In the display for the second piece, nailed to a standing coffin with its lid closed, was a real slice of bread painted red. Mold had started to form around the corners of it. The paint that covered it

was layered on so thick that the bread was shrinking into itself, taking the shape of a human heart. The bottom of the coffin dripped paint onto the floor and formed a pool of red where some of the mold from the bread had peeled off. A modern take on the iron maiden, perhaps.

I looked at the placard for this one. It read: *The Death of Cecilia*. Below that was the artist's name: Cecilia DeMoore. Finally something I could relate to. *The Death of Cecilia* evoked everything I was feeling about the break-up.

I had been stomped on and used like the slice of bread, the whole of me becoming rotten. The cracks in my heart were displayed to everyone I knew because the humiliation of being deceived was too much for me to mask. There wasn't enough of a reason to pretend that I was OK.

"How are you doing today, Greg?" my family, friends, and therapist would ask, my well-being never the actual concern. "Your mother is worried about you," or, "Did you finish last night's Calculus homework?" or even, "How would you like to use your time today?"

"Barely hanging on," I would tell them. "I'm sorry Ma's struggling," or, "I'm done with homework for good." Or to my therapist, "I'm not sure. I haven't been the best at making decisions lately." I always told the truth, though I wish sometimes I hadn't, because who really cares what a high schooler's going through.

Oftentimes I stayed up at night trying to study the faces of people I'd interacted with that day. Everyone always put on their best face and played the part, except for Hector and Jen who seemed genuinely happy to be alive. But then again, who wouldn't be happy to have Jen in their life?

She was an artist, a true artist, unlike Leon Ferdinand and his pretentious *Rejoice!* Oils were her specialty. You'd ask her to paint anyone's face from memory and two weeks later there they were, a four by six piece of cardboard masterpiece. She loved using cardboard.

All the girls looked up to Jen too, learned from the social butterfly that she was. Come to think of it, that's one of the reasons she never truly grew to love me like I did her. It bothered her how hard it was for me to go to parties; it bothered her to be with someone *less than*. Hell, it bothered me too.

As soon as I fell asleep, the faces that I studied would visit –or haunt– me in my dreams. Lately it was the latter; Jen pulling me away from a party to ask if I was OK with Hector sleeping with us that night; me not being OK with that and then Jen breaking up with me and still sleeping with Hector that night. This happened even before the break-up. The dreams, I mean. Except that before, I'd wake up and fight to remember that Jen and I were still together, that it'd only been a bad dream. Now I woke up and remembered that yes, even in my real life it was *that* bad. There was no texting Jen to tell her about my dream and her then reassuring me. Mornings became the worst part of a terrible existence.

*The Death of Cecilia* stared me down and read my mind, almost as if Cecilia herself was inside the coffin, hearing the loudness of my thoughts and whispering them back to the painted wood as the drips of red seeped into its heart. It was the first time I felt as though art had a life of its own, consciousness if you like.

I pulled out my phone to take a picture and like clockwork, immediately felt the ticket-taker's presence behind me. "Exhibit is now closed," he said. My phone convulsed out of my hands and smacked the exhibit floor with its screen.

"Christ!" I said as I got down and checked the damage. The screen had cracked down the middle and the LED lights were in a trance. The damn phone was totaled. "Do you have to sneak up on me to tell me that?"

"Sorry, sir," the ticket-taker said. "Protesters are gathering outside. It is for your safety that we are asking you to please exit the building. I do apologize for the damage to your phone." He gave me a business card with the exhibit owner's name and email on it and said, "Now please, let me show you outside."

I slid the broken phone in my pocket in the hopes that some of the data stored on it could be salvaged and followed him to the exit. There had to be at least three-hundred pictures of Jen stored in that phone that collectively told the story of our relationship, and sure, it was her decision to take herself out of the equation that is my life, but I still had a right to hold onto these, didn't I?

Outside of the exhibit it was hot and humid, a harvest of humans gathered around something I couldn't see. The crowd was so big that the street parallel to the exhibit was blocked off. People stuck their heads out of car windows as they honked and tried to yell at protesters over the horn. The ticket-taker gave me a free ticket for the exhibit, unaware that I still had Jen's to use, and said, "We hope you'll give us another chance." Then, as he went back inside the exhibit, a kid not much older than me materialized out of the crowd.

The kid got up onto a milk crate and raised his hand. A murmur went through the crowd and then it fell silent, except for a few people shouting words of encouragement at him. The kid acknowledged them with a nod and a shy smile. In the full light of day, he looked less angry and more beautiful. He waited until people stopped shouting. A siren could be heard, maybe five or ten blocks away. The kid raised the bullhorn, pressed the button, and began to speak.

"Folks! Folks! Thank you! Please! Thank you!" he stopped to let the crowd dial down again. "We all know why we're here today. The government does not like that we are here! The government would much rather that we stay home! They want us tuned in to their paid for news outlets. The government is no longer for the people, by the people!"

Everyone's smart and beautiful until they open their mouths and this kid was no different. Conspiracy theorists had started to gather all over town, an epidemic that would soon become one of the nation's biggest problems, second to global warming, because grown men and women felt comfortable listening to people my age tell them what to believe in.

Mom and Dad always made fun of those who protested. "They're taking the piss out of ordinary Joes just trying to get to work," Mom would say. "Forget about that," Dad would add. "What kind of an idiot would listen to a teenager's thoughts about politics and war?"

Frustration coursed through my veins as I slipped my hand in my pocket to record the mess with my phone and instead sliced open my index finger as it ran over the cracked screen. I cried out, "Son of a..." but stopped myself from cursing when the kid's pause in his speech made my voice the loudest in the crowd.

A few people turned their heads and shushed me with rage-filled eyes the way terrible parents do crying babies. I wouldn't have been surprised to find out that most of those gathered for the speech *were* terrible parents. Isn't that a big part of being a terrible parent? That you'd rather listen to someone else's child instead of your own?

I put my finger in my mouth and sucked on it to make the bleeding stop. The cut didn't look or taste too deep but it did remind me of *The Death of Cecilia* and my shrinking heart. It made me wonder if the lack of blood was because my heart could no longer pump as fast as it used to, if maybe I'd be better off squeezing out every last bit of it and becoming an art piece instead of a living thing.

Maybe in a couple of months Jen and Hector could pay the exhibit a visit and find me next to *The Death of Cecilia* in a piece titled: *Cheated On*; because being cheated on was now the only thing that defined me. Not my writing, not my friends, and definitely not my family.

The crowd began to suffocate me and my worries. The hot air felt cold on my now pale index finger. I looked up at the faces that shushed me and stared back at them in judgment. What the hell do all of you terrible parents want from me? Get out of my way! I shoved anyone that tried to stand their ground and wiggled my way through the rest of them until I reached the sidewalk on the other end of the crowd.

When I turned the corner onto Main Street, despite only being thirty feet away, the sound of the protesters started to die down and the people I passed looked friendlier. It's like this town wanted to segregate the sheep from the wolves and Main Street was sheep central. Was I just a sheep that got away? Or a wolf in sheep's clothing?

Some sheep even warned others not to turn down the road I'd just come from, "Beware Protesters!" signs in their hands. The difference between those trying to help us move along with our day and those trying to hide an ugly truth had blurred months ago. But when you're in high

school these things seem trivial to you, like the only world that matters is the one on school grounds. And maybe that's the way it should be. So many of my parents' friends are miserable because they worry about everything except what's right in front of them.

Yet there I was with no real aim in life, headed home for dinner with Mom and Dad; spaghetti and meatballs and an upset stomach in the morning to add to my already wonderful start of the day. Why couldn't I just get over Jen and focus on the day-to-day? I was the only one who didn't know what was best for me.

Everyone else had their ideas, and they loved to share them, tried to tell me what to do, what to feel, but hell, man, can't a boy just be miserable for a while? What ever happened to just being there for a broken someone? Not worrying about how to *fix* them, or what the right words to say are, just *being* there.

If I ever have a child, that's what I'll do for him. I'll let him tell me how he feels, let him cry if he needs to, and then I'll put my arm over his shoulder and say, "Listen, son, all of those feelings you're talking about are real. Your mother has felt them. Your sister has felt them. And I have felt them. And maybe they'll go away soon or maybe they'll keep you up at night, you know? Nobody really knows. But what everyone in this family wants *you* to know is that however long you need to feel them is OK, and it doesn't change how much we love you."

When I arrived home I saw the lights on from outside and our cat Paul sitting by the front door with a slow blink in his eyes. "*You* again," I imagined him saying to me. I walked onto the porch and opened the door. Paul got up and scurried inside as if there wasn't a cat flap he could've used hours ago. Then he flicked his tail and meowed.

I closed the door and got down on one knee. Paul rubbed up against one of my folded legs and purred, but when I brought my hand over his fur, he hissed at me and bounced into the kitchen. "Paul!" I heard my dad say. "Get out of the kitchen, we just fed you." Then my mother: "Greg honey? Come help your father in the kitchen." Honey becomes your last name when people think you're losing it.

The smell of marinara sauce crept up on me as I made my way to the kitchen. I found my dad frantically jumping from one thing to another, a bottle of wine in his hand, and said, "What can I help with?"

"Go help your mother set the table," he said. "Food's just about ready. You're too late to help with that. Make yourself useful some other way." He took a swig from the bottle and scared Paul away with his feet.

Mom was in the dining room reading on her iPad. Her feet were bare but even in the godawful heat, the rest of her body was warmly clothed. Her eyes stayed glued to the screen as I sat in the chair next to her. “Anything interesting happening in the digital world?” I asked.

“It’s a new moon tonight,” she said. “My horoscope says I’m in for a pleasant surprise sometime in the next few days. Do you want to hear yours?” I nodded. “If you’re waiting for someone to come and fill all of your needs, emotional ones in particular, you may have to wait a *very* long time! This would be unlike Libra, and certainly unlike you!”

I couldn’t find an appropriate response for my mother because all I wanted was to yell at her, but I knew that wouldn’t fly with Dad. So, instead, I waited for *her* to. Her fingers scrolled through the iPad, the light from it reflecting off her reading glasses to create the illusion that LED was the color of her eyes. Finally, she said, “Greg honey? What do you think?”

“Honestly, mom, I think I need to forget about Jen before I wait for someone else to come along. That’s not what I’m doing. It’s just that what happened really hurt me. Jen and I were...she really made me happy, you know?”

Dad walked in carrying a bowl of spaghetti in one hand and his wine in the other. He said, “It’s just a horoscope kid, come on. Get your head outta your ass with all this Jen stuff. How long’s it been anyway? Almost a year? Jen left town, Hector left town, your friends left town; you’re the only one who’s still thinking about it.”

I watched him set down the bowl and drink more wine. He went back and forth from dining room to kitchen to dining room until all of the food was in the same place. As he did this, Mom put away her iPad and set the rest of the table. Paul rubbed up against my leg and swatted at my feet a couple of times before finding his spot under a chair.

For a second I thought about getting up and leaving. Not just the table for my room, but also the house for the streets. I closed my eyes and fantasized about what it would be like to pack a bag and never come back; fantasized that maybe the shock from the experience would help to distract me from everything else.

Mom and Dad found their way back to the table and sat down. I opened my eyes and stared at the bowl of meatball marinara to avoid eye contact, the red reminding me of *The Death of Cecilia* and the puddle of blood and Hector and Jen and school being out and my twentieth birthday being so close. I felt my parents’ hands holding mine, closed my eyes again, and heard Mom say, “So, who wants to say grace?”