

About the Dead Vagabond on Seventh Street

That was the story that I told to The Prankster on the driveway in front of my house last night. I was sitting there lamenting to him about how I always hated the ones that started with dead or dying people instead of living people. They just seemed so played out to me. There are all the books like Faulkner's, with that whole thing about Addie and her coffin, and the Borges story about the dying man who tells a Roman soldier about a river of immortality, or even Paper Towns by John Green when the kids find the dead body in the park. Then it's everywhere in pop culture. There are all the beginnings of movies like *Se7en* or *Starsky and Hutch* or *Brick* where the dead body sets about the string of events that help solve a mystery. And then there are the songs like *A Day in the Life* by The Beatles or *Ghost* by Neutral Milk Hotel that are almost more about immortalizing the dead body in the beginning than how they're affected by it. But at any rate, I vowed to him that I didn't *want* to begin with the dead man, but that's just how it happened. That seemed to be how it had to start.

I stepped over the body and didn't even register for a second that he was dead. I mean, it should have been obvious. He was just suspended there in the middle of the sidewalk like a chalk outline, and I just stepped right over him and kept going. Didn't even look back for at least six or seven steps either. Then I paused, sensing that something wasn't right. I wheeled around slowly, and walked back to make sure I'd seen it right.

Yeah. He was definitely dead. No questions there.

Lost it right there in front of Club DeVille too, right underneath the flashing crown lights. Probably happened sometime after all the bars closed and the streets emptied out, but before the sun had come up, so nobody would have even noticed him. And he just collapsed on his cane like it was a grenade. I could see the handle still poking out from underneath him and the wood was stained with

sweat from a tense grip and so many hot suns. I could see his gray hair was still tucked underneath a worn hunting cap and I looked again just to make sure he hadn't started breathing, but he hadn't. His eyes were shut tight with a real look of anguish, all of the crow's feet bunching up near the corner of his eyes, and I'm sure that the last thing he felt was the splinter in the sidewalk where he had fallen.

He wasn't smiling. He didn't die happy, or peacefully. He went down hard after maybe hours of intense suffering, and surely years of the passive sort. He had one of those large Brookshire's paper bags that had spilled out next to him. Mostly empty cans now rolling down the sidewalk towards the gutter. But there were also fleeces and nylons sticking out, wrapped around the last of a bottle of R&R.

And then the ambulance came around the corner. No sirens or horns either. It wasn't an emergency. The EMTs only rolled him onto the stretcher so he could be pronounced dead on an operating table, and then sit in the morgue in a drawer or something without anyone claiming him until they do whatever they do with all of the unidentified bodies after so long. They probably cremated him and scattered his ashes in the river, or maybe they donated him to some scientific research laboratory or university where they can say "look at how enlarged the gallbladder is" and "see, this is what happens to the pancreas." I knew he wouldn't be buried though.

And then that was it. His funeral was held at sunrise on the sidewalk of the street. The same street that he probably spent the last months or maybe even years of his life on. It was warm but the only sun I saw was reflected off the faces of downtown buildings that towered over the sidewalk. There was no audience. No spectators. No family. No friends. Nobody blessed the body, nobody sang hymns, and nobody probably even knew him. But one man did give a short eulogy. As I began to walk away I heard a homeless man mutter to another: "Every day is blessed." And then I made it to the coffee shop and everything else about my day unfolded unremarkably.

The night felt like it was getting old and stale and it smelled like gunpowder, but it was still warm outside from earlier. Everyone else was either out back still drinking and talking or inside still drinking and dancing. The Prankster and I were there on the driveway, passing my Virgen de Guadalupe flask back and forth, trading pulls of Cabin Fever watching a Fourth of July fireworks show light up on the other side of the river. His face burned with intensity as he digested my story, and it flickered with color from the fireworks like we were flipping through TV channels. I watched the emotions pass through him, and saw him working it out in his head, trying to form a response. I had specifically brought him aside, away from the party, to ask him why I wasn't more affected by that dead man.

“I mean, I didn't even realize he was dead at first, you know? And then when I did realize it, I feel like I only stuck around and watched him get taken away so that I could find out what would happen.”

He nodded, acknowledging the absurdity of my actions.

“I didn't think about him while I drank my coffee,” I continued. “I didn't think about him at work. I didn't think about him on the bus home. I didn't even think about him again until I read Mary's note after I got home a few hours ago.”

He coughed and itched his nose, keeping his hand in front of his face.

“You know, there's that whole thing about universality,” The Prankster started.

“What?” I prodded, “you mean all the bullshit about how the universal man detaches himself from experience?”

He nodded affirmatively.

“Do you think objectivity here is the key to understanding?”

“Exactly,” he continued. “And it only seems natural that the only thing you learn from things that affect you is how to not be affected by them anymore.”

He passed me back the flask and held a Spirit in the corner of his mouth, always with something hiding some portion of his face. He saw me staring and offered me one but I waved it away.

“It's the same as when I first left rehab,” he said, fumbling through his pockets, digging for fire. “They gave me all sorts of pills to down at night to take the edge off during the day but it didn't even matter whether I took them or not. All of the emotion had already been taken out of me before the pills. The chemicals were already unbalanced. I didn't feel happiness and I didn't feel sadness. I definitely get what you mean.”

“No, no. That's totally wrong,” I said, raising my voice and shaking my head in emphasis.

He looked at me confused, like an innocent man waiting for a sentence.

In my mind, I knew he was only trying to empathize with me. In there I wanted to tell him that he didn't understand at all. It's not about the fact that I *couldn't* feel anything, it's about the fact that I *didn't*.

“Look,” I told him. “When I saw that man lying there this morning, with his old face and everything, my knee-jerk reaction should have been maybe a gasp. Or maybe some great recoil in shock and horror with my hand over my mouth. Or maybe even sympathy, as I knelt down on one knee to check his pulse and make sure 911 had been called. But I didn't do that shit. My response was so human and fucking detached.”

I reached over and grabbed the flask back from him. I unscrewed the cap and took a good pull of whiskey and yelled out “GOD DAMNIT” about as loud as I could while smoke chandeliers drifted down from the sky.

The Prankster could sense the uneasiness.

“Wait, but what about the note?” He asked. “You said you only thought about him after you read Mary's note?”

“Well, I was going to tell you guys later tonight, but I didn't really know a good time or how to approach the subject anyways, so I guess everyone will figure it out on their own time. But yeah, she's gone.”

“Gone, like, gone for good? Like...you know...”

“Not dead, obviously. It wasn't a suicide note. God no. She just left. Said she's going to Santa Cruz, said not to call, said I'd probably be better off in the long run.”

“Do you actually think you will be? Jesus, man. That's like four years wasted. I thought you guys were going to get married,” He added, stubbing his cigarette out in a crack on the driveway.

I looked up, pretending I could see stars, but there was only smoke and darkness, and then I looked down between my knees and felt sick. It wasn't the first time or the last time that I'd told myself I would be alright that night, so I forced the vomit back down in my throat and tried not to notice that The Prankster was watching me.

“I'll probably be fine, sure.” I swallowed. “You know how she was though. I mean, she left me a fucking note, you know? Taped to the fridge and everything. That's the kind of person she was. Didn't text it to me. Didn't sit me down and try to work it out. Just packed up and left while she knew I wouldn't be home. And even though that's part of what I loved about her--”

“It's part of what you hated too. Yeah I get it,” he laughed.

“I don't even know if it's what I hated about *her* though,” I replied. “How do I know it's not something that I hate about myself? This undeniable truth that I am magnetically drawn to people that seem to be even more out of touch with reality than I am? I mean, I didn't feel anything about the dead man all day. Coffee, work, bus. Nothing. And then I got home and there was her note on the fridge and I just lost it. I mean, I broke down hard right there on the kitchen floor next to the pile of empty pizza boxes and with the cat watching me from the window and everything.”

He stayed silent for a few seconds, trying to get me to work it out myself.

“So what exactly are you wondering about then?” He finally asked.

“I'm wondering why and how it is possible for me to be so affected by one thing but not another.

And how does one event by itself lend nothing to my emotions, but the same event in a different context has the ability to totally destroy me?”

His face lit up quickly. We had both been sitting, facing the river where the fireworks had been, but now he turned to face me directly.

“It's funny you should mention that actually, because I was watching this Woody Allen movie the other night--” he started.

I gave an exaggerated sigh in anticipation, but he ignored it.

“And I think he was onto something. Seriously. He said something like 'we fear death because we're afraid we haven't loved well enough or at all.'”

He turned back to face the river, and I sat there trying to let his words sink in, but all I could manage was to squeak out a small “Hmm,” and a fragile nod of my head. I tried hard to pretend that I was pondering what he'd said by looking up again. I let as many moments pass as possible, but I was only stalling for time. There was no room for his words to sink in because I was trying so hard to hold back the vomit that I felt creeping up my throat. I tried to focus, but this time I couldn't swallow it. It was coming up one way or another. I jumped up quickly from my spot on the driveway and made it halfway to the yard before it started coming out--painting the driveway a new color of beige, and filling in all of the anthills and cracks from the old foundation. Pretty violent heaving. So he called out to see if I was alright, even though he hadn't moved from his seat on the driveway. I gave a thumbs up while I was still doubled over in the yard, facing away from him, and the light from a long purple and green fountain illuminated the whole thing.

I remember wondering if the whole thing was somaticized. For instance, when I had first met Mary, her mom had just died of cancer. I had been going over to visit her with a friend--the whole suicide watch kind of thing. Checking up on her, making sure she wasn't destroying herself. We would take over food or board games or movies to watch, but she never wanted to do anything at first. She would either lie in bed or lie on the couch, and she really looked terrible—like her mom wasn't the only one that had been sick. And there were times when I'd go over there and she would ask us to bring her Tylenol or Soup because she was running a fever, and my friend would have to hold her hair back and brush it out of her eyes. My friend eventually got another job in another city though and then it was just me going over alone, holding the hair and fluffing the pillows, waiting until she was asleep to turn off the TV. But then she got better. She learned how to deal with the grief, how to manage it the healthy way, and then she went back to work and back to school, and when I went over I never had to bring her soup or Tylenol anymore.

The yard felt sufficiently fertilized with regurgitated hamburger meat and cheap whiskey though, so I slowly stumbled back to my place on the driveway. Prankster offered me the flask again and I seriously contemplated taking another drink for a moment before turning it down with a heavy hand.

“What were we talking about?”

“Love? Death? We're afraid of death because we don't think we've loved enough,” he says.

“Right. Yeah. That makes sense, but my problem here is that I'm not being universal at all. Death is a universal thing. Love is a universal thing. Should I stop trying to actually understand these things if I'm just going to do a slipshod job of it all? Is it better to not understand them? What I mean is, should I have been more affected by the dead man, or should I have been less affected by the note? And why was I even affected by either?”

“Why are you so concerned with objectivity anyway?” he imposes. “Maybe it's better to

experience subjectively. Maybe it's good that you cried or whatever. It shows that you're human. You feel emotion about things. Why is that bad?" There was a sharp edge to his tone.

He reared back to take another pull, but the flask was empty. I heard him sigh under his breath and I saw him shaking his head because he couldn't understand me and I couldn't understand him. He handed the empty flask back to me and I stuck it in my pocket and stood up. The fireworks had stopped, but shouts still swirled about from behind the door inside.

"This is going nowhere," I said.

I started to walk towards the front door and he yelled out "sorry," because that's the kind of person he was. Even if he didn't do anything wrong he'd still act like it was his fault, because he wanted as much to be responsible for my happiness as to allay my sadness. And walking away, I wondered if that was, in fact, far more universal than detachment—the desire to participate in other people's lives.

I walked inside and everyone was still dancing and drinking and yelling and I cut through the crowd to my room in the corner of the house. I closed the door and stuck a towel in the crack, so no light could get in. Then I pulled the drawstring on the fan and passed out in complete darkness.

When I woke up I was hungover but not feeling so sick anymore. I left the house in the same clothes that I fell asleep in and walk downtown towards the coffee shop again. It was gray outside, and it made me want to go insane. The humidity felt suffocating as I walked uphill, and as the buildings grew taller a feeling of insignificance began to creep in. As I got near downtown and Club DeVille, I looked closely for signs of the accident yesterday but there were none. I got closer and then I stopped and stood where I thought I saw him collapsed yesterday. I thought about trying to find a flower to pin to a telephone pole, or maybe making a cross out of a couple sticks, but as I looked around for a moment at all of the city, all of the decay, the rotten smell seeping out of dumpsters, there was only the disgusting

waste of human potential. Trash lines all the curbs, and garbage runoff stains the sidewalks. The birds know better than to come down from their stakes on top of the traffic lights and supermarket signs. I took off my shoes and set them down next to me on the curb. Then I lowered myself like a casket, really slowly onto the pavement until I was lying in the exact position that I remembered the man was in yesterday, in the exact same spot. I closed my eyes and pretended that the sun was shining outside. I pretended that I couldn't smell the garbage overflowing from the dumpsters or taste the turpentine in the cracks. I pretended that I couldn't hear the drone of every car passing by with rushed indifference, or drown in the exhaust they leave in their wake. I pretended I couldn't get up from where I was. I pretended that I'd be stuck there for the rest of my life, and it felt beautiful—not having to choose anything anymore.