

The Fan Blades Spin but I Can't Feel the Wind

The sun ignores the blinds and beams brilliant white light directly into my eyes, just pure unapologetic light. I've been awake all of one minute and his name is already in my head. Before thoughts of breakfast, before I realize I need to piss, before I've even figured out whether or not I'm late for work. His name floats along the shore of my brain like driftwood: Heath Raetz. Ours is a fleeting connection, one so inconsequential it could easily be written off as nonexistent; we are each of us irrelevant to the other.

My room is an atmospheric anomaly, dry enough to crack my skin and scratch my throat but muggy enough to render even the lightest bed sheet an oppressive force, every fold and tucked corner transformed into a maze of damp fabric that perpetually creeps back onto my body. The grating of glass against metal from the ceiling fan lends an odd metronomic quality to the room. This being all the ceiling fan cares to contribute. I lie in bed and watch the fan blades spin but I can't feel the wind.

The last time I saw Heath was in an army surplus store. He was working behind the counter and I had just returned from a summer in Montana where I had been doing a study of grassland birds. This was about 8 years ago. I was staying with my dad at the time and hadn't quite decided what I was going to do next. A former co-worker had moved into my room and taken over my part of the lease when I left for Montana. She seemed to be getting along with the other housemates and I didn't necessarily want to move back in to the house. Partly because I couldn't come to terms with the fact that she had begun dating a mutual acquaintance whom I had little respect for, and partly because I was losing interest in the city. I had I'd also decided

midway through the bird program that I didn't want to do that anymore either, so I moved in with my dad. In hindsight my decision to move had more to do with my feelings for Mai than I had been willing to admit.

Before I left for Montana, Mai and I had become pretty close. Having worked together for a year we fell into a pattern of post-work drinks. The chemistry, at times, was palpable. We even went to bed together a few times. The sex was fantastic. I think this feeling was mutual. Even still, the magnetism of our attraction was finite and for whatever reason, our pattern shattered. She had plans. I was trying to get into a competitive program in another state. We had our respective obligations that we had to see through. Of course, we would still flirt, and we did end up spending one more night together, but the next morning was silent and awkward.

It wasn't until I was in dire need of someone to take my place in the house that I overheard Mai talking about her imminent eviction. Something to do with a shifty roommate. She came over, checked out my place, and two days later I was moving out and she was moving in. It was a quick and relatively painless process but driving away I felt a wave of regret at the loss of what could have been. Maybe.

While living with my dad I would frequently have to run errands for him, which seems to be the sole purpose most children serve for their parents. He seemed to always need something from the store, and it was always a very specific item. My dad lived in a world made of post it notes and ever-expanding lists, something I seem to have inherited from him. Many mornings I would wake to find a list stuck to my forehead—my dad had an odd sense of humor. I never carried out my missions as expediently as my dad would have preferred—I have a tendency to wander—and he never failed to comment on how long I took.

It was during one such mission that I saw Heath. I had been sent to the auto parts shop in search of a replacement air filter which happened to be in the lot across from the army surplus store. When we were kids, my cousin and I would bike across Coburn—this was before the rapid expansion that seemed to coincide with my leaving—and would often play with the hatchets and machetes in the army surplus store until a surly clerk demanded our prompt exit, at which point we would pedal to an antique shop and browse through yellowed comics. Being back in Coburn had made me strangely nostalgic.

As soon as I walked into the store, I recognized him. Heath Raetz. Right there on his name-tag. I knew him immediately despite having not seen him for just shy of a decade. He didn't seem to remember me at all, but then, this didn't strike me as completely out of the ordinary. When I was in sixth grade, my parents divorced and I moved with my mom to the northern part of the state where her new husband lived. To clarify, Heath and I were never friends. We just happened to both exist in the same environment. Aware of one another but not at all interested in the life the other was living, the way one is aware of a table, or maybe more appropriately, the table that is assumedly in a neighbor's house. Still, when I left Coburn I left everyone, including Heath Raetz.

A while back, I developed something of a theory regarding the difference between the person that moves away and the people from which said person moves. I am certain this is universal. The person that moves, especially if that person is young and impressionable and moving against their will, vows never to forget their true, original friends. No bond can ever replace the bond of the first friendships forged. This, of course, is untrue. Likewise, the group that a person moves away from makes a similar vow. Letters will be written, summer visits will

be planned out in great detail, precautions taken for various obstacles that may come to pass, an uncooperative parent or a lack of proper transportation, to give some examples. Initially, there is correspondence with the friends back home, maybe even a few visits. Then, something happens. Letters and visits become less frequent; the moved begins to acclimate to the new environment. New friends are made. The original friends, they move on as well. Life fills the void left by the moved. But, and this is the theory, the moved has a better memory of the group that was left than the group has of the individual that moved. For the group, they suffer the loss collectively and soon they forget. A once dear friend is simply a memory to be conjured in moments of nostalgia. The one that moves however, this one suffers alone. Even having been accepted into a new circle, the moved dwells on the loss. Traces the faces of the missed when sleep proves impossible. I suppose a side effect of this, then, is that it is entirely possible to find oneself waking up and curiously, instantly thinking of someone that used to be a part of what was left behind. It makes no difference if the person was a friend or, in the case of Heath Raetz, merely a set piece. I doubt Heath was lying in bed and thinking of me, is my point.

The urge to urinate is now just an urge to expel waste completely. I have been in this bed for some time now, staring at the confusingly non-functional fan blades and ignoring my body's call to respond to the day. *Awake!*, I imagine my body saying. *Out of bed with you now!* My muscles ache; I feel weak. I don't know what it is that compels me to remain in this bed, wrapped in these sweaty, filthy sheets until it is unbearable, impossible to complete a thought for my body interrupting my mind simply to make room for everything else. I think about pissing in the sheets and the last time I had to deal with such a situation. I laugh. Across the hall I relieve myself. In spite of the bed-ridden procrastination, or perhaps precisely because of it, this

complete evacuation is accompanied by an odd but pleasant afterglow. I finish reading an article about the discovery of a new planet—one in the habitable zone, no less—wash up, and step in the shower.

Various water streams race down my chest, blending and branching and changing course. I try not to think of how much water I waste as I stand and do nothing but relish the feeling of warm jetting water. It is a luxury that I enjoy to the point of indulgence. Some days I shower three, maybe four times. I often think of Mai. Apparently, it is extraordinary that we *haven't* come across extraterrestrial life. That's what the author of the article seemed to think, at least. This new planet they found, if it had life on it, would actually be bad news. Not because of any risk of invasion—though I suppose that can never really be ruled out; we've got plenty of that already amongst us—but because of something called the Great Rift. It was all a little over my head. Standing in the shower I kept trying to make myself understand but in the back of my mind I am still in my bed, staring at the fan blades and thinking about Heath. The author seemed to think we were nearing extinction. He didn't sound crazy.

I remember wanting to say something to Heath when I was checking out. I can't recall a single conversation we'd ever had, but still, a part of me wanted to engage him, see what his life had become. He was still living in Coburn and he was working at the army surplus store, that much was clear, but that didn't mean much of anything. He could've been in school; there were plenty of colleges in the area. And besides, I was back in Coburn myself doing absolutely nothing. Running errands for my dad. Living rent-free and not really even looking for a job. Mostly, I think I just wanted to see if he remembered who I was. He rang up the old man in front of me and I stood there patiently as the two of them discussed rope.

My turn. We didn't discuss his life. We didn't even really make eye contact. He just took the bag of fishing lures I'd picked out—which I did kind of need—scanned them and gave me my total. Not once did I try to engage him. I'd heard it in his voice in the greeting; his life had not gone well. It's probably unfair to judge the quality of someone's life with absolutely no frame of reference, but I say 'probably' because I think occasionally it's possible to do so with some degree of certainty. This was one of those times. I never verified my hypothesis, so it could have been that Heath was simply bored out of his fucking mind at his job, as this is the case with a great number of people. But something in his voice, or rather a certain something lacking in his voice, suggested otherwise.

I step out of the shower. How is it that a chance encounter from 8 years ago has managed to occupy so much of my mind-space this morning? Toweling off, I am unable to answer the question. Why I should suddenly be concerned with this individual that I, for all intents and purposes, absolutely do not know, I have no idea. I am flummoxed. Up until now I've never once used that word, but it is an apt descriptor for the person that is bathing and thinking of a complete stranger that just so happened to attend the same grade school. Am I that convinced that this man's life is worse than my own? Another unanswerable question.

I lay the semi-saturated towel on my couch and sit naked in the living room.

I absolutely hate this couch.

When my parents were still together, the couch was in the living room of my childhood home, in which my dad still lives. It was new then, but hideous nonetheless. I do not know what possessed my parents to buy such an unsightly thing. When they split, the couch stayed with my

dad. When I came back from Montana, he still had the damned thing. He never remarried, so there was never anyone to tell him to get rid of it. I doubt he really even noticed it.

Now the couch is the centerpiece of my small one-bedroom apartment. The cushions are sunk in, so that to avoid being forced to the very center of the couch one must sit just next to the armrest. Practically *on* the armrest; anywhere else on this miserable piece of furniture, the body is forever sloped toward the center. This is likely another reason my dad didn't sit on the couch.

The wall directly across from me houses a mountain bike—this from my step-dad—an orange and grey Osprey backpack I got for my birthday, free, from Backwoods. I had been seeing this girl, Grace, and in an attempt to impress her I sold all my video games and bought a pair of pricey Vasque hiking boots (still mostly new) which merited me the backpack via a postcard I received months after Grace and I split. We'd planned what would've been an awesome trip to the Guadalupe Mountains over Thanksgiving, neither of us wanting to visit family, instead thirsting for an outdoor adventure. The boots are now tucked neatly beside the couch near the front-door, scorning the carpet, still waiting for peaks. An unopened Weber *Smokey Joe* grill, still in the box, paid for with a Christmas gift card from a family member whom I only know through holidays and funerals, is collecting dust in front of the bike.

Next to the bike is a completely useless Bissel *POWERforce* vacuum cleaner; an obsolete virus-infested Dell (step-dad), a Logitech keyboard with several broken letters resting atop its clunky frame; the left brother of a pair of JBL speakers which is home to two digital cameras: a Kodak EasyShare CD82 and a Fujifilm Finepix Z5; an alarm clock, brand unknown, Made In China; a TI-83 Plus Graphing Calculator; and a Toshiba TheaterView big-screen television, dimensions unknown (step-dad again).

The other speaker sits alone in a corner guarding a surge protector which is surely housing cobwebs.

A city of DVDs has formed on top of my TV, two islands of fantasy and violence connected by a double-decker bridge of players: one a hand-me-down Toshiba SD1700, the other, my own years-old fickle Philips DVP3140 which has now developed an irregular click (I fear it may be terminal). Some notable residents include: The Mel Brooks Collection, The Complete Monty Python's Flying Circus, all three Lord of the Rings films (extended), The Complete James Bond Collection, The Complete Planet Earth series, and a boxed set of the first three Die Hard movies.

Then, there is the bookcase. Ah, the bookcase.

The bookcase is home to more than just books, but mostly books, and occasionally I take all the books off and rearrange them in a specific order only to see them fall slowly back into disarray. The books are numerous and of varying age. They spill onto the floor and surrounding shelves; they gather on the couch, adding to the not-so-gentle grade toward the saggy center, their weight slowly molding the cushions into lazy, uncomfortable fluff.

On top of the bookcase is a set of the complete works of Shakespeare, in a pair of matching boxed sets acquired through heartbreak. I do my best not to think too hard on her name. Between these are three more books and a teapot, the books being family heirlooms passed down by my mother's father. I never knew him. He died when she was young but I'm told we are very similar. I've never figured out if my family meant that as a compliment.

The teapot is from yet another girlfriend. It is filled with old matches, ashes, and the remnants of incense.

I bought a blue recliner to distract me from my couch. It sits in the corner between the couch and the saltwater tank.

It is impossible to get anything done in this chair. I sit in it often, lights off, TV unplugged, and stare into the sea. The Clownfish (*Amphiprion ocellaris*) dance and swish their caudal fins in the crushed coral that is the ocean floor, leaving multiple variously sized valleys scattered between the three white live-rock monoliths I have strategically placed to simulate a natural habitat.

Crouched in front of my aquarium I think about skipping work. An amalgam of multi-hued algae shrouds the front glass pane; has already claimed the back in its name; has spared the smaller windows on the sides offering a distorted view of book spines. In the fall I came across some money and I decided to purchase a new light for my fish, one that would be suitable to start a reef tank. I ended up also buying a Coral Beauty. Beautiful fish, the Coral Beauty. I brought her home and proceeded to acclimate her into her new universe, which was silly of course, to enter into a pre-existing society a being that has matured in another radically different environment. No sooner had I slipped the plastic bag out of the water than my Clownfish attacked.

After a while, I will give my clownfish away, casting them out as murderers. I will find out their true scientific name, that they were actually *perculas*, and I will feel a twinge of pity and guilt for uprooting them from their home and returning them to a store.

Right now, however, the clownfish are happy enough despite the general mess of the tank. They don't seem to take any issue with my rock formations, either.

Circuiting through the room is a small table that gets placed wherever is most convenient depending on mood and motivation. The table is, at any given time, home to a number of odds

and ends: papers, pens, and dirty lenses; crumbs, bad-habits, and usually a pair of nail clippers. When exercise is in order, the table (and contents) is moved as a whole, in one swift and sure motion. When laziness is in order, the table is left in front of the couch and used as an ottoman with all the afore mentioned contents being gently urged to the very edge of the table where they hang in delicate suspension as my crossed legs rest in their place.

It is becoming increasingly more evident that I am in no position to judge the quality of anyone else's life owing to the relative chaos of my own. The driftwood thought of Heath slowly sinks into the ocean and returns to the deep. When I wake up tomorrow, his name will be nothing more than a dull ache of abandoned curiosity.