

floater

Phillip was the one to pull up his pants. He wasn't left with much of a choice. His sister wasn't going to do it. And it's not like they could wait for their mother to get home. That just wasn't right. The last image of her husband did not need to be his naked ass crack staring up at her from the bathroom floor. She deserved better.

That's not to say it was easy. Phillip's considerable girth didn't help matters. His father's body was a wet noodle in his arms. It was a challenge. An indignity and a challenge. But Phillip had no choice.

Somewhere in the ensuing struggle with his father's trousers, the toilet lid was put down. Phillip didn't remember doing it. Maybe it was his sister, Melanie, always wanting to present the best image to the world, often in direct conflict with reality. She wouldn't have wanted her mother to see what her father left behind in the toilet. That wasn't what anyone would want to remember him by. Curiously, the top dropper didn't flush. Maybe it just fell down. Melanie would have flushed. Phillip was sure of that.

It wasn't until a few days later that Phillip cried. Not at the funeral. That would have been the obvious choice. He was waiting in line for coffee — fingers dancing the jitterbug, waiting for their fix — when he felt something on his cheek. What he and everyone else at the Tenley Town McDonald's quickly realized was that he was crying. Bawling, really. It just took his brain a few moments to realize what was going on.

Phillip wasn't even thinking of his father. His mind was occupied by other matters, like whether buttermilk ranch was a suitable substitute for ketchup. He

hadn't noticed the fissures in his edifice of emotional disassociation, the cracks forming that day in the bathroom. But now it was too late. The dam had burst.

Phillip touched the moisture on his face. Staring at the droplets on his fingertips. Utterly perplexed. This was a facility long defunct, like his ability to play the clarinet and accurately translate Latin. After years of bottling up his feelings, Phillip believed he had actually succeeded in separating his heart from his brain. The evidence was overwhelmingly on his side. The two simply did not work in unison anymore. It's like they weren't even occupying the same body.

He'd once spent a full hour trying to take pleasure in the presence of his co-worker's new puppy. He stroked its auburn fur. Squeezed its Koosh ball face. Talked in that weird gooey voice people only use when addressing babies, animals, and college girlfriends. After all of that, he felt no warmth in his heart. Not even a hint of mirth. He was Colossus of *The Uncanny X-Men*. Unstoppable. Impenetrable. Not affected by stupid things like emotions. Part Russian.

Phillip wished — while crying onto the shoulder of a baffled Korean woman — that he had achieved this higher functioning, this great canyon between his heart and mind, when he was dating Katie Grasse. But this cephalic-aortic separation came later, following the long hurt. For months after the breakup, all Phillip could think about was Katie. Her smell. Her clothes. Her weird right nipple that pointed to the side, as if telling him to look elsewhere, ashamed of its own disfigurement.

Phillip apologized to the Korean woman. Wiped the tears from her shoulder. Blew his nose in some napkins. And pulled himself together.

In his car, the crying started again, his face flooding. He tried to remember how it had been the past five years. Cold, emotionless Phillip Mott. Post-Katie Grasse Phillip. He wanted to be that guy again. To not care. To not give a shit.

To break up with Greta Whitcomb, his girlfriend of seven months, over text and then play Call of Duty for twelve straight hours. He wanted his heart and brain to be bitter enemies, like in the good ol' days. This newfound communication was a problem.

It didn't stop. Here he was, crying in his car, unable to see the road through waterlogged eyes. He pulled over and attempted to get a handle on this emotional outburst. He tried thinking of something adequately distracting to take his mind off of the tears. Israel and Palestine. That was something that had seemingly no solution. As he tried to figure out the surest path to world peace, the tears slowly abated — though a steady trickle seeped out the corners every few minutes or so. At least he made it home.

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Phillip had to pee. He left the car in the driveway of his parents' house and headed for the second floor bathroom — incidentally, the place his father had died only a few days before. His bathroom, in the basement, was technically closer, but Phillip didn't want to have to pass the kitchen and potentially run into his mother. Living at home would have been less awkward if he could be honest when saying he wanted to be closer to his mother in her time of need. Instead, he had to face the brutal reality that he'd been pulling nine-fifty an hour in a temp job the past eight months and not paying rent was all he could afford right now. So he used his parents' bathroom.

The bathroom was just as it had been the previous thirty-plus years. White tiles. Blue molding. Frayed towels that wouldn't make the grade at a Motel 6. Phillip stood right where the body had been. Where he had put on his father's pants. A tear fell from his face. SPLAT! onto the cold floor. Phillip was sure it was the exact tile his father's left thigh had been resting on. The bathroom hadn't been cleaned since it happened, his mother too upset to even step foot inside. On

some microbial level, his father's corpse was still lying on that floor. The exfoliated particles tracing an invisible chalk outline of his dead father.

Phillip unzipped his fly. He considered, for a moment, peeing in the shower. It was just off to his right. Two feet at most. It all drained to the same place. But that would not have been respectful to his mother — even though he was sure he'd peed in it many times as a child. He'd probably peed over much of this house as a child. He had always found his own penis so fascinating.

Phillip raised the toilet lid... and there it was. His father's turd. Floating by itself, dead center of the pot, as if frozen in time. Waiting for him. "Hi," it would have said. But this wasn't a cartoon. It was just a piece of fecal matter. His dead father's waste. Floating in the toilet.

Phillip didn't even notice the tears had stopped. He was too busy staring at the turd. Like he'd just seen Jesus' face in a piece of toast. The turd didn't look like anything other than a turd. That's not what drew him. It was probably the fact that it was still there. Days later. Long after the funeral. Long after his mother's tears. After his sister's gasping sobs. After Uncle Geoff's awkward toast at the post-funeral brunch. It was still there and it was all that was left of his father on this earth. Well, above this earth. Six-feet below, over at the Methodist Cemetery, his father was still, technically... well, he was in the earth. If not exactly on it. So that left this turd — the last drop of Paul August Mott — as the only thing Phillip's father left for him.

That wasn't totally true. Phillip's father had left him some objects. Possessions. A stack of yellowing, *Life* magazines. Two-thousand dollars, mostly in change. A seaman's cap from his years "fighting the Japs" — on Wall Street, in the '80s — which continued well into his twilight years, if his dinner table discussions of Mitsubishi and the Asian Financial Crisis were any indication. Phillip wasn't left empty-handed by his dead father. But nothing carried any

memories for him. Nothing felt like they really came from him. To be fair, his father didn't physically give any of those things to Phillip. The executor did. Howard J. Bronfmann Jr. Nice fellow, if a bit noisome.

This floating piece of shit was all that his father had left him.

Once he realized that the crying had ended, Phillip knew what he had to do. He strolled down into the kitchen, making sure to peck his mother on the cheek — she was making lasagna for dinner — and returned to the bathroom with a roll of cellophane. And then Phillip sealed the bowl. The clear plastic sheet acting as museum glass. A turd in place of taxidermy. Or maybe it was more of a Monet. Either way, it was something of a memorial to his dead father. It felt right. The place where he died. A monument to the man. It's not exactly what he would have wanted — Phillip suspected his father would have killed for a marble statue of some kind, preferably one with him riding a horse — but Phillip liked to think that deep down his father would have appreciated the gesture.

Phillip spent much of the next week in the bathroom. Watching the turd. His eyes dry. His heart and brain hanging out in opposite corners, pretending not to know one another. But it seemed like every time he left a certain vicinity — about ten feet from the bathroom door, give or take — the tears would start again. His heart and brain finding each other like rain-soaked lovers in a hackneyed RomCom. So he tried to limit his time away from the bathroom. Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. He took them all on the cold, tiled floor. The offenses to hygiene barely registering on his radar. He even had his sister, after much hand-wringing, bring him a TV dinner stand, so he could eat while seated on the bathtub edge.

His mother was forced to use his bathroom. Twenty minutes of arguing with her son had brought him no closer to leaving the side of the toilet bowl, so she conceded defeat and moved her toiletries into the basement. She had no idea

what Phillip was doing up there, in the bathroom. She assumed he just wanted to be near the spot where her husband, his father, had died. She didn't know about the turd.

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Sitting cross-legged on the bathroom floor, Phillip listened to the drip. drip. drip. of the leaky faucet. It was about noon, he estimated. His stomach agreed. With no clock of any kind, Phillip had been using the timed "plinks" of water on porcelain as a de facto timepiece. It wasn't totally accurate, but he made do. And there was always his semi-starved digestive system, grumbling around meal times. Nature's alarm clock.

He'd long since ditched his smart phone, his last connection to the outside world — aside from his mother and sister, whom he tried to avoid. He drowned it in the bathtub. The smart phone. It didn't fizz and whir the way he'd expected. It simply went black. Like a switch went off. He never received the text from his boss, firing him. Or the two dozens calls before that. This was Phillip's world now. Nothing else mattered.

Phillip spent his days in an almost constant state of euphoria. It could have been his body eating itself, a byproduct of his newly observed diet of Ak-Mak crackers and carrot sticks — He'd long since lost his taste for anything else. Though that was probably because he'd long since lost his sense of taste — An inevitable result of living in a room with the fetid stench of rotting shit choking his nostrils 24-7. But he liked to think his euphoria was caused by the presence of his father's turd. Still miraculously intact, sitting there in the bowl like a island. Unto itself. Ever present. Never judging. The stench had even lifted. It was a miracle.

Phillip's stomach growled again. More of a gurgle, really. Maybe it wasn't

noon. He couldn't really rely on his stomach after all. His mother kept trying to sneak real food into his meal deliveries, but Phillip refused time and again. Aside from no longer being able to taste, he didn't see the point. Breaded chicken cutlets had not done his father any favors. He wasn't sitting here now, on the toilet, thinking about the Dow Jones Industrial Average or whatever he pondered while dropping a deuce. Sure, Phillip took his crackers and carrot sticks like a good little boy. He wasn't going to completely starve himself to death. He just didn't see the excitement borne out of overindulgence. The old Phillip might have reveled in consuming an entire honey-baked ham, but he was a vestige of an old self. The sagging flesh that hung past new Phillip's hips, peeking out from under his sweat-stained t-shirt — the ruins of his love-handles — those were testaments to his transformation. Out of death, new life.

But it would have been nice to lick an ice cream cone. He could almost feel the milky goodness dribbling down his chin.

Phillip's thoughts turned to Katie Grasse's deformed nipple. That's what it was like now. Flitting from thought to thought. Meditation for the attention deficient. Oftentimes the thoughts were sexual in nature. It had been a long time since he'd gotten laid. Let alone rubbed one out. But it wasn't proper. It wasn't right.

It was right there. Behind its plastic window. He couldn't.

Phillip steered his mind towards something more wholesome in nature. No, not ice cream. He had to stop thinking about ice cream. It was getting painful. No, he wanted to think about something else. Whiffle ball. He'd never gotten much of a chance to play as a kid. He had told his teachers it was on account of his asthma, but that was a lie. He was fat, not asthmatic. Phillip avoided sports because... Well, because he sucked at sports. He blamed a weak arm and a poor grasp of physics. Throwing baseballs with his father was not a part of Phillip's

youth. Neither was staying awake in Physics class. And the other sports, team sports. There was no “I” in team. There was no “Phillip” either. So he kept it that way.

A knock at the door. Phillip stayed stock still. Another knock. And another. This could no longer be avoided.

Phillip crossed to the door, and made the mistake of looking in the mirror. His skin looked wan. Almost bleached. It’s shocking how quickly the body forgets. A tan. A bruise. A burn. A father’s embrace. It was almost like he had never seen the sun, like some mole-person. There were bags under his eyes. His sallow cheeks hiding behind a scraggly beard that extended from the tops of his cheeks well past his Adam’s apple. Phillip didn’t mind the look.

Melanie greeted him with a concerned eyebrow raise and a plate laden with carrot sticks and a Clif bar.

“It smells like shit in there.”

“Where are my crackers?” mumbled Phillip.

After a few weeks of meal deliveries, Melanie Mott had figured out how to decipher her brother’s mush-mouthed patois - caused by a combination of poor hygiene and the diminished use of his mouth for both speaking and chewing purposes, “No more crackers. Mom’s worried about you.” Melanie held up the plate for her brother to see. “She got you white chocolate. They’re the best.”

Phillip just stared at the plate. Not moving. Melanie couldn’t even tell if he was breathing.

“Shiva only lasts seven days, you know. That’s what you’re doing right?”

Sitting shiva? The Jewish mourning period. Are you Jewish now? Mom thought maybe that's why you grew the beard... You have a razor in there." He did have a razor in there. Phillip wasn't going to use it. "I told all my friends you went to India. It's easier than telling them you went crazy and won't leave the bathroom."

Phillip stood there a few moments longer. The gears turning in his head. Formulating a response. India? Why would he want to go to India? He glanced over at the toilet bowl. The turd floated there still. As plump and putrid as the moment it was evacuated from his father's bowels. But it didn't leave. It would never take any business trips. It certainly wasn't going to India.

He could see it through the cellophane. It was a healthy looking turd. At least it had been. When Phillip first saw it — that moment a few weeks back when he really had to pee — it was a thing to behold. As wide as a Coke can. Phillip wondered if expelling that from his body was what had done it. Fuck, it must have hurt. Like giving birth.

"Earth to crazy. Come in crazy."

Phillip turned back to his sister.

"Are you going to take the plate or not? Mom says if you don't eat, she's going to call a doctor. A crazy person doctor. They're going to take you away and make you eat."

Phillip just stared at her. Her felt sorry for her. She was never going to have the relationship with her father that he now had. He was the favorite.

"Whatever. Weirdo." She placed the plate on the carpeted floor and stalked off.

Phillip was proud of himself. He'd stood up to his bitch of a sister and won. Victorious Phillip Mott! He could do anything. Vanquish any foe. Varsity baseball team? Suck an egg fellas, he was Fat Philly no more! Brandon Bart, Middle School bully, purple nerple expert, and inventor of the Indian neck burn? Who's the loser now?! Katie Grasse? Take a hint from your weird ass nipple and get lost! He looked back at the toilet and smiled. Look at what a good boy he'd become. A winner.

His father smiled back.

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Another letter slipped under the door. Phillip let it pile up with the rest. He wouldn't be picking this one up. He already knew what it said.

This was their strategy now, borrowing tactics from the Postmaster General. Two months in and Phillip was holding firm. There were towns in Italy who had put up less resistance to the Nazis. Phillip didn't quite equate his loving mother and sister to the Nazis — they were well intentioned, if not woefully misguided — but they were certainly on his shit list. Every attempt of theirs to remove him from his fortress of solitude had resulted in abject failure. The begging and pleading. The guilt trip. The time Melanie shut off the heat, trying to freeze him out. Phillip would not break.

The closest they had come was that most despicable act, when his mother — Phillip knew it was his mother, only she could be at once so wholly loving and blindly cruel — laid out an entire DiGregorio's fully-loaded meat lovers pizza at the end of the hall. Phillip couldn't smell it, but he knew what was out there. He sensed it. Like a dying camel senses water. It was a cheap shot. A last gasp of a broken, desperate family trying to reach out to a son they no longer understood.

Phillip almost pitied their desperation. Almost.

Phillip ignored the letter and continued filling in his father's chapeau — the black fedora he used to wear to all of Melanie's middle school field hockey games. Two more dabs and it was complete. Phillip's artistic skills were crude, but that didn't matter. No one was going to judge him for crafting an inaccurate likeness, the achievement was too breathtaking.

He took a step back and admired his handiwork.

The toilet was now but the centerpiece in a elaborate and, Phillip thought, profoundly moving tribute to his late father. Every detail of Paul Mott's life was meticulously depicted in the countless four by four inch porcelain tiles adorning the walls and floor. Phillip had gotten the idea from the Egyptian Pyramids, a favorite subject of his as a child. Instead of hieroglyphs, Phillip painted miniature snapshots from his father's life, using the nail polish his mother and sister had left behind. For the darker hues, he'd used ink, having been lucky enough to con his mother into lending him a pen with which he never intended to write her a letter.

Tracking the progress of his father's life, Phillip could not help but marvel at his accomplishments. And also what a good father he was. A great father. The greatest. Perhaps the greatest father who had ever lived on this planet. That was the father Phillip remembered. Not the absentee dad who'd forgotten his only son's name on his birthday, twice. Look, here was the proof! Phillip's fourth-grade mid-semester big band recital. There was Phillip, seating with the woodwinds. Stumbling his way through "Marcia All Turca." Doing his best to ignore taunts from the horn section. And there was his father, watching from the front row. Beaming. Proud. The fact that Phillip's father never actually made it to the recital meant nothing to new Phillip. He wanted to be there. Phillip was sure of it. What father wouldn't want to be at their son's fourth-grade mid-

semester big band recital? So Phillip gave him the life he'd wanted. The perfect life. Immortalized for everyone to see.

Next to that was a heartwarming tribute to Paul Mott's relationship with his brother-in-law, Uncle Geoff. The two men embraced in a great bear hug. Crude convex lines indicating that they were overwhelmed with joy to see one another. It was a minor point that Phillip had never seen his father touch Uncle Geoff. By all accounts he detested the man. But in his defense, Uncle Geoff was kind of a loser. On the wall though, they were the best of friends. You couldn't argue with the picture.

Over by the sink, or what was once the sink and now his de facto toilet, Phillip had commemorated the less sterling aspects of his father's life. First and foremost, his death on a toilet. Phillip rushed through that one. It was hard to tell what it was supposed to be.

The adjacent squares honored the many attempts by his family to remove Phillip from the bathroom. He was particularly proud of his rendition of the lean week. The time when the food deliveries had abruptly stopped. Starvation was difficult as first, but Phillip quickly acclimated himself to the nutritional qualities of Johnson + Johnson No Tears shampoo and bath soap. He remembered his mother crying outside the bathroom door, begging him to come out. Telling herself how hard it was to do this.

To achieve the desired pallor in hieroglyph Phillip's skin, real Phillip cleverly mixed some grout from the base of the sink with Melanie's Positive Pink nail lacquer. It gave the image a ghoulish, ethereal look that perfectly encapsulated the feeling of your family trying to kill you. Thankfully Phillip's mother didn't have the adequate disposition for sustained familial cruelty and the meal deliveries continued after a couple of days.

“Phillip?”

His mother’s words carried through the makeshift doggie door he had installed for food drops. Barely a whisper.

“I just want to make sure you’re alive...”

Her voice cracked. Words breaking apart. Syllables cascading into a pitiful torrent of boogers and tears.

She sobbed uncontrollably. Phillip felt nothing. His brain and heart separated by a fathomless abyss. Never to reconnect. He wasn’t even sure what sadness looked like anymore. Disillusionment. Fear. Rage. Earnestness. Abstract concepts he’d forgotten like all those lessons one learns in high school with no real world applications. They may as well have been Calculus.

But he knew joy. True joy. As if embraced by God himself. That’s what he knew now. His father’s love.

He no longer needed his mother. She could waste all her tears on him. But it would not change Phillip. Or his mind. He would not abandon his father. After all he had given him. Their relationship was as strong as ever. His mother was acting like a jealous child. Trying to pry Phillip from his father’s cold dead hands.

“We love you so much,” blathered his mother.

Or something to that effect. Phillip wasn’t really listening. She could have been saying, “Wheel of view slow muck.” It would have made little sense, but Phillip didn’t discount it. He no longer understood his family, the living members. And they would never understand him. What he had accomplished.

What he had achieved.

A photo peeked out from under the door. A Mott family portrait, circa 2003. Paul. Valerie. Melanie. And half of Phillip.

A memory bubbled to the surface. Paul not approving of Phillip's weight gain, instructing the photographer to crop the image. It was easier than paying for gastric bypass. POP! The memory was gone. Like so many useless thoughts.

Phillip tossed the photo into the pile of missives. None of that mattered anymore, now that Phillip was loved. Truly. Unwaveringly. Unequivocally. Now he was the favorite.

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It was a few days into the third month that Phillip's mother and sister barged into the bathroom without warning. Phillip had been lying on his makeshift bed: a small stack of bath towels with an American Flag beach blanket rolled up as a pillow. By then the toilet bowl had yielded to the turd. Black and green algae caked the porcelain sides, the water a brown bog, marsh-like and grimy. The turd seemed to have grown in size — probably water weight, but Phillip thought it might have been achieving some level of sentience. The smell... well, thankfully Phillip had long become acclimated to it. It wasn't a nice smell.

Phillip's mother and sister stormed the castle armed with cleaning equipment and a misplaced sense of heroism. Melanie took the lead, repeatedly slamming her meaty, Varsity-field-hockey-playing shoulder into the door, while Phillip's mother jimmied the lock with a screwdriver. Phillip's Uncle Geoff waited in the wings, murmuring the occasional word of encouragement. The door quickly caved.

Having braced themselves for the unknown — and possibly satanic — the Mott women were strangely relieved to find the fruits of Phillip’s madness illustrated on the bathroom walls and not, for example, carved into his body. The sink was another story.

They leapt into action. Unloading their disinfectants on Phillip and his mausoleum. Uncle Geoff had neglected to wear a cleaning mask, so the smell hit him especially hard — He was dry heaving in the second floor hallway while the early action occurred.

Phillip couldn’t say he was surprised at the sudden assault, but to be immediately sprayed by Febreze and hand sanitizer, that he wasn’t expecting. A bit of the disinfectant hit him in the eye.

Searing pain radiated out from Phillip’s cornea — temporarily blinding him and causing the release of a torrent of invective that really only had a place in the bathroom, ironically enough. Vision impaired, Phillip lunged for the toilet bowl, throwing himself over the seat, using his feet to keep his mother and sister at bay. He knew their target.

“You’re acting like a nut job,” said his sister, through her cleaning mask.

Phillip only heard the words of a traitor. Poisoned notes of a mockingbird. Laughing at him. Judging him. His mother’s pleas were no better.

“What are you doing with that toilet?”

They just didn’t understand. Phillip was keeping his father alive. This piece of shit was all that was left of their patriarch. And they wanted to flush him. Phillip was not about to let that happen.

He bared his teeth. Barking at them like a deranged mutt. He'd seen *Cujo*. Rabies scared the bejeezus out of people. If only he had anticipated their arrival, he could have applied some shaving cream to his mouth and really scared the shit out of them. His guttural howls would have to do the convincing for him.

"What the fuck are you doing?" said his sister.

It wasn't working. They were closing in. By now his Uncle Geoff had taken a few timid steps into the room, wisely wearing his cleaning mask. He had with him a garden hose, thumb jamming the water flow. Must have brought it in from the back yard. Clever. Phillip hadn't thought they'd be that pathetic, to resort to cheap tricks. He snatched the end of the toilet paper roll and stuffed it in his mouth. He chewed. "Now they'll think I'm crazy," thought Phillip. "Now they'll leave me and dad alone."

Uncle Geoff threw up in his mask. He had a weak disposition, that one.

But Melanie Mott had enough. She dove for the toilet handle. It was a ballsy move. If Phillip hadn't been mentally unstable bordering on insane, he might have been proud of her moxie. He wasn't. He tried to intercept her, but he had stuffed a bit too much toilet paper in his mouth and now his airway was blocked. He was choking. Spots of light danced before his eyes. The room spun. Maybe he was dying. It made sense. He and his father sharing the same resting place. Every good son's dream.

Hands tightened around Phillip's abdomen. Clenched fists slamming his insides. Scooping. Up and in. He retched, spewing toilet paper over the bathroom floor.

While Phillip's mother gave him the Heimlich, his sister flushed the toilet.

Phillip didn't see his father die a second time. He didn't even get to see the turd swirl around and around the bowl before being sucked away into the sewers.

He did hear the slurp though. The belch of the toilet as it took his father from him for a second time.

A quavering wail escaped Phillip's blistered lips. He cried.