

Evicted in the Early Evening

Evicted. Honestly, I thought it would be more humiliating. I'd been dreading coming home to the notice for weeks, and here it was. Every day was the same routine. Go out trying to find a job. Talk to managers in every store. Fill out another application. And in between, the knot in the pit of my stomach growing and spreading with the thought that I might come home to this red and white notice on my door, sealed across the frame.

And now I was standing in the hallway of my crappy apartment building staring at the red and white monster. . . and it just wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. The neighbors would all know. So what? I didn't know any of their names anyway. All my stuff was still inside. So what? "All my stuff" was just my other suit of clothes, the thinnest blanket in the western hemisphere, and some airplane-sized toiletries in the medicine cabinet.

Evicted. Ok. I took the blue pen out of my pocket. (They say you should fill out job applications in blue ink. Not a foolproof plan, I guess.) Under the eviction notice, right on the

white, painted wood of the door, I wrote, “Okay. Now what?” Rhetorical? Sure. Cathartic? Not as much as I’d hoped.

Mr. Next Door’s dog, one of those tall, lanky bug-eyed ones, was whining from inside the door behind me as I traced over the question mark and stepped back to enjoy my work. When Mr. Next Door’s dog whined, I knew it meant they would soon burst into the hallway and head outside for Mr. Next Dog to do his business.

The two of them made the loudest production of going outside, and it didn’t matter what time of day or night that dog whined. It was just the overture to the door slamming, the baby talking (“Does Mr. Pup Pup need go outside?”), and those doggy toenails clickClickclickClicking on the wooden floor with no regard for the fact that some people might be trying to sleep beneath the thinnest blanket in the western hemisphere.

I pocketed the pen and hurried down the hallway. I wanted to make it to the stairwell so I could avoid Mr. Next Door’s pity. I probably had a few more seconds. The pit in my stomach felt different now. It was that feeling you get as a kid when you’re playing hide and seek, and you know the seeker is almost done counting to ten or fifty or one hundred, and they’re about to come looking whether you’re ready or not. Running away from humiliation and vandalism feels like that.

I hit the stairs without hearing any door slamming. No chorus of cuteness or clickClickclicking. Success. I stood there for a few more seconds. The door never opened.

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Back on the street, it was still sunny. I had imagined finding the eviction notice later in the day. Nighttime. It just made for a better aesthetic. Now I’d have to wander around for a few hours in

broad daylight before my more ideal moody nighttime wandering could start. Life's just not fair sometimes. I say they should really not evict anyone until after 9 PM (8PM in the winter)!

So many things about this were wrong. For one, I just didn't look like a homeless person. I wasn't dressed for it. I wasn't talking to myself (though, I suppose, that could be easily fixed). I bet not one person who passed me on the street thought twice about making eye contact.

Give it a few weeks, and I will earn my invisibility with a lack of bathing, I thought. I should have said it to the attractive young couple walking toward me as they smiled in my direction, but I didn't. That was another thing. Homeless people were so gregarious, always chatting people up at stoplights. I was downright shy.

I shuffled down the sidewalk, trying to decide if I could be one of those meek types, pitied even among the pitied. For the amount of time I had spent worrying about this over the past six months, you would think I would have a more concrete plan in place. I mean, I had abstract ideas. . . go to a shelter, find a grizzled, older homeless mentor who would laugh at my naïve questions and make fun of me in front of the group, but he'd care about me. He wouldn't want anyone to know he cared. . . but he would. If I was very lucky, he'd be black. Older black gentlemen make the best "I've been there" pity faces.

So it wasn't like I didn't have a plan. I just didn't really know where I was going or what I was going to do when I got there. I was just walking. I came to an intersection, and I pressed the button to request a walk signal. I waited for the signal to turn.

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I wandered around the park across the street from the police station for a while, looking for other homeless people to commiserate with, preferably while standing around a trash can fire wearing

fingerless gloves. No such luck. The park was empty. Perhaps its proximity to the police station scared away my fellow loitering vagabonds. There were a few families around, though. I sat on a bench near some monkey bars and what looked like a fat orange duck on a spring that stuck into the ground. I guess the kids were supposed to ride it.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the blue pen. I played with the cap like I did while waiting to talk to a manager in the countless stores I'd visited over the last few months. A little blonde girl ran past me on her way to the monkey bars. I watched her swing from bar to bar. She was probably about six. When older children cross the monkey bars, they use their arm muscles more. They pull themselves up slightly to make sure their feet don't hit the ground. But younger kids, like this girl, really gave the monkey bars their name, letting their arms extend all the way as they swung in deep U shapes. If I swung on anything like this little girl swung on monkey bars, I'd pull my shoulder clean out of its socket.

The girl's mother came over and whispered something in her ear as she pulled her down from the bars. The little girl glanced at me as her mother put her on the ground. She ran away back closer to where her mother had been sitting, and the mother walked back that direction, too, without looking at me. I may not look like a homeless person, but I guess I look like a pedophile. Sitting in the park, staring at the girl swinging back and forth, and fiddling with my pen.

I could have been offended, but I couldn't help but think, "Good mom." Maybe a little too cautious, sure. But her daughter could swing on the monkey bars or sit on the fat orange duck spring after the weird loner man left. Hey! I'd had my first genuinely awkward homeless person interaction. She might not have known I was homeless, but I knew.

I wanted to leave, but I sat there for another fifteen minutes just so the mom wouldn't think I was leaving because of her. I mean, I wasn't offended, but I also wasn't a pedophile, so there was no reason for me to leave. I did stop fiddling with the pen, though.

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Why is it that every time you go out looking for a homelessness mentor, you can't seem to find a single homeless person? I used to think this town had a huge problem, but I was starting to realize we had this homelessness thing under control after all. To be honest, I was running out of places to look.

That's when I remembered what my mother said about the library. I'd want to go get my summer reading books at the library when I was in elementary school, and she would always shake her head, take a long drag from her cigarette, and say with smokey words, "No. Not at the library. Disgusting. Full of homeless people pissing on everything."

Classy lady, my mother. I turned around to head back the other direction toward. . . wait a minute.

I realized something. I didn't know where the library was. This was embarrassing. Aren't homeless people just supposed to sense these things? Be able to instinctively know where to find air conditioning and free Internet access? I had lived in this city for almost six years, and I had never once needed a library. Or known anyone who went to a library. Well, there was my friend Jonathan. He always talked about needing to pay his library fine and get another book, but I'm 99% certain he was using a code for drugs. If he wasn't, he had a serious problem returning books on time.

I looked around the neighborhood. Did I know anyone who lived around here? Anyone at all?

Hmm. Well, there was my brother's ex-wife, Sam. She'd probably been to a few libraries in her day. (Real ones. Not cocaine ones.) Worth a shot.

I pressed the doorbell, but heard no dings or donges. It was probably broken. Or maybe Samantha turned it off in the evenings to ward off estranged homeless men who looked like pedophiles. Not going to work this time. I knocked.

Samantha was always cool. I'd really gotten along with her back when she was married to my brother, Chris. I didn't know why they split up, but I assumed it was because someone had cheated on someone else. They'd both told me that they never had sex any more in the months leading up to their separation. But that was right around the time my mom died, and blah blah blah. Everyone just kind of lost touch after that.

The door opened.

"Shelby." She said my name like she knew it was inevitable I would end up on her porch one day.

"No one calls me that anymore, Sam," I said.

"And I haven't gone by Sam for a while now, either," she said. "I'm making people say all three syllables now, *Shelby*."

"And I'm letting people call me whatever they want, *Sam*." I grinned. "As long as it's not 'Dad,' I usually don't have a problem."

She did that thing people do when they don't roll their eyes but they make every other movement associated with rolling their eyes. Kind of an upward/backward nod with both eyebrows up. It was quiet for a few seconds.

"Well, what can I do for you?" she asked.

"Actually, I need to get to the library."

She just looked at me like she was waiting for more. When she realized nothing more was coming, she finally said, "Okay. . . " and laughed, "Again, what can I do for you?"

"Oh," I said, "I just don't know where the library is. I figured you probably did."

I had always thought I intrigued Samantha. Now she looked positively amused.

"I do," she said. "I do happen to know that information."

"Great."

"You know. . . it's not far from here," she said. "Why don't I walk with you?"

"Even better."

"Okay. I'll just grab a jacket." She turned to go back inside.

"It's...." I said.

She turned back and looked at me, "What?"

"I was just gonna say. . . it's like 85 degrees out here."

"Oh." She shrugged.

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We walked down the sidewalk in the direction of the library (I assumed). She carried her jacket folded over her arm and told me all about her latest promotion, which had come a few years

earlier than she planned. I nodded and added a few mmmhmm's when I could, but I couldn't really pretend to be interested in her life as an HR manager with AT&T.

"You get a discount on a new iPhone?" I asked.

"Well. I mean. I can pull some strings, I guess. Why? Do you want one?"

"Ha. No thanks. I should probably. . . I have some other things I need to get first."

We walked in silence for a little while.

"Listen," she broke the silence. "I'm really sorry I didn't go to your mom's funeral. It was a weird time, and . . . well. My goodness, you've heard that whole charade, I'm sure."

"Charade?" I teased.

She mock eye rolled again.

"Actually no. I haven't," I said. "I don't really talk to Chris much."

"Oh."

"And I didn't go to the funeral, either."

She stopped walking. I was a few steps ahead before I stopped and turned to look at her.

"What?" I asked.

"You didn't go to your own mother's funeral?" she asked, head tilted to the side in the universal sign of sympathy.

"No."

"Why not?"

I turned and started walking again. She caught up.

"I don't know," I said. "It just felt gross. All those people crying and saying she was such a good woman. That she was too young. . . promising to donate in her honor for breast cancer

research. I swear someone told me that. Ridiculous. The woman didn't have breast cancer. I don't even have a single memory of that woman when she didn't have a cigarette between her lips. She had lung cancer, and she earned it."

Sam let out the beginning of a laugh before she could stop herself.

"Well," she said, "it's just hard for me to think about not going to my mother's funeral is all."

"Yeah," I offered. I couldn't really think of anything else to say. It was completely dark out, now. That particular street didn't have any lights at all, so we walked along in darkness. I wondered why she had decided to walk with me. The silence suggested she may have been wondering the same thing.

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We walked up to the entrance of the library, which was flanked on each side by a dozen or so homeless people. Hmm. I guess we did have a problem after all.

"Well. There she is," said Sam. "The library. Closed a couple of hours ago, though."

I looked at the building, confused. "Closed?"

"Yeah," she said. "It closes at 8, I think."

"What is it with this town and doing things during the day? Shit," I said as I sat down on the concrete steps. They were still warm from the sun, but I doubted the concrete would stay warm all night.

"So what? It's not like you were coming here for a book." She pulled a cell phone out of her pocket and checked the time.

"How do you know what I was coming here for?" I asked.

She looked down at me, locking eyes for what I realized was the first time that evening.

“Well. . . this is a safe place for people to . . . to sleep.”

“You know I’m homeless?” I asked. My voice kind of cracked like I was in junior high when I said “homeless.” First time I said it out loud. It didn’t taste good in my mouth.

“Well, why else would you be going to the library now?”

“For free Internet. And and. . . porn.”

“Exactly,” she said, “and to use the restroom. And to sleep.”

“So you knew I was homeless and you didn’t even offer to let me stay on your couch for the night?”

“That’s not what you asked for. You asked to go to the library.”

I stood up again. “Fine, but any decent human being would offer-“

“I think any decent human being goes to his mother’s funeral!” Her eyes narrowed and her mouth made this shape I hadn’t seen since those last few months she was with Chris. Disgust mixed with . . . a different type of disgust? Like discovering something not only looks gross, but it smells like expired mayonnaise, too. I’m not sure what my face looked like, but after staring for a few seconds with Chris-mouth, the anger faded and I could see she regretted saying it.

I stared at her, a disappointed feeling sinking in and causing a heaviness beneath my ribcage just above my stomach. She opened her mouth and started, “I’m-“

“Don’t. It’s fine. She was my mom, so. . . who knows. I mean, I said my goodbye to her, and I said it to her face while she could still hear it.”

“That’s good. That’s really good, Shelb, “ she said. Once again, we fell into our now-familiar silence.

Finally she said, "It's really dark now. I should . . . go home."

"Let me walk you back," I offered.

"No. It's fine."

"Are you kidding? It's pitch black and your street doesn't have any lamps. I'm gonna walk you back."

"But then you'll have to turn around and come all the way. . . back. . ."

"It's fine. Really. Let's just get you back home." I started to walk down the steps away from the library. After a few seconds, she caught up.

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The End