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“Roadkill”

Sitting and lazily swiveling in my broken leatherette desk chair, I looked around my office, searching its contents for some sense of purpose for being there, but much to no avail. Brown bookcases lined the walls, squeezed tightly together in uniform fashion. The shelves were concaved, virtually choking on artifacts collected (hoarded, really) over my three-year tenure at the university. A great deal of my interests adopted since graduate school were also sufficiently represented: old English textbooks, manuals on psychotherapy, stacks of literature--mostly of the poetry and "dirty realism" ilk--and guides that promised to convey all one could ever want to know about qualitative research methods and their ethical applications. They were more distractions and dalliances than anything, really, that--in lieu of slowing things down and actually reflecting on my life--occupied my mind and most of my free time. Despite the random bursts of clutter that, strategically, were left untouched so as to add a sense of "busyness" to the room, it was a pleasant space to be in with its dark laminate wood furniture (in their varieties of almost-matching hues) and motley knick-knacks that, while decorative, gave visitors little to no information about the inner-workings of my head, leaving them a bit disturbed and slightly off-kilter. The main culprits were a gold-leaf Ganesh statue that doubled as a paperweight; a plaster skull that served as a makeshift bookend; a worn copy of the Zohar on the console table by the door; a metal dachshund on a wooden base, peeing on a fire hydrant; an earmarked book of daily reflections on stoicism; and a vintage toaster from the 1950s that sat atop the bookcase near the office's rear window that immediately pulled one's attention towards the back wall, where multiple degrees were mounted like stuffed deer heads but with no sense of pride or accomplishment attached to them. Stopping mid-swivel, I eyed the few shelves dedicated to the field that I not only currently taught, as a full-time assistant professor, but had dedicated a good portion of my adult life to, social work.

Many titles rang familiar, as I had immersed myself in the profession (clinical practice to be exact) for more years than I cared to admit, hitting heights in my career that even I had never anticipated. I smiled and nodded to myself, as I scanned book spines for titles I was particularly fond of and found most useful. Most of them centered around cognitive-behavioral therapies and developmental theories: the subjects that had lent greatly to my success as a therapist and college instructor. Other titles were observed, however, inserted willy-nilly amongst the familiar, that fell upon my consciousness with a dismally lackluster thud. I had no recollection of where they came from or even why I bought them in the first place. Their subject matters were relevant enough, spanning everything from family therapy to mindfulness-based practice to the “science of compassion” (whatever that was), but I had certainly never handled any of them nor flipped a single page between any of their crease-free, paperback covers. *Must have been bought last year when I still gave a shit...or at least tried to*, I thought to myself, disturbingly unmoved by the assumption.

Truth be told, I was no stranger to orchestrating a life based on what I “should” do, though the origin of that narrative really was never quite clear to me. The pursuit of upward mobility and goal attainment had become second-nature, making alternate options tantamount to failure or—at the very least—proof that all the things I had been trying to convince myself that I wasn’t were, indeed--after all--true. To ponder too long upon such thoughts was unacceptable. “We don’t do that”, my father used to say to me (when we were still speaking, anyway), after any suggestion of doubt or surrender was made audibly known, as if he were speaking to one of the many faceless football players he had coached during his long, acclaimed high-school teaching career. The radio silence between the old man and me should have made things easier for me to find a way

out of my current sojourn into limbo, but it didn't. Some specters follow you no matter how much time has passed. No matter how many skins you've shed and brushed under dusty carpets, they stick like birthdays or the need to breathe. No, those thoughts just didn't do. They were weak. Dangerous. After all, what would chucking it all have meant in retrospect? All those years of graduate school. The years of training. The late nights and weekends working in the ER until sun-up. My private practice. The systematic sacrificing of what little personal life I had had. All wasted? No. That wasn't an option. From a practical standpoint, it made absolutely no sense to shift gears this late in the game—much less, start over from scratch. That meant giving up everything I had talked myself into thinking was important and that couldn't happen, even though I—more than anything—wished it could.

As the silence of my office began to stab at my ears, I was overcome with the urge to feel tethered to something—anything. The groundlessness of what seemed like a constant free-fall was beginning to wear on me. I was always in my head, and when I was lucky enough to be present—really present—I felt pressed by the weight of it all—my life—and hyper-conscious of the meat that burdened my leaden bones.

My work had brought me a decent amount of security over the years, opening enough doors to help me coast through life. Up until a few months prior, that had been the most important thing in my small world, but—more and more—the prospect of more years of automaton-like productivity had begun to grate on me, gradually tearing away at the illusion of my career and its once-held platinum-card appeal. Maybe it was because I never really wanted to become a social worker—and clinician—in the first place. After all, it was just a means to an end: a way to prove something, though I wasn't sure to whom. Maybe that was what came from expecting too much,

or too little, or nothing at all. Maybe it was what came from forcing a purpose in life and not letting one just unfold before me. To have expected a different outcome seemed silly. In truth, the glamour had faded and, ultimately, I was left navigating a cold world of hard edges and empty space.

Leaning my head back onto my chair's headrest, thoughts pulled me back to the summer of 1977 when I drowned in my apartment complex's swimming pool; I always went there when I found myself walking that thin line between depression and numbness. School was out, so my sister and I had gone down to the pool to let off some steam and cut the boredom of the day. I remembered my father was there, reading a newspaper on a nearby bench with his usual cup of black coffee. My sister, Lisa, a pretty and slightly chubby girl, was laying on her stomach in a black Woolworth's one-piece with sash-like fuchsia and turquoise stripes that wrapped around her thick waist, flipping through a—then current--issue of Tiger Beat magazine with John Travolta on the cover. I aimlessly dog-paddled about the shallow end of the pool, enjoying the warmth of the sun on my back and the silky coolness of the water that glided around my legs. After a while, a boy about my age—probably from another unit in the complex—entered the pool gate and headed to patch of grass near the water. While close to the same height, the boy was much bigger than me. He threw his towel in the grass and dove in, surfacing close to where I was treading water. It wasn't long before a friendly exchange took place, and both of us shot-the-shit, chatting about everything from Legos to what pains-in-the-ass sisters were. Eventually, a game of tag ensued, and we flopped about, darting to-and-fro, launching ourselves from the rough-surfaced pool walls in relentless, individual efforts to make the other 'it.' I remembered one of my ankles being grabbed and then being pulled down, hard, but not before an excited laugh

escaped my lips: a moment of true, unadulterated happiness. I remembered being underwater for a long time, not being able to breathe or rise above the surface. There was thrashing and kicking. The pulling didn't stop. I remembered the play of shimmering webs of sunlight on pool walls around me. I remembered the distorted world above the surface that seemed miles from where I was. I remembered panic and the color light blue. Then black.

When my eyes opened, I was on my back; the silhouette of Lisa's head looming over me, as the noon sun beat down in a relentless assault. Instinctively, my eyes searched around for my father, but he was gone. It was just Lisa and me. She had given me CPR and saved my life: a fortuitous perk of her working part-time, as a lifeguard, at the city pool that summer.

"Oh, my God, Jacob! Are you ok? Are you ok?" Tears filled her eyes.

I was disoriented and had taken in a lot of water. I was too busy coughing up what seemed to be an endless supply of it to answer her. Each cough set off a fire in my chest, as small trickles of warm liquid splashed upon the concrete under my left cheek. "Where is dad? I want dad!" I cried.

"He's getting help. You stopped breathing, Jacob. We—I couldn't find a pulse. Oh, my God! You scared us to death! Are you ok?" Barely navigating her way through the too many emotions she was having, she pulled up my limp body from the ground and hugged me, tightly: something that had never happened before. "That fucking asshole! Was he trying to kill you?"

"What? Who?" I asked, laying back down on the warm, wet concrete, finding its hardness soothing.

“That kid. That asshole you were playing with! He pulled you down and wouldn’t let go.”

Lisa began to cry, stifling her sobs, as she continued. “I—we didn’t notice what was happening until... We saw you under the water. You weren’t moving!”

Lisa moved away to give me some air, leaving me even more muddled and blinded by the sun. I asked, “What happened to him?”

Lisa looked confused. “What are you talking about, Jacob?”

“The boy. Where is he?”

“I dove in and tried to pull you away from him, but he just wouldn’t let go. He wouldn’t stop. Asshole! That fucking asshole!”

“So, how did you—”

“I kicked the fucker in the stomach! Hard! That’s how! He wouldn’t let you go! I snatched you away and he took off, crying. I don’t know where. I pulled you out and...you weren’t breathing. You weren’t breathing!” she sobbed, wiping hot tears from her cheeks. “I checked after I got you out. You didn’t have a... Are you ok?” I had never seen her look at me with such care before. For a moment, it felt nice.

About a minute passed before I could speak, as I clutched the hard ground beneath me, waiting for the world to stop spinning, as if I could be flung off into the blackness of space at any minute. “I think so,” I said, still in shock, shivering. I raised myself onto my elbows, slowly, with my eyes—like my chest—burning with chlorine. “Where is dad? I want dad! Where was he? Did he see?” I asked, wishing it had been him who had saved me. Looking over my

shoulder, I saw the bench where he had been sitting: a newspaper was neatly folded on its surface and his coffee cup was gone.

I rarely thought of that summer day: it, essentially, remained wiped from my memory, except for when things got low--really low--which happened every so often, but still more than I cared for. I chuckled to myself at the irony of being saved only to live a life that didn't seem like mine anymore. *Guess God wasn't done with the show yet.* At times I felt like maybe things were so hard because I did come back, almost as if I wasn't supposed to be here, anymore, and the world let me know that at every turn. Or maybe I didn't come back all the way—a jumble of remnants that couldn't quite be properly pieced together, again. It was all so tiring, but that is what happens when you live life on a dare: the words “want” and “can't” just don't exist, so there is no choice but to keep moving and trying until the day you just don't anymore. Truth be told, I longed for that day, sometimes, but that wasn't up to me.

I could hear the custodian cleaning the office next door: he would be in my office soon. It was almost six in the evening, according to the clock on the computer. I let out a long, drawn-out exhale and gathered a stack of ungraded papers from under my keyboard and stuffed them into my satchel, powered down the computer, and prepared to lock up for the night. I turned off the lights and took one last look around the space for anything I may have missed. Turning to leave, I slightly hesitated, noticing how peaceful the room was without the electric hums of fluorescents and a running computer. It was time to go, though. *Papers to grade. Dogs to feed. Sleep.*

The drive home was calming. The lulling, rhythmic kisses of rubber treads on the road. The random selections of my iTunes on low. The stale smell of cigarettes and sweat in my car that



reminded me of my grandfather, who died forty years ago too soon, and his old, white Ford pick-up. I took the backroads home, as I always did, which took a little longer, but they were rarely used that late in the day, so I could take my time driving when the inclination hit me. I didn't mind. I liked to drive, especially when the quiet in my life threatened to overtake me, granting license to thoughts and memories to rouse and scramble, looking for hints of light that seeped in through doors, opened ajar, hungry for recognition. I reached my right hand over towards the passenger's seat, threw back the flap of my satchel, and dug into its contents for a Marlboro, fumbling through the sharp edges of papers and uncapped pens with determined purpose. Keeping vigilant, my eyes were fixed on the road, ahead, when I felt the edge of a cardboard box graze my fingertips. I pulled out the pack and with my thumb flipped open the top, bringing it to my lips, where I proceeded to pull out a lone cigarette with my teeth. I lit it with the lighter I had purchased that morning at 7-11: one more to add to the slew that I had, progressively, stockpiled at home in errant drawers, leather bags, and even the bathroom, where I ritualistically had my first smoke of the day, after dragging myself out of bed. I always forgot them when I left the house—too many thoughts, too early. I took a long, crackling drag and held it in my lungs for a while, exhaled, and then wrested my wrist on top of the steering wheel. As the cigarette dangled between me and the speedometer, I eyed the yellow-grey smoke, as it streamed from its flaming cherry, lost in how it rippled and curled like a fine silk ribbon. I admired the graceful poetry of it and thought it a shame to turn it to shreds with another exhale.

A loud ruckus suddenly broke my reverie, as the car and everything in it shook and shifted. *Shit! Did I hit something?* My eyes darted forward and found nothing but open road, then I quickly looked into the rear-view mirror, noticing nothing but a blackening sky that slowly

melting into asphalt that was divided by intermittent dashes of vibrant yellow. Pulling my attention back to the world outside the windshield, I noticed a shock of red among the dark hues that flooded the rear-view. I squinted and focused, intently, into the mirror, noticing a band of red that stretched in tandem along the road's surface, while my tires intermittently jarred and sounded, as if driving over stones and wet, rolled-up newspapers. Confused, I clutched the steering wheel with my other hand—so hard I pumped the blood out of my knuckles—and scanned the road before me, noticing the same ruddy hue extending off into the distance. Clumps of black speckled the highway, disappearing into the periphery, as quickly as my tires propelled me home. Intermittent bumps and pops from the road, below, reverberated within the cabin. *What?* I tossed my cigarette out of the cracked, driver-side window. *Something got run over.* I checked the rear-view, again, and saw no cars behind me, then decelerated to better see what was going on straight-ahead. *It's blood...and fur.* Given the distance that the length of gore had stretched and the amount of carrion on the road, it appeared as if some poor animal had been hit and dragged along for quite some time. As if in an automatic response, I turned the wheel, slightly, to adjust the position of the car within the lane, centering it directly over the deathly strip. Off to my right in the distance, I spied a motionless black mass by the side of the highway, much larger than what had then been feeding the road and my tires. I drove on and followed my “guide” until it minimized into sporadic smears and splatters that trailed off onto the side of the road, where the still thing lay. Veering off, I parked just ahead of it, turned off the ignition, and just sat there, staring at it in the rear-view.

A quiver possessed my legs, as I noticed my hands were still grasping the steering wheel. I released them, my right hand instinctively searching for another cigarette. *Damn!* Stopping

myself, I remembered I had just smoked the last one. *It's gotta be dead. No way he could survive that.* I wondered why I had stopped. What could I do? It didn't make sense, but something inside me knew I had to stop and take a look. Bracing myself, I released the seatbelt and opened the door. The air that night was cooler than usual—chilly, almost. I poked my head out into the dimmed light of evening and looked to the right, then left. Still no cars. I—we—were alone. I got out, closed the door, and took a deep breath. I looked ahead of me at a field of cotton that flanked the left-side of the highway. The stalks looked black against the evening sky with a peppering of stark white that punctuated the—seemingly--lifeless expanse's absence of color. It seemed colder all of a sudden--the air more humid and nipping than before.

I turned to my left and walked towards the heap, the crunching of gravel and clods of dried mud beneath my feet. With every step, splatters of crimson and bits of meat and fur marred the path ahead of me. I finally came upon it. The headless tangle of broken limbs—a dog, likely—had thick, black, woolly fur, that was stickily matted with congealing blood and gore. It was sprawled out in an almost apologetic fashion, seeming to want to edge its way towards the shallow canal just beyond its reach, past a patch of chaparral trees some forty feet away from where I stood. Looking down upon the sad lump, safely distanced from it (though safe from what I didn't know), I stood in silence and inspected my “summoner.” Shards of bone and bloody, gray innards crept out of peeks of torn flesh. Flies and ants had already started to feast. *Doesn't take long, does it?* The smell of carnage hung in the moist air like the odor pennies that had been held in a sweaty fist for too long. I thought of how much it must have suffered. How long it must have taken to die. *All alone...out here.* I wondered if he belonged to anyone. If he was

missed. If anyone even cared...or would. No answers came. Just the whispering of the wind through the chaparrals and black stalks of cotton, beyond.

I wanted to feel sad but didn't...couldn't. Something stirred within my chest: a burning. I thought about what I would have done if I had found the animal alive. I would have tried to save it--if I could. Stayed with it--if all was lost--so he wouldn't have to die alone: a prospect that made the fire in my chest rage even more. I imagined it alive and what it might have looked like: a pair of pleading, brown eyes, looking up at me for comfort; a tail, furiously wagging. In my head, I heard it whining and whimpering from fear and pain. "We don't do that," escaped my lips before my consciousness could ground me in the bloody place where I stood. My eyes began to sting and moisten, but no tears came. Silent and fatigued, I hung my head, as if in prayer, and watched the fading sun glistening off dampened, black fur and red-tinted bones, finding my thoughts pulling me towards the comforts of home and six dogs that were very much alive.

Before I got back into my car to leave, I pulled off the college ring I had bought myself years ago, after graduation, and tossed it onto the carcass, as if to show any passers-by that he—maybe I—wasn't alone.