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The Meadow

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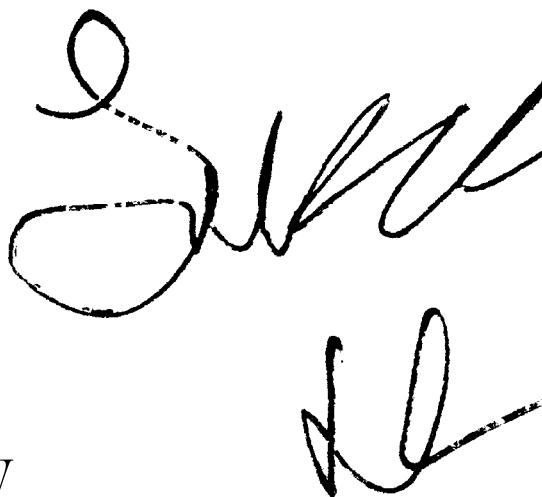
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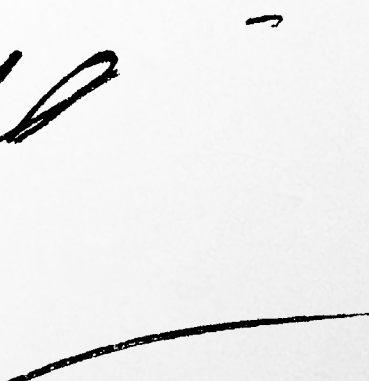


LUCAS HARBAUGH

The Meadow

The man stood looking from his window. It was a wide view from his 6th floor apartment. It showed an out of place, hilly little area, with scattered trees and overgrown wild grass. The kind of place perfect for a picnic with a thick blanket he often thought, only if it weren't for his apartment complex built directly in front of it. An old brick building with small rooms. The building was originally used for the making of textiles, but with a few added walls it was converted. His room was a little sliver of space, about five feet wide on each side of his door and only about 13 back. A place someone might refer to as a hole in the wall; a dingy, slightly decrepit hole for that matter. The floor didn't join properly in spots, leaving thick ridges where pieces came together roughly. Often, he would catch one of his toes on these mis-joinings which slashed and bruised them. Richard came to always wear shoes in his apartment because of this, only taking them off when getting into bed by dangling his feet off the edge and reaching down to forcefully pull them off. He'd then leave them neatly next to each other.

The walls of his apartment were covered in a thin white plaster, with most parts having given way to show the faded, reddish-brown bricks behind. In places where the plaster wasn't completely gone it was cracked or chipped, with little bits of dust falling from the walls every time a knock was made against them.



While some might call this place rustic or industrially charming, he did not feel the same. He felt as though this place was a cold, cluttered, and out of order mess. That it stood only because brick never falls, and the poor must be assigned to a place that some property manager would call "rustic."

That rustic label he hated. It had driven up the price of rent, as it's a word that hipster kids couldn't help but marvel at. The idea of living in such an apartment, stationed comfortably outside the city but not far, so crime could not be heard in the night and overpriced coffee could be enjoyed on the streets during the day. All with the added, and most important benefit, of being able to tell their friends they were a part of it, the city life. The man grew annoyed with the whole concept. Though he wasn't much more than a kid himself, 23, but convinced he was wise beyond his years. The type that had no need for frivolous endeavors, or pointless interests.

He carried himself poorly. He slumped his shoulders and hung his head when he walked. His dark hair contrasted with his pale skin, and covered part of his forehead on one side going down to his eyebrow, where it then crossed sharply up to the other side of his head. He was a stockily built man, not obese but on the cusp, leaving wrinkles in his shirt where his body had settled into. He often spent time trying to iron these out with his hands after standing up, embarrassed of their representative impressions. Dark, half-moon rings rested under his eyes at all times of the day. These rings were caused by his unsound sleep; at night he was constantly circled by anxious and angry thoughts like vultures picking away at his mind. Pulling his brain from his skull and throwing the pieces where he couldn't find them.

He turned from the window and looked into his sunlit apartment. Seeing his bed in the corner he thought of lying in it. Spending the day staring into his pillows, folded over blankets and under them, as he often did. An appealing thought but his mind was too overwhelmed at this moment to assign himself to that position.

"It's too quiet in here," he muttered to himself. Silence felt like an inescapable void to him. Silence brought those circling thoughts which he would rather avoid. Often, he filled the emptiness with music to drown out his panic, music which would throw him into fantasies of grandeur. Fantasies where he would be a world champion boxer, coming back from the jaws of defeat during a fight he was supposed to lose. Or a man who lives in the forest and speaks to animals, having dinner with them in giant trees, and loved by all. He would drift away, far from the cracked walls of his apartment, giving him a sense of freedom for the minutes or moments these fantasies would last. He cherished these moments and grew angry when he could not conjure them. They provided him with a company he rarely had.

He rarely left his apartment and despite his hatred for it, he told himself it had everything he needed. A small bathroom opposite his bed, with stand-alone shower and toilet stuffed against an always chilled plaster wall. This wall was one of the few in the house that had no exposed brick, while still being laced with jagged cracks throughout. When he sat on the toilet, he always envied this wall. How the stale covering remained unbreached by the course brick beneath. The only thing in this apartment he admired was that wall.

Next to the bed was his kitchen, hosting an electric oven with a stove top that took forever to heat up. Two small cutting areas stood on both sides of it. Next to the right-most cutting area was a sink, and next to that a black refrigerator, barren of anything on its magnetic surface. Dusty wood cabinets encircled the area, on bottom and top, holding various boxes of sugary food or quick, ready to make meals. Other than this the room was empty; it had no room for much else. Opposite the kitchen was a long barren wall, which was the most destroyed inside the space. He hesitated to put anything against it, as it constantly expelled powdery plaster

at any rumble or step, creating a thick dust on the floor conjoined with it. Every time he brushed the wall it covered him in its ceramic residue, which clung tightly to his clothes. Once, Richard tried to clean the powder off the wall but in the process knocked more plaster onto the floor which cracked and turned into dust upon hitting the ground, filling the air. The wall ended up being in a worse state than before he attempted to clear it off, affirming his belief that things are better left as they are.

He spent most days making food then quickly cleaning after, so that everything was back in its designated place. Pots above the stove, boxes broken down and into the trash, and pans stacked neatly in the compartment beneath the oven. It wasn't the sight of the pans being out that drove him mad, but the thought of their areas being filled with nothing. Empty cabinets, sitting without purpose.

The man, while staring into his apartment, decided against his bed and against making a mess in the kitchen only to put him in the throes of cleaning. Thinking of possibilities, and the angst associated with the number of them, he decided to do nothing. He decided today to sit sternly on the floor.

Many times, he tried to embrace the silence, figure out why he could not handle it. But these attempts never lasted long, he always convinced himself there was something pressing to do, or to learn that was bigger than himself. The man believed he was one insight away from freedom, and often looked for this insight in an endless stream of videos. Videos he couldn't recall hours after viewing them.

Looking to the floor he found an area where he could fit his plump body without being on top of a mis-joined section. Decidedly close to the window, but with his back turned away from it, peering into his room toward the door and his bed. He sat only slightly out of range of the thick dusty shore of plaster on the ground next to his battered wall, trying to ignore its persistent presence.

"I'm sitting here, ok. Now what," he thought in a plea for stimulation.

He felt the warm sun from the window behind his neck. "80 degrees and sunny," he had seen on his phone this morning, acknowledging that it was going to be beautiful. Now he felt the heat taunt him. He turned to feel it on his face, and slightly pressed his hand to the window. Feeling its invigorating projection of heat, he put his face to it as well. The heat on his cheek from the glass provided the sort of stimulation he sought. It was a relief from the view of his white-walled, asylum-like apartment.

He then realized how he may look from the outside and darted his eyes down. Quickly he peeled his face off the heated glass, looking to see if anyone may have been watching him, laughing at him.

No one was there, just the empty, hilly field. Sun danced off the rolling hills, making the tops glimmer a golden color. From his perch he could see some of the finer details of this meadow. He noted how the thin grass with wild dandelions and other wildflowers he could not name seemed perfectly placed throughout.

"So out of place for being on the outskirts of the city," he thought. "And no one down there, no one enjoying the day. Is everyone in the world so busy?"

"The world we live in takes no pleasure in the finer parts of life. Everyone would complain if someone set about building something in it, but no one cares about it before. It sits empty, day after day, despite its rare beauty inside this constructed mess. This city doesn't deserve such a place. If I had someone to share that meadow with, I'd be in it every day." This last thought in his pondering made him pause. He rarely thought of his loneliness, always convincing himself of otherwise, but the unprompted thought had caught him. A rare truth slipped through his defensive mind.

He placed his forehead back onto the warm glass, closing his eyes as he pressed into it. His body felt heavy, and his arms settled firmly on the ledge of the window, unmoving. The warmth of the glass no longer felt like a pleasure, but a reminder of what he had said. It was a reminder of the outside, a reminder of that meadow, of how perfect it looked. How dancing around it, arm in arm with someone would feel, and of laying his head on the thick grass, his cheek feeling its feathered embrace. Warmth not from a window but from the earth that the window was built to show. And on the opposite side of his face the un-barriered sun, baking his other cheek.

He immediately peeled his face from the glass and slammed it sternly back against it. Bruising his brow and sending large pieces of plaster from the fractured wall splattering across the floor. The fallen plaster reached all the way to the other side of the short room with pieces catching in the mis-joined floor and others shattered their way over it.

The wall was now left unmistakably different, but to Richard more of the same. It was all broken and battered anyway. Again, he felt more of the deep sorrow as he looked out the window. Impulsively he took his hand and smashed it onto the wall to his left, breaking it more, and sending more pieces of plaster in a rapid tumble down. And again, he smashed his hand, this time slightly cutting it on a sharp piece of plaster. The cut was not deep, only enough to draw a little blood.

The man, maddened more now by the slow trickle from his hand, slammed it once again even harder into the fractured wall, creating a spider web-like indent from where his palm had landed. When he pulled it away pieces of plaster stuck to his hand and others fell to the floor. A thick coat of white now covered much of the floor of the apartment where he sat, and a chalky red covered his hand. He felt a steady stream of blood run down his arm as the cut opened wider from his pounding, falling steadily off his elbow. He allowed it to pool onto the ground but carefully pulled his body away from the steady stream so it would not stain his clothes.

He turned from the sight of his bloody arm and turned back to the window. He pushed his face back against the glass, and once again looked down toward the meadow. He looked at the meadow's green pastures, rolling hills and tall, uncut wild grass. He thought of the blood he had just seen run down his arm; the steady, deep red stream. Thinking of how consistent it was, how it was the same color from the first drop to the last. But he thought of the meadow, and all the color it encompassed. Green, hazel, tan and brown. Blue from the great big sky. How it all combined to make a full picture, but how his red blood created one solid state as well. But his blood was no picture to him. One was a state of being, separate, but whole, natural in its most true state and came together in harmony. His creation felt whole, but in a bland, tasteless way.

A thought came to him.

He switched his mind from the pooled blood to the view out the window. And with wide eyes he stared out into the meadow. Tears streamed same as his blood did only moments ago, which had now slowed to a trickle. Richard wiped his eyes as the tears perverted his view and peeled himself off the jagged ground. Walking to the door he paid no attention to the splintered floor. His feet found their way instinctively over its cracks, leaving prints on the dust-covered surface as he stepped. When he reached the doorknob, he turned to look back into the still apartment. Dust covered the floor, chips of plaster hung from the battered wall waiting to fall, and a small pool of blood sat stagnant in the corner. The big window beamed sun all over the scene and in it, he saw his reflection. A big smile was spread across his face, and wet patches shone under his eyes. Through his reflection he saw the meadow, and his smile grew. Richard turned and went through the door, leaving it unlocked behind him.