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RAM

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It was Christmas, and he was the only child of only children. For the previous four years, his parents had spent the holidays alone together, erecting and festooning plasticy-smelling trees out of tradition and societal expectation and not of love or family solidarity. Though his father was more than happy to keep it that way, given the state of affairs; his mother was sick of the isolation, and decided to bite the bullet and accept Connor's invitation to spend Christmas with him—and myself. That was about six months before his death.

Given her effervescence and overall charm and vivacity, it was easy to forget that this was a woman who allowed her husband to throw away their son without so much as a protest, and as such, I was not so easily won over— the feeling was mutual. Margaret found my tendency toward frankness and stoicism irritating, given her expectation that Connor would always marry an effervescent, charming, and vivacious schoolteacher, and not end up dating a somewhat scruffy and slightly tech-obsessed sports journalist. Connor, however, was overjoyed to be able to spend Christmas with the doting mother he hadn't seen for the lesser part of a decade.

“...I hope that she didn’t fight much with my father over her decision to come,” he said, muting an uncomfortable anxiety on behalf of his mother with a disquieted—yet still charming—exasperated laugh. The fact that he was still capable of empathy toward this woman amazed and perturbed me. Again, I fell in love.

“...Yes, and hopefully they weren’t too upset over the fact that they disowned you, the poor things. I can’t even imagine how that must have looked.” Usually sardonicism rested solely in Connor’s realm, but I couldn’t help myself. He shot me a playful glance that said something along the lines of, “Yes, yes, I know what you’re saying, and I’d agree with you if we were talking about anyone else—but this is me, and this is my mother, so keep your opinions to yourself, douchebag.”

The house, as always, was charming and grand, though this was only the second time I had been in it, the first since his death. Connor, though an idealist at heart, was someone very much held prisoner by his past. Even after his parental abandonment, he would show me pictures of his delightful, old-style home, and he would speak, bitterly, of how we would go back one day, a family, and spend the holidays there in celebration.
“And we could get a picture with father right by the fireplace – I’m sure by that point the both of you would be chummy, throwing footballs all over the place, and – I don’t know. I’m sure I’d be pregnant by that point, too.” The sarcasm dripped, burlesque, from his voice. He would often use this tone when he spoke of his parents after they had blasted him from the family tree. We would exchange bitter ironies, poultices upon his (now old) wounds, and he tried his best to hide his desperation. (I didn’t like talking about his family, because of the barely hidden desperation.)

Margaret, wordlessly, led me upstairs – I had no idea where her husband was, and for my safety I hoped it would be kept that way. They had a grand staircase, and as we ascended I was given an ample view of the foyer. I saw that Connor’s enormous portrait had been put back upon the wall, his death having absolved him. In the portrait he smiled, young, ironic, but warm and though he faced the foyer, he appeared to be gazing, with blue, tolerantly amused eyes, upward. At something out of reach. It amazed me how brilliantly the portrait captured his humanity. (It hurt, brilliantly, to look at.)

The house was immaculate, and the intricately tiled floor of the grand entryway might have shone brilliantly had any light been let into the house. Beautiful, likely commissioned, art lined the walls: the calligraphy of a few of the corner signatures on the pieces was familiar, as was the art styles of some of the pieces themselves. I realized that Connor, having redecorated my apartment, must have commissioned art from some of the same artists, or stolen some of them from his old home, at least. The fact that he had wanted to make my home resemble his old one saddened me, but I decided not to dwell on things like that now that he was gone – his spirit, gone, at least. I wouldn’t have gone there in the first place had he left nothing substantial behind.

This manse, as filled to the brim with art and personal possessions as it was, couldn’t help but feel empty as this lone woman brought me to the old room of her – former? – son. (The grandeur left me feeling empty, not impressed.) It was at the end of a comfortably carpeted hallway, with beautiful oaken doors erected along the sides of the lengthy passage, all closed. We stopped for a moment, and she inhaled, removed from her breast pocket a tiny ring of keys, and she – why did she keep the door locked? – unlocked the room and pushed the door inward.

We both, for a moment, were taken aback, and I had to close my eyes and sharply exhale, as if pained – I suppose I was. “So this is where you took everything and dumped it, then?” I said, more bitterly than curiously. We were much too young to have written anything resembling a will – though Connor was always talking about his “death napkin” – and as such the family reclaimed most of his possessions, hoarding them in the bedroom their son used to reside in and leaving me nothing but memories, a few stories he had written for me, and “my” old sweatshirts (as soon as he moved in, he immediately claimed every piece of comfortable torso-wear he could find. They still smell like him. They smell nothing like pastries).

Were there a permanently lit candle, this might have looked like an upscaled memorial for a child lost in a school shooting – I suppose you could draw some parallels. The first thing that greeted you as you walked into the door was a smaller version of the portrait displayed downstairs, leaned against a stylishly modern vanity that faced, open, toward the entryway. Though, individually, the items might have brought together an ensemble, completed a room, or beautifully decorated a wall, everything seemed packed, as tightly as possible, into such a relatively small space that the ugliness was palpable. This room turned pleasant memories into ugliness.

“We had to put it somewhere,” Margaret sighed, my presence already having exhausted her, the room having exhausted her. “Take it and go. It’s in the far corner.” She gestured toward the metal box in the corner that contained the second corpse, and she turned from the room and exited, waiting for me outside so that she might lock the door again. She didn’t want to have to look at her son’s face anymore, not in this room – not that he would have met her eyes, anyways. They were focused on something else, something more important.

The box, though relatively large, was rather light, and it fit comfortably in my arms. I considered, briefly, bringing along its accessories, but I decided against it: one reason being that I’d have to come back upstairs to grab them, and I wanted to rid myself of this place as quickly as possible. The things in this room—the varied collection of favorite books, the monochrome tapestries depicting urbanity, the beautiful journals, scarcely written in due to the accessibility of a word document—though they’d be nice to have, were deemed not mine to keep, and being in this room, all of them crammed together as if
meaningless objects, made me sick to my stomach. But these things, though
his, were not him. He treasured them, but he did not inhabit them. What he
inhabited was either dead in the ground, or dead in my arms – and the box
would suffice for my needs. Though he was no longer with me, this, at least,
might be resurrected. Preserved.

With his things no longer decorating the apartment, there was a palpable
physical absence in my living space.

Having attached the power cord to the box, plugged it into the wall, and
connected the monitor, mouse, and keyboard, what was once dead whirred
back to life with a cough. The box tower was large, rectangular, black, and
I had it set aside my desk. The whirr of the fan was wonderfully familiar – late
into the night, I would hear the noise of the fan and the clacking of Connor’s
typing as he wrote about his day or concocted a fanciful tale. The more he
wrote, the more use he put into the machine, the greater his imprint upon
it. He, like most of us, arranged his life through files and folders, solidified
identity through networks and kilobytes. Onto this machine he externalized
his person, having curated a living space that, itself, came to live. I’d always
found it amusing that we used the same term for the fundamental building
blocks of both selfhood and storage: memory. (He wasn’t here, but there were
traces. I was looking for the traces.)

I was reminded of the way that my mother reacted when my younger
brother died, her life now measured through episodes of weeping. She would
smother herself in his clothes and belongings, and his scent became both
salve and toxin, stemming or enhancing the flow of tears. (He wasn’t there,
but there were traces. She was looking for the traces.)

He kept a collection of photos within a folder (Photos) in the corner of his
desktop. The folder was an extension of the cloud through which all of his
photos were uploaded, so regardless of the quality of what he took, it ended
up there. He had the habit of adding descriptions to each of the photos,
revealed in tiny, understated white textboxes that would appear when
someone hovered over the thumbnails. “A stony hillside, and the two paths
came together in the shape of an L. You’re on the right, but the left side of the
picture disappears into smoke. A finger over the lens, I think.”

“The moon, a streetlight.” “Stars in the moss. It’s just rained.” “Telephone poles,
bridge may be icy in cold weather, three cars ahead of us. You’re driving.” “My feet
and the edge of the hospital gown. This room smells like clean death. I think you’re
asleep in the corner.” I smothered myself in these descriptions (salves and toxins,
looking for the traces).

A word document (Death Napkin) was left, unceremoniously, in the center of
the desktop, and I double-clicked.

Hey, you,
 Listen. I was looking, again, at that website of prompts the nurse showed me
the last time we were in the clinic, and I saw one that was deliciously broody:
“Write a letter to a loved one prior to your imminent death.” I’ve been in a bit of a
macabre mood lately, so this one stuck out to me and I knew I had to try my hand.

The more that I thought about it, though, the more I realized that this wasn’t
exactly just an exercise in thought – this was something real, and scary. Scary
for you, at least, you codependent. What would you do without me? Well, the
answer to that, obviously, is mull over my computer and maybe try and decipher
something out of what I’d left behind. Actually, that sounds exactly like something
you’d do.

You always chastised me for not putting up a password on this old thing.
“What would happen if somebody stole it?” you said. “All of your personal
information would be right there for the taking.” I always told you a white lie,
something like “I’m lazy,” or “I’d probably forget what it was anyway.” Truthfully,
though, I’ve always fancied myself a fan of the tales where a reclusive grandparent
would pass away, and then the grandchild would find the key to his desk drawer,
stumble upon his journals and unlock the worlds of infinite mystery and wonder
that the old man had left behind. I wanted to leave behind something infinite,
mysterious, and wonderful – yet how would I do that if I was the only one that
knew the password? That just wouldn’t do.

Good thing, too, because you just waltzed right on in and started snooping
around, didn’t you? I decided to just place this document right in the middle of
the desktop so you’d find it, though. I wouldn’t want you thinking that I’d hid this
somewhere, giving you the go-ahead to ferret around my other folders and find
They follow a specific order as they intertwine and tangle with each other; they sit glistening in the puddles of the past fallen rain. A bird, a crow actually, looks on shifting its head left, then right. he wonders where to drop the screw held in his mouth, stolen from some mechanic changing tires, as he sits on the telephone wire unaware of the meaning of the cracks in the pavement; Infrastructure unable to keep up with the shifting weight of traffic jams. Shut the fuck up resounds from the street below—a man yelling at a homeless plea for a quarter—and so, dejected, the homeless plea shuffles away, wary of the cracks under the puddles, carefully avoiding them worried for the wellbeing of his mother’s spine. High-rises sprout, clean shaven,

something like, I don’t know, fanart I’d stolen from the internet or horrible old poetry I’d hidden away and forgotten about.

The point is, cutie, is that you’re expecting from me some great revelation, some great surprise, something that would shift your perspective of events and shatter you to your core. And I’d loved to have left something like that behind if I were creative enough or if I’d known that you might find it. Unfortunately, bucko, there is no revelation. There is no surprise. There is only you, left in a darkly lit room, trying to find meaning in the documents of a person you already know everything about. There is only me, typing this as you lie asleep in the bed behind me, knowing that there is future where you exist in a world without me in it. I’m not worried for me, but for you — like I said, you’re such a codependent.

There’s no twist, so I don’t really know how to end this — and you know how I am with “ILU’s” and “PDA’s,” so don’t worry, I won’t muck up the letter with any of that. Just keep this safe, okay? Save it to a flashdrive or something and keep it in your breast pocket — and you’re always in business casual, so I know you’ve got a breast pocket. No excuses!

There was a muddy picture formatted into the word document after the words had ended, and I hovered over it with the pointer. “I tried to capture a picture of the night sky, but my finger covered the lens. We’re holding hands.”