

## OBJECTS AT REST

*M. Shaw*

Mom died in May, Dad in September. By the end of the year, it was like they had never existed at all. The mourners and well-wishers had long since gone home and slowly stopped checking in. My little brother and only sibling lived three time zones away and we still rarely spoke, despite stated intentions otherwise. It wasn't his fault, I knew. Letting go had never been a problem for him, because he couldn't stop letting go. This was how he had always been: flighty, and perpetually in motion. Just shy of twenty years ago, he had been one of those kids you see on leashes, because he would fly away if Mom and Dad didn't tether him to themselves. He couldn't have really comprehended what it was like for me to live with their death. He had already let them go, and I often felt that he had let me go as well. I envied him. I wished I could let me go, too.

For my friends who had never met them, the death of my parents existed only as an idea. They knew, rationally, that it must be hard for me, but they never really saw any of it. My December 12th birthday came and went, with a subdued bar crawl during which I seemed no more sad than anyone in 2017 had every right to be. The birthday party-goers went home to join the mourners and well-wishers, and I went back to doing what any 24-year-old with a bachelor's in history does best: waiting tables.

The restaurant was a casual joint with booths and a bar and "Grille" in the name, part of a national chain. Poorly lit. Free refills. The closest we came to accommodating any dietary restrictions was the kid's menu. Not even the salads were vegetarian. My coworkers were a rotating cast of interchangeable impoverished youth, plus a few older cooks who did this as close to professionally as casual dining kitchen work gets. The manager was a tall, bald-headed white man named Chuck. Chuck was essentially a coward at heart who had acquired a cruel streak through decades of working overtime in high-stress environments. He knew this and tried to play off the cruelty by feeding us a lot of positive language and what he called "compliment sandwiches." Nobody liked him, but it was hard to exactly hate him because he was such a standard-issue restaurant manager that you almost didn't notice him. We might as well

have been any other restaurant fitting this description. It was the suburbs; there were at least three more within a mile radius. We were never slow.

When I went to work the night after my birthday, I had begun to feel like my desire to let myself go was coming to fruition. Like my parents, who, at that point, might as well have been figments of my imagination, I could feel myself disappearing. Only instead of death, I was disappearing into the restaurant. Any inclination I'd had toward grad school had plummeted that year, I could feel my social life stagnating and hobbies had fallen off the radar. I wasn't dating anyone or trying to. Nobody needed me. Nobody was relying on me. Except the restaurant. Restaurant work is happy to consume as much of your life as you're willing to give it, and it wasn't like I had any other priorities. So, I worked 60-hour weeks bringing people their burgers and salads, numbly getting hit on, and washing marinara sauce out of a small collection of black aprons in my spare time. There was almost nothing left of *me* in me. Something in the back of my mind still resisted this. Mostly, I tried to quiet it by focusing even more on work. This was coping, I told myself. This was how I would cope with Mom and Dad. But there were still moments where I did not fully want to cope.

One of those moments smacked me in the face around the tail end of dinner rush, and I texted my brother in Seattle a *how's life*. Not those exact words, but not much more, and I put the phone away as quickly as possible. It was a 3-second rebellion against my impending, voluntary disappearance. This was by necessity; getting caught with my phone out would earn a chewing-out from Chuck, who was surprisingly stealthy, using our tendency not to notice his presence to his advantage.

I didn't know what I was expecting to happen, here. Texting my brother was like tweeting at a celebrity. He had dropped out of college at 20 years old and moved to Seattle for reasons unclear. As far as I knew, he wasn't doing anything much more exciting than me, workwise. Whenever you talked to him, though, you got the sense that he was busy with some unknown, very exciting thing that you were distracting him from. It was a vibe that always made me want to oblige him and let him get back to it as quickly as possible. If he was an object perpetually in motion, then I was one at rest, always staying in the same city, holding onto what I had for dear life, no matter how little or how intolerable it became. I don't suppose I could have understood his needs any more than he was capable of understanding mine.

Before I could think about it in any real depth, I finally got the attention of Ralph, the cook who worked the grill station. “Hey, the guy at table 14 wants to know if the salmon is wild caught,” I told him.

I could see Ralph’s jaw clench. He was making the salmon in question for the second time, the first attempt having been sent back as overcooked. “Man, I don’t know,” he said. “If it was wild caught, wouldn’t it say that on the menu?”

“He says he can only eat salmon that he knows is wild caught. His doctor won’t let him eat farm raised. Says he’s allergic.”

“Allergic?” said Ralph. “Allergic to what? Farms?”

I shrugged.

“Why the fuck he order it then?” He swiped the salmon off the grill with a spatula and tossed it to the side. The slab of fish bounced off the side of the oven and into the trash. “Find out what he wants this time, I guess.”

Now my own jaw clenched. I did not want to go back to the customer’s table. Most nights, we had at least one *the customer*, and tonight, it was definitely this man. He had come in with four other people. Two couples, both on the younger side. Twenties-ish. Now, he sat at the table alone, his younger companions having already eaten, paid their bills, and left. I don’t remember

ever seeing them speak to him, or even look at him. He just trailed along behind, like a remora, his actual relationship to them unclear.

I hadn't really noticed him myself until all the food came out, and he looked at his maple-glazed chicken (this was *before* the two attempts at a salmon filet) and said, "I didn't order that."

This was when he had forced me to see him. His slack face, permanently repulsed expression, steeply sloping shoulders. His blue sweater, worn over a blue button-up and blue slacks, as if the police had casual Fridays. "I ordered the salmon," he said.

This was a lie, of course. He had changed his mind. But you couldn't just *say* that. So, the chicken had to go back. I should have been annoyed, as I was whenever we saw this behavior, but this time, a different type of anxiety took over. A feeling more like treating a fragile thing carelessly. Just looking at him made me worry about him. He seemed troubled, and weak, more than someone his age should have been. Like a sick dog, he gave me this urge to make sure he was okay, without wanting to touch him. Every time I replayed this interaction in my head, or any other one that I'd had with him, it felt like dropping a wine glass. Like rolling a heel.

Now, here we were again. Walking back toward the table produced a nails-on-a-blackboard feeling down my spine. Wasn't he starving, having waited this long without ordering what he actually wanted? Wasn't he embarrassed to be sitting there by himself, after his... friends? Nieces? Students? had already left?

He was looking at photos of boats on his very large phone when I came up next to him, and he hurried to cram the device back into his pants pocket. "Hey!" I said, "I'm really sorry, but we don't know for sure if the salmon is wild caught. Would you like to order something else?" I had left the menu at the table, not from any kind of premonition, but because he had seemed not to want to let go of it before.

"Oh. Uh. Come back in a minute," he said to me. "I need a minute. I just need one minute."

Without a word, I set down the fresh diet coke I had brought for him (his fourth) and left him to his business with the menu. Doing so carried the same vague discomfort as leaving a small child alone with an unlocked iPad.

I tried to think about something else. Like my own family matters, which at least offered a more comfortable, low-key sadness. But, as I kept myself busy with my other tables--families, mostly, the kind with younger children and

living parents, and a group from an old folks' home who wanted to know if they could order creme brulee to go—my mind kept itself saddled with the customer. He seemed, somehow, to be suffering. Like trying to figure out what to order brought him tangible, observable pain. His coming to the restaurant felt like a bid to infect me with this, to make me suffer. I *was* suffering, but not for reasons related to him, and he had no business barging in and trying to make my suffering about him.

Mom and Dad had left me the house, which I was now living in, because it was paid off. It did not feel good to live there, but I knew better than to turn down rent-free housing. It wasn't the house I had grown up in; they had downsized drastically when my brother moved out. The new, smaller house was sized perfectly for me to live in by myself.

I had expected this to make it easier, but now here I was living in the house of my dead parents, with no nostalgic attachment to the house itself. And it was full of their stuff. Their dead people stuff, just as much at rest, without mortal purpose, as they were. Anything I could have had any real attachment to in the house was dead. I often wondered, if I died, who would live with my dead stuff? My brother? Unlikely. He wasn't even willing to be around my alive stuff, for any length of time. I wanted someone to be willing

to live with my dead stuff, but how do you communicate that to a person? How do you find a person you're willing to communicate that to?

As I was bussing another table, Chuck snuck up behind me. He was terrified of ever touching anyone (he told this to all of us, on our first day) and would never even tap you on the shoulder, just walk up behind you and start talking. "We're comping that guy's meal," he whispered, with an audible tremor.

I set down my tray, proud of not having dropped it. "Okay."

"We made a mistake on his order three times. We're gonna comp him."

"Okay." I considered pointing out that we hadn't made three mistakes, or even one, but by that point in the night, I didn't feel like fighting him. My feet were in open rebellion and I wanted to go home and sleep before my double the next day. It was already less than 12 hours until I had to be back here. Not that I had anywhere else to be, of course.

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket and ignored it. This wouldn't be my brother, whose response time ranged between two days and week for texts. That at least would be the time frame if he responded at all, which was a 75% chance at best. Probably yet another neglected friend inviting me to a karaoke night, forgetting how late work tended to keep me. Most of my friends were

left over from college, and still doing more or less the same things for fun that we were then, which was starting to feel a little too much like running around the city in footie pajamas. How many times could we possibly sing the same ironic renditions of 90's pop songs? How many *hundreds* of times? I didn't have any friends from work, though, and had never really looked into other ways to acquire friends, so these outings were about all I could get for socializing, when I could get anything.

"I want to let you know, you're doing great," said Chuck. "It's not your fault. But we don't want to lose his business or get a bad review."

"Whose fault is it?" The words left my mouth before I knew it, flagrantly violating my brain's chain of command.

"Nobody's," he said. "Sometimes these things just happen. Don't let it get to you."

I'm trying! I thought. Really trying! There was no reason for me to care how much money the restaurant made, so why should it get to me at all? "Okay," I said again.

It was absolutely getting to me, though. I really hadn't done anything wrong, so why did I feel like this? Wondering about it only made me that much more anxious. I looked across the room at the customer, still looking at

the menu, rubbing his chin. *Sometimes these things just happen*, the manager had said. What did he mean? What were the *things* that *just happened*? People not knowing what to eat? It was such a strange idea. As if the customer's indecisiveness were something that was happening *to* him, like a question on a test he didn't know the correct answer to. As if he wasn't actively refusing to make a decision.

As I was bringing the tray of dishes back to the dishwasher, one of the cooks called out to me. "Hey, come look at this." It was Vicente, the guy who worked the fryer. I turned and saw him digging something out of the pocket of his chef jacket.

"Hey, tell me something. Do you ever not know what to eat?" I caught the object he tossed me: a pear-shaped leather pouch that buttoned shut at the top. It didn't have anything in it.

"Man, I'll eat whatever. I don't give a fuck. After I work a shift here, I'd eat a fried rat on a stick. I don't care. Fuckin' bees, whatever. I'd eat a salad made out of banana peels. We don't get no breaks back here. I don't give a shit. What do you think that is?"

I turned the pouch over in my hand. "Is it a coin purse?" He didn't seem like the kind of person who would have a coin purse.

A flat, restrained grin crept across his face. "I mean, what's it made out of?"

Definitely something gross. The cooks loved to be gross. People cope how they can. Or don't, in my case. "A tongue?" I guessed.

The grin unfolded to its full wingspan. "It's made from a kangaroo scrotum."

"Ah." My eyes fixed on the coin purse, unable to look anywhere else. I did not want to look away from it, implying that I was embarrassed to be holding the cured scrotum of a dead kangaroo, and I didn't want to look at Vicente, because he was enjoying being gross, which is gross in and of itself, and I didn't want to see that. I wanted to look like I was contemplating the object in my hand with detached bemusement. I probably just looked nervous, despite my efforts. "Where did you get this?"

"You can't get them anymore," he said, answering some other question, tangential to the one I had asked. "They're illegal in Australia. That's where they come from."

The pouch smelled like regular leather, and I was not comfortable with that, because I did not want the smell of leather to remind me of this. I couldn't

see anyone wanting a kangaroo scrotum coin purse, much less enough people for a country to have to make a law against them. And yet, here we were.

“It was my abuelo’s. He left it to me.”

I had thought, throughout previous shifts, that Vicente seemed nice. But then, so do a lot of guys, until they’re dropping marsupial ballsack in your hand. “I bet he had some great stories,” I managed.

Vicente shrugged. “He died when I was a baby. This thing was in a box in the attic until I turned 15.”

There was a moment, here, when I was about to open my mouth to tell him that my parents had left me their house, and enough money to pay off my student loans, plus a little extra, which I guessed I was supposed to put into savings or use to go on vacation or something. I wanted to talk to someone about wanting to use some of that money to go on vacation, but not being able to because I had not yet conceived of a vacation that was good enough to use my Dead Parents Money on, but the person to talk to about this was not Vicente. The correct person to talk to might be a therapist, but I couldn’t afford a therapist on my own, so then I would just be using Dead Parents Money to do that.

Vicente did not want to talk about dead people stuff. He wanted to talk about his kangaroo scrotum. It sounded like not just him, but his whole family was very attached to this cured ballsack of a dead animal. I wondered what it was like, to be so excited about inheriting something so stupid. For death and inheritance to be the novelty that it seemed to be, for him.

My phone buzzed again. I thought, Aww, somebody misses me.

“I’m gonna go see if that old guy’s made any decisions,” I said, handing the coin purse back to him. He stuck it back in the pocket of his chef jacket. The cooks didn’t take the jackets home; they belonged to the restaurant and had to be left there, on a rack in the supply room. I wondered if Vicente ever arrived home to discover that he had forgotten to take the coin purse out of his pocket, and had to show up early the next day to locate it before the used jackets went to the cleaners.

The customer was still staring at the menu. He looked like he could use some help, but of course, he always gave off that vibe. It might just have been his face, the way everything turned downward at the corners. Mouth, eyebrows, even the crows’ feet by his eyes seemed to sag helplessly. “Any questions I can answer for you?” I offered.

“No,” he said. “I just need another minute. It’s just...” Out came a tiny grunt, as if this were costing him some minor physical effort, like standing up from a crouch. I waited for him to finish the sentence, but he never did. It occurred to me that he probably did really want the salmon, but had already decided he was allergic, and so was stuck.

I was trapped between wanting to help him get unstuck, and wanting to get myself unstuck from the restaurant, although I was still at least an hour away from the possibility of leaving. Plus, leaving the restaurant would derail my own disappearing act. It would be a little too much self-advocacy for someone working on letting herself go. I had to find some third way that would make the restaurant situation less actively nerve-wracking without having to actually leave.

In front of me, the customer muttered under his breath at the menu. Begging it to show him the way, or maybe cursing it. “You know,” I told him, “one of our cooks has a coin purse made out of a kangaroo’s scrotum.”

The menu tilted down in his hands until it was resting flat on the table. “You don’t say?”

“He’s back there just whipping it around. Showing it to everyone.” I did a check through my peripheral vision and couldn’t see Chuck around anywhere.

I bent down to whisper to the customer, “You didn’t hear this from me, but he’s not wearing gloves to touch the food. He’s doing all this prep with his bare hands, and then he’s also holding this scrotum.”

The customer bit his lip. Of course, I had told him this in the hope that it would make *him* decide to leave so that I wouldn’t have to, and my heart began to beat faster when I saw this. Not from excitement, understand, but because I was actively fighting the strange, protective instinct he inspired in order to do this. Pushing myself not to think about how fragile and helpless he would be outside of the restaurant, where decisions were unavoidable and time limited. If this man got behind the wheel of a car, he would certainly die. It was miraculous for him to have made it here in one piece to begin with.

And if he did die in a car crash on the way to his... house? Retirement condo? Hospital bed? then would he be leaving anyone behind, who would then have to live with his dead stuff? Who would worry about how to spend his dead money? I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to lose someone to a car crash. I could only imagine major organ failure, which was what I had experience with. Mom’s kidneys and Dad’s heart.

“Do you think I could see it?” he said.

“Oh, believe me, I’ve seen it,” I whispered.

“No, no, I believe you, I do. That’s why I’m wondering if I could maybe get a look at it,” said the customer. His jowls were practically vibrating. “It’s been years since I’ve seen one.”

“That’s...” I stammered. “We’re not really allowed to.”

“You want to see Vicente’s kangaroo purse?” said Chuck. He was standing right next to me. I started to scream, then turned it into a cough.

“Very much,” said the customer.

“It’s really something.” Chuck smiled. “I’ll talk to him. Anything else we can help you with?”

The customer looked at the menu, sitting on the table, without touching it. He sighed, shoulders slouching even more than they already had been. “Not yet. Oh! Could I get another diet coke?”

I switched back into service mode. “I’ll get that right out for you!” I’d been waiting tables so long it was like I was under a spell. My phone buzzed impotently in my pocket. Can’t talk now, I’ve been ensorcelled. I imagined—fantastically—that my brother had been the one texting me all evening, having finally dedicated himself to forming a more genuine connection with his only living immediate relative. I felt a pang of cynical-hopeful-sadness as I thought this. Because, I knew, I was fantasizing about something I wanted, and if he

had taken no real steps toward making it happen, then neither had I. Nobody at the restaurant even knew that I had a brother. Or that my parents were dead. It still wasn't too late to stop my brother from becoming a figment of my imagination the way they had, but he would if I let waitressing swallow me completely.

It occurred to me, for the first time, that I might not want to let myself go and disappear. But what did that even look like? Maybe, if I were more like my brother, then I would know how to stop letting the restaurant consume my life, but this just didn't seem like a real possibility. I didn't have more interesting things to zoom off to instead. I only had myself, and my collections of dead things.

When I came back with the diet coke, all three of them were clustered around the customer's chair. The customer, Chuck, and Vicente. The customer was holding the coin purse, gently rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger, nodding.

"It's really something," said Chuck, which I could have sworn I had heard him say a minute ago.

"You can't get them anymore," said Vicente. "They're illegal in Australia. That's where they come from."

I set the diet coke on the table, reaching across from the other side so as to stand as far away from them as possible.

“Oh, I know,” said the customer. “It’s been years since I’ve seen one.”

“Are they really valuable?” Chuck asked.

“Well... no,” said the customer. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, though. That’s what they say.”

“It certainly is,” said Chuck.

“It was my abuelo’s,” said Vicente. “He left it to me.”

Thankfully, I had a couple more tables, some other late diners. I left the three of them, hunched over their little fetish.

From that point on, I resolved not to return to the customer’s table unless he called me over, or if Chuck got on my case, but none of those things happened. Still, I couldn’t stop looking over at him. I couldn’t let go of the notion that he was in some kind of distress. After all the trouble he’d caused, he still begged to be attended to. The scrotum party eventually disbanded, and he went back to staring at the menu for a brief time, before turning his attention to his phone.

When my other tables had paid and gone, I looked at the clock and realized it was 9:50 p.m. That was when I had to return to the customer, who was still in the exact state I had last seen him.

“Hey!” I said cheerfully. “Just wanted to let you know, the kitchen is closing in ten minutes, so if you want to put in a food order, we’ll need to get it in there pretty soon.”

“Oh gosh.” He fumbled his phone back into his pocket and picked the menu up. “Uh, just give me one more minute. Could I get another diet coke?”

After setting the refill on the table, I went straight to the bathroom and splashed water on my face, wet a paper towel and started scrubbing self-destructively at my eyeliner. “You remember the first time you told me you needed *one more minute*?” I hissed at my reflection. “It was *two hours ago*. Do you even fucking know what a minute is, you chode?” This, I felt, would greatly upset the customer if I said it directly to him. So I said it to myself, in the mirror, two more times. Then I heard a toilet flush and Gabriella, the hostess, came out of the farthest stall.

“Hey,” she said, washing her hands. “You good?”

“I’m good,” I said. This was not true. I was mortified that someone had heard me grumbling at my reflection, and the worst of it was that I was not

worried that I had upset Gabriella. I felt guilty in the customer's direction, as if Gabriella hearing what I said might upset him by some kind of psychic proxy.

"You good," she said, as a statement this time. "I'll wipe down tables and put up chairs, you vacuum?"

"Oh, uh, yeah," I said.

Chuck startled me again as I was vacuuming the floor around the bar, with most of the restaurant already done. I contented myself that the sound of the vacuum had drowned out my *Eeep!* when he said hey.

"I'd appreciate if you could avoid sweeping too near our guest." He always called vacuuming *sweeping* and it made me grind my teeth every time. He tilted his head in the direction of the customer, as if there were any other guests in the building.

"Okay," I said.

"We don't want him to feel like we're kicking him out," said Chuck.

"It's 10:30," I said. "We close at 10. Are we not kicking him out?"

"We've got it all covered," said Chuck. "We aren't turning off the grill or oven or fryer yet, so we should be able to make a plate real quick before we

shut down. He just needs another minute.” He dusted his hands together, perhaps to signify that he had been working hard, or perhaps to signify that he had been touching scrotum. “When stuff like this happens, you have to roll with the punches.”

“Roll with the punches,” I repeated.

“That’s right,” he said. “Honestly, I don’t see why this should be so hard for you. I’ve been talking to him, he’s a great guy, he just needs a little patience. Old people need patience sometimes. You’ve probably never dealt with an elderly relative, otherwise you’d know that. Just give him a minute. He’ll get there.”

I wanted to spit in his face but didn’t. I also didn’t want to open up to anyone at work about my family and exactly what I had dealt with, which I would have to if I stood up to Chuck now.

“Hey, you’re doing fine,” he said, dealing me an unwelcome, open-palm blow to the shoulder blades. “Just try not to make him feel uncomfortable.”

By 11 o’clock, it was clear that the entire quarter of the restaurant surrounding the customer’s table wasn’t going to get cleaned, so I returned the vacuum to the supply room out back. There was a strong wind blowing that night, making it hard to open the supply room door or to keep my hair out of

my face while opening it. Inside, I sat on a crate of paper towels and took my flats off. I wanted to massage my feet, but they felt angry enough to bite if touched, so I left them to their own devices to air out for a few minutes, confident I wasn't missing much inside the restaurant.

Sam, another one of the cooks, an older guy who worked pantry because his arthritic hands were still somehow amazing with knives, came in to hang up his chef jacket. "I've been cut," he explained. "If that guy wants a salad, someone else gonna have to make it. You think he wants a salad?"

"No." I thought back to his hand-wringing about wild caught salmon. "I think he might be allergic."

"To salad?"

I shrugged. He shrugged.

"Vicente." Sam's voice dropped an octave, and a few decibels. "He showed you the scrotum?"

"Uh, yeah?" It felt like one of the gotcha questions other kids would ask on the playground in grade school, to see if you knew what the word *scrotum* meant. I got the sense that, regardless of my answer, I was about to get giggled at. "So?" I added, hoping to cover my ass.

"He loves that thing," said Sam.

I looked at Sam. He looked at me. I no longer had any sense of where this was supposed to go. “Yes?” I said.

Sam gave another shrug, hung up his jacket on the dirty rack, and left.

Just as he turned outside of the supply room, Chuck’s head and shoulders popped into view on one side of the doorframe, like a jump scare in a horror movie. I did jump. And scream. He showed no reaction. His hair didn’t even react to the wind, him having none.

“Hey, what are you doing out here?” he said. “That guy’s ready to order.”

I hopped up and followed him back into the restaurant, shoes somehow already on my feet. “Why didn’t you take his order?” I said as we maneuvered through the kitchen toward the dining room.

Chuck winced. “Well, he didn’t actually ask to place an order. He just asked for you. But I assume that means he’s ready.”

I smoothed out the front of my apron as I approached the table. Honestly, I knew what was coming. I didn’t even get my notepad out to take an order. I could see that the occupancy of the restaurant was down to just me, the customer, Chuck, and Vicente. Everybody outside his influence was gone, and with them, all pretense of us following any kind of social contract. It was in the air now, his miasma. He owned this place, and us.

“Oh!” said the customer. “There you are. Hey, I was wondering.”

“Sure! What can I do for you?”

“Do you think you could talk to that cook again?”

I swallowed. “That cook.”

“The one with the—”

“Talk to him?” I asked, though, of course, I knew what he meant. I tried to summon the defiance that had come over me in the bathroom mirror, but it wouldn’t come. The miasma had me completely mired.

“Yeah.” The customer had his palms flat on the table, as if bracing against it. Or, as if displaying them, so I could see that he wasn’t doing some other, more insidious thing with them. “You know, about the—”

“I’ll be right back.”

I walked, as calmly as I could manage, back to the kitchen, then, almost at a run, out the back door and back to the supply room. I buried my face in as many of the dirty chef jackets as I could grab, my hands pressing them forcefully against the scream. Each time I inhaled to scream more I got hit with another tsunami of meat and cheese and balsamic vinegar smell. My face was absolutely going to break out from this if I didn’t give it a good wash at home.

Why could I not do this to his face? What he was doing to us was so clearly, outrageously not okay. We simply could not resist. What was it about him?

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. It seemed to be doing that unusually often. I didn't look at it, but I did think of my brother again. If I were more like my brother, I would not be in a situation like this. I would have left the restaurant hours ago, without looking back.

Why had the customer asked for me? Why not just ask Chuck to go get Vicente? He must have been somehow invested in my involvement, and why? What was he trying to do to me? Why did he insist on me being his caretaker?

It was like he had targeted me because he could see into who I was in my heart. An object perpetually at rest. This was happening to me because I was the kind of person who would live, miserably, in the house of my dead parents, surrounded by their dead stuff, working my dead job, and occasionally going out to try to massage some life back into my dead friendships. He could sense this about me, somehow. That I could be tied down easily and not know how to escape. He knew this, and he was preying on me because of it. He was trying to keep me. And why? What did he want me for?

I returned to the kitchen, but Vicente wasn't there. *Oh thank god*, I thought, *he must have been cut too*. He's gone home to his... girlfriend? Dog? Playstation? Either way, I would have to tell the customer he couldn't see the gross coin purse. No way around it. Couldn't be done. The scrotum has left the building. He'd have to finally order or go home.

At first glance, his table looked vacant. I soon realized that he wasn't gone, he was sitting on the floor near the table, again with Chuck and Vicente. All of them sat cross-legged, in a little circle, like boys in a treehouse. Staring at something between them.

I cleared my throat, standing directly behind him. "Would you like to order anything?"

"Oh, uh, um." He fiddled with the waistband of his pants, which had sunk almost underneath him when he sat on the floor. He didn't manage to move it up much. "I'm," he said, "I'm fine. Uh, I'm good. Thank you."

"Okay," I chirped. The only sound for several seconds was the curiously strong wind outside. There wasn't much going on in the strip mall wasteland after 9 p.m. "Well, we don't want to hold you up if you need to get home."

“Actually, um.” He looked theatrically around at the restaurant, nodding at empty tables, audibly breathing in when his gaze settled on the bar. “Actually, I like it here.”

Looking over his shoulder, I could see that they had taken one of the napkins from the table and placed it, open, on the floor between them, like an altar cloth. The scrotum sat in the middle.

“You like it here,” I repeated.

“You just go on home, tiger,” said Chuck. He used *tiger* as if it were a familiar nickname, although he had never said it before. “We’ve got this. It’s all under control. I’ll see you at 4 tomorrow.”

“At 8,” I corrected. “I’m working a double tomorrow.”

“Right. At 8. Actually, you know what, go ahead and come in at 4. You’re doing great. You’ve earned it.”

The customer frowned. When he did this, it deepened a crease in his chin that created what almost looked like a second, fleshier frown. “Oh gosh, there’s no reason why you should have to cut her hours,” he said to Chuck. Was he talking about my shift the next day, or was he talking about me going home right now? My brain tried madly, vainly, to read the cues. “She may need the money. And she’s doing such a good job.”

Chuck tilted his head back, now frowning himself, appearing to stare through the ceiling. "She does do a great job," he muttered. "She's one of our best." He turned to me. "What do you think, tiger?"

Something inside me broke loose. I could almost hear it, like a guitar string snapping. "I think I could use the rest more," I said, barely managing not to choke on it. "My feet are really killing me."

I didn't stick around to argue further. I clocked out, threw my marinara-stained apron in the plastic grocery bag I kept in my purse, got in my car and drove the 12 miles back to my Dead Parents House. I was shaking like a frightened rabbit for the first 8 of those miles. Like I had escaped real violence.

It was Wednesday night. Not many people on the road. I mumbled to myself the whole way. What had the customer come to the restaurant expecting to get out of his evening? Had he been looking to stay there all along? Did he want to live in the restaurant, or what? Over and over, I shook my head, thinking of the three men on the floor, worshipping. I had the feeling that I had watched them disappear, before my eyes, the way I had been trying to myself for the past three months. I really had just escaped a kind of death.

I didn't check my phone until I got home, but I did feel it buzz twice more during the drive. All of the notifications were texts from my brother, saying variations of *please call me* with mounting urgency.

I'll keep this part short. My brother had stage four pancreatic cancer. So, if you're not familiar, pancreatic cancer, pretty much, if you get it, you're dead. It isn't detectable until so late in the game that, by the time you learn about it, it's almost always too late. And he had waited a long time to get checked out, figuring he was just sick. He wasn't going to do chemo. He told me all this over the phone, in the space of fifteen minutes. With Mom and Dad both gone within a year of each other, he was tired of coping. Tired of trying to live, tired of looking for reasons to, tired of fighting. I had never heard him talk like this before, never knew that he had any of these feelings about Mom and Dad, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything. It just made sense, he said. They were giving him a few months and he was using it to make peace.

I yelled at him, but only after we'd hung up. It was very important that, when I yelled at him, he not be able to hear me. I was the older sibling, and I wasn't used to showing that kind of vulnerability. And now, it was going to be too late to work on that. I didn't want to make peace; I wanted a relationship with my brother. I wanted us to fill the parent-less familial void for each other.

I wanted to see him, one day, grow into the goofball uncle I knew he could be. Making peace is such a short thing, and I wanted length. Out of all the miserable shit I had let myself be tied to, he was the one person on Earth to whom I actually wanted that kind of attachment.

I screamed for most of the night, then called the restaurant and left a message that I wouldn't be coming in the next day, or for the foreseeable future. I explained that my brother was dying, and that my parents had just died as well, all of which was news to Ali, the Kitchen Manager who oversaw the a.m. shift. He didn't say much in response beyond "okay" and "good luck." I got the sense he was too intimidated by the sheer shittiness of it all, like he didn't want it to rub off on him by staying on the phone with me for too long.

I packed a suitcase and got the next available flight to Seattle. I was there for three months, taking care of my brother until he died. His Dead Parents Money, which he hadn't spent yet either, ended up being what paid for his funeral. I hung around the city for five more months, alone, staying on his friends' couches without ever really getting to know any of them. Then I got an English teaching job in Korea, and that's where I've been since. My parents' house sits, empty of everything except their dead people stuff, on the other side of the world. I almost never think about it.

Nobody understands what it is to be truly alone until they are. That's what I've decided. Unless they have been there too, it is impossible to communicate to anyone what it is like to know that you could disappear at any moment, and the only person who would notice is the one who would have to remove you from some company's payroll. I have become, at last, a figment of my own imagination. I and my brother were never opposites; we were both self-destructing, only in different ways. The difference between us is that I found a way out of my self-destruction, and his killed him. If I had managed to figure my shit out sooner, could I have been there to tell him to go to the doctor when the pain started? I wonder about this all the time, and I do it knowing that even this is a grasping to reclaim something already gone. That I am already gone.

I never went back to the restaurant, and for all I know, the three of them are still sitting there, clustered around that thing. *You can't get them anymore. It's really something. Roll with the punches. It's been years since I've seen one. Sometimes these things just happen. It was my abuelo's. Could I get another diet coke?*

And look: my last night in that place, it was weird. It doesn't make sense and I don't understand most of what went on. It hasn't been relevant to my

life in any continuing way, and I've never had the bandwidth to really process any of it in the time since. Except one thing. Except this:

Towards the end, when my brother was barely able to recognize that I was even in the room, when his body was actively failing around him, when he couldn't annunciate his words, when he'd usually already shit himself by the time he realized he had to go, he looked like the customer. The slope of the eyebrows. The chin. The constantly slightly open mouth. The thousand-yard stare. He looked just like him. The vulnerability and helplessness. The way his very presence compelled you to attend to him. In the grip of something that wouldn't let him go until the end. Afflicted. Nothing left for him but suffering unto death.

In that moment, I saw that he and I had switched places. Now he was the one at rest, the one tied down. To his illness, specifically, which would soon put him at rest for good. I, for all my inability to move on from things, was the one still in motion. I wondered if the way he looked to me now was the way I had looked to him, in earlier years. Maybe to others, as well.

I think the customer recognized in me a kindred spirit. And I think I understand that what he really wanted me for was a friend. He was just going about that through the only way of interacting with the world he knew:

through inertia. Maybe he found what he was looking for a little more successfully with Chuck, or even Vicente, but it was clear that he had really wanted me. I was the most inert of all of them, and he saw that, and that made me see it too. The only thing I don't know is how I finally managed to shake myself loose, at that pivotal moment. Maybe there was a little bit of my brother in me, after all.

Sometimes I imagine my brother, as he looked before he died, taking his last breath and then, at the end of all the pain, finding himself walking into a restaurant. Not a fine establishment, a Golden Restaurant in the Sky or anything like that. A casual place with booths and a bar and "Grille" in the name, poorly lit, where they give you bread and free refills. Comfortable. Safe. He sits down and, right there, he has all the control he could ever want of his environment, with no responsibility to anyone. A place where the biggest decision he'll ever need to make is what to order, and it's not a binding decision. They're always open and never slow, but also never crowded. His smartphone never runs out of battery, and the signal is always great. A place he never needs to leave. I'm not sure if it's Heaven or Hell.

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