

Barbara Gurgel

The Ordinary World

Afghanistan was a place that Seth Smith would later try to forget. It wasn't the heat that bothered him the most – despite the lame jokes that civilians liked to make when they learned he'd been deployed. The worst part was the sand. It got in his ears, in his food, in his gear. The sand stuck to the ever-present layer of sweat on every bit of your exposed skin and made you itchy and coarse. Actually, that may not have been the worst part. Afghanistan smelled like burning gasoline more than half the time, and shit, and vomit. And (*don't you hate yourself for thinking*) something that with a horrible, deeply morbid irony, smelled like roasting pork but was not roasting pork.

Seth Smith was average-looking and tall, with that kind of stretched-out quality that he had not yet grown out of by the age of 20. His mother always commented that his face seemed so thin and pale when she saw him these days. She had apparently forgotten (*doesn't make people feel loved even if that's how you mean it*) that this is how he had always looked. He was bright enough and strong enough to make a good soldier, but not so bright that he had any inclination to return to the college degree he left unfinished back home. Seth had attended an unremarkable community college in Lynn, on the outskirts of Boston. The faculty liked to

say that it was actually in Boston, but having been born in Southie Seth couldn't bring himself to call anything north of Orient Heights 'the city'.

Seth had come from a Catholic family, with several brothers, average grades and exactly two girlfriends. "Two, so far" he used to say to his friend Evans, who'd had lots of girlfriends. Evans was also not extraordinary. He was originally from Arizona, so he was not as bothered by the heat and sun, despite his very fair complexion and sandy-colored hair. Evans was shorter than Seth (*people were always surprised by this for some reason, Evans wasn't even that tall*) and had a broad, open face that seemed even broader because the boy was always smiling. At 19 he already had laugh lines around his large, brown eyes. Evans was friendly with lots of people, but he was really only friends with Seth. Evans had a friendly, cheerful demeanor (*unbearable*), and people either thought he was phony, and therefore irritating, or people thought he was sincere, and therefore weird. Seth thought he was both (*and so funny; funny fucking Evans*), and he liked him.

"The fuck even is there to be so cheerful about out here?" Seth asks, while the two boys drink their shitty non-alcoholic beer. He looks at his friend in an accusing way (*sometimes you get confrontational even with the O'Doul's which is such a predictable psychosomatic response, so typical*) and says

"Seriously. You are always smiling and laughing at everything. It's kinda creepy, dude."

The boys sit side by side on a low stone wall, enjoying the respite that the night air provides, even if it wasn't exactly cool. Their quarters were air conditioned, but somehow still stifling. The boys had taken to occasionally spending time outside in the evenings. Evans looks completely untroubled, the hair peeking out from his cover matted down with sweat and his small nose bright pink from the day. Seth's left hand finds sand clinging to his hairline and the back of his neck, and he pushes his own cover up a bit at the temples as

he scrubs off the grit. Seth's right hand holds his weapon, strap wrapped around his shoulder and the cold metal and plastic resting solid and intrusive and ever-present against his leg. Evans shrugs and laughs, and says

"Hey man, like I said. I can either smile or I can blow my fucking brains out. Everything out here sucks, but what am I supposed to do about it? Gotta make the best of it or some inspirational shit like that."

Evans puts the first finger of his right hand to his temple, with his thumb sticking up, and cocks his head back as he pulls the imaginary trigger. Evans is also tethered to his weapon, but he takes both hands off of it for the (*ha ha very funny*) gesture. Seth laughs, and the two boys pretend that had been a joke. Evans was good at pretending things were jokes, and especially good at making others laugh in inappropriate situations. Their Sergeant (*Sir*) called him 'Funny Evans' when he was being particularly un-funny.

Seth and Evans didn't always stay up drinking "beer". Often, they were too lazy (*working too much, working too little, you're exhausted either way, it's probably all the sun*) and Seth didn't really like to drink, even the fake stuff. He could never quite shake the feeling imparted on him by his mother the first time he came home tipsy at 15 years old. She hadn't yelled at him, but the look on her face when she caught him trying to sneak back into the apartment was enough to send him to confession for the first time since his confirmation. Seth believed in heaven and hell just fine, but he mostly believed in his mother. But when Evans drank, Seth drank with him, and it tasted vaguely of guilt.

The two boys walk through the base, having just finished dinner and too tired to do anything but head to the barracks and to bed. They take a winding path through the interior of the base, rather than the more direct path from the chow hall. The boys liked to figure out new paths to get where they were going occasionally, just to (*as if that was possible in this place*) break the routine. Their thick-soled boots make

crunching noises on the gravel and sand, and they pass boring square buildings and too-small trailers as they walk down what was meant to be a road. The two boys stand close enough that Seth sometimes whacks Evans with his animated gestures, and Evans' weapon swishes against Seth's uniform every couple of steps. Against their better judgement they had accepted those two bottles of wine from those Italian pilots, who regularly had wine in their chow halls. The airborne Troopers (*and the nurses, specifically one nurse, specifically the wicked pretty nurse that very un-sneakily delivered the bottles*) had been celebrating, and it seemed rude to refuse to celebrate with them. They were talking about their lives back home (*because really what else is there to talk about when you do everything together*) and Seth says

"I know this sounds like a shitty thing to say, but you are *lucky* you are an only child, dude. Honestly. Having FOUR older brothers is like... I was hazed into a fraternity I never agreed to join. AND! And, I was The Pledge until my mom got knocked up again." Seth laughs (*was it really meant to be funny?*), and Evans laughs with him. He always laughed at Seth's jokes.

"At least you didn't have to be a lonely weirdo your whole life. Well, I mean I'm sure you were always a *weirdo*. But being an only child makes you a lonely weirdo instead of just a regular weirdo." Evans looks at Seth very seriously as he says this.

"Yea yea, I'm the weirdo here, Mr. 'Oh I have a girlfriend but you don't know her because she goes to another school'"

Evans laughs again, and Seth smirks before adding

"I don't know, dude. I wasn't lonely, exactly. You literally can't be alone in my mom's house. But, I don't know. My brothers weren't my friends. They were fine, I guess it was nice to have people to hang out with, but they weren't my friends."

Evans looks at Seth with wide eyes and asks, with well-feigned shock, “am I your... first friend, Smith? Should I feel honored?” but Seth shoves him and says

“You’re a fucking asshole, I don’t even like you.”

The boys laugh, again.

“And I did have friends, asshole. But, when I was a kid I guess my best friend was my mom’s youngest brother. My uncle was literally the funniest guy, dude, I swear to God. Every single time that we all got together at my mom’s, he had everyone cracking up. It always kinda seemed like his wife was sick of his shit, but everyone else thought he was hilarious. Including his kids and my brothers and me. We all kind of grew up together, you know? My uncle was the best.”

Evans doesn’t say anything to this, so Seth continues

“Yea, I don’t know. He was just such a good guy. Even when he wasn’t being like a clown or whatever, he would just talk to me. He would call the house to talk to me and ask me about school and stuff. We never got to hang out like, just us, because he was a busy guy. But he always tried to make time for me. It was really fucked up how he died. I was like, fourteen, and they just told me he died they didn’t even tell me he killed himself until I got to the actual wake and my shit-head aunt, who was hammered at her own husband’s funeral, told me that he jumped off their building. Like, how do you not tell someone that ahead of time, you know? I wasn’t a little kid, just tell me the truth, you know?”

Evans says “yea man that’s fucked up” in the way which means ‘I’m sorry’, and the boys walk the rest of the way in an easy silence. Evans even has the courtesy to laugh when, as they approach the entrance to their barracks, Seth says “although if my best friend was my uncle, I guess that probably does make me a weirdo.”

The days passed, one indistinguishable from the other. The boys pass the time working and talking. Seth would talk about home, and Evans would just talk. He knew that Evans was from Arizona, because their Captain confirmed that before they were even deployed. He knew that Evans had a cousin and a mother, because they wrote him letters. And a father who died in a car crash (*or maybe brain cancer?*) when he was eleven. The boys walk through the nearest village, where they had walked a dozen times before. Evans had just told him a long, long story about his father taking him to see Santa Claus at the mall (*this might even be a true story*) when Evans was nine. Their feet kick up two identical clouds of sand behind them when they walk together, and Evans' cloud of sand chases him as he jogs up the row of men and past the head of the column. He had just said

“I didn't even have the heart to tell my dad that I was way too old to believe in Santa, because he drove like 35 minutes to the 'nice' mall as a Christmas surprise, just for me. I felt so bad, dude. So I just sat in this old guy's lap and told him I wanted an Xbox or something.” Evans had cracked up (*funny Evans*) like this was the funniest story in the world, and Seth had seen the people behind him rolling their eyes (*funny Evans, with his funny way of making jokes in formation, his funny way of volunteering for all the shit duties, his funny funny way of getting fucking blown up by a fucking IED and leaving his friend in this place all by his fucking self*). Seth doesn't quite remember what Evans had left to do when he was called up, not having finished his story. Seth does remember a blast, that smell of burning gasoline, running towards the explosion and screaming, praying (*ohGod ohJesusohGod, fuck*), please be dead God please let him already be dead.

There wasn't even gunfire afterwards to distract him. At least, Seth doesn't remember any gunfire. But Seth doesn't remember much except for (*the fear*) the smell. Sitting in his quarters later, Seth does remember something. That morning at breakfast Evans had asked Seth for his blueberry muffin, because he

was still hungry, and Seth told him to fuck off and get his own muffin, fat-ass (*and Seth didn't even like blueberry muffins and it hurt Seth so much, God, deep down in his guts he could feel it there and it just hurt the way nothing is supposed to hurt without killing you*). And the days carried on as if nothing had happened at all.

-X-

Much later, Seth comes home. He tries not to think about Evans every day (*they didn't even let him see Evans after they took him away*), but he does. He marries the wicked pretty Italian nurse, and her name is Rezzie. His friends thought they were marrying young at only 23, but his mother is elated. Seth loved her, fiercely, almost from the moment he met her. Rezzie loved him too, though she hadn't known it as quickly as her husband had. Seth knew that they would make it because even before there was love, there was youth and lust and that unnamed transcendent feeling that made you immortal. Seth believed in real 'true love', like children believe in magic.

Rezzie had long, wild chocolate brown hair and freckles that Seth somehow hadn't noticed until they had been married for six months. Her English was perfect, but her accent never quite dissipated and it made her very self-conscious. Her toenails were always painted black. She laughed when she was nervous. She hated New England Clam Chowder, and the first time Seth tried to feed it to her she thought it was a prank. They move into a tiny shithole above a Chinese restaurant just outside Back Bay. They could barely afford it but Rezzie liked being in the middle of the chaos. Where she grew up, nothing stayed open past 8:00 pm. Rezzie wanted to be where there was life, she would say.

Rezzie was not as superstitious as Seth, but she was also raised with very Catholic notions and never felt quite right arguing with his personal mythos. He had always had these funny ideas (*on their first date he got a bag of chocolate candies and ate all the yellow ones first, for luck*), and so it was a long while after they had

settled into their life together that Rezzie noticed that his superstitions had become something more. It wasn't her fault, she would later tell her therapist even as she was wracked with guilt.

"One time, he told me that... his mother's parking garage was haunted" she says to the counselor, almost laughing.

"What was the context of that conversation?" asks the older, friendlier woman.

"I guess it was right after we started sleeping together? We were talking about... something, I can't remember, and he just came out with it. Like it was just a fact: 'my grandfather is haunting my mum's building, we see him on the fourth floor of the parking garage all the time.' I didn't question him, I didn't even laugh."

"Did you ever talk about this again?"

"No, I just changed the subject because I thought, well, it's probably harmless... and it was too early in the relationship to call him crazy to his face, you know? People are allowed to believe in ghosts, aren't they?"

"Do you believe in ghosts, Rezzie?" asks the counselor

"Well no, but I still never parked on the fourth floor on his mum's garage."

Rezzie remembers that conversation now, lying in bed with her sleeping husband whimpering softly next to her. It had been hours since they had gone to bed and her strong, almost harsh face was still illuminated by the dim glow of her cellphone. She had a note app open, and she was counting the number of times that Seth had asked her 'what did you say?' when she hadn't spoken. When this started, almost immediately after they were married, it had been easy to dismiss as hearing issues from his deployment. But today she counted it 15 times, and Seth no longer looked quite convinced when she assured him that she hadn't said anything.

That night, he woke her up around 4 am to tell her she was talking in her sleep. And the following day, he accuses her of muttering things under her breath. The situation didn't start to seriously worry her until her husband began complaining about the neighbor leaving the TV on too loud, when the apartment next door had been vacant for weeks.

Remarkably, once confronted, Seth had no problem accepting that he was hallucinating.

“My uncle – the one who fell off that building – he had hallucinations too, my mom told me way after. Don't these things run in families?” he said, almost casually. “And it's not like they're saying anything sinister, right? It sounds like someone left a baseball game on in the next room. Or like, someone trying to get my attention, but they're just outside my peripheral vision, you know? No one is telling me to like murder my whole family or anything” he continues with a small laugh.

It wasn't enough to be worried about, and it certainly wasn't enough to bother a doctor over, he assures his wife. Rezzie, being a nurse, knew that this wasn't true. But she reasoned with herself that she and her husband spent almost all their time together, since Seth couldn't work anymore and stayed home during her shifts. She would notice if things got worse.

Coincidentally, things got worse. At first, Seth ignored the whispers as best he could. They never called his name, they hardly ever said anything recognizable as words to him. Until the day that they wake him up in the middle of the night with a

“REZZIE”

His heart pounding, he lays there listening hard, but the whispers go back to their unintelligible mumbles. As he lays next to his wife, he thinks that the far corner of their tiny bedroom is far too dark. Eventually, he falls back asleep. The whispers say his wife's name again the next day, and the day after, and twice on the

day after that. They never say anything more than just 'Rezzie', but it was.... wrong. It wasn't a call or a warning. It was a threat. Seth doesn't know how he knows, but everything in him tells him that his wife is in danger. Of course, he would never say anything (*he's just losing his mind his wife is fine it was not a big deal*). Seth continued to tell himself it was no big deal the day he saw a glimmering eye emerge from the dark corner of the room, and even as he sees a very wide mouth with too many teeth whisper his wife's name.

One day, Rezzie comes home hours before her shift in the ER was supposed to end, with a black eye and rapidly purpling welts around her neck. She says she's fine, and then starts to cry. Seth can feel his heart beating in his throat for the rest of the evening, as he sits and holds her on their (*too small*) couch. Rezzie apologizes for the crying, but can't stop. Seth cries too, but he doesn't tell her why. That night, the one-eyed thing shouts her name for hours. The next day, when Rezzie goes to work, Seth leaves their apartment with a heavy coat and no bags.

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Seth is jostled by the movement of the train car in his (*ugly dirty*) upholstered seat. The train is crowded, being a Tuesday morning. But the Red Line is always crowded. The passengers (*lawyers and policy-makers and students and tourists and moms and children*) stand around Seth. In reality they just stand, and Seth happens to also be there, but to Seth it feels as if they stand around him. Seth had always had difficulty believing himself worthy of other people's time and space, even before he started living on park benches. Now, he radiates remorse for imposing his company on these people. Seth's coat is thin for the weather, and his beard is long on one side of his face and singed on the other (*thank you hot ventilation grate and drunkenness*). He carries a worn duffel bag, and as he sits, he takes the time to sort through its contents. Inside are

a (*translucent red hard*) plastic cup from a cheap restaurant, thrown away for missing a large chip along the rim

a (*small greasy*) moving blanket stolen from the back of a truck

a Charlie Card

a travel toothbrush and toothpaste in an (*unopened*) plastic pouch that a well-meaning Samaritan had given him.

There were also

a box of cigarettes (*mostly*) filled with cigarette butts (*he didn't smoke*)

a pair of very dirty dog tags (*he never wore them*).

Seth remembers his first week on the street (*was it really so long ago?*) and Ada explaining “For a dollar and seventy-five cents you can ride the Red Line from Park St all the way to Alewife and back. That’s a whole 40 minutes of shelter, and it’s always crowded so it’s less obvious that some bum is riding back and forth. It’s still better if you get out and switch cars if someone is looking at you too much, just in case. I’ve never had the cops called on me but you never know these days.”

This was good advice on days that he could get enough money to put on his Charlie Card. And on some days when he had begged enough, Ada had continued, “sometimes it’ll be more worth it to grab a couple things off the dollar-menu and a handful of napkins. No use being warm if you’re just gonna be starving the whole time, you know what I’m sayin? And napkins are always useful” and she wheezed out (*what was probably*) a laugh (*it may have been a cough*).

Ada spotted Seth on his third day on the street. Apparently, she could tell he had no idea what he was doing. He had been sitting in the Common, fascinated by the erhu player who came every day. Seth had no

idea if the player was actually any good, since he didn't even know the instrument was called an erhu until Ada sat on the bench next to him and said

“this fucking guy, huh? He's here every single day with his little speaker and shit. Ever see him go on a bathroom break? Some lady in a big hat comes out of nowhere and sits with his erhu while he goes to The Thinking Cup to take a dump or whatever” and began to wheeze/laugh loudly.

Seth was alarmed at first, but the (*skinny filthy*) woman thrust her hand out and introduced herself. She'd been at the park early enough to observe him sleeping on a bench, with no blanket and clean clothes. She showed him the areas where the guards hardly ever patrolled, she taught him how to stuff crumpled pieces of newspaper between the layers of his clothes to trap the heat, and she warned him about which corners to stay away from if he didn't want his ass kicked. She smiled broadly (*her bottom teeth are so long and skinny they stick out of black gums like a rodent's*) and her face wrinkled in a leathery way around the eyes. Seth hadn't decided whether he liked her yet when they decided to hole up near each other for the night. When he woke up the next morning his wallet and phone were gone, and so was Ada.

Some days Seth feels the wind cut through all his layers to his spine, and on those days, he has to make the choice Ada had warned him about (*what use is eating if you'll just freeze to death what use is a warm seat if you're so hungry you can't sleep?*). Today had been one of those days. For the portion of the route where the train was above ground, the car shoved back and forth from the bluster outside and the age of the tracks. At least it's not the Green Line, where the alarmingly loud screeching of the brakes at every turn makes it impossible to sleep. Seth looks at the well-dressed figures looming around him and imagines they would resent the idea of having to choose between the misery of cold and the misery of hunger. Seth had felt both

so constantly this winter that he wasn't sure he remembered what it was like to be warm and fed. He puts everything back inside his bag, hugging it to his chest. He tries to sleep.

-X-

The profile of a face peeks out around the side of Seth's head. He doesn't seem to be able to look directly at it, but Seth can feel it there all the same. Its mouth is too wide, but otherwise it is a blackness with only shape and depth. Seth is sitting on a (*sticky*) wooden bench, waiting for the train at the Hynes Convention Center stop on the Green Line. He had come here a dozen times in the two years (*he's been away from home for so, so long*), willing himself to return to their apartment and then turning back at the pivotal moment. He had tried every path he could think of, had been to every other stop in the area surrounding Back Bay. It always found him (RUN), and he always fled.

The face asks him what he had expected would happen this time, but Seth doesn't really know. The face suddenly takes on a furious tone and repeats its question over and over (*and over and over*), screaming into Seth's ear until the sound is incoherent and becomes the noise of The Next Passenger Train Is Now Arriving. The train stops, and the doors of each of the crowded cars open. Seth is still sitting (*are you really waiting for a train if you don't care which train you get on?*) on the bench closest to the stairs leading up onto the street, and he feels the power coming off of her (*REZZIE*) before he sees her (*REZZIE*) step out of the train. She's (*REZZIE*) coming out of the last car, and she (*REZZIE*) hasn't looked up and seen him. Seth watches the pieces of his heart fall out of his open mouth and scatter into small white flowers on the ground, and feels the darkness looming next to him vibrate with excitement. A hundred voices chant her name. The darkness begins to grow, and grow, until the blackness is enveloping him so completely it feels like he is staring down

a very dark tunnel, and at the end.... her. The air is reverberating around her, sending off waves that pulse faster and faster with Seth's skipping heart.

He needs to get out (*OUT OUT*). He knows now, more than ever before, that he can't afford this risk. She won't understand, hurting her shatters Seth, but the darkness reaching for her (*REZZIE*) fills Seth with a panic that is like being injected with frigid water. She is making her way patiently toward the escalator with the crowd, she will pass him in a moment. Seth gets up suddenly and pushes his way across the crowded platform, trying to beat her to the exit. People shout at him and shove him back, he's causing a scene (*HEY man what the FUCK*), but he doesn't care. He hears her screaming his name as he tries to rush up the left side of the narrow (*so slow*) escalator. Her screams are drowned out by his own.

Seth runs out onto the equally crowded sidewalk, and keeps running. He turns right at the entrance and right at the corner and runs down this street, dodging the people that walk (*so slow*) along the shops and restaurants. The blackness is close behind. He keeps running until he reaches the park, sprinting across four lanes to the sound of honking cars. He collapses in front of a small fountain in the entrance of the garden.

The figure above the fountain has been bound up (*lumpy and white, funeral shroud*) in preparation for the winter. Seth, panting, stretches down into the small pool of dirty, partially frozen water remaining at the very bottom of the fountain. But as he raises his hands to wipe his sweating face, he sees they are covered in red. Seth looks down into the fountain to see the water clogged with flesh and gristle and hair (*THEY TOOK HIM AWAY HE DIDN'T EVEN SAY GOODBYE*). It clings to his hands, and just as he is about to scream (*Jesus Christ, what the FUCK*), a large, important-looking vintage car backfires as it drives past the garden, turning on to the street with the expensive shops. Seth jumps, looking around for the gunshot, and sees that the

garden has been deserted. He looks again at the water and sees only mud and rotting leaves. The sun is still shining as it starts to rain.

-X-

Seth despaired of getting any more money in the snowed-in park this morning, so he boarded the T. He found a white paper coffee cup by the entrance and sits down in the corner of the car, far away from the man at the other end with his head on fire. Time passes in weird intervals during these times, sitting with his head in one hand and the cup in the other. So he isn't sure how long he has sat when he feels a (*very small*) hand on his rough cheek. The small (*butterfly*) hand is connected to an arm is connected to a little girl (*wearing sunlight*) who stands too close to Seth and looks him full in the face. The child is warm, and seems to be glowing. He knows that she is human because angels (*and demons*) don't wear puffy yellow jackets. The girl says to Seth

"It's ok to be afraid"

And after a moment is yanked away by her mother, who looks at Seth with a face full of something cold (*he does not notice*). He is looking after the girl, who totters happily down the aisle towards the other end of the car. It is then that Seth sees that the corner of the compartment is shrouded in absolute darkness even in the (*golden*) afternoon light. Seth remembers, knows there is something in that darkness, even though it has been so (*so long, so so so*) long since it has come out to feed. Seth thought they had reached an agreement, assumed he had done what it wanted (*hadn't he suffered enough hadn't he hurt himself enough hadn't he*). But the blackness pulses when he looks away from it.

The only person who seems to notice the air warping slightly around the child is Seth. He keeps looking in her direction until the mother and (*messenger*) child get off at their stop. He thinks about her when

he stands at the Broadway station, he thinks about her when he counts and deposits his change in a busker's (*not an erhu*) hat, he thinks about her when he walks onto the crowded platform of the inbound train. Seth hears the approach, rhythmic and soothing, and the draft coming down the tunnel preceding the train lifts his long hair gently from his face. With the breeze, Seth feels a thrill, like a small electric shock from his navel to the top of his head. But this is quickly replaced by guilt. He feels terrible about inconveniencing his fellow travelers as he steps onto the tracks.

-X-

Seth wakes up in a hospital room. There is an IV protruding from one of the large veins on the back of his sun-spotted hand. A strange, very young man is sitting by his bed, reading out loud. His hair seems very fair, back-lit as it was by the light of the streetlamps outside. His nose is pink in his round, boyish face. When he notices that Seth is awake, the young man shuts the book and gives him a tentative smile.

“Hey, you’re awake! How are you feeling?”

Seth clutches the bed sheets closer to his chest and doesn’t answer. The room is too chilly and smells like a piece of bread that has been left too long on the kitchen counter. Seth always imagined hospitals to be clean and white, but this one has walls painted a (*terrible*) light green color, with pink and green and beige linoleum tiles on the floor. The curtains dividing his bed from the rest of the room are a dull beige, with flecks of the same pink and green, and some beeping equipment stands off to the right side of his bed. The room looks to Seth like it hasn’t been so much as rearranged since the 1980’s (*it definitely hadn’t*).

The young man grins, embarrassed.

“It’s alright, you’re in the hospital” the young stranger says with a chuckle. “I come here to read to the patients sometimes on my breaks. I work at the Starbucks in the lobby...”

When this fails to elicit any reaction, he clears his throat and says

“My name’s Pete, it’s nice to meet y—“

“I know who sent you” says Seth abruptly, in a rusty voice.

Peter starts at the suddenness of Seth’s declaration.

“I tried, ok? I didn’t die but I tried. It’s not fair! It’s not my fault! I tried to do what you asked and that’s the only thing I can do and I just want you to leave us alone now, ok? Please”

Seth doesn’t explain any further than this, and stares out of the wide, (*un-openable*) fourth story window. After another few moments of silence, Peter earmarks his book, gets up awkwardly from his squat vinyl-covered chair, and leaves.

Peter comes every day and reads to Seth after that. Seth had never read any of these books (*who has time to just sit and read*), but they are always tragic, which he likes. Peter carries on reading while the doctors help Seth figure out what is real and what is not. The heavy-set woman who comes every day and injects mysterious fluids into his IV: real (*probably not trying to poison him*). The creature with the blackened face who wakes Seth up every night with his screaming: not real (*Seth is the one doing the screaming*).

After a few days, the young stranger looks up from his book to see Seth staring at him, instead of out the window. Seth seems reluctant to speak, but when the young man stops reading, Seth asks

“Kid... do you wanna help me find someone? On Facebook or something. Do people still go on Facebook? I’m a little behind the times.”

The young man stares at Seth. He had said before that he didn’t have anyone to reach out to. Just as Seth was about to tell him to forget it, the young stranger bursts into a grin.

“Uh, yea! Yea, sure. No problem. Who do you want to find?”

“Well, I had this... friend. He’s dead now. I wanted to see if he had any family left. I know he had a cousin living in Philly. Do you think she’d mind if I asked her where they stuck him?”

The young man looks up from his phone for just a second. The look on Seth’s face is indiscernible. A few more bits of information lead to a possible match in a 50-something blond teacher living in Philadelphia, and the young stranger crosses his fingers (*he had worn yellow that day, it was good luck*) as he hits ‘send’. He wants Seth to have something good. Seth is smiling to himself when the young man looks up.

“This one time, right? Me and Evans and Mulley were fucking with this one kid in our unit. I think his name was.... Bill. Bill Rogers. Nice kid, real young. We fucked with him a lot, kinda. It was just too easy. He’d believe anything. We told him that if the Sergeant caught you trading cigarettes they’d take the chocolate out of your MREs. Sure as shit, poor bastard wouldn’t bum anyone a cigarette for the whole first month. So, this one night- “

Seth is laughing so hard that he has to stop speaking. The young man hands him a flimsy plastic cup full of water. Seth takes a gulp, holding the straw out of his way with a crooked finger. He keeps on laughing, and the young man begins laughing with him.

“One night, Evans gets into the crawl space under the barracks. Don’t even ask me how he fucking got under there. Middle of the night, too. Mulley and I were pretending to be asleep on either side of Rogers. He’s a light sleeper, you know. We had this whole thing planned out. Evans begins calling Rogers, right? ‘William... Wiiiilliaaaammmm’ Real spooky, if you’re superstitious and kind of dumb. So, Evans is under there, whispering his name and Rogers sits straight up in his bed and wakes me up to ask me if I hear that. Of course I tell him I don’t hear anything and go the fuck back to sleep. Mulley was on the other side, trying so hard not to laugh that I think he pulled a muscle. Funniest fucking thing I’ve ever seen was the look on that

kid's face. Get this- Evans does it AGAIN, a bunch of times. None of us slept for like a goddamn week. We never did tell Rogers that it was all a joke. Kid probably went into the shit thinking that the afterlife was already calling him. Fuckin Evans, man.”

The young stranger is laughing in earnest now. But suddenly, Seth's laughter turns into crying- the uncontrollable, shaking, frightened crying of a man who has suddenly found himself very old. The young man holds Seth's hand, because that is the only thing he can think of to do.

-X-

The new book that Peter is reading starts with a woman deciding to buy flowers herself. Seth rarely ever asked Peter questions, but this day he asks

“What is this book really about?”

“What's that?” asks Peter, looking up from the book.

“I mean... the book isn't really about a woman throwing a party, is it?” Seth is no longer sure if this is a stupid question and regrets asking it.

“Oh! Not really, no” says Peter. “It's about... people trying to figure out if they are truly happy with the way their lives have turned out. It's also about a man who loves a woman, as always.”

“And she doesn't love him back” says Seth. It isn't a question.

“She does, in her way. But she chose someone else.”

“But did he really love her?”

“I believe he did” says the young man.

Seth thinks about this for a moment, before saying, suddenly very sad

“Yeah.”

On the day before Seth's release, the young stranger is just finishing the book.

"I will come' said Peter" reads the young man. "But he sat on for a moment."

"Did you choose this book because it has a guy named Peter in it?" asks Seth with a smile.

Peter laughs.

"No, I don't think I'm that corny. I don't know... I guess I chose it because you sort of remind me of one of the characters."

The young man doesn't seem to be interested in explaining further.

"I liked this book. It seems very sad, even though nothing sad has really happened yet" Seth says, looking out of the windows again.

"Maybe it was in poor taste to read Virginia Woolf to someone in your... condition." Suddenly the young man questions himself.

"No, I really liked it. Sometimes feeling someone else's pain helps you understand your own, you know?"

Smiling, but not sure what to say, the young man continues reading.

"But he sat on for a moment" he reads. "What is this terror? What is this ecstasy? He thought to himself."

Seth takes the pills brought to him by a pretty nurse who enters his room. Her name tag reads "Sally". When she turns to go, she gives Seth a playful wink. The nurse leaves the room and nearly bumps into someone by the door, but doesn't apologize. There is a woman with one foot over the threshold, but she seems to be hanging back, as if she were unsure that she is in the right room. He recognizes the woman (*is she*

from a dream?). She is the kind of woman that you could just tell had aged beautifully. Her face is broad and brown with gentle lines around the eyes, and she has long, wild chocolate hair which is just starting to silver at the temples. She made the old man think of flowers.

She doesn't seem to notice Seth watching her from the far end of the room. She steps away from the door and walks back out into the hall. She stands there, facing away from the door. The traffic of the hallway flows around her as if they are small silver fish, and she is a rock in a stream. She does not speak to anyone, and from her back it looks like she is afraid.

"What is this that fills me with extraordinary excitement?" continues the young stranger.

Not looking up, Peter does not see the woman take several deep breaths and turn slowly around. He does not see Seth's eyes widen as the woman approaches. The woman does not knock, and she offers Seth a timid smile when she finally sees him, as she hesitates just inside the room.

"It is Clarissa, he said" reads the young man.

The woman and the aging man look at each other for a moment. The young man does not hear the woman start to cry quietly. Seth lets out a shuddering gasp and covers his eyes with both weathered hands.

"For there she was."