

A Man Alone

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IV

Water Water Everywhere

I managed to head into work on Wednesday still feeling very sore, but mentally stable, whatever the hell that means. I was weak having eaten nothing but a few saltines since Sunday night. But my bottle of water was never far from my side and was never less than half full.

See, mine wasn't like everyone else's bottle of water. I paid for my bottle because it came with Dr. Pepper in it—a whole liter. I dug the bottle from my trash that morning, rinsed it out, and filled it with tap water. I refilled it at the sink in the bathroom at work, okay? Everyone else paid for their bottle of Evian or Ice Mountain or Aquafina or Thor's Brand or whatever. And they paid out their asses for it.

If you go into McDonald's, they'll charge you something like a dollar for a twenty ounce bottle. In the movie theater, it's like two twenty-five. Water is getting more expensive than soda. Next thing is people will go into a bar and buy a shot of water instead of Puckers (as the ladies like) or Southern Comfort (like I like).

I just don't understand this bottled water thing. It's worse than cell phones. Everyone's got their own little container with what they feel is the best tasting water. Let me tell you something, water is supposed to taste like nothing. Water is two parts H and one part O, you got me? To call it anything but water is sacrilege. To put a catchy name on a ribbed bottle that looks more like a dildo makes me wonder if the water execs aren't laughing their asses off at everyone who sucks on one of their factory rejected dildos with tap water inside. It's cool, I laugh too.

I think a bottle of water is just a status symbol. People aren't that thirsty. Has it gotten so bad that people can't go on a fifty minute trip without a personal supply of water? People just want to look cool and since smoking is becoming less and less cool, water is okay because it's good for you and it makes you pee and people like to pee. It just feels good—but women can't aim.

At lunch my boss' secretary was kind enough to get me some chicken noodle soup from the cafeteria and I ate it at my desk, slowly letting my insides recall what food felt like. I was ready to bolt to the bathroom in case the old tummy betrayed me again. It was all okay. It had been seventeen hours since I last threw up and I felt pretty good. My boss even came up to me and told me he was glad to have me back. He stopped a moment before walking away to his office and commented that my color was peaked. No shit. He walked away and I rolled my eyes until I was afraid they'd pop out and roll around. One of the ladies in the office pool could then step on my eyes with a heel.

I rode out the rest of the day and did next to no work. I dozed at my desk some and nobody gave me any grief. To tell the truth, many of them felt pity for me. I'm the guy who comes into work half dead and tries bravely to not show my weakness. I should get employee of the month for that kind of crap.

Finally, at three thirty, I took off and drove to my dad's house. I pulled up to the house I grew up in and parked on the street. I chose the proper key from my set and let myself inside. Nobody was home yet, so I just sat on a recliner in the living room and watched a little television to pass the time.

Helen came home first. She banged the door around some as she wrestled in a few plastic bags of groceries. She set them loudly on the kitchen cupboard and went to her bedroom upstairs to change out of her work clothes. Three minutes later she came back down to start dinner. "Hi, Scott."

"Hello." How did my voice sound? No one at work mentioned it, only my peakedness.

"How is everything?"

"Fine."

"Excited about your brother?"

"Kind of."

"What do you mean, kind of? It's wonderful news."

My mom had lovely blond hair that curled at her shoulders. Helen's hair was dark and greying and short. Helen looked up from the meat she pounded with a tenderizer. "You look peaked; are you okay?"

I laughed and held my ribs from the hurt. "I'm fine, why?"

"Can I get you something?"

"No, I'm fine." Should I say it? "Thanks, though." How much time passed there? Too much? I couldn't tell.

"Are you going to join us for dinner? I can make enough for four."

"I think I'll stick around, but I won't be able to handle anything more substantial than soup or bread." I briefly filled her in on my condition. I just said that I was sick for a little bit and was still feeling under the weather.

She cooked and I watched the news.

Then my dad came home. He kissed her lips first thing, something he always did when leaving or returning. Without fail. Was it conditioned or what? Pavlov. If he ever neglected kissing her, did it piss her off? I smiled at it, but didn't laugh.

He came up to me loosening his tie and put a fatherly hand on my shoulder. "Hey, Scott." Wanna play catch? Let me tell you about the birds and the bees. "You look a little peaked."

"So they tell me."

"And your voice sounds strained. How are you feeling?"

"Better than I was yesterday. It was a small case of food poisoning, I think."

"Vomiting and diarrhea?"

I nodded.

"Did you drink fluids? Keep yourself hydrated?"

"You know it."

"That a boy." He took his hand from my shoulder but I still felt the weight there. "I'm going to change." I heard his steps go up the stairs.

Helen stopped prepping dinner momentarily to open a bottle of wine. She poured a glass for my dad and one for herself. They drank a lot of wine. Something like a bottle a night. They say wine's good for you—like a glass a day. (So three glasses must be great.) I mean, this isn't Europe. Okay, I understand that it's the customary drink with dinner and even kids have it over

there, but I just never got why my dad and step mom always had to have wine. She sipped some and went back to her meat. I always thought it was pompous to sporadically sip on a dry white wine while you tossed a salad.

Equally puzzling to me was how they could use the same fragile wine glasses every night and never break even one of them. If it was me, I'd be on my third set by now.

My dad came back down and snatched his wine in one hand while passing his other across Helen's back as he walked to the living room.

It should be natural for me. I should see Helen as my mom.

My dad plopped on the couch and opened the paper. I hate the paper. The smell makes me nauseous. When my brother first got his license he'd occasionally let me come with him on his paper routes that summer. I'd be in the back seat with the papers bagging for him if it rained or I'd read off the addresses for delivery if it was a newer route. But the thing was, we would leave late at night to get the papers and finish by five in the morning. At around three I'd start getting really tired and yawn a lot. And I was the one who always got car sick on family trips. I'd need to have him pull over every single time so I could throw up. I felt like such a kid. But he never told my dad about it. Each time he let me come along, I said to myself that I wasn't going to puke, but I invariably would. Fifteen times I went.

Plus, the newsprint gets all over your hands.

I saw my dad take a sip and when he put the glass back down and took his hand away, there were black smudges on his fingers.

The news on TV is bad, too. It's all sensationalism. Half the stories aren't even newsworthy. Sports don't affect our daily lives. Who cares what a bunch of rich jackoffs did the night before? I don't. Keep it off my news. The entertainment report: I don't care that Jack Nicholson is fucking Lara Flynn Boyle. If I had a quarter of a billion dollars, I could fuck her, too—and her family tree. Then there are the stories about Beanie Babies and Rosie O'Donnell and diet pills and this and that. Diet pills are not news. It becomes news when we find out that the pills kill unborn children and cause blindness. Thalidomide, now that was a story.

The only things that are really newsworthy are weather and traffic. I even get miffed about coverage of earthquakes and floods. And let's skip O.J. Simpson or JonBenet Ramsey.

I'm uninformed. I like it that way. I walk by people on break at work talking about Haiti and I'm content with being lost about the conversation. I actually said to someone: "What? We have troops in Haiti?"

Another sip. He doesn't know what to say to me.

I started flipping around the channels for something other than news I hated watching anyway. There was news on every major channel and unfunny sitcom reruns on the syndicated stations. Cheesy movies from the '80's starring people like Shelly Long and Don Johnson on the basic cable networks. Bad music on MTV, BET and VH-1. I gave up and settled on the preview channel where it scrolls text showing what's on each station. Give me a break; I was sick.

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My sister came home after five and kissed Helen and my dad. She didn't even look at me—she just went up to her room with her Tommy backpack slung over one shoulder.

It hurt. I tipped my head to one side as if I had been slapped. I felt like crying. My eyes stung from out of nowhere. I couldn't stand it, so I got up and went to the bathroom off the hallway leading to the front door.

Much of my color had returned. My eyes were glassy, though. My stomach started turning with its hollow feeling. Deep breaths only made it worse and I thought I was going to vomit again. I even positioned myself over the toilet when I felt my throat compress and contort on its own. Slowly the still strange feeling of nausea passed and I urinated a deep yellow liquid and splashed some water from the tap on my face.

I walked around the kitchen a couple times when I came out. It got on Helen's nerves when I did stuff like that. She never understood it. When I lived at home, sometimes I would come out of my room five and six times during the course of an evening and walk around the house—in and out of their bedroom and my sister's, even around the basement. I would just get antsy, so I left my confined room for the less confined area of the rest of the house. Strange? No.

"Can I get you anything?" Helen asked, opening a can of corn with a manual opener. I always thought she needed an electric one. She looked angry as she turned the little handle.

"No." I walked around once more and then to the front door. I looked out the two square windows at my old neighborhood. The first girl I kissed lived two houses down. The first girl I laid lived six houses down. They both moved out shortly afterwards. That made me the butt of a lot of jokes from my friends, but we did what we did because they were moving away.

There used to be a basketball hoop off on the side of my driveway, but they took it down the week after I moved out. The house next door had one with one of those little curved forms of metal that hung just beneath the net to return the ball so the kid didn't have to rebound for himself. I remember when you'd shoot it up and if it came down with backspin, it would bounce off the edge of the driveway and go shooting out into the yard. Then we'd have to run and get it. But now they got the return for lazy kids. I just don't get it. Basketball's about mobility more than anything. All we have today are kids who can stand in one place and put it up. You can't even lay it up with a ball return; you'd bang your hand.

I started feeling hot standing so close to the window. Nauseous again. A pain ripped through my right temple and that eye. I slammed my palm to my forehead as my body reeled from the stitch.

I backed up and sat on the stairs. I was thankful that I was out of sight from Helen and my dad. In time, it passed.

Three thumps from upstairs, from my sister's room. I stood and mounted the thirteen carpeted steps. I found myself standing outside her closed door. There were no notes or posters hanging on it. When I was her age I had crap all over my door. My favorite was a door knob hanging thing that said "Come in and see my prize-winning cock," and there was a rooster pictured. Helen ripped it down and told me she didn't ever want to see it again.

In the dimness of the hallway I must have looked creepy just standing there. I knocked twice. She heard me over the thump of the music. "Yeah?" came her muffled reply. It sounded short to me. I was nearly scared away.

I opened her door and the pastels assaulted my eyes: the walls where posters did not cover, the bedspread, the cushy chair, the drapes. I motioned if it was okay that I came inside with a sweep of my hand and raised eyebrows, even though it hurt my face. She nodded briefly.

I sat down on the chair. I had never done that before; it was very comfortable, like it was gently holding me. I didn't say anything for a long time.

She turned the music off and remained silent. She was looking over some school papers on her bed and continued to do so. I felt content watching. She was really pretty, I thought strongly and not for the first time. She had my dad's hair, a light brown with strands of blond. Her eyes looked so stoic, being large and dark like Helen's. The shape of her face she got from I don't know where. My dad's was long and thin and Helen's was round, but my sister had angles, tiny dimples, and perfect little features.

She yawned and covered her mouth.

She looked over the same papers again. She was ignoring me. "Kristy?" I winced at my voice all scratchy and pained.

She looked up and devoured me with her eyes. She hates me.

"Hi," I nearly whispered.

She put the papers down. "You're peaked."

It just wasn't funny anymore, so, without a beat I said, "Strange, I don't feel peaked."

I know she thought it was funny, but she was being stubborn. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm all right. I was, uh...how about you—what's new?"

"I don't know. Nothing, I guess."

We don't have anything to say to each other, either. "How's school?" Fine.

"Fine. How's work?"

"Fine."

We stared at each other. Her black eyes and my light brown eyes. I flared my nostrils rapidly. She began giggling—it always worked. I smiled back just happy to see she wasn't totally dead inside.

I stood up and walked over to her. She looked up at me, tendons in her neck straining. I ran my fingers through her straight hair being careful not to mess it up.

I went downstairs and told them that I was leaving. They didn't fuss besides telling me to continue drinking fluids.

In my car, the stereo wouldn't go loud enough to quiet the pain I felt inside.