

Not Happy, but Good

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Your brother came by here a day before.

Will was giving his customary investigation of Thrissur's environment. Elephant ecology had become a fascination for the twelve-year-old since the two had met, and lately the subtropical wetland had become the focus. He gave a questioning look at Thrissur, but neither the elephant nor his machine-brain interface interpreted the boy's body language.

"What was he doing here?"

Ah, he showed me his music.

"Mum says he needs to grow up and get a real job so he can afford a bigger apartment so he can get a girlfriend. But I like his place. He always says he's living the good life."

Thrissur made a rough baying that Will had come to recognise as a sort of chuckle. *Hmm, I think I prefer sculptures. But I like his music. You should bring him back here sometime. I actually wanted to show you what I'm making.*

Will expressed his excitement, and Thrissur grabbed him around the waist, hoisting him behind his head. Together, they plodded to the edge of the marsh and paused.

"I don't see it." Will said disappointedly.

Thrissur gestured with his trunk. *Do you see that mat of grasses? Look carefully at the shapes and colours.*

Will felt foolish that his eyes couldn't discern a pattern among the clumps. Will feigned comprehension with a generic compliment.

That baying again. *If you can't see it, it doesn't matter. I'm not finished yet.*

Something in Will's mind pulled at him: his mother was requesting his presence.

"Sorry, Thrissur. I have to go." They bid farewell, Will promising to return soon.

The virtual landscape dimmed to be replaced by the stars behind his own eyelids. His eyes fluttered. His mother was standing over him.

"William, I'm taking you to your brother's. I need to run some errands, okay?"

Will nodded, blinking away his inertia. The superimposed virtual objects glowed patiently as the physical world crept into focus. Will felt there was a warmth to having a lot of virtual objects in his surroundings.

Will went to the front hall to wait. He called up his personal directory and opened the context of his last painting session. Memories flooded back, hurling him into the process as though he'd never left. Using a digital paintbrush, he continued with the details on an elephant standing next to the six others.

"More elephants, Bud?" His mother's eyes flickered as her AR changed to see what Will was painting. An icon appeared at the edge of his vision to indicate that his layer was being viewed by her.

She praised his handiwork and grabbed his hand, "You should repaint some of those older ones to match the newer guys. But later. We gotta get going."

Devon had taken him to a virtual space that seemed like a living room of foreign design; whatever culture it was from, they were sparse decorators. It was textured with light-coloured woods and woven grasses that gave off a distinctive scent. An active hearth sat in the centre.

"I don't get it, why would Mum want you to get a bigger place when you can simulate all the space you want!"

Devon was sitting cross-legged before the hearth, eyes gazing into the dancing flames. "Dad told me not to hold it against her. Mothers are just like that, sometimes. She means well, she wants a good life for me, but my 'good life' and her 'good life' look very different."

Devon idly stroked the virtual textures of the floor, drinking in the sensation. He looked up; his curt demeanour was hypnotising. Will shuffled.

Devon's tone was unbalancing: "You have to find Your 'good life', Billy. Don't let anyone make you live theirs."

His features dissolved into a softer, playful expression. "A friend made this room for me. Isn't it neat?"

"But the real surprise comes out when you start playing."

Devon clapped and dissolved into three clones, each standing with their own instruments. The Devon playing an electric bass counted off a slow beat and the others fell in line.

The music had a steady melody in the bass, supported by sparse chords from guitar and keyboard. It brought ground to Will, and he resolved to find which of the Devons were recordings. He inspected the three faces, but each were entranced in their musical role. Will pushed his own face closer and the bassist chuckled. "C'mon, Billy, check out the room!"

It was then that Billy realised what was special about this room; each minute detail was responding to his brother's composition. The grass-weaved floor writhed with chord changes, and the hearth's percussive crackling was in complement to the melody.

It was magical and he felt encouraged to dance with the room. Pride welled within him for his brother's talent.

Between the road and Devon's apartment building, there was a narrow strip of grass. When Will got tired of dancing, the brothers went outside to play touch rugby. They had simple rules: three chances to run around the other, stay on the grass, no AR assistance.

On the first play Devon was quick to read Will's habitual opening attempts to feign left and right before attempting to duck under Devon's arms.

On the second play, the boys squared off about three metres apart until Will charged forward and play began. He skidded to a halt just out of reach of Devon's long arms. Will yipped in triumph, but was too slow to change his momentum and Devon's arms closed around him.

The last play: They squared off again, Will watching his brother's eyes for any lapse in focus. An opening — maybe — and he feigned a sprint through the closing apartment-side gap but instead made for the road-side boundary. Devon was quick, but Will couldn't fold back on his path lest he lose the play. He pushed forward towards the endzone.

"Wait, Billy! Don't go into the street!" But Will ran with reckless abandon. He cast his eye over his shoulder to see his brother running faster than Will thought possible. Devon hit hard and flung him to the ground.

Will winced as he straightened himself on stinging knees. "Hey! Don't shove!" He dusted off his hands gingerly, which were raw and bleeding. "No fair. Why'd you do that, Dev?"

A pause. He turned.

Devon was lying in the road.

His mother was unable to get time off work and without school, the week passed slowly. Will spent the days lying on the couch, crippled by both acute fits of tears, and a chronic failure to ignite a flicker of interest in anything real or virtual.

Presently, Will found himself in his bedroom. A clutter of objects — both virtual and physical — were strewn about the room. The closest of objects, a stack of books he had read in the last year; its dull light an itch against his mind.

Needing a piece of his brother, Will called up the two albums his brother had given him. Devon had asked him to design the artworks, then had taken them to professional artists for the final rendering. At some point, it had made Will feel so close to Devon. Now, he could only stare through them, unable to bring himself to play them.

They dematerialised and fell from his hands. The lifting of their simulated weight irritated him further.

Unwelcome tears blurred the physical world, but the pristine augmented objects were nettles to his bruised ego. Frustration boiled the air in his lungs, scratched at his throat, and vented in a stream of meaningless nothings. Embracing distraction, his small hands curled into fists and hurtled at the large stack of books. They cascaded over the floor dramatically — only to dematerialise and re-render into their neat stack.

Infuriated, he took another wild swing, but something blurred and unseen tripped him. He stared up at the ceiling, willing his vision to narrow on the only blank surface in his room. He kicked and screamed until exhaustion brushed at him; humbling, shaming him.

As he slipped into restless slumber, Will felt grateful that his mother was at work.

Until Will's mother finally got time off work, her face had been a porcelain visage of concern. It hadn't been just once that she found him writhing against oneiric terrors. Now, the mask was showing cracks.

Through some feat of strength, her tears slowed to a trickle. In a wavering voice, she invited him to sit with her. They had to organise themselves. Slowly — excruciatingly — they swapped details of how best to honour Devon.

An uncomfortable sense of appreciation laced around Will's throat. He hadn't been old enough to remember his father's funeral, but his mother still listened ardently to his suggestions.

"We should use his music —" *of course*, "— his Latest music."

There was a strained pause. "Do you have it?"

Something defensive burst out of Will. "No. Can't you just look at it like you do my paintings?"

"Sorry, Bud. I-I can't." His mother's face was awash with emotion. "Your brother's a grown up, so his things are encrypted."

"What's 'encrypted'?"

"It's like a lock. Did he ever tell you about any 'keys' or 'passwords'?"

Will wasn't understanding, and tears were welling out of his face. "I don't know."

His mother cooed him, trying to hush the stem of tears. "Billy, it's—"

"Don't call me that!" Will broke down, beyond consolation.

Devon's room had always been sparse, but it had never felt so empty. Without his brother, Will couldn't access any of his digital decor; all that was left was a second-hand couch and blank walls. His mother had come to collect his possessions, but there was nothing to collect. Instead, she sat blank-faced on the couch, taking in what had been her son's room before giving Will space for his own ruminations.

With his mother gone, Will's conviction broke and his vision misted. Breathing deeply, he wrestled with himself and once-happy memories.

Eventually, he sat down where his mother had sat — and his brother before them — closed his eyes and willed himself into the virtual space. There was no record of any space overlapping his physical location, so Will tried to manually specify spaces owned by his brother.

A locked directory was returned.

Desperate, Will tried to guess names of people, places, dates that were important to his brother, but after a score of rejections, Will's desperation could draw no new answers from his memory. His only option was to save the encrypted directories to open them at a later time.

As he got back into the car, Will's mother didn't ask any questions. She had seen the look on his face and was afraid to further hurt her son.

For most of the next few days, flashes of purpose would claw at Will, wherein he aggressively interrogated the encryption. Most of his time, though, was spent staring off into space, ruminating over the ransom.

In one fit, he sought to educate himself on the basics of encryption. His research revealed that a key could be much more than just a word. Audio or visual media, even spacial contexts, and memories could be used to share encrypted data. Will attempted to use the artwork for his brother's two albums, every song in his collection, any augmented memory he had of Devon — but to no avail.

During the ceremony, Will had grit his teeth and read from a card while Devon's first album played. He had never found the key, and the funeral was all the more painful because of it. But in his determination not to lose an even temperament, he resented himself for delivering a mechanical eulogy.

Strangers had come to the funeral and most were now back at their home for the wake. Will had wanted all of them to love Devin, to admire him as Will had, but he felt ill in the saccharine ocean of polite words and commiserations. He repeatedly felt the pressure to confront emotions that were hard enough grappling in private.

Will absconded to his room, fighting to control his breath. He still felt exposed and vulnerable. He retreated further, escaping into a virtual representation of his house, devoid of interlopers.

He went to the front hallway, took out his brushes and painted. Over the mural of elephants, Will desperately scratched out a likeness of his brother. He threw up colour under the lineart to instill a sense of substance.

Something tugged at his mind, but he ignored it. It pulled again, and this time an icon appeared at the edge of his vision — his mother was in the simulation with him.

She stood patiently behind him. He let the brushes derender under his fingers, and brushed his hand over his brother's face. He took a step back and just let his arm drop. Together they wordlessly observed Will's mural.

"I was so hard on him. " Her voice was shaky. "I just wanted him to be happy."

It was difficult to move the words from his throat to his tongue. "He was living his good life."

A sob escaped her — followed by a longer moment of silence.

"Why didn't he just live with us?"

Somehow, Will felt the answer, but he couldn't articulate it — and his intuition told him not to try.

"I just wanted what was best for him."

Will projected a memory for his mother to see.

She means well, she wants a good life for me. "He knew. He was living his."

She dropped to her knees and they embraced. Under her face, his shoulder grew warm and wet.

After a while, his mother held him at arms-length to look at him. "Are you living Your good life?"

He looked away, admitting that he didn't know.

A comforting hand moved from his shoulder to his cheek. "It's okay. You're young. I didn't know what my good life was until I met your father. And then your brother was born, and you surprised us — and both of you helped me endure the loss of your father. And now your brother. I want you to be alright, but not knowing is better than ignoring the life you have."

Will pulled back into his mother. He recognised the fear of not knowing inside him. Gingerly, he tried to let go, but that fear was holding him in kind.

“Have you seen your elephant friend lately?” There was a pain behind her voice, but also understanding. “When I lost your father, I needed my friends very much.”

Will, pensive in his reply, answered, “No.”

“Don’t neglect yourself.” She warned gently. “Humans, like elephants, are social creatures. No matter how solitary your character, it’s important to have that support. We can suffocate as much in a vacuum as in an ocean.”

Thrissur’s cheery greeting was repulsive. Will couldn’t help it, but it was an affront to how he felt. Remembering his mother’s encouragement, Will mustered a salutation. Thrissur responded to his hollow tone.

At first Will was going to tell him, but the words got stuck in his throat and all he could manage was a weak sob.

Hey, it’s okay. I’ve got something to show you.

Will was glad for the diversion. He acknowledged that he wasn’t ready to share yet.

Thrissur grabbed Will around the waist and placed him behind his head. They rode together to the edge of the wetlands. The mat of grass had been draped across the reeds and the thicket of colours now popped out to Will, enough that he could see the outline of an elephant with a human riding on his back. To Thrissur’s alarm, he burst into tears.

“He’s gone.” Will managed.

Who?

Will called the directory to show Thrissur, but there was something unfamiliar in the way it responded.

>> Context acknowledged. New User registered.

Guardedly, Will probed again. The registry opened into a bouquet of virtual spaces, music files, vlog entries, and much more from Devon’s life.

“Thrissur, did you know about this?”

What is that?

Will took a deep breath. “It’s what’s left of my brother.” Then, with more confidence, “Thank you.”

Thrissur didn’t respond. Maybe he didn’t understand, but Will was eager to explore this new world that had revealed itself to him. Noticing a tag named ‘my good life’, Will explored the tag and activated the most recent music recording.

“I want to show You something.”

They were transported to that oriental living room. Thrissur had shrunk to the size of a labrador to fit in the room.

“You have to find your ‘good life’, Billy. Don’t let anyone make you live theirs.”

It wasn't just a music recording, it was their whole interaction.

Devon clapped and the bassist counted off. The music filled Will with a sweet bile, but he forced his attention on the brothers' interaction, trying as hard as he could to weed regret, shame, and guilt from joy. He saw the unnoticed looks of the real Devon, watching his little brother inspect the pre-recordings.

Devon laughed. "C'mon, Billy, check out the room!"

"Do you see it, Thrissur?" But Thrissur was much more attentive of the environment than Will had been.

The recording ended with a loop of tableaux. Will stayed staring at the slideshow of the happy brothers. An interplay of sharp and soft emotions rolled around inside him. He couldn't tear himself away, and Thrissur could tell.

Thank you for sharing this with me. I enjoy your brother's music.

With stilted farewells and a promise to visit again soon, Thrissur left.

After a long while, Will opened his own directory and created a new tag: 'my good life'. He might not know what that was yet, but he would follow his brother's example and try to catch as many experiences as he thought worthy.

His mother was waiting for his return. The sun had set and just it was the two of them in the house again. She gave him a bittersweet smile. "You look happy."

"Not happy." He offered her access to Devon's directory. "But I'm good."