

Piece of Mind

The heat was relentless. He woke from the uncomfortable ambience of the van. The warmth from the comfortable day was magnified by the van's roof, and it was very noticeable. He couldn't sleep any more if he wanted to; it was too hot now. After waking, he looked at his surroundings. How different they were than they should have been at this point in his life. Only a year ago he had gotten the 'go ahead' to claim an abandoned mansion as his own. However, that same week, the land was purchased and the building was demolished. Instead of a homeless cripple, he could have been a king.

But he had gotten used to the statement 'all good things must come to an end'. He knew that phrase all too well; almost any time something good was promised him or became apparent, it became quickly destroyed or shown itself to be an illusion and nothing more. He thought back in history, maybe something there could explain it. His parents had met at work in their twenties. Dad was a jock- he had even earned jacket letters for football, basketball, and track. His mom was five foot two inches and wore a size one dress. It would be a case of 'love at first sight' but 'love' based solely on physical attraction could hardly be called such a thing with any sense of honesty.

His mother was an identical twin. Her sister was a 'problem child', always doing things her way which often landed her in trouble but she was honest about the trouble she caused if questioned. His mom, however, was always a 'goodie-little-two-shoes', or so he was told. It was when she had no supervision, however, that her true self emerged. With her sister's face, she stole kisses. She acted out and got in trouble, but which sister was blamed for it?

His father was a different story. His family's mind was from the past- only planned children within close proximity to their other children's ages were accepted- even from married couples. He was neither planned nor near his brother and sister's ages. His siblings were already grown and had moved out by the time he was born. They never considered him family and did not want to acknowledge him. Being cast out by his own kin led to depression, which he was already predisposed to. Our hero would be given the same gift, but for other reasons.

He wrestled himself out of his blankets. They were necessary to keep warm during the night, but the daytime changed the feeling of 'warm and comfortable' to 'hot and restricting', like a huge firey python. If only it was a true snake; the ancient beast's scales would be cool to the touch always... unlike the fork-tongued humans outside the van.

He greatly preferred callous, angry, abusive people than the prior. The outright onslaught from such people was reliable. People who seemed nice often showed that they were farther from it

than their opposition, but it took anywhere from days to years for it to become recognizable. A kind word here or there, a pat on the back, a smile or the sharing of food were all just tools to get him to release confidential information about himself. This information would be immediately put to use to hurt him, without the oppressor gaining anything but satisfaction of hurting someone else.

But few people considered him human, anyway. He came to relish it. He saw how abusive, manipulative, racist, prejudiced, malicious and cruel humans were, and to be considered 'not one of them' was the highest of honors. He was lonely of course, knowing that he wasn't just emotionally alone, but that he was the sole member of an outcast humanoid species, unwanted, unloved, and unacknowledged.

It didn't matter. He needed to eat something. He was always hungry when he woke up. One of his few friends knew it, and both were cooks. When the subject of our discussion gave his friend a place to live in his apartment with his dad, his friend would periodically wake him up to feed him freshly made breakfast. He didn't like being woken up, or being awake- or asleep for that matter, but to be woken up to be served hot food was not only acceptable, but heartfelt and appreciated.

He shrugged off the memory. That didn't matter, either. He reached for the box of donuts on the dashboard of the van. Not fresh, uniformed, whole, or purchased- but given in pity by the clerk at the closest convenience store very early in the morning, before the sun came up. If it hadn't been retrieved when it was, it would have been in the dumpster. It was still edible, and that was all that mattered.

It wasn't far from the happiest he'd ever been, actually. If only he could still drive the van he lived in. But the government branch which decides whether someone is a potentially safe driver or not had revoked that legal ability almost a year ago. It was a happy life before then- going to work up to seven hours early to assist the gentleman whose position he replaced at nine at night with whatever he needed to do in the daytime, or just as a companion so he wouldn't be bored the entire work shift all alone at the warehouse. When the co-worker would get hungry, he could not leave. Our guy could go at any time since he wasn't required to be there and food could be acquired for the both of them. Then night would come and the work shift would change. The large white owl, whose species he never could definitively identify, would fly along the outer fence looking for field mice. Assuming the owl to be male, he even locked his gaze and flew in a circle about the night guard in which we speak. It was somewhat confusing. He figured that the owl was only out looking for food, but why would it stare so, maintaining its view while flying in a complete circle, their eyes locked? Though the bird was big, its pure white feathers and kindred spirit showed it to be simply curious. It reminded him of a pillow, and he was unafraid of the large beast.

Not that he was frightened by small creatures. She had died recently, but he had once had a pet rose hair tarantula. She was much bigger than females of her species were supposed to be (female being the larger sex), nearly half the size of his own head. He was initially afraid of her, but kept her well fed and watered, with the closest thing to a natural environment he could make within her cage. After his emperor scorpion died, she was the only pet he had, and he wanted to feel the consoling touch of another, so he let the spider out. Eventually, neither was afraid of the other and missed each other greatly even with short times apart.

After having her for the better part of a year, he was too tired and his legs too weak to go out hunting for crickets for her to eat. Instead he left the outside light on, which attracted moths. He decided that putting the moths into her cage would be insufficient, she would be unable to catch them. To decrease the maximum movement range of the insects, both spider and moth were put into an insect carrying cage, one similar to what children catch butterflies in. Despite her constant loss of feeding interest when someone was present, especially making noise, the moths flying about antagonized her metabolism. Even with him watching her and cheering her on, while carrying the cage and it was in motion, she paid no attention as the moth was such a treat to her that it overwrote all other factors.

He had to move and could not take her with him, so he had his cousin take her. The cousin promised she would be okay. But she was starving herself. Even giving her giant moths to eat simply did not interest her. Without him, she refused to eat much of anything and it was very distressing to all three. When she molted, she ripped off one of her own legs because it was not anchored properly and she bled to death. Before she did, however, she went up against the glass as close to him as she could get. She put her front right leg on his right index finger and did not last much longer. It was what she had trained him to understand as a spider hug, a kind of love that almost no one anywhere has ever been privy to.

After he got off work, he would drive into an alley where the residents paid no attention to what vehicles were and were not there or for how long, and the police did not patrol as it was a maze of sorts, and the road difficult to spot to begin with. At about noon, he would awaken not from heat, as he was parked under some gentle-looking trees with a full canopy, but from requiring a restroom. The college was a good choice, he was enrolled there anyway. There he had hundreds of people in which he could choose to talk to, and he was able to get some excellent networking done because of it. At approximately six in the evening, class would start. After that, he would go to the convenience store to buy a sandwich and soda, since the combination often rendered the sandwich free and only the soda had to be paid for. He could afford it, plus it was cheaper to eat there than it was to eat at his next stop. It was a diner, very close by, renowned not for service or food quality, prices or even location- but that it's simply open all the time. He would get a french vanilla cappuccino and sip down free refills while working on his computer. The

manager was kind enough to plug it in for him, and would show sincere interest in the game he was playing, program he was writing, or movie he was watching. There weren't many customers at that hour, so even if it was feigned sincerity, it was at least something for him to do.

By the time the sun began to rise, he would be back home. Home, of course, being the school parking lot, parked in the corner out of the way where no one wanted to park anyhow. He would speak greetings to the morning security at the college if he was still awake, he was a veteran with many war stories and weapon schematics and proper use instructions to tell. He wondered if the nice old man knew much else, he figured he did, but people often speak of the things they are most familiar with. He was a game designer, and the soldier's information, which annoyed many people, as they told him so, was excellent insight to him. Much of it impossible for him to gain on his own. The guard would wake him up in the afternoon, just in case he had daytime classes. He wasn't supposed to, but did periodically and when he did, the security officer's wake up call was extremely appreciated. The stern, but kind guard even gave away his holiday bonus to him- a gift certificate for a steakhouse. But what was the point of receiving a gift without being able to give one? Nothing that was offered was accepted by the guard. He just wanted to offer something he was capable of offering to someone in greater need of it.

The college hadn't only given him the right to sleep outside and a place to feel welcome. He had met many people there, and one in particular changed his life. For the better, he hoped, but he still wasn't sure. On the last day of his first required math class, the girl that he couldn't help but stare at had no way to get home and was going to randomly ask people because the ride she had set up flaked out on her. Our hero, nervous, decided to offer a ride since he had a van and no one sat in the passenger seat anyway, and it was not as though he had anywhere to be. He assumed that someone as attractive as her would be rude in her dismissal of his offer because of how much higher her physical charisma was than his own, but she instead she accepted. He wondered what happened, but said nothing. He did as a man should do- led her to the car, opened her door first, and closed it for her once she was ready. Along the way to drop her off, she told him that she loved him.

Love! He hated that word more than any other. It made memories of his mother saying it to him claw their way through his brain, directly to the surface, then punch him in the face. Distinct timeframes he could remember properly placed him in junior and high schools. He would be at home, which at the time was living with his mother and sister in the southern part of the free country's state that makes the entire world think of sunshine, in a town known for the scent of bovine fertilizer. If he was having emotional trouble of some kind, even inadvertently caused by his mother speaking ignorant words, she would ask what is wrong. He knew that if he showed emotion, he would be put away again as he was before. He was terrified of that happening again, so he did not want to speak, and only wanted to be left alone. This would anger her, and cause her to yell and scream at him until he either had to use the entirety of his energy to not cry, for

fear of antagonizing the situation, or fail and show how he felt. At times like those, she would ask him to sit down on her bed for her to give him a hug. It was her who hurt him, and to be touched by someone who caused such pain was the last thing he wanted. She would then become even more irate and would demand that he do as commanded. Once embraced, she would tell him that she loves him. That one word spoken in that way hurt him so much mentally that it caused physical pain; even more so than when someone hit him in the face with a rock.

Months later, he and the woman he drove home were talking to a sociologist instructor they both had respect for, and were students of, and the woman admitted that the moment she told him that she loved him, the look on his face stated that he wanted nothing more than to kill her, but didn't do it because it would be unchivalrous since he had promised to help her. Unbuckle her belt, open the door, kick her out with his foot, and run her over on the freeway repeatedly. It was exactly what he wanted to do, and did not do so for the exact reason she stated. Plus he did not want to have to meet anyone in prison who practiced abusive homosexuality, and going to prison to begin with almost guaranteed everyone to meet *that guy*.

But that time had passed. Instead, he now lived with a friend whom he lived with previously. This friend had seven cats, and because of them, the house was filthy to the point that if the city knew, it would be classified 'uninhabitable'. One of the offending cats, the emaciated black and white, was put to sleep less than a month ago, but its transgressions were still spread throughout the house. Two- well, now one cat, the fat gold male, also refused to use the litter box and would only urinate on all the furniture, floors, walls, computers, televisions, and anything and everything else in the house. His main urination location was in the kitchen, of all places. The target locations also included the humans' pillows who lived there, even while they were in use. The family had kept the two described cats for over ten years, and the damage to their home was so severe, that each family member (except the sister) had brought up, in apologetic tone, as they knew the house would have to be rebuilt from the inside out since all of the wood was at least partially eaten away and moldy from crystallized feline hydration. He thought the repugnant beasts should be put down, but it was their house and their pets. He just wanted to clean up the puddles so it wasn't so offensive to the nose- but the sister screamed at him if he tried. She also threw his food away- and not just the food he rescued from the trash at the convenience store in the middle of the night. Food purchased or made that day that was put into sealed plastic sandwich bags which contained a sandwich type the bag was meant for, put into the refrigerator. Quoting exact words, she said it was 'disgusting'. *Sister*, let me tell *you* what disgusting is. Two of the other cats were also sick, both calicos, one obese and one emaciated, who vomited in just as tidy a manner as the pissers. The four of them, without question, did not create the feeling of sanitation; unless one confuses the word to have the same meaning as *sanitarium*.

She would yell nearly at the top of her lungs (which was apparently all she knew how to do) that if he didn't like the pee and barf everywhere he could leave. The mother never disciplined her

children which is obvious, but was nice enough to let him set his computer up in the dining room since the family didn't use it. It was of no surprise to him that it was never used. If he had to put up with a family member who behaved in that way, he would also have erratic eating habits and eat as far away from other family members as possible, so it had to be acknowledged that much less. Thinking about it, the sister and his own mother behaved pretty similarly. The wireless router was very close, so the computer was easily able to connect to the internet via thumb drive wireless adapter. Online, he could shine with his personality, and his social awkwardness, physical impairments, emotional weakness, mental disabilities, nor lack of monetary prowess could dull his sword.

There, online, he was popular. Not entirely famous mind you, but known well enough that any who recognized him- or depending on his character avatar- her, knew it was someone who could be counted on. He could tame dangerous beasts, slay the greatest of evils, protect the weak, supply the strong, train the green, and knew the lore of the fantasy world's history and forgotten locations that were once populous. He didn't know everything- but always knew who would know something if he himself did not. Here he could be who he always wished he could be- healthy, strong, respected, rich and famous.

He needed to concentrate. He would be maintaining his online neighborhood and many friends there, but would be moving physical areas within days. He was told that he would have free reign of the couch and the space beneath it, and room to set up his desktop computer that he just got, but that was about it. He wondered about that... There was surely enough room to set up the gaming console cupboard that he had made, since everything fits all nice and neat, snug and secure, vertically. One system takes the same space as seven, and the friend who he was going to be moving in with already had one console set up; surely there was enough room- there had to be. He would have to see when he got there, but more importantly, he just wished that it would not be a joke like the one played on him when he was a child.

It was not the kind of joke that people with any decency laugh at, unless it is simply laughing at how ludicrous the situation was. His parents were divorced when he was young, at an age that he can't remember accurately, and the psychiatrist suggested that a divorce is traumatic on a child, so he should be put in a mental institution. Being a wise woman who considers the consequences of various dominoes in the cause and effect of various stimuli, his mother informed the shrink that such a thing is far more injurious than could be stated in words. Oh, that's right, it is the opposite of what happened. While in the institute, he was molested. He told his mother who periodically came to visit him, but she refused to listen, which continues to this day. He could see the playground where he used to attend school, the children able to look through the chain link fences at the 'weird kids' incarcerated there. Regardless of how popular they were when they went in, they surely weren't when they came out.

The true hilariousness was that when his mother was getting him into the car to go, he remembered that he was told they were going to see his nonna, which is Italian for grandmother. As stated, that is clearly not what occurred; though it was but a single brick, as the musician who sings of building a wall against trust and emotion would say.

He hoped that he would soon be able to have income despite being unable to work, so he could get a new van, one that functioned, since the other became inoperable from a combination of recent disuse and previous overall system failure due to insufficient funds to cure the vehicle's ailments (a condition he felt he shared). This van would have an interior meant for habitation; but there was the problem of no legal driving ability... or was there? He had made enough 'nice nice' with the 'po po' that they would not dare arrest him. He had helped with too many stings, too many arrests, too many foiled burglaries, gang activity and street racing. The police knew that even if he DID do something illegal, it would not be worth it to the city to prosecute since having him as an ally meant easy incoming funds from criminals he caught, but even ticketing him once meant that it would immediately stop, and the money was too good to pass up.

He thought of the three personality types, organized visually as gamers, or those who play electronic games with as much available time as they can muster. Most abundant is the player, who has fun on their own, with or without help, alone or with others. The carebear, who is lost alone but easily has fun doing whatever their peers are doing, and more often than not, provides supporting roles. Last, and most definitely least, is the griever. The griever has fun by ensuring that no one else is having even slight enjoyment, let alone fun. They make the carebear cry, they anger the player, they break the rules and laugh the threat of punishment away. Whether gamer or not, he decided all people fit within the three categories.

He thought of the reason he was at college to begin with. He wanted to show the world that not only did he have the right to live, but that he was the greatest game designer in the world, or at least currently. He but had to find sufficient investors to realize it as well, to take a chance and a gamble (which he assumed is their vice) to make their money back and gain the prestige he already had online, but more so. He wanted to shine, to dream, to live and be healthy and not be so lonely that his body temperature would actually drop (noticeable with a thermometer) by multiple degrees when he cried. He did consider it impossible, the same impossibility of reaching up to the sky and pulling down a glistening star, a single grain of sand to shed its own magical light. But that is how legends are born, and of what he understood of humanity, people are predisposed to becoming inspired by the underdog's tale. He decided that though impossible, he might as well try; the only thing holding him back is the world and its darkness, the other companies already in existence not wanting a newcomer to threaten their income, the doubters who never believed but will demand swag the moment he gets it, and the griefers who like to

ruin everything for everyone everywhere all the time. However, these were but weaklings by comparison to an even more powerful force. He had to conquer his own self-sabotage.