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Back to Nothing

by Jeffrey Rindskopf

My dim reflection warped before disappearing from the pitch-black coffee as I tossed in a scoop of powdered creamer. It twisted like smoke, turning the French roast an inoffensive light brown like it always does. The sandy-haired waitress asked me if I needed anything else in her stilted voice like she always does. No, nothing she could offer me.

I took my first sip of the coffee—too hot. I folded the burnt tip of my tongue over itself and watched the surly Filipino cook grunt his way through a ham and cheese omelet. The other waitress, his rail-thin daughter, openly fiddled with her phone. Her eyes were a long way off. Returning from another table, the first waitress stuck a slip of paper above the grill. She was painfully attractive. Her bouncy curls, the shape of her ass stretching the black cotton of her skirt, her porcelain skin—all taunted me every time I had my morning coffee there on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. Coincidentally, those were the only days she worked.

Lewis and I had plenty of laughs daring each other to ask her out, or failing that, to slap her ass, to seize her in a passionate embrace, to propose to her on the spot. Passive bullshit, you know. “Commitment,” Lewis always said, “could make anything work. Slap her ass, and when she turns to you with that expression women get when they feel violated but flattered, just raise your eyebrows like it’s nothing, because it is nothing.” For all his confident talk, even he never made a serious move on her that I saw, and I suspected he was kept in check by the same uncertainty that I was.

Thursday mornings I’d come without Lewis and fix my thoughts firmly on her. Her nametag said Linda. Before it happened, I would watch her in my peripheral and just wonder. *I could ask her out today. It would be easy. Just say it: would you want to grab dinner with me sometime?* Eventually, I’d knock myself down a few pegs. *I’m can’t ask her out. Who the hell am I kidding? As if I’ve changed overnight, as if today will be any different from any other day.* It all knotted my stomach and haunted my thoughts as I drained the coffee down to the few grounds that had escaped the filter and ordered more. I never stopped drinking coffee, no matter how bad my twitch got or how many hallucinatory flutters I’d see in the corner of my eye. She would fill it up for me and flash a polite grin, and the thoughts would start again, until I had demolished my self-esteem to rubble. The perfect start to my Thursdays.

Now, I didn’t spare a single second on her. It was a Monday, but Lewis’s usual seat remained empty and I thought only of him. Or rather, the lack of him. One week before to the day, maybe to the hour, Lewis vanished before my eyes. Not like how a magician vanishes, more like how money in the bank vanishes. Really vanishes. We were talking

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about coffee. There was nothing else to talk about, so we felt compelled to fill the silence. We filled it with coffee. Lewis could make any topic interesting, and he was railing on the lack of quality coffee in America.

Watching Lewis on a rant was a treat. I could've sold tickets, \$10 general admission, eight for seniors and kids. "Real Columbian Coffee,' they say. 'Taster's Choice,' they say," he barked. "These must be some pretty fucking indiscriminate tasters. Are they part-time tasters? Do they get paid for tasting coffee? What's the criteria to become a taster—do you need a PhD?"

"They must get bribed."

"Exactly, you think some lowly taster is going to challenge the Nestle corporation when they could starve him out if he decides, 'hey, this coffee tastes like shit'? Or some Columbian grower is going to have a press conference to say they aren't actually using only his coffee beans?"

"Maybe a courageous grower," I offered.

"No. No is the correct answer. There's no check on their power or their lies, so they could sell dirt as grounds and rabbit shit as beans and call it the best thing you'll ever drink." Lewis slammed a hand on the table, adding punctuation. He sat back, confident that his point, whatever it was, had been made. He sipped his coffee and grimaced. I chuckled.

We lapsed into silence. Even Lewis couldn't keep the conversation going constantly. We busied ourselves—Lewis whipped a sugar packet back and forth as I scanned the diner. It was deserted save for us and the staff. They still seemed to have plenty to do. The waitresses were out of sight washing dishes, and the cook had his back turned, wrestling with the sizzling grill.

I noticed then that Lewis's expression had changed and his body seized up. His grin disappeared and his face went empty, except for the eyes. There was fear behind them. He didn't move and neither did I. I chuckled, confused, and looked around to see if I was missing something. I asked something useless but he didn't respond.

It started at his hands. I looked down at the table, where his hands lay flat, eager to escape his unrelenting stare—I've never been good with eye contact. His fingers had turned translucent, showing the checkered-red-and-white of the gaudy tablecloth beneath them. I tried to blink it away and moved my mouth stupidly so that I might say something useful. I slid my hand across the table to where his hand once was. It was gone now.

The hallucinatory phenomenon of transparency, of total disappearance, spread outward from his fingers. Crept up his arms and along his chest and didn't stop until it had consumed him whole. We were both silent, his face still frozen. His torso disappeared but for the fluorescent

lighting that bounced off it and the shadow that darkened the linoleum booth behind him. His head was the last thing to go—his eyes, it seemed to me, but maybe that's because I was staring into them the whole time. Eye contact wasn't quite so painful all of a sudden.

An adult contemporary song played faint over the speakers. Otherwise, there was silence.

It must have lasted ten seconds, but every second stretched to hours. There were no thoughts abuzz in my head, no concerns for my appearance, no self-imposed pressures to fill the silence. Only my eyes and his, nothing else, in Lewis's last moments on Earth. Or in this dimension, or in this universe, or in this time. Hell, I don't know. His last moments in some form or another.

He left me staring at the crack where red linoleum met creamy drywall where he once was. I remember that square foot of wall and those seconds of immovability better than I remember my first sexual experience, my first day of school, my first kiss, even the look on my father's face the last time I saw him.

No one else saw. The waitresses blundered on in insufferable ignorance. Linda returned, ending my trance, and asked if I wanted anything else. "No."

His coffee cup was still there, the weak Peruvian blend swirling slowly to a stop. He had been stirring it mindlessly only seconds before. Linda swooped it up along with the plate that had held his beloved blueberry muffin. I had to say something.

"Excuse me," I managed. "Did you happen to see my friend leave?"

She gave me a curious look, probably the longest she's ever looked at me. "I don't remember you being with someone, sir. I'm sorry." She returned to the kitchen. I watched as she threw the dishes into the industrial sink, pouring out the coffee and dissolving the artificial blueberries he left behind.

* * *

I haven't been to work since that day. I sat through a typical day, but I couldn't take another typical day after that. My mind roamed wildly through possibilities as I went through the script for calls, assuring dissatisfied customers I sympathized with them plenty, but was unable to do anything.

"Let me speak to your supervisor," a hefty-sounding woman said. But I was lost, weighing the possibility of alien abduction again. "Are you still there?"

“Yes, I’m still here,” I lied.

I promised myself I wouldn’t return to the library this morning. I had spent most of the subsequent waking hours poring over research books and sifting through the internet on a computer that operated at a snail’s pace. I needed to busy myself with other things. Go to a movie, play a sport, go hiking—No, not hiking. Too much time alone to think.

Realistically though, I knew I would be back at the infernal gothic building come tonight, searching through periodicals in vain until closing time when I’d hide in the men’s room stalls to stay undetected for the night.

I ended up at home last night, somehow. I remember leafing through a hefty volume on Kierkegaard and watching a blond slink by in a skimpy tank top. Then a stretch of foggy darkness where memories should have been—the longest one yet. I came to standing at the door of my apartment, which I’d left to rot for who knows how long. A dozen notes were taped to the door, one on top of the other, each complaining about the smell. I opened the door, and after that, I couldn’t blame them. Chaos, the natural state, was reclaiming its 500 square feet. The overwhelming odors from the dishes left in the sink and the compost in the trash bin made the air thick. I managed some sleep despite it all but found the bed too soft and woke up with my back killing me. I stared up from the bed for an hour or more, insisting to the blank walls and stucco ceilings of my apartment that I wouldn’t return to the diner or the library again. They didn’t buy it for one second. More likely I wouldn’t return to the damned apartment, now a foul-smelling relic from another life. I didn’t go for Linda anymore—I had come to loathe the sight of the waitress whose modest beauty once entranced me. I went now for myself and for Lewis, for some shred of hope that drifted further from reach each second that passed without hearing Lewis rant on and on.

The books and online articles started out relatively concrete. From the Wikipedia article on spontaneous combustion, to books attempting to shed light on history’s most mysterious disappearances, to endless literature on abductions and cover-ups. And down, down, down the rabbit hole. I’m surprisingly well-versed on philosophical history by this point, but little good it does me. Aristotelianism, cynicism, objectivism, utilitarianism, existentialism, postmodernism—useless trash for my purposes, unless I needed kindling to start a fire. I read one book by Kant that had no ending. The last ten pages or so were ripped out—some kind of sick joke, I guess. It tortured me to no end until I became convinced that those ten pages had the end-all, be-all answer. The universe itself, I imagined, was the one playing the joke.

I never considered how few friends Lewis and I had in common until he was gone. I had no way of contacting his family or friends. He was self-employed, some daring modern artist, pushing the extremes of what can be aesthetically beautiful or some shit like that. I never asked to see his art because I didn’t want to lie to him, say it was beautiful and that I understood his intent. His other friends were the same, artists of his ilk

that would find me intolerably *passé*. Our friendship was self-contained to the diner. The bastard didn't believe in social media even, pretentiously condemning it as the new opiate of the masses.

There was no one to contact. I considered calling the city pigs, or taking the L train to his neighborhood to start knocking on doors—hundreds upon hundreds of doors.

I realized only after his disappearance how little I really knew about Lewis. He struck me as a lively extrovert with little use for routine or silence or passivity or conflicting opinions—everything I was not. Maybe that was simply the self he projected for my sake, while his artsy friends knew him as a shy, tortured soul.

How little I knew, how little I know, how little I will ever know.

Linda approached the table, the cook a few steps behind her—probably the first time I'd seen him away from the grill. Linda's false smile didn't flicker across her face like usual. She stopped at my table's edge, the cook practically growling behind her.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave," she mumbled delicately, wringing her hands. "You're scaring the other customers."

I was scaring customers? They should have been more worried about the ogre sweating and shedding into their omelets, or about the possibility that they too might fade from existence like the man none of them remembered. But sure enough, every pair of eyes populating the silver-rimmed tables was squarely on me. I checked myself in the adjacent windows, but they were too smudged to make out any reflection.

I needed to escape this diner anyway, I decided. It reeked of Lewis. Then again, I felt reckless.

I turned my face back to her and snarled, "Make me."

* * *

The joke's on them, I thought as I rubbed my sore ass, bruised after landing on the cracked pavement. I didn't pay for my coffee, nor could I have paid if they'd let me stay—my accounts are all overdrawn as of yesterday. One too many cups of coffee and one too many packs of cigarettes. My wallet is little more than a useless lump of bovine skin in my pocket now. Same for my cell phone which powered down after idling a few nights in the library.

I hopped on the M train west, back to my apartment. I stood the first half of the ride, and distracted myself by trying to stand steady without the help of the steel poles.

In the dark tunnels between stops, I spotted my dim reflection looking back at me over the heads of businessmen burying their noses in pulp novels. I understood then why they booted me from the diner so unceremoniously. Matted hair hung past my cracked eyes to my sunken cheeks, and each article of clothing threatened to fall from my withering frame of a body. My reflection looked lonely, so I tried to imagine Lewis's next to mine. It flickered in and out of existence, but I couldn't will it for longer than a millisecond, even in my imagination.

A third of the passengers got off at a stop. I took the open seat farthest from the other passengers and avoided my reflection like a Gorgon. I looked at my fingers. They smelled like stale metal, with city soot embedded in the curves of my palms and dried ink deep beneath my fingernails.

My thoughts circled back to Lewis. I was so god damned sick of thinking about Lewis, every second of every hour of every day. I had no solace in sleep. I dreamt of him constantly, telling me reassuring things or terrifying things or morphing into a fleshy monster. His words would vanish with him each time I awoke.

I pondered the possibility that I was insane—that Lewis had never existed. I was a pitiful man, I reflected, the exact kind of isolated, insomniac wacko to concoct a glamorous companion to fill those long hours spent in a miserable all-night diner waiting for the sun to rise. Not the most comforting idea, but I tried to talk myself down. I had heard Lewis, felt Lewis, seen Lewis, even smelt Lewis. Hadn't I? It seemed lazy, like some contrived twist ending to a bad movie. If I was truly crazy, what suddenly ended my lengthy delusion called Lewis? I turned the thought over in my mind for five stops or so, but I couldn't accept it as a real answer. Like so many other possibilities, I abandoned it. Another one on the pile—a possibility but one that just didn't feel quite right.

And like that, nothing was left. I'd exhausted every option—alien abduction, spontaneous combustion, enlightenment, kidnapping, teleportation, holograms, aurora borealis, existential dilemma, solar flares, poison, invisibility cloaks, self-actualization, black magic, possession, paranormal activity, and now my own insanity. Deep down, I knew each could be true. I could stumble upon irrefutable proof that any one was true, but I still wouldn't be satisfied. A simple answer wouldn't make it all better.

Time sped around me, unstoppable, but I didn't care. My stop came and went. I was still staring down at my hands, but I didn't focus on the soot between the grooves, but the intricacies of the fleshy grooves themselves. These hands could blend in with the subway seats behind them at any moment and for any reason. Or for no reason. Maybe then I would join Lewis wherever he was. I alternately flexed and relaxed fingers, skin tightening and loosening around bone and muscle beneath.

My hands enthralled me in some bizarre way. I felt everything against them and within them. I felt the thousands of blood cells coursing through purple capillaries surrounded by a vast system of nerve endings, each made up of more cells that together contained a blueprint for this great, hulking being they were unwittingly serving with their every movement. Muscles dyed red with blood contracted and released because of some instinctual reflex drilled into them by my ancestors, our ancestors. Layer upon layer of skin protected it all from the malicious atoms that I could feel, even see bouncing against the outermost layer of my skin, which contained more cells, more living things ruled by function and habit, each believing it acts alone. And all of it a part of me, another being likewise surrounded by more and more living. And all us living stretched on and on beyond this planet, beyond this galaxy, into an infinite nothingness, which itself was another enormous living being inside another infinite nothingness, like a Russian nesting doll that never ended. That being, like all of us, would die before any time at all had passed to feed new budding cells that might one day join together to create a different being, still somehow the same. And on and on and on, all in these hands. For a moment, I saw the spotted tile behind my fingers as the flesh faded.

The bus screeched to a stop and a lanky dark-skinned man came on board. He held a stack of flyers above his head. "Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen! I am truly sorry for disturbing you, but I am not asking for charity! Rather I'm..."

A homeless man with leather skin took the seat across from me as the train lurched back into motion. He gave me a steely look and nodded his head once. I turned my eyes down, and let my hands, as solid as ever, fall back to my sides.

Damn, I thought as I shut my eyes and sprawled across three seats and drifted off. I almost had it.

Jeffrey Rindskopf was born in suburban Los Angeles and raised in Orange County. He attended college at Chapman University, majoring in screenwriting with minors in English and psychology. Currently, he works in online journalism while pursuing creative writing in his spare time.

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