

The Forgotten

I flipped a quarter to the bum. He looked new; I don't recall seeing him around here before. But then again who pays attention. They're bums, right?

"I remember you." He says in that gritty voice.

"What?"

"I remember you." It's that voice. Some people say that the eyes are the window into the soul, but I think it's the voice. A person's voice tells you a lot about what they're like, what they've been through. Bums all have the same voice. Raspy, bitter, decayed. Just like their souls.

"Do you now?" I replied, not that I cared if he remembered me, I just felt like killing time, and conversing with bums was always good for a little entertainment.

"It was--back then." He said it in a sadly nostalgic way.

"Back when?"

"You wouldn't know." I actually found myself becoming interested in what he had to say. Most of these crazy

dudes muttered incoherent shit. But this guy's incoherent shit actually peaked my interest. "They want you to go away." The sadness in his voice was turning to anger.

"Who does?"

"Them! All of them!" he spit the words out, pointing his hands in all different directions, as though he were accusing the world. "They want you to disappear! You don't exist no more!"

"You exist. I see you. You're right here." I hoped the sarcasm in my voice didn't sound too obvious.

"Aagh!" He waved me off. "You don't get it." I guess it did.

I kneeled down near him, like I was trying to gain the trust of a stray dog. I even held back the urge to hold out my hand, palm up. "Explain it to me." He just looked at me. I didn't see hate or anger in his bloodshot eyes anymore. It was just this sadness that he couldn't tell me something.

"Never mind. Thanks for the quarter."

I remained there a moment hoping he would reconsider and tell me his little secret. But he just rolled over on side and went to sleep.

His loud fart was my cue to leave.

#

I arrived at work the usual time. Fifteen minutes late. Cameron had stopped yelling at me about it months ago once she realized she liked me too much to fire me. The Common Ground coffee house sits right in the business district, the usual business men in expensive suits and blue tooth's wandered in and out all day long. Every once and a while a line of about eight or ten of them would form, every one of them talking on their blue tooth's. I would feel as though I were in the middle of a well dressed schizophrenic's convention.

"Wouldn't it be funny if they were all talking to each other?" Cameron said to me once. She said it loud enough that every one of them could hear it, but they were so wrapped up in their own little worlds they paid no mind to any of us coffee grunts behind the counter.

#

I always take my break in Cameron's office. Usually we talk about nothing in particular, but sometimes she has to get a certain something off her chest, like today.

"I'm giving the Assistant Manager job to Allison." She said.

"Cool."

"I would like to give it to you. I like having you around and I know you can do more. I know you can handle the responsibility."

"Thanks anyway." I said as I pushed the remains of my chocolate croissant into my mouth. "But Allison's a good responsibility person."

Cameron sighed and turned around, almost defeated, almost. Immediately she spun back around. "You're too old to make eight dollars an hour for Christs' sake." She sounded like she was trying to be motherly, but she could never pull motherly off very well.

"Then give me a raise." I smiled but she didn't find it funny this time.

"I pay you what you're worth."

"Oh, thanks." That didn't hurt.

"You know what I mean." Now she sounded like she trying to be apologetic, she didn't pull that off well either. "You're always late; you only do as much as is needed, you don't take on extra responsibility. If you were eighteen that would be one thing, but at your age?"

"You could fire me."

"I've considered it. I thought maybe if I fired you, you would do some serious re-thinking about your life and turn over a new leaf."

"It's entirely possible I could do that, sure." I almost made it five seconds before I started laughing. Cameron didn't make it to three.

"Besides, who would I tease the suits with if I fired you?"

"Allison?" I volunteered.

"She has the sense of humor of a turnip. A great employee but wouldn't know a great joke if it..."

"Threw a pie in her face?" We just sat there trying not to laugh. After a moment I got up. "I appreciate the thought Cam, I really do. I'm sure someday I'll figure it out, whatever it is. But right now I'm good where I'm at, really. I'm happy." I glanced at my watch. "I think my break's up."

"It was up five minutes ago."

"Oh." I hustled out the office hoping Allison wouldn't notice I was late, which, of course, she would.

"Just think about what I said." Cameron said as I rushed out to the floor.

"Sure." I called back. I really hate lying to her.

#

We close at five; the suits either rush home or to the bars for happy hour. Coffee is the furthest thing from their minds. I walk the long way home. These days it made

no sense to hurry back. My mom's new boyfriend Chuck would be home from work and he reveled in pointing out my flaws.

By the time I got home mom was just paying the delivery guy for dinner. Tonight was Chinese. Her recent promotion at work made it difficult for her to get home in time to cook dinner. And Chuck, well, Chuck was a man so God forbid he does anything girly like cook.

I gave mom a hand setting the table and Chuck wasted no time setting into me.

"Maybe if you came home earlier you could cook for once." He said in between gulps of beer.

"Maybe if you took a shower you could fix dinner."

"I'm a working man. Working men get dirty."

"Garbage men get dirty." That'll get him.

"Sanitation Engineer, you little prick!"

"Charles!" Mom drew the line at Chuck calling me names.

"Yeah Charles, take it easy. You almost spilled some of your beer."

"What are you trying to say?" It was so pathetic when Chuck tried to be tough. I always had to hold back the laughter. Not for his sake, I knew it would upset mom. There was never any doubt in my mind why she hooked up with this loser. She and I got along great, and after dad left

I did my best to make her happy. But women have needs, and as much as my mother and sex can never be in the same thought I know she has her needs. And at least Chuck doesn't physically or emotionally abuse her. He has his moments where he's genuinely a sweet guy to her. He just hates the task of being a step-dad. Or at least, he entertains some notion that he is. He actually makes her happy when he's not riding me, and I suppose eventually I'll move out and make things easier for them.

After the table's set and dinners portioned out Chuck settles a bit. Mom pours him a fresh beer and he seems as happy as a baby with a sippy cup. Sometimes I picture him wearing nothing but a diaper and a bib, holding a beer with a sippy cup top. He babbles and squeals and spills beer all over himself, laughing as though this were the most fun he's ever had in his little life.

"What's so damn funny?" He asks through a mouth full of orange chicken and chow mien.

"Nothing." I got serious about my Chinese again.

"Life's just a joke with you isn't it?" Well that didn't take long.

"Charles." Mom made her usual attempt to stop him before he got going. It was nothing more than a show to let me know she cares, but I knew she could never stop him.

"No. No, I want to know what this guy's deal is."
Even though he was looking at mom he was talking to me. He liked to do that, talk to me through mom, or should I say insult me through mom. "A man his age shouldn't be living at home with his mommy. A man his age should have a real job. A man his age should have responsibility." I knew he was serious because he didn't even touch his beer. "A man his age living the way he does is barely a man."

"Charles, stop it!" Good show mom. Now Chuck turned his attention fully on me.

"You make me sick just looking at you. You make me sick whenever I have to see your mother work so hard to support your sorry ass."

"Well, maybe when I grow up I can be a garbage man like you, Chuck."

I'm not sure which pissed him off more; the garbage man comment or the fact that I said Chuck like it was a dirty word.

"At least I have a real job, I have responsibility, I do my part." The fact that he wasn't yelling tipped me off that he was seriously pissed. "Your mother is blinded by her love for you, but I'm not. I see you for what you are."

"Do tell, Chuck." Profane could not begin to describe how Chuck came out of my mouth.

"You're the garbage I clean off the streets. You're the filth that stinks up the world, and I have to live with you."

"How profound, Chuck." I gave a golf clap just for flavor. "How long did it take you to write this little diatribe? Did it sound as marvelous out loud as it did inside your little brain?"

By now Mom was crying. This was the buzzer that ended our nightly game. "Good work, Chuck." But he was too engaged in consoling my mother to really care anymore about me. I grabbed the remnants of my dinner, liberated one of Chuck's beers and headed for my room.

"You're nothing!" Chuck yelled after me. "You're nobody!" This last outburst set my mom off and Chuck would now spend the rest of the night apologizing. He would exhaust himself explaining how he was using tough love to make me get off my ass and make something of my life. I would now be left alone.

I shut the door to my room, turn on the TV, plop my ass on the bed for a night of nothing much. I didn't really watch anything in particular. For some reason Chuck's words kept rolling around in my head. Normally I just told

him off and split. All his crap would go in one ear and out the other. But tonight I couldn't turn him off.

#

When I woke the next morning I was still dressed. I feel like I'm hungover but all I had was one beer. I'm not that much of a lightweight.

I roll out of bed and do my usual morning routine. Shower, dress and hightail it out of there in case Chuck's still home. I never know his schedule so two days a week I got an earful before breakfast. I don't see him around so I figure he's at work. Not a bad start to my day.

I head up to the Mayday Diner. Three times a week I treat myself to breakfast there. They have the best pancakes, not to mention the best server, Emily, she's this 22 year old actress wanna-be. One day I figure I'll get the guts up to ask her out. Of course if I can manage to buy myself a car, get my own place and make about five times more than I do I might stand a chance. But for now our courtship shall consist of pancakes and bacon three times a week.

While thinking about pancakes, and Emily, I almost miss seeing it. A garbage truck rolls right by me, Chuck's garbage truck. I spot his dirty face in the cab. He's staring right at me, I almost want to give him a sarcastic

little wave, or even a sneer, but something he does makes me stop. Actually it's what he doesn't do. He doesn't do anything. He looks at me and then looks away as though he doesn't even see me. I stop to watch the truck pull over by some cans. Chuck hops out, grabs the cans and empties them in the back. He drops the cans back where they belong and right before he hops back in the cab he looks at me again. But this time he stares at me a little longer and then gets in, shuts the door and the truck drives down a little ways more.

Chuck's giving me the silent treatment? Cool. Things are looking up.

I arrive at the Mayday with a bit of a spring in my step, maybe if Chuck decides I don't exist then I can pretend he doesn't exist and we won't be on each others backs all the time. Why didn't I think of this sooner?

"Hey there." Emily says as I take my stool at the counter. "Usual?"

"Absolutely." I watch her move as she grabs my cup and the pot of coffee. I take in her face while she pours and feel happy when she smiles. "I always used to think it was really cheesy when in movies or on TV a waitress would say 'usual?' and the guy would go 'sure.'" And she knows

exactly what he wants and how he wants it. But I have to admit, I really like it."

"Nothing wrong with a little routine."

Nothing wrong with it at all. And through our routine we go. She pours me three cups of coffee and serves me my pancakes with extra butter and my bacon extra crispy. We make our usual small talk with the usual bad jokes.

A bit of a rush comes in and Emily gets distracted for awhile, but I don't mind. It gives me time to think about a few things and make up my mind. I'm going to do it. I'm going to ask her out. To hell if I don't make shit for money and if I live at home with my mom or don't own a car. Maybe she doesn't care about that shit.

She passes by me with a smile to drop off my check. I pull out a ten, my bill will be \$6.85, it's always \$6.85 and I always pay with a ten, no change. I watch her as she takes an order then hustles over to the cash register to ring up another customer. I stand and grab the bill, even though I know what it'll be I always look at it. I like seeing her name at the top where it says; "Emily - proudly served you today". But this time the bill is blank. There's nothing written on it, not even her name at the top. That's weird.

"Emily, I think you gave me the wrong bill. This one's blank."

"I'm sorry, sir. Where were sitting? I'll print up your check." She says with a stale smile.

"What do you mean? I'm right at the counter, where I am every day." I point to my stool.

Emily looks over at where I had been. "You...were just at the counter?" I look over and saw my place had been cleared of everything, wiped down and reset all in the five seconds it took me to walk over to her. I turn back and notice a strange look in her face. "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't recall serving you this morning."

"Emily, what's going on here?" Emily didn't usually joke around like this.

"Do we know each other?" I saw it in her eyes, she wasn't kidding.

"What are you talking about? I'm here all the time always at that stool. Three cups of coffee, pancakes and crispy bacon. 'The usual'. Remember?" Emily began to look around for help from her co-workers. Adrian, one of the bus boys, walked over and gave me the evil eye.

"There a problem here, Em?" He says this without looking at her; he just stares right at me.

"This man has a problem with his check."

"What's wrong with it, Ace?" Adrian knew who I was, and he never called me Ace. Ace was reserved for those who were about to get kicked out on their ass.

"No problem, look, I don't know what's going on here, but here's what I owe you for breakfast." I lay the ten on the counter. "I'm late for work so I'll see you around." Emily doesn't make a move for the ten, Adrian does. He picks it up, looks it over and then hands it over to Emily. I back up to the door as they watch me go. "Careful crossing the street, Ace." I have never seen Adrian aching for a fight like he was now.

What the hell was that about? This is by far the most fucked up thing that has ever happened to me. Someone must be trying to play some weird joke on me.

#

I arrived at work a little early, 10 minutes late. I hustle into the backroom, my day had taken a really strange twist and I just want to get over it and on with my day.

I duck into Cam's office, take off my jacket and grab a clean apron out of the hamper.

"Cam, you wont believe what happened to me this morning."

"Excuse me?" Cameron had a strange look on her face.

"Emily, you know the girl at Mayday..."

"What are you doing in here?" She looked pissed.
I've never seen her this pissed before.

"What?"

"I said what are you doing in here? Who let you back here?"

"I let myself back here, I'm starting work." Is Cameron in on this too? "What the hell's going on Cam?"

"Employees only are allowed in the back area. I don't know who you think you are but you need to leave, now."

"OK, I'm not taking this anymore. It was bad enough when Emily did it and Adrian pretending he wanted to kick my ass, but this too much. Who started this?"

"Sir, you need to leave now or I'll call security."
Cameron had her scissors in her hand, blade out, like a weapon.

"Did Chuck put you guys up to this? I got to hand it to him; I didn't think Chuck had it in him to pull off a joke like this." I hate to admit it but Cameron actually had me scared with those scissors.

"I don't know a Chuck, and I don't know you, you need to leave right now." She actually lifted the scissors a little, not enough to be a threat, but just enough to let me know that if I tried anything those blades would go right in my gut, or lower.

"That's it; I've had enough of this little joke. You want to pretend you don't know me? Then why is my name on the schedule here?" I went over to the bulletin board and put my finger on the schedule where my name always is.

But the line was blank.

It wasn't that my name was just off the schedule, the whole line was blank like my name and work schedule had been erased. Right in between Allison and Tracy a long blank line ran across the page. This proves nothing. "So you erased me off the schedule, but I still got you." I went over to the linen closet.

"Look, you need to leave right..." Cameron edged for the phone with her scissors at the ready.

"After that episode two months ago when Allison changed the schedule and didn't tell me and I missed a day of work, I've kept a copy hidden, just to prove that a change was made if she ever pulled that shit again." I had them now. I never told anyone about my hidden schedule and I changed the hiding place every week. I opened the linen door and found my hidden schedule. I looked at it and found where my name should be. It was blank. Where my name should be a long empty line ran the length of the page. "What the hell?" I turned to Cameron who was now on

the phone with security. Now her scissors were held up, she would definitely stick me if I came any closer.

"Yes, he just came into my office...No he doesn't work here, I have no idea who he is...I don't think so, he's not acting high, just really strange." The look on Cameron's face was one I had never seen before. It was one of fear. She was actually scared of me. I slowly walk to the door, grab my coat and split.

On the way out I looked at everyone, Allison, Tracy, everyone I worked with. Some of these people I had worked with for three years. They all just stared at me like I was some sort of freak.

What the hell was happening to me?

#

I need a long walk this time. I keep trying to put it all together. The deal with Cameron at work had to be a joke, but how did they fix the schedule I hid? I suppose I hadn't been hiding them all that well and they cooked something up for me. But what about Emily and the check? I didn't think anyone knew about that place, I sure as hell never told anyone, the Mayday was my escape. If Chuck had been planning this I suppose it's possible he followed me around, but that was highly unlikely. That kind of

planning requires serious thought, and Chuck is seriously incapable of that. Nothing about this day made any sense.

#

When I got home I saw mom's car out front and Chuck's motorcycle next to it. If Chuck had anything to do with this he was in for some shit.

The door's locked. More weirdness, mom never locks the door when Chuck's home. They only lock it before bed. I grab my key and slide it into the lock, but it doesn't work. The key won't turn. What the hell? Did Chuck think he could lock me out now? I knock like a fricken' Jehovah's Witness. My mom finally opens the door. "Yes, can I help you?"

"Why is the door locked?"

"Excuse me?" She says. She gives me the look that is becoming very familiar to me. "Who are you?"

"Oh, give me a break. CHUCK! You got my mom in on this now!"

Chuck quickly runs up and gets between my mom and I. "Who the hell you yelling at?"

"You! I've had enough of this shit OK. You made your damn point, I'm a nobody, I'm nothing. I'm going nowhere with my life. I get it!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Chuck always talks down to me; he loves yelling at me and just being a dick. But the tone in Chuck's voice was not one of just being an asshole. He was being protective of my mom. They were both afraid of me. Some stranger on their front porch was screaming at them as though he knew them and this made them quite nervous.

"Chuck, what did you do? How did you get to everybody?"

"Look man, I don't know who the fuck you are or what drugs you're on but you better get gone and soon." Chuck wasn't kidding, but I wasn't about to give up either.

"Mom, it's me. Your son."

"I don't have a son, please go." It breaks my heart to see her scared, especially of me.

"Mom, why can't you remember me? It's..."

I know that if Chuck's fist hadn't shut my mouth at that exact instant, that if my mom had just heard my name she would have remembered me. I'm just sure of it.

#

I just sat on the bus bench trying to wrap my mind around it. I barely notice the bum when he sits down, that is until his stench hits me. I look over; it's him, that

same bum from yesterday. He gave me that same sad, knowing look.

"I remember you." His dirty voice grated on my eardrums.

"You're the only one." I say offhandedly. Wait a minute! "You remember me?"

"Yeah."

"You really remember me? From yesterday?" From before all this shit happened he remembers me! "How? How do you know who I am? No one knows who I am, not my mother, my friends my co-workers. Nobody. How do you...?" Just then I knew this guy had my answer. Somehow I knew this filthy, drunken urine-stenched bum had my answer. "What's happening to me?" I practically beg him.

"It happens to us." And suddenly his dried, cracked voice had some clarity to it.

"Us? What do you mean us? I'm not one of you."

"Us." He said. The new clarity in his voice pierced through me. I was terrified of what he'd say next. "The lost. We had no way. No path in our lives. We didn't know who or what we were." He looked out across the street. "Then, no one knew who we were. We became truly lost."

"So I'm..."

"Forgotten." He looked straight at me again. "Didn't you hear me boy? You're one of us now. The forgotten. No one remembers, no one cares!" He wasn't telling me this as a teacher or a friend, he was accusing me. "You're gonna walk the streets trying to find someone who knows ya, someone who cares! But no one does!" He began screaming the incoherent ramblings of the homeless. His voice once again became raspy and cracked. "No one does! No cares! No one remembers! You're forgotten! We're all forgotten!"

As soon as he stood up he seemed to forget the conversation we just had. He forgot who I was. "You got a quarter?"

"No." He looked around and decided to walk away. He came across some pedestrians and screamed; "No one does!" after the initial shock of being yelled at wore off they laughed with each other. "Crazy ass bum." One of them chuckled.

A crazy ass bum? Is that what I'm going to become? Just another crazy ass bum. Up until now 'bum' was just an insult Chuck would throw at me. But now it was true?

#

I have no idea how long I walked around that night. I literally had nowhere to go. All I knew was I had to keep walking. I was afraid if I sat down I'd never get up. My

hair and beard would grow long, my clothes would tatter and my voice would disintegrate and decay. I would become a shadow that people toss coins to out of pity and others turn away from in disgust. I wondered what my own mother would do if she walked by me. Would she have pity on me, or just toss a coin in disgust and move on. Her only son who she no longer recognizes, no longer remembers. But what scares me most is the fear that I too will forget. I will forget everyone I know, I will forget myself and everything I am. I fear that my soul will decay like my voice and I will truly be a nothing walking the earth desperately searching for something, unable to remember what it is.