

Walking Naked

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(A1) BETWEEN SECONDS

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The space between seconds stretches like an illustration of your body being pulled into a black hole,

Tick.

There is time, somehow, for so many thoughts. You run your fingers between the grooves in the khaki corduroy cushions until they disappear beneath you,

Tock.

Glancing up at an oblong slab of petrified wood as the upstairs muffled sounds of spoons on bowls clank in time to the cramping in your stomach, you marvel that the middle-length hand has moved less than five deviations in all this time. It must have been centuries by now,

Tick.

Anxiety is a warm blanket, rage is a friend, hunger is the nauseous nagging hag, and pain. You glance at the clock. It's been centuries. It's only been another five seconds,

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Tock.

You can smell the oatmeal and imagine the raisins. You imagine a fourth place setting you know isn't there, a plain ceramic bowl and a metal Mickey Mouse spoon, plenty of brown sugar and butter, oh heavens: butter! Just melted around the edges and mixing with the sugar. You swirl it with a spoon, add strawberries, mmmm,

Tick.

It's been three days since you've eaten, you think. The first night you did not sleep because you did not eat. You tried again in the morning, but couldn't get it down. This morning, the same beatrice potter plate again, same wilting pile of melting broccoli slugs. Same stern glare from the old man as he watches and commands you to eat. Eat now or no food at normal breakfast and the same plate for the eleventh time at noon. You shovel in one tiny bite, but nearly vomit. The moment the rubbery three-heated broccoli hit your tongue your throat closed up and refuse to co-operate.

Yesterday, gagging at the table over the same pile, the old man's daughter sees your face turning as green as the broccoli and tells you in no uncertain terms that if you throw up on the plate, you will just have to eat your vomit. "Trust me", she says. "He made me do it when it was me."

You cannot help but wonder why they think you would choose to disobey on purpose? It would be so much easier if you could just comply- everything in you wants to comply.

But you can't, and so you're here,

Tock.

Rebellious. That's the word they keep using. He's rebellious, they say. You don't know the exact definition of the word, but somehow it feels wrong. In the list of words sharing the dark space of your mind with you, it means something closer to defiance. But really, you're just scared. Terrified, actually. It feels like you always have been. Of more discipline, of the old man, of dying from stabbing hunger pains and feeling light-headed, of failure, and most of all: of forgetting. Why this fear trumps the rest put together you don't know. All you know is that you are certain you didn't forget anything.

For good measure, you go over it all again. First you inventory the faces, all the people you have ever interacted with and their favorite facial expression float technicolored in your mind's eye. You scroll through the list horizontally. You're positive you've forgotten no one. How about events? Glossing over all but the most important parts of your earliest years you run the whole four years of your life through a mental scanner, looking for defects. You definitely haven't forgotten something, absolutely not.

Tick.

You wish, more than anything in the world that the old man would randomly die, or be called away on urgent business. That way his wife could follow the compassion you see in her eyes. She could bring food, and comfort! The old man

just brings his cold eyes and impossible demands. He scares you to your core. You want to please him more than any being in the universe.

You love him.

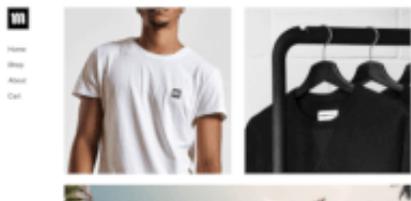
And he's coming back.

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