

## KIND EYES ■

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The day after her son blew his brains out, I received the call from Ms. Wilder asking me if I was available to tutor him that evening.

“Is seven o’clock still good?” she asked.

“That should work,” I replied, unable to think of any other response. I called the police after our conversation and explained what had happened. They said they would pay her a visit. I hung up. My cat, Sashimi, jumped up into my lap and looked at me like we’d never met. The boy’s math tutor, who also worked as a teacher at his high school, was the one who told me the boy had killed himself. I was upset when I heard the news, but mostly I was confused. He’d shown no signs. Sashimi jumped off my lap before I could pet her.

Ms. Wilder called again two hours later. I was busy in a coffee shop with a student, so I called her back when we were finished and I was in my car. She asked me again if I would be able to tutor her son that night. I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything.

“The cops came,” she said. “I understand why you called them, but please don’t do that again.”

“I apologize.”

“I was able to convince them that I’d had a momentary loss of sanity. Didn’t take much work, really. Alex stayed in his room. So, are you available?”

“I...I suppose.”

“Good, we’ll be expecting you.”

Alex had been sick with mono. I'd been tutoring him in English for about two weeks, but he hadn't really engaged with me on any level. We'd been reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Alex sort of just nodded his head (at least when I looked at him) while I talked about the dehumanizing effects of World War I. While he surreptitiously looked at his phone every now and then, I kept returning to the same question. "How does one endure in such a world where human life has no value?" Alex had no answers at all, just a shrug and then a phony look of interest while he muttered something I'd already said. But, to be honest, I don't think he'd even heard the question. His mind was always elsewhere. I don't think he'd even read the book. Though he repeatedly told me otherwise, bullshitting his way through it whenever I tried to put him in the hot seat.

All that aside, I still wasn't going to go over to the house; I wasn't an idiot. But then I remembered that I hadn't received payment on my last two sessions. At eighty dollars a pop, I simply couldn't avoid some serious weirdness to so pricey a tune. Since my wife had been the breadwinner, making the rent since she'd left me had been quite a challenge. So, yes, I was desperate to make ends meet and couldn't miss out on this opportunity.

When I arrived, I was greeted by Ms. Wilder at the door. Her hair was in a messy bun on top of her head and her face was raw from crying. She was wearing a sweatshirt and jeans with no shoes or socks on. This was not her usual classy dress or tennis wear. She moved out of my way so I could enter. The house as usual was spotless. Though I couldn't help but think it was a McMansion, it was probably worth millions. Widowhood had treated Ms. Wilder well.

We stood briefly in the entry hall, which was the size of my apartment building. A gigantic chandelier was above us. Whenever I saw it, I wondered if it would ever fall down and shatter

into a million pieces, proving its worthlessness in the greater scheme of things.

“So,” I said, “I suppose I should get started.”

“Yes,” she said, “he’s in the kitchen right now finishing up a grilled cheese sandwich.” She was always making him grilled cheese sandwiches. I never saw him eat anything else.

“There’s the matter of payment.”

She was surprised at my candidness, but quickly went to her purse on the side table and wrote me a check for three times the amount owed me. As she passed the check over to me, she held my hand for a moment and looked into my eyes. I had seen such desperation before, but I did not indulge in the memory. I pocketed the check without fanfare and followed Ms. Wilder as she walked me underneath the two-way stairs into the kitchen. Alex was sitting at the large oak table eating his sandwich. I was surprised that he wasn’t scrolling on his phone—in fact, his phone wasn’t even on the table. I walked up to him and put my backpack on my side of the table. He looked up and I saw that his eyes weren’t grey but still blue. I had expected them to be grey, like a zombie’s. But he wasn’t a zombie, at least not more so than he normally was in his general apathy. I looked at his mother and she nodded at me to go ahead and say hello.

“Greetings,” I said.

“Please have a seat,” he said in a well-modulated, seemingly adult voice. I shot a glance at Ms. Wilder. That was not remotely like something Alex would say. She shook her head, started to cry again, and ran out of the kitchen. I had expected a typical grunt to my ‘greetings.’ Who was this person sitting across from me? I sat down and looked at him for a moment before he slowly looked up at me.

“Is something wrong?” he asked. His voice was eerily warm, like the voice of an old actor who was semi-retired and was now only doing voice-over work, a scarf loosely fitted around his neck. I was unfazed by this new weirdness: my past experiences in the war had left a hole in my head where such things fit rather nicely. “Who are you?” I asked, focused and determined.

“I’m me.”

“No, you’re not.”

He scoffed in exasperation. “Are you going to sit down or not?”

I sat down, compelled by the fever in his voice.

“I’m not sure how to help you,” I said.

“Who says I need help?” He was down to the last bite of his grilled cheese. “Maybe I just want to talk.”

“Talk about what?”

He finished the sandwich, leaned back in his chair, and sighed. “Is there anything greater than a grilled cheese sandwich made by your mother?”

“I’d say that’s a subjective experience.”

“Is it?” He rubbed his belly. “Maybe it is.”

“Who are you?” I asked again, leaning in.

“Jesus... First my mother and now you.”

I interlaced my fingers and placed my hands on the table.

“Considering the circumstances,” I said, “I think our reactions

are perfectly reasonable.”

He rubbed some food loose from his teeth with his finger.

“Why do you teach?” he asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You don’t seem like a teacher, really. What are you?”

“We should probably focus on you at the moment. Now, please elaborate: if you’re you, then why are you *not* you?”

He sat forward again and looked out the window at the thick woods behind the house. He had a certain, hard-earned wisdom in his eyes. “Look,” he muttered, turning his eyes back to me. “There’s a lot of things in the universe that don’t make sense. I wish I had an easy explanation, but I don’t. At first I thought maybe I was just me at an older age. Like, if I didn’t off myself and continued on with my life. But that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, I don’t have any memories of anything. I mean, I have all the memories of killing myself and everything before that. But if I was in an alternate timeline where I didn’t kill myself, then why would I not remember anything from that alternate timeline?”

The phone rang. I heard Ms. Wilder talking in the living room.

“The memories could be gone,” I said.

“Like I blocked them or something?”

“No,” I said, taking my coat off and hanging it on the chair behind me. “If you are you from an alternate timeline, but you’re here now, then it might not be possible to have two sets of memories.”

“But why shouldn’t I have two sets of memories?”

I stammered a bit. “Like you said, there’s a lot of things in the universe that don’t add up. The brain isn’t capable of...”

He noted my hesitation.

“What?”

“How did you do it?”

He gave a single chuckle. “I suppose you want the nitty-gritty?”

“No, just an overview will do.”

We heard Ms. Wilder in the living room getting a little frustrated with whoever was on the other end of the line. Though I couldn’t make out much, I thought I heard her say “How should I know where his body is?”

“Fair enough,” Alex said. “My father had a gun collection, which my mother sold when he died. But before she sold them, I took one, a Luger, and a couple of bullets. I went into the woods behind the house. I chose the mouth. I watched from the ground as my mother discovered me. And then the first responders and all that. They put me in a bag and everything was dark and then I woke up in bed. As if nothing had happened.”

“I see... So, the fact that you’re here at all is nothing short of miraculous.”

“I’m not sure if I would call it miraculous.”

“Why not?”

“Well, miraculous would imply some divine intervention. But I don’t think that’s what this was. It just doesn’t feel like anything like that. Believe me, I wish it was; it would certainly make more sense.”

“What does it feel like, then?”

He thought about his answer for a moment. His mother slammed the phone down and yelled ‘Ugh!’ in the living room.

“It feels like when you die in a game and then come back after a few seconds of a black screen.”

“Oh...”

“I know, I know. It should be more imaginative than that, but I’m just being honest. I wish I could say that there was a tunnel of light or whatever, but that would be lying.”

He sensed my hesitation again, but this time just nodded at me to go ahead and say what I was going to say.

“*Why* did you do it?”

He grunted and looked out the window again, this time with a glaze over his eyes. Then he stood up, went to the fridge, and took out two cans of soda. He put one in front of me and then sat down again. He popped the can open and took a few sips.

“Like I said, it felt like a game. Dying. But everything was becoming a game, I think, before that. My life was a game. I don’t mean to imply that I was playing so many games that I thought I was in a game. I don’t actually play that many

games. This was more like I was detached from myself. Floating above myself somehow. I started to notice that life was functioning without me. I couldn't figure out how that could be."

"That sounds a bit conceited."

"No, that's not what I mean." He sat up a bit and put his can down on the table. "I mean, it didn't matter whether I was here or not. Not in an emo way or anything, but like on a truly realistic level. Then I thought about the book we've been reading. Well, *you've* been reading, I should say. I didn't read a word of it."

"I assumed as much."

"But I was listening to you when you talked about it. Do you remember that passage about the screaming horses?"

"Of course, the soldier who's a farmer back home is horrified by the sound and wants to put them out of their misery. They eventually do, but it takes so long."

"But they carry on, the soldiers." He furrowed his brows.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, after hearing and seeing something like that, you shouldn't be able to move on. But those men move on. How do they do that?"

"They have no choice."

"Right, they *have* to move on. I think there's some sort of freedom in that."

"In not having a choice?"

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow; there’s no logic in what you’re saying.”

“It’s not about logic!” he slammed his fist on the table. His blue eyes glowed like burner flames on a stove. I heard his mother gasp in the other room. I didn’t know she was listening to our conversation, but then I figured why wouldn’t she? He sat back and rubbed his hand.

“It’s about a feeling.” He picked up his soda and took three big gulps. I took a sip and put my can back down on the table quietly. The air in the room was getting heavier and heavier and my head felt light and giddy as a result.

“I heard those screaming horses,” he said. “I mean, they were faint, but they were getting louder and louder. It was only a matter of time before they were all I could hear.”

“Listen,” I said. He flashed his eyes at me, but waited for me to continue. “When I heard about your death, I was rather confused. But I wasn’t upset. I just wasn’t. Do you want to know why?”

“Why?” I could sense a leveling of the playing field.

“Because being upset required overlooking all the advantages you had and would continue to have over billions of other children. In a capitalist society, where certain souls are considered more valuable than others, I couldn’t help but feel some relief that, with your suicide, the scales had tipped—albeit ever so slightly.”

He smiled and chuckled. “Now, this is educational.”

“I could fit my entire apartment into your front hall...several

times over. The amount of money your mother is worth could feed hundreds of thousands of people for years. The college you would've gone to will put most people into debt that will take a lifetime for them to get out of. Do you want me to go on?"

Ms. Wilder cleared her throat. She was standing a few feet behind me. I didn't know how long she'd been standing there.

"The police are probably going to be coming back," she said, walking up to the table. "You need to hide."

"Where the hell am I going to hide?" Alex said.

Ms. Wilder looked at me and sighed. "Would you be able to take him? Just until this blows over? I'll pay you. How much would you like?"

I couldn't believe what she was asking me, but my guilt at having said the things I'd just said about their wealth made me reply with a modest, though somewhat indulgent number.

"Of course," she said. "Of course." She went into the hall to write me another check.

Alex looked at me, lowering his eyebrows.

"I suppose everyone has a price?" he said.

Despite Alex's odd evolution into an adult after his death, he still had the habits of a teenager. He didn't clean up after himself, which Sashimi liked because it gave him plenty of opportunities to snuggle in dirty clothes. Also, I don't think Alex ever took a shower. I was worried that maybe he was starting to regress to his old self, but that didn't come across in our talks, which usually went late into the night. However, I was starting to wonder what he was going to do with this

second lease on life. And if it would happen somewhere else, preferably outside my apartment.

One night, we were sitting in my living room talking about extraterrestrial life. Sashimi, having taken a shine to Alex, was sitting in his lap and purring loudly while Alex petted him. One of our theories about what had happened to Alex involved aliens intervening and regenerating him. Why they would go out of their way to do that for him, however, was a mystery. Was there something about him that was valuable to them?

“But then there’s also the chance that there’s nothing out there,” I said. “In which case, it must be some sort of a spiritual thing, maybe? God or something.”

“But what about all those galaxies and stars and planets?”

“Exactly. If there’s so much potential out there, then why haven’t we seen any evidence of life? ‘Where is everybody?’ as the phrase goes.”

“Maybe they don’t want to be found. Maybe they’ve been watching us and they know what we are capable of and they want nothing to do with us.”

“But then why risk being caught by reanimating you?”

“I don’t know, but maybe they saw that I had some potential or something.”

“So, out of all the people committing suicide, you somehow get a second chance?”

“Is this really a second chance?” Sashimi, perhaps noticing the change in Alex’s tone, jumped off his lap and walked out of the room. “I mean, I’m hiding from the world like some

kind of criminal.”

“That’s why you need to find somewhere to start over again.” At this, our conversation stopped. Whenever it came down to him leaving, he lost all interest. Perhaps he saw me as a friend and as an adult in his life, but it was starting to get a little too close for comfort. That he saw me as something of a father figure did cross my mind, but I wasn’t his father. And, yes, the money his mother had been giving me was wonderful, but I knew it couldn’t last.

Later that evening, Alex stood in my bathroom door while I was brushing my teeth. We were talking about the rainy weather we’d been having lately. He leaned against the doorway and changed the subject abruptly.

“You shouldn’t be a teacher, you know,” he said. “You should’ve stayed in Afghanistan.”

“Hmm?” I said, mouth full of toothpaste.

“You’re a cold fish. Teachers should be warm. I don’t know, maybe your wife did the right thing leaving you.”

I stopped brushing my teeth, a bit of toothpaste foam making its way out of the corner of my mouth. Alex knocked on the door frame twice and then walked down the hall to the guest room and shut the door.

At the end of the week, I was cooking dinner (steak sandwiches) for us when Ms. Wilder called her son. He was sitting at the table, talking to me about politics, when he took the call. I could hear her over the phone and she sounded frantic. He got up and went into the living room for some privacy, but I could still hear him.

“Are you drinking again? Mom, you’re not making any sense.

Okay, okay, we'll be there soon." He walked back into the kitchen, putting his phone in his pocket.

"We need to get over there now."

We brought the sandwiches with us, eating silently in the car. When we arrived, Ms. Wilder was again wearing jeans but with a plain grey t-shirt on top. She had on sneakers and her hair was pulled back. She quickly ushered us in and led us upstairs to Alex's bedroom door. She put her hand on the door knob, then turned to us. Alex and I looked at each other as she started to speak. Her voice was high and weird, like she was letting the air out of a party balloon.

"I don't know why this is happening," she said, "but it's happening."

"You can't mix wine with your medication, Mom. Remember?"

She turned around and put her hands on his shoulders. "That's not what this is. Open the door and take a look for yourself."

Alex Number Three was filled with glitches. He seemed to speak in tongues and when he moved he ended up repeating the same movement over and over again. When he saw us standing there in the doorway, he raised his hand to scratch his nose. It took him fifteen times before he could actually scratch it.

I turned to Alex Number Two and he said, "This is weird." Ms. Wilder let out a sob and ran down the hallway to what I guess was her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. "Is it?" I said. "I mean, on the continuum of weirdness we've been experiencing lately?" "No, I guess not."

I sat down in the large leather chair at the desk. Alex Three looked at Alex Two in the doorway and then at me. Then he started to pick his nose. Of course, we had to watch as he kept repeatedly bringing his finger to his nose before achieving a connection. When he produced the booger and wiped it on the side of the bed (actions which took a total of five minutes with all the repetitions), he looked at me and spoke.

“I’m not...I’m not...I’m not...I’m not gonna do it.”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

I’m going to spare you the stuttering and the repetitions of phrases. To make a long story short, Alex Three only had one focus in life and that was to make sure people knew he wasn’t going to do it. This was rather irritating to hear since every time I asked him *what* it was he wasn’t going to do, he just repeated that he wasn’t “going to do it.” It was pointless to keep asking him questions, especially since he started to masturbate in front of us.

Alex Two and I left him alone to his business and went downstairs into the kitchen. He took two sodas out of the fridge and we sat at the table and drank.

“Hmm,” I muttered. “I wonder why your body didn’t disappear this time.”

“I think I was meant to see this version.”

“What is he— I mean, what are *you* not going to do?” I asked.

He sighed, then put his head in his hands. I thought maybe he was going to start crying. But then he looked up again and shook his head. “It’s not very complicated,” he said, “but I

can do a pretty good job of making it complicated.”

“What is it?”

“I wanted to find some relief. Those screaming horses we talked about, they were just getting louder and louder. I figured I’d put them out of their misery.”

But he wasn’t talking about horses, was he?

“Who?” I asked.

“Whoever I could get to.”

I didn’t understand what he was saying at first. His eyes were tired and his voice was quavering.

“Did you take more than just one gun from your father’s collection?” I asked.

“Yes, I did. I just needed enough to make them quiet.”

“The kids at school?”

“Yes...”

“The teachers...?”

“Yes...”

“But nobody’s screaming, Alex.”

He stood up and walked over to the window over the sink. He looked out the window at the woods for a few seconds, then turned to me.

“How can you not hear it? Over and over again. Pleading,

begging for mercy. It gets so you can't hear anything else. If you could just ease the pain."

I took a sip of soda, then sat back in my chair. "Afghanistan is a beautiful country. Sometimes we'd just be sitting there watching the mountains. They were so silent, so calm." Alex came back and sat down at the table. "One day," I continued, "we stumbled upon these snipers. Ghosts, we called 'em. I had no cover so I kept running until I found some. Fell in a crevasse. I was a fucking idiot. I'm stuck down there, useless till someone comes along to get me out. Gunfire ricocheting off or thudding into the ground above me every now and then. So, I'm down there and I'm looking up at the blue sky and I see the goddamn moon looking down at me, wondering what the fuck I'm doing. I got nothing to say to it because it's gonna leave me down there and move on. And I kept thinking how I'd rather be on the moon than where I was right at that moment. And then I realize I'm not alone. Down in the dark, I see this kid looking up at me, watching me. Sixteen years old. Gun. Taliban, but he's not doing anything. Just staring at me. He knew some English and I knew some Pashto. He had a Donald Duck comic book in his pocket that some Jarhead must have gave him when he was little. It was all worn-down, like he'd been reading it over and over again. We talked about how Donald was always angry. He offered the comic to me, but I just shook my head. I don't know how long we were down there. The moon disappeared, that much I know. When the guys finally found me, the kid hid away in the dark. I said nothing to Gunny about the kid. I tried, but I just couldn't. I knew he wasn't gonna do anything. You can't hide kind eyes. The next day, I caught up with him again in an abandoned kalat. They hadn't expected us and they left a bunch of RPGs and shitty old rifles behind. And that's where we found him, behind the pile. According to the medic, he'd been gut shot. The Donald Duck comic book was partially ripped up, its loose pages flattened against the wall. And I've been wondering ever since what would've happened if I'd taken that

comic when we were stuck down there in the crevasse.”

Alex took another sip of soda and then turned the can three times on the table, full circle. The sliding sound raised the hairs on the back of my head. I stood up and pushed my chair back under the table.

“What am I gonna do?” he asked. He put his head in his hands. “They’ll just keep coming, the other Alexes.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “Let them come. It’ll stop someday.”

“How do you know?” he asked.

I walked over to the windows and looked out. A deer was grazing near a thicket, just before a steep rise into the woods. “It’s the only thing guaranteed,” I said. “Everything will be quiet again; the horses will have no reason to scream.”

He took the soda cans and dumped the rest of the soda into the sink. He threw them in the recycling and then walked over to me. He shook my hand and patted me on the back. I fell into his arms, then held onto him as tightly as I could.

“You can go home now,” he said.