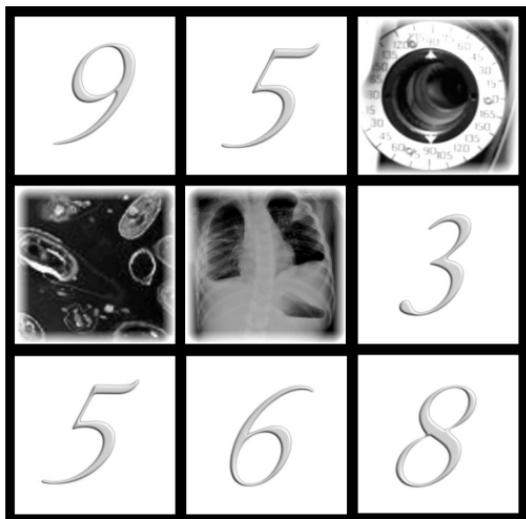


DISCONNECTION TIME

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THE LEPER COLONY



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DISCONNECTION TIME

Dylan Lanterman cast a hungry eye over the scraps of food left on his companion's plate. His companion had eaten little since first ordering, instead pushing his chips and peas around distractedly whilst casting nervous glances at the waitress. With a defeated sigh he gave her one last look, before resignedly pushing his knife and fork into the centre of his plate.

There was at least half a meal there, and Dylan felt sorely tempted to help himself to some of the unwanted food. But something stopped him. He simply couldn't bring himself to eat with others present anymore. It had been almost six years since he last ate with someone else watching, and even the sight of the still-warm sausage wasn't enough to break his habit.

Sitting opposite, his companion pushed the plate slightly nearer to the middle of the table, as if inviting Dylan to take his pick of the leftovers, before rising wearily from his seat.

They were practically the last diners tonight and even they were ready to leave. Dylan's companion took one step towards the counter, then paused, shutting his eyes and taking a deep breath as if approaching the electric chair. Having gathered himself, he put another foot forward and moved slowly across the diner until he was in front of the waitress. The waitress was busy totting up numbers from the roll she'd printed from the till, and didn't look up at his approach.

Dylan's companion coughed, a hesitant clearing of his throat to attract the waitress's attention. Distracted, she broke off from what she was doing but did not speak.

'I suppose you won't be coming round again?' the man asked, his voice heavy with a spent optimism that knew long ago it was too late.

The waitress met his eye, and her hard stare told him he should have known the answer well enough not to ask. Then she looked down again and continued to add up the figures on the till roll.

'I suppose I'll be going, then,' the man muttered, a desperate note in his voice begging her to ask him to stay.

But she didn't ask him to stay. Nor did she look up again from the counter. And, having waited a moment longer than was natural, Dylan's companion trudged out of the diner, with Dylan following silently behind.

What was there to say? His companion didn't look as if he wanted to talk about it anyhow. Whatever he might be feeling had long passed the point of being consoled by mere words.

Stopping by the edge of the pavement, he raised a hand to his face and wiped the sides of his eyes, as if it was merely the cold air causing them to water. Then he shoved his hands back into his jacket pockets and together they walked on, with only the sound of the wind shaking the leaves in the trees for company.

Dylan tried again to think of some words of comfort, but there were none to find. He could tell a teenager there were plenty more fish in the sea, but his companion was on the greyer side of fifty and doubtless realised that any fish worth catching had already been caught. And this last one had well and truly slipped through his net.

'She's really nothing special, y'know,' Dylan whispered softly.

Nothing special to him, perhaps, but she was obviously very special indeed to his companion. If only he could bring his companion to see her the way everyone else saw her. If only he could cure of him of his blindness to her faults, of which everyone had some.

Not knowing the waitress well enough to comment on any errant traits of personality, Dylan resorted to her physical shortcomings.

'She's got bad posture and a funny chin,' he reminded. 'And her skin wrinkles up in thick bunches beside her eyes whenever she smiles.'

Not that she'd done much smiling tonight. His companion's only response was to absently kick an empty tin can into the middle of the road. For all Dylan knew, the waitress's posture, chin and crow's feet were exactly the qualities his companion saw beauty in.

As they turned the corner onto Dalton Street a lone dog could be heard barking at the passing cars. For a long time Dylan Lanterman hadn't been able to walk on Dalton Street. There were too many painful memories encased in its concrete kerbing. These days it

didn't bother him so much.

These days he had a new kind of pain. A kind of pain he suspected his companion knew all too well.

Together they walked the empty streets, past rows of barren houses displaying no signs of life. At this time of night it was impossible to imagine that anyone could be asleep behind those uninviting windows. He followed as his companion made his way to a terrace divided into flats and pushed open the unlocked entry door.

Immediately Dylan's lungs filled with the acrid smell of damp. Accustomed to the stench, his companion clumped his way up the communal stairs to the first floor. The door to his flat had two locks, both essentially pointless since one forceful shoulder would be enough to splinter the rotten frame.

Nonetheless, his companion fumbled with his key-ring until he found the right keys, before dutifully unlocking each in turn. With a sigh he pushed open the door to his poor man's palace.

Once they were inside, he shut and bolted the door behind them, although why anyone would want to break in was a mystery to Dylan. Everything within was soiled with the dust of dead dreams, and an atmosphere of hope turned sour stagnated the room.

His companion lowered himself into a threadbare armchair and rolled a cigarette, as Dylan took his position on the sunken sofa. His companion smoked half the roll-up before he lost interest and dropped the butt into an empty beer can doubling as an ashtray.

Reaching under his chair, he pulled out a length of rough cord and began to fiddle with it. From the scent of seaweed and saltwater it released with each adjustment, Dylan supposed the rope had spent several years tethering part of some fishing boat before being left to dry.

'It doesn't have to be like this,' he advised softly, while his companion moved to the kitchen, a listless gait in his step. Seconds later he returned, dragging a wooden chair.

'You might feel differently in the morning,' Dylan added.

But his companion didn't hear him and Dylan knew his words were wasted. The deep-set lines on his companion's dull skin told their own story. A lifetime's worth of knockbacks, disappointments and failure were etched into his features, of which the waitress's rejection had been the final straw.

'If she's not worth living for, she's not worth dying for,' Dylan coaxed, as his companion stepped onto the stool and began fixing the loose end of the rope to the curtain rail.

Oblivious to Dylan's protest, his companion slipped the noose around his neck and cast a final disconsolate look at the ceiling, as though last minute salvation might reveal itself through the cracks in the plaster.

When none appeared he stepped off the chair.

Even before his companion fell, Dylan was in the kitchen searching frantically through the drawers. The assorted rusty tin-openers, broken potato peelers and burnt wooden spoons were of no use to him. Leaving the last drawer open, he set upon the piles of unwashed crockery fermenting in the sink.

By the time he found a knife sharp enough to cut through the cord, his companion was kicking aimlessly at the end of the taut rope. Coughing violently, his hands rose involuntarily to the noose tightened around his neck. His eyes were screwed shut and hoarse rasps escaped at intervals from his bloating mouth.

Scrambling onto the chair, Dylan started hacking through the rope. His companion's gasps were getting shallower now. Dylan worried it might already be too late.

Sawing faster, he worked until the cord snapped and his companion fell heavily to the floor. Rolling onto his back, the man took several deep gasps of air before passing out.

Dylan knelt down and felt the pulse on his companion's wrist. It was still strong. He would still wake in the morning. He tugged at the rope, loosening the noose, before leaving his companion's home forever.

Outside, a full moon glowed through scant clouds, and the night air felt a little warmer than it had been when Dylan made his way to the flat. He chose to return the way he'd arrived, even though it meant walking Dalton Street once more.

Dalton Street.

This was where Dylan's accident occurred and it had been a long time until he felt comfortable revisiting the scene of the crash. He could remember the night well.

He had been driving home from work when it happened, feeling guilty for having worked so late without letting his wife know. If

Laura had cooked a dinner it would be cold by the time he got home.

The traffic lights were red and, as his car pulled to a stop, he'd called his wife to tell her he was on his way. He'd heard the tinny ring of her phone in his ear as the lights changed to amber. Then Laura had answered.

'Dylan, where are you?'

He'd heard the note of irritation in her voice as he slipped into gear and moved through the green light, but he never had the chance to reply.

For a second he was blinded by a white light. Then the other car ploughed violently into his, smashing through the driver side. Dylan's body was thrown from the seat, his head colliding against the windscreen.

Beyond the moment of impact he could remember very little, only an unbearable, searing pain coursing through his head while wet streams of warm blood gushed down his face.

He remembered the noises too; car horns sounding, the fast paced jabber of anxious voices. But these were soon lost to the pulsing surges of pain splitting his skull and the lights flashing before his eyes. Then the pain started to subside and the noises grew more distant.

At first he hadn't realised what had happened. All he knew was that the pain was gone. His next recollection was of watching from the pavement as paramedics attended to his bleeding body slumped across the wheel. They still thought they could save him.

Once every course of treatment had been exhausted, the medics wheeled his corpse into the back of an ambulance, a white sheet covering Dylan's face.

He remembered hearing a policeman talking into a handset, confirming details of the deceased.

'Dylan Lanterman, white Caucasian, age 27.'

Behind him he'd sensed the light, radiating its cold warmth. The light was brighter than the midday sun, yet illuminated none of the wreckage before him. He had always known he should turn around and face the light, yet had fought against the instinct to do so.

On the floor of the car he had seen his mobile phone, and the realisation dawned that his wife must have heard the accident. If he turned towards the light, he knew he would never see her again.

There were three miles between the scene of the accident and his home. Dylan walked the distance, feeling no tiredness in his legs and oblivious to the passing of time. When he reached his house, the light was still behind him, though duller now, as if clouds had moved across its horizon.

He'd found Laura shocked and distraught, sobbing in the kitchen while being comforted by her mother. On the table lay their evening dinner; cold, congealed and waiting for Dylan's return. His mother-in-law would later scrape it into the bin after her daughter had gone to bed.

Laura's face was blurred behind a mask of melted mascara, her lips wet with saliva. Seeing her grief, Dylan felt his loss of life more acutely than when he saw his dead body being covered over by the ambulance crew.

Standing behind her, he'd placed a consolatory hand on her shoulder and felt the helpless tremors running through her body. They had been together for almost five years, married for the last three. Now their marriage was over. Their life together was over too. At least it was over to everyone but Dylan.

At first he'd done his best to comfort Laura. He'd watched over her in her grief and spent every waking hour in her company. He'd stopped only when he heard her tell a friend that the house felt haunted. If the feeling didn't go away, she said, she would have to move elsewhere. Dylan alone knew what haunted their house and felt obliged to leave her on her own.

Seeing Laura suffer had been the most difficult thing he'd ever witnessed. Yet compared to staying away, it was easy. Away, where he had no idea how – or even if – she was coping with his death.

On their first night apart he had watched her through an open curtain, but she seemed to sense someone watching and pulled it shut. Dylan would still return for a small amount of time every couple of days, and this seemed to be enough that the house no longer felt haunted to his wife.

But as the days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, there seemed to be no end to her tears. More and more phone calls were left unanswered, and she ignored the doorbell until the caller went away.

It was at this point that Dylan had wrapped a reassuring arm

around his widow's shoulder. She stopped crying, but when she lifted her head and saw no-one, her tears resumed more heavily than before.

Another time, he had lain down beside her as she slept, but she awoke and rose immediately from the bed. He'd tried to speak to her, just as he had done so many times before, but his words remained silent to the living.

On his last attempt to reach her, he'd left a note for her on the kitchen table. Written in pencil, it told of how he still loved her and asked her to be strong and happy. But when she returned home and read it, she'd screamed hysterically. After that she'd avoided the kitchen for weeks.

This was the last time he'd attempted any physical contact with Laura. Instead he filled his days with the company of the lonely and dispossessed, in the hope that he could comfort them.

But simply offering them comfort wasn't enough. He had to let them sink as low as they could before trying to help them back up. He had to watch as their trauma consumed them and brought them right to the edge before he could save them from despair. He had to let them exorcise these emotions or they would never leave.

It was a gruelling occupation, but one he had to occupy himself with. Because everybody deserves another day to live.

Soundless and unseen, yet still connected to the physical world he should have exited, Dylan watched them all. Although able to move physical objects, he had perfected the art of leaving his environment undisturbed. In company he waited to slide through doors opened by others, and sat only where he would make no indentation.

Behind him, the light continued to dim, until it was as invisible as a 40-watt bulb in daylight.

It took some time before Laura's life resumed any semblance of normality. Dylan witnessed with relief the small steps of her recovery. The way she would occasionally wear make-up again. The times she would leave the house to socialise. Even her enrolment on a Spanish evening course for beginners.

All small things, but each one a sign that she would one day be happy again. When she was finally back on her feet, Dylan vowed to move toward the light.

She wasn't quite ready to be left yet. Behind her outward appearance there was a numbness to Laura's spirit detectable to no-one but Dylan. She covered it well, hiding it from even close friends and family. But she couldn't hide it from him, and when her mask slipped he longed to wrap her up in his arms and comfort her like he used to.

However, his arms were not the ones that held her. Nor was it his comfort that would pump fresh life into her heart. There was someone else who would do those things. His name was Alan.

Laura first met him when she began socialising with some of the other students on her Spanish course. At first he had offered support and an understanding shoulder to cry on. Then he offered trips to the cinema and candlelit dinners for two. Before long, their conversations became more intimate and they blew out the candlelight together. And when they did, Laura found Alan had re-ignited the dormant spark inside her she'd thought was dead.

Seeing Laura truly happy again, Dylan knew it was time he walked towards the light. The light still remained, but at this point was no more than the last ember of a spent match.

It no longer mattered that moving toward the light would bring him his final peace. It no longer even mattered whether Laura was happy. Now all that mattered was how happy she was with Alan. Now Dylan needed to see whether Laura was happier with Alan than she had been with him.

Where once he'd managed to stay away from Laura and let her grieve in solitude, Dylan soon found himself returning nightly to her house, watching the blossoming of new love. It was a torturous compulsion he wished he'd never allowed himself to witness, but he was incapable of tearing himself away.

He saw laughter they'd never shared. He saw sexual positions they'd never tried. He saw intimacy that surpassed their own. Even when he saw arguments, he saw tearful aftermaths and doubted she'd ever wasted as many tears on their own petty feuds.

And when he saw all this he felt a burning jealousy he hadn't expected to survive where all else had died. But it was always there, even when the burning turmoil eventually subsided to a constant dull nausea in the pit of his stomach.

He couldn't leave now, and he spent all the time he could with

Laura and Alan. In fact he could spend as much time as he wanted with them, since Laura no longer seemed aware of his ghostly presence in the house. At times she barely seemed aware that he had ever existed at all, and each passing anniversary extracted smaller and smaller amounts of emotion from her.

Of course Dylan wanted her to be happy. But he also wanted her never to love anyone as intensely as she'd loved him. And these two desires could not exist simultaneously.

Every time she argued with Alan, Dylan prayed for it to be the argument that finished their relationship. And every time they made up, he prayed for the light to carry him away.

He tried to free himself, studying his wife's face more closely, searching for those shortcomings that an outsider might see. The asymmetrical curve of her lips, the small scar at the bridge of her brow, her uneven smile. Yet those were the lips he loved, the brow he loved, the smile he loved.

Next he stripped her personality bare, clinging to the irritability which rose in her when she was tired, the times she'd forget to listen to what others were saying or the way it often took her several attempts to understand what she was told. Yet this was part of the gentle innocence that had first drawn him when they met. Nothing he saw stopped him loving her.

And seemingly nothing stopped Alan from loving her either. For now Laura and Alan were engaged. And now the light behind Dylan was gone.

Even if it was still there, he knew it was too late to leave Laura behind. He had to stay around to see what would become of her relationship with Alan, to calculate their closeness in relation to his own, to torture himself with findings and assumptions.

So he spent every day wandering around barren parts of town, saving whoever he could from joining him in his fate. And he spent every night watching in agony as Laura acted out her life without him. There were plenty to be saved. And there was plenty to be watched.

This was his eternity.

On Laura's wedding day, Dylan stood at the back of the church. He could have moved closer if he wanted, positioning himself right by the altar, ready to knock the ring out of the best man's hand. But

someone would pick the ring up and the wedding would go on.

Even if he managed to spook Laura and Alan out of marrying, he would succeed only in making Laura miserable again. And if he truly loved her, could he bring himself to leave her miserable and alone, just as she had been when he left her?

Miserable and alone. Exactly how Dylan felt as he listened to the preacher recite, and heard Laura repeat, the very same vows she'd once exchanged with him.

'To have and to hold... In sickness and in health... For richer or poorer... Til death do you part...'

And maybe not even then.

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