

6:20 am

At 6:19 am, Stan sat in his scratchy brown recliner, the one remaining relic of his old life, in the middle of his smartly dressed living room, right in front of the window's big pane of crisp, clear glass. He sat stewing in his memories and watching the sun crest above the horizon. Nodding in agreement with his thoughts, he checked his watch one more time, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and held it in for as long as he could.

At 6:20, he was forced to exhale, and Stan opened his eyes. He checked his watch, looked out to the sun, still rising, and checked his watch once more. It told him that it was 6:21 am, Tuesday the 23rd, and Stan felt elated. His heart rose to the top of his throat as his watch confirmed that it was 6:21, then 6:22. Stan looked out onto the street and the sun light streamed in, between the houses and trees, up into his windows and onto his face, warming its grin. He had to check his watch, and then the clock on the cable box, in the kitchen, and the bathroom before he could let himself truly feel anything. They each said 6:23, except for the bathroom clock, which said 6:22. Stan made a mental note to fix that.

At 6:25, with this endorsement from his clocks, Stan finally allowed himself to feel it. Happiness. True, unadulterated, and unrestrained, without asterisk, footnote, or contextualizing. Happiness and only happiness. It was this hot, intoxicating, and reviving feeling that carried Stan up the stairs and into closet. The sensation slipped him into his favorite, most expensive suit. It, not Stan, draped his tie over his neck and slid the knot up to his throat, and it was his happiness that prepared him, immaculately, to face his day.

At 7:15, Stan, emboldened, sank into the beautiful leather of his 458 Spider Ferrari, and set off for his breakfast. He had no plan in mind and no direction, but certainly an appetite and desire to shake off the exhaustion that was attempting to creep out from under his bones and into his mood. Thus, he settled for the first restaurant that was open, an epitome of a greasy spoon, but assumedly one with coffee, fulfilling Stan's prerequisites. The clock above the window to the kitchen said 7:34, and Stan stretched out in his booth, still reeling, awaiting his omelet with a side of bacon.

At 8:03, the check came. Stan beamed at the waitress, preparing to tip her very well, turned his attention down to the slip of paper in front of him as he reached for his wallet, and froze.

The ringing in his ears coincided with his heart's plunge. His heart, which had previously been resting contentedly in his esophagus, now leapt off of the diving board right down into the seat of Stan's pants, into his large, then small intestines, and attempted to force itself out of any hole it could find. Meanwhile, as Stan's heart wallowed in the mud, the phone-off-the-hook tone grew and grew and grew until the deafening sound filled Stan's thoughts and blinded his vision. His euphoria soured and the only function his body could perform was to release his wallet back into his pocket and put the hand slowly back onto the table, all the while, the weight of reality started its long, painful process of crushing Stan's entire being.

Stan couldn't move, Stan couldn't think, Stan could hear, Stan couldn't see. The only reason Stan could still breathe was because Stan's stupid body wouldn't allow Stan to suffocate. All Stan could do

was sit in that stupid booth as truly nothing came to Stan's stupid brain. Slowly, Stan's stupid thoughts returned to Stan's stupid head, but the only stupid thoughts that came to Stan's stupid mind were all worthless and entirely stupid. Slowly, feeling returned to Stan's stupid arms and stupid hands, but all they could do was stupidly drain Stan's stupid coffee cup.

Stan closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and held it in for as long as he could. After moments, minutes, hours, days, Stan finally gave in and allowed himself to breathe once more. He then scanned the room. He noticed that the waitress was distracted by other customers, and he took that opportunity, slid out of his booth, locked a determined grimace onto his face, stared nowhere but straight ahead, and nonchalantly strode out of the restaurant.

It was only once he had pulled out of the parking lot, drove down the street, and into the lot of the Wal-Mart that Stan allowed himself to release. But no tears, no catharsis came. All Stan could do was to continue to stare straight ahead, willing his eyeballs to generate the necessary heat to melt the windshield, make the car in front of him burst into flames, and for those flames to consume him thoroughly. A sense of dread had attached itself to his shoulders and threatened to drag him down into the deep, dark, dangerous abyss, past his breaking point, and towards the utter dissolution of the very idea of "Stan". He couldn't escape it. He couldn't think around it. It had replaced everything else in Stan's life in that very moment, and all Stan could do was just accept it.

Stan didn't bother reading the dashboard clock and assumed that Bill was in the office, because Stan so desperately needed him to be in his office. Stan closed his eyes, took a deep breath, held it in for as long as he could. He released the caged air, gritted his teeth, and made the call. The phone rang twice before Terra answered. Stan asked for Bill and braced himself for the conversation.

Bill picked up with his usual, grey greeting and Stan willed his tone into one that, to him, sounded like a hollow mausoleum, but, Stan hoped, to Bill sounded pleasant. After what Stan had hoped to be pleasant conversation about pleasant things, he pleasantly transitioned to the point and pleasantly inquired about whether or not it was at all possible in the slightest that maybe, hypothetically, Stan's old job had not yet been filled and if it would be at all possible for Stan to get aforementioned job back? Bill proceeded to spend three hundred words on an answer that Stan only needed one for: No. No, Stan could not get his job back. It had been filled Bla-Bla, a man half Stan's age, and who was already very well liked around the office and it would just break everyone's heart if Bla-Bla had to leave. Not to mention, Bill felt the need to add, that even without Bla-Bla, it would be hard to bring Stan back, considering the way that Stan had left things with the compa-

Stan hung up, already hearing the words that Stan had already heard in his heart. Whatever facsimile of hope that his brain had tried to trick him with was shattered, Stan was, once again, where he had left things just a few minutes ago.

He looked at his phone again, knowing what the next call needed to be. He reached for his cell, unlocked the home screen, pressed "contacts", but couldn't press "call". He couldn't. He couldn't, he couldn't, he couldn't. He could not.

So, Stan drove. It had once given him immense pleasure to make the jungle cat that he was surrounded by purr and moan, and in an attempt to reclaim that distant sensation, he drove his car as fast

as he could. He quickly got out onto the highway, and even more quickly shot down the road. As the tachometer rose, he waited expectantly for his heartbeat to do the same. As the speedometer ascended, he waited for the world to blur and drop away. But what had brought him excitement before couldn't reclaim that sensation. What had once symbolized Stan's mastery over his life, his virility, a lifelong fantasy realized, and a life seemingly well spent had now had all of its grand meaning, lofty symbolism, "perfect world" mentality harshly striped away until it was merely what it was: a one and a half ton of metal, leather, plastic, and foam that transported Stan's unworthy carcass from point A to point B; nothing more.

Stan screamed across two lanes of traffic and onto the shoulder of the road, slammed on the brakes, ground the shifter into park, jammed on his hazard lights, ripped his phone out of his pocket, flung his phone open, and mashed the "contacts" button, hoping that this would surprise his phone into making his call for him, pulling the trigger that he still did not have the courage to pull. Stan instead closed his phone, turned on his right turn signal, merged into the traffic and pattered to his next stop.

His trip dumped him at the airport and his nerves said "fly". It was as simple as that. All Stan had to do was walk up to the front desk, a smile, a flash of his I.D. and they would wave him through to anywhere where else but here, no questions asked. He didn't even need to attempt a smile, which was for the best; the bile in his throat prevented him from moving any part of his mouth with any confidence anyway. Stan took it as a sign of progress that it took until he got all the way to the middle of lobby before the twitch of nervous energy, which started his heart racing as soon as he got out of his car at the curb, had reached the tips of his fingers and the ends of his toes.

The energy, generated by his unending fear, vibrated his finger tips, loosened his toes, moistened his palms, drenched his heels, shook his knuckles, weakened his ankles, rubberized his wrists, displaced his kneecaps, ground his elbows, rattled his thighs, wrenched his shoulders, buckled his hips, and slammed back down into his chest, punching a hole straight through to the other side, leaving a void that Stan was getting more and more familiar with, but no less used to.

Stan, with no reason to be confident and, honestly, no conviction to be either, hoped that he was keeping things together on his topmost layer, because everything from there on down was screaming shrilly from the mountain-tops about the memories that the airport had once created and facilitated. All of the sights and sounds that getting past that security line represented; every experience that Stan had finally experienced because of the unsmiling woman at check-in lane four gave him the permission; every bit of happiness that this airport had allowed Stan to finally feel crawled into his void and disappeared forever; lost amongst the shame and fear and desolate hopelessness that had replaced them.

Stan took a step forward, but suddenly, the white-hot lava that had been boiling in his stomach and scouring his insides needed out. It needed to escape. It needed to leave Stan as much as Stan needed to leave his life, except the lava had more conviction and an unwavering determination to evacuate. Stan's step forward buckled under the pressure of his insides, he stumbled on his own self-consciousness, fell to his knees and all of the self-hatred, doubt, and desperation finally won by erupting from inside and spilling out onto the white faux-marble tiles.

Stan's head rose slowly into the silence of either the room, or the silence of his ears giving up along with the rest of his body. The tears on his checks mingled with mucus from his nose mingled with the vomit on his lips mingled with the self-loathing in his heart. His weak, straw-filled pant-legs pushed

the ground away from him as he wiped his mouth, dampening his suit jacket's sleeve with self-loathing. Devoid of dignity, he shuffled out of the airport and coerced his unwilling car into getting him to his house.

He didn't bother pulling out his phone, or pressing "contacts" or "send". She couldn't know. After what Stan had put her through, Stan would not call her. He, a mere mortal, couldn't reverse anything that had happened in the past, so the only thing he could do was preserve her future and whatever happiness she could find without him. So he went inside.

And there he sat. In what had previously been considered as his home. Sitting within its impenetrable walls, keeping everything out, and Stan in. Its minimalistic design had at one point convinced Stan that he was finally on the cutting edge of every tiny detail, but, as with the rest, the house instead had become another bullet point on the list of hollow gestures that had filled Stan's imagination; gestures that had once made so much sense and, once obtained filled him with so much pleasure, but now just loomed indomitably over his weary body.

And there he waited. Stan was too tired to affect change himself, so he resigned himself to wait. Wait for a phone call, a text message, a doorbell, a knock; anything that would change something about his equation. Good or bad, just, for the love of god, something new.

But nothing new came. No one called, no one texted, no one rang, and no one knocked. Just Stan, sitting in his scratchy brown recliner, the one remaining relic of his old life, in the middle of his smartly dressed living room, right in front of the window's big pane of crisp, clear glass. He sat stewing in his memories and watching the sun crest above the horizon, nodding in agreement with his thoughts.

At 6:19 am, weary from the night, Stan closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and held it in for as long as he could. In that moment, Stan felt something tickle in the back of his brain, and suddenly, Stan smiled.

At 6:20, Stan's home phone rang. And it rang. It kept ringing until it finally triggered the banal greeting on the answer machine, then a beep.

At 6:21 Dr. Schultz said into his phone, "Hi Stan, it's Dr. Schultz. The lab *finally* sent over the last of your results, and unfortunately, the answer is still 'yes'.

There's more, however. I know we were very precise with you here at the office, but I have to say, these results have the potential knock things off course a bit. Now, it might mean prolonging the inevitable maybe a few days, or a week, or a month, a maybe a year, who knows? What we need to do is schedule you an appointment ASAP so we can work on this together. Just call Becky here at the front desk, and I look forward to see you soon. Goodbye".