

The Extinguishing of a Tiny Hope

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As Darryl's mind stirred itself awake, the tolerable neutrality of unconsciousness dissolved into hollow despair. His eyes opened to the popcorned bedroom ceiling, staring at overpainted and unpleasantly cream-colored bumps without motion or expression. He savored the queasy placidity of this transitional moment, bracing himself for the coming psycho-emotional ritual that had become his unfortunate morning routine. It started with, from the bottom of the hollowness, the gurgling entrance of a magmatic dread. This viscous stuff rose and bubbled and with muted intensity began transforming into panic, its sharper and more urgent complement. Still unmoved from his initial position of awakening, and remaining motionless throughout the full panicking process, any independent observer looking down at Darryl would have agreed that his fly-catchingly open mouth and exposed eyeballs, simultaneously sunken and bulging, lent him the disturbing look of a recently alive corpse looking to be put out of its misery a second time, as if the first had been somehow insufficient. If ever the beating of a dead horse could be done out of mercy for that very same horse, the prescription would have been well-applied here. Behind the posthumous facade, Darryl searched for some temporary crumb of solace with the rabid terror of a withdrawing crack addict scrambling to comb something smokable out of wiry motel carpet. He ripped through his thoughts, looking for any fragment of meaning worth grasping onto or any piece of optimism he could use to reanimate himself. As he scrambled, rifling through mental files in vain, the panic propelling him began to deplete. In its place, the smothering nothingness of a total loss of hope swelled grotesquely within him like some sort of crude-oil-slicked polytypic flesh balloon. This was the clock he ran against: the threatening prospect of complete annihilation of the self, an irreversible crowding out and suffocation of whatever thing made Darryl himself and not somebody else.

"October twenty-seventh," he sputtered suddenly, as if a nearly drowned man gasping for air post-CPR on the poolside concrete. How could he have forgotten that today was his birthday! He loudly exhaled in relief, closing his eyes and attempting to stabilize his reeling state. The various specters of torment that had been front-and-center just moments ago receded into their respective backdropped but ever-present hole-homes. This was enough to get him through the day, he thought, noisily rolling off of the mattress. The bedframe groaned in relief with the shifting of his weight. Wearing nothing but a muffin-top-generating pair of tight, white underwear, he plodded to the bathroom and stripped bare. In the shower, he stood with closed eyes and positioned himself so that its weak stream was aimed at the glabrous bullseye of his bald spot. While he still felt a little shaken by this morning's close call, the realization that it was his birthday hatched within him a very small and desperate seed of hope that he cradled and willed to protect with life-or-death earnestness. Darryl

reached out and grabbed a green, boxy bottle of body wash, a new addition to his meager collection, from the shower's recessed shelf. He had purchased the bath gel last week after a fit of panic about the possibility of his general smell being off-putting. The old one had, in his mind, simply band-aided the natural odors of being forty-one and overweight with the olfactory equivalent of trying to furiously wave away a lingering fart. Janet, one of several middle-aged female HR managers at Quality Peak Solutions (QPS), had mentioned in passing her appreciation of the smell of aloe vera. He squirted a splodge of the AV-scented stuff onto his palm and thought about her idly as he rubbed himself with the laziness and limited range of motion typical of men like Darryl. Having awkwardly toweled off and stepped into the day's attire, he stood before a toothpaste-splotched vanity mirror to micro-adjust his gray-and-blue-striped necktie. He looked at his reflection for a moment, sporting a light sweat from the lingering shower heat, and felt uncomfortable with the empty weariness it gave off. He flashed a grin that lifelessly relegated itself to the bottom half of his face, felt immediately stupid and mutteringly chastised himself for "being so vain," and turned heel out of the bathroom toward the front door of his apartment.

The elevator ride down to street level was both onerous and polluted with mechanical noise that made some of the more sensitive occupants wince. Dull metal doors speckled with brown patches of peeling rust, a host of shelled-out guests shuffling in and out at various stops, a collection of stains on the floor that, especially nearer to the corners of the space, built up multiple layers thick and created a sticky kind of urban geological record of mishaps. The doors opened to the ground floor with great relief to the increasingly post-shower-sweating Darryl when he was struck by a most unfortunate realization.

"My fucking keys," he muttered while frantically patting all five of his pockets (two in the front of his pants, two in the back of his pants, and, of course, one on the front-left side of his collared shirt). He waited for the other dead-eyed elevator users to shuffle out before angrily hitting his floor-nine button six or seven times in rapid succession. The sweating of emotional fluster now combined with the still-lingering post-shower sweating to cause him great physical and mental discomfort. Wet spots were beginning to emerge from all of the common folds as he rode back up to his apartment: pits, underbelly, subpectorals, the whole lot were springing leaks and pooling. Darryl cursed repeatedly under his breath and bemoaned the fact that the now-necessary shirt-changing process would also require a rehashing of the tie-selection and micro-adjusting processes. Somehow still only at floor four, he flicked his wrist upright to check the time.

"Shit shitting fucker fuck," he whisper-screamed, feeling the wet pit of snakes in his bowels knot up. An interminable collection of seconds slugged past before the doors opened with an electronic ding and he rushed out of the elevator toward his apartment. After crouching and feebly fumbling with both the spare key and the doormat under which it had been tritely hidden, Darryl burst back inside the one-bedroom flat and slammed the door behind him. He emerged several

minutes later a new shade of facially red, with a new shirt-and-tie combo, heavily sweating brow, new pools forming at the familiar sweat-gathering checkpoints, and a newly escalated tier of unutterables to mutter violently in his counterproductive attempt to expel the mass of abject frustration metastasizing throughout his body. Back in the elevator he went, with button-mashing and soul-sucked peers and historical stain records. Darryl closed his eyes and attempted to copy a calming breathing pattern he had seen demonstrated by a beautiful young woman on some short-form video platform.

“It’s all good, it’s all gonna be fine, it’s my birthday after all, and Janet will be around and the sweating problem will get better in the car when I can turn on some fucking air conditioning, I shouldn’t have said ‘fucking,’ and they know it’s my birthday from the form so Gene will have brought one of those Kroger cakes which aren’t half bad and I’ll get some recognition for once of the things I do for this goddamn company, sorry, and when I do, I’m going to say something that makes me look gracious and thank my coworkers and use that line I came up with about how Janet is ‘always a bright spot’ because that will make her feel really good and she’ll smile at me and say ‘aw, happy birthday Darryl’ which would be really nice and nice of her.”

This untamed but positively angled line of thinking went on until the elevator doors opened once again at street level. Darryl’s eyes popped open, as if he had in that moment been subjected to a spontaneous digital rectal exam, and he piled out of the elevator with the other bodies in an underwhelming avalanche of corporeal ennui. The lobby’s double doors revealed through dirty glass a littered sidewalk, potholed street, and PUFF’D SMOKE SHOP with adjacent plywood-boarded DELI of years past. Heavy bluish-gray cloud cover rendered the sky behind it invisible. Darryl tossed his work bag into the backseat before entering the driver’s-side door and starting the car. If one were seated in the Buick while Darryl drove, blindfolded and earplugged like an ISIS victim, the conclusion might reasonably be drawn that one was stuck in a forty-year-old carnival ride assembled by a crew of wholly apathetic and hapless trainees. In today’s rush hour traffic of quasi-suburban Toledo, Darryl’s unbridled yet anally retentive driving style did nothing to dam the sweating problem, air conditioning or not, which created a feedback loop with the exacerbation of his already turmoiled emotional state. He was hotly aware that all of this would manifest itself in a shamefully embarrassing physical appearance; that what he felt internally would be externally obvious to everyone, and that they might find him pitiable.

Careening into his Lot 3 parking spot at QPS, he huffed and hustled through the main doors of a low-rising but horizontally sprawling concrete office building. He gave an obligatory nonverbal greeting to the corporate park’s lobby-security man before walking to QPS’s Department of Operational Management through several carpeted hallways of off-white walls and mass-printed commercial art. The department’s setup was more carceral than labyrinthine, with a huge collection of uniformly ordered cubicles surrounded on its whole perimeter by a pathway that seemed reminiscent of violent patrolmen and restrictive oversight. The reality was, however, that almost nothing done in

the QPS D.O.M. was worth guarding or enforcing or even noticing. The whole thing could have fallen into a sinkhole without even the company's empty suits paying much attention. Its space was lit by regular intervals of colorless and rectangular fluorescent ceiling fixtures and scored by whatever audio prescription satisfied the basic requirements of being both inoffensive and uninteresting, so as to appeal to the largest number of employees while generating the smallest number of complaints. When one was not listening to the muzak, he could hear the clicking of keyboards, the shifting and squeaking of ergonomic roller chairs, and the randomly intervalled orchestra of body-related maintenance sounds (coughing, sneezing, throat-clearing, poorly covered-up flatulence, and the like). Darryl threw his stuff in his own personal cube before making a furtive beeline to the bathroom for what he feared was some much-needed appearance maintenance.

He entered to the loud and constant splashing of a strong piss stream hitting the back of a urinal. As Darryl frantically patted and combed and dried and tweaked in the mirror, the urinating gentleman zipped up the fly of his khakis with unnecessary and surprising volume, giving Darryl an anxious start. Bug-eyed and open-mouthed, Darryl looked past his reflection to see Patrick turning away from the urinal and walking toward the sinks. He felt great distaste for Patrick, his direct manager here at Quality Peak Solutions. Rumor around the office was that he and Janet had fucked. At least twice, maybe more. The pit of Darryl's stomach dropped as the thought that Patrick was probably a lot better at fucking than he was crossed his mind. Darryl often clamored at post-work drinks with his colleague Carl that he "didn't understand what Janet could see in that dickweed," but this animosity stemmed largely from feelings of primal inferiority. He heard the piss stream echoing in his head on loop.

"Hey, Darryl! Good to see you up and at 'em today after a tough loss last week!" the bouffanted and gelled Patrick gave a smarmy smile. Darryl recoiled imperceptibly. "Got a lot to attack and unpack for the start of the quarter, looking forward to it buddy," he said as he slapped Darryl's back with an open hand. Patrick strutted to the bathroom exit, wiping Darryl's back sweat off of his palm and onto the side of his pant leg, not acknowledging or attempting to decipher the gurgly blubbling sounds Darryl made in a feeble attempt to reply. More flustered than when he had arrived, and bitter about both Patrick's general existence and his neglecting to mention Darryl's birthday, Darryl stormed out of the toilets and headed for the break room.

"I saw Gene's Prius in the parking lot on the way in," he murmured to himself, "but I didn't see a cake anywhere, but obviously it's in the break room in the community fridge, Gene knows those things can melt. Of course it is, stupid." He lightly tapped his palm to his forehead as he entered the room, forcing a spittled chuckle. Rummaging through the fridge's collection of brought-from-home lunches, however, he found no Kroger cake. He frowned.

"But it's on the calendar, it was submitted in the new form so it has to be put on the group calendar, Gene knows to look at that and I know he's at work, Dagny sent out the birthday form again for

the new calendar system and I filled it out that same fucking day, everyone got it and filled it out...” His thinking grew more distressed as he waddled with reckless speed back to his own personal cubicle. He feverishly clicked to the office calendar and scrolled in a panic. There was no indication of his birthday to be found. Feeling a gravity well open up in the lower part of his midsection, he fell backwards into his ergonomic roller chair and crumpled as if his skeleton had been cleanly sucked out of his body and into that new internal orifice—the inverse of a chicken wing getting cleaned to the bone in one puckered pull. He was back in this morning’s suffering-corpse state of being, watching everything around him recede into a tiny pinhole as hopelessness-spurred panic set in.

“Darryl? Everything alright?” Her voice was a reviving naloxone shot for the sallow and seemingly uninhabited body that lay before her. Darryl thrashed and popped out of his chair, sending it noisily careening behind him into the lip of the cubicle wall and toppling onto its side with a crash. He felt his face get red hot and the self-loathing roar within him as he furiously mumbled apologetic aphorisms, cursing his idiocy and bumbling about in an attempt to right the roller chair and move it somewhere that would seem less embarrassing.

“Sorry yes, all good, just wanted to get a jumpstart on the day so I was taking a look around and... didn’t want to miss anything! Working hard, hardly working, and that, of course, but you know how it is...” He trailed off as she looked at him puzzlingly, her mouth slightly tilted in a combination of amusement and platonic concern. Janet was sporting a voluminous hairstyle that smelled of holding spray and had not been in vogue since the 1980s. Her face was kind, if gaudily over-lipsticked, and she dressed the way you might imagine some typical forty-something high school librarian to dress: green blousy shrug, cheap gold necklace over aged décolletage and massive motherly bosom.

“Sure sure, no sweat! Have a good one.” Her head bobbed as she spoke. Darryl looked down and scratched the back of his head reflexively as she turned to walk away. He felt in nearly equal force the urge to tell Janet it was his birthday and the frustrating paralysis of fearful, neurotic indecision. Unable to break this stalemate for a few laborious seconds, he had to jog out of his cube to catch up with Janet and tap her on the shoulder with a gnarled index finger. She whirled around, clearly a bit startled from the contact.

“Today’s my birthday” was all he said. The two looked blankly at each other for a moment, him increasingly exchanging earnest yearning for self-debasement and her with the buffering confusion of processing a strange and somewhat unwelcome encounter.

“Oh, happy birthday Darryl!” Her face registered the polite countenance that the situation called for.

“Thanks, yeah it wasn’t on the calendar but it still is today anyway.” He looked down toward his feet again and felt shame. “See you later then,” he said almost after rapidly pivoting and shuffling away, arms crossed in front of his body and face parallel with the floor. His ignominious posture meant that he could neither see the newly installed SPEEDJET INKMASTER unit nor protect himself in the

fall that ensued after his total and conspicuous collision with the fucking thing. Darryl's momentum took down both him and it, the boxy machine hitting the ground first and bearing the full weight of his body on top of its angular chassis, causing the external plastic to crack with a piercing snap as his back bent over it unnaturally. He bounced off of the frame and onto the carpet. Darryl laid in painful shock, yet again bug-eyed and open-mouthed, as he saw through tear-blurred vision the increasingly large gathering of rubbernecks peering down at him and making faces of wincing revulsion. Another all-encompassing wave of shameful heat passed through him as the chorus of platitudinous *"Oh my God, are you okay?"*-type comments swirled around him. He rolled over and rose as quickly as he could to his feet, waving off helping hands before scurrying unsteadily back into his cube.

He shuddered and began to sob, thinking only of how stupid and idiotic and uncoordinated he must have looked knocking his ergonomic roller chair over in front of Janet, of running into the printing machine and how it was probably broken now and would be expensive to fix, of how he had had to change his sopping sweaty shirt earlier this morning, of how his new shirt was already in that same state, of how he felt a complete and total inability to stand up for himself or even just to stand up as himself in the face of any sort of uncomfotability, of how his dad was a nobody and a shithead and a drunkard and how even *he* had screamed at Darryl over and over so loudly, *"you're the worst fucking parts of me mashed and stapled together and staring me in the face with no fucking lights on in your head"* between swigs and swings at Darryl's timid and terrified mouse of a mother.

Darryl's stomach gurgled audibly, emitting a series of squelching sounds as the intestinal snake pit cinched even tighter, causing him to double over in discomfort. His eyes went from forcibly squeezed shut to maximally gaped as he felt the inexorable rise of a yak coming from deep within his bowels. His face somehow both a pallid green and hive-y red, and with sobbing-related snot dripping down from both nostrils over the cleft of his top lip, Darryl barreled out of his stupid fucking personal cubicle in the direction of the bathroom. The sudden movement brought his nausea to an immediate head and he blew chunks while still in forward motion, splattering his shoes with the sickly yellow stuff. The brown leather of his loafers peeked through the coverage and made the whole thing reminiscent of mashed overripe bananas. Darryl gasped for breath and vainly wiped his leaking face with the backs of both hands, one after the other, as, yet again, rubbernecks began to accumulate like flies to shit. He looked around like a bewildered animal stuck in a foot trap, frantically scanning before bursting into tears and hurtling toward the lobby doors of QPS. Something between a visceral moan and a wailing shriek came out of his mouth the entire way, starting and stopping in fits with the heaving pattern of his sobs.

Darryl's self-revulsion was now all-encompassing; it had swallowed him whole. In his car, in QPS' Lot 3, he violently slammed both palms on the steering wheel over and over until he couldn't feel them anymore. He tried to scream atavistically, to *really* scream himself hoarse and empty, but even then he was restrained by the inescapable thoughts of how somebody might hear him and think one

thing or another. Shaking, he started the car and drove out of the lot, the desperate panic that comes from imminent hopelessness hitting a fever pitch within him. Hopelessness, that tumorous thing that was pushing whatever was left of the essence of Darryl aside and crowding it out in thick visceral nothingness. Not suffocating it in the way of something infinitely vast, like the ocean or the emptiness of space, but in the way of extreme internal claustrophobia. A strangling of the soul, of all identity that was in and of and for its own sake, unmediated by perception or circumstance or perseverative thought patterns or intestinal snake pits or brain-chemical imbalances. The last rod holding up the tent of his being snapped in half like a twig between the fingertips of a child. There was no Darryl anymore; hopelessness is unifying in its complete negation of individual identity, irreversibly smearing all of the hues of differentiation together into a murky sludge. Darryl unclicked his seatbelt with one hand, put the bottom of the gas pedal to the floor of his shitty Buick, and wrapped the whole fucking thing around a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old oak tree in front of the Kroger.