

ARE YOU OKAY?



PETE BERTINO

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BY
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1 ARE YOU OKAY?

Zap read the top banner of an online article written by a doctor from the National Institute of Mental Health and laughed in a quick hysterical manner that turned to a hoarse sob which he cut off as a few tears escaped his eyes. He sat in the modest and clean living room of the ranch house he lived in and let out another gasp that sounded more like a moan than a laugh. He read a few sentences and stopped when he read, males makeup 50% of the population but nearly 80% of suicides were men.

Zap shook his head looking away as his eyes burned. Was he suicidal? He knew everybody once in a while thought about the act, some more often than others. But did that make him suicidal?

He walked away from his desktop and sat by the bay window looking out on a damp and dreary morning. It had been spitting rain for most of the morning and the clouds looked heavy and ready to spit out much more. The thought of rain brought the dream of the water pitcher to Zap's mind once again and he shuddered internally.

It was a real water pitcher made of glass that his mother used to make sun tea. It was always spotlessly clean, as clear as crystal and looked heavy to him as a child and he would feel scared seeing his mother carrying it on a silver tray, afraid she would drop it and it would shatter into a pieces with a deafening crash but she never dropped it and when he grew up it left his mind completely until few years ago.
here

He'd been living in an apartment closer to the center of the town of Porter with his former girlfriend Wendy. They'd been together for three years at that point, living together, in what had been happiness. They'd been discussing the idea of marriage their last year together when something felt wrong. He could sense something was off, the way she sometimes looked at him when they talked or how her voice would sound strained if he asked her about certain things.

He asked her if there was something wrong and she looked at him bewildered, as if he asked her how to tie his shoes, he'd sometimes ask her if she were sure and she would say don't be ridiculous with her brow furrowed in confusion. He felt the question wanting to come out about once a week but would tell himself he was wrong, then one night he dreamed about the water pitcher. He was in the kitchen of his childhood, the row home on Bigler street in South Philly, but he was a grown up holding the long silver tray his mother used, holding its sides with stiff arms. Sitting on the tray was the glass pitcher filled with sun tea.

He could hear the cubes of ice tinkling musically against the pitcher. Zap's arm muscles were taught and his jaw clenched as he slowly stepped forward towards the kitchen table, which looked miles away. His legs moved like they were treading through molasses. Then Wendy walked through the kitchen looking down at her phone and bumped the tray. The pitcher fell to the floor with a smash that sounded like the crashing of church bells.

'Did you do that on purpose?' Zap had asked her in the dream.

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'Of course not, don't be ridiculous.' she said with her brow furrowed.

He had his suspicions she was cheating on him but it was the dream of the water pitcher which convinced him, the next morning Zap told her he knew she was cheating on him. When she asked him how he knew he shrugged and told her he was moving out. It hurt but not as bad as he'd thought it would be. He was angry, betrayed, lied to, but he felt more empty than anything else.

So Zap blocked her phone number and on social media, he was only on Facebook (he hardly ever used it except to talk to his best friend Dickie who had moved to Detroit a few years ago to take a job for the Detroit Red Wings as a physical therapist, he was happy for his friend but he missed him terribly) and it had upset Wendy.

"Why did you block me?" she asked with the same confused look he'd grown to loathe in a very short amount of time.

He thought back to the times he'd taken Wendy out, going to see her preferred type of movie, boring indie films starring Jesse Eisenberg, movies with vague storylines or an anticlimactic ambiguous ending. Or how they only ever went to concerts that were accompanied by a symphony or her constant looking down at her phone screen nearly every five minutes when they binged watched their favorite shows. Zap loved going out to the movies but he liked movies such as X-Men and Star Wars, what Wendy called movies for kids, and she thought the same of his hobby which was gaming.

She had called him boring plenty of times despite his efforts to expand his horizons for her, and he'd never complained because he had loved her but love wasn't enough, he bored her and he couldn't blame her entirely. He was angry she didn't just break it off with him and had been actually talking about marriage even while she had been sleeping with another man.

He would always remember to clean up after himself, he never missed her birthday or anniversaries, during the COVID-19 pandemic she'd gotten laid off and he'd supported her financially while she struggled to find work which she eventually did after nearly a year. All of those things went flashing through his mind in just seconds, flash frying his brain. So he gave her the only response he felt he owed her.

"Because fuck you, that's why."

He said it calmly with a light shrug and walked away without looking back. That had been almost three years ago though it felt more like a decade ago and the loneliness followed. His parents had passed away long ago, he had no siblings or immediate family. Dickie called him on holidays and on his birthday, when he wasn't busy rehabbing NHL superstars and raising twins with his wife.

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As time passed Zap would dream about carrying the pitcher, not often but often enough to judge the pitcher was getting heavier each time he dreamed of it. The sweet brown liquid would sometimes slosh audibly like rough ocean waves and he'd feel a cold sweat breakout and grease his fingers. At the beginning of the current year he dreamed he had tripped over his own feet while carrying the pitcher, it frightened him so bad he woke himself up gasping for air like he'd run a race before the pitcher hit the linoleum floor.

He remember he'd gotten out of bed to get a glass of milk and to watch the sunrise and he saw his elderly widowed neighbor Tom from across the road to get the paper, his wispy, thin white hair looked like gossamer and contrasted starkly with his heavy brown sweater. They would make small talk about the Phillies or the Eagles or the weather.

"Are you okay?" Tom asked.

Zap was silent for a moment, not sure what to say so he nodded and raised his glass of milk.

"Late night?"

"No," Zap said with a chuckle, "early morning."

"Yeah, just wait until you're my age, then every morning is early."

"Can't wait." Zap said with an eye roll which made Tom laugh like he does whenever he told Zap a 'dad joke' he found on Facebook which were quite funny despite their corniness.

"Well you're still young, you should get out more."

Zap thought Tom was right, that maybe he should get out more. He'd been so used to having Wendy attached to the hip, making sure that they were both at least content, he forgot he could do whatever he wanted now. The sudden realization at his independence had him feeling a little better for the moment.

He went to the movies and saw the latest Spider-Man movie, it was the animated one so it was definitely a kids movie but he didn't think long on that, he saw the new M. Night Shyamalan horror picture, he went to see Gwar in concert for the first time in ten years, he drove to Philly to visit The Mutter Museum, a place dedicated to things that would have made Wendy physically ill. Yes he went out and did many things he'd longed to do, and yet every time he went out to live and enjoy life, he still felt empty.

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He would go to the theater, or the concert venue and he would do the whole selfie thing where you smile, aiming the phone crookedly trying to show where you're at, letting people know you were having a blast and you weren't actually empty inside. That your heart is hurting but not because someone betrayed but because you were hurting still regardless even if you were over the betrayal.

Every picture he took he posted, then he would go on his Facebook page and look into his own eyes. Studying the lips that were in the shape of a smile but not smiling, and eyes that looked timid and unsure. He'd stare at the picture for only a moment or two before deleting it, feeling like he had taken a picture of an impostor. He was alone and it scared him a little at times and sometimes it was more than a little.

Sometimes the realization of that loneliness was like a jump scare in horror movie, he'd be walking around town and he'd see a couple walking hand in hand looking happy and in love, or a group of friends driving somewhere on a Friday night in a car packed with music and laughs and friendship then his heart would start to thump in his chest painfully and his eyes would start to burn like he wanted to cry and he would have to stop and close his eyes and catch his breath. He wanted to try dating again but he wasn't sure if he should and he didn't trust dating apps so he tried Facebook and went to a local singles page and struck up a conversation on Facebook messenger with a woman on the same page named Rochelle who had an X-Men logo as her profile picture.

They talked for a few days and were discussing an ex boyfriend of hers being an asshole and Zap feeling confident, suggested she try dating a nice guy like him. After several minutes of the bubble that shows the other person was typing Zap had gotten a very long, very angry response some written in all caps that was laced with misspellings and insults about his physical appearance but it was the end of the text that was seared into his mind like a scar.

'...ur only a nice guy because you want women for sex, you think because ur a nice guy woman owe you something, ur problem is you HATE women!!! you DON'T respect us and youse act like we all owes you a blow job and a THANK YOU for opening a door but we don't owe a PIG like you SHIT!!!! an no nice guy ever says they a nice guy, ur ex is lucky she got away from ur no good ass.'

Zap sat at the window thinking about that response, they were sharing Star Wars and X-Men memes a moment before and the next she decided he was a pig. A no good woman hater that was nice to women because he wanted to fuck them.

"I thought I was a nice guy because my mother taught me to treat women with respect." he said quietly to the empty living room.

That woman didn't know him very well but had decided he was no good because he told her he was a nice guy.

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“So no guy ever said ‘hey I’m nice’ not ever?” Zap said with a laugh that was as empty as he was.

Was he even ready to date? Was he suicidal?

“I don’t think so.”

Then why the sudden urge to scream or possibly cry.

“I’m lonely.”

If he was suicidal, would it matter? He took the phone from his pocket and scrolled through his contacts where less than a dozen numbers were listed. Besides Dickie’s number there was the number for the man he rented the house from, five or six different numbers for work and coworkers, one for the electric company and one for Xfinity and that was all. The sky was gray like sink water, rain drops tapped lightly against the window.

Zap stood at the window looking at the road that bordered the house, to the right it led you into town. On the left the road went on three quarters of a mile with forest on both sides, near the end of the road on the left hand side the forest ended where a two story house with white siding called a gable-ell sat on a low lying hill whose lawn and hedges were constantly maintained by professional landscapers that came from the city. The road comes to a sudden end just past the house where there is drop off into a stony ravine.

When he first moved up here Tom told him about the spectacular view but to be careful of the drop off and how there was no guardrail or fence. Zap had gone there a few times and the view was grand, the drop off went down for a good fifty feet where the stony cliff side rolled down and out into a forest that was like looking into a bowl of Fruity Pebbles when it’s Autumn or a rolling green sea when it’s a breezy Summer day.

Zap put on a hoodie knowing at this time of year the trees would be bare and skeletal, their naked branches would look like bony hands with knobby fingers. A sharp wind slapped his face as he stepped outside so he put up his hood and followed the path to the road. He didn’t know why he suddenly wanted to go to the drop off. Or maybe he did.

“No, I don’t know.”

He nodded his head as the rain picked up a little and walked up the right hand side of the gravelly road. The breeze pushed his hood back so he kept his head down as the clouds spat on the back of his neck.

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He could feel his hair getting damp and see the cuffs of his blue jeans turning a shade darker as he stepped in sporadic puddles. There was a good chance he might slip, he thought worriedly.

“Then I slip.” he huffed loudly at the foul weather.

Yes he’d slip or maybe he wouldn’t. Suddenly he felt too angry to give a God damn, he’d take a fuckin swan dive off the end of the road if he felt like it. He grimaced at the dark thought, it left a taste in his mouth that was putrid and sour. He ignored the house looking down on him from the left and looked up and could see the end of the road fifty feet or so ahead and he remembered the text that woman sent him, saying Wendy was lucky to get away from him.

He suddenly felt okay as the rain started to come on a little harder, well maybe not okay but a little more sure. He knew in his heart he was a nice guy because he was raised that way, not just because of his mother but his father too who told him to always treat others how you would like to be treated, but it didn’t matter because people see what they want to see. He kept his head down and marched but stopped a good twenty feet still to go when he heard a voice.

“Dude! Yo dude! Hey!”

Zap felt his stomach freeze and thought for a moment he knew what a deer caught in the headlights might feel. He turned and saw on the side of the road where the house sat was the short picket fence that edged the surrounding land. Standing on the property behind the fence was a man with long, carrotty red hair wearing a denim jacket, he was waving at Zap, gesturing for him to come over.

Zap’s heart was beating a mile a minute with uncertainty but seeing the red headed man slowed his heart and loosened the knot in his stomach. He felt nauseous and afraid, had he heard him talking to himself? Maybe he needed help. Zap took a deep breath and quickly walked over.

As Zap got closer he could see the man was young, only a few years out of high school, he wore a dusty looking denim jacket. The rain was coming down a little harder but the red head was unbothered. He smiled when Zap got close and his eyes lit up.

“Hey dude, you gotta be careful.”

“Huh?” Zap said.

“Check it out.” the redhead said pointing to the side of the road against the forest.

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The rain was picking up and Zap looked further up the road and could see a torrent of water start coming down the side he'd been walking on. It shocked Zap how fast it started to flow and quickly turned that half of the road into a miniature gully.

"I've seen trees get washed out and go over the drop off, I didn't want you to get hurt dude."

"Oh, thanks. I guess I wasn't thinking."

A crack of thunder echoed across the sky making Zap jump and laugh.

"I guess I better go home before I drown, thanks again."

"No problem, dude."

Zap ran, feeling both touched by his warning and horrified the redhead might have heard him talking to himself. Thinking he was crazy, suspecting or worse yet, knowing he was going to....

"No I wasn't gonna do anything, I was just...thinking."

Yes, he was just thinking...no contemplating about thinking about what the act of suicide would actually mean in the grand scheme of things. A sort of assessment, a weighing of pros and cons. A weighing of facts when you got right down to it, so he was fine. So what if he was running home feeling hysterical.

He ran because it was raining hard, not because he was being chased by his demons, those were rain drops on his cheeks, not tears. He was lonely, he knew that. Hell he'd even tried therapy for a month or so but it didn't help. All the therapist could tell him during their last Zoom session was that he was lonely and he already knew that and that he had trust issues that had developed due to Wendy's infidelity. Well no fucking shit, doc.

He closed the door behind him, pressing his back to the door angry but he couldn't fault the doctor for his own gullibility or poor choice of partners. He was an introvert who sometimes didn't know how to start a conversation or say more than hello to a random person. He worked security at an indoor storage facility near the city and he hardly saw anyone there regularly other than Vic the FedEx guy who dropped off paychecks from the main office in Philly on Fridays and random other things for the supervisor once or twice a week.

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If he was at a party he would be the one in the corner feeling awkward and looking for a cat to pet or a drink to nurse so he had something to do with his hands. He felt his eyes burn as the rain tapped loudly against the window. He rubbed his eyes to make sure they didn't squirt tears and tried to forget his brief walk to the drop off. The realization he had almost offed himself made him feel ashamed, even dirty. He took a long, hot shower to get rid of that dirty feeling and went to bed.

The following week, like most in his life, was uneventful. He plodded through work each day, sometimes sitting at a desk where he could watch TV on a 13 inch flat screen or read a book when he wasn't doing his brief rounds through the one story facility every hour. He saw Vic on Friday, he was a heavyset man about Zap's age who had dark skin and thick black hair and had a slight Spanish accent, on his right forearm was a tattoo of the Puerto Rican flag.

"Hey my dude, did you see Evil Dead Rise yet?" Vic asked.

"No I'm gonna wait until it's streaming. Is it any good? I've been trying to avoid spoilers."

"Yeah man it's creepy as shit, for real. Almost as good as the original" he said, handing over a package.

"No shit? I hope so, most horror movies suck anymore. Like Terrifier, those movies are gory but not scary. It feels like those movies go more for shocks than scares."

"Yeah, I didn't like the Saw movies either they..."

Vic was interrupted by his phone chiming 'Hello Moto' he took it from the pocket of his cargo pants to see who was calling.

"Oh it's my brother, I gotta take this call. See ya later, Zap."

"Stay cool, Vic."

The rest of his Friday and the following week was more routine with overlying loneliness that made time move slow. He would sometimes look at the conversation he had with the woman on Facebook, trying to figure out if he had come off arrogant or had maybe given off some kind of bad vibes from any of his responses but he didn't think he had.

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He didn't think he was ready to date anyway but he couldn't help but wonder what he had said or done wrong. Zap had more time to think about it the following week when a coworker began skipping shifts and the boss asked Zap to fill in. Zap didn't mind since he'd get overtime and honestly what else was he going to do with all his free time. The extra time at work meant he didn't have to sit by himself at home, though he hardly ever saw people while he was at work either.

He worked until nine every night and felt exhausted one night but tossed and turned until after midnight before falling asleep and dreaming of the glass pitcher. He was carrying it on the silver tray through the kitchen, he could hear the yellow and white linoleum tiles under his feet squeak with each step. The sloshing tea and tinkling ice was loud and it made his arms shake, a cold sweat had broken out over his body and his teeth wanted to chatter like he was in a deep freeze.

He was breathing heavily, his chest was tight with fear. The sun coming in through the kitchen window was bright enough to make Zap squint with a grimace. Then he heard the familiar chime of 'Hello Moto' coming from his pocket, it was so loud it caused him to miss a step. He over corrected and the floor under his feet felt off kilter and the glass pitcher began to slide as 'Hello Moto' chimed out again he closed his eyes in anticipation of the hellacious racket of breaking glass.

Just as his arms began to falter and the pitcher was about to tumble he felt a pair of hands grip his arms right at the elbow. He opened his eyes and saw it was the young red head he'd seen the other day and Zap felt touched and horrified all over again.

"Oh, thanks." said Zap as the floor felt flat and even under his feet again.

"I didn't want you to get hurt dude." he said with a smile.

"Oh, thanks. I guess I wasn't thinking."

He woke up and felt a little better than he had before. When his boss called a few moments later to ask him if he minded coming in on his day off he didn't feel too depressed about it. It was a long week and he worked more than fifty hours for the following two weeks and though he tried to appreciate his own independence that loneliness came creeping over him like a bad cold or infection. He hated that he couldn't be content with having no one in his life.

Though work still hadn't found a permanent replacement and Zap was still making overtime, he had a day off. It was November and cold but the sun was out and there was no wind so he went for a walk to the drop off. Zap was still in the throes of loneliness but he hadn't had any dark thoughts and just wanted to see the view one more time before it got too cold and windy to enjoy the sight.

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His steps were slow and easy, he took his time and drank in the crisp Autumn air. He passed the house on the left and gazed briefly at the domicile but the windows were dark and he couldn't see the driveway since he was looking into the house's backyard. Zap walked a little further and stopped, far away from the drop off but still close enough to get a good view of the naked forest below and the rolling hills beyond.

He loved the way the blue sky went on and on, looking as blue as the ocean and as still as a pond. In the distance a bird, possibly a hawk, coasted the sky from right to left before disappearing in the forest. About a half mile away Zap could see a white tailed deer with large antlers meander its way through the trees, he watched it for about twenty minutes until it was too deep among the trees for him to see and he felt a little bit of joy.

Zap sighed as he had a feeling this would be the highlight of the day and felt that small shred of joy evaporate. The thought was bitter but Zap shrugged it off with another sigh. So what if watching a deer was the best moment of his day, strike that, the best moment of his week? Wasn't he allowed a little magic in his otherwise solitary, boring life?

"Yeah, I guess." Zap said though he wasn't exactly sure.

He felt the loneliness coming over him as he looked on and turned away from the drop off. He half expected to see the redhead standing at the fence again but there was no one. Zap walked slowly away from the drop off with his hands in his pockets as he walked. When he was nearly past the fence Zap heard movement from behind it and saw the redhead had been bent over looking down at a rose bush that had a few wilted roses still hanging on to the thorny bush.

"Hey dude," said the red head standing up with a big smile. "my mom planted these. You should see it in the Summer."

"I bet they look good, my mom loved roses too."

Zap saw on the red head's denim jacket sleeve was a patch of Felix The Cat holding out his arms with a big smile, he suddenly had the urge to tell the red head about his dream but decided not to at the last second, thinking it might sound creepy to this young man telling him he had dreamed about him.

"They are a beautiful flower. How's the view today?"

"Great, I saw a big ass deer that'll probably wind up on some dude's wall before Christmas. I wish I could enjoy it better."

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“What do you mean?”

Zap was silent for a moment, unsure how to answer.

“I mean...”

Zap’s phone began to ring, he took it out and grimaced when he saw it was his boss’s number.

“I mean I feel like if it weren’t for work no one would give two shits about me, sorry I got to take this call, friggin work.” Zap said weakly.

“Be easy on yourself, dude.” the redhead said gently.

Zap gave him a wave as he walked away to take the call. When he was at work he regretted saying what he’d said to the red head, it sounded dark and he felt angry with himself for talking that way in front of a person and they hardly knew each other. If the young red head hadn’t thought Zap was a little crazy then he surely would now.

He wondered if he had come off as crazy to the woman he talked to on Facebook and felt his stomach become a hard knot. He had to come to terms with his feelings somehow, sometimes people were meant to be alone. It left an empty void in him but what would be the alternative? If a view on a cliff side was to be the highlight of his day, week, or even year, shouldn’t he be grateful?

The thought was a comfort, however small, and there were people that were worse off than him. People in loveless marriages or in abusive households that still got up every morning going to work or school. People that were in deep trauma or addiction still maintaining some kind of balance despite it all. Then there was Zap who was shedding a few tears because he was boring and didn’t have any friends even at the middle age of his life.

“Maybe I am being a baby?” he said to himself.

He would remind himself that there were others worse off than him whenever he felt sad. Or he’d think of the grand view at the end of his road and it held the loneliness at bay sometimes. Still he could feel it covering his body like a damp towel, Vic had come by on Tuesday with a package and had asked if he was okay and Zap just gave the kind of smile he’d given during selfies and said yes. He could hear Wendy in his head say ‘of course not, don’t be ridiculous’ but Vic appeared convinced.

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He dreamed of the glass pitcher again, holding it with stiff arms, standing alone in the kitchen seeing the table, its white vinyl tablecloth adorned with pink flowers. He didn't want to even move so he stood still but he could feel the floor tilt under his feet, the pitcher began to slide one way then the other like the tray had been greased. The pitcher was sliding left to right making his arms wobble up and down, faster and faster.

He could feel his arms thrashing as tea began to splash on his hands. He was gritting his teeth, trying to stop the rocking. He said no loud enough that he woke himself up. Zap pushed the dream away, reminding himself it could always be worse. He hated that feeling and wanted to make it disappear, but that was what his friend Dickie would have called 'magical thinking' which he also said was as useless and ineffective as telling someone 'thoughts and prayers' after suffering a personal tragedy.

He considered giving his friend a call, Dickie was focused and had a rational mind unlike Zap who could feel scatter brained even at the best of times. Zap went to Dickie's Facebook page and saw all of those pictures of him and his life, six hundred mile away, pictures of him, his lovely wife and doe eyed kids at places such as Disney World, Rome, Paris, him in a locker room with millionaire athletes depending on him to keep them physically fit nine months out of the year. Zap realized Dickie had his own problems to worry about, ones more important than his loneliness.

He told himself he'd be okay, that once he completely accepted this new fact he'd feel better. Maybe not happy but better. Friday had come on wet and windy, gray weather for his gray mood, the roads were icy and there was a snow squall that was heading over the Delaware Valley. He carefully pulled into the parking lot at work and gazed at his tired face and eyes with bags under them, his face was slightly pale.

He didn't dream last night of the glass pitcher or anything else but his sleep had been restless so he forged ahead into the workday. No one had come by until a little after eleven, the wind was howling when the door to the vestibule opened and Vic walked in wearing a wool knit cap and a heavy black Winter jacket with the FedEx logo on the back, his boots were wet with slush.

"Fuck that shit is starting to come down already." said Vic with a theatrical shiver.

"The weather app on my phone says it'll be done by rush hour." Zap replied with a sympathetic nod.

"Shit the one on my phone says it hasn't even started yet," Vic said, following it up with a swear word in Spanish. "the weather guy on channel 6 this morning didn't know when it was supposed to start either."

"Yeah those guys are fuckin useless." Zap said distantly.

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“Are you okay?” Vic asked, looking at him closely.

Zap had been looking down at a blotter calendar on the desk, he picked his head up looking at Vic. He was silent for three seconds before he finally spoke.

“I’m...”

That was all he said before the sound of a tire spinning on an icy surface followed by the sound of metal crashing into metal which was audible over the wind. Zap and Vic could see through the glass door leading from the vestibule to the outside that a sedan had hit the rear of Vic’s delivery truck.

“God damn it.” Vic said under his breath.

“Doesn’t look like the driver’s hurt.” said Zap standing up to get a closer look.

“God damn it, I’m gonna have to call my supervisor and fill out a friggin accident report shit, I’ll see ya later Zap.”

Zap was sad but relieved as well that he didn’t get a chance to speak. He doubted he would have said anything other than ‘I’m fine’ to Vic anyway. He didn’t have friends and the little bit of nerdy chit chat he had with Vic was a tiny joy in his life and he didn’t want to freak the guy out talking about this loneliness nonsense.

Saturday was cold but dry and the sky was bluebird bright and cloud free. Zap woke up feeling a little more rested and had a dry bagel and a Red Bull for breakfast before starting his day off with a walk to the drop off. He was hoping to see the red head again and to apologize for how he acted the other day, not that he had been rude to the young man but Zap felt foolish for throwing his personal business at a college kid just trying to enjoy the view from his backyard.

Zap reached the fence of the backyard, taking a glimpse to see if the young man was admiring the rose bush again but he wasn’t there. So Zap went towards the end of the road and found a large flat stump to sit on and wait for a little while to see if the guy might come outside. Zap sat watching the sky, seeing the occasional black specks of birds flying and the blinking white specks of planes coming and going from Philadelphia.

He sat for forty five minutes, looking over his shoulder every few minutes but he hadn’t come out. Zap hadn’t expected to actually see the red head today so he wasn’t too disappointed when he got up off the tree stump. His ass was feeling numb though the sun shining above kept most of the chills away and he

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stretched grimacing but sighing with relief when his back cracked audibly. Zap was walking towards home, he looked to his right at the house and saw the red head walking along the edge of his backyard where it met the forest.

“Hey dude.” he said cheerily to Zap.

“Hey man, I’m glad I ran into you. I just wanted to apologize for how I acted the last time we spoke.”

“Apologize?”

“Yeah for acting all...uh ya know...for acting like a sour puss about work...”

“You don’t need to apologize.” he said.

“Oh, okay...I just...I didn’t want you to...you know.” Zap said with a nervous laugh that he played off with a shrug.

“Are you okay, dude?” he asked.

Zap felt his heart stutter in his chest. He looked the young man in the eyes trying to gauge the question, wondering if it was an honest question or just an attempt at chit chat. If it had been Vic in front of him asking him again he knew he would have said he was fine but Zap didn’t think he could lie to this young man and he honestly didn’t want to.

“I think so,” Zap said after a few seconds. “I feel empty sometimes and alone. I feel like I’m invisible to the world and I didn’t know it until recently. I spent years building something and it fell apart. I didn’t know that even the little things in life are sometimes too much to ask for even if you’re a nice guy because life isn’t fair and the world is unkind. So in the end you’re left out in the rain without an umbrella with your hands in your pockets looking and feeling so alone you think you really are the last person on Earth.

“And it happens to a lot of guys now and I’m just one of many suffering loneliness. I read an article by a psychiatrist who called it a type of cancer, emotional cancer, and like most cancers you can’t kill it and if you try you’re more likely to kill yourself before you can do it. I know I’m at fault for this, don’t think I’m throwing myself a pity party. I just hurt is all.”

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Zap watched the young man's face as he spoke, waiting for it to change into a look of worried suspicion he was in the presence of a blithering man child complaining that life was unfair. But the red headed young man nodded slightly with a sad smile listening closely until Zap finished speaking. His smile lightened just a little when he replied.

"Being alone can be a prison for the soul, dude" he said, taking a glimpse of his mother's rose bush. "ya know what I think? Maybe the doctor's right, it's like cancer but the way you kill this cancer is by being an awesome dude. To give to the world instead of take, ya know dude? Don't just be a candle in the dark, be the flame that lights it. It's something my mom would tell me to do whenever I was feeling sad or lonely while I was away at school, it's corny, I know dude but it helped me."

Zap did think it sounded a little corny, but as he thought on those words they did fill him with a sense of comfort he'd never felt before. Zap recalled his mother telling him when still a child that the world is what you make of it and that you had to make a good one. Zap was about to reply when on the hill where the house sat a work truck that said 'R. & J. Ertel HVAC & Electrical Services' pulled up to the back of the house.

"I hope they didn't mess up your grass." said Zap.

"I guess they'll be weatherizing the house again, well I like to stay out of their way so I'm gonna split. It's good to see ya, dude." he said with a small smile walking towards the house.

"Yeah, you too." Zap said, taking a few steps before stopping suddenly to go back.

"Hey! What's your name?"

The young man turned and smiled.

"It's Felix," he said, pointing to the patch on his jacket. "like the cat."

"My name's Zap." he said with a wave.

"Awesome to meet you, Zap." Felix said with a wave before continuing his way to the house.

Zap went home feeling happy with a genuine smile on his face for the first time in a long while. He felt good, still hurting and lonely but also better. Like he just got over the worst part of a really bad cold or flu and could take a deep breath without hacking up a lung. Zap felt so good he decided to walk into

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town, he had no idea where he was going, all he knew was that his feet were itching for new ground to cover.

He walked down the road until he came to a large four lane avenue called Independence and walked a half mile until he reached the shopping district known as The Golden Strip which was a cul-de-sac lined with stores such as Hobby Lobby, Target, Lowe's, Dick's Sporting Goods and a couple of restaurants. He grabbed a hot dog lunch at Nathan's Famous Restaurant, he laughed as he walked by the GameStop store which had recently shuttered permanently. He did a little bit of shopping at Target before heading down a side street to walk the long way home.

He was enjoying the crisp air and humming a tune called 'Sunset', relishing the sound of dried out leaves crunching under his feet walking down a street called Sheridan. He went across a crosswalk nearing a white brick building on his left. He was halfway down the block when he saw from the corner of his eye a black figure had been painted on the wall. Zap turned his head to see the figure better and he felt his heart do a little jump when he saw it was Felix The Cat, smiling and holding out his arms.

Zap's lips felt numb but he smiled as he saw that there were other characters painted on the wall such as Bugs Bunny, Mickey Mouse, SpongeBob SquarePants, the Rugrats. The cartoon characters were faded, some to the point it was hard to tell who some of them were. The only thing that looked freshly painted was a large bright blue arrow with black borders pointing to the corner just ahead, in the arrow were the words 'this way to Elite Games' in blocky letters.

"Elite Games?"

He'd never heard of the store, Zap followed the arrow. He turned the corner and saw a brightly lit display window with a large neon sign flashing pinkish purple light in glass tubes that said Elite Games. A black banner with blue letters in a font style of the Sega logo stated that retro games and consoles were their specialty. Through the window Zap could see the walls were lined with games, and the store had a section for every generation console starting at the Atari 2600 going all the way up to the PlayStation 5 and Nintendo Switch.

Zap walked through the door which chimed 'Sega' as he walked in and saw that the center of the store had three island racks dedicated to handhelds, which was mostly games for the various versions of the Game Boy. There were signs on the wall declaring they did trade-ins and that they refurbished consoles and game cartridges. At the front of the store was a glass display case filled with rare games and gaming accessories, as Zap stepped closer someone came out of a door behind the display counter and Zap let out a surprised laugh.

"Hey Vic."

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