

Asphodel

The collar and tie were a little too stiff around Sam's neck. Too formal. He wondered if he had gained a pound or two. If that would affect his chances. In slacks and a tucked shirt, he had always felt like a dog that had been forced to wear a Christmas sweater. A little cuter, sure. Maybe. But unnatural. Off somehow.

He scrubbed to get the pomade out from under his fingernails. His eight o'clock wake-up alarm finally sounded.

“Voice command. Stop alarm.”

A little beep to confirm. The tonal equivalent of a little green check mark.

Sam wasn't sure why he had set the alarm. He had been up for hours. He never slept through the night anymore. He just took a series of fitful two-hour naps. Six a.m. had arrived and Sam had decided he couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't stand the sight of his ceiling or the taste of his own mouth.

“Voice command. Call Mom.”

The confirmation beep. Then the dial sound. Twice. Then cut short on the third. She had denied his call. Figured. She had been angry at him ever since he had told her where he was interviewing. The last time they spoke she hadn't stopped yelling, insisting he consider his options.

“What options?” Sam had asked. Furious, she had disconnected. He hoped she would understand in time. If he even got accepted, that was.

His gums bled a bit from their first floss in at least a month. Sam cleared the blood with a swig of mouthwash, which only made it hurt worse. But he needed to be clean. Fresh. He nearly tripped over the still-hot iron when he went to snatch his keys off the nightstand. Off his cluttered desk he snagged the red folder that he had filled with every document he thought might be relevant. Transcripts. References. His passport, too, even though it hadn’t been requested. He figured it couldn’t hurt. Besides, the folder was a good anchor, a prop. A thing to hold on to so he wouldn’t stress about what he ought to be doing with his hands.

Sam’s car still smelled like take-out grease from the day before. He wanted to lower the windows, air out the burger scent, but he thought the wind might whip up his cowlicks and ruin the neat front he had spent the morning prepping.

Road signs flashed bright banners for products he was driving too fast to read the names of. Traffic slowed around the hospital, like it always did. Sam caught his thumbs tapping anxiously to the beat of a song some that the back part of his brain was cycling over and over. Caught in the stop-and-go, he risked a peek at his phone. Another rejection email. Quick Mart. Sam wondered what brilliant application algorithm had determined that he was smart enough to get a college degree, but not quite smart enough to work at a convenience store. He didn’t have the energy to be annoyed anymore. To be upset. Angry. After a year of rejections, they no longer had the power to make him feel like a failure. He already felt like a failure. A brain doesn’t go lower than zero.

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It didn't matter. On that day, he had hope. He was on his way to Asphodel and no minimum wage rejection could stop that. Asphodel was his way forward. As long as he aced this interview.

Sam had first heard of the Asphodel Residential Communities on the news. A public radio special featured interviews from the first crop of soon-to-be graduates, ten years after the program's opening. The people sounded happy. Satisfied. A decade well-spent. An in-app link to their website had appeared.

*Not yet*, Sam had thought as he dismissed the pop-up, *Not quite yet*.

*Quite yet* had come and gone. Graduation seemed a lifetime ago and the empty days had blurred into one, long, lonely empty. Sketchbooks sat empty on his desk. He had hoped to keep painting. Hone his craft in his free moments while working full time. But the day job never came and he just couldn't focus. Never long enough to work, at least.

Things would be different at the ARC. Spacious rooms, free meals from a state-of-the-art kitchen, all the time to work and think you could want. All the time to play if you felt like it. Like a cruise ship. Ten years in the most perfect kind of cruise ship world. Set in the middle of a hundred acres of rolling Midwestern plains. All free of charge, as long as you were accepted. Plus, of course, that one little catch.

“It's worth it,” Sam mumbled. “It's better this way. Useful.”

He punched on the radio so as not to hear his thoughts.

#

Clementine Peters had three small cacti in decorative, hand-painted pots lined across the front of her desk. Sam thought they looked exceptionally well cared for, particularly for being the sort of plant that famously does not require much care.

He held his feet as firmly planted as he felt he could without straining, struggling against the urge to twist back and forth in the swivel chair. Instead he tried to casually study his interviewer. Perhaps there would be some advantage. Or at least give the appearance of polite focus as she sorted through the organizational boilerplate, copying his social security number from one printed form paper to a slew of others.

She had black pageboy hair and a patented customer service smile. Her clothes were more casual than he had expected. A yellow, floral pattern blouse that made it seem to Sam as if she had been taking a summer stroll along the lakeside. He fretted that he might be overdressed in his suit and tie. But Clementine Peters hadn't mentioned it. She had been all smiles. *Sure*, Sam thought, *it could be fake*. But it put him at ease.

“So!” she began, “How did you hear about us?”

“Oh. Uh. On the radio. They did an interview with the, uh- the uh...”

“With our alumni?” she chimed.

“Yes. The alumni. And it sounded, uh, it sounded like a nice place.”

“It is. It really is.”

Seemingly satisfied, Ms. Peters took a note on her computer, confirming it on the monitor that Sam could not see even when he tried to slyly crane his neck.

“Don’t worry,” she had caught him peeking, “it’s all positive.”

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Sam managed a laugh. He could feel the sweat forming on the small of his back.

“Why don’t you tell me a bit about yourself?” Her soft smile never broke.

“Well, I, uh… I’m sorry. Like, what sort of things?”

“Oh, anything. What do you like to do? For fun? Let’s start there.”

Sam forced himself to take a breath. This wasn’t a job, he had to remind himself. They weren’t looking to reject him. Clementine Peters seemed friendly. He tried to talk to her like a friend.

“I paint. I’m a painter. That’s what I really love. I haven’t really gotten to work on it lately because things have been… a lot. But I’ve been wanting to get back to it.”

Clementine nodded thoughtfully. “Any sports?”

“Oh. Uh. I’m on a basketball team. Like a rec league?”

“I love basketball,” she replied, elongating the word love as she resumed typing. “Bulls fan?”

“Mavericks.”

She made a clicking noise with her cheek, mock disapproval. “I guess I can overlook that. Let’s see… Any causes? Volunteer work? Something important to you?”

“Uh. I guess I like animals a lot.” He noticed her hands hover above the keyboard. A hesitation. A brief break in the smile.

“I mean, like, the environment in general,” he recovered. “Creating a sustainable future, y’know.”

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The smile returned. “That’s a big part of what we do here.”

As far as Sam could tell the rest of the interview went smoothly. Compared to the interview grilling he had become accustomed to, these were softball questions. Just talking. He almost felt a little stir. This was the most someone had cared about him just as a person in a long while. Even if it was her job and he would be a number again when the final form was submitted. Sam let himself enjoy the chat.

“Well,” she said finally, “Assuming the physical and drug test are fine, which I’m sure they will be, I think you’re going to make a great resident.”

“Is that, uh? I mean, thank you,” he stammered.

“Of course. Do you have any questions for me?” She folded her hands on the desk in front of her. She was ready for his question. Every applicant before had asked it. Every future applicant would, too.

“What if,” Sam said, “what if I decide I don’t want to, uh...”

“To graduate?” she offered. She had known she would have to.

“Yeah,” said Sam.

“You’re free to leave the community at any point. No questions asked.”

“Just like that?” he asked.

“Just like that.” Clementine Peters looked Sam in the eye. She decided to answer the question that lingered in his look, the one they almost never asked aloud.

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“Our patrons are good people, Sam. They’re innovators. This is a good place. You’ll be happy here.”

She offered her hand. He stood and shook it politely. Then an usher appeared to guide him to the clinic for his physical.

#

“It’s ok, Mom. Really. I like it here,” Sam assured her, but from the other end of the phone line he could only hear the crackling static of his mother’s weeping too close to the microphone. She still didn’t understand. Sam knew she never would. They exchanged their I-love-yous and he headed for the dining area.

The food was exceptional at the A.R.C. Anything you liked, cooked to order, any time of day. But after a week Sam had learned to trust the daily chef suggestions. They were always impeccable. A few of the chefs were even Residents. Sam liked that. The idea of a “community” had seemed silly to him at first, some over-corporatized pseudo-hippie marketing trick. But he could admit it felt nice to be part of something.

From the doorway he spotted Franklin, who was reading his newspaper by the window wall that gazed out onto the eastern courtyard. Franklin was a fourth-year resident, a former cop who had come to Asphodel when the pension went bankrupt. Mismanaged somehow. Sam had thought it would be rude to ask. Franklin had been asked to show Sam around on his first day and the two had hit it off.

“Pistons lost again,” Franklin informed him as Sam took an empty chair.

“That supposed to be news?” cracked Sam.

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“It’s gonna be their year. I can feel it.”

A tablet computer in the armrest lit up for Sam to order his lunch.

“It’s fish and a kale salad,” Franklin mumbled, “Some sort of dressing. I don’t remember.”

Sam gazed out into the courtyard. The tulips had just begun to pop from the rich, brown earth. Someone he hadn’t seen before was tending to them. He couldn’t see her face, just a storm of curly red hair hanging down as she knelt at the flowerbed. A dust colored apron protected a candy-cane, pink and white striped shirt. Thick, rough gloves went almost up to her elbow as she weeded and worked. Sam hardly noticed his food as it arrived, too transfixed on the Resident gardener.

Until, that is, she lifted her head and their eyes met, at which point Sam’s gaze sheepishly darted back to the dining area.

“Hey, Frank,” Sam did his best to sound casual, “You know her?”

“Who?”

“In the garden.”

Franklin peered over the top of his newspaper, squinted a bit. Sam went stiff with embarrassment, mortified that the girl in the garden would catch them talking about her. When he saw Frank smile and wave out the window, Sam’s whole face went red.

“That’s Dahlia,” Frank cheerfully informed him. “If you’re looking for a date, I wouldn’t bother. She’s almost out of here.”

“How?” Sam asked. “She can’t be much older than me.”

“Eh, she came in young. Eighteen, I think.”

Eighteen. It had taken Sam to twenty-three to work up the desperation to apply to the ARC. No one he had met had come in young. In fact, until that moment Sam had thought he had the youngest admission age of anyone in the Community.

Sam ventured a look back to the garden. Dahlia was gone, her work finished. She had left the rough, cloth work gloves on the dark grass, at the edge of the flower bed along with a pair of green-handled gardening shears.

#

The portrait wasn’t coming along the way Sam had hoped. No matter how many times he reconsidered the mirror, he couldn’t help but find the image of his own face strikingly pathetic. The self-portrait had been Franklin’s idea, but Sam was beginning to think a bowl of fruit would have been a far more pleasant subject. Still, he was thankful to be painting again.

Sam had not been expecting the knock. He struggled to open the door with just his elbows, his hands held aloft to keep the blue acrylic from smearing on the furniture.

Dahlia stood blinking at him in the doorway, as if she had already asked a question and he had failed to answer.

“Oh! Uh. You’re- uh, hi,” Sam stammered out.

“Sam, right? Sam Morgan?” Her voice was nasally, hints of an East Coast accent he couldn’t quite place.

“Yeah, do you want to, like, come in? I kind of need to...”

He grabbed the roll of paper towels he had left on the end table and began to quickly wipe the smudges from his hands and arms. Dahlia took a step in, hands held firmly at her sides.

“Franklin told me about you,” she curtly informed him.

“Oh, God.” Sam could feel the heated red running to his cheeks. “I’m so sorry. Whatever he said...”

“He just told me which room was yours,” she cut in.

Silence. Sam stood frozen in that social nervousness he had vainly hoped he would have grown out of by now. His mouth dropped open, but he didn’t know what to say, how to proceed.

Dahlia stopped in front of his portrait. She looked from the painting to Sam and back, but he couldn’t read her expression.

“You paint.”

“Uh, yeah. A little.”

“It’s nice.”

“It’s a work in progress,” Sam interjected. Flustered, he tossed a sheet over the canvas. “Just a sketch, really. Not worth looking at.”

There was something sad in the way she looked at him. In the silence that hung between them. Sam tried to force a smile.

“You should come with me,” said Dahlia, and she strolled back out into the hall. Her sandals flopped down the hallway as she led a winding path through the Community residences.

Eventually they came to a corridor Sam hadn't seen before. It was white-tiled and white walled, lit by a series of harsh fluorescents. The bleach-tinted smell in the air reminded Sam of a hospital.

"You're not wearing a belt, are you?" asked Dahlia. He wasn't, thankfully, and he realized that the decorative arch they were passing through was in fact a metal detector.

"Is this, like, an employee area?" ventured Sam.

"Departure Dorms," she corrected. "Anyone with under a month left gets moved here."

"You've only got a month?"

"Four days."

She stopped in front of a door, number 118. Inside was, as promised, just like a dorm. Add a couple posters, Sam thought, and it could have easily been his room from freshman year. Twin bed, a plain desk, and a single chair. In that chair, another resident that Sam didn't recognize. A tall, intimidating man whose deep-neck shirt revealed the head of an emerald green tattoo serpent.

"Sit," he commanded in a deep gravel. His hand stretched out toward the bed. Sam did as he was told, seated himself at the very foot of the bed. Dahlia locked the door behind them, then sat casually on the desk next to the stranger.

"This is Gabe," she said, and the tall man nodded to confirm. "He's done next week."

"Ten days. Don't round down on me," growled Gabe. He rose from his seat and assumed his full height. His eyes scanned Sam up and down, scrutinizing every inch. Then he smiled.

“Shoot, you’re what? Nineteen? Twenty?” Gabe laughed. His gentle, crooked smile put Sam at ease.

“Twenty-three,” he replied. Sam saw Gabe’s eyebrows rise a little in surprise. Dahlia’s too, though she hid it better.

“You go to college?” he inquired.

“Yeah, uh, A&M. Graphic Design,” answered Sam. Gabe nodded slowly, chewed his lip a little. Then suddenly he struck Sam across the face, a hard slap just beneath the cheekbone.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded.

Shocked, panicked, Sam didn’t know what to say. He meekly tried to point to Dahlia. She shook her head.

“At the ARC, Sam.”

“I... I don’t know,” he muttered, “I couldn’t find a job, I- I don’t know! Same reason anyone comes here. Same as you! I was desperate. It’s... It’s a nice place.”

Gabe wheeled on Sam, looked as if he was ready to hit him again. But he held back.

“Doesn’t make it okay,” he said finally.

“Sam,” Dahlia said, and as she did she stood and went to sit next to him on the bed. Her hands were folded in her lap, her fingernails painted a soft red with little white polka dots. “He’s trying to say there are better options. You have a degree. You paint! I saw-”

“No one wants my paintings!” he interrupted. “Or my degree. I can’t- No one will hire me. My parents can’t afford to have me move back. At least this way I’m part of something.”

Dahlia took his hands in hers. Sam felt as if the world around was suspended, disappeared. In the remaining void, she was staring through him, into him.

“This isn’t something you should be a part of.”

Sam felt cornered, attacked. He stood quickly and made towards the door. When his fingers hit the handle, he stopped.

“You can leave at any time. That’s what they told me. In the interview. No questions asked.”

Gabe sat and dropped his head in his hands. “Yeah, that’s what they tell you, ain’t it?”

Dahlia’s eyes met Sam’s, held them silently for a while.

“No questions,” she sighed, “but there is a price. They don’t want to lose their stock.”

“You’re in good shape,” said Gabe. It would have been a compliment in any other context.

“Low end you’re twenty thousand a pound. Plus, when you break contract they charge you a whole mil for every year you’ve been at the ARC.”

“A million?” Sam sputtered out.

“We’re luxury goods,” Dahlia said wryly.

“You break contract, you’re in debt. Ruin your life debt. Come after your friends and family debt,” Gabe summarized.

“And that’s what you want for me?” asked Sam. His cheek still stung and he was sure it was red.

“Ain’t as bad for you. You ain’t been a whole year yet. It sucks, but you could manage it. Maybe.”

“Maybe’s not, like, enough for me. I don’t have anything out there. I don’t have, like, prospects. That’s why I came here. I’m nothing out there,” protested Sam.

“And in here you’re a piece of meat,” Dahlia shot back. Sam stood in stunned silence. No one had said it aloud since he had arrived at the ARC. Ten years of perfect life, then voluntary slaughter. Each resident agreed to be prepped as meat for the adventurous ultra-rich. But in his few months there, he had never heard another resident breathe the word. “Meat.” It was as if they had all agreed not to mention it, to pretend this wasn’t their Community’s condition.

“Hurts to hear, doesn’t it?” she chastised him. “I was eighteen when I came here. My whole adult life… Yeah, sure, I was desperate. Aren’t we all? But it was a mistake. I was an idiot. Now it’s too late. My ten years are up. You can’t break contract in the last month. It’s considered theft. I’d go to prison for the rest of my life. No parole. No hope.”

“That can’t be legal,” Sam shouted.

“The rich creeps that run this place are the same rich creeps that make the law. Anything they want is legal,” she calmly replied. Her face was full of hate, but her voice never wavered.

“To hell with them, man. We ain’t meant to go out like this,” Gabe added, and he put a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “It ain’t worth it.”

“Why not kill yourself?” Sam asked. No malice. Just putting it out there. “Kill yourself and take it away from them.”

“They make it pretty impossible once you’re in Departure Dorms,” said Gabe. “Besides, they’d take you anyway. Any parts that are salvageable at least.”

Sam knew he didn’t have the stomach for suicide. He had come close once, had knelt over the warm bathwater with a knife in his hand. Instead, he had frozen in that spot and woke up the following morning on his bathroom floor.

“It’ll get better,” Dahlia said, “but only if you live.”

“Why me?” Sam couldn’t help but ask.

“Most folks in here are old,” Gabe replied casually, “Can’t convince ‘em cause they’re sure they’re gonna die anyway. Besides, they’re more likely to get lucky. Get cancer, get kicked out of here. Damaged goods or whatever.”

Dahlia’s eyes dropped to her feet. It was the first time Sam saw her look ashamed.

“I told Franklin we would talk to you,” she said. “He said you were a good guy.”

Sam felt sick. He felt the sweat issue from his hands as his mind flipped and spun through the options he had been hiding from, that he was still too scared to face.

“Please, Sam,” Dahlia said softly. “You have to get out of here.”

“You’re right,” he barely managed to say. “I have to get out of here.”

Sam threw open the door and ran down the hall, far as he could get from that room.

#

Sam felt numb as he marched dutifully to the dining hall. It had been a week since his night meeting with Gabe and Dahlia. A week. He knew that meant Dahlia had been dead three

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days. Three days and he had done nothing, said nothing. Three more and Gabe would be dead as well, processed and packaged for consumption. He shook his head, trying to dislodge the thought from his brain.

But the cloud hung in the foreground of his mind, swirling a fog through which he barely heard Franklin reading the sports news to him from his daily paper over breakfast. He thought about his mother. After his first day, she had stopped taking his calls again. As far as she was concerned, her son was already dead. Easier to accept it now rather than later, he figured.

A deep voice came from over Sam's shoulder. "Hey, Frank," he heard it say. "Sam?"

But Sam didn't turn. He didn't want to look Gabe in the eye. A part of Sam's soul that he despised but couldn't help hearing wished that Gabe was already dead, so that Sam would be able to forget, to pretend.

"You in there, kid?" teased Franklin. Sam risked a quick sideways glance at Franklin, but couldn't help picturing him in a roast, decorated with parsley and an apple in his mouth. Instead, Sam stared at his own shoes and said nothing.

After a minute, the condemned Gabe got the message. But before leaving, he removed from his jacket pocket an envelope and placed it upon the table.

"Dahlia asked me to give this to you." Gabe sighed contemptuously. Sam knew he was being a coward. But the price, the price! Over and over in his head it spun like a top. Debt or damage. The only ways out.

Gabe had gone. Sam knew he would never see him again. That same despicable part of his brain was almost thankful. He could return to pretending.

Sam took up the envelope from the table. It was unsealed and it bulged a little with some cold, stubby thing that had been packed in with the letter.

Sam dumped the contents on the dining table before him. There on the table was a fingertip, crudely cut at the second knuckle. Its nail was painted a soft red with little white polka dots.

The accompanying letter wasn't long at all. In a neat, blue-ink cursive it declared: "Free sample. Love, D."

Dahlia's finger rested on the dining table. Meat in the grocery store had never looked to Sam like flesh. It was hard to connect the killing to the product. But here was flesh that had touched his, held his. It was real. It was dead.

Sam did not remember deciding to leave the dining hall, or in fact to even stand up in the first place. Instead he felt as if he was floating, inevitably, towards where his legs knew he had to go.

*No debt, Sam thought as he unlocked the door to his room. It has to be the other way.*

This was not the Departure Dorms. There were no metal detectors. Sam had his full choice of tools for the deed. He settled on a large, serrated kitchen knife. One that would hurt, but that he felt was his best shot.

He brought the weapon out to his living room, sat on his work stool facing the painting he had been working on these last few weeks. The self-portrait. He saw his own face, captured by his skillful hand. It was a strong face, young and hopeful. His shoulders were solid, square. His hair was a color like autumn leaves. Sam saw himself and for a moment, he smiled. It was, he

felt, some of his best work. It was worth something. It would be worth more when he walked free of the ARC. It would be a reminder.

He shouted a little when he drew the first stroke of the knife across his left arm. The top of the arm, not a spot that would kill him. Indeed, he gritted his teeth and worked methodically up and down his body. Arms, legs, up his spine and down his chest. A stroke across the back of his neck. Three deep slashes through his stomach. Through the blinding, searing pain, he carefully avoided any veins. He was not looking to kill. He was looking to damage.

*Damaged goods. He held on to the thought for comfort. I will be damaged goods. Unfit for sale. Unfit to keep.*

The pain had rocked him off the stool to the floor. At the foot of that chair stood a bottle of turpentine. The sight of his new reflection in the glass of it made Sam gag. But all the same, he twisted open the cap. He grew weaker by the second, but he managed to tilt his head back and swallow a gulp. He hoped it would be enough.

Retching wildly, he knocked into the stand on which he kept his paints. Through the pain and the convulsions, he opened his best acrylics and slathered what colors he could on his open wounds until his consciousness went dark. His body seized, waiting for the hallway footsteps to come see what the commotion had been.

Out in the garden, at the edge of the flowerbed, sat a pair of rough work gloves. Next to them, a pair of green-handled gardening shears, stained with the smallest drop of red.