

White Canvas

By

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Mr. Anderson was a four year old trapped in a sixteen year old body. If you cut him, he bled nothing but white canvas stained with whatever happened to be around. He spent his teenage years ogling famous and brilliant people from afar, trying to force his pudgy, sagging body into their brilliantly inspired molds. He'd squirm and wriggle and pinch himself, but he never quite fit. And so, he spent his days trailing as many homegrown heroes as he could. Like a beaten puppy, he'd be a constant shadow hanging ten feet behind them, finding excuses to "go their way" and then hanging idly about with nothing interesting to contribute. He was shy. Persistent.

The brilliant ones used to laugh and scorn and mock him secretly behind silent corners. Mr. Anderson could feel it, no need for hearing. He could tell he looked foolish in the way they sped down the hallway, and rolled their eyes when they thought he wasn't looking. But he always was. He saw more with his eyes on the floor than many people see in their whole lifetime. And then, like a cracked mirror, he would go off and imitate them, hoping with every fiber that a little of what made them great would rub off on him.

He especially admired a local filmmaker who had won several prestigious awards. Confident and collected, Mr. Anderson often dreamt of cutting out his own face and slapping it on that visionary's body. The camera made the man, and so Mr. Anderson soon invested in his own, using what little money he had saved to buy the rattiest camera Circuit City could offer. And yes, he knew it was cheap. But it was his.

He spent weeks lolling about, vomiting back film jargon he only half understood, his camera always hanging off his shoulder or cupped in the palm of his hand. The filmmaker took no notice. Hadn't the time. Had too many lunch dates and too many projects.

Good work attested to good character. And no matter what he said or how he held the camera, Mr. Anderson desperately needed work to back up his dormant brilliance. So he pumped out a story:

a small, sad rip off of an earlier work, got some of his friends together, and hit the record button. Two days later, Mr. Anderson had a crudely made mock up of a Hollywood hit eagerly hanging out of his hands. He spent all day in front of Gromelin's Chinese Theatre, answering questions from imaginary reporters only pretending to be interested. But it wasn't enough. He needed the affirmation to come from an inspired source. And so, he hung around the visionary until he finally broke down and watched the film.

It was going to be the beginning of something beautiful.

Mr. Anderson was a ten year old trapped in a twenty two year old body. If you cut him, he felt nothing. Nothing but what he was told to feel by the sages of the University. He saw their mold and was fed that despicable lie that said it was the only one available. And so, tired and frustrated, he spent his four years trying to reflect what he thought they wanted to see. He spent any free time he had studying. He would crawl into his tiny, one room apartment and lock the door. He'd close himself up in a book on Chemistry so that he could vomit out what he half understood at the nightly lectures he attended.

Mr. Anderson hated chemistry, but he was willing to endure anything for the Chemist.

The Chemist sat in the seventh row from the front, in the fourth seat in from the aisle. He always brought a Coke with him, which he secretly sipped from while furiously writing out equations on his paper. Mr. Anderson could tell that, to him, these molecules weren't just abstract, imaginary spheres floating thru space. To him they were visceral. He would often catch a glimpse of them ricocheting around in the Chemist's eyes as he passed him in the hall. He would plant empty coke bottles all around him and bury himself in chemistry books hoping that a molecule might catch between them and spark conversation.

It never did.

The Chemist knew what he was talking about. His hand would fly up and, as though it were magic, brilliance would spill from him like aged wine. It would flow from his mouth and cover the room,

intoxicating Mr. Anderson into believing he would catch that brilliance, if only he reached far enough. If he studied hard enough and made just the right comment maybe, just maybe, the Chemist would realize his dormant brilliance. And this brilliance would carry them away to some inspired place.

Mr. Anderson would gain and lose courage fifty times during class, his hand jutting and falling through the air with every crest and dip of confidence. The words weren't there because the words weren't his.

The semester was drawing to a close: a semester of aborted conversations, false starts, and small, unnoticeable, unimpressive hiccups. It was now or never. He could sense it. And if he couldn't be brilliant by proxy, maybe he could meet brilliance face to face.

On the last day of class, Mr. Anderson watched the Chemist as he always had — with an intent stare. It was the Chemist's routine to confer with the teacher after class and Mr. Anderson could bide his time.

Mr. Anderson was a fifteen year old trapped in a thirty six year old body. If you cut him, he barely noticed. It had been a while since he had opened himself up to cold, rigid feeling. He enjoyed the solitude of his own company. Hunched over from nine to five in a cubicle no bigger than he was, he spent his days staring at gray corkboard and imagining what life might have been. If he had bled. Feeling was too difficult an emotional reaction for him to process. He worked off of single words now: happy, sad, elated, morose. He saw, but barely saw. He heard, but barely heard. He was a shell, echoing the past in small, unrecognizable vibrations.

He had been with the company for several years now. He majored in math and became an accountant and sat at a desk and crunched his life out in numbers that meant little and felt less. They were his brothers, these cold hard lines of digits.

The only time he ever really "felt" was when the lawyer was around.

He was overtly confident. He knew all the right people. He

knew all the right phrases. He was a career man with a wife and kids, a retirement set aside, and a house on Miami Beach that he talked about incessantly. A round tub of a man, he was filled with constant laughter, with a nose the size of a baby tomato and a hue to match. Mr. Anderson would spend his days watching the lawyer, copying his movements and mannerisms. He'd stare at his reflection in the computer screen and mimic the rise of his eyebrows, the constant smirk emblazoned on his cherry face, the way all of his teeth but none of his gum showed when he smiled. If only he could cut and paste a whole new him.

But he wasn't the lawyer, therefore he wasn't happy. With a chuckle you could hear all the way down the hall, the Lawyer attracted people to him as if he were magnetized. Like so many of the Chemist's molecules, the people would radiate around him in varying orbitals, and the further away you were from him, the more attractive he became.

Mr. Anderson knew that this was who he was supposed to be. That no matter what he had tried in the past, he would only be happy if he were a lawyer: a fat, red nosed lawyer with a slight southern drawl and a constant smirk and gum that hid behind perfectly white teeth. So, he quit his job at the company. Went back to school to study law. Started to eat more, to fill out. He was so used to this costume change that by now it was becoming routine. But if it made him happy, even for a moment, he would take that happiness.

He worked hard. He learned the laws and spent countless hours imitating the lawyer while reciting the such and such a law or the such and such an amendment. He even went as far as buying the same clothes as the lawyer. He wanted it bad enough. And this time the change would be complete. His search would come to a simple and satisfying crescendo.

Looking at himself in the mirror, ten times fatter and less himself than he ever was, a smile crossed his face. Finally, he was getting somewhere.

He held the bottle in his hands. He turned it over, nervously reading the directions. Not that they mattered. He wouldn't need

them. Setting the bottle down on the nightstand, he examined himself in the mirror. He had no reflection.

He remembered the look on the filmmaker's face when the movie flickered off and the lights flicked on. A look of total disgust and aggravation at wasting so much time on so little.

He remembered how he looked in the mirror: heavy set with a brown tweed suit and a smile that wasn't his. And a borrowed laugh that rang hollow.

He remembered the blank stare of the Chemist as he brushed past him without even uttering a single syllable. And how the molecules looked so very bright in his eyes that day.