

There is No Vanishing Point

by

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It's weird. When I don't spend my money on beer I don't know what to spend my money on. I've had this twenty-dollar bill in my wallet for a week now. Normally I'd have given it to Anheiser-Busch the day I got it. I've given some serious thought to buying a hooker, but I don't know where to find one. I've also thought about buying some pot, but I'd never smoke it; I'd stick it in my sock drawer then forget all about it.

There's a joke among folks in the twelve-step program that there really ought to be thirteen so as to account for the step where you inevitably exchange your addiction to alcohol for an addiction to coffee. And if I could stand the flavor of coffee I could easily spend that twenty here at the Starbucks down the street from my apartment. When did coffee start costing four-dollars a cup? Have I been drunk that long?

The other problem is I hate everything about coffee, the taste, the temperature, the way your tongue is coated with that horrible bitter grime. I don't want coffee. What I want is something cold and carbonated that will get me drunk, but since that's not an option I will just sit here for as long as it takes for my new sponsor to arrive and assure me there is a way to have fun in this place.

I have, however, been practicing in case I finally do work up the courage to order something: I step confidently to the counter, smile and order a Snickers Bar Carmel Machiatto Latte Mocha with extra whip, and the attractive girl with the sad eyes takes my money and turns it into less

money, and then I think long and hard as I sip from the steaming cup about how I might use the bills in my pocket to fix all the wrong I have done.

Perhaps I should move outside to the patio where the sunshine is beaming so brightly and where all the kind people upon entrance had greeted me with such wonderful smiles and wide eyes, the old woman with the wrecked hands twisting a length of yarn about a silver hook, commenting, “Such a fine day, don’t you think?” and the hulk of a man spilling out his plastic chair and dashing for the door to pull it wide for me, and me ducking in with eyes low enough to avoid eye contact.

And I feel miserable I’d rather scramble my brains with poison than be here next to so many fine folks, or that it makes more sense that they should be rushing around in the streets killing and raping each other than sitting here so well-behaved without making a scene or even talking to each other. It is important for me to believe I’ll figure this out, so I sit and wait with my hands folded in my lap and try my hardest to go unnoticed.

I live in a room the size of the closet in the bedroom I shared with my ex-wife. It has a sink and a heater in it. There are three other units—single-occupancy—all attached to a central kitchen, and there is a bathroom we share that is covered in black mold and stinks of years of bad ventilation. There is a jar of mustard in the fridge and that is the only thing I have ever seen in there. On sleepless nights I lie on my back and count the minutes between my neighbor’s cigarettes. He smokes every three minutes and he doesn’t sleep. Not ever. I’ve worked the math and if he keeps it up, he’ll spend one-thousand-seven-hundred-forty dollars on cigarettes this month.

One time I locked myself out of my room and needed to pass through his room so I could get into the kitchen because the door that separated my room from the common area I knew to be unlocked. I knocked on my neighbor's door and when he answered his face lit up. He greeted me effusively, smiling huge, and shook my hand until I thought my teeth would shatter. I told him my situation and he offered me some coffee and apologized for how cluttered his room was. He had no furniture or clothes or chairs or anything of the normal sort. Instead, he had filled the room with towering stacks of miscellaneous objects: There were microwaves in the corner near the door, egg crates piled below and on top the sink, a mound of greasy oven mitts, newspapers bound in colorful twine, frisbees and baseballs and old phonebooks, a collection of coffee cans and cigar boxes filled with who-knows-what, and a heaping stack of tiny porcelain angels that appeared to have been broken then repaired with a hot glue gun—the whole place stank of hot glue gun.

The man poured me a cup of coffee full of grounds and talked incessantly about his most recent project to rearrange the place into a woodshop so he could start making furniture. He told me Jesus had been a carpenter and that the years of his life that were missing from the Bible had been spent learning the trade of carpentry and that it was this—the carpentry—that had enlightened him. I couldn't take my eyes off those angels in the corner of the room: Many had the wrong pieces reattached to them and this made them terrifying and evil. After that I would not leave my room unless I was sure he was in his or gone.

For a long time I did not know who lived in the other two rooms. I did not think anyone lived in them. Then one day I was coming out of the bathroom and saw the door of one of these rooms

was open. I came around the corner, peeked inside and saw a nice looking man stretched out on a futon and watching television. He did not notice me standing in my towel and sandals, so I just stood there and inspected his belongings. I was impressed. He had several very nice computers on a desk near a wall where the futon was laid out. His television was large and the stand looked to be made of something solid and nice, like walnut or cherry—I didn't know. This came as a great relief after having met the Messiah with his heap of angel corpses.

Later I often found myself wondering what he might have done to land himself here. This was not the kind of place people lived if they could help it. It was the step before a dry doorway beneath a church awning, or a hole carved out the wall of an abandoned building. Perhaps it had been those fancy computers. Perhaps he was a hacker and had seen some hard-time but was on parole now and working for the government. I would formulate all sorts of thrilling and violent scenarios involving the computer hacker next door. I had little else to do during those nights I could not find sleep over the pounding in my head, the ache of every muscle and joint singing the sweet terror of craving, which had far surpassed any mental attachment to become instead an entirely physical thing: Like how a body held beneath water burns for oxygen, it reached down deep and tore away at my insides. And it was all I could do to remain on my back and dream up silly explanations for the neighbor's decent belongings while the lucid part of me counted off the minutes between the Messiah's cigarettes—every three minutes the scratch of flint, a spastic eruption of coughing and retching onto the pavement whatever bit of himself he caught in his throat—until the first light of dawn crept beneath my doorway to announce I'd made it another day.

Eventually I did learn what had gone down with the nice looking man across the kitchen from me. I was heating up a frozen burrito in the microwave when his door opened and the sound of

children's laughter came streaming out. I poked my head in because I thought I'd say, *hello*, though I was only hoping to see more. The man was on his futon again and there were three small children around him and bouncing on the cushion and jumping into his arms and somersaulting onto the floor. He was smiling and laughing and I knew then I'd been very wrong about him. Yet, there was something off about his happy disposition: His laughter was missing a note, if that makes sense—it was like a song with a flat where there was supposed to be a sharp. I looked at his legs and knew then the man was a paraplegic. I had not seen a chair the day I'd first peeked into his room, but now I saw it folded up against the wall near the door.

Eventually a woman came in and the children all sprang from their positions near the man and hugged the woman's legs. She greeted them each and then she acknowledged the man, whom did not move from his position on the futon. His expression went serious, then, when his eyes met hers, he looked very sad. She collected the children, whom each waved at the man, gripping small packages of what I was sure was candy, and before exiting the door offered the man a small smile, which he returned with one of his own. And then they were gone. I watched him for a while, alone now in his room. He just stared at the wall until I came into the threshold and asked him if he wanted the door shut. He asked me to leave it open, so I did.

That night I heard someone in the room I'd thought was unoccupied. There was the distinct sound of someone lifting something heavy followed by the thing dropping to the floor, and then there was only silence. I was at the sink, washing the dish I'd used to heat the frozen burrito I'd had for dinner. I stopped what I was doing when I heard the sounds and then when nothing else came I went back to the washing, leaving the dish on the rack to dry before reentering my

bedroom. I was lying awake again, fighting the worse withdrawal I'd yet to have. This one felt like I'd dived into a frozen lake and couldn't find the hole in the surface. I couldn't get any air into my lungs and I thought I would pass out but I didn't. I just kept breathing shorter breaths faster until my body was so full with the burn of the acid that I screamed out. I screamed and I could not feel it in my throat, nor could I hear it; the only indication was that I *knew* I was screaming. It was awful. Pure white light filled my body and burst through me. It was like being electrocuted, and I remember thinking this was it, this was the vanishing point, and for a moment I felt myself disappear—a small part of me, concentrated and lifting out a space in my chest while the body that was no longer mine froze and broke apart under the effort of clinging to life. Then came faint taps somewhere in the background, but the pain was too agonizing to really care. They grew louder and louder, and soon I was *hearing* them. Like objects shifting underwater, there was no locating the source; there was only the disturbance in the surrounding atmosphere. They came more distinct and soon I discovered the hole in the surface through which I'd fallen and was pulled out of the abyss and into the room where I discovered myself naked on the floor.

Someone was knocking on my door, the inside door connected to the kitchen. I pulled the sheet off the bed, wrapped it around me, and opened the door. A small girl stood there looking very concerned. She was dirty and her hair was very greasy and her eyes had dark red rings around them. I said, *hello*, and she wanted to know if everything was okay. "Yes," I told her. "I have nightmares." She said, "Do you want to come to my room and sleep so you don't have to be alone?" I thought about this for a long time before answering. I inspected her face and saw no indication this was an invitation to romance. In fact, there was nothing about the girl I could identify as particularly feminine. She had a lot of big bulky clothes on: a gray dusty pair of

Carharts and a tan Carhart jacket that would have fit a man three times her size. How old was she? She could have been fifteen; she could have been thirty. I stood in the doorway trying to remember how to talk and saw that my hands were shaking uncontrollably. After noticing this I realized my legs too were shaking and that I could not keep from jaw from shivering. I couldn't speak. I bore down, attempting to overcome the convulsions. Through clinched teeth, I said, "Do you live here? Are you the other neighbor?" She said she wasn't, but that she was staying here tonight and that she had some food and blankets if I needed any.

I followed the girl into the room. It was empty and it was clear she was squatting. There was only a large canvas rucksack, an unrolled sleeping bag and mat, and a big plastic case whose contents I could not decipher—it looked heavy and I figured this was probably what had made her grunt and caused the loud thud from earlier. She had the heater on and the room was very warm. I felt a little better and the shaking had subsided a bit. I sat on the floor with the sheet wrapped tight around me. She shut the door and moved into the center of the room then began rifling through her bag. She pulled out a hotpot and a large can of what I assumed was soup. She plugged the cord into an outlet, opened the can with an opener and dropped the contents into the pot, which was already hot and hissed loudly. She went back to her bag and pulled out a banana and a small piece of jerky. She unpeeled the banana and handed it to me. "You need potassium," she said. "And you need protein." She took a bite of the jerky and then gave the rest to me. I devoured the food and felt something like color returning to my insides. She produced a large felt blanket and put it around my shoulders then she filled a canteen with water from the sink and told me to drink from it. There was something in it that tasted like oranges. "E-mergency," she said. "I don't know if it works, but it's got vitamins in it." She sat down opposite me, pulled her legs into Indian position and watched me. Her eyes were large and very green and I wished then

I was not such a fuck-up and that it was I taking care of her rather than the other way around. There was no excuse. She was so dirty, and perhaps if I'd been healthy I could have helped her. I was sure my mouth was working again, so I tried to spark a little conversation since she didn't seem at all pressed to do so herself. I said: "Are you from around here? Are you a run-away? You're a child; don't you think it's a bit dangerous to be out here like this? I could have been a creep." "No," she said, and she got up from her position and poured the soup back into the can and then retrieved two plastic spoons from her rucksack. We sat in the center of the room, hunched over the steaming can of soup and fed ourselves.

He enters with this weight of seriousness wrapped about him like a heavy coat, as though this were a board meeting that will decide the fate of many livelihoods, his confident stride and squared shoulders commanding the room, and reassuring that, yes, everything will be okay now that he has arrived. I wonder how long he has been sober, and for how long he has been shamed into remaining a sponsor for the program—I should not be so pessimistic.

When he sees me, he smiles and waves across many tables. Several heads turn in my direction and I wave back so that they can return to their laptops or crossword puzzles or novels. "Great," he says, "doin' just great. Why don't we take this table over here?" "Okay," I say, even though my table is perfectly fine. "So how's it going? How are the cravings, any temptations? You want a coffee, how 'bout a coffee?" He says it as he's rising and now he's at the counter, ordering a couple Milky Way Carmel Frappucinos. The barista smiles as she takes his order and he smiles back. He clicks his tongue so that I will look at him and then he makes this face like he's just been bulled over by something heavy. Her tits, I presume.

While I slurp at the chocolate slushy I describe my urges to drink and how lately I have been tempted to buy some pot even though I hate pot. He tells me one vice is just as toxic as another. It's all just a crutch for what I am not presently dealing with. He wants to know what I think that might be. "Well, I can tell you," I say. "I'm trying to reintegrate, but I can't quite live with how one addiction just seems to replace another. I feel like so much is designed to get you into a state of craving that recovery means you have hole yourself up and never go outside. I feel miserable about how little I go outside." His gray eyes stare right through me. "I want to recover," I say, "I really do, but I can't just replace alcohol with—I don't know—stamps or baseball cards or coffee. I'd rather enjoy a good drunk than drink this crap, and what's the difference in the end, right?" He sort of smirks then says: "An addiction to coffee won't kill you, won't destroy your family and ruin your life." "I don't want to be an addict," I say. "If I'm truly going to recover I can't just exchange one addiction for another that happens to be more socially acceptable. That's not recovery, that's a con. I'm lying to myself is what that is." My new sponsor sucks hard at his pink straw; his eyes are closed and he breathes deeply before saying: "How are you trying to replace anything with anything?" "What?" I say. "Why are you casting about for something else to latch onto?" I say: "Well what the hell else am I going to do with myself?" "That's just it," he says. "The addict is the most selfish man on Earth. You gotta get past yourself, man. Nothing's going to start till you do." I take a moment then say: "But that is not at the root of it." "What you have to do is look at the nature of your connection to things, what do you see there? Take an honest look and really explore your..." and I am no longer listening to him because he is only regurgitating verbatim what I have heard in the meetings. I decide there is no point to this, so I nod my head and agree with him until he has run out of things to recite and gets up to shake my hand. "I want you to know you can call me day or night—anytime—whenever you feel you need

someone. That's what I'm here for, I'm your sponsor, and I will see you through this. Believe me, I've been exactly where you are right now. Don't forget that," he says, vigorously shaking my hand all this time. I smile, staring blankly at the wall behind him. Before he leaves, he orders another coffee from the girl with the sad eyes, and I wonder then if it is because he wants to stare at her ass or if he really drinks this much coffee.

I move back to the table where I was sitting before the meeting with my new sponsor. I reach into my back pocket and pull out the twenty and put it on the table. I stare at the wasted face of the man depicted there. I am unreasonably mad at my new sponsor when it occurs to me I never once thought to spend this money on anything but myself. It is nearly dusk and the barista is sweeping the floor behind the espresso machine, and there are plastic wrappers around all the food in the display case. An addict's loneliness is particularly pathetic because he does it to himself, and that leaves only blindspots where he wishes most to look; he need only turn his head to see for himself, but he's too goddamn lazy to do anything like that. He can know this about himself and not do anything with it. And, indeed, I am jealous of the people at the other tables because they can go to bars after the cafés close and I cannot; I have to go home where there is nothing but an empty room and a foul stink. I fold the twenty into a triangle, like they teach you to do with the flag in the military, and leave through the double-door and enter the street where the air is heavy with the smell of electricity.

Across the street from me, sitting on the ledge near a patio bustling with well-dressed diners and tall uniformed servers holding large platters of food or cradling wine bottles, is the girl who brought me back that night. She is hunched over a large accordion and playing something very

old sounding, and I wonder before I am sure she is playing Vivaldi. I know because it is sometimes better to sleep in the park—among the bare-roots of the overgrown rhododendrons, some as big as trees—than in my apartment and the bell tower of the nearby St. Christopher’s Cathedral plays this song every morning at six. It used to signal people to Mass, but the people stopped coming and the church went bankrupt and it has been empty for a long time now. I wonder if perhaps that is where she has been staying.

I cross the street and as I near her I notice that large plastic case I’d been curious about. It must have contained the accordion. She looks so diminutive behind its colossal bulk. It is no wonder she had such trouble lugging it through the window of the apartment that night. I near her position at the ledge, thinking I ought to get her attention so that I can thank her for what she did. The diners watch me pass out the edges of their eyes. She has an old aluminum can in front of her and in it is a bit of change. I watch her play for a while. She never opens her eyes and she plays the tune with such brilliance I can feel it on my skin. It makes me think of spring and all the green that is returning to the city, and how it is possible at dawn to lie on my back beneath the rhododendrons in the cool of the park and watch the leaves turn and angle themselves toward the rising sun. I decide it is better to let her play. I drop the little flag I have made out of the twenty in her can and walk away with the Vivaldi in my ears.