

**A Distant Song Posted on March 15, 2014 Eunoia Review**

My muscles stiffen and knots tighten in my stomach. Sweat beads on my forehead at the hairline and my palms are moist. I can’t predict these attacks, but I know their feel. Panic surges through me during a 1 p.m. appointment with my psychologist. He pushes hard. “Joseph, we need to talk more about your mother.”

She’s dead and it’s been a long time since I’ve wanted to talk about her, but the shrink won’t stop probing and poking. “Okay, I had a shitty childhood,” I finally shout and pick up my coat. “Now I’m going back to work.”

Five years of workshops, group sessions and individual psychotherapy confirm what I knew from the start: stress is crushing me. None of the experts have solutions, except pills which make my brain fuzzy or meditation classes where I fall asleep. I wish I could charge my clients $250 per hour to tell them what they already know.

As I walk back to my office through Pioneer Square, I steer for the Starbucks on the north side of the plaza. A panhandler, a fixture, is at his usual spot in front of the door. Customers stop to talk with him, but I never do. As I approach, a lawyer I recognize from my building says to him, “I’m due back in court,” and turns to hurry off.

“Make the jury feel how your client claws for each breath of air,” the guy calls after him, like he’s a fucking oracle or something. The lawyer halts mid-stride, turns and flashes thumbs-up. How did these two become acquainted, I wonder.

The man of some indeterminate age between 55 and 65 is missing his right leg at the knee. I’m guessing a Vietnam War veteran, even though I was only ten in 1975, too young to be directly touched by the war. Thirty-five years have passed, but here he’s stationed, disabled and drinking up his military pension to fend off whatever demons he needs to exorcise. He squats, an imperfect Buddha, behind his handwritten sign: “Running on zero; need $$$ for food.”

Still agitated from my therapy session, I approach the entrance to the coffee shop. Hoping to prevent eye contact, I concentrate on an ornate cornice decorating the top floor of the Jackson Towers across the Square. I’ve got my own problems and want nothing to do with either this man or his bad luck. I squeeze in the door, apparently without his notice.

Lines are longer than normal; the baristas unusually slow. I don’t really have to be anywhere or do anything, but I jingle coins in my pocket and rock on my feet as I wait. When I reach the front of the line, I order latte with skim milk and hope the tremor of irritation in my voice doesn’t draw attention. Clutching my coffee, I start back to my office. As I pass the panhandler, I’m preoccupied in calculations of the ideal temperature for coffee. I barely hear him when the guy addresses me. “Mr. Latte, gracing us with his presence.”

My first instinct is to pretend I don’t hear, but he’s speaking directly to me, for Christ’s sake. I halt and face him. “Excuse me, what did you say?”

“I said here comes Mr. Latte, the tall, distinguished gentleman with slightly graying temples and expensive suits.”

Sweat pools on my forehead again. Who is this stranger who has watched me and knows my habits? I don’t answer him.

He stares at me. “I see you go in here almost every day.”

*Why can’t I be left alone?* I slowly back away from his faint, unpleasant smell. *How am I responsible for this drunk?*

“You don’t look at me.” The man shrugs to indicate where he sits. “Maybe you don’t even know I exist?”

*I know you’re here. Shit, practically have to climb over you to get inside.* For a moment, the man fades into a shadow flowering behind him. A strange power holds me motionless until he slowly returns into focus.

“I’m not asking for anything.” He speaks slowly to make sure I understand. “Just want you to know your coffee costs more than a meal at Sisters of the Road for one of us brethren of the street.” He extends his hand towards me like we’re friends finishing a nice little chat. “Have a good afternoon.”

His annoying grin enrages me, but I take his hand and give it one loose, unenthusiastic shake before crossing the street to the American Bank Building. While I ride the elevator to the 10th floor, I’m careful not to touch any part of my clothing or body with my right hand. Edging sidewise around two other passengers, I hurry to the lavatory.

When I work late, I watch the cleaning crew from a distance like shadows, lifting and stooping as they labor. They make the marble and chrome of the bathroom shine. Walking directly to the sink, I scrub my hands thoroughly. As I’m drying them, I still smell the stranger’s odor and turn to wash a second time. The lemon scent of the soap mixes with the sharp tang of my perspiration.

Back in my office, I pick up a file, set it down and lift another, unable to recapture the calm I normally feel in the order of my surroundings and the patterns of my work. Ill at ease, I leave early.

At home, I’m too tired to cook a meal and open a Trader Joe’s frozen pizza. After dinner, I turn on the news but have trouble concentrating. At nine, I give up and go to bed. I have difficulty falling asleep, shifting and turning side to side until I drift off near midnight. Visions swirl and pass, but all I remember of my dreams, when the alarm startles me awake at 6:30 a.m., is the face of the bum with a body like the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland, mocking me with an ambiguous smile which seems to ask questions without answers. I drag my exhausted body to the shower.

When I arrive at work, I arrange my pens and pencils on the desk and compile a list of tasks to do, anticipating a check next to each item before I leave at the end of the day. This routine fails to soothe me. That guy forced his conversation and handshake on me. After several futile hours, I seek distraction and step from behind the detachment of my mahogany desk. In front of large double-hung windows, I scan the familiar geometric profile of downtown. My breathing slows, but when I glance down at Pioneer Square below me, I’m wrenched back into the world. I see food vendors, street preachers cheerfully shouting about the coming apocalypse, lawyers rushing self importantly to court and street kids with multiple piercings and tattoos. They move in a mysterious dance through the chaos of the square—a messy stew of people.

As it’s noon and I don’t have a lunch engagement, I venture into the square to buy a sandwich at The Mediterranean Bazaar, carefully avoiding the entrance to the Starbucks. Initially, I’d worried about the hygiene of the outdoor food carts, but my secretary had reassured me. “Those Hispanics are actually quite clean.” I ask for my customary sandwich—falafel with cucumbers, but no mayonnaise or other sauce—and extract two napkins from the dispenser. I don’t need their plastic utensils because I carry my own matched set of knife, fork, and spoon in a leather case.

It’s sunny and I search for a place to eat my falafel sandwich at a distance from a scrum of young people, instead of rushing back to my office to eat at my desk as I usually do. They make me nervous with the sweet, rotten odor of cannabis clinging to their ragged clothes. I spread a newspaper on the steps to sit on, careful that the fold faces outward and the sides align. To discourage any overtures, I stare at my Ecco shoes while I eat. Memories stir in my stomach like acid.

Mother started her art collection the year dad died. Something was wrong with his nervous system, I was told, and his heart stopped. She became preoccupied, frozen with her own loss. That left me alone at six to figure out what life without dad was going to be like. Laughter died in our household. Mother became obsessed with order. She covered flat surfaces with delicate glass figurines of animals in mute array. One small bump might shatter their crystalline beauty into a hundred disconnected slivers. “Don’t touch,” she warned if I got too close. I was not allowed to disturb the perfection of their symmetry, no matter how gentle my caress. Until I escaped to college, my life remained a timid, stuttering walk between the fragility of the glass and of my mother.

A man, the sleeves of his white shirt rolled to his elbows, intrudes on my recollections. “Great weather, man, huh?” His chatter invades my space like my ex-wife’s constant prattle. Our brief marriage ended years ago. She wanted to talk about everything that happened during her day; I wanted quiet, time to sort through and organize what was happening in my life.

“Yeah, good weather.” I stand and return to my office.

I arrange the files on my desk into two neat stacks. After finishing some research of IRS regulations and making some calculations in the file on which I’m currently working, I’m unable to decide to which stack I should return it. I can’t seem to regain any effective working rhythm, and I leave early—by the back exit to avoid the receptionist. While waiting for the elevator, I stare back at the brass plaque on the firm’s door―Landrech, Emerson, & Thom, Accountants, P.C. Once it mattered that my name came first; it confirmed I was a success in the world.

The next day, still out of sorts, I schlep to work. After teasing some sense out of the pile of papers left me by a client to prepare his tax filing, I stare at a pigeon strutting on the sill of my office window. As far as I’m concerned, pigeons are rats with wings, but today I’m struck by the light catching the emerald iridescence of its neck, melting into purple shading, and further down, the gray bulk of its body. Its reddish eyes stare vacantly for food along the ledge. I do not see or hear the peregrine falcon which strikes like lightening. Feathers fly. With one final squeeze of the pigeon’s motionless body, the falcon flies off carrying its booty to some secret place. My heart constricts.

As my pulse returns to normal, I decide I’m not going to allow that strange panhandler to disrupt my routine, and I head to Starbucks. I reluctantly nod my head toward the guy posted like a statue beside the doorway.

“So, what’s your name?” he asks.

I misstep and almost fall. Heat washes over me. I want to ignore his question but feel uncomfortable with the animosity that would convey. “Joseph, uh, Landrech, what’s yours?”

“Aron.”

We face each other across a social chasm until I feel a dam of restraint unaccountably crack within me. “What happened to you?” I ask.

Through the unruly tangle of his eyebrows, Aron glances up. “You mean about my leg or why I’m a bum?”

“Both, I guess.” I’m not feeling comfortable. *I didn’t start this conversation.* I don’t normally pry, but those are exactly the things I want to know.

Scratching his crotch absent-mindedly, Aron asks, “You want the truth or the version most people want to believe?” His half-smile appears to mock me.

“The truth, of course.”

“I lost my leg ten years ago when I was slobbering drunk for a month.” Aron rubs the stump of his right leg thoughtfully, seeming to contemplate its absence.

I’m too startled to respond.

“Yeah, thrashing round my apartment so bad I cut myself,” continues Aron. My cheeks twitch. “By the time I made it to the hospital, a hunk of my leg was dead.” I’m listening intently. “The part on my sign about needing money for food is true, shelter too. When people don’t give me enough, I sleep on the street, but I like shelters better.” He pauses. “Some of the lost souls in the Church of the Homeless and Forgotten won’t be caught dead in a shelter―too much stealing―but I don’t have nothing left to steal. Anyway, the cold makes my leg throb.”

I waver between staying and bolting into Starbucks. “Why didn’t you go to the hospital sooner?”

“Too drunk to feel the pain; too damn stupid not to drink.”

I want this discussion to end, to never have started, but questions surface like sludge from a ruptured sewer. “Why do you drink?”

“I don’t drink. I wallow.”

“But why?”

“Lot of reasons. Before she left, my wife called me her biggest mistake. She wanted things from me I was unable to give.” He looked at me to ensure I was following him. “Got back from Nam with a hole inside. Not a wound but an empty space I could never fill.”

After further reflection, Aron adds, “Maybe I always had a taste for booze.” An umbra of shade flickers behind him again. “I can go a day or two without drinking, but after the first sip, I can’t stop. Darkness sucks me further into its embrace with each swallow.”

I recall the impenetrable blackness of the closet where mother placed me in punishment one day when I’d nudged her étagère of art, causing a small glass ballerina to fall and splinter. “You wicked boy,” she shrieked and shoved me into the closet. “Think about how you can be better.” I heard her voice trickle under the door as her footsteps moved away. The isolation enveloped me like a shroud.

“Darkness?” My eyes lock on Aron’s.

Aron nods wearily. “Darkness, yes, but there may also have been a voice.” He shook his head. “I’ve been a drunk so long, I forget exactly.”

“A voice?”

“Seems like I hear singing,” Aron says. “Probably only alcohol twisting around in my brain.”

“What kind of singing?”

For a moment, Aron’s face goes slack, his eyes dead. He rolls back and forth on his haunches, struggling to evade remembrance. “Whoa, this is deep, far deeper than I want to go.” There is a long pause and then he brightens. “You’re one serious puppy.” Glancing over at me, he adds with the hint of a sneer, “Kind of wanted the heroic, disabled vet story, didn’t you? Well, the war was the cause…in a way. There just wasn’t anything noble about how I lost my leg.”

Unable to stop myself anymore, I ignore what he’s said and plead, “Try to remember about the singing.” I barely breathe.

“Don’t know if I actually heard anything,” sighs Aron. “Shit happens, you know. Some things we understand; others we don’t.”

A well-dressed woman stops and gives Aron a dollar. “How’s the writing going?” she asks.

“This is my new friend.” Aron points sidewise at me. “I’m gathering material for a short story.”

“What kind of story?”

“Can’t say; it’d ruin the surprise. But I’m going to call it ‘Glass Man’.”

“How did you know about the glass?” I stutter.

Aron looks blank. The woman glances at her watch and enters Starbucks.

A businessman delayed by this conversation lowers his Blackberry and turns toward me. “Hey, buddy, this bum hassling you?”

“No…no, it’s fine,” I say. I’m conscious people are watching, inventing their own versions of my connection to Aron. The man lifts his phone and moves on.

“Notice how upstanding citizens automatically assume a street person must be an inconvenience to a respectable businessman like you.” Aron smirks at the departing Blackberry man in his Italian silk suit.

Frantic to extricate myself, I ask Aron what kind of coffee he likes and disappear inside. As I exit, I hand Aron a double espresso. “That’ll keep you awake until tomorrow,” I offer up as a light joke.

Aron leans forward. “I lost my leg.” His voice falls to a whisper as if sharing a secret. “What body part are you missing?”

Sweat saturates my dress shirt with its ammonia smell. Without responding, I stumble back to my office and slump against the mesh back of my ergonomic Executive Chair. A shudder of fear shakes me.

After an hour, I flee to my two-bedroom condo in the Benson Tower. I flip through classical music CDs and choose a Handel oratorio. Slipping off my shoes and collapsing into an overstuffed chair, I stare at the construction site across the street. Unable to focus, I struggle into the kitchen for the one bottle of bourbon in my liquor cabinet. *Sonofabitch, how’d I get mixed up with that bum?*

In the following days, I avoid Pioneer Square and sneak around the corner to Peet’s Coffee. As I leave my building, my eyes twitch toward the square where I inevitably catch sight of Aron looming outside Starbucks. I smuggle a small, engraved silver flask to work and spike my coffee with whiskey. *What does he think is absent in me?*

After three weeks, I force myself to return to Starbucks. I need to find out what Aron meant. Standing in front of him, I try to speak, but nothing emerges at first except a soft gurgle. “What did you mean?” I finally manage to continue in a strangled voice. “About me missing something.”

“Hello, Joseph.” Aron ignores my question.

But I’m looking for answers, not conversation. I wait, stolid and silent, for a response.

“If part of you is missing, you can touch the empty space, suffer from the pain of its loss, but you can’t change the fact it’s gone,” Aron says.

The blood drains from my face as I backpedal.

“Connection to others,” Aron calls after me. “No one can live without it.”

I sense I’m standing on a ledge high above a vortex. No matter how firmly I cling to the edge, I am drawn, haltingly, step by step toward the whirling depths. I blunder back to the office, oblivious to my surroundings.

After this confrontation, home beckons whenever I’m at work. I hear a voice calling me from a place I can’t identify. “Come home, you’re safe here.”

At my condo, I nurse a drink in front of my television earlier each day. My kitchen once only contained wine and few rarely used bottles of hard liquor. In the evening, my routine was to drink a small splash of white wine as an apéritif while I read The Wall Street Journal and a single glass of Bordeaux with dinner. Now I only want vodka. Don’t want choices.

When I finish sucking down my last bottle of vodka, I heave myself off the couch and negotiate my way to the liquor store. The sales clerk knows me although I notice he doesn’t offer me any frequent customer discounts. “Hey, buddy, who’s helping you drink all this stuff?”

I don’t feel like answering. I wave my hand in the direction of the vodka section where bottles form a neat pyramid. He knows my brand. I hold up fingers to indicate the five quarts I want.

“Okay, maybe we aren’t going to have a conversation here,” the clerk mutters while he arranges my order in two bags.

At home, I organize the bottles in the cabinet with precision. None touch.

Eventually, I stop going to work entirely. I decide shaving is unnecessary and rarely leave home. Mostly I stare out the window at nothing in particular. My eyes develop a red rim and itch continually. After drinking the morning into a haze, I eat breakfast in the afternoon. With each new drink, I no longer ask myself why. Only, why not?

Sometimes images of Aron float into my reveries. I see the stump of his leg as he holds court outside Starbucks. What the hell, I top off my vodka, adding two ice cubes if I’ve remembered to fill the tray.

During one bender, I fly around the living room knocking art from the walls and sweeping books and magazines into indiscriminate heaps. My CDs spray across the floor. Without undressing, I collapse on my bed. “At last,” I hear an unfamiliar voice mutter before I fall unconscious.

I toss in restless sleep punctuated by a familiar dream. Hands by my side, my nose touches the lowest shelf of my mother’s prized glass art. Aching with desire to stroke the figurines, I watch in horror as one piece suddenly, and without cause, tumbles against the next. Each falling figure upends another, leaving an aftermath of decapitated rhinos, three-legged giraffes, and other maimed animals. I crumple to the floor. Pinched disappointment spreads like a pestilence across mother’s face.

“Don’t put me in the closet,” I beg. She doesn’t speak. I wish for another chance to do what is expected. But there are no second chances. I watch mother’s shadow dart from room to room, always turning a corner, always with her back to me. As I wake from this nightmare, strange music fills my ears. I struggle to disentangle myself from twisted sheets.

I rarely cook any more. When I order take-out, coins spill as I try to make correct change. “Here,” I mumble in total confusion one time and thrust a $20 bill at the delivery man. Closing the door quickly, I lean my head against the coolness of the wood, waiting for his footsteps to depart.

“Shit,” I hear him mutter through the closed door, “that guy can’t add or subtract. More customers like him, and I’d be rich.”

At first every day, then less frequently, my office calls to check on me. I tell them I’m sick and hint at something serious. I experience growing numbness in my chest, and I’m certain some obscure cancer is eating a hole in my center.

Once, an associate from the firm appears at my condo. “We’re worried about you.” I have no response and watch him wriggle in the silence between us. I hardly notice when he retreats to the elevator. “Let us know if we can help,” he calls as the door closes. The office stops calling me after his visit.

I no longer read the mail or collect it from under the slot in my door. I don’t open a certified and registered letter stamped from my condo association. During the day, I mostly stay in bed. If I sleep, I don’t have to think. When I can’t sleep, I pull the covers over my head. If I can’t see the world, maybe it’ll leave me alone. At night, I punch random buttons on the radio to fill the silence until rock music thunders from an AM station. A neighbor knocks and shouts through the door. “Turn that damn noise down.” I reach for my drink and neither respond nor reduce the volume.

One morning, I wake sprawled over the shattered remnants of my CD collection. I hear noise and groan. Opening my eyes, I see two intruders staring at me. I lurch to a seated position to protest. One man I remember is the super of my condo and the other guy might be a neighbor. *Who the hell do they think they are*? I droop back to the floor; outrage requires too much energy. Let them do what they want.

Some people come to get me. They force me to stand when I curl into a ball. Once they have me in motion, I no longer resist. They deliver me to the De Paul Center and place me in detox. Shaking with need at first, I gradually calm over the next three days. We are supposed to attend group meetings. “What bullshit,” I think, but then I realize I’d rather be told what to do than to have to figure things out for myself. That’s all I’ve ever really wanted— clear direction as to what is expected of me.

When it’s my turn to have my detention evaluated before a magistrate, I’ve been sober for a week. My courtappointed attorney shows me the official record of my treatment. Like I can’t read, he points to an underlined sentence. “Alcoholic, fourth stage.” *Asshole, what’s his point?*

“How many stages are there?” I ask. The attorney looks startled, but before he can answer, I continue. “I mean, fourth stage doesn’t sound too good, but if there are ten stages, it wouldn’t be so bad—less than halfway there, wherever there is.”

His nose twitches as if I had farted. Then he points to the report’s conclusion. “The patient shows no self awareness and is unable to relate to his therapist or other patients.” Yeah, no fucking shit.

“If you don’t convince the judge you’re ready for change, he’s not going to release you.” The lawyer emphasizes each word distinctly. After a week in the drunk ward, I could figure this out myself. I shrug into a semblance of coherence moments before the hearing starts. Pressing my hands together to stop their trembling, I lie. “I want to join Alcoholics Anonymous.”

The judge seems too busy to dig any deeper and declares me competent. With his eyes, he signals the bailiff as if to say, “Would you please remove this sack of shit from my sight.”

Instead of heading to AA, I seek out Aron. If I can talk to him, he’ll help. This time, I’ll listen closely as he describes the dark forces that summon him. I fight like a dying salmon swimming up the stream of my obsession to the corner of Pioneer Square where Starbucks looms like a jail.

A flyer pasted on the window invites people to Aron’s funeral two days earlier. Friend of many. A detailed sketch of Aron in his usual spot smiles at me from the memorial announcement, which contains limited biographical information but numerous testimonials from customers and employees. “He wove community around him in the anonymity of a public place.”

As craving slowly consumes me, I have nowhere else to turn. The cadence of a distant song beckons me to dance and twirl into the shadowland which has tightened around me.

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