

HOLIDAY

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It was well into the autumn months, but the weather retained a light and refreshing heat, enough so that windows and doors stayed open throughout the shortening days. To a visitor, like Y, these conditions were a privilege, but to those that lived here it was a regular occurrence, and if anything, invoked a dismissive type of boredom; certainly nothing special. X, however, was an exception and whether it was just for the sake of Y or because of a personal passion, he commented regularly and proudly of the year-round warmth, not jaded by the many years of living in it.

The mornings began slowly, and a slight chill in the air sat below a veil of dusty-looking clouds blanketing the sky. Small pockets of sun were allowed to dart through these grey layers as they trudged along slowly in the stillness. Once enough heat had gathered, the clouds would begin to pull apart and turn into smaller floating pillows, until eventually they gave up and let the rising heat burn them away completely, revealing the painfully blue sky. A sweet smell of something new and fresh would fill the air for these early hours, reminding Y of things being born and then the sun would come to have its way and begin baking the ground, causing a thicker, stronger scent to permeate. The smell of age.

Y was visiting for the week and luck had it that X was given an unexpected day off from work, so they decided to drive out to a reservoir that Y had been recommended. The description his friend had given was that of a lush and vast forested area which could be navigated via many different tracks, and this forest enclosed a decently sized reservoir, filled with crisp clear water; perfect for swimming, or just cooling off.

X volunteered to drive after a little back and forth about which car to take and they set off late morning, by which time the sun was already high in the sky and the world seemed subdued by the heat. They wound their way through the local suburbs. Y watched as they passed by countless houses, each different to the last. This wasn't like the neighbourhoods of his youth, which were made up of rows upon rows of identical red brick



buildings, each seemingly cloned from the last, these were awash with character and he saw single storey wooden shacks that looked ready to crumble and fall, sat right next to huge sprawling structures, with first floor balconies that would have swallowed up their poorer cousins next door. The mix of poverty and wealth in such close proximity was a common theme and it made for an enthralling display, at least for Y, as he would often ruminate on the haves and have-nots of different people, eventually looking inward and wondering of his own human value.

Whilst he was daydreaming, they had joined the motorway and were now gliding past a fractured stream of other vehicles, sitting in the outside lane to get to their destination without delay.

"Do you see that up ahead?" X said drably as he gazed forwards.

Y scanned the road in front of him and saw a collection of vehicles spread across the lanes, though nothing caught his eye. He looked upwards, above the cars at the sky and the few trees and distant hills that showed ahead, but again nothing stuck out.

"What are you looking at?" he said finally, glancing at X to see whether he could figure it out from his stare.

X let out a puff of breath and rearranged his lips.

"There's a hearse in front of us, right ahead" his tone remained flat.

"Do you think it's bad luck to be following a hearse?" he added.

Y took a moment, rubbing his chin and his cheeks, either due to a habit of thought or the few day-old beard that covered them.

"Bad luck... bad luck" he murmured to himself. After a moment his tone stiffened, and assuredness entered his voice.

"I suppose it depends whether you believe in luck, right?" and he posed this as a statement with a slight inflection and then went on, "If you believe in luck, then following in the wake of a dead person, or a vehicle for dead people would probably be a pretty sure sign of bad luck, but on the other hand, if you don't believe in luck at all then it wouldn't mean anything. Just another lump of metal on wheels."

Y stopped rubbing his face once he concluded the thought and sat back into his seat.

"You know, we could conduct an experiment" he added.

"Oh yea, what experiment is that?" X said, with little sign of intrigue.

"Well, we'd need to follow the hearse for as long as possible, staying behind it whichever way it goes and then see whether anything bad happens later on" Y took a tiny pause "and if something bad does happen... then I guess we decide whether it was luck or coincidence that caused it. What do you think?"

X looked over at Y and smiled, again rearranging his lips.

"Sure"

So, they stayed behind the hearse as it accelerated and as it slowed down, when it switched lanes and even when the long black vehicle indicated to take an exit which wasn't on their route, they took it, completely true to the cause.

By now they'd decided not to go to the reservoir, though neither had said anything.

"Wow, this hearse is really travelling huh" said Y, after around half an hour of following it

"I hope they've got the body chilled in there" he said, imagining a greying corpse shuffling around in the back of the stuffy vehicle, with the smell of death spreading in the autumn sun.

They were now driving down a narrow country road, snaking between thickets of autumnal trees that held back most of the blazing sun, but allowed thin strips to filter through, dotting and lining the road. There were barely any other cars, and it seemed that they were heading somewhere well out of the way.

X had been silent for a while but now spoke.

"What are we going to do when they stop?" he said.

Y went to rub his chin again but stopped himself.

"That's a good question" he responded and took a moment to carry on.

"How about, if they stop in a public area then we just park nearby and wait to see what happens next. If they pull up to a house, then I guess we just drive on and call it quits... or we could just drop it now, depending on whether you think we've followed for long enough, to build up some really bad luck"

X seemed to be soaking in the options and continued driving without speaking for a while.

"We can go for a little longer, I think" and carried



on like they'd never spoken.

They were mostly silent as they continued, both feeling the weight that the heat held, with X following the target like a faithful hound and Y closing his eyes from time to time so that he could soak in the sound of the road, feeling like he had stowed away on a ride to some indistinct, foreign land.

About an hour later, after climbing some steep and still winding stretches of road the hearse started to slow down and eventually stopped in the middle of the lane, having made no attempt to pull out of the way.

X and Y looked at each other and X instinctively slowed the car and also came to a halt, some 20 meters back from the hearse.

After a moment a man appeared from the driver's seat, clad in a well fitted black suit and with a solemn expression that matched perfectly his mat of dull grey hair. He was every part the archetypal hearse driver. He closed his door and walked steadily to the back of the vehicle, his walk showing no urgency, and his eyes locked forward the entire time, not deviating once to look at X's car. Once he'd rounded the back he leant down to the handle and pulled the rear door wide open.

The mood had become very strange, with Y worrying that they'd pushed things a little too far and as he stared at the side of X's onlooking head, he contemplated whether he did believe in luck. To him, the word 'luck' reeked of excuses and even if he thought that it may be a genuine phenomenon, he'd likely deny it.

No, luck wasn't real.

The sun was still dappling through the trees, and it cast brilliant spots of light which shook against the man's dark suit as he leant into the back of the hearse, seemingly rearranging something.

"Do you want to get out of here?" Y said, sounding a little apprehensive.

"Now?" replied X incredulously.

"You want to leave now, after coming all of this way? Before we even get to see what's happening?" he turned to Y and his eyes were bulging from his head in a mixture of excitement and bewilderment.

As he finished his sentence the man jerked backwards with a dull thud accompanying the action, as something heavily dropped

onto the road.

"What is that?" said Y uneasily, but there was no response from X who was now leant over the steering wheel, watching intently.

The man bent down and picked up two limbs of whatever was on the road and with some considerable effort began dragging it towards them, the scraping of hide on the rough tarmac audible in the quiet surrounds. He moved slowly and methodically, leaning backwards, pulling the creature along in neat little instalments.

"So, you want to just wait for this guy to bring that thing all the way over here?" Hysteria now rang through Y's voice as he fretted in the passenger seat, his hands pressing against the dashboard.

"Let's fucking go!" he shouted, but X was non-responsive, slumped over the wheel with no discernible expression, watching listlessly as the figures moved towards them.

Finally, the man dropped the load that he was carrying and turned around to face the two of them. This time he stared them both in the eye, X first and then Y, before walking the last 6 or 7 paces to the bonnet of the car. The sun was shining sharply onto his face, and it illuminated him almost as if he were aflame, with the iridescent yellows and golds flashing over him with every movement. Once at the front of X's car he raised his arms, spreading them like wings and they could see that the large pale palms of his hands and the cuffs of his white shirt were darkly stained with a ruddy brown. The image brought to mind horror movies of Y's youth and he was frozen with dread.

Throughout all of this X had been reliving a dream that he'd had many years ago. In the dream he was standing by the bank of a vast pond, so large that he could barely make out the low bushes and trees that lined the other side, with the water at his feet a thin mottled green that darkened the deeper it got. His feet were bare and only his toes dipped into the pond as the soles of his feet rested pleasantly in the soft mud of the bank.

Where the water was darkest, towards the middle of the pond, X could make out a collection of shapes bobbing on the surface, moving lazily and good-naturedly, appearing as friendly blobs on the water. Without feeling the urge, X had waded into the pond and once he was up to his waist



had begun swimming a languorous breaststroke out towards the nearest of these dark masses. It seemed to call to him in a low and welcoming hum. He recalled the water being unusually viscous, like swimming through a honey which gave some resistance, but this didn't cause any panic. Once he'd made it to the first shape, he started to tread water and stretched out his arms to reach over it, with a soft and rubbery texture greeting him. The object was heavy and seemed very dense. X leant over it, looking for signs of familiarity, but there were none.

It was like a large, tender rock that had decided to take its leave from the bed of the pond and float up to the surface, to enjoy the calm air that was on offer. As X looked around, he noticed that all the other objects were slowly floating towards him, but again this held no menace as they seemed only to want to be held as well. Gradually they made their way to where X was and one by one, they pressed against the mass that he was holding and merged into it, like drops into a black puddle, making an increasingly huge and misshapen body. As they collected in their dozens, X felt the sensation of it inflating below him until eventually he was laid on top of this thick black plane, some considerable height in the air.

He scrambled to the edge and looked down to see that the pond was an ocean now and from horizon to horizon there was nothing but still, moss coloured water stretching out below. The driver dropped his hands down to his side and turned around, walking back towards the hearse without so much as a glance at the body laid out on the road. He carefully closed the back door and then returned to the driver's seat, started the engine and turned the hearse around, driving back the way he had come. They sat for a few minutes and then X reversed the car until the lump in the road was out of sight, before taking them home.