A Man and His Beagle

Usually, I try to stay in my bed for as long as possible. Preferably all day. It's not that I've got some strange attachment to the thing, it's just that there's nothing really attractive about the thought of getting up.

I'm not depressed. I'm not at all sick. I'm just going through a little existential crisis.

At one point in my life, I really had something going for me. I was in school, and my work was always promising. Then I started to question things. Eventually I found that I was so unsure of everything in my life that I just stopped trying.

This is my typical day:

1. Put off getting out of bed until 3 pm (at earliest, depending on how hungry I am).

2. Eat everything and anything.

3. Maybe shower. Probably not.

4. Look out of the window at the bustling city below, whine that I'm wasting my life, fall to the ground and lay there for a while until I realize I could be much more comfortable lying in my bed.

5. Go back to bed.

My older sister, Ellie, has started calling me “The Hermit”. It would probably bother me if it was anyone else calling me that, but I know Ellie's only doing it to try to motivate me.

Which is why she is coming to see me today.

I roll over in my bed and pull the warm duvet further over my face. It's so safe in my cocoon of sheets. Someone would have to kill me and drag me out of here before I leave voluntarily.

“Hello! I'm here!” My sister calls from the other side of the door to my tiny apartment.

Knowing her, she really would do anything to get me out of my bed, so I decide to make it easier on both of us. Reluctantly, I swing my legs out from under the covers and wince as my feet touch the cool wooden floor of my bedroom.

It is 11:30 in the morning.

AKA, way too early to be greeting guests at the door.

AKA, way too early to be awake.

“Alright,” I call as I shove my feet into my moccasin slippers and scrape the crust out of my eyes.

This is the most presentable that I've looked in weeks.

I open the door to see her bright, cheery, look-at-me-I'm-doing-so-well-in-life face.

I want to puke.

Ellie, ignoring my grimace, hugs me and steps inside.

My sister and I have always been told that we look identical. We have the same wispy, chestnut brown hair and hazel eyes. We both have a sprinkling of freckles across our cheeks, but everything, I've noticed, just looks a lot better on Ellie.

“Smile,” she says. She's always telling me to smile.

She takes a seat on the arm chair by the window and looks me over.

“Oh, honey,” she winces at the sight of me, “you need some inspiration.”

I roll my eyes. “I didn't wake up this early for your therapy, Ellie.”

She ignores me and continues on. “Luckily for you, I've got just the thing to help.”

It would be far too tiring to argue with her, so I just follow her slowly across the living room as she dashes to the door and grasps the small brass handle. She glances at me over her shoulder for a short moment, and I quirk my eyebrow at her. I already know I'm going to hate this, but I decide to play along.

I watch carefully and pretend to be interested as she over exaggeratedly opens the door.

My gaze drops to the floor to see the fattest beagle in existence sleeping on my doorstep with its black, white, and brown behind pointing up in to the air. Its tongue lolls out of its mouth as it breathes slowly.

I eventually look back up at my sister, who is watching me with hopeful eyes. She can't be serious.

“A dog?”

“A dog!”

“I can't take care of a dog. Look how I take care of myself, Ellie.”

I motion towards my pyjamas, which I haven't washed since god knows when. There is a yellow stain from some sort of food on my pants, and let's not get started on the last time I properly bathed. To be honest, the only reason why I'm not lying in a ditch somewhere is because of how well Ellie takes care of everything for me.

“So what? You'll learn what to do. Besides, you two need each other.”

“What do you mean?”

Ellie winks and grabs her coat from the hanger beside the door. “You'll figure it out,” she whispers.

She steps over the obese beagle and heads for the stairs to leave. I'm left standing in my pyjamas in my living room with the door wide open and a creature at my feet. It's only been five minutes, but it's already the most eventful day I've had in months.

I break out of my trance and dart after my sister down the stairs.

“Ellie! You can't leave me with it!” I call frantically.

“It's a he, and this will be good for you. Trust me.” She barely turns to look back at me as she opens the door to my building and heads outside.

I watch as she hops into her car, which happens to be conveniently parked for her to drive off in a situation like this, and tears down the street.

“Have fun!” she yells out the window.

I groan and trudge all the way back up the two flights of stairs. Shamefully, I'm winded. I guess this is what happens when you don't exercise for a year.

When I get back to my apartment, I see that the dog had managed to move it's fat ass out of the doorway. Just as I begin to look for it, I hear an ugly snort come from the couch. I glance over to see the furry lump laying sprawled across the cushions.

“Well, just make yourself at home, I guess,” I mumble softly.

I feel like I'm about to faint from all the running, so I sit in the arm chair across from the dog and we just watch each other.

A horribly unfit guy with a horribly unfit dog panting together in silence. Quite the sight.

The next several days are spent shopping online for dog food and toys. I also have to -god help me- go outside to let the thing take a dump. Most often at the worst hours of the day. If what Ellie wanted was to make sure I never get to lie in my bed again, then she's doing great.

This evening, while watching the dog chow down, I decide to try to cook a meal for myself. All of the running around with the dog recently has made me especially hungry, and for more than a microwave dinner. I look in my cupboards for options, but find nothing other than three slices of relatively stale bread, a packet of hot chocolate mix, and a really old box of KD. So I do what anyone else in my situation would do. I toast the bread, use the hot chocolate mix for regular chocolate milk, cook up the mac 'n cheese and call it a win. When I call my sister later in the day and tell her this, she calls it “getting there”.

It's been about two weeks since I got the dog, and I get the sense that he's starting to become a little stir crazy. Every so often I catch him barking at the window and then head-butting it like a really fat goat. I look out of the window and think about the last time I went out and socialized. Then I think it might be a good idea if I started doing that again. This thought lasts for about twenty seconds before I decide to forget it and call Ellie.

“The dog wants to go outside,” I complain to her.

“Then take it outside,” she replies. Through the phone, I can hear traffic in the background and I realize that she's probably in a rush somewhere and doesn't want to deal with me.

I pause. “Alright,” I force out.

“Alright, and remember to smile.”

“Okay.” No.

“Good.” Then she hangs up.

I look over at the dog who is now looking at me expectantly.

I sigh, “let's do this.”

The dog pulls me down the sidewalk faster than I can walk, so I end up running alongside him. For a sausage with legs, it can move really fast. Several old ladies with canes scowl at me as I nearly run them over, and I mutter a small sorry to each of them as I pass. All the while my head is still spinning from actually being outside, and it feels so strange. After all, I haven't left my apartment in just over a year.

Not many things have changed in that time, I notice. The dingy Italian restaurant on the corner of the street still has paint peeling on the walls outside. The old lady who works in Wong's Groceries still sits solemnly on her stool by the cash register. The giant pot hole in the middle of the road by the park is still causing drivers to curse every time they drive over it. The sky is still blue, the grass is still green, and I realize that I don't feel the same dread about the world that I used to. I feel warm, and I almost want to smile.

On our way back to the apartment, the dog decides that he needs to use the fire hydrant. While I wait for him to do his stuff, an old man stops and smiles at me and the dog. It's been so long since I've had a conversation with anyone other than Ellie, so I'm a little unsure of what to do. I nod at him.

“That's a lovely dog,” he says sweetly.

“Thanks.” Please go away.

“A beagle, right?”

“Yes.” Stop talking to me.

“What's it's name?”

Now I'm caught off guard. It hadn't occurred to me to call the dog something other than Him, He, You, or something along the lines of Fat Guy.

“I haven't decided yet,” I sort of lie.

“He looks like a Winston to me.” He leans down and pets the dog.

I look at the dog beside me. He doesn't look like a Winston to me, but now I'm curious. Maybe this man sees something that I don't.

“Why?” I venture.

“He looks wise,” the man looks up at me, “like he knows exactly what he's doing.”

Little does he know, this dog rarely does anything.

“Right. Winston. I'll keep that in mind.” I turn and continue on my way.

When I return to my apartment, the first thing that the dog does is jump on the couch and go to sleep. I peer through the doorway to my room at my bed and think of doing the same. I decide against it though and sit down beside the dog. I stroke his fur as I pick up a book and start reading it. When I peer up over the book, I catch a glimpse of myself and the dog in the mirror in the hallway. I audibly gasp at the sight. I barely recognize myself. Who is this person all dressed up, taking walks with the dog, reading a book, cooking meals, and talking to people? A stranger. Not anyone I've ever seen before, but I have to admit, I'm becoming attached.

Maybe that old man was right. My dog is wise.

The next morning, my sister shows up to have lunch with me. I invited her the night before. While I was waiting, I cooked a vegetable stir fry for us. I have always wanted to cook a meal for Ellie.

“Welcome,” I say to her as I open the door.

She looks at me, and I can see pride in her eyes, pride for me.

“You look so clean and organized and, and...”

“Inspired?”

“Yes. Very inspired. Inspirational even.”

I smile, because I feel proud.

This morning when I was getting ready, I found a journal that I had when I was seven tucked in to one of the boxes in my closet. It was a beautiful dark red leather with a buckle on the front. On the inside of the cover I had written my name in curvy black letters with my father's fancy fountain pen. I chuckled at the memory of having to sneak in to his office because he wouldn't let me use it otherwise. He thought I would get ink all over the house. I unclasped the buckle and flipped through the pages. They were all blank except for the very first page where I had written myself a message. “Fill with Adventures”, it read. I grabbed a pen from my desk and to my old words added: “because life is defined by adventure”. I left the journal open on my desk along with the pen.

Ellie's voice finally brings me back to reality.

“How's the dog?” she asks.

“Winston,” I correct, “he's great.”

For the rest of the afternoon, I talk to Ellie. Because I can. Because I have something in my life to talk about now. I feel like my life is worthwhile, and I am happy.

So I smile.

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