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It's Just a State of Mind

by Zack Anderson

He rises in the dead of night, sweat-soaked and panting. He sits up in his bed, wincing at a headache worse than any he's felt before. In a painful instant, his senses – previously dulled – return with a vengeance.

A wretched odor assaults his nostrils. He can taste the dampness in the air, feel the uncomfortable heat on his skin. He can hear an array of troubling sounds coming from somewhere far away – sirens, screams, windows breaking, all melding together to form a feverish symphony.

And he can see his bedroom, though, to be honest, he isn't quite sure it's *his* bedroom. Clothes – not his – are scattered over the stain-covered carpet. The wallpaper is peeling off in sheets, exposing damaged drywall. In a hole in the wall, he thinks he sees something – a rat, perhaps – scampering out of one shadow and into another. He shudders.

He distinctly remembers falling asleep in a space very much unlike this one. Vaguely, as if remembering a dream, he recalls the smell of lavender, and the feel of soft blankets draped over his body.

His gaze shifts sideways, falling upon the woman in the bed, lying beside him. She resembles his wife, Julia, though only just. Aside from her general shape, and the

somewhat familiar structure of her face, she looks like a different person, a separate entity altogether.

She is sickly thin, pale – her face drawn and hollow and dried like a raisin. Her hair – which he remembers to be brown and full – is gray and thinning. What's left of it is plastered to her sweaty brow in solitary strands.

Her eyes are closed, and her body is still. For a moment, he thinks she might be dead, though the subtle rising and falling of her chest convinces him otherwise.

Gently, he places a hand on her shoulder and squeezes.

“Julia,” he hisses, surprised at how raspy his voice sounds. “Julia...”

But she doesn't budge, even when he begins to shake her, chanting her name louder and louder with every jostle. Her head lolls from side-to-side, though she remains fast asleep. Finally, he gives up, releasing her and feeling, once again, the headache he's been trying to ignore.

Dazed, he climbs out of bed (not the king-sized mattress he remembers, but what looks and sounds like a creaky fold-out sofa) and stumbles towards the bathroom, his undershirt and boxer shorts both damp and matted against his skin. He flips the light switch and catches himself on the counter, just as he feels his knees beginning to shake, threatening to buckle.

The fluorescent light overhead flickers to life. Though the light is dull, it is blinding, and only intensifies the pain in his head.

The bathroom becomes ugly under the glow. The tile

is chipped, the counter top is stained, and from his place over the sink (which itself is filled halfway with opaque water) he can see the toilet, surrounded by flies – the source, he surmises, of the awful aroma he'd awoken to.

He looks at the cracked mirror over the sink, at his reflection. But it isn't his reflection; it's as though he's looking through a window, at a man he doesn't recognize.

His face is long and covered in scabs. His skin seems to be stretched thin over his skeleton—no fat, no muscle, just bones barely held upright.

Gone is his luscious hair; he is bald, though that isn't the most alarming thing he sees. Opening his mouth slightly, he notices that a number of teeth are missing, and the ones that remain are yellowed and crooked.

He blinks, hoping uselessly that when he opens his eyes, everything will be as he remembers.

But nothing has changed in that fraction of a second, save for the headache, which seems to have somehow tripled in intensity in that meager span.

Ignoring his ghastly appearance, he turns his attention instead to the medicine cabinet on the wall above the light switch. The wood-panel door dangles on a single hinge. When he grabs it, it breaks free of the wall entirely.

He lets the door fall and explores the cabinet. There are three shelves, all of which house collections of solid gray pill bottles.

Frantically, he begins to snatch bottle after bottle from the cabinet, tearing off the lids and examining the contents, until he finds something that closely enough

resembles aspirin. He pours the bottle's entirety into his clammy palm and shoves as many of the pills as can fit into his mouth.

With his mouth full, he dips his cupped hand into the sink's brine, bows his head, and lifts the water to his dry lips. He washes down the pills, feeling them tumble down his throat, some alone, others wedged in side-by-side.

He forgoes his hand and plunges his face into the sink, letting it soak, contemplating leaving it there in the hopes that the experience might yank him from this nightmare. But slowly, coming to terms with the fact that he may *not* be dreaming, that this may, somehow, be his life, he lifts his head.

There he stands, monitoring his headache. Already, the pain is less severe, though he knows all he did was dull it, stave it off for only a little while – this was, of course, assuming that the pills he ingested were in fact aspirin and not something else.

He backs away from the counter a step, finding that he can stand now, as his shakes appear to have subsided. Cautiously, he takes a step towards the bedroom.

Briefly, he considers returning to bed, in the hopes that he'll awaken to find everything as it was, as he remembers. But in a flash, the pain in his head returns, a thousand times more powerful than before, now far beyond anything he could have ever imagined.

He needs to leave. He has no destination in mind; he yearns for a change of scenery, maybe some fresh air. Kneading his brow with bony fingers, he leaves the bedroom.

The hallway, living room, and kitchen all pass by in a scattered blur. He forces his way out through the front door and stumbles down the porch steps, somehow managing not to collapse onto the lawn.

His hands are on his knees, and his head is down. He is breathing heavily. Gradually, he becomes aware of the grass; the once-lush lawn is now dry and yellow. The blades crunch beneath his feet, jabbing at the soles as they bend like straw.

He looks up, at the world before him. A nearby sign reads: MATTSON AVENUE – his street. Somehow, his suburban neighborhood has devolved into a grimy slum. The lawns are dead, and many of the windows are broken or absent altogether. What were once vibrant houses are now flimsy shacks, looking as though they might cave in on themselves without much provocation.

He walks up the path, to the sidewalk, where he sinks to his knees. He feels like he might cry.

But then, he hears something a short distance away. He glances over quickly; a lone figure is walking, slowly, down the street towards him.

He begins to panic at the sight of the stranger. He stands and takes off running in the opposite direction. His head pounds with each step.

Finally, winded, he falls to the pavement. Gasping for air, he rolls onto his back, and stares up at the night sky. Usually, he can see stars. But now, they are hidden above a thick shroud of smoke which seems to blanket the road.

He closes his eyes, and when he opens them, the stranger he'd seen approaching is standing above him.

He screams in alarm.

The stranger is tall, thin (though not unhealthily so) and clad in a tan suit. His face is pale, round, and cleanly shaven. He is smiling; everything about his demeanor projects a disarming, friendly air.

“Michael,” he says softly, offering his hand.

Michael takes the hand, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet. Vaguely, he is aware of lights popping up all around him, as his neighbors – no doubt roused by his scream – peek out through their windows.

“Having some trouble?” the stranger asks, once he and Michael are face-to-face. Michael sighs, desperately.

“I guess.”

The stranger's smile widens. “Relax,” he urges. “This is just a slight...*mechanical* failure. Nothing that can't be fixed...”

Michael shakes his head, confused. “Fixed?” he echoes. “What...?”

“It'll just take a little calibration,” the stranger explains. He reaches up, feels the back of his head. “These things aren't perfect, you know.”

Cautiously, mirroring the stranger's actions, Michael runs a hand over his smooth scalp. To his horror he feels three lumps – cold, metallic nodes which seem to be jutting out from beneath his skin – at the base of his neck.

“What...?” he begins, weakly.

“I know it's confusing, but you must listen...”

“What is this?” Michael asks, gesturing wildly at the houses around him. “Is this real?” The stranger smiles – though his smile seems much more sinister now.

“Real?” he asks. “None of it is *real*, Michael. This world – yours, the good, the bad, the love, the hate, the sky, the street – it's all just...”

He pauses, searching for the right word. “It's just a state of mind.”

“But...” Michael mutters. The stranger's sentiments offer little clarity.

But the stranger hushes him, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “It'll only take a moment,” he assures Michael. “You'll be right as rain...”

But the sound of his voice triggers something, and Michael's head feels like it might actually explode. Moaning like a lunatic, he tears past the stranger, resuming his aimless run.

“As you wish,” he hears the stranger say.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a black, windowless van appears, rolling up onto the sidewalk, blocking Michael's path. A door opens, and men in black uniforms pile out.

Michael has no time to think as the men seize him and propel him forward into the bowels of the vehicle. They clamber in after him, surrounding him.

Everything is dark. And it stays that way for some time.

Slowly, Michael opens his eyes. He's in his room, and he stares straight up at the ceiling – painted a soothing shade of green – for some time.

His headache is gone. So, too, is that awful aroma, replaced now by the faint, pleasing scent of lavender. It is over-encompassed, however, by a much more tantalizing

smell – that of frying bacon.

He sits up, relishing the crisp sheets, the soft bed. The windows allow the sunlight to invade the room, embellishing it, creating a bright, warm atmosphere.

The walls are intact and the carpet is clean. The dirty clothes are nowhere to be seen, stashed in the wicker basket by the closet.

Timidly, he feels his head, running his fingers to his delight through thick, tangled locks. He feels the back of his head and neck; the nodes are gone and the skin is smooth.

Dragging his tongue through his mouth, he finds that all of his teeth are intact and smooth. He swallows; the faint taste of toothpaste lingers in the back of his throat.

Then, he looks sideways. Julia is gone; he can still see her imprint in the mattress, the crease in her pillow where her head rests, comfortably.

A voice – hers – calls out suddenly from the kitchen. “Michael?” she asks. “Are you up?”

Michael opens his mouth to speak, but for some reason, he can't think of anything to say. He can hear footsteps in the hallway, growing louder, coming near.

Julia appears in the doorway. She is fit, full of color, and wearing, apparently, nothing but her bathrobe. Her thick hair lies damp along her back.

Michael smiles upon seeing her. She smiles too, though there is concern in her eyes, something close to *nervousness*.

“Honey,” Michael sighs.

“How are you feeling?” Julia asks.

“Fine. I just...”

He stops, unsure of what to tell her. He isn't quite sure himself what exactly has happened. It feels like a nightmare now – the pain in his head, the smelly, dingy house, and those nodes, almost like electrical outlets, in the back of his head.

Maybe that's just what it was, he concludes, a nightmare. The notion is comforting, and he accepts it willingly.

“I just had an *awful* dream.”

Julia nods, as though she's already aware. Was he speaking in his sleep? Had he awoken her, wailing like a madman and muttering gibberish? He is nervous now, ashamed, unsure of whether or not to address his behavior.

“Well, it's over now,” Julia says, clearly, as if she's trying to convince him. “You're awake.” She seems willing to move past it. Michael is more than happy to oblige.

He sniffs the air. “Something smells good...”

Julia smiles. The concern fades in her eyes slightly. “That, Mister Nightmare, is breakfast,” she says.

Michael grins hungrily. “Is it ready?”

Julia nods eagerly. “Come, let's eat.”

Michael leaps out of bed and follows her to the kitchen, the smell of bacon growing stronger and stronger all the way.

On the kitchen table, breakfast is laid out. There's bacon, eggs, toast, and a steaming cup of coffee – Michael's favorite morning meal.

He sits down at his place, snatching up the newspaper that's been set beside the coffee. He sits back, plucks a strip

of bacon from his plate, and scans the front page.

The headlines are reassuring – unemployment at an all time low, the President enjoying staggeringly high approval rates. There is a cheerful article near the bottom about a girl, rescued from a collapsing building by dutiful emergency personnel. No mention is made of the *cause* of the collapse, but it doesn't matter, for no great loss has been suffered.

Michael glances up from his newspaper. Julia is sitting across from him, smiling sweetly, not eating.

“What's the matter?” he asks. “Aren't you hungry?”

“I'm just,” she says, “glad you're okay.”

He offers a smile in return. He reaches over, his smile turning into a mischievous grin, and steals a bacon strip.

“I'll take that as a 'no,’” he says, playfully, to no protest from Julia. He takes a bite.

But the food tastes like nothing. He chews, grinding it into a dry, ashy powder. He notices the newspaper. It's blank – just a stack of empty pages.

Confused, he looks across the table at Julia. She is thin, gray, *lifeless* again. Past her, Michael can see cabinet doors swaying on their hinges. He sees shelves, stocked with nothing but gray, identical packages. And out the window, he can see the smoggy, grainy sky.

This isn't a nightmare. It can't be. To his horror, Michael feels the headache returning, little-by-little, and the bathroom's dreadful aroma, etching its way up into his nose.

Panicked, hopeless, he shuts his eyes, hoping beyond all hope that when he opens them again he will be back in the home – *his* home – that he remembers so

fondly. There will be Julia, lively as ever.

And there will be sunshine – bright and pure. And food – fresh bacon. And coffee. And newspapers.

Now without hesitation, determined, with the memory of the dearly-held components of his life offering him strength, he opens his eyes. The light is blinding, at first, but he adjusts quickly.

All is right. The food is fresh, the sun is shining. And Julia sits across from him, in her bathrobe and colorful.

But she isn't smiling. She's panicked. "Are...are you alright?" she asks.

"I'm fine," says Michael, casually, as though nothing had happened.

"You just... you just had this *look* in your eyes..."

"A look?" Michael repeats. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know," Julia sighs. She softens. "You're sure you're alright?"

Smiling, Michael reaches across the table, takes her hand in his, and squeezes. "I'm fine," he insists. "Never better."

They finish breakfast and move to the living room, where they sit on the couch, Julia with her head on Michael's shoulder.

The television is on, but Michael isn't watching. He's looking around the room, at the bookshelves, at the rug on the hardwood floor, at the curtains, which are drawn to block the gleaming sunlight. He savors the cushions beneath him, and the weight of Julia's head on his shoulder. It's all so *perfect*, so comforting. He can't imagine things any better; he doesn't want to.

He closes his eyes and leans his head back, so that he's facing the ceiling. And he knows that when he opens his eyes, everything will be the same – everything will be just as perfect, just as good.

He opens them, stares at the ceiling, then down at his wife. She's transfixed, captivated by the television – what appears to be the news.

“Can you imagine?” she murmurs, after seeing startling footage of foreign slums.

“What?” he asks.

“Living like that,” she says, nodding at the screen.

“Can you imagine?”

He shrugs. “I suppose.”

“It's so terrible,” Julia continues. “I don't know how they can *stand* it.”

“Well, I'd imagine it's...”

Julia looks up at Michael, awaiting his insight. But he is quiet, lost in thought, lost in a *memory*, one that already feels so far away, so *distant*, as if it were a dream. Maybe it is one.

He remembers the words, mulling them over, chewing on them for a moment, while Julia considers to stare at him, expectantly.

“What?” she asks, finally. “You'd imagine it's...?” He smiles.

“It's just a state of mind.”