

## We All Fall Apart

Her phone buzzed in her hand a sixth time. She'd already tried to silence it twice.

"He's calling me again, Marge," Anya said, dropping the phone on the desk in front of her.

"Just answer." A pencil was clenched between Marge's teeth as she shuffled through an array of papers in front of her. She didn't turn around.

The phone shook on the desk, worming around as its vibrations overtook the friction of the table. Anya's hand remained by her side.

"It'd be worse in person," Marge's voice carried from across the chasm of space between their mirrored cubicles, her fingers mechanically clacking at the keys in front of her.

Anya smacked the phone in front of her, stilling it as if it were a fly caught indoors. She tapped the green dot, green for go, at the center of the screen.

"Anya," Willard said, his voice a monotone wall. "We have to let you go." Without time to respond, Anya felt a pinch in her right shoulder and a jack saw buzz before her arm slid off and rolled across the commercial flooring. It came to a halt next to Marge's buckled heel. Anya heard the distant muffle of Willard's voice, but she was too busy staring at the telephone wire stretched across the floor to her fingers six feet away.

"Shit, holy shit," Anya screeched, cutting across the sounds of printers, staplers, and secretaries booking appointments. Her left hand reached across her body on instinct, but it only passed through the air that remained. The stump near her shoulder was smooth and marble-like; no blood, no loose tendons: a barbie, whose arm a child had ripped off. Marge held up a finger to her lips and ushered a thundering hush. A headset was clipped to the side of her ear.

"No, Marge, no look. By your foot."

Marge pressed a button by her right ear, and Anya watched as Marge scanned the room, noticing the phone first, then the arm. Her expression didn't change. With a smooth, dismissive wave of her hand, she responded, "So reattach it." She tossed the arm across the aisle in a perfect arc.

In Anya's corduroy lap, she pried the phone from the clenched fist and poked one of the chipped grey fingernails. Nothing. No feeling, no reaction, nothing. "Just reattach it?"

Marge bobbed her head yes with raised eyebrows, "What's wrong with you today?"

Marge's voice blurred as Anya sank inside her thoughts, combing through memories in search of distant connections. Nothing. "Marge," Anya said. Then again, louder when Marge didn't react, "Marge! What do I do? Where do I go?"

"Dammit, Anya." She tore off her headset and rotated her body towards Anya, giving her her full attention. "Do you think you're the first this has happened to?" her voice was a harsh whisper, loud enough to carry but thin enough not to attract attention. "Fix it, call a doctor, but quit distracting me. I have a meeting with a client this afternoon, and I really need to prepare, okay?"

A swivel of her chair and its back once again faced Anya. "Besides," Marge added, "Shouldn't you call Willard back first?"

With a huff, Anya turned towards the blinking web browser of her desktop. The glow of the white background forced her eyes to squint.

*What do I even search?* Anya tapped each key with her pointer finger, typing out, *help my arm fell off what do i do*. The speed alone was like a third-grader just learning to type.

2,503,000,000 results appeared, and Anya felt a tinge of relief. This was normal; this could be fixed. Anya would get this resolved and she'd be able to return to work—a work—

sooner than later. Anya scrolled past articles debating replacing missing limbs, Tiktoks where users threw their disembodied limbs at passerby, and news reports chronicling the escapade. Anya couldn't believe what she read when she clicked on one titled, "First case of lost limb reported as early as 2015." Apparently, a journalist, someone named Dee Mendez, had her eyes roll out of her head while doing work at her desk. Anya skimmed the details, stopping when she saw she'd been on Twitter when it happened, replying to comments about her most recent article. 85% of the comments were harassment, trolls, or highly critical.

Her arm, still resting in her lap, seemed to smirk. The fingers were curled in a sneer and the veins along the forearm pulsed. Still no blood. The tendons and bones on each end were trimmed to a smooth, crisp edge. There was absolutely nothing normal about this, Anya repeated to herself, nothing normal.

"Anya," a man's voice called. "You need to collect your belongings." He handed her an unfolded cardboard box.

Half an hour later, Anya strode down the street, the box resting on her hip and the masking tape peeling up around the folds. Her hand lay among the office supplies, pressed between a three-prong hole puncher and a fake poppy stem. The streets were empty and the sparsely placed trees had lost most their leaves. They held up sprouts of boney fingers and every so often a withered leaf clung on.

As Anya shuffled forwards, she caught movement in her periphery. It was an old man twisting around in his sleep. His long body crunched at the waist in order to fit within the arms of the rusted green bench, and the man's arms were wrapped tightly around his torso, rubbing it in frigid circles. His beard was grey and tattered, and his mouth hung open as his chest

arrhythmically rose and fell, seeming to cease on more than a few occasions. Anya pulled her scarf tighter around her neck.

As she neared the man, about to pass by, Anya saw that where his left foot should have been was nothing but a knob. Same with one of the wrists. A clump of three tightly-packed trash bags lay beneath him and his disconnected limbs leaned against the bench's foot, tossed aside. The fingers curled in at the edge of the wrist, like the legs of a dead spider, and both limbs were tinted blue with frost that had collected on both ends. Anya hurried past.

When Anya walked through the double-glass doors of the doctors' office, the woman working the front desk chewed the tuna sandwich in her hand, grinding the bites as a cow does—small circles around and around. She paused her chewing mid-bite, her jaw halfway unhinged, when she noticed Anya. Her cheeks puffed out and she spun her chair around to lean over a trashcan. Dry-heaving. No liquid wrinkled the lining of the bin.

“Can I see a clinician, please?” Anya asked, placing her box on the counter.

“Give me a second.” After pausing to wipe the spit at her lips, the woman clicked away at her keyboard, every now and then bringing her hand to her mouth in anticipation. “Last name?”

“Metzger.”

The woman clicked her mouse for a few minutes before looking up again at Anya. “Do you have an appointment?” Her tone walked the line between the forced politeness required of her job and her obvious disdain for Anya.

“I don't. I just knew I needed to be here today, and I couldn't get an appointment before next week. They told me you took walk-ins.”

The woman grunted. “I'll need to see your insurance.”

She took Anya's insurance with two pinched fingers, careful to avoid any body-to-body contact.

"Ok, so it looks like all our staff members are unavailable right now, so you can just take a seat and we'll call you when we're ready." The woman waved her arm towards the empty set of fold-out chairs across the room. She and Anya were the only two people in the clinic.

Anya set the box with her arm in her lap. It didn't look promising; the skin was now tinted gray, almost like the browning of a banana after leaving it out too long. Meanwhile, the mound of her shoulder had begun pulsing.

A magazine on the table in front of her depicted an ad of a woman smiling at the phone in her hand, the same Anya had now. The magazine's date was four years old. *It'll make your job easier*, the slogan read. So much for that, Anya thought. Hours spent at the office, inputting various combinations of words designed to up the company's SEO score. Her cubicle never changed. Day after day her computer still blinked back at her expecting more of the same.

There'd been an announcement a few weeks prior. With the state of the economy, they said, it was bound to happen anyways. Anya just didn't think it'd happen to her. Her foot instinctively began tapping the floor, shaking up and down at the knee. Such bullshit. When she got that call, damn—she had no plans, nothing. Why not Marge? Her leg rose and fell even quicker now. When Willard spoke to her, he'd sounded bored, like this had been his tenth call that day. For him it was just another task to cross off the list, another way of earning money. Anya's leg jiggled with such speed now, the woman at the desk paused her work to glance up at the incessant tapping.

Anya heard a disjointed pop, like she cracked a joint. Something slipped, and she felt as if she were sliding off the chair, though she hadn't moved. Still, her leg continued bouncing,

more out of involuntary nervous habit than anything else. She thought to still her movement, but, on the next upwards arc, her shin and foot popped off and flew across the room in a perfect curve. At the same time, the door to the back opened and a crotchety young man in scrubs stepped out. Her leg landed in front of his feet, upright, and Anya's mouth hung agape. The man looked down at the foot, shuffling in his step, before checking his clipboard once more. "Uh, Anya?" he called.

Still no one else was in the waiting room.

"Um, yes." She collected her things and hopped, wobbling a little as she did. The clinician waited. An uncomfortable grimace crossed his face as he nudged Anya's detached foot with his toe. "Um," she tried, "Could I maybe get some help over here? Please?"

His head sprang up, and he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with his free hand. "Yes, of course. So sorry, my bad. We'll get you some crutches right away." He turned towards the woman at the desk swatting his hand. She got up in a hurry, scrambling to pull up her sagging pants, and walked quickly, almost at a jog, to the back.

Moments later she reemerged and passed Anya two rickety crutches. "Here are these." Her face was red and flustered. "You know how to adjust them?"

"I think I'll manage."

The woman scurried away back to her desk, fingers clicking and clacking at the keyboard once again as soon as she was seated.

The room was an off-white and smelled faintly of rubbing alcohol. Dr. Kitsch, whose name Anya learned as he reached to shake her hand, pulling back immediately when he realized his mistake, helped Anya step up onto the wax-sheet covered table.

“So, look, here’s what we can do,” he said. “We can reattach it surgically, but it’ll be at best a temporary fix.”

“What? Why? How could that be?” Anya scratched at the smooth stump where her leg had been.

“Well, the thing is, we don’t really know what’s causing the phenomenon. We’re doing research, and we’re trying to figure it out, but the human body just isn’t supposed to behave this way. Limbs just don’t come straight off, especially not as they have been. We’re not Legos; the body isn’t designed this way. So far, we think it’s stress related. Nearly every event we’re aware of has been caused by stress. So, uh, the best I can do for you is to help you schedule a surgical procedure and advise you to find someone you’re comfortable talking to.”

“Stress? I don’t understand. There’s no way. Why would it only happen now?”

“Look, we could be wrong, but so far that’s the only common denominator. Do you have anyone you can call to pick you up? The appointment won’t be for a day or two, and we’ll have to schedule it elsewhere. Oh, and don’t worry about your leg and arm – we’ll keep them on ice for you.” The doctor winked in a way Anya supposed he hoped was reassuring, but she wasn’t comforted.

Anya stood propped against a brick wall, balancing one of the crutches beneath her armpit. The gravelly texture scraped her neck. She cycled through a list of contacts in her head, scratching one after another off as they didn’t pick up. Out of options, Anya tapped the Uber app on her phone and waited the expected ten minutes for the stranger, Trey H., to arrive.

“Anya?” The man called, glancing to the floor at her box overflowing with limbs before returning to eye-level.

Anya, zoned off, didn’t hear him at first. She could only think, again and again, of the doctor off-handedly telling her of the possibility that the surgery wouldn’t take. What then? Would she just keep losing parts of herself—a finger, then two, breaking off like leaves on a tree until she was nothing but a heap of body parts, a pile of limbs like the one under the man on the bench?

“Anya?” The man tried again, looking around and seeing no one else nearby.

Anya’s neck snapped up. “Yes, sorry, sorry. That’s me.”

Trey H. whistled, one long dropping pitch escaping his lips. “You want help with that?” He nodded towards Anya’s cardboard box.

They drove in silence, and Anya angled herself towards the window. Through the blurry, scratched glass, she could make out some of the same sights she’d walked past earlier. Trey H. slowed to a halt for a stoplight, and Anya saw they were near the same bench the old man had been resting on the first time around. She craned her neck, searching for him lying with his foot in hand, but there was no one—just birds picking at droppings and leafless trees.

Trey H. twisted the knob of his speakers down. “So,” he began, “they say it’s stress-related.”

Anya continued facing the windows. She pulled a strand of hair that’d fallen in her mouth out.

“You know,” he continued as though Anya had smiled and nodded along, “I knew a friend of a friend who that happened to—he had to take some ti—”



“I’m sorry—” Anya interrupted, “I’m just not in the mood.”

“Yeah, sure, no worries.” Trey H. said, the lilt in his voice unchanging. “I just think maybe it’d be good to consider... You know, I’ve—”

“What do you know about this?” She spit, facing him now.

Trey H. kept one hand on the wheel. Anya repeated herself. “You sit here and drive all day. You listen to—” she gestured towards the center screen— “whatever this shit is, and—tell me...What should I do?”

Trey H. clicked his right ticker and pulled over.

“What are you doing?” Anya said. “Oh.” They’d arrived.

Trey H. said nothing more. Instead, as Anya slid (quite literally) out the side of the car, he slipped her a business card. Anya threw it to the bottom of her box and glared.

Anya never looked closely at the business card. Instead, along with the rest of the items in the cardboard box, it went straight into the trash. The cardboard box rumbled in the rain and the papers began to mold. When the garbage truck picked the disposed up a few days later, nothing on Trey H.’s little card was legible any longer.

Anya, after shakily lifting the box into the large bin, hobbled towards her couch, sweat dotting her forehead as she flopped on the flush cushions. With her laptop she opened tab after tab of LinkedIn, Indeed, Career One Stop—all that she could think of. Her left pointer finger punched emails and uploaded resumes as alerts of bills, including the two-hundred dollar medical bill from that afternoon already processed and charged to her, filled her inbox.

Her mind didn't once think of the card she'd tossed away. Later, Anya would return to it, huddled over a pillow, wondering what it was Trey H., had wanted her to read. It was likely an advertisement, a desperate attempt for him to get one more client for his failing business. But still, a scraping finger would claw at the back of her mind, she should've looked. Maybe she'd be in a different position.

Anya fell asleep a few hours later with her neck against the arm of the sofa and her laptop still glowing as it lay on her waist.

That night she dreamt she was sitting on the cold wiry bench from the park. But she wasn't in the park. Anya was surrounded instead by nothingness, floating in an empty void. Her legs dangled in front of her, and she blinked, trying to see anything in the distance, trying to see a distance at all really. As she squinted, Anya felt thumps and scratches, beginning first in her extremities, and spreading inwards. With firework-like pops, her fingers, toes, and ears, sprang into the void, floating around the bench just out of reach.

When she blinked, the parts disappeared and she was nothing—a mind floating above an empty bench, visible to no one. When a man in a suit rested his briefcase next to the leg of the bench and squatted into the seat, Anya suffocated until she woke up.