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Snapshot

The day after I got suspended from school, I started coming with Carla to the dry cleaners. I liked the dry cleaners. I liked the smell and the noise and the paint that would flake off the walls if I scratched it with my dog tags. Carla told me that I could be her business associate for the next week, and she even let me write the labels for each customer's order. I made sure to write real neatly because I wanted to do a perfect job, except I forgot to attach the labels to the clothes the first time. We didn't realize it until Jeffrey Hubner came in to pick up his suit two days later. My chest burned iron-hot when I found his tag underneath a pile of papers on the front counter, and I had to go into the back room because I didn't want to get in trouble.

The fourth day was a hot day. It was September and the sun went straight through me. I was sweating a lot in my armpits, which Mom said would start to happen more and more. This made me feel uncomfortable, so I sat in my chair next to the register and the AC vent and tried not to move. Carla was loading solvent into the machines in the back. I was thinking hard about what it might feel like to go into a washing machine, to be spun around and around and come out clean at the end.

I looked up when I heard the bell ring, and I saw a woman enter the shop. She had a face that looked like she was smiling, even though she wasn't. She said something, but I didn't hear it because I was focused on the dress in her hands. The color was dulled through the filmy plastic garment bag, but it still glowed bright yellow.

Then the woman laughed, and I realized I hadn't responded to her. "How old are you?" she asked. I became overwhelmed by her smile now that she actually was smiling. She was very beautiful, even though she was obviously old and had creases at the corners of her eyes.

“I’m twelve,” I said, even though I was eleven, because I wanted to impress her. Then I said, “I’m Leo.”

“You’re just a bit older than Oliver, then,” she said, and I thought, *huh?* and looked around for another person. There was no one else there, clearly, and I started to get a bit nervous.

“My aunt’s just in the back. She’ll be here soon,” I said, because I wanted her to know that I wasn’t alone.

She shook her head. “Oliver’s probably grabbing some things from the car before coming in.” She spread the dress out on the front counter and it spilled over the receipts, the pens, the cash register. “Does your aunt work here, then?”

“It’s hers,” I said. “This place is, I mean.”

“And you?” She asked. “Do you work here?”

I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. “No,” I said. “I’m supposed to be in school. I was suspended.” I looked at her dress again. “Can I touch it?”

She looked straight into my eyeballs for a few seconds and said, “Yes,” which made me feel better. I pulled a sleeve out from the plastic covering and ran my fingers, then the backs of my hands, then my wrists, over the fabric. It was cool to the touch. The more I touched it, the yellower it glowed, until I could almost imagine that I was painting it brighter and brighter.

I pulled my hands away when a boy skidded into the doorway. He was red-faced and sweaty and his cheeks were puffed out.

“Hiya!” He spat out around a mouthful of hard candies. “We came here from Oregon. Mom and I *finally* finished unpacking, ‘cept for my bike, which we have to put together again.”

He shoved a hand into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of red, gleaming ovals. “Want some? They’re *Italian*. We spent all summer there, which was *fico!*”

His mother laughed, and it made me embarrassed.

He pulled a face that looked like he was concentrating hard and swallowed down the candies. "I'm Oliver," he said.

I took a piece of candy from his hand. It was sticky. "I'm Leo," I said. "I'm actually eleven years old." I very carefully didn't look at his mother, because I felt ashamed that I had lied to her.

"Me too!" He offered me another piece.

Carla came out from the back and said, "New customers?" I sucked on the candies as she came behind the counter and pulled out the logbook. Sometimes she lets me pencil in the names, but Oliver poked me in the side and I forgot to ask.

"Do you want to see something cool?" He asked, leaning in close.

"Um," I said. My fingers started prickling, right at the tips. "I don't know."

He grabbed my shirtsleeve and started pulling me over towards the endless lines of racks. Sometimes, if it was a particularly slow day, I'd wander deeper and deeper into the aisles, hands skimming against fabric and plastic until I could slide my back down against the cool concrete wall and sit. I don't believe in magic anymore, but during those days I could still pretend that I was lost in another universe behind the heavy, thick garment bags, and I could never come back unless someone loved me enough to find me.

I looked back at Carla, but she was laughing at something Oliver's mother had said. I could feel my heart beating in my chest. Oliver tapped me on the shoulder. "Look," he said.

He pulled a phone out of his pocket and turned it over to show me the phone case. It was blue and had a faded sticker of a sweating polar bear holding a sign: "SAVE THE EARTH".

"From what?" I asked.

He tapped a passcode onto the phone screen. “Huh?” He said.

Oliver opened the photo gallery app and pulled up a photo of a rabbit. It looked soft and brown, and it was sitting on a dinner plate next to a fancy silverware set. “Cool, right?” He bobbed his head up and down.

He thumbed through more photos. Rabbit on a pillowcase. Rabbit in a shopping cart. Rabbit in the driver’s seat. “We got Thumper before we moved as a present. Mom takes the best photos of him. She’s a photographer.”

Oliver swiped out of that album and opened another photo gallery, one with pictures of half-empty clothing racks and sailboats and plates heaped full of brown rice.

My mom only takes photos of me, mostly, so I couldn’t stop myself from leaning in closer as Oliver scrolled through the gallery.

My head started feeling dizzy from the sheer number of pictures, and I wondered if it was possible to capture a frame of every single moment in life so you could scan through it, like a flipbook, and relive your entire life in real-time. Obviously, that would be a cool invention, because if you were ever bored or tired or hiding in clothing racks at the dry cleaners so nobody would find you, you could take out your photos and flip through the best parts of your life and then every bad minute would be replaced with a good one.

Oliver handed the phone to me. “You can look,” he said.

I began scrolling through. There was a picture of a fat squirrel with an acorn that made me laugh. The next one was so zoomed in that it took me a few seconds to tell it was a face, and when I did, I said “Whoa,” really quietly. The person had really deep-set eyes and a large nose. The next photo was also of him, but this time he was sitting on a park bench. He kept popping up in more pictures, so I asked Oliver if he was in any movies.

“No,” Oliver said. “That’s Rob.”

I nodded like I knew who he was, but I didn’t.

“Rob is Mom’s *lover*,” Oliver said, letting the last syllable trail off. “Do you know what that means?”

I didn’t say anything.

“It means,” said Oliver, “that he puts his penis in her mouth and then he ejaculates.” He paused. “Do you know what *that* means?”

“Um,” I said, and handed the phone back to him.

Oliver rocked back on his heels. “Me neither.”

I started to sweat again, and in more areas than just my armpits.

“Rob will come over a lot and make us spaghetti Bolognese. Spag Bol. Sometimes he’ll put it in an ice cream cone.” Oliver looked at me, and I looked at his shoes. They were dirty, and one of the laces was untied.

“Have you ever had spag Bol in an ice cream cone?” Oliver asked.

“No,” I said. “Mom doesn’t really like it when I eat ice cream.”

Oliver gasped, and then I looked up at him, like, *really* looked at his face for the first time ever. He had brown eyes and they were blinking very rapidly. “You don’t eat *ice cream*?”

“I eat it sometimes,” I said. Oliver had a very thin nose and a wide mouth. He had freckles. “Just, Mom doesn’t like it, that’s all.”

Oliver wrinkled his nose. “What does your Mom do?”

“She’s a nursing assistant. But she’s going to get her license soon.”

He made a *hmm* sound, like he understood everything.

I didn't know what to say. I looked at Oliver's shoes again. I looked at the ground. I looked at his mother, who I now noticed was wearing lipstick. I wondered if it was because she was going to see Rob.

"Rob got me an EMF sensor for my birthday." Oliver beamed. He was missing a tooth, which made me feel better somehow. "It's like, the *coolest* thing ever. I swept the entire house *and* Victor's *and* Jason's."

At some point he had moved closer to me, and now our arms were brushing. I didn't want to stiffen up, but I was very conscious of all the points where his body was touching mine. Oliver asked, "Did your Dad ever get you anything cool like that?"

I tried to think, but I didn't know if the answer was *yes* or *no*. When I was a lot smaller, he got me a plastic tub full of toy green army soldiers. I used to spend hours arranging them in neat, straight lines, and until I grew too big for that sort of thing and we sold them to an old man at a garage sale.

"My Dad left," I said instead.

"Oh," said Oliver, and our elbows knocked together. "That's okay. Rob's not my Dad either."

For some reason I felt like I wanted him to know more things about me, and so I said, "I'm suspended from school for five days. That's why I'm here."

"You're lucky," Oliver said. "I'm going to have to go starting next week and I don't know *anyone*." He popped another piece of candy in his mouth.

"I don't really know anyone either," I said, and then I thought about telling him what happened to me.

I didn't do that, but I kept thinking about it for a long time – after I flipped the sign and turned the lock at the dry cleaners, after Carla made us bowls of spaghetti, and even after Carla dropped me off when it got dark outside. Mom was already home, which was surprising to me. She was still in her scrubs, and she made me a mug of hot chocolate. Normally she doesn't let me drink sugary things, but she said Carla told her that I made a new friend today.

I sipped the hot chocolate slowly. Mom sat with me on the sofa, and we put on *Animal Planet* in the background. She started rubbing circles on my back, which she knew that I loved. I wished in my heart that I could grab this moment, stretch it out tight on a hanger, and make it last for a little bit longer.

She said, "Tell me more about your friend."

I told her that Oliver had a pet rabbit named Thumper and a mother who was a photographer, and he talked a lot. I told her that Oliver's mother had a lover named Rob who put his penis in her mouth, and a funny look came over Mom's face.

"Mom," I said. "Do you ever want a lover again?"

She made a sound that could have been a sigh, and then she said, "Leo." She kept stroking my hair.

I swallowed the last of my hot chocolate, and then I asked her if she still loved me. She said, "Of course." Then she repeated it – "*Of course*" – and asked why I would ever think otherwise.

I didn't know what to say, but I started getting that itching feeling in my throat that I hate, and I wanted to go upstairs and bury my head in my blankets like the ostriches on the TV screen. I didn't, because I'm older now, but I turned the side of my face into the couch cushion.

"I didn't mean to get suspended," I said.

Mom said, "I know."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Mom said, "It's okay."

"The dominant female ostrich must protect her chicks from hungry jackals," said the British narrator on the TV screen. We both watched the newborn baby ostriches onscreen for a few seconds. They were shivering because they weren't used to the world outside of their little eggs.

"I'm not a faggot," I said, and Mom turned to look at me. "Even if they say so. I just wanted to see what it would feel like."

Mom opened her mouth, but she didn't say anything.

"I just wanted to know why Dad left," I said, and I felt like I was making everything worse. "I just wanted to know why he liked that so much."

Mom took a deep breath, and then she said, "Dad left because he met someone else."

I said, "Dad left because he kissed a man and fell in love."

Mom didn't say anything for a while, and then I felt so bad that I started crying. I didn't want to, because I told myself a long time ago that I would stop crying about Dad, but once I started, I kept going.

I told her, "I'm sorry." My voice was clogged up with snot. Then I said, "I want you to fall in love again."

"Leo," Mom said. "I don't have time to fall in love again."

"But I want you to fall in love again," I said. "And have a new lover."

She smiled in this way that made her look very tired. "You don't need to worry about me," she said. "You just worry about yourself."

I wanted to tell her that I already worry about myself too much, but I felt like I had said too many wrong things already.

After the program on TV was over, Mom tucked me into bed. She comes into my room every night, even when she gets home after the late shift. If she thinks I'm asleep she'll give me a kiss on the forehead, but she did it tonight anyways, even though I was clearly awake and way too big for that sort of thing.

"Leo," she said. "I want you to know that I love you very much. I will always love you."

"Okay," I said. Hearing her say that made me feel very sad and happy at the same time, like someone was slowly pouring those emotions into my chest so they swirled around each other like unstirred paint.

Mom asked, "Do you want me to stay here for a little bit?"

"For a little bit," I said.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and we breathed together for a while.

"Do you remember," Mom said, "when you were younger and used to spend all day at the dry cleaners while Dad and I went to work?"

I nodded, even though those memories are sort of fuzzy to me.

"Sometimes we'd come pick you up and you'd be hiding under a pile of old towels fresh out of the dryer." She laughed. "You wouldn't want to leave. 'No', you'd say. '*It's warm in here.*'"

She closed her eyes, but I didn't want her to fall asleep yet, so I said, "Do you think it's hard to get a shot of a jackal eating an ostrich egg?"

"I would think so," Mom said.

“I mean, the documentary-makers would probably have to camp out and wait a long time, right?”

“Probably,” Mom said.

I imagined myself crouching in the desert, camera at the ready, waiting for footage. If nothing happened, it would probably get really boring after a few hours.

Then I remembered how sometimes, if your camera lens is very long and far enough away, you can photograph things that happened in the past, like how we can photograph stars that have actually died and exploded thousands of years ago. I also learned about that while watching *Animal Planet*.

I asked Mom what she would photograph if she could reach back in time. I wanted her to say something that would make me feel less heavy inside. I wanted her to say something like, “that time I heard a joke and laughed so hard I started crying”, or “the first time I kissed a boy at school”. Because in her case, she wouldn’t have gotten punched in the face afterwards. I wanted her to say something like, “When I was a little girl, I had a beautiful yellow dress, and it glowed brighter than all the other yellow dresses in the world. If I could take a picture of anything, it would be that.”

But she didn’t say any of that. She didn’t answer for a long time, and I was almost asleep when I heard her say, “Sometimes, I miss him too.”