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The Camera

I've always been a collector of the arts, or at least that's the way I phrase it. My mom calls me a hoarder. The way I see it, hoarders want anything and everything, I just want cameras. My room is covered in shelves and random piles of stuff that I use as shelves. On top of it all is where I keep all the cameras I own, from all different eras. Me and my dad used to spend hours tinkering with them, finding out their secrets. I wasn't able to let the hobby go when I lost him, it keeps him alive in me somehow.

I stare at the photo I just took, inspecting what appears to be a cobweb in the corner and faded wallpaper hanging off the wall; it looks like it once was vivid images of palm trees, now dull and riddled with tears. There isn't a desk in the center of the photo, instead a worn-down couch next to a lamp with no lampshade. My hands shake slightly, and I flip it over and then over again. After a while, I drop the picture on my bed and pick up the Polaroid camera that I recently purchased. I could spend all day flipping that in my hands, too, but that doesn't change the fact that it is just an old camera from my neighbor's garage sale. That still does not explain how a picture of my desk turned into someone's ugly couch. I quickly stuff both the picture and camera into my backpack and sling it over my shoulder as I head downstairs.

"Bye, Mom! I'm going to Ivy's house," I shout out, but don't wait for a response. I walk the whole way to her house with my head down low and my hands in my pockets. My heartbeat feels like it is going to burst out of my ears by the time I reach the stairs leading to her house. She lives closer to the heart of the city than I do, which makes traffic a bitch, which means I have never tried to drive here. Taking the steps in two, I let myself into her house and accidentally run straight into her.

“ Damn, who lit a fire under you?” Ivy laughs and embraces me. I don’t have time for jokes and just grab her hand and drag her to her bedroom.

“You’re never going to believe this.” I am already frantically searching through my bag and presenting her with the items I was studying earlier, “Look what I bought at a garage sale.”

“Oh cool! I think my grandma had one of these when I was growing up.”

“But look at the photo.” I shove it into her hands.

“Okay, woah, calm down, so it came with a photo? You show me a new camera about every week.”

“I took that photo.” I wave my hands dramatically towards myself. “I took that photo of my bedroom, of my desk.”

Ivy looks at the photo and then back to me. “You’re messing with me.” She picks up the camera and aims it at me. “Say cheese.”

Snapping a quick photo, we both huddle over the camera and wait for the picture to print itself out. The image slowly fades in and instead of seeing myself sitting on her bed, I see a small yellow house. In front of the house stands a couple and to their right is a “sold” sign. They are holding each other and have the biggest smiles spread across their faces.

“Holy-” Ivy starts but stops herself. We’re both scared to speak in case our breath blows the image away and we have to admit we’ve gone crazy. The minutes tick by and without a word we both inspect the photo and then the camera.

“Okay, obviously it came with photos already loaded into it,” she finally says.

“Then where are they stored? There’s nowhere to store them.”

This time I try to take a photo of her. It fades in and it is the same woman from the second photo but walking down the aisle in a beautiful wedding dress. She is holding a bouquet made from what looks like wildflowers and her veil is flowing down over her blonde hair.

“Who are these people?” Ivy takes the photo, bringing it as close as she can to her face and slightly bending it. “I mean it’s real.”

“Of course it’s real.”

“Let’s go talk to the people you bought it from,” she starts to help me stuff everything back in my bag. She puts it over her shoulder and we’re out the door as quickly as I had come barging in before.

“So which neighbor was it?” She tries some small talk as we start the walk back to my house.

“I don’t know, just some neighbor a few streets over, I saw the sale while I was on a walk.”

“That’s something, we’ll retrace your steps. I am sure it will be a funny story, they’ll be able to tell us who the people in the pictures are.”

We walk the rest of the way in silence. I feel sick to my stomach because it feels like we’re looking at intimate moments of someone’s life that weren’t meant for us. We pass my street and I lead her on the same path that I took for my walk earlier that day. Stopping in front of the house that hosted the yard sale, my mouth drops open.

“But… it was here, there were people and… and they were shopping.” My hands are frantically trying to show her, make her see what I saw.

“This house is abandoned.” She starts to eye me like I have actually lost my mind.

“Wait wait wait.” I grab at the bag on her back and don’t give her a chance to take it off before it’s open and I am pulling out the second photo that was taken. I hold it up so it sits parallel to the house in front of us. They’re both yellow only the real one is faded and the paint is chipping. The porches line up, but one is falling apart and some of the posts are rotting.

“They’re the same house,” Ivy states the conclusion that I was arriving at.

“But there was a fully functioning home here 3 hours ago.”

“Well, only one way to find out.” She starts up the walkway and I scramble after her.

“Isn’t this breaking and entering?” I ask nervously.

“I think that only applies to houses that people own.”

The front door is slightly open, and covered with overgrown brush. As we push the door open, dust particles fly around us, illuminated by the cracks of sun peeking in from the warped boards. The house looks like it’s days from falling to the ground in a pile of rubble. We can’t take the stairs even if we wanted to because the railing is hanging off and it is missing about three or four steps in the middle. The paint on the walls is shriveled and everything is covered with layers of grime. What catches our attention the most is the living room. She pulls out the first picture I took and holds it up to reveal that it matches perfectly, down to the tacky palm tree wallpaper hanging off the wall.

“What the fuck.” she turns to me and her eyes look angry. “You were here, you took this photo!” She waves it around in my face.

“I wasn’t! I swear!” I defend myself, stepping back away from her, “I don’t know why it’s here, or how it showed up on this stupid camera.”

I stare her down, refusing to break eye contact because she’s always been able to read my eyes. After a few minutes, her eyes finally soften and she lets out a deep breath.

"Okay…okay, I believe you, it's just fucking weird."

"Let's take another photo," I put the photos back in the bag which now sits discarded by the front door, and pull out the camera. I walk farther into the house, into what looks like it used to be the kitchen. It is missing the appliances and the sink sits on the floor leaning against the cabinets. I hold the camera up, hesitantly, and snap another picture.

We retreat back to the front door. As this picture comes to life, it fades into a bedroom scene. The light filters through the window over a couple that is tangled in bed. There is not a speck of dust on anything, the bedframe is a beautiful mahogany wood and the white sheets stand out against it. The man looks the same but in the bed with him is a woman with brown hair who peeks over the covers as she holds them up to her face. Comparing it with the other ones that we've collected, it is clear that it is not the same woman.

"Damn, he's a bachelor." Ivy lets out a light laugh, it's what she does when she's nervous.

"We clearly don't need to be here to take the photos, let's go back to my place so we can lay the photos out." I am already packing up the bag again as quickly as I can, this house makes my hair stand on end. When we arrive back at my house, Ivy exchanges some pleasantries with my mom but I head straight upstairs and start clearing off a place on my desk for the pictures. When she gets to my room, everything is laid out but when she tries to take another photo the camera makes a weird grinding sound and nothing comes out.

I feel relief for a second, thinking it's over until Ivy says, "Maybe it's just not ready to give us another picture."

"Whatever, let's look at the ones that we already have," I start arranging the four photos. "Obviously, this one of the couch feels like it goes last, and the wedding feels like it goes first." I just put them in the order that I think I would want my life to go.

“That makes sense.” Ivy steps closer to the desk with me. “And the sold sign goes second, and Mr. Cheater goes third, but we’re definitely missing pieces of the story.”

As if it reacted to her voice, the camera starts to print out another picture. We both snatch it and look to see that it reveals the same woman with blonde hair, but this time the couple is in the middle of a heated argument. She is holding a mug above her head and looks as if she is about to throw it in his direction.

“Yeah, he definitely cheated, and now she knows.” Ivy sets the photo down in between the woman with brown hair and the old couch.

“But what does this all mean?” I rub my eyes, “I know I didn’t imagine the garage sale earlier, they took five bucks from me.”

“I don’t know, but I feel like Nancy Drew.”

“Will you sleep here tonight? I really don’t want to be here alone with it. That sick feeling from earlier hasn’t left me, my dad said it was a special trick to tell when something bad was going to happen. I just call it my gut. “I pace over to my window, noticing that the street lamps have turned on and our remaining daylight has left us.

“Yes, of course, but if you’re visited by some weird vindictive ghost lady, I will not be able to protect you.”

Ivy’s jokes only do a little bit to ease my mind and we settle into my bed. She falls asleep fairly quickly but I am still up pondering what everything means. I toss and turn until I look over at the clock and realize that it reads 3:00 a.m. Witching hour. Ha. The irony does not surpass me and I hear the same grinding sound as before as the camera starts to print another picture. Glancing over at Ivy, I decide not to wake her because she looked so peaceful sleeping. I sneak out of the bed and make my way across the cold floor of my bedroom. I approach the desk and

this time don't have to wait for the picture to fade in.

I stand in horror at the scene that is laid out in front of me. The man from all the photos stands in the center, a wicked look spread across his face. In his right hand, he is holding a large knife, presumably from the kitchen. What really makes my stomach turn is that from head to toe, he is covered in blood. It almost makes his hair slick back and his clothes look like they were bought in a different color. If it weren't for his eyes, you'd think maybe he just had a mishap from making homemade pasta sauce. I stumble back away from the photo and my foot catches on the leg of the chair. I tumble to the ground which causes Ivy to sit straight up in bed.

"There are nicer ways to wake a person up, you know."

All I can manage to do is point in the direction of my desk and that's enough for her to know that I want her to go look at the new photo.

"You don't think…." she starts as she slides the picture into place after the argument one, "He did this because she found out he cheated?"

"Isn't it usually the one who gets cheated on that kills their spouse, a crime of passion?"

"I want to look up the house. Maybe Google can tell us more about the people that lived there." She picks my chair up from where I tripped over it and opens up my laptop. I collect myself from the ground and pull up another chair next to her.

"Try Yellow House, Evermore Street," I suggest. As she types it in, nothing really appears to give us much information.

"Wait here." she clicks on a link to an old news article, dated back to about seventy years ago. "Celebrating newlyweds, Steve and Claire Ashburn, as they purchase their first home," she reads the title.

“Okay, so they’re definitely ghosts by now and they have names so that’s nice.” I start by trying to give some positives. “But what does that have to do with me and this camera?”

“I can’t find anything here about a murder happening in that house.” She is clicking on more links, but everything leads her to a dead end.

“So, he got away with it?” As soon as I say that, the camera comes to life again and another picture is sitting in the space between us.

“The camera says yes.” She holds up the new picture for both of us to see. This one is set outside and depicts lots of people standing in a group. A gasp escapes me when I realize that they’re in a graveyard and they’re dressed in black for a funeral. “Fuck, Well, we know whose funeral that is.” Ivy sets the photo down.

“Well, what do we do? Do we go to the police and tell them that we solved a century-old crime that they probably didn’t even know existed?”

“We can figure out what to do in the morning,” She gets up from the chair and makes her way back into bed. She’s out within five minutes, a skill I always envied her for, while I sit there still staring at the photos all lined up. After I am sure that she won’t wake again, I collect everything into my bag for the final time and sneak out of the house. I get in my car, careful to not turn the lights on until I'm pulled out and no longer facing the house. Ever since the camera broke, I have had this feeling in my gut that I can’t quite place but I neglected to tell Ivy that I knew the location of the cemetery. It was where we buried my dad three years ago and it’s not a topic I readily discuss. First, I pull onto the street with the little yellow house but when I get to the area that I’ve visited twice today, no house sits there, just a patch of grass with weeds that would reach up to my waist. It doesn’t freak me out as much as I thought it would.

Next, I drive about ten miles to the farthest edge of the city where the roads get longer and farther in between and finally pull up to the worn-down cemetery. It's where I've been going to clear my head and talk to my dad whenever something was going wrong in life. I leave my car running and start making my way through the gravestones, using the light on my phone to help me read them. After a few minutes, I stop in front of one that is worn almost to the ground but thankfully the name is still legible if you know what it was trying to say, *Claire Ashburn.*

"Hi Dad," I say to the grave that's about ten feet over and then I sit down in front of Claire's. Collecting the items from my bag, I set them out one by one in front of the grave and whisper, "I am so sorry that this happened to you."

I thought it would be chilly this early in the morning since the breeze brushes over me but a warmth sits in my bones. The breeze carries with it the soft hint of a woman's laughter but I can never be sure. I always thought that ghosts were supposed to be scary but as I sit here in the dark, I realize that sometimes people just want to be seen. I lay down an equal distance between my Dad's and Claire's graves and just start to tell them all of the things that have happened recently. Somewhere in my heart, I know they are listening.

I made it home before Ivy woke up, I never told her about that day in the cemetery but it's definitely stuck with me. I changed everything about myself that day, I never wanted to be someone whose light could go out in the world and no one would even blink an eye. I don't want to be forgotten when I die, I want to be celebrated.

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