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The 101

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THE 101

ELLIS VAUGHN

In about five minutes he's going to throw up. The dark vinyl cafe blinds barely cut the morning sun that only illuminates the swirling dust in the foreground of his vision. This swimming sensation in his inner ear, and sweat running along his back is the start to a familiar, grim countdown. Errol Acker still figures he's done everything right when all he had to do was keep driving. Even after he had stopped wanting to, while his Los Angeles loft called to him after two hours northward, then eight, then twelve, promising the unconditional forgiveness that only DVD royalties could buy. You can come back and it won't hurt, it said. LA keeps twenty six year old has-beens safe.

His eyes stay closed as he fails to remember the magic ratio of inhales, exhales and holds that stop the saliva from pooling in the back of his jaw. Back in Southern California the people he knew might get work on a touring play, or take a night class. Former child star Errol Acker has inexplicably started stress vomiting. He momentarily opens his eyes to the long dining room of the cafe, then down at the half finished plate of huckleberry pancakes. Maybe he's been drinking too much coffee. The name of the restaurant escapes him, he's learned that these places quickly become interchangeable with the dusty Northwest Americana along the walls, daily specials, empty bar seating. The plastic booth creaks as he rests his forehead against the crook of his arm.

"Pay at the counter when you're ready, kiddo." A woman in an apron tenderly sets the ticket to his left. Does she call everyone that? She can't be more than 40. "Hey, wait. Let me get a closer look at you," she says and her turquoise earrings click together when she leans forward. Her perfume smells like burnt sugar and settles in the back of his throat.

His heart clenches at this type of encounter. Errol still has the trademark Sycamoreclan rusty hair, the only one who had come by it naturally. Still, it's been ten years since the show ended its eight year run. Outside of LA he had hoped people weren't looking for Blist celebrities with the same preyseeking eyes. Still, he turns to her with a weak veneer smile just as his cell phone starts to ring.

"It *is* you! Goodness, I probably wouldn't have recognized you... otherwise," she says while running a hand along her cheek to mimic the slash across his face, hissing through her teeth in sympathy.

All he can do is nod in response as he laments the damage to his eyes from the midmorning sun, now in vain. This spot in the diner was strategic, so his right side was facing away. The sweat on his neck pools in his collarbones. There isn't much time left for him to politely excuse himself.

"Sure a saving grace how they didn't have high definition back then. I'd probably just die if I saw it on my boyfriend's fifty-five inch with how many times TMZ played it. What brings you so far North?"

"I'm seeing my sister; it's my first time back in the country in five years." He says, as his phone rings again. Errol imagines the process of wordlessly taking the phone out of his pocket and hitting the screen with a salt shaker in one hand, pepper in the other and seeing which shatters first.

"Oh, your type has so much drama. My gay cousin lives over East and it's always *something* with him, you know?" she says, laughing and rolling her eyes. "I hope you don't mind if I ask for a picture, my kids used to watch your show."

Errol wants to react, perform the kind of humbling verbal takedown that would get airtime on those hidden camera shows, but it only amounts to diluted lavender vomit spurting onto the table.

His agent had asked him about a "comeback," once he was back in the states. It seemed only natural. Errol had said that he didn't want to be in the public eye, he didn't care what they thought of him anymore. They said nothing for three full heartbeats with only the sound of his agent slurping from a bowl of soup, then he said how people don't exile themselves for five years unless they're trying to, excuse the phrasing, save face.

"Oh my god, fuck. Sorry. I just you know what? Fuck off? Fuck this." He stutters out to the waitress and stands up out of the booth, dizzy, only thinking about how he's going to have to pay the meal from his emergency cash. He throws a fifty on the table narrowly missing the pool of sick and stumbles out into the mild, cloudy parking lot.

He hits the ignition button on his keyring and his car hums to life. The heel of his shoe crunches into a broken bottle on the asphalt that's the same color green as the glass that Alex had cut him with, of course it is. He almost vomits again, swearing he can smell champagne. He shuts the driver door and sinks low in his seat. This car has been his lone companion for the last seventy-two hours, it's only a temporary respite but he takes what he can. With short gasps of breath, he looks at the permanent fixture of black trees along the horizon, the greasy yellow of the cafe's outdoor trim, and then makes eye contact with himself in the rearview mirror. It's the same meandering, salmon pink line that runs past his crooked nose and ends just barely underneath his right ear. He had gotten so used to it in Lisbon, now it's as though it radiates a heat and light of its own. The cruelest thought he can imagine is that at least he ended up better than the other guy.

What would Alex have looked like now? He asks himself again. LA hadn't changed after five years, he thinks, so Alex wouldn't have seen the point in changing either. Maybe that in itself would have killed him anyway. He's been trying to avoid tangents about people being doomed, somehow, but it creeps in slowly like a mold. Errol knows he's allowed even delayed feelings of contempt, regret, anger, whatever comes after someone tears apart the remnants of your career with a complimentary bottle of champagne, and then outs you to the public for good measure. Still, he can't single out one emotion to unpack. His stomach feels locked in the swirling start of a sawmill fire, between the microscopic second of dust ignition before the room is consumed entirely. He adjusts the mirror with a trembling hand, and backs out of the parking lot to continue north.

He reminds himself that his career was long dead before the scar, before he started throwing up on tables. What's there to get from a comeback anyway? Errol imagines two magazine covers. The first one is tabloid standard: a waist up shot with him in a nicely fitted robinegg blue shirt, his head tipped slightly to the right and his eyes crinkle in a smile that says "Don't worry, don't worry, I made it in spite of myself." He would be framed by weight loss success stories and divorces and his hair is perfect. In the soft lighting his shoulders would be slightly tipped forward in a surrender, a public question for mercy. The caption would say something about forgiveness, love and inner strength. He imagines skipping over it in the dentist's office. The second option is a tight close up of harsh shadows, straight on, eyes forward, unflinching. A way that no one has ever seen him before that promises nothing. His scar would be almost like a tear in the glossy cover, in black and white with every detail honed to a knife edge against a gray background. This headline would have to be an exclusive tell-all, claiming to have the truth in all of the pockmarks and stark realism. It would ask the world to forget who he used to be and buy this version. Surrounding him would be

stuffy culture pieces about the state of the world and offering authority in tone, but fulfilling only what the last cover can: entertainment, something to chew on. Both seem so hollow. Both tell the world that he's brave, he's so brave but only in the right ways, the ways he can't keep for himself.

Errol gets his sister's voicemail and tells her he's two hours away, and no, won't be wanting anything to eat. When he got her first call, Errol was a halfdead type of jet lagged in LAX.. He'd done his best to cut off all family in the wake of the scandal, if they hadn't done it first, so he wasn't surprised by her urgency. Her sincerity made his chest tighten minutely, how she's getting married soon, she needed to talk to him in person, she had an extra room. As he stood at the terminal the smell of rainy Los Angeles gave him a sinking feeling he was sure he'd grown out of. He had always hated palm trees, was his immediate realization. With each step it seemed that all roadways and gravel paths and nightclub doorways would lead to the same raw, hazy nightmare five years ago. The nights he spent in clinics, the times he tried to be the one to apologize to Alex because it was the only thing that made sense, despite knowing who had held the bottle. He couldn't stay. Instead of taking another plane, he made the romantic decision to go on a road trip. Renee couldn't stifle her laugh when he said that it was "America's strongest source of catharsis," and that only made it impossible for him to admit defeat. His apartment in the hills stayed locked as he had transferred his suitcase directly from the taxi to his own car in the driveway.

Now, twelve hundred miles later, Errol hasn't been this exhausted since he went sober. He wants to maintain that this was a good idea to anyone he can, that the saying about the inherent worth of journeys versus destinations turned out to be true. The trees continue to race by as a light rain dusts the windshield. True green foliage nearly spills out onto the road from the soft, rolling northern hills blanketed by grass. He looks out onto the ocean and tries not to feel sick of it, trying to imagine the beauty instead of nausea. It'd be better to get lost here, he thinks, than the desert. He wonders how many thought games he can play until he forgets what the taxi driver had said to him: "If it's any consolation, and it's none of my business, I don't think you killed that uh, *friend* of yours. I read that you didn't even know he had died until you got locked up."

He pulls over at the sign entering Raymond, Washington. The door swings open, he kneels onto the ground and puts his head between his knees. His therapist had told him that this coping skill was a sign of regression, and she was right. During the first couple seasons of Sycamore, Errol would hide exactly like this on set. His TV parents would scream at the director, threaten to quit, then scream at him for just being a child.

He doesn't remember doing the same thing that night in the club while he was trying to

hold his face together. But he saw himself in the grainy resolution, hunched over, rocking back and forth as torrents of blood dripped through his hands and onto the floor. Alex only had two days left to his life as camera turned to him, while he thrashed against security, screaming but not loud enough to be heard over the music. His black hair covered his eyes, spindly fingers clutching broken glass. Errol could only make out the word “coward” in the one time he watched it on television, transfixed by both ghosts in an audience of strangers. What came before likely didn’t matter, it was too late to take it back. Did he kill Alex? Errol tells himself “no” out loud. An overdose in some apartment is just another weekend on the outskirts of the LA area. He says it again. There was nothing he could have given Alex that he hadn’t already taken for himself twice over. Errol rests the back of his head against the bumper of the car, sitting crosslegged and repeating the taxi driver’s words like a hymn.

He briefly rests his eyes before getting back into his car, checking the address that Renee had sent him. He’s both grateful and guilty that she doesn’t expect him to remember where she lives in such a small town. The singlelevel blue house sits on a small plot of grass facing the bay. He parks and exhales a shaky breath, and before he feels the urge to sprint away into the ocean, the screen door opens. Renee wears a tshirt with the sleeves cut off and a screen print of a local baseball team, slim shoulders pale from the Pacific overcast. They share a stark resemblance even as the years have gone by, gently angled chins and dark eyebrows that frame sleepy grey eyes. At just two years younger she could have gone into acting herself, but Errol suspects that she understood something about their shared dispositions a little better. Instead she took up web development and stayed in the Northwest, became a homeowner, got engaged to a carpenter. She’s the only person that he doesn’t have a hint of patented jealousy for, only a sense of comfort in her success. He recognizes worry in her eyes as she gets closer to him.

“It’s not as bad as you described it.” she says with deliberate calmness and trying to maintain the lightness in her eyes. Errol stands around three inches taller, and leans against the car as to not loom over her.

“Is it as bad as everyone else described it?” he whispers back, fearfully. Of course she hasn’t seen his face yet, not in person.

“Nope. I’m just glad you still have your eye,” she says and her eyebrows wrinkle, reaching out a hand to his face. He flinches, and Renee lets out a wounded cringe as she recedes. “They never released the name of the guy that did it. You never told me either.”

“It’s not important. But, maybe I could have gotten a good bit part on Law & Order if I

had lost the eye,” he says through a gentle grin. It’s a lame way to deflect, and it’s an old joke, but one he doesn’t get to tell very often since it’s in poor taste. Errol shuts the car door behind him and crosses his arms against the wind. “Everyone’s always looking for a convincing one eyed villain, right?”

“Fuck off,” she says and laughs more than he expected her to. “You up for a walk? I want you to finally meet Cecil, he’s working on something nearby for the wedding before the rain gets here.”

“I need to stretch out my legs anyway.” he says, “What is it he’s building?”

Errol would always ask about her life first in the few phone conversations they had. Cecil Mizutani had worked at the development firm with Renee when they had first met. It was a matter of months before they had moved in together, when Cecil suddenly told her that the “abstractness” of coding was driving him insane. He wanted a trade that was more tangible, he would say, something he could see down the road and know that it would stick around. He took what he learned as a hobbyist and soon got into contracting. Renee once told Errol that Cecil could probably build anything. He spoke with Cecil on the phone once, and he made Errol promise that no matter where he lived next, he would accept a full dining room set from him even if he could afford something better, so he’d have something from the family. The kindness frightened him more than he could say at the time.

“It’s a stage, actually, for the ceremony. The idea of a wedding with a stage is...not what I pictured for myself. There’s something nice about it though. Knowing what it means to him.”

The wind starts to pick up again. Errol tries again to imagine building something with his hands, and fails. If he squints towards the meadow on the edge of town, he can just barely see a partial platform nestled within the grass.

“When’s the wedding?” Errol asks. He could barely keep up with Renee’s athletic pace as they walked along the lush shoulder of the road.

“In about three months,” She says, and stops a few steps ahead of him. “And I want you to live here until then, with us. I know it’s forward, ad I’m not going to plot or scheme to get you to stay, Errol. But I don’t think it’s good in LA.”

“I shouldn’t even go to the wedding, really. It would stop being your thing pretty quickly if I showed up. It’d turn into a soap opera with the family.”

“Just think on it for a couple days, okay?” Renee says, having turned away from him. “I care about you enough not to want you living alone for awhile. I was scared for you in Lisbon.”

Errol realizes, all at once, that he might lose consciousness soon. His gaze fixates on the stage's skeleton but Cecil is nowhere to be seen. They cross a dirt path to the tall grasses and his breath flutters slightly. The closest thing he had to a meal in the last day is the failed breakfast at that cafe, and he's strained from lack of sleep. He doesn't want her to know that he drove in this condition so he only thinks about the things he could say to Renee if he stayed. A lot of misguided things, half truths, but maybe something real would surface. Was it better than being alone with that risk?

The clearing opens up as they follow tire tracks to the looming structure. Renee says something about how she wants to paint it green after the wedding and keep it up for the school to host plays on. Maybe you could help them, she says, and he can barely keep his eyes open. Her voice seems to echo. Errol searches himself for understanding, looking at this half finished monument as they draw closer.

He remembers the blue bathtub and the yellow sink in Lisbon, the destination he'd boarded to straight out of rehab. There he stayed at an apartment on narrow streets that curled into each other like an octopus with no one he knew and no one that recognized him. The caulking in the bathroom had separated from the wall and the wood underneath had begun to rot, the steam releasing an earthy, wet smell. Errol would sit for hours with only his eyes above the water and survey the flowered tile, the peach colored walls, orange street lights filtered through the lace curtain. The best that he could ask for was that this room was never real to him, making it easy to return to.

Something with a laugh track would play from the television he'd left on in the living room. Then music, then an engine turning, ghostly movements that kept the walls of the bathroom from sealing shut and trapping him inside with the shivering pipes. On certain nights it felt alright to cycle through the people that could be waiting in the adjacent room. The would-be ghostwriter or family members looking to see the old city, close cast members from later acting ventures, all at the last age he remembered them. He would cautiously bring up the short list of ex-lovers with their names redacted and imagine which figures he'd let through the door. All of them would say to him how cold the water was.

Only fingertips would graze the surface in quiet waves, with some sitting on the edge of the bathtub while others knelt to his left, always to his left on the crooked teeth tile floor and how the lace shadow would cast across their faces. He would catalogue where he thought their eyes would settle. The tenderness of who he wouldn't correct when he was told he could get sick from the chill.

The grass is wet when it finally tips towards him, and cushions his fall better than he could

have asked for. He wonders, in the back of his mind, when he got so nuanced at being able to rate the experiences of his body breaking down. A flash of red hair wades over his vision and Renee seems to call to who he can only guess is Cecil. In the peripherals of his vision he sees a figure jump from the edge of the high stage, and he can almost hear the sound of his running footsteps.

Renee sits above Errol, speaking softly, pressing a hand against his forehead, and there's something he wants to understand from it. Errol closes his eyes against her cool palm, and can match his breathing with the ocean.