**Lily-Livered**

He’d been there for a while now. The buzzing hum of the dim fluorescent lights overhead was the only sound in the bus station. He’d undershot it and gotten there two hours too early. So, he waited.

He seemed to be the only passenger on the eleven-thirty bus to Duluth—to anywhere. It was only him and the wiry, underpaid attendant sitting behind bulletproof glass on the other side of the building. When he bought his ticket, she hadn’t said a word to him—she’d barely even looked at him when she passed him the slip of paper.

His stomach growled for the second time in the past three minutes, and he stood and walked over to the dated vending machines at the far wall. The faded gray buttons jutted out of the machine, their bulky numbers slowly chipped away from all of the oil that came with being touched by so many fingertips. The glass of the machine had a long, deep scratch running down the diagonal of it, as if someone had once unsuccessfully taken a knife to the machine in order to steal the goods inside. Bills weren’t an option for this one—it only took coins.

Most of the spirals were empty, but there were a few cheap packages remaining. When he finally decided on dill potato chips, he reached into the front pocket of his worn jeans, which had become three sizes too big for him over the past six months, and pulled out a handful of spare change. A quarter fell from his hand and collided with the cracked tile floor with a clack.

He stooped down to pick it up, and when he straightened, he caught a glance at his reflection in the glass. Against the black background, one could barely tell that the diaphanous eyes that stared back at him were tinged with yellow. He averted his gaze and fed the coins into the machine.

He pressed a short series of buttons and, slowly, the gears in the machine started to turn, and the spiral that the chips were sitting on twisted obediently. The bag toppled to the bottom of the machine and he bent down to grab the snack.

His back ached and sent dull pains throughout the rest of his torso. What else was new?

As he walked back to his chair, thunder boomed in the distance. The moon could still be seen through the window, though, so the storm hadn’t reached the station yet.

The chips were stale. It was not surprising. He threw them in the trash can next to him.

He took an orange pill bottle from his right back pocket, popped an escitalopram, and swallowed it dry.

It had been raining all week. The water pelting against the windowpane developed into a familiar white noise over the years, and some nights now when the pain was too much to bear, he would play a cassette that mimicked the sound of rain in order to try and get some sleep.

He placed his elbow on the arm of the chair and rested his head on his open palm. His eyes shut as he took a shallow breath, and then another. He put his faith into the distant attendant. Surely, she would make an announcement over the intercom when his bus finally arrived.

His attempt at rest only lasted about fifteen minutes, however. A raggedy man in a maroon corduroy trench coat had collapsed into the chair facing him.

He would never be able to sleep with an audience. Irritated, he pulled a pack of Sterlings out from his left back pocket along with a matchbook and lit one.

The stranger watched him carefully. “Mind if I bum one?” he rasped. It sounded like he’d already had enough for the both of them.

He hesitated for a moment before he stretched out the open pack towards the man, who slid a long paper tube from the carton, put it between his browning teeth, and lit it with his own match.

After a moment of silent smoking between the two of them, the stranger said, “These’ll kill yah, yah know.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“And it don’t bother yah none?” the stranger asked, his gray eyebrow arched.

He shook his head, but when he swallowed, his throat was thicker than usual.

The stranger studied him for a moment, and then asked, “Yah from around here?”

“Used to be.”

“Where yah headed?”

He sat back in his chair as the stranger across from him fiddled with a golden hoop earring in his left ear.

He finally decided to answer him. “Duluth. Eleven-thirty. You?”

The stranger shook his head, his matted gray ponytail hitting the side of his neck as he did so. “Not going nowhere. Just decided to get in somewhere dry before it starts pouring.” He took a drag from the gift of a cigarette.

He’d supposed the stranger was homeless when he sat down, and his last comment simply reassured him of that. He didn’t mind the interruption or lending a cigarette so much anymore.

“Speakin’ of killin’,” the stranger began, “Yah ain’t doing so hot yahself, is yah?” He looked pointedly at the shaking cigarette between the other man’s teeth.

He could tell that the old man was surveying the abnormal yellowish tint of his hands and face. He felt a hot mixture of anger, shame, and surprise flare up in his abdomen. “What kind of question is that?”

The stranger shrugged, unbothered by his tone. “An honest one.”

He felt his shoulders relax in defeat, and he sighed and rested his elbows on his knees, his head hanging. He chuckled once, humorlessly. “No. No, I’m not.”

“Why are yah not at the hospital?”

He frowned. “I could ask you the same thing.” He inhaled and softened his attitude—this man didn’t necessarily deserve any sort of rudeness, even if he was being a bit invasive. “Don’t want to be. Almost nobody knows about it.”

The old man nodded and took another drag from his cigarette. “Believe yah going to heaven, then?”

Now it was his turn to shrug. “Used to.”

“Lots of people used to. It’s a nice thought; a comforting one. People don’t like thinking about their loved ones bein’ all but decayed and nothin’ else.”

“So, you don’t believe in heaven or hell?” he asked the old man.

The old man shook his head. “I used to be Buddhist. Thought that when I finally ate it I’d come back one day as somethin’ I wasn’t in this life. Stronger, as a bull. Lither, as a willow. Smarter, as a crow.” He hacked something from his throat several times, and it took him a moment to realize that the horrid sound was actually the man’s laugh, affected by decades of cigarettes and God knows what else. “Now I know it’s just wishful thinkin’. Who’s to say, really? If there *is* a God, and a heaven, I’d be overjoyed to see my daughter again. But what kind of a God takes a little girl away, eh?”

“I’m sorry.”

His eyes itched. He knew the sleepless nights were starting to catch up to him—the body needed rest despite the pain, and he’d been tired all day today. He focused on the stranger’s dirty brown fingernails as they toyed with a button on his coat.

The man spit on the tile floor and then scraped over it with his laceless black boot.

The action made him lift his brows at the stranger involuntarily.

The old man took another drag of his cigarette. “Yah know…I think the best way to think about it is to be the best person you can be in life. Be kind. Be generous. Don’t hold grudges, and let past anger go. Yer only gonna make yerself miserable if yer reserved and cold yer whole life.” He spread his hands in a strange type of surrender and continued. “Yer also gonna regret it if you keep to yerself most of the time. Sure, alone time is fine and even necessary on occasion. But no man is an island. *You* make life great, but friends and good company *enhance* it.” He put his hands into his coat pockets and shrugged again. “Without knowing about after-death, that’s really all yah can do—that, and hope for the best.”

His eyes had begun to droop involuntarily during the man’s speech, and, not wanting to be rude, he said, “I know what you mean.” He realized that he meant the statement genuinely. “But I’m very tired, and I think I should try and rest.”

The old man’s face broke into a grin—a warm, funny, grandfather-like grin—and he croaked, “Go on, then. Thanks for talkin’ to an old frog like me for a time. I’ll leave yah be.”

He extinguished his cigarette and flicked it away, and then he propped his head up on his palm using the arm of the chair and shut his eyes.

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*“All passengers boarding the eleven-thirty bus to Duluth, please line up behind the yellow tape. All passengers to Duluth, please line up behind the yellow tape; you’re boarding soon.”*

The attendant over the PA woke him up with a jolt. The conversation with the stranger was still fresh in his mind, and he looked up to thank the old man for killing time with him, but the seat in front of him was empty.

He stood, slung his backpack over his shoulder, and looked around the station. No sign of the man remained.

Thunder boomed once more overhead, and abruptly, rain pelted the skylight. Streaks of water cascaded down the windows of the station, and in the darkness of the glass, his reflection stared back at him.