

### Asylum

For five hours Dale sat in the corner, looking at his apple. He turned it over in his hands and incessantly brushed its red dusty skin. He never picked at it, never dared pluck the stem. He just sat with his apple, in the corner, on the cold tile. At the table across the room, Mary shuffled her cards in an uneven rhythm. The cards flapped senselessly against one another. Between them, Graham lay on the floor, legs laying straight, arms contorted at a bizarre angle where he had fallen. He was the weekend caretaker for the activity room, dead where he lay stricken from a sudden heart attack.

He had worked there for years, carefully and lovingly tending the residents of the asylum. All he'd leave there for years to come was dripping slowly from his nose onto the tile where it had smashed when he fell: a rust splotch that would turn faint and pink after months of bleaching and mopping. Dale would never forget the incident, and would keep his apple as a safeguard until it turned wrinkly and dry. He never threw it away, even when it rotted. For her part, Mary thought nothing of it and never did at any time after. The man she played cards with got up saying he wanted water, and then he fell over and didn't get up. She shuffled a long time, but he never got up to play the next hand.

As for Graham, he understood the incident the least. His throat had gotten suddenly very dry, too dry, in the way that one notices such a thing when intoxicated. My throat is really, really dry, he thought. He stood up to get water. I'm going to get some water, he'd said, and then he realized that his chest hurt, and his left arm was trembling. Did that hurt too? Hard to tell! Can I feel it at all? he thought. His next thought was, why well look at that window my god it's so green out there. It was not really even a formed thought - more a realization that held his attention as he fell forward, smashed his face into the floor tile and never rose again.

Later, walking the halls of the asylum, Graham was intensely dispirited to see Dale's withered apple. Time was going by. Everyone who played cards in the activity room after that found that bizarre combinations, tricks of number and color, had become the norm. Few of them actually thought anything of it. Graham tried haunting the space above his pinked-out blood stain, but capitalizing on this proved difficult, as certain of the residents became convulsive, and after a lifetime of caretaking this was difficult for Graham to bear. After awhile, he succeeded in giving the janitor the willies, but neither of their hearts were really in it. The janitor, being old and superstitious, and exceedingly kind, eventually just learned to politely skirt that section of floor.

And Graham was not a mean ghost; he was just bored and unsatisfied. All his life, he'd never expected to get such a meager reaction to his death. He was dissatisfied with his marker, the pink blotch. Graham had lived a life dedicated to people he had never really known, enveloped such as they were in their own minds. His own family connections had been severed long ago; he hadn't even attended his own funeral, and probably for the best. The heartfelt sorrow that can be so sadly sweet to the departed was absent from that dry affair.

One day the janitor mistakenly threw away Dale's apple, and Graham followed it to the trash, finally leaving the halls of the asylum for the unknown winds and whipping transom of the outside, the natural world. He clung to the apple in its bag, finding his way finally to a refuse dump, which he found quite

visceral, such as it could be, especially after the sterility of the asylum. Everything in color and in such glorious states of decay. He presided over the event as a crow plucked the appleseeds from a pile of trash in the mound. Graham attached himself to that seed as it was eaten, flown to a nearby hill, and returned, through the bird's bowels, to the ground.

Many years later, a young man streaking through a field after a harrowing auto accident, one hand pressed to his blood-leaking forehead, seeking a house or shelter or doctor, finds a man of exemplary calm sitting under an apple tree. A man with a fine brown beard and dressed in white from head to toe. This man hands the younger stricken fellow an apple, an incredibly sweet, delicious apple, and patches his head expertly. Are you a doctor, asks the bewildered young man. No, I'm dead! dead! dead! replies Graham, who dances away among the trees. Well, shouts the young man after him, Thank You For Your Help!

And then the trees swirl around Graham and he feels the mortal world no more.