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"FISH IN A BARREL"

KROPIK WAS EATING A liverwurst sandwich when the kid came in. No more than seventeen, the boy had the obnoxious look of some one too smart for his own good. A wiseguy but no wise guy. He marched right through the open door and stopped in the middle of the nondescript office. Two windows, two large filing cabinets, two brown wastebaskets, two dented and scratched green/brown metal desks. On the wall was a photograph of the most recent President of the United States.

The boy looked slowly around, as if trying to decide whether or not to buy the place.

Kropik dabbed delicately at his small round mouth with a white pa. per napkin and folded it carefully into quarters before dropping it into a wastebasket next to his desk. Plus the kid had red hair. If there was one thing Kropik didn't like, it was red hair.

"I found you!"

"You certainly did."

"I cannot fucking believe it! This place is a rumor, a myth. But here I am, I'm actually here!"

Kropik disliked that kind of language but refrained from protesting. Red hair and a dirty mouth. What a distressing combination. Embarrassed, he looked at his half-eaten sandwich. Liverwurst and Bermuda onion. Creating a good liverwurst sandwich was a modest feat but a satisfying one nevertheless. The secret was in knowing the correct brand of German mustard to use and the exact width of the onion slice

"So. I made it. Now what?"

"How did you find us?"

The boy crossed his arms and smiled "I have my ways." One could almost smell his smugness wafting across the room.

"We are in the phone book. You only have to look us up. We're also on the Internet under governmental offices. It's just that few people bother."

That took the wind out of the boy's sails. And how would one define the precise color of that awful hair? More orange than red, it was the color of a carrot left in the refrigerator too long. Exactly! Dead carrot red.

"There wasn't even a name on the door or anything."

"People find us if they want to. We're a government agency. It just takes a little looking."

"I found you."

Always the diplomat, Kropik smiled warmly. "You certainly did."

Suddenly the boy seemed at a loss for words. People who came to this room were often speechless. Or exhausted. Angry. Hysterical. Rarely calm. In fact few calm people entered this place besides Kropik and Aoyagi. But both of them were employees so they didn't count.

"I don't remember my mother. She died when I was really young."

Kropik stood up and shuffled over to a filing cabinet across the room. He wore a pair of tartan wool bedroom slippers from L.L. Bean which looked enough like street shoes to pass for street shoes, or so he thought. In truth he looked like an old man shuffling around in a pair of shabby bedroom slippers. But then again, he was an old man and didn't pretend otherwise. Unlike his office-mate Aoyagi with his "Grecian Formula" hair dye and gold doodad charm hanging from the effeminate gold chain around his neck. Aoyagi was still trying to be a swinger, but even a word like that in Kropik's active vocabulary defined what decade he came from.

"Don't you want to know my name?"

"We already know."

In surprise, the boy's mouth twitched open and then quickly closed. He knew where he was but still couldn't hide his shock that the old geezer knew who he was without having to ask. "I just thought -- "

Already fingering through files in the cabinet, Kropik held up a hand to stop him. "Details aren't necessary. It's all known." His favorite sentence. Forty years on the job but still he never tired of saying those three words. Enjoyed seeing the look on people's faces after he said them because the reactions varied so greatly. Some swallowed like characters in a cartoon. You could see their Adam's apple swell to the size of a PingPong ball and move slowly up and down. All that was needed was a balloon over their head with the word "GULP!" written in it to complete the picture. Or they looked away, acutely embarrassed to realize there were no secrets in this office. Everything was known. Remember that time in the bathroom when you thought you were alone? Or that inspired (albeit illegal) trick you pulled with your mother's will? The dubious tax return, the secret bank account, the XXX Internet addresses in Amsterdam you dialed up at midnight when you thought no one was watching? Forget it someone was watching. Your worst dream just came true. And how! Those were the people who looked away. The Realizers. In a blaze of ugly trumpeting light they realized that finding this office might help in one way, but was also going to flatten them in another.

Bombs away! It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

Also Kropik knew something they didn't-- having entered this office, they had to take what was there. Had to, like it or not. Some people tried to pull back or literally run away but there were measures to deal with that. The less said the better.

Finding the boy's file (robin's egg blue), he pulled it with a flourish out of the cabinet and returned to his desk. He sat down and centered the file in the middle. The boy craned forward to see, his curiosity making the muscles in his neck bulge. The old man gestured for him to sit in the chair facing his own. The boy didn't move.

"Come, sit down. I have everything you want right here."

Carrothead lowered himself into the chair as if sure the moment he touched down he would get a lightning bolt up his ass. All the puff-chested bravado of before had disappeared. Now he was only a skinny teenager with a worried look and a dry mouth.

The moment Kropik enjoyed most had arrived. Putting both hands down flat on the desk he conjured his best professional expression. "Every one of your lost memories is contained in this file. They are listed chronologically and begin the moment you were born." He paused to let that one sink in. From decades of experience he knew the best thing to do was not make eye contact. Having heard this piece of information, people's eyes invariably didn't know what to do with it. As if having suddenly been handed something burning hot, like molten lava, the terrible heat stopped their brains.

"You mean, like, I'll remember what it was like to be born?"

Kropik nodded. "That's right."

The boy looked at the file and his brow creased. "And every other memory I ever lost is in there? How come the file is so thin?"

"Do you work with a computer?"

"Computers suck." A dismissive sneer.

Kropik let that one pass. "Do you know what a Zip file is?" The boy looked to see if he was joking. Kropik spread his hands apart as if to show the size of a large fish he had caught. "On computers, you work with files. You create information and put it into separate files. Sometimes there's too much data for one, so you must condense it." He brought his hands slowly together till they touched. "There's a program that creates what are called Zip files. They allow you to crunch together a great deal of information and fit it all into one file. When you're ready, you unzip it and have everything you need." He touched the blue folder on the desk. "This is your Zip file. Your brain will serve to unzip what's here, if I can put it that way."

After a long silence, the boy murmured in a thin, timid voice, "I just want to remember my mother. I keep trying to remember her voice but I can't."

"This will help."

Everything in the room stopped. The two people, the noise, dust motes. Even the strong morning light waited to see what would happen next. The irony being there was no question what happened next-- the kid had to open the file and face his facts. Face his music. Face the face he'd never seen before because he had been living behind it until this very minute.

Lamentably, Aoyagi chose that moment to enter the room eating a cheese Danish and whistling "My Sharona." To his credit, he never would have done it if he'd known what was happening. However, so few people visited the office that it was usually ninety-nine percent safe to assume no one would be there.

Be that as it may, the moment went up in smoke. Right the hell up!

"Sorry! I didn't know we had a visitor."

Always the professional, Kropik hid his anger behind the mask of an impassive face. "I was just telling him about his file before handing it over."

Aoyagi's eyes flicked back and forth between the old man and the boy. He knew what was about to happen and was checking the temperature between the two to see how things were proceeding. Unlike his priggish, self-satisfied colleague, Aoyagi did not enjoy this job. He enjoyed Icelandic women and Japanese literature but could not bring those things into this office. He could only bring himself from nine to four, five stupefying days a week. Always waiting for the hapless few, like this poor chumpy kid, to come in with their hopes sky high and their guards down. All of them naively certain they would discover in lost memories what was missing from their lives. Instead what they found was that most of those memories were a writhe of poisonous snakes set to strike. No one got out of this office alive. And the older Aoyagi got, the more he came to realize that applied to Kropik and himself as well.

"What's your name, son?" he asked.

Surprised by the question, the boy looked at him. "Milton Kropik."

The red hair struck Aoyagi more than anything else did. He looked at the boy's strange hair and then immediately at the old man. Old Kropik had no hair. According to him, he had been shaving his head since he was twenty-five. Red hair, no hair. All Aoyagi could focus on was that difference. Not the fact the boy had exactly the same name as his tiresome colleague. Not the fact that there probably wasn't another person on earth who owned such a lousy name. No, all Aoyagi could think about was one had hair and the other didn't.

But old Kropik didn't appear affected by this staggering coincidence. He had picked up a perfectly sharpened Yellow pencil and was softly tapping its pink eraser end on his desk -- one of the many signs he was irritated. He was staring at Aoyagi with his patented "Can we move forward?" look. Kropik and his looks. Kropik and his life.

Once again Aoyagi realized how much he disliked his coworker. Disliked him and his abstemiousness, his Orderly life, his oh-so carefully wrapped sandwiches. Disliked Kropik's opinions on everything (even when he agreed with them), disliked his safe, never more than all right, no-risk days, no-risk anything. The pressed slacks, the nest egg of safe investments, the professional (dead) smile when in truth the only smile he had in his heart was for order. Because Kropik was nothing else but order -- alphabetized and color-coded. Aoyagi was sure if they cut the other's heart open they would find brown file cabinets and bar codes inside instead of blood and muscle.

In this miserable room where people came to try and undo the tight knot of their failed lives via lost memories, Kropik was content pulling files and handing them over. With never so much as a grunt or a lifted eyebrow when he saw these sad sacks one and all melt into jelly when they were confronted by the full ugly magnitude of their lives in Cinerama, Dolby surround, eight-track twelve-track give the dog a bone

At least he could have been a sadist. If only Kropik had gotten a sick kick out of seeing these people laid flat time after time after time. But not even that. He would hand over a file, watch the person implode and then offer them exactly one pale yellow (always yellow, never any other color) tissue out of a box he kept in the upper right hand drawer of his desk. Aoyagi often peeked in those drawers when Kropik was out of the office to see if anything was amiss, had changed, moved, was different. Never. Never once was a thing out of place. The eternally fixed longitude and latitude of his scissors, paper clips, rubber bands. Everything exactly where it should be and always was.

Yet how could that be when day after day the man's job was to toss bombs into people's lives and be there to see them explode? How could he never be touched, affected, worn down by the years of this terrible job? Where was his soul?

Aoyagi often wept. He would tramp disconsolately home from a bar, a movie, or a park bench, and sitting alone in his apartment, weep. He'd had a wife, a dog, a cat. All gone. None of them had cared what he did for a living so long as he brought home a paycheck. His wife left, the dog died, the cat jumped over the moon for all he knew. But that was okay because he didn't miss them. Over the years this job had stripped him bare. The only things he seemed to have left were a desire to read, look at tall blond women and hope that whatever life he had left would be better in eleven years when his retirement began. Nevertheless he still had enough compassion left to carry a truckful of sadness inside his soul for the people who came to this office hoping for redemption, a small miracle, at the very least a way home. Weirdly enough, he knew he wept sometimes because he missed these doomed strangers. Whoever came here was an optimist, a never-say-die who believed redemption was still possible. Aoyagi missed them because he missed that wonderful quality in himself and knew it was gone forever. He had given up hope decades ago on realizing he would never leave this job. He hadn't had the strength or the necessary stuff to walk away while his courage still had a heartbeat and the horizon wasn't an inch away from his nose.

"Okay. I'll look at that folder now."

Aoyagi's self-pitying reverie was broken by the boy's voice. His hand was out, palm up, waiting to be handed the blue file on the desk. Kropik asking Kropik. Pass Milton the file, Milton.

The only sign of the old man getting ready was a stiffening of his spine and a ceremoniousness in the way he pressed his hands together, cleared his throat. Pompous old ass. Just give the kid the bad news and run for cover. That was always what Aoyagi wanted to do, but that wasn't allowed.

"Here you are."

The boy took the folder and flipped it open. From years of experience, Aoyagi knew it took about ten seconds for the enormity of the first memory to hit and then the emotional fallout would show. "And how was your lunch?"

Fucking Kropik! What a time to ask that question! He was cold. One cold heartless bastard.

"Fine." Aoyagi retorted, not looking at him, trying to brush him off with the word, the ugly tone with which he said it.

"And did you end up having the meatloaf?"

Lunch? Meatloaf? How could he ask such stupid irrelevant things when this kid was about to go nuclear? Brute. A weird word, a stiff antique word, but it was the one that flew into Aoyagi's mind. Was the guy still human? If so, he was a brute.

Aoyagi glanced at Kropik a moment and in that instant he missed everything. As the two bureaucrats looked at each other, the boy's eyes scanned down the list he had been handed. His expression never changed not even when his eyes reached the bottom of the paper. If either man had seen that they would have snapped back like they'd been punched. But they were deep into a stare and their expressions were almost identical: dislike, disdain, and disrespect that went back forever and into every nook and cranny of their decades spent together in this office.

"What is this shit?" The boy held out the single sheet of paper and waved it up and down. "I don't know any of this stuff." His voice was accusation and question in one.

Now they looked at him and the men were more confused than at any other time on this job. Kropik had made a mistake? Turned over a wrong file? Impossible! And to his namesake, no less! Once his initial astonishment passed, Aoyagi could barely contain his glee. This was one big booboo! Their superiors would know about it before the day was over and Kropik's ass would be toast.

As if to rub in the mistake, the kid looked at the paper and said in a loud whine, "I don't know anyone named Andrea Harmon. And I've never been to Crane's View, New York. Is this some kind of joker What about my mother? You said I would remember what she was like!"

He was looking at Aoyagi and vice versa. Neither saw the change on old Kropik's face when he heard the names. His mouth opened and closed as if he were about to start chewing but decided not to. When words failed, he did something he never ever would have, should have, could have done in any other situation: he reached across his desk and yanked the file out of the boy's hand. Snatched it right away.

Aoyagi gasped. The boy stood up and pointed an angry finger at Kropik. "What the hell's going on here?"

Aoyagi stepped forward and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder to calm him. He didn't know what else to do. Something big and mysterious was happening here but he was dumbfounded. His colleague had always been as dull and habitual as a hundred-year-old Galapagos turtle.

Old Kropik ignored them both as he concentrated on the paper. Seconds later his mouth began moving again, and this time it went so fast that he looked like a chewing hamster.

The boy saw it first and laughed. "Your friend's going freako!"

Eyes on the page, Kropik slapped a palm against his broad forehead and began rubbing it furiously back and forth, back and forth. Was it a nervous breakdown? Had he gone mad?

"Andrea!" he shouted. "You should have told me! If only I'd w , , When his voice disappeared, his chin began quivering again.

"So where's my file? Huh? And what's his fucking problem?"

What was Aoyagi supposed to do? The kid was the job, Kropik was his colleague. He didn't care about either of them, but cowardice saved him. Cowardice and nothing else. Kropik would retire soon -- maybe even today, from the looks of things. But if the kid weren't served, Aoyagi would be in trouble. Word would get out. He'd be summoned upstairs. Anyway Kropik seemed all right -- he was just having a little fit but nothing deadly or anything. After one last look at his head-slapping, eyebulging, chin-shivering co-worker, Aoyagi went to a file cabinet and slid open a drawer.

Earlier Kropik told the boy he didn't need his name because everything was known. But he didn't explain what he meant by that. As an employee of this office, when a customer arrived, you opened any file cabinet drawer in the room. Without knowing the name or anything about the person, whatever file you pulled was the correct one. This mysterious process had deeply frightened Aoyagi when he'd first begun work years ago, but like everything else he grew used to it. Open a drawer, let your hand fall on a file--Bingo. Simple as that. My hand on your secret history.

So while old Kropik continued to frown, grunt and burble to himself, Aoyagi went to a different cabinet and opened a drawer. But when he reached in for a file something went wrong. For the first time in his long career, something stopped him from touching anything. Something very strong and final. You can't come in here, it said. Period.

"You can't go in there." The boy said behind him.

Empty-headed, empty of anything after the shocks of the last few minutes, Aoyagi simply turned and looked at the boy. "Why?"

"Because he already has my file in his hand. It's the correct one."

They both looked at old Kropik who was crying now -- huge fat tears streamed down his cheeks.

There was no expression on the boy's face, nothing in his facial cast--no pity, curiosity, not even derision when he said, "He saw the color of my hair. He heard my name. You'd think those would tell him."

Aoyagi remembered something. Once he was in the men's room next to Kropik as they did their standing business together at the urinals. For some reason he had unthinkingly looked down at Kropik's dick when he was finished and shaking himself off. The other man had absolutely carrot-colored pubic hair. Aoyagi had never seen such colorful pubic hair on anyone. It was one of the only interesting things he had ever discovered about Kropik but he sure as hell never mentioned it.

Now like a hammer blow, the memory of that color came back when he heard the boy calmly say, "He still doesn't know it's me. Look at him!"

Old Kropik was talking to the paper. His eyes pleaded, his lips said words with many syllables. He was asking for forgiveness, he was

trying to convince. Who knows what he was saying but he was certainly enthusiastic.

Aoyagi didn't want to say it but did. "You're him, aren't you? And he's looking at his own memories."

The boy nodded, pleased to be recognized. "Finally someone here gets it."

"But Jules had no CHOICE, Mother!" Old Kropik shouted to a longdead woman who had never liked him very much, truth be told.

"How could it happen? How could you not know yourself?" Aoyagi said it more to himself than to the boy.

"He's been here too long. He forgot what it's like to be human, doing this job. That's why they sent me. It's his last day."

A good deal of Aoyagi's carefully dyed hair stood up. "That's how it ends? That's what'll happen to me? They'll send ME down here to get me?"

The kid shrugged. "Could be. When you were little, didn't you always want to know what you'd be when you got older? So maybe when you grow up you're not supposed to forget that little kid. Isn't that what this job is all about anyway? Remembering what it was like?"

Aoyagi was able to stand long enough to see the boy lead old Kropik out of the room. He had watched so many human wrecks leave here. One day it would be him, led by a younger him he wouldn't even recognize when he entered the room. This room, this office where people came to reclaim what they thought they had lost, but which had only been waiting for the right moment to get them. Get them good.