

Just Real Life

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Peter winced, opening his eyes to the sound of the television blaring and empty bottles strewn about on the coffee table. It was the worst way to wake up. Groggy and disoriented, he rolled off of the couch. He must have fallen asleep on it watching late-night sitcom reruns. He turned his head to look around his apartment. Something didn't seem quite right. It was as if all of the colors were less saturated somehow. Instead of his eclectic decor, all he could see was junk mail and laundry baskets, making everything look plain and boring. And had his apartment always been this small? He could barely think over the throbbing pain in his head. He tried to think back what happened, but the details were all fuzzy.

The night had started out great. They had all gone over to Jenny and Brinda's apartment for a pizza and poker night to celebrate Jenny's break-up with her short term boyfriend. Peter had been in a particularly good mood as he had had a crush on Jenny since he first moved into the building two years ago. She had nursed a cut he had gotten from tripping over the bed frame that he was trying to fit through the door, all the while teasing him for being clumsy. Over the years, she had adopted him into her friend group and they had grown close in a way that he had never experienced before. It seemed that everyone could see they were meant to be together, all except Jenny, even though he swore she flirted with him just as much as he did with her. So many times he had been on the verge of making a move, but something would inevitably get in the way. A different eligible bachelor would seem to appear out of thin air to ask her on a date or one of them would get fired from their job or a distant relative would pass away, making the timing all wrong. Then last month, Jenny started to see Raúl. Raúl was the exact opposite of Peter- confident, chiseled, wealthy, foreign, and quite frankly a jerk, although that seemed to be apparent only to the guys. The girls seemed to fawn over him, especially Jenny, who acted like she was head-over-heels in love. Peter figured if that was the type of guy Jenny wanted, it would never happen. He convinced himself to give up entirely and pursue Katie, an attractive woman (but not as attractive as Jenny) he had met at the grocery store when they both reached for the last box of corn flakes. Even though everyone could see he was only dating her out of jealousy, Peter tried his best to convince himself, and everyone else, that she was the love of his life. In reality, however, her quirks were growing increasingly more annoying to him by the day, and ultimately he broke up with her after she stayed the night at his apartment for the first time and committed the unforgivable act of pouring the milk in the bowl before the cereal when she made him breakfast the next morning. (Unfortunately for Peter, when he offered to drive her to work after the cereal ordeal, they both realized she was the new temp that had just gotten hired at his office. But that's another story.) Peter had spent the next few days sulking while his friends tried to cheer him up. That was until yesterday, in coincidence of all coincidences, Jenny found out that Raúl had been two timing her the whole time with none other than Katie! She promptly dumped him; the gang had put two and two together when Jenny mentioned she caught Raúl pouring corn flakes over his milk that morning.

Peter thought this had to be fate and the guys quickly got together to concoct an elaborate plan in which Peter would swoop in and commiserate with Jenny so she could realize Peter was The One after all. Peter's chance came when Jenny needed someone to help her set up her new television stand. Raúl was supposed to have done it, but Peter was more than

happy to step in his place. Jenny and Peter's chemistry had palpable as they struggled to follow the diagrams, figuring out which little screws went where. But just as Peter was about to lean in to kiss her, he tripped over one of the extra pieces they couldn't find a use for and it was as if a switch flipped. Jenny suddenly seemed disinterested and explained that she was going to focus on her career instead of dating. It came as a surprise to Peter, not only because she was hammering the nail in their "will they won't they" coffin, but because Jenny and Brinda usually had a new boyfriend every week or two, so it was odd she wanted to be single. He had been able to hide his disappointment just long enough to trudge across the hall to his own apartment, where he plopped down on his couch to drown his sorrows in the rest of the case Heisler's he had bought for the night, but he couldn't find them and went straight for a bottle of Grey Goose. The next thing he remembered was the sound of the TV and the sun peeking in through the blinds.

Peter yawned, trying to place a finger on what was different. He clicked his TV off and frowned, noticing a small spider crack on the corner of the screen. Instinctively, he reached up and felt a small bump by his right temple. He must have hit his head last night when he was stumbling around. The throbbing compounding his hangover and he needed coffee. He walked across the hall to Jenny and Brinda's, but the door was locked. He knocked. Nothing. They were probably already at the coffee shop.

It was strange that he hadn't talked to any of his friends yet today. Most of the time they saw each other even before it was breakfast and he wasn't used to going anywhere alone. When he got to the coffee shop, they weren't there either and Peter was even more dismayed to find someone sitting at their usual table. Come to think of it, he didn't think he had seen it occupied by anyone else in his entire life. He just always assumed everyone in the city knew it was their table.

"Hi, what can I get you?"

Peter was relieved to see a familiar face working behind the counter. "Rashawn, you have no idea how happy I am to see you. I've been having the weirdest day. I must have hit my head last night-"

"Hey, sorry. That sounds rough, man, but I really gotta..." Rashawn gestured to the growing line of customers behind Peter.

"We were all at Jenny's and we were having such a great time until she said didn't want to date anyone right now. I know in a week or two, she'll come around, but I can't find her anywhere-"

"Uh, sorry... I don't know any Jenny. Do you know what you want?"

“What’s the matter? I thought we had a thing going on where I tell you what’s going on with my life and you offer me advice. We’re like, you know, buddies.”

“I mean, I’ve seen you come in here before, but yeah, I don’t really know you at all. Unless an oat milk latte’s going to help, I don’t really know what to tell you...”

“Rashawn, please, I’m having a crisis here!”

“I’m making fifteen dollars an hour in New York... I got my own crises. Including that line of people waiting behind you.”

Peter walked away without ordering, confused as to why Rashawn was acting like they barely knew each other. They had chatted almost every day for over a year and he always had some type of sage wisdom to offer him and his friends. He had to admit it was a little weird though. None of them really knew anything about Rashawn outside of his job, though Rashawn certainly did know an awful lot about them. Before he was even out the door, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket.

“Hello?”

“Peter? Where are you? You missed the staff meeting this morning and I don’t see any time off requests from you.”

“Oh don’t worry, I’m fine. I’m just getting some coffee.”

“Getting coffee? What kind of excuse is that? It’s eleven a.m.- you were supposed to be here two hours ago. Get here ASAP and we’re going to have a chat in my office.”

Peter sat dumbstruck. He got coffee here almost every morning, sometimes in the afternoon, too, even, and his boss never seemed to notice before. All of his friends did and their bosses did care either. He didn’t have much time to ruminate on it as he didn’t want to make the day any worse by having Katie seeing him getting in trouble with his boss.

Peter opened the door of his boss’s office and unsteadily walked down the corridor to his cubicle. The meeting did not go as planned. Mr. Donaldson was usually such a buffoon that no one took him seriously, but today’s meeting had been a whirlwind of concern for Peter’s cavalier attitude towards his assignments and a slew of technical instructions for projects he needed to finish. Peter really hadn’t even known what half of the terms meant- image analysis, production code, scalability.

“Hey, Peter where ya been? Jeez, take a seat. You look like you ate bad fish or something.”

Peter’s eyes lingered on all of the books neatly stacked on the shelf of his cubicle mates desk, not a crumb in sight. Now he knew something was wrong with this day. Mark was the kind of guy who avoided all semblance of work and made lewd jokes about the one woman who worked at their company all the while clipping his toenails at his desk. He didn’t even think the guy knew what a Clorox wipe was.

“Peter, hello? Seriously if you’re not feeling well, just ask Mr. Donaldson if you can go home sick or else we’ll all be sick. But if you’re staying, can you run the parameter sweep for the PAGES project?”

“Yeah, sure,” Peter answered meekly. “Can you just make sure Katie doesn’t come by? I don’t have the energy for any awkward encounters today.”

“Well, you’re in luck because we don’t have a Katie.”

Not wanting to believe this was real life, Peter suddenly got the notion that his friends must be pranking him and looked around to see if there was a camera anywhere. His eye caught a small screen near the ceiling, but it was just security. The brief glimmer of hope squashed, he swung around, turned on his computer and pressed the RETURN button. Nothing. He pressed it again. Nothing. He hit the key as hard as he could, causing the keyboard to slam into the wooden desk.

Mark looked over his shoulder. “What are you doing, man?”

“It’s not working. I keep hitting the button, but the code isn’t appearing.”

Mark laughed. “Very funny! If only. Too bad it’s not like on TV eh?”

A sinking feeling started to form in Peter’s stomach. “You know, I think you’re right. I don’t feel well at all. I was drinking trying to get over Jenny last night and I hit my head and-”

“Slow down, man, who’s Jenny?”

“Jenny!” Peter grabbed his head in his hands and massaged the bump on his head, mumbling to himself as he frantically tried to make his way to the elevator, only managing to get out the words “emergency room.”

“Wait! Should I tell Mr. Donaldson you’re leaving?” Mark called out after him.

Peter looked around the waiting where several people were sitting reading magazines. An older woman had a swollen ankle propped up on the chair beside her, eyes glued to the syndicated program on the television. He wondered where all of the frantic people covered in blood were; it was unsettling to see everyone looking so calm in a hospital.

"Excuse me, I'm Peter Herschel and need to see Dr. Singer, please. I was drinking last night and woke up with this bump on my forehead and I've been feeling dizzy all day."

"Are you sure you have the right place? This is the emergency department and the only Dr. Singer at this hospital is a cardiovascular surgeon. Unless you mean Dr. Singhal. He does internal medicine... Or Dr. Song in the neurology department."

"No, no, you were right the first time. Dr. Singer, the cardiovascular surgeon. He always sees me."

"I'm sorry. I don't quite understand. You're experiencing dizziness after a minor head injury, but nothing with your heart?"

Peter nodded vigorously.

"Well, I'm sorry but I can't call in Dr. Singer for a head contusion. It looks like Dr. Ramirez is your GP and it looks like she is here today." The nurse gestured over to two doctors discussing a patient case.

Peter listened to the doctors' conversation. None of it had anything to do with which other doctors were hooking up with each other or which just discovered a long-lost relative, it was just a bare bones discussion about a patient case and they weren't even using any of the names or gossiping about the family members or anything. It was so clinical and... professional. "No, that can't be. It must be a different Peter Herschel. I need Dr. Singer."

Peter's head was spinning. He wanted Dr. Singer. He knew all about Dr. Singer's family and relationships with the other doctors, and likewise. He felt like they had a real impact on each other's lives and he was the only one Peter could trust. This hospital seemed so *professional* offering him an appropriate doctor and the intake woman talking to him without an ounce of sass in her voice. Nothing about this day was right and, on top of it all, he felt so *tired*. It felt like he had been going non-stop since he had woken up a few hours ago, without a break or anything. Usually, he usually had at least a few breaks every hour to run to the bathroom or grab a snack or something.

"Sir, are you okay? I can call a nurse to help you."

"A nurse? How will a nurse help?" Peter only ever had doctors tend to him in the hospital. As far as he knew, nurses just roamed the halls carrying clipboards. He had to get out of there. He staggered over towards the waiting area through the sharp pains permeating his skull. From the center of the room there was a bright light calling towards him. It was the television. He felt like he was being drawn to it. Right before the nurse could get to him, he collapsed on hit, hitting his head with a hard crack.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER

FEMALE DOCTOR (attractive, white), MALE DOCTOR (attractive, white), and DR. SINGER (white, late-50's but still attractive) are standing over a hospital bed smiling warmly at a sleeping PETER (late-20's, attractive, Matthew Perry circa 1998 type). JENNY (late 20's, attractive but in an attainable way) sits on a chair to the side watching over him. A television screen with a spider crack in the corner hangs on the wall in front of the bed.

Peter groggily opens his eyes, squinting at the bright lights.

DR. SINGER

How are you feeling, Peter?

PETER

A little groggy... what happened? (confused)
I think I hit my head or something. I had
the weirdest dream- like I was in a coma
or something.

Dr. Singer pulls a chair to Peter's bedside. The other doctors gather behind him.

DR. SINGER

No, not a coma and you weren't dreaming.
It seems you went through the television
and got sucked out into the world. Jenny
told me you were helping her set up
her television set when you fell and hit
your head. (Pointing to the cracked television)
Somehow you must have found your way back.

PETER

(remembering)

The television set in the hospital waiting room...

DR. SINGER

It seems like you hit your head pretty hard, enough that it knocked you out for a while. But we ran some tests and you're going to be just fine, Peter.

PETER

So it was all just real life then?

Dr. Singer nods and walks over to Jenny.

DR. SINGER

And she came as soon as she heard and stayed with you until you woke up. You've got a keeper, Peter.

JENNY

I was so worried, Peter!

DR. SINGER

(Looking to the other doctors)

When you find someone like that, you have to hold them close.

Jenny and Peter gaze lovingly at each other. Female and Male Doctors look to each other, reflecting on an off-screen past argument.

DR. SINGER

We'll leave you two, now.

Dr. Singer leaves. Female and Male Doctor linger on Jenny and Peter's loving gazes, smile and slip their hands into each others' as they walk out. Jenny and Peter smile warmly at their reconciliation as if they have a perfect understanding of what is going on.

Jenny crawls on the bed beside Peter and wraps her arms around him. The chemistry is palpable. She caresses and lightly kisses the gash on his forehead. Peter looks into her eyes.

JENNY
You're so clumsy, Peter.

Jenny and Peter lean in for a long anticipated kiss.

END.

