

He Saw Me and Smiled

By Robert Diez

Look up from the ground. I traced the cracks of the hallway's baseboard moulding with my eyes. A clump of hair seemed woven to the carpet flooring – ugly limbs protruding and grasping at the loose threads here and there, as though they were holding on for life.

Look up, and say hello. The passing shoes each told a story. Dirty Reeboks from a recent expedition for Geology. A pair of fresh-out-of-the-package Uggs that foretold a chilly winter. The people wearing them were fleeting mirages, shaped by the conditions of their environment. The shoes themselves, though – anchors to the world, cracks and creases of truth – could not be so easily swayed. It had always been easier to study them – far less guesswork of the unknown.

Start a conversation. Look up. Continuing through the hallway, I sidestepped a pair of mud-caked Converse. A hard left to my room. Turning the key, and pushing open the door – my eyes remained fixed downwards the entire time.

It was the compression below my feet that I felt first. The burst of something so tightly wound, so pent-up, that the first prod to its exterior resulted in a rapid deflation. The juice let out around my shoe, like swamp water infiltrating a footprint in a patch of vegetation. It seemed to rise from beneath, as though it'd been there all along.

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But it hadn't, of course. I analyzed the semi-translucent flesh I had peeled off of my sole. A few drippings at last acquiesced to gravity's demands, and gently descended to a splatter. I was holding a grape, or at least what was left of it.

I'm not a particularly suspicious person, but I do believe in a rational explanation behind everything. I don't recreationally eat grapes, nor do I leave them on the ground as a trap for any possible intruders. My roommate was quite messy, and thus theoretically could have dropped the grape on his way out – but I hadn't seen him so much as smell a fruit or vegetable since classes began, so that was definitely out of the question. One thing was for sure: this grape had been placed in my room. As I studied the loose grapeskin in my palm, my periphery alerted me of a presence through a blurred lens. A lanky, freakishly tall, and spotted presence.

My gaze moved like a weighted lever, gradually up and then, all at once, down. In my flash of vision I saw it: a giraffe, contorted and pretzeled into the corner of my room, sat rather stoically. I analyzed the grout between my tiled floors. Grape juice had begun to spread throughout the space. My countenance stiffened, but remained fixed downwards.

Look up. See. I dared not flinch, out of fear that any commotion was a kind of confirmation of the absurd truth laid out in front of me. Perhaps by remaining stifled, I could retract inwards, and I would wake up from this freakish dreamscape.

The sound of a gentle strum was the first threat to my rigidity. Six notes in tandem. A chord progression further elicited me out of my stern withdrawal. Surely the giraffe wasn't... playing a guitar? Another strum. A melody filled the room – serene and reminiscent of childhood gaiety. Was a zoo animal coaxing me out of my paralysis with a serenade?

I was faced with a choice between self-imposed sanity or the terror of locking eyes with a guitar-playing giraffe. I relaxed the tension in my forehead. The saggy flesh of the grape, now discarded on the ground, loafed atop an unfurling labyrinth of juice-soaked grout. Suddenly, it looked rather pathetic. My eyes drew upward, along the path of the guitar's sound waves. I locked eyes with the creature, and we exchanged smiles – large incisors populating the inside of its upturned lips. I didn't feel fear anymore; the warmth of life's embrace, with all of its unpredictability and guesswork, flowed through me.

I gently closed the door behind me on my way out of the room. The LED lights above flickered once or twice, then steadied. *Look up.* I turned right and – before any hesitation could creep up from within me – swaggered into the Hank Ingram common room. *Say hello.* “Hi everyone.” *Start a conversation.* “I'm Robert. It's nice to meet you.”