

MUD CRUSTED COLLAR

Peter Buchanan bolted awake choking on the dead leaves that had been shoveled into his mouth, which had moistened into a papery sludge gritting against his uvula. He'd stumbled over into a crouch like a cat fighting a hairball, gagging up mushy paste, clods of dirt, and the occasional fragment of a branch that scraped a sensitive spot on his gums. All that was left was a pile of organic slop congealed with spittle, simmering between the palms he'd squished into the mud to support his torso. This was not a foreign feeling.

Once he accepted that trying to scrape off the taste from his tongue with the swipe of his fingers was only rubbing in the flavor, more rational inquiries came to mind. He sat back from the primal crouch. *Where is this? How did I get here? What the fuck happened this time?* Mr. Buchanan was a private detective after all. This, of course, gave him the framework to unpack these matters in the most efficient fashion possible.

Speckles of white capped mushrooms surrounded him. An oddly equidistant radius. The number *73 inches* popped into his head, but he wasn't quite sure where it came from. He wasn't about to pull out a tape measure and check. Either way, he'd traversed through this forest with his kids enough times to deduce that he was about a fifteen minute walk away from his home. And yes, maybe the last time he was in this exact spot with his children was at least four years ago, if not longer, but it was the thought that counted, right?

The other questions congealed like the muddy sludge into the back of his mind. For a moment, all he wanted was to just lie down in the leaves and rot for the rest of the day. Thus came to mind visceral images of clothing scraps and search dogs, flashlight beams breaking through the woods, an ill trained police officer poking at his half rotted, smiling cheeks with the tip of his boot, and those kids he hadn't seen in six months crying at his funeral, forming memories that would shape their incomplete perception of him for the rest of their more fulfilled lives. A better part of him screamed that this had to be an omen, but perhaps not a bad one. No, this was *promising*.

He blinked. The thought dissipated, like someone had plucked the idea away from a deck of cards. Odd. He tried to remember what his corpse had looked like, but the only image he had was a blurry fog.

In the sudden absence of thought, he remembered his cell phone was in his back pocket. Thank goodness: The screen wasn't cracked this time. In a lethargic fumble, he turned and fished it out of the muddy fabric, tapping at the screen. *7:42 am*.

Ah shit. I've got to go to work.

"Hey Mr. Buchanan, what's with the mud on your collar?" Peter flinched at the human interaction. He'd gotten so lost in cross checking license plate numbers on grainy security camera footage that he hadn't seen his coworker coming. The kid added a sheepish, "Ah, good morning by the way!" to compensate.

Hugo looked kind of like if a carrot was granted its wish and became a real human boy. He wore blocky CVS prescription glasses, had a lanky frame that stopped just short of tall, (much to his chagrin,) and tufts of short and curly red hair, which usually ended up in a frazzled halo by the end of particularly stressful work days. Peter knew Hugo had to be in his late twenties now, but he had a rosy, cherubic energy he just couldn't seem to shake. He often

complained about being mistaken for a teenager in public. The comparison was more apt than he cared to admit.

It took Peter a second to process the question once he was back in his own body again. *Oh, right.* With a relaxed chuckle to emphasize how nonchalant he was, he quipped, “Oh, that? Didn’t see it when I left the house. Whoops.”

This wasn’t entirely a lie. Before he’d driven off to the office, he’d spent the remaining fifteen minutes dunking his soiled shirt in a bath of OxiClean and scrubbing as much of the dirt off it as possible. Unfortunately, he had forgotten that this was the third time this week he’d awoken in an indeterminate location in the woods, so his backup shirts weren’t in great condition either. He’d only realized his spare white button up had some speckles of mud still caked onto the collar once he’d gotten into his car. By then it was far too late. He’d hoped no one would notice.

Hugo noticed. He was also a detective, after all. “What happened? You played with a dog or something?”

Lie. “Yep. Big dog. Knocked me over. Woof.”

Hugo squinted through his glasses. Gave Peter an appraising look. Thought to say something, then seemingly decided better of it. “Well, how’s the case going?”

“Pretty cut and dry. I’m emailing Mrs. Snyder the security camera footage and my findings report tomorrow.” Another cheating investigation. Mrs. Snyder suspected that her husband was hooking up with his assistant secretary and lo and behold, her intuition was right. Marginally more interesting than the stolen and lost pets, whenever they came through, but not by much. He’d gotten assigned the slush pile of what his peers called “grandma” cases more and more over the past year or so, while those younger peers immersed themselves in full blown undercover exposes that had a lasting impact on society. A younger, more ambitious version of himself might have rankled at the executive slight. But truth be told, he liked the busywork. He preferred solving multiple asinine cases over laboring on an impossible clue string for the dwindling years of his life.

“Nice.” An awkward silence followed the remark, with Hugo rocking back and forth on the heels of his loafers.

Peter knew what he was waiting for. “And how’s your case going?”

Hugo perked up like a wilting plant nourished by a half filled water bottle. “God, it’s a drag. I’m making some progress, I think, but it’s still such a slog to get through. You’d think that executives trying not to leave a paper trail wouldn’t, *you know*, leave like fifty kilotons of paper trails and tax paperwork to trudge through, but boy howdy, you’d be wrong...”

Peter nodded, gave a closed mouth smile, and let Hugo ramble on for the next fifteen minutes about the logistics of trying to catch the CEO of Blamazon in the act of insider trading, or whatever it was he was looking for. He honestly wasn’t sure, but it didn’t really matter. As long as Peter mumbled a considerate *mmm* every once in a while, he could get back to filing the finishing touches on that incident report. Hugo would be none the wiser to his inattention. Whatever gear of suspicion the mud on his collar had turned in the young detective, it was seemingly forgotten.

Mr. Buchanan coasted along nicely like this. Hugo at least was considerate enough to put up more of a front of caring than others, but at the end of the day, most people were willing to tune him out for the sake of discussing their own woes. He liked it this way. His coworkers almost always ignored him now, except for the perfunctory Dunkin Donuts gift card they’d give him during Secret Santa. They had no idea he was a wanderer. That in flickers he felt more like a

zombie controlled by a mysterious master than someone who had ever been human with a family. Sometimes, when he glanced into the black of his powered off laptop screen, his cheeks were sallow and the muscle around his eyeballs had already rotted away, leaving his bloodshot whites bulging out of his skull. Funny. The eyes were usually the first to go.

He thought of the woman who decayed in her cubicle for thirty seven hours before anyone noticed. If he'd really let himself vanish in the woods this morning, how long would it have taken for his peers to realize he was missing? Would Hugo be perfectly content rambling on towards a corpse? The thought filled him with a sense of misguided pride. He was the one mystery his hotshot peers would never be able to solve, because they had no idea he was even a mystery in the first place. Boring, painfully divorced middle aged man. That was all they needed. It was all he wanted.

"Oh, your computer fell asleep." Another flinch. Hugo was still there, somehow.

Peter became acutely aware of his heart jackhammering in his chest, until the surprise wore off and it slowed to normal. For once he was grateful. Wherever those thoughts of him being dead came from, they receded back into the ether. "Ah, yeah. Funny how that happens." He wasn't sure why he was like this.

Hugo was just about to walk away. However, before Peter could breathe freely, he turned back, raised an eyebrow, and asked, "Hey, did you get enough sleep last night?"

Peter shrugged, chipper. A knot ached in his upper back. "Probably."

Lately, Mr. Buchanan had chosen to take the scenic route home from work. It added a good thirty minutes to his commute, but to be fair, no one was waiting for him at the house anymore.

As he curved down a semi abandoned roadway blanketed with trees on both sides, he reminisced. He usually liked driving. It was a good opportunity not to think about anything in particular. Especially helpful when his default thoughts kept on skewing towards more morbid topics. A few months ago, he was perfectly content absent mindedly mulling over the logistics of his boring cases while being mindful of the turns. Now whenever he was left to his own devices, he became a different person entirely. He wasn't sure why, but he imagined it had to be as normal a midlife crisis as any.

When the kids were younger, Peter had cherished the spare weeks where he'd take the whole family on the hours-long trip to Shenandoah. Hours of bickering, yes, but in the moments when his kids were appeased by copious amounts of Goldfish, he found a sense of pure contentment behind the wheel. The awed glow on their faces upon witnessing the sprawling, panoramic landscapes stuck with him, even when most everything else had been tainted by time. Sometimes he thought of driving away to nowhere and never stopping. It was his job that kept him anchored to this town. Probably anchored to this world, really.

Apparently not anchored enough to see a deer in the middle of the road, but everyone makes mistakes.

Peter didn't lose control. Somehow. He yanked the steering wheel hard right and veered to the side. Thank god there was a conveniently placed shoulder that he hadn't remembered ever existing on this road before. Upon making the most frantic U-turn of all time, he shifted the car into park and put a hand over his chest, catching his breath. He spotted the deer through the

passenger window. It had scampered off into the forest at a pace so lackadaisical, a more passionate person would have found it disturbing.

He could have died. That whimsical deer could've fucking killed him. He wanted to feel more indignant about this, but again, he was coming up with nothing. He patted his seatbelt and checked his rearview mirror to see if anyone else had witnessed this. The road behind him was barren. Instead his eye caught on a flicker through that passenger window.

He wasn't thinking. He opened the driver's door and tentatively rounded his beat up Honda Civic. The sun was beginning to set. In the path where the deer had scampered off under the tree cover, a flicker of blue light twinkled in the air. His heart stirred.

Follow it. Go.

One step towards the woods. Then another. Mr. Buchanan stood on the side of the road, stumbling for a moment of clarity that likely would never come. He could've sworn the lights kept on going down and down, at a distance far beyond what his eyes could normally be able to see. There was a tug in his internal compass, nudging him to go further, further, to something that looked like it could be his destiny. Perhaps if he followed the lights, they would *finally* tell him where his life had gone wrong.

He was one pull of the strings away from following the deer into the middle of the road. That is, until he remembered who he was. Mr. Buchanan had a meal prepped casserole waiting in his freezer and a drenched soap bath of a top still waiting in his kitchen sink. It wasn't much, but it was something. What the hell was he doing here?

Peter took a step back, leaning his body against his car to ensure it hadn't somehow vanished. When he'd rubbed his eyes, the phantom lights were gone and the sun had long set. Only the glow of his dashboard prevented the roadway from being consumed by total darkness.

Without fanfare, he stumbled back into the car and made the concerted effort to block out visions of the deer frolicking through the forest. Instead, his headlights flicked on against the pitch black. He forced himself to drive.

His house had never felt more quiet. When he unlocked the door, he let himself stand in the darkness of the living room for a good thirty seconds. He kept a box fan running all hours of the day. The hum kept him grounded. It was only when his eyes had adjusted that he switched the lights back on and went about his typical unpacking routine. Except this time, he made sure to drain the kitchen sink and throw the stained shirt in the wash before anything else.

It had been about half an hour of rummaging about. Now, he was shuffling through the sea of takeout pamphlets shoved into what was once his wife's recipe box, debating whether he should replenish his supply of cold pizza, be responsible and work through his casserole, or go the adventurous route and order Thai food. He settled on the pizza. He needed something bland and familiar to scrape away the dirt left on his tongue.

Peter didn't notice the doorbell at first. No one ever stopped by this late, not even the Mormons. It was only the second ring that got him standing.

He came to the door with low expectations and mild confusion. He found Hugo standing awkwardly on his doormat like a stray cat, in the middle of adjusting his tie. He hadn't changed out of his work clothes.

"Hugo! How did you find my address?"

“Followed you. We’re detectives.” Hugo didn’t have to complete the phrase. He also decided to let himself through the doorway. Peter didn’t have the willpower to stop him. He at least had the decency to slip off his loafers at the door. “Why did you take such a weird route back? It’s like the opposite direction of your home.”

Peter’s brow furrowed. “How did I not see you pass me? I had to pull over.”

He began to formulate a lie about why he’d done so, except Hugo never asked. Instead, his eyes only bulged further. “What do you mean? I trailed you the whole way through.”

“Huh?”

“You never stopped driving. How could you have-” Hugo coughed into his hand, poorly hiding a pensive grimace. “-Nevermind. Mr. Buchanan, are you feeling alright? I stopped by because I was worried.”

Worried? About me? Peter raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“*Why?* What do you mean, why? You’ve been acting weird for, what, the past couple of months now? You keep to yourself way more than you used to, and when I do talk to you, it’s like you’re not there, really?” Hugo winced like he’d said something criminal. “Sorry, I probably could have phrased that better, but genuinely, are you okay?”

“Of course.” He hadn’t anticipated being asked, but the response was subconsciously rehearsed. “Never been better.” A large smile pulled his cheeks.

Hugo ignored this. “Is it the divorce? I know it was like a year ago at this point, and everyone else said they got sick of you talking about it all the time, but like if you want to talk about it, that’s fine! I can listen! I just don’t want you to do anything stupid.”

“Something stupid?” He believed all the things he was doing were more than rational and sound, actually, but he suspected Hugo wouldn’t acquiesce to his perspective. He was too young to get it.

Hugo sighed and began to count off on his fingers. “You always smell like the forest when you come into the office. Today’s not the first time you’ve come in with dirt on your clothes. You only bring saltines for lunch and suck on them for half the day. No one’s been able to reach you outside of work. Your solve rate has been shit lately. Hell, after I talked to you this morning, you seemed to be in what I can only describe as an unresponsive trance for the rest of the work day. Somehow? Again, *not* the first time for any of this. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you don’t have a lot of people checking in on you, yes?”

A pause. Peter’s voice cooled. “Is this an interrogation?”

“No? Kinda?” He went back to shifting his weight. “I was thinking *intervention*? Not in a negative sense, obviously, but like-”

“Did someone put you up to this?”

“God no!” Hugo’s face flushed. “Look, sir, I understand the deflection, but you can be honest with me. What’s going on?”

Peter couldn’t help but snort. *What wasn’t going on?* Nothing, but somehow everything. As much as he attempted to cobble his life together and operate as if everything was mundane, composing an explanation grounded in reality was impossible. In the back of his mind, he was well aware of this. But if wouldn’t admit it even if he was under the threat of torture, he certainly wouldn’t admit it to Hugo.

He reverted to the exasperated father tactic. “Hugo. I appreciate the concern, but I’m fine. Just been a bit tired lately. That’s all.”

The appraising glare wasn’t going away. But he conceded. Swiveled his gaze around the home to find a conversation topic.

“You know, I’ve never been here before. Are those your kids?” Hugo gestured towards a framed photo on the mantle of him and a beaming family that had to be taken at least five years ago at this point. Or was it seven? Why was the timeline so inconsistent?

He mumbled under his breath, “Probably.”

“Probably?”

Peter frowned. “Well, yeah. It’s...” His mind drew a blank. “My family.” He hadn’t thought of their names all day. For a while. Actually.

He gripped the edge of his marble counter. For the first time over the course of his very convoluted day, a sense of true anxiety settled in. He hadn’t noticed it because it had happened so slowly, but he had changed. Of course he had. But now, he realized that this change hadn’t occurred in a vacuum. It wasn’t an evolution into disgraceful middle age. It was a hollowing. *Something* was scooping him out day by day, and it wouldn’t stop until all that was left were mud and leaves.

Gawking at him in the current moment, Hugo reminded him quite a bit of a normal deer in the middle of the road. “Mr. Buchanan, you look ill. Do you need a doctor?”

He opened his mouth to say *Maybe?* but nothing came out. His expression glazed over. “I’ve got to go.” He walked to the door without elaborating. Stepped into his front yard. He continued moving.

Hugo responded on a delay. “Mr. Buchanan. *Peter*. Where are you going?” He peeked out of the door, but it was only once Peter made it to the sidewalk that he fumbled for his shoes.

Peter Buchanan didn’t reply.

“What the fuck-Dude!” He started an awkward jog once he made it out the door, attempting to catch up to where Peter had shambled off to. He was in the street now. “Do I need to call someone?”

It was evident that wherever Peter was, he either couldn’t hear him, or was choosing not to respond. He moved with a purpose. Not zombie-esque in the conventional sense, he was covering ground, but it was impossible to discern what that purpose could be. Hugo stopped following him once he reached about five houses over and neared the end of the cul-de-sac. It was useless. Peter was navigating a straight-shot path into the trees. Unbelievable.

Hugo almost hoped that this was just an unconventional response to a confrontational and poorly executed conversation. He certainly could’ve done better. But no, what he saw didn’t line up. He watched the unexplainable switch in behavior flick in real time. Mr. Buchanan side stepped logs and navigated the hilly ground like it was nothing. And sure, Peter had proven he wasn’t in the position to ask the question of his own life, but Hugo could very well investigate it for him. *What the hell was going on?*

He watched as Peter’s form blended into the shadows of the forest. Soon enough, he was out of sight. Hugo wasn’t sure where to go from here, but he comforted himself with a thought that wasn’t entirely his own. *Don’t worry. He’ll come back in the morning.*