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*Ben Spencer*

## Before the Sun Wakes Up

The darkness of the morning is not equivalent to that of the night. Arthur was well aware of this phenomenon, as he had arisen before the sun each day for the last two-and-a-half years. As he stepped out his front door, the morning world engulfed him. A pair of birds darted across his vision, winding and weaving in perfect synchronicity. His eyes watched as they sped through time, slicing through the thin morning air. He noted a strange sense of solace generated by their concurrent movements, and slowly closed his eyes. The stillness of a damp, green world both cleared and filled his head.

Arthur H. Saperstein is a man of average height and muscular build with dark hair parted cautiously to the left. His complexion is soft, but, as many of his acquaintances have said before, something about the sharpness of his dark brown eyes is “rugged.” The perimeter of his chin and jaw is accessorized by thick, wiry beard hair. He wears a bathrobe and slippers just about everywhere he goes, and always seems to carry a flask, as only a rugged man with a beard who always wears a bathrobe and slippers could carry. His teeth are straight, but they are slightly off-white. This imperfection proves to be one of his greatest displeasures in regards to his personal appearance, so for this reason, and this reason alone, he rarely ever smiles.

Arthur stood on his front porch. The exposed skin of his hands and face felt the prickle of the late November air. He pulled his small, silver flask out of his bathrobe pocket and took a swig. Then, he blinked twice, closed flask’s lid tightly, and nestled his silver companion safely back in his robe pocket.

“Ready, sport?” he called into the house, angling his head backward and to the right to better amplify his voice through the open door of his two-story brick home.

Almost instantaneously, a short, slender boy, no older than 10 or 11, emerged from the house. He wore grey sweatpants that extended only to his lower calf, exposing his nude, boney ankles to the cold. A black sweater had been pulled over his narrow frame, and the sweater, which was perhaps two sizes too large, made the boy look an equal two sizes too small. His eyes was broad and sleepy, and his hair was fashioned in

such a manner that you would expect of a young boy who was required to wake up far earlier than he would have liked to on a Saturday morning.

“Why are you even making me go to this?” the boy asked his father. He was still attempting to force the lingering sensation of sleep out of his body by vigorously rubbing his eyes.

Arthur reached in the direction of his son and brushed the hair away from his boyish forehead. “Because Ms. Sinclair needs our help, buddy,” Arthur said enthusiastically. “You wouldn’t want old Ginny to be left all alone this morning, would you?”

“I mean why are you making me go to this?” the boy said. The unwavering nature of his tone was certainly sufficient to signal to his father the lack of interest he had in visiting his elderly neighbor this early in the morning. “It’s your job to help the old geezer, not mine.”

Arthur’s right eyebrow slanted downward. His left eyebrow decided it may like to take an alternate route, and arched its way upward. Both of his eyes, however, had chosen to remain glued to his son’s. The unwavering nature of his stare was certainly sufficient to signal to the lack of interest he had in his son’s complaints. “She could use the company, champ,” he said, remaining certain not to break his gaze. “It could be helpful for her to see a new face around the house.” With that, Arthur took two steps down and off the house porch and signaled to his unenthusiastic offspring that he should follow.

The boy’s eyes rolled like a clock. He supposed he had better tag along, but he was going to make it nothing, if not completely evident, that he was not happy about the context he had been unwillingly placed into. The boy mimicked his father’s steps down the porch stairs and followed him through a hand-cleared path that connected the Saperstein’s and the Sinclair’s respective front lawns. As they crossed the tree line, Arthur’s son gazed up. Though the sky was still cold and dark, he was able to make out the silhouettes of the trees using the sky’s slightly lighter shade of black as a background for the darker shade of the trees’ arms. The two crossed the lawn quietly, and the small boy could feel the frigid morning dew painting itself onto the exposed skin of his ankles.

After a few more steps, they found themselves climbing up Ms. Sinclair’s porch stairs. Arthur pulled out a ring of keys and thumbed through them, searching intently for the correct key to match the lock. The boy often wondered why his father had so many keys on his key ring, and

customarily found himself imagining that his father was some sort of key trader. He would envision his father amongst many other key collectors, trading and selling an assortment of keys – big or small, long or short – that would suit their key fancies.

Upon finally unlocking and opening the front door, the two shuffled into the dark home. Arthur entered first; his son followed him closely.

“You wait here, sport, while I go wake up Ms. Sinclair,” Arthur said, attempting to combat the darkness of Ms. Sinclair’s unlit living room by groping the wall to find the light-switch.

Somehow the boy could very easily picture what the house likely looked like even though the lights were off. He could tell by the smell: it was the house of an elderly woman who either didn’t have any kids to help clean out the house, or who had kids, but they just didn’t care quite enough to help their widowed mother “remove some of that god awful clutter” from her house because they were far too busy with their jobs at the Hallmark Card Company.

When the lights finally turned on and Arthur exited the room to wake up Ms. Sinclair, the boy’s preconceived philosophies regarding the general clutter level of the home proved to be true. The flipping-on of the lights revealed to the boy that this was an incredibly, incredibly dusty home. On the wall directly in front of him was a row of five, maybe six shelves, all stuffed full of dusty books and old photo albums. Photographs of landscapes, families, and children covered the walls of the home in seemingly no particular pattern or design whatsoever. A chair in the far corner of the room appeared to have proven itself a worthy substitute for a coatrack, and to the left of the chair, on a window-ledge that was equally, if not even more dusty than bookshelves, was a row of ceramic windmills, gnomes, houses, foxes, deer, castles, and just about any other type of ceramic decoration you can possibly think of. The wallpaper was faded and yellow, but looked like it was probably pretty nice at some point or another. The house smelled like it was time to move into a retirement home.

Amidst a thorough examination of the home, the boy heard his father and Ms. Sinclair emerging from the hallway behind him. He turned around quickly to better locate the individuals that he was so suddenly going to be accompanied by. His father entered the room first followed by Ms. Sinclair. Virginia Sinclair was a woman of subtle beauty, as only an elderly woman who used to be attractive and young at some point in

time could look. After her husband's passing, it was pretty well known that old Virginia had fallen off the deep end a bit. Once a striking, up-and-coming model, Ms. Sinclair had done a fair amount of traveling the world, pausing only momentarily in various cities across the globe in order to pose accordingly for some fancy magazine spread. She had married her photographer, and the two of them essentially had built the business together until their sudden termination by corporate many years later. For perhaps no reason other than the desire to fulfill the stereotype of a superstar-gone-wrong, Virginia Sinclair accepted a job as a waitress soon after her firing. Her husband, Abraham, on the other hand, had continued to work in the photography business. Though they were a stunningly handsome pair, they never did recover after losing their jobs so suddenly, and it seemed to affect their marriage rather significantly, as the flame that fueled their affection was suddenly doused.

Ms. Sinclair took one look at the boy and then back at Arthur. "Jeremiah?" Her question was directed in the boy's direction.

The boy, wide-eyed and thoroughly perplexed, looked towards his father in an attempt to seduce some sort of explanation out of him. Arthur rested his right hand gently on Ms. Sinclair's shoulder.

"No, Virginia," he said. "This is my son. His name is Henry."

"Oh, goodness me," Ms. Sinclair said tossing her head back and chucking softly. "He looks just like my Jeremiah." She smiled incandescently at Henry, scanning him.

Henry scanned right back, showing no reluctance in doing his fair share of observing. His eyes were as wide as they were suspicious, and his narrow arms were folded guardedly behind his arching back.

"Well," said Arthur, "I think I am going to go fetch your medication and get breakfast started for you, Ms. Sinclair." He patted her shoulder and grabbed ahold of her frail left hand. Arthur then led her to a big, charcoal-colored leather chair (not the coatrack chair, of course). She slowly fell backwards into the chair and let out an audible sigh of comfort when she became fully submerged in the leather seat.

"Keep her company for me, would you buddy?" Arthur said as he stepped out of the living room and into the kitchen.

Sheepishly, Henry walked over to the seat next to Ms. Sinclair; his arms were now folded apprehensively in the front of his body and his

shoulders were stuck in a shrugged position. He wiggled his way into the chair and looked over in his counterpart's general direction. She looked back at him.

"You really do look so very much like my eldest son when he was a boy," she said in an attempt to interrupt the silence of the room. "Do you know him?"

Henry was quiet for only a moment before crafting a response to this question. "I don't," he said shaking his head. "But that is probably for the better."

Ms. Sinclair was visibly taken aback by this response. "Oh?" she asked. "Why is that?" Her straight-backed posture was a clear signifier of her interest in the conversation.

"Well," said Henry, wiggling his way just a bit deeper into the chair, "for starters he's probably like 45-and-a-half by now. I certainly would not want to know what I am going to look like at 45-and-a-half."

Ms. Sinclair, still fully disorganized by Henry's sudden alertness, could only gather enough mental competency to fashion a simple, one-word response. "What?"

"If I look like him, that means he looks like me." Henry folded his hands across his lap. His legs were far too short to reach the ground below his feet, so he swung them back and forth in an alternating fashion. "I want to be surprised when I'm 45-and-a-half. If I knew him, then I'd know what I'm going to look like."

"That's an... interesting thing to say," said Ms. Sinclair. She looked intently at Henry, noting the childlike charm of his face and hair. Perhaps his eyes were a bit "rugged," much like his father's, but something about the uncorrupted innocence of a child really got at Ms. Sinclair, and for this reason, all of her interest was now vested in extracting more interesting responses from the boy. "What grade are you in at school?"

"I'm in sixty-seventh grade. What do you think?"

This was certainly the response Ms. Sinclair was searching for. "You must learn an awful lot of interesting material in sixty-seventh grade," she said.

Seeing now that Ms. Sinclair was attempting to combat his ferocious wit and tactfulness with a bit of her own, Henry decided to steer the

conversation in an alternate direction. “My dad says you used to take lots of pictures,” he said pointing at the wall. “I one time took a picture of a dead fish. It was cool.”

Perhaps for no reason other than a mere symptom of old age, Ms. Sinclair found this statement to be oddly humorous. She began to laugh softly. Henry, who had not yet experience such symptomatic laughter, was more puzzled than anything at this point. He waited patiently for her laugh to subside, and sat still until Ms. Sinclair finally was able to say something.

“It’s awfully kind of you to come help your dad take care of me,” she said. “Not many little boys will be up before the sun on a Saturday morning!”

“I’m mostly here ‘cause he made me do it,” Henry said shrugging.

“Either way, it’s important to beat the sun,” said Ms. Sinclair. Her tone had now shifted to a more serious level.

There was no verbal response, but the now inquisitive expression on Henry’s face was enough for Ms. Sinclair to know that she should carry on speaking.

“The darkness,” she began. “It’s not the same in the morning, is it?”

Henry was still uncertain of the direction of the conversation. “I guess not,” he said shyly.

“The world can be a dark place at times,” she said leaning back in her chair. “I find that it’s all about how you approach the darkness that defines who you are as a person.”

Again, there was no response.

“Think about it this way.” She was leaning slightly forward now, and waved her finger in the air as she spoke. “Do you sleep with a nightlight?”

Henry nodded.

“And when you wake up in the morning is it ever still dark out?”

Henry shrugged. “I guess so,” he said. “But it isn’t scary.”

“Exactly,” Ms. Sinclair said. “The darkness of the night frightens you far more than the darkness of the morning. At night, you know there are still many hours before the light comes – you’re simply falling deeper

into the darkness. But in the darkness of the morning, you know that the light is close. It gives you hope.”

Henry was now sitting on his hands, and his rear was on the very edge of the chair’s seat. He was leaning in.

“Life itself is often filled with darkness,” Ms. Sinclair continued. She hadn’t herself checked to see if Henry was still listening, but it didn’t matter. “Sometimes it’s dark like the night. Sometimes it’s dark like the morning. Personally, I find it comforting to get up before the sun has even woken up. Sometimes darkness is good.”

At this point, Henry was wishing for nothing more than his father to walk back into the room. When Ms. Sinclair finally looked in his direction, all he could do was nod his head.

“Here, take this,” she said reaching over to the dusty window ledge and picking out one of the ceramic decorations. She handed it to Henry. The ceramic decoration, though old and faded, was oddly charismatic. Henry looked it over, rotating it like a kaleidoscope in order to get a better look at the whole thing. It was a lighthouse, probably from the early 60s, that was painted red and white like a candy-cane. Next to the lighthouse was a small brick house with one door and two windows. On top of the roof, a smokestack spewed out light-grey smoke. At the top of the lighthouse, there was a small man wearing a yellow rain jacket. He was pointing out into the distance.

“That man,” she said, leaning in just as much as Henry was, “he is the keeper of the lighthouse.” She pointed at the yellow-coated, ceramic man. “He lives there all year round.”

Henry looked up. His eyes were wide and quite obviously filled with curiosity.

Ms. Sinclair continued. “He lights the way for the ships whenever it is dark – night or day – and he lives in the lighthouse. It is his only duty in life. He must light the way.”

“Light the way,” Henry echoed.

“That’s right,” Ms. Sinclair said nodding. She was staring directly into his eyes now. Her gaze was sharp as an arrow. “When times get dark, Henry, how will you light the way?”

“Okay,” came a voice from the kitchen. Arthur strode into the room holding a steaming tray of food, “we got a plate full of meds and breakfast here!”

Henry shot up like a rocket ship, quickly sliding the ceramic lighthouse into his sweatpants pocket. Ms. Sinclair remained seated, but she was still looking in Henry’s direction.

Arthur set the tray down on a small table to the right of Ms. Sinclair’s chair. He put his hands on his hips. “Bon appetit,” he said nodding and shrugging simultaneously. Arthur soon shifted his gaze in the direction of his son. “Henry, I think you’ve spent plenty of time with old Ms. Sinclair here,” he said, beginning to motion towards the door. “I’m sure your mother wouldn’t mind if you went home to watch some cartoons.”

Henry nodded quickly and paced equally as quickly to the front door. He placed his small hand on the knob and turned. He opened it only slightly before glancing back into the room. Ms. Sinclair was still looking right at him. She cocked her head slightly to the right, smiled softly, and winked her right eye. Something about this wink made Henry feel warm, maybe even secure. He reciprocated the smile, exited the house, and closed the door firmly behind him.

As he marched down the steps and across the front lawn, he noticed that the sun had begun to come up. The horizon glowed bright orange and, for the first time that day, there was sound. It was as if he could hear the world – the buzz of the people, the murmur of progress, and the mumble of the oncoming day, fully illuminated by the light of the sun. As he crossed the path into his own yard, Henry reached into his pocket. He rubbed the lighthouse with his thumb. It was smooth and stony. He could feel the man in the yellow raincoat, and Henry’s thumb grazed his finger. As he did so, he began to think about what it might be like to be 45-and-a-half. He pictured himself, aged and astute, completely unafraid of the darkness that often surrounds the world. Henry closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and, even if it was only for a moment, thought that maybe, just maybe, one day he would like to live atop a lighthouse.