

A Palimpsest

Files. Or, more to the point, filing cabinets.

Green, brown, and different shades of grey. Battered, scratched, dented, their hardware tarnished. The room was a Kafkaesque bureaucratic dystopian fantasy: brown veneer second-hand conference table, a set of mismatched office chairs, several banks of fluorescent tube lights, and a wall of filing cabinets. An entire wall of them. Eight drawers high and twenty drawers long. A metal patchwork quilt, floor to ceiling.

“Jesus,” Simon said, half laughing, and half in wonder.

“Yeah,” said Eve, the staff member who’d led him to the file room. “That’s usually the reaction.”

“You guys don’t have this stuff in the IMS? Scanned? Anything?”

Eve laughed. The Lighthouse Project’s warren of offices was the largest and oldest homelessness agency in the city, Simon knew his question was stupid the moment he said it. Not even the big hospital programs had the staff time or operating dollars to do something so far removed from direct service as converting old files into digital.

“Sorry. Yeah. That kind of thing is a ‘C’ list priority, I know. No agency anywhere gets through all the ‘A’ lists... Ever. That kind of thing helps me more than you, probably. Can I do anything to make that easier?”

“Honestly, probably not. But thanks for understanding”

Simon was there to do a compliance audit. He was the pain-in-the-ass that came with the never-enough City, State, and Federal funding that mostly served to buy off just enough social guilt. He was literally part of the Regulations. His job; and the page after

page of mind-numbing regulations, were designed to protect the taxpayer, rather than the service providers. Let alone help “the consumer,” an unfortunate term for already unfortunate people.

When Simon first heard that term used, he was shocked. Quickly he discovered it said a lot about attitudes. A lot of public sector jargon was like that: upside down and backwards. It was the way society viewed the homelessness issue, and most of it boiled down to money. The money cast a haze over everything: oppressive and gray and confusing. Simon made a note to try and carve out some collective overhead funding to help every agency deal with their files. Fat chance.

“Everything from about eight years ago to now is digital. You can pull it up on IMS, or I can get you printouts. Everything older than that is right here,” said Eve.

Simon stood and stared. Normally he’d do a random pull of ten percent of the files. But normally he was looking at two or three hundred files, max. Often way less than that. Here he was looking at...?

“How many are here?”

“5200, give or take. Another 1400 digital.”

“There’s got to be duplicates here.”

“Oh, sure. There’s plenty of duplicates. Probably triplicates and quadruplicates and quintuplicates, too. If you find some, let me know. That’d be a big help,” said Eve with a smile.

Simon wrote twenty random numbers on a piece of paper and handed it to Eve. “Give me these off the IMS. I’ll start in here pulling files.”

He stared again at the great wall of despair in front of him. Ten percent of this would be over 700 files. 700 lives. It usually took all afternoon to do thirty. He had fourteen other programs to visit before the end of next month, plus all the other work on his plate. A full compliance audit here would be nearly impossible, even for a team with a week. The idea of it squeezed the color out of him. He decided to pull thirty files. If he found a compliance problem, like inadequate documentation or something, he'd pull another thirty, but he wasn't expecting to have to. He'd been here before and he knew Lighthouse. They were as good as their reputation. Lighthouse didn't have that hopeless clusterfuck feel Simon was familiar with from some of the other programs that had constant compliance issues. If the first thirty were tight, he would be fine signing off on the lot.

Simon began filling out his checklists: proper documentation, completeness, outcomes, referrals, etc., etc. Eve came in with a stack of printouts and asked if he wanted any coffee, or needed anything else.

It was the second-to-last one.

Simon knew by the fifth file that everything was fine here. The folders were complete, consistent and organized. No compliance issues at all. But, he had to finish the lot, just to appease his OCD nature, if nothing else. Relieved to be almost done, and happy to sign off on a program doing a serious and solid job helping the hardest-to-help homeless populations while also staying within compliance, he took the second-to-last file, laid it out on the table, and looked at the name on the tab.

The second-to-last file was Delilah Catrell. He opened the folder to verify the name on the outside matched the documentation and forms on the inside. It did.

He lifted the intake form like it was made of fog.

There was a photocopy of a driver's license (a rarity). He looked at it. This Delilah Catrell was someone he knew. "Knew?" no, not really. Recognized. Seventeen years ago.

* * *

Simon Layton was a senior at Carleton High School in Carleton, Indiana, the year Ms. Hillman, the young and forward thinking new English teacher, convinced the calcified old snakes and toads at the school to let her start an honors English class. So, Simon, and eight classmates, had English last period with Ms. Hillman. Easily the best class he ever had in high school.

Honors English wasn't called that; it was just 'English, Seventh Period.' 'English, Sixth Period,' the honors students all knew, was 'Dumbass Slow English' (They had worse names). All they had to do was look at who was in it. This was quid pro quo for Ms. Hillman; she got the best students last period; the worst the class before.

For reasons the kids couldn't grasp, Ms. Hillman had her honors students help grade tests from her other classes. Simon always drew the tests from Dumbass English. The mistakes were pathetic; however, being a teenager, pity wasn't generally part of Simon's repertoire. Instead, he and the other honors kids used the arrogantly assumed stupidity of their classmates to prop up their own fragile self-esteem.

Simon loved reading the Dumbass English essays, even though he wasn't supposed to. They were pure comedy: fractured syntax, the fumbling, dead-end thought processes, the kindergarten semantics, the brutal spelling. Some of them were so glorious he took to doing dramatic readings of them aloud for the other honors kids. They created the weekly "Dumb As Fuck" award for the worst mistake, and laughed endlessly at lunch over what a bag of doorknobs the entire Dumbass English class had to be.

Had he—or any of the honors kids—been pinned down, they'd have admitted that some of the kids in Dumbass English were probably dealing with issues of one kind or another. A fair few of them were doing the best they could. But the savagery of seventeen was what it was, and sacrificing the second-hand blood and pride of the kids in 'Dumbass' made for stronger walls around the honors English tribe in the Byzantine personal murder of high school.

One rainy Thursday, Simon got a couple of tests to grade. Predictably hopeless, the best one got sixty-eight percent on the objective section. The topic of essay was, "Beauty in your world," the same topic his honors class had on their last essay assignment. The first one he'd read was a classic, revolving around first person shooter games and a girl on a skiing poster. The second essay was something different. Delilah Catrell found beauty in her world alone in her room.

Out in the world—places like school—everything moved so fast and crazy that it all just blurred together, and stuff didn't make sense, and all the colors blended to grey. But alone in her room, she could get things to go quiet, and slow down, and the colors came out, and she understood things better, and that was beautiful. At least for a little while.

Simon knew who Delilah was, at least by name and sight. She was the sort-of-pretty girl some of the guys that couldn't get dates thought had great tits, and that nobody talked to. Trying to conjure up a mental image of her was difficult for some reason; she seemed out of focus in his head, a hazy outline, and, Simon realized, he didn't think he'd ever heard her voice. She wasn't the official school 'Weird Girl.' That honor fell to Lisa Hunter, who'd been the 'Weird Girl' since first grade, because she was fat, and smelled bad, and mumbled to herself, and didn't do lunch or gym with everyone else. Without Lisa, Delilah might be a good choice for that important school job. Always had to have a 'Weird Girl.'

Simon knew the rumors about Delilah: 'Delilah did drugs' was one. He'd heard a couple of 'popular' girls in the hallway say it in that diction of disgust girls like that reserved for the things they tore down and climbed up on so they had a higher place to stand and stay popular. Simon supposed doing drugs was a huge deal to some kids, but everyone Simon hung out with did drugs, some more than others. But whatever, 'Delilah did drugs.' And, the rumors continued, Delilah had given blowjobs to most of the baseball team at a party once. The more salacious the rumor, the more it was believed. If the rumor had been Delilah had kissed Fat Tommy Hazel, no one would believe it (Fat Tommy's mom probably didn't kiss him), but say something like she did a three-way with the principal and the lesbian gym teacher in the chemistry room last week, and everyone would just know that was true.

Simon laughed when he heard the baseball blowjob story. He asked Louis, who was on the baseball team. Louis looked at him like he was crazy.

“You think somebody invited a short-bus girl to a party? You’re high. She wasn’t at any party, and nobody’s getting near her. Don’t want to catch anything from that retard.”

The rumors, no doubt, started from popular girls, for no other reason than it was fun, and the more fingers pointing at someone else meant the less fingers pointing at you.

But her essay... that part about things slowing down, and going quiet, and getting less crazy, that was something Simon could relate to. And the slow, quiet, little descriptions of the things in her room stuck to the inside of his head like melting candy.

She had a lamp on the table beside her bed that looked like a sad giraffe in the dark. There were fourteen different colors on her closet door that were all brown, and it was beautiful that brown could be fourteen different things, if it wanted to be. She wished she could be fourteen different things, or even just one thing different, sometimes. And the quilt on her bed was the most beautiful thing of all, because her grandmother had made it for her, and that’s what made it a real thing, and not a fake thing, like the rest of the things she saw all the time, and real was beautiful. Sometimes Delilah didn’t feel like she was real.

Simon recognized that feeling.

* * *

Simon took Delilah’s file down the hall. Simon knew Tabitha, the Director of Case Management at Lighthouse, from the endless, pointless, homelessness strategy meetings. The gray haze of money was a live-or-die competition for funding for all the major

players in homelessness services, and it turned natural partners into a loose and vaguely hostile group at best.

They all sat around a table and privately wondered why no one in the room besides themselves could find their ass with both hands, while listening to yet another Continuum of Care power point presentation. Tabitha was actually one of several people in those meetings that Simon knew could not only find their asses, but could actually make a difference, if the funders he worked for got out of the way and let them do it. Tabitha had signed Delilah's case file.

"Yeah, I remember her. Why?" Tabitha squinted over the tops of her glasses with some defensiveness, assuming Simon had found a bad file with her signature on it.

"I'm just doing a random projection. Seeing how the files work in real life for a case manager." Simon lied. He knew he wasn't supposed to be asking about a client directly.

"Oh." Tabitha didn't really get it, but Simon was with the money, so he knew he could get away with being mysterious—or an idiot—if he had to.

"Well, yeah. The Street Outreach team found her downtown about three years ago. They convinced her to go to the Women's Day Center, and I got involved through them. This was before we started getting a handle on the 'rinse cycle.' She got caught in it pretty bad."

"Christ," sighed Simon.

He knew all about the 'rinse cycle.' Pretty much everybody on the street has co-occurring issues. Almost always mental health problems and substance abuse issues. So, a case manager would bundle Delilah off to one of the real good mental health service providers, and she'd get as far as the fourth line on the intake, where it asks about

substance abuse, and they would tell her they can't take her until she got the substance abuse under control. So, off she goes to Safe Harbor, to get some drug and alcohol treatment, and as soon as they find out she's got mental health issues, they say they won't provide her services until she gets the mental health stuff dealt with. 'The rinse cycle.'

"She bounced back and forth between service providers telling her 'no,' until she lost interest, and she went back out on the street," said Tabitha. "She came in to see me irregularly after that, then she hooked up with a guy named Roger, and they got into an apartment on the east side. That was a bad, bad scene."

Tabitha flipped few a few more case notes. "She was sure Roger loved her, but he was just a drug dealer doing what drug dealers do. The police think Roger was pimping her, then something happened. He beat her up pretty bad."

Tabitha closed the file and sighed. "The irony is, the domestic abuse—as terrible as it was—got her about as close to a real chance as she probably ever got. Sylvia's House, the DV center, took her in. I wish she'd stayed there. But right after she healed up physically, she disappeared."

Simon looked at the folder on the desk. "Any idea where she went?"

Tabitha opened the file again. "We've got some Street Outreach notes from June saying they encountered her at the camp under the Marker St. bridge near the CTS railway yards. That's all."

"Thanks." said Simon.

He went back to the file room to gather his things.

* * *

At some point, Ms. Hillman caught wind of the “Dumb As Fuck” award. After expressing her disappointment, and unleashing some pretty nuanced guilt, which sort of worked, she informed the honors English class that they were not grading tests anymore. Beyond the vague feelings of shame around the edges of his defenses, Simon felt something else on his way home from school as he passed Delilah’s house. Familiarity. The more he thought about her essay, the more familiar she felt. Being familiar with her felt awkward and frightening.

All through high school, Simon lived in a modest house at the bottom of the hill that was the Maple Heights neighborhood in Carleton. He knew Delilah lived in one of the huge brick bastions up at the top of the hill, on First Street, where all the big houses and big trees and big cars were. He spent countless days growing up watching brown leaves and the occasional glittering candy wrapper washing down the gutters with the cold dead rain from the top of the hill.

Delilah shouldn’t really have been unknown to him when he thought about it. He’d been going to school with her since he moved into town in second grade. He probably passed her house twenty times a week. He knew both her brothers.

Damien, her younger brother, was a freshman clown with one of those rubber bodies that was always in motion. He was obnoxious, but, if you gave him half a chance, you could see his heart was mostly in a good place, not given over to meanness or obstreperousness.

Donel, her older brother, was another matter. Donel existed on the periphery of things. You heard about him more than you saw him, and his scarcity made him feel mythic. Two years graduated when Simon and Delilah were seniors, rumor had it Donel was in the Navy. Simon encountered Donel a couple of times when Simon drifted into strange and unpredictable social circles. Donel had given him a ride home from a party out in the country once. At one point the car left the ground going over one of the rolling hills as Donel laughed and carried on a nonchalant conversation at a hundred and five miles per hour. Donel seemed interested in finding, and poking at, other people's soft spots and fears. Simon stayed away from Donel after that. There was a dangerous crazy about him.

But, while Donel had been vaguely apocryphal, Delilah was like a ghost. She felt more like a placeholder than a real person. She sat in the back of the class and never talked. She had once had a couple of friends, maybe, back in elementary school, but neither of those two girls was still around, and the memory of them was as strange and made-up-feeling as Delilah herself was. She was always there, but the longer she was around, the easier it became to see through her.

Simon was sitting in the school library, staring out the window, when he felt a presence over his shoulder. He turned to find Delilah standing behind him. She seemed removed and amused and looked at him like she was viewing the world through the misty window of a moving train. He looked up at her from his chair, and a pause longer than most people are comfortable with passed. Simon didn't know what to say, so he held on, not knowing what else to do.

“Ms. Hillman said I should talk to you about my essay.” Her voice was uncomfortable: rusty—like she didn’t know how to use it correctly—and Simon now was sure he’d never heard it before.

“What about it?” It came out rougher than Simon intended.

“She says it was good. She wants me to write it again, and make it better. She says you liked it, and you should help me. You’re the best writer in the class, anyway.”

They looked at each other. Delila was giving off strange in colors. Waves of it.

“That “Beautiful Things” essay?” Simon didn’t think he said anything to Ms. Hillman about that.

“Yeah, Rhonda said you were grading my tests. She says I ought to fuck you, and see if I can get an A in the class for it.” Delilah gave an odd little toss-off laugh.

Simon rummaged around in a box of responses but couldn’t come up with much of one. He didn’t know anyone named Rhonda, and he had no idea if Delilah was serious, or kidding, or being mean, or being weirdly friendly. She was completely unreadable. She smiled a little bigger, and handed him a copy of her essay.

“Ms. Hillman says I should give this to you, and let you read it again, and you’ll tell me how I can make it better. You can bring it to my house on Saturday. I know you know where I live. Ms. Hillman says you wrote one too. You should bring yours so I can see it. It’s fair.”

Simon took the paper.

That Saturday found Simon on the front walk leading up to Delilah’s house. The big brick structure was shadowed by a set of overgrown yews, which kept the front of house

feeling damp. The white paint on the windowsills and doorframe was peeling. Moss grew in the cracks in the mortar. There was a smell of wet earth and decay and frustration. The front door was open, and before Simon could reach it, Damien came bursting out, followed by three of the younger kids from the neighborhood, everyone of them the youngest sibling of brothers or sisters Simon knew, each of them deemed reckless or incorrigible: ‘such-a-nice-family-it’s-a-shame-about-THAT-one’ kind of kids. Damien came to a hopping halt.

“Hey, man. We’re going back out to the woods to party. You wanna come?”

“No. I came to see your sister,” said Simon, feeling out of place. “She here?”

A slightly confused, twitchy smile crossed Damien’s face. “I think so. Not sure,” and he and his small pack of early-teen hyenas dashed off down the block. Simon turned and found Delilah standing in the shade of the foyer.

“Hey...” he said, still a few steps from the screen door. The space between him and the door and her felt thick and resistant.

“C’mon,” she mumbled with a strange sort of loose-set smile and a toss of her head. She watched Simon open the screen door and come tentatively over the threshold. She led them up a wide wooden staircase, the light in the house seemed vague and unsure of itself. She took him to a closed bedroom door, opened it, ushered him in, and closed the door behind them.

Her room was full of twilight. Three layers of gauze curtains were drawn over her windows. Silk scarves were draped over the lamps, one, by the bed, Delilah switched on, sad giraffe, and she folded cross-legged onto her bed. Simon stayed standing while she

grinned up at him, until uneasiness found a desk chair for him, and he sat across the room from her. There was a strange featurelessness to her room. Maybe it was just because she, herself, was such a feature, a dissonant odd angle sitting there on the bed, or maybe it was something intrinsic to the space, Simon couldn't tell.

Her room was lived-in and disorganized. Simon's eyes found a bra and some of her underwear sprawled languidly in front of her closet. Being a teenage boy with no sisters, who had never had a real girl friend, the sight of Delilah's underpinnings casually on display like that was powerfully voyeuristic and erotic to him. Mysterious and wholly female. She watched him looking.

"Except for my dad and my brothers, you're the first boy ever in here." She looked at him like someone looks at a jack-in-the-box as the handle is slowly cranked. Simon began to feel on display.

"I brought your essay," he said. He felt like he was stepping into an inside joke. It was his turn to look at her, but he couldn't for long. She studied him deeply, like he was a photograph. It didn't cost her anything. He couldn't look at her except in oblique glimpses and flashbulb glances. He handed her a copy of his essay, and hers, with some red ink on it.

"I read it again. I think it's better than mine."

Delilah took both sets of papers and didn't look at them. Just sat them next to her on the bed.

"Why?"

"I don't know. Mine's some crap about the difference between what I'm told is beauty and what I really feel is beauty. It's five pages of not answering the question. Yours is

just about your room. But yours is honest.” He paused and looked at his hands to keep from looking at her, or her underwear.

“What do you think is beautiful?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m not sure... I really get what you mean about things slowing down, though.”

“You do?” she asked it like a real—not-weird—person.

“Yeah. And the getting less crazy stuff. I get that, too,” he ventured a look at her. She shifted and a look of interest crossed her face.

“So, you think it was good, huh?”

“Yeah, you can look at what I marked. There is one thing...”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t say anything about it in the comments. It feels like there’s something missing. Something that ought to be there, but it’s not.”

She let out a strange little sound, and her smile sharpened into an arrowhead.

“I’m not saying it’s bad. It’s not. Like I said, it’s better than I can do...”

“Close your eyes,” she interrupted.

“Why?”

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing weird. Just close your eyes.”

Simon didn’t know why he did it, but he watched Delilah’s smile bloom as he closed his eyes.

“Tell me what you hear and smell.”

Simon sat still and listened and breathed.

“I hear the house breathing. I smell... Lemons... And fabric softener... And...”

Simon caught the warm powdery mix of musk and clean. It was like he was standing on the dry land of himself smelling the tide pools of her ocean.

“And I smell you,” he opened his eyes.

The accent of a smile crossed her face. “Now close your eyes again, and take a deep breath, and tell me what you feel,” she said very quietly.

Simon closed his eyes and sat for a moment.

“I feel weird,” he said, opening his eyes.

“Why?”

“Because I’m sitting in a strange room that smells like lemons and fabric softener playing a weird game.”

She smiled broadly. “Try again.”

Simon tried again. “I still feel weird.”

“Why still?” she asked.

“Because you’re a little weird, Delilah. And you’re staring at me like that.”

She put her finger between her teeth and bit it absent-mindedly, like a pencil. “Try again,” she said through her finger.

Again, Simon closed his eyes. He tried to just sink into everything. At first there was nothing. Too much weird. Then he felt it. Or rather, he didn’t. He opened his eyes and looked straight at her.

“Something’s missing,” he said.

She glowed at him. “You feel it, too,” she said. “What is it? What’s missing?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t either. Sometimes it’s like I take a huge deep breath and my lungs are full of air, but I’m still gasping for something else. Or I turn on all the lights and it’s completely bright, but I still can’t quite see. It scares me. It’s never there.”

Simon suddenly found he could look directly at her, just sitting there on her bed, looking uncomfortable and a little frightened in her own skin. He didn’t know what to do, and the discomfort overwhelmed him.

“I should go,” he said, getting up.

Delilah got up and handed him her essay back. “Read it again. See if you can figure out what’s missing. And let me know when you do. I want to know. Please?”

She stood at the top of the stairs and watched him leave.

Simon kept Delilah’s essay in his locker for the rest of the school year. He read it fairly frequently at first, less so as time went by. He kept wanting to ask her about it, but they didn’t take the same classes, and didn’t move in the same circles. As far as Simon knew, Delilah didn’t even have a circle. He tried finding her after school, hanging out smoking in the parking lot, or at lunch. He thought he saw her a few times across the cafeteria, but maybe not. He thought once or twice about just going to her house, but he never did.

One time, right before the end of the year, Simon did see Delilah. He was walking down the third floor corridor after talking to one of his teachers after school, his footsteps echoing off the terrazzo and the metal lockers. Most of the other students had cleared out already, and their distant voices sounded like the seashore. And there was Delilah,

standing at the end of the corridor. She looked at him like a deer he'd surprised in the forest. She turned and walked away.

* * *

Simon parked his car in a wet gravel turnoff by the gates of the CTS rail yard. It was late afternoon, the first Saturday after his file review at Lighthouse. It was dead quiet. Rusted and graffitied train cars stood on sidings, and the wind blew. Simon saw the collection of tents and bikes and shopping carts tucked away at the edge of the huge set of bridges that formed a man-made cave, one of the biggest homeless camps in the city. It was a ragged patchwork of the flotsam and jetsam of desperation and fear and hopelessness. Simon walked out towards the bridges. This end of Marker Street was unused except by police cars—or ambulances—running in and out of the camp.

He got close enough to a couple of people to ask if they knew anyone named Delilah, and finally got a response from the fourth person he asked: no, they didn't. He waited and watched for an hour and saw no sign of her. Maybe she'd figured it out: what was missing. He knew he hadn't. But he knew it was still not there. It never had been. He forever now felt like something was missing.

He never saw her again.

