

The Offer – Paul Blake

Joel sat on the second-hand green and brown couch, outlining his next picture, the charcoal pencil scratched against the rough surface of the sketch pad. He used his left hand to smudge in shadows as he absently hummed along to whatever was playing on the stereo. His girlfriend, Jessica, was tapping away at the keyboard on the desk behind the couch, completing something for work. She preferred to use Joel's desktop computer rather than her ancient laptop. A typical Sunday mid-afternoon for the couple. Jessica working, Joel doing his art. But at least they were doing stuff together. In front of the couch was a fan slowly oscillating side to side, pushing warm air around the room, fluttering Joel's paintings, which were pinned up on the walls. His own gallery of work. His paintings were a mismatch of styles and themes. Portraits of himself and Jessica, mixed with surreal landscapes and hideously deformed creatures, mixed with still-life from his crappy apartment. He was still sketching away when he heard the first 'what the hell?'

“What the actual hell? Where's it gone? No, no, no, don't do this. Not now.”

Joel turned to look at her, “What's up.”

“Your goddamn computer just turned off. I was just finishing, and it just switched off.”

“That's weird. Have you tried turning it on again?” Joel laid the sketch pad and pencil beside him and started to get up. The weight of his hand on the cushion made the pad tip, and the pencil rolled to the carpet.

“Yeah, nothing. It's dead.”

“Dead? It's only six months old. It wasn't making any strange noises or anything before it turned off, was it?”

“No, Joel. It wasn't. It just turned off without any warning.”

Joel walked behind the couch and crouched down by the computer. He pressed the power button on and off a few times. Nothing. He pulled the machine out from beneath the

desk and started pushing in the various wires that plugged into the back. It was only then that he noticed the stereo had stopped playing, and the fan was no longer making its rattling blade noise. He could hear the muffled sound of next door's tv through the apartment walls.

“Um, I think the power has gone off.” Joel cringed as he stood up.

“Whaddya mean the power has gone off?” she said, her voice rising to a level just below shriek.

“We have no power.”

“Why do we have no power? I've spent all day working on that presentation. I needed it for my meeting tomorrow. Didn't you pay the electric bill again?”

“I was waiting for my welfare check to come through. I thought it'd last.”

“Well, it sure as hell didn't. What am I going to do now?”

“Didn't you save it? I always tell you to back up to the cloud.”

“No, I did not save it!” Jessica screamed in frustration. “I thought my boyfriend would use the money I gave him for the electric to pay for the electric.” She started prodding him in the chest. A poke to emphasize each word. “My,” poke, “money,” poke, “from,” poke, “my,” poke, “fucking,” extra-hard poke, “job.”

Joel backed away from her, “...” he failed to say.

“You're such a waste. A waste of my time, a waste of my love. What am I even doing here? You spend all day watching tv and playing with your fucking crayons. You have no ambition, no drive, no goals.” Jessica stepped forward into Joel's personal space. “Such a waste of my time, you'll never get any better. That's enough.”

“But—”

“No buts, we're through. You can find someone else to leech off.” She pushed him, but he didn't move back far enough for her liking. She clenched her fist and punched him in the face. Joel fell in surprise, his face rubbed against the rough fabric of the couch as he dropped.

Jessica grabbed her handbag from beside the monitor, walked around the room, stuffing in her possessions. Muttering to herself as she did it, “...fool I've been... going

nowhere...such an idiot...stupid goddamn paintings..." she picked up his sketch pad and threw it across the room. With a final look, she walked over to the door and opened it.

"We're done. You waste of fucking skin." With that, she left, slamming the door behind her. The apartment rattled at the force, and one of the pins holding a painting up fell away, and the painting slowly drifted to the floor.

Joel picked himself up. His lip was already beginning to swell. "What the hell just happened?" he asked the room. "Shit, I need a coffee." He walked into the kitchen and filled up the coffee machine on the counter with instant coffee and water. He flipped the switch and waited... and waited. Eventually, he remembered the electricity was out. "Dammit! I have to go to the coffee shop now."

Joel parked his car in the parking lot of the nearby Starbucks. He'd run the car with the windows wound down and without the a/c running because he knew he wouldn't be getting any more gas until his check came through. The heat hit him as he exited the vehicle. That dry, relentless Phoenix heat that crawls inside your mouth and nose and suffocates you with its intensity. He hurried into the coffee shop, expecting the welcome blast of air conditioning, but the shop felt even hotter than outside. He ordered an iced latte. He pulled his sticky t-shirt away from his body and decided to sit outside at one of the tables under the shaded veranda. That and the drink should cool him down a bit and give him time to think about winning Jessica back.

Joel went outside and sat down at the wrought-iron table set, beside him, at the next table was an old man in a dark suit. Joel barely glanced at him as sat down. He shifted the chair on the concrete floor to move it closer to the table and winced at the harsh grating noise it made. "Sorry," he said to the man. He put the straw into his mouth and took his first taste. The coolness of the iced liquid felt great against his swollen lip. As he sipped his drink, Jessica's words swam around his head, "Crayons... waste... drive." So lost in his memories, he didn't hear the man next to him at first.

"Nothing beats an iced drink on a hot day," the man repeated.

“Except maybe air-con,” Joel replied after realizing the man was speaking to him. “It's been a while since I've felt that.”

Joel felt the old man staring at him, it felt like the pressure just before a large storm, sitting on his brain, not releasing until the storm broke, or in this case until the man spoke again.

“You seem like a man down on his luck,” he paused as though waiting for Joel to answer, when nothing came, he continued. “As it happens, I have a job I think you'd be perfect for.”

I ain't blowing you old man, Joel thought, your jizz would probably taste like dust.

“No, nothing like that, I assure you,” as though he'd read Joel's thoughts.

Joel turned to face him. The man's skin was thin like tissue paper, with the rougher texture of crepe paper. A yellowy-white color like chicken skin. The man's eyes were small and dark, very dark, with a jaundiced tinge to the whites.

“I need you to pick something up for me. I can't go there. I can't go anywhere, really. Not allowed to drive, you see. I just come here for my daily fix and then home.” He pointed with a thin hand at the condos beside the coffee shop.

“What's in it for me?”

“Like I said, you seem like you're down on luck. From the paint and smudges on your hands, I guess you're an artist. How about I make you famous?”

“Make me famous? How would you do that?”

“That's for me to worry about. What do you say? You go pick something up for me, and I change your life?”

“It isn't something dangerous or illegal, is it?”

“No, just a box. It should be in the bedroom at this address.” He handed over an index card with an address penned in an elegant script. Their hands touched for a moment, the feel of the man's warm skin surprised Joel, it looked like it should be cold, like a defrosted ham. “The house is empty. There won't be anyone there.”

“How do you know?”

“It's my old house. I kept it when I moved here. No one to give it to and too many memories to sell. You'll need the key.” He reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and removed a plain copper-colored key with a tattered cardboard tag attached to it by a string. He held it out, “Do you accept?”

“You'll make me famous?” Joel thought for a second of Jessica. “Ok, I'll do it,” he said, taking the key.

Joel arrived at the old man's house just as the sun dropped from the sky. The temperature had dropped too. It was still warm, but a chill still ran up Joel's arms to his shoulders and down his spine as he looked at the house. It was a typical single-story chain-linked fence property. It didn't stand out amongst its neighbors, except maybe in upkeep. The front windows had been smashed in and then boarded up. Graffiti covered the front door with its security screen hanging from one hinge. Joel turned his engine off but kept his hand on the key. Should I? He can't really make me famous, can he? Joel's mind whirled with indecision. Jessica's face. Her mouth curled. Her finger poke, poke—Fuck it. He removed the key and opened his car door and stepped out. He approached the front door and took out the key the old man had given him. There was a smell coming from the house. Old, musty, moldy, rotten, sweet in a sickly kind of way. He put the key in the lock and turned. He stepped in, leaving the door open behind him.

It was dark inside, so he used the flashlight app on his smartphone. The graffiti from the front of the house had spread inside. Red, green, black paint covering the beige walls. Dried splashes of brown were interspersed with hammer holes and the occasional bullet hole. There was no carpet on the floor. Instead, two stained mattresses, broken bottles, broken crack pipes, needles, dead roaches, used condoms, McDonald's wrappers. Joel carefully made his way through the debris to the back of the house. The kitchen was on his left, the bathroom on the right. Their doors had been removed, and Joel hurried past without investigating their treasures. The bedroom was in front of him. The door was pristine and untouched. He turned the handle. It was not locked.

He entered the room, the first thing he noticed, was that he didn't need his cellphone. There were lamps on the bedside cabinets giving off a soft, welcoming light. His feet sank into the deep pile carpet. Joel saw the box on the dressing table, it was wooden and plain. No fancy engravings or markings. It looked out of place next to the ornate gilded frame of the dressing table mirror. Joel walked over to the box. As he reached for it, he saw his reflection in the mirror.

He looked like the old man, but the Joel version. Slight but significant differences in facial shape, but the same parchment skin and coloring. His hand, too, was different in the mirror. Brown age spots and sunken skin. He waved his hand in front of the glass seeing his true and reflected hands side by side. Enough of this, he thought. He grabbed the box with both hands and made to run out of the room, except his feet sank deeper into the carpet, to his knees, overbalanced he dropped to the floor. He tried lifting his arm free of the fibers, but they clung to him, pulling him in, deeper and deeper, chest, legs, arms, burying deeper and further, the room becoming darker, the box drifting away, the pile rubbing against his face, in his nostrils, his mouth, his ears, and eyes, he choked, he coughed, he screamed, he

Woke, eyes blinking, light flooding in, shapes appearing. His apartment, living room, green and brown couch, daylight. A brush in hand, palette with drying paints in the other, canvas in front of him on a stand. Jessica's face in paint. Mouth open wide. Eyes wider. Tears. Cords in neck standing out. A final blink, and peace. Joel dabbed at the painting, adding shadow here and there. The brush scratching umber at the canvas. The brush ran dry. Joel pressed it against the palette, but there was no more paint there. He lifted the color pot from the table beside him. That was also empty. He placed the brush on the edge of the easel, almost reverently, laid the palette on the table with care. He took the pot to the fridge in the kitchenette area behind his desk. He opened the refrigerator and crouched down to look for the color he needed. There were Tupperware containers stacked on the shelves. Each box had a label. Each label described a color. There were greens, browns, yellows, blacks, pinks, and reds. So many reds. Behind the first layer of boxes, laying on its side, was Jessica's head, in all her beauty. Peacefully silent. Joel removed the container that matched the color he had been using and opened the airtight lid. An irony-copper smell emanated from the plastic, and he poured a small amount of the mushy liquid into the pot. He replaced the cover and stacked the container back in the fridge and closed the door.

He returned to the living room area and poured a little of the color from the pot onto the palette. He picked it up and the brush and resumed his work. The brush swept past hairs and freckles on the canvas. A waste of skin? Joel thought. Well, the same can't be said of you. He painted away his thoughts and lost himself in his art. Capturing the look on her face, the fear, the terror, the panic. He didn't hear the banging on the door, the shouts from the men outside. He didn't hear them crash down the door. He didn't hear them screaming at him to drop to the floor, to put his hands behind his head. He did feel them tackle him, wrench his arms back, cuff his hands. He felt the piercing flashes from the bulbs of their cameras. Flash. Him lying there. Flash. Jessica's beautiful face. His greatest piece. Flash. His paints in the fridge. Flash. Jessica's frigid face. Flash.

END

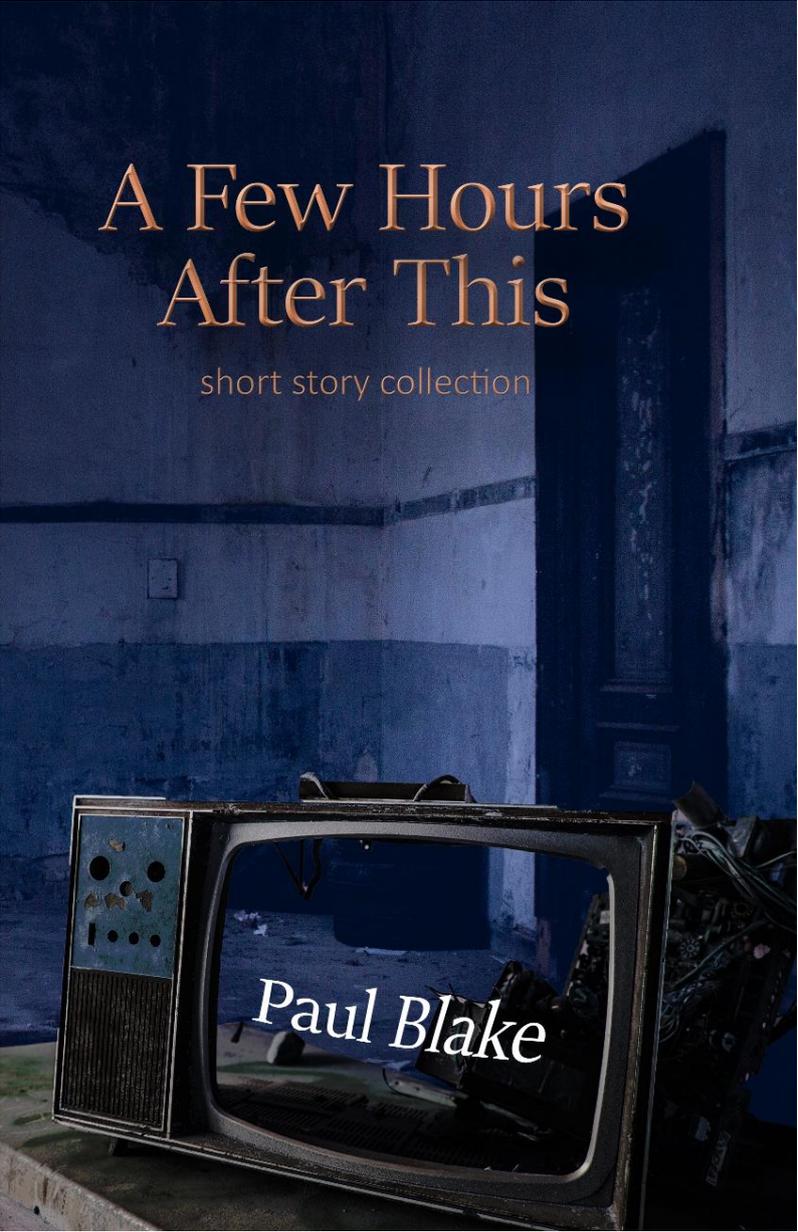
Author's note.

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A Few Hours After This

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