

I'm Not Here

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p. 7-9

Eleven more minutes, store

When the first call comes in, I'm on my knees in the middle of the store bent over the large box of coats that the courier delivered earlier today. The screen on my phone lights up, but I don't see it. It's a few meters away on the counter, on a stack of tissue paper. Even the vibrations don't make a sound.

I'm not the least bit aware of what's just happened less than a kilometer away at the Think Out Loud offices, or of the panic-stricken message Lotte leaves on my phone.

This new store is part of a French chain with seventy-some locations around the world. Next to me on the brand-new tile floor is a script with detailed instructions: which items belong on which shelves, which sweater goes with which pants. Only one of each size of each garment should be hanging on the racks at any given time, and only after it has been carefully steamed. There are even diagrams showing exactly how the scarves and ponchos should be folded. Luckily, I have no trouble immersing myself in this kind of work—just follow the script, forget the outside world, push out everything grinding in my head. I cling to the reassuring thought that in seventy other stores around the world there are men and women carrying out the same steps, handling exactly the same fabrics, in the same brightly colored interior, wearing the same uniform (a loose-fitting, white silk shirt with beige piping and beige pleated pants).

For the first time in my life, I am part of a chain, and somehow that feels secure—I am literally less alone.

A character who is fully absorbed in something, unaware of his or her own impending doom—that's all you need to up the tension. This was one of the first screenplay principles we learned in film school: let viewers in on something their protagonist doesn't know yet and they'll be on the edge of their seats, they'll want to call out to the screen to warn the character.

I can still picture our scriptwriting teacher as he explained this principle to us. On legs as skinny as a tripod's, he stood at the front of the auditorium showing us film scenes on the screen behind him to support his theory—the end of *Se7en*, where Detective Mills opens the box that the viewer already knows contains the severed head of his pregnant wife. Or Hallorann's long, drawn-out entrance into the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*; before Jack finally murders him with an axe.

"Sometimes," he said, "the images are enough. Watch how the camera follows Hallorann from behind as he enters the empty hallway, you get the feeling that someone's going to jump out any moment."

After we had watched the clip, he gave us our homework assignment: write a scene, maximum five pages long, that uses this technique. "It doesn't have to be a murder," he said. "There are plenty of other unpleasant surprises."

This scene would have definitely intrigued Mr. Tripod Legs: a young woman is working in a store; it's Friday, February 22, 2019, according to the screensaver on the cash register. Outside the weather is mild for this time of year. It's her first day on the job, she wants to do her best, she doesn't want to be seen constantly checking her phone, so she puts it out of reach on the counter. The incoming call is shown in such a way that you know—this call is urgent, it's about something important, this call should not be missed, picking up the phone could be a matter of life and death. But the character—blurred in the background—remains fully absorbed in her trivial task.

The camera slowly glides away from the illuminated screen, through the store, past the woman tearing open plastic packaging, tallying numbers on a list, sticking price tags on labels, hanging coats perfectly primed for sale—puffy models, sorted by color from small to extra-large. She doesn't hear the voicemail tone either.

The scene ends with a top shot of the towers of boxes waiting to be unpacked, a close-up on the coats, all arranged exactly the same way, with the sleeves folded together at the front, as if they know what's about to happen—as if they're already praying.

p. 278-287

September 27, 2018 (2)

We were immediately moved to a private room. Inside was a stretcher covered in a sheet of paper from a wide roll, so that Simon could lie down.

Waiting on the counter were a pair of scissors, a needle and thread.

I told the nurse we'd already seen a doctor who worked at this hospital once this month—Letiège.

Dr. Letiège was on call again this weekend, she said, he'd be by soon to assess Simon's condition. First, Simon was freed from the plastic; they cut him open, like a giant sausage being stripped of its skin. He endured it with his eyes closed, he kept his fists clenched. His hands were covered in small, shallow cuts—I hadn't noticed them before. A blanket was draped over his lower body. Behind his eyelids I could see his eyeballs fluttering back and forth. We weren't left alone; the door was never closed.

A local anesthetic and a few stitches would be needed to close the largest wound. Some of the open cuts on his arms would be sealed with special glue. But first, just to be sure, they wanted to run a brain scan and blood test.

"You okay?" I asked every time I saw the needle puncturing his skin. "You okay?" Simon said nothing, and he couldn't nod because of the work being done on his neck. There was something strange about it, that silence, like someone waiting for their lawyer to show up before they could say anything.

"Sir, would you like your friend to wait in the hall?" the nurse asked after inserting the second of the three stitches. The largest cut was almost closed. The skin was jagged, the pieces didn't fit back together very well.

I sensed that he wanted to say "yes", so I got up and left the room.

I waited in the hall for more than half an hour, on chairs clicked together in pairs—they were just a little too narrow to sleep on but wide enough to make you feel alone. Dr. Unicorn came rushing into the emergency room, his one tuft of hair blown straight up from the speed of his steps. He was wearing a long white coat, so I didn't recognize him at first. He brisked past me, opened the door to Simon's room and closed it behind him. I didn't dare to knock. The Unicorn was in there for at least ten minutes. I couldn't hear what was going on inside, and I didn't want to press my ear against the door—somebody might think I was crazy.

“At the ER with S,” I texted Lotte, who had messaged me five times since that morning to see if everything was okay. I typed quickly, even though I was sitting out there alone and had plenty of time to communicate.

“Stay strong, don’t worry, maybe take rest of week off,” she wrote back. I thought it thoughtful of her not to burden me with superfluous articles.

I wouldn’t have lasted two more minutes on those double-clicked chairs. Fortunately, the Unicorn opened the door. He stuck his head out into the hall, looking for me. “You’re Mr. Spruyts’s partner, *n’est-ce pas*? Would you come in please?”

Once inside, they brought me up to speed. The doctor did all the talking, Simon was lying on the stretcher under the white blanket with his back facing me. He had put on the clothes I grabbed for him and pulled the hoodie over his head. He didn’t want to hear what was being said. I laid a hand on his leg and caressed him gently.

He was going to be admitted, at his own request. The brain scan hadn’t revealed any abnormalities. Simon had a lot of scratches on his skin, most of them superficial. The wound behind his ear was deep but not too bad; he was lucky he didn’t hit a major vein. His state of mind, however, was more concerning. But this was a good start—patients who admit themselves have the best chances of recovery. Simon would be taken to a room and given something to help him relax. The first thing he needed was to sleep and calm down. You could say his brain was overheated. Over the next few days, they would remove all external stimuli—no screens, no people, no books, no movies. All he needed were a few personal hygiene items from home to tie him over for a little while. Could I pack him a bag with a toothbrush, pajamas, slippers, and any medication he was taking? I could drop it off at the “closed psychiatry” ward, where a head nurse was on call all day.

“Can I speak to him alone for a second, to say goodbye?” I asked.

“He’s just calmed down, we better not excite him. They’ll let you know when he can receive visitors.”

I put my hand under the blanket, caressed Simon’s back, kissed the back of his head and walked outside. Why hadn’t I thought to pack a few things for him when I heard the ambulance siren winding through the city?

It wasn’t until I was in the tram on the way home that I thought about the state of the house, what kind of battlefield I was about to enter. Simon’s blood, the Mikado of things, Dan in need of reassurance. I was already imagining myself cleaning it all up, having to sleep in the bed, alone.

“Lotte, can I stay with you tonight?” I texted.

“Of course, stay as long as you want,” she wrote back immediately.

To pass the time, I made myself a packing list, so it would all go quicker. Just grab these few items, clean up the worst of it, go back to the hospital, drop off the bag, then bike straight to Lotte’s. I’d spend a few nights there to gather my strength, then I’d start cleaning the house before Simon came home. Who knows, I might even be able to take a few days off work. Lotte still owed me after that babymoon.

How many pairs of underwear should I pack? Not too many, he shouldn’t be away for that long, but three definitely wouldn’t be enough. That thing inside him had to be completely out before I wanted to see him again.

“Danny...where are you Danny cat?” I whispered apologetically as I walked in the door. The softness of my voice felt soothing to me too. I couldn’t blame her for not coming out to greet me. Yesterday she had come out meowing loudly and climbed into my bag. She had seen all this coming, she had tried to warn me, but I didn’t listen.

The first thing I did was fill her food and water dish—a triple portion, one for now, one for tonight and one for tomorrow morning. Tomorrow after work I’d bring her something fresh, a thawed-out piece of cod, to make up for it.

Talking to the little lump under the bed, curled up in the corner behind the farthest leg, helped calm me down. Meanwhile, I checked all the rooms and closets, opening doors big and small—cautiously, for fear that I might find something without knowing exactly what that something might be. Mad constructions, booby traps, more surfaces covered in scribbles, or even worse—that I might find Simon in a closet, that the last hour had all been a dream, that no help had come, that those two first responders had been figments of my imagination.

His empty pillow still held the shape of his head. I didn't know which night it dated back to.

The first time around, I didn't clean anything, I simply took stock. I didn't dare to sit down, didn't look at the dry, brown drops of blood on the floor, didn't attempt to read any of the writing on the wall, the insane amount of notes. Dan didn't meow, she didn't whimper, she was glued to the floor, stiffened with fright.

It had been a long time since I'd seen this apartment without Simon pacing back and forth in it. Only now could I see what had changed: the black scribbles on the walls, the things he had collected over these last few months, the shoes, the coats, all the stuff he had bought second-hand online—it would never fit in a garbage bag, we'd need a small container. Now that I took in all the details for the first time, I saw that he'd taped off some of the sockets. On his desk, in the coffee mug between all the Simon Sproud pens, I found the bloody box cutter he must have used to cut open his tattoo. There were a few blood-soaked wads of paper, and a small, rounded spoon, which I immediately recognized from the tape around it: our avocado spoon. The handle was warped.

I retracted the blades and threw the box cutter in the trash. Letiège's words kept spinning around in my head—that it had been "serious". I rinsed the avocado spoon and dropped it into the basket in the dishwasher.

It was impossible not to clean most of it up, to undo as much as possible. One by one, I began extracting objects from the pile of stuff and putting them back where they belonged. I hung something on the wall, shoved something in a folder, set something straight—it all went pretty well. Slowly the chaos started to fade, the parquet floor in the office became visible again, I could see the pale stain where our bed used to be, where the sun hadn't bleached the wood. I tried to wipe the marker off the walls with a wet towel and soap, but that just created black smudges. I'd have to paint the wall, there was no other way.

Now that it was easier to walk around, I started making two piles of stuff, an overnight bag for me and a rolling suitcase for Simon. For him, I packed a comfortable pair of sweats, five pairs of underwear, a towel and some pajamas (I slipped a heart-shaped Post-it note into the chest pocket). His pile was bigger than mine. We were both going to Brussels, but it felt like he was going much farther away than I was.

Every time I pulled an item of clothing out of the closet, I said its name out loud, for the frozen ball of fur under the bed. My soothing voice in the room sounded familiar.

Halfway through the packing, I sat down at Simon's laptop. I knew the password to unlock it and was touched by the fact that he hadn't changed it: SLLeoS2007. (Simon loves Leo since 2007.) His browser was still open. There were so many tabs that the icons didn't fit on the bar anymore. If you were to open all those tabs and lay them beside each other, they'd stretch out of the city.

I clicked the X—**Close all tabs?**—actually, no. I hit Cancel. With trembling hands, I clicked from tab to tab. Pages from his own website, porn, YouTube, the Think Out Loud news page, results of all the things he'd Googled, the strangest searches about spy techniques appeared on the screen. Somehow none of this surprised me considering all the nights and hours he'd spent behind his computer, typing at triple speed.

Facebook was open on dozens of pages too—all chats Simon had started over the last few days and hours, with strangers, with old classmates he barely knew, sharing his suspicions about the practices of local politicians, asking if any of them had ever been approached by TOL to keep an eye on him. He had started a group chat to explain how he had seen all this coming and to share his

Scrabble predictions. Hardly anybody responded, most people hadn't even read his message. Some left the group or answered with a question mark. Others reacted more aggressively ("Dude, what are you on?"), or replied "Do I know you?" A few unfriended him. Under a photo of the winning indoor soccer team, the Tollers, Simon had typed "Did you erase the photos with Paul in them?", but no one was offended—the comment even got a like from Maxim.

Simon had written down the names of various people on a sheet of paper next to his computer, which he'd divided into two columns, titled "Coen" and "Paul". In another notebook lying open on his desk, he had kept a list of license plate numbers. There were facial composite-like sketches of street workers and even one of the neighbor. Next to them was a photo of Coen and a scribbled note: "October 1, 12:15 Lotte ultrasound"—I had no idea where he got this concrete information, maybe he had called the hospital himself and pretended to be Coen.

I kept clicking tabs until I felt numb, until the nausea had subsided.

I replied to a message from Open VLD Brussels, which had already sent Simon two emails asking whether he had received their first email—I can't answer your question, I wrote, but good luck with the upcoming campaign.

At first, I hesitated, but in the end I did it: with a few clicks of the mouse, I deleted the whole Simon Sproud Facebook page.

Delete this page permanently? Once a page has been deleted, it cannot be retrieved. Are you sure you want to delete Simon Sproud?

Yes, I was sure. I was on a roll. Since I was already feeling the pain of what I'd done to him anyway, I decided to finish what I'd started: I logged into the other accounts I knew of and deleted those profiles as well—Twitter, LinkedIn—there, too, I found all kinds of chat monologues with strangers. Always the same suspicions, always looking for someone to confirm his theories.

As I deleted the pages Simon had created, everything he had ever responded to and posted, his alter ego disappeared—gone, erased. The only thing I didn't touch was the folder on his desktop that contained all his sketches, ideas and tattoo designs.

I looked at the clock, an hour had passed. I felt much lighter. I had known about these pages for months, and all that time I had worried about what he was posting without me knowing, without me to correct him, as if, somewhere in my mind, a tortoise had been stuck on its back, and I'd finally managed to flip it over and it was crawling away.

Dan was still under the bed. Would she be happy after it was all gone? No more owner doing strange things, bouncing around, scaring her, ranting on social media.

Before I could leave, I needed to pack Simon's toiletries and find some rags to wipe up the blood on the floor. His toothbrush and toothpaste were probably on the edge of the bathtub, seeing as he had started brushing his teeth in the shower to save time. Swerving around Simon's dried-up blood drops on the floor, I headed to the bathroom, the only room in the house I hadn't been in since yesterday morning. Again, I felt vaguely nauseous as I opened the door—the threat of a room not yet declared safe.

Blood was splattered all over the floor and wall by the edge of the bathtub—this must be where he hurt himself, or where he tried to patch himself up, to rinse out the wound. There was blood everywhere, in every shade of red, some drops mixed with water and almost transparent. I found bloody wads of toilet paper by the bathroom door and in the toilet, so many that I was afraid I wouldn't be able to flush them down.

It wasn't until I bent over the edge of the bath, reaching for the toothbrush, that I saw what was lying at the bottom of the tub.

Before I could accept what I was seeing, before the image could penetrate my bones, before I could believe it, I had to go back and check what was under the bed, what it was I'd been talking to in that soothing voice for over a half an hour. I went back to the other side of the house, got down

on my knees and shined the flashlight on my phone under the bed. There, in the corner, was a towel twisted into a ball.

Now I knew why the avocado spoon and box cutter had been on Simon's desk. The cuts on his arms hadn't been made by a knife, they were scratches from a cat that, in total agony, had tried to defend itself.

p. 446-453

December 16, 2018

With every ornament he hung on the tree, Simon gave me a hesitant look. He'd gained weight; his Simpsons t-shirt fell differently on his body, Homer's lips were no longer on his belly button, but two centimeters above it.

We'd been home together since the beginning of the week, without a store to run or any other obligations. Mostly, we watched re-runs of cartoons that Simon had already seen. All that time, the Nordmann fir had stood bare in the house, its branches sagging from the heat, its expectations getting lower and lower by the day.

Not only did Simon need my confirmation to decorate the tree, he couldn't even fry an egg without asking me for help. Which pan should he use, which gas burner was best, which was better—butter or oil? And how long should he let it fry, could I attach a number of minutes to my “until it looks done”? He stood there staring at a carton of eggs for several minutes because he couldn't decide how many to crack.

At the table, he inched his chair closer and closer to mine until we might as well have been eating off the same plate. When I was home, he spent most of the time following me around the apartment the way dogs do when they know their owners have treats in their pockets. He'd stand behind me while I was cooking, follow me around the house, sit next to me on the edge of the bed as I tied my shoes, wait silently as I put on my coat, and while I was sitting on the toilet, he'd stand in the doorway and watch me, always with the same, sad look on his face—a hungry dog hoping for something other than what was already in his bowl. I was filled with patience like a tube is filled with toothpaste: so long you don't give up, you'd be surprised how much you can squeeze out.

“Simon, sorry, but can I please just poop in peace?” I said one morning. He took a step back and closed the door, but I could hear him standing on the other side.

“Sorry, baby, you can come back in,” I said.

He stood there watching me wipe my ass.

Out of fear that our neighbors and acquaintances might forget about him, I tried to maintain social contact on his behalf. I struck up conversations with people we knew on the street and wrapped my arm around Simon to show that the interest was coming from both of us, I sent a Christmas card to Bavo in Simon's handwriting, which I could imitate perfectly, and every time I talked to Lotte I told her Simon said hi.

I was living, in addition to a double life, a one-and-a-half life for us. It was me who was keeping him half afloat.

Like a volcanic eruption, depression was something that I'd always imagined to be different than it actually was. In the meantime, I had seen a video of the Kilauea eruption in Hawaii—how the lava mercilessly devoured everything in its path. It shows a man watching the thick sludge roll across the road at an agonizing pace and slowly engulf his car, then his garden, and eventually his whole house. I watched the clip over and over again, trying to learn something from it. It was a tutorial—this was exactly how depression moved. Slowly, it had crept up on Simon, seeped into his cracks, swallowed his terrain, scorching his qualities and personality.

If we were waiting together on a sidewalk and something dangerous came thundering past, I would grip his hand even tighter. Every now and then, I'd click through his tabs and search history, just to see if he had Googled information about suicide. I checked the "p" too, hoping he might have indulged in a little pornography. But the only thing he'd looked up was how long to fry an omelet.

"Did you take your pills?" was my standard question before bed and again at the start of the day. Then, I'd count the empty blisters in the package, just to be sure. There were times when Simon was absolutely sure he'd taken his medicine, and I had to show him proof of the contrary.

To make sure he didn't take a double dose, I bought a pillbox at the pharmacy, a long, plastic container with seven sliding panels, each with four compartments inside that I'd fill at the beginning of the week with the right pills. When the box was standing upright on the counter, it looked like a miniature flat with seven floors and pale faces behind every window.

I kept thinking about the sketch that the Unicorn had drawn with his four-color pen during Simon's discharge interview, those two lines that Simon was supposed to remain in between from then on. In his drawing, there were roughly three centimeters between those two red lines, but in reality, there was hardly any room at all, they'd trapped him with medication in a space that was almost too small to breathe, to exist.

For the time being, no adjustments were made to his dose. Twice, Simon had to go to the lab to have his blood drawn, so he and the Unicorn could evaluate the results afterwards. These were appointments that Simon didn't want me to attend. The fact that he was going out on his own made me nervous, but it was also convenient—I'd have an hour or two to myself at home to write.

The Unicorn thought things were going pretty well, and Simon confirmed this, he told me afterwards. Of course, Simon wanted nothing more than to let the days pass by, like someone waiting at a bus stop who takes a step back every time a half-full bus pulls up in the hope that a half-empty one is coming.

During the evaluation meeting four weeks after Simon's discharge, the Unicorn announced that he was retiring and that he'd only be taking his oldest patients, the ones he'd been following their entire lives, with him to his private practice. His replacement, Dr. Khany, an outstanding physician of Iranian origin, would be taking over his most recent patients, Simon included.

I could tell by the way Simon climbed the stairs, the way he unzipped his jacket, the way he shuffled over to the armchair that he had been abandoned, all he had left was me.

I was starting to get the feeling that the Unicorn had never known the real Simon and thus had never had a point of reference. Now, with this new replacement, whose photo on the hospital website was *No image found*, everything would be lost.

On my phone, I still had some videos from early on in our relationship, moments that I remembered filming. The assembly of an IKEA wardrobe that we'd decided to film so that there'd be less bickering; a magic trick that Simon kept trying unsuccessfully to perform until we were both laughing our heads off; a video of him farting under water after telling me to film the bubbles; him scoring a goal while playing forward for the Tollers football club and everyone running up to hug him; our coverage of the world championships of belly-button-lint golf with Simon's serious commentary; his unguarded facial expressions that I'd secretly filmed; him singing in the shower, his happy dances; I wanted to share all of these moments with Dr. Khany, but I knew that wasn't how it worked, it wasn't like showing a model photo to your hair stylist.

December 21, 2018

We ate more often in silence. Him wolfing down his food, me slowly slurping. Whenever Simon opened his mouth, I could almost see the emptiness inside, the worthlessness in everything he emitted, in his sweat, in his eyes. I tried the best I could to feel what he felt. I offered him a sympathy so big that his entire miserable existence could fit inside it, no corner would be left uncovered, but he saw in my worried face that I was trying to sympathize, which only made my guilt bigger and his shoulders hang lower—it was his fault, sorry sorry—and then I felt even guiltier because I could tell he felt guilty, and so on and so forth. We were like a loudspeaker and a microphone lying too close together, amplifying each other until there was nothing to be heard except an all-encompassing beep.

I constantly wanted to ask him what he was thinking, what he was feeling, what was going on inside him; I wanted him to express himself in words, those words would make it concrete, demarcate it, make it bearable.

I did it to Lotte too. During the first few months of her pregnancy, I constantly asked her how she was doing, whether she was nauseous, until she started getting cranky about it. “I know you mean well, but you don’t need to ask me every time I burp if I’m going to throw up, it only makes me feel worse.”

I tried to explain to her that I couldn’t just leave her to her fate. I had to sympathize, and in order to do so, I needed to keep up with exactly how bad it was.

“Just assume, for your own sake, that everything is fine.”

Of course, nausea and misery weren’t like grocery bags, they didn’t have two handles for sharing the weight. But the idea that someone knew exactly how heavy your bag was could mean a lot too, right?

“You don’t have to feel guilty for not spending every second of the day wondering how nauseous I am. If I need a barf bucket or if there’s something you can do to help, I’ll let you know.”

The next day, Lotte brought it up again. “You know,” she said carefully, “maybe, you should talk to a psychologist.”

Unlike Lotte, Simon tolerated my many questions with the same awe-inspiring calm that cows tolerate flies circling around their eyes. I would’ve liked him to have had the power that Lotte had to push me away, to demand his own internal space, to release me from all sympathy.

It always took a while for him to answer my feeling questions, as if he had to climb down a long ladder, deep into himself, to take his pulse.

“I mean...it’s not like I feel or think anything in particular,” he’d say after he’d climbed back up the ladder.

“And how does that feel, feeling nothing in particular? I mean, you’re always thinking something, right? Even if it’s just about what you’re looking at, or some song that’s stuck in your head. Are you looking forward to something, or back on something?”

I hoped for his sake that he wasn’t really as empty inside as he led me to believe, that he at least thought about food.

“Sorry, I don’t know,” he said. He didn’t feel like having to climb all the way down that ladder and back up again.

I knew exactly how bad it all was, S. was worse off than S. knew himself.

Roughly three months after our first and only appointment, I ran into Marianne from the mental health clinic at the supermarket. I recognized her from a distance by her wrinkly neck. We exchanged a quick smile, and then she walked up to me. She was carrying a bottle of fruit juice and

a loaf of bread, maybe she came here every afternoon between sessions to pick up lunch. I was shopping for Christmas dinner. In spite of everything, I was still planning to make something of it—three courses, including a shrimp scampi curry that I'd never made before.

“Hello, Leo, how are you?” she asked.

“Good,” I said, surprised that she still knew my name. I wasn't sure whether psychologists were still bound by doctor-patient confidentiality in the Delhaize supermarket, otherwise I could have told her to check page three of *Libelle Magazine*—then she'd see that I'd done *exactly* what she told me to do: I was thinking about myself too now.
