**New York or Bust**

I can still recall how I managed to misplace my most valuable possession. I knew I should’ve been cradling it in my arms as I slept during the night. I should’ve hidden it away in my room, a secret spot with the location only being disclosed to me. I should have treated it better, but I hardly knew how to treat myself. I woke up in a daze that morning, finding myself riddled with scratch marks and deep scars. Upon examining them when I rose half off the bed, I was convinced that I had either been possessed or back to my usual sleeping antics. I had the tendency to tear at my skin in my sleep. I’m not sure if it’s a result of nightmares, my old anxieties or a combination of the two; either way I prefer waking up pale and pasty to red and fiery.

I reached for my cell phone on the bedside table. My parents told me to contact them immediately if I started scratching myself in my sleep again. As I clutched the phone in my hands, I typed out a poorly written text to my father and my mother:

woke up today with scratch marks, really looking forward to trip.

I hit send without bothering to correct my capitalization. I contemplated texting my therapist, but I knew I’d likely get the same fondly written response:

Matthew, as soon as that jar is filled to the brim with coins and cash, you will be a better man. Just keep track of that jar and New York won’t seem so far.

I’d been diagnosed with social anxiety disorder about a year ago. I’m not ashamed to admit that. It seems that with each year that passes mental health becomes less stigmatized. My therapist gave me the advice of attempting to separate my identity from my illness. According to him that was the true cause of suffering, allowing the ailment to become a part of how you see yourself. Frankly I never saw my mental disorder as an affliction in the slightest. On the contrary, I assumed that it was just a part of who I was. I found myself to be a person who couldn’t stomach the existence of other people. People were everywhere I turned. On the streets, in cars, in music halls, in restaurants, in parks, on subways, on trains, on my roof, in my sink and just down the hall. I feared being around them. I could hardly utter a sentence, control my breathing or force my hands to remain still when I was in the company of individuals. Overall, I found them to be frightening. The way they talked about their relationships, the way they took pictures of their food, the way they binged on alcohol, the way they put themselves in debt; the way they did everything...I couldn’t identify with any of it.

Now this is not to say that I am a Holden Caulfield type all eager to strap on my red hunting hat- I don’t hate people. They just supply me with everlasting anxiety. I can't relate to them in any capacity. But it’s difficult to relate to people when you never supplied them with the opportunity. I had very few companions outside of my family and doctor. I didn’t talk to many people. It was a combination of genetics, childhood and experience that created Matthew Gardner: I was born to be a loner. (Side note: my name is Matthew Gardner. It’s a pleasure to write to you)

When I moved away to attend university, the symptoms of my illness became magnified. I was content for the first little while being on my own. I was put up in this boarding house with seven other people, eight if you count me. The house was a short walk away from Carlton University where I was studying Literature. The place was well kept and the rent was as cheap as I was going to find, but I had to live with seven other voices and fourteen other footsteps- four on each floor, and me occupying the room in the left upstairs corner of the house. If you were standing outside and peering up, my window would be easy to single out. I always had the shades drawn; I liked to be in a dark room. Living in a house full of strangers can be daunting for anyone, but with social anxiety, it is the equivalent of anticipating and then scurrying away from an avalanche. I was given the usual advice from my select group of companions:

“For Christ’s sake Matthew talk to them- it’s not going to kill you to make a friend.”

Who can blame them? I knew that I had to overcome my fear. But rather than overcoming my fear, I decided logically to run away from it. This was the catalyst for obtaining the most valuable thing I had ever owned.

One afternoon, during a therapy session, I began counting the tiny holes punctured in the ceiling of the office. Cognitive therapy was getting on my nerves so I began to distract myself by counting. My therapist calls that avoidance. He could register right away that I was no longer present in our conversation, so he asked me a question that I ought to be capable of answering. He laid the clipboard down on his lap, loud enough for me to hear, let out a long sigh and said:

“Matthew, if you could take a vacation anywhere, where would you like to go?”

I ceased counting and blurted out:

“New York City.”

During our following session, he presented me a tall glass jar with: “NEW YORK OR BUST” painted on the front in beaming, golden yellow. It was a very sweet gesture on his part, especially considering the fact that I had been phoning it in during our last couple of afternoons together. As soon as I saw that jar and those shining, beautiful words painted right front and centre, I began to fancy it over everything and everyone else.

My therapist advised me to start setting aside one hundred dollars a pay cheque I received from my job writing for a local Ottawa magazine. Once I reached three thousand dollars, I could start planning my vacation to New York City. Though I realized the sheer irony of a socially anxious person vacationing in one of the most densely populated metropolitan areas of the world, I felt I could let my fear subside; it gave me a reason to get better. New York was the nexus of the creative universe; it was made for writers. As soon as I had a goal in my mind that wasn’t merely finishing an article on schedule or timing my mornings so I wouldn’t cross paths with any of my roommates in the hallway, the money really started pouring in.

I started dutifully with one hundred dollars. It was large enough for the money to add up at a decent rate, but not large enough to bankrupt me, but I soon realized that one hundred dollars wasn’t enough. I started saving one hundred and fifty then two hundred then three hundred and eventually, every article I sent in to the magazine was all for the jar. I became so frugal that I would only buy food with money I received from selling things I didn’t want anymore. The sooner I raised the funds, the sooner I could be spending my Thanksgiving break in a city so nice, they had the nerve to name it twice. I stopped going to class because I was afraid I would smile awkwardly at a stranger; the same stranger would invite me for food or coffee and I would then be subjected to the tragedy of spending money. I essentially never left my room once I started saving; I became a hermit. But on that particular morning, after waking up with the self-inflicted scars, I was reminded of why I needed this vacation. I would do anything to be in New York. Even if it meant venturing out of my self-imposed isolation.

I stretched out and felt a sense of contentment as I realized that it was a Saturday morning. I usually spent every Saturday morning counting the money in my jar with a cup of Earl Grey by my side and “The Office” playing in the background. Never being distracted by Steven Carell’s one liners, I would sit cross legged on my bed with the cool coins and musty smelling bills against my toes as I counted the contents of the jar very precisely.

I walked over to my desk all eager to place my hands on that glass jar like I was Indiana Jones about to grab the prized idol. The jar was planted next to my laptop. The rest of the desk was cluttered with books and papers, but I saw to it that the jar stood out above all else. It gave me peace of mind in an anxious and agitated world. But when I came upon its careful resting place the jar was gone; only a ring of dust where it had once been. An intense drop in my stomach sent a chill throughout my entire body. I was hoping that my eyes were merely deceiving me. I rubbed them in disbelief, not once but thrice. Where was my jar proudly standing above all my other now worthless possessions? There wasn’t a single shard of broken glass, a remaining loonie, five-dollar bill or even a ransom note. All that I saw was a big, circular empty space where the jar once held residence, complete with that ancient ring of settled dust.

The thoughts began. *The jar is gone.* But the jar couldn’t be gone, I just put an extra fifty dollars in it last night. *Matthew, that jar is gone.* No, no, no! Who would take it?! *There’s no way you could possibly know that, but what you ought to do is look for it.* I wouldn’t know where to begin. *Why don’t you give the doctor a call? The jar was his idea to begin with, he should be held somewhat accountable for it.* Following the advice of my own thoughts, I grabbed my phone. After five rings, the therapist answered.

“Good morning Matthew. Did you forget what I said about calling on the weekends? Texting is perfectly fine but calling is not necessary nor *appreciated*,” he stated dryly as soon as he picked up.

“I know, I know but sir this is an emergency,” I pleaded.

“Then why have you phoned me? I may be an authority figure but I am certainly not the police.”

“I’m in a lot of trouble sir,” I always addressed him like that, out of fear to address him any other way.

“You didn’t hurt anyone, did you?” he asked.

“Of course not. But I’d like to hurt someone, but I don’t even know who they are. But I need to find out, so I can hurt them…but, like I said, I don’t know who they are!”

“Matthew, you’re going around in circles. Please explain to me why you’re calling me at nine in the morning on a Saturday. Then maybe I’ll offer you some guidance. Though I believe I already do that three sessions a week.”

I managed to catch my breath and explain to him what I had woken up to, he took it even worse than I had.

“Those sons of bitches! You get that jar back this instant! If I weren’t so far away from Ottawa, I’d come down and break all their doors down,” he exclaimed so loudly I had to inch my ear away from the phone.

“What should I do?”

“You have to do the unthinkable Matthew.”

“You mean…I have to talk to them? All three of them?” My skin crawled.

“That’s the only way you’re going to get the jar back. Since there was no sign of a break in and you obviously didn’t misplace it, it’s only logical that one of your roommates waltzed into your room, saw the jar full of money and stole it.”

“So, I should just go to their doors one by one and confront them about the theft?”

“It’s either that or you lose...how much money did you have in there?”

“Two thousand nine hundred dollars and eighty-two cents.”

There was silence on his end.

“Get that jar back Matthew. It’s important for your health and your finances.”

And off I went.

I took my medication, meditated for five minutes and listened to my “Take It Easy” playlist before leaving my bedroom for the first time in weeks. The last time I had crossed the comfort of the black bedroom mat and onto the green tiled floor of the kitchen just outside the room was when I went grocery shopping last week. I spent a great deal of time recuperating after that. I had been occupying space in the house for six months now and not once had I ever had to speak with, lay eyes on, or even pass by one of my roommates. But now I had a choice: continuing this lack of contact out of my social anxiety and not getting my jar back or swallowing my fear whole and demanding that one of the three of them return it.

As I stood in front of Number One’s front door, I contemplated phoning the police and reporting the theft. But I knew their first suspects would be the people I lived with, so the police would be no use. I would still be required, by law I might add, to look at them. Before I could even think of what other options I had, Number One opened up their door. I gasped and instantly regretted the decision I had made to leave my room. No jar of money was worth the crippling dread I felt in that moment. To my surprise, the person who lived right next to me in room number one was a woman. This entire time I had been living in a co-ed boarding house and I was completely unaware.

She had short, boyish hair which struck a resemblance to a 2009 Justin Bieber but her eyelashes were black and thick like thin strings of licorice. I thought she was attractive but then I quickly remembered that she may be the thief I was in pursuit of. She donned a blue bathrobe with a cigarette hung from the corner of her bright red lips. Based on her appearance I knew I had caught her in the middle of her morning routine.

“Yes?” she asked as smoke puffed out of her nostrils like a raging bull.

I was too anxious to mention my jar promptly, so I chose to comment on her appearance.

“I don’t think we’re allowed to smoke in here,” I stuttered. I could feel my heart pounding through my chest.

“I won’t tell if you don’t tell,” she replied slyly between puffs. “Do you live here or something? I don’t think I’ve seen you around here.”

I took a step back. She stepped closer.

“I-uh, I live right next to you.”

“So you’re in number four?”

“Yes. I am the gentlemen from number four.”

A smile came across her face as she ran her hand through her hair.

“It’s very nice to meet you darling. I’d love to stay and chit chat with you, especially now that I know who you are, and as riveting as this conversation might’ve been, I have to get going to work.”

“Okay, I’ll leave you to it. Sorry for disturbing you,” I said as I gingerly went back into my room. And then I remembered that big empty space on my desk. I marched right back.

She seemed a tad nervous when I came back. My first thought was that she was guilty of the crime, but then Number One invited me into her room. I watched her complete the rest of her routine, she was anxious about being late. That was why she came off as guilty. She was quite kind to me, however she was still on my list of suspects. She kept offering me a cup of black coffee and random scraps of food she found in the refrigerator. I rejected all of her offers of hospitality. I kept glancing around for the jar but to no avail. The more she spoke to me, the more I realized how intelligent a person she was. An intelligent thief wouldn’t leave evidence lying around like a set of house keys. I patiently waited for an opening as she continued speaking. I watched her apply the remainder of her makeup when she finally asked:

“Why are you here anyway?”

I brought up the jar and accused her of stealing it.

She stopped applying her foundation and turned around from her vanity mirror to face me. I quickly looked away and fixed my eyes on her door, avoiding her eyes and mentally preparing myself to leave. Number One started to say something, but her sentence turned quickly into a dramatic sob. She began to cry hysterically, as if my accusation had pushed her emotions over the edge. She collapsed on her bed and hid her face in her hands. She wouldn’t stop crying. I ground my teeth as she continued to sob. I knew I had to do something to comfort her. She never denied the act of thievery, but even if she was guilty she didn’t deserve to ruin her carefully constructed makeup. I ultimately decided to sooth her with my words.

“I’m sorry. I…I didn’t want to upset you,” I stuttered softly.

“I didn’t break into your room and take your money. You just met me, how could you accuse me of something like that?” she said in between her sobs.

I came over and sat on the corner of the bed. My hands trembled as I reached out to rub her back. But before I had the chance, she stood up and wiped her eyes, the mascara not as smeared as it typically is when tears come in contact with it. Number One was still frowning but her eyes suddenly sharpened, as if she had gained sudden clarity of her emotional reaction.

“Look I’m not crying because of what you said to me,” she muttered, “I am sorry to hear that you lost your money.”

“What is upsetting you?” I asked, genuinely curious to know.

“I’m on my way to a job that doesn’t pay me enough. And because this job doesn’t pay me enough, I can barely afford a flight out of Ottawa,” she confessed as she sat beside me on the opposite corner of the bed.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Home. I have to go home, but I can’t.”

“Where is your home?”

“California.”

“Oh, you’re from the United States?”

She stiffened up suddenly and rose from the bed.

“I’m sorry, this has nothing to do with you. You only knocked on my door because you lost your jar.”

“It’s obvious that you don’t have it, so…,” I struggled to form any cohesive thought.

“So what?”

I gulped. “Why do you need to fly to California?”

Number One needed a flight badly. She preceded to tell me about how her brother was extremely ill, only having a limited amount of time left. She described how his face looked the last time she saw him, a youthful face with an expressive smile. And now looking at photos her family had sent, she didn’t even recognize his once handsome features. He looked lifeless and decayed. He was diagnosed with stage five skin cancer. She knew instinctively that he was getting worse with each day that passed and yet she was in a completely different country. The plane ticket was far too expensive for her to afford. I felt sympathetic for her where once I might have recoiled, but it didn’t last. My anxiety came flooding back and I offered an embarrassing excuse to leave without even bidding her “good bye” or wishing the best for her brother’s health. I was too anxious to be in that space for another moment. I knew that a normal person would’ve stayed behind and consoled her some more, even if something valuable had been taken from them. The problem was that I didn’t have the tendencies of a normal person.

I soon forgot about Number One once I ruled her out as a suspect. I shuffled my feet along to the room across the hall. Whomever lived in room number two certainly must have heard bits and pieces of my conversation with Number One, the walls were quite thin. If I even blinked I was sure they would all know it just by listening. That was when I began wondering if Number Two had hidden the jar in anticipation of what he or she knew was coming.

I knocked on the door slightly louder than I meant to. I winced as I awaited the inevitable sounds of footsteps and the dark shadow overtaking the light beneath the door. I waited and I waited, but no one came. I knocked a second time. Followed then by a third time until he swung the door open quickly, nearly hitting me in the face.

“Hi?” he asked examining me up and down. His eyes were an intense blue and he wore loose fitting clothing concealing a dangerously thin frame. I had never seen a man so underweight.

“Hello. I live in room number four,” I stated robotically.

“You don’t say? When did you move in?” he asked.

“Six months ago.”

“Did you knock on my door to introduce yourself? If so, that was very kind of you.” He smiled down at me. Not only was he very thin, he was very tall.

I felt guilty of suspecting this gentlemen as a thief. He seemed very friendly. But it was no matter, my jar was more of a friend to me.

“I’m not here to introduce myself. I think you may have something that belongs to me.”

“Oh? Did you lose something?”

“Something was stolen from me.”

“Your innocence?”

“My what?”

He laughed. “I’m just kidding. What was stolen from you? Something important?”

“A jar full of cash and coins was taken from my room,” I said biting the insides of my mouth.

“That’s terrible. Did you remember to lock the door of your room?” he asked as he opened his door wider. He gestured for me to come in.

“I don’t want to jump to any conclusions, but…did you…take it?”

He chuckled slightly.

“I wish I could tell you where this jar is or who took it, but I wouldn’t know. I can promise you that I did not. Why don’t you come on in?” He could see that I still didn’t trust him. “I have nothing to hide. Ask the landlord.”

Number Two and I chewed the fat for a little while. He put me at ease, unlike Number One, mostly because I felt a little sorry for him. For a person that seemed so joyous and humorous, his body told an alternative story. At one point during the conversation, he opened the door of his refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water. Water was the only thing that occupied space in the fridge. He drank nothing but water as we spoke. There was very little food in his room. I could tell that he wasn’t one for breakfast. His body was screaming for nourishment. His rib cage was poking through his baggy t-shirt. His fingers were long and frail and his cheek bones were extremely pronounced. I knew something was wrong, and sure enough, he began to talk about it.

He was suffering from anorexia nervosa. Twenty four years old and the major concern in his young life was how his body appeared to others. He was very aware how the entirety of his self worth was intertwined with his physical appearance. I found it strange how confidently he was able to speak about his illness. It wasn’t as if he was bragging about skipping meals and hiding food, he just knew that he needed help. He mentioned that he found an eating disorder treatment centre in Ottawa, but the cost was too much. His health insurance wouldn’t cover it either. Number Two was in the midst of saving up towards it, but he wasn’t even close to the amount required.

“You can save a shit ton of money by not eating!” he exclaimed. His enthusiastic smile quickly turned into an expression of self pity. He wanted to be better but he just couldn’t find the money and scrounging for it only made the illness worse.

After spending a few more minutes with him, I decided to continue my investigation elsewhere. Although I felt sympathetic for both Number One and Two, my brain was still fixated on what had been taken from me. As I walked out of room number two, I could feel my anxiety flaring up again. I rubbed the top of my forehead attempting to remove the excess sweat. I looked down at my hand and cringed when the sweat dripped onto the tiled floor of the kitchen. It was moments like that when I wished the house had some sort of common area. All we had were two bathrooms, a kitchen and four rooms. I was about to knock on the final one right across from my room, but then I noticed something resting against the front of my door.

When I laid my eyes on what was in front of the door, I immediately smiled. I had not smiled in a long time. It was the jar. *My jar!* It wasn’t in pieces, there was no cash or coins missing; the jar looked exactly as it looked the day before. I cradled it in my arms like a newborn baby. Then I held it high above my head in triumph. Indiana Jones finally received the golden idol. I began to question whether the jar had actually been stolen. Perhaps I had dreamt the whole ordeal. Maybe I was the one who took the jar from my room in the deluded state of sleep walking and placed it somewhere. In my anxious mind, I may have forgotten that I moved the jar. Then I saw the note placed underneath it. It read:

To the Occupant in Number Four,

We have never met before. Nor do I think we will ever meet. But I was able to find out a great deal about you from being in your room last night. Although my actions could be perceived as creepy and unwarranted, allow me to explain. Last night, while preparing my dinner, I overheard you whimpering in your room. I sensed that something was terribly wrong so I came into said room. I was surprised that you didn’t lock your door. You seem like an intelligent enough person to know that one ought to even lock up their toothbrush in a house full of strangers. Perhaps you had a minor lapse in the judgement of your safety. Upon entering your room, I quickly realized that you were sleeping. Then I got to thinking how I had never seen you before. Not once did we pass in the hallway leading to the stairs or exchange pleasantries while washing our dishes in the sink, I began to grow uncomfortable by our lack of contact. I know everyone else on this floor except for the elusive occupant in number four. So, when I came upon your jar on the top of your desk, I figured I would steal it. Not because I wanted your money. But I figured if you lost a jar full of cash it would teach you a lesson about the sophistication of locks and it would force you to talk to the rest of us. I believe you have learned your lesson. Please remember to lock your door. And count all of your money, I swear it’s all there. I wish you the very best. I hope to see you come out of your room more often!

-Frederick T. Mason,

Room Number Three

The one time you don’t lock your door is the one time you come close to losing everything. The one time you count each and every bill in your nest egg after it has been taken from you and you don’t find anything missing, that only happens once. It is so rare. So rare that I don’t even know how to describe it. As I sat in my room that night, placing the jar next to me like a body pillow, I understood what Number Three was trying to tell me. I thought I needed that trip to New York City to find some sense of peace, fulfillment, meaning and happiness. The people I lived with, none of whom I had ever met before, needed a jar bursting with cash more than I did.

Because I decided to divide up the money Number One was able to buy that plane ticket back home. She managed to spend time with her brother a week before he passed away. Number Two could afford his treatment for anorexia. Two months later, he was beginning to eat properly again, but it was still a long process for him. He put on ten pounds. I also had enough money leftover to buy Number Three some stationary. His note was quite a gesture but I didn’t much care for the paper he wrote the note on. I didn’t stop saving though. I knew that for the rest of my life I would put money away. I did end up going to New York two years later. I didn’t mind waiting.