

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF HERMAN GRIMES

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In the entire town of Ardsmore, Oklahoma, there were only two restaurants that could be considered adequate, and neither was Herman Grimes's. Herman's was a franchise called Crystal's, located off the first highway exit leaving town, next to a twenty-four hour gas station. The food served in his restaurant was U.S. fast food, deep fried, mostly parts of chickens. The fact was that in Ardsmore, the options for dining out were bleak and could only be tolerated by a citizenry who'd grown habituated to the basest diet.

Herman's franchise featured a radiant jewel on its sign, a glass front, and once-shining chrome fixtures now dulled from repetitive use. Always, a thin layer of grease pervaded the air, ruining the complexions of his teenaged employees. Herman himself stood up front only when he was manning a register during the lunch and dinner hours or taking a complaint. He usually sat in the back, in his office next to the employee bathroom with the lock that did not lock, watching what was happening on the video surveillance monitor with dismay rising in his eyes. Herman had never been particularly interested in food, but when he and his wife had started out in business, they'd mutually agreed that a restaurant franchise was the safest bet. Now, for the last three years, the restaurant had hardly been making any money. The recession had driven most of Ardsmore to the pre-packaged frozen food aisles of the local supermarket, where the parts of chickens could be had for a dozen at the same price Herman offered for four.

The atmosphere in the restaurant had been especially brutal for six weeks, since Herman's wife had passed away. He'd been away an entire month, on bereavement leave. And then, barely recovered and somewhat bewildered by why he was doing it, Herman Grimes had returned to work. That first week back had been awful, filled with so many gruesome gestures of commiseration from his regulars that they drove Herman entirely into his office. His teenaged employees treated him as if his misfortune were contagious, even using the customer bathroom to avoid crossing paths. The worst was Joe Cloud, his general manager, who had seemingly taken it upon himself to rehabilitate Herman's psyche through sheer force of aphorism.

But it was primarily Herman Grimes that caused Herman to isolate himself in his office. He couldn't say that he particularly liked his restaurant, but it was all he had left, now that Greta had passed. Oh God. Greta. The second day back, in the midst of counting inventory with Joe, trying to regain a feel for hard numbers,

the thought had struck him like a bolt from the blue. She's gone. His clipboard fell to the floor, and he was biting his right knuckle hard, so hard it drew blood, cringing like an animal in the corner of a cage. When his fit had subsided, Joe was looking at him with more than mild concern. Joe said he could finish the inventory himself.

It would come like that. Driving to the supermarket. Talking on the phone. Placing an order with the wholesaler. Herman would start to feel that he was beginning to heal. He would go several hours, not without thinking about her, but doing so with some sense of critical distance. Everyone dies. But then, with just the slightest provocation, or, more mystifyingly, with no provocation at all, a brutally vivid image would rise and strike, gouging open a fresh wound. Her eyes, dancing with some private delight. Her arms, long and slim. Her sharp fingers dragging across his skin. Oh God. Twenty-six years. He was never going to see her again, in this life or after.

Herman was just grateful he'd never suffered one of his fits in his own restaurant, in front of customers. He knew people would talk, that people were concerned. Greta had been one of them. Herman wanted, needed...something. Someone to speak to. A professional maybe. But it was well known that Ardsmore could not count among its residents a single mental health practitioner of any stripe. It was the kind of community where you suffered your losses in silence, and after the initial unreality had worn off, Herman had steeled himself to the fact that he must try and face up to the challenge of these attacks with quiet dignity. He clung to this belief. He'd gone back to work.

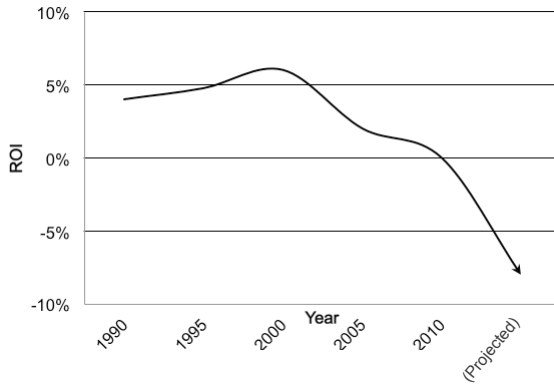
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Several weeks after his return, a registered letter arrived in the mail from the national headquarters of Crystal's in Tucson, Arizona, informing Herman Grimes and his Ardsmore franchise that they were due for an inspection within a month's time. Herman was troubled as he read over the document. They'd been up for visits before, as every franchise was bi-annually, but none had ever actually occurred—because there had been no complaints, he'd assumed, because the numbers had always been at least somewhat decent. Herman knew his numbers were no longer decent. He called Joe Cloud off the floor and asked him to shut the door.

In silence, Joe read the letter. Herman asked him what he made of it.

"I don't want to say," Joe said. "Maybe it's just a formality to make sure we have all the correct signage and promotions up."

"We're going to have to explain the numbers to them. You've seen the numbers."



Joe cleared his throat. “I can take care of the visit, Herman. That is, if you don’t feel up to it yet.”

Herman looked at his manager and an understanding passed between them. The fact was Herman was not in control of his psyche just yet, and Joe Cloud recognized this. Herman could not begrudge his manager any more than he could begrudge the avoidant tendencies or explosive pores of his teenaged employees.

“I see your concern,” Herman said. “I’ll let you know.”

Still, Joe Cloud lingered near the door.

“There’s more?”

“Well, I guess I should tell you, Herman. It’s relevant. The Jessup restaurant got disenfranchised while you were gone. They had a visit too.”

Now this news surprised Herman. The Jessup Crystal’s had been the first of its kind in the area. It had been around since his senior year in high school. 1979. Then, during the Clinton years, he and Greta had played in a bowling league with the owner, a sallow-eyed entrepreneur named Stephan LeDoux whose face had always somehow reminded Herman of the Jack of Spades in a deck of cards—a figure who could not be entirely trusted.

“That won’t happen to us,” Joe was saying. The platitudes flowed gamely. “We’ll clean this place up. We’ll get through this.”

Herman nodded but he could not muster the same level of confidence. Disenfranchisement was the most dreaded word in the industry lexicon. One was left with two choices: closing up shop or taking the restaurant private, and neither were viable options for Herman, financially speaking. All the money he and Greta ever made had gone right back into the restaurant. The medical costs, the funeral had siphoned off whatever meager savings remained. How could he possibly start over now, after all that had happened?

Late that evening, after he’d locked the front door, Herman stood in the parking lot across from the gas station, staring up at the façade of his own restaurant. It didn’t look nearly as dreary at night, closed, with the neon framed in the open sky beyond. It had some strong angles. He felt a sudden welling of emotion—it wasn’t just his. It had also been Greta’s choice. He couldn’t lose this. He absolutely

couldn't. Herman got into his old grey Cutlass Supreme and minutes later, found himself heading not toward home, but in the opposite direction, bombing it down the lonely thirty-five mile stretch of open road that separated Ardsmore from its more genteel neighbor, Jessup. He drove with a sudden, urgent need to know, the white lines of the highway vanishing underneath his car until he reached the exit where the first Crystal's in the area had once stood.

In the lot there was now a twenty-four hour truck stop called Deuces. A shredded Grand Opening banner snapped whip-like against the side of the building. There were two pay phones next to the entrance that were both being used, and when Herman pulled up, one of the callers looked up expectantly, then turned away, disappointed. The other completely ignored him. Herman could plainly see through the glass front the restaurant's new clientele: a rough assortment of men and women, nursing cups of coffee, reading the paper and smoking cigarettes. Some appeared to be homeless to Herman's eye; Jessup was a large enough city to have them. Nobody was talking much with anyone else. No one was eating. The ceiling fans spun listlessly, sluggishly. And behind the counter stood the sal-low Stephan LeDoux himself, tabulating receipts on a hand calculator, no longer looking so much like the confident knave from yesteryear, looking much more like life had dealt him a very bad run of cards indeed. Once, LeDoux looked up from his calculations, and instinctively, Herman stiffened in his seat, but LeDoux was glaring at someone standing across the room, one of his own customers. The color of his eyes frightened Herman. Deep yellow. LeDoux looked unhealthy, sick. His hands trembled as he returned to tabulating the thin stack of receipts on the counter—the onset of some crippling neurological disorder. Herman could not fail but to notice this. His earlier plan to perhaps stop in for a bite no longer suited him. He reversed the car, turning it in a half moon and directing it toward home, fast at first getting out of Jessup, then driving quite pensively once he was on the open stretch of highway, for the first time in a long time pondering what he would do if he lost the restaurant.

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For six weeks now, Greta had visited Herman regularly, always while he was sleeping. It was Greta in the absolute prime of life, the Greta Vanderhaus before she had become Greta Grimes, before the toil of Ardsmore had worn them both down as smooth and dull as stones. Many of these visitations were of a sexual nature, although sex had not played much of a role in their married life in recent years; it was as if the passion that had dissipated between them over the course of time could only have been rekindled in her passing. Herman was as young as her, or he was older, or he was the Herman Grimes of the present day and age. It didn't matter. They always ended with the vision of her slim arms, her long, sharp fingers dragging across his coarse skin, so real a sensation on his flesh that he was sure this time it was not a dream, that she was really back. Then he would awake

in his abandoned house in a miserable state of arousal, damn near suicidal as the harsh reality of the half-empty bed encroached upon the last vestiges of each visitation. Although not stupid, Herman was not particularly introspective, and it was only his subconscious that dully understood that each morning, getting up and going to his restaurant was the means by which his life was to be saved. His body instinctively obeyed because it wanted to survive.

The evening after receiving the letter from national headquarters, Herman and Joe reconvened in the restaurant parking lot two hours after close with their boxes of tools and cans of paint. Both men had agreed that the dead of night was the best time to perform the work the restaurant needed in advance of the visit. For Herman, this decision provided the added benefit of precluding any further visitations from Greta, at least for the week that they would be working. Joe Cloud's boundless enthusiasm was beginning to show its effects: Herman felt ready to fix what required fixing—mind, restaurant, and spirit. Their plan was to give each square foot the lavish regard that Herman had never felt it deserved before. Over the next week, from midnight until dawn broke in the valley, the two men refinished the floors and the countertops, polished the fixtures, replaced the broken ones. Using a level, Joe carefully measured each of the tables and chairs in the dining area, sanding them down so that none teetered. This was a common complaint among the regulars. Herman laid numerous ingenious traps in the food preparation areas for rodent and roach. The kitchen swam in ammonia vapors and good hygiene, and was so unusually immaculate that even during the day, Herman's teenaged employees seemed awed into preserving it, without question. Finally, Herman even fixed the lock on the employee bathroom door, the one that hadn't worked in seventeen months.

On the eve of the visit, everything in the Crystal's of Ardsmore was in a high state of readiness. After close, Joe Cloud and Herman sat in the office, drinking from a flask that Joe had mysteriously produced from his jacket pocket for the occasion, going over the final checklist. For the previous week, Joe had been asking their most loyal and presentable clientele to represent on the important day, and he was now outlining these individuals to Herman, who was not giving the impression of listening intently.

Herman was having a premonition about that night. Greta had not visited him for a week now, since the news of the visit from national headquarters had arrived. He'd put all his conscious energy toward anticipating that visit, working tirelessly to make the place as model a franchise as was within his limited power. His capacity for repression was, as they say, tremendous. But now, with nothing else to do before the morning, Herman aimlessly guided a rag over the top of the desk, feeling an unsettling foreboding creeping in. In the distance, a car horn sounded from the gas station, distant and plaintive.

Joe was talking about how Maggie Shuler was bringing her twins in about three-thirty. They were commonly considered the brightest kids in town, and they couldn't get enough of the fries—

"Did you hear that?" Herman said.

"Hear what?" Joe said. "The horn? It sounds like someone's in a hurry."

Herman rose from his seat and looked through the blinds at the gas station across the parking lot. At the pumps sat a lone vehicle, a foreign sports car with out-of-state plates. Herman couldn't tell which state. It was silver, with a poised, sleek front and a roof that sloped all the way back to the rear bumper. Its rims glistened like they were moist. Under the halogen lamps at the pumps, the whole car seemed to glow. It was marvelous, a magnificent sight to behold in Ardsmore after a week of cleaning and scrubbing a fast food restaurant. A young man's arm dangled off the sill of the passenger window, and the horn of the car sounded again.

"So what's going on out there?" Joe said after a while.

Herman explained exactly what he'd seen: about the silver car at the gas station, how marvelous it had looked after a week of cleaning, the man's arm on the sill, etc. How the car glowed. Then an attractive woman in a business suit, older, had come out of the gas station and gotten in the silver car, and now it was gone, probably already a mile or more down the interstate heading south toward Jessup. After Joe heard all this, he said, "Huh" expressionlessly enough to convey to Herman the idea that maybe this report had made him sound the slightest bit unfocused.

"What kind of car did you say it was again?" Joe said.

"I didn't," Herman said. "I couldn't tell." He turned from the window toward his manager, who still had a pencil poised over the list of customers. Joe was looking worried again, like he had when Herman had first come back to work.

Herman returned to his seat behind the desk. He felt strangely deflated all of a sudden. "Maybe it'd be for the best if you presented the numbers tomorrow, Joe," he said.

His manager appeared relieved. "You can count on me, Herman—I promise they won't shut us down." Joe leaned across the table and placed a broad hand on Herman's back. "I won't let them."

"Yes," Herman said. "I think it would definitely be for the best."

That night, however, Herman could not sleep. He lay in bed for several hours, waiting for Greta to visit herself upon him, but his thoughts refused to quiet. Preying upon his mind was the kind of knowledge he allowed himself the privilege of understanding only in the dark. The fact was—in more than a mere manner of speaking—he had let Greta die. He knew she had been in the process for a very long time, since long before the actual cancer that devoured her was diagnosed. She'd said she wasn't depressed, that she didn't need any help, but her interest in life had waned, the delight in her eyes had flickered, had expired. At some point, everything became fossilized, as rote as a diet of fast food. Herman had done all he could, he believed, to listen to her, but she had remained characteristically silent and he'd never asked, because he was the same way. When her sickness was discovered, there had been a great feeling of inevitability about the whole thing.

Herman could feel himself getting emotional again, and he despised himself,

tried to stamp it down with his foot. Think about your future, he commanded. Think about tomorrow. He squeezed his eyes shut, forcing himself to visualize objects he'd seen in his restaurant that day: a problematic chair, a pebbled plastic tray, the pair of tongs his employees used to extricate items from the oil bath. Joe was looking at him from across the desk, worried. And inexplicably, Herman's mind was drawn to the marvelous sight of the silver sports car idling at the pumps, glimpsed from across the parking lot, laying in wait for... what?

Gah! Finding no reprieve from these circular thoughts, going nowhere, Herman struck himself in the forehead with the palm of his fist, hard. Once. Twice. The blows seemed to set him straight a little. He turned on the lights, and, in the familiar surroundings, felt more in control again. He rose from the bed and walked across the carpet in his bare feet—the feel of it was strangely affirming—and opened the closet. One side of it was completely barren. Herman selected from his side his most distinguished suit, a dark brown three-piece he had intended on wearing for the visit. Meticulously, he began ironing it, focusing on making the creases as clean and as sharp as possible. After he was done, Herman tried on the suit, examining the creases in the mirror. He still cut quite a figure when it was demanded of him, when there was enough finely tailored fabric to cover his coarse blemishes and imperfections.

Then, in the night silence, Herman detected the faint noise of an engine, a car approaching from far down the street. As Herman listened, the engine grew louder—then suddenly headlights turned into his driveway, and Herman's silhouette was thrown into enormous relief on the bedroom wall. His shadow looked like that of some crude beast's. Chilled, Herman walked into the foyer of the house and opened the front door several inches, keeping the chain locked. The light was blinding, and even through a raised arm, he could see nothing but two headlights. Then the car began to reverse down Herman's driveway, back toward the street. It was a late-night driver, lost, drunk most likely, making a residential U-turn—that's all it was. But as the car reversed out onto the street, Herman suddenly realized that it was the silver car he'd seen that night at the gas station, the one he'd just been imagining moments before—the sleek, sloping profile and glistening wheels were unmistakable. Herman caught a flash of a woman's arm dangling out the driver side window, pale and long and white—Greta's arm? And then the car was already gone, the noise of its engine fading off into the night in a deathless whisper. Slowly, Herman closed the door. His fingers trembled. Was somebody watching him? He went into the kitchen and started making a pot of coffee. There would be no more thought of sleep.

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The national headquarters of Crystal's Inc., sent a team of two to inspect Herman's Ardsmore franchise. At eleven in the morning, Herman Grimes and Joe Cloud watched them pull up in a long, black hired car, and the two men exchanged

a look. "Let's do this," Joe said. They went out on the curb to meet them and to shake hands.

The woman's name was Ms. Stein—pronounced Shtein—an attractive older woman in a business suit. The younger man, her subordinate, held the briefcase and clipboard, and was called Stanaway. Joe and Herman led them to a table in the restaurant, where their teenaged Employee of the Month, Sandra, had been prepped to offer cups of coffee and Crystal's fried pies on a pebbled plastic tray. As they chatted politely, Herman studied Ms. Stein, who was sitting across from him.

Was this the same woman he'd seen getting into the silver car the night before?

There were not many sightings of attractive older women in business suits in Ardsmore. But what had she been doing at his house last night? Had that been part of some secret inspection? And the silver car—that thing that had looked so marvelous glowing under the lights—where had that car gone?

Joe was asking Ms. Stein and Stanaway about the quality of their flight the day before, about the two-hour drive from the Lincoln airport to Ardsmore.

"Your rental car," Herman interrupted. "How do you like it?"

Ms. Stein looked at him. "I can't say that we can complain."

"We got an upgrade at the counter in Lincoln," Stanaway added.

"What about the other car?" Herman said.

"Sorry, Mr. Grimes," Ms. Stein said. "But I'm afraid I don't follow."

"Don't you have another car? A silver one?"

"What do you mean?"

"A foreign sports car. With out of state plates," Herman insisted.

Ms. Stein stared at him. "I think you must be mistaken," she said.

Herman could not discern what this deception—if it were indeed that—was all about. He offered an apology. Joe was trying to distract them from the strange place the conversation had led them.

"Well, shall we get to it?" he said. "We can use the office in the back."

"Certainly," Ms. Stein said. "Will you be joining us, Mr. Grimes?"

Herman explained rather stupidly that Joe as the day-to-day operations manager was more suited to this type of detailed discussion. Ms. Stein accepted this explanation with a slightly raised eyebrow, and Herman watched as she and Stanaway left with Joe toward the back of the restaurant. Herman felt awful now. That hadn't gone well. The fried pie he'd eaten out of obligation lay like a hot coal high up in his chest.

The customers were coming in for their lunch. A few regulars, surprised to see him in the restaurant, asked him how he was doing, whether or not he needed anything. Herman wanted to get away, but Joe Cloud and Ms. Stein and Stanaway were in his office. Instead, in the kitchen, he played at overseeing his teenaged employees in their food prep, but he hadn't worked in that capacity in so long that Sandra had to rather pointedly tell him that they had everything under control.

Herman loitered in this manner for an hour, standing in a corner of the pan-

try, the place where he would be most out of the way of the foot traffic. Eventually, the suffocating atmosphere got the best of him, and he went outside and sat down on the curb to wait out Joe and the team. Watching the highway roll out in an endless coil beyond the horizon, Herman wondered if losing the restaurant might not be a good thing after all. He didn't understand this thought—it didn't make any sense. But he knew that it wasn't a new thought. It was the second time he'd had this feeling. The first time was a week before, when he'd been bombing his Cutlass Supreme down that same highway out of Ardsmore. He could always do that again except never have any reason to return.

A sudden and sharp cramp in his bowels brought Herman back to the moment. That fried pie. Herman got up from the curb and hurried through the restaurant, to the employee bathroom in the back. He closed the door behind him and locked the new lock. The latch shot smoothly in. Herman pulled down his pants and sat on the seat and tried to let whatever would happen happen.

~~A moment passed.~~

Herman flushed but remained sitting weakly on the seat, afraid he wasn't quite finished.

In this state, he heard the door to his office open, and there were steps in the hallway right outside the bathroom. Herman heard Joe say that he would meet Ms. Stein and Stanaway out front, when they were ready for the observation phase of their visit. His manager's footsteps receded down the hall.

"So what do you think?" Stanaway asked.

Herman knew he should make some sort of noise—clear his throat, flush again—let Ms. Stein and Stanaway know he was there. But they were already talking, already in conversation—it had gone too far. And they were talking about him. Herman could not help but to hear. Stanaway was making a remark to the effect that he wouldn't know what to do if his own wife died.

"There's something to be said for maintaining a presence in the area," Ms. Stein said. "Especially considering we closed the Jessup franchise this year."

Stanaway agreed. Joe had mentioned to him in passing—Ms. Stein had been taking a call—that Herman had been having a rough go of it, and was only starting to come around. The numbers, though, the trends—they hadn't been encouraging, no matter how Joe Cloud had spun them.

"Well—," said Ms. Stein, pausing. "Look, Stanaway. Let's be real here. We shouldn't take this one from Grimes. Would you really want to? We could. By all rights we should. But I think it might actually kill him if we did."

"Poor guy," Stanaway said. "What a tough break. What are you going to tell the people back at the office?"

"I'll tell them whatever needs to be told. We're not monsters. I don't know about you, but I want to be able to sleep tonight."

They were right outside the door, in the hallway. The lock on the door suddenly rattled, startling Herman. He could feel an attack coming on, his chest seizing into a fist. To hear himself being talked of that way did not surprise him, but

still, hearing how much in despair he must look to these strangers—

The lack of hope in it all—!

Herman was biting into his knuckle, hard. He had not understood at all why what had happened had happened. How the life gets sapped out of you, as if you were leaking slowly, constantly. But he had a fear now that it could be read in his own face, like some guilty mark. Slowly, he rose from the seat. His legs trembled with the weight of rising so slow. At the edge of the mirror, Herman's face began revealing itself to him like a squeezed card in a poker hand. He scrutinized his eyes from every angle, until they looked foreign, sunken and hollowed out. But beneath the stretched out, worn out surface of his skin, the only thing Herman could detect with any certainty was the shape of his own skull. The sockets and the bones—they remained inscrutable as rocks.

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That night, Herman's life finally began to accrue the feeling of narrowing down, of compartmentalizing itself again. The reestablishment of his future, as gray and steely as time itself, seemed to have this sobering effect. He and Joe celebrated quietly at a bar after the inspection team departed, discussing various ways to ensure the franchise remained solvent. Joe did most of the talking, and mentioned three- and five-year windows. Herman himself began to feel a certain kind of contained excitement in imagining his restaurant returning to an old, glorious state that had only ever existed in his and Greta's mind. In a fit of magnanimity, Herman offered to take on Joe as a 5% partner in the restaurant, which the manager interpreted as being so generous that he burst into tears of relief.

For the next several months, Herman fell asleep awaiting a visitation that never returned. He kept his blinds open in anticipation: the low roar of an encroaching engine, the sweep of headlights in his driveway. This time, he would interrogate the light. He would give himself up to its warm bath. But he waited in vain—Herman Grimes wasn't ever visited in this manner again. Eventually, as his grief wore itself out into a permanent, dull throb, he felt himself emerging into the cold dimensionless glare of a morning after, and the concept that he had ever been followed—that he had ever been singled out by anything marvelous—became ridiculous.