



PRISM
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Call it a Story

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If we took an ordinary man, say, slightly paunched with brown hair, and placed him in an ordinary home, say, in some pastel suburb. And if we gave him a wife who flosses regularly and two children in elementary school, a boy and girl, naturally, and gave him a necktie, one of the medium-sized ones, not too wide or too narrow, navy blue. What if we set him in a November with cold winds and gave him an 8 to 5 job at an insurance agency. We could send him to potlucks on Saturdays, Monday night football with the guys, church once, maybe twice a month on Sundays. He shops at Walmart and the local mall, occasionally stopping by Nordstrom for a new blazer or perfume for the wife on anniversaries. What if we took this ordinary man, he does appear ordinary, doesn't he? And set him into motion among all his ordinary surroundings, only the most comfortable, secure, predictable environments. Yes, let us put him there and watch him live:

November mornings are ways bitinglly cruel in Crescent Heights. The neighborhood wakes up to read the Wednesday paper as leaves heave themselves around in swirls of crimson, orange, marigold, and plain brown over sidewalks, flirting with the garbage cans. It is time to get up. Mr. James fumbles for his slippers, a gift from his mother last Christmas, shipped all the way from Florida. He could probably use a new pair this year, but he likes the ones he has now-they're monogrammed.

Mr. and Mrs. James keep their laundry in separate hampers in the bathroom. Mrs. James makes sure the laundry is done every week. Mr. James makes sure the sheets are washed every other week. Mr. James will not forget to shave this morning. His office is having a special luncheon for the employee of the month. He has been meticulous with his work since the end of summer. They are bound to notice his efforts, the after hours spent behind his desk, a furrowed brow and reading glasses settled over his nose. His employers hardly recognize how devoted he is; employee of the month gets a small raise. Mr. James misses his son's soccer games often, even some of his daughter's ballet recitals, the children so so

disappointed. But he will make his efforts count for his family. Perhaps with the raise, not that he's expecting to be the new employee of the month, but just in case, Mr. James can buy extra Christmas presents this year and an extra-large turkey for Thanksgiving. Yes, he smiles into the mirror checking his teeth for any new discolorations. Today feels promising.

"Jerry! Good morning, good morning." Insurance agent Connors treats everyone like they are one of his clients. The other employees at the agency know Connors is just trying to make that good impression for the boss, but secretly enjoy the bright greetings and attention.

"Morning Connors." Mr. Jerry James has a lot to get done; if only he could slip past Connors without having him mention the

"Hey, what a game last Monday! Can you believe it? Gee, you know Jerry, there are just some things that amaze me, and that game last Monday night is one of them. Remember?" Connors pokes Mr. James' shoulder, "Touchdown! I gotta say though, the best part of that night was when you went to call touchdown and forgot about the big gulp in your hand..." Connors slaps Mr. James' back, his other hand muffling laughter, "I swear, I never saw anyone look so mad as your wife did when she came home to find red all over her carpet."

"Yeah. Well, that's all taken care of now. Listen Connors, I've got a lot to do-

"Sure, you've got a lot to do. You're up to, what is it, forty clients now? Alright alright, go on. Next Monday, my house, no big gulps though, you hear me?"

Mr. James nods once. He is now safe in his cubicle. His cubicle, like many others belonging to young fathers in the office, has one section of wall devoted to his children's artwork. He re-reads their scribbled notes of love for the hundredth time. Now he can work. Work work work. Computer, phone call, back to computer, papers papers, conference call, back to computer, check email, loosen tie, drink coffee, phone, computer, check the clock. The clock is in the shape of a sailboat-a gift from a company party two years ago. Mr. James has never been sailing.

Ah, time for the luncheon. Mr. James buttons his coat, straightens his navy blue tie and swiftly walks down the corridor. He hopes he can find a seat on the periphery, one easily accessible for getting to the front, but not so far back that it would take a long time to walk around all the legs and purses and tablecloths.

You there, you see it, I'm sure. You see the way that the united current of society sucks our character in, how he cannot do otherwise except submit to its thick icy embrace, for then he might be, oh what's the word? Intolerant, yes, he might be intolerant, intolerant and inadequate if he were to rebel against the structure. But back to our character and how he must be feeling, how he is... trapped perhaps? Perhaps. Perhaps he feels that only the simplest accomplishments, only the simplest, comfortable life is all that can be had, is all that can be expected. But we are forgiving of his dull existence, are we not? Because in a story, the character always has layers. We know this. We know there is more to a life than a man's sappy routines and weak hopes. Perhaps he had a difficult childhood. Oh you know the type, one of those ordinary ho-hum but depressing ones that plagues our generation of the fatherless. A childhood void of direct abuse but littered with neglect in other ways. Missed praise, forgotten birthdays and baseball games, all replaced with soda in the fridge, a few cereal box collector's cards, and comic books. Let us not skip too quickly over these comic books. These represented what? Yes, yes, they were his magic for traveling to other worlds, other universes. Children need this don't they? To develop properly and all that. Let us look at our character as a child then, to uncover another layer, etc:

November mornings are ways bitingly cruel in Crescent Heights. The neighborhood wakes up to read the Wednesday paper as leaves heave themselves around in swirls of crimson, orange, marigold, and plain brown over sidewalks, flirting with the garbage cans. It is time to get up. Jerry hears his mother making cooking noises. Sometimes he lies in bed awake, being as still as he can, just so he can listen to her

nice cooking noises. Jerry hopes that it's pancakes. Jerry likes pancakes, and he likes being nine, even though it's not the double-digits yet.

His finger slowly outlines the spaceship with the three-eyed green Martian on his blanket. Someday, when he's bigger and smarter, Jerry's going to find real aliens and teach them about earthlings and how to play baseball. Maybe he'll be president of one of their schools. It can be called Earthworld or something like that. Maybe he'll start designing the school today. He'll have time during recess; maybe he could even get Mikey to help him. Mikey can draw really straight lines.

Mikey is Jerry's best friend. They're part of a club, a club that's going to save the world someday. There are no girls allowed

in this club; actually, so far, only Mikey and Jerry qualify. You have to lick five slugs to join and prove your loyalty. Jerry thinks it would be good to tell Mikey about Earthworld right away. It's too bad Mikey's grounded though, just for the week. They need as much time as possible to get going on their project. Jerry never gets grounded, but that's just because mom's always on the phone and dad doesn't come home 'til dinner's over and it's Jerry's bedtime.

After pancakes, and it did turn out to be pancakes, Jerry plays ball in the schoolyard. Thwack, a good kick. Mikey's home sick today, sick and grounded. Bummer. He won't get to see Miss Taylor's weekly science experiment. Earthworld plans will have to wait. Thwack, another good kick, but this time too good. The ball is skittering out across the yard, over the sidewalk and into the street. The driver of a station wagon honks as he swerves to avoid the dark red toy.

A flashback. Ha. Typical, you say. So we did not see the neglect or drama of his childhood, but we did see that Mr. James, Jerry, was once a little boy who wanted to save the world and believed that he could, with the help of his friend Mikey of course. However, this appears to only heighten the dullness of our Mr. James' existence. Honestly, what does the man do with his life? Doesn't he have any interesting hurts or plans or dreams or relationships? Why do we desire drama in others' lives anyway? It appears that Mr. James simply wants to dwell in some sort of utopia. You know what I mean, not a true utopia but the kind where everything is as calm as possible. If something goes wrong, it only goes a little bit wrong. If something good happens, it's only good enough to be enjoyed but not too good to bring greater responsibility or expectations. How boring. But can we blame him for wanting this? Do most people not wait this? Enough questions. Let us look at another character, a supporting character, someone who can provide greater insight into the humanity of Mr. James: his wife. But let's give her a name. Introducing Colleen:

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were a bit lighter, more playful, hopeful, before, forging into the schedule of her day.

She remembers the mornings when she used to kiss Jerry's ear and tickle his ribs until he pushed her and all their blankets off the bed, mornings when their dryer wasn't working and the gas bill in their apartment was huge and the neighbors had that awful pet Chihuahua. Jerry used to wait for her in the parking lot, picking her up after her night classes at the community college, long before she got her teaching license. She would stand at the window of the driver's side door, watching her hardworking husband sleep with his mouth open, head tilted back, sometimes up to a minute before tapping on the glass. Jerry always pulled her inside like he meant it, and sometimes they'd just sit in the car, talking and kissing deep into the night before driving home. But they were young then. Poor and young and dumb. They would talk about owning their own business someday and what their children would be like. They would travel, and life would always be fresh.

When did it all change? But it's always changing. Colleen even knows that. What can she expect? She should be thankful. Her husband is giving and hardworking and spends as much time as he can with the children. It's just that his job demands so much, or something. Jerry comes out of the bathroom. She hears him enter their walk in closet, fumbling with hangars and shoes.

"Sweetheart" Colleen says, "the minivan's been braking funny."

"Hmm?"

She stretches, "Do you think you could take a look at it?"

"Maybe later. What do you think: navy or crimson?" He's holding up his ties.

"I don't know."

"Yeah, definitely navy." Jerry steps into the hall, "Wish me luck." And he's gone.

Colleen better get the kids up. They'll be late for school. Maybe she'll make them pancakes this morning, in the shape of Mickey Mouse ears. They'll like that.

Does Jerry appear different to you yet? Or rather, does he appear to have become more complex? The strange thing is, nothing has really happened to our character; he's just a man going along, existing, existing the way people do sometimes. How nice. Perhaps you are thinking that it is time something should occur, an event of some sort. I've heard it said that life must be contrasted with death. Is this not true? Shall we have our character die? No, perhaps someone he is close to instead. But it doesn't even have to be death, it could be a loss of some kind or a failure or an epiphany granted through a struggle against X. Then whatever it

is will make Jerry's story appear more authentic, genuine; we can then see his struggle, his grief, his confusion, and perhaps this will give us peace in that it mirrors you and I. You know, You and I, real life, etc. Or maybe, none of that Because "real life", well, Ha, I say. Ha. Does anyone even know what this means?

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Most of the James family will attend the memorial service. They will sing unfamiliar hymns and read a poem by Robert Frost. They will cry lightly and hug each other. Jerry's son will be wearing a navy blue tie, medium-sized. The children would have had pancakes that morning. Two hours later, after brownies and punch, everyone will climb into their vehicles and drive home or to a hotel, depending on where they traveled from. The flowers will be left at the church.