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Opening extract from

Every Day

Written by

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EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

DAY 5994

I wake up.

Immediately, I have to figure out who I am. It's not just the body – opening my eyes and discovering whether the skin on my arm is light or dark, whether my hair is long or short, whether I'm fat or thin, boy or girl, scarred or smooth. The body is the easiest thing to adjust to, if you're used to waking up in a new one each morning. It's the life, the context of the body, that can be hard to grasp.

Every day I am someone else. I am myself – I know I am myself – but I am also someone else.

It has always been like this.

The information is there. I wake up, open my eyes, understand that it is a new morning, a new place. The biography kicks in, a welcome gift from the not-me part of the mind. Today I am Justin. Somehow I know this – my name is Justin – and at the same time I know that I'm not really Justin, I'm only borrowing his life for a day. I look around and know that this is his room. This is his home. The alarm will go off in seven minutes.

I'm never the same person twice, but I've certainly been this type before. Clothes everywhere. Far more

video games than books. Sleeps in his boxers. From the taste of his mouth, a smoker. But not so addicted that he needs one as soon as he wakes up.

"Good morning, Justin," I say. Checking out his voice. Low. The voice in my head is always different.

Justin doesn't take care of himself. His scalp itches. His eyes don't want to open. He hasn't gotten much sleep.

Already, I know I'm not going to like today.

It's hard being in the body of someone you don't like, because you still have to respect it. I've harmed people's lives in the past, and I've found that every time I slip up, it haunts me. So I try to be careful.

From what I can tell, every person I inhabit is the same age as me. I don't hop from being sixteen to being sixty. Right now, it's only sixteen. I don't know how this works. Or why. I stopped trying to figure it out a long time ago. I'm never going to figure it out, any more than a normal person will figure out his or her own existence. After a while, you have to be at peace with the fact that you simply *are*. There is no way to know why. You can have theories, but there will never be proof.

I can access facts, not feelings. I know this is Justin's room, but I have no idea if he likes it or not. Does he want to kill his parents in the next room? Or would he be lost without his mother coming in to make sure he's

awake? It's impossible to tell. It's as if that part of me replaces the same part of whatever person I'm in. And while I'm glad to be thinking like myself, a hint every now and then of how the other person thinks would be helpful. We all contain mysteries, especially when seen from the inside.

The alarm goes off. I reach for a shirt and some jeans, but something lets me see that it's the same shirt he wore yesterday. I pick a different shirt. I take the clothes with me to the bathroom, dress after showering. His parents are in the kitchen now. They have no idea that anything is different.

Sixteen years is a lot of time to practise. I don't usually make mistakes. Not anymore.

I read his parents easily: Justin doesn't talk to them much in the morning, so I don't have to talk to them. I have grown accustomed to sensing expectation in others, or the lack of it. I shovel down some cereal, leave the bowl in the sink without washing it, grab Justin's keys and go.

Yesterday I was a girl in a town I'd guess to be two hours away. The day before, I was a boy in a town three hours farther than that. I am already forgetting their details. I have to, or else I will never remember who I really am.

Justin listens to loud and obnoxious music on a loud

and obnoxious station where loud and obnoxious DJs make loud and obnoxious jokes as a way of getting through the morning. This is all I need to know about Justin, really. I access his memory to show me the way to school, which parking space to take, which locker to go to. The combination. The names of the people he knows in the halls.

Sometimes I can't go through these motions. I can't bring myself to go to school, maneuver through the day. I'll say I'm sick, stay in bed and read a few books. But even that gets tiresome after a while, and I find myself up for the challenge of a new school, new friends. For a day.

As I take Justin's books out of his locker, I can feel someone hovering on the periphery. I turn, and the girl standing there is transparent in her emotions – tentative and expectant, nervous and adoring. I don't even have to access Justin to know that this is his girlfriend. No one else would have this reaction to him, so unsteady in his presence. She's pretty, but she doesn't see it. She's hiding behind her hair, happy to see me and unhappy to see me at the same time.

Her name is Rhiannon. And for a moment – just the slightest beat – I think that, yes, this is the right name for her. I don't know why. I don't know her. But it feels right.

This is not Justin's thought. It's mine. I try to ignore it. I'm not the person she wants to talk to.

"Hey," I say, keeping it casual.

"Hey," she murmurs back.

She's looking at the floor, at her inked-in Converse. Something's happened between her and Justin, and I don't know what it is. It's probably not something that Justin even recognized at the time.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

I see the surprise on her face, even as she tries to cover it. This is not something that Justin normally asks.

And the strange thing is: I want to know the answer. The fact that he wouldn't care makes me want it more.

"Sure," she says, not sounding sure at all.

I find it hard to look at her. I know from experience that beneath every peripheral girl is a central truth. She's hiding hers away, but at the same time she wants me to see it. That is, she wants *Justin* to see it. And it's there, just out of my reach. A sound waiting to be a word.

She is so lost in her sadness that she has no idea how visible it is. I think I understand her – but then, from within this sadness, she surprises me with a brief flash of determination. Bravery, even.

Shifting her gaze away from the floor, her eyes matching mine, she asks, "Are you mad at me?"

I can't think of any reason to be mad at her. If anything, I am mad at Justin, for making her feel so

diminished. It's there in her body language. When she is around him, she makes herself small.

"No," I say. "I'm not mad at you at all."

I tell her what she wants to hear, but she doesn't trust it. I feed her the right words, but she suspects they're threaded with hooks.

This is not my problem; I know that. I am here for one day. I cannot solve anyone's boyfriend problems. I should not change anyone's life.

I turn away from her, get my books out, close the locker. She stays in the same spot, anchored by the profound, desperate loneliness of a bad relationship.

"Do you still want to get lunch today?" she asks.

The easy thing would be to say no. I often do this: sense the other person's life drawing me in, and run in the other direction.

But there's something about her – the cities on her shoes, the flash of bravery, the unnecessary sadness – that makes me want to know what the word will be when it stops being a sound. I have spent years meeting people without ever knowing them, and on this morning, in this place, with this girl, I feel the faintest pull of wanting to know. And in a moment of either weakness or bravery on my own part, I decide to follow it. I decide to find out more.

"Absolutely," I say. "Lunch would be great."

Again I read her. What I've said is too enthusiastic. Justin is never enthusiastic.

"No big deal," I add.

She's relieved. Or at least, as relieved as she'll allow herself to be, which is a very guarded form of relief, the relief of being in the eye of a hurricane and knowing the other wall is probably coming quick. By accessing, I know she and Justin have been together for over a year. That's as specific as it gets. Justin doesn't remember the exact date.

She reaches out and takes my hand. I am surprised by how good this feels.

"I'm glad you're not mad at me," she says. "I just want everything to be okay."

I nod. If there's one thing I've learned, it's this: we all want everything to be okay. We don't even wish so much for fantastic or marvelous or outstanding. We will happily settle for okay, because most of the time, okay is enough.

The first bell rings.

"I'll see you later," I say.

Such a basic promise. But to Rhiannon, it means the world.

At first it was hard to go through each day without making any lasting connections, leaving any life-

changing effects. When I was younger, I craved friendship and closeness. I would make bonds without acknowledging how quickly and permanently they would break. I took other people's lives personally. I felt their friends could be my friends, their parents could be my parents. But after a while, I had to stop. It was too heartbreaking to live with so many separations.

I am a drifter, and as lonely as that can be, it is also remarkably freeing. I will never define myself in terms of anyone else. I will never feel the pressure of peers or the burden of parental expectation. I can view everyone as pieces of a whole, and focus on the whole, not the pieces. I have learned how to observe, far better than most people observe. I am not blinded by the past or motivated by the future. I focus on the present, because that is where I am destined to live.

I learn. Sometimes I am taught something I have already been taught in dozens of other classrooms. Sometimes I am taught something completely new. I am often given information but have no context. I have to access the body, access the mind, see what information it's retained. And when I do, I learn. Knowledge is the only thing I take with me when I go.

I know so many things that Justin doesn't know, that he will never know. I sit there in his math class, open his notebook and write down phrases he has never heard.

Shakespeare and Kerouac and Dickinson. Tomorrow, or some day after tomorrow, or never, he will see these words in his own handwriting, and he won't have any idea where they came from, or even what they are.

That is as much interference as I allow myself.

Everything else must be done cleanly.

Rhiannon stays with me. Her details. Flickers from Justin's memories. Small things, like the way her hair falls, the way she bites her fingernails, the determination and resignation in her voice. Random things. I see her dancing with Justin's grandfather, because he's said he wants a dance with a pretty girl. I see her covering her eyes during a scary movie, peering between her fingers, enjoying her fright. These are the good memories. I don't look at any others.

I only see her once in the morning, a brief passing in the halls between first and second period. I find myself smiling when she comes near, and she smiles back. It's as simple as that. Simple and complicated, as most true things are. I find myself looking for her after second period, and then again after third and fourth. I don't even feel in control of this. I want to see her. Simple. Complicated.

By the time we get to lunch, I am exhausted. Justin's body is worn down from too little sleep and I, inside

of it, am worn down from restlessness and too much thought.

I wait for her at Justin's locker. The first bell rings. The second bell rings. No Rhiannon. Maybe I was supposed to meet her somewhere else. Maybe Justin's forgotten where they always meet.

If that's the case, she's used to Justin forgetting. She finds me right when I'm about to give up. The halls are nearly empty, the cattle call has passed. She comes closer than she did before.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," she says.

She is looking to me. Justin is the one who makes the first move. Justin is the one who figures things out. Justin is the one who says what they're going to do.

It depresses me.

I have seen this too many times before. The unwarranted devotion. Putting up with the fear of being with the wrong person because you can't deal with the fear of being alone. The hope tinged with doubt, and the doubt tinged with hope. Every time I see these feelings in someone else's face, it weighs me down. And there's something in Rhiannon's face that's more than just the disappointments. There is a gentleness there. A gentleness that Justin will never, ever appreciate. I see it right away, but nobody else does.