

Jeremy Robinson had been dead for two weeks before I heard from him. It had been a quiet, rainy miserable Sunday morning in April, and I was inside smoking a cigarette and flipping through the channels hoping something good would be on TV when the doorbell rang. At first I didn't think it was for me: the ringing blended in with the sound of the rain on my windowsill and melancholy jazz filling the room alongside the cigarette smoke. I figured it was for someone else down the hall, since no one ever called. Eventually though, maybe out of some misplaced optimism or maybe just a desire to get off the couch, I got up and went to the door.

I opened it to see some kid who couldn't be older than seventeen: black-hispanic, bright tracksuit, buzzed hair and knockoff shades. When he spoke, he had a heavy Harlem accent and two gold teeth. "Got a letter for ya, mister," he told me with a smile.

"No you don't," I replied. No one contacted me. I was a pariah in my old field and if my new boss wanted me, he'd just call. "I think you got the wrong guy." I had assumed this kid was one of the dealers that ran drugs for some cryptonet market. He was new and probably got the wrong address. It wouldn't be the first time. There were plenty of junkies in my complex.

"I dunno mister, the name on the package is one Edward Sunderland, at Apartment Thirteen, 24 Sycamores Residential Complex. You him?" He held up the envelope, a large manila one, for me to see. Sure enough, there was my name and address hand-written on the envelope. No postage, no return address. I stared at it blankly, trying to think of who would ever want to write me.

"Yeah... That's me...?" I took the envelope and looked at it in confusion. Could it be Dad? No, if Dad wrote me he'd leave a return address. Maybe someone writing to tell me that Dad had finally been found dead in a gutter, covered in his own vomit. Maybe some thugs had him hostage over his gambling debt or his bar tab and wanted a ransom from me. I must have been lost in thought because the kid looked at me blankly. I nodded at him and closed the door. I should have tipped him, but I honestly was too confused to remember.

I sat down on the couch and put out the cigarette. I turned off the TV, turned off the radio, and just stared at the envelope for the longest time. At first I was confused, but then I got anxious. I was debating on whether or not I should open it, or first take some Radoft to kill the anxiety. It was situations like this where the doctor had told me to take the Radoft. Normally I just popped one before going off to work, just to get over my issues regarding the morning commute. This was a letter, addressed specifically to me. Fear over what it could be was clouding my mind.

In hopes of overcoming that fear, I tried feeling around. It was a thin envelope, with a small cardboard fixture inside to protect the contents. Any of the shipping companies would have considered it to be a highly important document, yet this envelope was delivered by some school-age kid. I gave it a shake, but nothing slid around. That probably ruled out a letter bomb or any possible drugs. I couldn't really imagine why anyone would send me either.

Unable to produce a satisfying answer, I got up and looked out the window. At the very least I could distract myself. The rain was heavy and oppressive, and it reduced the view of the Long Island

skyline to a few vague shapes and blinking lights. Outside on FDR Drive, there were small flashes of light as the few cars and buses drove by, passing each other and speeding off into the rainy haze. Somehow, it made me hate the city even more when I couldn't see it. The rain made me feel like I could be back in Missouri, where there was clean air and room to breathe. And yet, those damned lights made me remember instead that I was trapped in Manhattan. Even if I couldn't see the towering residential blocks of Long Island, I knew they were still there. I couldn't just look out the window and pretend that I was back home. Some days I wondered if there was someone in that Long Island block looking over at 24 Sycamores, hating it for being part of that same monolithic wall of humanity that trapped us both in this prison of a city.

After what felt like an hour, I grabbed a knife from my silverware drawer. To hell with the Radoft, I was going to force my way through this. I slowly, delicately carved open the top of the envelope, as not to damage the contents. Reaching in, I pulled out a keycard. It was thin, grey, made with cheap plastic. All it had was a serial number on the side, and "Habitación 214" in big black letters below what appeared to be the number seven repeated three times in a fiery text. The opposite side had nothing but the dark strip familiar to keycards. I looked it over for a while, puzzling over what it could possibly mean before reaching inside the envelope once more.

Next, I pulled out a thin, white, traditional envelope. As I examined it, my heart skipped a beat. Dead center was "Eddie", handwritten in pen. Up where the return address would have been, it just said "Jeremy Robinson" in his unmistakable printing.

I put the envelope down in shock. Jeremy Robinson was dead. He had died two weeks ago in Mexico, caught in a car bomb meant for someone else. He and I were college roommates. After I had been fired from the *Chronicle* and effectively blacklisted, Jeremy was the only one who still talked to me. Hell, he had taken a lot of flak by refusing to give any comment to the rest of the press, citing professional ethics. We had still hung out, but it became less and less frequent. He was a rising star of a reporter and I was already a no-good burden on anyone else's career. We couldn't be seen together, no matter how much we were friends.

When I found out he had left for Mexico without telling me, I felt like he abandoned me. I didn't find out that he died until I saw it on the news. When I found out, I was shocked. I remember just breaking down on the couch and laying there for hours before crying myself to sleep. I waited for that funeral invite, but it never came. I didn't even know it happened until I saw photos from it, all of the big journalists had attended in his honor, along with a few well-known New York socialites. Our old professors even showed up. His editor, our old boss, Moses Kleinburg, had gotten to speak. It was just a celebration for his career, as short as it was. I remember for a brief time, as I went to bed, I was almost glad Jeremy had died. There was some perverse, sick joy in knowing that he was dead, almost as if it was punishment for abandoning me here in the city.

I stopped to think about what Jeremy could have wanted to say. Was this an apology for not inviting me to his funeral? Maybe some sort of hidden kudos he had left out of his will to avoid the rest of the press attacking his legacy? Jeremy was always a careful planner. I remember back in college he

would always schedule his entire month in advance, right down to the hour. He was an exceptional individual, meticulous and orderly. I'd imagine that most of his funeral were people talking about how great of a mind they lost. I remember one night, after I had been fired from the *Chronicle*, he had told me that journalism had lost a great mind by blacklisting me. I had laughed it off as drunken flattery: Jeremy graduated at the top of our class, I was barely in the twenty-fifth percentile. Everyone knew he was bound for success and greatness. Meanwhile my own professors had made it a point to state on the record that they knew I was no good.

I got up and walked over to my bathroom. I was definitely going to need some Radoft for this. After searching my medicine cabinet, I found the bottle. I unscrewed the childproof cap and pulled out a small yellow tablet. Using my index and middle fingers, I broke it in two over my thumb. Half of the tablet went down my throat, washed down by a glass of lukewarm tap water. I knew it would take some time for the drug to enter my bloodstream, but just taking it gave me a feeling of relaxation, as if I had just vaccinated myself against any emotional instability for the rest of the day. I took a deep breath, letting the tension out with my exhalation.

Looking at the clock, I could see that it was almost noon. Erring on the side of caution, I decided to fix myself lunch before addressing the letter. I reached into my fridge and grabbed a Heat-Em-Up. Jeremy had always joked in college that HEUs would kill me faster than my smoking. I had joked in turn that he'd work himself to death long before I kicked the bucket. Looking back, that joke probably wasn't very funny. I tore the HEU out of the packaging and popped it in the microwave. While it was running, I poured myself another glass of tap water. Jeremy would have lectured me to put on a filter so it would be clean, but I was always bad at handling money and never had the budget for one.

As I took a bite out of the finished Heat-Em-Up, I took a moment to savor the warm mesh of ham and cheese. It was almost like I was back in my college dorm with Jeremy. I felt like if I was going to turn around, he'd be on the couch reading a book. I did turn around, and the couch was empty. I guess his death was finally managing to sink in. I turned around and took another bite. I needed to get over this if I didn't want to be an emotional wreck reading the letter. One more bite, and I decided that I should just do what I did with the envelope: brute-force it.

Heat-Em-Up in my mouth, I grabbed the smaller envelope and a knife. With the utmost care, I sliced the envelope open. Inside was a handwritten letter. I put my meal down, took a swig of water, a deep, deep breath, and began to read.