

LVW Flash Fiction Contest 2017

FIRST PLACE

Pareidolia

by Ryan McBriar

“What does this look like to you?”

David Pearson frowned as his son slid a piece of paper across the table, tapping it with an index finger. He leaned forward, adjusting his glasses, careful not to bump the half-filled glass of complimentary water as he pulled the picture closer.

Printed on the paper, an image familiar to David: the front of a brick edifice with two circular black windows centered toward the top, each framed in larger white circles. Below the left window, a set of black double doors with a pointed arch, a thin strip of white bordering the top. He sighed. “A face, Jimmy. It looks like a face.”

Jimmy pulled the picture back to his side of the table, forcing a lopsided smile. “This was always one of her favorites.”

Vzzzt. David felt it then and did his best to ignore, ignore, ignore. He’d worked on this, practiced even. The buzzing in his rear pocket couldn’t be real. Shifting slightly in his seat, David felt the reassuring pressure of the rectangular shape there. He knew it was powered off. He did his best to ignore the vibration. *Vzzzt.*

Eyes trained on his son, picking a focal point and not wavering. The slight wrinkles that had built up around Jimmy’s eyes. “I know.”

Jimmy shook his head. “Go ahead, Dad. Check your phone.”

“It’s off,” David said, leaning back in his chair and scanning the restaurant for their waiter. He brought his gaze back to his son’s face, noticing the slightly raised eyebrows. “Really, I promise.”

Vzzzt.

“Okay, whatever. I’m just glad you actually showed up.” Jimmy sipped his water, also looking for the waiter. The younger man slipped the photo of the building back into an overflowing green folder labeled with the distinct cursive writing of David’s ex-wife, Julia.

Sam’s Sandwich Stop was busy and loud, but the silence at David and Jimmy’s table was a black hole, sucking up all the noise until David had to break free.

“So, the funeral--”

“Was nice. Yeah, she would have liked it,” Jimmy cut in, absently leafing through the other papers in his mother’s folder.

Vzzzt.

The waiter distributed the bread and meat creations for which the place was famous. “Finally,” David whispered. Hunger distracted him until the server elbowed his half-empty water glass into his lap.

Vzzzt.

After a torrent of apologies and forgiveness, the two men were left with their sandwiches and silence. *Vzzzt*. David's eye twitched and he looked at his son, who hadn't started eating yet. Forcing a smile, he shifted in his seat and envisioned the moment on the street when he had powered off his phone before entering the restaurant. *Vzzzt*.

"She really hated that thing," Jimmy said, grabbing a fry off his plate.

David, now attempting to ignore two things, took a large bite of his Sam's Special. The taste hit him all at once and he spat the first bite back onto his plate. Onions, like thin white worms, poked out from layers of meat and cheese. Clenching his left hand, he signaled Chet with his right.

"What?" Jimmy said as Chet returned.

"I specifically said no onions. I need a new sandwich. The taste is all over this thing."

Chet, following another eruption of apologies, took the dish away.

Vzzzt.

With the place in front of David empty, Jimmy passed his mother's folder back across the table. "You know," he said around a few more french fries, "toward the end she thought she was getting messages from them. The pictures. They weren't just faces in everyday objects: they were trying to tell her something. Warn her."

"Your mother was very sick, James."

"And you weren't? Isn't that why she made you leave? You couldn't disconnect with your phone long enough to connect with us?"

Vzzzt. David shifted. Jimmy's eyes widened, jaw tightened.

David raised a hand in surrender. "Have you heard of PVS?"

"Yeah, I think your granddaughter watches Daniel Tiger--"

"No. *V*, not *B*. It stands for phantom vibration syndrome, and it's--"

Jimmy signaled to the waiter, calling out loudly, "I'd like the check and a box, please."

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Outside, David waited until Jimmy rounded the corner before finally pulling out his phone. The feeling of euphoria at just having the device in his hand was exhilarating. Confusion quickly usurped relief when David went to power on the cell: the screen, which should have been black, indicated nine missed text messages despite the phone being off. They were all from the same person, Julia Pearson, each timestamped over the course of his meeting with Jimmy. He thought about racing after his son but instead scrolled to the first text on the way to his car.

David it's me. Look for explanations later, just get out of the restaurant.

Get out. Get out now.

Don't believe me? Look out, waiter's about to spill a drink.

See! Look at your phone, dammit!

David paused at the curb, tears welling in his eyes, about to laugh until he read the next message.

If you don't leave the restaurant right now, you will die tonight.

Do you want more proof? The chief put onions on your sandwich, you'll send it back.

See! The one time I want you to look at that thing.

I don't have much time and I don't think this is going to work. I'm not going to lie and say that I still love you. It's even hard to say I care about you. But I do, at least for Jimmy.

David stepped into the bus lane on Forbes Avenue, reading the final message on his phone.

It'll be a bus, David. You won't even see it coming. I thought I could save you. Goodbye.

THE END

Ryan McBriar is a writer from Pittsburgh, PA. He is a graduate of La Roche College and currently teaches high school English in Corry, PA. He holds BAs in both English language and literature and English education. When he's not teaching, Ryan enjoys spending time with his wife and son, movies, books, music, writing, and gaming. He thinks horror stories are the best kind of stories.