

2 – REUNION, OR: REJECTION

What is the thought process of someone seeing their family again after a near-decade?

For Shimon Astrai, the excitement of the initial news wore away with each step he took toward his former home. After relief followed a quiet assembly of concerns. How will they look? How will they react? Will they recognize you? Even if they did, would they accept you?

The closer he got, the more questions emerged. Are they all healthy? Are they mentally intact? Maybe one of them passed away, maybe another doesn't want you back? Shimon found that he walked at a much slower pace than normal, but he couldn't see himself speeding up either. The mental torture only prolonged with every second he wasted, but any faster and he'd have to face the wrath of his concerns even quicker. A true dilemma.

As the boy discovered the wooden plaque reading 'Astrai' - still hung at the same spot, yet looking skewed, as if it tried to get off the wall - his fears climaxed. The house was unscathed, a perfect replica from his memory, and yet, it carried an inexplicable atmosphere of emptiness. A desolate, barren air that he couldn't recall.

The next detail Shimon noticed was an additional patch of flowers, right beside the bench he so fondly kept in mind. A beautiful variety of tulips, carnations, gladiolas - all watered and fresh, kept alive with what seemed like ceaseless effort. He smiled as he glanced over the elegant flock of buds - then, like clockwork, his face set back to the main issue. Shimon eyed the wooden door, the final obstacle separating him from the ones he desired to see the most. His heart didn't pound anymore, it hammered against his ribcage. Persistent hammering. The longer he hesitated to knock, the longer it would continue. Torture really was the appropriate term.

One. One knock only. This was all that Shimon could muster himself to. As he felt the wooden vibrations, his dread climbed even further, and for a second he genuinely believed that his heart imploded right then and there.

But no reaction followed. He waited patiently for about ten seconds, but couldn't detect a response. As if destiny chose to ignore his request. For a tiny moment, his heart eased up a little. Then, it started once more when he realized he'd have to knock again.

By now, Shimon felt sick to his stomach. He didn't feel the need to hurl yet, but felt that it could happen out of nowhere in the next few seconds. He agreed with himself that he'd count and knock at the same time. Softly, with care and an emptied mind. Don't think about what may happen, just focus on the numbers, he concluded. They're hard enough as is.

The boy extended his fist to the oaken barrier again.

'One. Two. Three. Four... Five.'

By the fifth knock, Shimon felt an odd sense of peace. He conquered the step - what followed was now inevitable, out of his control. And yet, when he noticed sluggish stomping from inside the house, this peace was shattered again.

At this point, Shimon's perception of time slowed down to a crawl. It would only take about six seconds before the hefty metal lock on the front door would clatter open, but this amount grew tenfold in his mind. A final stretch of anguish, of the most excruciating inner turmoil.

Then, it swung open. The swing itself fit perfectly with the house's vibe of emptiness - a hollow, unenthusiastic opening, like there was no chance it would yield something positive. And as the responsible figure's silhouette became distinctly sharp, Shimon felt his whole being freeze up.

"... Who're *you*?" Shimon's father asked in a weary tone.

The boy failed to reply. In his mental absence, he did nothing but muster the man that created him. His appearance came surprisingly close to what Shimon recalled from the vague looks he kept in mind. A dark grey bob that almost fell into black if it weren't for the encroaching age, a hard and angular face that stood decisively atop a wide neck, oil-like irises that could reflect both a warm welcome and a soul-drilling stare.

There was a defect, though.

Shimon's father never looked particularly awake to begin with, but the bags around his eyes weren't just visible, they seemed like permanent stains. Irreversible, etched into his body forever. Creases dug ravines through his skin, and the welcoming stare of his pupils seemed like a long-lost memory; sand running through an open palm. The man looked defeated. Shimon recognized this immediately, even despite half a lifetime's worth of absence.

"P-pa..." he finally mumbled after a frame of time impossible to deduce. Then, something curious occurred to him. His body acted on its own, directed by his deepest desire - embracing his long lost parent. But when the missing son opened his arms, desperate to feel the protective warmth of his father again, Marcos Astrai didn't reciprocate with fatherly love.

"What— what the damn— *get off!*"

Instead, he would try three full times to rid himself from the clamoring boy. With every attempt, the dimensional traveler felt a sharp sting within his lung region. It wasn't due to his creator's strength, as Shimon held tight near effortlessly, but rather the violent intent, directed toward his heart more than his body. The boy felt as if he inhaled animosity.

When Marcos finally managed to separate his son from himself - mostly due to Shimon letting go as his stomach worsened - he couldn't stop him from using the momentum to enter the house, landing in the midst of the living room.

"*Hey! Get the hell out!*" he yelled as his stagnant blood began to boil.

Thousands of impressions ravaged the boy's heart. Thus, he did the only thing he could feasibly handle: observe. Time again drifted to a near halt, as Shimon realized just how closely the room resembled what fragments of memory he held on to. The long, elegant table next to the entrance was untouched. He recalled how proud his parents looked when they bought it, and he'd hear the words 'made from real cherry tree wood' on a constant basis over the next few weeks. One chair was missing.

Next, Shimon ogled the array of paintings coloring the living room's wall - all authentic as well, something his parents took great pride in. One of a solitary autumn tree losing leaves, one of a neatly dressed crowd of people enjoying the local park on a Sunday, one of two children play-fighting. He failed to register that he himself was depicted in the last one.

What he did register though was, again, a certain ambience of absence. Less pictures. Less decoration. Less furniture in general. The room felt grey, more washed-out than he remembered.

"What are you doing? *Get out!* Get out or I'll call the police, dammit!" the man shouted, his tired blood pumping for the first time in years. Empty words regardless. Marcos couldn't remove the invader, even if he tried with all his might. He was too late to do so either way, as he voiced his rage a second after Shimon discovered his mother, seated on the grand couch near the garden exit. It was then that all color faded for good.

There was nothing left but his mother's outline. Pure, yet carrying a visible lack of life. Shimon would long hold this moment as the most bitter of his life; a second that prolonged

itself to infinity.

Chirin Astrai suffered from the same tonelessness as her husband and home. Her sapphire hair, coupled with her mint green pupils, lost the vibrant glow that gave her the emanation of beauty she was known for. Her lips, usually smiling without fail, looked thin and exhausted. What was left was a woman that could crumble to dust and soar away at any given moment.

When the boy imagined reuniting with his mother, he failed to imagine the sour ache of witnessing shells of lost beauty. It overrode him. The pain accumulated and was too much to bear. Not only because his mother kept gazing into his eyes, with her lifeless stare.

Something had to be done. Something had to be said. If not now, then maybe never again. Never again. Never again. Never again, Shimon repeated in his mind.

At last, this briefly broke him out of his stasis. He now faced the hardest decision of his life. The first sentence - no, the first word counted. Whatever it was, it had to land. It'd have to hit the point immediately. It had to break this disgusting, unfamiliar veil of grey that enveloped everything.

One word.

"*Shimon!*" he called from the depths of his soul. Two syllables that hung in the air for an astounding amount of time. They were untouched, pristine, the first fresh thing that entered the Astrai household in quite some time. As such, they struck right through the bystanders, piercing their lungs and lapsing their breath entirely.

Then, silence.

Marcos' voice was the first to regain volume. His ears must have been clogged, he thought. Did that kid just...

"Sh—" he started with difficulty. But he was stopped in his tracks when his eyes traipsed toward his wife. His breathtaking, cheerful wife, whose life's work had one day been shattered, who was forced to say her goodbyes to a patch of flowers instead of a being of flesh, who spent the better part of two years desperately coping, trying to adapt, learn from the loss she was mourning over. She never quite managed, but she progressed. There grew a spark, a chance that things could brighten. In this moment, he witnessed the spark fading for good.

Shimon had no knowledge of this struggle, but even he could recognize the inner demise that his mother experienced. It was like her body was taken off the cross, only to be nailed onto it once more through the same holes. Chirin died for the second time, and the pain subsisted.

"Honey..." Marcos called out in horror. '*Please don't...*' became the only phrase wandering his mind. Finally, the mother's voice rang out.

"I'm sorry, young man - we've got our hands full at the moment," she said with eerie composure, "so it would be best if you leave right now."

While speaking, she stood up and started patting the couch's cushions with her bare hands, as to rid it of dust. She continued to do so until she finished her sentence, and long after as well, never stopping to pat the same cushion. Her void demeanor didn't shift.

Marcos grit his teeth. Not from rage, but from hurt. There was an invisible, unbearably large pain that only he as a husband noticed.

The son couldn't reply. He heard "leave right now". That was all. It stuck.

"Please get out," the grey-haired man hushed. A whisper that was louder than any of his screams, invading Shimon's heart. He didn't feel steady anymore. His stomach stopped hurting, but he couldn't tell whether the pain subsided or whether it simply numbed out.

'Get out. Leave right now.'

Respecting his parents' wishes, Shimon inched back to the entrance door. He couldn't spare a last gaze back onto his family. He knew that he'd die if he did.

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As Shimon Astrai perched on the doorstep to his former home, he didn't think of anything in particular. His mind merely replayed what had just occurred, repressing the bits that hurt the most as much as it feasibly could. For over ten minutes, Shimon wandered the echoes of his parents' rejection, forced to listen and endure. He felt as if he aged ten years on that doorstep alone.

'Why the hell did that guy say "Shimon"?' pondered the fourth person.