

Forty-Three Labels

by
Ashley Mangtani

The coordinator asked for his name.

"Raymond," Dad said.

Which were right.

Then he told her he'd been a carpenter all his life.

Which weren't.

He were a postman for thirty-two year. He knew every street in Oldham by name. They gave him a plaque when he retired.

We put it in the loft when we moved him.

There were nowhere to hang it here.

She wrote down carpenter. I let her.

Eli pressed his face to the window. Out in the garden, three residents sat in plastic chairs. None of them moving much.

"There's a cat," he said.

There weren't.

I did the labels the night before. Masking tape and permanent marker. Raymond Holt pressed into every shirt collar.

Every pair of trousers.

The comb he'd kept since before I were born.

My mam used to say he'd take that comb to his grave.

I wrote his name on the plastic. The first one smeared, so I wrote it again.

Forty-three labels.

The coordinator took us to the room. Dad sat on the bed.

He pressed both palms into the mattress—that same flat-palmed bounce from the Sunday furniture sales, his face set like he were gathering evidence.

That were still him.

Right there.

He looked up at the coordinator. "Have you met our lass?" he said. "She comes Thursdays."

I were three feet away.

Eli turned from the glass. "That's me mam," he said.

Dad looked at me.

His mouth opened, then closed again. "Diane. I know it's you, ya daft 'apeth."

He said my name. The one he'd chosen. He said it with the stress on the wrong syllable, sounding like a question he already knew the answer to.

Then he turned back to the coordinator. "Good lass, our Diane," he said. "She comes Thursdays, don't you, pet?"

I locked my knees to keep from swaying.

We walked him to the dining room. He sat across from a stranger and told him he'd been a carpenter for forty year. Built some solid stuff. The man said that was something.

Dad picked up his fork. He wrapped his thick fingers around the handle and started to eat, looking like he'd sat at this table every day of his life.

In the car park, our breath came out white. "Does Grandad know where he is?" Eli asked.

I unlocked the car doors. "He's settling in."

"He didn't know you, though," he said.

"He did. Just for a minute."

Eli went quiet. He were six. A minute still counted at six.

At the junction, I kept my foot on the brake.

In the rearview, Eli stared back at the building. Waiting the way he did when a film finished, expecting something more to happen. On the back seat were two shirts with no labels. I'd run out of tape.

Dad's own father were a carpenter.

Died donkeys ago.

There were no photographs of him in our house. No old chisels in the shed. Just a name that dropped out of the air the day they buried him.

Dad had spent thirty-two year wearing the map of Oldham into the soles of his boots.

He came home smelling of damp wool and exhaust fumes, his right shoulder permanently dropped from the canvas strap.

Not a speck of sawdust on him.

And now here he was, building himself from whatever parts remained.

Carpenter.

Father of three.

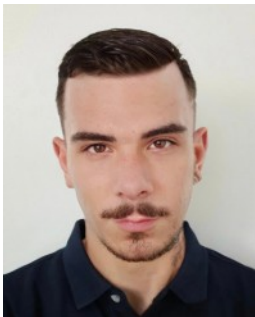
Raymond. Which were still true.

I hadn't put my name anywhere he could find me.

Not on a label, not on anything.

The light went green.

I just watched it.



Ashley Mangtani is a writer whose work explores ecological and social collapse, and the roles people inhabit in moments of crisis. Drawing on an [M.Sc.](#) in Environmental Science and his experience as a longform fiction reader for Ploughshares, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in Litro, Washington Square Review, Boudin, Expat Press, Thieving Magpie, Flash Fiction Online, HAWKEYE, Mobius, Literary Garage, Emphyrean Magazine, and others. Read more at ashleymangtanifiction.carrd.co