

End of the Line

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opening line like the speaker's.

The man went to the pet store to buy himself a little man to keep him company. The pet store was full of dogs with splotches and shy cats coy and the friendly people got dogs and the independent people got cats and this man looked around until in the back he found a cage inside of which was a miniature sofa and tiny TV and one small attractive brown-haired man, wearing a tweed suit. He looked at the price tag. The little man was expensive but the big man had a reliable job and thought this a worthy purchase.

He brought the cage up to the front, paid with his credit card, and got some free airline points.

In the car, the little man's cage bounced lightly on the passenger seat, held by the seat belt.

The big man set up the little man in his bedroom, on the nightstand, and lifted the latch of the cage open. That's the first time the little man looked away from the small TV. He blinked, which was hard to see, and then asked for some dinner in a high shrill voice. The big man brought the little man a drop of whiskey inside the indented crosshatch of a screw, and a thread of chicken with the skin still on. He had no utensils, so he told the little man to feel free to eat with his hands, which made the little man irritable. The little man explained that before he'd been caught he'd been a very successful and refined technology consultant who'd been to Paris and Milan multiple times, and that he liked to eat with utensils thank you very much. The big man laughed and laughed, he thought this little man he'd bought was so funny. The little man told him in a clear crisp voice that dollhouse stores were open on weekends and he needed a bed, please, with an actual pillow, please, and a lamp and some books with actual pages if at all possible. Please. The big man chuckled some more and nodded.

The little man sat on his sofa. He stayed up late that first night, laughing his high shrill laugh at the late-night shows,

which annoyed the big man to no end. He tried to sleep and could not, a wink. At four A.M., exhausted, the big man put some antihistamine in the little man's water-drip tube, so the little man finally got drowsy. The big man accidentally put too much in, because getting the right proportions was no easy feat of mathematical skill, which was not the big man's strong suit anyway, and the little man stayed groggy for three days, slugging around his cage, leaving tiny drool marks on the couch. The big man went to work and thought of the little man with longing all day, and at five o'clock he dashed home, so excited he was to see his little man, but he kept finding the fellow in a state of murk. When the antihistamine finally wore off, the little man awoke with crystal-clear sinuses, and by then had a fully furnished room around him, complete with chandelier and several very short books, including *Cinderella* in Spanish, and his very own pet ant in a cage.

The two men got along for about two weeks. The little man was very good with numbers and helped the big man with his bank statements. But between bills, the little man also liked to talk about his life back home and how he'd been captured on his way to work, in a bakery of all places, by the little-men bounty hunters, and how much he, the little man, missed his wife and children. The big man had no wife and no children, and he didn't like hearing that part. "You're mine now," he told the little man. "I paid good money for you."

“But I have responsibilities,” said the little man to his owner, eyes dewy in the light.

"You said you'd take me back," said the little man.

“I said no such thing,” said the big man, but he couldn’t remember if he really had or not. He had never been very good with names or recall.

After about the third week, after learning the personalities of the little man's children and grandparents and aunts and uncles, after hearing about the tenth meal in Paris and how the waiter said the little man had such good pronunciation, after a description of singing tenor arias with a mandolin on the train to Tuscany, the big man took to torturing the little man. When the little man's back was turned, the big man snuck a needle-thin droplet of household cleanser into his water and watched the little man hallucinate all night long, tossing and turning, retching small pink piles into the corners of the cage. His little body was so small it was hard to imagine it hurt that much. How much pain could really be felt in a space that tiny? The big man slept heavily, assured that his pet was just exaggerating for show.

The big man started taking sick days at work.

He enjoyed throwing the little man in the air and catching him. The little man protested in many ways. First he said he didn't like that in a firm fatherly voice, then he screamed and cried. The man didn't respond so the little man used reason, which worked briefly, saying: "Look, I'm

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a man too, I'm just a little man. This is very painful for me. Even if you don't like me," said the little man, "it still hurts." The big man listened for a second, but he had come to love flicking his little man, who wasn't talking as much anymore about the art of the baguette, and the little man, starting to bruise and scar on his body, finally shut his mouth completely. His head ached and he no longer trusted the water.

He considered his escape. But how? The doorknob is the Empire State Building. The backyard is an African veldt.

The big man watched TV with the little man. During the show with the sexy women, he slipped the little man down his pants and just left him there. The little man poked at the big man's penis which grew next to him like Jack's beanstalk in person, smelling so musty and earthy it made the little man embarrassed of his own small penis tucked away in his consultant pants. He knocked his fist into it, and the beanstalk grew taller and, disturbed, the big man reached down his pants and flung the little man across the room. The little man hit a table leg. Woke up in his cage, head throbbing. He hadn't even minded much being in the underwear of the big man, because for the first time since he'd been caught, he'd felt the smallest glimmer of power.

“Don’t you try that again,” warned the big man, head taking up the north wall of the cage entirely.

"Please," said the little man, whose eyes were no longer dewy but flat. "Sir. Have some pity."

The big man wrapped the little man up in masking tape, all over his body, so his feet couldn't kick and there were only little holes for his mouth and his eyes. Then he put him in the refrigerator for an hour. When he came back the little man had fainted and the big man put him in the toaster oven, at very very low, for another ten minutes. Preheated. The little man revived after a day or two.

"Please," he said to the big man, word broken.

The big man didn't like the word please. He didn't like politesse and he didn't like people. Work had been dull and no one had noticed his new coat. He got himself a ticket to Paris with all the miles he'd accumulated on his credit card, but soon realized he could not speak a word of the language and was too afraid of accidentally eating veal brains to go. He did not want to ask the little man to translate for him as he did not want to hear the little man's voice with an accent. The thought of it made him so angry. The ticket expired, unreturned. On the plane, a young woman stretched out on her seat and slept since no one showed up in the seat next to hers. At work, he asked out an attractive woman he had liked for years, and she ran away from him to tell her coworkers immediately. She never even said no; it was so obvious to her, she didn't even have to say it.

"Take off your clothes," he told the little man that afternoon.

The little man winced and the big man held up a bottle of shower cleanser as a threat. The little man stripped slowly, folded his clothing, and stood before the big man, his skin pale, his chest a matted grass of hair, his penis hiding, his lips trembling so slightly that only the most careful eye would notice.

"Do something," said the big man.

The little man sat on the sofa. "What," he said.

"Get hard," said the big man. "Show me what you look like."

The little man's head was still sore from hitting the table leg; his brain had felt fuzzy and indistinct ever since he'd spent the hour in the refrigerator and then time in the toaster oven. He put his hand on his penis and there was a heavy sad flicker of pleasure and behind the absolute dullness of his mind, his body rose up to the order.

The big man laughed and laughed at the erection of his little man, which was fine and true but so little! How funny to see this man as a man. He pointed and laughed. The little man stayed on the sofa and thought of his wife, who would go into the world and collect the bottle caps strewn on the ground from the big people and make them into trays; she'd spend hours upon hours filing down the sharp edges and then use

metallic paint on the interior and they were the envy of all the little people around, so beautiful they were and so hearty. No one else had the patience to wear down those sharp corners. Sometimes she sold one and made a good wad of cash. The little man thought of those trays, trays upon trays, red, blue, and yellow, until he came in a small spurt, the orgasm pleasureless but thick with yearning.

The big man stopped laughing.

"What were you thinking about?" he said.

The little man said nothing.

"What's your wife like?" he said.

Nothing.

"Take me to see her," the big man said.

The little man sat, naked, on the floor of his cage. He had changed by now. Cut off. He would have to come back, a long journey back. He'd left.

"See who?" he asked.

The big man snickered. "Your wife," he said.

The little man shook his head. He looked wearily at the big man. "I'm the end of this line for you," he said.

It was the longest sentence he'd said in weeks. The big man pushed the cage over and the little man hit the side of the sofa.

"Yes!" howled the big man. "I want to see your children too. How I love children!"

He opened the cage and took the little floral-print couch into his hand. The little man's face was still and cold.

"No," he said, eyes closed.

"I will torture you!" cried out the big man.

The little man folded his hands under his cheek in a pillow. Pain was no longer a mystery to him, and a man familiar with pain has entered a new kind of freedom. "No," he whispered into his knuckles.

With his breath clouding warmly over his hands, the little man waited, half dizzy, to be killed. He felt his death was terribly insignificant and a blip but he still did not look forward to being killed and he sent waves of love to his wife and his children, to the people who made him significant, to the ones who felt the blip.

The big man played with the legs of the little armchair. He took off the pillow and found a few coins inside the crevices, coins so small he couldn't even pick them up.

He put his face close to the cage of his little man.

"Okay," he said.

Four days later, he set the little man free. He treated him well for the four days, gave him good food and even a bath and some aspirin and a new pillow. He wanted to leave him with

some positive memories and an overall good impression? After four days, he took the cage under his arm, opened the front door, and set it out on the sidewalk. Unlocked the cage door. The little man had been sleeping nonstop for days, with only a few lucid moments staring into the giant eye of the big man, but the sunlight soaked into him instantly, and he awoke. He exited the cage door. He waited for a bird to fly down and eat him. Not the worst death, he thought. Usually the little people used an oil rub that was repellent-smelling to birds and other animals, but all of that, over time, had been washed clean off him. He could see the hulking form of the big man to his right, squatting on his heels. The big man felt sad but not too sad. The little man had become boring. Now that he was less of a person, he was easier to get along with and less fun to play with. The little man tottered down the sidewalk, arms lifting oddly from his sides, as if he had wet hands or was covered in paint. He did not seem to recognize his own body.

At the curb, he sat down. A small blue bus drove up, so small the big man wouldn't have noticed it if he hadn't been looking at foot level already. The little man got on. He had no money but the bus revved for a moment and then moved forward with the little man on it. He took a seat in the back and looked out the window at the street. All the little people around him could smell what had happened. They lived in fear of it every day. The newspapers were full of updates and new

incidents. One older man with a trim white beard moved across the bus to sit next to the little man and gently put an arm on his shoulder. Together they watched the gray curbs passing by.

On the lawn, the big man thought the bus was hilarious and walked next to it for a block. Even the tires rolled perfectly. He thought how if he wanted to, he could step on that bus and smush it. He did not know that the bus was equipped with spikes so sharp they would drive straight through a rubber sole, into the flesh of the foot. For a few blocks he held his foot over it, watching bus stops come up, signs as small as toothpicks, but then he felt tired and went to the corner and let the bus turn and sat down on the big blue plastic bus bench on his corner made for the big people.

When his bus came, he took it. It was Saturday. He took it to the very end of the line. Here the streets were littered with trash, and purple mountains anchored the distance. Everything felt like it was closing in, and even the store signs seemed too bright and overwhelming. He instantly didn't like it, this somewhere he had never been before, with a different smell, that of a sweeter flower and a more rustic bread. The next bus didn't come for an hour so he began the steady walk home, eyes glued to the sidewalk.

He just wanted to see where they lived. He just wanted to see their little houses and their pets and their schools. He

wanted to see if they each had cars or if buses were the main form of transport. He hoped to spot a tiny airplane.

"I don't want to harm you!" he said out loud. "I just want to be a part of your society."

His eyes moved across grasses and squares of sidewalk. He'd always had excellent vision.

"In exchange for seeing your village," he said out loud, "I will protect you from us. I will guard your front gates like a watchdog!" He yelled it into the thorny shadows of hedges, down the gutter, into the wet heads of sprinklers.

All he found was a tiny yellow hat with a ribbon, perched perfectly on the yellow petal of a rose. He held it for a good ten minutes, admiring the fine detail of the handiwork. There was embroidery all along the border. The rim of the hat was the size of the pad of his thumb. Everything about him felt disgusting and huge. Where are the tall people, the fatter people? he thought. Where are the aliens the size of God?

Finally, he sat down on the sidewalk.

"I've found a hat!" he yelled. "Please! Come out! I promise I will return it to its rightful owner."

Nestled inside a rock formation, a group of eight little people held hands. They were on their way to a birthday party. Tremendous warmth generated from one body to the other. They could stand there forever if they had to. They were used to it. Birthdays came and went. Yellow hats could

be resewn. It was not up to them to take care of all the world, whispered the mother to the daughter, whose yellow dress was unmatched, whose hand thrummed with sweat, who watched the giant outside put her hat on his enormous head and could not understand the size of the pity that kept unbuckling in her heart.

*How does she feel  
about us being  
this?*