

Uneven Shading
By
Joseph Devon

Marshal went into work on Friday embarrassed by the fact that he was turning invisible.

A few of his coworkers had noticed. If it had gone unnoticed Marshal might have assumed it was only allergies or the coming of spring, a passing hiccup of low health that would fade when the pollen count returned to normal levels. But other people had noticed, and they hadn't said, "Gee, Marshal, your eyes are red. Allergies got the best of you?" And they didn't say, "I can't wait for summer either now that the weather's finally turned warm." They merely told him that he looked tired and not entirely there. One of them used the word, "wispy."

His boss, Mr. Ruttiger, called him into his office later that afternoon. It was a brightly lit room with sterling spring sunlight beaming in through large floor to ceiling windows. "Marshal," Mr. Ruttiger said, "please sit down." Mr. Ruttiger was friendly and he came around from his desk to sit next to Marshal as a contemporary and not a boss.

"Marshal," Mr. Ruttiger began. "I've called you in here because a number of your coworkers have become worried about you. And I've come to agree with them. You don't appear to be entirely with us."

"It's just allergies," Marshal said.

"Marshal," Mr. Ruttiger went on, his voice honest. "We do great things here at CBI Industries. We help a great number of people with our prosthetics and we push our research teams off of the envelope to make sure everything that currently can be done *is* done to help disabled patients throughout the world. It is a noble calling and we believe that everyone who works here should share in it, from those in the medical laboratories to those in the accounting department."

He paused and Marshal could feel Mr. Ruttiger looking at him as he nodded. Marshal had heard this speech before, and knew he was lucky to be working for a company that actually stood by words like this. Mr. Ruttiger not only believed these things, but had taken real action numerous times in Marshal's memory to back them up.

"This results sometimes," Mr. Ruttiger went on, "in a less than perfect situation. Because of the high ideals of our company, we get a lot of applicants that merely *think* they want to work here. We get people who we feel would be better off in any number of other jobs, working at any number of different careers, who only want to work here because they think they should. It can be tricky. But we here at CBI Industries don't believe in putting square pegs into round holes and if your heart is invested in something else, we think the only true shame would be in coming to work here while not following your heart."

"I know Mr. Ruttiger. I know what—"

"Now, Marshal," Mr. Ruttiger interrupted.

"Mr. Ruttiger," Marshal started again as the two began trampling on each other's words, Mr. Ruttiger's steady and patient, Marshal's trying to be calming but with a touch of agitation sneaking in. "I swear, it's just that spring is here and the weather is so nice and I've been thinking about taking a nice vacation."

“Marshal,” Mr. Ruttiger said, the word acting as a reset for the conversation, wiping everything away and bringing them back to solid ground. “You’re almost see-through.” Marshal sighed and held up a hand, noticing how transparent it was. “I have a hard time believing that all of you is here with us at CBI Industries.”

Mr. Ruttiger’s eyebrows lifted and he looked at Marshal with concern.

“Mr. Ruttiger, I have no regrets in my life.” Marshal held his eyes, needing to be believed. “This is where I’m supposed to be.”

“I know you believe that, Marshal. Nobody here is calling you a liar. But many people begin to shade over their past as they go through life, and...well,” Mr. Ruttiger glanced at Marshal’s hand again. “I want you to go home, take an early Friday and do some poking around in your life. Your research team can make do without their leader for a few hours, yes? I want you to really question what you’re doing here and whether or not CBI Industries really has all of your heart.”

“It’s just spring, Mr. Ruttiger,” Marshal said, something in his voice caving in with hopelessness. “It really is. I have no regrets.”

Marshal pulled into his driveway and parked his car in the garage. He held his hand up as he walked across the cement and looked at it, curling it into a fist and squeezing, watching the tendons on his wrist flex and wriggle while he tried to see just how transparent he was. “Stop that,” he said in a soft whisper to his hand, before shaking it out, flexing his fingers in a feeble attempt to make himself whole again.

Walking into the door of his condo he stepped over the water stained section of carpet that he had not gotten around to replacing and walked past his end table overgrown with magazines. He put his briefcase down in the hall where he always did and was halfway to the kitchen to start thinking about dinner when he realized that he had been sent home from work early and that dinner was still a few hours off. He decided abruptly to go out that night and enjoy one of his favorite meals. This left him in a strange state of paralysis, craving the Thai food he would have for dinner, but unable to seriously consider heading out to eat for at least another two hours.

Rather than solve this problem his feet started walking across his living room to the sliding glass doors that led to his small wooden porch. As he passed the mirror hanging on the wall he glanced over and stopped. The form looking back at him was wavering and thin, barely seeming to exist, a puff of fog that could easily be blown away. Mr. Ruttiger was right. Something was wrong.

But he had no regrets.

Then a thought occurred to Marshal and it afforded him some comfort in the form of an explanation. His father had passed away over the winter, an abrupt departure. Marshal was not sure he had fully said goodbye and, even though he really didn’t feel like it was true, he decided that his mind had been occupied recently with thoughts of his father, which would explain why he wasn’t fully there at work or anywhere else. He looked at his wispy form in the mirror.

That must be it. There couldn’t be any other explanations.

He smiled. All it would take was some grieving and he would be all there again. He just needed to say goodbye to his father. That was all.

Some part, deep inside of him, some little piece of himself crushed under distant memories that never got disturbed, tucked in with jagged bits of pain that were best left untouched, supported by bubbles of happiness that were no longer felt, some part of himself disagreed with this idea. But Marshal didn't listen. It was his father's passing. He had figured it out.

He walked out onto his porch. There was a blink in his form and he turned more transparent. He became a little bit more invisible, a little bit less there.

Ten years earlier Marshal was sitting with Sindy in her living room.

"I don't understand," Sindy was saying. Her eyes were hard on him and her voice was angry.

"It's my dream job, Sindy. It's kind of a medical company, only it specializes in prosthetic—"

"Not *that*," Sindy said, venomous.

Marshal didn't say anything. The conversation had been awkward and dragging up until then but no strong emotions had been spilt. With Sindy's last words things took on a scary edge and Marshal found himself being so careful in choosing his words that he wound up saying nothing while a steady desire to get out of the room began to fill his insides like a slow leak.

"Are you breaking up with me?"

"I'm moving to Indianapolis," he said. He hadn't come here to break up with Sindy. He had come here to tell her he was moving to Indianapolis. In his mind the two notions were kept safely apart. That had allowed him to picture this conversation going easily.

"I can't move to Indianapolis, Marshal."

"I didn't say that you should," Marshal answered, the words made him more nervous with their surprising bluntness and all his plans for how to make this conversation go easily were forgotten.

Sindy couldn't react, beginning one sentence then another, not finishing any thoughts out loud as Marshal's words hit her hard over and over again.

"Look, the offer just came through," Marshal started talking, trying pathetically to make this a conversation about his good news and not a break up. "I really didn't see it coming and had almost forgotten I'd applied. They take their time filling job slots; it's one of the things that makes them such a desirable employer. And for them to take me right out of grad school...that's like the Yankees taking a new pitcher right out of the eighth grade. It's—" he looked up and saw that Sindy didn't very much care how great an offer this was. She was crying.

"We only dated for half a year," he said abruptly to combat the tears, his mind opting to hide behind the blunt notion that she was acting poorly because she couldn't be happy for him and let him go while he ignored the fact that the past half-year had been the happiest in his life.

"Get out," she said.

"I didn't want to—"

"Just get out," she was hugging one of the pillows from her couch to her chest and she had detached from the conversation. The tears were no longer there but she wasn't looking at him either and when he tried to speak he was met by an ice wall of avoidance.

“We only dated six months,” he mumbled as he stood up, and with every step he took towards the door he let himself savor the notion that this conversation he had been dreading was now over, that he was free, that he had his dream job, that his life would now start, and by the time he was out her door and in his car he had almost convinced himself of these things.

Back in the living room Cindy hugged the throw pillow tighter and then began to weep, angry bitter tears that she hated herself for shedding.

Sitting on the couch opposite her sat Marshal, ten years older, mostly invisible, sadly watching her with regret on his face. There was a blink in his form, and he became just a little bit less invisible, a little bit more there. And when Cindy stood up and left the room, he followed longingly after her.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.



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