

Joey Lambert

### I Am Nothing

It was 9:36 PM when Lester wiped the sweat, blood, and spit off his pant legs, and continued on to the Popeyes Chicken on 40th Street. Or rather, it was 6:30 when Lester closed the front door of his apartment on the third floor, double locked the locks, and headed downstairs out onto the street. It wasn't the most luxurious place, or the most sanitary, or the most not crumbling-to-the-ground-by-the-very-second-inhabited-with-more-rats-and-roaches-than-people-257-burglaries-and counting place. But it was home, and it was cheap, and Lester liked cheap. He liked it a lot, more than luxury or sanitation or safety, or any other less-than-necessities in life. He didn't make a whole lot of dough from manning the cash register at Walgreen's, so he tried to make the little that he earned count. And that's just what he was about to do, by going to Popeyes and getting the \$5 Bonafide Big Box that he loved so much. It was the silver lining of his week in fact, the saliva coaxing, greasy, delicious smell of the slightly suspicious "where did this meat come from" grocery store worker budget chicken wings. He would buy his dinner, and then sit in front of his low definition, boxy, fuzz screen of a T.V., and catch the reruns of Magnum P.I. every Friday. He loved the show almost as much as his Friday chicken wings. He hoped one day, he would visit Hawaii, where they shot the show. He had it all planned out, he would save his money everyday, living in this garbage bin of a home, watching his favorite show on his goodwill television, and eating Popeyes chicken wings, and then eventually, he would have enough Walgreen's money saved up to go on a long, well deserved vacation. The little rational voice kept reminding him that no, this would never

happen, Lester would die alone at 60 from a heart attack in the sad little containment area of dirty laundry and takeout boxes that he called home, without ever fulfilling any of his dreams. Lester didn't like his rational thoughts very much.

Lester then realized he had been standing as still as a statue the whole time that he had been thinking all of this, and that a couple people were staring at him mumble to himself about chicken wings. "Got to stop doing that, Lester" he said to himself. "Also gotta stop talking to yourself, Lester", he thought to himself. Lester put his ear wax coated earbuds in his ears, shoved his hands in his pockets like an angstful teenager, and started his journey with a moderate hunch in his posture. He had his vintage 1980's Discman equipped on his belt, with a scratched up Miles Davis CD playing to accompany his lonely walk downtown. He made absolute certainty that his feet were moving up and down one at a time in the general direction of his destination before he started thinking again. He thought happy thoughts. He had a phrase he would utter to himself whenever he needed to reassure himself that life was not terrible. He would say, in slightly jumbled, stuttery speech, "Everything is alright Lester, everything is okay." Lester would repeat this over and over again under his breath until he had said it so many times that it was a reflex, not a choice. It was automatic, so automatic that half the time Lester wasn't even sure if everything was alright, or if he was okay, but he would rather be deceiving himself with comforting lies than have to face the somewhat unsavory truth. "Everything is alright, everything is oka-." He stopped dead in his tracks like a deer in headlights who had just remembered it forgot to turn the stove off. He had already walked a good mile or so, and wasn't that far from Popeyes, but he wasn't worried about chicken when he saw it.

It was a little pigeon. Not an entirely uncommon sight for someone who lives in New York, but Lester was fixated on it. It was stumbling around the street, flapping around in circles like a drunkard on rollerskates. Everyone else on the street avoided it, some laughing too, as if it was a quaint little detail they would tell their families when they asked about their day at work and their commute home. Lester looked closer and saw that its wing was tarred and feathered, literally, and the poor little bird couldn't lift it to fly away. All its other bird friends were soaring away, looking happy as a pigeon could look, breathing in the smog and fumes of the New York City air, and scanning the ground for peanuts or french fries. Not this little guy though, this little guy was stuck. He was chained down to the Earth and couldn't pull himself up. Lester took interest in his new feathered friend. He identified with him. He realized he was the bird. Lester was the bird. Lester started repeating this over and over again in his head, staring at the crippled fowl. He stopped the music, dropping down and crawling on all fours, lowering himself until he was flat on his belly on the concrete a homeless man probably peed on yesterday, snaking towards the pigeon. He laid still observing it, it's twitching motions and its frantic movements, hoping somehow he would be freed and would be able to fly again. Lester thought for a moment, and raised his gaze towards the people around him. A few were crowding now, waiting to see what the crazy man would do next. He started to feel uneasy, like he had suddenly turned claustrophobic and was in an elevator standing next to an elephant, except in this elevator there were no walls, only people, and they were coiling around him, fiery serpents of curiosity and amusement choking him and burning his flesh. A few took their phones out and took pictures. One said, "Wait till my wife hears about this," chuckling. Lester was the pitied conversation piece. The thought of someone mentioning his name at a dinner

table and the kids laughing while eating their meals almost gave him some fleeting warmth inside. But the opposite of that deadened him more than anything. The fact that his life was filled with such sheer isolation that the highlight of his day was being laughed at, not with, was a horrible thought. He was nothing, Lester was nothing. Already having made a scene, Lester informed the gathering crowd of his recent discovery. **"I AM NOTHING,"** he screeched with veins popping out of his neck and flem flying from his salivary glands, and in that moment there was quiet. With his palms and knees on the concrete, he repeated the statement, whispering, "I am nothing," his cry of defiance turning into a whimpering sigh of defeat. Lester crawled into fetal position on the street, leaving his earbuds and CD player scattered on the street, shaking and drooling while muttering under his breath, "Nothing, nothing, nothing," hitting his head on the cold gravel as everyone around him stared in astonishment. A man in a yellow jacket and brown jeans cautiously walked over and asked, "Hey man, you good?", his hand outstretched. Lester wanted to look up at the man, take his hand, and to respond to him, saying, "No sir, I'm not good. My life consists of nothing but hot wings and tv reruns, and I'm currently laying on the street yelling at passers bys because of an injured bird I saw, please call an ambulance immediately, for I am bleeding profusely from the head," but it came out a little more like "Ahhnuhhahuhhuhahhooohoouuuuh," as he continued his regiment again and again.

And it continued for sometime, until he looked up at the sky and the moon had taken place of the sun. The man in brown jeans was long gone, and the bird had hopped away. Lester laid there for a moment in his own bodily fluids, taking in his surroundings, and evaluating how his day had gone. He thought about the people on the sidewalk, and the bird, and the man in the brown jeans. He thought about what he said and he thought about it hard, perhaps harder

than he could ever recall thinking in his whole life. Was he really worth nothing? Was all that Lester would amount to in life a spectacle for busy new yorkers to casually commentate at and then get on with their days? He was nearing 37 and he was right where he was at during 36, 35, 34, and most other years he could recall. There wouldn't be any friends over to celebrate his birthday, there wouldn't be any cake, or any fun decorations or surprise gifts. It would be just him, Lester, watching Magnum P.I. on his dirty coffee stained couch feeling sorry for himself, and wishing he would of followed his dreams and became a NASA engineer or a deep sea diver or a zookeeper. Wishing that he wasn't shot into the world with a brain defect and a mental disease and a stutter and a shake and the nickname Spaz permanently tattooed on him with big, flashing, anxious letters. Lester thought about all that he wanted to accomplish in life, all that he had, and all that he would, and what he thought about didn't make him feel good. But he was also wet, bleeding, and hungry, and while he couldn't fix his crippling anxiety or chronic depression with a \$5 Bonafide Box, a hot shower and a fresh change of clothes, it would certainly make it more manageable. So Lester stuffed all his little worries in a crowded closet in his head, slammed the door, put his earbuds back in, and continued onwards, to Popeye's Chicken.