

The Sand Polisher

Her workshop, unsurprisingly messy, smelled of sweet sawdust. Squares of sandpaper in leather binders stacked on top of each other like photo albums. Long benches and wooden cabinets lined the white walls. Files of various sizes were scattered on her workbench and hung proudly on the corkboard. They were in an ombre from bump files to edges with elongated teeth and reflected the lanterns in the room.

I admired her heavy workbench and its intricate leather trim with loops and pouches for sanding tools, a grinding block, and jars full of milky water. A hot scent seeped into my pores, overly sweet and sticky, and weighed me down. It reminded me of walking into Bath and Body Works, and the emulsion of morning blueberry pancakes and grapefruit passion sunsets grabbed my nose with a powerful grip.

“You came right on time.” An older woman wearing tan overalls removed her ventilation mask. She gracefully set down her file and pointed to the seat in front of her.

“I’m a bit behind on finishing my last visitor.” I walked over to her, carefully stepping over cables and vents.

“Take your time. It’s not like I’m going anywhere.”

Her thin lips quivered into an odd smile; it suited her. The seat was a wooden stool that didn’t have much character. Bland and sanded down to a thin round plank. I hugged my knees together, making myself as small as possible in her workspace.

She already went back to her sanding, and the dust softly falling down memorized me.

“How does it look?” She presented a smooth bone that resembled white porcelain and raised her naked brow.

“I’m not sure. Looks good to me.” I shrugged my shoulders and they rattled. It didn’t feel right to be in the presence of a client during a sensitive time. This was therapy after death, a private and intimate conversation between her and the bones, but I just waltzed in.

She giggled, “I think it still needs a bit more. This one strictly said not an ounce left.” Any more sanding and the bone would be a toothpick, but I didn’t say that. The dead’s wishes should be honored here.

We sat in a somewhat comfortable silence—it was mostly me uneasy. The Sand Polisher happily went in with a finer grit and hummed with no direction. She lifted the round limb up to her eye, wearing a spectacle; it was a large prescription with a lens as thick as my finger. Satisfied, she placed it in a wooden box with a name I couldn’t decipher.

“All done!” She exclaimed, sweeping the remainder of the dust with a large brush into a glass jar. It joined the rest of the jars in a crate and was labeled with words I didn’t know. Her thick arms hauled the crate onto a shelf amongst other crates of various sizes. “Now hop on, and we’ll get started.”

My heap of bones awkwardly clinked on her table, and it took me a couple tries to ground myself. After passing on and entering her workshop, my body was free from ensnaring muscles and tendons, but it became near impossible to haul myself onto her table. Even without my nervous system, I could feel a flush burn my cheeks. I made the worst first impression, and I wished I could run out of here. Giving all my willpower, my heavy body slammed on her table, rattling her tools and erupting the dust piles around me into a cloud of smoke.

I muttered a meek apology and lay on my back with my hands crossing my stomach. They awkwardly rested inside my hip bone, like keeping skeletons in a closet. I readjusted a few times, trying to get comfortable, but eventually gave up, laying them beside me.

Ignoring my fumbling, she started her introduction, “Thank you for your patronage. All who have died visit me to become their best selves in the afterlife. I’m responsible for hearing their wishes and sanding down the rougher edges of their personalities and worries.”

My nervousness was almost unbearable. This was my only chance to change everything I’d ever hated about myself. I’m sure it was the same for the many others before me. We all have regrets about what we didn’t do before dying, but our regrets about who we were seemed more detrimental to us.

“Remember, once I polish a flaw or anxiety, I can’t put it back on. It’s lost forever—forgotten.” She leaned over me, intensity in her white eyes. “Something *you* will forget.”

I nodded my head, moving to the side a bit because I didn’t want to touch her. The point of sanding is forgetting, and I was ready to forget it all. Satisfied, she moved back on her chair and clapped her hands together.

“Alright! Name what you’d like to sand out, and we can determine intensity from there.” She put her mask back on, and I remembered this movie I watched back way then. It was a B-movie horror about some nuclear gas terrorizing the city, and everyone wore a gas mask; there were zombie sharks, too. They couldn’t recognize each other and could no longer breathe fresh air. I gave it a low score on Rotten Tomatoes.

“Generally, everything,” I racked my head for the reasons for coming here. “I want to be smoothed out as much as possible.”

“Ok.” She nodded her head slowly, smiling with a curl in her lip. “Different grit numbers influence the way I polish you. If you get a larger grit, the rougher it is, and we use that to get the deeper kinks out.”

I perked up. I did have a lot of flaws, and it would lift a lot of pain if I could smooth them out. Like my need to sing “Happy Birthday” better than everyone, though I’m not a good singer. Even the habit of me judging others based on how they cross their legs. Maybe even my need to be the best in general.

The Sand Polisher spread out squares of sandpaper, dealing out the cards for my polishing. “Fine grit smooths you after the deep stuff, like fluttering emotions that you don’t want.”

I thought about the number of times I cried over dumb things, funny things, and serious things. I don’t want to feel in a way that makes me cry because I’ve always hated the way my tears stuck to my face.

She held up her hands, covered in long leather gloves. “12 to 2000 grit is what I have in inventory today. What’ll be?” She slowly made numbers with her fingers, making a point about something I didn’t understand.

“Maybe start with the harshest grit you have. I’d like to forget about my deeper issues.”

“Of course!” She put her mask back on, tying her ponytail a bit tighter.

“Don’t I need a mask?” I asked.

“Well, you don’t really need to breathe, do you?” She wiggled her finger playfully in between my bare ribs, and my nakedness began to worry me.

“Yes.” I decided not to speak anymore and rubbed the bone she touched. She had a habit of making me feel dumb, despite being right.

The grit vibrated my bones and felt wrong. Like when you pet a dog against the grain. She glided around my head on a stool with wooden wheels, hunching over my face and touching every crevice from inside my nasal cavity to the cracks in my forehead. Her hands were long, caressing my cheeks and the bottom of my chin. It was the most intense massage I’ve ever had—if I had one.

It wasn’t uncomfortable when the Sand Polisher moved onto 1000 grit. I imagined a cute kitty licking my face, picking up all my past worries with its rough tongue. My pores were caked with dust from my judgmental comments and my effort to keep up appearances—why did I even bother with my skincare routine—I felt whole.

The vibrations soothed my body, creating a low buzz that consistently kissed my ears. They’ll rock me to sleep, and when I wake up, I’ll be defined. My quarrels with friends about how to pronounce a word or who started that rumor will be filed away. Their names, scraped from my dry lips and memory, became a speck of snow meant to melt. I’ll say goodbye to my failures in something, something I can’t think about right now, but I know they’re better off floating in oblivion.

“Here, take a look.” She handed me a mirror, remnants of dust packed inside the creases, and inside its glass, I shined brightly. My face was free of powder, and my head didn’t ache; it couldn’t feel anything. The polish liberated me, and I couldn’t name a problem I had with my mouth or thoughts. She

wouldn't tell me about my insecurities before sanding, of course—it's part of the contract. Souls agree with the terms of sanding, and it's a service respected by both parties. Why should the Sand Polisher bring up the problems she worked hard to polish over, worries I'll never remember? I wonder what my signature looks like.

The larger grit paper lost its bumpy texture, and I felt more content about my progress. I think I remember doing before and after photos of my weightlifting program, and the definition in my later photos made me feel like what I did was real. The Sand Polisher threw it away in a can. Her large foot pressed down on the handle, revealing a fire burning inside. I strained to see the small piece of sandpaper melt and burn, becoming ash.

She grabbed another piece. "We still have a bit of way to go."

"How long does it usually take?"

"Depends on the client. The more polished, the longer. I've had some stay cons in here. Don't worry, I don't mind the company." She chuckled and rubbed my shoulder, reminding me how much I've bumped shoulders with people.

I was always looking for a fight, a reason to be right all the time. I pressed hard into the sides of my loved ones, etching permanent marks into our relationships and continued lousy arguments that broke bonds. They asked why I couldn't give up, and I forgot what I was fighting for—the Sand Polisher must've sanded it out.

I even brushed shoulders with a few old friends at a small bar, their touch bittersweet. Perhaps they were past lovers. Our conversations were flat about our university days, but their names can't help but escape from my mind—they're not there. If any recollection of them has disappeared, then I suppose they added to my pain and influenced the anxieties of my past. At this point, I'm letting go of my shoulders. Her filing will shave off the pounds of guilt that caused my spine to hunch.

I hummed in rhythm with her scratching, and she scraped my throat, my chest—I could breathe again. My attempt at counting the beats to my song went sour every time my voice dried out. I puffed out dust, and I couldn't muster another note. Perhaps my voice wasn't as good as I thought. I wondered if I

did any talent shows during my childhood because I had an inkling my mother wanted to show off my skills. I imagined belching out an opera or performing a guttural yodel.

Then, I couldn't. My mind fuzzed, and it buzzed, but I think that was the sandpaper on my leg. The razor bumps would finally disappear. They would be smooth as stone, strong as marble, and I couldn't think of any other strong or impressive rock. I think I wanted to be a geologist but eventually found my way into astrology and crystals that soothe negative energy.

I wasn't here anymore, and my sense of self waned. I'd been hearing the same buzz of the file, and I'd been in the same position for a long time now. I tried to speak, but I remembered she had sanded down my teeth and jaw. For what flaw, maybe I talked too much during work meetings? Days of my life I spent with my mouth open, but nothing noteworthy came out. My words were flat, malleable to fit whatever the majority wanted, not that they cared for whatever ideas I offered. I had forgotten if I had any problems with my speech. Did I not sound eloquent enough? I believed my voice was my best quality or was it my eyes? They're gone anyway. I would have asked The Sand Polisher about what she thought of my voice when I first entered her shop, even about my eyes, though she had never seen them before. But, if she sanded down my mouth so much, she also believed it wasn't worth using.

My acquaintances knew me as stubborn about all the wrong things. I thought I had many stupid arguments about the pronunciation of a certain coffee shop or how you should wash the dishes. It's silverware first, then bowls and plates. In this instance, I wanted the Sand Polisher to put some of my jaw back on. I can't remember the sound of my voice, and I think my grandpa said it sounded like a bluebird—whatever that is.

I focused on my fingers, making fancy hand signals I've seen in movies or during my time in scouts to attract her eyes. I strained to look where she was, and she causally rubbed my feet, oblivious to my hand puppet show. She polished my heel with a long piece of sandpaper, and particles of dust would burst into the air when she snapped it.

I thought she didn't like the dog I made since I did it wrong, but now that I looked, my fingers were missing. My wrists rested in fluffy mounds of starch, sliced in a flawless cut with a sharp edge. I

turned my wrist, moved the dust around, and compacted it on the table. The phantom of my fingers danced, but my arms lay still. Perhaps, I twirled my thumbs too much for my liking when I had to wait in the doctor's office or stand in line at the bank.

I lightly tapped her leather-clad arm with my foot, which was more like bar soap. Did anyone play "This Little Piggy" with my toes? She paused her sanding, tilting her head a bit in my direction.

"What's wrong?" Her tone was flat, and I worried that I bothered her.

I flailed like a fish, wiggling my sad little arms and my sad little body. Her knotted forehead relieved its wrinkles—not like she had any—and nodded in understanding.

"It's perfectly normal to be incapacitated." She softly rubbed my shoulder, tickling my neck. I wish I could itch it.

Her back turned to me, grating my sole. "Forgetting is part of the process. I usually remind my clients since they forget a lot." She drew a line in the bottom of my foot with the tip of her finger, parting the sea of snow left from my bones. "They talk about anesthesia, but this is more permanent."

She wiped it off.

As these moments passed by, I tried to reach far into my consciousness and pull out the memories, the feelings I wanted to let go of. She sands and rubs, taking away all my rough edges, and the desperation to remember waned. I remained relaxed, floating in this white room, and I focused on what was left of me. She finished my hips a while ago, and they disconnected from my legs, left as a tiny block of bone. Maybe my dancing wasn't as good as I thought it was.

Vertebrae were strewn across the table and had the look and feel of marbles. The shaking from the sanding sent the orbs across the wood or bouncing off the edge. I thought I could hear some shattering, and the others that got in her way were tossed off into a crate.

The Sand Polisher didn't consider my presence anymore. My joints weakly failed to grab her attention, and I'm stuck in place, slipping deeper into nothing. I wanted to ramble about my life aloud or what I remembered left of it. Forgetfulness became something that I forgot more and naming the fading memories relieved the anxiety I felt.

She polished and brushed off my excess matter into her jars, filling them with water. My memories I wanted to forget sloshed around, dripping from its sides. Emotions I repressed sunk low into the glass, too dense to play freely with the water. She unscrewed another large jar, moving the pile of what used to be my right arm into its confines. It fell towards the bottom, erupting into a mushroom cloud, and eventually settled.

“Almost there.” She mumbled to herself, shaking her gloves. She moved to the side of the workbench and grabbed a hefty orbital saw that hung off a hook, complete with a fresh pad. Its soft whir filled the workshop, but it became louder as she switched the buttons, screeching into my ears. Dodging the numerous wires and dust piles, she approached my head and firmly set it on my skull. My body jolted from the sudden force, grinding against the tabletop. Her strong arms moved in a figure-eight, covering my eyesight and scraping my face. She was consistent in her direction, deliberate in her strength, and I swayed with the movement she forced upon me. Didn’t I come here for this, though?

What was I remembering? I forgot when I entered her walls, but I came here with clear intentions. They’re not so clear now, and I couldn’t for the life of me think what my wishes were. Well, thinking is a flaw in itself if you consider it more. I thought too much about people, the world, and myself. I absorbed all assumptions and clung to needy feelings, and the bouncing in my head was drying out.

More and more, I tried to think. I believed in physical therapy that one must continue to do a motion even if it’s small, but the effort is becoming too much or not at all. I have no urge to explore my mind. It’s frustrating to forget something you had a moment ago, and she won’t give me a break to get my bearings together. She continued to skate on my face, obliterate my head, and I can’t help but forget who this woman was.

I mustn’t be here, and I never was. My lack of contemplation told me that it’d been a long time. While she buzzed my brain, sanded all the recollections of my hard times and the good, and sentiments of what I held dear or detested, I remembered. I didn’t know why I came here in the first place.