

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 3

THE PAINLESS REEL

*Some memories
should stay on
the cutting room
floor.*



CHEW Z

◆ A ROYA PUBLICATION ◆

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Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 3

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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SYNOPSIS

In the back room of an unmarked parlor on Vine, a lonely man finds a drug called Halo, sold to people who no longer want to be themselves for an hour. Halo does not show you lights, or gods, or your own childhood. It gives you somebody else's worst night, lived from inside a man who felt none of the things a person is supposed to feel while doing it — and to the men and women paying for the privilege it feels like the first true peace of their lives.

They come back shaking. They come back with marks they cannot explain. They come back.

He tells himself he is only visiting, only curious, only once — and then a second time, and a third, and a fourth, building a gentler story about who he is with every visit, until a fifth, unlabeled reel shows him something no story survives.

This is a noir about the second self we manufacture to outlive the first one, the appetite for a peace that was never ours to feel, and the particular horror of recognizing your own hands in the one memory you were never supposed to see.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book began with a simple, uncomfortable question: what would you trade to stop feeling, even for an hour, the exact thing that makes you afraid to be yourself?

Halo is not built as an escape. It is built as an exchange. Every reel gives you an hour inside somebody else's nervous system — a man who has never once, in thirty years of documented use, been recorded flinching at what his own hands were doing. You do not get his violence. You get the thing underneath it that customers are actually paying for: the specific, catastrophic relief of feeling nothing at all where dread is supposed to live.

You come back shaking. You come back marked. You come back for more, because the drug was never selling a vision. It was selling permission.

At the center of the book is a man who tells himself, every single time, that he is only visiting. A witness, not a participant. Curious about somebody else's darkness rather than a resident of his own. Five reels in, that story runs out of road. What is waiting for him in the fifth reel is not a stranger's memory. It is the one memory he has spent the entire book unconsciously building his personality around not having.

I wanted to write about the particular kind of forgetting that is not really forgetting at all — the gentler story we construct, visit after visit, excuse after excuse, to make an unbearable fact survivable by relocating it onto somebody else.

Chuck Palahniuk has talked about fiction that goes all the way into the graphic, unbearable places becoming a kind of permission slip for people carrying something they have never had anywhere honest to set down. That is what I wanted this book to be for a reader, the same way Halo is, in the story, for its customers — except I would like to think this permission slip does not come with a bill attached.

You will not forget what he did by the end of this book. What you will have a harder time doing is remembering how to want anything as cleanly as his customers wanted that one hour of not being themselves.

— Chew Z.

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REEL ONE

WHAT I WENT LOOKING FOR

Nobody hired me to go looking for Halo.

I want that on the record before anything else, because everything after it only makes sense if you understand that nobody sent me and nobody was paying me by the hour to be there. I went the way people go looking for anything they already half suspect is going to fuck them up for good. Quietly. On my own time. Telling myself it was curiosity, which is the word you use when you are not ready to say hunger.

I had heard about it the way you hear about a fire three streets over. Close enough to smell, far enough to keep pretending it is some other poor bastard's insurance problem. And then at some point I stopped noticing when I had started thinking about it on the drive home every single night.

It had been a bad year. Not the kind with a clean story attached — nobody died, nobody left, nothing you could hand a stranger in one sentence — just a slow pile-up of nights lying awake doing arithmetic on every way I had failed to be the kind of man who sleeps. That is a worse year than the other kind, and you cannot tell a soul, because the honest version of it is I am forty-one years old and I have turned into somebody I would not cross a road to help, and there is no fucking way to say that at a dinner table.

I knew Halo was a drug. I knew it did not get sold on corners, because corners are for people who still want to be found, and whatever I was by then, I was not that. And I knew the ones who came out the other side of it stopped meeting your eyes straight on, like something in the angle of a direct look had started costing them more than it used to.

What I did not know, that first night, was that I was about to spend six weeks turning into a regular at a place that sold people the one hour of their life when they finally stopped being scared shitless of themselves.

Six weeks turned out to be a hell of a lot more dangerous than curiosity usually is.

There was a man ahead of me in the stairwell. Older. Further along than I understood at the time. He said it quietly, the way you talk when you think the walls have opinions.

“You go looking for Halo enough times, you stop finding out about the drug and start finding out about yourself.”

I wrote it down later, in my head, the way I write down every damn thing that sounds like wisdom and turns out to be a confession nobody is ready to make yet.

Including, as it turns out, me.

THE PARLOR ON VINE

The parlor on Vine had no sign.

It had a door, and behind the door a stairwell that smelled like an ashtray that had given up trying, and at the bottom of it a woman who introduced herself as Ruth and never once, in six weeks, gave me a surname to write down.

Ruth ran the place the way a good madam runs a house. Not with menace. With hospitality, which is worse, because menace at least tells you to get the hell out and hospitality is the thing that makes you comfortable enough to stay. She had a face built for trust — the kind that makes strangers hand over their coats and their car keys and, eventually, their whole evening — and she looked me over for exactly as long as it took to decide how much of the truth she was going to charge me for.

She told me Halo was not a hallucinogen. Not the way the papers wrote it up.

The papers always wanted a molecule to blame, she said. Something with a structure you could put in front of a jury. It made a tidier story than the truth, and the truth was that Halo did not show anybody a goddamn vision at all.

It gave them an hour inside somebody else's nervous system.

A very specific somebody. A man the customers only ever called the Painless Man, because in thirty years of documented work nobody had ever recorded so much as a flinch out of him. Not fear. Not hesitation. Not — and she said this part slowly, the way you set a glass down on a table you do not want to mark — the thing normal people carry afterwards that stops them ever doing it again.

I asked her straight out what the hell that meant.

She did not flinch either. I noticed that the way you notice a family resemblance you are not ready to name.

She said people did not come to Vine for a trip. They came because they had spent their entire lives afraid — of failing, of being seen, of

the exact shape of their own anger — and because for one hour, wearing somebody else's calm like a coat cut for a bigger man, they got to do the unthinkable thing and feel nothing on the other side of it but clean, complete relief.

I asked her what the unthinkable thing usually was.

She said that depended on the reel.

She said it the way a sommelier talks about a vintage. Something about that particular calm put the hair up on my arms in a way six weeks of much worse rooms never quite managed again, and I have thought since that this is the only honest warning I ever got and I sat there and ordered anyway.

I asked if I could watch somebody come down off one.

She took me to a curtained booth. There was a man in a good suit sitting very still with his hands open on his knees, palms up, in the exact loose posture of somebody who has just set down something heavy he has been carrying a long way. His eyes were open. He was not blinking at any rate a person is built to sustain.

And around his throat, faint, like the ghost of a hand that had never actually been there, was a ring of bruising the color of a healing plum, in a shape too deliberate to be anything but a print.

I went home. I did not sleep. I told myself I had seen something, and that seeing something is not the same as wanting it, and I believed that for about four days — which I now know is the exact shelf life of that particular piece of shit lie.

REEL THREE

THE CUSTOMER

I told myself I was going once. Just to see what the fuss was about.

That is true the way most of what I told myself that year was true. Technically. And only if you do not look at the fucking thing too long.

Ruth did not ask many questions about why a man my age wanted his first reel. She asked one thing: did I want an old one, safe, worn smooth by a hundred customers before me — or something closer to new.

I said old. I was not ready for anything the room still remembered clearly. Christ knows I was not ready for the old ones either, but that is hindsight and hindsight is cheap.

I could not have told you at the time what I meant by that, or why remembered was the word that arrived for a piece of tape.

What I can tell you about the hour itself I have told exactly one other person. I am only telling you now because I no longer have a single reason left to protect the man I used to be from what he did to himself that night, in a leather chair, in a curtained booth, on Vine.

It was not a hallucination. Ruth was right about that.

It was a room. Complete. Down to the temperature of the air and the specific give of a floorboard under a shoe that was not mine. And there was a person in front of me, frightened in a way I recognized instantly and hated myself for recognizing — because some old, ugly, curious part of every living person, the part that slows down for a wreck on the motorway, knows exactly what that particular fear looks like the first fucking time it sees it up close.

I want to tell you I felt what she felt.

I did not. That was the whole design of it. That was the entire fucking cruelty of the thing, dressed up and sold as a gift.

I felt what he felt, watching her.

Which was nothing. Nothing at all, standing exactly where fear is supposed to live. A vast, cool, complete absence spreading out in every direction like a held breath finally let go.

And underneath the absence — worse than the absence, and I have had three years to find a kinder word for it and there is not one — something that can only honestly be called joy.

I came up out of that chair the way a man comes up out of deep water. Except drowning is supposed to be the part you are grateful as hell to have survived, and some ungovernable, unforgivable back room of me was already missing the water.

My hands shook for three days straight.

On the second day I noticed a faint discoloration starting at the pad of my thumb. The color of a healing bruise. In a shape it took me an embarrassingly long time to admit resembled the exact place a man's thumb sits when his hand is doing the one thing hands are never supposed to do to somebody who is begging them to stop.

I looked at that thumb for a long fucking time. Then I put my hand in my pocket and went to work and said good morning to people and did not think about it — and that is a sentence I would like you to hold against my throat for a second, the way I have to.

I went back to Vine four more times before I understood what I was actually doing there.

Sit with that number a second. I have had to.

Four.

Not once, to steel myself against it. Not twice, to be sure of what I had seen.

Four.

REEL FOUR

WHAT THE REELS ARE MADE OF

By my third month as a regular I had stopped being the kind of customer Ruth had to work on. I was the kind she talked to between reels, a little, the way people talk to a barman they have decided is safe enough to stop performing for.

One slow evening, with the parlor empty enough to hear the pipes, she told me the Painless Man was not thirty years dead the way the regulars liked to believe.

The legend was good for business, she said. A tidy villain, safely buried, nobody's problem — which, when you hear it out loud in an empty room, is the most obviously bullshit sentence ever constructed, and I nodded along like a man being told the weather. But the newest reels — the ones she only brought out for customers she trusted, the ones that still had that wet, unfinished quality the old hands swore they could feel, a rawness the worn tapes had lost —

Those were not thirty years old.

Those were weeks.

I asked her what that meant. In words. Out loud. Because I needed to hear myself fail to say it before I would let myself believe a damn word of it.

She said it meant somebody was still working.

Still working. Like it was a trade. Like the man had a fucking round to finish.

I want to be honest about what I did with that sentence, because honesty is the only currency I have left that is worth spending on you.

I did not ask one more fucking question. Not that night. Not one.

I told myself it was not my business. That was a lie I could still, barely, afford — and if you ever want to know what a man sounds like in the exact second before he stops being able to afford

anything at all, he sounds like a reasonable prick saying not my business in an empty room with the pipes going.

It was some weeks later. Close enough to trusting her by then that the question came out of me before I had decided to ask it. Who the hell was he. The man whose calm I kept buying. Forty dollars an hour. Four times running.

Ruth looked at me for a long moment with that hospitable, trustworthy face — the face that makes strangers hand over their coats and their keys and their whole evening — and said the thing that finally cracked the story I had been telling myself open down the middle.

She said: “He doesn’t even need paying. He seems to enjoy the work. He just doesn’t remember doing it, which honestly, between us, makes him easier to manage than anyone else on my payroll.”

I asked his name.

She smiled the same hospitable smile she had been wearing since the bottom of the stairwell.

And she said that the thing customers had been paying to feel, one curtained hour at a time, was never a stranger’s calm at all.

It had never once been a stranger’s.

It was only ever a man’s relief at being permitted, for one hour, to stop pretending he did not already know.

REEL FIVE

THE UNLABELED REEL

There was one reel in the back cabinet with no number on it.

Every other tape on Vine had one — filed by date and duration, the way a library files anything it wants to be able to find again. Ruth kept that one separately, in a drawer she opened with a key she wore on a chain I had never once clocked as a key until that night.

She told me I could have it for free. She said it with something that might have been pity. She said a man in my condition had earned the right to see the whole picture, and God help me, I heard that as generosity.

I sat in the chair a fifth time.

I told myself it was the last time. The way I had told myself the first four were curiosity, then habit, then research into my own nerves. Every gentler word a man keeps behind the bar for exactly this occasion, lined up and dusted, and not one of them worth a damn.

I was in a hallway.

I recognized it before I understood why I recognized it.

The woman in front of me was frightened in the specific way I had hated myself for recognizing the very first time. And this time — God help me, this time — I knew the geometry of the room before the reel got to the part where it would have shown me.

Because I already knew where the crack in the floorboard was.

I already knew which way the fucking door stuck.

And I already knew, standing in a body that was mine and not mine at the same fucking moment, for the first time in six weeks of very carefully not asking myself the question, that the woman in that hallway — frightened in the specific way that had been living in my thumb for six weeks like a stain that would not set —

was somebody I am never going to be permitted to name.

And that I was not, and had never once been, a visitor standing outside the reel looking in.

I want to be plain, because there is no version of this where being careful with the words helps anybody. It was not somebody else's worst night. It was mine. I had been paying forty dollars an hour to rent it back off the woman I gave it to.

My hands did the thing my hands had apparently already fucking done once. Live. Off the tape. On a night I have since reconstructed out of a bar tab, six missing hours and a coat I never found again.

And I felt, watching my own hands do it a second time from the inside, the exact vast, cool, complete absence I had been driving back to Vine four separate times to buy, forty dollars an hour, without ever once letting myself ask what I was actually homesick for.

Ruth was not running a supplier.

She was running a customer who paid in product instead of cash. A man who came in every few weeks not for the reels but to hand one over. Who left every single time with no memory of the transaction and a gentler story already assembling itself on the drive home — about a curious man who had merely come to watch, and was almost, almost ready to stop.

I built that gentler man out of the same clean absence Halo sells for forty dollars an hour on Vine. Because a man can survive damn near anything he has done, so long as he gets to be the one visiting the scene instead of the poor bastard who made it.

I want you to understand that is not a metaphor. That is the actual mechanism. That is the whole shit-eating design of the thing, and it worked on me for six weeks like a charm.

And I was, the entire time, my own best customer and my own most reliable source.

THE UNREMEMBERED

The parlor on Vine is still open. I know, because I still go. Not the way I used to, and not for the reason I used to give myself.

There is a room at the back now. Ruth added it sometime in the last few years, after the story about the man who found out what he was got told in enough basements that it stopped being my story specifically and started being a category — the way any true thing does, if enough strangers need somewhere to put it.

Eight of us most weeks. Sometimes eleven.

People who bought a reel once, or a dozen times, or who only ever watched some poor bastard come down shaking in a curtained booth and knew, the way you know weather changing in your knees, that they had been standing closer to the center of it than a customer ever gets to stand.

We do not call ourselves anything.

We tried Unremembered for a while, because that is the word Ruth used the night she finally told me the truth, and it fitted for a while — the way a coat fits until you notice it was cut for somebody else's shoulders. Most of us have stopped needing the name.

Here is the first thing you learn in that back room.

Halo never needed a monster to keep running. Not one. Not ever.

It only ever needed some poor bastard willing to become one for an hour and then hand the hour off to somebody kinder to carry forward. A stranger. A customer. A self assembled fresh every few weeks out of nothing but relief and a good clean alibi.

The supply never dried up, because the supply was never a person Ruth had to go looking for. It was a mechanism. And mechanisms do not quit. They just find the next set of hands willing — however briefly, however sincerely — not to remember whose hands they were.

We read the fifth reel out loud once a month. His own voice, on tape, describing a chair and a curtain and a woman's hospitable, trustworthy face.

Most of us cannot get through the damn thing out loud without stopping. We take turns.

Afterwards, without anybody ever saying to, we sit there checking the pads of our thumbs the way you would check a lottery ticket you were hoping to have lost.

Nobody in that room has ever finished the sentence out loud about what we are checking for.

I have learned not to ask.

I have learned that some silences are the only mercy anybody in that room still has left to give each other.

And I have stopped, mostly, calling it mercy at all.

A lonely man hears about a drug called Halo and tells himself he is only curious. Halo does not show anybody visions. It sells an hour inside somebody else's nervous system, and the somebody is a man who has never once been recorded flinching at what his own hands were doing.

The parlour on Vine has no sign. The woman who runs it has a face built for trust and never gives a surname. Customers come down out of the booth shaking, with marks they cannot account for, and book again before they reach the street.

He goes once, to see what the fuss is about. Then four more times. With every visit he builds a gentler story about the kind of man who would only ever be visiting.

There is a reel in the back cabinet with no number on it, and the woman who runs the parlour tells him he has earned the right to see the whole picture.

He tells himself he is only visiting. Nobody on Vine is only visiting.



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