



Amos

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Amos had been an employee of All-You-Mart for thirty-two years, eight months and nineteen days when he was called into the small room at the back of the storage dock.

His commencement date was emblazoned in tiny white print on his bright blue employee identity tag. Beneath that was a QR code that served to reassure All-You-Mart that he was wherever he needed to be, whenever he should be there. Amos always was. The Rorschachesque clouds of black and white that made up the code reminded Amos of a pair of opposing swans, long and broken-looking necks curving toward one another to form the shape of a pixelated heart.

The room was quiet and empty, save for a featureless wooden desk and a black chair on the opposite side. The leather on the back had worn away to a tired-looking grey in a wide patch the approximate size and shape of a man's torso. He had been here before. Several times. The Floor Manager's office was the room they had been brought to when he had been taken on by All-You-Mart under the Post-war Reemployment Scheme. His whole division had been taken to the same megastore, thirty-two ex artillery operators. He had overheard the manager at the time – Amos didn't know if he'd ever learned his name – saying that it was easier to keep the divisions together.

"Build on existing dynamics: war and retail aren't all that different."

Amos was able to understand that. His role at All-You-Mart felt like a minor deviation from his military duties. Take the products from the big metal cart. Locate the tag for the product on the shelf. Place the product. *Load, Aim, Fire.*

The other ex-military employees were gone now, of course. For what little it still sold, All-You-Mart did not need thirty-two stock replenishment staff. They barely needed Amos.

The coffee disappeared first, about two years after Amos had started working at the store. Bananas, then chocolate. Avocados and peanuts, about ten years in. The milk and honey had stopped in the same week, just a few years ago. Some of the customers and staff had found that amusing. Amos hadn't known why. The most recent loss was the fish, eight months ago.

The fish had made Amos sad. He'd never been to the ocean – at least, he didn't think he had. He might have been stationed near the coast during the war, but that time had become an indistinct miasma of red skies, thick smoke and graveyard silences fractured by ballistic eulogies. When Amos tried to remember the war, it was like peering through the smoked glass window in the manager's office. Vague shapes, grey murmurs of movement that might have been anything. The only distinct memory he had from that time was the

Prime Minister's announcement when the war had ended. The middle-aged man telling soldiers and citizens alike that the fight was over; that their soldiers would remain Useful in this new world of peace and prosperity. His clear voice, thin and sharp as it broke the formless drizzle of the war. A bolt of lightning in the rain.

When he wasn't busy, before the store opened for the day or after it had been closed, he would go and look at the mackerel and sea bass arranged neatly on the faux grass that lined the seafood fridges. He would peer into their glassy, unseeing eyes and imagine them swimming in the great, blue everywhere of the Atlantic. He'd wondered if fish knew they were in the Atlantic. Or the Pacific. Or the Arctic before the Arctic had become a place where no fish could live, before it had turned from everywhere-blue to nowhere-black. Once he had stared so long at the unblinking eye of a red emperor that the store opened around him without his notice. The Floor Manager had to ping his company receiver, over and over, until the man had simply come and thumped Amos on the back. Told him that if he stopped working like that again he'd be out of a job.

The Floor Manager did not like Amos, and more than once had stated that he was too old to be working the floor, out around The Customers. Amos knew he was old, older by far than anyone else at the store, but he liked to be near The Customers. He liked The Customers and the noise they made and the mess The Customers left behind on the slowly emptying shelves. He liked to show The Customers where to find the vitamins and the dried beans and the water filters and the prophylactics and the rice flour and the sedatives and the motor oil. And more than anything, when he had finished helping them, Amos liked to ask The Customers; "Have I Been Useful To You Today?" and they could tell him Yes or No or any number of answers in between and their answer would be reported to management and most days Amos got more Yes's than No's, and that made him very happy.

Amos was thinking of his Yes's and No's while he waited in the Floor Managers office. He was quite sure he had plenty of Yes's, and not a single No so far today. Amos had been Useful. So surely, he had thought, he was not here because he was in trouble. The last time he had been to the office, he was in quite a lot of trouble. There had been a complaint. From a Customer. The first one Amos had ever received. He hoped that he had not been complained about again. Last time, he had been sent to retraining for a month, and when he returned, all the fish were gone.

The last complaint had come from the mother of two small boys. Amos shouldn't have known that, but the Floor Manager had told him when he had called Amos into the office.

"A mother of two and a Class Six Citizen, Amos! Do you know how many Sixes still shop here?"

The boys had been watching Amos place boxes of sunscreen on a shelf. *Load. Aim. Fire.* The smaller of the two had approached, straining to reach a thin tube of SPF 150 from the highest shelf. His fingers brushed the smooth plastic and knocked several bottles onto the ground. The boy had looked bashful. He had a striped green towel over his shoulder. Messy white-blond hair. A tooth missing, right at the front.

Amos had picked up the fallen sunscreen and handed a tube to the boy. The boy took it and grinned. The gap in his tooth exposed a tongue that was stained an artificial ice-lolly blue. Amos asked the boy if he had been Useful to him today.

He didn't hear his reply. Amos would never know if the boy had been a Yes or a No. A cold stream of water had hit him and pulled his attention to the second child. Taller. Wider. Holding a bright yellow gun as long as his arm, a bulbous chamber protruding from the top. The word *Toy* did not thunder across his brain like a wave of mortars and cut-off screams. The word *Weapon* did. *Weapon and Danger and Protocol and Load. Aim. Fire, Load. Aim. Fire, Load. Aim. FIRE.*

A security drone had captured the incident, and when Amos had been hauled into the back the Floor Manager had shared the footage.

Amos thought that surely it could not be him, throwing his bulk between the small gap-toothed boy and the larger one who brandished the sun-coloured water pistol. Sending the small one flying into the shelf, plastic tubes of lotion clattering to the ground and aping the hollow *rat-tat-tat* of spent machine gun cartridges. The figure that had dropped to one knee and held the weightless ghost of a blast cannon, pulled from a distant dream, was an imposter. The Amos-like thing that mimed *Load. Aim. Fire* in the direction of the now crying older child, that ignored the shouting of The Customers and the staff who had rushed over to pull the dazed smaller boy from the wreckage of the sunscreen shelf was a mirage, an illusion, a nonsensical scribble over the logic that guided Amos's identity. Amos was not a soldier. Amos was not loud and deadly and necessary. Amos stocked shelves at an All-You-Mart. Amos was quiet and good and Useful.

The Floor Manager had wanted to be rid of him after that. He had called Head Office, in front of Amos, and said as much. The faceless, static-tinged voice on the other end of the call had transformed the Floor Manager's face into a rictus of distaste and impatience. He had not shared with Amos what Head Office had told him. Just spat the word "Retraining" in his direction before leaving the room.

Amos could hear voices heading towards the Floor Manager's office, and he hoped he was not being sent to retraining once more. It was not that it had been bad, per say. It just hadn't been much of anything. Without the changing faces of The Customers; the banners and signs that transformed from Happy Christmas to Happy Easter to Happy Halloween and back again; the slowly depleting cans and cartons on the long white shelves, he found each day, each hour, melded into the next. He barely remembered a moment of it. What he did remember was his first day back at the store, returning with anticipation to the seafood case and finding nothing.

Nothing was not correct. The too-green faux grass was still there. The translucent, knobby plastic beneath the grass that was supposed to look like ice but looked more like shards of broken glass was still there. There was even something new, a little sign that read:

All-You-Mart regrets to announce that fresh fish is no longer available in stores. For citizens class four and above, please contact Head Office for alternative options.

But there were no fish. No glimmering silver scales, or bulging eyes filled with frozen ocean. Just pretend grass on pretend ice, an apology, and Amos's own reflection staring back at him, a spectre trapped beneath the glass.

The door to the office opened, and the Floor Manager entered with a woman Amos had not seen before. She wore a grey coverall, carried a black bag and did not acknowledge him. The Floor Manager sat in his chair. Stared across the desk at Amos.

"We don't need you anymore."

He did not tell Amos why. Why or why now. Amos did not ask either. Instead, he asked:

"Are there no more fish left in the ocean? Are they all gone now? Like the coffee? Like the bananas?"

The woman in the coverall was standing behind him. She made a surprised sound. The Floor Manager was typing something into his computer. He did not look at Amos again.

"There haven't been fish in the ocean for a long time. They were from a pond, in a shed in Victoria. Shed's closed now. Pond went bad."

The woman snorted at the Floor Manager.

"You talk to your vacuum cleaner like that too? They should never have given these things voices. Makes everyone sentimental, start treating them like people. They aren't."

With that, the woman behind Amos took a thin silver rod from her square black bag and jammed it into the back of his neck.

The device that had been running on a declassified-for-the-commercial-market version of the Australasian Military Operating System – AMOS – had been returned to basic functionality.

Amos could no longer remember the war, or All-You-Mart, the fish or the gap-toothed boy with the sunscreen. What was left behind in the repurposed combat bot was enough to have him stand and walk into the back of the van that waited to take him to landfill.

It was enough to have him tramp over the mounds of microwaves and plastic bottles, the single, abandoned shoes and burnt-out automobiles. The sun-faded, unwanted toys and discarded air filtration masks. The things that once had meaning. Form. Things that no longer did. There was enough left for him to lay down, unassisted on the tallest pile of refuse and to stare up at the empty sky.

As his shutdown screen began to overlay his external visual feed, the sky seemed to change from a dull, weathered grey to the great, promising and impossible everything-blue of the ocean, and as the final, fleeting sparks of awareness flickered and died in the spaces between his metallic synapses, there was enough left for Amos to hope.

And he hoped that he had been Useful.

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