

# **Polaroid Prison**

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It sat upon a dusty shelf hidden in the back of a second-hand store just above eye level. David wasn't convinced it would work, but he bought it anyway. At home, after picking up some related supplies, he took his new purchase out of the box the store clerk had generously provided. He smiled as his eyes floated over the black plastic surface of the object's exoskeleton.

*Camera.* The world almost magically appeared in his head. It was not just any camera, it was a Polaroid camera, which seemed to have mystical properties of its own. Even the name of it conjured a sense of alchemy. *Polaroid.*

There was no real good reason for the purchase. David already owned a camera, an expensive one in fact; however, there was something about this particular camera. He was unsure why he had entered the rundown second-hand store that day. He was perplexed how he came to be in the back of the store, lit by a dim fluorescent bulb that irritatingly flickered, holding this very camera with the impulse to buy. The machine had a certain draw to it, as if it spoke to him urging him to buy, but his eagerness to try out his new toy overcame any worries that appeared.

His apartment was on the third story of a tall brick building. The elevator always seemed to be broken, so he was used to taking the stairs. The apartment was well suited for any modern bachelor—not too large to give the illusion of a great emptiness and not too small to cause any claustrophobic feelings. It was a fine abode and David had resided there for some time.

Though being a bachelor, he did not live alone. He had obtained a roommate many years ago and her name was Maggie. Maggie, as was her evening routine, greeted him at the door.

"Hello my dear," David said after closing the door behind him. Maggie rubbed up against his leg and released a soft purr. Maggie was a gray tiger cat, who was a bit portly in the mid-section, though that never seemed to slow her down. She was a good companion, David's idea of the perfect female. She was always glad to see him arrive and never complained when she saw him go. "Daddy's got a new toy."

Loading the camera with film proved much easier than he had expected. It seemed to be less cumbersome than his 35mm. He took a damp cloth and wiped the years of dust away. With the film loaded, batteries replaced, and the shell cleaned, David scanned his living room for his first model.

A young fern sat upon a shelf by the front window, which opened on the main road. The clear pane of glass allowed the rays of the sun to filter into the room, warming the leaves of the fern. Happily, the fern leaned toward the window, contentedly basking in the light of the sun. David approached the fern with the camera in hand as if he were stalking prey. It seemed, if one were observing him, that David expected the fern to uproot itself and flee. The young plant stood perfectly still however, as still as a well-trained model. Within a few feet from his subject, David lifted the camera to his right eye. Using the camera's viewfinder, David centered the fern in the frame and activated the shutter.

The flash exploded, sending a blinding white light throughout the room. The camera spoke a series of whirrs and hums then spat out a square of white plastic. David removed the plastic from underneath the camera and quickly placed it upside down

on the table next to him as was always instructed to do when using these types of cameras. His anticipation overwhelmed him and he almost immediately picked up the developing photograph and turned it over. He watched as the gray film evaporated, revealing the forming color underneath.

When the gray film had completely vanished, it revealed the image of the young fern sitting in front of the window atop the shelf. David smiled proudly. It was a well-taken photo, the colors crisp and clear. His gaze was temporally interrupted as Maggie jumped on the table next to him.

“Meow,” she said and then purred as he pet her.

David smiled and again looked at the photo and then looked up at the model to compare its likeness. It was not there! Where the fern had once sat peacefully absorbing light was an empty space. His rational mind forced his eyes down to the floor to see if it had fallen. When he was satisfied that it had not; he walked over to the shelf where the plant had once been. He again examined the area but there was no sign of the fern. No spilt soil, no shattered pot, no mangled plant, nothing. He checked the window as his brain suggested. Its idea was that it might have fallen out onto the street below, but the window was not open nor was it broken. The plant had just vanished as if it had never been there. He looked back at the photo that was still in his hand and then at the empty shelf.

Where’s the plant? David thought, it echoing in his head like the reverberation of clock chimes. Where has it gone?

The only proof that the plant had existed at all was the photograph taken by his new camera. The camera! It hit him like a bolt of electricity. The plant had disappeared after he had taken the picture, had not it. It could not be...it just was not possible. He really did not recall if the fern was still in its place on the shelf right after he had pressed the shutter button. He had been so excited and preoccupied with his first photo that he had failed to take notice. He recalled the events leading up to the disappearance. The flash. His impatience for the development of the picture. The distraction caused by his cat. Not once up to that point did he recall seeing the plant. Could the camera be responsible for the disappearance of the plant? Was that even possible, never mind plausible? A test needed to be conducted, a scientific experiment of sorts.

David placed the photo of the fern on the table and cautiously picked up the camera. It was as if he expected the camera to suddenly grow fangs and sink them into his flesh. Of course, it did not but David, still cautious and a bit nervous, slowly brought the viewfinder to his eye and scanned the room.

His next subject, he decided was a teakettle that sat quietly on the front burner of his stove. He lowered the camera to make sure the viewfinder had not deceived him. It had not. As faithful as his eyes were, the viewfinder proved equally as faithfully, though at this point he doubted them as well.

David lifted the camera again lifted and positioned so that the viewfinder was in front of his eye. He framed the kettle, so that it was centered inside the viewfinder, and slowly extended his index finger over the shutter button. The index finger faltered for only a moment and then...

Again, there was an explosion of brilliant white light as he pressed the shutter button, and again it spoke. Within seconds a white square piece of plastic exited from the bottom of the camera. This time, David had the frame of mind to look at where the kettle was sitting and to his surprise it was still there!

What is going on, he asked himself. He of course had now answers to give but hoped that somehow it would miraculously become clear. He looked down at the photo. The gray film that shielded the color image of the kettle still lay thick over the plastic surface. It had not yet begun to fade and the kettle still sat quietly where it had been before the photo was taken.

Am I going mad? The possibility was there and David knew it. The mad do not know there mad. It bothered him as he continued watching the kettle, expecting it at any moment to disappear. It did not vanish; however, it did look rather peculiar. It seemed to David that the kettle looked distorted, giving it a blurry characteristic. It seemed less like a solid object and more as smoke evaporating into the air. David looked down at the Polaroid print in his hand and saw that the gray film was now partially gone and its place was the forming shape of the kettle! In a few moments, the entire gray film had disappeared and so had the kettle that was once on the stove.

A puzzled look spread across his face. The kettle was completely gone as if it had never existed, just like the fern. Reality's only memory of it was the photo in David's hand; its content was the kettle's duplicate.

Eureka! David exclaimed inside his head. As the gray fades so does the object. That must be the explanation. But how is this possible?

Without answering his question, he tested his theory again, on a chair, the sofa, and his dining room table. All of which eventually faded from existence only to imprint their images inside the boarder of a small piece of plastic.

David was astonished. It was the most incredible thing he had ever witnessed. He could not explain it, nor did he want to try. Throughout his life he only believed in what could be scientifically prove; nothing was based on faith. This was something that just was, and for once in his life he accepted it, if by choice or because of the lack of it. More questions kept surfacing in his head. Where did his belongings go? Were they erased from existence? Did they exist somewhere else? Could they return? How? Could living objects make the journey as well?

This last question sparked his attention. This had to be tested. He himself was unwilling to take such a bold move.

*Bold. Not exactly how I'd refer to it. More like idiotic. However, who?*

The question was the first one with a simple answer.

"Here Maggie," he said as he crept closer to his cat. Maggie was lying on her side atop the shelf where the fern had once sat soaking up the sun. She did not budge when he called her name or even when he came closer, camera in hand. As a cat would say, There is no reason to rush.

As before, the flash exploded, the camera whirred and hummed, and the bottom of the camera ejected a plastic square. Maggie still lied motionless ignoring all that went on around here, completely content in her feline laziness. Within a few moments, David watched as the gray film faded from the photo and Maggie from the shelf. She seemed

unaffected, and undisturbed, by her transportation off the physical plane. When she had completely faded away, David looked at the photo in hand and saw Maggie, lying as she did when he had taken the picture.

It was then that it hit him. How was he going to retrieve his cat? Would Maggie be stuck in this photo forever, or was she dead? He did not know how he could answer these questions. She had always been a good companion and was upset by what his curiosity had caused. In his excitement, he had completely overlooked the consequences and now he was left with anxiety. He had every intention on retrieving his cat if he could. Was the camera a transportation device of some kind, and if so, where to? More importantly, was it only capable of one-way transportation? No answers, on questions, and questions were getting him nowhere.

The sun set rather quickly that evening and David was still no closer to bringing his beloved friend back than three hours earlier. During that time, he had not dared to take another photo. He picked up the camera and made for his bedroom. Perhaps by accident, or by intention, his finger brushed against the shutter button. The flash and the noise startled him out of his zombie-like state and he nearly dropped the camera. The camera ejected the brand new photo and he reluctantly retrieved it. Entranced, he watched as the gray film slowly began to evaporate and color appear. Just ahead of him his bed started fading as if slowly melting.

It was at that moment a ball of gray and black lunged at him from inside the grayness. He screamed and dropped the camera and stumbled backwards. The camera hit the ground and from it exploded a blinding white light, whirring and humming as it rolled along the carpeted floor. The gray and black ball grew legs, a tail, and a head. Maggie's claws dug into his shoulders as she sealed him. Though he was in pain, David was astonished to see her again. His astonishment quickly became joy and he bent over and embraced her.

"Oh Maggie. I am so sorry. I will never do that again. I promise." Maggie eagerly accepted his apology and snuggled closer to his chest. She spoke to him in a low steady purr in forgiveness.

David first noticed something wrong with his hand as he was stroking Maggie's back. It appeared translucent. Panicked, David immediately stood up, dropping Maggie in the process, and ran to the bathroom.

Flipping on the light he made his way to the mirror, and then gave himself a full examination. He noticed that it was more than his hand that was transparent. At this point his whole body was afflicted and became more so as the seconds passed. He rushed out of the bathroom screaming all the way back to the spot where the camera lied, now motionless. The black plastic body cracked slightly at the base and a small plastic square protruded from it. Dropping to his knees, David whimpered. He struggled to stretch out his hand to pick up the photo. His whimpers became an uncontrollable hysteria.

The photograph fell to the floor of the bedroom of the apartment. It would lie there for many days. Eventually, the photo was discovered exactly where it had fallen. It was a Polaroid photograph of a bachelor named David, and the gray had completely faded from it.

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It sat on a dusty shelf in the back of a second-hand store. Debbie was uncertain if it would even work. It had a small, but noticeable crack on the base of it, but she bought it anyway. She had no reason for the purchase since she already owned a camera; however, there was something about this particular camera. She was surprised to find herself in that rundown second-hand store that day. She was even more surprised when she found herself in the back of the store among dusty shelves and poor lighting holding this very camera with an impulse to buy. Shock overcame her when she found herself leaving the store with the camera inside a box tucked underneath her arm. She seemed drawn to the machine, but her eagerness to try out her new toy overcame any worry

