

Earl Halston Has Come Undone

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. PARK BENCH - DAY

EARL HALSTON sits on a bench in a sunny city park. He is a fifty-nine year-old man with glasses and gray hair, the hair on top receded and wispy.

His old man pants easily display his black socks and loafers. His tweed jacket features leather elbows, worn and nicked in places.

Next to him is a briefcase popped open with academic papers inside. In his lap is The Norton Anthology of British Literature, a large worn bookmark resting in its open face, his cloddish hands resting upon it.

A happy couple jogs past him. He watches them go past.

EARL (V.O.)

Beautiful people haven't changed.
They're always quite aware of their
beauty.

Earl's concentration is broken by the sight of a teenage black girl in front of him, SABRINA. She is beautiful with long braids, barely eye level with Earl on the bench.

SABRINA

Mister?

EARL

Ye- Yes?

SABRINA

(without stopping)

Mister you got change for a dollar
I wanna get a can of soda.

EARL

Oh, a dollar...well, yes, here.
(reaches into his jacket
and pulls out his wallet)
Here...

SABRINA

You got four quarters?

EARL

Why, yes I do, actually...
(fishes them out and hands
them over)
One, two, three, four. Enjoy!

Earl looks at her, and is temporarily stricken with fascination as she holds out her dollar bill.

EARL (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 A real thing of beauty. How refreshing. Unassuming. Unconscious of itself. Just like Nang.

FLASHBACK - EXT. VIETNAMESE VILLAGE - DAY

A smiling fourteen-year-old Vietnamese girl named NANG looks up at us, led away by her MOTHER, HUONG.

YOUNG EARL, in fatigues, "HALSTON" painted onto his helmet, watches, fascinated. We recognize the exact same stare.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. PARK BENCH - DAY

Sabrina looks back at Earl.

SABRINA
 Are you alright?

EARL
 Yes, yes, of course. You just reminded me of somebody.

SABRINA
 Can I have the dollar too?

EARL
 What?

SABRINA
 I'll pay ya back but I want Skittles.

EARL
 (hands over dollar)
 There you are, just promise you'll spend it today.

SABRINA
 Okay, thank you.

She trots off.

Earl smiles.

EARL (V.O.)

In her world, I was a nice old man
who bought her a treat. She may
remember me for a long time.

(stands up, putting Norton
Anthology in briefcase
and closing it)

Life after death...as a giver of
candy.

EXT. GROCERY STORE - DAY

Earl wanders the aisles, looking for something but not
knowing what it is, wondering if the things he's seeing
aren't what he wanted twenty minutes ago.

A stunning LATINA strides past him, minding her own business.

Earl stops in his tracks to turn and watches her go past him.

EARL (V.O.)

Catch her...

INT. CASHIER - DAY

Earl moves forward in line. He places cans of soup and
noodles on the belt. He waits, looking down. People jabber
but he tunes it out.

He looks sharply up as the Latina picks up her six pack of
water and walks past his checkout lane towards the store
exit.

She catches his glance, but looks sharply away and moves on.
Earl stares.

EARL (V.O.)

I only get to look at her five more
seconds...

She's gone.

EARL (V.O.)

Thank you for your time.

The CASHIER awaits Earl. Her face is tired and entirely onto
Earl.

EARL

Hello, there, uh...yes, got them
scanned, good...

(pulls out card and swipes
it in machine)

There.

CASHIER

(snide)

Do you want cash back with that?

EARL

No, thank you.

(laughs)

To be young again, eh?

CASHIER

(sarcastic)

I'll be young til I'm 90.

EARL

Yes, I can tell. I hope the same
for myself, although-

CASHIER

Please sign here, sir.

EARL

(signing)

La-dee-da, bum-pa-bum...

CASHIER

Have a nice day.

EARL

I certainly hope to. You as well.

CASHIER

Thanks...

Earl walks away, cheery.

EXT. GROCERY STORE - DAY

Earl walks out, still smiling. He crosses into the parking
lot and towards his car.

Earl sees the Latina getting into a sports car with her
rather handsome LATINO BOYFRIEND. Earl sees her plant a kiss
on her boyfriend's lips.

EARL (V.O.)

Not a young man anymore. It's my
job now to observe and recognize
what is good...to see that kiss as
that boy will see it in his elderly
years, not as the fool he is now.

INT. UNIVERSITY LECTURE ROOM - DAY

Earl Halston talks to a small room of graduate students.

EARL

So, when we focus on internalism versus externalism...in a sense it's very simple to understand. The internalist says he was excused for his actions because he didn't know any better at the time. The externalist says, "

(class laughs)

The externalist tends to be a bit less solitary...he says essentially that it doesn't matter if you honestly think two plus two equals five, you're still full of steaming horse filth. The internalist is truly no different than Charles Manson belie

A GRAD STUDENT raises his hand.

GRAD STUDENT

I take it you're an externalist then, Dr. Halston?

EARL

(putting on a smile)

Well, it's quite silly to draw a line...there's lots of room for internalism, I believe. Sometimes people follow very irrational paths with exceptional results. The mother getting a tight knot in her stomach and then running into the back yard to save her son from drowning in the pool, the work of the Catholic Church in South America, for a couple examples. Most art and literature validates the internal, by definition.

GRAD STUDENT

Can one really exist without the other, you think?

EARL

Obviously the internalists and externalists would disagree. But, for example... if you start a career designing new slogans to sell soda pop or cars, you would want to favor internalism. A lawyer would favor whatever won their case.

Class laughs.

EARL (CONT'D)

(continuing)

And if you want to spend your life being known as a terminally correct ass, stick with nothing but externalism. Any questions?

A female hand raises. Earl looks at the hand, then traces down the arm to the face of a young Asian woman, ILENE.

Earl nods at her but looks away to listen to her question.

ILENE

You didn't answer the question.

Earl is dumbstruck.

EARL (V.O.)

I didn't answer her...

(aloud)

(looking directly at her)

I didn't answer you?

ILENE

No. I asked you what foundationalism was.

EARL

Oh... you'll have to forgive me.

(looks away from her

again)

I thought I'd shake you there, Miss, uh...

ILENE

Ilene.

EARL

(still looking away)

Yes, Ilene... I'm going to have to postpone that question until Thursday's lecture, and that lecture does feature a comprehensive outline of foundationalism. Will that do? All apologies, of course.

ILENE

Yes, Doctor.

EARL

Good. Alright, class, you can all go now, be well read and ready to go on Thursday.

The students murmur good-byes and thank-you's and exit. Earl retreats to his suitcase and puts his notes away in them, his face turning blank and empty.

The classroom isn't empty, Earl looks up to see Ilene pausing by the doorway. She studies him.

EARL (CONT'D)

Ilene.

ILENE

Dr. Halston.

EARL

How can I help you?

ILENE

Stop.

EARL

Excuse me?

ILENE

Please stop acting different with me. It's embarrassing.

EARL

I'm sorry, I don't mean anything-

ILENE

People notice.

EARL

I don't see what's to be noticed.

ILENE

Plenty.

EARL

(looks straight at her,
begs her to listen with
his eyes)

Miss, sometimes you just have to forgive us old lit types. We've heads filled with beauty and are forced to hide it from an unbeautiful world. It becomes easy to appear "disproportionate" to common eyes.

ILENE

Oh, a second insult, good.

EARL

No, that's not right... I don't mean you, I'd never want to insult you with my silliness.

ILENE

Then admit it when you do.

EARL

(sees his error)

I am sorry.

ILENE

Ah. Okay, then.

She walks out the door, but pauses and looks back. Earl still smiles.

ILENE (CONT'D)

Don't you go out, socialize?

EARL

(surprised)

Huh? Oh...well, just with those from the past. I like being a "late participant" in the times of those who, you know, walked this earth before me.

ILENE

Okay, Dr. Halston. But I'm sure there are more people out there like you.

EARL

Funny, I've been telling myself that for fifty years...

ILENE

Okay, Dr. Halston, goodbye. Thanks for listening.

EARL

Okay... Keep up the good work.

Ilene smiles, then leaves.

Earl bites his lip, packs his briefcase and leaves.

INT. EARL'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

Earl, in T-shirt and boxers, brushes his teeth.

EARL (V.O.)
Shut up...shut up...

Earl spits and goes into his bedroom.

INT. EARL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Earl's simple bedroom is mostly wood. He has a dresser, desk with computer, bed, night table, and a small TV stand with a thirteen inch screen on top of it.

Earl moves to his dresser, which has a large mirror on top of it. A photo of EARL'S MOM, an old old woman, is tucked into the lower right corner. Next to it is tucked a forty year-old picture of a family of three, a seventeen year-old YOUNG EARL standing by his parents, grinning. His smile is reluctant and forced.

Earl puts his glasses on the dresser, then his watch.

EARL (V.O.)
Shutupshutup...shut up, shut up...

Earl goes to his desk and sits. He clicks back and forth on his computer between several documents in progress, reports, essays, letters...nothing suits him. He starts a new document. He types.

We read: WHAT HAS ALL THE TALKING EVER ACCOMPLISHED?

He shuts down all the documents and the computer. He takes out a notepad and pen. He pushes them away.

Earl moves to the bed.

EARL (V.O.)
Shut up, shut up, shut up...

He gets into the bed and pulls his covers up high. Earl turns off his lamp and looks up at the ceiling.

EARL (V.O.)
Just shut up. Listen.

Earl's eyes look up at the ceiling, and trace patterns.

EARL
Show yourself, spirits. Are you there?

The ceiling is blank.

EARL (CONT'D)
I thought not.

Earl's eyes look down in disappointment. He closes them and turns his head sideways to sleep.

EXT. PLAINS - DAY

Dark clouds move quickly across the sky. Earl looks up at them, then at us.

EARL (V.O.)

I liked to believe that my life was a canvas to be painted. Then I recoiled in horror at what that canvas showed me.

FLASHBACK - EXT. VIETNAMESE VILLAGE - NIGHT

Young Earl is in military fatigues, fire dancing in his glasses, a glassy stare behind them.

END FLASHBACK

INT. UNIVERSITY LECTURE HALL - DAY

Earl slams his Norton Anthology to the ground.

EARL

So nobody read the assignment? You idiots don't give a damn about knowledge!!! Trying to surf through here with a C dreaming of some goddamn car and three bedroom house. Oh, you'll get it, because you'll bite through the necks of your brothers, and then you'll realize you've nothing left to dream of because you've become used to shitting on every single thing of value that passed you by! You think you will succeed through sheer power of arrogance?!?! Forty years ago this was high school material!!! And you complain I don't make sense!!!

(kicks chair over)

Bunch of damned fools!

In the corner, Ilene sits, watching him.

INT. UNIVERSITY LECTURE HALL - DAY

Earl lectures again.

EARL

It's perfectly understandable that Oscar Wilde believed in God. Namely, because the word "God" didn't mean the same thing in that time and place. Older times held so little opportunity for anything to be proven absolutely. The more man is removed from rational thought, the more he must rely on the intuitive. And while intuition can rise above believing every religious farce you hear, if you live in a world where nothing is truly literal, how can one even conceive of accusing God of not being real? The question doesn't even make sense.

ILENE

(raising hand)
Dr. Halston?

EARL

(looking directly at her
with perfect patience and
calm)
Yes, Ilene?

ILENE

Well, people did accuse God of not existing, though.

EARL

(without blinking once)
Oh, certainly, but most of the time it was just a pretense for attacking the church. When society equates the church with the word "God," not believing in one means not believing in the other. But they always had their own idea of divinity, really.

ILENE

Thank you.

EARL

(smiling, still not
blinking)
You're welcome.

Ilene smiles back at first, but then realizes the room is fixed on her and Earl. His unceasing stare elicits a giggle and a whisper. Ilene frowns.

Earl still smiles, but finally breaks his stare, looking down. His cheeks blush.

EARL (CONT'D)

(weakly)

Read the chapter titled "False Assurances of the Twentieth Century."

GRAD STUDENT

(to Ilene)

Is that the chapter title?

ILENE

I don't know...

A MIDDLE-AGED STUDENT has hers open.

MIDDLE-AGED STUDENT

It's "False Impressions of the Nineteenth Century."

EARL

What?

MIDDLE-AGED STUDENT

Uh, it's "False Impressions of the Nineteenth Century," Sir.

EARL

Oh, yes, that too. Class dismissed.

The class laughs weakly at his cover-up joke then ambles out.

EXT. DINING CENTER - NOON

Earl sits in the campus dining center, eating his meal.

Ilene is sitting across from him, with a glass of water. They seem to be in the middle of a conversation. We hear Earl's thoughts while Ilene's lips move.

EARL (V.O.)

She doesn't want to know that the only thing worth talking about is her, the only thing admirable here is the perfection of her jawline as it intersects and disappears into her hair, the purity of her lean body and how it mirrors her soul, and the illusion of permanence that her eyes create as they echo all the beauty that has ever come before. You can never access that, you can only have her naked in front of you today, you can only grip her in your hands today, until she pulls away, then you-

ILENE

So?

EARL

(shocked out of his
trance, stumbles for an
answer)

I don't know.

ILENE

About what?

EARL

(firming)

I'm going to not share these things with you, Miss Ilene. I'm sorry.

ILENE

You don't have to be.

EARL

I believe that one should not enter a situation one is not prepared for.

ILENE

I just asked you where you studied.

EARL

Exactly. But the situation I'm not prepared for is sitting here talking to you.

(standing up)

I can speak to you after class... that's it. Sorry.

Earl walks away.

INT. EARL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Earl sits under his covers, the lamp still on. He lies still, zoning. Then he turns the light off and stares up at the ceiling again, looking for those spirits...

A bump somewhere else in the house distracts him. Earl sits up, confused. He slowly gets out of bed and walks out of the bedroom.

INT. EARL'S STAIRWAY - NIGHT

Earl eases down the steps quietly, staying alert.

INT. EARL'S HOME - NIGHT

He passes a tall grandfather clock.

EARL
(touching clock)
Keeping the time for me, good job
there, old man.

Earl moves to a door. He opens it to the basement.

INT. EARL'S BASEMENT - NIGHT

Earl turns on the basement light and looks around, confused.

EARL
Is somebody there?

Earl hears a grunt. He seems shocked.

Earl turns on another light switch, and a new area of the basement becomes visible. Past the water heater and an old treadmill, a young black male, ISAAC, sits, bound and gagged.

ISAAC
MMMPH!!!

EARL
Oh, God, YOU...

ISAAC
MMMPH!!! MMMPH!!!

EARL
Ah. Well, has been awhile, I
think. Smells that way, anyhow.
Maybe you've had time to reflect.

Earl walks up to Isaac and pulls off the gag.