

Rusty Fears 7

“The Uses of Analog”

**BY AARON SWARTZ
PROMPT: VIDEO STORE**

[Music]

ANNOUNCER:

Roses by Abi Kinsella

[Music]

NARRATOR:

Mike had worked at *Video Help Stop: VHS Rental and Repair* for as long as he could remember, and it was an alright job. Mostly. Then again, how was he to know? He'd never really done anything else. He'd heard that most people hated their jobs, so being bored most days seemed like it probably wasn't too bad in comparison.

It was the same routine day after day: unlock the shutter and doors, send out any notices for tapes that were either about to be due or well-past due, and wait. That was most of the job: waiting. And on the rare occasion the dented bell above the door would signal a new arrival, Mike's heart would judder subtly in his chest as he waited to see which kind of visitor they were.

Of the few patrons *VHS* could claim, there were two main types. Most were older—the kind of people who not only still had VCRs, but still used them. If it wasn't the old timers then the bell most often heralded a couple of 20-somethings who would come stumbling in through the door, riffle through the collection while holding up this or that box to marvel at with their friends, before the inevitable question of “how does a place like this even stay in business anymore man?” would get thrown out like an afterthought. Mike would shrug, mumble something about a dying artform, and the 20-somethings would leave without renting anything.

Both the older and younger customers were the first type.

It was the second type of customer that meant Mike's heart could never rest easy at the sound of the bell.

They came once a month, maybe. Always right around closing time, and they always waited until the store was empty before marching right up to the desk like they owned the place. Maybe they did; Mike really wasn't sure. They didn't like it when you looked them in the eye, though, so when they rushed the counter like a stormfront Mike pitched his eyes down and waited to hear what they wanted.

It was always the same thing.

"I need an edit made," they'd say.

Mike would nod. "What kind, and how much?" he'd ask.

The answer varied somewhat. Most often they'd say "I need a few minutes cut out," or sometimes "I need 30 seconds spliced in," or "I need a full wipe." The specifics didn't matter too much.

Mike's next question was always "do you know the terms?"

He'd get a nod, or a grunt, or a hoarse yes, or a swear that stood in for agreement, and he would nod, finish closing up the store, and lead the customer into the back and through there into the very back.

The back room of *VHS* was mostly normal. The very back room behind the false wall was not. Mike didn't know what most of the equipment did, and that was mostly what the room was filled with: choked clots of cables, ticking 8-tracks spinning like tiny moons, lights that blinked on and off like stars, and sometimes didn't blink at all. It all fed into the Chair, and that was where Mike would always gesture for the customer to take a seat. Once, one of the more nervous customers had joked that the Chair was "straight out of the Matrix." Mike had stared at the man's shoes—they didn't like to be looked at in the eye—and then continued prepping the equipment he knew how to use. The customer had sat down eventually. Mike never had to worry about getting them into the chair. Just the other parts.

Once they were seated, Mike would ask the next question.

“Do you have the payment?” he’d ask, and they’d hand him money. He counted it out of habit not necessity. No one had ever tried to short-change him, and he had never needed to explain the rate: 500 per minute.

When the money was counted, he would set it aside, and then he would look the customer in the eyes for the first and only time during their visit.

“And the other half?” he would ask.

This answer varied too. “My sixth birthday party,” one would say. “The day my son was born,” would be another’s offer. “First time I got laid.” “Seeing Bowie live in ‘92.” “The first time I killed someone.”

Cheap offerings usually, especially compared to what they wanted done, but always good enough. No one tried to short-change him with that half of the payment either. He wasn’t entirely certain why. Maybe it was because he looked them in the eye.

He would let his eyes fall, noticing passively the way the customer’s body relaxed as he did, and move back to the equipment. It was tricky to work properly, but after all this time Mike had the knack for it, and could cut, splice, insert, or rewrite the relevant segments as requested. He could even snip out the pain of the procedure, which judging from the way most of them screamed must have been significant.

After the requested work was done, he’d load in a blank tape and collect their payment, labelling it carefully with the events it contained while the customer rebooted, one system at a time, adding the new tape to the bank of others against the right wall of the very back room.

He’d give the customer however much time they needed to remember the necessities of breathing, blinking, walking, and all the rest, and escort them out of the very back room, through the back room, and to the door, where they would hurry off into the night. They always seemed keen to get going after their business with him was concluded, which Mike didn’t mind in the slightest.

And then Mike would go home—which was the grey apartment above the video store, and the only other place he spent his time—and he'd sleep and dream of a shut door and a silent bell, and smile. Or sometimes he'd dream of a set of tapes, three in a wall of a hundred, and frown.

And then he'd open the shop again the next day anyway.

It was an alright job.

The worst days were when Fuschia came in. That wasn't her name, but it was the color she always wore somewhere—sometimes a tie, sometimes a belt, sometimes a bracelet, sometimes makeup, sometimes streaked in her hair—so that was what she was in Mike's mind. Fuschia.

Fuschia never came in for herself. Fuschia came in to place orders, and to make sure they got filled to the letter. Fuschia expected results, immediately, and didn't like waiting. Fuschia made sure Mike understood how little she liked waiting.

Mike wasn't sure why Fuschia was so scared of him, but he didn't worry about it too much. He just got on with things and did his job as he was told.

Like the times when Fuschia would tell him to go in the back while she went and got his patient. She said patient instead of customer, which Mike didn't like. But he'd go into the very back room and begin setting up the equipment anyway, and sooner or later three or four big men would drag the customer into the room, shove them into the chair, and tighten the manacles built into the arms of the bulky contraption until they cut into the customer's thin wrists.

Fuschia was always very insistent that he do his job without complaint, even though he never complained or did anything but his job. So long as they paid he would fill the brief just as they asked. He didn't like doing complete reformat, but they were part of the job, so he did them.

He just didn't look those customers in the eyes, and didn't label the tapes he made out of them.

Sometimes, in the long quiet spaces where Mike sat at the counter and hoped the bell wouldn't ring, his mind would wander. He'd think about the rows and rows of tapes in the very back room labelled in his careful handwriting.

He'd think about the three tapes labelled *Mike Pendleton* in the same careful handwriting as all the rest. The first labelled *Years 1–10*. The second, *Years 11–16*. The third, *Years 17–24*.

He'd think about watching them.

He wouldn't watch them.

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[Music]

ANNOUNCER:

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