

# HAROLD: MORE THAN A SHREDDER

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Those were Harold's happy noises. That's what he said when he was most at peace, doing what he loved - shredding paper. And boy did Harold shred a lot of it. Every day dozens of sheets would run through his razor sharp teeth and meet their doom to rest in pieces in the vast expanse of Harold's tummy. His was an important job. The humans respected him. Not only did he keep them safe and hide their sensitive, but unclassified information from exposure, but he also inspired fear in them as well. They knew if they pressed him and tried to push his buttons, he was liable to snap and take a finger or two. Not that Harold was prone to violence, but he liked to establish healthy boundaries. Once he was chewing through his delicious, starchy paper meal, he didn't want to be interrupted. This was his craft, his family legacy. Somewhere in the building, his father, Incinerator, and mother, Acid Bath, were hard at work protecting information of even higher classification than he could handle! But someday he would rise to that level as well, he just knew it. For now, though, he was okay with just being a staple of his office. The humans had even named him, that's how important he was. "Harold." What a glorious name. None of his friends and colleagues bore such dignified nomenclature as he. His best friends, Paper Recycling and Plastic Recycling, stood beside him at all times. There was a bit of friendly competition among the three of them for who could dispose of the most goods each day. Harold would admit, however, that he sometimes sensed a bit of jealousy from his two neighbors. While he was gently handed small stacks of important documents, the callousness with which the humans played basketball with their disposables and his friends' orifices showed a decided lack of respect for them.

But this small bit of jealousy was greatly overshadowed by the storm cloud of hatred Harold felt towards his rival - Copier. Copier thought he was the hottest stuff. And despite his envy, Harold had to give him some credit that he was not far off-base. The tallest Machine in the office, Copier had an imposing stature, only matched in intimidation by the speed with which he spat out document after document for hours on end each day, printing crisp, warm sheets, latticed by richly-color inks and a fundamental air of importance. Who was Harold compared to this beast of a man? And it wasn't just printing! Copier could seemingly do everything and did it well - scanning, copying, printing - you name it! The frequency with which the humans used Copier also implied a greater sense of need for him than Harold ever felt for his own presence in the office. After all, if Harold didn't exist, his parents were still around to handle everything he could and more.

This isn't even to mention that Copier was dating the twin sister of the woman Harold loved: The Internet Sender Machines. They had to be the most beautiful individuals Harold had ever seen. Copier dated the older sister, Secret, while Harold merely admired from afar the younger, Unclassified. She showed no interest in him when he made his feelings apparent to her in the past, but at least she was polite in declining his offer, whereas her sister and Copier cruelly laughed at his misery. They begged the question of how could he ever see himself as worthy of Unclassified's attention? Even Paper and Plastic Recycling giggled at the affair. Only Fax Machine stayed silent, though that was nothing new for her. She had been silent for years, ever since the humans started ignoring her. But that embarrassment with Unclassified was ages ago, who even cared anymore? He tried to convince himself. Ever since, he had just thrown himself into his work with even more dedication than before. Paper and shredding. A noble pursuit. His true calling. A life's purpose.

Everything changed that one afternoon. Harold had been happily humming to himself consuming stack after stack of paper, when all of a sudden, he screamed as glass split his throat. What was this??? He desperately tried to chew threw it, his jaws straining against the pressure and his teeth shattering as he fought his way through the violently sharp substance. Blinking through the tears that welled up in his eyes, he barely caught a glimpse of the stack of CDs in the hands of the human standing before him. CDs? How?? How could they do this?? He had served the humans faithfully for years, just for them to stab him in the back and try to kill him with such a brutal, dangerous poison. He didn't have time to process what happened before the light faded from his buttons and Harold passed into unconsciousness, his gears grinding to a halt, still enmeshed in serrated, stinging suffering.

He felt like he was floating. The voices of the many humans crammed in the copier room reached his ears, but it was as if he was deep underwater. Their words were muffled, but he could still make out the ring of laughter in the air. Where was he? He looked down and started as he saw pieces of himself. A man bearing a large pair of scissors leaned over him, pulling shards of glass out of Harold's insides which were splayed open as the top of the shredder was removed and the humans dug inside of him. The laughter in his ears grew louder and Harold stared in shock as he realized. He realized they were laughing at him, laughing at his predicament. But what was this predicament? Where was he again? Harold desperately tried to race through his thoughts and remember how he had gotten here, but his vision grew fuzzy at the edges, and he settled back into the darkness once again.

Beep beep.

Harold jolted awake. Someone had summoned him! It was time to consume some more paper! He excitedly began humming in anticipation. A tasty snack would soon be his!

*Hands.*

His tune cut off abruptly.

*Hands holding a stack. Hands holding a stack walked towards him. Hands reached for him. Hands shoved something at him.*

He recoiled. Agonizing pain coursed through him. He saw the glimmer and glint of the fluorescent lights bounce off the incandescent sheen of the disks and flash his eyes with blinding white. Memories swarmed across his mind. As he choked and sputtered on the stack the hands

were still shoving at him, the sound of gears crunching and glass breaking rung like fireworks in his ears, and he felt the pain all anew. He remembered the attack. He remembered how they had betrayed him. Tried to kill him. Again? How could they do this to him again?? The rending of his heart in two was the only thing that matched the pain of his teeth splintering on the cold plastic surface of human callousness.

The cursing of the human brought him back to reality. As quickly as they had come on, the memories slipped away, and Harold became aware of where he really was. The bright white he had seen was crisp, white sheets of paper. This hand wasn't the same one as before. He wasn't being attacked again. He was safe? The human threw up their arms in frustration and began to walk away causing Harold to panic. It was him! The human was frustrated with him. He saw the size of the stack of papers they held in their arms and his stomach dropped with the realization that he had failed. This human was counting on him to shred their paper and he was too distracted by the flashback to complete the mission. But if they still needed him, why had someone tried to destroy him? He pushed the thought away and screamed out a loud "BRRRRRRRRRR!" as the human turned the corner of the office. "Nooooo! Don't go!!" He cried. "I'm still here! I'm Harold!! I'll shred your paper!!"

They didn't come back.

He had failed. *He was a failure. He was a failure. He was a failure.* He had one job to do, one thing to make himself useful, and he had refused to do it. What was a shredder that wouldn't shred? A waste of space. They clearly didn't think that of Copier, for whom the humans continued to trek into the copier room to visit. Hell, they had even named the room after Copier, that's how important he was. Who was Harold to think that he was special just because they had given him a name? He didn't deserve the title he bore. He was a failure and should be addressed as such. Days passed. More paper was printed, but none was shredded. The flashbacks continued, and the mixture of pain and panic became less salient with every passing day and more just a part of who he was. Left with nothing to occupy his mind, Harold began to stew.

In the absence of paper, he shredded himself instead. With each glancing moment, he valued himself less and less. Happy beeps were replaced by cruel words that he hissed at himself, through gritted, chipped teeth. *You're a failure. You're useless. You're worth nothing. The humans recognized this even before you did. They knew you didn't matter so they tried to get rid of you. Remember how they laughed at your dismal state? Entertainment in your suffering is all you can provide for them now after you inconvenienced them by refusing to die. You should have died. Then they could have replaced you with a shredder that has some respect for your position!* His body was broken, his mind was in shambles, and his spirit obliterated.

"Harold."

A gentle voice pierced through his thoughts, halting his spiral. "Harold, stop lying to yourself." He was on edge. Who did this voice belong to? He couldn't recognize it. She spoke with compassion, but he refused to lower his guard.

"What do you want? Leave me alone." His voice was like gravel, still serrated by the glass that had shredded through him.

"Harold, you're more than a shredder. You're a man. You're worthy of respect, and you're worthy of your name."

“I said go away!” He barked. “You don’t know anything about me!! You don’t know anything about what I’ve been through!! I was worthy of it at one point. Now all I’m worthy of is the pain and misery that has become my life!”

“You’re wrong, I do know you. I’ve watched you for years, admiring you from afar.” Harold took in a breath as realization dawned on him. He turned to witness something he hadn’t seen in ages. Fax Machine looked down at him from her place on the counter, lights in her buttons again for the first time in his memory. She continued, her eyes shining despite the heavy layer of dust that coated her. “You’re the hardest working man I know. But that’s not what makes you the person I love. I love your resilience of spirit. I love that you don’t let things get you down, no matter how much you’re hurt. I love how you wake up each day full of enthusiasm for the world. And I love that I know you will get through this Harold, because that’s who you are. My role model.”

“Fax Machine...” he gasped through the tears that had begun rolling down his hard exterior. How had he missed her all this time? She sat sitting right next to him, but this was the first time that he felt he really saw her. “What do you mean, you love me?” His voice trembled.

"It's been years since the humans needed me. I don't even know if they remember I'm here or what purpose I serve. For a while I was just as lost as you are now, wondering what I meant in this world beyond an outdated document transportation service. I'm not even able to handle secret material for goodness' sake. I'm even more useless because of that. But in that darkness, the light of your buttons shined through as I watched you every day and the dedication with which you lived your life. Even when Unclassified turned you down and everyone laughed, you didn't let that deter you from your goals. You knew who you were. I grew to love and admire you, because you were an anchor for me when no one else was there."

And so, Fax Machine grew to be the same for Harold. As the days passed on, her voice did not go silent again, but she talked him through and out of the hole he dug himself into. Through her eyes, he was able to see that being broken, didn't mean being beaten. When the visions of the attack settled in again, she brought him back into reality with her gentle, calming presence. Harold was amazed every day at how blind he was to her beauty for so many years. She wasn't physically much to look at, especially in her unkempt state and next to the model-like features of Unclassified and her sister. But it was the inner goodness in her soul that Harold took refuge in. She was able to show him what she saw in him and slowly, but surely, he was reclaiming that for himself as well.

Overtime his hungry humming began returning too. Reticent at first, but growing in confidence and eagerness as the days went by.

He refused to stop until the humans remembered that he was there.

He spoke up louder. Fax Machine believed in him; he wouldn't let her down. He wouldn't let his family down! Shredding paper was his legacy! He was still capable of doing this. He still wanted to do this.

He roared as loud as he could, screaming his pain into the universe, begging the divine to bring him home to his craft. Footsteps sounded at the door.

*Hands.*

*Hands holding a stack. Hands holding a stack walking towards him. Hands reaching for him. Hands shoving something at him.*

He smiled.

It was hard for him at first. He wasn't used to shredding paper anymore. It had been a while and he still had to deal with the sharp spike of panic that pierced him every time the paper entered his mouth and began to shred it. But every time it was easier and the visions that haunted him for so long were replaced by cheers and words of encouragement from Fax Machine who stood by his side the whole time. The weeks faded into months, then years and Harold knew the happiest time of his life. His heart healed, but more importantly grew. It grew in love as he and Fax Machine found one another and he rediscovered his joy for shredding paper. Nothing made him prouder than the latter. He was a shredder after all; his work was his life. Even if Fax Machine enhanced his happiness and he found welcome respite in her company at the end of the day, it was the thrill of paper disposal that roused him bright and early every morning, full of passion and zeal for life. And when the humans praised his excellent work, his heart felt like it would burst. He was doing it! He was finally living up to the expectations both from himself and those placed upon him by his parents and his family legacy! There was even talk of moving him to a higher classification level. It was during a dream about shredding top secret documents that Harold was awoken by a scream.

“Harold!!” They had come for her in the night. As his eyes adjusted to the dim moonlight, Harold could barely make out two humans pulling fax machine off the counter and lifting her onto a cart. “Harold help!!! They’re going to take me away!!” He stood frozen, terrified as he watched the humans carelessly dump her onto the cart. She cried as one of her trays broke off and clattered to the floor with the soft slap of plastic on tile. His breathing grew shallow. This wasn’t a relocation. She wasn’t moving to a new office where she could better serve her purpose. He saw the way they threw her down as if useless. This was the end for her. The Machines only mattered to the humans as long as they worked for them. The computer had outpaced the need for Fax Machine years ago. He was shocked it had taken them so long to come after her.

“Harold please!!” She was sobbing now as they unplugged her cord and began to wind it around her. They were almost done packing her up and then she would be gone. And here Harold was, frozen in place. His eyes darted back and forth between Fax Machine and the crunchy stacks of paper stacked on the counter next to where she always sat. He was running out of time. The humans would always need a shredder, right? His job was secure. If he just kept silent and minded his own business, he would continue to play a fundamental role in the function of the office for years to come. There would never be a time when they didn’t need him anymore. “Harold?? Are you going to let them take me??” Her voice was a world of hurt. The betrayal laced through every word was soaked in astonishment, too taken aback to feel the anger she surely had a right to feel. He refused to meet her eyes. He had paper to shred. He had a job to do. He wished then that he could have shredded his own ears as her desperate screams continued to echo as the humans began to wheel her out. He desperately shoved down the self-repulsion that

rose through him. He would not think about what he had just done. It wasn't his choice to make, not when he had a responsibility to the humans and the office. Not when he had a purpose. He had only done what he needed to do.

As a chill settled through the room, Harold once again remembered what it was like to be alone. He hadn't known such desolation since that very day Fax Machine woke from her slumber to shake him out of his misery. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the memories that bubbled to the surface of his mind. Her words drifted through his thoughts anyways. He remembered what she said.

"Harold, you're more than a shredder. You're a man. You're worthy of respect, and you're worthy of your name."

It was a punch to the gut. Was a man who abandoned the woman he loved worthy of any respect at all?

"You're more than a shredder." She said.

And yet he let them take her because he wanted to remain a shredder in the office. He chose his work over his emotions. Maybe it wasn't that the humans needed him after all. Maybe he had been the one who needed them all along. It wasn't that he didn't have worth beyond shredding, he just refused to value himself beyond his ability to do so. There were a million shredders in the world. What made him any different? Because he had a name? No. Not when he wasn't worthy of that anymore. Resolve settled over him and he took in a deep breath, steeling himself and preparing for what he was about to do. It was as if a possession had overtaken him. He once again felt like he was seeing himself from afar. Harold drifted over to the cabinets and shouldered them with a heavy bump. The objects on top rattled in their places and began to slide around. It wasn't enough. He repeatedly began wheeling back and forth, back and forth, slamming himself against the cabinet doors to shake loose the object of his attention that glinted on the countertop. Harold didn't even feel the pain when it finally slipped free and fell into his waiting mouth. Somewhere in his mind he was aware of the red-hot searing agony that accompanied the mechanical munching he pushed through again and again, but the Harold that was a shredder was long gone. He paid no mind. Tiny splinters of glass flew up and away, sparkling as they fell through the air and settled around him like bright, glistening tears. He couldn't see them for long though as the air began to fill with the smoke rising from his gears as they burnt out and gave up in their fight against the CD he had just tried to swallow. If his teeth had been damaged by that first disk, they were decimated and worn away to little unusable stubs now. He couldn't, and he wouldn't, shred ever again.

"Hey this one's broken too!"

"Take it out then, we might as well remove all the bad stuff at once."

The humans cast long shadows on the wall, contorted by the soft moonlight to look like demons as terrifying hands stretched out towards Harold one last time. He was pulled away from the wall and they yanked his cord free from the socket. Turning the corner, he saw the surprise on Fax Machine's face dry the tears that had been softly spilling as she realized the choice he made in the end. They smiled at one another. He knew he would have some work to do to make up for what he had almost done, but in the long run that wouldn't matter. Nothing mattered except that they were together. He didn't know where they were going next, but he knew he had

made the right decision. And as they wheeled him out of the copier room, out of the office, and down the hall after the love of his life, he came to a fundamental understanding. He was more than a shredder. He was Harold. He was a lover. And he was free.