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## Barriers

Joshua Lawrence

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## Barriers // Joshua Lawrence

In a hallway full of vibrant color, the white sign seemed out of place. It was hastily taped onto a door, white computer paper with the words "Personal Problem Solving Group Meeting" printed in large letters. Levi looked at the stark motif and sighed before reaching for the knob. What happens in Personal Problem Solving, stays in Personal Problem Solving, he thought as the door opened and light spilled out into the dimly lit community center corridor. No sound came with it, though. Levi frowned. Sound could tell you a lot about what was happening in a room, but the silence emanating from the room's interior was...subdued. As if the people inside were afraid to make any noise. Eyes downcast, he entered, clutching the pamphlet that Kate gave him last night.

Levi had been sitting at the kitchen table when Kate purposefully strode through the front door. She slammed down a pamphlet in front of him. Personal Problem Solving was printed across the top. He looked up at her, eyebrows raised.

He could hear the frustrated quiver in her voice. Kate was at the end of her rope, and he realized that she was shaking. "Levi," she said. "Sharon gave this to me at work today. She said that her husband did it after his mother died, and now he's perfectly all right. This whole Pickles thing has been going on for too long, and from my point of view it's damaging our relationship! If you go to this meeting, it will help you get over your damn hamster's death." She drew in a deep breath, steeling herself. "If you don't do it, I'm breaking up with you."

Wow, he remembered thinking. An ultimatum. He blinked as he considered that in his head. He had never realized just how much his hatred of Cindy's cat and how it murdered Pickles created a rift in their relationship, an impassable wall of emotion that Kate had continually been trying to surmount, only to be thrown back again and again. He looked at her eyes and saw it: a soft pleading, willing him to help himself, to go to the meeting. He thought about whether or not it was worth it. He had never thought much about staying with Kate, but then again leaving her was totally out of the question in his mind. He thought about their relationship. There had always been a part of her that was hidden, but now it dawned on him that she had seen Pickles' death as something that would always be between them, relieving him of

her complete trust until he could get over it. Maybe this one thing was holding them back from...a future, he guessed. And certainly so if she was good on her threat and left him.

So instead of correcting her by saying that Pickles was murdered, he thought that it would be better to take the class. He silently nodded and took the paper from her.

The center of the room was filled with an oval of two-dozen chairs, only half of which were filled. The carpet had a square design, and the walls were lined with bookshelves sagging under the weight of scores of books. A bank of windows opposite the door looked out to where the streetlamp lit the nearly empty parking lot of the community center. The ceiling fan turned lazily, doing little to fend off the summer heat.

For a second he thought that Kate had accidentally sent him to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. But no, he saw some more pamphlets saying Personal Problem Solving on a table next to the door, along with a stack of nametags and a sharpie. Levi wrote his name on one before walking over to the circle of chairs.

Not very many of the seats were filled, and Levi took one that wasn't right next to anyone else. They were metal chairs, the ones they got out of storage and unfolded for big events. It felt cold as he sat on it, but that may just have been the general emotional atmosphere of the room. No one looked happy. Just like me, he thought. Eyes were downcast, hands were clasped nervously, and chairs creaked as the small group of people fidgeted repeatedly. There were only a handful of people, three women and three men, all looking presentable but clearly a wreck at the same time. The women congregated together, while the men spread out, keeping their distance from each other. One of the women, the youngest one, had been crying recently. While she wore makeup and had the shiny gleam of mousse in her hair, nothing could hide the redness around her blue eyes. Levi imagined they must have been sparkling with life at one time or another, but now they only had a dull glint.

This must be how Kate sees me. An emotional wreck who can't get over the death of his stupid pet.

No, he thought, Pickles wasn't a stupid pet; he was my

friend. Levi thought back to that day in college when his best friend had died. He had just returned to his apartment after soccer practice. The team had played a hard game against their rivals, the Wildcats, and Coach Borne decided to let them scrimmage for the entire practice. After showering and grabbing a quick bite to eat, he headed home. Cindy, his girlfriend, was coming over to watch Apollo 13. He needed to be back before she got there; otherwise she would go on a rant about how he was wasting her time whenever he was late to something. He reached his building and hurried up the stairs to his floor, taking only a second to find his key and go through the door. He set his bag down in his bedroom and turned to Pickles' cage, which rested on a small dresser by the closet. He opened it up and pulled the hamster out, setting him on the bed along with some lettuce.

He had just put a bag of popcorn in the microwave and pulled out a beer when he heard the door open in the hallway. Cindy called out a greeting and sauntered into the kitchen, taking the beer from Levi' hand and gulping it down without a murmur in thanks. He frowned, but did not say anything as he reached into the fridge for another beer. Cindy sat down at the small table and glanced around, taking in the numerous cups and dishes in the sink as well as a half-empty box of pizza on the counter and remarking that he lived in a sty.

"Oh, and I brought Fortis over," she said absently. "I thought he might like some new territory to explore."

Levi froze, the beer halfway to his lips. Fortis was Cindy's cat, roaming free throughout his apartment. And Pickles was currently munching on some salad on his bed. He had enough mind to place the beer on the counter before taking off toward his bedroom.

He was too late. Pickles lay on the bed, unmoving, as Fortis calmly walked around the bed. Cindy ran into the room and snatched up Fortis, playfully berating him in a squeaky voice.

Levi felt something snap. That...that animal killed Pickles! And she was playing with it? "Get out", he said, forcefully.

Cindy looked at him. "Oh, come on, Levi. It was just a hamster. You can get a new one in the morning. Look at Fortis, though! He got blood all over his fur. Poor baby."

"Get that animal out of here," he said again.

"Come on, Lev. Calm down."

That was it. Levi lost it. "NOW!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. She looked scared, and hurried out of the room as fast as she could. Levi's anger slowly turned to despair. He knelt by the bed, and wept. Somewhere in the background a door slammed.

The oldest woman, Francine, cleared her throat. She alone looked composed and self-assured; Levi figured she was the one running this thing. "Well, I guess we'll get started," she said, forcing a smile. "Welcome, everyone, to Personal Problem Solving, where we will find out what's holding you back in life!"

A chair squeaked as the blue-eyed woman stood up. Levi could see her more clearly now, wearing a black blouse and the name 'Darlene' written on her tag. She was crying again. She hurriedly collected her things and began to walk out, saying, "I'm sorry, but I can't do this." She visibly shook as she reached the door and had trouble turning the knob. Finally getting it open, she stepped through and walked out.

Francine sighed. Maybe this happened a lot, thought Levi. He thought of Kate, and told himself that whatever the case, he would not walk out of this meeting. He had a lot riding on it.

Francine straightened again and smiled, and continued with her introduction. "Everyone has problems," she said at one point. "But these problems have a greater effect on some people, causing them to clam up and close themselves off from the world. What we are trying to do here is share our troubles with each other, and through that shared experience you all will come out stronger because you will know that you are not alone."

Levi agreed with that. It was certainly true in regards to Kate and himself, he supposed. The issue of Pickles' death had plagued him for years, but maybe it was time to get over it. It was time to start anew: to find a purpose other than wandering aimlessly and mourning a dead hamster.

Before Francine started again, he timidly raised his hand. She looked at him. "Yes...Levi?"

"I'd like to speak a little." He could not explain it, but Levi

had the feeling that he could trust these people, that he could talk openly with them, and that they could help him. He glanced around, meeting the upturned gazes of these emotionally torn people. He saw encouragement in their eyes, and after a calming breath he began his story.

“He died when I was in college. Murdered, more like. It tore me up inside. That wasn’t a good time for me, and he was one of my only friends. He cared about me, you know?” Several people nodded when he said that. “One of those friends who always listens to you when you’re down, who is always there to comfort you.” He heard one of the women begin to cry, her body shaking. The men began fidgeting in their seats. The man in the rumpled suit and wingtips, Phil, was looking at Levi, his gaze full of sadness and understanding. “He never said very much, but I still know that he cared about me. He kept me going.” Levi took a shaky breath. His throat was dry as he blinked back tears. This is too difficult, part of him said. Stop before you hurt yourself. And yet another part of him lashed out in frustration. No. I need this. I need to get this out into the open. He continued, heedless of the terrible memories. He needed to do this, for Kate. He drew in another breath. “And then her cat killed him. Killed Pickles. In one second my hamster was dead and...”

“Wait a minute,” said Phil. “Pickles is an animal?! That’s what you’ve been crying over this entire time?!” The man’s chair flew backwards as he exploded out of his seat. Everyone visibly jumped at his angry outburst, but he did not stop there. “And a hamster at that? I mean, if it was a dog that you had for ten years I could understand that. But a hamster? Are you crazy? He probably would have died soon anyway from old age! You think people should feel sorry for you?” Francine started to tell the man to sit down, but he shouted her down. “No! This is ridiculous! We should talk about someone with a real problem! I lost my wife in a car accident, and I was driving!” The man was teary eyed now, his voice cracking. Levi shrank under his gaze. “I’ve had to live with that guilt for four years without moving on, because I thought that everyone blamed me! But now I see that I’m just beating myself up over it. Yeah, I’m sad that it happened and I miss her, but that doesn’t mean that the rest of my life needs to stop because of it.

Now that I've seen how lame you are, I realize that some people are a lot worse off than I am. With that in mind, I think I can get over my wife's death!" He paused to take a shaky breath. His face was a dark red, and his eyes revealed a mixture of anger and agony. Eventually the anger won out, and his voice did not shake when he spoke again. "Wow, I haven't thought that clearly in years," he said, and then turned to Francine. "It appears, ma'am, that your class actually works. Thank you." And with that he stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

The room was dead silent in the wake of his departure. No one moved a muscle as they all stared at the door. The man's fallen chair stayed where it was.

A buzzing sound came from one corner of the room. Every head snapped in that direction as a stinkbug lazily made its way from a windowsill to the top of the nearest bookshelf. It landed and began roaming around the new territory.

A chuckle came from one corner of the circle. Every head whipped that way to see another man chuckling, and then laughing, his body shaking uncontrollably. He threw his head back as his chair threatened to tip over.

There was a moment of shock as everyone stared at this madman, and then the floodgates opened as the room started laughing. The woman next to Levi held her sides while the man across from him was doubled over. The man who had started laughing was now rolling on the floor, and even Francine was giggling while trying to maintain a composed aura.

Levi soon joined in. The more he laughed, the more he felt that a burden was being lifted off his shoulders. He began to realize just how ridiculous that burden was, that he had mourned for so long. Maybe, he thought, he had been more affected by Cindy's uncaring response towards the whole thing as opposed to Pickles' death, or by the way that she had cared more about the size of her cat's hairball than the hamster's demise. Now, as he laughed, he realized that he did not actually care anymore about Cindy or her cat. He had more important things to care about now.

The meeting ended shortly after. On his way home Levi stopped to get some lilacs. They were Kate's favorites.