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## A Few Steps Back

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## *A Few Steps Back* // Joseph Zelek

“As I walked by one of the rooms, an old man had just flat-lined so I called over to one of the nurses. They eventually wheeled the guy out and me, being the curious person i am, went inside. The only thing on his bedside table was a book with a dollar bill in between the covers. It was in between pages one-ninety-four and one-ninety-five of a two-hundred page book. No one sent this guy flowers or a bookmark or even came to visit and he didn’t even get to finish his book before he kicked the bucket. I’ll tell ya, it’s a messed up world we’re living in.” Trenton Walters sat in a local diner with his only friend, telling stories like this one. Trenton’s stories, no matter when he told them or who he told them to, all had one common theme: that Life was a sadist. “It’s not because I’m a pessimist,” he would say, “It’s because I’ve accepted the truth.”

Trenton worked at the local hospital as a custodian. Each day he saw a combination of three things: people check into the hospital, people check out of the hospital, and people die. And for the ones who did check out, Trenton often saw them return a few months later.

“It’s screwed up, don’t you think? It’s like we’re all just loose puzzle pieces that can be tossed aside at any moment. Sure, people try to make the pieces fit together but they never do.”

Trenton’s friend Marshall took a sip from his coffee and then said, “What a man thinks about the world often says something about the man himself.”

“What are you saying here, Marshall?”

“I’m just saying that it depends on how you look at things. Sure the world has its problems, but if we all looked at it the way you do then no one would ever be happy. Let me ask you: do you truly believe that you’re just another loose piece? That you serve no greater purpose? That you fit in nowhere?”

Trenton paused. “Yeah, I do believe that. All my life I’ve



been told that I'll find my place. And now I spend my days watching people wither away, and when they're finally gone all I can do is clean up their trash." The conversation went on like that for a while. At the end of it though, Marshall made a proposal. He asked Trenton to spend next Sunday morning with him, and if his belief did not change, he would pay for lunch. If it did change, Trenton would pay. The men shook hands.

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That Sunday at nine A.M., Trenton met Marshall at the train station. While Marshall marched over to the ticket window, Trenton stood wistfully against the station's brick wall, his eyes fixated upon the ground. Marshall bought two tickets to Fellerton and handed one to Trenton.

"Fellerton? The only place I know near that stop is the mental ward. What, are you going to try to have me committed?"

"Beautiful day isn't, Trenton? It hasn't hit the sixties in weeks." Marshall enjoyed playing upon Trenton's curiosities. The train arrived at its destination at nine-thirty. Marshall then hailed a cab and off they went—indeed to the mental ward.

The psychiatric ward's corridors were a pristine white. The nurses wore voluntary smiles and spoke with sincerity, which irked Trenton. An eternal doubt had infected his mind long ago and now any implication of perfection caused him unease; perfection insinuated decay. Marshall and Trenton signed in at the front desk and then one of the nurses led them down a hall to the main area where the patients played board games, talked, and even laughed.

"I've got a friend here that I'd like you to meet Trenton; he's a voluntary patient and has got a perspective I think might cause you to raise an eyebrow."

"Mr. Vance is over there," the nurse said, pointing



towards a table where a group of men were engaged in a game of Blackjack. Marshall and Trenton approached the table while the nurse stood still, a perpetual smile upon her face.

“A regular Nurse Ratched if you ask me,” Trenton remarked. “I know a facade when I see one. I’d like to see this place when there *aren’t* visitors.”

Marshall made eye contact with his friend and then waved. “Hey, if it ain’t Marshall. What are you doing here?” Wes Vance’s voice was welcoming, which just aggravated Trenton’s unease. Wes wore sweat pants and a Chicago Bears t-shirt. His brown hair was combed straight and his glasses made him look distinguished. He looked—normal.

“I actually came because I want you to meet a friend of mine: Trenton Walters. You think you have a minute?”

“Of course.” To the rest of the men at the table: “Gentlemen, you’ll have to excuse me.” Trenton, Marshall, and Wes found an empty table and sat down. The table had a Rubik’s Cube and a few board games scattered across it. Wes picked up the cube and started solving it while he and Marshall caught up with one another. Then, they all talked about sports and after that politics. When talk of politics frustrated the men too much to continue, they moved on.

“So Trent,” Wes began, “Why is it that Marshall finds it necessary that you talk to me?”

Marshall interjected to explain Trenton’s outlook on life in brevity. Then Marshall put forth a question to Wes: “Why did you check yourself into the ward?”

Wes paused and peered down at the Rubik’s Cube. “Well, it’s simple really. Trenton, you say were all just loose puzzle pieces, that we’re—expendable. Well, I say we’re more like squares on one of these cubes. We’ve all got our place, but it takes time for everything to line up.” Wes twisted the multi-colored block around, looking intently at each side. “And the only people who find their place are the ones who



realize that sometimes you've got to take a few steps back to get where you want to go. I'm here because I was stuck. I forgot where I wanted to go. I forgot how to be happy. This, I guess you could say, is my few steps back." Wes handed the now finished Rubik's Cube to Trenton as he stood up from his chair.

On the train ride home, Marshall sat pleased. Trenton, silent and in deep contemplation, leaned forward on his seat with his hands clasped together. Marshall broke the silence, an unbreakable grin perched upon his face. "Quite an earth shaker, don't you think?" He nudged Trenton but he remained silent. "Hey Trent, don't worry. I'm not all that hungry anyways."

A few moments passed before Trenton spoke. "I was thinking, and you know what's messed up?" Marshall frowned. "Your friend Wes. He can't ever be president." Marshall became confused, almost frustrated. "The second he checked himself into a mental ward, he was labeled. By trying to get help, ya know those few steps back he was talkin' about, he closed some doors, limited his opportunities. Imagine Wes was a politician and ran for president in the next election. And imagine he was more than qualified. Well, I'll tell ya what, he's not winning that election. No one's gonna elect a man who once thought he was crazy..."

"But he's not crazy, nor *was* he. Ever."

"Well we know that, but the American public doesn't, strangers don't. They see the facts and don't bother to consider the circumstances or look much further than the black and white. The labels one accrues over time have got permanent glue on them. Now *that* is messed up."

"I'll take that as you're not yet convinced."

Marshall was still determined to change Trenton's mind and so they went to the park, Marshall again in lead, Trenton again in somber curiosity.

Children filled the playgrounds, parents the benches, and birds the trees. Dogs ran to catch Frisbees while their



owners stood in content admiration. People walked the paths, hands in their pockets, looking up at the sky, unable to keep from smiling. Anyone could find peace here.

“Look around, Trenton. What do you see?”

“Inevitable decay. Things don’t stay like this; they can’t. And there’s no way to hold onto the good things. I see loose puzzle pieces in temporary disillusionment, convinced that *this* is where they belong. Sunny days are quite deceiving.”

“So are dark days.” Marshall spent thirty minutes trying to help Trenton see the beauty of it all. Though after years of morbid encounters and ensuing self-assurances that the world was inherently cruel, Trenton had shut his eyes too tightly, and by noon Marshall had given up trying to pry them open. “Well, I guess lunch is on me.”

“And boy am I hungry. But I need to stop at the hospital and pick up my work schedule for the week. I’ll meet you at the regular place?” Marshall nodded.

Marshall sat in their usual booth at the diner, sipping coffee and waiting for his friend. He thought about things to say that might at last change Trenton’s mind. Nothing seemed to suffice; Trenton would poke holes in every anecdote and every piece of wisdom. Marshall decided that the only way Trenton would change was if he saw the errors in his philosophy for himself.

Trenton arrived fifteen minutes after Marshall had. He carried a book in hand and wore a revitalized grin. Seeing this, Marshall sighed.

“What’s that? Although I’ll probably regret asking.” Marshall was referring to the book.

“This? Just the old man’s book I told you about. Guess where I found it? I found it in the garbage. How messed up is that? The man’s sole possession ends up in the trash.”

“Just because that was the only thing he had at the hospital—nevermind.” One of the waitresses came by the table to see if Trenton wanted something to eat. He ordered



more than usual. An idea then sparked Marshall's curiosity. "Wouldn't you have been the one to clean that man's room?"

"Yeah, why?"

Marshall motioned to the book. "Would you mind?" Trenton slid the book across the table and then gestured in a way that said "be my guest". Marshall opened the front cover, stopped for a few seconds, and chuckled briefly. "What pages did you say you found the dollar in between?"

"One-ninety-four and one-ninety-five." Marshall flipped near the back of the book and then grinned like Trenton had minutes ago.

"What?"

Marshall flipped back to the front cover and began to read: "Dear Dad, I left this book with your nurse because you were resting. I hope it makes your time here a little better. And sorry about the dollar bill (I forgot a bookmark!). The kids and I will be here tomorrow just like every Tuesday. Love, Cindy." Marshall glared at Trenton.

"That still doesn't change the fact that the guy never got to finish his book."

Marshall flipped back to where he had before. "Page one-ninety-five: Appendix." He then slid the book across the table so Trenton could see for himself. Trenton stared intently at the page in front of him, thinking of a way to discount Marshall's point; he remained silent.

"You set up this false world a long time ago, Trenton, because you weren't satisfied with where you were, where you *are*." Marshall spoke not out of urgency but out of sincerity. "At some point in your life you forgot who you were, or at least who you wanted to become. You needed a reason for your struggle and making one up was a lot easier than changing things. You've held on to this illusion. But I can't make you change how you view the world; today is evidence of that. You have to be the one that lets go of the mirage you created." Silence overtook the conversation, only to be broken by the



waitress's customary questions and the men's solemn replies.

After having finished his meal, Marshall looked at Trenton's half-full plate and stood up to leave. "I'll leave the money on the table. How much should cover it do you think?"

"No. I've got it," Trenton replied. Marshall stopped for a second and then exited, leaving his friend sitting quietly in the diner, his eyes fixed upon the word "Appendix".

\*

The next afternoon Marshall and Trenton met for lunch as usual.

"I quit my job," Trenton began.

"Why? It seemed to be the perfect job for a pessimist like you."

"I thought about what you said, and what Wes said, and about the park. And then I remembered that I was the one who threw that man's book away in the first place." Trenton laughed, then paused, and became serious again. "I feel like my subconscious had been trying to protect me, making me see things in a way that would explain why I am where I am. I must've felt that if I could convince myself that no one had a place in life then I wouldn't be mad if I discovered I wound up in the wrong one."

"Well, I'm glad you've come to terms with this. But what are you going to do about work? Do you have a plan?"

"Not in the least bit. But I needed to do something. You of all people can attest to that. So I quit my job. I don't what the next step is but I'm ready to find my place in the world—and yes, I do believe we all fit in somewhere. Although it might be someone's, my place isn't at the hospital. It made me miserable."

"Quitting your job, I guess you could say..."

"...is my few steps back."

When the men finished their lunch, Marshall left the diner as he always had: content with a fine afternoon. Trenton, however, exited as he never had: hopeful and excited. As



Trenton stepped outside, he breathed the afternoon in and looked to his right. He saw a familiar path: the one he had taken every day for years. Then he turned his head to his left and walked that way, his eyes not fixated upon the ground but upon a new horizon, upon a future that made his fingers tremble in anticipation. Trenton, once slave to self-told lies, now ventured out into the unknown as children do: infatuated by a world yet to experienced, scared, though strengthened by the thought of dreams yet to be fulfilled. This was not the end for Trenton, nor was it the beginning, for to say that would be to disregard his past, which is almost as important as his present. Instead, this was the curtain's ascension—the signal of the start to Trenton's Act Two. And now, granted his brief hour upon the stage, he chased redemption.