

Moving Mountains

Sunday, October 14, 9:30 AM

I took out my red stress ball and tossed it against the wall. Throw, bounce, catch. Throw, bounce, catch. I lounged on my bed diagonally, bare feet resting against the white walls of my dorm. After five rings, he picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey!” I said, sitting up.

“Hey.”

“Did it work?”

“I don’t think so.” replied Jonathan.

“Really? Nothing?”

“Nope.”

“Oh. Okay.” I slumped back down, squeezing the ball until I had nearly flattened it in my palm. The meaty flesh of my hand lost its color from the force.

“Not yet, anyway.” he said.

I clamored up the peak of that hope, tripped in my haste, then tumbled towards the cliff’s edge. I flailed outwards as I slid, bloody nails ripping against the icy mountainside, just managing to grasp the ledge before I fell into the void. Forearms burning, I dangled, legs kicking wildly through cold, lifeless air. One by one my fingers trembled, weakened, and slipped, until all that gripped the edge were the index and middle on each hand. Then just one hand. Then nothing. I closed my eyes.

“I feel like,” I started slowly, “something would have happened by now, if something was gonna happen at all.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. Kinda.” I said, tossing the ball against the wall again. Throw, bounce, catch.

“Well,” he paused, “this is your thing, kid. I figure you know more about this than me.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. The morning sun illuminating my room seemed suddenly oppressive in its cheerfulness. Birds chirped outside, blissful and ignorant. Nature was, at once, too small to grasp the gravity of the moment and too large to care.

Jonathan sighed. “You’re pretty fucked up about this, aren’t you?”

“And you’re not as fucked up as I imagined you’d be.” The words flew out before I could stop them. Who was I to weaponize his emotional stability, him of all people, now of all times? “I’m sorry, that was...mean.”

“Eh,” he said, and I pictured him doing his half-shoulder shrug. “You’ve always had high hopes. It’s one of the things I like most about you.”

“I don’t understand. What did I do wrong?”

“Maybe it isn’t about you.” replied Jon.

“I don’t really know what that means here. Like I hear your words, but I don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me.”

“It means...it means that you did what you could.” Jonathan said. “You’re always doing what you can. And I appreciate it. You’re like a brother to me. This didn’t work, and that’s okay. For a second there, I had a little bit of hope. That may not seem like much to you, but I haven’t had real hope in, well, quite some time. Thank you for that.”

Throw, bounce, catch.

“Maybe I’m just being dramatic right now.” I said. “Like tomorrow I’ll be over it and it’ll be all good, but, to be honest, I’m not sure who I am anymore. I think I’m different now. How? I don’t know. To what extent? I don’t know. But different, definitely. Does that make sense?”

“It does.” Jon said. His brevity left me hollow.

“What do I do now?”

“Mm. You sound...hopeless. And, kid, let me tell you, I know a thing or two about being hopeless. You’re new here, an out-of-towner, a weekend visitor. I’ve been here. I built the damn hotel. So, as the proprietor of this fine establishment, here is my advice: Visit, sure. Get a room if you need to, call a hooker, go down to the bar and throw back a cold one, but leave. As soon as you can. Because this place...it tends to grow on you. In you.”

He paused, sighed, then continued.

“You know what? Maybe you are different now. Maybe that old you is dead forever, buried under the weight of crushed expectations. I’d just ask, as a favor to yourself, as a favor to me, that whoever you are now, try to grow up in the old you’s shadow. We need people like you. People crazy enough to think of shit like this, and bold enough to believe it would work.”

Throw, bounce, catch. Throw, bounce, catch. Throw, bounce, catch.

“I can’t make any promises.” I finally said.

“No,” said Jon. “No, I suppose not.”

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Saturday, October 13, 10 PM

I called Jon, my fingers steady as I handled my phone. I wasn’t surprised at my sense of calm. Being surprised would have meant that I expected to be nervous. Being nervous meant that I could fail.

“Hello?” said Jon, sounding tired.

“Hey, it’s me. Ready?” I reached for my stress ball and began massaging it in my hands.

“You’re sure you want to do this?”

“Yes.” I stated. “Are you?”

“Mm.”

I pushed myself up into a sitting position and took a breath. “Hey,” I said slowly, hitting the tone I had practiced, “if you don’t want to do this, I get it. For real. No judgment, no disappointment.”

“Mm.” he said again, deeper this time.

“Take me seriously. We really don’t. I wouldn’t want to do this if you’re not fully about it.”

Jon didn’t reply, and my words languished in the silence, crumbling to sand like pieces of brittle clay.

Throw, bounce, catch. Throw, bounce, catch.

“You really think this will work?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“It will.” I replied.

“But what if?”

“It will.”

Throw, bounce, catch.

“Okay.” he said.

“Okay?”

“Okay.” I let the ball drop from my fingers and it slid into the darkness.

“Alright. Now?” I asked.

“Yeah. Should you be here in person?” he asked.

“I’ve thought about that. I don’t think it matters, there is precedent for both ways. Do you think different?”

“I don’t know.” Jonathan said. “This is your thing. I’m just saying. A nigga has expectations and shit.”

“Ah, okay. No, I think we’re good.”

Jonathan blew out a breath. “Okay. Okay. Let’s do it then. I’m ready for a miracle. Miracalize me, Captain.”

I chuckled. It felt good. “Alright. Let’s do it. Bow your head and close your eyes.”

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Friday, October 12, 8 PM

I stood in the pew, hands on the back of the chair in front of me, allowing the music to wash through my veins.

Lord, I will lift mine eyes to the hills, knowing my help is coming from you.

The music swelled and ebbed, drawing out the emotions of the audience with a liberating force. The upbeat praise anthems earlier were powerful, filled with the impromptu testimonials from the worship leader about the saving power of God. Then came the slower tempo worship songs that left the room speechless, as people all over the building simply swayed in time with the boom-tap of the drums. Finally, this song. My favorite. It was unplanned, the worship leader just started humming the tune into the mic as the praise team left the stage. But the humming was a snowball rolling down a mountainside, picking up momentum, picking up power. We all stood, the entire sanctuary, adding our voices to the avalanche.

Your peace you give me, in times of the storm.

I sang, loud and robust, letting my voice join the chorus as my heart filled to bursting from the sound. No music. No piano. No guitar. No praise team. Just voices, all in harmony, all calling on God. Just voices, all in pain, all begging God to move. Just voices, all in adoration, and the boom-tap of the drums.

You are the source of my strength! You are the strength of my life!

Shouts filled the space in the music like mortar between bricks. An elderly man in front of me caught the spirit and began praising, his arms limp at his sides and his head thrown back. “Yes, Lord,” he sobbed, “God, you have brought me from a mighty long way. A mighty long way, oh Father of my fathers. Don’t you leave me now, God. Don’t you leave me now!”

I lift my hands in total praise to you.

Don’t you leave me now.

Amen.

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Wednesday, October 10, 7 PM

I needed to eat.

I didn’t feel like eating.

Chopped bananas floated in my oatmeal like alligators in a swamp, the yellow slices peeking just above the surface like eyes partially submerged in the thick morass. Clumps of brown sugar gathered together in blotches, lily pads in my man-made marsh. I was supposed to end my food fast with soup, but I wanted something heartier. After scooping out a knife-slab of

Jiffy's and plopping it into the bowl, I poured in several ounces of almond milk, forming a moat around the moist peanut butter hill. With a forced flourish, I drizzled three interlocking circles of honey, then sprinkled in a handful of raisins. I let them fall from my hand two and three at a time.

A bead of honey had landed on the outer edge of the bowl and began slipping lethargically over the lip. I stared as it hung there, suspended, gravity begging it to drip onto the table. For an entire minute, the droplet leaned downwards, teasing, but never separating from the bowl. My oatmeal grew cold.

Earlier, I had asked God to reveal the faults in my character through this fast, and the results unnerved me. My ego craved uniqueness, to own a special place in the Kingdom of God, either at his right hand or his left. Like a schoolboy who knew the answer to the teacher's question, I itched to be called upon, to be perceived as above the rest, to earn a gold star. I hated myself for that.

The line of honey attaching the drop to the bowl thinned perilously, the drop's weight lowering it ever closer to the table. I watched it, wondering how long it could hang on.

If this didn't work, I'd be forced to choose between a God that doesn't exist and a God that wouldn't answer my prayer. I didn't know if I preferred to live in a world without God or a world with an indifferent God. Some morbidly curious part of me wondered about the intellectual choice I might have to make, a sick "Would You Rather" hypothetical. I hated that part of myself, too.

The bead of honey broke away from its connecting line, becoming a tiny golden dot on my wooden table. Disappointed, I scraped it up with my spoon, then mixed it back into the bowl. The oatmeal had coalesced densely under the pool of almond milk. I stirred listlessly, breathing life into it with the same energy as a pimply-faced teenager demonstrating CPR for a lifeguarding class. I took a bite. Well-flavored, but gummy from sitting too long. I took another bite, forcing myself to swallow, forcing myself to believe that God could use me despite me. The chopped bananas were mushy now, my tongue easily pressing them to mash against the roof of my mouth. God didn't call the qualified, but he qualified the called. Was I called? Was this hubris or inspiration? How could I tell the difference?

I began to take another bite, but halfway to my mouth I turned the spoon over, watching the oatmeal slop back into the bowl. It fell faster than the bead of honey did.

It fell, all the same.

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Monday, October 8, 11:45PM

"I don't know, man," Jonathan replied, the wind making his words hard to hear through the phone. He was probably outside on his porch. The stars were out, and I knew he liked to sit in his rocking chair on clear nights like this. "It's been years, you know? Years. And like, after so long, I think I've gotten used to it. Before, that would terrify me. As if by getting used to it, I'd be giving up on myself. But now that I'm here, it feels like I've always been here. So, when you ask me if I remember a time when I wasn't depressed, yeah. I know, intellectually, there was a time. I'm not stupid. And, you know what? Sometimes I get a glimpse of that old me. It's not much. It's never much. An echo of a whisper. A ghost so faint as to be barely more than breath. Then it's gone. And I'm left wondering what's real and what's in my mind. You'd think...you'd think those would be easy to keep separate. That you could just look at the colors on your plate and intuitively know which vegetables are corn and which vegetables are peas. I imagine for most folk it is that simple. But it's not for me. My depression, it makes me color

blind somehow. I mix them up. The real and the unreal. Memories and feelings. So yes, I remember. But no. No, I don't. Not really. Not in a way that matters. And no one understands that. No one. Not you, not my family, not my friends. Everyone tries, good intentions out the ass, but no one ever gets there. And that's what hurts the most, I think. The distance separating me from my friends. The mountain between us."

"You think...you think there is a way out?" I asked, blinking rapidly.

"I know there is."

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant. As in--"

"Relax, kid, I know what you meant," Jonathan cut in, chuckling. "I like depression word play. You don't get to try it, though. Just like how white people can't say nigga. As for a way out, I don't know. I know what my therapist says. But I also know what I feel."

"How well can you trust your feelings about stuff like this?" I asked. "Doesn't depression mean your feelings are compromised?" Throw, bounce, catch.

"See, that's the thing. I *know* I can't trust them. I'm *aware* of my chemical imbalance. But knowing and being aware doesn't really mean shit when you get right down to it. I feel what I feel. I'm not a robot, guided by unadulterated logic. I'm a human*fucking*being. And part of what makes me human is that my emotions mean something. But everyone, you, my therapist, all of y'all keep saying that my emotions don't mean shit. Not in so many words, but that's the gist. I can't trust them. Well they are the only emotions I have. It's pretty damn unrealistic to ask a human being to distrust everything they feel, I think. Unrealistic at best. Cruel at worst."

I said nothing for a few minutes. I never knew what to say to Jonathan.

"Do you still believe in God, Jon?" I asked.

"I.. I don't know. Sometimes, yes, I'm very much a believer. I was raised in this thing, just like you. I went to the same services as you, heard the same sermons. But, other times, if I'm being honest, what God would do me like this? I have been depressed now for years. Years. Years of severe depression. Of suicidal ideation. Of cutting. Of this totally fucked up existence. If God existed, how could he treat me like this? How is this love? How is this in 'the plans I have prepared for you?' Kinda seems hard to believe, you know? But it's complicated. I haven't...given up my belief. I'm still holding on. Barely, but holding."

"You think God could heal you?"

"Eh," said Jonathan, "It's not a question of ability for me, I know he is able. I believe the stories. It's more a question of willingness. Would he do it for me? And I've prayed, so long, so many times for this exact thing. And yet, here I am." He paused. "I used to have more faith man, I used to be all about this shit." He paused again. "I think, if I was going to get healed, the time would have been a while back, before I became...this. Back when I still believed good things could happen to me, back when I still believed I wouldn't die in this thing, one way or another. Why do you ask?"

Throw, bounce, catch.

"Well," I said, "I've been thinking. There's a story in Mathew of a guy who was sick but couldn't get to Jesus. His friends grabbed his mat and carried him to the house where Jesus was at. The house was so crowded, though, that they had to open up the roof and lower the friend to Jesus."

"I remember," said Jon, "what about it?"

"I know I'm being really literal with the text here, but after Jesus heals the guy, he says something like 'rise and walk, *their* faith has healed you.' 'Their.' As in the faith of the friends, not the faith of the guy. So that got me wondering some..."

“Ugh. Maybe? Maybe. Just, do me a favor?”

“What’s up?”

He breathed out slowly. “Don’t try this unless you really believe. Okay? That’s important.”

“Okay,” I said. “I won’t.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. Listen,” I said, “I’ll text you in the morning with more thoughts. Maybe we do this, maybe we don’t, no committal yet. I’m just saying, it could be a thing.”

“Yeah,” Jon said softly, “it could be a thing.”

“Alright bro, I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Goodnight Jon.”

“Goodnight.”