

"I don't understand why you are making believe that you don't care about money," my Dad said.

I looked at him, he had my eyes. "Because I'm not going to live this life at the margins."

"What does that even mean?" He had brought me out to lunch in the three star Michelin rated restaurant that was on the same street as his office. We had two waiters, a sommelier and two attendants. Before I could answer, the taller waiter came over and asked us if we had decided on our food. I think his name was Bryan.

"No," my Dad told him, staring into my eyes with my eyes. "Give us five minutes."

"Yes, sir," Bryan said quickly.

My Dad leaned back and sighed. His face was tanned and clean shaven, healthy looking with a sheen from Kiehl's Facial Fuel Anti-Wrinkle Cream for Men. My mom would buy it for him every Father's Day and Christmas, amongst other gifts. It had started out as a special luxury when they were younger. He had kept on buying it after she died. His hair was cut tight and above the ears. It was swept from left to right on his head with a sharp part on the left side and was a mix of dark brown and varying greys. It shined from the pomade. His eyes – my eyes – were grey and cool. He kept in shape and was a good looking older man and he knew it.

"Well, what does that mean?"

I broke eye contact with him. The other waiter started to walk over with a bread basket but Bryan stopped him. Bryan whispered to the shorter waiter and he put the bread basket back down and stood next to Bryan, quietly.

My left hand was lying on the table on top of the blue folder I brought with me. It contained my detailed plans. My startup idea. I drummed my fingers on top of it and stared back at him. "It means that I don't want to just live and just do whatever it is that I am supposed to do." I took a breath. I felt stupid because I sounded like a child. I leaned forward. "Listen, I am not a child, I know what I am doing. I am still young enough to make a change, to take a chance. I don't have a family that is relying on me – I don't even have a fiancée anymore." A wry smile formed on his face, but I felt better. My hand continued to

drum on the blue folder. On my left wrist was a Rolex GMT Master II that my father had given me when I turned 25 the year before. It had a black face and red and blue bezel. He had it for over 30 years. I had replaced the gold and stainless steel link strap with a black leather strap. I kept the old strap in a watch winding box in my apartment.

An old lady sat by herself at the table to my left. She wore a vintage Chanel lavender skirt suit with a cream blouse. She had on a wide brimmed hat that drooped at the edges. She sat up straight in her chair with her hands in her lap. The menu was closed in front of her in the same spot where Bryan had placed it. She motioned to Bryan and he walked over briskly.

"I'll have the *salade niçoise*," she told him. Her clear unaccented speech switched to a near perfect Parisian French accent for the last two words. Bryan nodded, took the menu and walked away.

I fought the urge to get up and leave. My left hand laid flat on the table and I opened the menu. My Dad did the same.

"What will you start with?" he asked me. "I asked for the red snapper when I made the reservation."

"I don't know. Maybe I'll get the *salade niçoise*," I said with immediate regret. I stumbled over the last word with such a strong feeling of stupidity. "I'm sorry," I said.

"Yes."

"I think that I will probably get the oysters and the bacalao."

He laughed. "You do love the bacalao." He was being nice and I was being a shithead child and I knew that this was going the wrong way for me.

The painting that ran across the back wall was completely filled by the ocean. You couldn't see the sky or the land. Green and blue water crashed throughout the painting cresting into whitecaps. It wasn't violent, but it wasn't calm. The painting memorialized a moment, but I was thinking about what would happen after. New whitecaps would form, mixing water from different waves together. And on and on it would go and a picture taken at any other moment thereafter would look different than the painting I was starting at.

Bryan came over to us and we ordered.

“You would be doing this to make more money, right?”

“Well, yes, that is part of it.”

“But, you already have a path to make more money.”

“Yes, but that’s not the whole point.” The shorter waiter came over and placed a piece of bread on each of our bread plates. He nodded his head when I thanked him. Bryan placed the *salade niçoise* in front of the old lady. The tuna was dark pink in the middle and fresh.

The shorter waiter brought my oysters. “On your plate you have a Kumamoto, an Olympia, a Tatamagouche, a Colville Bay, an El Cardon - careful that one is salty,” he warned me, “and this large one is a Glidden Point. *Bon appétit.*” Bryan stood next to my father explaining his dish. The sommelier came over and gave me a taste of a Muscadet which he described as an ideal pairing for the oysters. I nodded at him after I sniffed and drank the taste and he poured a glass. My Dad got a different wine.

My father had taught me how to eat. He had explained to me the complexity of flavors, starting with the difference between sweet and savory. From there, he injected nuance into the lessons. He would have me eat something and ask me how it tasted. Then he would describe how it tasted to him. Beef was tender and rich, almost creamy when cooked right and tangy or spicy if there was fresh horseradish or *au poivre* sauce made with quality black peppercorns. He introduced me to textures in food. Good pasta was cooked *al dente* and had a little bite. Good uni was light, firm, slightly sweet and only a little soft. He would tell me to think about the food when I ate or drank and not to eat just to eat.

I squeezed a little lemon on the Kumamoto and tilted the small shell in front of my mouth. I slurped in the oyster, which was sweet and barely briny. I took a sip of the wine after finishing the oyster and the acidity stood out and I liked it. I continued eating like that – an oyster and then some wine – for the remainder of the starter.

The attendants came and took our dishes and wine glasses. The lady at the table next to us was still working on her salad. She had a glass of sparkling wine that she had left untouched. A continuous stream of small bubbles floated from the bottom of the glass to the top where they burst into the air. Her skin was mostly covered by her hat, her blouse,

her vintage Chanel and her stockings. Her hands and face were visible and her skin was white, almost translucent and speckled with age spots. Her hands worked the knife and fork deftly, cutting tuna, potato, egg and olive in quick succession to form a bite that she put in her mouth with obvious delight.

My Dad motioned to our surroundings, "So you are willing to give this up for awhile then?"

"I thought you were paying for lunch," I responded with a smirk.

He laughed. "Well, yes, yes, I am."

"I am not concerned with having to go without for awhile." I took a sip of water. "Anyway, not eating at places like this can hardly be categorized as going without."

"I suppose that's true." He had his hands on the table and then he rubbed his nose with his right hand. He did that often and it looked like he was trying to pull his nose off. "But the end goal is the same, isn't it? To be able to take care of the family that you don't yet have and provide for them and secure their life?"

"Traditionally."

"So I don't understand why doing this is any better than the path that you are already on. You are on a secure path and are at the beginning of a very promising career." He made sure I was looking at him. "I'm proud of you."

I sighed with a mix of frustration and appreciation. "Thanks Dad."

He smiled. "What did you think, I would just be sitting here waving the flag of support for you?"

"I don't know. I thought that you would see this as a worthy challenge."

"Maybe it is, Dave, maybe it is."

We stopped talking about it then and finished our meal, discussing politics and the Yankees. We hugged goodbye and he told me he loved me. I left the restaurant with seafood swimming around my stomach in a pool of the Muscadet and the Chablis and the Garganega from the last two courses.

My Dad was always the practical one. My mom was the dreamer. When I was younger she would take me to the theater and afterward we would sit in the coffee shop

across from our apartment and she would ask what I thought about the show. I would try to come up with sophisticated answers that described the meaning of the show and its subtext. She'd stop me. "First," she would say, "you must answer whether or not you liked it." And I would usually answer that I did. "And now," she followed, "you must describe to me why you think that." Sometimes by the end of my description I might have ended up describing all the reasons I didn't like what we had seen. She would tell me, "that's okay, Honey. At least now you know why you didn't really like it and you're not starting out by thinking about what deeper meaning you should get from it. Start on the surface first and then try to understand what lies beneath." She was less concerned with material things than my father. She would always tell me that because she grew up with so little that she knew that having these things made little difference as to whether a person was happy. I used to think that meant some equivalent of the old trope that money can't buy happiness, but as I'd gotten older I wondered if it just meant that everyone was equally miserable.

My head was cloudy and I called my friend Tommy who lived on the Upper East Side. He was a freelance journalist and I knew he was working on pitches for his next piece and would be making believe he was working - either at home or at his local coffee shop. He was at home.

I pushed the button for 4C, which said T. Huda beside it. It quickly buzzed and I pushed the door open. I walked the four flights of stairs holding the handrail as my legs were heavy from the wine. His door was open and I pushed through it. I left my leather loafers and my brown Jack Spade waxwear field bag by the door and walked barefoot to his fridge. I opened it while asking, "Hey man, do you have any Heady Topper left?"

"One sec," he responded, his voice muffled by the bathroom door. He lived in a junior one bedroom and his bedroom was separated from the rest of the apartment by a burgundy sari curtain. The main room had a couch and a couple of chairs that faced a fifty-five inch Panasonic 4K Ultra HD television, which had a sharp picture but the black on it wasn't as dark as I would've liked.

"What was that?" he said as he came out of the bathroom.

"Nothing, I figured it out," I told him as I popped open the double IPA.

"Is that the last one?" he asked me.

"Oh, shit, I didn't check."

"Nah, it's fine." He chuckled. "I have a bunch in the closet."

"Asshole."

"Well, I was just confirming that you are, in fact, the asshole," he told me, emphasizing the last word as if it was a proper noun. "Isn't it a little early on a Wednesday to be drinking?"

I took a long sip. The beer was hoppy and bitter with a citrus taste, but it went down smooth and easy. It was great. "It's hump day," I responded.

He snorted and walked over to the fridge. He grabbed himself a beer, some craft blood orange pale ale that I can't ever remember the name of. Tommy had smooth brown skin and black hair that he had buzzed short on the sides and long hair on top that he styled back. He sat next to me on the couch and turned on the TV, putting the volume low.

I looked over at him. "I just had lunch with my Dad."

"Ah, I see." He opened the can and said to me as he held the can up towards me, "Well, at least that part is over."

"Cheers to that," I responded as we touched cans and drank.

"I fucking hate this beer," he said.

"You don't have to drink it just because it's in your fridge."

"Listen, people bring you a gift, whatever it is, you have to respect that. And I'm going to respect this fucking beer and then never buy it." He took another sip and swallowed it with a sour look on his face. I laughed. "So, how did it go?" he asked.

"Yeah, not so great." I was almost done with my beer, but I didn't finish it off. This was a beer you were supposed to enjoy and I knew Tommy would be mad if he saw that I had pounded it. "He just seems to think that I'm really trying to do this just to make money in a different way than I'm doing now and without any particular purpose."

"Well, it's not like your idea is going to save the world or anything."

"I know that."

"And you are doing pretty much the best out of all of us from school."

"I'm not sure about that, but, yeah, I'm doing well."

"Indeed."

"But clearly there's more than that."

"Of course."

I couldn't help it, I finished the beer. Tommy gave me a disapproving look and I got up and went to the fridge. "Look, I'm going to help the cause." I pulled out one of the blood orange pale ales.

"That's the least you could do," he said to me.

"Look at you," I told him. "You've followed what you've wanted to do with your career and your life." I added, "And, it's not like every piece you write is making the world a better place."

He faked indignation, "What, you don't think that article on the vineyards of Long Island is challenging the human race to improve? I am shaking the trees of progress."

I laughed with him. "That doesn't make any sense at all."

"What do you know about metaphors?"

I didn't respond. I put my feet up on the West Elm mango wood coffee table. He had the one with storage inside and the top popped up and out and could be used as a makeshift dining table from the couch. Which is how he used it because he didn't have enough room for a kitchen table. He liked to tell people that it was made in India like him. I would then joke that, like him, the table didn't stay in India.

"Listen man, you're right, I have done what I wanted to do," Tommy said to me after a minute. "But, I've known forever that I wanted to be a journalist. But, let me tell you something that I have told you many times before, this is what I want to do, but this isn't really what I like to do. Maybe it was at first, but I have had to scratch and grab for everything along the way. And it changed the desire. Even now, I'm basically living story to story. I can't stop."

"I get that, but it was your choice."

"Yes."

"Well, I never really got to make that choice. I just did what was expected of me."

“Stop it,” he told me. He finished his beer and got up. “Just fucking stop that shit. Grow the fuck up. Listen man, if you want to do this thing, then do it. But don’t act like you’ve been some sort of fucking passenger in your own life. How’s that for a metaphor?” He went to the fridge and got another beer.

“I think that’s a cliché, not a metaphor.”

“Whatever. If you believe in this thing, whatever the fuck it is.” He stopped. “No, no, don’t try explaining it to me again. What matters is if you think it can succeed, then do it.”

I scratched my head and took another sip of the blood orange beer. He was right. It was terrible. “What if I’m just bored?”

“That’s a good enough excuse for me,” he said without missing a beat. “We can over think this shit to death. Plus, you have a safety net if you fail anyway.”

“Fuck you, that’s not why I’m doing this.”

“No, but it sure makes it a helluva lot easier to do, doesn’t it?”

I took another long gulp of the beer, the blood orange was pronounced but tasted fake and metallic. I finished the beer. I was pretty drunk. “You’re right.”

“And who gives a shit if you’re just doing this for a different way to get money. As long as it keeps you interested, that’s what matters.”

I had my hands in my head. “Yeah,” I mumbled. My head was swimming in drunken thoughts that didn’t connect and I couldn’t make sense of. I had started pursuing this idea because I was bored. Then I was excited and now I felt a mix of boredom, excitement and apprehension. I had not quit my job yet. My lunch with my Dad was the first step to do that since he knew my boss well and had gotten me the job to begin with.

I got up. “Thanks for the beers, man. Thanks a lot.” He was up too. I grabbed his hand and brought him in for an embrace. “Means a lot.”

“No problem.” He looked at me. “You alright to go?” he asked.

“Yeah, man. I’ll be fine.” I walked to the door and put my bag over my shoulder and across my body. I stumbled slightly as I slipped my feet into the loafers. As I walked out the front door of the building I was shocked by the brightness of the sun. It was still afternoon. I put on my Ray-Ban Aviators. They were black carbon fibre with smoke grey lenses. I started



walking south. In my mind my destination was my apartment in the Battery, but I hadn't decided how to get there.

The streets were full of people. They walked swiftly passed me, both coming and going. Many had shopping bags from department stores, boutique stores, drug stores and other stores. My legs felt stuck in wet cement and my mind was barely firing. I figured I could use a little bit of a break and I stumbled into Blake. The bar looked familiar, but I couldn't remember having been there before. The floor by the bar was white and brown tiles and the rest was dark wood slats. The bar itself was huge, a large stone slab that snaked across the back wall on top of wood that was lighter than the floor. I sat on a stool near the beer taps. The bartender came over. He wore his hair pulled back tight against his skull and put into a little bun at his nape. He had on a fitted black t-shirt and Lucky Brand dark jeans.

"What can I get you?" He asked me politely.

I looked up intending to order a coke, but I saw a bourbon that I liked so I said, "Can I get a Widow Jane, neat, with a coke on the side?"

"You got it," he told me.

I turned around and surveyed the place, trying to figure out if I had been there before. It had a put-on aesthetic, a manufactured look that was somewhere between a speakeasy and a local pub from the turn of the twentieth century. This was accentuated by the oval prints of silhouettes throughout the bar with black wood frames. There were large, picnic-style wooden communal tables, crimson leather button-tufted booths and smaller, round mahogany tables with matching chairs. The effect was pierced by the forty inch Sony 1080p Smart LED televisions that were strategically placed around the bar.

I didn't hear him put down the drinks, but I turned when he asked, "You interested in food?"

I wasn't hungry, but I said, "I'm not sure, can I see a menu anyway?"

"Sure thing, here you go." He grabbed a menu and slid it over to me. "Specials are on the board," he said while pointing to a chalkboard that hung behind him.

"Thanks."

I finished the coke quickly. It was served in a highball glass full of ice. I motioned for a refill and he quickly obliged. There was no one else at the bar. After a few more sips, I took out my phone. I tried to catch up on Twitter, but I quickly moved to playing a game. I swiped through it quickly, got bored, and went to the browser, where I opened *espn.com* and read some of the top headlines. I pushed the button on the side and the screen winked out. I pulled the bar menu in front of me and grabbed the bourbon.

I looked at the bar snacks: *Spicy Deviled Eggs, Roasted Carrots, Korean Chicken Wings, Charred Octopus* and *Fire Roasted Meatloaf*. I was disgusted by the bar and myself. I drank the bourbon like a shot when the bartender wasn't looking. When he came back over I said, "I think I will pass on food, but can I get a double bourbon and the check?"

"No problem," he said to me, grabbing the bottle and pouring a double into a new glass. He put it in front of me. "I'll get the check."

I tried to savor the drink a little more, tasting the cherry and orange and then the spice on the finish. I got the check and put down my JP Morgan Palladium card. He gave me the receipt, which was for thirty-nine dollars. I put an eleven dollar tip on it to bring it to an even fifty and scribbled my name. I got up and walked from the bar and the bartender called out to me.

"Hey!"

I turned around. "Listen, I know it's a lot, but."

"No, you left your bag, man."

My face turned red. "Oh," I said sheepishly. "Yeah, thanks man."

"Have a good one."

I walked out quickly with my bag over my shoulder. I walked south again, still unsure of how I wanted to get home. After five blocks or so, I headed west, towards Central Park. My parents would take me on long walks in the park when I was a child. The three of us would hold hands as we wound our way around the paths. My mom and Dad would talk over my head about their week or their work or something they had recently seen or read. We would stop at an ice cream cart and I would get an ice cream sandwich. My mom would carefully unwrap the top of it and put a napkin in my hand before handing me the ice cream

sandwich. And I would eat it without thinking about its flavor and would lick my fingers clean of chocolate before my parents saw that they were dirty.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out. It was a text from my ex, Sam, asking me how the lunch with my Dad went. I didn't respond and put the phone back into my pocket.

I continued to walk towards the park, watching people through my sunglasses. People were getting out of work and the streets were thicker and slower, which suited my pace. I had been looking for a bodega and finally found one. I stepped in and bought a twenty-four ounce can of Budweiser and a small package of Cheetos, the crunchy kind. The cashier put the can into a brown bag and put the brown bag into a black plastic bag with the Cheetos. I paid in cash.

Outside, I pulled open the Cheetos and put a handful in my mouth. They were crunchy and the fake cheese taste was satisfying and made me want more. I popped open the Budweiser and took a sip. The beer was light and sweet without any bitterness or noticeable hoppiness. It stood up to the Cheetos well and also cleansed my palate, clearing the bits stuck in my teeth.

I entered the park in the sixties and walked around for awhile, eating and drinking as I went. I was careful not to get any of the orange dust on my shirt, which was a light blue Brooks Brother custom fit shirt.

I think I was trying to scramble up a boulder when it happened, but I only really remember waking up. At least, I woke up at the bottom of a group of rocks. My head was bloody and my shirt and pants, which were JCrew golden tobacco colored chinos, were torn up and had spots of blood on them. I sat up slowly. I reached into my pocket to grab my phone, but it wasn't there. I stood up quickly and looked around. I rushed around the rocks and looked in the grass, but it was gone. It was then I realized that I was barefoot. My sunglasses, my wallet, my watch and my bag were gone, too.

"They took everything," I heard a voice say from across the path.

"What?"

"They took your stuff." It was an old homeless man. He wore an old baseball cap covering his long, white and stringy hair. He wore a sweater with blue and gold horizontal stripes and stained khakis. Next to him on the bench was a group of shopping bags and milk crates that were somehow tied together.

My head was foggy. I couldn't tell if it was the booze or the fall. It was still light outside. "Who? You didn't stop them?" I asked without emotion.

"I couldn't have even if I tried. Group of boys."

"How do I know it wasn't you?"

"What am I going to do with that stuff?"

"It's worth a lot of money," I said.

"I've got all the money I need."

I walked over to him, and looked at his stuff. I got a whiff of how he smelled and took a step back. "I'm sure," I told him.

"You don't look so good. You should sit down for a bit."

"Maybe, maybe I will." But I didn't. "Fuck." I had my head in my hands. I didn't know what to do.

The old man watched me. "There is a pay phone down there," he pointed east down the path. "You can call the police."

I thought about the hassle of that process. "Thanks. It doesn't matter. There's always more. I just want to go home." I walked out of the park and down to my apartment barefoot. When I got home, I wasn't able to retrace my steps. I was young and dumb and full of shit and I knew it, but all I wanted to do was cancel my credit cards and get a new phone.