

Albert in Retreat

Albert stuffs his hands into his pockets and lifts his right leg. His bare foot lands ten seconds later and a few feet ahead. He notes the pressure from heel to ball and lifts his left foot, pausing flamingo style in the sun to take a breath and watch the other retreat participants. They don't seem to be going nuts.

Albert's hands survey his pockets, wanting something to fidget with. He has no use for keys here. His phone is locked in the retreat safe. Reading, writing, and music aren't permitted. Retreatants have surrendered these appurtenances and taken the vow of noble silence, if only, Albert snarked on day one, because passive-aggressive glares from the staff aren't worth any post. He questions his sanity for choosing to walk in slow motion around a dusty Israeli kibbutz near a biblically famous place—Galilee, or maybe it was Tiberius, he can't quite remember—when he's several projects behind at work, but there's nothing else to do during the three o'clock hour here. How was he supposed to know that doing anything besides meditating wasn't permitted?

Albert shakes his hands from his pockets, thuds his left leg down, and faces the dry sun. He recalls—or is recalled back to, as he had no intention to remember this—an incident a few months ago, back in Brooklyn. A middle-aged, professorial-type woman with long, pale legs and a khaki chiffon strode toward him on an empty sidewalk. He attempted eye contact but this only increased her self-assuredness and fueled her ignorance of him. She sped past, acknowledging Albert by pretending he was invisible.

Albert's scoliotic posture, downcast eyes, and busy pocket hands emerged as the primary signals that caused this woman (and others) to decide from thirty feet away to ignore him. His

familiarity with the sad and lonely sensations that her (and others) lack of reciprocity engendered triggered his self examination more than the anxiety and insecurity that perhaps caused them. His stride was natural enough when alone, but if an attractive female broached his field, he fumbled in his pockets and looked at the sidewalk with an expression that wasn't a mask for insecurity but insecurity itself. The keys in his pocket had carved the fingernails he hadn't chewed off like subway doors.

That incident on the sidewalk inspired Albert to take a body language class at the Manhattan Open Center with poker champion Barney Shelton. Albert learned that hands are the biggest indicators of anxiety, and that if one lacks confidence, one must "fake it 'til you make it." Albert straightened his posture, smiled, and copied those New Yorkers he caught cantering to the rhythms of self-confidence; their hands, shoulders, and faces swinging in liberation from the pockets of low self-esteem. Months later, after Albert's confidence still only emerged when alone or not paying attention, Barney Shelton closed their expensive private session by recommending meditation.

"It fits us Jews," Barney said, shrugging and opening his right arm toward his office door.

Albert lifts a leg. He is happy to have nothing in his pocket now, although his hands wiggle back there, anyway. He shakes his head in self recrimination and removes his hands as his leg lands. He reminds himself that he's lucky to beta-test free-swinging arms and new gaits amongst foreign strangers, far easier than doing so again amongst cooler heads in Brooklyn, whose catwalks he hoped to return to triumphantly self-assured.

Albert lifts another leg and tries to concentrate on the uneven, horseshoe-shaped path. Udi, a fifty-something short Sephardic man and Albert's roommate, approaches. Albert quickens his pace and averts his gaze, fearing that Udi will see through his cosmetic confidence. In their five-minute chat before noble silence began, Udi said that he'd been attending ten-day Vipassana retreats every year for thirty years. Albert admired Udi's natural avuncularity, and his abnegation of middle-age

through meditation, bachelorhood, and the benign depressive strain that leads one to more yoga mats than bars.

Udi finally passes. Albert quickens and slows down several times. Another woman approaches, walking slowly and smoothly, concentrating on each step. Albert's fingers wrinkle pocket lint. He feels competitive to meditate the most, the hardest, especially against those whom he assumes, like this woman, are trying too hard, and probably judging him for doing the same. He laughs at the absurdity of feeling meditatively competitive, and for judging others for judging him, a classic projection. He wonders why he feels that it's important to appear confident here (where falling apart isn't only welcome, but expected), and why he wants to appear as someone other than who he is. And who is that? He is ashamed that he doesn't know the answer.

Albert speeds up, craving to complete his circumambulation around the small horseshoe sidewalk, traversable in two minutes at a normal walking pace. Completing a loop of the horseshoe feels like some sort of accomplishment, although he would only start the horseshoe again, and be in the same situation, more or less. Why hurry? Albert pauses in a patch of sunlight, shuts his eyes, and feels into this familiar feeling. 'Doing' for the sake of it, whether it's working seventy-hour weeks, over scheduling himself, or ledgering every attentional nanosecond to devices of varying sizes and intentions (phone, tablet, e-reader, laptop, video game console, television, etc.). The illusion of exchanging the present moment for a more satisfying future that never arrived was a genocidal cull of the millions of present moments that constitute a life. It persisted through chronically dim—if non-existent—returns.

"Huh," Albert says. He puts his hands on his hips and looks down at his hairy, hobbit-like toes. He understands, for the first time, that craving to complete the horseshoe, or anything, is projecting happiness into a future that's really just another Now. All futures only happen in the Now, like Eckhart Tolle said in that book his co-worker forced him to read last year. Accomplishment presents new goals and new iterations of unsatisfactoriness. Little actually

changes. Contentment is a *choice* he must make *now*. This choice is independent of external conditions, which are unreliable, and always change. Wisdom is to gratify Now, be happy Now.

Albert gets it. He'd been kicking contentment down the path to a future that always thudded densely into his experience as another Now, not the expected future, because that's impossible. He vows to devote his attention to every successive Now for the rest of his life. He will not falter.

Albert moves from the cement to the lawn, caked with dried soil and flora detritus. He wiggles his bare feet into the hard ground, exfoliating the soles of his feet. Pleasurable sensations flow from his toes to his calves and up his spine. He shakes his shoulders and swings his arms. He thinks he'll only do this for a moment, but he can't stop. The more he moves, the more he smiles.

Albert digs in harder, but the sensations wane, and disappear. He stands limply and burps up tahini. He'd scooped a lot on his salad at lunch, which was bland: diced cucumber and tomato, brown bread from a plastic bag, and lentil soup so undistinguished he kept eating it to detect a single flavor. Would every meal be this uninspiring? His mind and stomach rumble with concern for the rest of his meals. He wonders if Tal, the retreat matriarch, would grant him permission to visit the Palestinian hummus shop near Nazareth. Or was it Tiberius?

The guy that coughed during the dharma talk last night approaches, coughing, of course. Albert jams his hands into his pockets and clenches his fists. He sees the dirt but is blinded by a desire to shove the guy into the bushes for disturbing him, last night and Now. How could Tal and the rest of those idiots allow a man with whooping cough into a meditation retreat? Albert exhales forcefully as the man passes, hoping to communicate to him how disruptive noise is, and maybe reciprocate the suffering.

Slow walking, bad cooking, coughing morons. This is how we wake up? *Ridiculous*.

Albert is seized with the urge to run away and never return, to never meditate again, but he is stubborn, and likes accomplishing things, especially difficult things, and would prefer not to have his anxiety or anger discovered, particularly by Udi, who he admires, and Tal, who he doesn't

admire but wants to please in some vague, uninvestigated way. He is the only American here and doesn't want to be seen as a quitter.

Albert slows down. This feels like another injustice. He is pretty sure that the only thing that could make him feel better is a big trampoline, like the one his father, Alfonse, bought for Albert's tenth birthday. The ridiculousness of this craving is self-evident and causes Albert to chuckle, but he sees that he'd stopped using the trampoline soon after its arrival because he was angry at his father for dying of pancreatic cancer. Not using the trampoline was a ten-year old taking revenge.

Tears come. Albert stumbles toward a pomegranate tree. He squats in its shade, closes his eyes, and breathes. His knees crack with relief. He bounces in the squat. It feels good. He picks up a pomegranate from the ground, overripe and cracked open. It fits perfectly in his palm. He has never really examined a pomegranate before. He pops a seed in his mouth. Sweet antioxidants toboggan to his brain. He shuts his eyes and chews.

The premise is unreasonable: pomegranates, lentils, trees, people—*they just happen*. The magic and mystery of this planet seizes him with gnosis: he is a bipedal pomegranate, happened; imbued with life from the Earth for a short time like his dad, only to return to it.

Albert places the pomegranate against his forehead. He promises it that he will not waste his precious human birth on fear, insecurity, anxiety, self-hatred, fidgeting in his pockets, jealousy, revenge, or concern about how he appears to others. He is a successful comic book illustrator, flown to Israel to storyboard a sportswear startup's first television commercial, but only Now does he feel creative for the first time.

Albert thanks the pomegranate, apologizes to his father, and places the fruit gently on the ground. He stands and stretches. A head rush comes on. Dizzy, he puts his hands on his knees and waits for it to pass. He straightens, feeling normal, and continues walking, proud for experiencing peak profundity. Now that he gets it, he feels, he can leave.

He quickens, but slows down, irritated. The gratitude and wonder of a few moments ago is gone. He feels a cold dread for the upcoming week. Meditation, sitting and walking, is the only scheduled activity besides meals, and nightly dharma talks. What is that but more of this, more of him? What's the point if he got the message about his insecurity, about Now, about his father, about the ephemerality of life? What else is there?

Queasiness floods his solar plexus. He feels trapped in a bad dream.

Seeking normality, or stability, Albert thinks of his studio apartment of nine years in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and his banal office on 35th St. and 9th Ave., in Manhattan. He's moving to South Brooklyn, and quitting his job soon, so both fail the stability test. He pines for his mother, Elizabeth, and his father, Alfonse, although Alfonse died thirty years ago, and Elizabeth joined a Kabbalist doomsday cult outside Fresno and cut all ties with the outside world, including her only son, last year. Tears for his childhood terrier Goonie, who was run over by a Kia the month Alfonse died, blur his vision. He understands Now that he was so numb and confused from his father's passing that he'd never mourned Goonie. Or his father. Or his mother.

He'd never mourned anything or anyone. Albert feels alone and pained and ashamed. The loneliness grows heavier with each sob. He has always been alone. He always will be. His most stable go-to's are only mile markers of duplicitous permanence in an infinite flux and instability, and he'd been too dumb to see it, yet alone understand it. Grief overwhelms him.

Albert grows angry. The pomegranate's message of impermanence has been confirmed too heavily and too soon for his liking, and borne more consequence than fruit.

The sun slinks behind a cloud. The day grows sepia, hazy. Albert looks at his already forty-year old hands. One of the slow walkers could break silence and tell him that he is dreaming, and Albert would believe them. He would feel grateful, relieved even. It would mean that he could wake up to something tangible and solid. He suspects that he might actually be dreaming. He's pretty sure he isn't, but how does anyone really know?

Frightened, Albert tries again to think of something or someone permanent and solid but understands it's impossible. Even the mountains in the distance will one day fall. He collapses into a plastic dining room chair that someone had dragged out to the lawn. He feels like puking. He rubs his belly and his knees. He tries to take deep breathes but air won't go down. It's ninety degrees but he's shivering, trapped inside an insane asylum inside a dream. Barney Shelton and the beautiful woman on the Brooklyn sidewalk were moles to commit him. He has never felt so scared and alone.

To distract himself, Albert watches others pace the kibbutz grounds. Some are anxious. Some are not anxious. Some are anxious trying not to appear anxious; some are not anxious but trying to appear anxious in solidarity. Some project their anxiety, or lack thereof, onto others, like Albert had. Some of the not anxious feel anxious when no one notices them not being anxious (this brings forth a chuckle from Albert). Some are mindful of their anxiety, and some have never understood nail biters, quick walkers, and pocket hands; had never breathed the carbon monoxide of emotional disorders that's tasteless and odorless until one is totally in its throes.

Albert watches a woman take refuge behind a shrub and cry. An old man passing her is walking quickly, trying to hold it together. The woman on the lawn ten feet away is on her back, smiling. Most walk slowly, in peace. That they've taken a ten-day leave from jobs and families to seek wisdom and insight about themselves and the nature of things feels heroic. He is touched by their courage to leave familiarity and meet solitude and difficulty head on. They knew what they were getting into more than he had. If he knew, he wouldn't have come. Albert feels grateful for being here, and for not doing research beforehand. He is honored to walk amongst those dedicated to waking up in this dream.

Albert slides off the chair. His knees hit the lawn. His palms come together at his forehead in gratitude and solicitude toward his fellow loons. More understanding clobbers him.

Everyone has always been and always will be alone, and impermanent. That is the deal. The intractable suffering created by solitude and impermanence is everyone's. It is the source of the deepest human communion, which is compassion. Encoded in the poison lay the antidote.

Love, compassion, and understanding flood Albert. He has never been alone, and never will be. No one has—or ever will be—if you can see it.

Albert is crestfallen that these feelings of communion, joy, and gratitude will—either in a few moments or days—pass, but he smiles, happy for certainty of any kind, even that of change.

Albert, swinging his arms, returns to the path to walk with the others.

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