

Walking in Circles

"Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost."

Quote by
Virgil

It's the same every morning, really. I park my car and look at my phone – for what, I'm not too sure of anymore, avoidance or procrastination, I guess. After that, I close my eyes for a few seconds and take a deep breath. This is really the only part of the day that makes sense nowadays, trying to remember a time when I wasn't constantly filled with dread, or worse, apathy. It's hard to tell which is which sometimes. Eventually, I get out and start the quarter-mile trudge through the skywalk towards my office.

It's summer now, and that means one thing. It means that by the time I start my daily slog to the office, the sun is already beating down full force on the glass tunnel that winds its way through the cityscape to the building I work in. This annoys me, and let me tell you why. It's because of the constant glare. The sun reflects off the glass and forces me to shield my eyes, which means I don't get to see the ocean. It's three blocks away, and most days, I can't even see it. This disappointing circumstance has become frustrating for me on a fairly regular basis now, and it usually starts my day off in a bad way. To make matters worse, it makes the skywalk incredibly hot and irritating to walk through, but I suppose I have to walk through it anyway. What else am I going to do?

Today, I'm lucky, though. It's raining out. The rain reminds me of the fall. I prefer the fall, and there's a particular reason for that. The ocean waves are a bit more violent during the fall months, and the sky's a little darker. It allows me to see everything more clearly without the

glare... I told you it was specific. And if you're getting the idea that I'm using metaphors here, I'm not. I really do prefer rainy days for this very reason.

I'm wearing a new silk tie I recently got from our trip to Singapore. I don't know if I actually like the tie yet, but while I'm looking at it, I notice a small scuff on the inside toe of my left shoe and wonder how it got there? It turns out to be one of those thoughts that you drift into for a few minutes of wonder before realizing you've burned through five minutes of boredom in a daydream; It's a welcome relief, but the truth is, I'm feeling pretty good today for the most part. No complaints, at least not yet. Unfortunately, I know things will soon change; they always do.

Every morning it's the same people walking through the skyway, and it saddens me. Not because it's always the same people, but because of who they are. The first person I pass is always a slightly overweight city employee holding a small radio to his ear while he cleans the windows. Most days, there is no sound coming from the radio, and today is no different. He walks in a stuttering cadence and is disabled in some way, though I'm not entirely sure how. I would like to buy him a new radio if that means anything, but I'm pretty sure it doesn't.

The next person I naturally pass is an elderly gentleman with a long, gray beard and bald head – think the old man from Home Alone -- who I have no doubt is homeless. Each morning, he stands in the same spot, wearing the same clothes – grey polo and khaki pants--- staring out at the ocean. Apparently, he has no trouble seeing it. He's constantly smiling, and I'm never sure why. I offer him a few dollars, but he politely declines, just as he does every day. The list could go on, but I try not to think about it. What's the point? Right now, I rather focus on the drumming sound of the rain plinking on the glass above my head.

I get to the end of the skywalk and reach an escalator that leads up one floor to the bank of elevators that will take me to my office. I really do feel pretty good today, I must say. Maybe

it's that feeling of autumn in the air, or perhaps it's the fact I could see the ocean this morning, but today somehow just feels lighter than usual. When I get to the top of the escalator, the elevator doors are already open, waiting. Sheryl, the office manager, is standing inside smiling. Like the homeless man, she's always smiling.

“Good morning, William,” she says, pursing her lips, careful not to ruin her overly applied lipstick.

“Good morning.”

“Crummy day today, huh?”

I smile politely. I don't like the word crummy.

The elevator doors close. After two stops, we reach the ninth floor. Entering the office, there are several people still gathered around the coffee machine and chatting by their desks. I can't imagine having to work in a cubicle. The conversation is always the same. What everyone did over the weekend, how kids are doing in school, how nice it is outside. I avoid these conversations when possible. I don't want to tell them we had tickets to opening night at the ballet on Saturday. Besides, what do I care what these people think about me? There's nothing remarkable about being liked; It's ordinary, it's boring.

Still, I try to make small talk even though I hate it. “Crossword puzzle with a pen, huh?” I want to show that I'm willing to engage my peers, and humanity I suppose, but I already know there is universally only one response to the question I just asked.

“That's the way my mom did it, Mr. Brimmel.”

Well, that's why you, or your mom, or dad, or brother, or sister, or cousin, or whoever the hell else has ever done it that way has never successfully finished a crossword puzzle, ever. It's

not a sign of perseverance; it's a sign of stupidity. Erasers were invented for a reason. But then again, what do I care?

When I get to my office, safe again behind a closed door, the first thing I do is open up my emails and social media pages. I have five accounts; two personal accounts, two for work, and one shared account with Stacy. Why do I need all these accounts -- I have no idea. I open up the shared account first, mostly because it amuses me. Stacy made us get it so I would see any Facebook *news* that pops up throughout the day, and so I would see pictures she shared of us with her family. Apparently, I won't see them on our own computers at home or in the twenty-five Instagram posts she sends me daily.

Nonetheless, I amuse, or anger myself, dependent on my given mood, scrolling through the countless page updates of our *supposed* friends. Todd from the class of 98' is thinking about buying a new car, Tara is upset with her boyfriend, and Ted, who I don't know, is apparently depressed, which has led other Facebook friends to wish him well, all the while, Molly has a live poll going about which dress to wear this weekend on her blind date. I really want to vote for the dumbest one, but my pride in not being seen playing any role on social media is more important to me than the chuckle I would get from actually doing it. All this *social interaction* has happened in only the last fifteen minutes. It's amazing that anything ever gets done anymore.

I can't see the earlier posts without logging on, but those are usually the ones that truly shine. 2:00 a. m., Theresa is going to make a change in her life, and Carl is promising to make it through the week without using. I sometimes wonder how others would act if I walked around and started sharing my immediate feelings and actions aloud to random people. Hey Neil, I'm going to take a shit. Brenda, I'm sad, frowny face, exclamation point. Hey person I've never met

standing on the corner, here's a picture of my wife breastfeeding. Albeit doing so would amuse me, people are idiots. Yet, day after day, it happens. It's always the same, without end.

After wasting five more minutes, I begin looking at my work emails, which do have an actual impact on my life. It's Tuesday today, so that means that all the partners of the firm meet to scout the upcoming associates. If I haven't mentioned it already, I'm a partner at a large law firm downtown. That may sound prestigious or pretentious, depending on how you look at it, I suppose. I'll let you guess the way I feel about it.

I'll let you in on a little secret; you want to know what a partner's meeting really is? It's a group of very privileged people getting together for the first hour of the morning--- no one really does work during the first hour of the day unless they're forced to be in a courtroom--bragging about how well things are going. That is to say, if things are going well. When things aren't going well, these meetings become a piss and moan session about how lazy the new associates are and how things were so much harder back in the *old days*. I guess law was just harder to practice thirty years ago? Apparently, the skills of reading and writing have changed over the decades. But, because I'm a younger guy fortunate enough to be a partner, I smile along. What else is there to do?

Anyways, after the bragging or bitching is over, again, depending on the flow of income the firm is getting at any given time, the next thing that happens is Khalil gives the group a brief overview of the previous week's cases and makes sure to note important news and deadlines that are nearing. Khalil is extremely logical and process orientated. Honestly, probably what a reasonable attorney should be, but when it comes to managing attorneys or people in general, he's an idiot. There's talk that he'll be moving soon to head up another office in a different city. I can't wait for this to take place. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'm more excited about this than he is.

I've been at my job for six years now, and it's safe to say I do not particularly care for my line of work. Let me rephrase that; I don't care for the other people in my line of work.

Remember the thing I said about prestigious or pretentious? It's always pretentious, always. I suppose I make good money, though, which allows Stacy and me to be happy for the most part. She likes to travel, and so do I, so it allows for that. Look on the sunny side, right?

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During my lunch breaks, I like to go for walks. It lets me put aside the pointlessness of work and the other arbitrary matters of the day. The rain forces me to walk indoors today, but I admit that I would much rather like to walk down by the harbor. I would walk beside the large granite rocks along the shore and feel the spray of the salty water mist over me, the rush of the waves breaking against the coast. It's the only real good thing about sunny days.

Along the shore has always been a favorite place of mine, but it's not without its peril. Someone invariably gets swept off the rocks along the coast every few years during the storm season in late October. Last year it was big news when a twelve-year-old boy drowned after slipping and getting his leg caught at high tide. It was a rare thing for no one else to have been there watching the storm that day. Had someone been there, maybe they could have saved him.

I stop briefly by a window to catch a glimpse of the white caps sliding across the surf before continuing on to complete my requisite number of laps around the downtown skyway system – my record is nine. To be clear, though, it doesn't matter if I walk indoors or outdoors; the sights, sounds, and smells are really all the same. The heavy, salted air makes its way into the skywalk just as easily as if you were standing outside. The sounds of street performers never stop night or day, rain or shine, indoors or out, and the shops that used to hold unique charm to me now all look the same. It's strange sometimes how the more you learn or know about something,

the more it loses its original beauty. It begins to lack the initial romance and mystery that intrigued you in the first place. I'm still fond of walking down by the harbor, don't get me wrong, but it isn't the same as when Stacy and I first met here fourteen years ago.

I no longer look forward to the things I used to as I journey through the city on my daily walks. There was a time when I truly enjoyed walking past the movie theatre, smelling the popcorn, hearing the excitement in the air as children pestered their parents for candy. It used to bring to mind memories of Stacy and me on our first date. The eager excitement of getting dressed up and going out to dinner, worried about the kiss goodnight before the date even began. I don't have those memories anymore. I still smell the buttered treats and hear the laughter, but the beauty of the moment is no longer there. I wonder if it ever comes back.

Five hours later, leaving work, I pass back over the highway that leads out of town. I stop for a moment in the skywalk to watch the cars go by. The highway winds up the coast into the hills that rise above the city. The cars go by, effortlessly, up the winding road, disappearing from sight into the green hillside, leaving the city behind. I turn around and decide to sit on a bench for a while. Sometimes it's nice to just watch the cars go by.

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When I get home, Stacy is in the bathroom getting ready to go to dinner. We go out for dinner most nights. I suppose it doesn't really matter to me, but it does mean I have to stay dressed up for another two hours. I really hope it's dinner alone this time, though, and not with some of her friends, or mine for that matter. Those evenings can be tiresome.

"Hi, honey," she says, giving me a quick kiss before rushing off to another room. "How was your day?"

I don't respond. She's not really listening anyway.

"Listen, on the way to dinner, we have to stop by the shop on 8th to see if the frames are ready," she says, returning from yet another room, changing into another pair of high heels.

I nod my head.

We go to Francecilli's for dinner. We basically go there every night. It's one of the more well-known, upscale restaurants in the city, and Stacy insists that we be seen there regularly. For me, if you have eaten dinner out before, it's really all the same no matter where you go, Francecilli's or KFC. You walk in, smile politely, wait to be seated, sit down, pretend to look at the menu while you judge everyone around you, make small talk, and then finally order something to which the waiter usually replies with a snarky comment. It's the same no matter where you go, really.

Stacy scrolls through her phone while we wait for our food to be served. "How was work today?" she says without looking up.

"Fine."

"Did you see what Kimmy wrote on her wall today?"

"No."

Stacy tells me a story about her sister. I gather from the enthusiastic way she's getting into the details it's meant to be humorous, but I guess I missed the punchline.

"Can you believe that someone would say that to her?"

"No."

Our food is served.

When we get home, Stacy takes a shower and gets ready for bed. At night, she likes to watch different shows than I do. She watches some family drama show or the local baseball game, both of which I dislike, but it works out for me just as well. I usually spend most of my

time in the basement. I have a 72 inch and a bar, so I'm fine with it. I prefer more depth to the shows I watch; Shows that either make you think, or shows that talk about history, that teach you something other than who cheated on who any given week. Stacy complains about this to our therapist, why I can't watch more upbeat shows, comedies. I tell the therapist the same thing I tell Stacy---I don't care for comedies. Anyways, I usually have a glass of Martell and stay up late watching TV in the basement.

Tonight, I turn off the television and rest back in my chair for a few minutes, allowing the room's quietness to settle in. This is the only time things seem to ever be silent and calm anymore, and I like it. The time goes by. Stacy's been asleep for over an hour upstairs, but I'm rather content with where I'm at. Although I can barely see the ceiling, I recline back further to look up towards the black emptiness above. It's a habit I've had since I was young, a kid, really. In the daytime, I loathe looking at the ceiling. Now, though, I can hear the rain has picked up again, and I imagine each slight drop, each tiny bullet of water, hitting the roof two floors up.

I really like these few minutes of solitude and detachment. It's the only time when I can see myself as myself. It's the same feeling I get during my walks around the skywalk, just moving, my brain turned off. It's a surreal feeling, as if I'm watching a movie of myself playing over and over and over. I feel like there's something wonderful in the moment, something real. I've seen some remarkable things in my life, on my walks, but all too often, they don't turn out to be real.

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When I wake up, I reach for Stacy, but I know she won't be there. I hear the shower running, which means she's been up for an hour already doing her yoga. Like I said, it's the same every morning, really. Stacy gets up early to do her yoga and then takes a shower. I wake up and

go to the kitchen to drink a single glass of ice-cold lemon water while sitting at the island on a stool, looking absentmindedly out the window. The newspaper is sitting on the table, but I don't like to look at it, not now anyway. What's the point? It's the same thing every day. Someone somewhere was killed by someone else from somewhere who held a grudge. Four fatalities in a deadly highway crash. ISIS strikes, and the administration responds. Don't worry though, some local idiot made nice by doing some act of charity somewhere for someone else. I guess that's supposed to make up for the rest of the world being so fucked up.

Anyways, like I said, it's the same every morning, really. After I have my glass of iced lemon water, I amble into the bathroom and open the shower curtain on Stacy.

“Morning, baby,” she says, rinsing out her long blonde hair. “I'd ask you to jump in with me, but I'm in a hurry.”

Stacy is in a hurry every morning.

“That's all right.”

I close the curtain and go back to the kitchen. I drink a second glass of lemon water, this one room temperature, and make for the bedroom to get my clothes. By now, Stacy is getting out of the shower and drying herself off. She walks naked back into the bedroom with the towel around her head and starts looking through the closet.

“I have nothing to wear,” she says, shoveling mounds of blouses and slacks aside.

If I haven't mentioned it, we have a double walk-in closet.

Stacy gives me a good-morning kiss and asks how my day will be.

“Same as yesterday.”

“Sounds good, babe,” she says, giving me another wet kiss on the cheek. “Mwah.”

When it's my turn in the shower, I like to plug the drain so the water pools at the bottom over my feet. I close my eyes, and the splash of the water becomes hypnotic. I wish I could fill the room with steam like the Romans did, but I guess it wouldn't make much of a difference. I'll let you in on a little secret --- the best part of the experience is at the end. I put my head directly under the falling water and let the drips run down my face and body as the collecting water slowly inches higher on my ankles. It's usually around this time that I remember Stacy and me in the hot springs in Thermopolis, wading in the turquoise water as the falls splashed around us into the pool, the water skipping back up into our faces, the snow drifting overhead, evaporating mid-air before ever reaching the steamy springs below. If you have never done this, I suggest trying it --- the hot springs or the shower thing - both are equally enchanting.

Driving to work, or anywhere I guess, I like to listen to the classical station. The music is calming and lets me drift into my thoughts. I always tell myself to buy a radio so I can play in the shower during my morning ritual, but I never do. I wonder why that is? Today, there's a favorite piano concerto of mine in B flat minor by Tchaikovsky. Funny how even on the classical station, they still know how to play the popular tracks. I'm jealous of the pianist and the composer, their ability to create beautiful things, play such beautiful things. I suppose to do so, you need to first be able to feel and see beautiful things around you. This isn't to say I don't see those on my walks because I do. I just can't express them like Tchaikovsky or this particular pianist can. I don't paint, draw, play music, or do anything creative, really. Then again, I rather suppose I was never meant to. When the piece is finished, another one begins. I don't like the song playing now. It's boring. I dislike boring things. Why would anyone like something boring, something plain, something ordinary?

When I get to work, yesterday repeats itself again, just a different day of the week. The only difference is that today it's nice outside, so I decided to take my walk beyond the confines of the skywalk down to the harbor. It would be a waste not to enjoy the outdoors on a day like this, right? When I get to the boardwalk, my eyes struggle to adjust to the bright blaze of gold that bounces off the glass sheet of water sweeping out into the bay, and it takes me a minute to adjust without having to squint. Eventually, I get my eyesight under control and pick a park bench. It's time to just sit for a few minutes and watch the world spin.

The water is a vibrant blue with the occasional white streak of foam rippling across the surface as boats come and go. I wonder who all these people are and what they do for a living that gives them the freedom to boat around on a weekday in the middle of the afternoon. They're adults, after all; shouldn't they be working? I guess they made better life choices than I did. I ponder on the idea for a few more minutes.

And then it happens. Of all the benches open around me, some young, irritating couple finishing their bike ride decides to sit down right beside me, at *my* bench. I wonder why any person, anywhere, ever, would choose to sit next to someone else. But as I've said, it's always the same, really.

"Do you have the water?" the girl asks.

"I left it on my bike," replies the guy pointing to his bike lying on the ground a few feet away.

The girl rolls her eyes and angrily gets up. This, in fact, does put a smile on my face.

"There's no water left," she says haughtily before flipping the bottle to the ground. "You left the cap open, and it all spilled out."

"Well, we're going home now anyway."

“Great,” she responds, rolling her eyes.

The two get back on their bikes and leave me alone looking out at the water, just how I like it.

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Another day of the week, and I’m down by the harbor again. And as always, I stop to sit on *my* bench --- after the unpleasantness with the couple on their bikes, I’ve decided it is *my* bench. I set my sights on the water, watching as the infinite flow drifts up the shore, pulsing in rhythm, releasing back into the depths. No surprise, it's incredibly bright, and my eyes are struggling to adjust to the relentless reflection in front of me. I shield my face trying to look up, but I strain to keep my eyes open. Tiny droplets begin forming under my eyelids as I fight the glare, and I can hardly make out my surroundings beyond a haze of gold and scattered movement around me. Why don't I ever wear sunglasses?

“Are you ok?” asks a young woman passing by, stopping.

I look up, teary-eyed, covering my face. I get the impression she's pretty, but who could tell for sure with this brightness.

“Excuse me?” I’ve managed to rise back to my feet, still shielding my face.

“Are you all right?” the young woman says sympathetically. “You seem upset.”

Confused, I tell her my eyes are sensitive to the light, but I’m not sure she understands. She smiles again and pulls back against her right knee in a stretch. She looks up at the sky, and I can tell she is trying to choose her words carefully. My eyes are starting to focus, and I confirm my original hunch that she is indeed charming in a simple and earnest way, dressed down in white Capri spandex and an orange tank top. She's the kind of pretty Stacy used to be before the

designer clothes, and the Kardashians started telling her how to dress and wear her makeup. I'm not saying my wife isn't beautiful anymore, she is, but I fell in love with sweatpants and a natural look, not sculpted eyebrows and slanted bangs, or whatever the term is.

"I don't see any clouds in the sky, so you might be out of luck," she says, switching legs. "You need to get yourself some sunglasses."

I think about the statement for a moment, but no words come to mind. "Yeah, probably," I say, feeling an urge to utter something, anything.

"Well, I hope it gets better for you," she says, smiling a moment longer. She places a hand against my shoulder for a brief second before continuing on her way.

Yeah, probably? That's the best I could do? What the hell was that? It hadn't occurred to me initially, but maybe the woman had been trying to flirt with me. I've seen her before, and she always smiles and waves. I think about it for a moment, but it's more likely she waves at everyone like that. Then again, that would be a lot of people to interact with. I decide that I will talk to her the next time I see her. In fact, I make a point to do so. And next time, I'll have sunglasses.

After another minute or two, my eyes adjust to the sunlight, and I look out over the harbor to see the boats circling the red and green buoys. It just now dawns on me that the tank top woman likely thought I was crying, and that's the real reason she stopped in the first place. After all, I was shielding my face with tears running down my cheek. The thought troubles me, though. Was that the only reason she stopped---because she thought I was crying? My mind begins to wonder.

As my consciousness floats from one troubling idea to the next, the thought of crying brings to mind two distinct memories that have been with me since childhood. To tell you the

truth, I don't really like thinking about them, but they seem to have a certain knack for finding their way into my ruminations on a fairly regular basis. The first is that of a sad occurrence that took place in my hometown when I was twelve. I grew up on the shores of Lake Michigan. During the winter, when the water near shore would freeze, Tom Tillerson's father would take out the town's firehose and flood the shoreline, effectively making a skating rink out of the shoreline inlet during the UP's harshest winter months. Tom's father was always very cautious about the makeshift rink, and he took every precaution to ensure it was safe before letting anyone out on the ice. Any signs of open water, warm weather, or danger in general, and he would rope off the entire shoreline, sometimes putting himself at risk.

Even with the warnings, though, the older kids would play a game, daring one another to skate as fast as they could towards the danger areas, either stopping or turning away just before the open water. In short, it was a game of solo chicken with the water and not a particularly sensible one. It wasn't terribly surprising then that Tom had never liked taking part in the activity. For one, he knew how his father felt about it, but on top of that, he wasn't the most popular or athletic kid in town. Rarely a day went by when Tom wasn't teased, and it always ended poorly for him anytime the children did play. He would either refuse to play all together and face ridicule, or stop several yards shorter than the other kids, leading to equal contempt. Either way, it always ended in embarrassment for Tom.

After taking some particularly bad taunting one day, or so I later heard, Tom left the rink alone, crying. I saw him walk past our house a few minutes later on his way home. For a moment, just as he passed by, Tom stopped and looked up. I could tell he had been crying, even from a distance, but he didn't wave or say anything. He just stared at me for a few seconds,

waiting. I didn't wave, didn't respond at all, didn't think it would look good to be seen waving to the dorky kid storming off on his way home, even if it was just us.

There was heavy snow later that night. I can remember it like it was yesterday, looking out my window, watching the snow whip mindlessly from one direction to the next. Even the heavily lit shoreline was hard to make out a block away, but that's when I saw it. A shadow, a figure, something out on the ice, moving slowly away from shore, further and further, just keep going, until eventually, the shadow outran the light.

They found Tom's body in the spring when the ice started breaking up. His skates were still frozen to his feet; at least, that's what was whispered on the playground when the adults weren't around. The whole town went to the funeral. I remember many people crying, especially Tom's father. He never flooded the rink again and eventually *fell* off the bay bridge a few years later. Of course, he didn't really fall off. That was just a sad story that a grieving town was happy to print up in the local newspaper. It's my understanding that children still play that game on the shores of Lake Michigan in the winter. What I don't understand is that I have no memory of crying myself at Tom's funeral.

The second memory that eventually finds its way into my contemplation is that of a gruesomely, vivid passage from a Hemingway story I read around the same time Tom floated off into the darkness. Although a work of fiction, there is no doubt in my mind after reading Hemingway's detailed description of the event that it actually took place. The basics of the storyline are simple. Hundreds of alleged fascist sympathizers were taken prisoner during the Spanish Civil War in a house overlooking a gorge, which inevitably led to an execution line – the prisoners were forced to jump off willingly or be killed and thrown over the edge. The choice was theirs.

After time was given for prayer, the house's doors were opened, allowing the town's mob to rush in on the prisoners, killing several outright and forcing the others to jump to their death. While some among the crowd willingly threw themselves off the edge; notably, the priest among the group cried out and begged for his life. He died pleading, beaten, burned, and ultimately thrown off the edge. When I first read the account, I cried, and to this day, I wonder how I would handle the situation. How would anyone handle it? Would I walk willingly towards the cliff and jump, or would I beg and cry for my life? Hemingway later put a shotgun to his head, so make of that what you want. I'm not sure what I would do facing certain death. I guess, in a way, we all have a hand in our own demise. It's just not usually done in one fell swoop. I suppose it doesn't really matter either way. It's time to get back to the office.

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I am late getting back to the office, and I know this because the support staff is more relaxed and talkative than usual when I walk in. That means the attorneys have already gathered in the conference room another floor up for the monthly review, and the staff doesn't have to worry about getting an earful from their bosses for the next hour. The staff looks at me cautiously as I quicken my pace to my office. I don't really feel like going to the meeting for any reason today, but as I said before, I am a partner, so I am expected to be there even if it serves no real purpose. I should bring something to write with, but I don't. To be honest, my thoughts from the walk have taken a lot out of me.

I rush back out of my office and back into the hallway. The elevator is already open for me, waiting. When I get to the floor above, the VIP level it's called, I'm confused to find that the attorneys are not all bundled into the conference room as I expected them to be. On the plus side,

this means I won't have to walk in awkwardly in the middle of some presentation about something I could care less about, but it also means something is up, and that could mean trouble. I see Mr. Siegle, one of the namesakes of the firm, walking towards me.

"Glad you could make it, William," he says smiling, though he looks pretty unsettled and uncomfortable. Then again, for most of these guys, that's their natural state.

He reaches out his hand in a motion typical of a greeting. I shake it, though I am confused as to what is happening.

"After all, this meeting is really about you," he says, still holding my hand awkwardly.

"About me?"

"Today's a big day for you, William."

"And why is that?" I ask.

Mr. Winton, another namesake of the firm, is walking towards us. He, too, is smiling but appears less unsettled than Mr. Siegle.

"Because today, William, your role in this firm is changing," he says, still smiling and patting me on the shoulder.

"Please, if everyone would make their way into the conference room, we'll get started," says Mr. Winton motioning everyone to make their way to the conference room.

I start walking towards the room before Mr. Winton lightly holds me back by the shoulder. "Wouldn't you like to know what this is all about?" he asks, still holding my arm. He has a firm grip for an eighty-something-year-old.

Before I have a chance to respond, Mr. Siegle answers for me.

"Our office in Baltimore is undergoing some restructuring, and we want you to head it up."

“Head it up?”

"Run the day-to-day operations of the firm, manage the attorneys."

“What do you think?” says Mr. Winton. He’s grabbing again for my hand to shake. You can almost picture the cigar drooping from his lip as he smiles at me.

I try to think of something to say, but nothing really comes to mind.

“Well, let’s get in there and let everyone know the good news,” says Mr. Winton urging me towards the conference room.

I walk into the crowded room, the smell of feet and designer perfume floats over me, a bad dream come true. The crowd is already standing and applauding. It occurs to me that I haven't yet accepted the position or been told what my responsibilities will be. I suppose it doesn't really matter. Circumstances always have a way of just forcing you in certain directions in life. Whether it's good or bad is irrelevant. I never intended on becoming an attorney, yet here I am, a supposed rising star at a prestigious law firm. I never planned on getting married, yet I wear a wedding ring. I guess there is really no point in thinking about it. Things just have a way of happening.

When the pomp and circumstance of the moment finally ends, I’m plagued by people wanting to shake my hand and congratulate me. I want to ask them why. Why are they so compelled to wish me well and congratulate me on something I could care less about? About something happening that had nothing to do with anything I’ve done. It simply happened because it did, that’s it, no other reason. If it wasn’t me, it would be someone else. After all, what’s the difference between where I am now and Baltimore? Scenery, more money, a new house? Like I said, in the end, it’s all the same, really.

*

“I got offered a job today,” I tell Stacy when I get home from work.

She’s busy getting ready for dinner again, fiddling with earrings and glancing at her watch.

“A promotion?” she finally asks, leaving one room and entering another.

“No, a different job in a different city.”

“Why are you applying for a job in another city?” She’s moved on from the earrings and is currently occupied with her dress strap. “When were you going to tell me about it?”

“I just found out today,” I add. “I didn’t apply for it. They just offered it to me.”

“Well, what about me and my family?” she says, stopping to look at me. “We do all have lives here, Will.”

I guess I hadn't thought about it, and if I'm honest, I'm kind of surprised by her reaction.

“How much more money would it be?”

There’s the reaction I had been expecting.

"I'm not sure. I didn't ask."

Stacy frowns at me and turns her attention back to the dress strap.

“We’re meeting Kimmy and her new boyfriend Mark tonight.”

Nothing more is said about the job. We leave for dinner.

*

When I come up from the basement, it's dark in the living room, probably has been for hours, and I tiptoe towards the kitchen's green glow hoping to avoid waking Stacy. The digital clock on the oven has always been annoyingly bright, and it fills the room with an unsettling green haze, like being trapped in a carnival funhouse. It's another one of those things I always

say I'm going to change but never get around to doing. I'm thirsty, but I don't feel like looking through the refrigerator right now. I would rather go into the living room and enjoy the silence for a while longer. I reach in my pocket and feel that I have a cigar still rubbing up against my thigh along with a plastic Bic lighter. One of the junior associates palmed them to me after the *big news* broke. A way of getting in good with the new boss early, I guess. I take a seat on the recliner, light the Churchill, and inhale deeply. It's a cheap Oliva, but it doesn't matter. It's nice just to sit and smoke. I wonder why I haven't ever done this before. All this time living, and the first cigar I genuinely enjoy is a cheap one, sitting alone in the dark.

I hear the bedroom door open and expect to hear Stacy coming down the stairs, upset with the smell of smoke, but the house quickly fills with silence again. I pause and listen carefully. I guess it wasn't her after all. The blinds on the far wall behind the TV are still partially open, and I can vaguely sense the moon through the cracks. It looks no different than a street light blocked by tree branches. I relax back into the recliner and take another puff. I wonder what time it is? It seems like a good night to go for a walk. I glance down and see my watch already reads 3:37 a.m., but the idea of going out into the darkness is too much to resist.

I worry about waking Stacy, but the impulse to walk continues to grow, childlike almost, and I feel myself getting giddy. Maybe I'll walk out onto the dock and look at the moon, or the stars, or the lights on the other side of the lake. I doubt anyone else is up at this time, and it would be nice to just stroll away for a while. I stealthily open the patio door and walk barefoot out into the cool darkness of the night. Fog billows over the damp grass, bringing a sense of joy to me I haven't felt in a long time. About fifteen yards off the back porch, there's a wooden-planked trail that weaves through the woods around our house leading back to the lake, and I reach it after a few seconds of sliding my feet across the cold, wet grass. If the moon weren't out,

it would be nearly impossible to see my way, but the pale white glow lights my way, carrying me onward down the rickety path. I look back towards the house, but it's nothing more than a dark shadow through the tree branches now. I turn my back on its black walls and continue up the winding path through the tall grass and swamp below. I hear a plane flying overhead, and I look up to see the artificial shooting star cross the sky from one cloud to the next.

I reach the end of the path and look out over the serene water reflecting every twinkle of light the night sky has to offer. It's quiet, just as I thought it would be, and there's a stillness in the air. I look at the moon and take another pull of the cigar. For the first time in a long time, I enjoy the moment. I breathe in deeply, at ease, tranquil, but I already know it won't last. Now it's time for me to go back, and the momentary excitement begins to fade. Stacy will eventually wake up and wonder where I am, and my own alarm clock will be ringing in only a couple hours. But so what? So what if she does wake up? So what if my alarm clock goes off and I'm not sleeping? Why would it really matter?

*

It's raining today, but I walk outside anyway. I'm tired for obvious reasons and have spent most of the morning pondering over my late-night walk. It's fall, in my mind at least, and I'm standing in the middle of a wetland with high yellowing grass surrounding me. My flip-flops pop with each step I take across the wooden planks. It's raining, I'm alone, and it's nearing sunset, but I haven't even reached the end of the trail yet. It's dark, and there's absolute stillness, but I'm not worried about the approaching darkness. I'm more struck by the mist that floats just off the stagnant, muddy water around me, ghostlike it whisps and curls mindlessly.

I reach the end of the trail, a dead-end dock with benches on either side jutting out into the mist and fog, only marshland below. I stand in awe, looking out over the mysterious setting.

The silence is deafening. Even with the sounds of the wild around me and the rain breaking against the water, I know I can't go any further. I have to turn back, but I don't want to. I don't want to leave this moment.

I open my eyes and realize I'm standing on the rocks by the harbor. It's still raining hard, and water pours down my face onto my feet. I turn back towards the city and watch the people coming and going. Some walk fast, some walk slow. There are women with high heels and umbrellas gliding to their next appointments and businessmen with briefcases holding newspapers over their heads to shield the rain. Car horns blast throughout the city, and the water taxi carries people out to the island; a steady popping sound signals the inlet bridge will soon rise. My favorite suit is soaked through, the Singapore silk tie is all but ruined, and I can feel the water collecting in my shoes. I close my eyes and feel like I'm falling.

I'm back on the dock. What would happen if I took one more step? I can't, though. It's too dark now, and the rain has stopped. The fog is heavy over the water, and I'm cold. I open my eyes, and rain is no longer falling but continues to race down my chin. I turn towards the city again. Several people are walking across the street towards me, towards the harbor. I notice that the couple that sat next to me the other day are among a group riding their bikes. As they approach, I can hear them laughing, thrilled to be splashing through puddles in the rain. I close my eyes again.

A circle is a curious thing. No matter where you start, you always end up in the same place. No worse, no better off, just the same. Why bother walking the circle if you already know where it leads? Yet here we are, day after day, all of us, walking in circles, chasing what it is we think we're looking for, only to return to where we first began.