



The Invisible Forest

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Full brightness blared through the window as he rode the train home from the airport. Beyond it the world continued to hum along to its routine, but he had temporarily stepped out of his.

He surveyed his companions. A clear, logical trajectory had led each one of them here. Most appeared to be returning from business trips, weary, lone or paired people toting a piece of luggage each. Others bore the worn out but satisfied afterglow of completing a family visit. And the stragglers, empty-handed and leaning back with ease, donned badges that marked them as airport employees. They were riding out at the end of their shifts.

He had no reason for riding the train in the middle of an ordinary workday in the middle of an ordinary workweek. Wary glances scanned his thin, stylish messenger bag, the sole attaché accompanying his business casual dress. In this sampling, he was the oddball. What was his trajectory? Who was he among the crowd?

He had been sitting at his desk, listening to the murmurs of people walking past him to heat up boxed lunches while laughing about something on TV, feeling very strongly that he was not in his world. He had simply gotten up and left. While

riding home, on a whim he had disembarked at the airport and caught a shuttle to the terminals, from there had descended an escalator to the bar, and had sat down to watch the people walking by him.

He stole glimpses into strangers' worlds that revealed the same exact setups as the one he'd just left. Most people fell neatly into place. They maintained their circles, their ties, their memberships in organizations that held them securely to the world. They gossiped excitedly about their plans and the innards of their lives, never lifting their heads out of the warm sand. What need did they have for that? Their lives, though undoubtedly filled with the spectrum of human drama, flowed smoothly, disturbing nothing and remaining undisturbed.

Several jarred out like sores from the bright crowd, cracking the smooth painting and holding his gaze. The loners, the weirdos, the unexplainables. The rail bodied middle aged man at a table by himself with a stack of empty glasses and a newspaper he read with resolute tunnel vision. The Salvation Army-styled woman with thinning gray hair who muttered to herself on a bench beside several tearing bags. The twenty-something fidgeting awkwardly on his

phone as he fought to escape association with the reject table, stealing uncomfortable glances around the scene until his friends joined him.

He felt closer to those on the fringes. At some point in their lives they must have fallen from the swift train bounding toward a clamoring bright world and been left to forage for scraps along the tracks as it carried on without them. Those he put into this category he often remembered as being brighter in their youth, as people who harbored the disorderly grain he himself had been fighting his entire life to suppress. They were his mirrors. In the outcasts he saw his own future, for despite appearances of composure he stood very close to that ledge. He could take just a few steps forward and jump off.

He came home when it was still midday and threw his messenger bag onto the couch, then sat down himself and stared at it with loathing. *Casual yet sensible*, his roommate had espoused when he'd exercised contemporary sensibility in picking it out. It lent him an edge of self-possessed youthfulness while remaining safe with its timeless design, and it earned him many – his only – compliments around the office.

He had not had an appointment, nor an interview for a better job. He had not felt remotely ill. It was a mystery. On the surface he appeared to be going along as ordinarily as everyone around him – he was mild-mannered, calm, barely noticeable. One had to peer closely to glimpse the staccato hidden in the smooth pattern of his life. It was buried in the missed step, the skipped beat that threw off the whole song until hurried back into sync. It was in the weeks of steady work in perfect health followed by an unexpected sick day, or an afternoon of joking before an anticipated happy hour followed by an unexplained no show. These maneuvers were not grand enough to raise audible questions or brew long-lasting unease, but if one wanted to, one could glimpse behind them the infinitesimal space between his business casual attire and unremarkable life, and his own skin. It was in this gap, where they did not mesh, that his destructive tendency lay.

He did not know why he could not simply carry on. It couldn't be easier. *Put one foot in front of the other, follow the dress code, keep your head down, and don't fight your boss. For this, a peaceful night's sleep in a comfortable apartment with a slowly fattening bank account to sweeten your dreams.*

By all accounts he had a good life, many would even say a blessed life. In fact, this iteration of his life was the most acceptable one. He, too, scored email victories with the optimal appropriately polite but firm response, and he certainly *had* seen the weirdo lurking around the building that morning – but these daily trifles did not touch him beneath his most superficial layer of skin.

“Of course it doesn't affect you. These little things *shouldn't* affect you. They're just fun,” his roommate laughed at this observation. He clapped him on the back and assured him he was fine.

But the fact of how natural this was discomfited him more than anything. How could his roommate so readily accept not being touched by his own life? *His* panic grew with every step that this remained true, watching himself inexorably inch mile by mile toward a destination he had never intended to reach.

And so once again he'd broken down his life. Once more he stood in a clearing facing all possible paths. For a long time he sat on the couch, immobile, his head in his hands, ruminating over this latest unraveling.

His roommate came home that evening still wearing his

buoyant smile with his button-down shirt still crisp. He spared no time launching into the unbelievably weird thing Jack did that afternoon which was all the better for him as now their boss hated Jack. His roommate had just applied for a promotion for which he was the obvious choice, but Jack was butting his way in.

His roommate followed a steady upward trajectory from which he never seemed to waver. He was socially perfect, consuming the next trending TV show without second thought, going on a brain-dead vacation to a beach or a semi-exotic city every mid-April, and never taking a risk he didn't already know would pan out in his favor. Not one of his steps merited the slightest raise of an eyebrow. They were always perfectly logical, what a sensible person would do.

As far as career prospects went, he was a star at happy hours, where he flaunted just enough personality to walk the fine line between interesting and office-appropriate, except that the line was imaginary: all of his interesting parts were one hundred percent approved by the prevailing culture.

His roommate surveyed him while washing his thermos in the sink and waiting for Stacey to come over before heading out for the night. A classic beauty, Stacey was a prize whose

merits were recognized the world over. She worked for a respectable company, knew how to live her life, took care of herself, but most importantly, had been born on a solid platform that gave her a healthy leg up among her peers and a peculiarly low threshold for suffering. His roommate went for no other kind.

They had been a couple for years, poised to move in together any day. It only made sense. A photo of them sat framed on the mantle, matching the sleek minimalist design of their apartment, inspiration his roommate received from an unfiltered composite of today's most popular interior design blogs and shows. Two years from now it would look completely different.

He hated its stylistic interior. It was designed purely with the head and resembled neither his roommate's tastes nor his. It resembled nobody's tastes, yet his roommate received endless compliments on it.

"What happened today? Did you get sick?" his roommate asked at the end of his soliloquy.

"No. I feel fine."

"Then why'd you leave? Interview?" his roommate got

hopeful.

“No. I don't know why. Nothing unusual was going on. I just couldn't sit there anymore,” he said.

“You just left? Who does that?” his roommate asked, doubling back.

“I did,” he shrugged.

“What about your Friday deadline?”

“There's plenty of time.”

“Yeah, but you don't want to be the guy taking personal time during a project. That looks bad.”

“It's all for the reputation, isn't it.”

“Of course. Don't be an idiot,” his roommate said. “You just need a good night out. Got plans for tonight?”

“No.”

His roommate shook his head. “You've got to start dating again. What was wrong with Samantha? She was a good catch by all accounts.”

By all accounts. She had ticked every box going down. He was an idiot to let her go. No sensible man would have cut

loose a solid woman like Samantha.

“We didn't have enough in common.”

“And the one before her? And the one before *her*? Still not enough in common? What exactly are you looking for?”

“I don't know. I just know it's not there,” he said.

“You're always throwing perfectly good things away,” his roommate shook his head.

He nodded. This was no epiphany. The particular restlessness that had broken down this life had been leading him to veer off the path for as long as he could remember. Every time it struck he scrambled to correct himself before all was lost and resumed walking on the road, but a mile behind everyone else, struggling to catch up.

“I just can't play into the game. Gratitude for the few hours bestowed to pick away at a hobby just long enough to scratch its surface? The cheap company rewards one-step-ahead dangles at us like we're animals? Tell me you don't find it laughable! These professionals nearly kill each other over who wins a day off, and then they straighten their ties and make off to happy hour to tear into whoever's not there.”

“Everyone deals with the same bullshit. You have to enjoy

the little things,” his roommate said, as he always did.

But he could not be placated by trivialities. He did not care about the latest office intrigues, the hot new brunch spot, that new TV show made specifically to comfort people like him, or finding a new person to love to raise neurological highs back up to appeasing levels and adequately distract – how could he be distracted when he had his finger on the problem!? The more trivialities life threw at him, the more he encountered his own restlessness!

“How do you do it?” he asked his roommate. “How do you play along and keep going straight?”

“I just put on a mask every morning,” his roommate shrugged.

Indeed, his roommate donned it expertly, but some evenings he forgot to take it off, leaving it on for days, weeks, even months, through his promotions and relationships, and even before him.

“Well I can't,” he said.

He had known his roommate since he was seven. He remembered his favorite games, his imaginary friend, and the words he confidently mispronounced until someone

corrected him with mirthful laughter. He remembered sharply their first day of middle school when his roommate was teased to tears for wearing his favorite t-shirt, a neon green one he never saw again. He knew that his roommate's first favorite color was lavender, that he used to sing alone to himself when he was a little boy in his high, pretty voice, and that he had once auditioned for the school's honors choir and been rejected.

None of that shone through his roommate anymore. Now he saw only the crisp white shirt and the exaggerated concern over Jack's small but significant blunder, the elements of a life that was strikingly analogous to their apartment: an entire kingdom devoid of the very things that defined *him*.

His roommate seemed utterly unperturbed by and even unaware of any of this. From his perspective, he was on the right path and *he*, who sat on the couch with no girlfriend and dwindling career prospects, deserved nothing but pity as he inexplicably climbed the ladder downward.

"I don't understand. You have a good life! Better than average job, a nice apartment, you're normal, smart, respectable, decent looking. Why are you going backwards?"

his roommate remarked in bafflement.

“I don't want any of this. This isn't my life!” he pulled at his shirt in frustration, gesturing to the photograph, the stylish furniture, around every inch of their apartment. “Everybody around us is rushing to hit the checkpoints. They've all secured an acceptable, vetted spouse and if they haven't they're on their way to locking down that second place trophy while they're still young. Or they're climbing into management positions and upgrading to nicer apartments, maybe a house, a better car, maybe even a boat. Those are the only ends of this trajectory!”

“Well, I don't know what to tell you because that's pretty much the extent of what can be had,” his roommate replied.

The next morning, he stood at his front door. He could not take another step down this road. While his roommate went to work, he split off and walked in the opposite direction.

He walked for a long time. He did not know where he was going. The life he had called his own for years unraveled behind him as he replayed the long string of failures that had brought every iteration back to square one, where he stood now naked and nameless. Soon he reached the highway. Cars sped by as he walked alongside it. He walked under the

dusky blue sky until he reached a quiet stretch where nothing drove past and only an empty road stretched on ahead and behind him. It was here that he abandoned the highway and plunged into the forest at his side as it beckoned him with its dim interior, fulfilling with giddy abandon an act he had always dreamed of doing as a child during car rides when he'd stared out the window and imagined losing himself in the trees.

The deeper he wandered through the twilight woods the more pronounced the silence became. It punctured his tight, netted thoughts and let him taste patches of simple freedom. He savored both the freedom and loneliness here. *Even if I have no place in the world, I am free of what is not mine.*

Not even a animal appeared among the trees. There was no path to follow, and he made haphazard, unguided turns. Meanwhile the sky grew dimmer above him, the forest hazier around him. At last, where the trees became sparse and wintry, he reached the forest's edge. He stopped. He stood at the border. He was a hundred miles from even the highway.

Behind him lay the vast lifeless forest littered with stones and broken things. Before him began another, invisible. A dense forest of invisible trees whose unknown fathoms stood

plainly before him. He took a step inside. A melody floated through the air, piercing a spot in him nothing had ever touched. He had not even known of it until this moment.

He walked through the unmarked trees, moving by no outside sense or guidance, but in the full, without doubt. This forest was inexpressibly beautiful. Every step filled him with awe and he wondered how he had never before heard of this entire world existing beside them. It wasn't guarded, it wasn't hidden. It was there in plainness, open to all. Yet no one had ever mentioned it. Nobody had known of it.

The thick, lush green canopy changed kaleidoscopically with his slightest movement as the light danced through the leaves and played upon their patterns, creating a sublime ever-changing static. The ground was fertile and soft, a rich, dark tone that caught white light and sprung back its pieces in irreplicable, partial mosaics. Peace and silence pervaded the forest, along with a sense of safety. Here he was as if held.

“How strangely you walk. You must have stumbled in here backwards,” said a voice behind him.

He turned around to a plain looking man in a featureless robe whose eyes burned bright and alive in an otherwise calm, even face.

“That would only be fitting. I've spent my life fighting the tendency to walk backwards,” he said.

“Why is that?” the stranger asked.

“Because by its bidding I break down every life I build up. It's left me a failure who has no place in the world, but fighting it has been so futile there was nothing left to do but to follow my tendency.”

“Well, there is no measure of success or failure here, so you can stumble backwards as freely as you please.”

“Where is here?” he asked, looking around.

“This is the Invisible Forest.”

“And who are you?”

“I am the Phantom,” the Phantom said.

He seemed to have no identity. A sense of thoughtlessness emanated from him, but it was not that of a simpleton; rather, it was a blissful, clear emptiness.

“Do you live here?” he asked.

The Phantom nodded. “But you are asking the wrong questions.”

“Why have I never seen this place before? It's so beautiful!” he drank in the forest insatiably, wondering of all that lay in its depths. “I suppose if one good thing came out of my unraveling it was chancing to stumble here.”

“It is *because* you walked backwards that you've reached the forest. Logic could not bring you here,” the Phantom said.

They strolled among the trees at leisure. The Phantom moved at an unhurried pace that let him savor their surroundings, and with each passing step his curiosity grew. The more he saw the more there became to see. The forest contained a million beginnings, popping out from behind every nook and filling the view with unending shapes.

“If only people knew about it! They would drop everything and run here. It's an endless wellspring of all the beautiful,” he said.

“Not merely beauty. The Invisible Forest holds the truth of things. There are many things in here that have never left it and sit and stir in the cauldron of its depths.”

“Left? Where would they go?” he asked.

“Where did *you* come from?” the Phantom posed.

“It doesn't matter. I'm never going back. For the first time I

have touched something that is mine. There is no turning away. Now I'm burning to plunge in and discover this world."

"Great joy will come to you from that. It is the easiest thing. All you need to do is wander as freely as you please," said the Phantom, who echoed his own mantra as he wandered free and empty-handed.

"You're the first one I've met in ages who speaks to something in my core. You're a true friend," he turned to tell the Phantom, but the Phantom was gone. He had disappeared as silently as he had appeared. For a moment he wondered if he hadn't imagined him, but he couldn't have, with the mark their encounter left on him.

He had come to a clear, wide road that cut through the forest, plunging into its heart. He walked easily down the broad path, alone, searching for the Phantom, whose absence sharpened the gaps between the trees. His aloneness was fullness here. He saw the Phantom in the sway of every leaf, at the edge of every bend, praying that the forest's whims would deign to reunite them and quench his thirst. His anticipation of their reunion colored the surroundings, making them sing with a poignant, pulling melody. But he met no one for miles until at last he saw an apparition, a

person, coming toward him down the road. He hurried forward excitedly, praying to see his friend.

It was a stooped old peddler, rattling slowly with a junky wooden cart that clanked obnoxiously over the pebbles. Unlike the Phantom's silent appearance, the peddler's coming was impossible to miss. His racket shattered the forest's peace inconsiderately.

He stopped short with disappointment.

The peddler had spotted him, too, and waved to him. Their meeting was unavoidable. No doubt he would try to sell him something. It would do no good as he had no money, but he was bound to engage this old character in a long-winded conversation before they sussed that out.

“Good day to you, stranger. I don't expect to meet many people on the fringes!” the peddler greeted him brightly. He looked somewhat pathetic in a dusty linen throw that matched the pale wood of his unpolished cart too well.

“The fringes?” he asked in surprise. He sensed he'd been in the forest far longer than that.

“Barely,” said the peddler as if he were weary of the land. “You're new here, then,” he eyed him. “Have you a map?”

“Well, no – ”

“I *know* I have one buried somewhere in here.”

Accepting his own invitation, he plopped down his cart and drew back the dusty red curtains that covered it, pulling out shelf upon shelf of nick-knacks in a feigned frantic search of what was surely a fabricated map. By swift sleight of hand, the peddler spread his entire collection across multiple levels, all laid out before him on a velvet red cloth. They lay glittering and bright, enticing him.

“I don't have any money,” he said quickly as the peddler slipped around to the back to continue searching.

“Don't worry! A traveler doesn't need to pay for a map!” he called nonchalantly, creating a din as he set various objects clanking against each other.

“But if you *do* see something you like let me know! I'm sure we can work out a deal!” his voice carried around. He operated as if he had been at his profession for an eternity. “My treasures are curated from all over the world! You wouldn't know this, being a newcomer, but I am quite a famous merchant in these parts, known for finding one of a kind rarities!”

In spite of himself, he perused the merchant's offerings, examining an ornamented golden lamp whose thin gilded coat was peeling off at the base. He set it down among a handful of decorative statuettes, chipped, drawn-on, and abandoned looking thanks to decades of decaying in neglect. Next to those lay an array of bent metallic spoons combed from twenty sets of silverware, a swirl of broken chains, and a singly hinged wooden jewelry box bearing delicate inlays that splintered around the edges. Its loose lid opened to showcase a pile of lurid jewels glittering ostentatiously, but with a dull and plastic sheen repellent to a discerning eye.

Among the plastic he spotted a cool grayish stone that was duller at first glance. When held to the light it revealed a delicate vein on its smooth slate surface that spiraled calculatedly into an unseen infinity. For the briefest moment, he whiffed the complex history of eons encapsulated inside it, unable to pinpoint or wrap his head around this gust of scents fresh and ancient. He closed his fist over the rock as the merchant came around in a flurry of movement.

“It seems I'm out of maps, but *this* will serve you much better. Unlike a map it will never go out of date,” he smiled, handing him an old silver compass.

He examined it. "This is broken!" he said, thrusting it back into the merchant's hands, annoyed that he took him for a fool.

"Because you forgot to add thirty degrees. *Now* it's on point! Have I told you where it comes from?" he lowered his voice enigmatically as if sharing a secret with him.

"Who cares where it comes from, it's useless!"

"Don't let uselessness blind you to beauty! Look at *these*," the merchant grabbed a handful of the plastic gems from the broken jewelry box and with some desperation thrust them into his customer's face.

He raised both hands to wave them away.

"What's that you have?" the peddler asked sharply, grabbing his clenched fist.

He showed him.

"Ah, a rock," he relaxed. "Worthless. Must've fallen in."

"You have some gall to call anything worthless! All you sell is junk. I don't even believe you're a merchant. You're just a poor old man peddling a walking flea market."

"And you're a lost drifter shouting that a pebble is worth

more than a silver compass. It's no wonder you're poor."

"The pebble comes from *this forest*," he impressed. "That gives it value."

A smile broke across the peddler's face as if a hand beneath his wrinkles lifted them up like heavy curtain folds.

"If I didn't know better I'd say you're trying to out-bargain *me*. My friend, I live for the shrewd clients. I'll trade you that pebble for anything off my cart. *Anything!*"

"I'll hang on," he pulled in his hand.

"I offer you all of the world's riches and you choose a pebble off the ground? You're a backwards creature."

The peddler fumbled with his neck clasp, undoing his cloak. He flipped it over to reveal a magnificent robe. It was a tapestry of the forest itself, embroidered with changing scenes of life in every conceivable color from corner to corner. It rippled with motion and breath, as fluid and light as its owner's demeanor. Where the hunched over peddler had been now stood erect a thin, tall man, unabashedly bright, owner of a wicked grin and childishly sparkling eyes. In contrast to the Phantom's preternatural calm, he was a nebula of unsettled energy. The entire forest paled around

him.

“I am the Magician,” he bowed. “No need to hold on to that common pebble,” he nodded. “The forest is filled with them. The castle grounds alone are littered with thousands. It must've fallen in there.”

The words piqued a spark in him.

“There's a castle?” he asked.

“Much deeper,” the Magician waved vaguely behind him.

“Could you take me there?” he asked.

“I don't quite know the way from here. But I can take you in part,” he said.

The Magician closed the cart with his long nimble fingers and pushed it along the pebbly road back the way he had come with such a light touch it must have been for show. He was certain the Magician could make the cart go on its own, or vanish it altogether.

“You have no compass, no money, and no map? How did you find the road?” the Magician asked curiously.

“I met the Phantom and he led me to it.”

“Ah,” he said understandingly.

“You were right, I myself *am* poor. I have a tendency to walk backwards which has prevented me from gaining much in the world,” he said.

The Magician laughed. “Being poor is no cause for worry. In an instant your fortune can change. You may be a penniless beggar one second and a king the next.”

“It's easy for one so rich to make such a bold claim,” he said, noting the Magician's priceless cloak and the fine, tailored suit he wore beneath it.

“It's natural for one who has been both. With a snap of my fingers I have everything, and with another snap I have nothing,” the Magician said.

They came to a waterfall such as he had never encountered. The water was not sterile but bubbling with nutrients. They strolled placidly along the banks where it fell and nourished a garden of edible flowers and sweet, nectarine fruit. He had never felt such abundance; it thrust upon him more than he could contain. Any moment he wanted more, more was at hand.

Imperceptibly, its lushness diminished until he noticed the soil becoming dust and the grasses sand. Hungry, he reached

and found nothing. There was no wellspring from which to draw. He cried out, at a loss as to how he had come to the desert when he had been moving so steadily within plenitude. He was once wealthy! But what good did it do him now?

He wandered in the desert for a thousand miles, wondering how long this was to be his lot and forgetting about the Magician, and even the forest, for stretches that continued beyond the horizon. Again he felt alone, barely tethered to the universe and hanging at the mercy of circumstance, unable to change a thing, unable to move, like a ship marooned at sea in a swirling fog. There was nothing to do but continue taking step after step on as he had through the garden.

After a seeming eternity, green began to reappear. Slowly he reemerged into the familiar forest until it was all around him, as lush and vibrant as before. Yet, his mind lived on in the hollow chill of the desert, until one moment when it hit him: he was no longer there. He blinked. He was standing on the broad path again.

In the distance he glimpsed a turret, topped with a brightly waving flag flaunting shards of color through the trees: the

top of a magnificent castle that sat far ahead in splendor and majesty.

The end of his long, uneven life came to this! he was exultant. He inhaled its notes of vibrancy and music, joy and love – the life he had long dreamed of, flourishing on its grounds, and he had only seen it because he had taken his wayward steps freely. It was *his!* The life in the castle called him on like a birthright with the melody that danced through the forest, and he made his direction toward it, to the promise of his true family awaiting him.

The moment he stepped it vanished. He swiveled his head to catch it between the trees, but where the turret had been there were only leaves. The Magician stood beside him again as if he had been there all along.

“It was your trick!” he turned to him and cried, wrung.

His expression was as unconcerned as if nothing at all had happened since they last spoke. Like a blossoming flower, the Magician revealed his true nature as destabilizing agent signaling one's downfall, or just as well one's fortune.

“How can you play so carelessly with entire worlds as if they're weightless?” he cried in anger, grasping at the

shattered life of which nothing remained. It was smoke, as insignificant as if it had never been.

“From thin air form stones; stones go to thin air,” he said. “Don't see this as heartless. It's freeing. You know if you are in the desert it is not forever. In a moment I can rebuild your entire world, or a wholly different one.”

“But you will only do so at your whim!”

The Magician's mouth crooked into its wicked grin and his long fingers twirled the air between them as if he might pull something out of it any second. Expounding his anguish to the Magician was useless. He held nothing in seriousness.

“How can you think nothing of losing a whole life?”

“The material is not lost. It merely changes form. *You are afraid to lose.*”

“Of course. The castle was the very gem of my heart, found after a lifetime of searching, and you dangled it before me only to whisk it away! You're a cruel character,” he said.

“Castles fade,” the Magician said lightly, as if there could be a million of them.

Could it be that his castle, the reason for his backwards

walking, was merely a charlatan's trick? It couldn't be so. Its sense of home was so certain, so true, it could not possibly lead him astray.

He followed the Magician down the road until they came to a small town. People bustled up and down, to and from the market, moving in a rushed collective. He glimpsed only vague faces, unable to distinguish a single one. The Magician strolled among them idly. His vibrancy lit up the town, but either the townsfolk paid him no mind, or they did not see him.

They walked into a quiet tavern and sat down at a table by the windows. Beyond them the town had grown dark. The scene was calm and comfortable, but he was not. Some of the Magician's unrest had rubbed off on him. He could no longer view his surroundings as he had before, knowing now how everything balanced on the ledge between stability and change.

The Magician himself hung between the formed and the unformed. His whole being had an air of malleability, yet he remained calm within it. He sat across from him with a bright gaze and his light grin, yet a palpable power gathered behind this casual trickster, just barely apparent. It was the might of

the whole forest, releasable on call. The sole barrier to his appearing a ten-headed hydra, to rearranging this comfortable bar, or to raining down any manner of turmoil or bounty upon them, was his contentment to rest in the present image. He could turn the town into a city. He could then wipe it away into a plain.

“You can create and destroy the whole forest?” he asked the Magician.

“I merely play with forms. I do not touch the essential thing. The forest is full of forms. Not just pretty forms, but forms that mean something. They evoke an idea, a truth, a grain – it is hard to say what. But only for a time. Eventually all forms become used up and fade away. That is the nature of them. They are truly beautiful only while they are alive.”

“The Magician has been around nearly forever,” said the bartender as he approached their table.

“Yes, I’m an old form. My use is still relevant. You could say that I’m a master of forms who is a form himself. But one day I may lose my meaning. Old forms are constantly being destroyed and, within the forest, new ones created.”

“I’ve heard rumors of an entire ocean. A little lone ship sits

out in the middle of it, its lights always on and flags waving in the wind,” the bartender divulged his gossip.

“It sounds heartrendingly lovely,” said the Magician with uncharacteristic tenderness.

“You mean you don't know everything that dwells in the forest?” he asked in surprise.

“Don't think of the forest as such a static place. It, too, is just a form. It doesn't exist.”

“It's all your trick?”

“Whose trick am I?”

The bartender had taken out a coin and spun it on their table where it perched perfectly on its edge. Each spin flashed between opposite sides with steady meter. One side displayed a beautiful lively house with its lights on, sitting in the midst of the woods. The other was an empty unlit clearing.

He watched the coin switch between the house and nothing. There and not, never falling to one side.

“There is a house that could or could not exist, isn't there?” he asked, catching on to the bartender's manner of exchange.

“I have heard of it,” the Magician said thoughtfully.

“But you haven't seen it?”

These gaps vexed him. The Magician was becoming less of an authority and merely another limb.

“You forget that you and I are not separate,” the Magician said, and for a moment he understood. The form existed, but had not yet materialized for the Magician – for *him* – and who was *he*?

“If you don't know all the mysteries of the forest, who does? Who is the one who rules over all of you?”

“No one. We all are. We are all different faces of the same thing. And you are, too. You are one of us.”

Beyond the windows, he spotted a figure running frantically down the street, his movements out of sync with the townsfolk's. He disrupted their straight, steady flow, going neither to nor from the market. Instead he rushed like a madman from door to door, turning away from each one. His face was clearly defined, with wide and searching eyes attuned to the merest peripheral glimmer of whatever was his quarry.

“Who is that?” he asked, fascinated.

“He is another representation of the truth,” said the Magician.

Irresistibly, he left the bar and ran after the man, catching up to him as he turned away from yet another door with a pained look.

“Are you lost?” he asked.

“Yes,” the man said desperately.

“I don't know how you'll find your home among these. They're identical,” he surveyed the houses.

“None of these places are my home!” the man exclaimed with a pained look. His entire being flared up. He had caught him in the moment of realization. The man stopped his search and stood in the middle of the town, not knowing where to go.

“I've been wandering my entire life in search of my home, but perhaps it's my fate to remain a wanderer forever,” the man said, riddled with doubt.

“What does it look like?”

“I have never seen it, but it has pulled me for as long as I can remember,” he said.

A revelation hit him. He was looking for the lit house etched on the coin. The beautiful house in the middle of the forest that could or could not exist; it was bound up with his very self, flickering in and out of existence just as his resolve swung from the surest belief to the greatest doubt. He felt it in his bones.

“I know the place you're looking for!” he cried, and when the proclamation left his throat it mirrored the very conviction that fueled this wanderer.

“Can you take me?” The Wanderer turned to him with burning desire.

“I believe so.”

He called up the vision on the coin and started down a path that appeared as he took it, but which he took as if on a wind.

“You're going off road,” said the Wanderer warily as they plunged into the trees. The forest's night revealed nothing but the dark thick trunks that stood around them like monoliths.

“That's the way.”

“Are you sure? Nobody goes into the woods,” the Wanderer

said, glancing back.

“Of course not. They aren't looking for your home,” he said.

“But there must be a reason they have never done this before. How can an entire town be in the wrong and I be onto something true?” the Wanderer asked. He looked back frequently to catch the safe little lights of the town that glimmered like lighthouses.

They wandered deeper until they lost sight of them. The Wanderer was swimming in doubt, turning his head about the trees that offered no guidance. He had never gone this far, and rather than nearing a destination they seemed to be increasingly losing their way.

“This is foolish. All the homes are back in the town. I would be wise to accept that and pick one,” the Wanderer coached himself.

“But you said none of them were what you sought.”

“That is what I repeatedly find.”

“Then you know if you go back, you will only set out again in time.”

The Wanderer proceeded divided, fearing himself crazy for

following this stranger's nonsensical whims. But at last they glimpsed a glimmer of warm light blinking through the trees.

“Do you see that? It's a window!” cried the Wanderer, surpassing him. The light danced between the trees as if somebody toyed with a switch while the two of them slashed through the shortest route to its resting place. They stayed fixed on its elusive flicker, disappearing one moment and reappearing in more sublime beauty the next.

The Wanderer pulsated with anticipation as they fought through the last clump of trees. When he broke through the brush at last, he came upon an empty clearing.

“There's nothing there!” he cried in anguish. “What I sought doesn't exist!”

The Wanderer turned to him. “You!” he cried accusingly, full of sudden recognition. “I shouldn't have followed you! The Man Who Walks Backwards! You always lead to failure!”

“Me!? I just arrived here!”

“Lies!” the Wanderer screamed. “Oh, why were you sent to me,” he moaned, his head in his hands.

“*You* were sent to *me!*” he cried, bewildered by these strange assertions.

“He who has turned his back on everything and gone awry! Why did I have the misfortune to follow *him*! To lead me with the promise of what I have spent my existence searching for and let me glimpse it, only to show it is nothing! How will I go on now that I have seen it? What else should I want? All the lights of the world will pale in comparison to the one I cannot touch!”

The Wanderer's speech rent his heart as if his own lips were forming the words.

“I followed the Backwards Man and he led me astray!” the Wanderer cried loudly into the forest.

“That's not true! There *is* a reason! You have to keep going! Keep wandering!” he frantically consoled the hysterical being.

But the rumor had spread. The entire forest now knew: Backwards Man led one away one from all practical paths with the lure of treasure to only a dead end.

The Wanderer left, running into the forest as if he had collided with lightning. He did not return to town but remained in the trees in this mad, restless state, eternally seeking that which he knew he could not find.

Backwards Man returned dejectedly to the road, where he met the Magician standing outside the tavern with his cart, ready to set off into the morning.

“Hello again, Backwards Man!” he smiled. “Now you are the manifestation of a single idea, a unique path – something indestructible which has never been seen before, and so are another inimitable face of the truth.”

He whipped off his vibrant cloak and flipped it around. Once more he was the ratty peddler, hunched over and pathetic. With a cheerful farewell wave to Backwards Man, he set off, tediously pushing his cart along the road, stopping occasionally to sell his wares to the townsfolk and continuing on when they walked away satisfied.

Backwards Man returned to the trees. He was a pariah of the forest, a curse to avoid. The creatures within it knew to keep their distance lest he touch them and set them askew. And so he set himself to wander as far as he could, to discover everything the forest contained and reach its depths. Every inch was open to him as he minded to walk freely backwards as the Phantom had advised.

He did not glimpse the Phantom again, nor his other companions, and put all of his previous encounters behind

him in spite of his ache for reunion with a familiar friend. Backwards Man reminded himself that much more lay in the forest than what he had already seen. Only one form resurfaced often to the forefront of his mind, and that was the castle, the fleeting memory of whose image made his being pulse with the ache for home. Backwards Man looked for its turrets and waving flags at every step. The Magician had averted answering whether it existed or was only his trick, but Backwards Man maintained a hope that it did so strong it contained its own end inside it. Yet no matter how widely he wandered, any trace of the castle proved elusive.

Backwards Man glimpsed the beginnings of many vibrant scenes, each its own world to plunge into, passing them for the green until he came upon the next scene, a different story, another lesson. His free walking led him to spaces where the forest grew darker, denser, lusher, thicker. A quietude fell softly over the ground here, muting the rustle of leaves and bringing out their subtler, tinnier sounds simultaneously.

He met many unusual forms here that existed without names. They were wilder, unrefined and undefined creatures who had never left these recesses. The Wanderer's cry had not reached them through the dense tangles and they

mingled freely with Backwards Man, who came to know their peculiar unnamed natures and left each encounter a different shape than he was before. In this way he was an accumulator of color, grafting patterns from the others onto his own skin.

In such an unguarded manner he stumbled into a densest patch whose edges crept over him like a stain. It was a void for light and sound. Even the unnamed creatures were absent here. This wild garden of knotted, tangled trees was full of what resembled budding mushrooms. They rose and retreated, reabsorbed into the boggy soil. He tread carefully, his insides shivering with a high frequency vibration while the surface stood as still as the heartbeat on the ocean floor. He was certain his castle was not here. The ground was too muddy, unstable, and he could not reside here in peace.

He came upon an indescribable head emerging from the ground. Indeed the only word for it was alien. Its neck grew out like a pulsating tree stump, fanning out widely before splaying into the dirt. The form stretched poignantly against the bed that bound it. Its body was still the forest, the *entire* forest. A surge welled up through Backwards Man at that thought. It was a concentration of energy turned partway matter. Its appearance was barely defined. It did not have a

name. It was not yet a complete idea. The forest was gurgling it in its throat, waiting for the right time to spit it out.

Backwards Man feared he was privy to something forbidden, an act he should not bear witness to. He glanced over his shoulder to be sure no great force was about to strike him down.

The one-of-a-kind flower bloomed before him innocuous, open to his contact, a heart without skin. For a moment he perceived a distant birthplace across a cold vast stretch of universe, this unimaginable crossing echoed in just a few unearthly molecules floating around in the swirl until they disappeared forever from perception once the being took form. All of the universe's possibilities lay in this tiny bud, unchosen.

Empathy pulled him. They were two beings wholly unguarded. How could he refuse one so open and rare? Why should he impose restrictions now when he had been open to everything else?

He stretched out his hand. His mind moved a pace ahead, and he saw himself swallowed by the great incomprehensible energy, liquefied, merging with this unnamed concentration budding its particular flavor in the warm fervid soil until they

became a *new* thought that was neither him nor it. This new thought could break from the floor, acquire a form, and wander the forest where it would mingle with other thoughts, and this mingling would not be the same mingling as if it were only Backwards Man. The meanings would change, the revelations would shift like plates, and the subsequent paths from the contact would slice the forest differently. In this way the forest's history was written. Backwards Man stood, at this very moment, at a fork in fate's road, and he realized that there was no preset script that favored one way over the other. He could continue the destiny of Backwards Man or he could end it right now.

Where in this merger did the bud end and *he* begin? Were there still two, or did their minds become one new entity? Who, then, stood behind this one neat, complete thought, the solid and painstakingly acquired identity – who witnessed this scene as a separate phenomenon – of “Backwards Man,” if “Backwards Man” and his knowledge could unravel at one touch from the unformed and his material reemerge as a different identity?

Backwards Man withdrew his hand. From the lightest brush upon the cloud of unknowing he glimpsed the

bottomless vat of liquefaction. He backed slowly into better lit parts of the forest.

He emerged from the depths after a satisfying, full wander and continued his explorations unbounded, revering only this one constraint. His encounters had left him patchy and wild-eyed, or brought a wildness within him close to the surface, and once safely away he resettled into his comfortable form and grew calmer, beginning to reflect over his experiences.

He didn't stop walking until he came upon a scene that caught his eye. The formation of a town unfolded in an empty clearing. It was led by a vibrant individual, a king dressed to befit his title in a regal robe and a shining, bejeweled crown of bright gold around his head. But it was the alertness in his eyes that gave him life. His movements were animated and free, springing from a well of abundance and fearlessness.

One by one the town grew in numbers, and the people, as if springing out from the king himself, sprung forth more people, and they still more, in a fountain of creation. Each individual filled out the details of life like lines filling an empty page, and it was not the details themselves but every moment of this filling – whether little mass and much space or much mass and less space – that was beautiful. Homes,

items, roads, waste, breath, excitement, digestion spread until they covered every square inch of the clearing and a fully flowered world teemed with the king in its center.

The moment the town reached its crest its life became clockwork, no longer forming but repeating the steps of a changeless dance. In a blink the spirit slipped out of the king unnoticed, leaving him identical to a second ago in his clothes and his manner. One could argue that nothing had changed. But the spark of creation in his eyes was gone.

The bustling town began to fade, becoming fainter until it disappeared completely and left an empty, quiet clearing again.

“I wanted to show you how worlds are created.”

The Phantom was standing beside him, as plain as when they first met.

“You were the king!” Backwards Man exclaimed, recognizing in his eyes the eyes of the king. “Who are you really?”

“You will find me again and again in a million forms. I am the one who is here but not.”

“Like the forest itself.”

The Phantom smiled. "You are getting older."

"What happened to the town?" asked Backwards Man.

"When growth stops, the forms through which it occurs become merely shells, and they fade away."

"Where do they go?"

"To the World of Shadows, where all shells go."

"What do they do there?"

"What can they do? They are lifeless. They add to the waste pile and sit, weighing down the creatures who follow them. The World of Shadows is a barren, desolate place made of dry rocks and rubble, lit by a cold sun. The creatures there cling to forms, building their lives out of these shells. They spend their lives erecting grandiose structures that convince them of beauty through their complexity, but even the grandest and most intricate are in vain. They are empty."

He led Backwards Man into the clearing and let him glimpse through the floor. A ruinous, rocky terrain sprawled out below them, largely empty, littered with what resembled the junk in the Magician's cart. An unorganized swarm of creatures crawled across the cracked concrete ground and into and out of broken stone towers. They picked up lurid

objects off the floor and clanked them hollowly without pattern. Their efforts came to nothing, merely piercing the unbearable silence around them with a discordant racket.

Backwards Man pulled back in horror. “How can they thrive there? They're starved!” he cried.

“They are frozen. They remain untouched. One can remain a toddler for millennia in the World of Shadows,” said the Phantom. “Growth is only here.”

“Then they never grow!” He could not reconcile his heart with the fate. To be deprived of growth was to Backwards Man the ultimate horror of existence.

“It isn't their fault. The forest is unseen while the world of shadows is all around their eyes! Can't it be the other way?” he pleaded.

“It has been as it is for eons. Who knows what bringing the forest out would do. All of its weight and significance might simply crash into the wall of daylight and disappear.”

“But what if? There is always the hope that – *what if?* Why else would the invisible forest exist if not because another way is possible!” Even Backwards Man heard his naivete resounding through the forest.

“You must examine your hope, Backwards Man. Growth is painful. Few will choose it, even if the archway stands right before them. You cannot force someone to come to the Invisible Forest. They must turn around on their own, and take all of the pain of doing so upon their shoulders.”

Backwards Man tried desperately to understand the incongruity that boggled him to his core. “Perhaps it exists *because* it is hidden.”

“The whole thing may be the result of a problem,” said the Phantom.

“Which problem?”

He replied sadly. “Isolation. Embarrassment. Misunderstanding.”

At these words the forest broke open to spill its full heart, and for the first time Backwards Man saw the underside of each rustling leaf as together they cried the one note that rang eternally through. Backwards Man had never before heard it, but he could not ignore it now. With his attention alert, the chorus emerged from the background, singing the problem, a chant so ubiquitous it became clear to him that it had gone on repeating in rounds, unchanged, unheard, for

long, lonely eons. And so it would continue, singing the story, crying the note, until the problem, if it ever could be, was resolved.

Backwards Man had come to a respite from his wanders. He and the Phantom sat in the clearing, talking of the forest at length. Backwards Man relayed his adventures in detail to the veteran of nothing. He was an adolescent soul for whom everything was new, and suspected that everything he mentioned the Phantom already understood. But the Phantom listened patiently, filling in Backwards Man's tales with his knowledge of the forest as Backwards Man told him about the Magician, the Wanderer, the castle, the unnamed creatures, and the densest wild region where the notion of identity came to its end.

“I wanted to reach the depths, but I admit when I got to that point I was afraid to go on. I only came to the end of identity, and it seemed there was no farther for me to go. What lay beyond identity was so much vaster than identity, everything I have so far discovered has been only a fraction of what could be. Nothing that has been, *had* to be! It was as if the history books lay open before me and I held the pen to rewrite the definition of life itself. We are but echoes of the

very first life forms who eons ago determined our most basic problems! Had the angle been just off, the whole problem would be other. We would have different language, a different biology, and you, I, the Magician – who exist in this framework of humanity chosen as one from infinite possibilities – might mean nothing!”

“It is the framework that bestows meaning. Against a framework, against restriction, the unfolding of a world has its beauty. Backwards Man is critical in this world – ”

“ – which is not critical! How do I go on being Backwards Man, knowing that Backwards Man does not have to be? His problems, his viewpoint, his structure, his patterns of perception, could be thrown into the melting pot and reemerge as a labyrinth governed by wholly foreign dynamics, and it would be just as close to and far from the truth as before!”

In the far distance they glimpsed a figure walking into the trees with his back to them. As he walked, lustrous gems fell from his bag and landed on the ground behind him. Backwards Man followed a ray emanating from a dropped gem that illuminated a patch of the forest, revealing previously unseen crevices within it.

“Is that a friend of yours?”

“He is a friend of nobody's. Nobody can touch him. Whatever hundreds of lives he led, he dropped them again and again until he stepped off all paths and walked into he-didn't-know-where to find what he sought.”

“What did he seek?”

The Phantom grinned. “You're still a young soul, Backwards Man. By walking toward his destination, he is inside his destination always. But he does not know this. He does not look back to see their effects. He may not even know he is inside the Invisible Forest,” said the Phantom.

“He can't possibly carry so much,” Backwards Man noted.

“I suspect he is making them.”

“How?”

“Time and effort, and the willingness to step into the dark. He always faces the nothing. But one cannot be inside the nothing. Even constantly facing the nothing, something is created at every step.”

Another gem fell behind the man, its glimmer illuminating a part of the forest that hadn't been there, bringing suddenly

to light a new part and depth. Backwards Man noticed them all over the forest. They littered every path, from those walked a thousand times to those walked just once, by the man himself. They sat on the ground, barely perceptible. Backwards Man realized that the ambient light throughout the forest, what revealed the myriad beauties forming within it, was the very light of these gems, and without it, all he had seen and all that had gone right through him, would not be. The entire blossoming world holding everything true hinged on a single action.

Backwards Man turned to share this revelation with the Phantom, but he was not there.

Backwards Man continued walking freely through the forest alone, absorbed in its beauty. Silence surrounded him as he encountered a host of new vibrant scenes, treading the milliard paths slicing the ground as equals, often winding along in solitude except for brief moments where they crossed. He eventually came upon a path snaking charmingly through and in a glance he knew that it led out of the forest. Decidedly, he walked the other way. A sense of destiny pervaded every step, leading him without explanation to the base of a hill. He looked up and there beheld the solid,

irrefutable castle in its full splendor and radiance, its flags waving boldly through the air.

Music reverberated behind its walls, heralding his return. At long last, the reason for his backwards walking became clear! It alone had brought him to his true life. Behind the senseless waywardness his castle had been calling him through the thicket. Backwards Man laughed and cried together. He saw warm, sultry nights, an ocean of stars, the exhilaration of travel and the warmth of loved ones who shared it. The world stood waiting at his fingertips as he felt the entire forest swell beneath him in an intake of air, realizing at once the forest was wrong: he was not Backwards Man. He had never been Backwards Man. He was the King of the Invisible Forest!

A rift in the forest rustled the trees synchronously, as if in a wind. He paused for a moment, then resumed his way forward.

"There you are! I've been looking all over for you!" cried an old but familiar voice.

Backwards Man turned around. A figure was fighting awkwardly through the brush, pushing the wildly twisting branches out of its way in frustration.

It took Backwards Man a minute to recognize his old roommate. But it wasn't his roommate as he remembered him. His facial expressions, his likes and dislikes, his daily routines and favorite sports teams – the details of his life – were gone. All that remained of him was his distilled essence.

“What's happened to you!” his roommate's essence exclaimed, looking over Backwards Man's wild appearance. He was wearing a garland of twigs and leaves. His body was a canvas of little scratches. His eyes were bright and alert, clear crystalline pools that reflected what met them.

“I've become myself here in this place that doesn't exist,” he replied. “How did you find it?”

Backwards Man could not make sense of it. The Invisible Forest was his home because he walked backwards. But his roommate walked forward in the world. *He* was the stranger here.

His roommate seemed unsure of this himself.

“I went searching for you after you disappeared. You're a part of me,” a note of pain pierced his voice. “Finally I can take us home,” he gestured back along the path.

“My home is here,” said Backwards Man.

“Where *are* we?”

“We're in the Invisible Forest,” he flung open his arms.

“Everything is so strange and distorted,” his roommate looked around, cringing in bewilderment and disgust.

Backwards Man noticed that he surveyed the forest through tiny pinholes. He could barely see his eyes beneath the smooth plaque that shielded his face from the forest's dense brush, as well as its beauty.

“That's because you're wearing a mask!” Backwards Man laughed.

“No, I'm not,” the Mask laughed back.

“You are,” Backwards Man said. “Look.”

He reached forward to take the mask off, but the Mask pulled back, crying, “What are you doing!?”

The Mask quickly regained his composure and said, “It's time to return to our real life.”

“That life doesn't belong to me,” said Backwards Man. “And it doesn't belong to you, either. What's yours there? Where's Stacey?”

“Who?” asked the Mask.

“Your girlfriend! Your *lover!*” said Backwards Man vehemently.

“I've never met her,” said the Mask warily.

“What about your job? Didn't you get a promotion?”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” the Mask looked confused.

“Because it's not truly yours! But you could have your real life here! Look!” he gestured wildly to the castle that stood before them upon the hill, gardens spilling over its turrets into a colored scene, a gateway into a banquet of a life.

The Mask faced it and Backwards Man glimpsed a momentary flicker in his eyes through the pinholes, so tiny it could have been a trick of the light or his imagination. But his hope latched on. For the briefest flash, the vision of the castle had pierced what was under the Mask.

“You see it!” Backwards Man grabbed the Mask by the hand, overjoyed that they shared the vision.

“That? That's a fabrication of your imagination. It cannot be real,” the Mask resisted.

“It *will* be real the moment we step inside. Trust me!”

“Trust you? The Backwards Man? You're insane!” the Mask laughed, pulling away.

Backwards Man lost restraint. He lunged forward, tearing at the mask again.

“There's nothing underneath!” the Mask shrieked, shielding himself.

“There has to be! What else could have led you here? You arrived here of your own accord!” Backwards Man cried as they wrestled violently in front of the castle, arm against arm. The wind that had rustled the forest picked up, blowing the leaves about hard. “Just take one impossible step! Do what the Mask would never do, and you'll turn all of existence around!” Backwards Man cried.

“Ha!” the Mask gave a forceful bark, his eyes turning wild beneath their pinholes from the absurdity, putting such a strain on the mask that it quivered momentarily on the verge of a fracture. “An impossible step at the cost of my entire life! What fool would step so that the whole world thinks he is crazy? Do you think I want to lose all the respect of the public eye? That I want to ruin my chances at dating and look like a loser? I will have nobody by my side if I choose the invisible forest!” he cried, wrought with distress.

“You will have me.”

“What is the company of the backwards man worth?” the Mask's voice filled with disgust. “Tell me, what in there is worth spending my life alone?” he gestured toward the heap of stones and its waving flags. “You cannot. Because it is only your dream,” he answered himself.

“I can't take the step for you. You must trust the improbable little grain you fight with,” Backwards Man wrangled his arms, helpless. “You don't know what you give up if you turn away! We're *two steps* away from our real life – !” he tried to impress the gravity of the situation upon the Mask.

“ – is exactly what you're running from!” the Mask cried.

“*You're* the one running! You won't step forward because you're ashamed of what's under the mask!”

“Shame!?” the Mask balked, wrenching himself out of Backwards Man's grip and standing aside. “You said it yourself – none of this exists!” the Mask waved around at the forest, shouting for Backwards Man to hear him. “The invisible forest is an escape!” he cried, his back to the castle.

The cry echoed among the trees – *the Invisible Forest is an*

escape. The Invisible Forest is an escape! – as the wind gathered into a violent storm, dissolving the forest in a blur. Behind the chaos the castle faded like a mirage. He recalled the Magician's words.

Through the mess of leaves he glimpsed the entire meandering path, winding halfway across the world from a starting point he now saw lay just two feet away, on the next carpet square.

The forest was gone. He stood in his living room, facing the spot where his castle had been a moment ago.

He was so close. Just as he was about to step inside, it vanished. He held not a vestige of that limitless world of whose riches nothing but figment remained.

He. Who was he?

“Yan!” a voice called around the corner.

He was Yan.

“What are you doing? You're going to be late for your first day,” his brother, Mark, came around from the kitchen and looked at Yan standing in the middle of the living room in bewilderment. It was a quarter past eight.

Yan blinked. He was wearing a fresh button-down and slacks, and was just about to put his shoes on. He shook his head clear.

“I’m on my way out,” he said, looking around their cozy apartment with a surreal sense of the foreign and the familiar.

“Well, good luck,” his brother clapped him on the back.

“Thanks,” Yan said, taking his keys.

“Are you nervous? You look shaken,” Mark was concerned.

“I’m fine. It’s just another job.”

Yan performed one last check to make sure he forgot nothing and headed out the door, where the cars’ discordant racket punctured the air and a weak morning sun cast long shadows over the concrete.

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