

*A Road, a Fence, and a Man*

*In the heat of a sun that may or may not exist, there lies a road. It is a road of twists and turns, a road of decisions and mistakes. Its length is that of infinite proportions; its side routes unable to be counted. Its surface is worn and corroded with the wear of the many feet that have passed over it, and the flowers that had once sprung from its edges are now bent with age. Its composition varies, changing from granite to sandstone to glass; to any material known on the face of the earth. The road stretches far into the horizon, creating a field of quilt-like patterns below the ever-present sun. And it is filled with people. Billions of people. The ground shakes at the pounding of their footsteps and the air trembles with the echoes of their voices. They don't all make it, some reaching far off tributaries that they know they can never return from. But as long as they follow the road, they will be fine.*

*On this road walks a man. His brown hair is parted in a normal way and his height is a normal height and he is not very important. He is young: his body is sturdy and lithe and his skin has not yet been folded in by the years. His mind is sharp but not impressively so, and is able to quickly process his surroundings, which he does, pointing his chilling gaze to the many bodies packed in around him. His blue eyes shift, with something akin to animosity, to the fences that border the walls. They loom over him with their chain link armor and glare. He looks away, sighing. He's been very tired lately.*

*A yellow dress runs in front of him. Twisting and whirling, it weaves its way through the crowd. The girl wearing it, hair piled high in a complicated bun, is beautiful, the man thinks. With long legs and graceful arms, she is dainty in every sense of the word. Her face, with full lips and large brown eyes, would be breathtaking if it wasn't for the unpleasant mask of determination covering it. Slow down, the man thinks, stay and walk for a while. But the girl in the yellow dress has reached the fence. She curls her fingers around its chains, an unreadable expression flitting over her features. Then, gritting her teeth, she leaps, gripping the sides of the fence and using the holes as footholds. Inch by inch, she begins to scale the massive structure. And second by second, a crowd begins to notice her attempts. They hurl hushed and hurried whispers back and forth to one another, gathering like sheep at the base of the fence. The girl tenses, increasing her speed suddenly as if it were a natural reflex. The mumbling crescendos, building a towering wave of sound. And the man lowers his head, suddenly finding the ground*

*very interesting. He kicks a rock, wondering where it will land instead of focusing on the girl's slipping fingers. He taps out a beat on his leg, making the rhythm much more interesting than the thud of something falling from high up. He hums a tune, listening to it far harder than the spew of lethal words battering a torn yellow dress. The man sinks into the crowd, tiredness filling him to the point where he could burst. Still, he walks the road. Because as long as he follows the road, he knows he'll be fine.*

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I've been having a staring contest with the computer screen for a while now. It isn't a very fun game, and I lose as soon as I begin, but I really have no other options here. These numbers are just refusing to stop wriggling around my vision. That's what four straight hours of accounting can do to a guy, I guess. As if testing the waters, I plug a few values into the screen. Reluctantly, and with some high-pitched beeping noises, the computer accepts them. Gaining a little bit of hope, I plug two more in.

"Error," says the computer.

"Shut up," I growl.

I've only had this job for a week and I'm already talking to computers. Great. But, hey, it pays well and it's what I went to college to do. My father always said that if I got a good-paying job I'd be happy, and be able to live comfortable. And in his mind, there was no better paying job than the one I was in now: working for his very own company. I, of course, had agreed. There was no sense in being someone on the streets, forgotten and starving, strumming a guitar for whoever will listen. There really was no sense in being someone like that, living their own life and forgetting their promise of calling their brother every once in a while. I stare at the computer screen. It goes into sleep mode. Looks like I won the staring contest.

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It's been about a year since I first joined True Bleu Accounting Firm, and until now, nothing has really surprised me. Each day, with its monotonous clicking and tapping away at the computer, has become routine, and every person I've interacted with up to this point has been normal and predictable. Which is not necessarily a bad thing; I have indeed been comfortable. But today something is happening that feels completely out of place. We're getting a new employee. This event, in it of itself isn't very unusual, but as soon as she steps out of the

elevator, I feel like it's different somehow. She is a young woman, fresh out of college, filled to the brim with that strange mix of excitement and nervousness one gets at the first time in a new job. With hair done up in a complicated bun and crisp white clothes, she is obviously trying to dress like what she thinks stereotypical secretaries look like. Her brown eyes are sparkling with energy and her high heels click on the floor when she walks, long, loping strides that take up about two full tiles with every step. Her name is Desiree Hancock, a name that to me wouldn't be out of place belonging to a fast-talking attorney. And when she vigorously shakes my hand, it seems even more likely she'd do better in court.

"Greetings, Mr. . ." she squints at my nametag.

"Bleu." I say, "Alexander Bleu."

She tilts her head, "Bleu...huh, I feel like I've heard that somewhere..."

Was she seriously asking me this?

"Um, it's the name of the company..." I offer, trying to be the least sarcastic that I can.

She looks lost for words, "Yeah, I, uh, knew that." Something in her expression tugs at me a little. I think because, for some nonsense reason, it reminds me of myself on my first day. Granted, I wasn't *that* dumb, but I could at least try to help her a little.

"I can show you around if you like. It's not that exciting, but you'll have to get used to it if you really do want a job here," I say, a dull professional tone entering my voice.

"Yeah," she says, "Thanks."

We start to walk forward. "But don't you worry Mr. Bleu," she leans in as she says; "It won't be boring as long as I'm here."

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"No."

"What?" Des cries, brown eyes going wide, "What do you mean no!?"

I raise an eyebrow at her "I mean that I'm not stupid. The last time you came rushing over to my cubicle with an idea, the entire office shunned me for a week. No friendly hellos, lunch invitations, nothing. I really don't want to go through that again." I wasn't over exaggerating. On that occasion, she had brought over a full-scale police report, filled to the brim with criminal profilings, DNA evidence, and worst of all, crime scene photos, exclaiming to everyone who would listen that we were going to become private detectives. Despite being

mortified in every shape and form, I had to endure countless suggestions from her to actually go through with it. And I'm no weakling, but honestly, seeing murder victim photographs every day for a week had made me want to curl up in a ball in the corner.

"Oh, don't worry Alex; it's nothing like last time!" Des says brightly. Will she ever realize that all of her ideas were like last time? Still, I could feel eyes on us, and the only way to dispel them was to finish this conversation, and fast.

"... Fine," I sigh, "What is it?"

She takes a deep breath, and puts on a face she hardly ever wears: a serious face.

"I want you to write me a poem."

My emotions roll from shock to anger to absolute terror. Then to emptiness.

"How did you...find out about that?" I mumble. My father couldn't've—

"John told me," Des says, "He said you used to write his songs. Good ones, he said.

And—"

"I told you before to stop talking to my brother," I say, force pushing its way into my voice.

"But he knows you, Alex! He really, truly knows you and he wants to help you! I've known you for a year now and I know that you're not happy here. So just write one! I know you've wanted to!" She exclaims, her voice echoing around the room.

I hiss, "Be quiet!" The eyes of our coworkers are starting to hurt.

"Here, let's try it out!" she says softer, but with just as much earnestness, pushing a pen and a scrap of paper in my direction. But just hearing her say it makes my head ache.

She locks her eyes with mine, but I break the connection and look away.

"C'mon, I know you're bored," she pleads. Bored. I am bored. I'm so bored I could watch paint dry and it would be a theater production. But being bored is better than being a failure.

Confusion lacing her voice, she says, "Failure?" I guess I said that aloud. But it was true. Because when I was little, I would play with words. I would spin them around, mash them together; blend them until they were beautiful: descriptions of flowery sunsets and clashing waves. I was real good at it too; I could make them say whatever I was thinking and feeling and they would listen, placing themselves in order right in front of my eyes. But as I grew, I started

to see the truth. My words were useless. I could play with them all I want, mix them in any form or combination, and they still could do nothing for me. Because they weren't practical: weren't a good paying job. They were like my brother John, made out all his life to be a proper accountant like my father, only to throw it away for his own fickle music. He was a failure, said my father, a disappointment. Don't be like him, he said. I won't, I said. And I knew what I had to do. My words set me apart, distanced me, from the rest of the world. If I wasn't with them, I could be useful. I could be a success. So I threw them away. They weighed me down, so I threw them away. Reality chased away reverie, practicality knocked out purpose, and I was left standing in the middle of an empty room, pressing my hands against my ears so tight that even the words I loved the most couldn't get in.

But I won't say all that.

All I'll say is, "Yes, failure." Then I'll walk away; sit down at another cubicle, and work.

But seeing Des sitting here, hoping for me and believing for me, is killing me. Her ideas were always so crazy; so far out of left field that I could never agree to them. And she wouldn't care; she would just laugh it off and come back with another the following week. But this idea, I could tell, she wanted me to follow through on. The first day we met her eyes had held the most excitement I had ever seen, and now, they held an emotion just as intense: a deep-as-the-sea sincerity, begging me to believe her. She was reaching out to me, calling me back to a past so buried I could barely see it. And really, she was starting to convince me. Almost. Because the moment I looked from her eyes to my desk, reality clambered right back onto me and held me tighter than it ever had. Because my father was standing there, standing right behind my desk. He looked at me for a brief moment, as if analyzing my thoughts. Then, he turned to Des.

"I have your final paycheck in my office," he says.

What?

"Thank you," Des nods. She looks back at me, surprisingly emotionless, "I was just leaving."

"Yes, of course," he states, "Follow me." He walks away down the hallway.

"I was thinking of quitting for a while," Des says, looking at me with strong, unwavering eyes, "I didn't know the exact day I would do it, but this morning I just felt like I had to go. I'm

sorry I didn't tell you earlier. I'm just . . . so tired of this place," she smiles softly; "I thought maybe you were too."

Des looks at me one last time, her warm chocolate eyes dancing with playfulness, "Don't get into too much trouble once I'm gone."

Then she turns, her sunshine yellow dress swishing as she walks.

I open my mouth to call out to her, to say my last goodbye, but nothing comes out. She turns the corner, and is gone. I plop down in my chair, staring at the cluttered surface of my desk. Slowly, with a trembling hand, I pick up the pen. My coworkers stare at me, at the glaring abnormality in the center of all normality. And I begin to write.

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*A man stumbles through a tightly-packed mass of people. He weaves through the crowd, clumsily but gracefully, haphazardly but surely. The man must be a very confused man, as he fights with the flow of the crowd, choosing to walk in the opposite direction they do. He dons an unpleasant mask of determination, one that envelopes his features and maneuvers his mind. And in his hand he carries a small piece of office stationery, words sloppily splashing its surface. The man reaches the edge of the road slowly, as if every step were a separate hurdle for him to leap. He grips the fence. And with creaking bones and shaking hands, the man begins to climb. Every step up is a dream; every foothold a memory. He remembers as he climbs, he remembers the words and he remembers the computers. They help him, curing him of the tiredness that was rooted in his mind. And when he hears the roar of the crowd below him, he does not falter. Instead, he gathers up his hopes and they push him higher and higher and higher. Then the man stops. Because he has reached the top of the fence. He looks out at the groves of trees that continue forever, spread out below him like a sea. He has never seen such trees, glistening and shining, each one radically different from the rest. There is no road; no path, and for a second, the man is scared. If there is no path, where should he go? If there is no one to follow, how will he walk? But then he clears his mind. He looks down at the words in his hand, and breathes a deep breath. Then he descends from the fence, venturing into the unknown.*