The King of the Street Corner

“May I walk in your shoes?”

The homeless man’s head snapped up startled, and when his eyes settled on me I could practically feel their confusion. We stood there for a minute, man contemplating boy, while I waited for his answer. When he didn’t offer one, I asked again, taking great care to be polite, “Would you mind, sir, if I walked in your shoes?”

He was quick to respond this time, “What are you playing at boy?”

I sighed inwardly- I had known this would come. Standing stock still, I let the man’s eyes take in my private school uniform- button down tucked into khakis paired with my school’s sweater- and make all the assumptions I knew he would make before giving an answer, “I’m not playing at anything.”

A knowing smirk crept up onto the man’s lips, pairing perfectly with the contemptuous disbelief filling his eyes. “I know your kind,” he countered, his gaze once again sizing me up. “Your entire life is a game, and I will not be a pawn in it.”

This man was certainly not commonplace, I could already see that. At first glance, he fit right in on this street, practically blending into the smudgy shadows that adorned the corners, but I felt convinced that underneath the threadbare layers of his clothing was a man with a world of wealth to offer.

His clear eyes and sharp mouth made him into a contradiction in his world, just as my defiant questions and somehow radical thoughts made me a contradiction in mine. He and I both had so much to give, no matter what world we lived in- I just had the power to give it, and he was stuck on the other side of this social chasm that separated us, unable to do anything. But to cross that void, to make him see the parallels between us so obvious to me, would have taken up time and words that I just didn’t have. Lowering my voice and looking straight into the man’s eyes, I tried to show him how serious this was to me. “No, this isn’t a game. Nowhere near a game. All I am asking for is your shoes.”

The man nodded, looking at me as if he could see straight through to the works of my mind. “This is a game,” he asserted, casting aside everything I had just said. “So what’s the point of it? What do you want with a ratty old pair of shoes?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but the man just sped on. “Oh let me guess, and we’ll see how many points I earn. I bet your friends are around here somewhere, and this whole thing is a set up- put a homeless man in the spotlight and see how he dances! It’s just another laugh for a bunch of rich boys bored with the world, and frankly it disgusts me.”

I groaned inwardly, closing my eyes. “No, you’ve got it all wrong.”

“Do I?” asked the man, the chuckle that escaped his lips effectively shattering my little remaining composure.

Opening my eyes to look at the man, I could see the only chance I had to sway him was to tell him the truth.

“Yes you actually do,” I said, my stable tone surprisingly disguising the own disgust I felt at the world’s perception of me. “You are so very far off. It’s a desire to change my view on my life, I know that much. Past that point though, motives run together until they form a non-distinct mass of ideas.” I paused, measuring the man with my eyes one last time before I pour my inner thoughts on him. “I don’t want to drag my feet through life anymore. I don’t want to only look at things half way, only enjoy things half of the time. I refuse to be the stereotypical upper class kid next door, only getting through school until I inherit the family business. I refuse to throw away twenty-two years of my life just waiting for the next superficial thing to come along. Being privileged, getting almost everything I want, has been my lifestyle ever since I came into this world, and its novelty had rubbed off before I even understood what novelty was. I’ve started to float through life, staring at the world around me with tunnel vision- never wondering, never admiring, never appreciating. Your shoes, I had hoped, would serve as a physical, tangible reminder to me to never forget that what I have is not typical. Only typical things may be taken for granted; I can’t take my own life for granted anymore.”

I took a deep breath, fully aware of the girth of my confession, and slowly moved my gaze from its station on the ground upwards until it reached the man across from me. He was sitting cross legged with his chin resting on his hand- the perfect picture of an attentive listener. There was something, though, in the lilt of his murmured responses, something almost satirical in the tilt of his head that didn’t quite fit with the otherwise sincere image. It was his smile, simpered and crooked, that discomforted me most of all.

“You’re mocking me.”

The man threw his hands out, standing up to face me, the derisive smile still painted smugly on his face. “Of course I’m mocking you boy. Don’t be a fool. You and I both know if you really want to change at all you’re going to have to do something more than ask for a poor man’s damn shoes.”

I flinched. I had heard enough. This happened every time, and it still stung. I finally think I’m on the right track to move me towards where I want to be when suddenly the tight rope I’m walking gets buffeted, sending me plummeting right back to rock bottom.

I could feel my back straight as a rod and my shoulders tight to my neck as I turned away to leave, without a word or a backwards glance. It didn’t take long though, only a few steps, for the man to surprise me again. He called me back, this time his voice softer, devoid of all its earlier bitterness.

“Hold on. I’m sorry. I guess perspective is a difficult thing to master on both ends of the social spectrum. Really though kid, I can tell from just you coming over here that you’ve got a strong character. Don’t sell yourself short now by asking for the easy way out, you’ll only end up back where you started.”

“I wasn’t looking for a cop out,” I mumbled stiffly, not quite won over by the man’s apology. “I thought it was a decent idea, at least worth a try, but obviously you’re the scholar between the two of us, so by all means, sir, instruct me.

“I am no scholar,” he confessed, calmly holding my gaze across the battlefield laid out between us. “But I’ve got more years under my hat than you do, more experiences behind me than you could even begin to imagine, and a few tricks still stuck up my sleeve that I can easily pass off as wisdom.”

I cracked a smile at this, and upon seeing it the man curved his lips into a sincere smile to mirror mine. “I’ll tell you what boy,” he continued, the smile on his lips warming his tone. “You come back when you’re actually willing to change. Get rid of this superficial desire and replace it with something real, something passionate. Then you can come back- come back when you’re actually open to listening- and we’ll see just how much I really know.”

I crossed my arms, at least putting up the appearance of thinking the man’s offer through. “We’ll see,” I finally said, not committing to either end.

The man nodded, his smile suddenly understanding in nature, and within the minute I was walking back the way I had come, determined not to come back. I still wasn’t sure what I needed to do in order to change myself, but I felt certain that this man, this King of the Streetcorner, couldn’t be what I was looking for.

*Two months later...*

“What do you make of these?”

I threw the pile of magazines down by the homeless man’s head, startling him awake.

“What in the world,” he muttered, rubbing his eyes with one hand and struggling to push himself up with the other. When he cast his gaze on me, though, his disgruntled look quickly cleared, only to be replaced by complete shock. “Oh it’s you again.” He straightened himself out, brushing off his shirt as if getting ready for an important visitor. “I have to say I’m very surprised that you’re here, but good morning anyways.”

I glanced at my watch with a scowl. “It’s four in the afternoon,” I mumbled, not meaning for it to reach the man’s ears.

He picked up on my tone though, astute as he seemingly was. “Someone’s piqued aren’t they? Well, about what? I know you didn’t come by just to display your superior time-telling abilities.”

I lowered myself to the ground, reaching eye level with the man, and lightly kicked the unorderly heap of magazines that were scattered between us. “What do you make of these?”

The man gave me a skeptical look before picking the top magazine up and quickly flipping through it. “Well, they’re nice magazines I guess. Good paper; definitely a luxury I can’t afford.”

“No, no, no,” I interjected, snatching the magazine out of the man’s hands and pointing at the picture on its cover. ‘What do you make of this? These celebrities, their lifestyle, their role- what’s your opinion on it all?”

The smirk curling the homeless man’s lips told me that he had understood what I was asking all along but just enjoyed giving me a hard time. Suddenly though, and quite quickly, his small flattened into a quizzical frown and his eyes narrowed, completing the look. “Why are you testing me? So I can prove my worth?”

I rolled my eyes, the idea that the man surely had a flair for dramatics crossing my mind not for the first time. “This isn’t a test,” I assured him. “I didn’t think I was going to come back here after the first time we talked, I didn’t think I would need to. Then I saw these, and I thought that maybe, just maybe, you might actually understand why celebrities bother me more than anyone else has been able to.”

The man quirked his eyebrows at me. “You’re assuming a lot about a perfect stranger if you think we’re going to have the same views. But okay, if it’s my opinion you want then it’s my opinion you’ll get.” He shot me a sly smile before continuing, swiftly making me nervous for what I was about to hear. “Those to whom much is given, much is expected.”

I nodded my head in confusion- of course I knew that, it was one of the few topics constantly harped on at school, but what did that have to do with what I had asked?

“In light of that,” the man continued, “I don’t see much of a difference between you and celebrities.”

My mouth hung open in shock. “I am nothing like them. They are nothing more than self-made powerhouses. They have the ability to change so much in this world for the better, but they lack either the conscience or the gumption to do anything about it. I am not them, not at all.”

“Hold on kid. Hear me out, you may find that I’m actually worth listening to.” He smiled, situating himself in a way that reminded me of my grandfather settling down before he launched into one of his countless stories. “Celebrities are self-made powerhouses, just like you said, but they have the supreme leverage they have because they took the talents given to them and manifested them, and you can’t fault them in that aspect. You can, however, fault them when they don’t take the next step, when they don’t complete the circle and give back. You,” he said, pointing an accusatory finger at me, “you messed up way before then. You see the problem with you is that you’re so blinded by anger and jealousy, you don’t see that it’s your own fault that you aren’t in their position. You blame them, accuse them of misuse of their own resources, but you don’t see that you have just as much of a chance to reach their level and achieve that kind of leverage if you would only use the tools given to you. Don’t focus so much on the big picture that you don’t see the work that you have to put in to get there- you have the tools, you just have to learn how to use them.”

I swallowed hard as the accuracy of the statement hit me. Then I narrowed my eyes at the man, the smile forming on my lips devious in its very nature. “That was a test,” I confessed, turning around to walk home. “Congratulations, you passed with flying colors.”

*One month later...*

“Now tell me, what’s been gnawing at you?”

My head shot up from its resting place on my hands. “How did you know something was wrong?”

The man next to me smirked, lifting his eyebrows in jest. “First off, you only come around when you have a problem with something.”

“That’s not true!” I interrupted, offended by his words. “I’ve been here a full five times, not including our first disastrous meeting, and only two have been about problems.”

My friend’s smirk only grew. “Second, you haven’t spoken one word since you’ve sat down. There has to be a problem- what is it?”

I sighed and looked around, my eyes flitting across the now familiar surroundings of the street corner, still silently mulling over my problem.

“Arrogance,” I finally blurted. “My problem is arrogance. How do you deal with it?”

The onslaught of laughter that erupted from beside me was certainly not the response I had been. “Look around you boy,” he scolded once he had caught his breath. “There is nothing for me to be arrogant about.”

“Well, maybe not now,” I consented. “But you’d truly be a noble man if you’ve never once felt arrogant about something. Come on, you always have an answer for me, don’t let me down now.”

The man just shook his head, a now-familiar smile growing on his lips. “There’s going to come a day when I won’t have an answer, and you’ll have to actually work things out for yourself.”

I waved my hand impatiently, pushing aside the ridiculous idea.

“But,” he continued, “as a matter of fact I do have an answer. You may not like it though.”

“Try me.”

“Arrogance is human nature’s way of compensating for its failures. It’s a way to soothe your confidence when you’ve been stumped, a tool to help you forget your shortcomings. Arrogance isn’t inherently evil, though, it is human nature that makes it that way.”

He paused, searching my eyes for understanding, but I just shook my head, silently inviting him to go on.

“You see, arrogance can be used to make people feel better about themselves, or it can be used to make people do better by themselves. It isn’t necessarily the purest incentive to achieve a goal, but it is an effective one. Unfortunately, and I’m guessing this is the case with you, arrogance doesn’t serve that purpose as often as it serves as a boon for failures.”

He stared at me then, daring me to contradict his assumption, but it wasn’t something I could do and stay honest at the same time.

“Right,” he asserted, rubbing his hands together in an almost conspiratorial way. “My answer for you then, boy, is that you drag yourself out of the shallow level of conscience you are stuck in, and realize that you have been spoon fed for your entire life and really have nothing to be arrogant about. Or,” he suddenly added, seeing the stunned expression I knew was framed on my features, “use it to encourage yourself to rise above the challenges that seem to stump you, and finally start achieving everything you’ve told me you want to achieve.”

I nodded my head, absorbing all the man had told me, but at the same time taking note of the distinctly acidic tone he couldn’t seem to vindicate from most of his words that day.

The bitterness I had heard in the first half of the man’s speech had all but disappeared in that latter, yet it still brought on the ever present thought that this man had a back story that he was willingly keeping from me.

Well, that and the nagging sensation that I should really start bringing along a pen and paper with me so I can take notes.

*Two weeks later...*

“Read this,” I demanded, dropping the letter into the man’s lap, not once breaking my pace.

“Well, hello to you too,” he joked, opening up the already broken-into envelope I had handed him. “Are you going to tell me what this is or, is it a surprise?”

“Just read it.”

“Sir, yes sir,” he mumbled, mocking me as he astutely unfolded the paper.

I continued to pace back and forth, casting furtive glances at the man ever so often as he read the letter. It seemed he was taking hours, reading at a snail’s pace, and I was finding it harder and harder to be patient. Finally, I gave up on my attempt entirely and whirled on him. “Do you not know how to read?”

The man just smiled at my outburst, not once taking his eyes from mine as he folded the letter once more. “Me? Oh yes, I’m an excellent reader. I may be poor but I’m not stupid.”

I looked away with clenched teeth, immediately regretting my words. “No, of course you aren’t, I know that.” I looked at him, and I could practically feel the anxiety casting a shadow over my expression. “I’m sorry, I’m not at my best right now. I mean shouldn’t I be happy about that?” I asked, pointing at the letter still sitting in the man’s hands. “I should, I know I should. So why am I not?”

The man shook his head, handing the letter back to me. “That’s one question you have to answer for yourself. For God’s sake boy that’s an acceptance letter from Princeton- any rational man would be ecstatic right now, what has gotten into you?”

I shot him a desperate look, pleading with him to see through my problem before I had to explain it, but the man’s eyes only hardened, and with his arms crossed he waited for my answer, not willing to offer any help.

“Does it really never bother you that I have been given most everything while you have almost nothing? You sit here on this street corner while I eat at country clubs, own a car, and can spend money in ways you couldn’t imagine. Don’t you ever wish the roles were reversed? Don’t you ever wonder whether or not I’m really worthy enough to have been given all this?” I crouched down to eye level with the man, my expression hardened by my words. “Because I do, all the time. The feeling of my own unworthiness seems to slap me in the face everyday. I feel guilty,” I whispered, not even able to meet the man’s gaze anymore, “because I know that while I just keep receiving, there are so many people out there that never once have been given a fraction of what I have. I feel it weighing on me, all the time, and this letter,” I plucked it from the man’s fingers, barely suppressing the urge to crush it, “this acceptance only serves to worsen the feeling.”

For a while we were both silent, both still, and with a sinking feeling I realized that for the first time I might have truly stumped the man. I waited, crouched only a few feet away from him, with my eyes closed but my ears perked- hoping to hear him refute me, hoping to hear him help me, hoping to hear him say anything at all to me.

Finally, slowly, the man pushed himself onto his knees and inched towards me, only stopping when we were a breath a part. “Sometimes I wonder if you ever listen to yourself speak,” he questioned, shaking his head at me. “Because if you had opened your ears just once during any of our conversations, you would have realized by now that you really aren’t as terrible of a person as you make yourself out to be.”

I raised my eyebrows with skepticism, my pursed lips calling his bluff without even uttering a sound.

“Really,” the man continued, sensing my disbelief. “You need to cut yourself some slack. Just the fact that you are aware of how privileged you are shows maturity beyond your years. Even more than that, though, to see you care and feel so guilty about your possessions, that shows a true conscience- something that evades most everyone this day in age.”

I put my head down, embarrassed by the man’s praise, but not willing to refute it for fear of interrupting him. I had lowered myself onto the ground at this point, and in crossing my legs I waited with anticipation, my embarrassment slowly ebbing, for the man to go on.

“Look kid, Princeton wasn’t handed to you on a silver platter. It wasn’t just money, nor was it all connections that got you into an ivy league- you had to work for it. Yes, your parents’ money provided you with the education and other tools to help you along the way, but without effort on your side every single one of their attempts to get you in anywhere in life would have been futile.”

I nodded my head reluctantly, my eyes still fixed on the ground by the man’s shoes, before giving a sigh and motioning for him to go on.

“It doesn’t make you a bad person to be privileged, you know. To be privileged and to waste all of your gifts, now that can’t be deemed good. But to do what you’re doing, to take the gifts you’ve been given and extend them and expound upon them so that one day you’ll be in the position to give back, now that can’t be deemed anything but good.”

I nodded in understanding, my eyes closed by my mind finally open. “Throwing away my opportunity now would be the greatest sin.”

The man didn’t answer, only reached his hand down until it covered my own, and I was shocked to realize that this was the first time we had touched- we hadn’t even ever shaken hands. I had distinctly felt his strength coursing underneath the weathered, calloused, skin, and to this day I still feel it surging through me.

“You’re doing everything right kid,” he whispered, the sincere look on his face making him appear older than usual. “Keep it up, and you’ll be exactly the man you want to be one day.”

I smiled at his words, and when I got up a little while later to leave I could still feel that small curve to my lips. “Thank you,” I said, the notion hitting me that it was the first time I had ever thanked the man.

I shook my head. It was a day of firsts, I guess.

The man waved off my words. “Congratulations on your acceptance, by the way. The old orange and grey will suit you well.”

I chuckled as I stretched a hand down to help my friend up off the ground. “I hope so. You can be the judge of that though- next time I visit I’ll be sure to wear a sweatshirt.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

I smiled once more, and after lifting a hand in simple goodbye I turned to begin my mundane journey home. That’s when it hit me.

Orange and grey. How had I not noticed it before?

Whirling around to face the man again, I let my eyes confirm what my mind could not, and the realization almost overwhelmed me with shock. “Your sweatshirt. It’s Princeton, isn’t it?”

The smile that I could tell was forced onto the man’s lips was unlike any smile I had seen from him before- it was sad, wistful, and it didn’t reach his eyes. “I was wondering when you would notice.”

“Well of course I would notice,” I mumbled, my eyes taking in every last detail of the sweatshirt.

You could tell it had been bought years ago-its faded colors likely the reason why it never caught my eye- but its owner hadn’t let it become disheveled. Despite dressing the back of a homeless man for years, it had been preserved to the point where I knew it held importance. It served a purpose besides keeping this man warm, otherwise the thin layer would have been substituted long ago, replaced by the next best thing the man could find. It hadn’t, though, and that was enough to spark my curiosity.

“Where did you get it? Why do you have it?”

“I’ve had it for a long time, I just can’t seem to make myself get rid of it.”

I tilted my head and gave the man a sharp look. He deliberately avoided completely answering my question, but I could tell by the slight lift to his chin and the hard glint in his eye that no amount of rewording would get an answer out of him. So, I tried a different tactic.

“Who did you get it from?”

“An old friend, you wouldn’t recognize the name,” he said quickly, his tone turning wistful. “I’m not even sure I would recognize him today, even if he were to pass within one foot of me.”

His answer only served to pique my curiosity even more, but I knew I was already walking a fine line and one small misstep would send me toppling over. I studied the man a bit more, hoping he would offer up more information about his carefully veiled past, but when a minute had slipped by without any words exchanged I knew any further attempts on my part would be in vain.

I turned to go again, and this time neither of us said a word. He was too wrapped up in his own thoughts, and I in my desire to know what those thoughts were.

*One month later...*

After that conversation, I never saw the man again. June hit and I was sucked into the whirlwind of graduation with all of its tangled strings attached. Every time I would make to walk down to the street corner, my mom would whisk me off to so-and-so’s house for yet another countless celebration. When I finally got  moment to myself, I made my way down to the familiar spot, only to be met with surprise.

The place was bare, stark empty, as if someone had power washed every bit of character from its surface. It was obvious the man was gone. My mentor, my friend, gone, and as I stood there with the emptiness of his home surrounding me, I didn’t know what to feel. The tears that welled in my eyes fought fiercely with the smile shakely curving my lips.

If I was right, and I was sure I was, then the man left not only this street corner, but this entire life. He had abandoned his throne, finally deciding to follow his own playbook, the one he had been teaching to me, and change his situation permanently. This I knew even before I saw the sweatshirt.

It blended in with the shadows, just as he used to, and only because of its smattering of faded orange did I see it. Rushing to it, I snatched it off the ground, almost missing the folded piece of paper tucked inside the collar. I silently watched it flutter to the ground before bending down and hesitantly picking it up. My fingers shook as I went to unfold it- I knew that this tiny piece of paper, so vulnerable in my hands, was the last correspondence I would ever have with the man, and I couldn’t help but feel that deep within my core.

It was a short letter. I expected nothing more, but the sparse lines flooded me with so many different emotions, I am still not exactly sure whether my tears were those of true grief or pure joy. It read, scrawled out in a script perfectly suited to its owner:

*You may forget me, but never forget what I’ve taught you.*

*P.S. You still can’t have my shoes, but please take my sweatshirt- from one Princeton boy   to the next.*