The Student

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It was absolutely absurd. Three months passed since the beginning of the semester, and the student found himself in a self-inflicted state of agony. Somehow he had forgotten that he signed up for Theories of Moral Philosophy. It was so late in the term that he had missed nearly every lecture. He did recall attending a couple times in the first week, but his memory of them was blurry and distant. He ravaged through his notebook in a panic, looking for any notes he may have taken. How could this be possible? Had it somehow fallen off of his calendar and erased itself from his mind? Or was he losing it entirely from stress? There was little time to dwell and wonder — today was the date of a major exam, and he was clueless.

The wave of anxiety that overtook him ran from his head to his toes. He could feel his spine tense, tingle, and grow warm. Chills coupled with sweat as he felt the blood rush to his head and fill his face. This was his greatest fear — undoubtedly this would be his first failed class; it was too late to drop it. But in the confusion, he heard a distant sound that reverberated from all directions. Louder and louder the sound became until all at once the universe collapsed.

He opened his eyes to a blank, softly lit ceiling, and looked over to his roommate working at the desk in their room. The orange light from his monitor spilled across the wall; the chaotic rhythm of the keyboard bounced from corner to corner.

“Christ. I’ve had the dream again,” he said, quickly verifying with himself that his class schedule was correct and that he had not actually forgotten anything.

His roommate replied, passive and unexcitable as always, without so much as turning around, “You worry too much.”

The student rolled out of bed without responding. He grabbed his bag and coat and ambled out into the hallway. Still early enough that the

sound of his yawn could have woken the others on his floor, it was time to get to work.

From the library window, just above the treetops, the student could see Main St, the park, and the mountains in the distance. It was his favorite place to work, both because it was tranquil and because he could watch the bustle of the town when he needed a break. He could see the wind had picked up since he walked across campus that morning. The air was crisp and cold, the trees rustled chaotically, and the people on the sidewalk walked and shuffled with the gusts, collars flapping against their necks and faces. Trolly after trolly made its way down Main St., the sound of their bells gently tapping the window. He watched the town come to life as the shops turned on their lights and put out their signs. He took a sip of his coffee, which was warm and contrasted nicely with the cold he saw outside, and calmly returned to work.

By the afternoon, hunger had stolen his focus. He packed his bag and walked back to his apartment for lunch. Coming in and finding his roommate, he gently closed the door and stood in the warm orange light that hadn't changed since that morning.

"No class today?" the student questioned with a teasing tone. He knew his roommate had skipped his lectures — as was becoming the norm.

A tall, lanky fellow with dark, nappy, medium-length hair, stubble, and a grungy fashion sense, his roommate often appeared more like a day laborer than a university student — he claimed that it was his aesthetic. Incredibly smart and witty, he had little interest in applying his talents. "Nah, he doesn't take attendance — I'm probably gonna change my major anyway," his roommate rambled.

"Oh yeah? Econ isn't working out?"

"It's worthless, man, everyone studies it. And I don't want that kind of job anyway. Think I'm going to change to CS."

“Computer science makes sense, you never leave your desk — you sure you’re gonna change?” said the student as he opened their small refrigerator in search of lunch.

“It doesn’t matter. I just follow my gut on this stuff. It’s better that way,” he said. Knowing the student had been wrestling with himself about his own major in recent weeks, perhaps he wanted to lead by example. He thought and regularly suggested to the student that he loosen his grip on his life a smidge

“Well, good luck with all of that, wish I had that kind of confidence — do we still have bread?”

“It’s not confidence; it’s self-respect and acceptance — and yep,” he said, grabbing what was left of the loaf in the cabinet beside his desk and handing it to the student.

“You saying I don’t have self-respect?”

Throwing his hands up softly, the roommate spoke carefully, “I’m just saying you could take things less seriously, let things happen, and realize that that’s okay. Stop trying to follow some masterplan.”

“Sounds horrible, sounds like anxiety central,” the student said, taking a bite from his sandwich and picking up his bag.

“It’s not when you just let go — be more relaxed like me,” he said teasingly, swiveling his chair back towards his desk.

The student nodded and rolled his eyes with a full mouth and left for class.

Walking out of the front door of the dormitory, he glanced at his mailbox and noticed it sitting open. The delivery service must have been in a rush this morning, he thought. Curious, he walked over, reached inside, grabbed the letters and papers, and locked it back. Junk mail for student insurance, a few coupons as usual, and a

crumpled and torn poster for the campus theater. Someone clearly cared little for the theater's presentation. He noted the strangeness, but did not give it much more thought — the clubs often threw advertisements into mailboxes haphazardly. He stuffed the stack in his bag and continued on his way. Arriving to class just in time, he found his usual seat and tried to settle himself.

The Professor was a strange old man. Hell bent on answering the questions facing humanity, he seldom was keen to answer those that came from his students. Why he chose to spend his life teaching was anyone's guess. A Professor of Philosophy and Ethics, his primary focus was understanding the relationship between the modern world, humanity, and the universe — quite a broad, exhausting subject, and that tiredness could be seen in his eyes. His dress was classic and consistent: a tweed suit, a quiet tie, and well-worn, brown leather shoes. His teaching style was best described as monotonously, like a rough draft of a play being read by a lawyer. However, if one could get past this dry exterior, his content, insight, and wisdom was something to behold. The student loved to sit and listen most to the didactic rabbit trails which the Professor often inserted. Despite the fact he only took the class as an elective while he studied engineering, he put the lion's share of his energy into this course.

Despite his appreciation for The Professor's lectures, the student was unable to maintain focus on this day. The suggestion of his roommate to follow his gut, and his perceived inner-peace, had started a vicious cycle in the student's mind. It demanded his attention. He spent the entire class outside of himself, observing the class from over his own shoulder. Anxiety trembled softly. He watched the clock — which turned frustratingly slow — until he was unable to sit still any longer. As the Professor made his point, the student slid his untouched notebook into his bag, and briskly sneaked out through the back door.

He made it all but twenty steps outside of the lecture hall before collapsing onto a bench. His eyes were empty according to anyone who happened to look into them; his face was bare. He was entirely in his own mind. Panic attacks were becoming a hallmark of his anxiety,

and the inexorable rush was becoming too difficult to control. Seeking some distraction, reading the mail seemed like the least anxious activity he could imagine.

He flipped through the bills and coupons, fingers slipping on the paper, but payments and savings do little to curb anxiety. He held the chaotically folded theater poster, deciding it might be best to imagine whatever production they were showing and how he might sit in the audience on a peaceful evening. Looking at the crumpled pamphlet, he noticed that marks of ink had bled through the paper. He flipped it over to a note that had been written manically on the back. The handwriting was difficult to read. It was clear whoever had written it was less interested in presentation and more keen on expulsing the words from their brain. He felt that he and the writer shared the same anxious energy — and that was oddly comforting. The note was a poem:

The poet's work may never be complete.
He consumes himself in thought
Of the past and its truth.
Of the future and its mystery.

But time travels in one direction,
The past, it leaves us always.
And the future ambles in.
Subjects of concern are infinite.

The only poet whose work completes
Is he who has accepted,
That Now is all there is.
And that most answers will not be found.

And in this acceptance he finds peace.
The desperate chase concludes.
He lives in the moment.
And he writes nevermore from worry.

He sat absorbing the words in a trance, reflecting on their meaning in hopes of putting his busy mind at ease.

Classes and lectures were ending. The crowd of students filled the courtyard ending the airy silence. The Professor was among the confusion, leaving the lecture hall and walking past the bench where the student was sitting. “Professor,” said the student sharply through the crowd. The man stopped and turned, unsure of what to say, seeing the ambivalence in the student’s eyes. “I’m thinking of changing my major to Philosophy.”

The Professor stared for another moment, holding his briefcase by his leg, before walking over to the student and letting out a soft chuckle. “Heh, well I wouldn’t wish such a thing on my worst enemy,” he said, followed with a small, fake grin, “you could start by not rushing out of my lectures as if you’re afraid of my conclusions.”

“You noticed that,” the student said, embarrassed. “Sorry, I wasn’t feeling well, a bit in my own head today.”

“Hm, well,” said the Professor, his disinterested personality began to seep back through, as if he remembered he had more important matters to attend, “If that’s the case you could talk to the department heads and they can change you over.” He started to turn to walk.

“I want to study what you do — humanity, nature, meaning, and all of that,” the student said quickly. “Things that actually matter. I chose engineering because it was practical but… it’s boring. But I know I would be giving up a lot, and I would be disappointing people. I’m afraid of making the wrong decision.”

The Professor stood silently taking in the student’s ramble, seeming as if he was trying to hide his being annoyed before asking, “Are you

more worried about disappointing others or yourself?"

The student sat unsure of what to answer.

"You wrote your essay on Freedom and Truth, correct?" inquired the Professor, uncharacteristically excitable.

"Yes, sir, that was mine," he said, surprised his essay was so readily in the Professor's memory.

"And in that essay you argued that finding one's Truth — or truest-self — is the highest good, only attainable through radical honesty with oneself? And, one must make the most of freedom to follow such honesty?" The Professor gazed across the courtyard as the student nodded, silently looking up from the bench. He inhaled and furrowed his brow, appearing to find some tranquility of his own, "It sounds like you've already answered your own question."

The Professor, sensing there was little more to say, nodded and awkwardly smirked before dwelling a moment, turning, and walking away. The sound of his shoes knocking on the sidewalk faded as he walked to the building opposite the courtyard. The heavy wooden door clanked and shuttered as he disappeared into the building.

The student sat in silence, looking ahead at the garden, watching the flowers enjoy their existence in the sunlight. The crowd of students and professors had disbursed. Only the breeze made a sound as it flowed around the buildings and massaged the trees. For once, his mind was at ease, and his shoulders released their tension. The complexity of the universe collapsed before him, and he finally saw the world for what it was. He stared long into that truth, sitting with it as long as it would have him.

The clangoring of the trolley bells pulled him back to reality. The simplicity of his circumstance revealed, he had accepted his decision. He no longer wrestled with himself. Calmly, he grabbed his bag and walked towards the department head's office. His walk was rhythmic and light. All while remembering the words scribbled on that paper. "And in this acceptance he finds peace. The desperate chase concludes. He lives in the moment. And he writes nevermore from worry."