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The Road to Betterment

While I had not even known its name a couple years ago, Doten Road had become more than a stretch of pavement for me. My girlfriend Lauren and I's bond had slowly developed with long walks around the street and its paths, and the peacefulness felt magical compared to my house which was only a hundred yards from the bustling highway. My exposure to this road had kindled a relationship, and infinite memories and experiences that stretched along with it.

Walking along it felt like living through the past year all over again. My first arrival to it had been filled with anxiety and stress as I worried about impressing Lauren, but thankfully those emotions gripped me no longer. Well, they did, vehemently in fact but just not in relation to her so at least there is that. It had been about a year since that day, I had grown a little taller, and certainly had not been able to stop and appreciate the sights before me way back then.

The sun had finally begun to set and thus I walked down the wavering road as I often did. It was filled with bumps and cracks in the pavement that would gleefully send any unsuspecting cyclist over their handlebars. However, such notes of chaos were absent from the current landscape, with the sound of silence only being interrupted by the infatuating conversations the birds on the power lines seemed to be having. The air was filled with the aroma of the fresh mulch and wildflowers beside me; however, it was enhanced by an indescribable feature that made each breath a journey of its own. The first breath following a rainfall is the only description that could come close to capturing it. The bushes and flowers alongside the edges of the property lines did their best to give privacy to the homes behind them but were beginning to fail at such after their months of service. They were starting to slowly wither, as their leaves and deep blue

flowers felt quite stiff compared to the typical delicateness one might expect. I continued down the road, often looking to the sky to witness the ever-changing collection of purples, reds, and oranges that melted into each other. Their colorful embraces would quickly give way to new participants. In time they would be forced to leave each other and give way to the darkness of the night, but they would soon meet and dance again tomorrow.

What met the skyline was the expansive trees of the neighbors. The farmland that bordered the road was lacking in any actual farm animals, those being hidden away in the barns as the colder days approached. Of course, this presented the opportunity for wild deer to roam freely and unbothered throughout the land, of which they needed no invitation. They fixated their gaze onto me for many seconds before returning their focus to whatever had previously occupied their attention on the ground before them. I was all-too familiar with this area for multiple reasons, but I was particularly averse to this dip in the road that separated the street from the farms.

Among my recent escapades of learning to drive I had passed by this area, often turning into it due to the sheer anxiety that having another driver behind me would cause. Driving was still brand new and as a result my only emotion was fear. Of course, one such instance of my attempted escape had caused me to be directly behind a mail truck that immediately caused me to ask, “What do I do?!” to my dad who patiently sat in the passenger's seat. “Just slow down and keep to the left you’ll be alright” he quickly instructed, and oh did I slow down indeed. My patented safety measures included driving below 10 miles per hour whenever I found it necessary, which was basically all the time. I carefully maneuvered around the vehicle, pulling into the dip in the road, mentally preparing myself for reversing and turning out of here. However, this was no small feat, as I shakily moved the stick into reverse, and rapidly whipped

my head around searching for any potential hazards behind me. When I was finally satisfied, I began to back up at a snail's pace, before throwing it into Drive and jolting forward unintentionally. My trauma was far from over as a massive truck was barreling towards me, forcing me to scramble and turn the wheel off to the side, despite it not being within 30 feet of me and this being entirely unnecessary. However, it was indeed massive, and my palms were slipping against the steering wheel as I tried to stay as far to the right as possible to let it pass. Thankfully all went well and there were no issues, but I had breathed the largest sigh of relief upon its departure. Ultimately, I did not find myself sticking around this area of the road for long because of this experience.

While I often thrived now in these moments, captured by my surroundings, memories, and the intertwining colors of the sky, I'd insisted to myself that I would not linger and yet again find myself under the worn thin blanket of darkness, cold and shivering given my tendency (aka outright refusal) to not wear long sleeved shirts. Just as the Amherst weather had come to attack any bare skin, the winds of Plymouth had been skilled in this art for decades. Despite my love for the hours before the night I had no enjoyment being caught up in it, with my unhelpful thoughts often insisting that any noise I heard was a clear sign of imminent death. The intensity of such had certainly dwindled over the passing months but they still attempted to make themselves heard all the same.

The allure of new or old sights and the extending road before me was currently hushing these voices that were quite rudely suggesting I turn around immediately. If I simply ignore all the times that those voices were correct in their assessment of a situation, then that leaves no instances of them being right! A masterful loophole had been found in my thinking, and thus I pressed on. The houses that flanked the roadside only seemed to grow more elaborate and

expansive as I continued walking. However, the stylistic choices of one were more than enough to bring out my inner realtor critic. A red house with white trim was accompanied by a white barn themed garage with a miniature lighthouse atop it that casted exactly zero light from its bulb. The outright refusal to select colors that make sense stalled me for many moments as I could only gawk at the monstrosity in front of me. The arrogant voices arguing that I turned around were also momentarily silenced by what lay before my eyes. This was hardly the first time this property had been met with disapproval, as throughout one of our many walks Lauren and I had both stood aghast at the cacophony of design choices. While the sun had continued to beat down on us, we could only stop and stare, as she had openly wondered “why did they even need a lighthouse?” Of course, I could only assume she was looking at me when she asked this as her trademark brown sunglasses hid her eyes away from me. “Rich people are strange” was my only explanation, before our shoes once again crunched against the gravelly, aged road. We both would take intermittent glances back at it until it was out of view. I yanked myself back into the present however as I was now rounding the bend towards my favorite yard on the street after tearing myself away from the atrocity that I just could not take my eyes off. How could I possibly go back now? Who cares about the darkness? I've practically never been afraid of it anyways; I do not think that it has ever caused me to panic in my entire life.

Regardless, even if the complete inability to see anything and the terrifying creatures that filled the shadows happened to throw me into a panic, then continuing onward would have been worth it anyhow because this yard has A KOI POND. Oh my goodness it was as mystical as I had remembered, lined with carefully laid, totally real stone from which a small waterfall erupted into the water. It was bordered by a wide array of ferns and beautiful plants who even among the dim light bloomed as proudly as ever. My darkening surroundings were irrelevant with the sight

before me, as I stepped forward to try to catch some glimpses of the bright colored fish that inhabited the waters. Soon a deep orange fish made its appearance, with white splotches running along its fins that beat softly against the water, soon propelling him out of sight. I typically preferred to avoid stepping onto the grass in fear that I'd be hastily reprimanded for trespassing (which was rather irrational), thus I tore myself away from the pond and began to wrestle once more with my own thoughts.

Well, I mean it's not that dark out yet, I can still see somewhat, and I wouldn't mind walking further. There's no harm in moving on. No harm? No harm?! my head spat back at me; you remember what happened last time you rationalized this? Unfortunately, my own self was correct, and I did remember. I had been walking home late at night, constantly on edge over the sounds of scurrying animals and the cracks of branches. When to my right a figure had begun to move towards me, it'd crept closer and closer, and I began to lose all composure. Sweat was dotting my forehead and I felt a sensation on the back of my neck, seemingly pushing me to go forward and get away. All I could see was a dark silhouette and so I began to run as quickly as I could all the way back to my house. I'd returned to the same spot the next day, in broad daylight of course. As I slowly walked towards the fence and peered over, a white, large being met my eyes. It started back at me with a vacant look, tilting its head at the sign of my approach. It was a sheep, and his name was Doug as his collar proudly boasted in all capital letters. Its bleating cry came across as laughter as I began to walk back away from the fence. Of course, not one of my finest moments, but surely nothing like that would happen again. After all, I had that address memorized now and its exact location pinpointed, so I would not have to worry about it!

However, my head would not be silenced by my own accord but a new friend that stretched out before us. The pavement flowed into dark green grass, dotted with dandelions. The

sea of green only parted for the towering trees that bordered the path, providing a shield from all rainfall or sunlight. The canopy above one's head would make you feel truly safe, as the fields of the tall, unmown grass bordered this paradise. This was not necessarily the site of the beginning of my relationship with Lauren, quite the contrary in fact. I had always spotted this area when heading over to her house but not until recently had we begun to traverse its wonders. While at first it had not grabbed my attention, it had slowly become a haven for me. Hands intertwined and our ankles being tickled by grass that practically reached towards us, we would walk until the trails end, observing the bulls and horses that were behind a fence of questionable strength, however they typically paid us no mind. It was truly a peace like any other that trail, no pavement or stores, or cars would ever crowd one's view, only the expansive countryside that somehow always managed to hide itself away if you did not know where to look for it. In spring the wildflowers would make their way through the soil, sprouting around the base of the trees, climbing as high as they could before blooming into a sea of purples and blues. Of course, the romantic man that I was, I had completely overlooked the opportunity to offer her one, maybe I should do that... My sudden inner dialogue had brought upon the return of my nemesis, and soon I was tackling my thoughts of why I should surely turn around at this moment.

Unfortunately, my head had started to gain the upper hand, throwing quick jabs packed with reminders of fearfulness brought upon by the black night. Another journey down that path would have to wait but doing it alone would not have been as magical anyhow. I reluctantly turned around, scraping the heel of my shoe against the pavement as I did a 180. A new, danger filled trek was set to begin. Filled with gremlins and horrifying creatures that totally, absolutely lurked in the shadows, they were just really good at hiding themselves and their growls were disguised as the sound of a stick breaking. They would make their presence known only to scurry

away or shapeshift into a chipmunk or squirrel before I could properly make out their true forms, being the troublemakers that they were. The notion that it was only my overactive imagination is absurd, gimme that goblin explanation instead.

I had been afraid of the night, and the dark overall for as long as I could remember. Late night bathroom trips would culminate in me sprinting back to my room while I averted my eyes from the long hallway that branched off to the other side of the house. I would argue that I am not scared of the dark, but instead the spooky figures that my mind conjures in the absence of light. As far as I can remember I would always avoid turning my back to the door when I slept at night, always keeping an eye on it or within my gaze, as the anxiety that would fill me otherwise would be too much to bear. I may have been a little ashamed of this fact but over the years I am sure this strategy had protected me from numerous assassins, who had spotted be turned toward the door in my sleep and thus walked away defeated.

I continued to walk onwards, taking to my thoughts to occupy myself instead of letting them run free with the occasionally broken silence around me. I had begun to truly come to terms with my time on this road, what it meant and what it might describe. It was certainly not a lifetime's worth of memories but that hardly diminishes their value. The disintegrating pavement, the unmatching houses, the juxtaposition of the green fields and of course the memories of the people I love, all compacted together. Full of perfect imperfections. And while I would often argue that the absence of meaning was hardly an issue (damn you Mrs. Terry and your over-analyzation of *The Great Gatsby*), I'd come to realize that neither was its presence. Doten Road was a materialization of me, complex and filled with flaws, but also... happiness. A place of wonder, questionable choices, and at times anxiety, but wonder all the same. Certainly an interesting way to think of myself. Of course, I was hardly terribly off during my first meeting

with it, but my travels and walks along its pavement over the numerous weeks had become more of a journey towards loving myself more than anything else. Truly I do not believe I had grown any taller at all but had just finally started standing up straighter and smiling more. No, smiling has nothing to do with that and I do not care. I am pleased with my progress in that regard so I will include it anyway. Each memory, every story, had added a small speck of light to me, making those flowers on the side of the road feel a little brighter, smell a little better. All the little things in nature had begun to feel more vibrant compared to past years. This area had become a road to a better me in every sense of the word. I had never in my life attempted to drive beforehand, far too terrifying, and way too many things to focus on at once, but that had finally been conquered. I had of course dreamed of having a Lauren in my life but that had now finally come true, but above all else this road also represented and brought out the remaining flaws in who I was. Even a love for walking had been brought upon by this area. I was hardly perfect, or fully satisfied with who I was, but I do not really believe anyone is. I would not call myself full of perfect imperfections, but I mean I am definitely happier hearing the crunch of my shoes hitting the pavement than I was a year ago. And I would like to think that counts for a whole lot.

My philosophical breakdown of the past year could only last so long before my brain sprinted to another topic, which was the realization that goosebumps had started to sprout on my arms, and I had begun to shiver only a little. However, my inner judgmental dialogue had faded, and the only punishment I was receiving for my procrastination was feeling frigid. The air still smelt as fresh as ever but that was hardly enough reason to stay out here. My feet began to hit the pavement faster and faster, my foot falls taking up all the silence that had previously graced the road. Sweat began to form before being wicked away by the cold, but my body was finally warming itself with this jump into action. My long sweeping driveway loomed in the distance (it

seemed terrifying in the night, trust me), and I quickened my pace, rounding its corner and then taking measured steps down the steep incline. I went underneath the wooden, aged grape barber whose leaves had started to vanish, and then skillfully passed through the door as quickly as possible to make sure none of the moths that had gathered around the outdoor light could sneak in. Finally, home, and with a renewed sense of self-worth. However, self-worth would not protect me from my own self as I had learned nothing from my encounter with the cool fall air. Being an improved version of me did not mean I had to give up procrastinating of course, or at least that is what I'll tell myself for now. Need to find a whole new street to handle that issue...