

Zachary Tan

How Much is \$15,000 Worth?

“You stick with your current job for the next ten years until you can’t take it anymore and quit. You apply to as many jobs as you can but only get one interview because everyone wants a Master’s or Doctorate. You blow that interview because you haven’t had a proper conversation with anyone in years. You become depressed and live off your savings for two years until it begins to run out. You sell your belongings and scrape together some extra cash and decide to get another job. Your old workplace doesn’t accept you because they hired a new cashier. You look for a new place until your funds dry up, but have no luck. Eventually, you sell your apartment for less than you bought it for. You drift from cheap motel to cheap motel not doing much of anything until eventually you get robbed late at night. There was nothing for them to rob so they stab you and run away. You bleed out on the pavement at 4 AM.” The stern look on the teller’s face distracted me from the harshness of her words.

“So...” I trailed off.

“You have about fifteen years left, but you don’t do anything with them. I apologize, sir, but it doesn’t seem like we can offer anything for them.” She didn’t sound sorry. “Regardless, everybody’s time is valuable, so we offer a flat rate of \$1,000 per year. Anything extra is added on top of that.”

Her monotone voice really bothered me, but I would have found it strange had her voice been anything other than monotone.

“Rounded down, of course,” she added.

“Can I just sell it all?”

“Yes sir, that is an option.” She glanced at her computer. “Personally, I have a suggestion though. Would you like to hear it?”

“So the person who wants to buy my life for \$15,000 wants to give me a suggestion?” I held back a laugh. “Go ahead, it's not like it matters much anyway.”

“We offer a flat rate per full year. You will die on September 15th. Today is June 28th. Selling 15 years would get you the same amount of money as selling everything. I would recommend selling the bare minimum. At least then you still have time to spend your money.”

“Well, that’s not really the point now is it?” I tried to joke around with a laugh, but it came out strained.

“How much would you like to sell?” She completely ignored me.

I let out a long sigh. “15 years flat I guess.”

“Please wait a few minutes while we prepare a debit card for you.”

• • •

I walked out of the one-story corner store with a new black and gold debit card in my pocket. They might seem shady, but they have already been in operation for over twenty years, and have shown no signs of leaving. When they first sprung up, many people laughed them off as fakes. They saw it as a way to get free money. All the suspicion died in the first couple of weeks, after the people who had sold everything turned up dead. There was nothing the police could do about it because the sellers were made to sign contracts stating they were doing it out of their own free will.

The main ideas of the contract slowly became common knowledge: we are not responsible for any deaths that may occur, the signer agrees to sell at least one year to the buyer, predictions of death are subject to change based on the actions of the signer, and death is

guaranteed to occur before the predicted date or at 11:59 PM on the predicted date at the latest. It was always guaranteed that selling time would lead to a decrease in lifespan, but the seller now had a general idea of when they would die, given they acted normally. Some people thought it was worth it. Some people didn't care.

The first few years were chaotic. There were protests and outcry questioning the ethics behind it. Some people tried to investigate how they did it, but they came up with nothing. All the employees didn't exist, although they seemed to have regular shifts, and they always appeared and disappeared without a word.

Slowly, they became a facet of life that was no different from any other large corporation. More and more locations sprung up, and since they didn't have a name, people started calling them all sorts of ambiguous phrases, but eventually settled on The Store. The biggest questions by far that people had were: How did it work? Who was behind it? What did they do with all that time?

I listlessly walked back home rubbing the card the whole time. I made it back to my apartment at 8 PM, two hours later than usual, but usually I don't have two hour detours. I wasn't hungry, so I spent the rest of the night staring at my new card. I ran my thumb over the embossed letters and numbers again and again until I fell asleep.

• • •

Saturday, June 29, 12:38 PM. My back cracked as I sluggishly sat up from where I had fallen asleep at the table. I decided that if I only had two months to live, I might as well spend them doing whatever I wanted, instead of whatever the world wanted from me. So, the first thing I needed to do was to make a bucket list. I walked to my kitchen drawers and searched through

them until I found what I was looking for, a lined yellow notepad with a cooking recipe scribbled on it. I tore out the first page and started writing the first things that came to my mind.

☐ Eat good food

☐ Don't go to work

I don't remember how much time passed, but I spent most of it spacing out. Did I really have nothing else that I wanted to do? I couldn't think of anything.

☐ Take a trip

☐ See something new

I used to go on vacation with my family, but that stopped after I graduated from college.

☐ Tell someone 'I love you'

At some point, I started writing down whatever came to my mind. I had never thought to say that to anyone before, but I had always been told that love leads to happiness.

☐ Be happy?

...

It was the first time I tried eating out in a long time. I was politely asked if I had a reservation. I said no. They said it was for reservation only. The second time, I made a reservation. I imagined the host's inner thoughts went something like this: "What is this person doing? Doesn't he know that restaurants are meant to be attended by parties of two or more?" Or maybe something more pitying: "I'm sure this man has just gone through something terrible. Look at how he made a reservation for one."

He showed me to my seat, which was along the wall, and dimly lit by weak low hanging lightbulbs. The square wooden table had two sets of silverware on it. A waiter asked me if I was

waiting on anyone, and when I said I wasn't he took the other set away. I browsed the menu until someone decided that I had been given enough time to look through it.

"Hello, my name is Anthony, and I will be your server for tonight. Can I start us off with something to drink?"

I looked up at him from the menu I could barely see. "Sorry, I think water is fine for now."

"Of course, sir, although if you change your mind, I wanted to let you know that we just received a new shipment of Chateau Margaux from Bordeaux, France."

"Sorry, I drove here, so I don't think I will be having anything to drink tonight. Water is fine."

"I see." He nodded "Would you prefer bottled or tap?"

I had always gotten tap.

"Bottled please."

"Certainly, I'll bring that out right away. Take your time with the menu, and if you have any questions, I am happy to assist."

I nodded and looked down at my menu. When I looked up, he was gone and a glass bottle with Evian printed on it took his place. I looked around, but couldn't find him anywhere, so I turned my attention back to the menu and read the same dishes over and over again.

"May I ask if we are ready to place our order, or do we need a few more minutes to decide?"

I snapped back to the sudden call of the familiar voice of the waiter.

"Uh, yeah, I'm ready." I thought for a moment. "Are there any specials?"

“Absolutely! Today, we have a few exquisite specials. Our chef is offering a seared sea bass with a lemon-butter sauce, paired with roasted baby carrots lightly seasoned with sea salt and a touch of olive oil to bring out their natural flavors, sautéed spinach with, and heirloom potatoes. We also have a wild mushroom risotto, made with a blend of fresh, earthy wild mushrooms, including porcini and shiitake, cooked into a creamy Arborio rice. It’s finished with a touch of Parmesan cheese and drizzled with fragrant truffle oil for added richness. Would either of those interest you, or would you like more details on any dish?”

“Could I have the risotto please?”

“Of course, and do we want anything to start?”

“Um,” I looked back at the menu and chose something green. I hadn’t had a lot of vegetables lately. “Could I have the mixed green salad please?” I turned the menu towards him and pointed at it. I doubt he could actually read what I was pointing at because of the gloom, but he feigned a look anyway.

“Certainly, both wonderful choices. I will get those started for you right away.” He picked up the drinks menu that I hadn’t realized had been put there, then eyed the menu in my hands. When I handed it to him, he lowered his head slightly and walked away.

The salad was good. The risotto wasn’t terrible, but it was a bit too creamy for my taste. Not the best I’ve had. Not the worst. Definitely not worth the price.

When the waiter brought me the check I debated which card to use. In my right hand, I held the new black and gold debit card, and in my left, I had the card I had been using for years: a blue and green credit card. I had more money than the black and gold one, so I decided to use the blue and green card until it was empty, and treat the black and gold one as a fallback.

“Thank you for dining with us. I hope we see you again.” The waiter sounded too happy.

When I made it back to my apartment, I was exhausted. The reviews claimed it was the best food in the city, that the risotto was to die for, but eating alone, surrounded by tables full of people, made me feel sick. The chatter of the people around me clashed with the music of whatever song they were playing, making it difficult to focus on one or the other. The whole thing felt pointless. Monotonous.

I erased 'eat good food' from my bucket list.

• • •

I woke up with a sharp pain at the front of my head. I thought to myself, maybe this is it? I checked my phone. No, I'm just sick. I couldn't recall the last time I had gotten sick. It was probably sometime when I was back with my parents after college. I seemed to always get sick within the first couple of days of getting home. Usually, I could feel it a couple of days beforehand, but would power through. Maybe it was all the all-nighters I would pull before exams and projects, or maybe my body just knew when the best/worst times to get sick were. While it was great that I only got sick during breaks, I hated that I only got sick during breaks. I guess my body thought that my forced break was a normal break and got sick.

I rifled through my cabinets but couldn't find any medicine. The sometimes-dull-sometimes-sharp pain continued to radiate from the front of my head. The room went all squiggly, and I couldn't focus on any one thing for too long. The top of my throat constricted and opened as if I were telling jokes to an invisible audience.

I would have been better if I were just dead. I threw up.

• • •

I was determined to check at least one thing off of my bucket list. That's the point right? I booked a flight to Paris on July 24th. The price for that flight was cheaper than usual so I picked

something not too far away, but not too close. I don't know why I was so concerned about price, but I guess old habits die hard. It was July 20th, so I had about three days to kill. I decided to rummage through my old belongings.

I took down an old box that had been collecting dust atop my dresser since college, nearly crushing myself in the process. I couldn't remember how I got it up there in the first place. I held my breath and squinted my eyes as I brushed off the dust and cut the clear masking tape off. There were a multitude of colorful binders and folders that I didn't remember using. Old notebooks that were filled to the brim with notes, and textbooks that seemed more post-it than paper lay underneath. At the bottom was a thick black and grey binder. The spine was at least two inches thick, probably more, and the faded white now shone a faded grey.

Each page was a laminated folder that held sheet music for the piano. There used to be a folder connected at the end of the binder, but it broke off a long time ago. All that was left were small imprints from when the plastic was melted or pressed together. I glanced at the keyboard that leaned against the wall across from my bed, propped on its side to avoid taking up space. I had received it as a housewarming gift from my parents but hadn't touched it since after college.

I used to practice every day. I was so holed up in a practice room, that my friends eventually stopped calling me because I always turned them down. There was always some competition or performance I was practicing for, and never had the time. I spent more time in a practice room than I did actually studying. I wasn't even a music major.

I tried my hand at composing, but never made it past the first page. I was too much of a perfectionist. Each measure had to be perfect before I could move on to the next, but the next measure made the previous one seem awful. I told myself that I just didn't have the talent for it,

and that I was better off just playing what someone else had written. Like a recorder. Unlike a recorder, I got sick of playing the same things over and over again.

Screw this, I told myself. There was nothing else for me to do anyway, and at least playing the piano didn't give me that sickening I got when wasting my time on my phone or in front of the TV. It's the sort of lethargy that is different from the lethargy a person gets after a long day at work. There is a sort of dry-wet feeling in your mouth, and you feel full even though you haven't eaten. At this point, I was just killing time to kill time.

I stood up and set up the piano. Since I had gone through all of my belongings, my small apartment looked like it had just gotten hit by an earthquake. Knickknacks and paper were strewn all across the floor. There was no space to set up the piano other than right next to my bed. I didn't have a chair, so I pulled my desk chair over and sat down. I stared at the piano, then eventually pushed down a key: middle C. There was no noise. I had forgotten to plug it in. I laughed at myself.

• • •

I missed my flight. I didn't even bother to check in. A week had passed since I had set up my piano, but it didn't feel like a week. My apartment was somewhat tidier, or at least my floor was since my desk was covered in sheet music. I didn't bother adding a new item to my bucket list. I didn't feel like I needed to.

I had decided to create an album of all my previous unfinished compositions. Some were already nearly complete but most needed a lot of work. I had to remember what melodies I wanted, or create new ones, but by far the most problematic issue were the left hand and ornaments. The perfectionist wanted them to be more complicate, but my deadline didn't allow

for that. I bought a pair of headphones and an adapter so I wouldn't bother the neighbors when playing at night.

I found myself completely absorbed back into the world of music. I argued to myself that it was more fulfilling than going to Paris, although I was still somewhat regretful that I had wasted money on tickets. I also debated on whether I should keep the scores on paper or move them online. I decided paper was better since if I tried some online program I would need to learn some completely new software, and I didn't have the time for that. Paper was faster for me to write down my thoughts and make all the changes I wanted to, albeit a lot of erasing and crossing out. I decided to at least rewrite all the scores to make them at least somewhat legible to someone other than me. I hated this waste of time, but I thought it would be fun to see if these went anywhere.

The Store offered an evaluation service. It got exponentially more expensive the more someone used it, however, I had only used it once before and was well off enough to afford a second one. Wouldn't it be hilarious if a random month were worth more than 15 years? Could the value of my life really change just like that? Blinded by those thoughts, I kept working.

I had never been that engrossed in any one thing before. I had always been a procrastinator that left things until the last minute. Part of me didn't want to waste any time, and the other part of me knew that I could do it in whatever time I allotted myself. Maybe the immovable deadline of September 15th gave me the motivation I needed to take the initiative.

At some point, I had the thought that it was only through death that I could understand the value of time. It sounded philosophical, so I wanted to write it down, but whenever I went to do so, it felt too pompous, so I refrained.

• • •

Time flew past in the blink of an eye. If someone asked me what I had been up to for the past two months, I wouldn't be able to say more than, "I played the piano" or "I wrote music". Partially because that was all I had been doing. Partially because that's all I remembered doing. I just felt like I had no memory of doing it. It was like I had been in a trance where I was not myself. Where did the chronic procrastinator go?

I had finally finished everything. I breathed a sigh of relief. I looked at the thick bright green folder that held my sheet music on my desk and smiled. In the end, I hadn't spend any money the black and gold card. Although, I had just about run out of my savings. What I had thought would last me half a year barely lasted me two months. Other than splurging a bit on food here and there, and ordering in more often nothing else had changed. I hadn't bought a new piano. I hadn't moved out of my musky apartment. I hadn't bought new clothes or a car. The teller was right, I wouldn't have lasted long.

When I walked out of my apartment building, the brisk air of early September hit my face. I closed my eyes and soaked it in. Then, I started wandering in the direction of The Store. I didn't remember exactly where it was, and Google Maps was no help, so I had to ask someone for directions.

I walked up to a couple with matching hats. They seemed a bit confused as to why someone with my seemingly cheerful attitude would want directions to The Store, but gave them to me nonetheless. At this point, I couldn't care less about what other people thought of me.

I arrived at the familiar one-story corner store and made my way inside. It was exactly the same as I remembered it. There were two people on the bench waiting, but could also wait. I felt like I had all the time in the world.

I heard my name on the loudspeakers, stood up, and made my way to the back. It still made no sense how they knew who I was, and how they knew I was there, but their whole business defied common sense anyways. I sat down in a spinning office chair and heard a monotone voice.

“What can we do for you today?” It was the same teller who had appraised me before.

“Hi, could I buy an evaluation please?”

“Name?”

“Don’t you already know? You did call me up here.”

She frowned. “Name?”

“Zachary Tan.”

I waited in silence while the teller clacked on her keyboard, then stared at the computer. Then clacked on her keyboard. Then stared at her computer.

“You spend the next two weeks doing nothing but composing and playing the piano until you die of a heart attack at 4 PM,” The Teller said.

“What about my music?” I asked.

She typed on the keyboard some more.

“ You don’t hit it big, but there are some people who listen to your music. It seems some people like it because the frantically chaotic yet soothing melody helps them focus and relax.”

“So, how much am I worth now?”

She sighed. “\$100 per day. I must warn you because you have less than two weeks left. We are not responsible for any deaths that may occur between now and whenever you choose to sell until. Wheny ou will die will be some time from now to then because all we do is make a prediction.”

“Well, it’s usually a pretty damn good prediction.” I had a bitter taste in my mouth.

“If you wish to sell everything, the total will be \$1,400. How much do you wish to sell?”

• • •

I walked back to my apartment with a self-deprecating, but self-satisfied grin. Would this be called happiness?