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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 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, and you will die on September 15th. Today is June 28th. Selling 15 years would be the same price as selling 15 years and 2 odd months. I would recommend selling the bare minimum so you still have time to spend the money you gain.”

“Well, at this point, that's not really the point now is it?”

She was silent. “So, would you like to sell, and if so how much?”

“15 years flat.”

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

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I walked out of the one-story corner store with a new black and gold debit card in my pocket. They might seem shady, however, they have been in operation for over twenty years, with no signs of leaving. When they first sprung up, many people laughed them off as fakes and a way to get free money. All the suspicion died in the first couple of weeks. 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 first few years were chaotic, but they slowly 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 That Store or The Store or any other ambiguous phrase. People understood understood. Their locations were passed around through word of mouth, and no one could ever pinpoint who started it. However, the

biggest question I had, and I am sure many others did as well, was what did they do with all that time?

I walked back home rubbing the card the entire time. I made it back to my apartment at 8 PM, two hours later than usual, but usually, I don't spend two hours at some random store. I wasn't in the mood to eat anything, so I spent the rest of the night staring at the card. I ran my thumb over the embossed letters and numbers again and again until I fell asleep.

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I woke up and checked my phone. The words 'Saturday, June 29, 12:38 PM' glared at me from the phone screen. My back cracked as I slowly sat up from where I had fallen asleep on the table. I decided if I was going to have 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 one by one, and in the third drawer, I found a lined yellow notepad with a cooking recipe scribbled on it. I tore out the first page and started thinking.

- ☐ Eat good food
- ☐ Don't go to work

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

- ☐ Take a trip on my own
- ☐ See something new

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

- ☐ Talk to Alex

I stared at those three words for a minute, then erased them.

☐ Tell someone ‘I love you’

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

☐ Be happy?

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I was bored. I had spent the last couple of days lazing around. Occasionally I would bring myself to visit a random restaurant with good reviews, but that was all it was. I had eaten all types of food in all types of restaurants both high class and not when I was younger. Most of the time it would be for some event: family or friends were visiting, someone’s birthday, some get together. I always viewed it as a pain, and counted down the minutes until we could leave. I never understood how everyone else had so much to say.

The first time I tried eating out, I was politely asked if I had a reservation. I said no. They said it was 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 card that linked directly to my savings. I had already moved all the money from my savings account into my checking account. Now, it held more money than the black and gold one. I decided to use the blue and green card until it was empty and treat the black and gold one as a sort of fallback. Something I could use, so I knew I wouldn’t live terribly no matter how quickly I blew through my money. It at least gave me the peace of mind to worry less about my spending.

Eating alone at restaurants, 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 hard to focus on one or the other. I would order one or two plates, then either blankly look around the room, or stare at my phone while I waited. I never thought eating alone could be so suffocating.

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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 counted my forced break as 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 threw up.

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I booked a flight to Paris on July 24th. The price was cheaper than usual so I picked something not too far away, but not too close. 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. I leafed through it.

Each page was a laminated folder that held sheet music for the piano. There was supposed to be a folder connected to end of the binder, but that broke a long time ago. All that was left were small imprints from when the plastic must have been 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. It reminded me too much of the empty promises I had made with my friends.

Every time, before breaks, we would agree to start some project. One year it was a band, another year it was writing a book. Slowly we started to focus on projects that were more tangible, more closely related to our majors, and less on what we wanted to do ourselves. These were more specialized projects that we claimed would increase our job prospects came up, but we rarely ever completed them as a group. There was still talk about doing something larger together, like making a video game, but that slowly died down as we got busier. Slowly I assume they all forgot about it and moved on.

I had always been hung up on incorporating music into whatever project we chose. I wanted to include some audio to whatever we did. My friends had said that I was more excited about making music than the music or audio engineering majors. I laughed it off and said it was because I wanted to do it for fun, not for a job. I hadn't touched the piano since graduating,

maybe because I couldn't bring myself to play anything. A couple of times after I had just graduated, I sat in front of it and just stared at the keys. I could have played any random song that I had memorized, but they all seemed dull whenever I sat down to actually play them. I could have chosen any of the countless unfinished works that I had started, but as a stand-alone piece, they seemed too lonely. I couldn't bear to finish them alone when they were meant to be brought into the world alongside something else.

Screw this, I told myself. There was nothing else for me to do anyway, and composing felt less sickening than wasting my time on my phone or in front of the TV. I had spent so much time in front of those two that I felt lethargic and ill. It's the sort of lethargy that is different from the lethargy that 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.

I stood up and took down the piano. My small apartment looked like it had just gotten hit by an earthquake, so there was little space to set up the piano except for a small space 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.

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A week had passed since I had set up my piano, and I missed my flight. I didn't even bother to check-in. I had never seen what would happen if I missed my flight, since I had never missed my flight before. My apartment was somewhat tidier, or at least my floor was since my desk was covered in sheet music. I added a new item to my to-do list.

☐ Finish composing all songs

Most were already mostly complete but needed a few revisions. I had to play them through first, before knowing what changes I needed to make, then test out what I thought would sound good on the piano. I bought a pair of headphones and an adapter so I wouldn't bother the neighbors. I also ordered in every 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 needed 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.

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I had finally finished everything. I looked at the thick bright green folder on my desk and smiled. In the end, I hadn't spend anything from the black and gold card. I hadn't even run out of money from my savings. Other than splurging on food at the beginning and ordering food 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 new car.

When I walked out of my building, the brisk early September air hit my face. I closed my eyes and soaked it in, then made my way to The Store. I would like to say I made my way, but I had to ask a few people for directions. They seemed a bit confused as to why someone with my seemingly cheerful attitude would want directions to The Store, but I didn't care.

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 before me, but could 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.

"You know what we offer. 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 your taxi is hit by a speeding car. You die of blunt force trauma at 4 PM.”

“Why was I in a taxi?” I can’t remember the last time I had taken a taxi.

“You were so excited that your music had been accepted by a producer that even though you had emailed it over, you wanted to deliver it in person. Your music does get published and becomes somewhat popular. 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. “\$1,000 per day. Congratulations, that is one of the largest jumps in value I have seen.”

“Thank you, I worked hard.” I had a bitter taste in my mouth.

“If you wish to sell everything as you did last time, the total will be \$14,000. Do you wish to sell?”

I walked back to my apartment with a self-satisfied and self-mocking grin.