

The Axiom of Choice

by David W. Goldman

The incident in the story's penultimate scene comes from something I stumbled upon several years ago—a message from a defunct e-mail discussion list that had been copied to a website (by now, also defunct).

In his 1996 message, Mike Beauchamp described a concert he'd just attended at the Brantford (Ontario) Folk Club. During one song introduction, musician Michael Doyle related an anecdote about reassuring an earlier listener that travelers always come back. Someone a few rows behind Beauchamp commented, "Sometimes they don't come back." Sitting in that section was Ariel Rogers, widow of legendary Canadian singer/songwriter Stan Rogers—victim of a 1983 airplane disaster.

"I think," Beauchamp wrote, "there is a song in there somewhere to be written."

301

The guy mentions a town that means nothing to you, but the remark topples Paul into laughter. Into his big, rumbling belly laugh, the one so deep and generous that during a gig it never fails

to convince the audience that they're all in on the joke with you and him.

The three of you have lingered outside the darkened club an hour beyond the show's end. Your palms rest atop your guitar case, which stands vertical before you on the cracked sidewalk. Standing not quite as vertical, Paul steadies himself by pressing a hand against the club's brick wall, just below a photocopied poster bearing an image of his face looking very serious. (DYNAMIC SINGER-SONGWRITER PAUL MURONI! says the poster. Your name appears lower down, in smaller type.) One corner of the poster has come loose. It flips back and forth in the unseasonably warm gusts that blow down the narrow street.

"But really," says the guy, some old friend of Paul's whose name you've already forgotten, "why should you two spend tomorrow driving way up the coast for one damn gig, and then all the way back the next day? I'll fly you there tonight in my Cessna—tomorrow you can sleep in as long as you like." His arms sweep broad arcs when he speaks, the streetlamp across the road glinting off the near-empty bottle in his grip.

Paul rubs the back of his hand against his forehead, the way he always does when he's tired. You're both tired, three weeks into a tour of what seem like the smallest clubs in the most out-of-the-way towns along the twistiest roads in New England.

Paul looks at you, his eyes a bit blurry. "What do you think?" There's a blur to his voice, too. "I'm in no condition for decisions."

You're not sure that your qualifications for decision making are any better than his, given not only your sleep deprivation, but also the beers during the gig and the fifth of Scotch that the three of you have been passing around since.

If you ask Paul's friend to let you both spend the night here in town on the floor of his apartment, go to section 304.

If the thought of sleeping in until noon is too tempting to pass up, go to section 307.

304

This would be a different story.

Go to section 307.

307

The third time the little plane plummets and steadies, its propeller's buzz nearly lost beyond the pounding of rain on the cold aluminum hull, you turn to Paul.

"You know, maybe this wasn't the best decision."

But Paul's snores continue uninterrupted.

Usually you're the one who can sleep anywhere, anytime. Tonight, though, Paul has achieved a blend of exhaustion and inebriation that's vaulted him into a league beyond even your abilities.

"Hey," shouts Paul's friend, twisting around from the pilot seat, his head a silhouette in the dim glow of the control panel. "You ever used a parachute?"

For an instant you're aware of nothing but your own heartbeat.

Then the friend cackles. "Just kidding! Flown through worse than this, dozens of times. You two just sit back and enjoy the scenery."

You peer out the dark porthole. The only scenery is the shivering wing above, illuminated ghost-like in the fan of the plane's lights.

The plane bounces again. You picture aerial potholes.

If you unstrap yourself to check on your guitar in the back of the cabin, go to section 310.

If you pound on the pilot's seat and demand that he turn the plane around, go to section 312.

310

Go to section 324.

312

Go to section 324.

324

Ice-cold water splashes your face.

If you keep your eyes shut tight and try to ignore the water, go to section 325.

If you're confused about where you are and how you got here, go to section 326.

325

Ice-cold water splashes your face. You're terribly cold, except for your arms. You can't feel your arms.

If you wonder why you're so cold, go to section 327.

If you wonder what's wrong with your arms, go to section 328.

326

This is not the choice you make.

So this section doesn't really need to be here. If it were omitted, its absence wouldn't affect your story.

Go to section 325.

328

Ice-cold water splashes your face. You open your eyes to blackness.

You're floating in freezing, heaving water. You spit out a mouthful of brine as you realize that your numb arms are wrapped around something. Whatever it is, it's the only thing keeping you afloat.

You remember the plane, and the storm. It's still raining now, the drops plinking against your scalp even as ocean sloshes into your mouth.

The last thing you can remember is aerial potholes.

You realize that something is tangled really tightly around your arms.

If you try to work your arms free, go to section 335.

If your consciousness fades, go

338

“Now *that* is a guitar case!”

You open your eyes. A few inches away, blue medical scrubs wrap somebody's legs.

“The lining's not even damp.” It's a woman's voice. The scrubs turn and she says, “Well, good morning, Sunshine! Joining us at last, are you?”

You blink and roll your head to look up toward her face. On the way you see the metal bed railing. Hospital, you think. The woman—in her early thirties probably, tall but pudgy, her brunette hair pulled into a ponytail, a stethoscope slung around her neck—is grinning at you. Nurse, you think.

She points to a bedside table on which your guitar case lies open. Your head is too low to see inside.

“Coast Guard brought it over this morning,” she says. “Figured you'd like to keep it close, the way it saved your life and all.”

You see the case's shoulder strap—tooled leather, custom-made, presented to you by a lover three, no, four years ago to replace the case's broken handle—dangling in two jaggedly truncated scraps from each of their rivets.

Maybe the nurse notices the direction of your gaze. “They had to cut you free when they got you out of the water. That strap was so tight that your hands—”

She stops, as if she's caught herself saying more than she intended.

You look at your hands, resting atop the bed covers. They're wrapped in so much gauze that they look like two cantaloupe mummies. Both arms are also thickly wrapped, nearly to the shoulder. You try to bend one, and then the other. They don't move. Your arms don't move. What the hell—

"Calm down!" says the nurse. "Just relax. Those splints have to stay on for a week. They spent a whole night working on you in the OR. You don't want to put all that effort to waste now, do you?"

You let your head settle back into the pillow.

Your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth for a second when you try to talk. "Working on me?"

"Well." She reaches down to adjust the covers over your chest. "Your hands got really banged up in the crash, and you were hypothermic, of course. And then that strap got tangled around your arms, choking off the circulation."

"So they had to, what, restore the circulation?"

For a second she doesn't answer. She reaches up and pulls her ponytail over her shoulder, and then slowly runs her fingers through its end.

"Yes," she says. "That's right." A brunette curl wraps around her finger. "Also—"

She straightens and takes a step away. "I should tell the doctors that you're awake. They'll give you a full report."

If you insist that she stop and tell you everything right now, go to section 341.

If you wait to hear what the doctors have to say, go to section 344.

341

“Well,” she says, “your right hand is going to be fine. Except that they had to amputate the end of your pinkie finger. Just the last joint.”

It takes you a moment to understand that word. Amputate.

But okay. Just the pinkie. You don’t need that one to hold a pick. Not even finger picks. So that’s okay. You’ll still be able to play, no problem.

If that makes you think of Paul, and you ask how he’s doing, go to section 350.

If you realize that the nurse hasn’t said anything about Paul, nor the other guy, and you guess what her omissions must imply, and you recall that it was you who decided that flying would be the right choice, go to section 356.

356

“Okay,” you say. Your voice is louder than it needs to be, and you speak quickly, as if you’re drowning out some other voice. “And my left hand?”

Her finger tightens in her ponytail. “You’re right-handed, aren’t you?”

You nod. You’re busy trying to not think, so you don’t wonder why she asks that.

“There was more damage to your left hand. I’m afraid that they couldn’t save all the fingers.”

She has freckles across both cheeks. You hadn’t noticed that before. Her eyes are green, like the eyes of the cat you had as a kid.

“You still have your thumb, though. And your middle finger should be fine. So you’ll—”

If you think about Django Reinhardt, the Gypsy guitarist renowned for his prowess despite half his left hand being crippled by a fire, go to section 362.

If the only thing you can think about is how, just the other night, your biggest priority had been sleeping in until noon, go to section 373.

373

You stay in the hospital for three weeks. There's a lot of pain, and two more surgeries. You don't have insurance, of course, but the hospital's social worker says that they'll work out a payment plan for you. You meet her eyes when she says that; after a second she looks away.

This afternoon a therapist is making you squeeze a rubber ball with your left hand, but you keep dropping it. Each time he picks up the ball, without speaking, and puts it back into your hand. The two of you repeat this cycle for five minutes, glaring at each other.

Somebody punches you in the shoulder.

"Ow!" you say.

It's your nurse, the one with the freckles. You didn't notice her entrance.

"Get out," she says to the therapist. Her eyes, though, are locked on your face.

"Look at your hand," she tells you.

"What?"

"It's why you can't hold the ball. You never look at what you're doing."

"Fuck you," you say. And you turn away.

So you aren't watching when she reaches out and grabs your left wrist.

"Hey!"

She's stronger than you, despite your panic. She yanks up the hand and holds it before your face. "Look at it." Her other hand clamps onto your head so you can't twist away.

So you do it. You look at the hand. At the intact but twisted middle finger. At the half forefinger, wriggling like a decapitated worm. At the puckered stumps at the hand's outer edge.

"All right!" you shout at her. "I'm looking! Now let go!"

"No," she replies. "You're looking at this messed-up thing I'm holding. Now—" and suddenly you realize that her voice, this whole time, has been surprisingly gentle, almost a whisper, "—look at *your* hand."

It's not some immediate, magical thing. But after a few seconds you notice the thumb. And, yes, it's your thumb, exactly the same as it's always been. And that's your palm, with all its familiar lines and creases, including the scar from when you fell onto a rock as a kid. And the fingers—the parts that are still there—those are yours, too.

You lift your other hand, and she releases her hold as you press your two palms together. You turn them back and forth, back and forth, studying what's there. What's not.

If, for the first time since the crash, you start crying, go to section 378.

If she's brought back a memory from your college philosophy class, go to section 125.

125

The professor is roaming the aisles between desks, as he always does, speaking about determinism and free will. You try to pay attention, but you were up all night at a party, jamming some blues with a hot piano player and a lukewarm fiddler while everybody else drifted home or fell asleep in the corners. Now the only things keeping you awake are the cup of dorm coffee you swallowed on the way to class, and the good-looking redhead two rows down, across the aisle.

Somebody punches you in the shoulder.

“Ow!” you say.

The professor stands beside you, massaging his fist. “What’s wrong?” he asks.

“You punched me! Why did you do that?”

He looks confused. “What do you mean? Oh—my fist?” He studies it. “Well, my fist has free will. It hit you for no reason.”

“What?” You know that you’ve fallen into one of his Philosophical Dialogues, but you’re pissed. “Your fist doesn’t have its own will. It does what *you* decide.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true.” He draws out the moment, as if you’ve just given him something novel to consider. “Well, *I* have free will. *I* punched you for no reason.”

You notice the redhead watching you.

You say, “People don’t do things for no reason.”

“You endorse determinism, then? The claim that everything that happens is predetermined by what’s happened before? So I punched you because, say, I wanted to get your attention. And I wanted to get your attention because you were nodding off. And you were nodding off because—well, I suppose that’s none of my business, is it?”

Your classmates snicker. Except the redhead, who smiles and raises an eyebrow.

“But,” continues the professor, “don’t I have free will? Can’t I make unpredictable decisions, regardless of what’s come before?”

You’re about to speak when you have a sudden insight.

If you think you see how free will and determinism can coexist, how their apparent conflict is merely superficial, go to section 132.

If it strikes you that philosophy is bullshit, and after lunch you drop this course, and then pretty soon you decide to drop the whole university and become a professional musician, go to section 390.

390

You spend two more weeks in the hospital. The nurses explain about changing the bandages. The therapist gives you exercises to do, and a rubber ball.

When you're discharged you try to leave your guitar behind. But the nurse with the freckles makes you take it.

You drive—of course you can drive, you're right-handed—to Paul's memorial service. Lisa, Paul's wife, widow, hugs you tightly, careful to avoid your bandaged hands. You hug her back, but when you step apart there's a piece of the way she looks at you that you can't manage to interpret as sympathetic. Or friendly.

You sit in the rearmost row of folding chairs. The room fills with people all sitting still, watching and listening. Like a concert audience. Your forearms always tighten up right before a gig, and they do that now. But this time your legs tighten, too, and then they start shaking.

Somebody picks up a guitar to sing one of Paul's songs. Your heart hammers at twice the song's tempo as you push back your chair and sneak away.

You reach your apartment as the sun is setting. You lean the guitar case against its usual bookshelf. You're relieved to finally collapse into your own couch, surrounded by your comfortably familiar clutter. Then, after a few minutes, you take a closer look at your familiar clutter. CDs, sheet music, *Guitar Player* and *Dirty Linen* magazines, scattered picks, broken strings. The apartment doesn't feel so comfortable now.

You stare awhile at the telephone. But all your friends are musicians. You don't want to watch them as they try to say the right thing. As they try to not look at your hands.

If, despite all that, you do phone one of them, one of your oldest friends, go to section 402.

If you go out for a drive and after an hour come back with three fifths of Scotch, go to section 429.

429

Your savings—at least, the dollars you don't spend on the increasingly cheap whiskey that keeps you from hearing your own thoughts—let you hold onto the apartment for three months. The guitars and the mandolin buy you two more. It's nearly another two before the police show up for the eviction.

It's late spring by now, so your timing could have been worse. Your hand hurts a lot, though, and the prescriptions keep running out early—and your new pharmacy, who meets you each Wednesday in the alley behind the porn shop, isn't interested in your Medicaid card.

The guitar case—you've still got that. The way it saved your life and all. Also, with a rope tied to the strap-stumps you can sling it over your shoulder with all your stuff inside. The case whacks against your hip when you walk, but that's not so bad, and when the bottles in there clink against each other—on the happy occasions when there's more than one—you tell people that you're making music.

If you meet a guy at the shelter who convinces you to get into treatment, go to section 440.

If you tell that guy to go fuck himself, go to section 472.

472

You should, somehow, have gotten yourself down South someplace before winter arrived. Last night some asshole stole your shopping cart while you slept, so now your only possession that you're not wearing is the crappy cardboard sign asking people to help a vet. (It's pretty obvious that not everybody buys that when

they first glance at you. But you always hold the sign with your left hand showing good and plain, and then nobody asks anything.)

This afternoon you kind of lost track of the time, and when you finally got to the shelter it was full. So now you're heading toward the bridge by the river, where at least you'll be out of the wind.

You must have turned the wrong way, though, because you're walking along right next to the frozen river. You look up, and then around, and finally you find the bridge, way the hell behind you.

As you turn, your foot slides onto the ice. Which isn't as thick as it looked. You yank it out quick, though, and it doesn't feel wet. Of course, both of your feet were already kind of numb.

If you think you can still make it to the bridge, go to section 476.

If the idea of just lying down right here and sleeping in until noon is too tempting to pass up, go to section 491.

491

You wake to noise and light. Your chest hurts. You squint against the glare and lift your head just enough to see that some asshole has stolen both your goddamn coats and all your shirts and left you lying here, covered in just a sheet like a corpse. You try to grab the railings and sit up, but your wrists are tangled in some straps and your arms don't move.

"Hey!" you yell. "Hey! Hey!"

Somebody grabs your shoulder. Red hospital scrubs. Nurse, you think.

Both of your shoulders get shoved down against the mattress. Your nurse says, "Take it easy."

"My case," you demand. "Where's my case?"

You twist around to see her freckles, but she's up behind your head too far.

"We've got your case, don't worry."

Of course you're not worried. "The Coast Guard," you explain to her.

"Sure," she says. "Take it easy."

Damn, she's not even listening to you! "The Coast Guard!" you repeat. "They're supposed to bring my case!"

If you keep trying to get through to her, until a warmth slides up inside your arm and then you feel sleepy, go to section 501.

If you shut up for a minute and look around and realize that you're not where you thought you were, and then you quietly ask the nurse if maybe you can stay here a few days and get some help, go to section 525.

501

You're sitting in a plastic chair, in a circle of people sitting in plastic chairs, in a bright hospital room with pale blue walls. There's a TV mounted high on one of the walls, but it's off right now.

"All right," says the guy in one of the chairs. He's the only one who's wearing shoes. Not these little socks with rough patches on their soles, at least if you put them on right.

The guy says, "The past couple days here in group we've been talking about what? Choices, right? Choices. Now I've got something I want you to try. I'm going to shut up for the next ten minutes, and for that ten minutes I invite each of you to think about the thing I'm about to explain. And each of you, you need to shut up, too, or else it's not fair to the others. Okay?"

He waits until everybody, including you, says okay, or at least nods.

"All right, so here's the thing. We've all had moments in our lives where we were faced with a choice. And we made our decision, and that choice sent our life down a certain path. And one thing led to another, and finally, well, here we all are." He looks around the

circle, his gaze pausing on each person. When he looks at you, you stare right back at him and he gives you this little smile he does sometimes. Then he finishes looking around the circle, and then he shakes his head and says, “Here we all fucking are.”

Everybody chuckles. This guy is all right. He’s told you that his drug of choice, back when he wasn’t the one wearing shoes to group, was meth. Normally you can’t stand tweakers. But he’s all right.

“So,” he says, “here’s what we’re going to do for the next ten minutes. Each of us is going to think back to some choice we once made, some decision that at the time made sense, but that ever since, we’ve wished we could do over. All right? Now, I invite you to sit here and take yourself, in your head, back to that moment. But this time, this time you get to do it over. This time you make a different choice. And for the next ten minutes—maybe close your eyes, if you like—for the next ten minutes you get to watch how your life goes, step by step by step, after this different choice. Just follow it out slow and easy, okay? All right? Give it its fair chance. All right, here we go. I’m shutting up now for ten minutes.”

You look around the circle. Most of the others are doing the same. A few have closed their eyes.

What the hell. You close your eyes.

If you ask Paul’s friend to let you both spend the night on the floor of his apartment, go to section 304.

If that strikes you as too obvious—too predictable—and instead you’re curious about how free will and determinism can coexist, go to section 132.

132

You pick an empty table and set down your tray, still thinking about your dialogue with the professor. As you’re taking the second

bite from your burger, the redhead from class sits down opposite you.

“Hi,” says the redhead. “I’m Kerry.”

You never finish the burger.

The two of you talk about how free will differs from unpredictability. How predetermination doesn’t equate to constraint. How fists can’t have free will because they don’t have brains, but how brains are overrated.

Kerry is a year ahead of you—a junior—and a math major. (Kerry’s the one who introduced the term *equate* into your conversation.)

You try not to be obvious about letting your gaze wander over what you can see of Kerry’s body. You’d like to see more.

Then Kerry makes a stupid claim about the contrast Boethius drew between fatalism and divine omniscience.

If you steer the conversation back to the part about how brains are overrated, go to section 138.

If you get frustrated as you keep trying to explain why Kerry’s claim is stupid, go to section 155.

138

You and Kerry have been spending all your evenings together at the library, and afterward at the Rathskeller or just wandering campus talking. But so far things haven’t gotten past holding hands and kissing. Pretty intense kissing, true, but come on.

Apparently math majors are shy.

Tonight, though, the two of you are rolling around on your bed, and many items of clothing have been removed. A few minutes ago you almost blurted out something about hoping that Boethius’s God was looking someplace else, but you suppressed the impulse.

As you yank off a sock, Kerry suddenly pulls away and says, “Do you have any...I mean, because I don’t, not with me....”

You don't either, but right at this instant you're not really up for a Philosophical Dialogue. "I'll get some tomorrow," you say, and you reach for Kerry's shoulder.

"Wait." Kerry eyes you reappraisingly.

If you say, "Just this one time," go to section 160.

If you offer an apologetic smile and sigh, and then, deliberately but gently, you put the sock back onto its foot, go to section 144.

144

You listen to the morning's birdsongs. Kerry's dorm is on the edge of campus, by the arboretum, so mornings are louder here than in your room. There's one bird who keeps hitting this little arpeggio with a syncopation on the last note that you're trying to memorize, so you can try it out later on guitar.

You're also trying to memorize how Kerry looks asleep. Just because you think that will make a good memory.

Eventually the alarm buzzes, and you two have to get out of bed.

A little later, you face each other over breakfast trays. (The first time you shared breakfast, you discovered that you both like oatmeal—with raisins, and definitely no brown sugar—and that neither of you can stand breakfast sausage.)

Kerry asks, "Figure it out yet?"

You've been teaching Kerry some basic music theory, and in return you're learning about set theory. Last night Kerry gave you a challenge: Suppose you're given some arbitrary sets. It doesn't matter how many or what's in them. Maybe one contains all the even numbers, while another contains red fire trucks, and a third includes the contents of your pants pockets on the morning of your fourteenth birthday. Whatever. Now prove that, without having to know exactly what's in each set, there is some other set that has at least one element in common with each of the given sets—but

which isn't simply the union of all of them, as if you'd dumped all of the original sets into one big bag.

You did, in fact, figure this out, last night while you were brushing your teeth. But then the two of you got distracted by other, more entertaining, challenges.

"All right," you say. "I pick one element from each of the sets you give me. My new set is defined as the set containing precisely those elements. Ta-dah."

Orange juice in hand, Kerry nods. "Very good."

You grin, but Kerry's not finished.

"So who gave you permission to *pick* an element from each of those sets? There's nothing in the basic rules of set theory—the axioms—that says you can do that."

You frown. "Of course you can. It's obvious."

Kerry raises an eyebrow.

"Fine," you say. "I choose the smallest element in each set—that's well-defined, right?"

"What if one of the sets consists of all fractions bigger than zero? What's the smallest fraction?" Kerry reaches for your toast, which you've been neglecting.

Annoyed, you start to offer a counterproposal. But you catch yourself as you see its flaw. Which suggests a different solution—but no, that doesn't work, either....

Finally Kerry says, "It does seem natural that you should be able to pick elements out of sets. But it turns out that there's no way to prove that you can do that, in general, based on the axioms of set theory. Most mathematicians agree with you that it should be allowed, though, so they add a new rule that specifically says you can do it. The Axiom of Choice."

Now you're annoyed again. "Then why didn't you tell me that up front? If this Axiom of Choice is simply one of the rules, why are we even discussing it?"

Kerry leans forward, one elbow skidding almost into a puddle of spilled coffee. "It's *not* one of the rules. Not one of the most basic, defining ones, anyway. You can build up a complete, self-consistent system of mathematics that doesn't include the Axiom of Choice. If you add it in, you end up with a slightly different system. One that includes a lot of new, interesting results, most of which *feel* right. So most mathematicians are fine with proofs that depend on the Axiom of Choice."

You glance at your watch. You'll both be late for class if you don't pick up your trays and get going. But a corner of Kerry's argument looks loose to you.

"So," you say, "you can do math either with this axiom or without it?"

"Right." Kerry stands up.

You remain in your seat. "Then, each mathematician has to *choose* whether or not to use the Axiom of Choice."

Kerry pauses and stares at you.

And then, slowly, Kerry nods, and slides the two trays in your direction. As if presenting you an award.

"I guess," says Kerry, "that says something about the rules of the *higher* system. The one in which we live."

If you stack both trays and carry them away, go to section 147.

If you push back Kerry's tray and grumble about hypocritical mathematicians, go to section 170.

147

That night, after you get under the covers, Kerry approaches the bed, naked.

“Tonight,” says Kerry, “I want you to lie completely still. Got it? Now pay attention. Here’s my hand. And here’s my mouth. And here—” Kerry takes a step back, so you can get a really good look, “—is the rest of me.”

Kerry draws out the moment.

“Choose.”

If

502

“Okay, that’s ten minutes.”

You open your eyes to a circle of people sitting in plastic chairs, in a bright room with pale blue walls.

“So,” says the guy with shoes. “Who wants to share something from their experience?”

If after a few seconds you raise your hand, go to section 511.

If it strikes you that group is bullshit, go to section 550.

550

One of the counselors is standing in your room, looking Very Serious.

“We can’t do this without you,” she says. She’s in her forties, you guess, her dark hair braided and wrapped up on top of her head. You’ve decided that the lilt in her voice comes from Jamaica.

You lie completely still.

She sighs. “You only get to keep your bed if you’re an active participant in ward activities. Do you understand me? If you’re going to stay here, then you have to get yourself up and out of this room, and interact with the others.”

She waits for you to respond. As if it matters what you might say.

Again she sighs. “At least come to the common room for lunch.”

If the idea of lunch finally gives you a reason to get out of bed, go to section 557.

If you're finally recognizing that you're not the one making the decisions in your life, go to section 601.

601

Somebody has started a fire with some old campaign signs from a dumpster, and you join the others huddling around it. The bridge's supports block most of the wind, and after a while, for the first time today, you stop shivering.

"Nice hat," says a big guy, meaningfully.

Somebody at the hospital gave it to you when they kicked you out. It's the warmest thing you're wearing, stuffed with fleece, and with furry earflaps.

If you kick the guy in the nuts and run, go to section 615.

If you stand there waiting to see what the higher system is going to make you do next, go to section 620.

620

You're standing in line at the mission, leaning against the counter to take some weight off your feet. A lady asks whether you'd like brown sugar on your oatmeal.

If you shake your head and keep shuffling down the line, go to section 634.

If you stand there, waiting, until finally somebody drops a clump of brown sugar onto your oatmeal and shoves you ahead, go to section 652.

652

Your sign isn't working at all today. You glance down to your lap and notice that you're holding the sign with your good hand. Dumb.

A brown leather wallet drops onto the cracked sidewalk, right in front of you. The guy who must have dropped it is sauntering away, oblivious, eating one of those big pretzels.

Even without leaning closer, you can see a lot of bills in there. Probably cards, too—you could maybe sell those cards.

If you pick up the wallet and stick it inside your coat, go to section 664.

If you just sit there, and eventually somebody else notices the wallet and grabs it, go to section 701.

701

The sky is full of fluffy clouds today. You've got a good view, except for some tree branches. You must have slept on a park bench last night, since that's where you find yourself now. You can't recall the details, though.

If you're just going to lie there all day, go to section 701.

If eventually you get so bored that you sit up, go to section 702.

702

At first it's really early in the morning and you've got this part of the park to yourself. But soon a thickening parade of office workers marches past your bench. Some of them glance your way for a second, and then lift their coffee or their phone to block the view.

If you ask one of them what they think they're staring at, go to section 708.

If all you do is wait to see what's going to happen next, go to section 721.

721

There aren't as many office workers now, but between the kids and the joggers and the drunks there's still a sort of parade.

If you lie back down on the bench, go to section 724.

If your fist punches somebody in the shoulder for no reason, go to section 801.

801

“Ow!” says the woman who had just sat herself beside you on the bench. “What was that for?”

You’re staring at your fist.

“No reason,” you say.

“Yeah?” She squints at you for a few seconds.

Then she punches your arm. Pretty hard, actually.

“Hey!”

“So,” she says, “if we’re done with that, I have a proposition for you.”

You give her a closer look. Mid-thirties. Dressed like a lot of women you used to know, in a long crinkly black skirt and a brightly striped top from Peru or Mexico or someplace like that. Hair falling in waves to the base of her neck.

Redhead.

She continues, “Community House—maybe you’ve heard of us? One of our residents got himself kicked out last night, so this is your lucky day. You get a bedroom to yourself, and three meals. Only two rules: You don’t do anything illegal in the house, and you don’t piss off everybody else.”

You narrow your eyes. “So why are you choosing me?”

She nods toward your still-clenched fist.

“No reason,” she says. “Now come on.” She stands and begins walking away.

If you’re fine with her making the decisions, go to section 808.

If you lie back down on the bench, go to section 815.

808

Your third afternoon at Community House, Irene—the redhead—invites you to come along with everybody to a movie.

In your mind you see a dark room full of people all sitting still, watching and listening. Your arms tighten up, and then you start shaking all over.

After a minute Irene says that maybe you should just stay here today.

If you insist on joining the outing, go to section 815.

If you're fine with Irene making the decisions, go to section 822.

822

A couple evenings later you and a few others are in the living room watching TV. When the show ends, Irene gets up and turns off the set. Nobody objects.

“I’m going to read awhile,” she says. She crosses the room toward an armchair, pausing at the stereo to start up a CD.

The drums kick things off, and then comes the bass. A bottleneck guitar eases into some Delta blues.

You get shaky, and stand to leave.

“Wait a minute,” she tells you, looking concerned. She turns off the CD. She glances around the room at the others. “I think I need some tea. Come on.”

You follow her to the unoccupied kitchen. She runs water into the kettle. Not looking at you, she says, “Music. It’s a problem?”

You don’t feel entirely steady, so you slide into one of the wooden chairs at the kitchen table.

She lights a burner and sets down the kettle. “Especially guitar.”

You let out the breath you’ve apparently been holding. “I used to play.”

She pulls out the adjacent chair and sits. “And then your hands got messed up.”

You nod. Though you don’t know whether she’s watching, because you’re staring at your lap, where your hands are holding each other. As well as they can.

You've had this conversation enough times, back when you were in the hospital, to know that next she'll ask how that makes you feel. And then you'll be having a Therapeutic Dialogue.

You wait, but for several seconds she doesn't speak.

"That," she finally says, "truly sucks."

A minute later the kettle starts whistling, and she stands. You hear her open a cabinet.

"Damn. We're out of green. Chamomile okay?"

If you wait silently for your tea and then carefully pick it up with your right hand, go to section 831.

If you look up and say, "Sure. Thanks," go to section 845.

845

A week later there's a trip to an art gallery.

You go along.

If, when you're standing in a crowded room where everybody is attentively staring at the same big painting, your heart starts hammering and you have to leave, go to section 859.

If you don't leave, go to section 870.

870

You've been at Community House for three months now. Sometimes you help Irene or the other staff with grocery shopping. Often with cooking. Lately you've been able to sit still while CDs play, and a few nights ago you realized that your right hand was fingerpicking along with an old Ry Cooder track. (Though at that realization you did have to leave the room, and for a couple of hours it felt like all the fingers you don't have anymore were spasming in boiling water.)

But what surprises you the most, what truly astounds you, is that some of the other residents lately have been asking if they can

talk with you. Have been asking your opinions about their stuff. As if it matters what you say.

This afternoon you're sitting at the kitchen table with Irene, stuffing fundraising envelopes. The sun is warm on the back of your neck. Through a screen, birds arpeggiate.

"I'm going to a concert next week," she says. "Some Canadian folksinger." She positions a stamp at an envelope's corner, presses it down with her thumb. "Come with me?"

"Sure," you say. "Thanks."

If you lift a fundraising letter from the pile and fold it precisely into thirds, giving the task absolutely all your attention and thinking hard about nothing else at all, go to section 884.

If there's no way you're going to let her drag you to that concert, go to section 896.

896

Could be worse, you think, sitting in the darkened room. The guy's guitar playing is rudimentary, but his lyrics actually make sense. And he's got an interesting, gravelly voice that he keeps sending out on surprising trajectories. It twists and soars until, sooner or later, it always ends up crashing back home.

Irene is working her usual nonchalance. But you've noticed her glancing your way every minute or two. You consider telling her that she can relax, that you're doing fine. Then you feel the singer's diminished chord echoed on your left hand's own phantom fretboard, and you think maybe you'd better wait a bit and see what develops.

Now he's introducing his next song, explaining that it's about a man sailing away on a long expedition, leaving the woman he loves to await his return. "Couple months ago," he says, "a guy came backstage after a show, looking really sad. And he told me how his girlfriend was about to leave for Europe for a year, and so he had to

ask me about the traveler in my song: ‘Did he come back?’ And I told him, ‘Of course he came back! This isn’t a blues song!’ He seemed reassured.”

Everybody chuckles. Then, just as he leans forward and is about to start playing, you hear a soft voice.

“Sometimes they don’t come back.”

Two rows behind you sits a woman whose face you can’t quite make out in the darkness. You can’t be sure the comment came from her. But you think it’s Lisa Muroi. Paul’s wife, widow.

If you sink down into your seat and hope that Lisa doesn’t recognize you, go to section 898.

If you sit up and try to pay attention to the singer, figuring that somehow you owe that to Paul, go to section 901.

901

You’re sitting on the curb outside the club, watching cars and pedestrians. Two songs after the break you told Irene that you needed some air, but that she should stay for the final few tunes. After considering you for a few seconds, she nodded.

You’re thinking about people who go away. About the ones who never come back.

And about the ones who do. Even if it takes them a long, long time.

The show lets out. Irene lowers herself to the curb by your side, and helps you watch traffic. She passes you her open can of ginger ale. You take a sip and pass it back.

After a while there are no more pedestrians and not many cars. Irene stands.

“Let’s go back to the House,” she says.

You look up at her.

And ask, “What if I don’t?”

For a few seconds she squints at you.

And then, slowly, she nods. She hands you the empty soda can, as if presenting you an award.

“I guess that would be for you to find out.”

You reach out your left hand and take the can between your thumb and middle finger. The can wobbles in your uncertain grip, catching a glint from a nearby streetlamp. And in that glint, for just a second, your life takes a step back so you can get a really good look.

If you return with her to the House, and over the following days realize that helping other people is something you could learn to be good at—

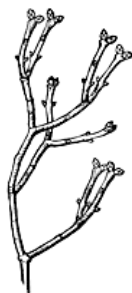
If tonight’s show has left you wondering whether you could learn to play guitar left-handed or maybe pick up some different instrument, or take voice lessons, because you’re realizing that during these past couple years a lot of new songs have been growing in you—

If you think that maybe you should get back together with some of your oldest friends, maybe even look up that lover of four, no, six years ago—

If you think that it’s time, finally, to forget your old life and hitchhike out to Minneapolis, say, or Seattle, and find a job, maybe take some classes (starting, you think, with philosophy)—

You lower the soda can to the ground.

And you choose.



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