The Great Secrets

by

Elliot Thomas Grant

For Aidan and Logan,
and anyone else with a child or parent

PROLOGUE

There are little secrets that hardly seem worth knowing, like the name of the cleft running from nostril to lip. Apparently the ancient Greeks found that crease attractive, because their name for it, philtrum*, can also mean a love potion.*

Then there are the Great Secrets: Where did we come from? Why are we here? What lies ahead?

And sometimes these secrets are connected.

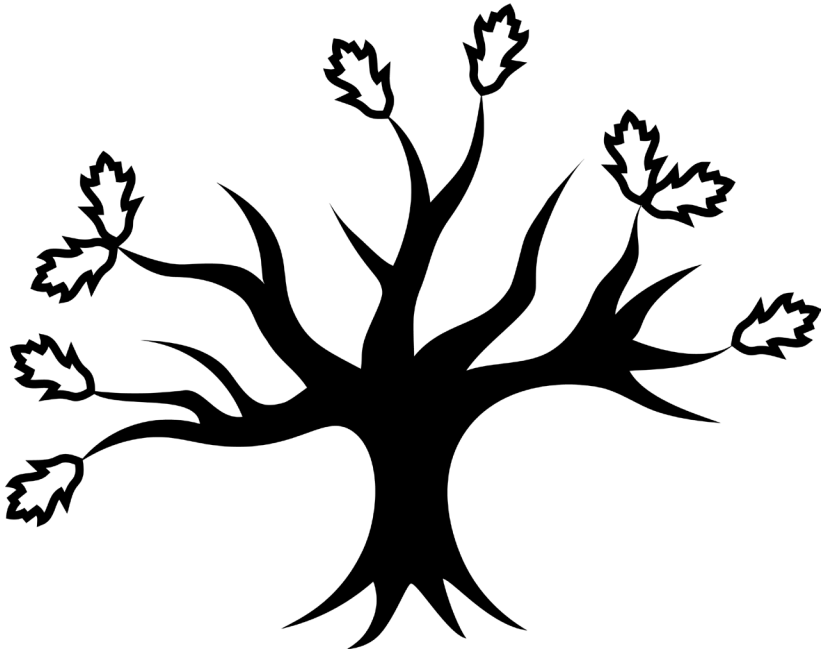
Avi once told me a Talmudic story about the philtrum. Before birth, he said, each child is smooth-lipped and accompanied by an angel of the Lord. The seraph is a guide and mentor, unfolding the great secrets of the universe to the burgeoning soul.

Just before joining the world, the baby understands the inner workings of the cosmos, from fundament to welkin and beyond. But as the child prepares for birth, the angel performs a final benediction. Laying a single finger upon lips that have yet to breathe, the spirit commands its charge:

—Forget.

The impress of the seraph's finger sears the philtrum into the babe's malleable flesh. And so we wander through our lives seeking remembrance of all we have lost; struggling to understand, catching only occasional glimpses of truths we instinctively recognize…

Beginning & Ending



He is so very old. At first I think there must be a mistake; but with recognition comes acceptance.

The frail figure in the hospital bed is unmoving, so still I wonder if he even lives. But then a nearby monitor beeps, and I hear a gentle snore. Wispy gray tufts float off the top of his head; more responsible hairs cling stubbornly around the temples and ears. A thin mustache mourns its lost glory, and stubble encroaches his cheeks and neck—not fashionable stubble, only the unstoppable weediness of one who has given up shaving. Skin the color of tea, lighter than mine, mottled by liver spots.

There's an empty chair beside the bed. Although I try to be quiet, he must be a light sleeper. Eyelids fluttering, he searches the small room until discovering me.

A cough, and the rasp of a voice that isn't used much. —Who are you?

The real answer would be ludicrous, so I tell the truth instead. —My name's Darshana. You can call me Dar.

—Dar?

I nod, but he isn't looking at me. Thankful for a moment to collect my thoughts, I wait for the pale hazel eyes to circumnavigate the chamber. Facing me once again, he squints and frowns.

—Who did you say you are?

—Darshana. Dar. What should I call you?

—I don't know. His head slumps back on the pillow as he mutters. —I don't know. Doesn't matter. Dar?

—That's right.

The monitor is labeled, so it's not much of a guess. —And you're Ashoka?

More muttering, almost as if he's trying the name on for size. —Ashoka. Yes. Me.

—Hello, Ashoka.

His eyes are on the move again. He wheezes a bit and clears his throat. —I'm thirsty.

—I'll get you something. I'll be right back.

An empty coffee cup, apparently clean, sits on the nightstand across the bed. I collect it and venture out in search of drink. Although a water fountain graces the hallway not 10 feet from Ashoka's door, he is asleep again by the time I return.

I use the time to consider the surroundings. Bed and monitor notwithstanding, this clearly isn't a hospital. It's too small, and less sterile. At the same time, it lacks the personality of a real home. The prints on the wall are uninspired watercolors of boats. The nightstand and dresser don't match and are bare of photographs or knick-knacks.

After a time he wakes, and I repeat our introductions. The water is no longer cold, but he gulps it greedily when I hand him the cup.

—Ah. I get so thirsty. You thirsty?

—I'm fine, thanks. Let me know if you need anything else.

His forehead wrinkles. —I need… There's something… He shakes his head in disgust. —I don't know. I don't know!

—Just relax, it'll come to you. It's ok.

—Don't tell me what to do. What are you doing here? Why did you come here?

—I came to see you. And to… help, if I can.

A snort. —Some help.

—I'm sorry.

He finishes the water and shrinks within himself as his eyes close, dart open, close again, longer this time, longer.

Ashoka sleeps.

Although he shifts restlessly for an hour, he does not wake again. I decide to return tomorrow, although I'm still not sure what to do. Before leaving, I refill his cup with water.

When I gently open the door the next day he is again, or still, sleeping. And dreaming, if the rolling of orbs beneath closed lids is any indication. His brow is knit, betraying the stress of his vision.

Waking brings no relief. —Where?… He peers around. —What time is it?

—A little before noon. Do you want something to drink?

—No! Yes. I don't know. I need to… There's somewhere I'm supposed to be. I have to be there, when it's time.

He can barely raise his arms; I can't picture him leaving the room. —It's all right, you don't need to go anywhere now.

—How do you know? It's important, I have to be there…

—Where?

—I don't know! I told you, it's gone, it's all… I can't think of it. I don't know, but I have to. I have to.

Lost hazel eyes look to me for an answer. —What should I do?

My words of reassurance and comfort feel empty. Even though he is calm when I leave, helplessness makes me despondent. This isn't good enough. I need to do more, but I can't see the way. My mind endlessly replays Ashoka's question: *what should I do?*

I'm still running in mental circles when I push open the door the next day. And again am shocked by the figure on the bed, this time because the old woman is a complete stranger.

Where is Ashoka? Even as I imagine the possibilities, the simple truth hits me: This is the wrong room. Ashoka's door is on the other side of the hallway.

—I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you.

As I start to leave, a smile breaks out across her face. —Beth?

There's no one else around. —No, I'm not Beth. Is she here? Do you want me to find her?

She's not even looking at me. —That's where they go, around the back. Up the steps.

—I'm sorry, I don't…

—In the drawer, in the drawers, the ba da ba. Ba da ba ba ba.

She nods happily to herself, content with the nonsensical syllables. I don't know where her mind is, but I'm glad it offers solace. Fighting back memories of another woman traveling to dementia, I finally grasp the reality of this place.

There are many rooms, each housing a man or woman approaching the end of their allotted span. They have come here to end their days. *That's where they go.* This is neither home nor hospital. This is a house of death.

Ashoka, at least, knows who I am. —You again?

—Me again. Here, I brought you some apple juice.

He squints at it warily before sipping. —It's all right, he concedes. —Thanks.

—You're welcome.

—Don't suppose you figured out where I'm supposed to go yet?

I feel like I've been apologizing a lot lately. —No. I'm sorry.

—Ah, not your fault. Me. Got an empty head, full of nothing. I should remember.

—Sometimes you just need to stop trying. Let it come to you in its own time.

—What if it's too late?

All I can offer is a rueful smile. —At least you'll know what you missed.

Neither of us is much for small talk. Long silences are broken only by my offers to open the window shades or adjust his coverings. I resolve to bring a deck of cards tomorrow so we can pass the time more agreeably.

Eventually Ashoka naps again, and I set out to explore. Perhaps there are some communal games or books to borrow.

Two others have found the common room before me. An elderly woman stitches a quilt that overflows her lap, and a similarly old man sits nearby in a wheelchair. An oxygen tube sprouts from his nose like a plastic mustache and wraps around to a tank behind the chair.

He sees me and waves.

—Howdy, young lady! You've come to the right place.

—For what?

—The party! You know what they say: two's company, but three people makes a party.

He has to stop every few words to get more oxygen, but that clearly hasn't dampened his spirits. The quilter knots her thread and looks up.

—Just ignore him. He always talk crazy.

She extends a hand. —I am Julie Weifu. It is very nice to meet you.

Her thick accent and precise speech betray her origin. Somewhere in China, I suppose.

—Always a pleasure to have a pretty face around, chimes in her companion, also offering his hand. —I'm Bill. I'd tell you my last name, but it's hard to say and harder to spell.

I have to smile. —Mine's harder, I bet.

—You bet? Hear that, Julie? She's a gambling lady!

He reaches into his pocket. —I'll wager a quarter. What we

used to call two bits. Julie here can judge, if she promises not to play favorites.

—Very well. Julie takes his quarter while I fish out a similar coin.

Holding both quarters between us, Julie points to Bill. —Say your name.

—Tkachenko! He spits it out with glee. —That's T-K, nothing in between.

Julie looks my way.

—Thanthuvaaya, I pronounce carefully. —With two A's just before the end.

Julie considers a moment, then turns to Bill.

—Her name is harder. You are loser.

—You coulda just said I lose, no need to judge me as a person! But he's still smiling as Julie gives me the coins. —What's your other name, then?

—Darshana. But Dar is fine, I add as I take an empty chair.

—Welcome, Dar! Guess you're not a resident.

—Just visiting.

—Good of you. Sure it's appreciated. Wish my kith and kin paid their respects more often.

He laughs at himself. —Paid their respects! Shouldn't have said that, I'm not dead yet!

Julie pats his arm. —You will be here when rest of us are gone.

—We'll see! We'll see. Think Sam'll be next. He'll get a military funeral too, same as me.

—When did you serve? I ask.

—Second World War, '43 to '45. 89th Infantry, the Rolling W. Not many of us left now.

Julie, stitching again, nods. —My husband also fight. On battleship, in Pacific. He got shot in leg, so he limp. You not get shot?

Bill shrugs. —Naw, I was lucky. Real lucky. Only one German ever came close to killing me.

—What happened?

—It's like this. I shouldn't even have been over there. You know, the first thing you do is get a physical examination. They line you up, and different doctors examine you to see if you're fit. I stepped up on the scale, and I only weighed 108 pounds! I was a beanpole back then. And the doctor looked up at me and said, You'll never make it, son. You're too light. You have to weigh at least 116 pounds.

But he said to go on with my examination. So I did. And when I got through they said, Wait outside until your name is called, and we'll give you the results.

When they called my name, I went in to a little room, and there was a captain sitting behind his desk. He looked up at me and said, What's wrong with you?

I looked at him and said, I don't know, sir. Is there something wrong with me that I should know about?

He said, No, I'm asking you: What is wrong with you?

I said, nothing that I know of.

Very good, he said. He took his pencil and erased 108 and said, You now weigh 116 pounds. You're in!

But about that German, the one who almost killed me… When we got to Germany, our unit would come in after the artillery and mop up. In one town, my commanding officer came up to me and said, Put on your helmet and pack your gun. We're going to the hospital.

We went there to pick up some soldiers who were posing as patients. There were 81 soldiers hiding out in that hospital, but we only captured 80. See, one of the soldiers I found was a young kid, couldn't have been older than 15. The hospital didn't have proper heat, so he still had his army coat on under the sheets. It must have been two or three sizes too big for him,

he probably only weighed 108 pounds. He shouldn't even have been there. I took his army coat and told him to go home.

Never thought I'd see him again. But a few days later we heard about a big champagne factory in the town, so the first sergeant and me and two others decided we'd raid it. We went there one night and discovered it was mostly underground. We were going from floor to floor with our flashlights and holding up the bottles to see if they were clear. Because if they had any sediment, they weren't good enough to drink.

After a while we heard somebody walking behind us. We turned around, and there was that German kid! He said his uncle was the factory foreman, and we were thieves, and he was going to report us. He had guts, I'll give him that.

I shone some light on my face and said we just wanted some champagne. Neither of us said a word about the hospital. So he said, Well, you won't find any to drink here. Follow me, and I'll show you where the champagne is ready for shipment.

He took us to the shipping room and asked, How many bottles do you want? The first sergeant said, Bottles? We want a case each!

So we each got a case and went back to our unit where we were sleeping, and we started drinking champagne. And I got so drunk that when I tried to go outside for a leak, I fell down a whole flight of stairs. Nearly cracked open my skull right then and there.

I blame the German kid. He almost killed me with that champagne.

—He probably tell same story to his grandchildren. All your fault! teases Julie.

—Maybe, maybe. Always wonder what happened to him.

—Do you have grandchildren? I ask Julie.

She spreads out the quilt to display a large embroidered oak tree. —Many, many grandchildren. Three daughters, two sons.

Julie points to the five lowest branches of the tree, each labeled with a hand-stitched name. Her finger traces the branches higher as they split and grow. —Three grandchildren from first daughter, two from second daughter, three more from first son, one from third daughter, four from second son. Thirteen grandchildren! And nine great-grandchildren, she adds, tapping the little leaves that crown the tree's canopy.

—Congratulations, I tell her.

She beams. —This quilt for youngest great-grandchild. Just born five months ago. I make quilt for every child, every grandchild. Every great-grandchild. Almost done now. I must live long enough to finish. Then I can die.

—I hope you'll live long enough to welcome more great-grandchildren into the world, and give all of them quilts. It's a beautiful custom.

—My grandmother made me quilt. I bring it with me when we escape China. We could carry very little, but I could not leave behind my grandmother's quilt.

—I think she'd be very proud of you.

I rise and wave farewell. —I should get back. I'm so glad I met you both.

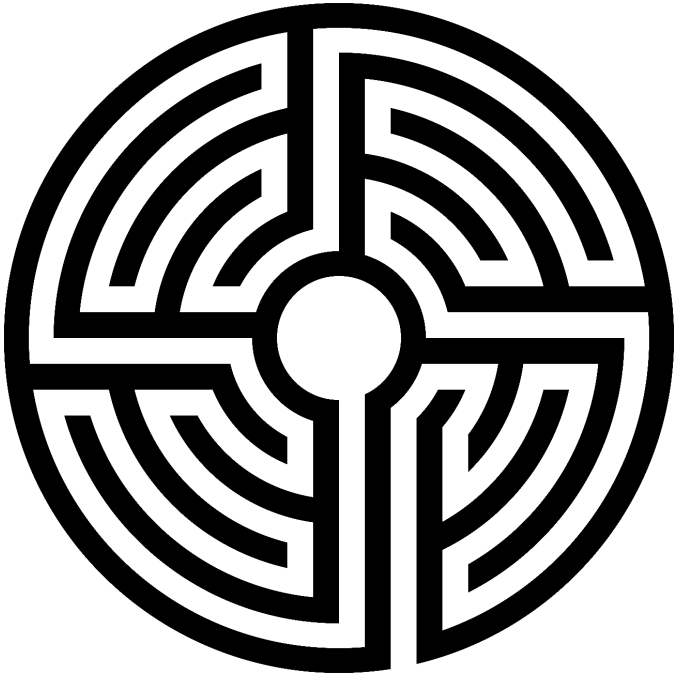
—Pleasure's ours! says Bill. —Drop by anytime.

—I hope we see you again soon, says Julie.

Ashoka is sitting up in bed when I return. —What are you smiling about? he asks.

—Am I? I guess because I understand something I didn't before. I was wrong about this place. This is a house of life.

Journeys & Destinations



Over the next few weeks we settle into a simple routine. I bring in books to read—children's books mostly, which are easy to read aloud and often wiser than their grown-up counterparts. Although Ashoka still can't summon the details of his forgotten tryst, he stops worrying about it. From time to time we run through possibilities for The Date, but nothing stirs recollection.

—Could it be a job interview?

—If so, I might as well skip it. No one will hire an old bag of bones like me.

—Maybe it's a literal date. Have you been romancing one of the residents here?

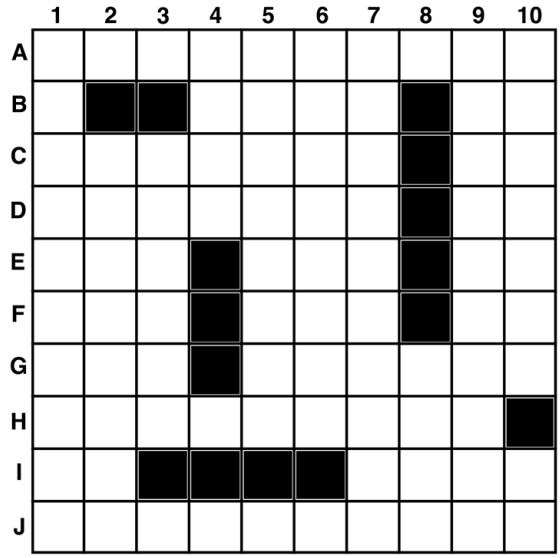
He snorts. —Not a chance. I'd remember that.

Julie finishes her quilt and dies in her sleep less than three days later. Her service draws a large crowd, family members some of whose names I recognize from her quilt. As Julie predicted, Bill shows no sign of giving in to his illness. Any concern about Ashoka appears unfounded—for "an old bag of bones," he seems if anything livelier than when we met.

We keep a deck of cards in the nightstand drawer and pull it out for War, Gin Rummy, Double Solitaire, or other games. We also indulge in pen-and-paper pastimes, like Hangman and Battleship. We play the latter the way I learned as a child, which is more challenging than how I usually see it played now. The way I teach Ashoka is like this.

Each player controls a fleet of five ships. The ships are deployed to a section of ocean represented by a 10-by-10 grid. The fleet consists of a 5-square battleship, a 4-square cruiser, a 3-square destroyer, a 2-square submarine, and a 1-square PT

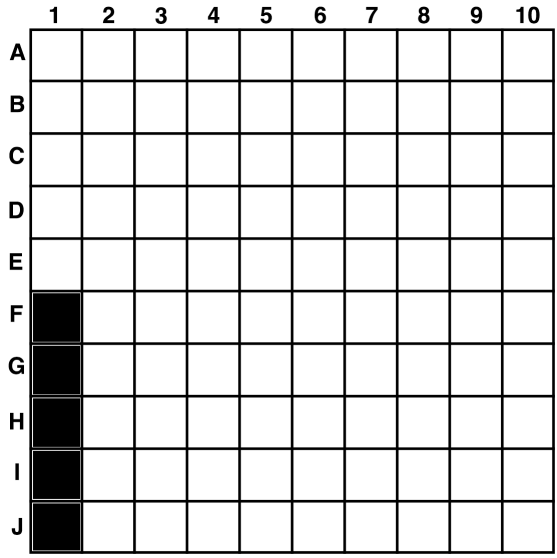
boat. A typical placement might look something like the grid below:



Once both opponents place their ships, they take turns firing torpedoes in an effort to sink every ship of the enemy fleet. Each ship fires one torpedo per turn, and the player can choose any grid square to target. All targets are announced at the same time; for example, B-7, C-2, F-5, H-9, and J-3. The opponent then announces how many of those target squares were part of a ship: Two hits, say. It's up to the player, turn after turn, to figure out which target squares contained ships.

When every square of a ship has been hit, the ship is sunk, and that fact is announced to the other player. By losing a ship, that player also loses one torpedo shot. The player whose ships are all sunk first loses.

Ashoka is a fast learner, but after one disastrous loss I am perplexed. I had fired torpedoes all over the grid but only hit one ship. When I ask to see his grid, Ashoka grins slyly and shows me the following diagram:



—That's only the battleship! Where are the other four ships?

—They're all there. I just stacked them on top of the battleship.

I am aghast. —You can't do that. That's cheating!

—I didn't cheat. You never said anything in the rules about not stacking ships.

—I don't have to say that, you know ships can't be stacked on top of each other!

He pretends innocence. —Why not?

—Because… Well, just think about it. You can't put one ship on top of another in real life.

—But this isn't real life, is it? It's just a game.

I should have an answer to that, but I am bereft of arguments. I do resolve to be more careful about explaining the rules of any future games.

And then one day when I arrive, he is not in the bed. Like Bill, he has traded horizontal confinement for a set of wheels.

—What do you think? he asks proudly as he grips the treads and propels himself forward.

I can hardly believe it. Lively is one thing, but what happened to the invalid? I look closer, trying to peer past lingering first impressions. Is his hair thicker, or just better groomed? Is his skin firmer, or just a trick of the light?

Conjecture and intuition cascade, collide, then settle and reshape my understanding. I see now. Of course.

Not that I can tell Ashoka, not yet.

—Come on, I temporize. —Let's go for a spin.

Moving behind the wheelchair, I grasp the handles and push him out the door. The common room proves empty, but an inner courtyard entices us through a sliding glass door and into the late morning sunshine.

Ashoka closes his eyes and tilts his head back. I follow his lead, feeling the warmth as he does, as rediscovering an old friend rather than standing under familiar light.

Since nothing we could say would improve the moment, we are silent.

Life moves on regardless, though, and a squirrel skittering across the path breaks our reverie. I push the chair ahead as we take in the surroundings.

The atrium is large, with a fountain burbling happily at its heart. The path winds through scattered shrubs and trees on its way to the center, even an old willow that attests to some long-gone gardener's care. As we approach the fountain, the walkway turns in a perimeter. Looking closer, I see that what first appear to be concentric paths are actually a single trail.

—A labyrinth! I exclaim.

Ashoka glances around in confusion. —Where? I don't see anything.

I point to the path. —See how the bricks are arranged to form a trail? It winds around, doubling back on itself over and over again, until it finally reaches the fountain. Here, I'll show you.

—Outside for five minutes, and you're already getting us lost, he grumbles as I maneuver the chair along the walkway.

—No, you're thinking of a maze. Mazes are designed to hide the finish and make you guess the correct path. A labyrinth is a single path that guides you inevitably to the finish.

—Why's it keep going back and forth, then? Seems like a waste of time.

—It's a passage. It gives you time to contemplate your destination, as well as your journey. A meditation incarnate.

Already I see the fountain as The Date. Each turn we traverse in this brick circuit becomes, in my mind, another waypost on that longer road. My uncertainty wanes as the itinerary begins to coalesce.

Ashoka has other ideas. —I'm bored, and all these twists and turns make my head hurt. You want to get to the fountain? Watch me.

With a few sharp spins of the wheels, he cuts directly across the shuttling path. I'm left staring as he catches his breath beside the cascade.

—See? Nothing to it.

—That's not the point, I protest weakly. I almost accuse him of cheating again, but there's something so human about Ashoka's way. Where would we be without that inner daemon pushing us to look for shortcuts? We are such a paradox: we hate cheaters but love rulebreakers.

—You're right, I admit. —That was faster.

—Darn right, he smiles victoriously.

My hand stirs the water as I consider how to bring up my revelation. I don't expect him to be happy with my request, and

I can't imagine the outcome should he balk. As usual, there's only one way to find out.

—Ashoka?

—Hm?

—I think I know what The Date is. Or at least I have a guess.

He cranes around eagerly.

—Well? What is it?

—I could be wrong. And even if I'm right, it wouldn't make much sense. But I think that's why I'm here, to help you get there. Can I ask you to trust me? I promise to do everything in my power to prepare you, and there's plenty of time. Months, even.

—But what is it? Why can't you just tell me?

—I think… it should be a surprise. Or if I'm wrong, I don't want to build up expectations. Please. Can you trust me without having to know?

He's frowning now. My stomach clenches, I've lost him.

—I'm cold. I want to go back.

I wheel him along the path, through the sliding door—away from the fountain, away from the labyrinth, going, going… gone.

I can't bring myself to visit the following day. When I do return the day after, Ashoka's room is empty. I find him at the fountain and sit on the edge.

—I did it your way this time, he says. —Took a lot longer to get here, to the center. Gave me plenty of time to think, though. I guess sometimes that's more important.

He looks at me directly, searching my face for confirmation of his decision. —If I can't trust you, who can I trust? he asks finally.

—Thank you, I manage.

He nods, and the courtyard is quiet again for a time.

When the shadows have shifted, he stretches and rubs his hands together. —So what's your plan?

I consider his strength, and all there is to do. I hardly know where to begin, but one thing is clear.

—It's a big world out there. I think it's time we left this place.

Knowledge & Values

—Here you are, I say, handing Ashoka his ticket for the express train. —Your pass to Boston.

—And why are we going to Boston?

—We're not.

—Then what's the ticket for?

—We're going *through* Boston. But since we need to transfer stations anyway, and because it's too long a trip for one day, I got us a hotel room in Boston.

—Wouldn't it be faster to fly? he grumbles.

—You know me, I like to take the long way around. And to be honest, I need the time to gather my thoughts and put things in order.

—"Things"? What things?

—Everything. There's so much, I hardly know where to start.

I scan Penn Station's gargantuan arrivals and departures board. —We just missed a train. Looks like we've got a couple of hours to kill. Come on, let's explore midtown Manhattan while I try to explain.

Pushing the wheelchair up the zigzag exit ramp, I take us out onto 33rd street.

—Which way should we go?

—All the same to me. Food trucks as far as the eye can see.

He's right about that. A mini–United Nations of pushcarts surrounds the station entrance. I scan the skyline and find a familiar outline. —Look, there's the Empire State Building.

—I see it. Ashoka squints at me suspiciously. —You're not going to make us walk to the top, are you?

—Of course not. But if we head in that direction, we can pick up Broadway at Herald Square.

—You're the boss.

We meander through oncoming crowds who, for the most part, give way when they see the wheelchair. The street sign for what I call 7th Avenue—sauntering down the runway here as "Fashion Avenue"—reminds me that we're on the edge of the Garment District. —Did you know this used to be one of the worst neighborhoods in Manhattan? When it was called the Tenderloin, it was a hotbed of racketeering and prostitution.

—Seems to have cleaned up nice since then. What happened?

—Discrimination. Masses of immigrants were pushed into the Tenderloin. They were mostly garment workers, so the area became the textile center of the city. But then the industry grew so fast that it transformed the Tenderloin into the Garment District and boosted the whole city's economy. So I think they had the last laugh in the end.

—Guess so. Now there's all these fancy stores and restaurants. Like that one on the corner—bet it's a good place to eat.

It doesn't look like anything special to me, but I don't want to argue. —Probably. Here we go, light's changed.

We swerve around a friendly Labrador and continue east.

—Anyway, I promised you an explanation… I've been thinking a lot about something you said to me soon after we met.

—Was it "I'm hungry"?

—No. You asked me, *what should I do?* I didn't have an answer. But I keep coming back to that question because it covers so much.

The wheelchair stops suddenly, and I stumble. Ashoka is

twisted around, glaring at me. He's also pushed down the wheel locks.

—What's the matter? Why did you stop?

—Because I want some *food*. Maybe you're on a crash diet, but it's after one o'clock in the afternoon and I'm not going anywhere until we have lunch.

I have to laugh. —You're the boss, I admit. —Let's eat.

One adequate if overpriced meal later, we're back on the 33rd Street sidewalk approaching Herald Square. A nagging voice in the back of my mind insists I need to be a better caregiver. But Ashoka's in a much more expansive mood and waves at me regally. —Carry on!

—What?

—You're itching to finish that explanation of yours. Don't think I can't tell.

—Guilty as charged. You can see right through me.

He snorts. —If I could do that, I wouldn't be in the dark about The Date. Still not ready to spill the beans?

—Not quite. But I promise to tell you everything before we get there. That's what all this is about. I want you to be ready. But if I'm right, there's a lot to prepare for. That's why I'm having a hard time even starting. I wish I had a manual, or just an outline. Some kind of framework I could follow.

We reach the intersection of Broadway and 6th Avenue, and I turn us north. —What I was saying before… Your question is as good a place to start as any. "What should I do?" Think about it. It's a question we all ask ourselves a thousand times a day, about the most unimportant decisions. What should I do: wear the yellow shirt or the blue? What should I do: use a paper clip or a staple?

But at the same time, it's the question we ask at the most significant crossroads in our lives. What should I do: take a new

job across the country, or stay at home in a dead-end position? What should I do: marry this person now, or wait for my soul mate?

Making a bad choice of that kind can resonate across years, and affect more than one life. That's why it's so important to make good decisions.

—I hear you. Course, nobody makes the right decision all the time.

—Absolutely not. But I'm talking about *good* decisions, not the *right* decisions.

Ashoka mulls this over, then shakes his head. —I don't get it. What's the difference?

—The right decision is the one that leads to the best outcome. But the only way to know which choice was right is to wait and see how things turn out. Sometimes you don't know what the right decision was for years. So you'll just go crazy if you always try to make the right decision.

What you should try to do is make a good decision. That's a choice that seems most likely to work out well given the information you have at the time. Like… See that lottery billboard? Let's say you want to win that $100 million. You have to choose a number to play. One number is the right number to pick, but you won't know which one until the lottery is over. Instead, you just need to pick a good number, one that has a good chance of winning. In a fair lottery, all the numbers are equally good, so there aren't any bad choices. But there are millions of wrong choices.

I know too many people who castigate themselves for making a wrong choice because it didn't turn out the way they hoped. But that's just hindsight. So often they forget that their wrong decision was actually a good choice! It was the option that made the best sense at the time. Instead of simply learning from the experience, their self-esteem nose-dives and they

become convinced they're bad at making decisions. Which means the next time they face an important choice, they're hamstrung by doubt. It's a vicious cycle.

—I see what you mean. That's kind of sad.

—So promise me you won't fall into that trap. That you won't fret over the right decision, just try to make a good decision.

—Sure. But I don't think it's as easy as you say.

—I didn't say it was easy. Making good choices is one of the hardest things to do in life. It takes a very special quality.

—What's that?

—Think about it. If you were facing a tough choice right now, what kind of person would you ask for help?

He considers a moment, then points. —How about her?

I was expecting a more abstract answer. He's indicating a gaudy sign on a door squashed between a jewelry store and a gift shop. MADAME ROSE, proclaims the banner. PSYCHIC! SEER! TELL YOUR FUTURE! Gold stars bespeckle the purple posterboard, along with cards featuring fantastic images of knights, skeletons, and hermits.

I cringe. —Please. Please tell me you're joking.

—What's wrong with seeing the future?

—What's wrong is that no one can do it! Do you really think that if Madame Rose could see the future, she'd be operating out of a dingy walkup?

—Maybe she's humble.

—I think the word you're looking for is "humbug".

Ashoka sighs. —Too bad. Looked like fun. Particularly those fancy cards.

I start the pushing the chair on again, into the trees of Herald Square. —They're part of a deck of tarot cards. If you asked Madame Rose, she'd probably spin you a yarn about ancient Egyptian mystics inventing them.

—Not true?

—Not even close. Playing cards probably started in China, and moved west through Persia into Europe around the 1400s. The major arcana—those "fancy cards"—were simply added to make games more interesting.

—What did you call them?

—"Major arcana". It's Latin for "great secrets", but the name was coined by a Frenchman in the mid-1800s. My advice to you: Forget about psychics, seers, fortune-tellers, astrologers, and anyone else who claims to know the future.

—So who do I ask for help with these tough choices, then?

—Well, I was thinking someone like *her*.

We're facing a monument at the north end of the square. Ostensibly it's a clock, but the Roman numeral–graced disc surmounting the edifice is not what draws the eye. A warrior goddess stands guard over a bell taller than I am, while a serene owl perches atop. Two burly figures in printers' aprons astride the bell lift massive hammers, ready to strike the hour.

—This is Minerva, the Roman deity of wisdom. That's her owl standing on the bell.

—You want me to talk to an ancient Roman god?

—I didn't mean her literally, I meant what she personifies. Wisdom. That's the special quality you should look for in someone you ask for help. Because wisdom means making good choices. Being wise isn't the same as being smart, for example. There are plenty of smart people who make terrible decisions. When we need life advice, we don't turn to scientists. We look to grandparents and gurus, people we believe are wise.

Stuff and Guff, the two bellringers, swing into action as the clock's minute hand ticks upright. Their hammers converge on the bell, stopping at a discreet distance to prevent actual damage while an internal mechanism chimes two sonorous gongs. When the reverberations finally fade, I start following Broadway north.

—But do you know what's even better than asking a wise person for help?

—Nope. Somehow I bet you're going to tell me, though.

—Right you are! Even better is being wise yourself. Think what that means: Time after time, in little ways and big, you consistently make good choices.

Ashoka peers into the department store windows as we roll by. —Hm. Think I can pick up some wisdom on sale in there?

—Always looking for a shortcut. But you don't need money to earn wisdom. You really just need two things: knowledge and values.

—How do you figure that?

—You know the expression, *knowledge is power?* Obviously it's not literally true. You can't send a truck down the highway just by knowing how a combustion engine works. But on a deeper level, it's absolutely true. Power is the ability to cause change. The more power you have, the greater change you can create.

Knowledge also gives you the ability to cause change. Say you're in an unlit room at night. If you know how a light switch works, you can change the room. If you don't, you're stuck in the dark.

Making a decision is making a change in your life. You want to make a good choice. But what if some of the possibilities are hidden from you? Maybe the best choice is one you don't even know exists. And how can you choose if you have no idea what the result will be?

You need knowledge to make good choices. That's why it's one of the keys to wisdom. But like I said earlier, knowledge by itself is not enough.

—You didn't say that.

—I said being smart wasn't the same as being wise, and having knowledge is one way of being smart.

—Are there other ways?

—Sure. Solving problems is another way of being smart. So is empathy, when you deeply understand other people… But that's a whole different discussion. This is why I need some kind of framework! I digress too often.

Knowledge will give you options and help you estimate their outcomes, but it can't offer you guidance on the actual decision. For that you need values. After all, how can you make a good choice without a sense of good and bad?

—Beats me. How'd you get to be such an expert on wisdom, anyway?

—I can't actually swear to being wise myself. But I am a certified lover of wisdom: I have a philosophy degree. And the word philosophy comes from the Greek roots philo, meaning love, and sophia, meaning wisdom.

—There was a woman named Sophia back at the house, but she wasn't particularly wise.

—And not everyone named Philip loves horses. But anytime you see *phil* in a word, there's some connection to love: audiophile, a lover of good sounds; philtrum, a love potion.

—Philadelphia?

—The City of Brotherly Love!

We scoot along in silence for a while, surreptitiously taking in the surroundings while trying to pretend we belong here.

—So this is Broadway, Ashoka finally remarks. —I expected a bit more somehow.

—This isn't the flashiest stretch. But there is history here. The road is even older than the city is.

—Really?

—Yes. Long before the Dutch arrived, indigenous peoples walked the length of the island on this trail.

—Guess it must being doing something right to last this long.

—I guess so. And don't worry, we're already at 39th Street. Things pick up in just a few more blocks.

The closer we get to 42nd Street, the denser the sidewalks become. What had been nearly even two-way traffic becomes a single northbound stream, pulling us along and emptying into:

Times Square.

It's a mild day, and the city's most popular destination is predictably packed. Perhaps adding a souvenir bicycle bell to the wheelchair would help us push through the crowd.

Ashoka doesn't seem to mind. His head keeps craning around, trying to take it all in. —What do you see? I ask.

—All the signs! Billboards and neon and TV screens… It's a madhouse, but I like it. Feels alive. What do you see?

—Mostly the people. There are so many, and they're so different. I wonder: Why are they here? What are their stories?

Look at them all, and at us. They say if you stand in Times Square long enough, the whole world will pass by you. Some in a hurry, some lost in the moment. All the different ages, skin colors, creeds. But all in the same place, at the same time. Brought here by all the choices we've made throughout our lives.

Just before his execution, an ancient wise man said *the unexamined life is not worth living.* That's a little harsh, I think… Some lives are an endless struggle just to find food and safety. But once you have the necessities, I believe you owe it to yourself to do a little examining. Owe yourself, and the rest of us who will ever pass through Times Square. Because every choice changes the world.

This is what I want for you, Ashoka. You have been given an invaluable gift: A space of time to examine life. To gain knowledge. To construct values.

To earn wisdom.

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