

The Gift of Chance

How do I begin?

It is often said that the perception one has of oneself is frequently skewed and hardly reliable. Still, I cannot help but imagine what Maggie Fisher might have seen that December day five years ago when she approached me outside of the corner store on Baker Street. What of my countenance, of my tattered jacket and ripped jeans, pulled her toward my being and made her feel so inclined to help what indubitably appeared to be a helpless man?

I know discovering logic in such thoughts is futile, but for the span of fifteen years, pointless thoughts were all I owned.

Thoughts, I tell myself, and a pitiful piece of cardboard.

I close my eyes as I sit further back into the desk chair made of leather. Small pops and sizzles which are played so musically by the fireplace soothes the soul, and I allow myself, just this once - and for the sake of writing this letter - to be taken back to that lonesome place of years prior. The comforting image of mauve walls disappear around me and are replaced with expansive sky. The bookshelves and lavish furniture of the study, in return, melt away; and in their place forms the littered alleyway of Baker Street's only corner store, the place which I had once called home.

The previously mentioned piece of cardboard was a long slab of stiff paper, which I had long ago assumed made up one side of a refrigerator box. This treasured article of mine was currently propped up between a wall and a large dumpster, acting as a barrier between me and the wind while I slept. During the day, I simply placed the slab securely behind the dumpster and continued with going to "work." This work was not at all honorable nor enjoyable. It included hours of inquiring for spare change from busy passersby, who undoubtedly had the money to spare but never the time.

On this particular day, when the sun began to rest, I give up my labors early for the night and allow myself to sit directly outside the front of the store. Men and women proceed to walk by with places to be, company to enjoy, and homes to love. It contented my heart to watch them and formulate a story of each individual's life. I imagine that it may not be too different from that which I had led before this humbling existence; for I, too, had a home worth adoration and a wife worth even more so. And while I tried so tirelessly to plan my future predicaments around continued success, life is a figure which often works alone and had decided an outcome quite different from what I had aspired to achieve.

No, life was not on my side. Life allowed death the pleasure of taking away my father, my hero. After which, depression similarly took away my happiness; and as I soon discovered, cheerful wives do not tend to enjoy the company of sad husbands, and that is how I lost her and any further motivation. The financial turmoil, which was spurred on by the impact of

becoming an orphaned son and a forgotten lover within the span of a few short months, was a destructive hurricane of debt that I had no ability to pay off.

And so here I now am, a penniless fool, a product of misfortune and bad luck. I would like to point out, nonetheless, that while I have significantly less wealth, I am no less a human being. And yet, these passersby do not seem to feel the same. The reflection of disgust in their eyes at my very sight is more painful than any spoken words. The response of pity, too, is just as hurtful because while it has the pleasure of feeding my stomach as they offer me food, it also contains the venom of destroying my pride. At times such as those, I am forced to believe I am lesser than them, a person dependent on others' kindness.

But I digress - as I often do when reminiscing on this lowly period of existence.

The sky has now become dark, save for a few glowing spots of heaven dotting the blackness. I sink deeper into the pavement and gaze up toward nothing. Cars are flashing by, creating a split second of disrupting noise as their tires meet the puddle-covered streets with a loud swish. I am at peace in this moment. No one shall approach me with judgement nor meet my eyes with looks of sympathy. Right now, I am not poor and alone. Right now, I am as I was born, equal.

As soon as this thought escapes my conscience, I hear the jingling of the store bell, continued by the sound of small footsteps making their way toward me. I prepare to once again be scolded by the store owner. She is a small woman with a voice of power and worthy of fear. On many occasions, she has threatened to call the cops if I continue to sit in front of her store; though, she never follows through with the act and even pretends not to notice as I sneak to the back alley of the store and sleep next to the dumpster. Needless to say, I am rather fond of her.

But it is not her. It is a girl, still in her teenage years. She is dressed in bell-bottom jeans too long for her short legs and a green winter coat, zipped up tightly around her chin. This girl did not look, at first, to be strikingly beautiful by society's standards. She had poofy hair, eyes as green as her coat, and facial features sharper than a knife. But she did, however, appear to be strikingly kind. This stranger walked toward me as if we were old friends, with a familiar smile that stirred warmth inside my cold heart.

"Hi," she began casually, as if talking to homeless men was a daily occurrence for her. *Maybe it is, I remember thinking. Maybe she often enjoys spending her evenings in the company of sketchy people in sketchy places.*

"Hi," I cautiously responded, unsure if I was supposed to know this girl, for she approached me as if I did.

"I'm Maggie Fisher," she said while taking a seat next to mine on the sidewalk, "and it's my birthday."

“Um . . .” My mind was reeling. What was happening? Why is she telling me this? “I’m Ben. Happy birthday.”

The girl - *Maggie* - abruptly placed her head in her hands.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I know this is probably strange, my coming up and talking to you like this. But the truth is, I’m alone; and, well, I’m starving for a bit of company. So when I saw you . . . I thought . . .”

“I was too?” I asked plainly.

Her only response was a sad nod, and there we sat in silence for a few heartbeats. I looked down at my dirtied off-brand boots, careful not to stare in wonder at this mystical being who chose to seek company in what most would consider lowly company.

“Do you ever look up at the sky,” *Maggie* interjected, breaking the quietude, “and feel envy when you see a plane?”

The question was so absurd and out of place that I could not deduce what might be the proper response, and she laughed after a few minutes of my stupefied soundlessness.

“I mean, I look up at that plane right there, knowing that someone is looking back down. I imagine what he or she might see. I imagine the city lights illuminating the night, and I imagine how this person might feel, heading off to a new destination. And I feel jealous because I’m here instead of there. I have to go through the mundane activities of the everyday without the excitement of a new place to visit.”

I studied this young girl’s face, at her awestruck gaze which was directed toward the stars; and realized that she was not entirely young, for her soul was old. We continued talking in this metaphorical manner, discussing the small minutia of human life and how it mattered not at all in comparison to the daily ongoings of the infinite universe.

After conversing with her for what seemed like forever, finally, my curiosity became too overpowering.

“*Maggie*,” I addressed her unpretentiously, “why are you here? At a corner store, at night, on your birthday?”

Her face glowed with surprise at the question before responding, “Oh! I was buying a lottery ticket. It’s my first one. I’m turning eighteen.” *Maggie* pulled out a thin slip of paper from her coat pocket, already crumpled despite having only been purchased a short time ago. She studied the object intensely and with a furrowed brow that lead me to believe she was pondering a deep inquiry.

“Why don’t you take it?” *Maggie* finally spoke, holding the discussed object out toward me in obvious offering.

My initial instinct was to deny any help, refusing to feel lesser than this girl by accepting her aid. But when I looked into Maggie's eyes and saw the genuine compassion which lie there, I did not feel as if she were partaking in such a gesture out of charity, but because it was in her nature to give. So instead of forthcoming with any denial, I reached for the ticket and placed it within my own pocket.

"Thank you," I said and meant it.

I wanted to stay there all night talking to this old soul, which is in part due to my starvation for conversation; but Maggie had to leave because of her curfew. We exchanged a brief, unceremonious goodbye, and then I watched as the first authentic human encounter I've had in fifteen years disappeared into the blackness.

I never saw Maggie Fisher again after that night, even though she changed my life forever. You see, Maggie's ticket was a winner. A substantial winner. How much, I dare not say. But because of that ticket, because I met Maggie, I was able to buy this house which I am currently seated and prove myself financially stable once more. The present situation, however, is not such a pleasant one regarding Miss Fisher.

It was brought to my knowledge, via a local newspaper obituary, that Maggie has passed away some three days ago. The article was short and not all descriptive with details, but I was able to understand it was a car accident that took her life. This brings us to the situation in which I discover myself right now, as I attempt to write a letter to Maggie's family. When I read the article, a rush of mixed emotion overcame me. On one hand, I felt an urge to let everyone know what this young, kind, and softly outspoken girl had done for me. To express my gratitude for the person who had offered me not money, but a second chance. On the other hand, I felt shame and regret that I had not reached out to Maggie sooner and let her know the impact that she had.

Notwithstanding all of this, I could not yet seem to produce words, to properly communicate my gratitude. Who was I, a stranger, to write to this family which was certain to be grieving? With this defeated thought in mind, I abandoned my blank piece of paper altogether and decided to go for a walk. The open air was as chilly as it was on that fateful, life-altering day. This connection seemed to stick in my brain and speak to my feet because without consciously meaning to, I walked directly to that very corner store, located several miles from my house.

I swiftly strolled passed the alleyway, as it held nothing of mine except painful memories. Instead, I continued walking until I was in view of the front window, sneaking a peek at the owner lady who sat, as she usually did, behind the counter. While gazing at this familiar scene, I concluded that everything looked the same, but nothing felt the same. Self pity and nostalgia filled my lungs; and becoming more distraught than inspired, I decided to walk back home. But as I shifted to leave, a figure caught my eye. There sat a man sitting on the side of the road. He was dressed in a brown jacket and torn jeans. The denim color of his pants had long ago began to fade, and the premature wrinkles which lined his face spoke of an

unimaginably difficult journey. The image was a slap to the face, for I saw this man now with the eyes of Maggie; and he was me. Without another moment's hesitation, I turned around and strode directly into the store, where I purchased a lottery ticket. With renewed vitality, I then made my way over to the man who sat alone, only a few feet from where I had once made homage during nights such as this one.

Sitting down next to him, I opened my mouth to speak.

"Hi. My name's Ben."

"Charlie," was his short reply.

"Well, Charlie," I pointed toward a flashing light in the sky, "do you ever look at a flying plane and feel envy?"