

Buckets of Waning Optimism

It was Sunday afternoon in the living room. Charles and Lucille were playing monopoly and discussing philosophy, as middle schoolers are inclined to do. It was Lucille's house, and as hosts do, she started the whole debate on human behavior.

"We already know why everyone misbehaves. It's simply much more fun than acting right. No, the real question is, why would anybody want to waste his or her time doing the right thing?"

Charles had his opposing perspective ready at the instant. "But no righteous act goes unnoticed. I know if you show charity long enough, someone will pay you back for your efforts."

Lucille exerted a sneeze. Then she took out a clipboard and a few pieces of notepaper to write it down. "That's good. Did you come up with it yourself? Because if so, you should write a joke book. On second thought, let me write it down. Everything I come up with on my own is too profound for comedy."

This wasn't her first time arguing this way. No matter how many notes she openly took on his supposedly inferior intellect, he never got used to the condescension. It was time he took action. No amount of arguing would show her the golden glimmer of a deed done right.

He happened to own Boardwalk at the time. "What if I let you have this, the most expensive property on the board?"

That got her attention. "Are you serious?"

"It's a good deed. I'm sure you'll find a way to thank me and play fair. If you want it."

A slithery smile that shouldn't have been possible on the mouth of a fourth grader slithered between her lips. "Oh Charles, you are too kind." She took the card without another second of hesitation.

Charles didn't retract his empty fingers for a few moments. "Did I really just do that?"

Yes, he did. Lucille placed four hotels there on her next turn.

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Nobody their age remembered the last time they played monopoly by the official rules. That was how she got away with it. It gave her inspiration for a read-aloud essay on the futility of altruism. That in turn inspired plenty of gossip and tittering over Charles's slipshod economics. "You'll see," he uttered after muting the class zoom call. "You'll all see."

He'd volunteer his way back into glory. He browsed through the school's extracurricular message board to find something accessible to fifth-graders. He passed on "caretaker's assistant" and something about filming a lab safety video. A post for a community cleaning club meeting on Saturday looked

the least dangerous. The location was available through his phone's map app - according to the post, he was to help pick up litter that had collected all up and down the street.

The day came and he took the bus as far as it would go. For some reason, he'd apparently have to hike through a mountain trail in order to get there, so he made sure to bring a change of clothes and a water bottle. No doubt he'd end up getting sweaty by the time he even got there.

He passed a rustling bush on the way to the start of the trail. He wouldn't have given it so much as a glance had Lucille not popped out on her bicycle.

"Ha! I knew you'd go for this kind of thing. You didn't even bring adequate transportation? Probably a good idea. With your luck you'd pop the tires within seconds."

"Why don't you give your mouth a break?" He hissed.

"Why don't you give your failure a break? You already lost the argument, but you still won't give up."

"No, I never will. No good deed goes unnoticed. You'll see."

"Oh I'll see, all right. I'll see you crawling back after everyone else decides it's too dirty to try and clean." She plopped down on a big rock. "It's a good thing I brought my essay along. I learn a little more every time I read it."

"Oh really? Have you learned you're trapped in a time loop of making the same dumb point over and over? I could help you out of it but you seem quite happy where you are."

For once, Lucille was too stunned to talk back. Charles turned and left her with her perplexity. He had a long way to go, but the satisfaction of the last word he could coast on for miles.

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Further up the trail, he found himself in a valley between tall shady oaks. They leaned over him, almost like a jury waiting to express judgment. He had to be imagining things - the way the branches and leaves were arranged looked like learning faces, wearing expressions that said "Go on up, baldy." It even felt like he was walking along a rib cage with all the grooves in those concave slopes. He walked past old stones, and small creatures he wasn't yet aware of retreated when he approached. Even beyond that, he couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching him, following him, hunting him.

The backpack made him a little sweaty. He checked his phone. This was the right direction so far, but he needed a bit of a rest. He sat on a stone and startled a bird away. Just as he unscrewed the lid, Lucille's voice echoed.

So he was being hunted. The spirit of snide retorts was after him. She was too far away for her voice to be comprehensible, but whatever she wanted to say couldn't be anything encouraging. Charles got going. Once he found his group, he'd be among enough do-gooders to shoo her off.

The directions led him up out of the valley. Around a corner, he hiked a steeper incline between a balding rise in the mountain and a steady drop off. He could see the town from his position, and he wondered how much further the clean-up site was.

Lucille was getting closer. Charles could now hear that her sentence started with "At least I'm not-"

He picked up the pace. He didn't care what she was or was not, and he actively needed to shield himself from knowing.

The trail narrowed down between bigger, sharper rock formations and scanted trees until it led directly into a cave.

All the terrain surrounding it looked loose. There'd be no way to scale it and leave Lucille and her words behind. The arrow on the map app pointed directly inside it. This was the kind of thing you'd need two people for - one to look inside and the other to run for help if you somehow got stuck. What if the stones over the entrance collapsed?

Well, when his only option was a fussy who was only ever interested in winning arguments, he was left with no other option than to take shelter inside.

In a perfect world, she would have lost her voice long before she got to him. In Charles's world, he could tell she'd escalated to shouting. He'd have to go in further so the echoes would drown her out.

So that's what he did.

It wasn't bad in there, actually. It smelled like wilted salad, but it was much cooler now that he was in the shade. As he continued, he imagined Lucille would be too chicken to follow him down the cave. For all her talk, she wouldn't go near anything remotely dark or clammy. No philosophical conquest would be worth trekking through a smelly old cave. And it did get smelly. It also got breezier, almost as though running its own modern day air conditioning.

The path curved a little clockwise. Dim lights indicated he'd come out the other end soon. Now that he was safely outside the range of Lucille's voice, he could look forward to his time cleaning up. He could admire the nature on the way as well. At least, that's what he thought before the dirt under his feet ceased, and what was left was something curvy and metal.

He paused. Just in case he might have been imagining things through his boots, he knelt and touched the ground. He was on some kind of metal grating. What was that doing in a cave? Was it something they needed to keep the cave from collapsing under the weight above it?

Maybe that was it. He stood and continued on his way, only to discover what he thought was the exit was actually light from a pair of fluorescent fixtures near the roof.

There was electricity down here? He had to be imagining this. They were low enough for him to reach up and touch. Sure enough, they were man-made light fixtures. It was almost absurd to see that someone had gone to the trouble of installing these things inside a cave. Who'd be spending enough time down here to even need this meagre bit of light?

Curiosity was the new driving force behind his venture. The map app hadn't diverted its directions. Maybe he'd be picking up trash around some kind of underground military base... No, that was ridiculous. No self-respecting army would let a school volunteer their student body to show up just to pick up garbage. Any soldier who littered would probably spend sweeping and mopping.

Whoever was down here had placed these sets of lights at ten foot intervals. Yup. Not only had they built lights into this cave, they'd managed to generate enough power to get several dozen running. It wasn't a ton of power - a dense fog clouded what little good they did - but there was power nonetheless. Did they run on batteries? That sure would have been a waste. No way would they still be running, unless the batteries had been put in recently.

His footsteps echoed now. Was the cave broadening out? He could also hear something humming. Maybe it was the power source running the lights. It seemed to be getting colder as well. He'd been walking for ten minutes, and the location was getting stranger by the foot. Most people would have turned around and gone home, not caring about any snide remark their rival had in store. Maybe Lucille had given up herself and gone home.

He had just decided to brave her remark when an echo-free voice spoke up over the hum. "As I said, it's better than-"

Charles turned about face. Further into the cave he ran. Ten or so steps later, the floor gave out under him, and he fell towards a ground he couldn't see.

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"I shouldn't have run. I definitely shouldn't have run. This flooring must be older than world war I. It couldn't uphold the likes of a beagle. Here I was worrying my phone battery wouldn't last and I'd evaporate into a statistic: children who went missing on some superstitious mountains. I may do that anyway, and then Lucille will be the only one around to tell my story. This doesn't bode well for her. What's a cliffhanger doing inside this cave anyway? Wouldn't all the mountain on top be too heavy for it?"

He said all this to Carolinus while hunched over a brick wall. Carolinus contemplated his words while sucking his thumb and coddling a blanket. Let the boy have his comfort items and habits. Those are the only thing we have in the world to keep us from going crazy.

He pulled out his thumb to observe, "There's a difference between good deeds and good will. One has to come before the other, you know."

"Excuse me? Is that what we were talking about just now?"

Carolinus was about to orate a dissertation on the sanctity of life when a mosquito interrupted. It was then Charles knew he was dreaming. In real life, Carolinus would have glanced at it with only a moment's distraction, whereas here, he pulled out a baseball glove and smacked it.

Lightning struck.

Charles sat bolt upright, nowhere near Carolinus or any brick wall. Instead, utter fuzzy darkness surrounded him. He was stiff, but none of his bones were broken. No, he would have learned if any were right when he sat up. The damp papery flooring must have broken his fall. That wasn't the only thing that broke, he thought upon discovering his phone's shattered screen. Where was he supposed to go now? Where was he in the first place?

Little by little, his eyes adjusted. There were precious faint lights from periodic street lamps. The ones that worked, anyway. Even if they still had any power, they were dim and flickering. This place had a rather pronounced gas station smell about it, though no vehicles of any kind were in view. It was a large metropolitan area. Large urban buildings rose far above him and vanished amidst the fog. In spite of the lightning, there was no thunder that followed after. Alongside a faint, whispering wind, there were some distant metallic sighs, like steam rushing through pipes.

Something brushed by his leg - a newspaper page. He definitely had a litter pile to thank for making his plummet survivable. Garbage carpeted the street. In fact, the only way he could tell there was a street at all was through the presence of so many buildings. Grocery boxes, plastic bottles, used tissues and napkins, discarded laundry, broken electronics and more covered every last inch. Although there wasn't much of a breeze, lighter items fluttered and rolled along the curb like leisurely pedestrians.

He began to sweat just thinking about cleaning these streets. Was this where they were supposed to meet? If so, where was everybody else? They'd probably given up and gone home. If his phone hadn't busted, he could have checked the school website to see if the whole thing had been called off. It would take more than a class of middle schoolers to get anywhere with this dump. You'd need a whole city.

Another lightning strike let him glimpse his surroundings. It was a split second glance, but that was all he needed. The buildings were dirty and dilapidated. The closest one, a dress shop, was missing its door and the display window was cracked. Its dresses were scattered throughout the floor. The few that hung on hangers were as dirty as those on the floor. They'd also had holes torn through them. They bore a striking resemblance to an old bedsheet he'd struggled to turn into a trick or treat costume, the kind that only got you rocks.

He had to find a way out. Surely whoever settled here had to build a way to get down here. He just had to find it. Yeah, just. He watched his feet as he made his way to the sidewalk - there might be some cables or cords to trip over. As he made his way forward, more lightning flashed without thunder, revealing the buildings he passed. Every last one of them looked like the victim of looters and vandals. If the windows weren't broken, then the doors were either missing or hanging on by a single hinge. There was something suspiciously nauseating about it, like a bone or an organ in a place it didn't belong.

Rarely did this lightning (if that's even what it was without the thunder) cut through the fog. He knew these buildings loomed high and large. He could feel a prickle of exposure. What he couldn't feel

was whatever wind carried the trash along. He perspired, but it didn't necessarily feel hot down here. At least, it didn't feel like there was heat alone. It was more like a feverish mixture of warmth and chilliness, accentuated whenever the wind lifted its voice a little.

He stumbled over something but quickly regained his balance. How did that happen? Wasn't he watching where he was going? But his frustration over the incident dissolved when he saw it was a flashlight. Did it work? Yes - it penetrated all the darkness left by the meagre streetlamp light. The clearer view of the street showed him he was on a somewhat tidier street. There was still trash, but not so much that it hid the asphalt.

Maybe tidying up a little wouldn't be such a waste of time after all. He couldn't pick it all up by himself, but maybe someone really was watching him. They'd see his earnestness, and find in it the inspiration to join in, to call in others. A clean street is not a lost cause. No good deed should go unrewarded.

Before he began, he would need a trash bin. Perhaps there were no public trash bins here, and that's why it all ended up on the street. No - there was one, but it was full. Overfull. Its contents already spilled out. Several yards down was another trash, but it was also spilling. So was the next one, and the one after that. By the eleventh, it was safe to assume that there were no empty trash cans left.

If there were people around to litter, there should have been people around to collect the garbage. Was there no landfill down here? Oh... yes there was. He was standing in it.

A crack and crumble, akin to stones tumbling down a loose-terrain slope, got his attention. Had a piece of the building just fallen off? If it had, there was no sense looking for the evidence in its already ramshackle state. It did give him the idea to check inside for a personal trash bin though. He just so happened to be in front of a barber shop. There had to be one inside. And while he was at it, he needed a broom and dustpan as well. No doubt he'd find broken glass in a place like this.

Nobody had swept the place after the last few customers. The checkered linoleum floor was covered with hair from at least six different kinds of people. Surely the trash here wouldn't be full too, would it?

As Charles searched around, electrical wires seemed to fizzle behind the wall. Maybe this place would have electricity. Before he found any light switch or breaker, though, he discovered his broom and dustpan near the back. The dustpan, hallelujah, was the kind with a handle. That would make things easier on his back.

He never did find the breaker box, but he wouldn't need to. There was a trash bin under the receptionist desk. It wasn't empty; it was about halfway full of hair. He almost overturned it before wondering what kind of message that would send to anybody watching. Come to think of it, would anyone be inspired to help tidy the streets after they saw their only role model walk out of a store with a trash bin and cleaning supplies he didn't ask permission for?

But he wouldn't take them far. He'd sweep up the nearest trash, then borrow another set of supplies from the next building over. Assuming they had any supplies.

As he left the store, something collapsed behind him with a clank. He checked. Whatever had fallen wasn't apparent among the mess that was already there. Nothing followed after. It left the wind to its whispering.

It gave him the jitters. Now his hands were trembling enough that the flashlight threatened to fall and break. Nevertheless, he gripped the broom and began sweeping until the dustpan was completely full, and he emptied it out into the trash.

It didn't take long to fill it up, at most maybe two and a half minutes. It was a rather paltry window for anyone to look out and take inspiration. From what he could tell, it didn't look any cleaner even in that one spot. Stray papers and plastic still breezed along the minor clean patch he'd just created.

He stood long enough to catch the sound of wild scurrying, though from which direction, he couldn't tell, but it prompted him to find a new spot he could clean up. He'd need another trash can, though. One bigger than the one from the barber shop would be ideal.

Just a few doors down, he found a pizzeria. Jackpot! Restaurants always had the tallest trashes, supposing they weren't those stylized ones with cartoon characters you needed a key to open. Yes, it would take him a good 10 minutes to fill up one of those, and in that time, any number of people could look out their window at him and see what a steadfast steward---

For a moment, he thought there was someone in there. Someone naked. A tall peachy figure stood in his flashlight beam facing away from him. It took him a moment of staring stunned and paralyzed to see the strange segmentation of its legs. It wasn't a person, but a stage robot with felt skin. Though the felt was faded pink, it had blotchy brown stains all around it that looked like bruises. Stitches held patches together in odd asymmetrical places. Whoever put this thing together barely had any idea of what they were doing. What's more, was it wearing a straight jacket?

Good grievy! Charles darted away. He wanted great lengths between him and whatever that thing was. It had turned - ever so slightly, but there was no mistaking it or the accompanying creaking, like a pair of gears struggling to turn towards one another.

His hasty retreat made him forget to watch his feet, so he tripped and lost his grip on the flashlight. It bounced and cracked its glass against a mailbox. Charles had a few seconds to mourn before lightning struck again and he witnessed a crude drawing on an alley wall - a team of tribal huntsmen surrounding a giant hairy creature. Probably a mammoth.

There was no sign of anything coming after him, no footsteps or anything, just those metallic sighs and groans. His fear subsided a little. Still, his will to do good, especially with no one to assist him, went the way of the dinosaur as well. He was done here. He sought what he should have from the start - a way out.

If he just walked straight long enough, he was sure to meet the cave wall. However big this cavern was, it was still an underground cave. No one could build a city this big without going back and forth to get resources for it. That meant hauling things through a big elevator. Unless, of course, all the resources came from this level. If there were some kind of factory or manufacturing plant here underground that let them put this place together, there'd be no need to go up to the surface.

Charles's mind fought against that. He'd get back to where he came from. That industrial hum was the sound of an elevator somewhere. He didn't know exactly where to find it, but there was definitely one down here. Just... where were the people? Did everyone around here just retreat to the top floor of every building? Come to think of it, even if he did come across another person, there would be no reason to think they'd be interested in picking up trash. A place where every establishment had missing or broken doors was a place where looters and marauders made their hideouts. Kind of weird when there was nobody to hide from in the first place.

A trash can toppled nearby, and something scurried from it. Towards Charles. He sped his way across the block. From what he could see under the dim streetlamp, nothing was actually chasing him. He slowed a bit just in time to bump into a trash bin. A rather small one. He caught it just in time to keep it from toppling.

Wait, was this the one he'd borrowed from the barber shop? He lowered his boot into it. It couldn't be. This one had less trash. In fact it had no trash. What it had was...

...hair.

The faint wind began to sound like screaming from a mute man's throat.

The lightning flashed again, only this time it was accompanied by a whistling cry. He looked up and glimpsed something he truly hoped was just his imagination. It looked like the silhouette of a giant rat pawing at something in the air. The lightning returned without casting any shadows, but Charles knew he'd seen something in the first go around.

Quick eager scampering charged in his direction. He could be sure that whatever was coming had more than one pair of legs. He didn't wait to confirm it. He swiveled and ran inside the nearest building.

There was no protecting himself without a door to shut and lock. Even if there were, he had no idea who or what else might be in here. What choice did he have? He stumbled around in the dark, over furniture. He wasn't sure what kind of place he was in, even considering whatever he tripped over. He felt his way towards an alcove and squeezed himself into a corner.

Without anything to physically obstruct it from reaching him, Charles still trembled with that exposed feeling. Burying his head between his knees, He prayed with all his soul this thing didn't have night vision or a profound sense of smell. He was sweating now. That would be a dead giveaway. He couldn't smell himself from his current position, nor did he dare raise his arm to check. If he did give

off any odor, there'd be no disguising it. His only recourse was to wait like a child under bedsheets awaiting the sunrise.

After a few minutes, his nerves calmed a little. He took some refuge in the idea that this creature might not be out to hunt him. Otherwise, it would have found him by now. He looked up. Maybe it was light enough to understand what kind of building he was in. A cluster of buttons glowed on the wall to his right. He was in an elevator.

A working elevator. Absolutely! Those buttons wouldn't glow if there were no power. He heaved himself up and pushed the button to the highest floor. The doors groaned a bit before leaving their frame; this thing clearly hadn't been used in ages, but it was working. The gap between the doors narrowed one inch after another.

Then there was a lightning strike.

This one, much unlike the earlier ones, came in short, flickering intervals, bright enough to illuminate what Charles could now identify as an old-fashioned hotel lobby based on the check-in counter and a row of boxes for the room keys.

But his attention centered on something else, something tall and pointy, crouching over only a few yards away. Charles fell backwards and gasped. He couldn't take it back, he'd made his presence and position known. The pointy thing's face jerked towards him. He couldn't see what it was, only that its eyes lit up with the lightning flash. They were vomit yellow. They first seemed directed just above Charles's head, but they quickly dropped down to his eye level. Charles was hit with a dull, sick terror, as the lightning ended and all of his surroundings went black. Scattered nails clacked on the floor before him, getting closer, louder, closer.

The doors closed together, and the elevator ascended. All he could do was wait for the dim glow of the buttons to return. Was he alone in the elevator? He stuck out his legs. The thing hadn't made it in. He was alone, ascending to the top floor.

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More than once, he thought he saw eyes peering through what little space the elevator doors allowed - pink, hungry eyes starving to gain access. All the same, the elevator never halted its steady climb to the top floor. He had no plans for what to do once he got there, only that he was happy to leave the ground and his stalker.

All he could do now was slump to the back wall and wait. It took a while, but his relief eventually dwindled into anxiety. Just what pray tell would he do when the elevator doors reopened? If the size of that thing was as big as the lightning made it look, all he would do would be to get closer to its mouth, its jagged yellow teeth, its slopping jowls.

A harsh thud struck him alert and wary. The elevator had collided with something. Now it tilted on its side - he slid towards the left wall. There was nothing to grasp onto - if the cable had snapped, he'd plummet all the way back to the ground floor and be at the mercy of that creature, if he even survived the fall.

The elevator fell completely on its side and the doors fell off. Two weak fluorescent lights outside gave him enough light to see that he'd made it up to some kind of tunnel. He crept his way over the fallen doors and recognized them to be the same kind of light fixtures that led him down the cave in the first place.

Was he back up to the surface? There wasn't much power left in those lights. If anything, they appeared to be fading. Charles stood up and reached for them, and they went out completely. Where they had been was now nothing but damp mossy stone wall.

For a moment, he was tempted to check behind him to see if the elevator doors had disappeared too. Then he remembered Lot's wife - checking back could lead to a 30-story drop that would leave him nothing more than a pile of salt. He followed the cave wall in the opposite direction.

A few turns and the entrance came into view, yellow evening light spilling onto the ground. He didn't need guidance any more. He took off and emerged into familiar mountain flora.

"Well well well. If it isn't good deed Charles. Did you get the satisfaction of a charity lottery?"

There, too, was Lucille, reminding him of his wasted efforts. He must have looked like a pig pen. It must have been at least half an hour sweating down there, collecting dust and fog grime while begging for a chance to do something worthwhile. Did it even have a point? He'd lost his phone and a good chunk of his dignity, not to mention anything that would have been left of his innocence and trust of school programs. Building a whole city just to dump trash in there, let a titanic parasite in, and abandon it. Then leave it open for a child to wander in and nearly get lost down there forever.

He saw that Lucille still had the essay with her. "No," he replied, "but I did get this."

He snatched it from the clipboard and tore it in half.

She gaped at him a moment before finding her detestable tongue. "Hey! What gives you the right?"

All he could do was shrug. "Dunno. But I sure got it."