

BA

To the Left
Brendan Abernathy

The sand is cool between your toes as the grimy bits grind into the soft parts between the big and the index and the roughness of the bottom of your feet feel far insufficient compared to the grit beneath you, while the tops remain lit by the full moon that towers off your right shoulder over an immense plain of darkness that reveals by its constant hum to be the ocean. You are on a beach.

You pick and plant one foot after the other, reliving each time the glory of the molding of the sand beneath your toes. The wind whips up from the ocean and blows your hair leftward, leaving your forehead coolly exposed as your eyes begin to water a bit due to the chill of the fast moving air. Your natural response is of course to turn away, and so a couple blinks later you are ready again to continue your journey to wherever the night takes you. And so with you, you carry the salty touch of the ocean air on your tongue and the sandy stiffness in your leg hair.

You look back and there behind you are your footsteps, one after the other, until sight and sand go no more. They wind a bit, but for the most part have stuck the course.

Oh how perfectly blissful! to be treading with the wind from the ocean that lay beneath the moon to your right, the rough but smooth sand beneath you, nothing but the slowly disappearing marks you have left behind you, and endless sand awaiting your foot's discretion in front of you.



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Yet all this time you had paid no mind to what lay ashore, to the inland.

Immediately to the left lay a small city of lights, each brilliant and exciting. And they are each illuminating what seems to be a whole world of fun that is calling your name – ice cream, candy, and surf shops; kebab, souvenir, and corndog stands, and amidst the attractions are people, all of them going about their business, you feel certain in a carefree way. A teenager tries a kick flip on his skateboard to impress the onlooking girls – to no avail you notice – as the young ladies are unimpressed. An old woman putters through a held door with a nod at the doorman, who bows kindly. There's big groups and small, loners with headphones and socializers with hyperactivity. You hear a restaurant's music – a bass-heavy mix it would seem – and street musicians beating on PVC pipe hoping for a tip. Surely you would give a struggling musician some spare change, no? Overall though, it all sounds exciting and loud. You can smell the boiling peanuts and the freshly pressed chocolate crepes and even the corndog stand seems to be letting off something fine. Everything to the left is ever inviting.



So naturally to there you veer.

Now this is an unconventional story with an unconventional narration, so naturally it is going to have an unconventional ending. What is unconventional is that I have taken you, the reader, and placed you in my own microcosm and I have no deception: you are the protagonist of this story. Therefore, while I am the writer, you are the character. While I created the scene and brought you into it, you choose the tone of my voice and the meaning of my words. While I know where each plot of sand will lead you, you may

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choose freely, and I will finish either story – unique and different, yet the same. While I know the ending, you determine the path.

As a result, you have two options for the end of this story:

1. You may continue your path into the lights, the music, the smells, and the welcoming people.
2. You may redirect your path to continue walking down the beach with the sea to your right and the land to your left.

All I tell you, as the narrator, is this: whichever path you choose, I will still tell you the story.

Option A (for the sake of continuity, choose this one for now):

As you draw nearer to the crowded streets you begin to notice something peculiar about the people. One group doesn't seem to be going anywhere or doing anything in particular. They are just dilly-dallying about, following each inviting whim as it whips past. Yet the other group is dogmatically in pursuit. Of what you cannot tell, but their eyes are fixated on the path ahead, their feet on the step on the furthest horizon.

Regardless, neither seems particularly happy to you. You see a family leaving the candy shop with momentary bliss, until two of the siblings begin bickering over who gets the sprinkled side of the candied apple. That same man that was holding the door is now walking head hung, eyes downward, fiddling on his phone. Actually, yes, that seems to be quite a theme. Many of these people are looking down at their screens. It's amazing they are not colliding!

...

After a few hours of walking you come to two kiosks each with a man dressed in a sharply tailored tuxedo, with a red bowtie and cummerbund.

“Good late evening, my friend. How may I help you? Have you any questions I might answer?”

Well of course now you might ask any multitude of questions about this mysterious city you have entered having its equal amounts of carefree and driven people, all sorts of phone-users, and other people you have noticed in your time there – those drifting from

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club to club, couples young in love and old in coexistence, street musicians who are thankless (and those who are *thankful* too, but those are far less memorable), and uppity folk who could not possibly be as important as they seem to think they are. “Well, uh, let me think,” you might say, and then, “Oh, yes I do have a—”

“Question! Yes I have a question for you, my friend,” but the second man won’t let you get it out!

“And what it is that, my friend?”

“Just where does this oddball think it hails from, walking around, analyzing everything, and even having the audacity to ask questions!”

“Well I couldn’t tell you. Perhaps we should ask. Where do you come from?” one of the men directs his question to you.

You will of course answer somewhere other than the city you are in now, but regardless of your answer, I assure you the men shall reply mockingly:

“Ah yes, we should have known you were not from here. But if you plan on staying long, you must choose a package that we sell to you, each directing you down a different path. Everybody picks one or the other.”



“And what are my options?”

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“My friend, you must choose wisely, for only one option is right for you. One will surely lead to unhappiness and bitterness with the choice you have made.”

Now, if you are anything like me you are presently overcome with exactly what the man has predicted (regret)—however, not over the decision ahead but over the decision in the past. You are simultaneously drowning in self pity for not staying on the beach, realizing that you cannot undo the past and must push onward, and contemplating which route will lead to the most happiness and which will lead to your inevitable doom. And so you begin to sweat and focus on the decision ahead of you.

...

There is of course another way to react. You still are extremely sorrowful for not remaining on the beach and you still realize the importance of this decision, but unlike the other option, you find yourself saying, “Screw it. I’ve gotta choose, so I’m gonna get moving.”

Again regardless of your choice, one of the men at the kiosk lays before you your options. “Now don’t stress too terribly much my friend, he is far exaggerating. In reality, we can’t even assure you that one option is right for you, so really the decision should not be that tough. You will figure it out as you go. Even better, we will tell you what the other option would have held once you have selected a package!”

... Wonderful.

“Well to our right, you have the comfortable East, with ease, goodness, and effervescence.”

“And between us lay the adventurous West, with glamour, gold, and everything you could ever want!”

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Honestly, both seem like pretty solid options. Take your time, for this decision is a big one – what will you seek the rest of your life?

As you ready yourself to buy the package from the men for West or for East (again it is up to you), you notice another package that they have not told you of off to the left. It's not being sold by the men at the kiosks in the tuxedos, and the man surely has no sales pitch.

It is offered by a cardboard sign held by a homeless man, who before you had paid no mind to, and it reads, "This way to the beach."

As the men catch you looking that way, they scramble, "Hold up now there, you, don't go looking over there. These are the packages you want to invest in! I know there's risk, but there's reward and—"

"And we will throw it in at a discount!"

You know your heart is yearning, but for what? Surely it longs for the security that can be provided by the one, but it also secretly covets the riches of the other. It most definitely desires the "goodness" of the East – which you read in the fine print to be *morals, food, pleasure, and more*, but it also inwardly likes the idea of having *everything you could ever want* in the West.

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But for some reason you can't keep your mind off that bearded man, and to him you walk, leaving the banter behind.

"Good day, sir."

"Evening. How have you enjoyed your time thus far?" the raggedy lump asks with a growl and a spit of his tobacco into a small cup he holds.



"Well, it's been just fine, I guess, sir. Yeah quite good." For of course no one ever asks questions such as that *truly* looking for an answer. Just a good way to get you talking. "And you?"

"Me? Well, I've been here a good deal longer than you, seen a good deal more goings and comings, and, to be honest, seen far too many buy one of those packages from the kiosk without ever paying no mind to me, so—"

"Well, I can give you some change sir if that's what you're after."

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“No, no that’s not what I’m getting at. I was saying that I seen men and women, young and old, walk up to that booth yonder and with no mind to what was ‘round ‘em become so hell bent on the purchase that they don’t notice all *this*.” With ‘this’ he gestured in a way that implied obviousness, dipping his head outward, tucking it within his shoulders that lifted his arms sideways with palms raised to the sky.

And there around you, you now notice what he is talking about.

“Ya see, everybody comes to this city by choice, and by damn, everybody can leave when they wish. You yourself walked past dunes four times, a humble ensemble of choirmen singing the Beach Boys twice, and this thicket here just now.

“You have to understand that this place has its way with a man’s mind. It throws candy and gifts and those damned corndogs at you until you have nearly forgotten about the beach. Then you begin to notice the people, some without a care and others with only one, and you can’t understand what is going on or where you are or more importantly, where you come from.

“Then the only thing that actually makes you remember where you came from is the regret when you finally get to these damned kiosks, where it’s time for you to choose – shackled to success or anchored by apathy. And sometimes even that doesn’t jostle the hardest of the heads.”

“Which did you choose?”

“Neither. I chose the beach because I still remembered it. I saw the signs around me pointing me home.”

“So why are you still here?”

“To point you home.”

And here you are, toe to shin with a homeless man and a cardboard sign, three roads before you, regret behind you, and the pressures of conformity on each side. *Which path will you choose?*

“One more thing, youngster. I’m not here trying to sell you some *package*. The road home only requires *your* decision, but I can’t tell you what lies on your way.”

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“What was on yours?”

“Hunger, hurricanes, poverty, and the storms of my battle with aggression.”

“So what’s your purpose here?” You ask, and while you speak, you subconsciously begin to back towards the kiosks, which seem more enticing by the moment. “To lure people into the same pain you experienced?”

“Destiny calls, child. Answer.”

Now, for the second time in this story, you have a decision to make, but this time there are three roads instead of just two. And after this, you may assume, you will have more decisions to make, and each one might be between two choices, three, or even seven. Regardless, you must choose, and again, I will tell you your story despite your decision.

But for the sake of brevity, here ends this story as you choose your path:

To the East:

If you choose to buy the package that leads to the East, you will end up with a nice life, make a good living, and have stints of prolonged happiness plagued by periods of great trial. But that’s life. You will live in the city all your life, sometimes traveling other places for vacations with your family, but all the time you will gladly call the city home. You will scoff at “those rich folk” who chose the West, commenting, “I could have had that too if I was so self-conceited and only cared about money.” Yet sometimes, you have regret as you remember what the men at the kiosks told you; “You will never live this down! You could have been successful!” In short, if you choose the East, you will be like those people walking around the city without a care in the world; from the outside all is well, but inside you churn in turmoil, as you can’t quite figure out what leads to perfect happiness.

To the West:

If you choose to buy the package that leads to the West, you will end up with a big life, get rich, and always be experiencing noteworthy memories, yet also constantly being

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drug face down in the dirt by the desire for more. You too will live in the city all your days, and the days you travel out your heart will still be with your work. You will frown at “those meager persons” who bought the East, remarking, “If I had been less motivated and driven, I might have ended up like that too.” Yet everyday you secretly covet the East, as you remember what the men at the kiosks warned; “You will never be able to return! You could have been happy!” In reality, if you choose the West, you will be like those people on a fixated pursuit; from the outside you are living the dream, but inside you always wonder what could have been and what could have not if you would have followed your heart instead of your head.

To the Left:

If you choose to accept the offer of the bearded man, he will take your hand and show you the way. Through the thicket you march, trudging through sludge and weeds and briarthorns, and you instantly can't help but wonder if you have messed up.

“You see that dim light through there? That's what you follow. Don't step in any direction other than where that light leads you.”

“Where is it taking me?”

“To the beach.”

“That can't be that far off, can it?”

“Maybe not or maybe so. I know nothing of your path. The light only shows you where to step next, not where you'll be in a while.”

But I know your path and everything that is on the way, and I tell you, my character, that even if you falter, even if you turn back and run to the city, I will still tell you your story; your amazing, beautiful, unique story. There will be moments when you wish you had gone for riches and there will be times when you wish you had reached for comfort, but I assure you that through it all I will be there, with hands firmly on your back and whispers softly in your ear. Even when it seems so dim that you cannot see it, once your eyes adjust to the darkness around you, there will be my light, one step in front of you, and even when it seems foolish as it did that day at the kiosks, take the step.

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And this is my promise, this is Option B:

*One day you will reach the beach,
And all that befell you will be naught;
All that troubled you will be fought
And defeated, as you lock eyes, with all you ever sought,
All you ever wanted and all you ever desired,
One day in your life, will be acquired.*

*And as you bound in the foam, shin deep in the waters,
The teeth that beam white shine joyful and thoughtful.
For your newfound freedom will leave you no choice
But to fall to your knees and try out your voice.*

*From a robber in the night comes one final theft:
To steal your life from the lights to the left.*

Two wrongs don't make a right, but two lefts make a 180.

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