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	Slightly	
	Younger Friends	
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	The	
	Loneliness	
	Thief	

Wisdom comes with age. Fact. Time seems to heal all wounds. Fact. Time seems to cure all pains. Fact. Time does many things and the sad thing is, one cannot take back time. It just keeps in one direction. And one has only to keep pace. Or not.

He was at the ambiguous age of around fifty. No longer right in the middle. Somewhere, a little above and beyond. Not young for sure. But definitely not old. Or old enough to be considered old. Married. But no children. Whether by choice, or by timing, the opportunity had missed them somehow. No children, but they were, for the most part, a happily married, somewhat responsibility free couple who spent time enjoying the things they did enjoy. Crafts, hobbies, small projects that kept them going. Not necessarily a part of the rat race, but perhaps participants of a mouse race? Enough money to survive. And enough schedule capacity to find those things that occupy the time. And continuing to seek those things that could pleasantly occupy the days and this precious time outside of work.

He had a fairly steady job. Actually, extremely steady. One of those jobs where he could not be fired unless he did something drastic. Something dramatic. He had only to clock in. Say the right things. And go through the motions. Everyday. Do these specified tasks, carefully, correctly and all would be good in his world. A good salary. Not outstanding. But definitely not at the bottom end of the scale. Just enough to supply them with the fuel to live and live comfortably. Not having children too, only added to the impact or scale of the things they could do with such a salary. It was definitely more than enough to live.

But with old age comes wisdom. Old age sometimes brings new thoughts. Or perhaps old thoughts. One or the other, thoughts come and there is no way to stop them. They just come and one has to be ready for when they hit you. Because they sometimes do hit you. Their decision to not have children was a serious one. For the most part it was him. He had seen, over the years, a kind of vicious cycle. And he knew he did not want to continue this vicious cycle. He himself knew acutely that he for sure would be a terrible father. A selfish man. With only his basic interests at the front and center. For all his efforts and love and care for his wife, he could sometimes still mess this up. And he who has trouble maintaining stability with such a loving wife, well, how could such a person raise another human being? Let alone two? Three? How

could such a man be the home, the foundation, the rock for a group of human beings? He knew he would fail. And he knew he was not alone. The vicious cycle had to stop. And he was going to stop it.

He had seen this time and time again. His father, politely put, was there but not there. There in body. But not there in spirit. Not there in mind. Could he remember a single, memorable conversation with his father? It was tough to. Extremely challenging to even recall a conversation extending past the ten minute mark with his father. There were moments. Terse moments when fragments, small bits of information were exchanged. Fragments of talk that went back and forth. But was this a conversation? Was this a meaningful conversation? Was there meaning to this interaction? Very hard to say.

And this was not just him. Again, he was not alone.

He had seen this time and time again. His friends often discussed their home/family lives. And how they all knew, that deep down inside, their children greatly disliked them. And how they would come home, as outcasts, within their own homes. He had heard this story a million times. It just seemed normal. He heard this when his wife would sometimes discuss her relationship with her parents. It was rough. The years of criticism. The years of one directional communication. The constant heaviness of their expectations. Their requirements for your future. Even his father's father, he could remember, as similarly being a man there but not really there at the same time. There was a lack of communication and these all create a relationship that could be tertiary at best. One level removed from an active, moving relationship with real, palpable back and forth. Exchange. Nope. No exchange.

And so why continue this vicious cycle? At what point would it need to continue. He knew he would continue it. He had little confidence in many things in life. Little confidence in his work. Little confidence in any of his abilities. Little confidence as a human being. Or in his ability to be even mildly successful at anything in particular. But he was extremely sure about one thing. He was extremely confident about one thing. And that was the fact that he would be a poor father. It was almost as if written in stone. A sure shot. A given. And he knew it. He was the kind of man that sometimes people think, should not have kids. Again. He knew it.

But now, at this ambiguous age, the second thought had changed position and become first thought. Now at this age, where

child bearing no longer was a possibility, he began to wonder. Was such confidence in poor fatherhood, and a desire to end the quote unquote vicious cycle, the wisest thing in the end? For sure it was. It had to be. Logically. It all still makes sense. And, had he had the ability to play back time. To make that decision again, he would most surely do it again. For sure. But now, with age, with old age, these second thoughts. They come now like ants. Lots of them. Over and over. Second thoughts trying really hard to be number one. And succeeding.

Children? No children? As old age enlarged his sight radius, he began to see things that were foggy before. No children? He began to see those who had similar decided for no children. And he began to see that without children, who was really there to care for you into old age? Who will be there to make the final decisions that lead you into the grave and hopefully, wherever it might be next that you would go? Not that all children actually do such things. But when there are no children, such options do not exist.

For him, there was nobody really. Just him and his wife. And this was it. And in all honesty, this was fine for him. This was fine years ago. And it surely is fine now. But, he could not help but wonder. Was this the right choice. Second thought continues to overtake second thought into the first thought slot. Congratulations second thought.

What nonsense was this? Does that mean that the pure goal of having children would be to create somebody who would care for you in your late age? Nonsense. Absolute nonsense. Or was it? Was this the case for many parents? Was this an unsaid desire amongst those who did have children? One would never know. One of the things that stopped him years ago was similar thinking. Some parents had this desire to raise children in a kind of strange, vain manner in that they wanted to raise better versions of themselves. Or see themselves in somebody else. Or something along those lines. And he had no desire to do that. What would that mean to raise somebody in this world? To see yourself again? Genetically? Or to see something similar to yourself, come into this world? It did not make sense to him.

Sometimes his mother would say that without having children he would never understand the completeness of life. The total life cycle. And in some ways, this might be very true. And his current seeds of doubt, were very much sewn from such lack of knowledge. What did such things mean? What does it all mean in the end? There would be this cloud. This haze. This fog. Of this whole life process. And in such a

haze, how could ever one really know, what would be the right decision? Impossible.

And so he struggled. Everyday, through this haze, he would have these second thoughts, occasionally coming through the house, like bursts of wind on an open the windows day. Here and there. Not a full on pouring of wind. But just here and there, these moments that come sweeping in. And made him think.

But equally combatting this, combatting this haze, was his left brain. Trying to rationalize that it was the right thing. His decision was the right decision. It was time to end the vicious cycle. It was time to do the right thing and realize the truth. Actualize the truth. Realize an inevitable future that he had cleverly avoided. It all made perfect sense. Right?

What else. What else?

The concept of care giving was one that he always struggled with. His father, had vascular dementia. And had pretty much began to lose 'it' a good five years before his eventual death. And by lose 'it' I mean losing life, consciousness, cognition. And although he was not the direct care giver for his father, he had seen enough to know. Know how tough it was. Know how immense a situation it could be and all the damage it could cause. Was this the cycle of life? His parents also struggled to care for their own parents. It was a vicious cycle. His father now, in his old age and despite being a tall, proud and beaming figure of the family, was now an infant. A giant baby. To be cared for. To be carried. To be fed and to be looked after from morning until night. What is this? What meaning does this mean? Was this the cycle of life?

He vowed he would not do this. He would not be such a burden to anybody. He had often secretly hoped of perhaps just dying in his sleep. Or something very sudden. Not along the lines of suicide or anything like that. But a swift death would be best he thought. This was a very common wish and one he knew many of his peers shared. A quick end for a long life.

At this ambiguous age these thoughts, second thoughts, keep coming like ants. Swift death aside, what would those older years be like for him? The time, the large amounts of time on one's hands. What would you do with all that time? What could anyone do with all that time? Or worse yet, all that time but now alone? No children. Nobody to talk to. Nobody to care for him? Not having anybody to share this

time with or to extend to another generation? These kind of things had begun to sink into him. Sink into his thoughts, into his plans, into his morning routine. Made him think. Made him wonder. For sure.

Alone. Aloneness. Obviously, his wife would be with him. Or would she? This was a real fear as well. Would she be there? What if one of them happened to go earlier than the other? What if? This was petrifying. This was fear in a pure form. This was true aloneness. Years back such a thought had never occurred to him. Perhaps this was just being stupid. Poor in thinking. Young. Poor in foresight. Poor in every aspect. Again, wisdom comes with age. Or so they say.

His father-in-law would call several times a week. No calls lasting longer than seven seconds max. So it was never cumbersome. But it was frequent. And perhaps it was just to hear a voice. His father-in-law just wanted to hear the voice of somebody who was connected. Someone who was family. Perhaps it was, again, aloneness. He would call. And convey a wide variety of thoughts in those seven seconds. It is surely something the amount one can convey in seven seconds. And in repetition, it goes deeper. Trips, food he ate, things he saw, things he thoughts. The spectrum was as wide as it was deep. But one recurring theme began to take form in recent years. His father-in-law would often comment that his friends were all dying. Passing away, one by one. And he was now, very much alone. Aloneness.

So second thoughts had become first thoughts. And these thoughts, they would tell him everyday, ask him everyday, are you prepared for this time? Aloneness? Are you ready for this? Large batches of silence. A phone that does not ring. A phone with no numbers to call. Aloneness.

As happens sometimes with ambiguous ages, a change is necessary in order to stir things up. To shake things up. They would often take walks. It was their thing. Neighborhood walks. Nature walks. A way to exercise briefly, see the world, get out of the house, get some fresh air. It was their thing and it was something they did love. But something changed in recent times. These walks began to take on new dimensions. They began to explore new neighborhoods. They began to explore new restaurants. And for whatever reason, began to play where younger folk play. With time, neighborhoods become set in their occupants. Certain neighborhoods become youthful neighborhoods. Certain neighborhoods become domains of the old. Much like North

American caribou, watering grounds move as they move. Certain generations mix with certain generations. But certain generations stay within or with themselves.

And in these recent walks, they began to cross the divide. They began to go to areas where younger folks play. What reasons could exist for this? Some may assume, it was just to feel young again. And perhaps there was some truth to this. But in general, it seemed to be a very natural extension of the walk. Something that did not feel abrupt. Or out of the norm. Whatever it was, it just happened.

As with any walk, or series of walks, repetition leads to happenings. Repetition always leads to things. When one sees something over and over again, something always happens. And here, during these walks, they began to frequent places. Repeat customers. In their past walks, this would happen on occasion, but it was never a permanent thing. If for one thing, Korea is a place of great change. Rarely do you have a bar/pub/cafe that sits in one location for more than seven years. Very rare. Change is always in the air. But for the first time, they deliberately, and again, somewhat going with the flow, decided to return to certain spots on their walks. Perhaps it was to change things up. Perhaps it was an effort to see beyond what the neighborhood could be on a surface level. Whatever it was they began to be regulars. Begin to know to know the staff, begin to know the owner, etc. Again, nothing unusual, but not exactly a common thing in Korea. Especially for folks of this age.

There was one particular restaurant that felt just right. Whether it was the decor, the food or just that feeling that comes with atmosphere, one may never know? It just felt right and they began to attend in frequency. As with watering holes, stomping grounds, nests, the more you visit, the more you stop by, again, the repetition leads to happenings. The owner was a younger woman, who, memorizing all patrons, enjoyed the frequency of their visits. Perhaps she had business intentions at first, as with all establishment owners, but at the end of the day, birds of a feather, flock together. As they say. And as owner of this place, the decor, atmosphere, menu and everything they loved, was an extension of her. So it all made sense. The repeated visits, that is.

It could probably best be described as a somewhat 'hipster' type of restaurant. Meaning, very cool, perhaps surface level cool, or trying

to be very cool in every possible way. Under normal circumstances, this would be a great turn off for him and his wife. They preferred things that were not dependent on trends. Not dependent on things of the moment. But again, this place felt different. Trying very hard it did, yes. But the food, the ambiance. All of this was really nicely done. Period. The kids, and yes, you could call them kids, that hung out here, were wearing clothes they themselves would not wear next year. This was how hipsters worked. And they were ready for this. This was being hip. And this restaurant, in the same way, felt a same kind of non-classic-ness. A culture of now. He could honestly not say or be certain if this restaurant would be here the next year. In this place. With this atmosphere, with this menu. Nothing was certain. But this was fine for him. This was fine for them.

After many visits. They began to notice patterns. Not only the owner, but they would begin to see others. Other regulars. They too, now with multiple visits, had become regulars too. Greetings upon arrival. No need to look at the menu. Ordering from memory. Owner taking orders from memory. Or better yet, owner just confirming said orders with a smile or a slight nod. Just enough to get the communication across. And this again was nice. And what happens when such regularity occurs? When patterns repeat like this? This is how networks become networks. Circles become circles. Friends become friends. It takes often the third meeting up to the fifth meeting to see where and how one connects. Probably something akin to dogs smelling each other in strange locations, these meetings began to happen in such frequency that strangers now could be considered friends. A community of sorts? A society? Not explicitly, but somewhere in between. For sure.

And this group was younger for sure. A lot younger. Extremely younger? Not that much. But definitely, something in the range of a ten to fifteen year age gap. Would that technically be a generation? Not quite. But sometimes it felt like it. The differences existed for sure. Extremely palpable. But not overtly. Not enough to overwhelm. But just enough to overcome.

But this new generation. Something was different about this new generation that threw a wrench into this such thinking. This new generation, and particular this new generation of hip, was extremely

90s friendly. Was it the 90s themselves? From pop culture academics to pop culture icons from the 90s themselves, there was a common thought that perhaps the 90s were a kind of golden age. A heyday. Halycon days? Golden era? One pop cultural icon had laid blame on the year 2004 and the advent of the smartphone and the proliferation of the internet and internet culture. This new generation was incapable of creating pop culture. Or perhaps this new generation was able to satisfy themselves with the accessibility of all cultures on their phones and therefore creating a situation where no new culture was needed? This generation of hipsters was re-creating the 90s. From their musical tastes. To their clothes. To their interests in pop culture. The 90s were in bloom. And ironically, this might have been some kind of connective tissue. A link that was able to bridge this older couple taking walks with the young regulars of a small restaurant in a young neighborhood of Seoul. Some felt comfortable with 90s culture while the others were 90s culture through experience. From fine art, to music to pop culture references. There were so many connections. Radiohead sounded good then. It still sounds good now. Thom and jonny, were some kind of connective material. Like silicon for tiles, they were the bond that can bond.

And so the relationship with this place, with these regulars began to grow. Began to get deeper and more connective in ways that would have been unpredictable. And this was good. It was perhaps better this way actually. But there were always moments, when it truthfully did not feel exactly right. The age gap was sometime extreme. And even these kids, often admitted, they had never hung with folks this age. But they ultimately did not mind. He ultimately did not mind. As a couple they enjoyed it. Not because it made them feel younger or anything like that. But because it was not forced. Or at least he thought. It was genuine. And they loved it. He loved it. He had in a roundabout way, found friends. And nothing felt not right about it.

But someday, the logical side began to creep in. Sending more second thoughts and adding to the haze. As it always does. But he would sometimes sit at this restaurant, a few beers too many in, in those moments when to speak would not be the right thing. Instead, a nice time to look around the room. And observe. And think. Observe and think. And his mind would wander. Sometimes he would think immensely happy thoughts. And be thankful. But other days, he would

sometimes wonder, what on earth was he doing in such a place. How could he, this old man, be here, a generation removed, and be part of this place? Sometimes the thoughts would go darker. Was he one of those old guys, trying to be cool? Mid-life crisis? Frank the Tank from Old Skool? Trying to relive his youth? Or trying to be youthful by spending time with youth? Was he some kind of vampire? Absorbing youth? No. Definitely not he thought. But very fairly, anyone might think that. They were definitely the oldest folks in this room. By far. His grey hair would present red flags in any other context. But they were beyond that now. They had truly just become friends. But he would often think such things. What was he doing here with this group of younger folk. Younger folk who, by and with, any normal circumstances, would not wish to spend any time with him outside of such contexts? Right?

Two years into this new found group, the restaurant was still around. But as with time, had become less hipster-ish. Just a regular restaurant. But from day one, a restaurant with a good sense for everything. Food was again, just right. Atmosphere, again, just right. It was hip but now, slightly older hip. He would sometimes even wonder, was this partly their influence? Is this what happens when two old cats hang out in an alley? It just becomes like this? It becomes home? He sometimes couldn't help but think this because the restaurant just felt more right as time went on and with every visit. They were happy here.

The relationships had grown too. At first the odd couple. Saying jokes to silence. Generational jokes. Pop culture jokes. Things that at first made little sense to a generation that had no experiences with such content and such context. But eventually, a sense of what jokes to say, and what might connect instead of disconnecting conversations began to become the norm. They had found their peace. Their piece. Their peas. Somehow, whatever it was, it was working. He would often think about the strangeness of this and again, attribute it to some kind of sense? Or taste? What would be the right word for this? Somehow, things felt right, because there was nothing that went against the grain here. They had, in some ways, all grown together like dandelions. Whether it be a small crack in the concrete, or a pile of dirt in a discarded plastic container, they grew together. And it all felt right.

But there were always slight moments when he would still wonder. What was he doing here? They were the older friends for sure. Sometimes looked to for advice. Sometimes looked to for thoughts.

Sometimes just giving advice from the perspective of somebody who had experience. Experiences with this, experiences with that. And that was a very common thing. But all in all, there were no problems here. And they were happy to be of help or advice in any of these situations. There were the other random moments too when it just was quite transparent that they were the older couple. And they did not fit into all situations, or circumstances. They were definitely the odd ones out in many situations. But he knew this. He knew the reasons for this. He would often ask himself, would he spend time with somebody fifteen years older? The answer was often an affirmative no. And so he again, was just thankful to be in such company on any given night, on any given week of any given month.

His father-in-law would still call. And the conversations sometimes were getting shorter than the normal seven seconds. Somedays, he would now call and just say, 'It is so nice to just hear your voice, sometimes, call me when you can, it is again, so nice to hear your voice.'

Years later those second thoughts spoke once again. And instead of creating the haze that they normally do, they created a moment of clarity. He had realized, many years after the fact, he had done something none of his friends had rarely done if not ever. He had broken a generation divide. He had crossed the line from one generation into another. They were part of a community now. But part of a community a generation removed. A younger generation, but no less a member than anybody else. They were an integral part of a community and they had broken a divide broken rarely before. And in so doing, years later he realized, he had in some strange way, stolen his aloneness. He would die. It was coming. And it was closer than before. He would die for certain. But he would not die alone. He now could realize, and with great clarity, that day, whenever it may be, may be a day where he was surrounded. Surrounded by a group of friends who only had one thought. And that was to wish him well, on his way. He might now leave this earth with people around him. Something his father had not done, nor his father's father before that. He had perhaps quite unintentionally, stopped one of many vicious cycles in his life. It was comforting. It was peaceful. To know that this group of friends was still very much alive. All of them. And everyone of them. And now, on that day, all of them, each came to say goodbye. And all he thought again, 'it was so nice to just hear your voice.'

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