

Sip. Burn. Sip.

Maxim Ericson

You need to sign in to work at 6:30 am. It is 5:45. The train and the walk will take 40 minutes. One train leaves at 5:35; that's when you woke up. The next one leaves at 5:55. You continue to sit; sipping instant coffee. It's too hot and although you aren't rushing (like you should be) it brands your tongue. Sip. Burn. Think. You tell your legs to stand up and pack a bag; brush your teeth; shave - they don't. Sip. Burn. Think. It's a Tuesday. 5:50. It will take you maybe 3 minutes to walk to the station; it's right next to your apartment. Maybe two if you run down the stairs rather than waiting for the elevator. Sip. Burn - no, the coffee has cooled. Think. It's 5:53 and finally your legs act on their orders. Your mind continues to sit at the table. The table gives an angry wobble when you lift your arms from it. Your mind, disturbed by this, watches as you throw on your coveralls and run out the door.

It is 8:17 pm. Your legs walk through the door, and your mind jumps. Finally the body has returned home. Your legs are tired, but your mind watches as they stumble through the essentials before joining you in the chair. The stove: on. A pot filled with rice and water to sit on it. Chicken sliced timidly. Chopping board nudged towards the sink; covered in slime that will be caked on by the next morning. That's ok. You wonder what happened today at work. The legs don't bring you in anymore. They don't need you.

You need to sign in to work at 6:30. It is 5:45. The train and the walk will take 40 minutes. One train leaves at 5:35; that's when you woke up. The next one leaves at 5:55. You continue to sit; sipping instant coffee. Your legs don't want to stand up. They don't want to go to work, but you send them anyway. An unfinished coffee is left on the table, a chopping board uncleared in the sink. Your mind watches the legs go out the door. You make them leave early so that they don't have to run.

You decide today that you will follow the legs; see how they are doing at work. So you do. You follow from the back of your head, and see from a distance. A finger reaches out and presses a button. A minute later the doors slide open and you walk into the lift. As the lift hums down you slide forward towards your eyes, but as it shudders to a stop you snap back. Your legs carry you to the train station. You're too tired to be here. You should've stayed at home. The train screeches into the station. Its engine is electric and silent, but the brakes aren't well oiled. The sound nearly sends you flying out the back of your skull. The doors slide open to reveal a packed train. A packed train entering a packed station. You know you should let your legs drive you into the carriage, but instead you just stand there. You press

forward into the front of your head. Now with a full view of the station you see people streaming around you to squeeze onto the train; you see the empty eyes of people pressed against the windows; you see a pigeon's wings in a flurry as it comes back down to land on the rafters. You observe: The pigeon doesn't have a job, coffee branded on its tongue, an untidy neck beard, sore teeth. You take yourself home.

The razor has warm water running over it. Shaving foam drips in a line onto the collar of your coveralls. You take them off and they sit in a pile in the corner. The blade leaves a clean path as it works its way around your neck. Bits of hair stick to the sides of your sink. The blade moves to your face, and then clippers to your hair. You stare into the eyes in the mirror. As suspected you don't recognise yourself. You shower, calmly dry yourself, and brush your teeth. In your wardrobe you have a suit you save for interviews. You realise that doesn't matter. The pants are a slightly darker beige than the blazer. You carefully button your shirt, do your belt up to the 5th hole, and finally slide on your jacket. You look back in the mirror, but it's fogged up a little. You sit down and make another coffee; there is already milk powder in the coffee, but this time you add some of your fresh milk. The coffee is a pleasant warm temperature. The kitchen cleans itself and the wobble from the table disappears. It is 9:00 am and the phone rings. You dance a jarring waltz to the tone until it goes back to sleep. Although you just dressed up you get back into the linen pants you sleep in and drift back to bed.

It is 2:00 pm. Work is a distant memory, and you've just woken up. A warm cup of coffee makes itself while you spin around the kitchen. You sip your coffee and wonder what somebody does at home in the early afternoon. That sends you back into your pants and jacket and down the stairs onto the street.

You've never thought much of the streets before. When you enter them in the morning your head has always been sucked under a monsoon current. It drags your legs to the train station. Fighting the flow is futile. But now with a head above water, clear eyes and no current whatsoever, you can finally see. The streets are lined with trees whose gaze you've never returned before. As you glance up and down you give them an acknowledging look. It seems a bit silly but you look for a pigeon. Proof of something else free here. You don't see one.

Your legs carry you in the opposite direction to the train station. You've never gone this way before. There are cafés, but the tables outside are empty. The streets, in fact, are empty except for you. A bizarre peace; how many pairs of legs walk and sit in each building you

pass? You hear nothing at all, so you walk down more tree-lined streets. Brick buildings stretch into the sky. They feel like the walls of a maze. You continue to walk. Your legs have never been fresher.

You find the centre of the maze: A park. You can see the walls on all sides, but as soon as you walk in, surrounded by trees, the buildings disappear. Your legs carry you further in as your mind wanders. Fig trees stretch their arms to form a tunnel for you to walk through. The lindens that have stood solemn guard over the streets are having a family gathering just off the path. A grand oak watches as a mighty chestnut tree grows up beside him. Your legs feel at home walking on fallen leaves. In the centre of the park there is a clearing. It's large enough that you can see the brick towers that stand outside, but you feel safe and far from them. You see that there's an old man sitting at a table with a board and two jars. One is filled with black stones and one filled with white. You ask him what they're for, and he says "Go". He explains to you that it's an old game and that he'll teach you. You tentatively agree, but before he starts you see him toss some bread out of his bag onto the grass. Pigeons from the trees around fly down and start pecking; you hope that he won't shoo them away. You realise he is feeding them. It makes you smile. A smile that connects mind and legs.

There is a freedom that sweeps you away. The sun is warm on your back, and the man kindly teaches you a simple and complex game. You think: how many hours has this man sat here; feeding the pigeons and waiting for a friend to play Go? You ask and he says that he never waits long. He has taught many people the game, fed many pigeons, and says when no one is around the sun and the trees are his friends. He points out the building he lives in, and he says these days he doesn't spend too much time in the park: he doesn't need to. When he first found his freedom he took it right back into his own life.

You need to sign in to work at 6:30 am. It is 5:15. The train and the walk will take 40 minutes. One train leaves at 5:35; today you will be on it. You woke up earlier so your coffee would have time to cool. You carefully shave, and slide into your coveralls. You sit at your table and sip your coffee. You brush your teeth, and mind and legs walk out the door together; 10 minutes to spare. Tapping your foot on the tiles you wait for the lift but you're not in a hurry. On the street you smile to the trees and drift to the station. Train screeches in, and doors open; there's a little bit of space that's been set aside just for you.

While you're pulling out of the station you see a pigeon sent into the sky by the sound of the train. Your mind goes to follow the bird; to flap and glide and dive, but instead it stays with

the legs; cramped at the front of the train. You can bear living in a cage knowing that the key is in your pocket.