

WANDER

John Percival Berkley was named after his father, Johann Percival Berkley. John had always adored his father and gave him utmost respect, even more than what he gave his mother, Mary Percival Berkley. But it was alright with Mary; after all, which mother ~~didn't~~ doesn't want her son to have a healthy and prosperous relationship with his father? Moreover, Johann proved to be an excellent father and a brilliant role-model to all his six children. The family ran smooth and without much feuds and misunderstandings - than many. Their neighbours held a sense of admiration along with a bitter envy towards the Berkley family. But just as ~~there~~ there is a bump in any smooth road, the Berkley family was far from perfect. Though to an outsider's eye it wouldn't be easily apparent, everyone in the family ~~knew~~ knew that their family, just like any other, had its own short-comings and imperfections.

Being the eldest of Johann's six wards, John had grown up ~~to~~ with an ingrained sense of responsibility. ~~and~~ Maybe it was this factor, being the eldest sibling, that made him see things his sisters and brother couldn't see, and also to embark on a journey, the end of which was ~~correctly~~ easily imaginable by him.

John walked towards the ~~plz~~ subway platform. He knew what he had to do. Board the train ~~coming~~ due to arrive in two minutes, secure a seat, a gaze outside while his mind ponders on arriving at a conclusion as to why he was in the train, travelling to LA, ~~thousands~~ miles away from his hometown on a random Thursday morning. The train was late only by one minute and forty-seven seconds, John had counted. His agitated mind didn't allow him to do much more than that. Through the busy crowd, people around him, travelling to various places, ~~for~~ each his own errands, John entered a compartment, scanned the seats once over and chose the seat with least possible chances of sane human contact. ~~Out~~ Out the nearby window went his gaze, and along with it he let his mind wander. A memory from so long ago surfaced at the forefront of his mind, blurring the scenery he was viewing. It was from ~~thirteen~~ thirteen years back, a long-lost vision, from a compartment in a train, similar to the one he now sat in. John must've been five years old then - barely started registering memories - with his mother, two younger sisters and his father, travelling to LA. It was sunny and the view out the window was spectacular, greener and somehow, more brighter.

"Papa, why didn't you let me bring my bicycle along?" a sulky young John asked.

"Johann tore his gaze away from the newspaper he was holding and scrutinising, looked up over his rimless spectacles, a kind smile already in full bloom on his weary face. John remembers how old and tired his father had always looked and wondered why he never bothered to ask the man his real age (Johann had lied playfully, saying he was no more than thirty-two every time someone ~~of~~ inquired his age).

"Because, we're travelling in a train, John", said Johann to his still-sulky son.

"But what about when we get there? What then? I could've rode my bicycle after we reach there, wouldn't I?" John continued his rant.

"Well John, you could've yes, you could've rode your bicycle after we get down from the train. But sometimes, you must leave behind something small of your's



to get into something bigger.... " Johann said mysteriously, as if talking to someone ^{who were} his equal. He often forgot his children's age and said things they'd never understand at their age. But even so, John was satisfied with his father's answer. He felt important when his father, the well-respected man, took out some minutes to spare his doubts. ~~He~~ John knew he ~~it~~ hadn't entirely understood what his father just told him, but he felt that it was the right answer and that was enough.

A sudden burst of sound ^{from} somewhere nearby, which, ~~was~~ John realized was from a wailing baby struggling to squirm out of its mother's ~~grip~~ grip, woke him from his reverie. John was older again, a mind and body anxious and strained, not sulky anymore. It'd been an hour or a half, and various memories, some of which seemed to have happened a life-time ago, floated from thin air into John's mind, playing an endless loop of visuals from his growing years. ~~It~~ Reflecting on these memories, ~~it~~ it was apparent to John that he'd always known, without ~~any~~ ~~even any~~ ~~piece~~ the aid of gossips and rumours ~~that~~ that there was something fundamentally wrong with the relationship he had had with his dad. It was always on his subconscious, an unfading mist of doubts and murkiness, never clear.



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At this time, his eyes saw the ancient, yet still awe-worthy structure of the Percival House, the enormous mansion to which John had come only once in his lifetime. As if the soul sensed the grim-reaper nearby, John's mind felt trapped for what felt like the hundredth time since that morning, his breath came out in short puffs and his heartbeat was erratic as his pale hand closed around the car handle. He paid off the driver a lumpsome amount in cash; it wasn't usual that LA folks hailed a cab for more than one mile....

~~Then~~ Numb feet took him till the doorstep, slightly shaking fingers rang the bell once... twice, but there came no answer. Momentarily forgetting his dread, John wrapped his long fingers around the knocker and forcefully knocked.

"Just a mo' - Coming... wait a minute, can't you?" came a muffled voice of a woman. With a few clicks and a loud creak, the door opened and with it came the face of a short, middle-aged woman at the door-side.

"Who are you?", the nameless, worn out face asked.

"John, um, I'm John Percival.... here for Mr. Johann Percival Berkley", said the unsure John.

As if by the click of a switch, the nameless face in-front of him transformed, from curious to surprised to a look of being speechless and ~~at~~ at last, settled on a solemn look of grief, a deep one at that. 'What more signs do you need?', John's mind asked himself peckily.

"Ah, Johnnie, my boy Johnnie!", exclaimed the ~~the~~ woman, "come in, come on in, John....".

John ~~enter~~ stepped over the threshold to a dimly lit living room, ~~with~~ ^{scattered} with massive ~~of~~ pieces of furniture and decorated with an obscene number of ~~photo~~ portrait frames, ~~a~~ small small, others huge, spanning so wide and high on the walls.

"Sit, sit Johnnie, what'd you like to drink? ~~the~~ ~~the~~ Coffee? Yes, yes, that'd ~~best~~ be best...." said the woman as she retreated to the back of the hall, her voice dying away with bits of words that sounded ^{suspiciously} like "...just like his papa....".

John was left alone, still standing awkwardly in the vast space, ~~clearly~~ ^{guessing} correctly that the woman must've been as agitated as he were, for her to not ~~see~~ wait till he sat down and made himself comfortable. After all, what was she to do when one of John's sons come unannounced to the mansion?

She came back shortly ~~with~~ holding a tray sporting one cup of coffee, and served ~~it~~ it to John. Then, she stood back, wringing her hands, ~~she~~ exhibiting her nervousness.

"Who are you, by the way?" asked John ^{in an effort} conversationally, to minimise the ~~suffocant~~ strangling tension in the air. The woman stood gaping at him, almost comically and then, recovering her composure, said,

"You don't recognize me, Johnnie boy?", ~~the~~ ~~she~~ she waited a few seconds, "why, it is me Martha Jorkins, the chief-maid...." she declared incredulously. Now it was John's turn to gape back. But, surely, he'd heard the people in the mansion were all.... but it can't be, right? not with Martha standing well and alive right in front of him....



"But ... I thought, you were, ... Martha?" John ~~st~~ stuttered, unable to find the proper words to express his confusion.

"Johnnie boy ...", Martha supplied helplessly.

John ~~put~~ ~~it~~ cautiously leaned forward to deposit his cup on the nearby table, lest his ~~treasure~~ treacherously shaking hands drop it and create a mess. He carefully breathed in a measured manner, did so for a few long seconds. ~~and then~~ Then, making sure that he wouldn't humiliate himself again with his awful stammer, spoke again:

"Surely Martha, you must know why I'm here ... I've heard of the grave accident. Mother and the children are all sick with fear and we need to know what happened," he said, and suddenly, losing his flow, continued, "Is he ... is papa okay? What happened Martha? he let the question plaguing him from the moment he heard of the accident, out into the air, freeing it to enter whichever ears were open nearby. Martha stood still, absolutely motionless, as if in a trance."

John would've thought she were a wax ~~sculpture~~ sculpture if he hadn't known better - and then let out a heart-~~wrenching~~ wrenching wail, similar to the one the baby had made, and it went on. She covered her face with both hands, ~~and~~ the sobbing echoing around

the room, blaring in John's ears from all directions. It was confirmed. What more could Martha ever say? She'd revealed all with such a simple but terrible act. John's heart seemed to have frozen over, iced, waiting to be dropped so that it can be broken; shattered into a million pieces.

"Johann sit, he, Johnnie!", was all Martha could utter.

It was enough, more than enough for John. The words made him stand up from his seat, mechanically once again. The words made him drop the frozen heart, ~~the~~ breaking into ineparable smithereens. It was too much. The walls were too much, the paintings and the couches and the expensive rugs all too much. He had to get out. Taking his briefcase ~~to~~, he made his way to the door, ~~he~~ stepped over the threshold, ~~he~~ went down the front stairs and finally, finally reached the landing. He went out through the gates, forgetting to close it behind him, a pardonable mistake by a man confronted with the worst news. The man he'd looked up to all his life, Johann Percival Berk.... - no, ~~his~~ his mind resolved ^{itself} for him, no, he wouldn't think of it, not about any of it, not unless he was back in front of the familiar door, which would open with burst with even the slightest ring of the bell or the faintest knock from the knockers.

The air around him seemed to pity him, making way for John to pass through with ease. It was miles away, his mother's anticipating face, his young brother's and sisters, waiting for a news from him. But it felt like they were a world away, as if he wouldn't be able to reach them even if he tried. He'd lost ^{all} sense of ~~the~~ direction. John was lost!

He didn't know which way to go, the blow all too big for him to handle alone, yet he knew ^{that} he should.... Where would he go ~~on~~ from here? Which way was home? Why ~~is~~ there wetness near ~~tip~~ ^{tip} his lips? Are those tears? John didn't know. He wished his mind, like it always ~~to~~ did, could somehow make it all better, could ~~do~~ ^{it} make him do what he was supposed to do. He prayed to noone in particular to somehow show him the way home all the way there, from here.

John wished he knew how he could possibly go from here to there