



PROMPT: You're sure that someone keeps tapping you on the shoulder. But when you turn around, there's just empty space.

Thoughts Are Things

by **Harrison Line**

“And that’s when it happens. Again.” Joe shifted slightly in the oversized armchair.

“Oh? And how did you react this time?”

Joe hated these condescending questions. Every psychiatrist and therapist he’d ever developed a quasirelationship with had whittled down his social anxiety to a simple repetitive routine rhetoric. How did that make you feel? What did you do? What should you have done? As if he didn’t spend countless hours asking the same questions. Hindsight is 20/20. It doesn’t need a secondary observer.

“What do you think Doc? I panicked.” He tucked his long dirty blonde hair behind his left ear, “I panicked and told her I had an emergency I needed to take care of. And she didn’t move. Just stared at me like I was some joke set-up right before the punchline.”

“What did we discuss about positive reinforcement Joseph?”

“Sure, whatever. Look, I know this seems trivial but I’m 31! I can’t just keep circling around happy hours praying that this will be the time I don’t-“ his train of thought is cut off by a ringtone. A therapist with a Coldplay ringtone, that is something you could see a mile down a flat dirt road. He gave a quick glance at his Rolex knock off watch, 2:55 PM. An hour already? Jesus, time flies when you’re having fun.

“I am sorry Joseph, I have to take this call. Listen, talk to the receptionist. Let’s reschedule for sometime next week. And it’s the end of the month? I will give the pharmacy a call as well. You’re doing great.”

Joe stood up, thrust his hands in his denim jeans and forced a weak smile, “Thanks.” That seemed like pretty believable exit. Accept the compliment and move on. No need for extra information to muddle up the circumstances. He had learned a couple of tricks after all.

As he leaned on the reception desk, the young woman typing away at the computer glanced up.

“Did we need to schedule a follow-up sir?” She had the high-pitched teenager voice to match the braces and brown bangs, Joe thought. Probably an intern from the community college.

“Actually, we came to a consensus, I’m cured! Imagine that.” Joe knocked twice on the white paneled counter and headed towards the automatic doors leading out of the clinic. He was greeted with a gust of February mountain air. He inhaled a deep breath and held it for a second, letting the chill in his lungs be absorbed by unoxygenated blood and pumped through his arteries. Winter wasn’t his favorite season, but there was something comforting about wrapping yourself up in as many layers as possible without cutting off circulation. Guess that breath served two purposes, he mused putting on his black faux leather gloves. There was another comforting benefit of cold. Coffee. Joe pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket and quickly found a coffee shop open two blocks down the street. As he was putting his phone back he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Woah!” He tensed, fumbling his unprotected phone onto the pavement six feet below.

Joe swung around angrily to see an old lady with a wispy gray hair and a clouded left eye. She had a cheap tripod cane with three tennis balls on the ends. He noticed this old lady was wearing a hospital gown and had an unlit Marlboro Red in her mouth.

“Got a light?” She wheezed. Her breath looked like the smoke she was craving.

“No. I have a six-hundred-dollar broken phone. And I’m guessing you aren’t a gainfully employed cyclops, are you?” He was furious. And I didn’t get the damn phone insurance either, he thought.

“Careful boy, words can hurt you know.” The old lady eyed Joe with a steady gaze. He immediately got butterflies in his stomach. Great, a broken phone and a panic attack caused by the wicked witch of the northwest. He bent over and took a moment to examine his device. Cracked screen, but it still worked thank god. He looked up to an empty sidewalk and a sluggishly closing automatic door. His anger slowly changed to perplexity. Well that was about a seven on the weirdness scale, Joe thought. Nothing a little caffeine can’t fix, as he began the quarter-mile journey to warmth and solace.

Joe made it to the end of the first block and hit the pedestrian crossing button. He saw the red hand on the other side of the street begin to flash. He remembered how his mother used to reprimand him for crossing the street too early and with reckless abandon. Joseph get your butt back here right now! She would scream as she grabbed the back of his t-shirt. Are you always stupid, or could you at least think normally every once in a while? He could remember the smell of Jameson's on her breath and the wrathful gaze she wore after the fifth drink. He gagged at the memory. He hated whiskey. But he still inherited the love for the bottle. Vodka was his vice. More than a vice, rather a nightly escape into the sweet bliss of nothingness where life and death played cards using the years you had left to ante up the next hand. It's never a fair card game though. Death always has an ace up his sleeve. The price you pay to wash your woes away. Joe felt a headache coming on. Great, maybe we can get that coffee to go and stop by the liquor store for a quick nip.

The red blinking hand turned into a green stick figure. The cars parallel to his path began to move. Joe began to cross the street he couldn't remember the name of. Was it High Street? Or maybe Grafton? Halfway through the crosswalk, he felt a tap on his shoulder, rousing him from his guessing. He stopped and turned around to see who wants his attention at the most inconvenient time. No-one. No-one? Joe thought. He turned from his left to his right to see if someone was pranking him. No-one. A green Subaru Forester with its left blinker on slammed its brakes and blared its horn. Joe waved an apology at the driver and leapt to the sidewalk. Maybe a rock fell from the stoplights? Or a bird with a payload hit its target? He wiped his shoulder and looked at his glove. It was clean. Something or someone had tapped him that he was sure.

Joe dived into the Coffee shop and shook off the cold. The aroma of freshly ground coffee beans was welcoming. He approached the counter and ordered a medium coffee with light half and half. Two minutes later he was handed his order and graciously took a sip hoping to alleviate this increasingly annoying headache. To his relief, it did the trick. He took a deep breath and scanned the room. It was a quaint coffee shop. Brick walls and oak tables with a few hanging house plants to compliment the hanging ceiling lights. The acoustical ambiance that is so cliché yet so perfect for finding yourself turning another page in a book. If he didn't already have a date with a white Russian dressed in cheap vodka he would have grabbed a book off of the "Borrow a Book!" shelf next to the swinging kitchen door. But he had made a decision, hadn't he?

"Hey Joe!" a voice said from one of the tables. Joe took a second to process. It was the girl from the date a week ago. She was wearing a red overcoat, her dark hair flowing over, and fashionable black pants to match. Wow, she is beautiful Joe thought.

"Hey Sara, fancy seeing you." Joe said with a sheepish grin. Butterflies. Crap.

“Did everything turn out ok the other night? I was kind of worried about you and you didn’t reply to my text.” She put her pen down on the table next to a half-finished crossword and shifted her body to match her attention.

“What? No. Yeah. Everything’s great.” He stammered, “I mean it all worked out so its great.” Smooth, Joe thought. Butterflies and a headache. That White Russian wants a word with you.

Sara giggled her green eyes beaming, “Aha. Well, I’m glad to hear that. You know I paid for those drinks. Which means you owe me one cosmopolitan. And, it’s Friday.”

“No doubt. Got any plans this weekend?” Joe shifted his weight.

“No. Hence, the Friday reference.” She cocked an eyebrow still smiling and sipped her coffee.

“Oh, right. Yeah, well I’ve got your number. I’ll drop you a line. Got to run though. Tight schedule.” Joe glanced at his watch, “3:30. Got an hour before the post office closes.”

“I’ll hold you to it.” Sara said. Joe caught the slight sarcastic inflection. The headache slowly creeping from the sides of his head to the front. He took another sip of his coffee and raised both his eyebrows. Got to mail my soul to the other side of the universe before it melts away to John Mayer’s guitar solo.

Joe turned to the door and grasped the brass knob. A tap on his shoulder caused him to turn around. Sara wanted to say one more thing?

“Hmm?” Joe said aloud, turning to empty space and Sara sitting at her table, pen-cap in her mouth looking hopefully confused at him.

“See you later!” Joe quickly opened the door and stepped out oblivious to the below freezing temperature. Unless Sara has supernatural speed and a terrible sense of humor, she didn’t touch me. So who did? Joe ran his ungloved hand through his hair. What in the hell is going on? The old lady’s words rang in his head “words can hurt you know.” What words? I didn’t say anything other than the wrong words. He was feeling the anxiety transform into anger. Everything can be explained. It must have been a bug that fell from one of the plants. He ordered an Uber and directed the driver to the liquor store close to his apartment.

A couple of hours later, Joe squinted his eyes to make the four hands of his watch turn into two.

“11:45 comrade. The mission was a success. The feelings. Pushed down. Such is life.” Joe slurred in his best Russian accent. He turned up the volume on the TV and closed his eyes. What a day.

“That wrinkly hag better have the latest greatest phone waitin’ for me in the mornin’. And a side of scrambled eggs with all the hot sauce.”

He looked across the studio apartment into the kitchen. His cat was perched next to the almost finished bottle of vodka and the long-emptied overturned coffee cup with the words “Have a great day!” visible. “Loki, bring daddy a piece of pizza!” Loki, a 5-year-old tabby cat, stared at Joe with lazy eyes, his tail flicking from left to right.

“What are you judgin’ me for?” Joe stood up and immediately fell back into the beige recliner, “Sea legs.” Joe mumbled as he stood up again, slower this time and stumbled his way across the hardwood floor, spilling the last of his watered-down drink as he went.

“I am so glad we don’t have carpet. That would come straight out of the deposit.” Joe gave a hearty laugh that lacked real emotion. Loki meowed in response and jumped off the counter.

Joe opened the freezer and grabbed a handful of ice and threw it in his glass. He turned around and reached for the bottle of vodka. He unscrewed the cap and let it clatter and roll across the counter top. As he was about to pour a drink he felt another tap on his shoulder.

“WHO IN THE F-“ Joe turned around abruptly. “I’m the only person in here so who is pokin’ my shoulder?” He shouted, “You’ve been at it all damn day I want to know!”

Silence. “Answer me!”

Silence. Joe stared into the blue-lit living room. The TV running through the same commercials it had been two hours ago.

“Maybe I should take my meds.” Joe breathed with a drunken, sardonic smile. Wasn’t his uncle schizophrenic or something? He reached for the bottle and tilted it. Another poke on his shoulder.

“I swear to god invisible man I will throw you out my invisible window and watch you splatter your invisible guts on the pavement!” He turned around. Nothing. Loki meowed and ran across the room. I am going crazy. Joe’s mind began to turn. But I was sober when it happened before. It happened in the street when that guy slammed on his brakes to make a left-hand turn. Idiot could’ve run me over. He should have been paying more attention.

Another poke.

“What!” Joe exclaimed, now completely red-faced, blonde hair a mop-top and 5-o’clock shadow in full bloom. “I’m tired of this stupid game. I’m not playing. I’m having my night cap and I’ll play mentally-ill in the morning.” Joe poured himself another drink. A double. He made

his way over to the recliner just in time for the murder mystery finale to start back up. Loki meowed. An illuminated Joe took a sip of his drink and coughed. Liquor burned his windpipe. I'm so drunk I'm breathing the alcohol now, Joe thought. He continued to cough and sat his drink down on the table next to the chair. Finally regaining his breath, he closed his eyes again. Probably that stupid ghost that keeps poking me in the back. He's making me choke on my drink and ruining what should have been a peaceful night of poker with the grim reaper.

Just before he slipped into unconsciousness, Joe felt one last poke.

He awoke on Saturday with a massive hangover. Typical, he thought as he cracked three eggs into a pan on medium heat. A tall glass of water would help him greatly. The irony was not lost on him. I wonder how much weight I've gained, Joe thought as he looked at his non-existent abdominals. He popped four aspirin and killed the heat on the stove. He opened the fridge and found a bottle of Frank's hot-sauce.

He turned the bottle upside-down and got the last drops onto his hangover-cure.

"Looks like I'm going to have to hit the store bud, you need anything?" He glanced at Loki who responded with a purr.

"I'll put it on the list." Joe said as he devoured the eggs with gluttonous haste. He declined brushing his teeth, put on his boots, and grabbed his favorite jacket and gloves. At the door, he gave a pocket check for all the essentials and headed to the local one-stop in walking distance.

On his way, he found himself wondering about the phantom nuisance that would not leave him alone yesterday. It seemed to hit him at the height of his anxiety. So, it's a side-effect then? That didn't make sense though, a new symptom just pops up out of nowhere? Where was this ten years ago when he was debating on dropping out of school? It just didn't add up. He could see the store down the street starting to grow in size. As he pondered his ridiculous dilemma his phone vibrated in his pocket. It was a text from Sara. "I've got an extra ticket to a comedy club tonight. Not sure what to do with it."

The butterflies started to wake from their slumber as Joe reread the text. He remembered her flirtatious look at the coffee shop as she cocked an eyebrow. Smart. Witty. Cute. What's there not to like? Joe opened the keyboard on his phone and stared at the screen. Yeah, but I'm really hungover and I'm just not feeling it, Joe combated in his mind.

A poke. Joe didn't turn around this time just raised his head to the sky as if to question the gods why they are wasting their time with him. He looked back down at the screen. He did feel comfortable when they were sharing a drink last week. And she seemed to be the same way? Maybe? I don't know, Joe thought, it's just not worth the risk.

A poke. This is looney-tunes, Joe thought. I've got a ghost that wants me to go on a date? The hangover still pounding in his head, Joe stopped in front of the store and wrote back a reply, "I know a guy who would go. He's kind of into you." Joe held his breath. That was stupid he thought. He deleted the draft and headed into the store.

Grabbing a red-bull from the mini fridge, Joe got behind the young man in front of him paying for his groceries. The man, a kid really no older than 16 with curly dark hair and a purple backpack, glanced back at Joe and nodded.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school or something?" Joe eyed the patron.

"It's Saturday, pops. Aren't you supposed to be at a brewery?" The kid rolled his eyes and pulled out a credit card.

Poke. Joe ignored it as his eyes lit up. I'm not taking this from a punk he thought.

"Why don't you hurry it up so I can get there on time."

"Actually sir, I think I'd like to pay in exact cash." The kid placed his pack on the counter. The clerk rubbed his eyes and sighed.

Poke. "You are a petty runt aren't you?"

"I just don't have anywhere to be and I've got all this loose change that needs to find a home. You two probably have something in common."

"You are going to be running home with no groceries in about thirty seconds if you keep up the charade." Poke.

The kid turns around to reply, looks Joe in the eye, and blood spurts out of the right side of his head with a simultaneous bang. Joe's jaw drops and eyes widen in absolute disbelief. His ears ringing, chances his head to the entrance witnessing a glimpse of a hooded figure with a large chrome hand-gun and a fully extended arm.

"EMPTY THE REGISTER, OR I'LL DO IT FOR YA!"

Joe fires his hands in the air, "HOLY HELL MAN WHAT ARE"—darkness.

Joe wakes up sitting on a tall back wooden chair. He looks around. He's sitting close to the edge of a rocky cliff with a salty breeze blowing in his face. Looking down he hears waves crashing into smooth rock. They look as if they had been wearing away at the formation for

millennia. He feels cool grass between his bare toes. He sees a pearl cloudy sky. Wow, he thinks indifferently, this is not where I'm supposed to be.

"Hey, Joe what you doin' what that gun in your hand."

Joe turns to look behind the chair. He can't stand up. Very odd, he internalizes, but doesn't panic.

"Hey Joe. Jimi Hendrix really nailed it. But like most things he was not the first to sing it. Just made it known" the voice began to whistle the tune.

"I'm dead, aren't I?" Joe scanned the owner of the voice. It was an ancient man that the voice did not match. A long-braided beard fell to his waist. A white robe with gold trim flowed effortlessly as he walked. He wasn't thin, nor was he fat. He wasn't tall, nor was he short. He was, however, emitting an aural sense of positivity. Joe stared in wonder. Who was he?

"A decent question, though I don't think it really matters. You, Joseph, are quite the specimen." The man chuckled as he slowly approached Joe. "Not as scattered as you might think."

"What?" Joe did not know what to think. This is lunacy. He must be dead.

"No, my mortal friend, just dying, as you all are in your own way." The old man stopped next to Joe and stood with his hands clasped behind his back. "But, as I said, you are more perceptive than you give yourself credit."

"Have you been poking me?"

"No." The old man smiled, the wrinkles next to his eyes as deep as caverns. "I don't have time for such things."

"But you know who has." Joe found it very difficult to look the man in the eyes for too long. He could feel the warm glow radiating off of him.

"Not really. Valkyries do not like to talk about their business so much. They are truly humble." Joe thought about the old lady at the hospital.

"You were tapped my friend. For it is our business to, "the ancient man stroked his beard twice, "nudge those souls that are out of balance. You, Joseph, have been leaning a certain way for quite some time. How do you put it? Playing poker with death?" The old man gave a warm smile and looked out towards the endless sea.

“Joseph, you have made decisions in your life. And, it seems, you will continue to make decisions in life. You will also continue to feel and you will continue to think.” The old man turned to Joseph with a somber face. “Those feelings and those thoughts are things. They can dictate your decisions. They manifest in different ways. Good. And bad. And you, Joseph, have the power to focus your thoughts to be positive or negative.”

“Are you saying I’m a superhero?” Joe grinned.

The ancient man stretched his head towards the sky and gave a hearty laugh. “You are all connected. And you all can tilt the balance of each other. Positivity is as contagious as its opposite. Provide a genuine encouraging energy. Fellows will embrace that love. And will return in kind.”

Joe felt a headache coming on fast. “How do I know this isn’t some dream or hallucinogenic jargon?”

The old man gave smiled at Joe, poking him lightly on the shoulder before turning away, “I believe you have met someone who would mean a lot to you if you tried. Help keep her balance. And she will in turn balance you.”

The headache, almost unbearable now blurring Joe’s vision, “Hey! How can I trust you!” Joe tried to stand up but darkness was slowly closing in.

“Trust yourself.”

Joe awoke on a gurney.

“He’s conscience! Sir, can you understand me?” A flashlight moved between each of his eyes. His head felt like it was going to explode.

“Yes.”

“We are taking you to the hospital.”

Joe looked at the paramedic, took his hand and smiled, “Thank you.”

The paramedic gripped Joe’s hand and returned the smile.