

PROMPT #2: You open a book and a note with a letterhead falls out. At the top it says: If you are reading this, ...

Memories of a Notebook

by **Mason Strader**

I grip the rough cover of the notebook, the worn binding being the only barrier between the molded carpet and the collection of frenzied thoughts of an evidently deranged man.

Overcome by pity, I finally allow the tome to slumber, snug between an assortment of other books to which time has been much more kind. However, as it buries itself between the unusually kept shelf, a single sheet of parchment falls from the corded spine, seemingly unready to hibernate in its antiquity just yet. I once again strain my eyes under the buzzing fluorescent lights, squinting at the hurried handwriting. Unnerved by a vague sense of familiarity, I try to make out the contents of the withered note. “If you are reading this...” Huh. A warning, it would seem. I make no effort to control my unease, well aware of my situation. I know there is no one here but myself. This note, archaic as it may be, has not seen its author in quite some time. I read... and read again... and once more, for good measure. I feel myself being drained as I collect my thoughts, the feelings of unease becoming a rampant sense of dread. “Blasphemous!” I think to myself, as I rip the note in two, just before leaving it to succumb to the mildewed matting beneath my feet.

The moment of frustration passes, and I set forward into one of the musty halls that pierce the interior of the library with their grotesque yellowed wallpaper. The all-too-familiar corridor lay bare before me, mocking me, knowing that no matter the distance I cover or how many of its twins I traverse, there is no one else nor no exit in this hellish place. A sprawling complex, more akin to a maze than a typical building. A mecca of lunacy. Of mania. Enough to drive even the sanest of folks mad. Of course, these halls have long since been commonplace to me. My memory, fleeting as it may be, still makes a lackluster effort to tidy my thoughts. I never consume food nor water, for I feel no need. I never indulge in sleep, should I be so lucky as to be cast aside much like the notebook. I simply continue forward. Exploring, feeding my

ravenous hunger for escape, for clues, for any sort of agency over my situation in this damned place. How long has it been? How long since I left the library? Memory... memory. That which escapes me, the only liberation I am offered, that of fleeting thoughts and a tattered mind. I clench my fist as I make my third—no, was it second?—left through the twisted halls.

Home, I think to myself. The vague remembrance of a quiet street, the fading silhouettes of those I can no longer recall the names of. A wife... and a daughter? Yes, that's right. Or was it a son? Their faint outlines dance around my head as I try to recall their voices. But I hear nothing. No laughs, no cries, not even the faintest sound of their breath. All I can recall is my own voice, the dialogue within my mind. As far as I know, it has always been me and me alone. I am alone. The sole heir to these corrupted lands, bound to them just as they are to me. Bound... like that damned notebook. I think about turning back, but how long has it been by now? Hours... no, maybe days. I can't stop now; every step is a chance at freedom. This struggle, it has always been one of the mind. My memory, blessed as it is cursed, it insists that I forget my worries as quickly as they come, leaving only thoughts of hope, recovered from the recesses of my darkened mind. I leave my concerns behind, not letting trivial anxieties break my stride. One step after the other, knowingly falling deeper and deeper into the shambles of this maze, I am undeterred. I simply hold onto my thirst, my unquenchable thirst for freedom, for knowledge, for home. In this domain, time is infinite, and patience is a virtue. The only thing between me and my way out is my will to find it. My ambition is limitless. I will escape, no matter what. Room by room, hall by hall, I will clear out every possible path until I finally find the exit from this hell. The way is lit and the path is open. I require only the resilience to follow it. I will be free. "I will be free," I swear to myself.

...A day passes. A week. Months. I can't keep it straight anymore. The same halls, the same paths, the same twists and turns. Every door, locked, as always. My steadfastness fails me as I take a right turn to yet another abhorrent hallway. I have wandered for what feels like months, years—an eternity. Yet all that I have been rewarded with is madness. Could this be penance for my actions? What abhorrent crimes could have committed for this punishment to be a just consequence? An eternity of pointless struggle, pacing haphazardly through these mimicked pathways, now as twisted as my own memories. As mishappen as the wrought corners of that ever-aging notebook I found in the library. Why is it the only thing I can remember? Every thought, every action, the farther I delve into this insanity, the more I recall that library. My once familiar recollections of my life, now foreign echoes of a life once lived. Blending, contorting every which way, these halls warping my memories just as they have warped themselves. But I can never forget that book. Barely a whisper escapes my mouth, as I swear to myself one last time. "I will be free."

Time passes infinitely. I no longer make an effort to keep track of it. Cursed by this place, I accept this hell. The cruel twist of fate that brought me here, the evil intent at the heart of this realm. The progenitor of the blaring lights and decaying walls, casting me into his maddening world. I accept him, as my creator... as my destroyer. Death would be a blessing. There is no escape from this place. These are the thoughts I am drowned in as I turn my next innumerable corner. Only, this time is different. I am met with a light. A dizzying light. A room, indifferent to the rotten walls of the hallway. I pause. How long... how long since I left these halls? I compose myself, trying as I might to levy my thoughts of freedom against my overwhelming acceptance of my state in this place. But I succumb. My hope drags me along and my faith in my deliverance drives me into a frenzy as I make my way to the open doorway. The lights blare brighter than ever, and tears feel my eyes. My sentiments, my struggles, my incomprehensible tribulations, they all fall to the molded carpet as I set aside my frustrations. My eyes adjust to the dazzling light, the promise of safety, the evidence of my hardships paying off. I steady myself. And I weep once more.

Shelves align themselves against the maroon walls. A study fit for a scholar. I absently make my way to a familiar shelf. And a familiar book. I stare blankly at the ground, seeing none of the refuse I had expected. My mind no longer has the sensibility to make me despair, nor the care to make me irate. In this abyss, this limitless rupture of chaos, I realize it once more. That which I have come to terms with time and time again. That which my memory unfetters me from, the horrid truth of it all. "There is no way out." I despondently open the book, the pages rustling under the heavy silence of the library. The reminder of my place in this world. "If you are reading this..."