

Swimming in a Sea of Intent

The weather was hot, not just hot, but the sticky wet hot of the mountains in August.

He slumped down in a chair nearest the old overhead fan that seemed to beat with a wobbling futility against the thick air. He was glad to see the little diner was nearly empty, it was too hot to listen to the usual chatter about local politics or the weather and its effect on the local farmers.

Nothing much had changed in twenty years, the diner still had the same old green booths from the fifties, more tired, but still serving those who got off the four-lane out front, or walked over from the stockyards next door.

The place was dirtier than he remembered, smaller and darker. But the afternoon sun still glared at the front windows much the way he remembered it. Maybe they had decided not to wash the windows as a monument to another time.

Maybe they just never thought about it. He had noticed the little diner earlier on his way around town. It still sat slouching in between its more respectable neighbors the town barbershop and local drugstore. The front could use a coat of paint he had thought, but then it could have used a coat of paint twenty years ago to, some things never change.

He took off his glasses and wiped at the oozing sweat gathered on his face. You just oozed sweat in this weather it seemed no matter how still you tried to be. Most people timed this time of the day for those activities that required the least physical effort. The pavement outside burned through the bottoms of your shoes and felt all the world like walking across a hot griddle.



Putting his glasses back on and wiping his hand on his pant leg he noticed the hazy brown Formica on the table. There were only four tables in the place besides the six or so booths; he just couldn't remember it being this small. He heard the shuffling of tennis shoes on the old linoleum. The waitress loomed out of the quiet darkness. She was a big, friendly girl, or woman actually, who had obviously come to terms with her position in life. She wore one of those nondescript pale green waitress uniforms with a little pearl thing clipped on the collar.

"Afternoon, hon. What'll it be today?" she asked, ball point raised menacingly above her little order pad. She smiled one of those easy, known you all your life kind of smiles so common here.

"Just a Coke right now", he said, "I just want to cool off a little first before I eat."

She smiled again and stuff her order pad into the big pocket on the front of her uniform. The pen went unceremoniously behind her ear.

"I hear that, it's been somethin' this afternoon ain't it, whenever you're ready just flag me down."

She trundled off softly on the linoleum and soon reappeared with a large glass and set it down on the table.

"Just wave at me when you're ready", she said, and disappeared again.

He poked the straw down into the glass and took a long hard sip at the straw. The liquid had a familiar sting to it as it went down, but it was cold and he was grateful for that. Looking up he surveyed the only other customers in the place. At the far end of the diner in the last booth near the windows sat a thin middle-aged woman with dark hair. She was wearing a blue sundress and even from this distance he could tell it was homemade. Her back was to him, but as she leaned over in the booth he got a look at her dining companion seated opposite her. He looked to be young heavysset man in his twenties dressed in blue jeans and t-shirt. Something struck him as odd about him.

He studied him closely for a moment, what was it that felt different. It wasn't the burr haircut or the way he seemed to eat his French fries like a cow chewing its cud, then it struck him. The boy was a Mongoloid child. This woman across from him was his mother then. Now it made sense. Eating at the local diner was probably a big treat for him and more than likely the only time his mother was able to make her way around town to take care of the little errands life puts in our way.

The man took another drag on his straw and looked up again. They were leaving. The boy's mother had her purse on her arm, a small black patent leather thing. She stood up and brushed the wrinkles out of her dress as best she could. Looking at the boy now she asked quietly, "Are you ready to go?"

The boy nodded with quick jerk of his head signifying his agreement. Taking a napkin from the table she began rubbing and dabbing at him as he stood up. He looked annoyed, but suffered this indignity with minimal shuffling and protest. Just as she laid the napkin back on the table though he spied a French fry that had escaped his notice. He made a quick ham fisted grab and



quickly stuffed it in his mouth. Unfortunately he also deposited a large dribble of ketchup down the front of his white t-shirt.

"Oh Jimmy, now look", she said with more tiredness than anger. Her shoulders slumped like someone had let the air out of her. Jimmy looked down at his shirt and seemed surprised as though maybe someone else had put the ketchup there. She darted at the table retrieving the napkin she had just put down and dabbed furiously at the stain as though she could somehow retrieve all of it onto the napkin. Mostly she just spread it out some.

"I don't know why I even try", she said to him, "I'm just going to get you colored shirts so things don't show so bad, that's the second shirt you've had on today. Come on, let's go."

She turned and headed across to the counter. Jimmy hesitated for a moment as though he was waiting perhaps for some more dabbing and rubbing, but soon turned and followed his mother. He plodded deliberately towards the counter. The waitress met them at the old cash register that served as the financial nerve center of the business.

Assuming her role as cashier the waitress asked, "How was everything today Levicey?" She gave out one her big smiles.

"Just fine," Levicey said tiredly, "Of course Jimmy had to go make a mess right at the end, but everything was just fine." She handed over the little slip of paper that served as the diner's bill. She looked askance at Jimmy now who was standing quietly, staring at the small display of breath mints and suckers next to the register. She handed the waitress some bills and the old cash register cachinked and rattled as the exchange was made. The waitress looked at Jimmy and smiled again as she pushed the cash drawer closed with a bump.

The waitress reached over the rack of suckers and plucked one off like it was the last rose of summer. She thrust out her with the sucker in in towards Jimmy.

"Here you go, hon, you don't want to forget your sucker." She smiled again.

Jimmy reached out his chubby hand and took the proffered treat, tore off the wrapper and plopped it into his mouth.

"I swear Jimmy I believe you get more handsome every time I see you", she said and offered a quick wink and smile to Levicey, Jimmy's mother.

This compliment caused Jimmy to take immediate notice of his shoes as his face turned a bright red. He swayed side to side just slightly.

"What do you say?", his mother asked, smiling.

Jimmy's brow furrowed. The answer was in there somewhere; finally he managed to mumble out a sort of thank you, which caused both women to smile. The man took another sip of his Coke as he watched this scene unfold. How many times had it been played out over the years with the same script? How many cheeseburgers and fries had it taken to teach Jimmy to accept this single compliment, one could only guess. The man looked up again as Levicey, with Jimmy in tow, headed for the front door and passed into the glare of the sun coming through the windows. Now they were just shadows in the glare; ghosts moving into the light. Then the glare intensified in the man's vision and then there was darkness.

The man felt his eyes close and he searched, for something.

A slash of lightning tore across the darkness. He remembered.

The smells came first, honey colored smells from ripening hay drifted into his awareness. Fescue and orchard grass tinged with the faint sweetness of red clover came calling for him from somewhere in the past. Sounds crept in and swirled together with the smells as his mind breathed the familiar aroma and he listened. They seemed to ride in on the wind of memory, hay crickets and katydids, the rising and falling crescendos of the locusts. An easy wind moved down through his memories bringing with it a dawning light. He felt cool steel against his arm and looked to the east, blinking, into the sun.

Time hung hollow in the air and he turned his gaze down the hill on which he was standing to the valley below. The Cumberland River wound like a lazy green snake between the green hills. Gazing to his left he saw the old cemetery with its dozen or so tired old tombstones corralled up by a fence which seemed to be more honeysuckle than wire. They were set there to guard eternity he thought, maybe someday they would guard him the same way and someone else could wonder and stare. His gaze wandered now to the huge old hickory tree just outside the cemetery and the old man sitting underneath it. The old man was lighting his pipe.

He felt it now, the summer of his fifteenth year, and he moved from the old battered pickup truck on which he had been leaning. He looked back and saw the rocks gathered in a pile near the front of the bed. Off to the right the old red farm tractor was sitting in a sulk, waiting for its next charge against the ripening hay. He moved now towards the old man. A ring of smoke curled up from the old briar pipe the man was holding.

"You should move these gas cans over into the shade," he said, matter of factly, "Otherwise they might not find enough of both of us together to bury in a shoe box". He grinned. The boy knew there wasn't much danger, but he dutifully picked up the two gas cans, one heavy, one light now and moved them to the shade of a neighboring oak tree. He returned and sat down a few feet from the old man who was just finishing off a swig of water from the beat up thermos they carried. The man pushed his straw hat back on his head and wiped at the sweat with a red bandanna he had retrieved from his pocket. Putting the cloth away he glanced over at the boy and said, "It looks like you already have a pretty good start on getting the truck filled". The boy nodded his head in agreement.

The boy remembered feeling like he had been picking up rocks forever. Everyday it was the same, pick up rocks in the morning, unload after lunch into barn lots and rutted dirt roads, another load in the afternoon and deposited the same. This ritual had gone on for weeks; he knew he had moved tons and tons of stone in this time. He tried to figure it up in his head; the truck would hold about a ton and a half at a time, so two loads a day, no, sometimes three, he was losing track of the numbers now. It just figured up to a lot of rocks he thought, he couldn't quite see the point of it all either, seemed like a load of gravel, thirty tons at a time, would be more efficient. He looked up from his calculations to see the old man looking at him intently.

"What?" the boy asked.

"I didn't say anything", the old man replied, "are you nervous today or something?" He grinned now.

"No, I was just trying to figure out how many more loads of rocks you were going to need", he said, covering up his real thoughts on the subject.

The man smiled again, "Maybe none, maybe all of them, it just depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Well," the old man looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, "I tell you what, you see that big flat rock down the hill there?" He pointed out a rock of very large proportions to the boy. "I've got a spot all picked out for that fellow, if you can get him in the truck that is, do you suppose you could do that?"

The boy surveyed the rock from his seated position and came to the conclusion it would take three stout men to move a rock that size, let alone lift it and get it into the back of the old truck. He voiced these opinions quietly to the old man. The old man scrunched up one eye so as to make it seem that he was getting a closer look at the thing.

"I tell you what I think," he said, "I think one man who intended to get that rock into the truck could do that all by himself if he really intended to do it."

"I don't see how just intending something can make it happen or what difference it makes," said the boy. He was glad to entertain the old man in this line of thinking because it certainly beat picking up rocks all over the countryside in the hot sun.

"Because nothing happens until someone or something intends for it to, nothing in all creation," said the old man.

"I can understand how a person can be strong willed, but I don't see where what a person intends has much to do with anything other than point them in a direction." The boy thought this a very good point, maybe he would finally come out on top in one of these discussions. Thinking of besting the old man in one of what seemed like an endless number of these sorts of discussions made his ego swell a little. He looked over, the old man was looking at him with eyes the color of blue ice, they were twinkling. The boy knew he had said the wrong thing at the right time once again.

"I'll explain it to you," he said, "but I'm only going to explain it once, ever. So pay attention."

This wasn't an idle threat; the old man never went back and explained twice about anything. Paying attention, for the boy, had become an art form in these situations. If you had questions you had to ask them at the time, later they wouldn't be answered with more than a desultory shrug, or a "What do you think?" If you wanted to understand you had to both think fast and pay total attention at the same time, the boy had learned this the hard way.

The old man leaned back and began to speak. "We are swimming in an ocean of intent. The world, other people, nature and the reality we live in are all filled with competing intents."

"What about willpower though?" asked the boy. It seemed like a reasonable question, he couldn't see the separation between the two.

"Think of it this way, if will is the trigger, intent is the entire gun. The two can be separated; they are not the same. You might look at a man and say he has an iron will, but if he doesn't have clear intent then he is doomed to failure. Whether you know it or not you are already forming intentions that will follow you through your entire life. The question is whether you can learn to focus your intentions, make them matter to you and the people around you"

"But doesn't everyone do that naturally," the boy asked, "like the old saying, 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions'. And doesn't that mean that even though people have good intent that sometimes it's just out of their control?"



"Indeed it is," said the old man, "But maybe not for the reasons you think. People go through life forming all sorts of intentions.. They look at something in a store window and if they don't have the money to buy it they may promise themselves they will if they can get the money. That's intent, that person has formed an intent to buy that thing. Pretty soon that person has formed all sorts of intents, both little and big and everyday he parcels out his energy a little to each one until finally he has none left. Most people are like that, if you look into them you will see a mixed bag of intentions, some of them even at odds with each other, so they're spending energy just canceling each other out. So when it comes time to answer the big questions in life most people just sort of muddle along waiting for someone else to come by and show them the way. Humanity is pretty miserable when taken as a whole."

The boy perked up now, "I think I see what you're saying now, people just waste too much energy on intentions that aren't really important to them, is that

it?"

"In a way that's what I'm saying and it's true, people waste enormous amounts of energy on things that are essentially meaningless. But more important to intent than the number of intentions you hold is the clarity with which you hold each one. If you want to go out and make a lot of money that's fine as an intent, but if you say I want to go out and make a lot of money and be respected and....and...and so on, before long you no longer have clear intent. You're all muddled up just like everyone else."

"Learning to handle your own intent is one of the most important things you can do, or should I say, it is really the only important thing you can do," the old man reached for the water jug and took several long swallows before continuing. "Once you have learned to create clear intent you must learn to focus it, without focus it will never work. Once you have the intent focused then you apply will."

The old man paused as though he were trying to think of how to say something. The boy swatted absentmindedly at the sweat bees buzzing around the water jug. The heat of the day was really rising now; he could feel it on his skin like being raked with prickly needles.

The old man cleared his throat. "When I was seventeen I wanted to go to college and I had saved up enough money for the first year at least, so I went off for a physical exam which was part of the entrance process. First one doctor looked me over and then he left and another one came in and he looked me over. Pretty soon a third and a fourth had been through. They had all paid a lot of attention to listening to my heart and lungs it seemed like. When the first doctor came back in he told me he would approve me to go on to school, but he had some very serious news for me about my health. He told me that my heart was in such bad condition that I should never consider marriage because he and the other doctors there doubted very seriously that I would live past my twentieth birthday."

The boy was truly shocked by this revelation; he had never considered the old man to be in anything but robust health. Quickly he thought of what a pronouncement like that would do to him, what the awful prospect of imminent death might have over him. Then, the boy thought, they must have been wrong; he asked the old man if that was the case.

"No, they weren't wrong," he said softly, "I shouldn't be drawing breath now, the dentist won't even give me Novocain to work on my teeth, he's afraid it might kill me. I had rheumatic fever as a child, it pretty much ruined my heart they claim."

"But you know what, I remembered what an old man once told me, just like I'm telling you now, so I wasn't about to let what those doctors intended about my health to become my own intent. I intended to live. And you know those doctors, they're all dead now, I went to every one of

their funerals."

This new information had put the boy in a sober mood. This was serious. The old man had pulled his hat forward again; he was getting ready to get up and back to work.

"But how do I find intent, how do I create it, what do I do if somebody else's intent is greater than mine?"

The old man rose to his haunches and sat there a moment. "Learn to recognize the intent of things far more powerful than you, respect them. Don't try to argue with nature, you'll lose every time. Don't worry about other people's intent in their lives, worry about yours and if a time comes when you seem to be in a struggle with the intent of others remember that nature will sort out it's own. And where do you find intent? It's somewhere between a memory and a dream."

With that the old man chuckled that in that deep baritone the boy knew so well, rose and sauntered off through the high grass to the waiting tractor. He heard it cough into a roar and then begin its chugging journey down to the river bottom. The boy sat there a while, occasionally swatting at a particularly annoying sweat bee. It seemed simple he thought, but no, it didn't either. He rolled it around in his head for a while and then decided it would have to wait.

The rest of the morning he picked up rocks and brought them dutifully to the old truck as though it were some metallic beast which required feeding. With each cachunk of rock against metal he thought about the huge stone lying just down the hill. Each time he passed it he glanced down at it and wondered if it had its own sort of intent, whether it could ignite it's own will. While eating his lunch of roast beef on biscuits he decided to give up on the whole line of thought. It just seemed to hurt his head and not go anywhere either.

During the afternoon he pried loose more meat for the truck-beast and each time he passed the big stone on the ground he paused just ever so slightly. The heat was amazing by mid afternoon, he had sweated until his shirt was a hanging wet rag and his pants were now soaked through as well. The water was almost gone in his thermos and there was still a big space to fill in the bed of the truck. Each trip past the big stone now he began to feel a little more like it was laughing at him from its cool nest there on the ground. The more he thought about it the angrier he got. He kicked it on one pass, just to let it know there were people up here who had taken notice.

Suddenly he found himself looking down at the big stone. It was soft brown sandstone, worn

smooth and flat on the top by eons of rain. He wasn't angry anymore, something else had taken the place of anger, something he could feel deep in his chest, yet he couldn't define it, nor at that moment did he want to. He watched as drops of sweat seemed to fall from a vast height, traveling it seemed like minutes, to splash against the old stone, leaving dark browns where the thirsty stone gulped in the moisture. Where there had been anger now there was understanding. He felt the stone creeping into his veins, the coolness of its belly lying fast against the earth.

The world seemed to snap in and out of focus, thoughts ceased. The world stopped. All there was in the universe was this rock and himself, everything else had evaporated in the heat. He realized his face was now against the surface of the rock, his fingers probing the edges against the ground, forcing their way in just enough. He looked up, sweat, or something obscured his vision, he couldn't see anything now but the surface of this stone, it had become his universe. He felt a sudden searing pain, his back and shoulder muscles screamed. The rock moved.

He felt the mass of stone rise to just under his chin. Instinctively he rammed both knees under the bulk of the stone. He could feel the damp coolness of its hidden side. He saw his vision darken, he had to move. He was standing, he didn't know how and it certainly didn't matter now. He had the huge bulk of stone balanced against his legs above the knees; he felt the warm trickle of blood where the cloth had given way to the course roughness of the stones movement. He moved again, first the left foot and then the right. He could feel the bones in his thighs bending with each step. He stopped, he felt frozen in the grip of this terrible weight. He wanted to let go, but a small voice cried out from somewhere in his narrow universe, don't let go, never let go.



He found himself somehow at the back of the

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option, his legs would be crushed. His mind asked the question, "Why do you do

this?"

From somewhere else came the quick reply, "Screw you, do it or die." He heaved the stone upward with more than muscle and nerve and sinew, he heaved it with every cell in his body because it would be death not to. The next thing was sound, the heavy settling of the stone into the truck bed. It was over.

The boy stooped over, the world came crashing back in. He closed his eyes and opened them just in time to see the ground coming at him quickly. He thudded face down in the grass. He laid there listening to his heart thrash in his ears. It was hard to believe a heart could be that fast without bursting. When he had calmed down some he rose slowly to his feet and surveyed the damage. Yes, the stone was now perched in the truck and the truck was squatting almost to its tires. He looked at his legs, they burned, but not as much blood was visible as he had thought there might be. His hands were another matter, the fingers looked like they had been caught in a corn thrasher. Where were his gloves anyway? He didn't remember taking them off. He found them lying on the running board of the truck and slipped them back on even though the pain was wonderfully intense.

Just then he heard the chugging of the old Farmall Tractor plodding up the hill. When did it get this late, the sun was headed down. The tractor clattered to a halt in front of the truck and the old man slowly climbed down. It must have been a long day for him too the boy thought. The old man took out his pipe and carefully filled it in the tired leather pouch he carried. He looked into the truck bed and lit the pipe.

"That's a mighty big rock you got in there," he said, as he drew down on the pipe and puffed out a cloud of smoke. A little smile played across his lips.

"Hard to believe one man could move a rock like that."

The boy looked over at him.

"All you have to do is focus." The old man laughed at that as he got back on the tractor, they both started home.

"Are you okay, hon?"

He heard the words like they were far away down a well or something. Then once again only louder. "Hon? Are you okay?"

The man looked up into the face of the waitress, her forehead furrowed with the concern of her question.

"Fine," he said, "just day dreaming I guess".

"I was beginning to get worried about you there, you know this heat can do strange things to a body."

"Yeah, that's for sure. I better get going, it's getting late".

He got up slowly and followed the waitress to the counter. She slipped behind it to the cash register. "How much do I owe you," he asked. "Just fifty cents," she said, looking him directly in the face.

"Hon, if you don't mind my sayin' so, you look like you just lost your best friend."

The man reached out two quarters, which she quickly took and plopped into the waiting till.

"I did," he said, "but that was a long time ago." He looked directly into her eyes now, they seemed to soften. He could see her tiredness.

"You're not from around here, are you," she asked.

"No, just visiting a bit."

"Well, that's probably a good thing for you," she said, cause if you was from around here I believe I'd have to date you!" And with that she broke out in one her big waitress smiles.

The remark caught him completely off guard; he felt the heat of a deep blush moving up his neck. Instinctively he looked down at his shoes and then smiled.

"Thanks, I appreciate that," he said.

She laughed gently and said, "You come back and see us again real soon, okay?"

"I will," he said, "Whenever I'm back down this way again."

With that he turned and walked to the door, opening it into the late afternoon glare and stepped out, blinking, into the sun.