

"Life is an adventure. You deserve to travel."

That's what the commercial said, at least. The cool, soothing confidence of the voice-over always gave Charlie pause when he heard it. She sounded so convincing, like the way he imagined hypnotists or therapists to sound. She knew what was best. He deserved to travel.

He never changed the channel when that commercial came on. It was an advertisement urging him to go partake of the wonders of the world and perhaps help line the pockets of the global tourist industry along the way.

The commercial showed tourism's finest: clips of soaring over jagged, pristine and snow-capped mountains from a bird's eye view, the blue vista as a waterproof camera followed happy scuba divers, neon tropical fish darting here and there, and dense, verdant forests stocked full of wild creatures, waterfalls and streams.

"Don't you want to see," the same coolly confident voice challenged, "what's out there?"

Something about the entire thing gave Charlie a peculiar tingle, made his breath catch in his throat as though he was on the verge of falling, atop some high precipice. It made him restless.

This was not the first time he considered traveling, but every time it ended nowhere, the fear reaching up to seize him again and again. But something greater now was pushing him, an urging, a whisper. An industry's plea for money or not, something in that message was a catalyst to him.

*Don't you want to see what's out there?*

Charlie pondered long and hard on this. The commercial wasn't the first thing to push him toward wanting to travel, wanting to break the monotony of his life and pry him out of his little self-constructed cage. It was something on the verge of his thoughts, buried in his subconscious and eventually consciousness for a long time. But the imagery, so bright and pure, with the hypnotist's voice-over urging him to step forth made him especially antsy.

*Life is an adventure.*

One particular night, Charlie woke from a dream. In the dream, he was a bird, soaring gloriously and gently above mountain peaks, above veins of forest and branching rivers. The beating of his wings never tired, and there was never an end to the great tapestry of the world laid before him. The urgency and power of this dream called to him more than any other he had experienced, and in a sweating fit he threw off his tangle of covers, wrestled his pillow away, and stumbled through the dark of his house toward the front door.

*You deserve to travel.*

It was this night that Charlie felt the heavy, tight pumping of his heart, beating like the wings of his dream self, powering him forward toward the front door in his boxers and sleep shirt. With trembling hands he reached forward to undo the metal lock there, and all the strength and confidence began vanishing from him, falling out and draining quicker than any waterfall or river. He turned the lock, but the action became more of a question than a statement of confidence, and suddenly he found himself terribly frightened at his front door. He forced himself to grasp the handle, his palm sweaty and shaking. He turned, full of terror and uncertainty now, and pushed his door wide open. Warm, musky early morning air filled his nose and lungs then, and the sounds of distant cars on the highway and the last remnants of crickets filled his ears, a ringing symphony of sound.

Charlie then found himself standing in his open doorway, seized with horror and fear, fear that grasped his chest like an icy pang. The ice in his chest began to spread outward, rippling through his arms, his legs, his fingers and toes. With fear he slammed the door shut, locking it. He then double and triple checked the lock and only then was he satisfied enough to go stumbling away from the mouth of his residential cavern as though recoiling from a burn.

A sudden anger filled him then, sharp and bright like glancing accidentally into the sun.

“Idiot,” he growled in self rebuke, and began kicking around boxes and a pile of books he had set out earlier near his coffee table, feeling the blood as it raced into his head, into his cheeks, feeling the spittle fling out of his mouth as it formed the word. He was raging at himself, at his own uselessness. To be so conquered by fear.

It had been six years since Charlie last went outside. Once or twice he had ventured out into his lawn, only to go creeping back in with a feeling of great unease distending over him. He opened the door when deliveries came—groceries or other goods ordered online—or to pay the boy who tended his lawn. But for most of the past several years, Charlie had not left his home, had not ventured outside the confines of his walls. Even his work was all digital, performing web design services and receiving his payments through the mail or, more rarely, direct deposit. Something about the openness, the vastness of everything outside frightened him. Something about all the people out in the world was dizzying. He couldn't quite place the reason for his fear, though he spent much time as of late dwelling on it in frustration and great sadness. The world terrified him as much as he longed to be a part of it.

Sometimes it got so bad that Charlie wept for hours at a time, emptying himself almost ritualistically through his tears. He was no longer embarrassed as he once was by these episodes, as there was no one else at home to see his outbursts. He only felt a great deal of anger and helplessness at what he had become, at how much larger everything seemed than he. It wasn't always this way—he remembered being a younger man, a man who was full of life and curiosity and courage. He used to go surfing on weekends and driving down old highways at night when the world was quiet, feeling the wind in his hair, the radio murmuring out a song about youth spent in dance halls. He felt that that man was Charlie, and that what he was now was something else, someone else, something that Charlie had shifted into. Something he had become, but not quite Charlie. A fractured image, like distorted light reflected and scattered off a faceted prism. Where life unperturbed had once been, anxiety and impulsive, sweltering fear slithered their way in now.

He sat watching television when the commercial came on again, the same vivid peaks and oceans and happy people living their lives without a fear of everything and without a fear of nothing at all. This time, when the voice-over spoke, Charlie spoke too.

“Don't you want to see what's out there?” He flipped the TV off and a silent black filled where the vivid pictures once were, a nothingness in place of adventure. He sat for a long while like that, unmoving in his chair. Something about the emptiness of the television screen was too familiar to him. It was time, he decided. It was time to change. To see what was beyond these walls. He would push against that fear or he would die in a cage.

Charlie purchased a plane ticket to California. It was where he had spent those glimmering days of his youth driving, surfing and having adventures, and it was where the sequoia trees were in their towering splendor. In his dream of flight, the lush forests called out to him most, inspired him the greatest. He could still almost smell the rich petrichor of a forest after rain. How long had it been since he had smelled a forest? Since he had felt the crisp of leaves and twigs beneath his feet?

He spent the next two weeks leading up to his flight in a strange and fitful state of ecstasy and misery entwined, one in which courage and terror both came roiling over him in waves. Some hours he felt determined and enthusiastic, planning and researching other sights or activities during his trip. Other times, it was all he could do to keep himself from frantically canceling his flight before it was too late and the crushing enormity of the world devoured him.

When the day of his departure arrived, Charlie was overcome with a nervous and giddy sort of nausea, his vision brimming with a brightness both sickly and excited, like he was overstimulated and there was too much of everything filling his senses. He was determined this time not to let the sickness win however, to push forward and do what he dreamed of every night. To go out and see. To be a part of the world once more.

The time came for Charlie to step outside and catch the bus to the airport. He stood before the threshold to the outside, his house quiet and still now, the lights, television and computer shut off, gone into an eerie electronic hibernation in preparation for his grand departure. His skin prickled with nerves as he paused before the door, baggage in hand, and reached forward, turning the lock. His hands began to sweat and shake once more.

“Not this time,” Charlie snarled, forcing the door open. Sunlight flooded in through gaping entryway as all the outside world greeted him. He meant to step forward through the threshold but found himself frozen. “Not this time,” he echoed again, inhaling a sharp breath and stepping forward with determination onto the sunlit porch. After a moment's shaky hesitation, he began stiffly and awkwardly marching further onto the driveway, intent on not relenting until he reached the bus stop at the end of his street.

He was suddenly dizzy, wild with fright and sickness. The world was so cluttered and the sky was so big. When Charlie reached the end of his driveway, a dog across the street spotted him and began vigilantly barking, either in excitement or a warning. He couldn't tell. The sharp staccato sounds of its barking punctuated the air, relentless. Familiar icy fear and anxiety blossomed in his chest at an alarming rate, seizing him and crushing the breath out of him. He rushed back to his door, fumbling desperately with the keys, his hands disobeying him in their frantic trembling. Once inside again—safe

again—he locked the door behind him.

Charlie did not shout or snarl this time. He did not kick over his books with rage. Instead, he felt a terrible sorrow, the sorrow that he had failed, that it had been too much for him. With his heart still pounding in his throat and ears, he slowly dropped his luggage around him and sank to the floor, leaning against his front door. The muffled barking outside still made its way through the walls of his created, impenetrable fortress, like a trespassing alarm. He began to cry again, a horrible hurt welling up in place of the fear, overcoming it, trickling in to fill him like the flood of a slow rising tide.

Charlie heard the sound of the bus as it lumbered its way down the street, pausing before sluggishly picking up and going again. He listened as its sound grew quieter and quieter still, until it was gone, severed from him by distance. It carried with it his dream. He would miss his flight. He would not leave his house. He had failed. When he could not cry any further, reaching the point where his body became exhausted, he simply sat until he fell asleep against the door, the bewildering, thin barrier between inside and all that lay outside.

He did not dream.

He awoke some time much later, consciousness groggily turning first to confusion at his unusual location, then to great sorrow as he recalled what had transpired. His house was silent and dark; evening had come and passed and in its wake, night had arrived. Moonlight filtered in pale through his curtains, shrouding the interior of his house with a picturesque stillness. He sat for a long while, simply taking in all that had happened now that he had rested. As he sat, a strange feeling came over him. It was something that came gently bubbling up from deep beneath the surface of his consciousness.

Charlie was calm. Despite everything, he was terribly calm. He felt almost as though he were dreaming then, though the sober reality of memory told him he was not. Among this feeling of calm, something else was rising up as well: an idea, at first small and timid as a whisper, and then billowing up into a determined and demanding roar.

Charlie knew then what he had to do. He rose slowly, gently sliding his luggage out of his way and retrieving the keys he had earlier dropped to the floor. They glinted silver in the moonlight and chimed like tinny, subdued bells as he sifted through them for his house key. Every sound was amplified there in the still, dark of his home. He turned to the door, and with a long, heavy inhale, unlocked and opened it.

Again, Charlie was greeted by warm night air. There was no longer a dog outside across the street. The people and cars that usually filled the view from his window were gone now; the world was quieted. The sounds of the distant highway hummed constantly, a heartbeat of the city. He felt strange: afraid and dizzy, but alive. Brilliantly alive. So far, he was alright. He simply stood and watched, becoming used to the sounds, the warm air and the feel of everything, the vastness of the sky and the complexity of the world around him. And then he stepped outside. Charlie stood on his porch for a long moment, becoming accustomed to it as well. In an almost sacred gesture, he then shut the door behind him.

He had missed his flight, but he had another plan. A smaller plan. One that was more realistic for him. Charlie opened the garage to see his car still sitting in it, as it always had been. It had been six years since he had driven it, but he thought to give it a chance. He could not fly, but he could drive, like

he used to, down quiet nighttime roads. He could take small steps back into the world instead of pushing himself in one great leap. He climbed into the car, the smell of dust and leather filling his nostrils. For a moment he simply sat, adjusting to the feel of it all, careful not to push himself too quickly. He slid the key into the ignition and turned it, breath held. The car barely choked out a single gasp, then settled back into silent stillness.

“No,” he growled, turning the ignition again. Still, nothing. The vehicle had simply sat for too long, its battery succumbed to years of idleness. Suddenly all at once, Charlie felt that anxiety, loud and enormous, welling up like it did before, telling him to get inside, to go back to where it was safe. The frustration and panic of his idea not working, however, was becoming even more frightening than the idea that it would. He fought the urge to run, turning the ignition again. He was met with only the still and quiet garage around him, the car now nothing more than a sepulcher of his hopes and intentions.

For a moment he simply sat upon the driver's seat, the steering wheel clutched uselessly in his hands. He felt dazed, terrified and frustrated. The familiar urge to retreat to the gratifying, static comforts of his home filled every inch of him, beat an alarm along with his pulse, pushed up at his skin to escape. He didn't know what to do.

Charlie gazed around the garage, helpless in another failure of his plans. His gaze fell upon an old and forgotten shape: his old bicycle lying propped up against the wall. He climbed back out of the car and went over to it, examining it. It was covered in cobwebs from years of neglect, which he hesitantly brushed away. The tires had long since gone flat, folding marginally upon themselves where they met the ground. Charlie began digging around the old and equally cobwebbed shelves of his garage, tense and fighting off the constant hounding of anxiety still. He pushed it down, all the crawling fear; he was determined to see this through. Finally, he found his old manual air pump and with a good bit of elbow grease, worked to refill the tires. Something about the hard labor of working the old pump encouraged him, made him feel all of this was more tangible somehow. When he was done, he climbed up onto the seat of the bike, feeling strange to have it between his legs. How long had it been since he had gone for a ride? How long had it been since he'd truly enjoyed anything, sincerely, with passion?

Charlie pushed forward on the bike now, and it wobbled dangerously beneath him. He pushed the pedals beneath his feet—a strange and powerful feeling to do such a thing—and regained his balance as he picked up speed. He guided the bicycle down the driveway, and then out onto the sidewalk, pushing harder and harder against the pedals, against the resistance of them, feeling the warm breeze pick up around him as he went, watching the world rise up and approach him, pass him, and be left behind him with each turn of the bicycle's wheels. It had been many years since Charlie had ridden a bicycle, but the memory of it came back to him now with a surprising naturalness; this instinct was a primal thing, something that persisted from all the years before, when he was young and walked and danced and biked and surfed and ran down the paths of the world as it all spread out before him, welcoming and full of such wonders. For a brief moment, a tingling fear to stop the bike and turn around before he went too far welled up through him, but it was drowned out in a greater feeling now, one of anticipation... one of, perhaps, joy.