

Break Your Mother's Back

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Working close to home has always been one of my biggest treasures, allowing a casual walk to work. It's very relaxing, preparing me mentally for the day's work. This morning the air is a bit crisp and cool, one of those early autumn mornings that slowly warms up, until when the day is over you throw your coat over your shoulder as you stroll home. The walk home is so mind cleansing, shedding the day's work problems like clods of drying mud falling off a pair of old hiking boots.

As I walk along, a churning clump of small children in front of me is running and jumping on the sidewalk on the way to school. They scream loudly as a group, "Step on a crack, break your mother's back."

My mind does a quick counterclockwise time-jump; I remember playing that game when I was a little twerp. Sure was fun. What the heck, no one is looking; maybe I'll try it after the kids go around the corner. Hope no one sees a grown man in a business suit running and jumping down the sidewalk.

Running. Running. Running and jumping across the cracks. Lot's of fun! Well, off to work. Oh, maybe one more time! Running. Jumping across the cracks. A big leap, hair flying back, and tie whipping in the wind. Watch out, a bunch of cracks close together! Damn, I'm going to land on one; hope Mom's back is OK! I land on the crack, stumble and fall on the grass, suit pants torn and one knee scraped. What a dumb ass!

You know, seems like I was in the air longer than I should have been. Moreover, it got sort of foggy just before I landed.

Coming down the sidewalk toward me from the direction that I had come from, walking at a brisk pace is another businessman in a suit. As he approaches, we stare at each other. We look exactly alike.

“Hey, are you Ok? I saw you trip and fall. There is blood on your torn pants. Need some help?”

“Well I was just heading home to get cleaned up and to put on some other pants. I'll be OK.”

“No, no, let's stop at my house first. It's nearby. At least you can clean up the scrape. You know, we look like we could be twins; I can't wait to see my wife's reaction.”

This sounds reasonable, so with his assistance we walk the few blocks back in the direction of my house. Then, he says, “Here we are.” However, it's my house. I start to say something but then Mary comes out of the house and walks up to us with a curious look on her face. He says, “This is my wife Mary.”

“You look just like John,” she says.

He says to me, “By the way I'm John Fenton, what's your name?”

Something is wrong here. My name is John Fenton. I feel a bit dizzy. The fall and the situation, I don't know what to say. They both look at me with concern. This is my wife Mary. What is she doing with this guy who calls himself John Fenton? I ask her, “What's your last name?”

She appears puzzled, “Fenton, Mary Fenton, of course.”

How can I say my name is also John Fenton? Dazed, I mumble and say, "I'm Martin Thomas."

They take me into the house, my house! Everything is just as I remember it. Mary cleans my knee and bandages it. John brings a pair of slacks for me to try on. They are a perfect fit. They should be. I remember buying them at Penney's two years ago.

"Martin, return them whenever you get a chance."

Mary continues to comment on how much alike we look. I try to laugh. After tea and cookies, I excuse myself and start to get up to go. John offers me a ride home. He says, "I usually walk to work, but now I am late, so I'll drive."

"Thanks a lot, but it would be better to walk a bit to relieve some of the stiffness."
I depart.

Where am I to go? That was my house. I'm John Fenton not some made up Martin Thomas. What is happening? What is going on? I know that woman is Mary. She's my Mary Fenton! However, who is the other John Fenton?

Wandering about, I end up walking down the same sidewalk as before. There's the spot where I fell down, the grass a bit flattened. There are the close-together cracks in the sidewalk. This has something to do with the cracks. I know it. I remember the fog or smoke or whatever I saw before falling down.

What can I do? Hmmm, maybe! There is no one in sight and no cars on the street. It is mid-morning and the streets are empty. The kids are at school and people at work. It's just me on this damned cracked sidewalk. I walk back to where I had started my running and jumping across the cracks. Perhaps if I just repeat everything.

Running and jumping, I reach the multiple cracks and jump onto them. I land on my feet. Great, I'm back!

After a brisk, happy walk, I arrive home. I recall that my keys are in the torn pants. I knock and Mary answers. Starting to reach out for her, she looks at my new slacks and says, "Oh, Hi Martin, John already left. What can I do for you?"

Stunned, I realized that it had not worked. Panicky, "I forgot my torn pants."

"Oh, here they are," she says, getting them from the chair where I had left them. Retrieving the keys and thanking her, I leave, very confused.

Those cracks have something to do with this. I just need to jump in the proper manner. Therefore, I go back to the sidewalk cracks and look at them. There is nothing in particular to see. I run and jump fast, slow, haltingly, leaning sideways, in all manners and positions that I think might work. Nothing happens. Sweating and exhausted, I nearly collapse to the ground with increasing panic.

I am startled to hear a rather high-pitched gravelly voice behind me.

"Well, it looks like I'll have to help you. So many fools and they always have to try it."

He's a strange looking short fellow with pale, almost translucent skin and a rotund body. He wears black-and-white striped pants, a formal black tailcoat, a bow tie, and topped by a black bowler cap with a red rose stuck in the silk band. Dressed like that he looks like the little guy on the Monopoly cards, even has the little white mustache. Is he going to say, "GO TO JAIL?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Alfred. I am the keeper of The Order."

"The what?"

"The Order is a set of boundaries separating the various universes. This separation allows people, unknowing, to live alternate lives. Sometimes the lives are very similar to yours, as you saw. At other times the lives are extremely different, something you might not want to experience. It provides my Boss with a lot of amusement."

"You say amusement? Boss? This isn't funny to me. Tell your boss, whoever he is, that I don't like this at all. Tell him to do something."

Sticking his lips out and scrunching up his eyes, "Tell the Boss? Impossible! Unheard of my foolish friend! You have one and only one option; to go back to where you belong!"

"Back to where I belong? What do you mean?"

"You have rather upset things haven't you? What with all of your crack jumping? These cracks allow me to move from one universe to another. Do you want to hear what I have to say?"

"Yes, certainly. Sorry, it has been a bad day."

"It could have been much worse I assure you. There are things that you have no idea about. Very well, but I can't help you directly. I didn't help you get here and I can't directly help you to go back. However, here is a clue. Step on a crack and break your Mother's back back."

“ Step on a crack and break your Mother's back? What nonsense is this? That's just a children's game call.”

“I didn't say step on a crack and break your Mother's back. I said step on a crack and break your Mother's back back.” With that he slowly vanishes, with the last thing I see of him being his lips moving and saying, “back back”, as the final words came out of his mouth with a rising pitch.

Then it dawned on me, “back back.” In order to get back to where I had come from I need to run backwards and jump backwards starting from the crack that I landed on the first time. I have been running and jumping forward or sideways, never backwards. I am willing to try anything.

Now, I am a fairly coordinated and athletic, but running backwards and then jumping backwards is a bit more than just difficult, particularly with my stiffening knee. I try it a couple of times, slowly. Nothing happens. How fast was I going when I jumped forward? Could I go that fast backwards? Practicing on the grass along the sidewalk, I build up speed and coordination, not to mention determination to get the hell out of here as quickly as possible.

Now or nothing, it's getting toward noon and soon people will be on the street. I lay my torn pants on the ground to better run. Looking back over my shoulder, targeting the very crack that I want and beginning to run backward as fast as possible, I repeat my earlier movements in reverse. Closer to the crack I come, my foot hits it and I leap backwards. Through the fog, I go once more, seeming to float a bit and landing on my rear end, splitting the borrowed slacks.

Butt hurting and with a stiff knee, I feel good as I walk back to my house. Yes, to my house and my wife! To my life, alternate or not! Nuts to the Boss!

There's the house. My car is in the driveway. Mary's gone. John Fenton is coming home!

Then, I see the name on the mailbox, Martin J. Thomas. This can't be! This is John Fenton's house, not Martin Thomas' house. What has gone wrong? There is no Martin Thomas! I'm John Fenton!

Nothing to lose, I knock on the door expecting to see myself answer it. No one home. I insert the key into the door handle, it turns; I slowly let myself in. Yes, it is my house. At least it looks like my house. How can I prove to myself that it is? Mary would probably be coming home soon from shopping or wherever. What can I do?

Looking at my torn slacks, I yell, "Yes!" Running to my closet, almost crashing into the hall table, I throw the sliding door open. My slacks are there! I now have two pairs of slacks. I am wearing a pair I just ruined! No, these belong to the other guy. I left my torn suit pants behind on the grass. There are no suit pants in the closet! I rejoice, jumping about.

What about the name on the mailbox? It said Martin Thomas, an undeniable fact. I go outside and look again. Yes, Martin J. Thomas, not John Fenton. However, the pants I no longer have and the extra pair of slacks I am wearing? They continue to say, yes, I am home.

I go back into the house, change into the good pair of slacks and take a beer out of the refrigerator. It isn't noon yet, but who cares if a not-before-noon alcoholic beverage consumption policy of mine is being broken. How thirsty and needing I am.

Sitting on the barstool at the kitchen counter, I remove my wallet from the rear pocket of the torn slacks and place it on the counter before putting it in the clean slacks. I look at it. Slowly, I open the wallet. There's Mary's picture. There's my driver's

license with my ridiculous government-photographed face on it and my name, Martin J. Thomas. Somehow, I recall that the "J" is for Joseph.

Raising my beer high I yell, "Here's to Martin J. Thomas! Moreover, to John Fenton, whoever and wherever he is! I am home!"

"Martin, who's in there with you? Please come help me with the groceries." It's Mary.

Later in the afternoon, I hear children's singsong voices in the distance screaming, "Step on a crack, break your mother's back."

"Wonder if they will all make it?"