

You slept in last night. Some nights you can't fall asleep for a while and then you have to catch up the next night. It's fine, it's the way it is, it's the way it has been.

It's Saturday morning, a little late in the morning. You feel a bit overslept, so you go for a walk, and that helps a little bit. You come back to your apartment and can't think of anything to do. Should you go to Mitzi's once again? Is your life nothing but that cafe and working? Yes, that's pretty much true. You wonder if you should try going to a different cafe. But you would still be going to a cafe.

You get through the two journal articles you have left to correct, and send them back to their authors. Then you look around your apartment and decide to do what you usually do.

You go to...

## MITZI'S CAFE

Brian sits, actually nodding off!

You get your drink and sit down.

YOU: Hey.

You shake him a little.

BRIAN: Oh, oh! Hey.

YOU: You were sleeping.

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess I was drowsy.

YOU: Didn't get enough sleep last night?

BRIAN: Yeah. I got into a book.

YOU: A novel?

BRIAN: A biography.

YOU: I was up late not last night but the night before. I don't remember why now.

BRIAN: You sound kind of tired today.

YOU: Yeah, I slept in this morning.

BRIAN: I don't think I can do much with today.

YOU: Yeah, I know the feeling. I got some editing done, but I don't think I could do any writing.

BRIAN: What have you been working on?

YOU: Just stupid ideas. Maybe I'll have a good one.

BRIAN: Yeah. That happens. What's one of the better stupid ones?

YOU: I have this idea of a dream. It's not a dream I actually had, but I could have a character have it. It's about this place where everyone has to be one people. And the way that they make that happen is through empathy. And the way they have empathy is by understanding people. So if there are people they can't understand, they change them until they can understand them, and then they can have empathy on them.

BRIAN: That sounds kind of interesting.

YOU: Yeah. I can't think of how to make it into a story though. And who am I to say bad things about empathy?

BRIAN: You have some empathy.

YOU: I do.

BRIAN: Maybe you're the one who needs to say this. Only Nixon can go to China.

YOU: I don't think I'm a good enough writer to make much of a difference.

BRIAN: Yeah. I think from what you've showed me that you are a good writer, but you don't have whatever it is that makes people famous.

YOU: Yeah. Oh well.

BRIAN: Well, you might be able to get some people to read your writing. Maybe you could put it on a blog and 50 people could read it. 50 people is pretty good.

YOU: That's true. It's a lot better than 0.

BRIAN: But it's a good question whether people need to be dissuaded from being empathetic.

YOU: Yeah, I hope that story wouldn't dissuade people from being empathetic, but would help them understand that empathy has limits.

BRIAN: Or, in a way, the higher empathy is to know what it's like to be someone who isn't being understood by someone else, and to give them space.

YOU: Yeah. That makes sense.

BRIAN: Any other thoughts?

YOU: No, I guess I'm all out of thoughts.

BRIAN: I'm out of thoughts, too.

YOU: Maybe we should play a game.

BRIAN: Okay. Nothing too competitive or requiring too much thought.

YOU: Chutes and Ladders?

BRIAN: No, don't feel like playing that today.

YOU: Scrabble?

BRIAN: No, too competitive and too much thought.

YOU: Not Monopoly... that's no fun for two players.

BRIAN: Monopoly could be good, but, yeah, we played that recently.

YOU: I'll go look at the game shelf and see if there's anything we missed.

You look through the games on the shelf. Chess? No. Checkers? No. The deck of cards might be good. Risk? No. Then you see one that you've never heard of before, called Breaking the Devil's Backbone. It's at the bottom of the stack and you carefully remove it and lower the stack of games above it, to rest

where it was.

You bring it over to Brian, along with the deck of cards.

YOU: So here's a game that I don't know what it is. Also a deck of cards.

BRIAN: Let's look at the new game.

You open it up. It comes with a board folded into thirds. You unfold it. It comes with fake money and deeds to properties.

YOU: This looks like some kind of Monopoly clone.

BRIAN: There are rivers on here.

YOU: Okay... hm...

It appears to be a history-themed game. You read through the rule-book for a bit.

YOU: Okay, so it's like Monopoly. You start the game up at the starting places given by the "Bill of Lading" and then go down the river to Natchez, Mississippi. And then you sell your cargo and go up the trace to Nashville, Tennessee, and you can buy property along the way. And then everybody goes through over and over until someone runs out of money or something like that.

(You actually didn't read the rules too carefully, just skimmed them and read them.)

BRIAN: So wait, the idea is that you are ...?

YOU: You're a flatboatman during the time when

the American South was the frontier. And you're going down the river to sell your cargo, but you have to get back over land, so you walk up the Natchez Trace from Natchez to Nashville.

BRIAN: Okay. So it's like Monopoly with a historical theme.

YOU: Right.

BRIAN: Huh, I wonder why this game is in this cafe...

YOU: I don't know. Do you want to play it?

BRIAN: What are these red and blue cards? Are they like chance cards?

YOU: They are Trace Hazards and River Hazards.

BRIAN: So they're like chance cards.

YOU: Right. "Hazard" and "chance" are related words.

BRIAN: I don't know if I want to play Monopoly again, even if there's a historical component.

You start to read the Trace Hazards out loud. There's something about the French exploring the Lower Mississippi Valley, and another thing about the founding of New Orleans. The cards are detailed, with names and dates. They involve the player character in history, like making them go to Natchez to congratulate the French (for building Fort Rosalie on the Natchez Bluff in 1716).

YOU: Oh, these Trace Hazard cards all have years on them. Oh... they're in chronological order.

BRIAN: Okay, so maybe this game is history-based. Like that's its claim to fame. I guess that is different than Monopoly.

YOU: So you want to play?

BRIAN: Yeah, it's not going to end up being all that competitive. We're just going to go through the motions and learn some history.

YOU: Okay, I'm in too.

BRIAN: What does the name of the game mean, though?

YOU: This piece of paper says that the Devil's Backbone is a term for the Natchez Trace, and breaking the Devil's Backbone is when you successfully make a trip up or down the Trace.

BRIAN: It's a vivid name.

YOU: You have to go through the process of commerce over and over, breaking the devil's backbone over and over.

BRIAN: That's an interesting image.

You choose your tokens. Neither of you wants to be the thief, so you decide not to have one. You draw your bill of lading card: You are from North Carolina and you start on the Cumberland River.

Brian draws his bill of lading card: He is from Indiana and he starts on the

Wabash River. Both of you have cargo to sell in Natchez.

You start, and roll, and hit a river hazard. The river is flowing slowly so you have to move slowly for the next three turns.

After you get done with your slow river curse, Brian hits a river hazard. Something about having too much stuff and needing to unload his boat, so he misses a few turns.

Eventually both of you make it to Natchez and start up the Trace. And you eventually make it to Nashville, working through some of the history. There's nothing to do today, so you keep playing, starting over with a new bill of lading, a new identity, to be drawn down the river only to have to walk your way over Satan's spine, breaking it over and over as though it's never been broken before and will never have to be broken again. Over and over, working through the history.

BRIAN: Who made this game?

YOU: It looks like it was basically self-published.

A woman approaches.

WOMAN (with a Southern accent): "Breaking the Devil's Backbone"... that's an interesting name.

YOU: Yes. This is a game about the Natchez Trace. The "Devil's Backbone" is a name for the Natchez Trace, and "Breaking" it is when you make it from



one end to the other successfully.

WOMAN: I'm from Nashville. I've never been on the Natchez Trace though. Hi, my name is Abigail.

YOU: Beth.

BRIAN: Brian.

ABIGAIL: I'm here in California to visit relatives, but I came by this coffeeshop to pass some time.

BRIAN: I see you have a Bible with you.

ABIGAIL: Yes, I was reading the Bible when you said something about Nashville and it caught my attention.

BRIAN: Do you go to church in Nashville?

ABIGAIL: Yes, I do.

BRIAN: What kind of church?

ABIGAIL: We're a holiness church. We believe in overcoming our sinful habits. As part of this we try to do good works for the Father.

BRIAN: How does that work?

ABIGAIL: We each find some sort of consuming fire ministry and then pursue it. And as we work, the Holy Spirit fills us and we don't sin.

BRIAN: Interesting. I like that idea.

ABIGAIL: God is a holy God.

BRIAN: What's your consuming fire ministry? Do

you have one?

ABIGAIL: Actually, part of why I'm in this coffeeshop is to see how coffeeshops are in California. I want to make a place for students in Nashville to be able to study.

BRIAN: Is there anything specifically Christian about that?

ABIGAIL: Yes, there will be, if I get to do this plan. The coffeeshop will be called Abigail's, and that's not out of pride but because it will be my home away from home. I will practice hospitality there, and when people are around me, they will see the light that goes through me, which comes from Jesus Christ.

YOU: This is something you've been into all your life?

ABIGAIL: Not all of my life, but yes, for a while.

YOU: Huh, I wonder if there's a woman named Mitzi who owns this cafe... I never stopped to ask...

ALICIA: No, it's just a name. Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to eavesdrop!

ABIGAIL: No, don't worry about it. What's your name?

ALICIA: Alicia.

Abigail and Alicia talk about cafe business. Abigail is getting a free education.

You and Brian get back to your game. But you're thinking about Abigail, and apparently, she was thinking of you, turning back to your game.

ABIGAIL: Do either of you go to church?

YOU: No.

BRIAN: No, not regularly.

ABIGAIL: Are you a Christian?

BRIAN: No, but I do believe in God.

YOU: I don't believe in God.

ABIGAIL: You're playing a game about breaking the Devil's backbone. I think that's interesting.

YOU: Well, we didn't choose the game for the name but more because it was the only one we hadn't played recently.

ABIGAIL: Yes, I guess it might have been a coincidence.

YOU: But you're right. It is interesting.

ABIGAIL: If you believed in the Devil, would you want to break his backbone?

YOU: I don't even know how to do that. What is the Devil's backbone?

BRIAN: Something like walking up the Natchez Trace successfully?

YOU: Living life, I guess. Getting through life

without getting ambushed.

ABIGAIL: That's interesting. How would that defeat the Devil?

YOU: I heard something one time, about how things get bigger if you fight them. So if you just live your life without getting drawn into something, the other thing doesn't have any power.

ABIGAIL: That does make sense. The Devil doesn't have a lot of power on his own. But he can use our minds to give him space to work.

YOU: I definitely believe in the Devil as a metaphor. Some ideas get in our heads and take us over, get us out of balance so that we're going around and around in circles.

ABIGAIL: The Devil only has to plant a seed and then he can go off somewhere else. Sometimes he comes after you like a lion. But he has more power if you don't know it's him.

YOU: Couldn't it be that we have feelings and we think that they're people, like that the Devil is a person? People are really good at making stories out of patterns.

ABIGAIL: That can be true. But there are times when you see enough to know.

BRIAN: How do you know?

ABIGAIL: Have you ever been in love with someone?

BRIAN: Sort of.

ABIGAIL: How about you, Beth?

YOU: Yes.

ABIGAIL: Did the other person love you?

BRIAN: I thought so.

YOU: Yes, he did.

ABIGAIL: How did you know, Beth?

YOU: There were signs. And then I knew.

ABIGAIL: When I was dating my husband, there was a time when I didn't know if he loved me back or not. I could think through all the evidence either way. It was all memories and little signs. And I couldn't figure it out, one way or another. And then I was talking to my best friend about it, and I just said all the different things that I thought might have been him loving me. And I didn't believe that he was in love with me when I started listing them. But then when I was done, I knew. Just saying it all out loud. So when God or the spiritual world talks to you, you get glimpses over time, and then eventually you have seen enough glimpses and you believe.

BRIAN: But you never know for certain, right?

ABIGAIL: No, you can know things.

BRIAN: Haven't you ever been wrong about something before? Maybe you're wrong now.

ABIGAIL: Yes, sometimes human beings are wrong. But Jesus said "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." So if you have

been set free, you know the truth.

BRIAN: But that could be wrong. How do you know that Jesus really said that?

ABIGAIL: How do I know my husband loves me? If I examine it, I can always doubt it. But do I honestly believe that he doesn't? How would I be a bigger fool, to think he loves me, or that he doesn't?

BRIAN: I can see how it could be foolish to doubt that your spouse loves you.

ABIGAIL: Brian, you believe in God...

BRIAN: Yeah.

ABIGAIL: Is everything going to work out in the end?

BRIAN: Yeah. I think so.

ABIGAIL: So what's more important, to learn to trust that reality, or to be into the reality of the visible world?

BRIAN: I guess in the end we all have to trust the world where everything is good or else we can't be part of it.

ABIGAIL: Yes. I think that is true. The present world is passing away. So we have to learn to trust the new world.

BRIAN: You said that everything is going to work out in the end. But what about the people who go to hell?

ABIGAIL: First of all, I do not believe, and my church does not teach, that hell is permanent. The smoke rises forever but nobody lasts in hell forever. Secondly, nobody goes to be with the Father until they have overcome all of their sinful habits. But very few people have done this by the time they die. If I died today, I would not be ready for heaven. So God gives us another time to grow in holiness, during the 1,000 year reign of Christ after Jesus returns. So all the people who died without hearing about Jesus will have the chance to turn toward him. And most people will, eventually. But it's not inevitable. Some people will choose to reject Jesus, either by being open rebels against him or by not being interested in overcoming their sinful habits. God gives us free will and doesn't force us to love him.

BRIAN: I guess if he could he could just zap us to make us holy.

ABIGAIL: You don't zap people to make them truly love you.

BRIAN: Huh, so most people don't go to hell...

ABIGAIL: But a few people do.

BRIAN: That doesn't sound like absolutely everything works out in the end.

ABIGAIL: No, it's not perfect. But it's generally true that everything works out in the end.

YOU: So you don't get rid of fear from your thought system.

ABIGAIL: Fear is not evil. Fear can be used by evil, but it can also be used by good.

Unfortunately, it's hard to find a balance. Maybe there can't be a perfect balance.

BRIAN: That's interesting.

YOU: Yeah, I never heard Christianity explained that way.

ABIGAIL: Our church started out pursuing holiness. And then as we kept studying the Bible, we came to understand what you've heard. I need to get back to my husband and my relatives, but it was very nice talking to you all. If you're ever in Nashville and if my cafe is open, I would love to treat you all to some coffee or tea.

You and Brian laugh.

ABIGAIL: I know that your plane tickets would be much greater than the value of the coffee or tea, but it's also valuable to see a friendly face in a strange city.

You both are quieted.

BRIAN: Yeah. No, thank you for the conversation. I think about philosophy and religion all the time and this is giving me food for thought.

ABIGAIL: That's good. Okay, Beth and Brian, goodbye!

She walks out of the cafe and down the street and out of sight.

You return to your game.

YOU: Huh, she left an impression on you.



BRIAN: Yeah. Where do all these people come from?

YOU: All these religious people?

BRIAN: There was that guy who was into selling, too.

YOU: I don't know. I kind of don't expect religious people in this city.

BRIAN: Well, I guess Abigail was from Tennessee, so that makes sense.

YOU: You don't see a lot of Southerners in this city.

BRIAN: No... even fewer people from the Midwest or New England.

YOU: There are some, but yeah.

BRIAN: Where do people come from?

YOU: I don't know, Brian. You mean something like, what are the cultural roots of people?

BRIAN: Yeah. Southerners come from the South, and Midwesterners come from the Midwest. Immigrants come from other countries. But where do people come from?

YOU: I don't know. Maybe from evolution?

BRIAN: There's two kinds of people. The people you see when you scrutinize the visible world. Then there is the person you are in yourself, which observes the visible world, scrutinizing it, or not. And the other people who are like that.

And the scrutinized person appears to come from evolution, but we don't really know that we do come from evolution...

YOU: But it might be foolish to think that we don't...

BRIAN: Right. That might be true. But be that as it may, there's the unscrutinized reality.

YOU: And if that's more fundamental than the scrutinized, where do we come from then?

BRIAN: Yeah. Where does *that* come from?

YOU: Maybe from a person? From God?

BRIAN: Yeah, I guess that's the answer.

YOU: Maybe we can't know the answer.

BRIAN: Or we're fools to not desire to know the answer.

YOU: Maybe so.

BRIAN: How do you feel about this?

You pause to think.

YOU: I don't know. I guess I don't want to believe something that isn't true, just to believe something at all. But yeah, what Abigail said about being a fool to not believe when there is an answer... that's kind of sitting with me. I don't know. Here we are at the table. We broke the Devil's backbone a few times.

BRIAN: Yeah... it's like we usually don't have the

answer at the end of a conversation.

YOU: But that doesn't mean we never will have some of the answers.

BRIAN: Or even the overall answer.

YOU: We're never going to have all the individual answers.

BRIAN: No.

You and Brian put the game away and then leave the cafe and part ways. You take the bus to nowhere (somewhere) and back. Then you go to a restaurant with one of your friends and talk for a while about her problems. Then you go home and watch a DVD you had checked out from the library. And then you go to bed.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT

Episode 13 "Breaking the Devil's Backbone"

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## COMMENTS

(no comment)

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