

Impulse

Matthew Pepple lay on a cheap hotel bed and stared the ceiling while he wondered where he had gone wrong. Ever since he was a kid he had tried to do the right thing. He made plans. He studied his options and made logical choices. He loved to play softball and video games, but he realized those were diversions. He was never going to make a living at them, so his schoolwork came first. At school he enjoyed history and drama, but he didn't want to teach history, and the world was filled with would-be actors, so those weren't career options. He also enjoyed science, and there were career options in science, so that's what he focused on.

When it came time to pick a college, Matthew looked at several colleges and degrees, comparing costs to average starting salaries. For some science degrees, you had to get a Master's degree or a PhD before there were good job opportunities. Other degrees offered opportunities with a four-year degree. Several schools offered computer programming degrees for reasonable expenditures, there appeared to be lots of job offerings, and Matthew didn't think computers were going away anytime soon. He had taken a programming course in high school and enjoyed it, so he decided to make that his life's work.

To Matthew, college was just an extension of high school. He lived in a dorm for four years because there were fewer distractions in a dorm than in a fraternity or an apartment. He could focus on his schoolwork. It was also cheaper, so he was able to avoid running up a huge student loan debt. Sometimes he hung out with friends, and he dated sporadically, but his schoolwork always came first. He worked part-time jobs in the little free time he did have, which helped minimize the need for student loans. Everything was going according to plan.

Matthew's plans suffered a devastating setback in the spring of his junior year. Both of his parents were killed in a car crash. In addition to the personal tragedy, the funeral arrangements, funeral, and related activities caused him to miss a lot of classes. He returned to school in time for his final exams, but his focus wasn't there. He passed, but his GPA took a major hit. That summer he closed out his parent's estate. He sold their house, their furniture, and the accumulated memories of a lifetime. After paying off the mortgage and other debts, Matthew was left with a small nest egg. In a rare display of sentimentality, Matthew kept his father's classic MGB. His father had lovingly restored that car, and Matthew couldn't bring himself to sell it. As he drove the MG to school that fall, it occurred to him that he was well and truly homeless.

The second major blow came when Matthew began applying for jobs. There weren't nearly as many job openings as he had expected. The "rumor mill" among students was that companies were finding it cheaper to hire foreign programmers. During the pandemic companies had become used to employees working from home, and with high-speed Internet "home" could be anyplace in the world. Programmers in India and China were rumored to work for ridiculously low wages. Some companies were even outsourcing their entire programming function, hiring overseas companies to develop the software they needed. His professors told him the rise of AI was also responsible for the lack of entry-level programming jobs. Much of the work that was previously done by new college graduates was now being done by AI. Computers wrote basic computer software. What companies needed now, they said,

were experienced programmers to develop AI and oversee this work. How you got to be an experienced programmer when there were no entry level jobs was never explained.

The fact that Matthew's GPA plunged at the end of his junior year also came back to haunt him. The jobs that were available went to students who had not suffered a setback. As graduation approached and Matthew was beginning to panic, he got an anonymous phone call that gave him yet another reason to despair. In high school, Matthew had been elected President of the Teenage Republicans Club. He'd spent two summers working with the local sheriff's department, upgrading their IT infrastructure, and developing databases that helped streamline their office procedures. Matthew had listed these activities on his resume because he thought they showed leadership and programming experience. The caller, who didn't want to give his name or the company he worked for because he thought the call might put his own job in jeopardy, said listing those activities made HR departments worry that Matthew's "political views" might create discord in the work environment. Matthew had no idea if the caller was telling the truth, and if he was telling the truth Matthew didn't know if this applied to a lot of companies or just the one screwed-up company that the caller worked for. He decided to delete these activities from his resume and reapply to several companies as a test, but it was too late to expect results before graduation.

Matthew was forced to make a fallback plan. A friend who had graduated the year before had found a job in Florida and was renting a house with a spare bedroom. He said Matthew could stay with him while he looked for a job. Matthew realized his inheritance would last a lot longer if he shared expenses than if he tried to live on his own, so he gladly accepted his friend's offer. The day after graduation he packed all his worldly possessions into the MG and set off for Florida. He avoided Interstates because he wasn't in a hurry, and he didn't want to put too much of a strain on the MG. Besides, driving a classic convertible through the countryside on a warm spring day is a glorious experience. Driving the same car in the slow lane of an Interstate, cringing every time a giant truck or SUV whizzed past, is a miserable experience.

The drive got even more exhilarating when he came to the Blue Ridge Mountains. The road twisted and turned as he navigated the switchbacks. It was ideal for a small sports car. He didn't push it, as there were far too many blind curves on this unfamiliar road to do anything stupid. Besides, the passenger seat was packed full of clothing and other loose items that could topple over and distract him. He didn't need to push it, as staying within the speed limits was exciting enough. The air got noticeably cooler as he climbed, and spring flowers were still in full bloom. The scenery was breathtaking, and every mile or two offered a scenic overlook of the verdant valleys below. Everything was just about perfect – until the left front wheel bearing began howling.

He'd learned a fair bit about the MG, growing up and working on it with his dad. He didn't know exactly what the noise was, but he knew it wasn't good. Fortunately, he was just coming into a town. "Welcome to Singecat Falls," the sign said. There appeared to be one gas station in town, and the man who ran that told him where he could find the town's only repair shop. The repair shop was run by a man who Matthew guessed was in his mid-thirties. He'd never worked on an MG before, but he reckoned changing the wheel bearing wouldn't be much different changing a bearing on any other car so he said if he could get the part, he could fix it. Matthew had a catalog from a company that

specialized in MGs, and when he showed it to the mechanic the mechanic told him what parts to order. The company advertised overnight delivery, but the mechanic said you generally needed to add an extra day or two for deliveries to Singecat Falls, regardless of what the catalog said. In any event, there were a several cars ahead of him.

“But I’ve got to get to Florida,” Matthew protested. “I’ve got plans!”

“The other people need their cars, too,” the mechanic said. “If you can get me the parts, I might be able to get to your car by Thursday. Or maybe Friday at the latest.”

Matthew ordered the parts, and the mechanic gave him directions to the only inn in town. Matthew took his overnight bag out of the trunk and walked to the inn. They had a room, and that’s how Matthew came to be lying on a bed staring at the ceiling.

Where had he gone wrong? Just a little over a year ago all his plans were working out. He was getting a degree in something he enjoyed, looking forward to a high paying job in an exotic location like California, flying home on holidays to see his parents and friends from high school . . . and now? His parents were dead, the only home he’d ever known now belonged to a stranger, he had no job, and very little hope of getting a job. What was he going to do when his money ran out? And now he realized he couldn’t even depend on his car. The pleasures of the afternoon were lost in the gloom of the evening.

He rolled over and looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand. Eight o’clock. He should probably go down to the dining room and have dinner. He wasn’t really hungry, but when he checked in the man behind the counter told him when the dining room closed. He didn’t remember what time it closed, but he remembered it seemed early. He put on his shoes, tucked in his shirt, and headed downstairs.

The dining room was small, which made sense as the inn probably didn’t have more than a dozen guest rooms. There was a family at one table, a couple at another, and a litter of dishes on a table where a party had recently left. A sign said “seat yourself,” so he chose a table at the far end of the room, where he could be alone with his thoughts. The menu featured a half-dozen sandwiches and a few entrees from the grill. The special of the day was meatloaf. It occurred to Matthew that he hadn’t had a home cooked meal in a long time, so he ordered the meatloaf when the waitress came by.

The meatloaf was good. So good, in fact, that it reminded him of his mom’s meatloaf. That brought forth a wave of sadness, followed by a return of despair. He barely noticed the rest of the meal as he wallowed in self-pity over the way his plans had fallen apart. He paid his bill and lingered over a cup of coffee, still lost in thought. It wasn’t until the waitress said “More coffee?” that he realized she was standing beside him, holding a pot of coffee.

“Please,” he said, setting his cup on the table beside her. He was embarrassed that he had kept her waiting.

“You look troubled,” she said as she filled his cup.

"Is it that obvious?" he asked.

She nodded yes. "It's pretty dead around here. Sometimes I flirt with the customers, just for fun. I smiled at you three times, and winked at you twice, but you never noticed. Your face was pointed in my direction, but you were staring at something a thousand miles away."

"You were flirting with me?" he asked in surprise. He suddenly noticed she was about his age, and quite pretty. How could he have missed that all through dinner?

"Don't flatter yourself," she replied. "I flirt with lots of customers. Sometimes it leads to a good tip."

"I, I don't remember what I tipped you," Matthew said, feeling flustered.

"It wasn't very memorable," she said. "But that's not important. I'm more concerned about why you're so troubled. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Please do," he said instinctively. He had never before had a waitress ask to sit down at his table, but when he looked around the dining room he realized he was the only customer left." She sat down and poured herself a cup of coffee, using a cup she'd brought with her.

"Am I keeping you from closing?" Matthew asked apologetically.

She shook her head no. "Uncle Bill insists on keeping the dining room open until closing time, even when we don't have any customers. We've got another twenty minutes."

Matthew realized it was his turn to say something, but he couldn't think of anything to say.

"My name's Angeline," she said.

"Oh, I'm Matthew," he replied.

She took a sip of coffee. "So, Matthew, now that we've got the small talk out of the way, what makes you so blue?"

"My plans have crumbled to dust." As soon as he said it, he groaned inwardly. It sounded dramatic in his head, but pretentious on his lips. It didn't seem to bother her, though. She nodded in sympathy.

"I know what that's like," she said. "It's part of life, but it sucks just the same. My dad says we just have to roll with the punches. What were the plans that crumbled?"

Matthew told her about his lack of a job, the death of his parents, and his car breakdown. She was easy to talk to. She was a good listener, asked intelligent questions, and gave him hope that he might

still find a programming job. He was amazed at how fast twenty minutes passed. They said good night when the dining room closed, and he returned to his room feeling a little better about life.

The next morning Matthew exchanged a few pleasantries with Angeline over breakfast and then set out to explore the town. There wasn't much to see. In addition to the gas station, the mechanic, and the inn, there was a Dollar General store, a small tourist shop with souvenirs of Singecat Falls, a luncheonette, a barber shop, and two beauty salons. There was also a small public library. Matthew spent several hours reading magazines in the library, had a leisurely lunch at the luncheonette, and then wandered aimlessly on the side streets. He found an antique store, but it was closed. There were a few empty lots, the repair shop that had his MG, and a lot of small houses. Matthew wondered what the people who lived in the houses did for a living. There didn't seem to be many jobs in Singecat Falls. He guessed they worked in one of the larger towns he'd driven through on his way here. The houses were modest but appeared to be reasonably well maintained.

Matthew worked up an appetite wandering through the town, but he deliberately waited until almost eight o'clock to go to dinner, hoping he might get to talk to Angeline again. He wasn't disappointed. When he finished the nightly special, he was the only customer left and Angelina joined him at his table. He'd had all day to think about what to say, and he realized that the previous night all the conversation had been about him. Tonight he asked Angeline about *her* life.

"There's really not much to say," she answered. "I grew up here in Singecat Falls. I went to school in Hollis Springs, which is the nearest town big enough to have a school system. My dad works for their maintenance department. My mom used to work here at the inn, helping Uncle Bill and Aunt Kay. No one in our family had ever gone to college, but my parents encouraged me to go to the Hollis Springs Community College. I was just about to sign the student loan paperwork when my mom had a heart attack and died. I knew Dad would have trouble keeping the house without her income, and my Aunt and Uncle would have trouble keeping this place going without her, so I dropped the school idea and came to work here. My dad says I've always been impulsive like that."

"That doesn't sound impulsive to me."

"Well, I'm impulsive in other things, too. I'm not very good at planning ahead."

"Sounds to me like you had a plan."

"Yeah, but I didn't stick to it," she said. "I admire the way you make plans and then stick to them."

"No plan survives contact with the enemy," Matthew said.

"What enemy?"

Matthew chuckled. "That's a quote from a German general named 'von Moltke the Elder,' a couple hundred years ago. He meant that while it was important to make plans, it was foolish to think that everything would go according to plan. The enemy was going to do something you didn't expect. You

had to stay flexible, and adapt to whatever the enemy did. Sometimes life is the enemy. You made plans, but you changed your plans when your mom died. I think you did the right thing.”

“You’re so smart,” she said.

“I’m not any smarter than you are. I was just lucky enough to go to school where I had time to study things like ancient German generals. Have you ever thought about going back to school?”

“Sometimes,” Angelina said. “My dad’s thinking about retiring next year. If he retires, he’ll get a retirement from the school system in addition to Social Security. He should be OK financially. And I’ve got a cousin who will be old enough to help out here at the inn.”

“What would you like to study?”

“I like art,” she said. “I’ve always loved to draw, but I don’t think I could make a living at that. I really like kids, too. I thought maybe I’d go for my teaching certificate. That way I could teach school during the day, and work on my art at night. Maybe I could even teach art. We had an art teacher who used to come to our school and teach an art class two days a week. I think she taught art classes at schools all around the county. I really liked her.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Matthew said.

There was a brief lull in the conversation, and then Angelina asked him how his day had been. He told her about wandering through the town and spending a few hours at the library.

“Did you see the falls?” she asked.

“What falls?”

Angelina gave Matthew a surprised, ‘are you kidding’ look. “Singecat Falls,” she said. “It’s about the only thing this town has going for it. It’s what keeps this inn in business. We don’t have many visitors now, but during the summer and fall we get a fair number of tourists who come here to see the falls.”

“Oh,” Matthew said with embarrassment. “I guess I should have guessed there would be a falls around her someplace.”

“It’s not an especially large waterfall,” Angelina said, “but it’s very pretty. I think it’s prettiest this time of year. There’s more water flowing over it, the trees are leafing out, and there are still lots of wildflowers in bloom. I could show it to you, if you’d like.”

“I’d like that very much,” Matthew said.

“I’m working breakfast tomorrow morning,” she said, “but I’m not working lunch. Let’s meet in the lobby at ten o’clock. Wear comfortable clothes and hiking shoes.”

Matthew figured he'd wear jeans, a T-shirt, and tennis shoes, the same as he was wearing now. All his other clothes were packed in his car at the mechanic's shop. He did have a lightweight jacket he could wear if it was cool.

The next morning Angelina met him in the lobby. She was wearing shorts, hiking boots, and a light jacket over a T-shirt. Matthew noticed that she had nice legs. She had a small backpack strapped on her back and a belt with two water bottles. She handed a similar belt with water bottles to Matthew.

"I thought you might need these," she said.

They quickly walked to the edge of town, where a small sign reading "Singecat Falls" pointed to a trail. The trail wound its way up the side of a mountain. The trail was mostly shady, interspersed with patches of sunshine. Brightly colored wildflowers were scattered along the way. Unseen birds occasionally burst into song, and there was the steady background rustling of a spring breeze winding its way through the trees.

They climbed for the better part of an hour. Angelina told a few stories about exploring these mountains with her high school friends, and Matthew responded with tales of his Boy Scout adventures. This led to general reminiscing about friends and adventures from their childhoods. Matthew told fewer and fewer stories as they climbed, as his attention became focused on breathing and on taking each additional step forward. He didn't want to suggest they take a break, but it was becoming obvious to him that Angelina was in better shape than he was. Four years of late-night college studying had taken their toll. He was beginning to think he should have spent a little less time in the computer lab and gone to the gym more often. Or once, even. Finally, to his relief, they crested a ridge and started downhill.

After a half-hour of leisurely downhill strolling Matthew heard running water ahead. Soon he could see the falls. A sheet of crystalline water plunged maybe thirty feet before crashing onto a rocky ledge. From there the water split into several smaller streams that cascaded down a steep rocky face, forming dozens of small pools which overflowed in tiny waterfalls to rocks a few feet further down the hillside. Drops of water splashed out of these pools and glittered in the sunlight. The rocks between the rivulets were covered with soft green moss, kept moist by the splashing. A little below where they were standing the streams came back together in a waterfall which dropped about twenty feet to the floor of the ravine. A rushing creek, swollen with the spring rains, carried the water down the ravine toward the valley below.

Matthew and Angelina stood side by side, silently admiring this view for a long time. Almost without thinking, Matthew put his arm around Angelina's waist. It seemed like the natural thing to do. He was rewarded when Angelina put her arm around his waist. Finally, Angelina broke the silence.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

They sat down on a small grassy meadow a few feet from the falls. Angelina pulled a loaf of French bread, some cheese, and a summer sausage out of her backpack. They chatted about the hike and the falls while they ate. After they finished Angelina pulled a sketch pad out of her backpack and began

sketching the falls. Matthew admired her skill, but he sensed that watching her work made her nervous, so he lay back and stared at the white clouds drifting across the brilliant blue sky, framed by the gently swaying trees. Eventually Angelina finished her sketch and lay down beside Matthew. She pointed to a squirrel climbing one of the trees, and when she dropped her hand back down it landed on Matthew's hand. They held hands and stared at the sky for a long time.

A gentle tune sounded from Angelina's phone. "Damn," she said. "We need to head back so I can cover the dinner shift."

Reluctantly they got up and began hiking back to town. It seemed to Matthew that the scenery in the afternoon light was even more beautiful than it had been in the morning.

As Matthew was getting ready to go to dinner, he saw he'd missed a call from the mechanic while he was at the falls. He guessed there had been no cell coverage there, which didn't surprise him. The mechanic had left a message. His car was done, and he could pick it up the first thing in the morning.

When Angelina joined him for their after dinner chat she was carrying a large manilla envelope which she gave to Matthew. Inside was the sketch of the falls which she'd made that day.

"Thank you!" he exclaimed. "It's beautiful."

"Thanks," she said. "It's not the best sketch I've ever done, but I thought maybe you'd like it. Especially since you watched me make it."

"Oh, I do," he said. "I really enjoyed that hike today. Those falls are beautiful."

"They've always been one of my favorite places."

There was a slight pause in the conversation.

"So," Angelina said. "Got any plans for this weekend?"

"Actually, I do," Matthew said. "I just got a message from my mechanic, and my car is done. I can pick it up tomorrow and head for Florida."

"Oh." Angelina seemed at a loss for words for a moment. "I didn't think it would be ready so soon."

"I didn't think so either. He said he had several cars to finish ahead of mine. I was afraid he wouldn't get to it before the weekend, and I'd have to wait until next week to be on my way. But I guess he got to it early."

"So, your plans weren't disrupted as much as you thought they'd be," Angelina said.

"Nope. I called my friend in Florida and told him I'd probably be there by Saturday."

There was another short pause before Angelina spoke.

“My parents took me to Florida once. Years ago. Uncle Bill had a friend who ran a motel near the Space Museum so we went down to see that.”

“That’s about half-way down the state. My friend lives farther north. In Jacksonville.”

The conversation dragged on a little longer, but Angeline didn’t seem very talkative. Matthew said he guessed he needed to start packing and went up to his room. The next morning, he was disappointed when he didn’t see her at breakfast.

“Where’s Angelina?” he asked the waitress when he paid his bill.

“Angel was feeling a little under the weather this morning,” she said. “I don’t think it’s anything serious.”

“I was hoping I’d get a chance to say good-bye to her,” Matthew said. “I’ve really enjoyed talking to her these last few days. Please tell her Matthew said goodbye.”

He picked up his car from the mechanic, drove it back to the inn, and checked out. Things had shifted in his trunk, and it took him a few minutes to rearrange everything so his overnight bag would fit. He closed the trunk lid, looked up, and was surprised to see Angelina standing beside him.

“Angelina!” he said. “I was afraid I wouldn’t get to see you before I left.”

“Aunt Kay said you were looking for me,” she said.

“I was worried about you. She said you weren’t feeling well.”

“It was nothing,” Angelina said. “I just didn’t sleep well last night. This is a really cute car.”

“Do you like it?” Matthew asked. “It’s a 1965 MG. My dad and I rebuilt it. Well, he did most of the work. When I was younger I’d hold the light for him and hand him tools. When I got older I could actually help him a little with the real work.”

“Is that an extra wheel tied onto the luggage rack?”

“Actually, that’s the spare. There’s a place for it in the trunk, but when I’ve got a lot to carry it makes more sense to put the spare tire on the luggage rack to make room for luggage in the trunk, where it will be protected from the rain.”

Angelina nodded and said “Always planning ahead.” She slowly walked around the car, admiring it. When she finished, Matthew realized it was time for him to say goodbye. He suddenly felt awkward. He didn’t know how to go about it.

“Well,” he began. “I suppose I really ought to be going. I really enjoyed . . .”

Angelina threw her arms around him and gave him a long hug. Then she kissed him. She drew her head back and looked directly into his face.

“Don’t you ever stop making plans now, ya’ hear? And I hope you have a wonderful life.”

She let go of him, turned, and walked away. Matthew was stunned. He had no idea what to say or do. Finally, after she walked into the inn without looking back, he got into his car and drove off.

He could still feel her arms around him as he drove out of town. He could feel her body pressed tightly against his. Her lips were soft and warm. But what did she mean about his plans? Of course he’d keep making plans. That’s how you got things done. That’s why he was going to Florida. He was behind schedule as it was. He needed to get to Florida, move in with his buddy, and start applying for jobs. And if that didn’t work out, well, he’d just have to make new plans. Maybe she was just being impulsive. She said she was impulsive. He couldn’t think of any time he’d ever done anything impulsive. He’d always stuck to his plans. That’s what got him where he was today . . .

The mechanic was surprised to see the MG pull back into his driveway. “Something wrong with the bearing?” he asked.

“No,” Matthew assured him. “That bearing’s fine. But it occurred to me as I was driving through switchbacks, the wheel bearing on the other side is just as old. We probably should have changed both of them at the same time.”

“Wouldn’t have been a bad idea,” the mechanic said, “but I don’t think it’s urgent. You never know when a bearing is going to give out. Just because one failed doesn’t mean the other one is about to go.”

“They’ve probably both been on the car since the day it was built,” Matthew said. “And I’d be in a world of hurt if that other one let go on these mountain roads. I’d feel better if you replaced it.”

“Not a problem,” the mechanic said. “I can do that, but I won’t be able to get to it until sometime next week.”

“There’s no hurry,” Matthew said as he took his overnight bag out of the trunk.

“I thought you had plans,” the mechanic said.

“No plan survives contact with the enemy,” Matthew said with a grin.