

Eliza Jacobi

## **“Focal Points”**

I maneuvered the pieces rapidly. Turning them, shifting them, swapping them out with a brief careless glance and a few swift flicks of my fingers. Dust particles swirled about before me, visible only due to the beams of sunshine that filmed through the expansive windows to my left. Out of the corner of my eye I spotted, and heeded no regard to, a small, darkly-colored bird as it flitted by- so immersed within the meaningless pastime did I force myself to be. I had no desire to exert any further thought or emotion for the rest of the springtime day.

No intention to doubt myself, or my actions, out of fear that they didn't fit the mold of expectations set by my peers. After years of self-conscious deliberations on the correct- though, unnatural- ways to walk, to talk, and to think; today I was done trying. After too many months berating myself for a misspoken syllable and feeling shunned for my own imperfections; today I kept my head down as I sat three seats into the last row of the classroom, enjoyed the beat of the sun on the side of my face, and played Tetris.

The teacher was distractedly combing through his desk for some reason or other and I spared no heed. The packed classroom around me broke out in a buzz of conversation, interspersed with the shrieks of mock laughter from a particularly loud girl out of my line-of-sight. I hunched further into my seat as I attempted to concentrate on the laptop screen. The pieces were now coming down faster than I could manage with fleeting glances. I suddenly realized that, at some point, enough time had passed that the teacher had ventured to a completely different area of the room and had begun handing out some leaflet. Being at the opposite end of the room, I decided not to concern myself with it until it reached me and submerged my consciousness once more. I lost myself within the intensifying game as the increased difficulty caused it to become less of an exerted effort to focus on the flying pieces.

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Words enwrapped in varying voices passed over my ears and nothing processed beyond the two-dimensional objects of no true significance before me.

I'd never gotten the leaflet. Odd. The paper was supposed to circulate around to me from behind and the people in front of me had it. The understanding brushed by my senses without significance and suddenly, with the rushing sense of a swimmer breaking through a thick current to gasp in a slight breath of air, a singular voice among the many broke through the haze of my mind. "Go! Go! Holy shit, how are you doing that?!" The voice was actually addressing me. Had been for a little while, in fact. It was the boy who sat behind me, and who had probably never strung as many consecutive words together to be directed to me, all at once, throughout the entire three years of high school we'd thus shared together. He'd redirected the handout for concern that I would be distracted. I realized this as I precipitously hurried to maintain the flow of pieces that hadn't overwhelmed me before that moment. One more meager moment passed by and I'd failed. The game was over.

I blew out a disappointed gust of breath and I suddenly became aware of my unbecoming posture. "Thanks." I replied as I straightened my back and finally looked around a little, wondering how much time had passed. An eternity seemed to have gone by. "No, but seriously, like how did you even do that? I would *never* be able to do that." With those words I became aware of his hushed tone, the students around me, and the roaming gaze of the teacher at the front of the room. Shifting somewhat so that I could try to see him, I answered the boy before really thinking. "Nah, I'm not that good. I'm just a loser with too much time on my hands." The words were meant to be laced with sarcasm- instead, they came out dull-edged and I couldn't place where from within myself they had even emerged.

I sensed a strange stillness from the boy and shifted further, just in time to see the expression of flagrant and unabashed bewilderment on his face as he met my gaze. "Yo, why are you hating on yourself?" The words were rooted in blatant confusion and I struggled to respond with some noncommittal reply before averting my gaze

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and turning back around. I'd been faced with a question I didn't, for once, have an immediate answer to and I sat staring ahead for a few moments, asking it to myself over and over- unthinkingly sinking into the haze of self-preserving concentration once more.

I thought of the way I'd forced myself to mull encounters over and over in the past, until I knew how I'd embarrassed myself, and resolved to never repeat the same mistakes again. I thought of the way I'd indoctrinated myself to various norms of society- to the walking, talking, and thinking of my peers- and how I'd come away with a residing shame for not naturally fitting into the mold of the extroverted teenager. I thought of the point in time when I'd decided to stop suffocating my true self in the process of growth. I thought of the moments when I'd spoken what I truly thought and was met with agreement, and how I'd matured to be nowhere near the person who regarded herself as a "loser" anymore.

I kept thinking, trying to uncover any motive I could have had for disparaging myself in that conversation, and not pursuing any specific conclusion. And with a jolt I was presented with a consideration I'd never met before, a realization that caused me to see that I actually had no reason to criticize myself as such and it was for one specific reason. It came in the form of three words. *I like myself*. I'd never considered it before, not even in the negative. The question of whether or not I liked myself for my true inner presence- for the character I'd refined and the channel of personality through which all of my future actions would base themselves upon- had never occurred to me before but it abruptly felt like the most pressing question in the world. It suddenly felt like the entire world should be preoccupied with this question and looking within for the amazingly important answer, because I was unexpectedly overwhelmed with a corresponding comfort that I had never felt before. I had tapped into and forever discovered a reservoir of strength and rectitude that no one could rob me of.

*E. Leza Jacob*

I checked the clock at the start of the game and the time on my watch. It had been all of five minutes.