

Pebbles

by Jason Haas

(with apologies to William Steig)

"We need to be ready for a world with trillionaires in it. And that's always going to feel deeply unfair. It feels unfair to me. But to drive society forward, you've got to let that happen. I think we just have to accept that there are going to be people who have wildly more money than others. The tradeoff of that is that I think we should guarantee a pretty good standard of living for everybody, but this socialism ideal that everyone should be totally equal – I don't think that's going to work."

- Sam Altman, Y Combinator

Sylvester awoke with a start. It sounded as if the house had been hit by an asteroid or by some kind of truck. The peace of nighttime was irrevocably lost--men's voices, the sound of metal grinding on metal, the crack of splintering wood. Sylvester was frightened. Father and Mother were also startled awake. All three Duncans rushed

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downstairs to find that a hole had been smashed clean through the wall in Father's office.

"What did they take, Father?" Mother asked with great concern.

Father looked about the office. Their papers were strewn about, drawers were pulled from the desk and emptied on the floor. Father looked overwhelmed for a moment, then pulled up short. He flew to the closet. Throwing it open, he cried out.

"They took the safe!"

Sylvester and Mother froze. The iron safe was a prominent member of their household, but one seldom discussed. The safe itself was fine, but the pebble inside was what made it a burden. Shiny, candy apple red, and almost perfectly round, the pebble teemed with wonderful, terrible power. Two years prior, the pebble had caused their family tremendous sadness. Since then, the safe and the stone would drift into the minds of the three Duncans when they wanted something. REALLY wanted something, something that they did not believe they could have. All three family members had placed their hand on the dial of the safe at one point or another. Sylvester did not even know the

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combination, and yet he found himself sneaking into father's closet, momentarily hopeful he could guess the code.

This moment now all three of them breathless. The safe was their burden, their challenge. Sylvester had not been able to get anything he wanted for anyone at all. Not his family, not his friends, not the hungry wolf who sat on his rock form in the dead of winter, howling from hunger. Father and Mother Duncan had not been able to repay the kindnesses of the neighbors who had searched for Sylvester and cared for them with food and companionship in that black year. None of them had felt prepared to wield the power of the pebble. All three, even Father and Mother, hoped they would find themselves more mature and beter prepared at some later time. But not now. Not yet.

Perhaps part of their fear was that they did not want to be known to others as people who had the kind of power the pebble granted. How people's wishes would suddenly be their responsibility! Each instinctively knew that sooner or later they would encounter the wish of one neighbor or family member that would harm or diminish that of another. And what of the wish contrary to their own wishes?

And this is to say noting of the dangers! What would the Mayor of Oatsdale say and do? Would he compel the

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Duncans to surrender this most amazing pebble? What of the Oatsdale Police Department, who had not been able to find Sylvester? Would they see the Duncans as dangerous maniacs? And what, of course, about those who would try to take the pebble from them for selfish gain and harm to others?

A gentle night wind rustled the old oak outside their home, just enough to shuffle the papers on the floor through the brand new hole in the wall. The Duncans came back to themselves, worked wordlessly to fasten a tarpaulin over the hole and went to bed for some rest. None of them slept.

In the morning, the Duncans gathered in the kitchen. Father and Mother sipped coffee. Sylvester poked at a bowl of oatmeal. After sitting for a time, Father lit a cigarette and went to see about repairing the hole in his office wall. A moment later, Mother and Sylvester heard him exclaim, "Oh!" They ran to see what was the matter, and as they bustled through the office door, they exclaimed "Oh!" as well. The wall had been repaired! The drawers were returned to the desks and filing cabinets! The papers were neatly arranged just as they had been! A quick peek in the closet revealed that all was as it had been save one thing - there was no pebble. As the Duncans tried to comprehend these marvelous events, a commotion was arising outside.

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Animals of all kinds were hastening to the town square, excited conversation filling the air. The Duncans hastened along too to see what was the matter. Upon arrival in the square, Father asked his friend Mr. Johnson what was happening.

"It's the grocer's! It's the most amazing thing! Their cash registers have disappeared, and the food is simply bottomless. Free food for everyone, without end!"

At this, he raised a golden apple to his mouth and took a bite.

"It's pretty good, too!" he said, wiping the juice from his chin.

"How is this happening? Who did this?" asked Mr. Duncan.

"No one seems to know! We better get while the getting's good though. I'm headed home to get Stella and the kids and every bag we can find."

With a clap on Father's back and a wave to Mother and Sylvester, Mr. Johnson was gone.

As the entire town seemed to stream past the Duncans with the same idea, the family looked at one another with wide eyes. Sylvester managed to speak first.

"Do you think...?"

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Mother cut him off.

"Let's talk at home, dear."

Around the kitchen table, the family discussed the morning's events. Of course, it was a good thing that no one would go hungry in town again. They felt shame at not having done this themselves and sooner. Sylvester thought again of the poor wolf who had howled with hunger that winter, but also of the hungry lion who had frightened him so long ago and caused his family so much pain. Sylvester wondered if that lion had had access to that bottomless grocer's, would he have scared anyone else with his appetite in the two years their pebble had been locked in a safe? Sylvester felt the fear of those potential victims and hung his head.

In a day's time, news had arrived that the same thing had happened in every village and every city in the country. Everywhere had a bottomless grocery. Within a week's time, everyone in the country also received notice from the government that they no longer had to pay rents and mortgages for their homes, and all would be free to find accommodations that suited them. People in Oatsdale were elated, but by and large a satisfied sort. Hardly anyone moved, simply happy to own their own tidy little castles.

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What happened next was most remarkable. With their food and shelter accounted for, people dramatically changed what they did all day. Of course, some sat idle, reading a book or sunning themselves. Others did that for a time, but soon grew restless and bored. Most chose to pursue that which might make them truly happy. The grocer, no longer needed in his establishment, opened a flower shop that he had always dreamt of right next door. Mr. Johnson left his job and took up painting again, first decorating his home with beautiful murals, and then selling or giving away some gorgeous painted canvases. Most of the older children stopped going to school, knowing that they would not have to find a job if they didn't want to. At least not right away. Everyone agreed that the younger children should learn to read and write and do basic mathematics. Even still, their school day was shortened.

Many people in Oatsdale changed jobs. Some policemen and women became teachers. Some teachers became the police. Letter carriers became musicians and chefs became inventors, and so on and so on. Of course, some people kept their jobs. The mayor stayed the mayor. The police who enjoyed being police kept their jobs. The teachers who enjoyed teaching

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kept their jobs. The same was true of letter carriers and chefs and firemen, on and on.

In the Duncan home, things became somewhat strange. At first, they were like everyone else in the country - elated to have some choice of what to do with their time. Father smoked and golfed. Mother puttered in her garden. Sylvester played with his friends and struck out on adventures to find exciting new pebbles and stones. As the reality of their present paradise on Earth set in though, the joy wore off and the care and guilt began to overtake them. Why hadn't they done this themselves? Why had they left the pebble in the safe for years, not helping people become their happiest, best selves? Crime, hunger, and so many other forms of misery had all but disappeared. Drudge jobs, commuting--these were things of the past. Father became short with everyone (but especially with his family), smoking and obsessively reading the paper. Mother slept more and more, and Sylvester returned to school. There he could focus his mind on other things, distract himself from the guilt and avoid his father's temper. When he saw his mother sleep the day away, he could not help but think of his helpless, hopeless sleeps as a rock and how his mother was not a rock.

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One morning, before Sylvester left for school, Father stopped him at the door, shaking the newspaper.

"Hold on, hold on, son! I think school is cancelled today! Some very important men are in town for a parade."

Father and Sylvester gathered a lunch and headed out for the parade (Mother stayed home to sleep). Sylvester was not quite sure what to make of this parade, but the parade had gotten Father up and out of the house. He was smiling, even! Sylvester was grateful.

"Who are these men, Father?"

"Mr. Golden and Mr. Deedle have built a very important firm. They have given talks around the world, built many buildings and other structures, and changed many lives. People have gotten better whose doctors gave up for dead. Their buildings astonish with impossible seeming angles and structures. And they came from RIGHT HERE IN OATSDALE!"

Just as Father raised his voice, a small marching band began to play. Sylvester was dazzled by their bright red uniforms and their shining brass buttons. Next came one of the police squads in their parade dress uniforms. They performed an amazing demonstration with their rifles,

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spinning them in their white gloved hands and stopping them precisely with loud, unified 'SNAP's.

Finally, a small, convertible car drove past, covered in crepe paper streamers and containing the mayor of Oatsdale and Messers Golden and Deedle. Sylvester was taking this all in with a bemused enthusiasm until he got a good look at the faces of the men in the car. One of them was the hungry lion that startled him all those years ago. The other was a lean, hungry looking wolf, and Sylvester guessed that perhaps it was his visitor from that winter on Strawberry Hill. His stomach sank a bit. Maybe these men would have wonderful, inspirational things to say, but maybe they would be hungry animals in a noisy crowd.

The mayor led the men from their convertible to the stage with a wide smile and a lot of direct eye contact with the crowd. As they seated themselves, the mayor stepped to the microphone on the podium at center stage and cleared his throat. Then, he began to speak.

"It is not every town in this country that can see two of their own leave town and achieve success. It is even more rare to leave town only to return as TRILLIONAIRES!!!!"

At this announcement, everyone in the square, including Sylvester's father, went berserk. "I suppose this is

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exciting," Sylvester thought. Still, he was uneasy, and that would be justified by what came next. As the mayor announced the conquering heroes as "Mr. Jonathan Golden and Mr. Enos Deedle" to great applause, the pair rose from their seat, and Sylvester noticed the chain that hung around the lion's neck (he, presumably, is Jonathan Golden). At the end of the chain, Sylvester could see through his button-down shirt, was the magic pebble! Sylvester felt faint, stumbled, and passed out.

Sylvester came to with his head in his father's lap, lying on a bench in a small green space adjacent to the park.

"You scared me there, son. You missed some truly inspiring words. Those men have made something of themselves, working hard!"

He was comforted by Father's hoof stroking his mane, and stared for just a moment into the clouds. He then remembered what he had seen and snapped to attention.

"Father! They haven't worked hard at all! They have the magic pebble! I saw it on a chain around Mr. Golden's neck! THEY'RE THE ONES THAT TOOK IT FROM US."

Father was dumbfounded. He respected the achievements that were attributed to these men, but it did explain why he

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couldn't exactly remember them doing much or building much around their town. It would explain why he had never seen these men at the Chamber of Commerce meetings before their meteoric success. Despite his recent dourness, Father loved and trusted Sylvester.

"Sylvester, if this is true, we have to do something. We have to get that pebble back!" Father thought for a second. "Right now is the Youth Chamber of Commerce Get Together in that tent over there--the one with the policeman guarding it. You've never been active in Youth Chamber of Commerce, but maybe you could explain that the speeches inspired you to join up."

Feeling the urgency of the moment, Sylvester was up and on his hooves in a flash. He rushed to the tent and explained himself to the policeman. The officer kind of shrugged and sent Sylvester inside. What Sylvester beheld as he opened the door and felt the policeman's hands shove on his back would have ordinarily haunted him for a lifetime. In a perfectly silent scene, Sylvester saw Mr. Golden, Mr. Deedle, and the Mayor, shirtless and covered in blood, and tearing at the throats of three of his classmates. The silence must have been an effect of the pebble, to suppress the screams of his school chums. Wincing away from the gore

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in the teeth of these great men, Sylvester saw the pebble and chain right on top of Mr. Golden's neatly folded shirt. He grabbed the pebble as Mr. Golden dived after him, and without thinking, Sylvester wished the pebble had never existed.

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Sylvester Duncan was a donkey who walked home in the rain with a few pebbles in his hand. He was eaten by a hungry lion on Strawberry Hill.

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Night came, with many stars.