

THE CAGE: A short story by Riley H. Welcker

Not so very far from here, there once lived a young man named Idle. He lived at home and worked in a small, little-known grocery store called “Super Deals” down Main Street. His father owned the store, and as one of his few employees, Idle was required to do many jobs. He had to sweep the floor, wash the windows, bag customers’ groceries, and look after the vendors who unloaded their pallets in the back room early each morning.

It was well known that Idle did not like his work. He complained to everyone about everyone else. He complained at his broom. He complained at the store and often called it his “tomb.”

One day while Idle was staring wistfully out the roll-up door, past the vendors who came and went, an apron at his waist and a broom in his hand, one of the vendors asked him what he was searching for.

“Freedom,” Idle said.

The vendor looked over his shoulder and smiled. “It’s a wide world out there, but it isn’t a place for the faint-hearted. Out there, life is full of adventure and danger, riches and pleasures in plenty. Out there you can have anything you want.”

Idle just stared.

The vendor only smiled, finished his work, and promptly left.

After a few days, Idle looked at the apron at his waist and the broom in his hand and thought to himself, “I am not faint-hearted. I want more than this dull, dreary life. I want more than to slave all day for hardly any pay on the hope of some future inheritance. I want to see some of the world, to experience life.” And with that, Idle dropped his apron and broom and left his work to seek an easier fortune. But before he left, his father warned him of many frightful dangers to watch out for and offered him a still, small compass made of solid gold. Idle didn’t listen to his father’s warnings. He believed he knew enough to keep out of harm’s way and that his father only told him of harbingers and horrors to discourage him. His father said the compass would guide him back home and that he need only heed its needle.

Idle looked at the compass. The needle did not point north. Instead, it pointed at his father. Idle believed it was broken but thought that he might get a good price out of it if he ever got the chance. His father put it into his hand and hugged him fast.

Idle waved and started off with a spring in his step. Having no car, no bike, no form of transportation whatsoever, he walked the margin of the scenic byway out of town like a high-spirited hitchhiker. His father watched him from the storefront window. He waved just as Idle was on the edge of sight but Idle never turned around and eventually his body disappeared altogether over the last hill. A tear fell from his father's cheek, and he turned inside.

Meanwhile, Idle pressed onward, feeling free at last and soaking in the wide world around him. He glanced at the compass, no more than the briefest of glances, and crammed it into his pant pocket, out of sight and out of mind. The fields around him were sharp and green; the breeze, cool. The trees were upright and cheerful and the clouds were, large and frothy. The sun shone bright in his face.

But it wasn't long before fatigue and hunger crept on him. At first, it was uncomfortable, then it hurt, and finally it ached. He felt dizzy. The fields around him became a blur; the air was hot and still. The trees seemed to wilt, their branches drooping like Idle's arms. The sun slid behind a dark cloud. Idle felt his pockets and found nothing but the little gold compass. He pushed it deeper into his pocket and trudged onward, feeling bad, when he met a fork in the road.

It surprised him.

At the fork, Idle saw a man. He was sitting on a stump. His legs were crossed and he was busying himself with a rag and his shoes. The man was dressed as any normal person might dress—nothing out of the ordinary. He wore no cape, no hood, no large boots as one might think of a traveller or a villain in tales. No, he was dressed in a dark blue suit, almost black. He wore a yellow tie. His hair was clean cut and his black shoes well-polished. A large cage hung from a pole beside him, like a canary cage, but only large enough for a man. Idle thought he recognized the man but could not place him. He stood there, puzzling, growing ever hungrier and more fatigued when the man saw him, snapped up and took Idle's arm.

"Please, have a seat," he said. He smiled a familiar smile.

"Who are you?" Idle asked.

“My name is Rascal,” the man replied. “You look tired and hungry. Do you not have any food?”

“I have nothing,” Idle said. “Nothing but this gold compass.” He pulled it from his pants’ pocket. The compass buzzed in his hand, and he tucked it away in his shirt pocket.

The man nodded. “I tell you what. You can have anything you want, anything at all, and I will give it to you for neither price nor work if you will sit in this cage for a single second. I will even leave the cage door open.”

Idle frowned at the cage, but the man seemed harmless. He was friendly, and he did offer him anything he wanted. “Only a second?” Idle asked.

“Only a second,” the man said. “After that, you can have anything you want, anything at all. Only remember that for each thing more that you want, you must sit here in this cage twice as long as the last time.”

Idle thought there could be no harm in that. All he wanted was something simple to eat to satisfy his desperate hunger, nothing more; and besides, the man said he wouldn’t even close the door.

Idle agreed.

And he sat in the cage for a single second, his feet dangling from the open cage door. Idle then leapt from the cage as the man promised. The man smiled back at him. “Whatever you want, it is yours.”

Idle asked for a bowl of beef and beans, and it was freely given to him. It was nice to eat food without paying or working for it, and Idle ate and ate until he was hungry no more. All the while, Rascal talked to him and asked him many questions and they had a nice conversation. Rascal was so harmless and friendly. Idle told Rascal all about himself and listened intently to Rascal’s stories, ignoring the constant buzzing in his shirt pocket. Of all his stories, Idle especially enjoyed hearing about the many wide and beautiful paths in the world and the clear, sparkling brooks burbling from the mountains and foothills, which made him feel thirsty.

Idle thought how nice it would be to have just one drink from one of those clear, sparkling brooks. So he asked the man and consented to sit in the cage for two seconds, his feet dangling through the open cage door as before, and when he got out, the man gave him a clear, cool drink. Idle thought it was the best thing that he had ever tasted until he heard the word ice cream, and Idle could not think of anything better than to have a triple-chocolate scoop in a heavy-breaded waffle cone. Again he asked the

man, but this time the man said he could skip the cage just this once if Idle would give him that curious gold compass. Idle pulled the buzzing piece from his pocket and frowned at it vibrating in his hand, its needle pointing away from the man and away from the cage in a single, steady direction, and promptly gave it to Rascal, feeling that he had made a good trade as he greedily gobbled his newfound triple-chocolate pleasure.

But Idle could not stop there, no sir. That ice cream was just too good. Idle wanted more. He truly believed it was great getting something for nothing—well, almost nothing. Sitting in the cage wasn't all that bad, and he was soon out again. Whatever Idle wanted he got and whatever he got made him want more and so he kept on asking the man and sitting his time out in the open cage. He required new clothes, and Rascal gave them to him. He demanded a motorcycle, a car, his own jet plane, and Rascal gave them to him as well.

Idle sat in the cage for mere seconds, then minutes, and so on until he was sitting in the cage for hours at a time. Meanwhile, Rascal stood outside the cage and waited and watched. He didn't have to do much, only remind Idle how wonderful his wants were and of the things he might have, and so Idle forgot about his time in the cage.

The longer Idle sat in the cage the bigger and grander his wants became until he had a house, a 20,000 sq. ft. castle, a moat with ducks in it, land, animals, and hosts of servants. He was certain he was entitled to **good health** and decreed it so. He owned closets of shoes, fleets of boats, and took the most exotic vacations.

He wanted until he was spending days, months, and even years in the cage, all the while basking over the things he would get for nothing and no work at all when he had finished out his time. Meanwhile, Rascal stood outside the cage and he waited and watched.

Idle's wants consumed him. He claimed whole cities, whole countries, and whole kingdoms. He lived in the most beautiful places, and saw the most beautiful things, and was wanted by the most beautiful women. Idle wanted all that the world could offer until it seemed he might take possession of the whole of it—everything, that is, but the cage to which he returned. Meanwhile, Rascal stood outside the cage and waited and watched.

It seemed to Idle there was nothing he could not have and no end to getting what he wanted, and so it was that he began to want less and less until his wants were quite small and insignificant—a cool drink from a nearby brook, a friendly smile from passers-by and finally his freedom. It was on this last that he dwelt the longest—for he was now wholly confined to his cage. Simple freedom. It seemed to him more than any

man could ask for; the freedom to walk about, the freedom to lift a broom, the freedom to act according to his own conscience. And so it was that he dwelt on this, the idea of simple, insignificant freedom, what he had so longed for, until the day he died, curled on the floor of his cage, a wistful look in his face, with the cage door open.