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One Task, One Time, One Tale

Abstract

Fiction can sometimes present the truth of a situation that would otherwise seem absurd. Sam Osbiston, a first-gen student from Durham University, would like to bring you on a journey of resilience, but there are no guarantees all will end well. A child's ambition is to dream, and the Luman exams are on the horizon. They determine a person's future and the possibility of climbing to the next level. First-time experiences are full of the unknown, but with experience comes knowledge that can be passed down. Someone must experience it first; sometimes forces are outside our control. All that we can do is try.

Recommended Citation

Osbiston, Sam, "One Task, One Time, One Tale" *Text & Type*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2024. CSU Open Journals.
Available at: <https://journals.calstate.edu/textandtype/issue/view/451>

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SAM OSBISTON

One Task, One Time, One Tale

Where to start is a typical opening for those with no frame of reference or guidance. Stumbling into the narrative summarises all those who dream above their station or beyond the horizon. It is a common belief that all men are born equal, and that merit should enable a person to be successful. However, few people experience the logic of belief or equality through reasonable means. As children, we're often told "you can be whatever you want," but for many adults with hindsight, the encouragement is just a cruel joke—a fallacy that burns dreams and desires, leaving empty husks following the same paths of misery and struggle as many before them: Nothing changes.

A predictable experience for the students takes place at 3:00 pm when they sit astutely at their desks as the professor waffles at the front of the class.

"72695! Sit up, pay attention!"

A flicker of mechanical eyes focuses on the authority figure. "Why are the New Towns built vertically?" I confidently respond: "Most urban areas like this one are built upon what came before, literally and figuratively. Each level strives for perfection, discarding the adaption and compromise of what came before, for only the perfect succeed." Expressed with the thought of being all-knowing, the professor exclaims. "Good, if only you would embrace perfection, and maybe you can go up a level." With this statement, my peers couldn't contain their contempt. Laughter can be heard in the background as the students voice an understanding that people like me fail. I belong under them, and it doesn't matter how much I try. It is impossible; I will always be seen as deficient.

Staring down at my mechanical leg, built from foraged parts constructed by care and love. "I will make it, watch me!" an inner voice exclaimed. A series of unfortunate events resulted in the loss of my leg and my eyes, but that doesn't make me any less of a person. I am the first in my family to attend a school, which is supposed to be a right for all people. But just because it is meant to be doesn't mean there aren't loopholes to refuse entry. These parts, the bits people see as foreign and different, are extensions of myself. They don't stop me from dreaming both through the day and night to want something better for myself and lift my family out of the underbelly of this society. It is an uphill battle. The Luman exams are essential to the effort, as these determine the professions available to students like me, but even this choice is out of the hands of the individual. This all-in, high-stakes exam decides my worth and provides me with a chance to see sunlight. It is tomorrow. "Am I ready?"

Throughout the classroom there are posters that place emphasis on this one exam, from "the committee determines your future, are you worth it" and "ascend to the next level, pass the Luman exam." This is my only shot; I cannot let everyone down. The one poster that always catches my eye is a silhouette of a man in front of a rocket, taking off. The words read: "the stars glitter, the moon is bright, reach for it." Being from the lowest level, the

underground, I have never seen the night sky or natural sunlight. I want to experience that. I need to get to the upper levels.

At the end of the day, the buzz and bustle of the walk home begins; however, this time, I need to divert to the offices and pick up my registration for the exam. Each step leaves me wondering about a new life at the top, the pyramidion. Honesty, the thought of a better life is a goal of many that is often beaten out over time. The older generation, battered and bruised, try to give their children the best chance to succeed. However, this place, covered in grime and the discarded remains of those above, has become the currency; they no longer dream of the moon and stars or want beyond what they find or forage for. I am going to succeed for those I love.

Entering the building, nothing but blank walls with perfect propaganda and the sole desk with a 1990s computer set upon it. Believing I was alone, the screen came to life; I stepped back, landing on the carcass of what should have been a rat. Looking up, a face appears on the screen, grainy and unrefined, in black and white. “Ah, what are you here for?” Nervously and shocked, I reply: “The exam, the Luman, hmmm, please.” “Of course. You are to take all sheets from the tray below and report to ‘Way 313’ on the day printed,” the voice cracked, producing static. I gather all the materials and nervously shuffling out of the building. The experience wasn’t pleasant.

I made my way home along a well-trodden path, but this time my pace was quick and my head was full of thoughts. Autopilot guides me, my mind fixed on the encounter. *What was that?* With all the talk of organic perfection, why are machines controlling the offices? Making my way through the front door, I began placing everything in its proper place—shoes, books, coat—and headed towards my room, a place of security where all I know and have been given reside. I placed my bag on the bed alongside a treasured possession, a stuffed animal missing an eye, full of holes and missing fur. I had been told it was a raven. A friend who had always been by my side, found by my grandma but thrown away—I treasured him. He is my good luck charm. Creatures other than rats don’t live here; nothing but the rats survive. But in the office, the rats are hunted, poisoned, and stepped upon. Everything has its place. I will change mine.

Towards dinner, my mind raced, trying to break the silence of the upcoming moment where my life is decided on the back of an exam. One moment, one future, they will be more nervous than me. Sitting down, I waited for each to take their first bite. “I’m getting us out of here. I am going to win, going to try,” I blurted out with conviction. The moment stopped, each wide-eyed focused on me. Why? My father whispered, controlling his breath and posture. I wasn’t expecting that. I thought. “Because I need to know if it is possible—if I can get to another level.” On my expression, silence fell, and I wasn’t sure if this was acknowledgement or the calm before the storm.

In the night, Grandfather George woke me and stated, “Your mother, father, grandma, and myself have never had the opportunity to take this exam. So, I cannot tell you what to expect, but I know that those who live above, ‘the pure ones,’ will play dirty. Using unfair tricks and tactics to force you to stay down here.” He continued, sounding worried, “They look down on adaption and compromise, unable to see the many solutions. Be careful.” We talked for many hours, and he insisted that I understood that whatever happened tomorrow, he and my family would still love me. I am not a failure. I am not stupid, and some of the

smartest people are down here. In the end, he held me tight, whispering, “You will always be of value to me,” before returning to bed to prepare for the new day.

The next day, I prepared myself, rose before sunrise, and, with steely conviction, packed my things. Having no clue what to bring as the instructions said nothing, I followed my internal logic, I packed food for lunch, snacks, a coat, pens and paper, and my friend, the old one-eyed raven. Before I left, I hugged everyone and set myself away. An adventure is afoot.

Heading towards ‘Way 313,’ I wondered about the location; it’s no hub or community centre. A singular lamp post is the only structure that lies there, bent and broken, continually flickering upon a background of abandoned containers. Turning the corner, I saw hordes of people waiting for the same event. Once upon a time, this place was a place of invocation and creation where inventors tinkered and enhanced everyone’s lives; my grandma was one of them. Over time, these people disappeared; the rumour is that they fled beyond the boundary, while others believe they were taken for a special project. I don’t know what happened to them, but she wouldn’t have left us behind.

Standing at this point, this instructed location, 7:00 am, then 8:00, and then at the stroke of 9:00, a lonely bell in the distance rang. In that second, a roar broke all-natural sound, and a door swung open to more darkness. Stepping hesitatingly into blackness, as herded cows to slaughter, up each step, 1, 2, then on the third. POP, swoosh and the brightest of white lights. The light was so bright that my eyes couldn’t cope; the searing pain shot through my skull, “Ah!” Adjusting to the blinding, I saw just white.

A room, a warehouse, with lined up desks geometric and clean. I had seen nothing like it before. Scanning the emptiness, a voice clashes with the space. “One desk, per person. Sit down and wait for further instruction.” The living, stunned, not sure what this is, hesitated. “NOW!” the voice shouted. At that moment, everyone observed the command and rushed. Wondering what was happening, I sat gingerly at the nearest desk, spiralling my head, and watched the chaos unfold.

The illogical movements ran towards the back. *Why was everyone acting like this?* As the bodies filled this cavern, there was a greater panic with more movement as if we were playing a contact sport. Once the last space was filled, it dawned on me: *there isn’t enough for everyone.* At that moment, the bell sounded, with the same voice announcing: “Those without a space need to leave the building.” The moment was tense with dread and amazement taking over. “Why? What is going on? This isn’t fair!” One exclaimed. “NOW! Get out!” I really didn’t like this voice; the apathy and annoyance were a strong communicator of an uncaring attitude. Anyone still standing, their faces filled with the same confusion, panic, wondering what to do. A lonely voice commanded back “NO!” shattering the voice control.

Those with an understanding of what was to come moved towards the door from which we came, but those with no knowledge, the first of our kind to enter that hall, watched with palpable curiosity. This voice didn’t need to speak a word to express his annoyance. “Candidate 73562 has failed to adhere to instruction and disrespected a higher rank of being. Thus, he is no longer eligible for ranking, expelled from all movements and denied entrance into all public offices and buildings. NOW LEAVE!” From his voice, it was evident that he enjoyed stating that. Seeing that boy’s face twist from resistance to fear shocked those of us who had never experienced this level of cruelty. I could not comprehend the enjoyment that a person from a status of privilege could take from inflicting suffering.

They all left with a sense of defeat—the loss of any opportunity they believed in, gone. It further hit me as a sinking feeling dropped. This isn't fair or right; what is happening, and why are there limited places? What is the point? Honestly, I was afraid and unsure about what was to come next.

As the last person left, the door automatically shut and locked with a click. *I'm trapped*, I thought. Like a rat in a cage. I have no agency but to do as I am told. The desk in front started to glow; all the desks began to glow. I watched as the white turned to a glossy black computer screen. A countdown of 5 minutes began, and this trial would commence. Looking straight at these numbers further tensed my body with fear. This is my one chance; I must seize it. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

It began. The paper was split into 3 sections; Part A was a mathematical theory with a particular fascination with the golden ratio. Part B was the founding and history of the New Towns, their purpose and the hierarchical structure. But Part C... Part C wasn't normal. It was designed to fail.

Question 1

Draw a line around the letter or number in this sentence.

Question 2

Circle the first letter of the alphabet in this sentence.

Question 3

Cross out the shortest word in this line.

On and on it went. *What am I meant to do? How is this possible? Am I going to fail?* Finally, I realised I was not meant to succeed, nor was I meant to dream; I couldn't work my way out of this place. I have tried and tried and tried. It isn't fair. I continued working through these questions, hoping my guesses would at least be enough, but I was doubting everything I had ever been told. I cannot be what I want. I cannot work my way out. It's a trap. I am trapped, and I am never getting out. At that moment as I finished the last question, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The screen turned white again, and the light escaped, plunging us all back into darkness. That was it.

We all got up, each looking defeated. None of us were getting out of here. Leaving the hall was leaving all I had wished for; there would be no moon, stars, or sunrise. This day is my last; I will become the same empty husk as everyone else, and there is nothing I can do about it.

Taking a left out the door, I believed I was going home, but I hit a structure that had not been there before. "Oww," I expressed, instinctively clutching my nose, and wiping the tears from my eyes. Feeling around the object, I realised it was a door; in disbelief, I followed it into the structure. Running my hands against the wall, I continued in curiosity at what should be an abandoned shop, but the deeper I fell, the more confused I became. Coming to a corner, the wall's texture changed, becoming rough like stone. Wondering what this was, I further felt this new material and came to what could only be described as a button. On further inspection, I pushed it, and my world glowed once again.

A screen opened up and a sea of light escaped from many screens mounted into the structure. I couldn't believe my eyes and walked straight into the desk. Full of information, I quickly skimmed each screen, until... seeing the words "Lumen Exam Automatic Marking" and the loading bar quickly accelerating across the screen. I wondered in anticipation of the results. Once the process had finished, I promptly initiated the command to see the cohort's results and report.

An undesirable cohort that lacks the values of those who live above. No member from this group will be authorised to ascend to the upper levels, and each candidate will receive a result of no grade and not qualify for essential work permits or benefits. Instruct and execute all offices to begin the next assimilation program. Candidates who successfully exceeded the required threshold (indicated by * below) should be sent papers for relocation. They should be reported to X15.

What do they mean everyone failed? How is that possible? What is the assimilation program? Scrolling through the spreadsheet, rushing towards my own assigned number. I stopped, wide-eyed and panicked. 72692, 72693, 72694, 72695.

Candidate No	Participate in exam	Part A	Part B	Part C	Assimilation Programme
72692	conducted	53%	40%	0%	
72693	failed	0%	0%	0%	
72694	failed	0%	0%	0%	
72695	conducted	82%	79%	0%	*
72696	conducted	23%	58%	0%	
72697	failed	0%	0%	0%	
72698	failed	0%	0%	0%	

Whatever this assimilation program is, it can't be good, I realised. And at that moment, insanity compelled me to decide on a plan of action. I printed the report, which resulted in hundreds of pages being shot from the lower tray of the machine. Not expecting the speed, I instinctively grabbed the pages, stuffing the finished product in my bag. It wouldn't be so easy to delete the report. The delete key on the screen didn't work, so in a focused daze, I searched for a way to delete this thing.

Looking up and down, I set my eyes on a big red button in the middle of a small pedestal in front of the screens. Slightly tucked away it was easily missed. Launched in a clear case, it looked like something important that shouldn't be pushed by accident. *I wonder.* Unhooking the case and freeing the button, I placed both hands and pushed. Instantly the screens went blue, and a loading bar exclaiming deleting all data began; however, on the release

of my hands, the screens returned to normal. Ahh, it needs to be held down continuously. This room had no objects that weren't screwed down or were too small, but then I remembered my friend, the one-eyed raven. As a vessel, he could hold all the objects needed to hold that button. Pulling him from my bag, I was hesitant to sacrifice the only friend I had. We had been together from the start, and it felt wrong to leave him here to save myself and others.

As I looked at him, not wanting this, bells began to ring. It was now or never! Pushing many of the loose stones and screws into the tares, I plumped this malnourished bird into a heavy gluttonous object. Acknowledging what needed to be done, I placed his body on the button, watching the screens turn blue again, deleting all the information. At that moment, I understood that doing this would defy the usual order and how others chose to run things. I will no longer let this place, this society, define me as undesirable based on who I am and where I come from. I will tear down this reality, build my own rules, value myself, and make my own judgements. I will have control of my destiny, but for now, I need to run, for if they catch me. They cannot catch me.