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It was that same damn dream again, but I couldn’t really remember it in detail. I knew it was there but the only thing I could remember was the climbing…well, that and there was a beautiful woman that I couldn’t remember, either. This had been going on now for weeks (or months?) and I was feeling that it was something that I needed to remember; that there was an importance to remember and put the pieces together. It just wouldn’t come.

So I just lay there in bed, waiting for the haze to retreat completely; something that seemed to take longer and longer as I got older. Even when I didn’t drink, I still got up feeling that I did, something that Mikey and I talked about at length. So why not drink? At least you had a little fun the night before. But, this was another Monday and the hard-wired responsibility took over and made me get moving.

It’s a pain in the ass to be fifty.

The pale green and grey walls always looked the same every morning. The floors always feel the same to your feet, the water in the shower feels the same on your skin. I think you get to the point that you don’t feel that stuff after a while…is it because you are fifty and have felt these feelings for so long? It would be cool to feel something new for a change. But I don’t really know what that would be.

I did know that the third job in 4 years waited for me as I tried to get moving: junior partner, junior fricking partner, working for people that hadn’t even been born yet when I graduated from college. At least I was working instead of spending what was left of my 401K. Well…I felt that way on the good days. On the bad ones, I just didn’t really care if I lived or died; is that the description of depression? If it is than everyone that I know is depressed. It was a giant pain in the ass to be the “old guy”. What was the alternative?

I didn’t really understand the whole of the work we did at the firm. I did know that when they hired me on that every aspect of my life had been probed by the F.B.I; they had almost rejected me for a little problem I had when I was younger and I had to take a couple of months off to make sure I cleaned up. I may be fifty but I still have my vices; I enjoy my vices, they are my friends and I depend on them as I do my real friends. I’ve always ignored the morality of this little part of the world; it’s artificial after all. I did know that there were times that we worked closely with local and federal officials and that the senior partners were treated with much deference when this happened. What did they have on these folks? I still didn’t understand why they hired me but it was good to have a paycheck coming in every two weeks. Maybe they needed some grey hair. Geez, was I just the token old guy? That’s a great thought for first thing in the morning.

My phone rang and I didn’t realize what it was for a moment. Is brushing your teeth a Zen-like experience? I shook out of the trance and ran to the living room to get it. Chad calling.

“What’s happening, Chad?”

“Squat, what’s up with you?”

“It’s 7:05 in the morning, what am I usually doing at this time?”

“That’s right, you’re working again. I get so used to you not working that I thought I’d call and see if you wanted to go to Detroit to see some friends.”

“I really do need to go to work Chad. It’s that responsibility thing that I have a hard time shaking.”

“Yeah, me too.” I could tell he was having a hell of time suppressing a laugh. “But I did shake it this morning and I’m heading out.”

“Well, I’ll think of you while I’m sitting in my office doing the 3 minutes of work I have to do today. Say hi to the guys for me.”

“Later.”

I looked at the phone and had to try not to call him back and say to the hell with work. But I didn’t really want to go to Detroit; it was just the lesser of two evils, neither of which was very attractive. I had to suppress my base philosophy this day: never do anything you do not want to do. I guess work was the only modifying corollary that I might allow. Maybe it only applied to leisure activities? Hey, I was still seeing how it fit my world.

I was feeling pretty adult when I locked the door and headed to the car. How can you be fifty and not feel like an adult? In my case pretty easily; most of my friends were in their 20’s and 30’s and we did the things that those ages do; drink too much, stay out too late, and pay for it the next day. The price gets higher the older you get, though, and I still felt to some of them I was the “weird old guy” that I had known when I was their age. I remembered that those folks were always on the periphery and could never really be part of the true circle of friends, would a 20 something really be friends with someone their parent’s age? And then there is the sex thing; I was still a guy in my head but in their heads I was the old guy that could give advice and be a confidant but was never considered to be a potential lover. I think that was the thing that troubled me most of all, especially when I saw some of the choices being made. Was it ego talking? Was there something wrong with me that I couldn’t see?

Who am I to pass judgment on their choices, anyway? I just know that the rejection still hurt like I was 16.

At least the weather was good. It had been cold but the February thaw had come and most of the snow was gone; it hadn’t rained enough to clean the salt and trash from the streets, though, and the whole city looked old and used. My car hadn’t fared well, either. I like to drive the old ones and Michigan winters went through them like acid. Leaving a shell that was like me I suppose; still serviceable on the inside but showing the ragged edges of too many years and not enough maintenance on the outside. Dependable. God, how I hate that word.

Traffic was normal as I drove out to the suburbs where our offices were located; a pretty non-descript low rise that would have been at home in Tulsa or Toledo. Who designs these things, anyway? Does anyone design them or do they just grow here like mushrooms?

Lanning and Devereaux. I still couldn’t understand why they put my name on the firm. Especially when I was just a junior partner with only about 30 years of experience. I hope that doesn’t sound too sarcastic. No, I don’t.

I’ve even got a parking spot with my name on it. I think it’s my name anyway; they ran out of space so it reads J. Dever but the car has not been towed so it must be mine. One thing is for sure, the rest of the partners must make a lot more money than I do. There are way too many Corvettes and Mercedes in the other spots. Maybe they are company cars? As I said, I think they make a lot more than I do. Maybe I should ask for one. No, the license plates are from different states so they can’t be owned by the firm. Where do these guys live?

I didn’t bother to lock my car when I parked, there was not anything in it that anyone would want to steal except my pool cue and I think I remembered to put it in the trunk anyway. The remote release had broken a few weeks ago so there was not really any way to get to it except with the key and that only worked sometimes. Maybe I did need a new car? It was such a big pain buying one that I know that I would probably just adapt to its lessening capabilities as I had to my own. I do wear glasses to read now, you know?

As I walked up to the door of the office, I fumbled through my coat pockets looking for the electronic badge that would unlock the door and found it under my phone and eyeglass case. It was another of the mysteries of this company that I had a hard time understanding; In the year I’d been there I’d not seen anything that would explain the need for any type of security at all but all of the doors both on the exterior and interior were badge-keyed and kept locked. The projects that I had worked on were, for the most part, quite mundane with only one or two that even showed a whiff of secrecy. Oh, another strange thing was that most of the staff was armed.

Once I got through the front door and said hi to Angie at the front desk, I started my daily routine that had much to do with coffee…one at 8, one at 10, and another with the newspaper at lunch. It wasn’t so much that I liked coffee but that it helped to relieve the boredom and gave me a reason to move around and talk to people. I’ve found that I’ve started to grow a need to be social in my old age but I still need to control it, being social that is. I guess it goes with not having many friends in my younger years. That’s another story. The coffee helped keep me awake.

My assistant Kate came in with a few messages and a reminder that I had a monthly meeting with the senior partners. She dumped a stack of files that were about six inches thick on my desk that we would be covering in the meeting and I felt pretty good that I would have work to do for the day. It was a pain that they scheduled the meeting for 6 pm, though, since I had plans to meet up with some of the youngsters at about that time. It was Monday after all and we always met up at the Mill for beer and to catch up on what happened over the weekend. It was certainly a good way to start the week.

I got my first cup and started in on the files, mostly engineering summaries and consulting requests on business processes both from domestic and international companies and I hoped that at least one of them would give me an excuse to travel. I hadn’t been anywhere in almost 6 months and the last one had been to a little company in Virginia that seemed more interested in the paperwork I brought than anything I had to say. I didn’t really have anything to do with putting that presentation together and my participation appeared to be an afterthought when Robert Lanning fell ill just before the trip. I really had tried to get prepared for that meeting but as with many small companies, there was not much information available except that their business involved an importing relationship with China. But whose didn’t these days? I ended up giving them my take on how to streamline their purchasing function, had a nice lunch at one of the local restaurants and was back in town by 5:30. You need to travel by private jet.

I spent the rest of the morning going over the files that Kate had left and drinking more coffee than I had planned, most of them were quite boring and I was having a hard time staying awake since they only needed a notation here and an initial there. Not too challenging. The last one in the stack grabbed my attention and made me sit up straight in my chair. A building at a small firm in Virginia had collapsed without warning in the middle of the night three days before. No one was injured and the pictures showed a pile of rubble that was almost uniform in size and shape; none of the large slabs of concrete that you would expect to see and that I had seen hundreds of times from other sites. It looked more like the building had just come unglued and fell down. I wanted to see if there was more information available and was reaching for the phone when it rang with an outside call.

“Well….where the hell are you?”

“What time is it?” I answered remembering the lunch date that I had made last week with Bill.

“You’re late is what time it is.”

“Can we…….”

“ No way, you are not blowing me off again. Drag your butt out to the car and get over here before I get to my second beer.”

“Alright, okay….give me about ten minutes and I’ll be there.”

“Don’t make me come over there and get you….”

“Going out the door right now. Bye.”

I hung up the phone, closed the file and went out the door heading for Cleo’s. At least the day had gone fast to that point and I really did want to see Bill since it had been, what, 2 months since I’d seen him? He was one of my last friends from an earlier life in corporate America. Working 28 years for the same company was never going to happen for anyone anymore and I can say that I did miss it at times. Only at times, though. I still hated them for what they did to my life but also knew that I had survived it and was still alive. I don’t think it was corporate greed that had cost me my job; more like corporate stupidity. And stupidity could be forgiven.

It was such a nice day that I almost decided to walk the 15 minutes to Cleo’s but Bill was on his second beer and I didn’t want him to get too far ahead. Unbalances the conversation, you know? So I jumped in the car, opened the sunroof and took off. Cleo’s was one of those places that was trying very hard to be a neighborhood bar but without a neighborhood to support it. It was just another storefront in another strip mall but at least they were making the attempt; not just another clone of Friday’s or Bennigans’s. Not that there is anything wrong with that. I surely don’t want to be a snob about the places I go since quite a few of them should have been torn down long ago. The Dirty Shame comes quickly to mind.

Bill was waiting at our normal table (well, we did sit there before) and he had thoughtfully taken the seat that allowed me to see the rest of the room from mine. There was a cold Stroh’s at my place and he had the empties of his first two Heinie’s in front of him along with a quart glass of ice water.

“Long night last night?” I asked looking at the ice water and the empties.

“Longer than it should have been that’s for sure,” I could see the puffiness under his eyes and the faint hint of red that the Clear Eyes couldn’t mask.

“We actually golfed yesterday. You know what that means, a beer a hole for 18.”

“There are no courses open around here that I can think of this time of year,” I was a little confused.

“Who said the course was open? I can still go over fences with the best of them and we played three club; there’s no hockey so we had to find something to do.”

“Stan and Mark, I bet. Outside of me, they are the only ones that are crazy enough to do that.”

“Craig, too, but he lost 4 balls on the first two holes and got so pissed that he just drank from that point on. Only made it to nine and went home. We did find part of his shirt on the top of the fence and haven’t heard from him today. That should be a good story for later.”

Bill must have guessed that I wondered why I wasn’t invited to go along.

“I tried to call you but your phone was going straight to voicemail….”

“Oh, yeah, Karen and I had another ‘conversation’ that took quite a while. You know the drill, you’ve heard it how many? four or five times now? I want a relationship and she wants her space, that she is not sure what I want from her but it is surely not what she wants. Yadda, yadda.” It was the pattern that seemed to repeat itself in all of the interactions that I had with women; I gave and they took. At least that is what it looked like from my side of the eyes. Maybe I am being a little too harsh, I did get companionship but that is like kissing your sister; it’s a good thing but doesn’t keep you warm at night.

“You ARE an idiot when it comes to women. You’ve heard me say this many, many times. I’ll never understand it. I’ll say this for you, you are consistent but man, didn’t you ever think of trying anything different? Give up on the youngsters and Karen. You treated Julia and Sarah like queens, lent them money, gave them friendship, and hoped that something romantic would happen. What did you end up with? Being hurt and confused when they wanted to just be friends and yet you still keep putting in more and more effort. You are FIFTY years old and they will never see you any other way!”

“Yeah but what do you really think, Bill?” I just sat there, not stunned or surprised because I’d heard it all before. I just hated being reminded that I had a large capacity for stupidity when it came to women.

“I’m just getting tired of hearing it. You don’t like your life, change it.” He sat there and rubbed his temples slowly but there still was no color in his face.

We just sat for a few minutes while the waitress came to take our orders. The special was a Philly cheese steak with garlic fries that we both thought sounded good and Bill ordered another Heineken to go with my second Stroh’s. The conversation moved on to small talk about how things were going and if there was anything new. The answers were: going well and nothing new, and the critique of my sorry love life faded into the background as time passed. Things were still going well with Sarah and I was truly happy for him, especially after the nasty divorce from Karen. It hurt him to have only limited contact with the ex-stepson he had raised but that too was starting to heal.

We were getting ready to leave when the file on the collapsed building popped back into my head and I thought I’d see if Bill had heard anything about it.

“Nope, I had the news streamer on my computer all morning and I would have heard or seen something on it. Where was it? Virginia? I’ll take a look when I get back. The details sound kind of odd; you’d think that CNN or somebody would have picked up on it by now. Especially on a slow news day. Hey, I hope you’re not mad that I got into your shit earlier.”

“Bill, how can you get mad at anyone that is telling you the truth? I know I’m an idiot with women. All I can do is try to change things….hmmmm, how many times have you heard this before?” It had almost been turned into a set play that we did every time we saw each other. Maybe some day I could really change….nope, doubt it.

I walked back to my car and just in time; the weather had started to change and the sunny, fifty plus degrees of the morning was giving way to a darkening sky that had started to weep just a little. I thought briefly about taking the long way back to the office but I had already taken almost two hours with Bill and didn’t have a ready excuse why I would be gone longer. So I closed the sunroof, put on some Tommy Castro to give me a jolt of energy for what was looking like another boring afternoon and drove back just a little slower than normal. The two Stroh’s helped.

I got back in the middle of the afternoon lull. There were a few people around but most of them were moving quite slowly from lunch so I went back to my office to continue to prep for the monthly. I was looking forward to going over the rest of the Virginia file but when I looked for it on my desk it wasn’t where I’d left it. It wasn’t the first time something had disappeared on the swamp that I call my desk but I was sure that I’d left it on top. Maybe there had been more files brought in and put on top of it. I looked through the pile but the rest of the monthly information was still where I’d left it so I was just a little confused.

“Kate, did you take a file from my desk while I was out?”

“Nope, Jake. I was over in training until 11 and I went out to lunch about 12:30. Just got back a few minutes ago. Robert was looking for you around the time I left but I told him I thought you had lunch with a client.”

“Thanks for the cover. I’m missing a file that I was reading; maybe Robert needed it for something, I’ll call him to see.”

It was never a good thing when the senior partner was looking for you, especially when you were out drinking for lunch. In the year that I had been there I couldn’t remember him looking for me at all; he would usually send one of his assistants to summon me to the master’s chamber. This made me more than a little uneasy but I’d been unemployed before and I’m sure I would be again. Well, I may be exaggerating a little but only a little. I knew I wasn’t the best worker in the world and at times I would have fired me. Was I supposed to be doing more than I was? Probably.

I decided to take a little walk down to his office instead of phoning. I still kind of hate telephones, trauma from the days of cold-calling to sell soap for a well-known local company and from bill collectors looking for payments. Marilyn was at her desk but on the phone and computer at the same time so I leaned on the counter and just waited for her to come up for air. While I waited, I looked her over (I do appreciate women, you know) and thought that this is one woman that I wouldn’t want to cross. Well, that’s not entirely true. I love intelligent, challenging women and Marilyn was both; I couldn’t understand why she was not running the company instead of some of the idiots that were.

“Is he in?” I asked when she got off the phone.

“Why?” This was her normal response. I think she didn’t understand why I should even exist let alone ask any questions of her.

“I need to talk to him about some files for the monthly today.”

“No you don’t. Robert left about an hour ago and he’s cancelled the meeting.

“Wh…..”

“Don’t even ask. You know he doesn’t need a reason and I wouldn’t tell you anyway.”

“Whe….”

“If he wanted you to know where, he would have told you but that’s not very likely is it?”

I tried to think of a snappy comeback but when I had been standing there like a moron thinking for more than thirty seconds, I just gave up.

“Thanks.”

I walked back toward my office with a mixture of annoyance and elation. I was a partner, after all and I should be treated like one but that feeling was quickly extinguished by the fact that I didn’t have to stay for the monthly. Does everyone feel this good when meetings get cancelled? The afternoon had suddenly opened up to many possibilities and I could spend a while contemplating them since all of the work I had to do was no longer necessary. Who should I call? Chad was gone and Mikey was working later. Well, it was too early to leave anyway so I got another cup of coffee and went back to my office.

The Virginia collapse was still in the back of my mind so I thought I’d bring it to the front and do some research on the internet. I wondered if there could be such a big coincidence that it should be the same company that I’d visited a few months back. At least it may be nearby and I could put a “face with a name” and recognize the area. Yeah, I know, Virginia is a big state and the chances were quite slim but that’s what makes this stuff fun. It’s like when I was in Atlanta and visited CNN, I now recognize the set they use and can say I was there. What does it mean? Not a damn thing to most people I know.

I tried all of the websites that I normally use to get the news when I’m bored: The New York Times, Washington Post, CNN, and all of the others and did not see a thing. But is that so unusual? I wouldn’t expect CNN to cover a water main break here in GR. I didn’t even know exactly when the collapse happened so I could have been looking for old news that happened many cycles back and would have been dropped for the flavor of the day or a new, breaking development of another celebrity split-up. Brad and Jen ARE more important than death and destruction anyway. Took a long shot and googled for the generic building collapse and got a hit from the Norfolk paper that turned out to be some 80 year old that had driven through a drive through restaurant and it had pancaked on top of his car. Nothing else, in the USA that is.

Thankfully, it was moving toward 4 o’clock and getting close to the window that allowed us to make some flimsy excuse and leave early. Since all of the senior partners had left for the “undisclosed location”, I found myself in command and ordered myself to leave. Nifty trick. Told Kate that I would be available on my cell for emergencies to which she just laughed, shook he head and said have a great night.

“Out with the Twins tonight?”

“Nope, giving up on the youngsters completely,” I lied but there was some grain of truth to it. Bill’s admonishment earlier had sunk in somewhat and I promised myself that I would at least start to look for women that were my own age, Well, maybe not my age, geez, that would be OLD, but maybe nearer my age anyway.