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DHSA Short Story competition 2021

[Is this recording?

Yes

Ok, good.]

Brandon Alexander Smith is the sort of man you forget within an instant of meeting him. Not that this is his fault, of course. He just happens to have the kind of face that melts into the crowd, a voice that becomes part of the background hum and altogether a rather... how to put this... a rather beige personality, if you know what I mean; unassuming, mild-mannered and utterly indistinguishable from half the other middle-aged men in the American Midwest. None of this, you understand, makes him a bad person. Quite on the contrary, we require an abundance of Brandons in the world to make the non-Brandon-esque stand out. This is not to say that there is nothing special about him. Among his (somewhat limited) interests listed on the dating sites he now rarely frequents are bowling, stamp-collecting and baseball. Well, baseball is something he enjoys only because he feels he ought to; you see, his grandfather was in a now long-dissolved minor league baseball team, something he brings up more than frequently at the few drinks evenings he is invited to. I suppose the best way to put it is that Brandon's life was one characterised by complete and utter normality. I say 'was' because at precisely 5.12pm on Thursday 4 November 1998, Brandon Alexander Smith will die.

The last day of Brandon's life began like any other. He was awoken at 7.15am by a digital alarm clock on his bedside table populated by forgotten mugs of half-drunk chamomile tea. He slipped out of his single bed and pulled on a fraying blue dressing gown gifted to him some 15 years ago by a girlfriend he still thinks about most weeks. Yawning, he stepped into his bathroom and began a morning ritual that hadn't changed since he was 16. Twisting the tap that was always either slightly too cold or hot enough to scald him, he rinsed his face and patted shaving cream onto his wan cheeks. This was generally the only point in his day that he looked in the mirror. It's not that Brandon was a self-conscious man- he didn't think of himself often enough- but the sight of his own face always made him slightly disconcerted. No- disconcerted is too strong a word for it. It just gave him the uncomfortable feeling that he was growing old. Which, of course, he was. Well, not for much longer given he's got about 10 hours left to live. LOL.

[Clarence you have to take that out

I can't, this is being recorded. And also I don't want to

It's not funny, this is a man's life you're talking about

I deal with so many lives, can you blame me for trying to inject a little spice-

You're 342 years old, you can't use the term LOL ... just... look, if you're not going to be professional about this-

No I'll behave, please let me finish

(deep sigh) Promise?

Yes, I promise]

Sorry about that. Now, where were we?

Brandon combed his greying hair into a middle parting held firmly in place by a generous dollop of gel, giving him the waxy appearance of a LEGO figure-

[Right that's it

What's wrong with LEGO figures?

That's not the point, you keep laughing at your own jokes. It wasn't even that funny

You laughed too, I saw you

Clarence, if you're not going to take this seriously-

I am taking it seriously, you're the one making me giggle

I-I mean... do you want me to leave the room?

That might help

Fine. You have to finish this up quickly, Brandon will be here soon

Right. Oh can you bring me one of those cupcakes from yesterday?

They're all gone, Gabriel finished the last one this morning

Damn. Alright then. See you later

Bye.]

Getting dressed was the next stage of Brandon's morning routine. He had never been burdened by much of an imagination, something very much reflected in his choice of clothes. A typical outfit (if one can even call it that) included a pair of brown trousers, a collared shirt, either in pale yellow or mint green and a pair of tennis socks. After committing this utterly reprehensible crime against fashion, it was time for breakfast. This usually consisted of two slices of buttered white toast accompanied by a bowl of cornflakes and washed down with a mug of slightly watery coffee. Having dumped his used crockery in the sink for 'soaking', Brandon tied up his well-worn shoes, buttoned up his coat and set off for work. It was a ten minute drive, giving Brandon time to listen to whatever the radio was spouting: US READY FOR IRAQ STRIKE. ICY CONDITIONS, DRIVE CAREFULLY. DO YOU BELIEVE IN LIFE AFTER LOVE? At 8.57am, Brandon pulled into the parking lot of Michaels and Ponsonby Inc.

Much like Brandon himself, his place of work, a company that dealt primarily in stationary products, was remarkably forgettable. Situated just on the edge of town, this two-storey concrete eyesore was the architectural equivalent of unseasoned rice. It was here that Brandon had worked as an accountant for the last 21 years and, had this not been his last day on earth, probably would go on to do so until his retirement.

Upon entering the building at exactly 8.57am, he was greeted by Gladys, the kindly receptionist, who reminded him about the shipment of pens due at 5pm and could he please complete the paperwork by lunchtime. He grimaced and was grimaced at by his co-workers (only about four of whom actually knew his name) as he made his way to the tiny cubicle where he'd spent nearly half his life. Brandon sat down at his desk, littered with bits of paper, stray pens and a Rubik's cube which, though he wasn't quite sure how it got there, had been sitting on his desk for nearly five years. Brandon got to work with the shipping accounts, filling in pages and pages of little boxes with numbers or whatever it is accountants do, don't ask me. At 11.42am, he dropped off the shipment papers with Gladys and wandered into town for lunch. In all his years of working for Michaels and Ponsonby Inc., there were only three eateries he had visited: the local burger joint, the sandwich counter at the supermarket and a rather confused Italian place called Chez François.

Given the supermarket was just a two-minute walk from the office, Brandon opted for a sandwich and, as it was Friday, a chocolate muffin. He returned to his desk to eat his modest lunch, staring into space and thinking of nothing in particular. He now has less than five hours to live. The rest of the day went by just as it always did. More filling out forms and tapping away at the greasy keyboard of his ancient desktop computer. Brandon's life had become such an unbreakable routine that he merely passed through the day like a sleepwalker, drifting along the well-travelled paths to the printer, the bathroom, the coffee machine. Not living so much as simply existing. He was so deeply engrossed in the monthly expense report that it was with slight surprise that he noticed it was already 5.07pm. He shuffled the papers on his desk into a vague pile, picked up his coat and left the cubicle. He had just reached the staircase when he realised he'd left his briefcase behind. Sighing, he hurried back to retrieve it. It's funny. If he had remembered to pick it up when he first left, he'd still be alive. Well, not funny funny but... You know what I mean.

At 5.10pm, Brandon stepped out of the building and made his way through the parking lot to his car. At that exact moment, a lorry carrying the 5pm pen delivery turned the corner just a fraction too fast. Brandon carefully reversed out of his parking spot. The lorry, now totally out of control, skidded across the icy road, picking up speed. Brandon slowly drove towards the open road. The truck driver, seeing a car peeking through the bushes to his right, slammed his fist onto the horn which blared like a bull preparing to charge. Brandon heard it. But it was too late. The lorry smashed into Brandon's car with such force that all the windows shattered instantly, the hood crumpling as if it were made of paper. Brandon, knocked unconscious from the blow, was flung through the windshield and landed with a sickening crack on the concrete pavement. His broken body lay spread-eagled on the frosty ground as a stream of blood leaked out from behind his left ear. He was dead by the time the paramedics arrived.

[click.] The last thing Brandon could remember was a loud horn followed by a mighty crash and a sudden, all enveloping darkness. It wasn't the kind of darkness you are met with when you close your eyes, but rather a wholly consuming void that had swallowed his body and now contained him in complete nothingness. He couldn't remember how long he had been remembering or why he could remember what he couldn't remember a moment before or how long it had been since he was able to remember. It was all very confusing. It was then that he became aware he was sitting in a chair. And that it wasn't dark at all. In fact, it was overpoweringly bright. Brandon blinked several times and, very slowly, his surroundings began to take shape. He seemed to be in some kind of office reception area, similar to that of Michaels and Ponsonby. Brandon looked around. The room he was in was fairly small but well-lit by gently humming fluorescent lights which, combined with the bright white walls, seemed to make the whole place glow. One side of the room was taken up entirely by an enormous filing cabinet which stretched from the cream carpeted floor to the ceiling and contained large drawers stamped with different letters.



To Brandon's left was an elderly man dozing in his chair with a peaceful smile etched on his wrinkled face. In front of him was a large front desk where a man in a white shirt and sweater vest was tapping away at a computer, ignoring the incessant ringing of the desk phone. Although he still couldn't remember how he had come to be here, Brandon felt strangely calm. Before he had time to think any further, the receptionist cleared his throat pointedly.

"Mr Smith?"

"Y- yes?"

"Can I get you any refreshments while you wait? Water, coffee?"

"Thank you, but- there must have been some kind of mistake... I don't think I'm meant to be here."

The receptionist smiled kindly, but his eyes betrayed an unmistakeable sadness.

"That's what they all say."

Before Brandon had time to respond, a door to his left swung open to admit a very bizarre looking man. He sported an impossibly white suit, complete with a white silk tie and waistcoat and ivory leather shoes. The only non-white object on his person was a gold chain that stretched from his waistcoat pocket to a timeworn watch held aloft in his hand. More blinding than his suit was his smile, which radiated from under a magnificent crop of silver hair as he strode across the reception and seized Brandon's hand, shaking it energetically.

"Brandon, my dear boy! Delighted to meet you, absolutely delighted."

All Brandon managed in response was a weak smile. The strange man continued.

"I suppose Peter has filled you in on everything?" He asked, glancing in the direction of the reception.

"N-no." Brandon responded feebly.

"Well, we'd better get cracking then! Follow me." The man swept back across the room before stopping suddenly and turning back to face Brandon with another dazzling smile.

"I'm Clarence by the way. Just Clarence."

A few moments later, Brandon, having been whisked through a labyrinthine corridor, found himself sitting opposite Clarence at a large oak desk, strewn with papers, a rubber band ball and a bowl of mints which Clarence, now concentrating on a large computer screen, had taken a handful of.

"Now... Brandon Smith... Ah, here we are! Before we begin, do you have any questions?"

"Um, yes, several. Where exactly am I? And why am I here?"

Clarence peered at him kindly through a pair of pearl-rimmed spectacles.

"You're dead, my dear. Mint?"

Brandon felt his throat dry up.

"Dead? What do you mean dead?"

“I’m terribly sorry to tell you but you were killed in a car accident on Thursday 4 November 1998.”

“Then... then where the hell am I? Is this meant to be Heaven?”

“Sure. Limbo. Elysium. The Great Beyond. Whatever you want to call it.”

“So... so you’re... an angel?”

“I prefer to be called a liminal space worker, but yes.”

Brandon’s mind was racing. He brought a trembling hand to wipe away the beads of sweat that had appeared on his forehead and cleared his throat several times before looking desperately at Clarence.

“How long have I been dead?”

Clarence helped himself to another mint.

“Time, or at least the way you understand it, doesn’t apply here. We exist everywhere and all the time. You see, time is not so much of a straight line as it is a... well, this ball for instance.”

He picked up the rubber band ball.

“For us, time is more of a... a spherical thing. Continuous and infinite and existing all at once. Separate strands all belonging to a wider picture. Right at this very moment, Genghis Khan is invading Persia, Alexander Graham Bell is inventing the telephone and the Oscar for Best Picture is mistakenly being given to La La Land. You came from one very specific timeline. But there was always a myriad of others existing above, below and beside you. Your life was one rubber band in one very large rubber band ball, if you follow... ”

Clarence paused to pop another mint into his mouth. Brandon’s head was swimming.

“So... so what now?”

Clarence rested his chin on his fingertips.

“Well, there are three stages in this process. Let’s begin with Hell. No, don’t panic, it’s really nothing to worry about. Dante got it horribly wrong.”

Clarence turned his screen to face Brandon. On it was a picture of a muscular man with a tanned complexion, a million-dollar smile and what looked like a million-dollar suit. A laughing blonde woman stood next to him, holding a young boy in her arms. They were all standing in front of a new-looking building, a modern design of glass and steel. All three radiated an almost tangible happiness.

“Who is that?” Brandon asked.

Clarence smiled sadly.

“That could have been you.”

A long silence ensued. Finally, Brandon stammered:

“I- I don’t understand.”

Clarence too was silent for a moment. He then looked Brandon directly in the eye spoke softly but with a deadly seriousness.

“Every choice you have ever encountered opened up an infinite number of possible outcomes. Life is not simply a question of fate and chance. It’s a reflection of your decisions, every one of which has been a step down a certain path. You are who you are because you turned down every opportunity that presented itself. You never ventured into the unknown, never spoke to new people. No, because every time you thought you should, there was a voice in the back of your head saying it wasn’t worth it, that it would go wrong. But what if everything went right? Everything in your life was there for a reason, all potential rungs on a ladder to success. Your college investment project for example. You were too afraid to present it to your father’s banker friend in case he laughed at you. Well one version of you took that chance. You were afraid, yes, but you still did it. And he didn’t laugh. He offered you a damn job. Remember Sally Calvin from high school? How you were too scared to ask her out? Well, she liked you back. That’s her in the picture by the way. With your son. They are the reason that’s the best version of you. Even at the opening of your own stockbroking firm, where this picture was taken, the only thing that ever mattered to you was your family. But the version of you sitting in front of me never knew that happiness. Why? Because you got comfortable. And if you hadn’t forgotten your briefcase in your office that day, you would have carried on living your convenient life, entering a bitterly lonely retirement and, eventually, dying completely and utterly alone.”

Clarence’s words hung in the air. Brandon was completely still. Another long moment passed. Brandon took a deep, shaky breath.

“That’s... definitely not what I expected Hell to be like.”

“It never is. Are you ready to move onto step two?”

“There’s more of this?”

“Not of Hell, no. This bit is more exciting.”

“Ok... then I’m ready.”

“Right. Well you have three options. Option one: you stay here. You’ll train under my supervision and eventually become a liminal space worker yourself. Option two: you are reborn as either...’

Clarence tapped his keyboard grandly and read from his screen.

‘Edith Benson, born 1894. Occupation: English teacher. Baldwin Blacksmith, born 1247. Occupation: err, blacksmith. Barry Manilow, born 1943, Occupation: singer.’

“Do I get to choose?”

“Certainly not. And you haven’t heard option three yet.”

“Right.”

“Option three. You can start over. As yourself. You won’t remember this, of course. I can’t promise it will be a better life. But it’s another shot.”

Clarence smiled kindly at Brandon, who had closed his eyes, deep in thought.

“Take as much time as you need to decide.”

But he had already made up his mind. Brandon nodded his head slowly.

Clarence beamed.

“So... what next?”