

# CHAPTER 1

What's in a name? For many, nothing. For some, not nothing, but not much. For a very few, blessed or cursed, it's everything. I'm one of those few. And if you're wondering, I usually count myself among the cursed.

When I turned forty, I lost the desire, and even the ability, to sleep in. So I was an early riser. Yet, at 7:45, I still wasn't the first into the office that morning. I heard him as I crossed our marble lobby, past the futuristic "reception pod" where Angela and her headset would soon be stationed. He called out to me from down the hall.

"Morning, Hem. Um, you got a minute?"

Bob was standing just outside the corner office, *the* corner office, *his* corner office, at the end of the corridor. This was not good news. Bob was never in before 9:30. And when he eventually did arrive, it was to start a workday that was almost always devoid of any real work. Bob, BOB, **BOB**. I've never really liked

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the name “Bob.” It’s just so short. Simple. Primitive. Unrefined. In fact, I have a theory on the name’s origin. Six million years ago, when the early hominids first discovered their vocal cords, I think the sound “Bob” may well have been among their first harsh guttural utterings. Shortly after “Grrrrr” and “Aaaah” would have come “Baaaahb.” Short, simple, primitive, unrefined. Much like Bob himself.

Conveniently, I disliked Bob as a person as much as I did his name. We’d joined the New York ad agency Macdonald-Clark within weeks of one another nearly fifteen years ago. But we’d been on different trajectories ever since. Over the years, I rose through the ranks as if I were sauntering up a gentle slope, stopping often to lounge at patio rest stations along the way. But soon after we started, Bob seemed to board the space shuttle, docking with the corner office after what seemed to me like a very short ride. How it happened so fast – no, how it happened at all – was more a mystery to me than Bigfoot. I still cannot fathom how Bob parlayed his principal assets of incompetence, paranoia, and mediocrity all the way to the top. But there he was, M-C’s general manager, waving me into his palatial enclave, with an expression on his face that suggested his next words just might be “Grrrrr” and “Aaaah.”

On the other hand, despite its shortcomings, I’d be thrilled to have a name like “Bob.”

“Sure, Bob.”

I turned and followed him in.

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He led me to the couch and easy chair at one end of the office, far away from his barren desk, where very little work was ever done. I took a spot on the couch, lowering myself into what felt like upholstered quicksand. I sank in so deep that when I stopped, I could almost rest my chin on my knees. I wondered how I was going to get back out. Bob sat in the chair across from me.

“So, Hem, um, how have you been?”

“Just fine, Bob. You?”

“Awesome, thanks.”

Cue awkward silence. Bob shifted his position in his chair. I tried to shift my position but the couch simply wouldn't let me.

“Well, um, I guess you've heard the rumours,” he continued.

“Actually, Bob, I've been here too long for that. I make it a point never to pay any attention to stray rumours or anything else I may encounter in these hallways. If I see a colleague crying in a corridor, or yelling at an intern, or moaning in a bathroom stall, I quickly make a show of checking my watch, turn around fast, and head back the way I came. That's my policy. So, no rumours have reached these tender ears.”

“So you really haven't heard anything? No rumblings? Nothing?”

“Not a peep, Bob. Should I have?”

His face clouded.

“Come on, Hem, you're not helping!” he snapped. “We plant those rumours for a reason. They help condition the staff and prepare them for bad news. Strategic rumours are an important

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part of our internal communications program. You're a senior guy. You've been here a long time. You should know that."

"Well, I'm sorry, Bob. Had you flagged and tagged them as 'strategic rumours from the corner office' I probably would have paid more attention."

"Shit."

"Bob, I'm a copywriter. I sort of work on my own. I just follow the brief and try to think up the right words and how best to arrange them. That's what copywriters do. I don't really hang out much with the account teams. I'm generally oblivious when it comes to office gossip."

"Shit."

"What's this all about?"

Bob sighed, then looked at the ceiling as he spoke.

"You're out, Hem. It's over. We have to let you go. Today. Now. I'm sorry."

I laughed. Well, it was more of a chortle.

"You're kidding, right?" I looked around the office. "Where's the camera? This is for the Christmas party, right?"

I could tell from his face. No, this wasn't for the Christmas party. I just looked at him for a moment as the news settled over me like ash from an angry volcano.

"Bob, I'm shocked. I don't understand this. I'm hurt. You could have at least given me some warning."

"Shit, Hem, I floated the balloon last week. You seem to be the only one in the agency who didn't pick up on it."

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Come to think of it, in the last few days folks had been kind of giving me the cocked-head, arched-brow, sad-eyes routine as they hustled by.

“Bob, I’ve been here fifteen years. I’ve won awards! You promoted me last year and gave me what I thought at the time was only a modest raise. But still, you did give me an increase!”

“Hem, calm down.”

Calm down? That was a surprise. Incarcerated in that couch, how could I look anything but calm? I could move only my upper body. I guess I may have been waving my arms around a bit.

“I am calm. Calm and flabbergasted. Calm and furious. Calm and, um, apoplectic. What possible rationale can you have for firing me?”

“Hem, we’re not firing you. We’re just letting you go. We’re thanking you for your years of service, giving you a generous settlement, and parting ways. That’s all. It happens all the time in the agency world.”

“Well, it’s never happened to me,” I said. “And you still haven’t explained why.”

“Hem, come on. You really don’t know? You’re a long-form copywriter. You’re a relic,” Bob said, waving his arms around a bit. “The world has changed. In fact, it changed a decade ago. I’m amazed you hung around this long,” he said. “Everything is short and punchy now. We live in the 140-character universe. Ad agencies don’t need long-form copywriting any more. We held out as long as we could. I’m sorry.”

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“But I’m good at my job. I’m in on virtually every new biz pitch. My writing has won the agency awards. I’m . . . um, good at my job. I’m great at my job!”

“Come on, Hem, don’t fight this. Don’t make this difficult,” he soothed. He pulled an envelope from his jacket pocket and held it out to me. “Hem, you’ve got a *huge* package.”

“Well, kind of you to say, Bob, but I’m really more interested in the settlement you’re offering,” I deadpanned.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have deadpanned. Bob was befuddled. I opened the envelope. The cheque was for the equivalent of a year’s salary. Wow.

“It’s well above the legislated requirements. Don’t bother trying to negotiate. This is as much as I could get for you. If you choose to push back, the offer will be withdrawn and you will receive the bare legal minimum.” Bob said this part like he was reading me my Miranda Rights.

I know I should have fired back with both barrels blazing. But I really wasn’t good at this. I was out of things to say. I had nothing.

“Hem, think of this as a gift. You’ve got at least a year to do what you want. You can finally write your novel. Think of this as freedom.”

“Freedom?”

“Yes, freedom.”

I wanted to say, “Fuck you, Bob,” like they do in the movies. But I just couldn’t get it out. My civility instinct prevailed.

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“Hem, you have to go see Marlene. She has all the paperwork. You need to sign it all if you’re going to keep that cheque,” he said, almost in a whisper, as if he were talking me back in off the ledge. “Pop back here before you go.”

I nodded and tried to get up.

“Bob, do you mind?” I reached out my hand.

“Sure, Hem.” He pulled me up and out of the couch.

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It only took a few minutes to deal with Marlene and her stupid paperwork. She was Macdonald-Clark’s Human Resources specialist, or as she was sometimes known among the account teams, Human Overhead. She was nice to me. I signed without even reading the termination agreement. The cheque stayed in my pocket.

It’s such a cliché to load your personal effects into a cardboard box before making the long walk to the elevators. So I was relieved when Marlene actually gave me a largish clear plastic bag instead, in return for my key and security card. It didn’t quite seem a fair exchange. I emptied my desk drawers and bookshelves of all the personal stuff that just seems to accumulate over a decade and a half spent in the same office. Marlene hovered outside my door as if I might steal a pad of Post-it notes on my way out. I could feel anger building. Finally, I picked up the framed shot of Jenn and me taken at Club Med in Jamaica four years ago, just before we moved in together. We

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both looked deliriously happy. And I guess we were. I tossed it into my plastic bag where it landed photo side up and stared back at me. The bag was full and heavy. Being able to see my “personal effects” through the clear plastic made the whole scenario seem all the more pathetic. I left the plants where they were. They’d die if they came home with me.

It took some effort, but I thanked Marlene for her assistance, balancing curt and courteous – call it “curteous” – and headed back to Bob’s office.

True to form, he was sitting at his utterly empty desk, gazing out the window.

“Settle down, Bob. You have to pace yourself or you’ll just burn out,” I said.

“I’m sure going to miss your sparkling wit, Hem.” Bob sighed as he stood. “Did you sign off with Marlene?”

“I did, but just now, when cleaning out my desk, I had a change of heart. You can tear up the paperwork, I’ve decided that you can’t terminate me because I resign,” I said, staring him down.

Bob smiled and held out his hand. It sort of looked like he wanted to shake, so I automatically reached out my hand. He shook his head.

“No, Hem, not your hand – the cheque, please,” he clarified. “Since you resigned, you have to give back the cheque. There is no settlement when you resign.” His hand stayed there, outstretched.

I thought long and hard, for the next three nanoseconds.



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“Whoa! Hang on, I wasn’t quite finished,” I stammered. “What I was about to say was that I resign, um, myself to the, um, decision and associated settlement that you and I agreed to earlier.”

“Sound thinking.” Bob smirked as he dropped his hand.

“Well, Bob, it’s been a real delight,” I said, as we shook a final time. “Of all the colleagues I’ve worked with in my fifteen years here, I will always remember you as, um, one of them.”

Then, without missing a beat, I spun on my heel and walked out, lugging my plastic bag. Man, I sure told him.

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I was in a surly mood by the time I made it into our apartment on Bank Street, almost at Bleecker, in the West Village. It wasn’t just losing my job. I’d remembered on the way home that I’d lost my wallet on the subway the day before. Funny how losing your job can make you forget about losing your wallet. It was well and truly gone. Stray wallets don’t last long on New York subways, and they never make it to the MTA’s Lost and Found.

When the elevator opened, Jenn and her brother, Paul, were standing there in the corridor with a cardboard box and a couple of suitcases.

“Oh hi, Paul,” I said. “Are you moving in for a while?”

Jenn had kind of a dazed look on her face.

“Shit,” she said.

“Believe it or not, you’re the second person to say that to me this morning,” I replied.

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“Good to see you, Hem,” Paul mumbled before turning to his sister. “I’ll wait in the car.”

Paul took the box and hit the elevator button. When the doors didn’t immediately open, he and his box sprinted to the end of the hall and disappeared into the stairwell.

“Very odd” was all I said.

“Hem, what the hell are you doing home at this hour? You’re supposed to be at work. Are you sick?”

“I wish I were sick. Instead, I’m unemployed,” I reported, trying to hold it together. “I was just laid off. On the upside, I have a big cheque in my pocket that I can deposit just as soon as I can get a new bank card.”

“This can’t be happening,” she said, almost to herself. “Well, that’s just great news, Hem. Your timing couldn’t be better.”

It wasn’t the sympathetic response I was looking for. She just stood there with this strange look on her face. Uh-oh.

I figured it out.

“Shit,” I said.

“Hem, um, look, here’s the thing. I’m really sorry about your job. That just sucks. But, I’m leaving. I didn’t want there to be a scene so I was going to call you tonight.”

“What? Hang on. For a second there I thought you said you were leaving. I must not have heard you correctly. Just run that by me again.” I made a show of leaning in to hear her better as my anger took over.

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“I obviously didn’t expect you to arrive home in the middle of my . . . um . . .”

“Getaway? Great escape? Betrayal?” I offered. I always try to be helpful when people are searching for *le mot juste*.

“. . . departure,” she chose, bobbing her head and scrunching up her nose. From experience, I knew it as the precursor to tears. “Hem, don’t make this difficult.”

“Believe it or not, you’re the second person to say that to me this morning.”

“Hem, it’s time. You must have seen it coming. We’ve lived together for four years, but the last two we’ve really just been roommates. You know that. It all slipped away. You had to have felt it. How could you not?”

“So you were just going to sneak away without saying anything and hope that I wouldn’t notice. Were you going to leave me a note?” I said, my voice rising. “Jenn, this isn’t public school. We’re adults. We talk things through.”

“Yeah, right,” she countered with an eye roll. “When have we ever ‘talked things through’? Whenever I’ve wanted to talk about it, you’ve gone to ridiculous lengths to avoid a meaningful discussion. I know how you think, Hem. If we never talk about it, there’s no problem. It doesn’t exist. Well, I can’t do that any more. I’m done with that delusion. There is a problem, and I’m solving it on my own.”

I realized we were still standing in the corridor where we could be overheard by curious neighbours with ears pressed to doors.

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“Jenn, at least come back in and let’s talk about it now. I’ve now got plenty of time on my hands.”

“I can’t. It’s too late for that. We haven’t been in a real relationship for a long time. If I don’t do something about it, you’ll just carry on, stuck in this rut, but unable to take any action to climb out of it. You’ll just deny, avoid, distract, and crack jokes. It’s what you do. It’s what you always do. Well, it’s time to be a grown-up, Hem.”

She exhaled. It was a sigh of fatigue, not of sorrow, not of regret. I could tell. Again, I had nothing.

“Paul has his van loaded. I’m staying with him for a few weeks until I find a place. I gotta go.”

She leaned in and kissed my cheek before bolting for the elevator, dragging her suitcases behind her. Mercifully, the doors opened quickly and she leapt in.

“Think of this as freedom,” she said as the doors closed.

“Believe it or not, you’re the second person to say that to me this morning,” I muttered to myself.

The apartment was pristine. She and Paul had worked hard and fast in the four hours since I’d left that morning. I felt in a time warp. The rooms all looked almost exactly as they had before Jenn moved in four years ago. No, they actually looked better. Beyond a couple of framed photos of the two of us, every other vestige of Jenn was gone, as if Orwell’s Ministry of Truth had expunged the last four years. It was almost surreal.

I dropped into a chair in the living room. I loved our

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apartment. Hardwood floors. Big windows. Parking under the building. Blessed air conditioning. A fair chunk of real estate in the West Village for the money. And it seemed I was back to having the space all to myself. I loved my apartment. I may have been in shock right then, but I was thinking about my apartment and not about Jenn bailing out on me, on us.

I took a moment to catalogue the woes I'd collected in the previous twenty-four hours. I had no wallet. I had no job. I had no girlfriend. Losing your wallet is really no big deal. It's a royal pain in the ass, but it's just inconvenient, not a threat to your mental stability. On the other hand, losing your job and your girlfriend in the same day is like getting beaten badly in both ends of a psychological doubleheader. I felt terrible. Miserable. Depressed. But to be completely honest, I probably should have felt worse than I did. Beneath the body blows to my ego that would ache for a long time, I was perched on the precipice of a brand-new start. A rare gift. I like my glass half-full. I had a year's salary, a seriously simplified love life, a lovely apartment that hadn't been this neat and tidy . . . ever, a novel to write, and time on my hands. To coin a phrase, *think of this as freedom*.

I opened my laptop on the kitchen table where I could look out the window and see the trees lining Bank Street below. The canopy of leaves dappled the June sunshine on the pavement. It was time to write. After I had surveyed the scene outside for fifteen minutes or so, I read through the file folder labelled "Debut Novel." I had no title yet for it. Inside were files with

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names like “Character back stories,” “Settings,” “Chronology,” and “Basic outline.” There was also a subfolder entitled “Manuscript.” I opened the “Basic outline” file and shoved it up against the right-hand edge of my screen. Then I clicked on the “Manuscript” subfolder to reveal chapters one through eleven stacked in separate files. My mouse hovered over Chapter 11 and I double-clicked to open it. I spent the next twenty minutes or so rereading the words I had written in my last writing session a week earlier. They weren’t bad, I guess. But the prose read as I’d been feeling when I’d written it and the previous few chapters – forced, listless, unfocused, rudderless, and utterly devoid of literary merit. But that was then. Now my world had been stripped of at least two of the principal distractions that have plagued writers since words were first etched on tablets. I had no job and I had no girlfriend. Suddenly taking their place were two commodities writers have always sought but seldom found. Time and money.

If not now, when? So I laced my fingers, turned my linked hands downwards, and pushed out, stretching and cracking my knuckles in the clichéd way piano players do before duelling with the keys. I know. It must have looked lame, but it actually felt quite good. I opened a new document in Word and typed “Chapter 12.” Then I felt thirsty and got a drink. Okay, Chapter 12. Then I noticed a dustball Jenn had somehow missed in her guilt-encrusted vacuuming frenzy. I picked it up and tossed it in the garbage bin under the sink. Now, Chapter 12. I wrote a sentence. It was not a great

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sentence. It was not “luminous.” It was not “elegiac” or “incandescent.” But it was a sentence. It was a start. I read it over, again and again. I flipped the front clause to the back and read it again. Then I put it back. Fifteen minutes later, like the Ministry of Truth, I backspaced through the entire sentence, eliminating any signs that it had ever existed. I looked over at my “Basic outline” for guidance, but found nothing of interest.

Okay, Chapter 12. I shook out my arms like an Olympic swimmer just before the gun. Then I took a shower.

Twenty minutes later I was back at my laptop feeling refreshed and enthused. Chapter 12. What’s in the fridge? No, that wasn’t a new first sentence. That was the question that I simply had to answer before trying to write that first sentence. Writing always makes me hungry. Even trying to write, or avoiding writing, or wanting desperately to write but succumbing to distractions, or falling prey to simple, pure, unadulterated procrastination, all make me hungry. I made a peanut butter and peach jam sandwich. It was very good, with the perfect proportions of peanut butter and jam. It’s hard to nail that balance. Writing and eating usually make me tired. Yep. I took a nap.

I awoke two hours later and wondered what I was doing in bed. Then I remembered, and felt discouraged and depressed all over again. When I analyzed my post-nap feelings, I realized I wasn’t really grieving Jenn’s departure. I wasn’t a blubbering mass of emotion, but actually felt okay about it all, and was oddly motivated to get back to my novel. I was supposed to be

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hurting, but it hadn't hit me yet, and might never. What I did feel seemed more like relief than emotional angst. Strange reaction, I know, but there you have it.

I hauled myself up and was soon back in the kitchen in front of the laptop, staring at a very intimidating screen. By this time, it was three in the afternoon. I decided I simply couldn't put it off any longer. Not Chapter 12, but replacing my driver's licence at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Driving without your licence is generally frowned upon by the NYPD.

I took the subway up to Broadway and 6th and eventually got myself in line at the DMV. I would have arrived sooner, but on the way I was forced to cross the street to avoid two leashed beagles leading their owner up the sidewalk toward me. If I haven't already mentioned it, I don't like dogs. Not at all. Long-haired or short, brown, black, striped or checked, I just don't like them. More precisely, I'm scared of them. Smaller dogs in particular, for some reason. There was no terrier trauma that I could point to as the root of it all. Dogs just scare me. I'm well aware that my fear is irrational, thanks very much. But that doesn't make a Shih Tzu any less frightening.

The lineup was long. Right out the door, along Broadway, then wrapping around 34th. What a great day. Losing my job, losing my girlfriend, and now lining up at the DMV. The trifecta. At 4:30, I actually inched into the building. By 4:45 I was finally standing at Window 10, in front of a clerk who looked like she worked at the DMV dealing with cranky drivers eight hours a day.



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“How can I help you?” she said in tone better suited for “What the hell do you want?”

“Um, I lost my wallet on the subway yesterday and need to get a replacement driver’s licence, please.”

She had not yet looked up.

“Spell the first name.”

I did as I was told.

“Surname, now.”

Here we go. I leaned in a little closer and almost whispered the spelling of my last name. Her screen was angled so I could see it, too. She stopped typing at the “w.”

“I do not have the time for this. Do you see the lineup behind you, sir? I do not have the patience for this. By 2:30 today I had lost whatever sense of humour I brought in with me this morning. So either you spell your *real* surname, or move along.”

This was not the first time this had happened. In fact, I confronted it almost daily in one form or another. I could feel my stomach tightening a little.

“I’m sorry. But I actually did give you my real name. Against all odds, that is actually my name.” I said it and spelled it again for her. She wasn’t typing. She pushed her glasses up onto her head.

“Let me see some ID, right now!”

“Arghhh.” Yes, that’s what I said, “Arghhh,” while scanning the ceiling for salvation. It seemed an appropriate response at the time. “Look, I’m here because I lost my wallet. So I have no ID. That’s where I usually keep my ID. That’s why I’m here,”

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I pleaded, doing my best to suppress my simmering anger. But my voice was starting to rise a little.

“Look, mister. You expect me to believe that any sane parent would give their son that name. I ain’t buying what you’re selling. You got no ID. You’re getting belligerent. You’re practically foaming at the mouth. So back off and go and get your jollies somewhere else. We’re busy here. Try the passport office on Hudson. They’re loads of fun.” She pointed in a vaguely southerly direction as she said it. “Next in line, please!”

I’ve often heard of people snapping under the cumulative stress of a situation. All of a sudden a bolt pops loose and that nice gentle man who gives to charity and volunteers at the food bank somehow steps off the deep end and turns into a raving lunatic. Well, it was different for me. You see, I volunteer at the Planned Parenthood Clinic down on Bleecker, not at the food bank. But everything else was just about the same. You know, the deep end, raving lunatic part. So much for my civility instinct.

“Wait just a second,” I shouted, yes, shouted. “Wait one second! That is the name I was christened with forty years ago. I am not impersonating anyone. The spelling is not even the same. There’s an ‘a’ in my first name and a double ‘m’ in the second. See, it’s a completely different name. Okay, now try to focus. I’ve had a very, very bad day and I need a new driver’s licence. Your job is to make that happen. Please do it now!”

“Security to 10” was all she said into her headset. She sounded tired.

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It felt like an out-of-body experience. I could hear myself yelling, but seemed unable to control it. As an observer, I was impressed with my coherence, despite the higher pitch and volume of my voice.

“Whoa, hang on! I’ve been waiting nearly two hours. I’m not leaving without my new driver’s licence. I’ve already given you my name. I live at 75 Bank Street in the village. So just process it now and I’ll leave quietly!”

I didn’t feel the need to utter the “and nobody gets hurt” line. It was implicit.

For the first time, I noticed the crowd behind me backing away, some of them even surrendering their position in the line to get a little farther away from the whack job ranting at Window 10. I felt like I was among them watching this crazy dude melt down.

“Security to 10!”

I was still yelling. At one point I seem to recall banging the glass with my open palms. Excellent idea. I listened to myself shout some more at the woman at Window 10.

“Do you know what it’s like to go through life with my name? Do you? It builds a wall around you. It isolates you. It’s harder to meet people. Fellow drivers in the DMV think you’re crazy. And you know what the worst part is? Are you listening? Do you know what the worst part of the story is? I’m a writer. Yes, that’s right. What a hoot! Isn’t that a laugh? I am a writer. Say, what’s your name? Where’s your name tag? Come on, what’s your name? I bet it’s a normal, average name that has never

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registered on any radar anywhere in the world. Brenda Cooper, or Linda Baker. Something like that, right? No spikes in notoriety, no front-page stories, no celebrity scandals to make your life difficult. You have no idea how lucky you are, whatever your name is.”

The words just flowed out of me. I knew the speech well. I’d been mentally rehearsing various versions of it for many years. I just never thought I’d ever say it out loud. I paused to look carefully at the ceiling again and tried to calm down a bit. That didn’t really work. My throat hurt from shouting. I really don’t know why I was shouting but it seemed the most natural thing in the world to be doing at that moment.

“You gotta help me! Just make this one little thing go right for me today, because *nothing else has.*”

In case shouting wasn’t enough to make my point, I also went back to banging on the glass. But for variety, I pounded it in time with my words for added emphasis, as a crazed bongo player might. Yes, my breakdown was syncopated, almost rhythmic.

“You have no idea what I’ve already been through today! It’s been a nightmare and this is not the way I want it to end! This is not the way it’s going to end!”

“*Code 66! Security to 10! Now would be good!*”

“Look, whatever your name is, you are not helping turn my day around. It’s your job to help me! And at least you’ve got a job! I lost mine this morning after fifteen years, and then my girlfriend moved out, *all before noon!* That’s gotta be some kind

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of a record! Just give me this one little victory. Please! Just this one teeny-weeny win. *Give me my driver's licence!*"

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, went my hands on the glass of Window 10 following the cadence of my words. It just felt so good to get it all out. How do you spell "catharsis"?

I was caught off guard by what happened next. Or perhaps "caught by guards" might be the better way to put it. I felt them before I saw them.

"Hey, wait . . . what gives . . . get your hands off meee . . . I know my righhhhhh . . . Heyyyyy . . . arrrrrlllllchshhhhh . . ."

After that, I was still making sounds with my mouth, but it's hard to be articulate with a nightstick pressed against your trachea. There's not a lot of give in those nightsticks. But I was gurgling as eloquently as I could. It took three of them to carry me, squirming and squealing, to the front door of the DMV. The hordes still waiting in line parted before us, as if I were infected with the Ebola virus.

Now I had always thought that the phrase "They threw him out on his ass" was just a catch-all term to cover any kind of forcible ejection. Well, in my case, it really did mean "They threw him out on his ass." There's not a lot of give in those dirty sidewalks of Broadway either. And, there's not a lot of give in my tailbone any more.

I lay back flat on the pavement where I'd landed. The big guard was on me in an instant, her knee pushing down on my sternum, her colleagues towering on either side.

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“If you’re still lying here in ten minutes, the police will be called. You’re lucky they aren’t here now,” she said, her face pressed quite close to mine.

She spoke to me like I was one small step up from a disobedient dog. “Go home! Do not go back into the DMV! Do you understand? Go home right now!”

I pointed to her knee as politely as I could.

“Need to breathe here . . .” I gasped. She lifted her knee a little and I sucked in all the air around me.

“Do you understand?” she shouted at me again.

“Of course I understand,” I replied calmly, lying flat on my back on the sidewalk at Broadway and 6th having been mounted by a burly security guard. “I’m not an idiot.”

She just shook her head, stood up, and led her team back into the building. I lay there for a while making sure I had feeling in all my extremities. I can report that I certainly had feeling in my ass.

No one stepped forward to assist the innocent taxpayer unjustly abused by the state. In fact, I’m really not sure any passersby even noticed me. A guy lying on the sidewalk, moaning, is nothing out of the ordinary in Manhattan. From my pavement-level vantage point, I noticed a black miniature poodle closing fast. So I got up, fast.

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I turned the key in my apartment door forty minutes later and plopped down on the couch. Then I shot back up again as a

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tsunami of pain started in my coccyx and then washed over me. My, what a short memory I have. I discovered through trial and error that the least painful position was lying on my stomach. So I did that for a while, after popping twice the recommended dose of Advil.

She was right. Jenn, I mean. Our relationship had been, not so much strained, just pallid and pale for the last two years. Whatever spark had kindled the fire early on had become so anemic that the flames petered out before I even noticed. Jenn was right. I probably knew as early as she did, perhaps even earlier. I just couldn't bring myself to deal with it. It was easier not to. Not better, just easier. I see that now. Many relationships limp along because they're convenient. And it's inconvenient to do something about it, and end it. I'm very good at pursuing the path of least resistance. It's what I've always done. But I'm also getting a little better at hindsight. Who knows, perhaps insight might not be far behind.

I managed to get up, put the two pillows from Jenn's side of the bed on a kitchen chair, and with considerable care, lowered myself into a pseudo-sitting position. I stared at the screen some more. Chapter 12. I was unable to find any words that worked. I knew where my story was going. I just had to look at my outline. But the words just would not come. It felt like they would never come. I Googled "writer's block" and enjoyed twenty minutes of depressing reading as I matched symptoms.

Finally, I surrendered, clicked open one of my existing Word files, and spent some time working on a taxonomy system I've

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been developing to classify the various kinds of people who, for one reason or another, have famous names, even though they are not famous themselves. Like me, for instance. It was my shrink's idea to do the analysis and develop the model. I found it interesting, even fascinating at times. Having thought about this topic for most of my life, I felt as if I'd covered all the bases and had a pretty good handle on the different categories. I just didn't know anyone else with a famous name to test-drive my system. In case you're interested, I'm classified as a "before/sounder/O&O," in my own taxonomy model. More about that later. I couldn't sit on my tender tailbone any longer so I stripped down, then went to lie face down on our bed, on my bed. I reached for the phone on my night table, dialled, then I waited for the beep.

"Hi Dr. Scott, it's Hem. I'm hoping you've got some time tomorrow. That would be Thursday. I'm clear all day. Yep, all day. Look, some stuff has happened and, well, we need to talk. Just let me know when, and I'll be there. Thanks. Bye."

I hung up. It was only 8:30, but I was exhausted after my big and busy day. I was just drifting off when the phone, rang. I assumed it was Dr. Scott. But no, my father's name appeared in the little liquid crystal caller ID screen. No, no, no. No thanks. Not now. Absolutely not. I'd rather head back to the DMV, perhaps even with a side trip to the dog pound. Not tonight. Still, it rang. I'd been through enough already. I did not need a conversation with my father to top it all off. I already



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had a very big pain in my ass, thanks just the same. I just let it ring as I swallowed more Advil. I looked for a while at the empty side of the bed Jenn had occupied for the last four years. I was feeling sorry for myself, but not really for very long. Then I assume I fell asleep, my ass still throbbing.