

Moments of Lucidity

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With a freight train thunder the door to the corridor was yanked open, and slammed. The new arrival was slim and tanned. He was dressed in a faded denim shirt and blue jeans. A liquorice whip of jet black hair fell into eyes, and his – almost feminine – features were bookended with cheekbones which looked like they could slice a T-Bone steak. The black haired man looked back at the fire escape door - which he'd just cannon-balled through - with a look of apprehension. Seconds turned into minutes as he caught his breath. The corner of his lips began to curl, and he laughed a big, joyful, beautiful laugh which doubled him up as he gasped "Oh man!". After two minutes his laughter trailed off, he wiped a tear from his eye and looked around at where he was. It was certainly a sharp contrast to the neon and day-glo splendour which he'd just escaped from. The corridor was scuffed and peeling. There were three doors. The fire escape, which the black haired man had just come through, a dull metal lift door, and at the far end an exit to the outside world. Despite the best efforts of the hotel's owners natural light was sneaking in through the gaps. The black haired man laughed "Holy cow!" he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen daylight. All kinds of debris had washed up in the corridor, crates of dusty linen, broken chairs and unmarked boxes. Forgotten relics in a forgotten space.

"Goddamn it!" the dark haired man noticed the old, thin man. The reason that he'd overlooked him was because – like a human chameleon – the old, thin man blended into his surroundings. He wore grey jogging bottoms, a frayed grey t shirt, grey tennis shoes, even his skin had a grey hue to it. The old, thin man melted into the sea of grey around him. He was stood in front of a stack of cardboard boxes. His eyes frantically scanned over them, his mouth – framed by a patchy grey beard - silently counted the boxes repeatedly while his body pitched forward slightly. It was as though his body wanted to move forward, but his head was anchoring him back. The black haired man had a

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confused grin on his face as he watched the other count and recount the boxes. The old, thin man was oblivious to the other man's presence, who opened his mouth, and then shut it. He put his arm up, then let it drop again. The black haired man didn't know how to react to being in the same room as someone who wasn't going apeshit at being in his company. It was sort of a relief not to have to go into the 'act'. It felt like a shower after a sweaty gig. This is what he needed. Just some room to breathe! That's all!

But...what if...what if no one ever took notice of him again? Like an episode of that show "The Twilight Zone". That was mad. The black haired man cleared his throat, licked his lips and said "Say, you're a tall one!" The old, thin man must have been at least six three.

There was no response.

The expected recognition never came.

The old, thin man continued to silently count the boxes.

"Well, if that ain't just plain rude!"

For a moment the black haired man thought that this too was going to be ignored as well, but the lips stopped moving, and the old, thin man shuffled around to see who was making the commotion. He had startling brown eyes, which seemed to be the only thing showing signs of life in the oatmeal streak which was his face.

"You must forgive me, I have a slight problem with my right ear." His voice was husky, but strong. It reminded the black haired man of an old movie actor like Orson Welles or Gary Cooper.

"Hey, forget about it man. It's good to meet you, my name is, uh, Wade, Jess Wade." He said with a smirk, and held his hand out to shake. The old, thin man looked at Mr Wade's hand, frowned, and let

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it hang in the air. Mr Wade's smile faltered, his hand drifted back to his side and he instinctively wiped it on his jeans.

"Yeah right, what name do you go by sir."

"My name is Charles Howard." He said in a monotone drone.

"Right." Mr Wade scratched his chin "What were you doing there?" he gestured towards the boxes.

"I was just on my way...out, when I saw these boxes, and it struck me how inefficiently they were stacked."

"Inefficiently stacked?"

"Yes. Look at the amount of room they are taking up. Surely there's a method which could be applied to them which would maximise space, while reducing waste! Now, I began to count the boxes..." he looked back at the boxes, and momentarily lost his train of thought, and the black haired man thought he saw the whisper of numbers on the man's lips. "...and...and..." - he cleared his throat - "I just wanted to make sure that was all, Goddamn it! Nothing wrong in being thorough!"

"Hey I ain't got a problem with that pop!"

"Pop? What do you mean *pop*?"

"I don't mean nothing by it. It's just a – what do call it – a turn of phrase. I didn't mean no insult, honest sir."

"No. You misunderstand me. I am not offended. I just do not consider myself to be that old. I have not taken a good look at myself for some time, and I know that, perhaps my grooming might not be as diligent as some others who have the time to fitter away on such trivialities. "

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“Well there’s a mirror. You can take a look for yourself.”

Above where a fire extinguisher should have been, was a cracked and grubby mirror. Mr Howard looked at it, and lifted his arm to rub the filth away, but his hand trembled as it came within inches of the grime. His face strained with the effort to get his hand to touch the mirror.

“Here, let me help you.” Mr Wade bunched the sleeve of his shirt and wiped the surface.

Mr Howard stared, wide eyed, at his reflection.

“How did this happen?” he croaked and looked in horror at the back of his liver spotted hands, with their bulging veins and raggedly cut finger nails.

“Hey man, you know we all get old.” Mr Wade said, but thought that in many, many years time when it began to show on him, that scientists would have invented something to help a fella out.

“How did this happen?” the old, thin man asked again, then he snapped around. “This is *just* what I have been talking about. Why am I not informed of these developments?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about sir.”

“What is that? What?”

“I said I don’t understand what you’re saying. You’re not making any sense. This is the first time I’ve ever met you.”

For the first time Mr Howard really looked at the black haired man, who took a small step back. The old, thin man didn’t say anything for the longest time, his eyes flicked over the dark haired man’s face.

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“Who are you? You look familiar. Do you work for me?” The black haired man laughed, and flicked his hair away from his eyes with a snap of his neck.

“I doubt it.”

“So what do you do?”

“Uh, I’m a – uh – a entertainer.”

“Do you work here?”

“Yes sir.”

“As an entertainer? So like a magician?”

“Ha! What a kick, wait till I tell the bo...uh...boy...yeah well, sorta like a magician, sir. Talking of magician’s you look kinda familiar yourself. You know who you reminded me of?”

The old, thin man glared back.

“The Wizard of Oz! Ha! I’m only foolin sir, seriously though, where do I know you from?”

“No where.” He growled “You do not know me.”

“Why sure I do!” Mr Wade’s eyes narrowed, and a thin smile snaked across his lips.

“Now let me think. Where do I know you from?”

“What are you doing here?” Mr Howard’s voice boomed out like Charlton Heston’s in the ‘Ten Commandments’, the black haired man had to check behind him. “What am I doing here?”

“Yes.”

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Mr Wade scratched the back of his head and smiled.

“Well, if I’m honest sir, I’m just trying to get some peace and quiet...you know, I’m a very lucky man, I’m more successful than I could ever have dared dream of.”

“As a magician?”

“Yep, as a magician.”, but a smirk was not far away. “Yes, I’m a very lucky man...” the black haired man let his voice trail off and silence filled the corridor.

“You say you’re a lucky man, and successful. I assume that this translates into money? Some would say that you could buy peace and quiet.”

“Sure, some would say that.”

“I ask the question as a fellow traveller, a...kindred spirit.” The words fitted uneasily in his mouth.

“Yeah, well...” Mr Wade scratched his nose with his thumb and looked down at his shoes. “What are you doing here sir?”

“I suspect the very same thing as you. What was it? Peace and quiet? Yes. Or maybe some clarity? Yes...that would be nice. When you wake up in the morning, and there are those first few seconds where you do not know where you are, who you are or even if what you’ve just dreamed has just happened, or if this - what is happening now- is actually the dream...What kind of hell must it be to be caught in that hazy reality? Would you have any realisation? A living death, to doubt the reality of your own existence. Purgatory.” He dragged lines down his face, giving it temporary colour. “When I was young, when I was a boy I was sent away to camp. My father thought it would toughen me up after all the attention my mother gave me. No one expected I’d get through it! Ha! You know what I did?” There was a pause before he asked again, more forcefully. “Well do you?”

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“Uh, no sir.” Mr Wade didn’t think the old guy actually wanted an answer.

“I signed up for the boxing! Ha! You were not expecting that now were you?” Mr Wade smiled and shook his head.

“Yes, despite all the..despite all the...despite all the...”the old, thin man’s eyes grew wide and his hands began to shake. His closed his eyes, and a new family of lines cracked around his face.

“Despite... all...the...quite reasonable germ concerns.” He said slowly while he wiped a line of sweat from his forehead. “I defied them all, just like I’ve always managed to do! I fought! I lost some fights and I won a few, but that is life and I proved I could do it.” He said with the monotone of a threadbare anecdote. “Regardless of who was in the ring it was always about me. I would go into the ring with a mixture of fear and excitement. That time exists in my mind aside from everything, in a bubble of its own. When I was boxing I had to use every fibre of my being to survive. You operate on an animal level. Then, between the rounds you can barely believe what just happened, that you were in this whirlwind. You see the world through a prism of sweat and blood and you think that is how the world is! You cannot remember how the world was before. But that is wrong Goddamn it! It is a wrong, warped, fuzzy version of the world, like you have just woken up! It is only when you wipe the sleep from your eyes that you *really* see how the world is. The problem is that these blue sky breaks in the clouds are becoming more scarce. These days I seem to be caught up in the maelstrom and holding my arms up to avoid the punches. I rarely seem to fight back any more.”

“You mean back then.”

“I know what I mean! What do you take me for? Ha! Some...some kind of lunatic! Ha!”

“Hey cool it man!”

“I am sorry. I just become frustrated at times.”

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“Boy, do I know what you mean there! I’ve got these friends, good old boys from back home, know what I mean? It’s great to have them around, but man...sometimes...I feel so responsible for them and their kids. Every time I open a door there seems to be someone behind it with their hands out. It seems like every third gig I do and every second record I cut it’s to put food on someone else’s table.”

“Magicians make records?”

“Uhhh...yeah, kinda of, for kids.”

“I see.” Mr Howard looked confused. “We have more in common than you would imagine.”

“Yeah? You got any kids?”

“No.”

“I’ve got a little girl, just a few months old. Her name is Lis...uh...her name is...” he stuttered.

“Louise. Louise – uh – Mary...”

“You do not seem very sure of your daughter’s name.”

“Uhhh, yeah she’s uh...still pretty new!” he ran a hand through his hair and laughed, Mr Howard man found himself joining in, but it made his face ache.

"I'm telling you man, she makes me walk the line! Know what I mean? I ain't too proud to tell you sir a few years ago that I was getting a little flaky there!"

"Define 'getting flaky'?"

Mr Wade shifted his feet.

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"Well you know, things. I hate to admit it sir but drugs, uppers, downers hell even around abouters! I've got it all under control now. I only take the medicine that my Doctor's prescribe."

"I have a very similar regime."

"I was starting to put on a few pounds there." He patted a stomach which looked like you could iron a shirt on. "It's that little darlin' girl of mine, she's keepin me straight. I wasn't taking care of business, but that's all changed now. I'm gonna get back in front of my fans."

Mr Howard snorted.

"Hey man, what's so funny?"

"I have known...a certain amount of public adoration, and let me tell you friend – from bitter experience – that the great American public can turn their love on and off as easily as a forset."

"Hey, hold up there a second!" He looked Mr Howard up and down. "Now I don't know what you're experience is, but for me there's a – I don't know how you'd put it – real connection I guess you'd say between me and my fans. Awhile back I had to – uh – drop out of the public eye for a chunk a time, and I'd been lying to you if I said that I didn't have a few sleepless nights wondering if they'd want me back, but when I did come back – Hell – I was more popular than ever! Those people love me!"

"Which is why you are in this hotel corridor?"

Mr Wade blinked and looked around.

"Well, uh, it's like I was sayin. There's these people that can be kinda suffocating. Know what I mean? Sorta takin' advantage of my kind nature?"

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"I am glad that I am not in that situation. My advisors make sure that no one gets close to me that could take advantage."

"I'm jealous that you have friends like that,"

"They are not my friends."

The black haired ran a finger under a strained smile.

"Uh...You ever thought about having kids?"

"I had a daughter, for about an hour. She died shortly after child birth."

"Ah shit, excuse the language. You should'a said something, here's me blabbin about Lisa..Lousie Mary! And all the time..."

Mr Howard held his palms up.

"There really is no need. It was a very long time ago. I feel people use grief as a button to draw attention to themselves. I have never been one for emotion. By the time I was eighteen I was an orphan, but I did not let that slow me down. Quite the reverse in fact."

"Man, I don't understand that, I don't understand that at all. When my Mamma passed I was just gettin going you know, uh, as a magician, and it stopped me dead. I never thought I was ever gonna stop crying. Poor Mamma, poor poor mamma."

"Yes, well." Mr Howard shifted, rubbed his arm and looked away. "I see that you are wearing a wedding ring! I am lucky enough to be in the same arrangement."

"Arrangement?" Mr Wade laughed "Oh man! I don't see a wedding ring on your finger."

"It irritates my skin."

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"Married life ain't a bed of roses either! You should see the women that buzz around me! I think there's more since I got married! There's these sweet things flappin their gums that they were all kinds of stuff to me! And I ain't ever set eyes on these girls! Now I ain't saying that I ain't been a hound in my time, but the bird doggin lies these people tell about me!"

"I have had a similar problem. It is all about money. Every man has his price."

"I gotta disagree with you there sir. It's not all about that. They want a bit of a glimmer from you, see what I'm saying? They see that people know you, and they want a piece of the action." Mr Wade kicked his shoe against the floor. "*Mannnnn*, I'm getting bored hanging around in this scuzzy corridor." He paused. "You said you're gonna leave?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Anytime now."

"How about now."

"Maybe."

"How about right now!"

"Perhaps. What about you?"

"What about me?"

"When are you going to go?"

"I'm gonna go now" Mr Wade strode towards the door.

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"No! No! Wait!"

"What now?"

"Look at the door! Look at the handle!" The old, thin man hissed.

"Jesus, what about it?"

"Look how filthy it is! It's crawling with germs! Crawling with them!" he whispered and jabbed a bony finger at the door handle.

Mr Wade looked at it again and rubbed his chin.

"...it does look sorta dirty, but..."

"No buts!"

"You know you can never be too careful with germs, my Mamma told me."

"Yes. My mother was also most informative regarding the menace of bacteria, and I am very prone to them, but through years of careful study and vigilance I have managed to overcome their tyranny."

Mr Wade's eyes slanted as he looked at the old, thin man.

"What research?"

"I have detailed notes and memos on my methods of avoiding the bacterial menace. I have spent years perfecting techniques, some which involve the use of many many Kleenex tissues to form paddles, which must be used..." he was stopped by the sound of a belly laugh.

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"Ah man!" the dark haired man gasped "You're as crazy as a shit house rat son! Listen to yourself!

Paddles? Detailed notes and memos? That's insane!"

Mr Howard blinked rapidly while he clenched and unclenched his fists.

"I...I...I..."

"And that's three I's in one sentence, man you've got an ego on you!"

"It is just that I worry about..I worry about what being stuck in the half dream moment, not knowing what is real..."

"What do you want to do man? Come on walk out with me now! Hell we'll get a steak and some beers and then we'll do whatever you want to do. If you could do anything in this world, what would it be?"

"I would fly."

"Yeah, well..."

"In a plane." the old, thin man smiled "I am, and have always been an avian. When you are up there in the clouds, life is so much simpler. I have never quite got people. I do not understand their concerns and worries, yet I understand their greed and flaws only too well, but planes! Now you are talking. His eyes sparked with life. "Now that is something I can understand. If you move a joystick left the plane goes left! It makes sense goddamn it! People, hell, I do not think I will get the measure of them."

"That's what you want to do? Fly a plane again?"

"Yes. Everything else." he gave a dismissive throw of his hand. "The money, the companies, the women! Hell I would not miss any of it. If I thought for one moment that I would end my days and

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not know the thrill of sitting in a cockpit and easing a plane up...not to know the freedom of being amongst the clouds again...I...I..."

"Come on then man! That's what we'll do. Never mind the steaks and beers! That can wait till after the flight!"

"Are you...serious?"

"Sure am! I know a fella out by the Sands who'll hook us up. You know what I say? Let them all go to hell! We're good guys, we'll figure something out!"

"Yes! Yes! To be in the sky again!"

"Let's go!"

"You will have to..."

Just then came the grind of machinery in action and the lift doors shuddered open. Inside were four men in expensive looking suits, sweating profusely. They all had a look of barely controlled panic on their faces, which - to a man - turned to relief when they saw the old, thin man.

"Mr Hu...!" one exclaimed before being nudged forcefully in the ribs by one of the others.

"We..we've been looking for you! We were worried!"

"I am perfectly fine. I am just going for a stroll with my good friend here."

Some of the new arrivals gauped open mouthed at the man with the black hair.

"But sir..."

"But nothing! I am going to fly a plane for the first time in ten years. You were not expecting that were you? Ha!"

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“But sir, look at it out there, aren’t you worried about contagion?”

“I have been discussing that with my young friend here, and we think...well...” The old, thin man looked at the door handle again. “It does look...”

“Come on man! Don’t listen to these guys! You wanna be up with the clouds again! Remember?”

“Yes! Yes! You are right! I just get so...punchy...We will...” Just then the fire escape door opened and standing there were five men. Like the dark haired man they were dressed in denim, but their clothes were garnished with rhinestones and chunky diamond encrusted jewellery. All of them were wearing aviator shades. For a moment the two groups studied each other with an itchy suspicion. The black haired man and the old, thin man stood in the middle.

“Hey boss! We were wondering where you’d got to.” One of them said in a lazy Southern drawl.

“Hell I was going for a walk! Do I have to check in with you guys every time I wanna get some air? Hey! Hey!” The dark haired man was just in time to see the lift doors close on the old, thin man. His eyes were still, but the dark haired man could see through a gap between the helpers that the old, thin man’s lips were moving as he began to count the boxes again.