

How Steven Became a Legend

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From the instant he opened the front door for the first time and drew in the foreign, fresh aromas of his new house, Steven could feel the expanding smile on his face – the first smile in oh so long – and knew his luck was about to change.

After unloading his compact four wheel drive of one of many cartfuls of boxes, unpacking another labelled 'Kitchen Supplies' in thick black marker and placing the kettle found within on his new stove to boil, Steven quickly walked through every room and re-examined their layout. He remembered the rough dimensions of the walls, noting the differing heights of ceilings, and mentally prepared the configurations of furniture he could achieve – he *would* achieve – when he'd saved the money to do so. After the kettle boiled and he had poured himself a drink – the jars of sugar and instant coffee luckily within the same box (through no prior planning) – Steven guided himself to the backyard and, whilst slowly sipping from his favourite cup, quickly became lost again in dreamy thought. He could imagine the possibilities of landscaping and the wide range of themes he could apply – a Balinese corner here, English flower beds there – of course only when he

had the time and even more money had been saved. But this did not deter him, in fact his smile was even fuller, had stretched past its limit, for soon Steven wouldn't have to worry about a money shortage at all.

Tomorrow he was starting a new job – a new house and new job, all at once. It was simply too much for the equilibrium of life, but he was only overwhelmed by a happiness lost since childhood.

But as he turned to face the house his thoughts shifted, as if his brain wanted to counter his pleasure, to act with contradiction, and Steven began to think about the life he had passed through, the life he had left behind.

He immediately ran inside and tore open another box – the one labelled 'Fragile...Glass' – quickly yanking out the first bottle he touched. The one labelled 'Whiskey'.

The rest of the night was a blur.

Steven had planned to wake up at 7:30 am, drifting into consciousness slowly, slovenly eating a warm and hearty breakfast before refreshing himself in a nice hot shower and leaving for work by 8:30, allowing him to be around a comfortable ten to fifteen minutes early (with a start at

9:00). Instead, the oh-so-important alarm that would have kick-started this routine had been forgotten, left in one of the boxes. When Steven opened his eyes it was already 8:30 am. Panicking, he had to miss every step of his plan except a dip in the shower, which was unfortunately icy-cold, and he arrived just as each clock-face in his new office ticked over to 9:00.

It didn't matter – Steven was actually a day early for work – his new boss hiding behind the urge for mockery as he explained that the business had continually tried to contact him (though Steven was yet to receive a landline connection and so was sceptical at that part of the explanation), had even managed to reach his parents and leave a message (which could have been true), because the job co-ordinator had been sick for a week and Steven's role of duties were yet to be prepared. If they had contacted his parents, Steven wouldn't have known. He hadn't spoken to them in a month – the day they signed as guarantors for his home loan – since even under such a joyous moment their company was onerous. He loved them; just couldn't live with them. He had been staying with his Uncle for the last four months, a distant relative who was out most hours and hence offered no more than an extra room, though Steven figured most people outside the circle of his closeted family couldn't possibly have known that, and all records would have still indicated his parents as the first point of contact. A mental note was made at that moment, while his boss joked light-heartedly, that they should be called soon.

Instead of being sent home under a wave of office-halting embarrassment, Steven was given

simple, errand boy duties to carry out as part of an agreed half-day shift. When this was over and lunch time arrived for his new co-workers, he was about to sneak out through the rear exit (lest he do anything else stupid) when a deep voice called out, halting him.

'Oi! New guy. Come back here and say Hello.'

Steven turned and saw no one in the rear hallway. He back-tracked his steps until he reached the nearest adjoining room, noticing its door was slightly open. He pushed its surface further and peeked inside. It was a common room, a white laminated table in the middle and equally sterile cupboards on the side, a sink, fridge and microwave oven the only utilities at a glance. A man was seated at the furthest corner, his chair touching a drawn shade which must have blocked an outside view, and he was rocking back and forth, putting great pressure on the chair's plastic legs. Under closer scrutiny the man actually appeared the same age as Steven, but his hair was already thinning at the top, sticking out in random, wiry patches. He wore a business shirt beneath a pair of blue overalls, as if he were an executive uncharacteristically painting his own office.

'Graham's the name,' he said enthusiastically. 'Been here two months. Marketing Advisor. I basically get paid to sit on my ass and think of anything crazy and out-there...'

A bit like yourself, Steven jokingly thought as he watched the man's quirky face twitch and stretch with each word.

'...You just missed everyone else. They went back to work a second ago...'

Funny, there didn't seem to be anyone leaving the room when I approached it.

'...Anyways, I best be getting back to work too. I'll see you tomorrow, hey? Oh, a piece of advice. The boss likes people who arrive early, not just on time. You'll want to get in his good books immediately. It'll be easier to make friends.'

With that, Graham stood and walked around the desk, brushing against Steven's arm and nudging it at the last second as he exited.

The whole encounter seemed rather odd, but Steven dismissed it, snuck outside as planned, and drove home.

He had enough time remaining in the day to purchase a single-seater chair and a coffee table from a factory outlet, both of which managed to fit in his car. He eagerly made use of them later that night. He was seated with a coffee in one hand, book in the other – the first time he'd ever been able to do such a simple gesture on his own. He expected the caffeine to invigorate him, to keep his mind and body alert for hours, but the book he'd started reading was of poor quality – the same repetitious and predictable junk he had read dozens of times before – so the parallel of boredom quickly crossed over and his confused body started to doze off.

Sleep always involved a nightmare.

Steven's memory instantly began playing tricks on him, reaching into the past and replaying scenes it knew Steven would have objected to if he were conscious and had the choice. The scenes placed him in that house again, with his so-called friends – the house they were about to rob. Steven was forced to trace the same pattern of

steps he'd originally taken through each room, was made to grab the same compact discs and books and the little portable stereo he knew would give them all enough drug money for two days, once pawned. And then he could hear the noise again, the click of the front door as a key unlocked it, and Steven felt himself freeze, again, though this time it was only in the dream. That's what his brain was telling him, taunting him: *Don't worry Steven, it's just a dream. This time.* He watched the next scene as the man walked into the house and the other boys ran into the next room, keeping quiet and hidden. The man eventually walked past but didn't see them, then proceeded to put his briefcase down – the one with 'Matheson' written in gold embossing along the side – and remove his shirt like he had probably routinely done for at least twenty years after a hard-days-work. Then the man looked up and, as if by cruel fate, met Steven's eyes perfectly. They were only several feet from each other. Steven was still frozen, not in shock or fear but in a stiff panic in calculation of his next move. The man's jaw dropped in horror, a grunt all his voice could exert. Then Steven finally began to move and it was here as an observer in the dream that he wished he could spur himself to act faster. But in haunting slow-motion, Steven tried to direct the man's gaze with a twitch of the head, his hand following and beginning to lift as if to point; point at one of the other boys rushing towards them, unnoticed by the man, a baseball bat raised high in the air...

Steven jolted awake, his body dripping nightmarish sweat. He rose from his new chair and hurriedly returned to the 'Fragile...Glass' box, pulling out the same bottle of whiskey.

Wasting no time, he swigged from the bottle, hoping a quick shot would calm his nerves. He was meant to forget his past; that's why he had moved into a new house, a new area, a new occupation, away from it all – the friends, drugs, and the attaching lifestyle. He prayed his memory would soon forget, but as the spirit burned his throat he knew it would take longer than expected.

The rest of the night was a blur.

The next day at work – his 'official' first day – Steven felt quite isolated. The other staff weren't exactly keen to introduce themselves and by lunch time he was actually relieved to see a familiar yet quirky face – Graham's.

As Steven reheated some store-bought noodles, Graham began complaining about how tough his position was and how even the Accounting Department would have lost track of the overtime he'd put in during the last few months. This amused Steven, for Graham was a year younger than him (he found out) and was already whining like an old man disgruntled with sacrifice. It was even funnier since Steven was only twenty one, an age most wouldn't believe when they heard he had just acquired a house (though with a substantial mortgage). Many who couldn't believe this were those who forcibly left their parents' house after thirty or when they were married and believed with every wholesome thought that it was still how things were done; or, more increasingly, were simply stuck in the savings trap whereby every year the amount put away for a loan barely covered the average rise in housing prices. But Graham believed Steven, in fact

admittedly admired him for his bold transition, and over the next week the two men developed a respectable rapport during lunch time breaks, mostly whinging about the other workers who never seemed to eat with them. Steven never saw Graham at any other time, but assumed he was locked away in a secret office somewhere, working to the bone. Graham had even provided a card with his name and mobile phone number on it but Steven wasn't quite ready to go beyond the confines of business hours, his trust in committed friendship too damaged for the time-being.

Two weeks later, during a quick, morning coffee break, Graham bounded up, almost scaring Steven with his unnatural eagerness, and quickly asked for a favour. Steven was instantly confused as he glanced at Graham's attire – he was still in overalls, a regular slogan-shirt replacing the business one beneath – wondering how his boss could let the man enter the building with a repeated Hicksville presentation. Surely it didn't take that long to paint one's office?

The favour requested was just as strange.

'Let me get this right,' Steven said. 'You want my driver's license?'

'Not your current one, Stevie. An old one, for my mate. He's not quite eighteen but we're going clubbing tomorrow night. He looks like you a bit, and it'll help him get in.'

You could have asked me to come along with you, Steven thought, but decided he would have refused the offer anyway.

Steven brought an old driver's license to work the next day, which had just expired (he renewed it

annually), and handed it over expecting another warm glow of happiness and perhaps even admiration. Instead, Graham looked at the card for a while, put it in his pocket and murmured something (Steven hoped it was 'Thank You') before turning and walking away, dragging a frown with his feet.

It was a cold, unexpected reaction. Steven couldn't knock the feeling that something was wrong.

And then he didn't see Graham at work the next day.

Or the one after that; nor for the following week.

Steven worried, thinking that perhaps his act of kindness had been a test of merit he'd failed dismally – giving your license to another for such use had to be illegal.

Steven had been in his new profession for a month, its gradual monotony making both sides of his life become a wavering blur. On Monday, during the lunch time break, Steven walked into the common room as per usual and was greeted by a new lone soul who sat in the opposite corner, tilting the chair into corner where the wall and drapes met. He was in what appeared to be his mid-forties. He wore overalls, blue overalls, blue *Hicksville* overalls, with a white business shirt beneath. He had a cup of coffee in his hand. Steven felt as if he had opened the door to a parallel office universe.

'Hi,' the man greeted with familiar enthusiasm. 'Name's Jeffrey. I'm the new Janitor.'

'New...Janitor. What happened to the old one?'

'Can't say for sure. Young kid, Graham; only met him once.'

'Graham...'

Steven stood there, stunned, for the rest of the break.

Wanting to disbelieve Jeffrey, hoping he was referring to another employee named Graham (it *was* possible), he finally moved to his boss' office, bewilderment at the apparent deception tapping into a reserved bravado.

'What happened to Graham?!' he demanded as he opened the office door. He didn't care if his boss was on the phone. He didn't care about the repercussions of speaking out of line. He wanted answers and his boss recognised the urgency, immediately ending his call and paying attention (whilst making a mental note to conduct a performance review).

'Graham?' the boss pondered.

'Graham, the Marketing Advisor, or Janitor, or, I don't know.'

'Oh, Graham Matheson, the Janitor. He called in his resignation yesterday. Against policy, mind you, but he stated family importance, a calling which would move him out of the area by the week's end.'

'You said his name is Graham...'

'*Matheson*. Be a pity to lose his services, but his position was easily replaceable. Poor thing though; his story really touched me. Father got killed, Graham moved away wanting to start a new life, and ended up here. Said in the interview how he thought his luck would change some day.'

Steven darted out of the office, shaking as he fumbled for his keys in the parking lot. He drove his car home disregarding the speed limit, stop lights and cross walks, escaping unscathed and unnoticed. It wasn't long before he arrived home.

The clock ticked by. Night time arrived.

Steven was seated on his new chair, a shot glass of whiskey in the palm of his hand, its contents swirling slowly. He raised the spirit to his lips, his hand shaking so much that half the liquid splashed out and landed on his shirt. He gulped the rest down. The whiskey burned the back of his throat, sent his head recoiling as he drew in a large breath, then made him feel a little dizzy. *Don't fall asleep now*, he thought, *this is not a dream*. He had been deliberating all afternoon whether it was all just coincidence. After all, Graham could have been ashamed of his profession so he'd lied, could have genuinely had a family emergency (even though he'd never discussed family), could have just unintentionally left on sour terms. No...the reasoning didn't feel right. Steven couldn't shake the look on Graham's face when he'd handed him the driver's license. He needed to be sure it was his overactive imagination. He picked up his newly connected phone, took a card from his wallet, and slowly dialled the numbers written on the glossy side.

'Hello?'

'Graham?'

'Ah, Stevie. I expected to talk to you soon but I had no idea *you* would call *me*. We're quite surprised.'

'We?'

'You know; me, myself, I ... my *father*. Well, my father's spirit. You know my father, don't you Stevie?' Graham no longer spoke with the enthusiasm of his usual office-banter. His voice now had a deep, hoarse tone. An evil tone.

'How...did you...'

'Know? How did I know? Coincidence, Stevie; well, luck in fact. I thought I recognised you that first day. Your face was familiar. It wasn't

'til you foolishly handed over your driver's license that I had your last name and knew for sure. Do you know it's a crime to give someone, a minor for all you knew, a license so they can impersonate you and disobey the rules of the liquor act? Just like it's a crime to break into someone's house, take their possessions and, as the final icing on the cake, beat them over the head and leave them to die?'

'Graham, I didn't...'

'Oh, that's right. You were a harmless accessory. You didn't take part in it at all. You tried to stop it. You wanted to stay and make sure my father was all right. Blah, blah, blah. I know the results of your trial, Stevie. I was there amongst the crowd, and at the time I swore I would have my revenge on all of you.'

Steven quickly poured and gulped down another drink, making Graham's voice even more surreal.

'Now, I'd tried so hard to stay on the law-abiding side of revenge. I even simply tried to forget about you all - that's why you're image didn't strike my memory immediately. The others got what they deserved anyway - a nice, long jail term and a constant struggle for survival. You though...Oh, you...Why did you think you could simply take your life elsewhere?'

But you've done the same thing, Steven wanted to cry, his chest heaving in spasmodic breaths.

'I must say though, Stevie, you didn't have to find work this far away from your home. Guess you gotta escape it all during the day, heh?'

But I'm only twenty minutes from work, Steven thought. *What's he talking about now?*

'No matter, I'm here already. You heard me? Here. Right outside your front door.'

The glass that had rested in Steven's violently shaking hand fell through his fingertips, dropping to the floor and bouncing across the room. He froze in sheer horror, shrunk into the padding of his chair.

'I'm pressing the doorbell now. Can you hear it?'

Steven clenched his teeth, clenched his body; prepared.

Throughout his house, silence. Yet he could hear a faint chiming tone on the phone.

'Come on, Stevie. Answer the door.'

He heard the tune again, over the phone, not in his house. Its melody wafted through his head, played back in his memory, and quickly became very familiar.

Oh...dear...God.

Steven hung up the call – cut short the maniacal laughter Graham had fallen into – and dialled another number.

Please, oh please, pick up the call.

'Hello.'

'Mother!'

'Oh, Steven dear. How are you? It's been over a month since we've talked. You really don't call often enough...Steven, can you hang on a second. Someone's been at the door for a while and it doesn't look like your father's going to answer it. I won't be a minute.'

Steven didn't have enough time to protest, or yell out for his mother to stop – only enough time to hear her receiver being placed on the kitchen bench-top.

The rest of the night was a blur.