

Ten Something in the Morning

by Peter J. Stavros

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WHY WE LIKE IT:

A quietly heartrending tonal study with overtones of cinema verite. The second person singular POV puts us in the character's shoes and deepens our identification with the humiliations, disappointments and all too understandable apathy that become routine for those who, for whatever reason, fall through the cracks of the system. The despair here is 'Every Man' speaking and Stavros' assumption of the voice is flawless.

It's that feeling when you're standing in line at the unemployment office patiently waiting your turn to explain to the anonymous person behind the counter and Plexiglas partition why you're here, everything about you on the inside sinking and falling to the linoleum floor, and your brain scrambles to conjure up something to say that makes it sound not as bad as you know it is, and all you can come up with is that you're here because you got kicked to the curb from the last place you worked just because they didn't want you anymore, and so you figured you might as well take what you can from those assholes besides that shitty chair from your office you absconded with as security escorted you from the building, no matter how depressing and discouraging it is to stand in this line. You sigh, and you could kill for a cigarette, and you hope

that you'll be able to put it better when you get up there, and you're confident you can since you used to get paid to articulate, could do it even when you weren't firing on all cylinders – and you're certainly not firing on all cylinders now, at ten-something in the morning.

You couldn't sleep last night, per usual, and after tossing and turning, pillows and sheets sweat-soaked, damp underwear, you stumbled down the stairs and broke into that bottle of bourbon that had been sitting on your bookshelf gathering dust, the one with your name printed on the label that a client (or former client) gave you last Christmas. You thought that bottle was merely decorative, just something to show off, maybe filled with brown water or tea. But it was the real deal, it turned out to be, when you gulped down a healthy (or unhealthy?) portion last night, enough until the taste stopped stinging your tongue, until your body felt pleasantly numb, until your bed gently rotated on its axis when you went back to lie down.

That bourbon was the real deal alright, and you're paying for it today as you explain to the anonymous person (and it's finally your turn) why you're here, and it comes out somewhat, slightly, marginally better than how it played out in your head, no style points. The anonymous person behind the counter, whose name you see from her name tag is Trish, doesn't look at you when you talk (but in all fairness, she doesn't look at anyone), has barely made any eye contact throughout the course of this stilted, perfunctory exchange, has just been typing, typing, typing on a computer that's gray and oversized and clunky and looks like something out of the grainy stock footage of the NASA mission control center during the lunar landing. As you talk, as Trish types, you wonder if she can smell the stale odor of booze on your breath because you can still taste it in the back of your scratchy throat, and you wonder if she can see you subtly gripping the counter with your fingertips from underneath to steady yourself.

This stilted, perfunctory exchange continues for not nearly as long as it seems (and it seems like it's lasting an eternity and your mouth is running dry and your stomach is grumbling), before Trish finishes typing whatever information she's been inputting into that Cold War era computer. She pokes a button on the keyboard with an index finger, and you see that she's wearing purple nail polish with little sparkling silver slivers, and a printer that looks equally antiquated suddenly rattles to life against the side wall by the louvered window balanced on a card table and regurgitates a piece of paper. Trish pushes herself out of her chair with a pronounced exhale that is obviously directed at you for coming in this morning and making her do her job, even as she refrains from making any eye contact, and ambles over to retrieve that piece of paper. She returns it to you, sliding it through the slit in the bottom of the Plexiglas partition, for you to sign, which you do with a wavy scribble in green ink without reading it because it is understood that if you don't sign then you won't get anything and the only reason you're here is to take what you can from those assholes who were too cheap to offer you severance.

Trish asks you if you want a copy and you shake your head no, and that hasty movement hurts your head at the temples like tiny daggers, and she seems relieved yet it's hard to know, it's just a sense you get, and deep down and in some perversely curious way you wished you had said yes if only to see what kind of anachronistic condition the copier machine might be in. Then she tells you that you're "all set" and it immediately strikes you that never has that phrase been more inaccurately applied than as applied to you at this instant, and it makes you snicker, because nothing, absolutely nothing, about your life at this instant is "all set" except that apparently your unemployment benefits are "all set" so that's something, you guess.

You thank Trish who no longer acknowledges your existence as she has moved on to the next person in line, a line that has grown exponentially and out the door, with the same stilted, perfunctory exchange, and the same typing, typing, typing. You kind of nod, pretending that she had acknowledged you, and walk past the line, an assortment of humanity all patiently waiting for the same reason, and exit the non-descript office building, and step out into the harsh, unforgiving sunlight of the day. You glance around for a place to eat because bacon and eggs sounds good, but you're not familiar with this part of town, and you don't want to stray too far and get lost, so maybe instead you'll just go home and get back into bed.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

My writing influences range from Sam Shepard to Charles Bukowski. When I began to study writing in college, I was blown away by Jay McInerney's 'Bright Lights, Big City'. I always wanted to write something that would put the reader into the mind of the main character. The piece is a part of a collection that I am working on that tells the story of this person who is struggling through some difficult life issues that are revealed in a nonlinear through various episodes and vignettes.

BIO:

Peter J. Stavros is a writer in Louisville, Kentucky, and the author of two short story collections, *Three in the Morning* and *You Don't Smoke Anymore* and *(Mostly) True Tales From Birchmont Village*. More can be found at www.peterjstavros.com.