

## Not Too Long from Now

Jack Lewis awoke at 7:00 am as he did each workday and headed to the bathroom. At 7:30 am, his ablutions completed, he dressed for work. Today he chose a grey, three piece Aaron Portland suit and black Pantofole shoes. The choice was not a difficult one considering he owned five matching suits complete with five matching sets of shoes, five matching white French cuffed shirts and five maroon ties. There is one outfit for each of his five workdays, Monday through Friday. He did not work on the weekends. The kitchen and breakfast were his next stop. He'll conclude his morning ritual and be out the door by 8:00 am.

Outside his brownstone apartment building he walks the short distance east to Maple Street to flag a cab. He prefers the cab over the modern and faster *Tram Line Service*. It took longer but the taxi, unlike the *TLS*, offers those private moments Jack requires to reflect, organize and plan his day. This habitual routine has been unaltered for years. It's repeated in the same time frame, in the same sequence with never so much as the slightest deviation. Mundane for others, it's the perfect lifestyle for Jack.

The cab slowed down and stopped at the curb. It was the same cab, the same curb and the same driver each and every workday. Nothing ever changes for Jack and he likes it that way. He insists upon it. It is this necessity that keeps his existence on an even keel.

Jack got in and said, "Good morning Ralph. You know where we are going, correct?"

"Sure do Mr. Lewis," the driver said, "the Mored, Jackson & Shane CPA building. It's the biggest on the Boulevard and I've been driving you there for fifteen years. Every time you get in my cab you ask me the same question."

"Just keeping you on your toes," Jack said.

Ralph shook his head slowly from side to side and quietly said, "You say that too."

"Say what?" Jack asked.

"Nothing Mr. L, nothing at all," the driver replied forgetting how acute the man's hearing is.

The cab driver stopped at the light on Maple waiting for it to change and allow him to take a left onto the Boulevard. Jack Lewis looked out the passenger side window at the people waiting to cross the Boulevard and head straight. They began to cross. There was one woman and three men. It was the woman that caught and held Jack's gaze. She took his breath away. He was convinced his heart stopped for a brief second then continued beating only faster this time.

"Ralph," Jack shouted, "continue straight. Do not take the left turn!"

"I can't go straight from this lane Mr. L," Ralph pleaded.

"Find a way and follow that woman," Jack said pointing over the seatback at the most beautiful female he had ever seen. She seemed to float rather than walk and his throat tightened as he began to speak. "She is a vision, but she is real, right?"

"She is that," Ralph said as he sped up and cut two drivers off to enable his unimpeded access to the far right lane. They leaned on their horns and waved to Ralph with the middle finger of their left hands. Ralph returned the gesture with his hand held high above the roof of the cab, out of Jack's sight.

The woman was close to six feet tall with straight mid-length auburn hair parted at the middle and combed straight down on both sides. She wore a dark red blouse with a large matching bow tied at the neck. The long ends of the tie draped over and accentuated a light brown, tight fitting tweed vest covering her chest, which needed no accentuating

assistance. The hem of her cashmere skirt, *it had to be cashmere* Jack thought, fell to midcalf.

It sported a slit that ran up the side of her left leg ending three inches above her knee. Sensational Jack whispered.

He always processed and stored all that he observed. This detailed knowledge was not limited to fashion, however. He had the ability to access a collection of eclectic subjects that both amazed and bored the crap out of all with whom he came into conversational contact. That's what made him the favorite Audit Director at Mored, Jackson & Shane. There wasn't an IRS regulation, including all paragraphs and subparagraphs thereto with which he was not thoroughly familiar.

Just a short distance after crossing the intersection the woman entered *The Perk*, a small coffee establishment. It catered to the take out crowd looking for that last caffeine jolt before facing one more day in the trenches.

"Pull over and wait," Jack instructed, "I have to meet her."

The cab pulled over and stopped. There was no parking space at the curb. Ralph flicked on his hazard flasher and stopped one lane over. Without another word Jack opened the cab door, leaped out and headed for the entrance to *The Perk*.

In less than five minutes he exited the coffee shop, and without speaking, returned to the taxi's rear seat. The driver put the vehicle in gear and headed towards Jack's office. Never willing to jeopardize his tip, Ralph resisted the obvious question, "*How did it go in the coffee shop?*" And opted for, "Have a nice day," instead as he pulled in front of their destination and shut his meter off.

Jack got out, paid and tipped the driver, as usual, and left without a word, not usual. He was ten minutes late for work.

Jack Lewis entered the lobby of the building that housed the multinational conglomerate that was Mored, Jackson & Shane. He showed his identification to the entrance guard, had his palm as well as his retina scanned then quietly walked toward the bank of elevators that will take him to his office on the thirty-fifth floor. The elevator doors opened and Jack walked in without acknowledging the elevator guard's, "Good morning Mr. Lewis and how's the world treating you this fine day?"

Jack always responded with, "There is always room for improvement." Then he'd laugh and continue on his way. This morning the guard was left with silence and a quizzical frown on his face.

When the elevator doors closed Jack inserted his key into the floor selection panel and pushed Number thirty-five. The elevator expressed passed floors two through thirty-four and the multitude of diverse business ventures that comprised the financial behemoth.

Sanderfield (Sandy) Gilmore III, Vice President in charge of all accounting activity, internal as well as external (clients), was waiting at the elevators when Jack Lewis arrived on the thirty-fifth floor. The lack of a response from the elevator guard's daily greeting to Jack prompted him to call Mr. Gilmore and relay what had transpired; or rather what did not. Security personnel at the company were trained to report any unusual behavior, by anyone in the building, to a corporate officer.

"Good morning Jack," Gilmore said.

Jack stared straight ahead and walked passed Gilmore without a word.

"Wait Jack," Gilmore called after him.

Jack stopped but did not turn around, continuing to stare straight ahead.

Gilmore walked up to him and put his arm around Jack's shoulder. He guided him to the large couch alongside the reception desk.

"Let's sit here for a moment and chat," Gilmore said. "You've never been late in all the years you've been at the company. What's wrong lad?"

Jack sat legs together, back upright and continued to stare wide eyed, straight ahead in silence.

George May, Gilmore's assistant, walked into the reception area and said, "Good morning Jack," and then sat next to him on the couch. Jack did not respond.

"What is wrong with him?" George May asked Gilmore. "Has Medical been called?"

A fully operational medical unit was available at the company twenty four/seven.

"Medical Doctors can't help him," Gilmore said, "I've called Tech-Five, they're on the way."

Tech-Five was the designation given to one of the diverse business ventures that Mored, Jackson & Shane owned and operated. Housed on the fifth and sixth floors their primary functions are the design, manufacture, distribution and maintenance of advanced bionics.

The look on George May's face was one of astonishment, surprise and shock all rolled into one.

"Are you telling me Jack is part mechanical?" George May asked as he got off the couch and faced his boss.

"No," Gilmore said.

“What is it then?” George asked, anxious for an explanation.

“Jack is one hundred percent bionic. He has a titanium skeleton covered with our patented, expandable, skin-like substance, Hoyt-53. He’s the JSV Prototype and was built fifty years ago which is long before my time.” Gilmore replied.

“I do not understand,” George said, “Jack is in his early forties the same as me. He was married several years ago and devastated when she left. He told me about it.”

Gilmore explained, “A chip integrated into his neural network gave him memories of the most beautiful and kind woman our scientists could come up with at the time. That was fifty years ago when he was built. He thinks it was recent. Over time his obsession with his implanted life with her was wreaking havoc in his work. An adjustment had to be made. Our scientists felt that changing the chip to eliminate the wife could not be done at the time because the memory had been too long embedded in his complex circuitry of neurons. They decided instead to modify the wife chip and have her leave him. That was twenty-five years ago. Ever since then an event or happening occurs which stimulates the residual memory of her and that of her leaving him. The type of lockup you see here begins whenever the question about her departure arises in his central processing unit. He can never formulate an answer to that one question.”

“Which is?” George asked.

“Why?” Gilmore replied.

The Tech-Five technicians arrived and led Jack into the elevator.

“We’ll take good care of him Mr. Gilmore he’ll be back to work in the morning,” one of the techs said.

“Thanks boys I know you will,” Gilmore replied.

When the elevator door closed, George May said, “I had no idea we had any androids left in the company particularly in the accounting department.”

“George,” Mr. Gilmore began, “you’re second in command in this section. It’s time you knew that of the 38 men and women in accounting more than half are like Jack.”

“Impossible,” George said, “I would have known, particularly if there are that many.”

“You didn’t know about Jack,” Gilmore replied. Then he sat down on the couch and motioned for May to do the same.

Gilmore began speaking softly, “Jack doesn’t know what he is. He knows who he is (Jack Lewis, CPA). All similar configurations in this department and elsewhere in the corporation are equally unaware of their origins. They’re not sentient in the wide-ranging design that defines humans. The exceptions are mental acuity, and a specific level of consciousness that has been wired into their central processing unit.”

George was bewildered and slowly shook his head from side to side as he said, “This is difficult for me to comprehend.”

“I know,” Gilmore said, “Perhaps this’ll help. There is one unique feature in their speech that could distinguish them from humans.”

“Well,” George asked, “do not keep me in suspense, what is it?”

“They’re programmed to never use contractions,” Gilmore answered.

“But I,” George paused, “do not believe I have ever used or, even thought of using a contraction. Does that mean,” his thought trailed off and he stared at his boss without completing the question.

Gilmore, his eyebrows raised and head cocked slightly to one side, looked reassuringly at George in silence. A barely perceptible smile began to form on his lips.

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