

The Blue Screen of Death

Josh couldn't keep his hands from violently shaking. He knew sweat was beading on his brow even with all the ferocious air conditioning pulsing like the breath of an icy dragon through Martin Hammerstein's office. He'd entered the Hammer's private sanctum completely certain he was getting canned. Because Josh could think of no other reason why the head of equity trading would order him to appear at eight thirty in the morning before he'd even had a chance to turn on his computer. That's how it was normally done. Get them before they tried to log into the network and found their access denied. He wouldn't even be the first that week to be let go from Bixler and Bixby. The status of the brokerage industry was no secret either on Wall Street or Main Street these days. Not after the complete melt down of first Goldman Sachs and then, damn them, Lehman Brothers. The entire world had finally figured out what everyone on Wall Street had always known. Brokers were nothing more than legal bookies, taking bets on the rise and fall of the stock market like illegal bookies took bets on point spreads and horses. Blood had been spilling on the Street for months now since the debacle that had almost brought the free world to its knees. Good blood. Blood a lot better than Josh Kreider's. He was nothing but a lackey working retail and getting little traction at that.

So when the Hammer started talking it took a full minute before Josh understood what the old curmudgeon was babbling about.

"You never think it's going to happen, do you, Josh?" Martin asked. The giant man, over six feet in height and pushing three hundred pounds, none of it muscle, dropped almost winded into the padded leather chair behind his mahogany desk. "I mean a city bus! Who actually manages to get hit by a city bus, for God's sake?"

Josh blinked to clear his mind as the thought registered that he was not, in fact, getting canned. Unfortunately he'd missed ninety percent of what the Hammer was ranting about so he had the marginally good sense to keep his mouth shut.

"You hear the old joke getting hit by a city bus, but Jesus! I never thought anyone actually did." Martin was rubbing his hand through what was left of his thin gray hair. He shook his head and fidgeted with his glasses. "Well anyway. Bart bit the big one yesterday crossing 27th and Broadway which turns out to be your lucky number, Mr. Kreider. You're getting moved to the whale desk. Starting now." He threw a set of keys at Josh who was so flustered, he didn't catch them and they landed in a fold of his suit jacket.

For an eternity the young Mr. Kreider sat staring at his boss while the words slowly permeated the layers of permafrost in his brain. The whale desk? The *whale desk*?

"Get moving, kid," the Hammer barked. "You've got to call everyone in Bart's Rolodex before those idiots open up this morning's paper, see Bart plastered all over MTA #29 and start thinking their accounts are going up in smoke."

With his mind still stuck somewhere around the words whale desk, Josh stumbled from Martin's office. His feet took him on autopilot down the hall, past the glass fronted suites housing Fixed Income, Institutional and Commodities and brought him safely back to home territory, Retail. Instead of turning right towards the warren of cubbies that made up Standard Retail, aka Cold Call Hell, Josh turned left and fell like a stone into the chair once occupied by the late, great Bart Marchefski.

Bart had been something of a legend to Josh and the other young bucks working their way up through Retail. He'd started there himself a decade ago but had quickly risen from the toil to land himself a position at a whale desk. Whales were retail investors with deep pockets. The average account ran about five mills. Just on the maintenance fees alone, Bart had been raking in the mid six figures and could spike that if he bothered to actually

sell something once in a while to the twelve gentlemen in his stable. And yes, they were all gentlemen. Not ladies, not church congregations, not farmers' cooperatives. Just gentlemen. That was how Bart had acquired his position at a whale desk. He cherry picked from BnB's accounts every client who liked to walk on what Josh's mother always called the wrong side of the street. Rumor had it he'd slept with them all. Not that Bart swung that way himself. No sirree. But Bart was willing to do anything---*anything*---to win himself a fat commission, including taking one for the team. Literally.

Josh was still sitting at that desk, staring blinding at the Rolodex, when his buddy Ken arrived, flush faced and spangle eyed.

"Man! You did it! You graduated from Cold Call Hell!" He slapped Josh on the shoulder. "You are one lucky dude, Josh."

Josh collected his wits enough to smile weakly at his pal and nod his still whirling head.

Ken planted a chubby hip on Josh's new desk. "I mean, who would have figured it? You were just ranting about Big Ass Bart a couple of nights ago on Facebook. Weird, isn't it?"

Josh had no choice but to nod. Ken was right. He had been venting about his day to his friend in an instant chat. He vaguely recalled being furious because he'd gotten a good tip from his grandma about an elderly woman who needed a home for her savings when Marconi, Marston Duffy went belly up. Bart had somehow gotten wind of the lead and beat him to the punch, landing the account and another nice steady maintenance draw while Josh was sent back to cold call the next fool in the phone directory. He remembered typing that he hoped the bastard got hit by a city bus and went to hell. Cold Call Hell.

Josh glanced at his tablet computer which he'd tossed onto the top of the desk without thinking. It was the second strange coincidence that week, he realized. He'd been on Instagram on Saturday bemoaning the fate of all people stupid enough to be a Cubs fan. Like him. Was it asking too much, he typed, to win just one game, by just one run every once in a while? That had led to a torrent of abuse from his two friends who followed the Yankees and told him he needed to get a life. Josh would have forgotten the whole thing except the next morning, there it was on the front page of the sports section of the Post. Chicago wins over number one ranked Toronto by of all things a single run, dinked in by its pitcher, a man notorious for his abysmal batting average.

Strange coincidences or not, Josh had a new job and a new opportunity and he wasn't going to blow it for anyone, especially Ken. He dug in, working the phones and assuring his new stable of nervous high strung gentlemen (plus one old lady) that all was well and their accounts were securely held in his strong, masculine hands. Josh couldn't help but shrug every time he pulled the protective man schtick. Hell, if it worked for Bart, it could work for him.

The gang from Retail were so excited about his promotion, they offered to buy him pizza. They met in the lunch room on the fourteenth floor and celebrated that one of them had made it through the desert to find the promised land.

Much to Josh's astonishment, as he was crumpling up his paper napkin to toss into the empty pizza box, a melodious voice spoke his name. He turned and for the second time that amazing day, froze solid. Lucy Gonzalez was standing beside the table holding a glossy order form in her hand. Luscious Lucy she was called by the men of the fifteenth floor, including those toiling in Retail. Tiny but curvaceous in a way only Hispanic girls seemed able to be, Lucy worked in payroll and didn't get out very often. Josh had had day dreams, night dreams and wet dreams about the girl with her nicely rounded ass always prominently displayed by ever so slightly too tight pencil skirts and that rack that was

forever threatening to spill from her brightly printed blouses. His eyes got stuck on that mound of loveliness and there they remained the way a cat stared endlessly at a mouse it couldn't reach.

"Would you be interested in thin mints?" she asked in her high pitched, girlish voice.

"Huh?" Josh jerked backwards and forced his eyes to focus momentarily on the girl standing behind the rack before his attention returned to the only part of her that mattered.

"I'm selling cookies for my niece," she said, thrusting the order form at him.

Thrusting. Jesus. Josh felt himself break into a fresh sweat.

He still couldn't believe Luscious Lucy was talking to him. Rumor had it she was hopelessly over protected by her grandmother and lived a chaste life somewhere close to Chinatown. Like most of the young men at BnB, Josh had fantasized about what it might be like to land Luscious Lucy, but he'd never in his wildest dreams thought he'd talk to her.

Like a robot, Josh mindlessly took the order form and wrote something on it. Might have been an order or it might have been his grocery list for all he made note of it. His eyes were plastered on the rack that was now mere inches away from his nose. If he bobbed his head forward, he thought dizzily, he could plant the tip of it right in the crevice between those two hills of ultimate delight. To his amazement, she didn't seem to realize he hadn't looked up at her face from the moment she'd arrived at the table.

She seemed happy enough with whatever he'd written however, because she looked at it, nodded and smiled.

"I thank you and the Girl Scouts of America thank you," she said with a giggle. Her beautiful brown eyes twinkled. "Would you think me forward if I asked if you're busy this week?"

Once more Josh's mind blanked. His eyes were still trapped in the cleft. He was certain he'd stopped breathing. Then it hit him. News was already out he'd landed the whale desk. Every girl in the brokerage was going to be scoping him out, trying to determine if (a) he was available and (b) if he was not at the whale desk merely because he liked things to come at him from behind.

"Um, yeah. I mean, no! I wouldn't find you forward at all." Josh actually thought the old fashioned reference was kind of cute.

She smiled at him. That made his heart flutter. To his astonishment, she leaned over him and took the pen that he still clutched in nerveless fingers. This action brought the mountain range right into his face and he sat without breathing, willing himself not to lean his forehead into all that prime real estate. Once again, Lucy didn't seem to notice. With the pen, she jotted a phone number on the back of his hand. Then she giggled and with what could only be called a perky bounce, flounced out of the lunch room, leaving behind a Josh so shell shocked he was certain he'd died right there.

"Holy Mary mother of God what was that?" Ken gasped. "Man, Josh! What golden ticket did you find that's making you so lucky today?"

Josh shook his head blearily.

Ken was shaking his own carrot top in bewilderment. "This is just too weird, man. You went off about her in an email last week. About all the things you'd do to her if she ever realized you existed."

Mindlessly, Josh nodded. Yes. True. He had gone off on a rant when he, Ken, Roger and Pratesh had been bored and exchanged a series of emails about their wildest fantasies. He'd had more sense than to use the corporate computer to type anything like that. Instead, he'd used his tablet. Once again, his eyes were drawn to the thing. It sat innocently enough on the lunch table, his ever present companion.

He'd bought the iPad only two weeks ago from Craig as the poor man cleaned out his desk after a five year career working in Cold Call Hell. Not that Craig had wanted to sell his computer to Josh but the man had been desperate for cash. The father of three with another one on the way was suffering. Miranda had been forced to give up her job working at a grocery store in order to maintain the bed rest her doctors ordered. That had left earning enough to feed the family on Craig's fragile shoulders. Then he'd been fired and the wrath of God seemed to have fallen on his head. He needed the money. While his eyes spit fire, he grudgingly took the hundred measly bucks Josh offered. Like a vulture circling over the almost deceased, Josh, of course, had grinned at the deal. He was making out at Craig's expense. Too bad. So sad. That was life in NYC. It was a dog fight and only the most brutal prevailed.

Embarrassed and humiliated, Craig had left BnB with his few meager belongings stuffed in a computer paper box. He'd been fired because someone had dropped a dime on him, telling Martin Hammerstein that he was using corporate resources and working hours to start his own real estate business on the side. The Hammer had never revealed the name of the snitch, but everyone pretty much knew it was Josh. Josh shared the same cubby with Craig and had often moaned over lunch in the cafeteria about Craig's endless work on the phone trying to drum up clients for himself rather than for BnB. So when the news broke that Craig had been fired, everyone including Craig knew who'd snitched. The final kick in the balls had been Josh's offer to buy his computer. He'd needed the hundred bucks just to have enough fare to make it home with his box. He'd taken it.

"I'm warning you," the man growled hatefully at his nemesis. "It has a few quirks."

Josh shrugged nonchalantly. He didn't care if the thing didn't work at all. He was enjoying with profound delight sticking the final shaft in Craig's sorry ass. Nothing else really mattered.

After spending twenty minutes clearing sensitive data off the hard drive, Craig handed the computer to Josh, snatched up his box, and cursing Josh with his last breath he left Bixler and Bixby never to return.

Now Josh was wondering about that iPad. It had a few quirks, did it? Josh wondered if Craig had been hinting at its strange ability to bend future events to the will of its user. If it was the purveyor of good luck like the genie in the bottle, why would Craig have abandoned it for a mere hundred bucks? Why hadn't he used it to conjure up a fortune for himself or at the very least a client or two? Or did the computer's magic only work for Josh?

Josh decided to test his theory. He opened up Outlook and typed an email to himself, sending it to his personal account. He envisioned something that couldn't possibly happen. A man will freeze to death on the city sidewalk just outside Penn Station, he typed, feeling a frisson of fear as he hit send. Considering it was August and the city had been baking under unseasonably high temperatures, most afternoons reaching past one hundred, Josh doubted anyone could freeze to death right now. Shrugging, he shut off the tablet and went back to work.

In the morning, he bought a Post from a newsstand on his way to work. And there it was, right on the front page. The Iceman Cometh: Man Freezes to Death in Freak Accident at Penn Station. Josh came to so fast a stop in the middle of the sidewalk, several people plowed into him cursing, one even spilling his latte all over himself. Josh didn't care. His eyes were captured by the strange story. A man delivering bulk ice to the vendors in Penn Station had tripped and fallen. At the same time a van delivering bagels slammed into the ice truck, causing the back doors of the truck to fly open and two tons of ice to tumble onto the street, burying the man in all those bags. The heat had caused the bags to

instantaneously freeze and lock together into a giant mass and a construction crew with a front loader had been called to help clear the scene. By the time they'd gotten the ice off the victim he was dead, crushed and frozen by all that ice.

Damn.

I own a magic computer, Josh thought, first in astonishment and then with growing avaricious glee. Clutching it to his chest like he'd found the map to Blackbeard's treasure, he hastened to his office to get to work.

Over the next several days, he tested the computer multiple times, writing to his friends the most outlandish things then watching the news to see if any of it happened. It did. An alligator stopped play in the middle of the Master's Tournament when it laid down on Jim Furyk's ball. A meteor hit San Francisco's City Hall, conservative Christians claiming it was an act of God. Some guy name Jimbo Jones astonishingly won the Arizona primary for House of Representatives, everyone scrambling to determine who the guy was and where he'd come from since he'd never even submitted paperwork for the election. Through it all Josh grew ever more excited as his plans for world domination grew.

Once assured of his fantastic good fortune, Josh started working the iPad for himself. He locked in his date with Luscious Lucy and bagged her the first night. He invented a rich uncle then promptly killed the guy so that he could inherit a cool half million. No sense getting greedy, he thought, nervous someone would start to catch on to his strange turn of fortune. Just because he could, he conjured up a handsome widower to date his mom, leaving the actual results of said dating up to her. He simply couldn't bring himself to write about his own mom having sex with a stranger.

And so it went as summer shifted towards fall and Josh typed his way towards a world designed to fit his most primitive fantasies.

He was sitting at a café table as the warm September breeze ruffled his hair and he contemplated how he would conquer the world when someone slid into the chair next to him. He looked up in annoyance, then shock when he saw Craig.

"Enjoying the computer, I see," the man said pleasantly.

Josh froze, wondering what might have brought the loser to his table. Craig was looking a little rough. Instead of wearing the standard issue business suit required at BnB he now wore what looked like a janitor's uniform with his name embroidered on the breast. His hands were greasy and his face possessed a haggard, hungry look.

"You aren't getting it back!" Josh snapped, clutching the computer to his chest as if afraid Craig would steal it from him then and there.

Craig laughed. It was dark. Evil. "Oh, I don't want it back you little prick. Have you gotten to know its quirks yet?"

Josh looked around furtively then lowered his voice. "That whatever you type into it happens?" he asked.

Craig nodded.

Josh stared at him in astonishment. "Why didn't you just kill the Hammer or create clients for yourself, or claim a winning lottery ticket?" It was a question that had plagued him ever since he'd realized just what the computer could do. Why had Craig allowed his life to swirl down the toilet when he'd possessed the miraculous ability to make the entire world bend to his will?

Craig tapped the thing with a dirty finger. "Because first of all, I have a soul, you ignorant ass. And secondly, I found out the hard way there's a price to be paid for its largess."

"I haven't noticed."

“You’re thinking it only acts on what you type into it,” Craig said calmly, ordering a latte from a passing waiter. “It doesn’t. It also acts on information sent to it from others.”

Josh hastily glanced at the computer he still clutched to his chest. “Yeah? So?”

“So I made the mistake of getting drunk one night and telling my goddamned brother in law about it. He got greedy and wanted me to use it for him. I refused. That’s when he started sending me emails that the computer followed. Nothing serious at first. Just a nasty knife cut when I was slicing peppers. A really bad case of food poisoning. A less than friendly visit from the IRS. And so on and so on. Trying to force me to work for him.” Craig shook his head. “There was no way I was going to do that. Or give him the computer either.”

“So what happened?” Josh asked breathlessly. His fingers tightened on the iPad.

“He sent me an email telling me I would lose my job and end up as a mechanic.” Craig waved at his uniform. “I decided I’d had enough. I wasn’t going to spend the rest of my life a prisoner to my brother in law’s email threats. So I unloaded that thing.”

Josh’s hands tightened still more. “Yeah? So?”

“I thought I would get one last use out of it before I tossed it into the drink.”

Josh couldn’t help but dart a hasty glance at the computer. “I won’t let you touch it!”

“I don’t need to touch it.”

Again Josh looked worriedly at his prize. “What are you saying?”

Craig sat back in his chair. “I’m saying maybe I emailed you.”

Josh felt his face go white. He slammed the tablet on the table and opened up his email. There it was, an email from KillerCraig@yahoo.com. His hands trembling, Josh opened the email. He read the brief message with terror blooming in his heart.

Josh,

What do you think will happen when someone asks the computer to present you with the blue screen of death then suggests you go with it?

His eyes leaped to Craig’s. The man was smiling at him placidly. To his horror, Josh watched as Outlook closed of its own accord. Moments later he was staring at the blue screen of death that computers presented when their systems failed. It would be the last thing he ever saw. The last words he would hear came from his enemy.

“Paybacks are hell, aren’t they, Josh?”