

From the Trenches at Macy's

What felt like twenty years flashed before Dale's eyes, red ringed and bloodshot by the threat of fatigue he continued to fend off. He rolled his warped American Express up and down his knuckles without too much thought and shifted in his seat to keep his lower back pain from flaring and he wondered about the freedom he so carelessly took for granted. It wasn't that he wanted to throw it all away, but what choice did he have? It was his duty to answer the call. All Dale wanted to be was a good husband. Supportive. Proactive. Invested. All the things his dad and his older brother and even his grandfather said he should avoid, if only for his own good. But Dale thought nothing of their warnings. The cynical musings of jaded know-it-alls, that's what he thought. Dale palmed his cell phone from his pocket to check the time only to come face to face with a black screen. Of course. The battery was dead, just like the last four times.

He couldn't have imagined a more loving gesture of affection to his darling Natalie, any more than he could've fathomed the path that very decision would place him on. It was a path known throughout the ranks that led him all the way across town through mind fields and fallen friends to a warzone no man dare enter.

The most terrifying address at Herald Square. A site that saw the bloodshed of countless bank accounts in a time where pinching pennies was more than a science. It was a philosophy.

Dale leaned back in his seat and watched his own chest rise and fall, like a charcoal cable-knit tide rolling along the shoreline. Gradually, a tidal wave burst, snarling in his belly. The hell with the phone. In a world this big it had to be noon somewhere.

"Honey?" he asked, watching the air over his head. He imagined his voice taking form and floating, up and over the canyons of coat racks before it flew around the corner and through the corridor of fitting rooms, fluttering through the slats of one of the doors.

“Yeah?” Natalie asked. Her voice came like a disembodied angel from up on high.

“I was just going to go down and see if there's a food truck somewhere on the block if you wanted me to grab some lunch.”

“Dale, there are seventeen blouses left in here. And by God, I need five of them to go with these four pairs of skinny Calvin Klein's. You know I'm terrible at this and need extra eyes so please be patient.”

Dale's shoulders slouched and he sat back in surrender. He loved Natalie and that love blinded him from the truth his father and older brother and grandfather knew all too well. Now he was paying for it. Out here, in the battlefield, he had no power. He was a grunt, caught behind enemy lines.

“I'm trying to but I just thought—”

“—five more minutes, sweetie. Then you can help me pick a top three and we'll be done. Twenty minutes tops, I promise.”

He'd heard it all before. The empty promises of an unseen force. Time was the only form of currency in this foreign territory and Dale's rations were dwindling. He tried to negotiate terms and pass his time on numerous occasions throughout the conflict. Vain attempts to bring about a swift end that forever lingered out of reach on the horizon. There was the bid to embark on the great Starbucks run of 0800 am, which came and went unsuccessfully. The stalemate at 0845 when he deserted his post and ventured off into Men's to model overcoats two sizes too big just to see how they looked on him, squelched by an angry text to return to his station and await orders. And the nearly glorious coup d'état of 1030 when another woman tried to claim the burnoose Natalie eyed for herself, only to go down in flames while Natalie retreated to her fitting room with the spoils of victory.

For a time, Dale's purgatory in the trenches wasn't terrible. He had his phone to thank for that. It was a life line, tethering him to a freedom he had trouble remembering the taste of. He wrote texts to his folks, though they were few and far between given the cell reception.

“Prayin 4 U”

Dale had to choke back tears. It was the kindest thing his older brother had ever told him. He looked back at the cell in his hand, staring at him in turn with a face of nothingness. Those words were gone now, along with the high score on Tetris he could've beaten had the charge held out another ninety seconds. But nothing lasts forever. Not in this fluorescent-light soaked, mannequin guarded wasteland. And when the screen went dark, Dale felt the true depth and magnitude of his isolation sink in. Dale shoved the phone back in its place, fighting to ignore the hunger that beckoned within his gut.

Suddenly, a mirage faded in from the distance over in Junior's Shoes.

What was it?

Dale only now realized his eyes were slightly scabbed over with the crusties of drowsiness. He broke them away for a better view and the sight struck him to his very core. Like a godsend, nearly a reflection of what he once was. It was another hapless soul, wandering aimlessly through the racks. Dale watched him with a fraternal instinct in his eyes and then, like fate, their gazes locked. Without words, the timid stranger made his way towards Dale, checking to make sure his movements weren't detected by his wife while she fidgeted a pair of shiny black dress shoes onto their hapless daughter.

“Hey.”

“Hey, how's it going?” Dale asked. He offered the stranger a nearby seat, knowing full well how his legs must've ached from all his marching.

“Walt,” the man said. Walt might've been a younger man, late twenties, but a tour on Herald Square made him look ten years older. His eyes, framed by horn-rims and Dayquil, couldn't lie to Dale.

“Dale. So, how long?”

“Going on two hours so far.” Walt said.

“Still fresh today.” Dale said. He meant no offense to the newbie and sensed Walt interpreted his comment correctly for what it was. A faint reminiscence of what it felt like before the terrible two hour mark. The faint optimism of still thinking you could catch that ball game you'd soon realize you'd never see, before the pang of hunger struck its vicious blow across the abdominal wall. On the outside, fine dining was a commodity. But Dale learned soon enough the sacrifice of combat. Street vendor hot dogs and day old churros were practically Zagat worthy now.

“Hardly, but surviving.” Walt said.

The rustle of plastic hangars grabbed Dale and Walt's attention and they turned to the opposite direction from Walt's family. They spotted a woman in the distant territories of Boy's, dressing her son in some corduroy embarrassment. The child, eight or nine by the height, fought the urge to slouch. His face was round and red but not upset, rather in the exhausted aftermath of reluctant acceptance. He was numb to his fate, eyes glazed and fixated on nothing in particular.

“Poor kid. He's got the stare.” Dale said.

“The what?” Walt asked.

“I call it the thousand sizes stare. When they turn you into their own personal Ken doll.”

“Why sizes?”

“Watch.” Dale said. They turned back, shifting in their seats for a better view of the battlefield.

“Now how does the thirty two feel, dear?” the mother asked. She leaned back on her knees for the big picture while he modeled the jacket, encased like a summer sausage.

“Feels fine, Mom.” he said. The words spurt out like puffs of agitated steam from an overanxious locomotive.

“Are the sleeves long enough?”

“Yes.”

The mother tapped a polished finger on her cheek, unconvinced.

“Let's try the thirty one again.” She rummaged through a stockpile of spent coats, checking the size tags while the boy fought to free himself from the unforgiving snare of size thirty two. A full blown sigh let loose from his lips that slipped by her unnoticed. For Dale and Walt it was the clearest sign of surrender.

“If he's throwing in the towel now, I'd hate to see him on a Black Friday.” Dale said.

“Oh please, not the BF. I still haven't recovered from my last tour.” Walt said. He clutched his heart and steadied his breathing. Dale knew the signs of PTSSD (Post Traumatic Shopping Stress Disorder) all too well. Put his grandfather in a stupor a few Christmas Eve's back.

“That bad, huh?” Dale asked. Walt took his glasses from the perch of his nose and rubbed the bridge to calm his nerves.

“Four AM. Door busters.”

“Damn. Where?”

“The Pottery Barn, 7th Avenue. I swear I was this close to paying a passerby fifty bucks to go in my place, deal with my wife. I figured Gwendolyn wouldn't know the difference. Not in there.”

Dale's eyes lit up for the first time since Tetris. It couldn't possibly be.

“Wait a minute. Did you say 7th Avenue?” Dale asked.

For the briefest of moments, a twinkle caught in Walt's eye before it disappeared. Dale couldn't believe it. He'd heard stories passed between the scattered companies of neglected husbands. Legends that ran all through Manhattan like teletype, carried over from Bobby's Department Store in Brooklyn, through the posh corner stores of Sutton Place and up the main feed of Central Park. The fabled Black Friday warriors at last year's battle of the 7th Avenue Pottery Barn. For the longest time, Dale thought it nothing more than a myth. He looked into Walt's eyes again, harder and deeper and it hit. He was telling the truth. Dale never thought he'd meet one in the flesh.

“You've heard the tale.” Walt said, adjusting his glasses back in their place.

“Everyone has. You're heroes.”

“I suppose there's a certain poetry to it, thank you.”

“The husbands banded together in an act of protest. Five hours into shopping, you abandoned your posts and did the unthinkable. You left them there.”

“Those of us with cars rode together. The rest made a break for it, tearing up their wives subway passes.”

“Rumor was the wives couldn't even get cabs for the rest of the day.”

“We had a cabbie in our ranks, he pulled some strings. They were sensitive to our cause. The only reason things got so bad was because of...The Horn.”

“No,” Dale said, his shock carried up in volume.

“Dale?” Natalie asked from around the corner.

“Nothing, sweetheart, it’s nothing.” Dale said, leaning in closer to Walt in order to keep their conversation quiet.

Donna Hornsfellow. Known in celebutant circles as “The Horn,” she was one of the wealthiest and most conniving realtors in New York. She made a name for herself renovating low income tenements along the Hudson. But despite such noble beginnings, the luxuries of high society knew no loyalties. Eventually, she began taking poor saps fresh from the suburbs for a ride, providing them inadequate urban housing through outrageous deals. A blood sucker in every sense and, for what it was worth, she was good. The bulk of her fortune came from the line of husbands she manipulated, collecting them like personal piggy banks. She bled her first five marriages dry and gradually gained her reputation as the apple of every woman’s eye in the city, eventually amassing an army of naïve, devout wives in the process. It was an inner circle that looked after its own, and the Horn’s protection was iron clad. No newlywed this side of Central Park was safe from the influence of her grasp and no husband or their savings stood a chance against such dreadful forces.

“How do you know Donna?”

“She’s friends with Gwendolyn. You?”

“Natalie knows her too, they’re in a wine tasting club together. I swear she has her claws dug into every woman on the Upper West Side.”

“Well she spearheaded the Pottery Barn campaign that season. We knew we were going up against a tyrant. She’d have the wives still nitpicking over apothecary tables today if it were up to her. She’s relentless.”

“You’re telling me. Last summer, Nat was on the phone with her for an entire afternoon discussing crystal decanters. I don’t even know what they are.”

Dale and Walt shared the briefest of laughs. In light of such horrors, levity was imperative. They knew they had to keep their wits out in the field, no matter the cost. It was the only way they would make it out of Herald Square, alive, sane and under budget.

“We had to do something.” Walt said.

“What you did was legendary. Word is The Horn’s been out for blood ever since. She’ll rope any man into any shopping situation no matter what. I heard she even got one to fly back from a business trip in New Zealand for a white sale with his wife.”

“I heard that too. Apparently the guy still has the ticket stub from baggage claim. Carries it around like a scar. He’s too scared to throw it away.”

Dale and Walt recognized the value of finding one another, as subtle as it was. From the bowels of Bloomingdales to the dizzying heights of Sephora, one out on a lone tour of duty could go a lifetime without running into a brother in arms. Trapped out here in the desolate vacancies, left to one’s own devices, a man could risk madness. Or worse, bankruptcy. Dale and Walt had known of men, saddled in seats and wasting away while their wives looked at chiffon scarves they swore they “needed.” Some say that when a man is trapped behind enemy lines for too long, he’ll begin to suffer from dementia, followed by numbness to credit card use and, on frightening occasions, a formulation of actual, genuine opinions on items in the store.

The thought of such a fate was more than Dale and Walt could fathom. The families and acquaintances of Upper Manhattan, though somewhat secure, weren’t spared the ravages of economic dilution. Every man was doing their part to stave off the threat of mounting debt in a landscape littered with broken lines of credit and the fumes of burnt plastic. But the spouses

wanted and they wanted and the concept of saving became lost on them. Now it was an ideal all husbands fought for. But no battle worth waging came with success overnight. The Horn and her throngs were just the beginning. Dale and Walt knew they had to be prepared for anything.

“Any of you got the time?” a voice asked, commanding Dale and Walt’s attention. Though tempered by age, it was a voice soft in its rasp. A woman’s voice. They turned to find a woman, beautiful though haggard in her wandering, leaned against a table piled with a display of sterling silver Rolex’s decorated with brightly colored faces. Walt’s eyes shifted independently from his head, focusing on Dale. Neither knew what to make of the startling development that stood before them.

“None to spare.” Dale said, patting the bulge of his phone.

The woman nodded, looking on at a finely tailored gentleman modelling belts in a nearby floor to ceiling column of mirrors. Dale couldn’t help but notice the faint roll of her eyes as her gaze worked its way back to them. She tipped her chin to another vacant seat.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Not sure.” Dale said, keeping his eyes locked on the stranger in case she made any sudden moves. The woman moved into his and Walt’s inner circle, reading their rigidity like a book.

“Ease up, I’m not a spook or anything. The name’s Ellen. I can’t stand getting dragged around town when he’s accessorizing and my feet are killing me.”

Dale and Walt exchanged inquisitive glances. Ellen sat down with a sigh of relief, pulling off her heels with a touch of dramatic flair before she rubbed the balls of her feet one by one to relieve the pain. Taking a moment, Ellen felt the men’s eyes on her and finally acknowledged

them. “What? It’s not like you boys have a corner on the market or something. Shopping can be a pain in the ass no matter what’s between your legs.”

Walt arched his eyebrow with a shrug, clearly convinced.

“Sorry,” Dale said, waving off his own bias as he abandoned it immediately. “I guess I’ve just been dug in too long. You?”

“Total blitzkrieg. My husband, Chester.” Ellen nodded over her shoulder to the belt model. “He’s hit eight shops in four hours. Started the campaign all the way back up in Columbus Circle and down Broadway. I thought I was safe with a meeting at work, but it was cancelled.”

“Honey?” Chester called from across the aisle. Ellen looked over her shoulder as he presented an arm’s length of belts draped across his forearm while lifting the back of his blazer, jutting out his rear end while he turned for her. “Which shade says *power brunch*? Southern Crocodile or Olive Dash?”

Ellen cringed while Chester shifted weight from foot to foot, his fanny showing off the current belt around his waist while his shoes squeaked like an accompanying orchestra. Dale stifled a laugh with a hand over his mouth. Sometimes a little reprieve from the treacherous dangers of the struggle found its way to the frontline, too few and far between for his taste. Who knew there was still fun to be had in even the most hopeless of circumstances?

“Whichever one’s cheaper?” Ellen asked. Chester waved her off with a smirk.

“Silly.” He turned back, checking himself in the mirror with various degrees of sucking in his paunch in the hope of managing just one more notch. Ellen turned back to Dale and Walt, her fingers massaging the burdens buried beneath her temple.

“This is a nightmare. We barely scraped by with rent last month.”

Before Dale could open his mouth, the sound of the elevator doors opening cracked a chasm through the silence followed by a faint waft of whispers that drifted along the racks. The three of them exchanged looks. They knew only one person who could cause such a commotion and as their gazes turned, they spotted her, in all her nipped and tucked glory.

Donna Hornsfellow floated out of the lift with a pack of earnest wives that made up the convoy behind her. Her fresh Botox incisions were unmistakable along her pale complexion with ruby lips drawn in a thin red line. Her face was framed by a perfectly quaffed and sculpted blonde bob haircut and she wore it with pride like a GI's helmet. The tweed pencil skirt stifled her gait while she promptly marched down the aisle in what appeared to be a beeline for Gwendolyn with a phone lodged in the nook of her neck. Dale and the others might've barely made out what she was saying were it not for her insistent bark.

"I don't care if his mother's in the hospital, taking a tumble down a flight of stairs is no excuse. The train has left the station and sales wait for no one. I don't even know why this is an issue, I've had this conversation with him before. If he's really that adamant, just have him leave the VISA with the receptionist and I'll send someone to pick it up!" With that, she ended the call with the butt of her chin and allowed the phone to fall into her bony hand. She turned to the wife at her right with a shrug of annoyance. "Nurses, am I right?"

Dale, Ellen and Walt watched on in disbelief while the Horn drew an unconvincing smile across her face upon reaching Gwendolyn. She gave Gwendolyn a pair of kisses across the cheeks despite the apparent fact that they were nowhere near a country where that was customary. Dale chalked it up to leader's showmanship.

“Darling, I came as fast as my Jimmy Choo's could take me. Now where is that man?”

Donna asked. Gwendolyn turned to the campsite, pointing a firm finger. The Horn turned to track the trajectory and locked narrow eyes with Walt. He was caught dead in her sights.

“No way am I sticking around for this. Good luck, boys.” Ellen said. She threw her hands up and stood from her seat, retreating to Chester's side while he smoothed out the wrinkles in his jacket and modelled a belt shaded “One Dollar Bill” with an unsatisfied grimace.

“She's finally onto me.” Walt said, turning back to Dale.

Even as Donna's heels thrummed in her advancement upon their station, Dale realized the remarkable sense of calm in Walt's eyes. It might've still been the Dayquil but somehow he knew it was more. Dale realized that even in the shadow of his forthcoming demise, Walt showed no signs of fear. Fear was what the enemy wanted, what it fed upon. No matter the torture his wallet would endure, Walt was determined. He wouldn't give The Horn an inch. It was in that moment that Dale truly understood the respect that Walt had earned in his duty.

“Say,” Walt leaned in closer to Dale, knowing full well that he was out of time. “How's your phone?”

With a defeated frown, Dale pulled the phone from his pocket, brandishing its blank stare for Walt. With a nod, Walt conducted a quick search of the floor before turning back to Dale. He retrieved a vision from his breast pocket, its plastic surface dazzling in the overhead fluorescents. It shimmered like some desert oasis that Dale was grateful to reach.

It was another cell phone.

Dale tried to keep his enthusiasm in check, not wanting to tip Natalie off to his newfound salvation.

“Eighty seven percent charge.” Walt said. “Six hours at least.”

“Reception?”

“As crystal as those decanters.”

“Does it have Tetris?” Dale asked.

“Out here, in no man’s land? It has everything you need.”

In an instant, Dale thought of the joy this new lifeline represented. He could call family. He could hear the sweet sound of his brother’s voice. He could learn what the weather outside was like. Reconnect with what was happening in the world and enjoy the fun of novelty games that made him feel human again. Dale couldn’t help the glassiness in his eyes. It was the sacrifice Walt was making. The kind of sacrifice that turned a man into a hero.

“I expect that back whenever I see you again.” Walt said. Donna continued her progression, closer and closer to their chair lined encampment.

“When will that be?” Dale asked in anxiousness.

Walt simply smiled, standing up and buttoning his coat. He left Dale without an answer. Such was the folly of war and all that was consumed in its path. Dale watched on as Walt looked The Horn in the eye and refused to blink. They left Dale behind, falling into an argument of hushed tones and hand gestures. Though he couldn’t make out what they were saying, Dale knew in his heart that it would soon become the stuff of legends.

With a small smile, he looked at the cell phone cradled in his hands and turned it on. Its screen blazed forth with a wave of euphoria that enveloped Dale like a blanket on a cold winter’s night.

He would never forget his savior for as long as he lived.

For it was one thing to find a brother.

But if there was one asset that could ensure survival, it was finding a friend.

Epilogue

The Battle of Macy's raged on, all consuming. It devoured everything in its path and left no soul unmarred. The conflict lasted until closing.

Dale left the Battle of Macy's thanks to the assistance of Ellen, who mocked Natalie's taste and forced them to leave early. He went home and hugged his older brother, whose prayers were answered. He lit a candle in Walt's honor.

Accounts went belly up in a monetary massacre that finally concluded that Christmas Eve, when Walt and Dale joined forces and staged the triumphant Saks Fifth Avenue lock-in, trapping the wives in the store for a full five hours until they forfeited their credit card privileges.

Despite her minor victory at Macy's, Donna "The Horn" Hornsfellow left Saks Fifth Avenue in ruin. Her reign finally came to an end six months later when a brave mole infiltrated her circle by becoming her sixth and wealthiest husband and duped her into signing her very first prenup. Her underhanded realty methods came to light and her spending days were finished.

Natalie got fifty percent off her Macy's purchases. She switched allegiances and assisted Dale and Walt with the Saks Fifth Avenue mission.

Ellen never acquired a taste for shopping. She lived in blissful peace forever more.

Chester left Macy's after choosing a belt with the shade "Unkempt Swamp Grass." The promotion eluded him. He didn't keep the receipt.

The summer sausage was, in fact, a size thirty two.

The above personages lived in the age of overspending.

They are all equal now.

End