

Tuesday Night Misfits

Tom walked down the front steps and out of his driveway on his way to the busstop. Slinging his backpack over one shoulder, he took in a deep breath of the cool October air. The late afternoon sunlight brightened the leaves in the ash and maple trees lining his street. His brief moment of peace was broken, however, by his neighbor's screeching voice as he passed her mailbox.

“Your damn dog kept me up half the night again, Murphy!”

He turned to see Mrs. Kopek glaring at him from her front door with her bony chin thrust forward. She was propping her storm door open with one hand and holding her wheelchair in place with the other. She was the most miserable person he had ever known. Her lawn guy kept her yard groomed like a putting green. Years ago, she had a chain link fence built on her edge of their shared property line, and she constantly roared that fence on her scooter, glaring over at Tom's property and driving his dog crazy. Tom did not reply, engage, or even break stride, but only waved at her. In his mind, however, rather than a wave he imagined a stiff middle finger held up high.

Tom got off the bus on Oak Street and was soon mounting the steps of the Unitarian church, his destination on nearly every Tuesday evening for the last few years. In the cone of pallid light cast by the lamp above the landing, he swung the heavy front door open. Inside, he took the stairs down to the basement. The room was already buzzing with the usual pre-meeting crowd loitering around the coffee urns and sipping hot drinks from Styrofoam cups. They were munching on store-brand cookies out of packages marked with large red labels, “2 for \$3”, and loudly sharing their mundane stories of the week.

Tom kept his head down and turned slightly sideways as he skirted the coffee area. He crossed the painted concrete floor as inconspicuously as possible to avoid being caught up in the mind-numbing small talk. When he had first started attending, he had tried to participate with the others, but he had

always felt outside of himself - as if he were watching a talentless actor portraying the role of Tom Murphy in a bad play.

He chose one of the folding chairs in the circle set up in the center of the room and sat down with his backpack on his lap. Sounds in the basement echoed sharply. It smelled strongly of Pine-Sol and faintly of old hymnals. An ancient upright piano stood in one corner. Glancing around the room, he spotted their group leader Larry standing off to one side chatting with one of his fellow alcoholics. At that moment, their eyes met briefly. Larry smiled, then quickly broke off his conversation with the other member and crossed the chair circle. Tom cringed internally as he approached.

“Hello, Tom,” he said, taking a nearby seat.

“Larry.” Tom smiled thinly and pulled his backpack a little closer to his chest.

“I was glad you gave me a call last night. Again, I’m sorry I had to reach out to your parole officer about your missing the last two meetings, but I was concerned about you.” Tom’s only response was the slightest shrug of his shoulders. “Oh – and I’m really sorry to hear about your dog.”

“Thanks. He was a good friend. I miss him.”

“Okay. Well hang in there.” Larry patted Tom on the knee and stood to step away, then paused and placed a hand on Tom’s shoulder. Almost as an afterthought, he said, “Oh -would you mind sharing tonight, Tom? I think it might help some of the others to hear what you told me on the phone.”

“I’d rather not, if it’s all the same.”

Larry reacted with a pained, plaintive expression. When that didn’t work, he tilted his head to one side like a begging puppy.

“Okay. All right – I’ll say something.”

“Thanks.” Larry smiled and patted his shoulder, then walked slowly to the center of the chair circle with his arms outstretched.

“Welcome. Welcome, everyone,” he said in an elevated, directorial tone. “Can we get settled and start now? Thank you.”

The last stragglers moved toward the chairs, gingerly carrying their coffees and finishing their stories as they found their seats. Larry took his usual place and waited for the room to fall silent, then bowed his head.

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.” Then, raising his head he looked once around the circle. “So – let’s get started, shall we? Would anyone care to share?” Several people immediately raised their hands.

One after another, speakers exposed their inner demons, confessed their weaknesses, and put their flaws and failures on display. Inevitably the session would, at some point, include a weep fest from a regular attendee who Tom secretly referred to as Sobbing Steve. He told the same pathetic story at each meeting. He was a hopeless drunk. He knew it was wrong, but he just couldn’t stop. His wife and kids had abandoned him. He’d lost his job, missed his rent payment, and was about to be evicted.

Tom often imagined himself standing and yelling across the circle, “*For God’s sake, man! Do yourself a favor!! Just put the bottle down and get your shit together!*” Of course, he never acted on his fantasy. But the internal tableau usually provided him just enough relief to get him through it.

When Steve’s tantrum finally ended, Larry offered him a tissue and looked around the circle for any other hands. “All right then. We’ve had a lot of meaningful sharing tonight. Is there anyone else?” As Tom hadn’t yet contributed, Larry’s eyes settled reproachfully on him. “Anyone?” he asked, lifting his eyebrows. Tom slowly raised his hand. Larry smiled and nodded.

“Hello everyone. My name is Tom. I’m an alcoholic. I’ve been sober for nearly five years. Some of you know my story. These meetings are a court-ordered requirement for me, but I missed the last couple. My dog died a few weeks ago. I haven’t felt like getting out much. Toby was my best friend. He was my rock after my wife Jean was killed.”

Tom went on to describe the incident which, about five years earlier, had marked the beginning of his battle with sobriety. While attending their 30th high school class reunion, he and his wife caught up with old friends, which included Tom enjoying more than a few drinks. When they decided to head home, Tom got behind the wheel. Jean suggested that since she hadn't had anything to drink, it might be better if she drove.

“Well, I refused to move, she insisted, and we argued. In the end she gave up, and I drove. On the way home, it began to rain hard. The visibility got really bad. I lost control when a car stopped suddenly in front of us. We crossed the median and I hit an oncoming car. The other driver was killed instantly. Jean died in the hospital a few days later.”

Although some of the group members had heard his account before, a stunned silence settled over them as they processed the story. A long moment passed while Tom gathered himself to continue.

“Anyway, after a lot of grief, anger, and denial, I knew I had to take responsibility for the fact that my wife's death and the death of the other driver were on me. Accepting that simple fact was the first step in my recovery. And if I'm honest, I learned that lesson here, to a large extent. I may not look like it sometimes, but I am always listening. So, thank you. You have all helped me.” He glanced over at Larry and nodded with a twitchy smile.

“Okay. Thanks Tom,” Larry said. “I'm sure your words have found resonance with others here tonight. Taking responsibility for the damage we've done is an essential step to beginning any meaningful recovery. Anyone else then? No? Well, it's after eight so let's call it a night. Have a good week everyone. See you all here next Tuesday, same time, same station.”

The room was immediately filled with the sounds of folding chairs being slapped shut and stacked against the wall. Conversation bubbled among the exiting members. Tom stood his chair against the wall with the others and went upstairs without speaking to anyone. The air outside the church was cool and refreshing. A sliver of a waxing moon hung above the western horizon as Tom headed up Oak Street toward his bus stop.

“Tom?” a voice called from behind him.

He paused under a street lamp and turned to see a woman approaching. “*Oh man,*” he thought, “*What is her name? Eilene, Noreen? Something with ‘een’?*”

“Hi Tom. I’m Irene. I see you here most Tuesday evenings,” she said, slightly out of breath from hurrying to catch him. She stopped and stood close to him and offered her right hand. Irene looked to be about his own age. Some character lines accentuated her eyes and lips, and a few grey strands were mixed in with her dark hair. Tom wondered why he had never noticed before that she was actually quite pretty.

“Hello. Sure,” he replied, awkwardly returning the handshake. “How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Sorry for chasing you down like this, but I just had to tell you how much I appreciated your comments tonight. I had something sort of similar happen in my life, and I didn’t really start getting through it until I learned the same lesson you talked about.”

Tom pushed his glasses back on his nose and nodded vaguely. After an awkward pause that probably felt much longer than it was, he coughed and said, “Well, I am glad that you liked - or I should say – that my story was helpful for you. As I said, I don’t really feel comfortable talking much about these things in public. Larry kind of guilted me into it tonight.”

“Yes. I noticed,” she said.

“That I was uncomfortable or that Larry was guilted me?”

“Both,” she said with a grin. He sensed something broken behind her crooked smile. She slid her hands into her back pockets, tilted her head to one side and squinted a little. “Hey, what have you got going on tonight?”

“Tonight? Uh – well, nothing special, I guess. I was just going to head home and see what was on TV. Why?” His pulse upshifted.

“I wondered if you might want to grab a cup of coffee with me?”

“Oh – well. That is very nice of you to offer. But I, I’m pretty tired. I don’t think I’d be much company.”

“Fair enough. But I’ll hold you to a rain check. How about after next week’s meeting?”

“Okay,” he quickly agreed, not allowing himself time to think of another excuse.

“Good. It’s a date then.”

Tom felt himself flinch slightly and hoped she didn’t notice.

“Just so you know, Irene, I haven’t, well – seen anyone since – that is, in a long time.”

“Whoa, simmer down there, cowboy – it’s just coffee!” She smiled and placed her hand on his forearm. He was surprised that it didn’t feel uncomfortable.

“Right,” he said. “Okay – next Tuesday it is. I’ll see you then, Irene.”

“See you then,” she said, then turned and walked back toward the church. Tom watched her for a second or two, then smiled, spun on his heel, and continued up the street.

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For the next few days Tom went about his usual routine, working around the house during the day and spending his nights with warmed up dinners, television, or some reading. Whenever he remembered his appointment with Irene, he would immediately find some project or distraction to occupy his anxious mind.

Soon enough, Tuesday night came around again, and he fretted as he rode the bus back to Oak Street. *Maybe Irene won’t be there. Maybe she decided it wasn’t such a great idea and will just let it go without mentioning it again.* But she was there. And during the “sharing” time, Tom frequently found himself looking in her direction. More than once, she caught him and smiled. After the meeting, they got into Irene’s car and drove to her second floor apartment.

“Come on in, Tom,” she said, turning on the lights and hanging her keys on a hook in the entryway. “It’s not much, but it’s home. Coffee? Tea?” she asked as she moved toward the kitchen.

“Tea would be great, thanks. I never have coffee after noon.”

“Okay. Please - make yourself comfortable,” she said, gesturing toward the living room. “I’ll put the kettle on.”

He tentatively stepped to the couch and sat down. The apartment was tidy and impeccably clean. A sofa, two chairs, a television and a coffee table were all the furniture in the room. A few pieces of framed wall art were just enough to keep it on the cozy side of austere. He envied Irene’s uncluttered spaces. By comparison, his home could barely contain the cumulative effects of twenty-five years of marriage and five years of clutter from his dismal bachelorhood. He felt more than a little out of place, and wondered whether it was a good idea or not.

On the coffee table Tom noticed some magazines, including a *National Geographic* and a copy of *The Atlantic*. There was also an oversized book about the 9-11 tragedy. He pulled the book open with one hand and flipped through it. Large glossy images from that fateful day covered most of the pages. A few minutes later the kettle whistled, sharply cutting the awkward silence.

“Sugar? Milk?” Irene called from the kitchen.

“Two sugars. No milk, please.” He felt weird after he called out. His voice seemed loud and out of place. He closed the book, tapped his fingers on his knees, and waited.

A minute later, Irene returned with a tray and placed it on the coffee table. She took a chair across from the couch and picked up her mug, holding it in both hands up close to her face.

“Tell me, Irene. Last week, after the meeting you said that you had experienced something similar to what happened to me. What was it? If you don’t mind my asking.”

She looked up at him through the steam rising over the rim of her mug. Her eyes narrowed slightly, but after a moment her expression softened with a flicker. She put down her tea and shifted in

her chair. Sitting back, she wrapped her arms around her legs, swiped a strand of hair behind her right ear, and put her chin on her knees.

“It was September, 2001. I was still married at the time. My husband Andrew and I were having problems - mostly about money, but that led to other pressures. I had always enjoyed a glass of wine or two in the evening, but when things between us got really bad, I started making more frequent trips to my box of merlot in the fridge.”

In a shaky but deliberate voice, she told Tom of her daughter Abby, who had just started middle school at the time. Their home was close enough that the district wouldn't bus the kids from their neighborhood, but it was still a long walk. Since Irene wasn't working at the time, they decided that she would drive Abby to school and pick her up each day.

“So, one Monday morning, following a particularly rough night of arguing with Andrew and more drinking than usual, I overslept. Rather than wake me, Abby left a note on the kitchen counter.” Her voice cracked as she continued. “The note said she wanted to let me sleep, so she would walk to school instead. But she never got there. She was hit by a car and killed along the way.”

Tom inhaled deeply. A tight feeling gripped his chest and rose into his throat. He felt a rushing in his ears. His feet and legs felt heavy, like he couldn't have moved them if he had wanted to.

“Abby was my only child. She was bright and funny. Every one of her girlfriends thought they were her best friend. And they were all right. I miss her every day.” Irene's voice shook and a tear coursed down her cheek. “I knew I needed to forgive myself, but most days I just didn't feel strong enough. Or like I wasn't allowed to, you know?”

Tom nodded and several minutes passed between them in silence. Irene seemed far away as he processed her confession. She had never told the whole story in their group meeting. He wanted to say something comforting, something perfect to help her, but everything he thought of seemed glib or patronizing or melodramatic. He leaned forward and handed her some tissues from a box on the end table. She accepted the offering, smiling crookedly at him.

“Of course, Andrew blamed me entirely. He left me the day after Abby’s funeral. Then the random horror of the terrorist attacks happened in the middle of it all. My whole world fell apart. That’s when I went looking for help and eventually joined the Tuesday night misfits at the Unitarian church. It wasn’t until I finally accepted my responsibility instead of trying to deny it that I started to get better.”

Tom unconsciously glanced down at the 9/11 book on the coffee table. When he looked back at Irene again, she was looking at him. “I don’t get this,” he said, leaning forward and tapping the cover. “Doesn’t it bring up bad memories for you?”

“I know, right?” she said, waving her tissue at the book. “It’s hard to explain. I keep it around because – well, I guess it keeps me honest? Maybe it helps me remember that even though horrible things happen, I have to choose between going on living, or not. What was that great line Morgan Freeman said in ‘The Shawshank Redemption’? Get busy living or get busy dying – right? Besides, I find it healing and inspiring to read about the heroes that risked their lives to give others a chance at life that day.”

“There’s an overused word,” Tom said. “Hero, I mean. Not in that case, of course. Those men and women that day were certainly heroes. But I get tired of hearing the casual way people toss the word around. For God’s sake, if somebody opens a door for an old lady anymore, he’s a hero. I think it diminishes the actions of those who actually deserve the honor.”

“So what is the distinction? Where would you draw the line between a hero and someone who just does what they feel is needed?” she asked, drying her eyes and dabbing at her nose with the tissue.

“Well,” he said, shifting in his seat, “I think it must be a situation where someone risks everything to help someone else – even more so if they don’t know the person. That’s a hero. Then again, sometimes people just do what they feel is the right thing, and their actions could be called heroic. Is that heroism? I don’t know. So, I guess it’s complicated. Maybe sometimes being a hero and just doing the right thing can be one and the same?”

After a few minutes of silence and tea, the quiet started to feel a little awkward again. Just about then Irene said, “So, tell me about your place, Tom. Where do you live?”

“Over in the west side – near Recreation Park. Do you know Mendelssohn Street? All the streets around there are named for composers. I have a two-bedroom Sears and Roebuck house built in the 40’s. It’s kind of a mess. I haven’t really kept up with anything since Jean died.

“My next-door neighbor, Mrs. Kopek, is a nightmare. She’s a widower and permanently disabled. She can’t walk. Rides around on one of those little motorized scooters all the time. She has a special van, and a ramp from the driveway up to her front door. All that.”

“Well, that seems pretty sad for her,” Irene said. “Why do you say she’s a nightmare?”

Tom spent a few minutes sharing the details supporting his opinion of Mrs. Kopek, and finished with, “She yells at everyone. The paper boy, the mailman. Even the poor garbage guys, for God’s sake! Oh – and I’m pretty sure she killed Toby.”

“What? She killed your dog?”

“Yeah. Well, I think so. He was pretty old, but there didn’t seem to be anything wrong with him before he died. One morning I went out back to put some trash out, and there he was, just lying next to his house. He didn’t jump up like usual when I came out the back door. Just laid there. I went over to check on him and he was already cold. Gone.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry! So, what makes you think Mrs. Kopek did it?”

“I know, it sounds crazy. Well, for starters, she always hated Toby. A couple of days after he died, I went out to break down his house and clean up the area. I found a scrap of spoiled meat with some flecks of something like bluish crystals in it lying on the ground, just our side of the fence. I’m telling you - I don’t know where that came from, but I never gave Toby raw meat. And it looked like it had been chewed on.”

“Oh, no. Did you do call the police?”

“Sure. How would that have sounded? ‘Hello, I’d like to report a crime. I think my crazy handicapped neighbor poisoned my dog.’ Besides, what chance would I have of proving it? No, I decided to just let it go.”

After another longish pause, Irene said cheerily, “Hey – would you like to watch ‘Jeopardy’?”

“It’s almost nine – isn’t it already over?”

“I record it every night and watch it when I can. Would you like to watch it with me?”

“Sure. But be forewarned, I’m pretty good!”

Irene chuckled and turned on the TV and the DVR, then joined Tom on the couch. They were fairly evenly matched. Irene swept “The Bible” category, and Tom got all but one of the “Astronomy” questions. They both got the Final Jeopardy question right. During the show they had settled in closely with each other and by the time it was over, Irene was leaning up against him a little. They turned the set off and talked for a while. Then Tom looked at his watch.

“Well, it’s getting close to my bedtime,” he said. “I guess I’d better head out. The bus only runs hourly after ten.”

“Can I drive you?”

“No. Really, it’s fine. There’s something I like about watching the characters on the bus and wondering what their stories are. But thanks for offering.”

“Okay, Tom,” she said as they stood and moved towards the door.

She retrieved his jacket from the hall closet and handed it to him. He felt self-conscious and not at all sure what the protocol was in this situation as he started to pull his jacket on in the narrow entryway. When he shoved his arm into the sleeve, his elbow jerked unexpectedly. His fist came out the end of the sleeve and bopped Irene on the chin. Her eyes opened wide in surprise. Mortified, he reached out and gently grabbed her by the shoulders.

“I am so sorry, Irene! Are you alright?”

She was frowning, holding her jaw in one hand, and moving it back and forth assessing the damage. She looked at him and started laughing, which made him laugh. They laughed together until they were nearly breathless. They were finally able to catch their breath, and they ended up standing very close, face-to-face.

Irene reached out and placed her hand along Tom’s cheeks. Her eyes sparkled and she leaned forward, standing up on her toes and kissing him gently on the other cheek. He liked it. It felt safe and right. It was as if she knew he wanted to do something but wasn’t sure what it should be. Irene lowered her heels back to the floor and they stood, smiling and looking into each other’s eyes.

“Well. Now that the prize fight is over, I guess I’d better be moving along,” Tom said playfully.

“Yes. I concede. You win! Oh – and the prize is,” she said, quickly crossing to an end table and retrieving a pen and pad, “my phone number. Here you go.” She folded the note, tucked it into his jacket pocket, and patted him on the chest. “Call me sometime.”

“I will. I had a really nice time tonight, Irene. Can we get together again soon?”

“Yes, let’s. Good night!” She stood in the doorway as he walked down the outside steps. When he got to the parking lot, he looked back up and saw her profile framed in the doorway, silhouetted by the light in the hallway behind her. He waved. She waved back, and he turned and headed for home.

After a typical late-night bus ride home with the usual cast of characters that he either judged or pitied, or both, Tom got off the bus at his stop. Turning down his street, he was alarmed to see flashes and flickering light through the drawn shades of Mrs. Kopek’s house. As he crossed the lawn to her driveway, he saw black smoke rolling out from under the eaves near her kitchen.

His heart beat hard as he ran up the ramp to her front door and knocked. No response. He tried to open it. Locked! He hurried to the side door and found it locked as well. He pounded hard, and after

shouting her name several times with no answer, he stepped back and gave the door a heavy kick. It popped open and he rushed up the steps to the kitchen.

Heavy smoke burned his eyes and throat. A wave of heat rocked him as he called her name. She answered weakly from somewhere nearby. Holding his arm up and staggering toward the sound, he spotted her lying on the floor near the stove. Moving quickly to her side, he hoisted her up and over his shoulders in a fireman's carry, then shuffled back toward the door. He carried Mrs. Kopek down the steps and onto her perfectly manicured lawn, where he drooped to his knees, lowered her carefully to the ground, and lost consciousness.

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*Bright lights. Pain. Strange smells. Beeping. Thirsty - so thirsty.*

Tom blinked hard and tried to focus. *Where am I? Vaguely familiar scents teased at the edges of his consciousness. Alcohol? Irene's perfume? Adhesive tape? Smoke?* He heard a steady beep-beep-beeping. His blurred vision began to resolve and give structure to the clues around him. A network of tubes and wires spanned upward to join bottles and instruments suspended there. He squinted and swallowed hard. A figure loomed above him.

"Water," he heard himself croak.

"Sure, Tom. Here you go," a female voice said softly.

A hand slipped behind his head and gently tipped it forward. A drinking straw touched his lips. He took a sip and swallowed, then another sip. The cool water brought soothing relief to his parched throat as his head settled back to the pillow.

"Irene? Is that you?" He hoped she could hear him.

"Yes, Tom. I'm here."

"Where are we? What..." his voice failed.

“You’re in the hospital. You are hurt, but they say you’ll be okay. Do you remember what happened?”

He closed his eyes and tried to retrieve the shreds of his last memories. He remembered leaving Irene’s place, getting on the bus, the happy feeling he had jouncing toward home, then what? He felt suddenly alarmed.

“Fire?” he croaked.

“Yes. Fire,” Irene whispered. “Do you remember anything?”

“Mrs. Kopek,” he rasped.

“She’s alive, Tom. The firemen found you both on the front lawn when they got there! She’s in pretty bad shape, but they say she’ll be all right. You’re a hero!”

“No,” he rasped, shaking his head stubbornly. “Did what I had to. Still hate her.”

“Even more so, then,” Irene said, suppressing a smile.

He frowned, and she chuckled.

“How did you know?” he asked, gesturing vaguely around the room with his finger then pointing at his chest.

“Oh – that you were here?”

He nodded.

“One of the EMT’s found my number in your pocket and called me.”

“Glad,” he whispered. “Really glad. Thank you.”

She smiled and squeezed his hand.

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