

The Unusual Day of Martin May

On one particularly chilly morning in February, Martin May looked up from his bed to the ceiling just above him. An idea he had devised the night before sat neatly on the tip of his nose, as the sun tiptoed into the room to remind him that there was no more time left for pondering. Today was the day. It was a Tuesday actually. He had made his decision. He would quit his job.

He flailed his left hand in a general direction, not fully having control of his own body by this point. His worn, cedar-trimmed glasses danced around the nightstand until his fingers were finally able to snatch them up. As the lenses met his eyes, he gazed around the small room to see remnants of the night before, still in their last known locations. He hadn't particularly cared about tending to things like dirty socks and half-eaten bowls of bran flakes, not with the weight of his pending freedom fully in his mind.

It's not that he hated his occupation. Actually, he'd spent many years working towards this position, slowly building a resume of jobs around a mediocrity he had come to be quite content with. Bills were paid. Savings were accumulated. Stocks and bonds and all the things adults are supposed to care about most were all being satisfied; satisfaction, ironically, being the one thing Martin had always forgotten to get around to.

His heavy step slammed around the creaky wood floors in his room as he reached for articles of clothing. He found his best shirt, a plain black Oxford with a collar that had not yet grown a resentment for being worn. His pants from the day before would suffice, a dark brown khaki with the belt already fastened and ready for the day. He lifted them from the floor and leisurely up his somewhat hairy legs. He then opened a drawer and separated socks as if he were Moses parting the Red Sea, seeking out the one perfect pair that had yet to add character holes around the big toe. It is funny how much he cared to look his best to leave an occupation he had never been that fond of, had never even bought a suit for. Still, a moment of glory, no matter the circumstance, must always look its best.

There is a strange power to behold in possessing a knowledge of something that no one else can possibly know. His co-workers- what would they say? His boss- how would he react?

He wondered these things as he had reached the kitchen and began pouring a cup of coffee from a pot he had brewed the night before. He wouldn't drink it cold, mind you. He was patient and civilized enough to give his morning beverage a half-minute stroll around the microwave. But there was no time to give great thought to a new brew. It was of no great importance, and he'd have lots of time for drinking fresh coffee in the days and weeks ahead.

There was no grand plan for Wednesday. He hadn't gotten that far, to be honest. He had his dreams. He had his passions. He knew what he wanted to do, and soon there would be no eight-hour daily distraction to keep him from it. Of course, eventually the funding of his fantasies would also run out. It was a balancing act in a dance of daring risk that Martin had determined was worth a tango. But he also knew that tomorrow reality would sink in, and this was something he dreaded.

He had spent a year planning his escape. There were evenings and weekends of plotting, poster boards of pros and cons, and a bedroom desk full of half-finished and half-witted ideas never fully realized.

A growing fear began to creep into Martin's mind as he sipped his microwave coffee and took a bite of some slightly burnt toast with peanut butter not evenly spread across the whole. What if he failed at what's next? What if he couldn't be brave enough to get past his safe and secure mediocrity? What if this was all a terrible mistake?

The bus ride into work that morning would in no way serve as any kind of reassurance. Moments after dropping his change into the machine and finding his usual seat in the back, a familiar voice yelled to him from the front of the bus.

"Hey, Martin!", the man shouted. "I thought that was you. Have I got a story to tell you!"

Indeed, as usual, he did. Gene Rothenberg was one of those aspiring humans, the ones who are always adding letters next to their last name and talking with their head perfectly seated in first class. It's a wonder his nose wasn't always pointing straight into the air.

"Guess who just became the VP of Operations at Concord Hospital?", Gene asked with a clear answer already in his tone.

Skipping the formality of a guessing game, Martin replied in an even manner, "Congratulations, Gene. Well-deserved, I'm sure."

Gene studied Martin's bland reaction to what he had felt was worthy of some tempered celebration. "You certainly seem to have something captivating your thoughts right now," Gene volunteered to Martin in a somewhat resentful voice.

Martin, staring straight ahead, nodded. "Indeed."

Martin then turned his distracted gaze towards Gene, as if suddenly breaking free of a daydream. Leaning further in, with a face excited to share a secret, Martin whispered, "I'm quitting my job today."

Gene retreated a few inches. "Quitting? You're...quitting? To do what?", he asked in a series of questions that seemed to all illicit the same concern.

"No idea", Martin said with a grin. Saying it aloud brought about an immediate sense that Gene was identifying a sort of worst-feared acknowledgment that perhaps he had lost his mind.

Gene then proceeded- "But what about the apartment?"

"I have a few months of savings that can manage it," Martin answered in an attempt to reassure himself. Still feeling that Gene could not understand, he found the courage to say what he had been feeling for quite some time.

"I'm not living, Gene," he proclaimed. "I'm not aspiring towards anything. I sit in a cubicle every day and do the same bloody thing. I don't even have a window. There are literally four months of every year where I don't get to see the sun go down. I eat the same turkey and swiss sandwich every afternoon in the thirty minutes they let me roam free. I own four work outfits that I wear in a rotation throughout a five-day work week. I've ingested the same ghastly cup of coffee for six and a half years and now my breath is permanently stained with the stench of it. I've never been out of the country. For my last holiday, do you know what I did? I sat at home and watched re-runs of Gilligan's Island. Can you imagine? Even in my escape into television the characters on my screen can't even seem to accomplish their goals. It's quite pathetic, really. I'm surrounded by mediocrity. I'm fed up. I want to live, not just be alive."

There hadn't been a pause in almost a minute. Gene listened intently but could not relate. Eventually, feeling sorry for Martin, he jumped into the ongoing monologue.

"I've been there, Martin," he said. But he lied these words, albeit convincingly. "It's the way of the world, I'm afraid. Our dreams get set aside. Life requires more of us it seems."

"But that's not a life," Martin said. "Sometimes we have to leap, even if we can't see exactly where we're going to land. I have to leap, Gene. I simply must."

Gene's bus stop had arrived and he quickly stood up.

"I wish you the best with this, Martin," Gene assured him. "I really do. Keep me posted, yeah?"

Martin nodded with his head already turned towards the window.

The flashing beams of whitish blue at the stop light ignited, indicating an ambulance was passing through. The bus sat there for many extra moments, and Martin's gaze found a man on the street corner with a saxophone in his hand and a hat at his feet.

Martin couldn't take his eyes off of the man. He watched him as he played each jazz-infused note of a song he'd never heard that somehow felt familiar to him. He could feel a sense of shared life with this stranger. It was as if he were watching someone else love something as much as he had always dreamed he could.

Eventually the bus let out a sigh of exhaust, indicating it was time to move onward. Martin remained fixed on the man and his shiny instrument, until he was faded out of sight and only the gold of the saxophone gleamed slightly in the distance.

As he settled into his cubicle, Martin looked around his desk as the scent of horrid coffee wafted through the air. There was nothing on his desk. No characteristics of Martin or his personality; just some random pens, a stapler, and a framed photo of him and his brother on a fishing trip that was almost a decade old. His life seemed quite boring, and yet the security of it began to creep back into his conscience.

Moments before that he had sent an e-mail to Denise Walsh, the personal secretary for his boss, requesting an end-of-day meeting to discuss something he had classified as 'urgent'. Denise had replied quickly to confirm Mr. Delmar's availability. There was no turning back now.

His heart beat out of his chest for the first few minutes at his desk that day, but then a sense of familiar comfort washed over him. Maybe he was being too dramatic. Maybe mediocrity was acceptable. Maybe Gene was right that life requires more of us than our dreams. Maybe his dreams were just daydreams. He began to panic.

Almost abruptly, five o'clock announced its arrival. The day had been a blur. Martin used his arms to lift himself slowly out of his squeaky chair. His feet began to lead him, one foot after the other in a slow but rhythmic march towards Stephan K. Delmar's corner office. He began to feel as if he was a death row inmate, taking his final steps towards his impending end. His heart was racing again, and he had momentarily forgotten why he had called the meeting.

When he opened the door to the corner office, there sat a rather large and balding man. He was seated in a large black leather chair. He had removed his suit jacket, exposing red suspenders that assumedly kept his pants from running away. His round belly dipped over the edge of his mahogany desk. He lower his eyeglasses in Martin's direction and, with a commanding voice, exclaimed, "Come on in, Martin. Have a seat there." He pointed to a lesser chair in front of him.

Mr. Delmar studied Martin for a moment, then proceeded to ask him why he had called the meeting.

In a culmination of moments thereafter, thoughts began to run rampant in Martin's now sweaty head. He could feel his palms grow moist as they rested along the arms of the chair he was now sitting in. Panic crept in. He was confused. He felt trapped.

Then, amidst a series of thoughts that seemed to clarify, he looked out Mr. Delmar's large window behind his throne. The sun had begun to dip, preparing its nightly departure. This was something Martin had never beheld from his cubicle.

In a moment of reflection, he had thought about the day's events; about his restless night of preparation; his morning pondering over reheated coffee and slightly burnt toast; his odd conversation with Gene; the beautiful image of a stranger playing life into a saxophone.

Suddenly, none of it made sense. Martin straightened up in his chair, and without formulating the words himself, spoke up-

"I just wanted to let you know that I have those budget reports you had asked me to work on. I finished them early and wanted to get your input on formatting."

A blander set of words had never left Martin's mouth. Everything he had prepared had vanished.

Mr. Delmar sat back in his chair and rest his slightly swollen hands on his belly.

"Great work, May", Mr. Delmar delighted. "Just leave them with Denise today and I'll give you my feedback in the morning. Way to show initiative. We need more people like you around here."

"Thank you, sir", Martin let out in appreciation. "Glad to be a part of the team."

Martin stood from the chair and began to leave, gazing one last time at a window seeming to represent something Martin had been too scared to hold onto.

In his mind he felt as if Gene would be proud of his quick diversion, while the sax man on the corner played a sadder song in his honor.

Looking out of Mr. Delmar's window, Martin watched the sun go settle into a restful sleep, with an orange glow striking his eyes and his heart. A single tear cradled his left eyelid.

With a frail exhale, he wondered when the next time would be that he'd see a sun set.

The End.