

Spilled Milk

Jack watched the swelling pool of milk as it flowed along the grout lines of the kitchen tile. Lauren had insisted on glass bottled milk. Something about no BPA or RBST or some other acronym to scare suckers into paying twice as much lest they die of cancer. He hadn't even touched it. He'd just pulled open the refrigerator door, and it had dropped to the floor and exploded like a Molotov cocktail.

A quick glance at the clock told him what he already knew. He was going to be late. Again. It wasn't his dream job, but, for a thirty-two-year-old with an associate degree, it covered the rent.

Jack plucked the jagged shards one by one and dropped them into the garbage. With both feet and one hand planted on dry islands, he strained to reach for a piece wedged under the fridge. As his finger poked it, the tip of his necktie tumbled from his shoulder and flopped into the liquid. He lurched to an upright position and took deep calming breaths. He considered leaving the mess, but Sam's clumsy paws would surely stumble into the middle of it.

He grabbed a broom and swiped it under the refrigerator. The piece came loose and skidded through the liquid along with some dust bunnies and a miniature brown log. Jack examined it. A Tootsie Roll? Where the heck had that come from? It sure wasn't Lauren's. Maybe the previous tenant? Gross.

Jack finished cleaning, changed his tie, and filled Sam's food and water bowls.

The front door slammed behind him as he rushed outside. Two stories below the railing, the first rays of sunlight glinted off the corrugated metal roof that covered the parking spaces.

Spilled Milk

Jack pulled his jacket tight as a gust of wind chased him down the first flight of stairs. If the traffic wasn't too bad, he might slip into his cubicle in time to avoid another tardy warning.

Jack quickened his pace as he approached Elmer's apartment below his own. The sliding window was open, and it sounded like his neighbor was watching game shows again. Bob Barker's voice called from inside promising a new Buick Skylark. Jack ran on his tiptoes and ducked as he passed under the window. It was an impressive and ridiculous feat. Luckily there were no witnesses.

Except one. As he straightened, he came face to face with Elmer. Jack could've sworn the coast was clear, but the old man had a way of appearing at the worst times as if by magic.

Elmer's white wavy hair fanned out under a plaid wool beret making him look like a Russian philosopher. "Whatcha doing, Jack? Something wrong with your knees?"

Jack figured the old man might be senile enough to be serious. Should he fake a torn ACL? Ruptured hamstring? Elmer's crooked grin warned him otherwise. This was sarcasm, plain and simple. Jack was busted. "Look Elmer, I'm really in a —"

"Hurry," Elmer said. "Same as last time. Say, what's going on up there anyway? You trying to break through my ceiling?"

"Trust me, I have no interest in breaking through your ceiling," Jack said. "A bottle of milk fell out of my fridge and shattered on the floor."

"Must've been some bottle." Elmer gripped the rail to the stairs as if to steady himself. The action blocked Jack's escape route. "You ever wonder if things happen for a reason?"

"No reason. I'm just cursed."

"Some might say you're blessed. In fact —"

Spilled Milk

“Elmer, I’m not in the mood right now.” Nor would Jack ever be in the mood for his neighbor’s endless Bible-thumping.

The old man shrugged. “Fine, but you promised to help me with my television. I’m sure the cable just came loose again, but these fingers are useless with my arthritis.”

“Did you not just hear me?” Jack said. “I told you I’d help *if* I had time, and I don’t. Anyway, I can hear your TV from fifty feet away, so I’m pretty sure it’s fine.”

“It’s fine if you want three channels on a rabbit ears antenna instead of a hundred forty.”

“I don’t care about your TV,” Jack said. “Call your daughter, or the landlord, or the cable company.”

“I’m sorry,” Elmer said. “I didn’t mean to —”

“And another thing,” Jack said. “There’s nothing wrong with my knees. I was avoiding you.” He rushed down the stairs, not bothering to stick around for a response.

Already thirty minutes late for work, Jack sat in his car as it idled on the freeway. The overhead LED sign said that the accident had blocked four of five lanes, which was clearly a lie, because all five were at a standstill.

Jack pried a finger under his collar and yanked at the starched shirt. Why did he have to wear a tie anyway? He had no face-to-face contact with anyone of importance. Heck, he could make phone calls in his underwear, and the customers would be none the wiser. Just one of Ben’s stupid rules.

His lane started to inch along and then jerked to a stop. Brake lights, angry and red, glared at him. He stared them down. His fingers strangled the steering wheel. This was Lauren’s fault.

Spilled Milk

Had she not bought the stupid milk, he wouldn't have spent all morning cleaning it up. He probably would've been beyond the accident when it had happened and missed it altogether. Why was he with her anyway? She was always taking clients to expensive restaurants on her so-called business trips, while he ate cereal and babysat her slobbery dog.

Eventually, Jack passed the site of the accident. A compact car was pinned under the cab of an eighteen-wheeler like a crushed can. Rescue crews attended to someone on the ground.

Jack's hands found the ten and two positions on the steering wheel. Strange how one minute you could be driving to work, and the next...he suddenly hoped Lauren was okay. He'd call her after he was done getting chewed out by his boss.

Soon after Jack arrived, Ben called him over.

Jack's elder by a dozen years, Ben had slicked back hair that grew two shades darker each month when he replenished his supply of Grecian Formula. "Everything okay?" his boss asked.

"Yeah, it's fine," Jack said. "It's been a horrible morning. One thing after another, and a huge accident on the freeway."

"Traffic again, huh?"

"Yeah, well it was more than just traffic," Jack said. "It was out of my control."

"Was it?"

Jack scowled. Yes, he could've left earlier had he planned on a thirty-minute commute taking an hour-and-a-half.

Ben grinned. "Jack, I'm just messing with you. Half the team was late. Just stay late and make up the time you missed."

Spilled Milk

Unbelievable. Ben had a way of making a person feel like crap and then acting like he'd given them a gift.

"Okay, thanks," Jack muttered.

They headed back toward the team area. A warehouse-turned-call-center, the building was a giant rectangle with end-to-end cubicles. Grey aluminum mini blinds snuffed out any promise of natural sunlight. *Thanks a lot, Sally. Just had to complain about that glare, didn't you?*

Ben high-fived a co-worker passing by then turned back to Jack. "Everything okay with you and Lauren? Is she still out of town *entertaining* clients?" Ben's version of small talk was to pry into Jack's personal life. The addition of air quotes to imply infidelity was the icing on the cake.

That's what I get for venting to my boss about my love life, Jack thought. "She's fine."

The day at the office concluded with Jack accidentally closing an online file without saving the updates. He'd have to come in early tomorrow to fix it.

The commute home took longer than usual because his staying late had caused him to hit rush hour traffic.

His cellphone rang, and his heart quickened when he saw the caller ID. "Hello?"

"Hi Sweetie." Lauren's voice sounded far away.

"Hey you," Jack said. "How's the trip?"

"Exhausting. I just want to come home. How's our baby?"

"He misses his momma. He's been barking at every little sound thinking you might be walking through the door."

"He's so cute. I miss both my handsome men," she said.

He paused. "Yeah, we miss you too."

Spilled Milk

“You okay, hon? You sound a little distant.”

“It’s just been a rough day.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He did. By the time he was done complaining, he felt better and a bit silly. He’d listened to himself talk, and even with the exaggerations, his day didn’t sound too bad. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just feeling sorry for myself.”

“Tomorrow we can feel sorry for ourselves together,” she said. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” he said. He turned into the parking lot as he hung up.

His feet felt like cement blocks as he trudged up the stairs to his apartment. All he could think of was going to bed.

“Hey there, Jack.”

Jack spun around. Once again, his neighbor seemed to appear out of nowhere.

Jack’s shoulders slumped. He’d forgotten about the interaction earlier that morning.

“About the television –” Elmer said.

“Elmer, I’m sorry about this morning. I can look now if you’d like.”

“Oh, I was going to say don’t worry about it. I know you’re busy.”

Whether by charity or guilt, Jack suddenly wanted to see it through. “Really, Elmer. It was wrong of me to be such an ass to you this morning. I’d be happy to look at it.”

“That’s nice of you,” Elmer said. “I’m just watching local news tonight so maybe tomorrow?”

“That sounds good.” Jack stepped into his apartment and slept while Sam snuggled by his side.

Later that evening, Elmer sat on his couch, a secondhand relic that sagged underneath him as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. On his lap, rested an open Bible, its margins covered with notes. His neat handwritten script rivaled the tiny size of the Bible's typewritten font. A newscaster rambled about the economy through the wavy lines of the television.

Elmer's thoughts were elsewhere as he replayed the events of the afternoon. His young, hurried neighbor had offered to help him. He hadn't really needed the help, but that wasn't what mattered. The gesture was sincere. Progress.

His eyes were drawn to the television as footage of a freeway flashed on the screen. The newscaster described the accident with a tinge of sorrow mixed with matter-of-fact detachment. The driver of the semi was fine, of course. The other driver had died. A devout Christian, grandmother, and philanthropist, she'd started one of the largest homeless shelters in town. She'd survived five years of an aggressive leukemia that doctors had predicted would take her in six months. Her life had been a miracle.

Elmer tilted the rabbit ears antenna to improve the signal as the reporter finished the eulogy. Elmer didn't mourn the woman; she was with the Father.

Still, it was too bad she had been at that exact spot on the freeway the moment the truck had swerved into the other lane.

He considered it. Countless factors that placed each person in their unique spot on the globe at any given moment. The executive who'd run the stale yellow light; the factory worker who'd run the red. The college student who'd squeezed into the crowded elevator while her

Spilled Milk

roommate had opted to wait for the next one. The plumber who'd taken the extra few minutes to shave, and the lawyer who'd decided to sport a five o'clock shadow. The frazzled young man who'd delayed his commute to mop up spilled milk.

Billions of people each making thousands of decisions per day. The number of permutations was incalculable, yet all according to God's plan, like some divine algorithm.

Elmer settled back onto the couch. Funny how any one of these events could change a person's life or even the course of history.

He propped his feet on the ottoman and grabbed a piece of candy from the jar on the corner table. His wrinkled fingers deftly removed the stubborn wrapper and he popped one in his mouth. A Tootsie Roll. His supply always seemed to be dwindling. Was he eating them or losing them? The thought made him laugh. Could an angel become senile?

His neighbor would never know his life was saved that day, but somehow Elmer knew it was right. God's plan contemplated every possible contingency including an old angel deciding to spill a little milk.