

H.A.N.D.

In the middle of my morning coffee's warm embrace, the first customer of the day barges through the door all gangbusters. The man's already in mid-sentence, ranting and carrying on as if we'd been talking for hours. He didn't even give me a chance to say hello.

"Did you *hear* me?" the man asks. "Where's the boss around here?"

"Sorry, he's not available. How can I help you?" I reply, placing my coffee cup beside the desktop computer.

"Is *this* correct?" He slaps one of our company-letterhead quotes on the desk.

"Ah, is what correct?"

"The amount on this invoice!" He fumes, his eyes bulging. "It's almost a million dollars!"

"Do you mind if I have a look?" I ask, picking up the paper. "That sounds a bit low to be honest."

"You've gotta be joking, right?" he crosses his arms. "Eight hundred and twenty-eight *thousand*? Someone's totally taking the piss here."

"Well, I can see the manager put this together himself... and he takes potential customers pretty seriously. So, no, it's definitely legit."

“Okay, if it’s not a joke, then are you sure it’s *accurate*?”

“When it comes to quotes, all know is what the computer tells me. But, yes, it appears everything’s in order.”

“So, you’re telling me this is best price you can do?” He uncrosses his arms, and studies the name-badge pinned to my shirt for a few seconds. “Is *that* what you’re telling me, Brian with an O?”

Seriously? Brian with an O? What a hard case.

“Uh, we genuinely do our best to try and keep our prices competitive.” I say, sliding the quote back to him. “And I can’t say if you’d get this service for less elsewhere, but you’re more than welcome to shop around, sir.”

The well-groomed fifty-something year old stands glaring at me from the other side of the desk in his finely tailored worsted wool suit. His dark brown eyes bore into mine, as if this ever could or would be a test of wills. I take a deep breath, and note that the caramelized aroma of my flat white has now become overpowered by the man’s musky cologne.

“Where’s the business owner?” he demands, looking over my shoulder toward the office door. “Is he here?”

“No sir, he’s not. I’m the only one in today.”

“Well, he’s the guy who emailed me the invoice, so I’d like to talk to him about the breakdown.”

“I’m sorry, but Mr. Webb doesn’t come in on the weekends.”

“*Fine.* Then you just pick up your phone and tell him that Fred Middelstone’s here. Go ahead, I’ll wait.”

“I’d be as happy as Larry to do that, but he’s not available right now. If you’d like to come back tomorrow morning, I’m sure he’ll—”

“No, I would *not* like to come back then. I have a prior engagement.”

“Okay, I understand. Everybody’s busy. I get that.”

“By *not* calling him that’s a refusal of service. That’s against the Consumer Guarantees Act.”

“I’m not refusing anything, sir. As I said before, Mr. Webb’s on a job. That means he can’t be reached... literally.”

“Why is that my problem?” he asks, hands on hips.

“Mr. Webb’s flash-forwarded a few months in time to complete an urgent assessment for one of our clients. Now, would you like to have a seat? I’d love to help you. Or would prefer to come back tomorrow?”

“Fine then, whatever!” he barks, pulling back the empty seat across from me with an abrasive clamour. “I’m already here now.”

“Alright.” I say as the man sits down. “That’s better... Isn’t that better?”

“Ridiculous.” he mutters under his breath.

“Now, where were we, Mr. Middelstones?”

“Middelstone.”

“I’m sorry, sir?”

“Middel-*stone*.”

“Uh, that’s what I said— isn’t that what I said?”

“No. You said stones. It’s Middelstone. Singular. Middel. *Stone*.”

“Right. Sorry. What do I have to do to get your pre-departure papers lodged with us today, Mr. Middelstone?”

“For starters,” he growls, shaking his head, “There’s no way in Sam Hill that this invoice is accurate.” He taps his index finger repeatedly on the edge of the desk. “And I know for a *fact* that other guys at the firm paid less for their death than this.”

“Well, I’ve looked it over a couple of times now, and as I said before, it appears to be in order. If you want, I could take a closer—”

“Are you *sure* the price reflects my company discount having been applied?”

“Actually, uh, since you’re here, let me just go ahead and double-check that for you.”

“Fine. Do that.”

“Sure, no worries.”

I press Enter on the keyboard of the office terminal, then type *Middelstone* into the search field. The computer pulls up the customer’s quote, and I add in a couple of unnecessary mouse-clicks for effect.

H.A.N.D Quotation ID: QUOT2053-MIDFREDC

Name: Middelstone, Fred C.

Date of Death: 5/11/2069 (Est.)

Cause of Death: TBD

Location of Death: TBD

Date of Birth: 26/08/1997

Occupation: Partner, CrossWaters Church.

Personal injury attorney (retired), Hix & Randol.

Hobbies: Sailing, golf

Discount (Y or N): Y

“Ah, yes. There’s a discount for you having been an H&R staff member.”

“Partner. I was a *partner*... before those two bought me out.”

“Okay, well, regardless of your position, I think Mr. Webb’s factored in the eight percent for you.”

“Thinking isn’t knowing,” he says, raising his eyebrows. “Either you *think* he has, or you *know* he has. So which is it?”

“Uh, you’re welcome to come round to my side and have a look at the screen yourself... it’s right here in black and white.”

“No, I still think it’s too high. Webb’s made an error. Has to be.”

“Mr. Webb rarely makes mistakes, if at all. If he cocked-up in this line of work, I’d say we’re all in pretty big trouble.”

I chuckle nervously and Mr. Middelstone groans. Then he looks down at the floor, rubbing his index finger vigorously across his bristly salt and pepper moustache.

“A lousy eight percent, huh? After all I did for that firm?” he laments, removing his horn-rimmed spectacles and rubbing the creases in his forehead. “Less than church tithes.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, it’s still a good price, sir. But I think you might’ve missed the fact that it’s just an estimate based on your future time of death. We still don’t know the location or cause of death yet.”

“How do you determine that, then?”

“This is, unfortunately, where things can start to get costly. But, if you were to pay the deposit today, I could take a deeper dive into this quotation when Mr. Webb returns tomorrow. Perhaps then I can try and crunch the numbers a bit.”

“Christ Almighty!” he howls. “You guys must be laughing all the way to the Bank of China.”

You’re gonna lose the sale, you moron.

“Mr. Middelstone, I don’t work on commission. I’m not here to sell you anything, okay? But, the Double Tap *is* a good package. Maybe our biggest seller. And when you consider what your non-chosen alternative might be, I think it’s probably one of the best ways you could go.”

“What do you mean *non-chosen*?”

“Oh, that’s just a fancy term we use in the business for, you know, letting fate take its course.”

“Right.” He nods and rolls his eyes.

“Mister Middelstone... you know, both my parents died B.C. Think about that. Before the Big Change, you and I wouldn’t be sitting here. We couldn’t even have this discussion. Neither of them were fortunate enough to find themselves in the position you’re in right now.”

“And what position’s that?”

“The right-to-die position.”

“Ah, I thought maybe you meant the one that puts this right up my keister!” he says, making a fist. “The bend-me-over-and-screw-my-finances-one?”

“Sir, I realize expiry-alteration isn’t an enjoyable process. It just isn’t. But you’d be getting to make the choice my parents couldn’t... the choice a lot of people still don’t get to make. I mean, do you *know* how many people are killed by champagne corks every year? Do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Dozens. It’s *dozens*. The statistics are out there. I mean, talk about all the weird ways to cash in your chips.”

“What’s your point?”

“The point is, if you *can* choose a way to check out, why not choose a better way? And in this case, you’d be doing it for more or less the same price as what the premium club members pay.”

“Premium?” He rubs his forehead. “At these prices isn’t everyone a *premium* member?”

“You’re right... it is lot of money. And I know to you I’m probably just some guy who works here but, believe me, it doesn’t mean I’m unsympathetic. I’m on your side.”

“You’re not on my side. You’re on the other side of that desk.” He leans back in the chair. “I bet as an employee you get a lot more than eight percent off, don’t ya?”

“Actually, I don’t think we’re *technically* allowed to use our own services.”

“So what you’re saying is, at this point, the price is just the price?”

“I don’t have much to do with what we charge, unfortunately. I just—”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re just a guy who *works here*, right?” he says, using both hands to make air quotes.

You’re losin’ the sale, idiot. Abort. Abort!

“Mr. Middelstone, I think it’s important to bear in mind that there’s a bigger benefit to you being here right today that we haven’t discussed.”

“Oh yeah? And what’s that?”

“If you’re able to pay a bond, to put money down, then this whole thing gets locked in for you.”

“Aw, hells bells!” He points a finger at me. “You people are a bunch of jagaloons, you know that? I *knew* I should’ve gone to Deaths ‘R’ Us!”

Mr. Middelstone puts both hands on the edge of the desk, then pushes himself and the chair backward. *He’s gonna walk out, you egg.*

“Wait, Mister Middelstone, sir. Please don’t go.”

“Then how ‘bout you start singing something to the tune of less than eight-hundred thousand, and maybe I’ll stay!”

“Mister Middelstone. *Fred*. May I call you Fred?”

“What’s the difference?” He throws up his arms in exasperation.

“Fred... trust me when I say you don’t wanna go to D.R.U. Did you know they got busted for using deepfakes of their deceased customers in their post-mortem files? You know that, right?”

“Deep fakes?”

“Yeah. It’s amateur hour over at that place.”

“What the hell is a deep fake?”

“Oh, jeez, you don’t know?”

“No.” he pinches the bridge of his nose. “I don’t.”

“Seriously, you gotta google it. They’re everywhere. Salty George Lucas reacting to the Empire of the Ewoks trailer?”

“Ewok *what?*”

“Episode XVI. I mean, you watch that and tell me they don’t totally nail Lucas’s laugh, Fred. Who could tell the difference? I couldn’t tell.”

“Son, I really don’t understand a single thing you just said.”

“Okay, just— Never mind that. What I’m saying is that you have no idea what death you’re really getting with D.R.U. All the packages *we* offer come with a post-lifetime guarantee because we want you to have peace of mind knowing that the demise you’re paying for is the one you’re getting.”

Mr. Middelstone’s eyes narrow, and then he stands up slowly. He adjusts his Navy blue jacket by grabbing at the cuffs, then places his right hand on top of the H.A.N.D. brochure.

“You know,” he says, “the more I think about it, I could simply do this at home. It’s a gloomy Sunday. I could just sit on the bed and double tap myself. Quick and easy, right?”

“Well I can’t argue with that, but the fact remains that you’d be—”

“Might not be *legal*,” he says, pushing the brochure toward me, “but at least it’s *free*.”

“Mr. Middelstone, sir—”

“Save it, kid.” he waves a hand dismissively. “I think I’ve had just about enough baloney for one day.”

And you blew it. Way to go.

“No problem, I... totally understand.”

Mr. Middelstone turns on his heel toward the exit, and the reality starts to sink in that I’ve lost yet another sale. Stepping into the entryway he stops, then taps his knuckles on the glass where the company logo is affixed to the door. “You know,” he says turning toward me, “maybe you guys oughta think about changing the name of this place to something a tad less passive-aggressive, eh?”

“Okay. Sure. I’ll definitely make sure to pass that feedback on to the business owner for you.”

Mr. Middelstone rolls his eyes so hard that his entire head rolls with them, and he leaves the office with an overly exaggerated sigh. When the door closes I can still see him through the glass, hesitating on the sidewalk. I half expect him to turn around and come back to negotiate.

Just watch. He’s thinkin about it.

Dry autumn leaves tumble around Mr. Middelstone’s feet while he looks left and right. He crosses the gridlocked street, then fades slowly into the grey background of the city morning. It’s then that the reversed letters of the business’s namesake etched onto the glass door attract my attention.

.D.N.A.H

“Damn.” I whisper, sipping my cold coffee. “Forgot to tell him to have a nice death.”