

Greg

For the record, my name is Greg, just plain Greg. Definitely not some of the other names people call me. Sometimes, I think it would be much less troublesome if we could wear nametags or, better yet, those photo ID badges hanging from solid black or red lanyards. I brought this up at the last group meeting, but my suggestion was ultimately rejected. As our manager, Mr. Sentry, put it: “How often are they actually going to see you anyway?” I had to admit he did have a good point—although I still may raise the issue again the next time we all meet, whenever that is.

Also for the record, I don’t love what I do, in spite of what others might think or read in various stories (usually written by people who don’t actually know anything about us). Oh, there may be days when I don’t mind it too much. And I know that some of my colleagues really do enjoy the work, even to the point of always asking for the tough assignments and voluntarily working overtime. But to me, it’s just a job, perhaps a bit better than some jobs and definitely worse than others.

Mostly, we operate alone, with each of us having a specific territory matched to a specific specialty. My particular specialty is old people, although I do occasionally get the name of a younger person, if that person is in my territory and no one else is available.

For instance, not long ago, I was assigned to Marnie Louise Cameron. Her profile said she was twenty-three years old, lived alone, and had lost her mother, her job, and her boyfriend all in the same week. Apparently, she had requested a visit. And, given her recent losses, I could certainly understand why—not that it matters what I might think.

I found her on the couch in her little one-bedroom apartment. She had a needle stuck in her arm; a half-empty bottle of Jack was sitting next to her. She appeared to be well on her way to a coma but was awake enough to see me approach.

“Who are you?” she asked in a garbled, barely discernible voice.

“Greg,” I replied.

She chuckled and tried to open her eyes more fully. “Greg?”

I nodded.

Her eyes closed and her breathing slowed. I leaned over to touch her, but before I could, she re-opened her eyes and looked at me again. “Wha...d’ya want?”

“You asked for me.”

“I did?”

In a sudden moment of clarity, I could see her inner and outer beauty and her potential, maybe even a future, in spite of her ragged appearance and her recent losses. I stepped back away from her, as we are occasionally permitted to use our own judgment, especially in cases like this. “Yes, you did.”

No doubt it took all of her remaining energy, but she managed to sit up. She pulled the needle from her arm—along with a few drops of blood—and cast it onto the dirty floor next to a small empty syringe. Her blue eyes shifted aimlessly before finally settling on me. She smiled rather seductively and pulled up the hem of the stained nightshirt she was wearing, exposing her underwear. She pointed to the bottle of Jack with her left hand. “Greg...I...think I could like you. Help yourself...to whatever you want.”

some people—nearly all of them women, of course—flirt with me; others attempt to bargain. It’s an occupational hazard. It is also a gross violation of policy to accept—or even

acknowledge—any gratuities that may be offered. As Mr. Sentry reminds us, we're there to do a job as quickly and efficiently as possible. "No, thanks," I said, sensing what she was offering. "You can do a lot better than me." I pointed to her cell, which was on the arm of the couch. "You better call the paramedics before you pass out. You don't want to be found like this."

At first, she gave me a small pout, but then she nodded as though she understood, although I'm not sure she really did. It isn't often that someone who actually sees me gets a second chance. And those who are granted that second chance don't always appreciate it right away; some never do.

"Marnie, get yourself together and don't call for us again. Your turn will come over the course of time." Then I pivoted and left without waiting for a reply. I don't know if she ever got herself together (we don't do follow ups), but I do know she hasn't requested another visit.

As I said before, mostly we operate alone. But occasionally, if a particular situation becomes hurried and chaotic, we get called in to work as a group. Remember the World Trade Center? I got pulled away from a nursing home because my colleagues who had that territory got overwhelmed very quickly.

Remember Hurricane Katrina? Hurricane Sandy? With practically every natural disaster, every mass murder, we get called away from our normal territories to work together. In such cases, we don't have time to socialize or even communicate with each other. One of the supervisors arrives on site and gives us our instructions, which generally begin with 'move fast.'

Afterward, a few of us may get together to talk shop, if we don't have any pressing assignments elsewhere. I have to admit I do enjoy sharing stories. One time recently, after Hurricane Maria, Bob, Madeline, and I got together. I told my story about Marnie, which they

enjoyed, although Madeline said she probably would have done what she was there to do—definitely no second chance. “Leave it to a male to be so forgiving,” she said.

Bob told us about how he snuck up on a fifty-two-year-old man while the man was mowing his lawn—quite a feat in the daylight, and one that I’ve never been quite able to master—not that it makes any real difference to the outcome. Still, sometimes you have to challenge yourself just to keep things interesting.

Madeline told us how she actually seduced a sixty-year-old man and took him while they were in bed together. Neither Bob nor I had a story that could top that. Besides, Madeline is one of those colleagues who truly enjoy their work, so it would be just like her to risk violating policy in order to put her own frame around an assignment.

The truth of the matter is what I could really use is a long vacation or even another job, any other job. I offer two very recent experiences—among a great many—to illustrate my point.

The first was John Bruce Capsahw. His profile indicated that he was eighty-four years old and lived with his wife of sixty-two years. For the past three years, his health was failing. He had been hospitalized five times for heart and lung problems and was in very early-stage dementia.

As I studied his profile, I thought this would be a simple and routine assignment. After all, the man was old, sick, and clearly ready—no problem, right? I chose a nighttime approach, having learned through experience that the process is much more efficient and less stressful when they’re asleep. However, as I approached in the near darkness (they always leave a light on somewhere, usually in the bathroom), John awoke. He sat up straight in the bed and looked right

at me, nodding as though he knew who I was and was even expecting me. He didn't appear at all surprised or frightened – not the typical reaction.

At first, I was a bit unnerved but soon relaxed when I saw his calm, almost serene demeanor. This would be very easy, I thought, in and out and on to the next.

“So are you the one then?” he asked.

I knew what he meant—I've been asked that question before. “I'm Greg,” I said. “And it's time.” I moved closer.

But before I could reach him, he nudged his wife, who was sleeping next to him. She awoke with a start. “What is it?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

He smiled and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. “He's here for me. Do you still want to go together?”

She sat up and stared out into the near-darkness. For at least a minute, she said nothing. I knew she couldn't see me, but somehow she sensed my presence in the room. At last she nodded as though she finally understood. She clutched her husband's hand. “Yes,” she said with conviction and love in her voice.

John gathered his breath, not an easy feat given his diseases. “Greg, we want to go together.”

I'd never gotten this request before and wasn't quite sure how to answer it. “But...it's not her time.”

“Please,” John said.

I looked at them both, saw the love and the pain in their eyes, and I confess I was moved. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” they said in one voice. John put his arm around her and pulled her into his body. She rested her head on his shoulder, a shoulder that was bony and bent with age, but, no doubt, familiar and comforting, at least to her.

I thought about it for a few agonizing seconds. I didn’t think I would get into trouble if I took them both. In fact, there was a good chance my supervisor would never find out. After all, a lot of people go without our help. And we have been known to take a few by mistake with no consequences. “Very well...as long as you’re sure.”

“Thank you,” John said. He kissed his wife on the forehead and eased back against the headboard. She closed her eyes and smiled.

I leaned over and touched them both. Then I watched them for a minute or so. They appeared to be asleep. I knew at a glance they were at peace together. If, at that moment, I would have had the ability to cry, tears would have been streaming down my face. It had been a very long time since I’d seen love like that, a love that is truly eternal, a love I myself never experienced.

As I moved on to the next assignment, I couldn’t help wondering what Madeline would have done in this situation. I would like to believe she would have acted as I did. Rupert, on the other hand, probably wouldn’t have. He is known to be a real stickler for the rules, definitely no sentimentalist. But then, I didn’t think I was either—at least not anymore.

However, one of my most recent situations is probably the best example of how much my attitude may be shifting away from the emotional indifference necessary to do this job. I was working in one of the largest hospitals in my territory, an assignment I get every so often. During

this particular assignment, I had three names, all over eighty and all very ill, mostly from exacerbations of chronic diseases.

The first was George Washington Jackson, eighty-six years old and in failing health. I found him in the intensive care unit already sedated. I took him without incident, and I was hopeful that this night's work would be quick and routine.

The next person I was to visit was Louise Aspen Dumbrowski, eighty-two years old with severe pneumonia superimposed over congestive heart failure. She was asleep as I approached. In fact, she never did wake up. However, just as I leaned over and touched her, her nurse entered the room.

Of course, the nurse didn't see me or what I had just done. However, she did see the result. This is one of the risks of working in a busy hospital, and I should have been more alert. The nurse called for assistance. And while I stood off in a corner and watched, at least ten people raced into the room. They worked on poor Louise for a long time before finally giving up. When I take someone, that person does not come back. But what should have been simple and peaceful turned out to be very messy and chaotic. It was also extremely unpleasant to watch. I mean, I never ever want to see so many well-intentioned people try so hard to undo my work. I vowed to be more careful in the future.

My last assignment at the hospital was Martha Jane Simmons. Her profile indicated that she was eighty-eight years old and suffered from several chronic disorders, mostly related to age. She was a widow. I didn't remember this then, but apparently I took her husband a few years back. I found her in bed, where she should have been at this time of night. But she wasn't asleep. Rather, she was sitting up watching television. She saw me approach and appeared startled by my presence. "Who are you?" she asked.

I gave her a quick smile in an attempt to provide reassurance. As I said before, I try to make these encounters as peaceful as possible, both for their sake and mine. “I am here to take care of you,” I replied. We are permitted to stretch the truth, if it fits the situation. In my judgment, this was one of those situations.

Her eyes narrowed behind her glasses. “No you’re not,” she said in a near whisper. “You’re...you’re...him, aren’t you?”

I got closer, close enough to touch the bed, then stopped. “I don’t know who you mean by him. I’m Greg.”

She huffed. “I don’t care what you call yourself. You’re him, although you don’t look like what I imagined.”

I’d never been told that before, but I saw no point in prolonging the charade. I was still a bit shaken by the last encounter and wanted to get this one over with as quickly as possible so I could get a little R and R—and certainly before the nurse or someone else came into the room. “Who were you expecting...Robert Redford?” Given her age, I naturally assumed she had seen the *Nothing in the Dark* episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Mr. Sentry had probably made us watch that particular episode a dozen times. We always shared a good laugh, as none of us comes close to looking like a young Robert Redford.

She actually laughed at that. “Maybe,” she said. She looked at me, then up at the ceiling. “He is a good-looking man, even at his age now. But that’s not what I imagined.”

I suddenly knew what she was thinking. “I know, you thought I would come as a grim-looking man with a white face dressed in black carrying a large scythe...right?”

She laughed again. “Something like that.”

I had a vision of another movie Mr. Sentry made us watch, *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*, with William Sadler playing the Grim Reaper. We shared a good laugh at that depiction—the common stereotype—as well, although I have to admit the image is pretty scary in its own way. “Sorry to disappoint you,” I said.

Her expression became very serious and several tears leaked from her eyes. “Does it have to be now? What if I’m not ready?”

I should have just reached over and touched her right then, gotten it over with. That’s what Rupert would have done; Madeline and Bob too probably. I was tired and ready to move on, to leave this crazy hospital behind.

But there was something about the way she looked at me, something about the profoundly sad expression on her face, a face that was scarred with age and disease, but in its own way reflected the young and robust woman she had once been. “Martha, why aren’t you ready? Your husband is gone; most of your friends are gone; you’re living with pain and discomfort that will only get worse.”

She shrugged. “I know,” she said. “But...I feel like I need more time.”

“Time for what?” I shouldn’t have asked the question, but I really was curious.

She seemed to consider it for a moment. “I don’t know,” she said. “I just don’t think I’ve done everything I want to do.”

“Nobody ever does.”

She shook her head. “Please, Greg. More time.”

I gave her a hard look. “Extended time isn’t free, you know. You have to pay for it.”

“How?”

A simple yet surprisingly good question. “I don’t actually know,” I said. And that was true. I really didn’t know how she would have to pay. I only knew how I paid. Maybe she would fare better in the overall scheme of things. And then again, maybe she wouldn’t.

She sat up straighter in the bed, probably as straight as her age and infirmity would allow. She looked at me and took a deep breath. “Death, be not proud.”

I froze. The poem by John Donne has always been one of my favorites. Madeline prefers Emily Dickinson: “Because I could not stop for death...” (although she always replaces he with she. “Why discriminate?” she says). I may have smiled at Martha, I’m not sure. ““Though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, thou are not so...”” No, I have never thought of myself as mighty and dreadful, just a simple agent trying to do a job that isn’t always easy or pleasant—or appreciated.

She returned my smile with one full of hope. “What happens if you don’t take me?”

Once again, I didn’t know the answer to that question. In fact, I didn’t—and still don’t—know how the process actually works. All I do know is that someone somewhere decides who we are to take then gives the names to our supervisors, who pass the names and profiles on to us.

Suddenly, at that moment, it struck me how much I didn’t know. And just maybe that’s how the universe truly operates. Like a big impersonal machine—everyone doing their job as if they were on an assembly line, with no-one giving much thought to what anybody else is doing or why. So if an individual—such as me—were to deliberately defy the system, would the whole system come crashing down? And what would be the consequences of bringing down the system?

For the longest of moments I remained where I was, gripped with indecision and doubt. I could complete my assignment and move on or I could turn around, slink away, and see what

happens. Perhaps nothing at all would happen. Perhaps someone else would get the assignment I failed to complete—and probably wouldn't hesitate. Or perhaps the universe would simply stop functioning the way it always has, leading to total chaos.

For an instant, I thought about John's wife, whose time had not yet come but I took her anyway because she asked me to. I thought about Marnie and her request that I didn't fulfill. I thought about all the people who go without our help, the result of war or murder or suicide or just plain bad luck and stupidity.

And that's why I need a long vacation, or better yet, a reassignment to a completely different job. When one starts to ask the questions I was asking, he—or she—loses his—or her—effectiveness. In the end, it's the organization that matters, not the individual, never the individual.

I gave Martha another long look, then shook my head. "I'm sorry," I said. I reached over and touched the side of her face.