Getting Into the Picture

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A two-year old pair of scuffed and cracked loafers rested against a bottom shelf, the two holes in the soles of each shoe are pressed against the edge, creating more room for the toes. Their owner, Wendal Pembroke, lifts his pant legs and eyes the scuffs and cracks and decides it is not only time to get a new pair of shoes, but to find a new job. He is two years out of college with his degree left collecting dust in the closet, and stuck with the same job in the Stilwell’s Men’s department that he has had since high school.

When he was thirteen he set his parent’s garage on fire and hasn’t been the same since the severe verbal and physical thrashing he received from his father. Since that day, his motivation and self-confidence have taken back seats to his directionless disposition.

“I need a new job,” he tells Francine, his co-worker and constant recipient of his persistent flirting.

“What, and leave me?” she pouts. “How can I tolerated this place by myself? Besides, they said you needed more experience to work in the appliance department.” Wendall looks around for Mr. Crems, the wormy store manager who seems to be more concerned with catching his employees slacking off than the well-being of the customers. Seeing only customers, he sits on top of the counter.

“I’m not talking about out of here. I’m sick of selling polyester ties to senile old ladies to give to their senile old husbands and fitting fat businessmen who come in here only because our stuff is cheap, not because it’s worth a damn.” He stares at his loafers, throwing paper clips at them as they rest against the cash register. “I need a new pair of shoes.”

“I’m sure you could find something,” she says as she heads over to her register to help two boys trying on sweaters.

He empty’s his hand of the paper clips and thinks of what he could do if he left the store. He thinks of selling insurance or real estate or getting some type of corporate job, but as hard as he thinks, he knows he is unqualified for all of them. He is a failure and he knows it.

“I’m not a failure!” he says to me, turning and looking up to the ceiling tile where I am perched and telling the story from.

“You can’t do that, this is third person,” I retort.

“Well, you don’t expect me to just sit here,” he starts, climbing on top of the counter and standing on it to get a closer look at me, “and have you tell the story of my life when you’re getting it all wrong?” He stands there, staring up at me as if he could change his whole history, his whole character with just a deletion of a paragraph.
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“You don’t expect me to have you tell it, do you? I ask him. “You’re unreliable. You’d try and make yourself out to be some stock broker on Wall street rather than a piss ant little sales clerk in this dumpy department store.”

“I would not,” he says shaking his head. “Why don’t you come down from there, I can barely see you?” I was talking through a small crack and he could most likely see only my nose.

“No, I can’t, then it would be a first person and I don’t want that.” He tries jumping up to the ceiling, but he comes far short and falls onto a rack of suits.

“Why not?”

“I’ve had too many first person stories lately and all my characters act like me. They all read a lot, feel the world is a hopeless place and have fascinations with women who are taller than them. They bore me.” He lies on the gray and charcoal suits, looking astonished at what is taking place.

“But his is my story. I should have a say in it!”

“No,” I say, “you’ve held it up too long anyway.” I close the tile and let him alone.

“How strange,” he says to himself as he picks himself up off the suits and begins rehanging them.

“What happened here?” Francine asks, bending down to help him.

“I fell on the rack.”

“Fell on the rack? What were you doing?”

“I was, uh, talking to someone and lost my balance,” he says, loosening his shirt from his back, stuck from a sudden flow of perspiration.

“Who were you talking to?” she asks, brushing off the last 43 long and setting it back on the rack.

“I don’t know, I can’t remember now.”

“Maybe you hit your head on the floor. You should have it checked.” She puts her hand on the back of his head and feels for bumps of unusual size.

“No, I don’t need it checked, I’ve just been here too long. This place is turning me into a premature version of my grandfather. I’m losing my memory and I complain all the time.” He takes off his shoe and rubs his toes. “There’s gotta be more to a career than this.”

“You should get new shoes. It’s no wonder your feet hurt, those things have had it.”

“I just told you I did. Does anybody listen to me?”

“Huh?”

“I said...oh,” he says, realizing her joke. “Ha, ha.”

“Oh lighten up a bit, Wendal,” she says.
“Don’t you see? I need more than a new pair of loafers, I’m talking about a future, a life. I’m talking about doing more with my self than selling discount men’s wear. Where are the classifieds we were looking at before?”

“They’re under the register.”

“Today I’m going to change my life.”

“Well you change your life, I’m going to straighten up. If Mr. Crems sees the place looking like this you’ll have to find a new job sooner than you think,” Francine says, looking hard into Wendal’s eyes. He feels the intensity of her stare, as if she wants to tell him something more.

He goes through the paper, bypassing the retail jobs and circling salary-sales jobs with a black felt-tipped marker. He is determined to get out of the stalemate he has put himself in. He begins to look back at his life as he has on many a night, lying on his parent’s couch in the cool darkness of their living room. He lived at home throughout school, forced to go to the city community college because his high school grades weren’t good enough to get into any university. For four years he ate and slept at home, studying in his room and stretching himself out on the couch before he went to bed, wishing it was all different.

He would look up into the shadows on the ceiling as if he was looking through a chronological history of his life, wanting to change everything he had done wrong which far outnumbered the things he had done right and wanted to keep. He wished he hadn’t clowned around so much and tried a little harder in school. He wished he had more direction, more focus. Every night he went to bed tense and frustrated and afraid that he had dug himself a hole that he would have to eat out of and sleep in the rest of his life. Yet, each morning, each new day, he did absolutely nothing to change it.

He sets the paper down and wonders what things he would change if he had the chance, and what things he would keep. Setting the garage on fire and dating Susan Stratner, the hair conscious, unsatisfied, tyrant, who ran three of the most important adolescent years of his life, ranked in the top five, but making something of himself stood far and above at number one.

“I’m going to the bathroom.” he yells across the empty sales floor to Francine.

“Don’t be long,” she says, “I can’t handle this by myself.”

Six inches away from the clear bathroom mirror, Wendal Pembroke looks deep into his own eyes and sees how he has thrown away every opportunity he’s had and now seems to be in a spiral of self defeat. He is a loser and feels destined to be one for the rest of his life.

“I’m not a loser,” he says, peeking over the toilet stall where I was sitting, writing furiously on a legal pad.

“God, would you quit doing this!” I yell, startled at the appearance of his face.
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“I’m not a loser, and I’m going to break out of this.” he says, holding himself up on the stall.

“You are too, face the facts. You’ve done nothing with your life. Every opportunity you’ve every had, you’ve thrown away. You had a chance to transfer from that kindergarten community college to an accredited university but you turned it down so you could be closer to Susan what’s her name.”

“Stratner,” he says, sounding embarrassed to even mention the name. I was going hard on him, but his attitude had begun to grate on me. Besides his feelings meant nothing.

“Right. And what did it get you? Three years of wasted life, on top of the twenty or so you wasted on your own. Every penny you made in that time went to outfitting her jewelry collection. The only interesting thing you’ve done in your life was set your parent’s garage on fire.” I say as I come out of the toilet and face him. He sits in the sink, staring at the floor tiles. His eyes have just a bit of water to them and his face looks as if it had just sat through ten of his father’s most intense lectures back to back. He plays aimlessly with a loose thread on his pants. He’s crushed and I love it.

“I’ve always regretted that.”

“I haven’t.” He gets up from the sink and brushes the wrinkles on his pants.

“I’m breaking out of this,” he says. “I’m starting a new life, today.”

“No you’re not.” I tell him.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve decided to get you fired.”

“You can’t do that!”

“I can too, I’m writing this. And get used to those shoes,” I say, motioning to his beat up loafers, “they may have to last you for awhile.”

Francine sits on the hood of Wendal’s car, a can of soda resting against the windshield, waiting for him as he walks from the rear entrance of the building and his return from his meeting with Mr. Crems. She isn’t sure if she should prepare to console him or congratulate him, so she waits to hear the news from him as he saunters, dragging his feet on the pavement, making his way to the car.

“Fired,” he says concisely.

“He fired you? For what?” she asks, sliding off the bumper.

“Failing to meet sales quotas is what it came down to. I also got a rather lengthy lecture on how some people just aren’t meant to be salesmen.” She comes close and hugs him but he leaves his arms dangling at his sides, temporarily paralyzed from the emotional shock waves he is suddenly being hit by.

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“‘It’s gonna be all right.’ she says close to his chest.

“Yeah,” he realizes, looking at her head nestled against his shirt, wondering if she means it.

They drive in silence as Wendal watches the road with a glazed look in his eyes, holding up traffic at every stop light when he doesn’t notice the lights change. Getting fired was a final straw. He is not helpless into letting himself fall into that spiral of self-defeat, completely submerged into the current of the downward slide that he had ridden all those years. He looks at Francine, the wind blowing through her hair from the open window, and thinks about her hug and his sudden attraction to her. It could never happen though, he would never ask her to get involved with such a loser as himself.

“Francine,” he asks, clearing the film over his eyes, do you want to get involved?”

“To what degree?” she asks, playing with her hair and smiling brightly at him.

“Do you want to go out on a date?”

“That’s a good start.”

He asks her and that is that. He shouldn’t have, but he did and he begins to get a false sense of control that he knows is nothing but a hormonal jolt, and will never last.

“I think I’m finally gaining some self-control,” he says, smiling for the first time that afternoon.

They see each other constantly for the next couple of weeks, though Wendal knows the relationship will never last. It is only a matter of time before she discovers what he really is—a lifeless, futureless ex-retail sales clerk who is hard pressed to name a single thing he has going for him. He makes no effort to find a new job, for he is unqualified for work. He is content to move into middle-age living at his parent’s house, keeping the lawn cut and attending to their garden in the back.

“I got a job,” he tells Francine suddenly as they sit at what has become their regular table at a near-by delicatessen. He could barely believe what he was saying.

“You did!” she yells, dropping her corned beef and throwing her arms around him. “Doing what?”

“Selling office furniture. It’s not great, but I think it’s a good start. I can get some sales experience under my belt and in a couple of years move on to something bigger,” he says, emphasizing the point with a forceful crunch of a potato chip.

“That’s fantastic. I’m so proud of you.” She kisses him and he looks at her, amazed that he could be this happy.

“I’ve got to go the the bathroom,” he says getting up. “All this excite-

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ment gets to me.”

He is whistling as he comes into the bathroom when I storm out from behind the door and hit him over the head with a roll of paper towels.

“Ow, what was that for?” he asks.

“I think you know,” I say. “Dating Francine, getting a job, avoiding the spirals of self-defeat. I didn’t write any of that.”

“Do you always hang out in bathrooms?” he asks me, rubbing his head.

“Amazed that you could be as happy as you were. Where did that come from? You were on a self-perpetuating downward fall, where did this happiness come in?” I say, pacing the small confines of the bathroom. He watches me, still rubbing his head, but with a small trace of a smirk on his lips. I eye his face while I lecture, astounded that it barely looked familiar to the one I saw falling on the rack of suits.

“It’s my life. I think I’m certainly allowed to improve it if I have the chance.” He brushes his hair in the mirror though it was for the most part all in place.

“It’s not your life, it’s my life. I created it. If I say you’re spiraling, you’re spiraling. Now drop her and quit your job.”

“Never,” he laughs. “You know for awhile I thought if I found you, I could rewrite or redo whatever you had done to my life. All I needed was that yellow pad and I could rip out the pages of Susan Stratner and whatever else I didn’t like and work in whatever kind of wealth and success I wanted to.” He takes a towel and brushes off his shoe. “But then I decided that if anyone was going to turn my life around it was going to be me.”

“Oh, did you? And those aren’t the shoes I gave you,” I say.

“These are the same shoes I’ve always had, I just took them in to get them shined up and have the soles replaced. I couldn’t afford a new pair, being fired, so this was the next best thing.”

I watch as he gives a quick and proud polish as if they were straight out of the box and suddenly understand what it all means. I make for the stall and get out my legal pad.

“Where are you going?”

“Keep your job,” I say. “You were right, make the best of it.”

“Thanks,” he says and walks out.

He sits down with Francine and takes a big bite out of his corned beef, completely confident that everything is going to go his way.