

Galen R. Faison

DO SUM SUM

It wasn't just his jogging that caught my eye. It was more so how he jogged. It was an odd little trot—fists tucked under armpits, mimicking wings; legs bowed, twirling like egg-beaters. What an odd little trot, I thought. Besides his unusual gait, the man was otherwise unremarkable. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, wore his brunette locks to just before shoulder length. He was a little thick in the waist, was neither especially tan nor pale and was dressed in a modest (think middle management) fashion. In fact, the only thing atypical of his dress was his Mets baseball cap. He wore it low, brim pulled to brow.

My eyes trained on him as he abruptly pivoted 180 degrees, hunched low, and sprinted a good fifteen yards. With momentum building, he leapt into the air; his arms spread out like airplane wings, his legs bent slightly at the knee (frog-like). His head was tilted back so far that the brim of his Mets cap pointed to Heaven. His necktie and hair flapped behind him like a cape. He was Baryshnikov without the style, grace or athleticism. Gravity called him home. He landed awkwardly, stumbling headlong and catty-corner for several yards before regaining his balance.

Apparently not finished, he began to furiously run in place; his chin tucked deep into his chest (brim pointed to Hades now); he pumped his arms and legs maniacally and then launched himself again. While airborne, he warbled, "Believe it or not, I'm walking on aiiirrrrrrr!" His arms were militarily rigid at the sides of his arrow-straight body. His face was tilted up to the clouds

again. His toes levitated, for only a moment, a few inches above the ground. This time he touched down a bit easier, more or less in the same spot from where he took off.

Standing still, he looked flushed from the exertion and positively pleased with himself, the cat that got the canary. He smiled stupidly as he tucked in his shirt tails and readjusted his tie.

I've lived in the city for a long time now. You get used to seeing the damndest things. Typically, drunks or deranged street-wraiths exhibited the Jogging Man's peculiar behavior. He didn't appear to be either. Standing on the city sidewalk, he looked normal and blended in with the swarms of after-work drones who were making beelines back to their hives.

I was acutely annoyed by two realizations: First, the drones barely acknowledged the Jogging Man's antics. They seemed indifferent (impatiently buzzing past him) despite him almost bowling over more than a few of them. Were they so consumed by their Sisyphean trifles that they no longer appraised the out-of-order? Second, I thought the Jogging Man to be a complete jackass to display such buffoonish brio so close to (what I assumed to be) his professional base.

Or perhaps, I was just hypersensitive. I'd just come from an adjacent office—with my tail tucked—after a poorly executed job interview. I'd really mucked it up. You see, I was newly laid off, another victim of the recession. During the interview, I was pretty wound up. I stammered stupidly, anxiety spilling with my every utterance. And here's the kicker: I'm due at Beth Israel's maternity ward in just a few hours to coach my wife through the birth of our first child.

Kerri's pregnancy was a surprise. We'd stopped trying to conceive because she has a condition called endometriosis, which is Latin for try-as-you-might-but-no-bambino-for-you. I had a job then. Of course, now that I'm unemployed, we get pregnant. Such is life. Still, Kerri's excitement has never waned. I'm envious of her enthusiasm. As I inch towards parenthood, my cloud of despair thickens. It fogs out all the pleasantries that a father-to-be should be enjoying. I wasn't in love with my old job but it paid well. I've learned the hard way that a B.S. in Information Science isn't recession proof. Neither is my psyche.

The Jogging Man was apparently still on the clock because he waded against the current of humanity and headed back to the office buildings. I followed him.

He walked a few feet and ducked into a glassed door with a Spartan sign hanging overhead. It read—Reliable Copy: When You Need It Done Right. I pushed open the door and entered. Inside, a semi-circular desk with a single PC dominated the front portion of a small office. Behind the front desk, the office was divided into machine and man. To the right was a platoon of technology: copiers, fax machines, computers and other complicated looking equipment. To the left were three work desks lined up in a single row. Each work desk held a mammoth PC monitor. There was an open door at the back of the office. Ancillary signage was plastered everywhere. The office was quiet except for a few whirs and clicks coming from the machines. The Jogging Man had disappeared. The place looked deserted. I was unsure of my next move—then I noticed, atop the last work desk, a Mets cap.

“Wow, you're quiet,” a disembodied female voice chuckled. The head of a young woman materialized next to a PC monitor, the middle work desk. She smiled. “I usually hear people when they come through the door. I'll be with you in a sec.” She stood and stepped from behind the work station that had obscured her entire petite body. She wore a blue apron—emblazoned with the Reliable Copy mantra—and a name tag that read: April.

“How may I help you?” she asked. I was unsure of how to reply. I didn't actually need to copy or fax anything. So, I studied the various signs around the office with my lips puckered, as if weighing my options.

“Oh . . . I'm . . . just looking.” I said, offering her a stock reply usually reserved for salespersons at department stores. I'm certain had I not been so well dressed and clean shaven, she would have mashed the panic button (all city stores have one or at least should) and dispatched a precinct full of police to drag me away. Instead, she just regarded me with slight amusement and said, “Well if you see something you like, holler.” She returned to her work desk.

At that point, I was going to call April back, ask a few customary questions, and feign interest in her answers. I didn't want to leave looking like a psycho. But then I heard male voices coming

from the door at the back of the store. The Jogging Man walked out followed by an older gentleman. They were talking shop. The older chap was apparently calling it a day.

“We get an ETA on that FedEx from Sterling Trust?” asked the old man.

“Should be in before we close. I’ll set that job up tonight and ship it first thing,” answered the Jogging Man.

“Good, good,” the old man responded, giving the Jogging Man an avuncular pat on the back. “Seems like those bastards at Sterling place these last minute orders just to test our deadlines.” They stopped at the foremost work desk. The older man gathered his sports coat and fedora.

“Mr. Finch,” the Jogging Man said, helping the older man with his sports coat, “We won’t give them the satisfaction of a blown a deadline. Not on my watch.” This exchange sank one of my theories about the Jogging Man. I assumed that he was self-employed, and thus could act a damned fool because he had no boss to answer to. Well he had a boss, and his boss trusted him with the big-dog accounts; I was familiar with Sterling Trust. Still, I couldn’t fathom that his boss would okay with his—

“You looked a little rusty out there today, kid,” said the old man, “A bit shaky on one of them jumps. I thought you were going to hit the dirt and slide into home.”

The Jogging Man laughed. “Yeah, I was headed home alright, but instead of home plate, I almost slammed a parking meter.” They all laughed, April included. They were all crazy.

“Hold on a sec, Mr. Finch.” April slid her purse over a shoulder. “I’ll walk you to the parking lot. I wanna get a bite and move my car around before it gets dark.”

“Good idea, my dear,” said Mr. Finch, offering April his elbow in a chivalrous fashion, “Lots a’ crazies running the streets these days.”

Running the streets? I thought. *You’ve got a class-A, certified loon running your store!* April intertwined elbows with Mr. Finch. I watched them stroll out the door. “Hold the fort, Ricky,” April called over her shoulder. I turned to the Jogging Man. His name tag read: Richard. I was alone with a nut-job. Although up close, he looked incapable of that display I’d witnessed a moment ago. His mania had passed. He was now the consummate professional.

“Afternoon,” he said cheerily. He walked up to the PC at the front desk. “Was April helping you with something?”

“Actually, I was . . . uh . . . hoping to speak with you.”

“Really? You have an account here? Problem with an order?”

“No.” I searched for the words. “It’s just—well I saw you outside and . . .”

“Ooooh, I see,” he said, now wary. “Pardon me. Did I bump you?”

“Oh, no,” I replied. “Miraculously, you missed everyone. I was just curious . . . well I was just wondering . . . if maybe you’d hit the lottery or something? Because you were really *out there*.”

“No . . . no lottery,” he said blankly, “just the Mets.” He said this matter-of-factly, as if it should explain everything. I studied him. A sports nut? Sure, they can be eccentric but that explanation fell short.

“Okay. Then—” The business phone rang, drowning out my query. Richard answered and fielded an order. He held the phone to his ear with a shoulder while touch-typing the order into the computer. When he hung up, I expected him to pick up our conversation. Instead, he kept typing.

“So, you a big Mets fan?” I reopened our discussion.

He glanced at me from his monitor as if he’d forgotten we were conversing. “You can say that.”

“And you do this every time the Mets play?”

“Depends,” he said flatly, peering back into his monitor. His fingers never stopped working. They mauled the keyboard.

“Yes? Depends on what? Why today for example?” I felt obnoxious, asking so many questions.

He didn’t answer right off. For awhile, the only sound emanating from him was the clickety-clack of the keyboard. It sounded like an army of tiny plastic spiders marching out of step. He finally said, “Close game today. We were tied going into extra innings.”

“I see.” He was giving me nothing. Why so guarded, Ricky? After all, you were the one prancing about imbecilely amongst the throngs of civilized society. After such a display, shouldn’t you expect a few questions? I kept digging. “Well, did it work? Did you guys pull it out?”

“Hmmm?” The typing stopped. Richard cocked his head like an inventor struck by a Eureka moment. “Good question. I hadn’t thought to check.”

I hadn’t thought to check? After that crazy-ass rain dance, wouldn’t he want to know if his funky little jig had worked its mojo? Richard was indeed a strange fruit. I watched as he swirled the computer-mouse in little arcs and clicked to a baseball website. He searched the scoreboard.

“Nope,” he said nonchalantly and with a little shrug. “K-Rod blew the save. Ah well, live to fight another day.”

“*Live to fight another day?*” my tone was incredulous. Richard was on trial. “Don’t you care now? Why wouldn’t you care now? I just saw you outside trying to achieve spaceflight. Now, all of a sudden you’re all *que sera, sera*? What sense does that make? Lemme me ask you, that

spastic ballet of yours, does it ever work? All bullshit aside, do you really believe it helps you win ball games?"

He answered evenly, "The outcomes are the outcomes. I'm not consumed by outcomes."

I pressed my cross-examination. "Then why do it? Why hop around in the street like you've lost your ever-loving-mind. Especially if you're unconcerned with outcomes?"

"Well," Richard shrugged again, smiled apologetically and said, "Sometimes you gotta do something."

Sometimes you gotta do something?

I slapped the counter in frustration. I opened my mouth to pursue a new angle of questioning. The door opened behind me and stalled my words at the lips. It was the FedEx guy. He carted in about a dozen long cardboard mailing tubes. The Sterling Trust stuff had arrived. Richard walked from behind the front desk. He and the FedEx guy gabbed for a few minutes while sorting the shipment. I spied a water cooler and had a drink. The FedEx guy left in a flash and we were alone again. Richard was back to work, trying to grab all the tubes in one armful. They looked cumbersome.

"You need help with those?" I asked. I was feeling a little foolish after practically yelling at a complete stranger.

"Uh . . . sure. I could use an extra hand . . . literally." Richard was struggling, now employing a knee to corral the unruly tubes.

I grabbed about six tubes and followed Richard behind the front desk. We stopped at a large, wire-mesh basket marked: PENDING. He placed his tubes in the basket and I followed suit. Now unburdened, we stood for a moment sharing an awkward silence. He sighed and motioned to the work desk with the Mets cap atop, "Have a seat."

I sat and decided I'd let him dictate the protocol of our powwow. I wasn't sure of how to proceed or what to even ask. *What was the point to all this?* Was he going to regale me with some silly little baseball anecdote? Or worse, jabber incessantly about on-base percentages and runs batted in? I wanted neither. Maybe he was simply a head-case, or as my favorite cousin would say, a 7-30—Rikers Island slang referring to the administrative form for inmates who went ape-shit.

"Coffee?" Richard offered.

"No thanks. If you hadn't noticed, I'm already a little wired."

"Understood." He pulled up a chair and sat across from me. We were alongside his desk, our knees facing each other. "Long day?" he asked.

“You can say that. I had an interview over at Hayne & Klein this afternoon. It wasn’t my best day. I performed about as well as your closing pitcher.” I paused for a moment, and since I was in the figurative ballpark, I asked, “Speaking of which, this whole jogging dance, is it really about baseball?”

Richard paused. “Yes and no,” he said absently. His eyes fixated on the Mets cap. He pursed his lips in thought. He was probably deciding whether to let me into his whacky little world. The strange thing is, I would’ve waited eons for him to come to a decision. Call it irrational but I was drawn to him, needed to hear him. But what could he impart to me? I mean, he wasn’t Yoda or some mountaintop guru with keys to the meaning of life. He wasn’t Plato or *The Matrix*’s Morpheus offering me the red or blue pill. He was just Richard (sometimes Ricky) who practiced ritualized lunacy during close Mets games but was otherwise a damned fine copy tech. When he spoke again, the words were unexpected.

“My brother died of cancer.”

Yikes.

“I’m sorry,” I said, remembering the old proverb about being careful for what you wished for.

“It’s okay. This was awhile ago, ‘86 to be exact, the same year the Mets won the World Series. You follow baseball?”

“I follow the Yanks, but I remember the ‘86 series.”

“*Ugh*, a Yankees fan. I should’ve known.” Richard grimaced in mock disgust. He relaxed his face into a smile and said, “I’m kidding. To each his own. ”

“It’s cool. Twenty-six championships will bring out the haters,” I said jokingly. I once read a bumper-sticker that stated: IF YOU’RE NOT THE GIANTS, THEN YOU’RE JUST THE JETS; IF YOU’RE NOT THE YANKEES, THEN YOU’RE JUST THE METS. Variations of this sentiment can be found on either side of the Hudson River.

“Touché.” Richard fingered his Mets cap. “Speaking of championships, I remember the ’86 series like my brain DVR’d it. The year before, my big brother Russell was still in high school. Lemme tell you, saying he was a baseball phenom would be like calling the Titanic a boating mishap. Russ had all the tools, y’ understand? He was a legitimate five-tooler.”

I whistled in acknowledgment. “Not many of those around these days.”

“*Oh yeah*, man. He made a bunch of All-America teams, was elected as Player-of-the-Year in a few papers. Heading into graduation, he had the colleges rolling out the red carpets and the majors rolling out the greenbacks. It was an exciting time. Well, until Russ got sick.”

“Sick . . . just as his life was about to take off.” I thought about life’s unfairnesses, like the man who drops dead on his retirement day.

“Hell, all our lives. You see, he’d already planned to go pro. We needed money. I mean, it was just me, Russ and our mother. We were struggling. Mom worked hard but her paycheck was spread thin. Our father, the lame bastard that he was, skipped town. I was in middle school. What could I do? So Russell took it upon himself to save the family.”

I am an only child. I often wondered how it would’ve been to have had a brother. “He was your hero?”

“Dude, he was my big brother. My hero before he ever tried on a cleat or swung a bat. ”

“I’ll bet. Did he ever get to make it to the big time?”

“The Mets weren’t about to let a local talent like Russ slip from their own backyard. So they picked him up. Before that, me and my mother followed all the local clubs. Once Russy got picked, the Mets became our club. It’s easy to root for a team that puts food on your table.”

“That’s understandable,” I said. “The way my day is going, the Mets could buy my allegiance with a box of franks and a case of Cokes.” We laughed.

“Please, continue,” I said.

“After high school, Russ started playing on one of the Mets’ farm teams. He was doing great, but then he started having problems with his foot. It kept going numb. Then came the seizure. He got checked out and they found a brain tumor. Doc said it was the ‘good kind’—that it was treatable.”

“The good kind.” I shook my head. Unbelievable.

“Russ had surgery and started radiation treatment. In a few weeks, he was back at the ballpark. He never stopped working. He wasn’t himself but he pushed through.”

“He had that true warrior spirit. It’s rare,” I said, and I meant it.

“Damned right he did.” Richard nodded his head earnestly. “Anyway, Mom and me, we were juiced for the ’86 season. Russell was working back to full strength. Man, he was really coming along then—*boom*—he went for his three-month checkup, y’know, just to get cleared and—”

“Bad news.”

“Yep. The cancer was back and it was pissed.”

“That sucks.”

“At first, Russy didn’t get down about it. He just geared up and gave it another go. He was back in treatment; radiation then chemo. He was plenty sick this time, though. Weaker too. We lived in that hospital. Yep, that was in ’86, the year we discovered the Do Sum Sum.”

“The Do Sum Sum?” I repeated. I had a name to go with the action. “The—”

“Jog, dance . . . whatever you want to call it.” Richard paused. His look conveyed that this was the tricky part of his story. “See, it started with Russ. He wasn’t superstitious like a lot of ball players but he did have a little thing he’d do. When he was at bat, he’d waggle his hips a little. This always tickled the shit out of Mom. I mean it. Every time he did it, she’d giggle her ass off.”

“Your mom sounds like fun.”

“You don’t know the half. Hell, she even started doing it. Every time Russy went in for a surgery or a procedure, she’d wiggle her scrawny backside around. Right in the hospital.”

I suppressed a laugh. I didn’t want to insult Richard, but an ass-wiggling mother? A snicker escaped my lips.

“Hey, it’s okay to laugh, man. I still laugh myself. Anyway, she’d do the waggle. Well, I wasn’t going to be left out of the fun, so I got into it too. Then Russ would join in. Could you imagine such a thing? The three of us, three Elvises, wiggling and rocking our hips in a little family huddle? We didn’t care what we looked like as long as Russy got well.”

“That’s not so strange. It’s actually beautiful when you think about it, but—” I needed more, “—outside, that was more than a little Elvis action.”

Richard nodded. “Well, Russ’s second battle with cancer was taking its toll. He was bald. His skin was the wrong color and flaky. For the first time, I realized that my brother wasn’t super-human. That scared me. He was down a lot. It felt like he was running out of juice. He stopped watching ballgames. I mean, he wouldn’t even talk baseball. Now that really scared me. But all of that changed when the Mets got into the World Series.”

“He watched the series?”

“We watched every game. Mom cooked every day of the series. Russ wouldn’t eat much but at least he was into the game again. You remember how that series went?”

“Yeah, Boston was up three games. The Mets won two games but game six—.”

“—Game six wasn’t looking good. We were about to get put to bed. So Russ says ‘Man, if I was playing, the Mets would have this sewn up.’ Then Mom says, ‘Show ‘em how you’d do it Russy.’ And as weak as he was that day, Russ stood, gave a little wiggle and—boom—Knight gets a hit. Strawberry, who was on second base, scores. So I say, ‘Jeez Russ, you just got your first major league hit.’ We yucked it up about that. So then Mookie Wilson comes to the plate. Me and Mom, we link up with Russ and get to wiggling our patooties—” Richard popped up from his seat to demonstrate the waggle. Still sitting, I was eye-level with his undulating crotch. Thankfully, he sat back down to continue his story. “Mookie winds up—”

“—and gets a hit. Against Clemens no less.” I remembered.

“Right! So up comes Heep to the plate—”

“—he grounds out.”

“But Knight scores! It’s two-two. We got a tie game. It goes on like this. The Mets would get behind and stall. Then Russy would say, ‘Alright guys, on your feet, let’s Do Sum Sum!’ We’d get to gyrating and then they’d score. Every time. It was hilarious but damned if it wasn’t spooky too.”

“So let me guess, the game goes into that epic tenth inning and you guys are doing the *Do Sum Sum*?”

“Almost. See, by this time, Russ was worn out. He looks sick. He’s slumped in his recliner and says to me, ‘Ricky . . . I’m beat, little bro. You’re gonna have to Do Sum Sum for both of us.’ Well for some reason, I felt that waggling wasn’t enough. Something . . . just kinda took hold of me. I felt helpless against it. It’s like when your bladder’s full of good suds, and you just make to the head before hosing yourself?”

I nodded, thinking back to all the chug-a-lugs I partook of in college.

“The release was like that. Like if I didn’t let loose, I’d burst. So I waggled. I jogged. The jogs turned into sprints. Sprints into leaps. Leaps into pirouettes. A couple of times, I ran onto the lawn and boogied my way back into the house. I was going *full tilt*. But it felt right, like it had to be done. More so for Russ than the Mets. It had to be done so that he could live. Maybe play in a World Series one day. And if not, that’s okay, then just be around. Get married. Have a family. Do whatever. . .” Richard paused, and then almost whispered, “. . . just don’t leave us.”

I gave him a moment, then asked, “So the outcomes? The outcomes were important then?” I sensed that I was at the cusp of understanding Richard’s inner workings.

He nodded and then slipped on the Mets cap. “Okay, remember in the tenth inning, how the Mets were down two runs and the Red Sox only needed an out to win the series? Dude, I Do Sum’d Sum’d through that whole inning. I couldn’t help myself. To me, if the Mets lost, then we, my family, we’d lose. So I kept going. Boom—Carter singles, Mitchell singles, then Carter scores. We are closing in.”

“Then the Sox change pitchers. They bring in Stanley because they’re scared of Mookie’s bat.” I remembered how Stanley looked like a lamb being led to slaughter. “Stanley and Mookie are going toe-to-toe when—”

“—*Boom*— Stanley throws a wild pitch! Mitchell scores; game tied is five-five! Mookie hits a grounder toward Buckner. Buckner goes for the scoop to end the game but—”

“—Buckner lets the ball roll right through his fucking legs! Knight heads home—”

“The Mets win the game! We take game seven and are the ’86 world champs! The Do Sum Sum had worked its magic!”

I wanted to believe. I really did. Such a great story should not be left to even the most moderate cynic. Yet, a question lingered and I was too polite to ask it. Richard must have sensed this because he answered the question for me.

“Russy died two months after that. The Do Sum Sum couldn’t save him. Lord knows I thought it might.” Richard looked into me and said, “You’re probably thinking, what’s the use of the damned thing if it wins ballgames but lets big brothers die, right?”

“It seems like a bitter pill to swallow,” I answered.

“Back then, it was. But I’ve come to terms with it. I know what I felt was real. It was right. So I don’t question the Do Sum’s purpose. It’s just an exceptional chapter in our lives.”

“And that brings you peace?”

“Without the Do Sum Sum, Mom and me would’ve been worse off. We have the beauty of that memory. It became our touchstone. We became closer because of it and what it represented. Hell, I don’t claim to understand it all. Don’t need to.”

“How is your mother these days?”

“She’s great. She used Russ’s Mets money and started a little scholarship in his honor. I guess it was therapeutic for her. People got behind the foundation and it really blossomed. Now, she works it full time. You met April? She went to Villanova on Russy’s scholarship. She does Reliable’s graphic design work.”

“Oh.” I remembered my encounter with April. “She may think I’m a little weird.”

“Really?” Richard said, a little bemused. “I wouldn’t worry about that. After all, we thought each other strange just a moment ago. Me and April are both defectors from that stagnant corporate scene over yonder.” Richard waved his hand in the general direction of the offices outside.

I was familiar with the scene: the asphyxia of sitting in a cubicled-prison, sweating away over some project that was designed to make the bosses richer. *Screw North Jersey Mutual. They could stick it sideways. I was better off without them.* Still . . . a check was a check.

Richard continued, “Old Man Finch, he gave me a position here, an apprenticeship really. Then April came aboard. We helped him modernize and fend off the McCopy corporations like Kinkos and the lot. He’ll be retiring soon. April and I’ll run the place. We love this old shack. We set our own pace, not to mention, business has been steady despite the bad economy.”

“Be glad. It is indeed rough out there.” I sighed. There was weight in the action.

Richard gave my shoulder a reassuring pat. “Hey man, your outcome will be your outcome. I get the feeling you’ll be okay. You just need to find your Do Sum Sum. Something that’ll bring you peace. Maybe not a jog or dance—just—some exercise in faith.”

“Do Sum Sum.” I chuckled. “What a name.”

“It *is* that. Truth be told, I haven’t Do Sum’d in awhile. And never outside in the open like that. In the store from time to time, sure. But today, I was listening to the game and—boom—I caught the old fever.”

“I guess in some ways—”

My cellphone sang an Alicia Keys tune.

Kerri!

“Oh My God! I’m having a baby!” I blurted out, jumping to my feet. I tore at my right pants pocket searching for the tiny phone. Frenzied, I made a few quarter turns trying to get at the device. I looked like a crazed matador fighting an invisible bull. *Why do they make these things so small?* I get a hold of the phone and pull it free. Arthur freeing Excalibur from the stone. I spilled receipts, business cards and a few balls of lint onto Richard’s desk. He sat still and wide-eyed; his hands were raised to his shoulders like a man being held at gunpoint. A smile formed at the corners of his mouth.

I answered the call: “Baby? Ok . . . Ok. . . Okayeee! I’m on my way! My mother there yet? Good! I’m on my way! I’ll be there! 20 minutes!”

I took Richard’s hand and pumped it a few times. “Hey man, thanks for your time! Thanks for your story! I’m sorry if I bothered you! Good luck to you!” I turned, sprinted past the machinery and out the front door. Outside, I spotted April walking back from her break. She was holding a fountain soda and regarded me with that same amused expression. I intended to tell her that Richard and I had had a nice little gabfest. That we made a connection. That now, I was on my way to witness the birth of my baby girl. But when I ran up to her, all I could huff out was: “April! Richard and I talked! I’m having a baby!” And I was off again. I didn’t see April’s expression but her parting comment caught my ear:

“Cool. I didn’t know we provided that service.”

The delivery room is quiet except for the sound emanating from the fetal monitor. My daughter’s heart beats rhythmically. The sound, *boomsh-boomsh-boomsh*, resonates like a boxer hitting a speed bag underwater. The fetal monitor’s two sensor-belts are strapped around Kerri’s considerable midsection. She is trying to relax, but contractions are making that a formidable task. The contractions are increasing in frequency and intensity. I only know this because Kerri’s grimaces are becoming more frequent and intense.

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I’m guessing that every expectant mother has her way of coping with labor. Some may moan and

need to be cooed; others might cry out and have to be restrained. Kerri just wants quiet. The only sounds in the delivery room are the fetal monitor and the hushed conversation between my mother and Nurse Gwen. My mother is well versed in areas of childbirth. She is a southerner, and the oldest of ten children, many whom she helped deliver. Nurse Gwen was the neighborhood midwife in her Jamaican township. She came to the States to make it an official occupation. They are trading war stories.

Kerri had already hung her Quiet Please sign when I arrived at the hospital. Her eyes are closed. She is simply focused on breathing. So there was no reporting to her about my poor job interview or episode with the Jogging Man. I simply sit next to her bed, offering what I hope is moral support. We wait. My eyes go to Kerri's stomach, to the sensor-belts and then follow the length of the thin wires back to the fetal monitor. *Boomsh-boomsh-boomsh*. Alexa's heartbeat is strong and steady. *I'm having a baby girl; her name is Alexa*.

The fetal monitor features two numbers always in a state of flux. The number to the left is my main concern. It has a little heart icon that flashes with every heartbeat. Earlier, Nurse Gwen explained that during labor, a baby's heartbeat ranges from one-twenty to one-sixty beats per minute. Ever so often the fetal monitor alarms, signaling a drop in heart rate. This usually happens during contractions. It's normal but I hate the sound. Alexa's heartbeat is at one-thirty-nine. *Steady as she goes, Captain*. I close my eyes and try to match Kerri's mid-labor Zen.

Doubts invade my thoughts: *Shortly, I will be a father. A father without means. Our banks accounts are running on E. And work—that will support a mortgage and a family—is playing hard to get*. I sigh heavily. Kerri sucks in sharply—then expels a lungful of air. She is fending off another contraction.

“Big one, huh?” I ask quietly. She nods her head, eyes remaining closed. “Won’t be long now,” I say, giving her arm a little squeeze. She attempts a feeble smile. I appreciate the gesture. Nurse Gwen pads over to check on Kerri. I like her. She addresses me alternately as either Dad or Mr. Williams. Her Jamaican accent is thick, so when she says my name, it sounds like: *Meestah Will-ee-yahms*. Nurse Gwen has an elegant bedside manner. When the anesthesiologist arrived to administer the epidural (think big needle, delicate spine) she eased Kerri through the harrowing procedure. Nurse Gwen: the epitome of cool.

“Mom, how are we doing?” she asks, giving Kerri a once over, and then turns an appraising eye to the fetal monitor. Kerri just nods. “And you Mr. Williams? You hanging in there, Dad?” I smile and give her a thumbs-up.

I look over to my mother who is sitting quietly in a corner. I give her a thumbs-up too and she returns it. My mother, Sophia Mae Williams, the virtual do-it-all. Her help has been indispensable: packing the over-night bags, acting as Kerri's chauffeur, cooking, cleaning, organizing the baby shower—really taking care of business. She deserves the opportunity to see her grandbaby today. When I think of her commitment to us, it reminds me of Richard and his mother.

A young man and woman, both in scrubs, burst through the door. We all jump a little. Nurse Gwen shoots them a dirty look. They are resident physicians and have been assigned to us. I don't know their names and don't wish to. I just refer to them as Heckle and Jeckle. They have been running in and out for hours now, always disrupting our quiet. They carry themselves the way they *think* doctors should carry themselves: annoying and pompous. Heckle and Jeckle wear game show host smiles. They ask repetitive questions and hold Kerri's medical charts to the sky like they're watching a solar eclipse. Satisfied with themselves, they huddle and murmur in hushed tones; they figure themselves obstetrical mini-gods. Nurse Gwen rolls her eyes. Truth is, I have more faith in her expertise than that of Heckle and Jeckle.

There is a soft knock on the delivery room door. It creaks open, and Dr. Chevrone walks in without theatricality. *The Real Deal: leave the bullshit at the door.* As he walks to Kerri's bed, Heckle and Jeckle give him a wide berth. We haven't seen him in about a half-hour. He's been busy with the business of delivering babies.

"Okay guys. How are we doing? Mr. Williams? Mom?" His speech is always coated with sanguinity. I have no doubt that he could deliver a baby upside-down and blindfolded. He walks over to Kerri and gives her a little pat on the wrist. "Kerri, how are we feeling?" Kerri opens her eyes, rolls her head to the doctor and nods. He smiles warmly at her.

Dr. Chevrone takes a peek at the charts, at his watch and then at the fetal monitor. He looks at Nurse Gwen. She gives him a nod. He looks at me and winks. "I'm going to take another look, Mr. Williams. We might be able to get this show on the road."

Dr. Chevrone stands at the foot of Kerri's bed and snaps on a pair of surgical gloves. "Kerri dear, we are going get your feet up and see where we're at." He turns to Heckle and Jeckle who jump to action. They each grab one of Kerrie's legs and gently place them in the bed's stir-ups. Dr. Chevrone lifts my wife's gown, hunches down and looks into her Valley of Nativity. *Check the oil while you're under there, Doc.* He pops up and says, "You know what? I think we're a go."

The statement causes a flurry of movement. Everyone dons their surgical masks. Nurse Gwen and Heckle and Jeckle form a tight horseshoe around the business end of the obstetrical bed. Dr. Chevrone is at the center. My mother walks over. She and I post ourselves on each side of Kerri—each taking a hand. Kerri shifts into a position that will allow for maximum push. Dr. Chevrone makes eye contact with everyone. *All systems are go, Houston.*

He says, "Okay Kerri, remember how we discussed? You're going to push, just like you're making a bowel movement."

Kerri takes a deep breath and she pushes, exhaling wind. I feel like cheering. Instead, I offer calm encouragement, "That's it, baby. You're doing it." She breathes and pushes again, her face contorting with the effort.

The doctor chimes, "That's the way Kerri. Just like that. Give me another." Kerri takes a few more breaths. She is in pain but she doesn't cry out. She just breathes—and pushes again. The air

in her lungs hisses out like a punctured steam pipe. She will push in sets of threes, just like we practiced. Nurse Gwen nods at me. My mother smiles. Alexa is on her way.

After a short break, Dr. Chevrone says, “Okay Kerri, let’s go again. You are pushing like a champ, dear. I wish my other moms pushed like this.”

Kerri takes a breath and pushes for another set of three. Her cheeks puff out like she’s blowing out the world’s biggest birthday candle. Little droplets of spittle fly from the edges of her lips. Her bangs are plastered to her forehead with sweat. She grimaces, her face a mask of determined agony.

This must’ve been a good set because Dr. Chevrone says, “*Yee-up*. That’s the way Kerri, dear.” It looks like he’s smiling through his surgical mask. “Dad, we are crowning.” I give Kerri’s hand a squeeze and then let go. I have to get a first glimpse of Alexa. I go and stand behind the doctor; I look into the valley. The very top of Alexa’s head (an apple-sized tangle of hairs) is visible. Whoa. I shoot past Cloud Nine and into the double digit cumulus. I go back and retake my wife’s hand.

“Oh Kerri, I see hair! Lots of hair! You’re doing it, babe!” I say excitedly. Kerri nods but nothing else. She’s now hung the Mom-at-Work sign. And to work she goes, pushing through several more sets of three. She rests. My mother strokes her head.

I look to the doctor. I want a progress report but he is focused on Alexa. A seriousness exudes from behind Dr. Chevrone’s and Nurse Gwen’s surgical masks. Puzzlement from Heckle’s and Jeckle’s. *What’s going on?* I flit over and stand behind the doctor. I see why Dr. Chevrone isn’t reporting any progress. There’s no progress to report. Alexa hasn’t move an inch from when I last checked.

“Kerri, when you’re ready, go again.” Dr. Chevrone’s stern voice is all business. Kerri pushes. She pushes. She pushes for all that she is worth. The fetal monitor alarms. *One-fifteen*. Both Nurse Gwen and Dr. Chevrone look at it and then at each other. Heckle and Jeckle are murmuring through their masks. I hear an alarming term escape from their exchange: emergency Caesarean.

The fetal monitor quiets. The heart icon number creeps back to one-twenty-two. After a quick reprieve, Dr. Chevrone asks Kerri to push again. She tries to push like before but is noticeably weaker. She is panting. The nurse and the doctor confer. I hear more alarming terms: android cervix and nuchal cord. I recognize them both. Kerri must have a triangle-shaped cervix and it’s trapping Alexa in the birth canal. Even worse, it appears that Alexa’s umbilical cord—once her sustainer of life—has turned traitor. It’s become a noose. The fetal monitor alarms again. *Ninety-five . . . ninety-three . . . eighty-nine*. Nurse Gwen walks over and silences the alarm.

“Dammit. I think she’s in fetal distress.” Dr. Chevrone hisses. He looks at Heckle and Jeckle. “We are going to give it another try here. You guys ready the OR.” Heckle and Jeckle scamper off like dutiful children running an errand for their father. My mother clasps her hands and does what she does best; she prays. Kerri is crying now—big, fat sobs. She is scared. I am scared.

“Kerri, again! Give us a good one. A really good one!” The doctor urges. Kerri, bless her heart, she tries but Alexa isn’t budging. The alarm sounds again. Eighty-six...eighty-four. My thoughts continue to betray me: *I am useless. I can’t support a child. The cosmos know that I will fail her. That’s why she’s dying. I’m already failing her. Letting her die right in front of me.* Kerri squeezes my hand to the breaking point. *Eighty-one . . . seventy-nine . . . seventy-six.* The alarm intones crazily. *I am useless.* Kerri raises her eyes to me. There is panic swimming in them. *Useless.* Nurse Gwen kills the alarm again. *Seventy-five... seventy-four.* A low, distressing moan seeps from Kerri’s ashen lips. She sharply pulls me to her.

With a cracked voice she whispers, “D-Derrick . . . do. . . some . . . something.”

Do some something.

Do Sum Sum.

I back away from the bed. I need space. I raise my arms like a whooping crane and waggle my hips. Dr. Chevrone and Nurse Gwen freeze and look at me quizzically. I bounce around on the balls of my feet, throwing jabs and uppercuts in the direction of the fetal monitor. I shuffle my feet like Ali in his prime.

I chant, “*Float like a butter fly, bite like a hound, it’s been long enough baby, you comin’ outta there now!*”

Dr. Chevrone shakes his head and says something to Nurse Gwen. She edges up to me, palms up, like a woman talking a jumper off a ledge. “*Meestah Will-ee-yums?*” she says, “I think you might want to be calming down now.” Her voice is so far away. She’s talking to me from another world.

I bounce in front of her and again I chant, “*Float like a butter fly, bite like a hound, it’s been long enough baby, BUT YOU comin’ outta there now!*” Nurse Gwen is still trying to reach me. I hunch down and pantomime punches to her gut, hitting the heavy bag. I grunt explosively with each shot: “*Hunh-hunh-hunh. I’m da boss. I’m da boss. I’m da boss.*”

Dr. Chevrone has chosen to tune me out. He has focused all of his will to one singular objective: to deliver this baby. *Upside down and blindfolded. I knew this guy was good.* Kerri eyes me with a distant curiosity but not much alarm. My mother has disappeared to the floor. She is kneeling, taking the prayers up a notch. She is petitioning God to save her grandchild so that she can take her rightful place in this world. She also prays for her son, that his senses take their rightful place in his head.

Nurse Gwen props open the delivery room door and calls for help. A troop of RN’s at the nurses’ station look up. The open door allows me to run out into the halls of the maternity ward. I bop my way up to the nurses’ station. The RN’s, like Nurse Gwen, try to reach me. They too are speaking from other worlds. I spot an umbrella and a clipboard sitting atop the station counter. I grab them. With the umbrella tucked under an arm and the clipboard held to my head, I belt out a song. I am Fred Astaire outfitted with cane and top hat. My toes tap-dance. *Puttin’ on the Ritz*

bellows from my mouth, only I change the lyrics, just a little: “*If your womb is closed and you don’t know where to go to; Why don’t you go where babies are born in a flash . . . slap ‘em on the ass!*” Tears stream down my cheeks but my voice doesn’t waver.

I spot Heckle and Jeckle in the hallway. They are frozen in place. *I betcha Gray’s Anatomy didn’t cover this*. A security officer is hustling his way down the hall. He plans to end my little act. I can’t let him stop me. The show must go on.

I head back to the delivery room. Nurse Gwen stands in the doorway with her arms extended out. She is a big letter T. She pleads, “*Meestah Will-ee-yums*. Get a hold of *yah-selve*. I cannot permit you—”

“*Jack be limbo, Jack be quick, Jack go unda limbo stick,*” I sing a new song. I shimmy my shoulders, lean backwards and hop forward. Nurse Gwen’s arm is my limbo stick. I shimmy under it and back into the delivery room.

Kerri has her arms folded across her face; her chest heaves up and down, wracked by sobs. Dr. Chevrone looks at me and shakes his head disapprovingly, as if to say: Not this guy again. My mother is still on the floor.

I glare at the fetal monitor. *Fifty-seven . . . fifty-three . . . fifty-one*. I turn my feet outward and bend my knees, my legs shape a diamond. I put my hands on my knees and waggle them rhythmically. I do the Charleston dance. I sing The Charleston song. I change the lyrics of course, but just a little: “*Alexa, Alexa. Come outta there ‘Lexa. Alexa, Alexa.*” Hospital staff bunch into the doorway. They bear witness to my insanity. Heckle and Jeckle creep back into the delivery room. They and Nurse Gwen are preparing to wheel Kerri to the OR. I sing, taking it an octave higher. “*Alexa, Alexa. Come outta—OOF!*”

Two beefy arms clamp around my chest, pinning my arms to my body. My back was to the door. Johnny Law has arrived. The security officer drags me backwards, out into the hallway. I continue singing and since I didn’t have use of my arms, I kick my legs high like a Rockette. *They are going to sedate me. Like in the movies, they are going to jab me with a needle and put my lights out*. The thought sends a panicked strength through me. I writhe loose from the guard and dart back into the room.

I dance. I sing, louder this time. I’m screaming in fact: “*Alexa, Alexa! Come outta there ‘Lexa! Alexa, Alexa!*” This time the officer yokes me by the neck. I’m stuck good this time. He’s dragging me away again. Away from Kerri. Away from Alexa.

“Hold it!” it’s Dr. Chevrone. “Something’s happening. Let him go Ramsey!” Ramsey pauses. I could almost imagine his expression clouded with uncertainty. The doctor snaps at him, “Now, Ramsey—Now!”

The vise-like pressure in my head subsides as Ramsey releases me. I shake off the cobwebs, wobble over, and stand next to Dr. Chevrone. I look to Alexa. The apple-sized tangle of hairs has grown.

“Go ahead,” Dr. Chevrone says low but with urgency. I fixate my eyes to the crown of Alexa’s head and I sing her song: “Alexa, Alexa. Come outta there ‘Lexa. Alexa, Alexa.” I Charleston. I Jitterbug. I do the Robot. My movement is ceaseless.

The fetal monitor’s readings go blank for a moment, the heart icon flashes, and then numbers come: *sixty-two... sixty-three...sixty-seven.*

“*Mary, mother of God,*” Dr. Chevrone says as if in a trance. He is leaning back; a man staring at the steering wheel of a car that has begun to drive itself. I look to Alexa. I see more of her now. She is being pulled by...something unseen. Coming to, as if lying atop an invisible conveyer belt.

I Pop-Lock. I do the Twist. I do the Bus Stop. *Eighty-nine. . . ninety-three . . . ninety-nine.* I see all of Alexa’s face now. *Oh, her beautiful, round face!* I see her neck and the umbilical cord wrapped around it. Dr. Chevrone has recovered from his stupor and readies his surgical scissors. He doesn’t need them. Alexa rotates slowly like a rotisserie chicken on a spit. The umbilical cord unwinds from her neck in two spins. *One-oh-six...one-oh-eight ...one-eleven.* She stops rotating and her shoulders come free. Kerri squeals. Two RN’s from the nurses’ station tend to her. Unnerved, Heckle and Jeckle hold each other.

I’m almost spent, but I keep singing: “*Alexa, Alexa. Come outta there ‘Lexa. Alexa, Alexa.*” My voice cracks. I weave with exhaustion. My clothes are damp and cling to me.

Mother is up. She walks over, takes my arm and puts it around her neck. She wraps her free arm around the small of my back. Sophia Mae Williams is not going to let her only son fall flat on his face. She joins me in Alexa’s song. Nurse Gwen does likewise at my other side. We rock, side to side, and sing. *Look at us, The Three Tenors of Beth Israel.* Alexa is out to her waist now. *Moving right along, Captain.* Dr. Chevrone cups his hands under Alexa. He’s not going to have a dropped baby on his résumé. *One-twenty-eighty . . . one-thirty-three . . . one-forty.*

I look to the doorway. Some of the hospital staff look in from the hallway, too spooked to venture into the delivery room (Ramsey is back the farthest). The rest have bunched themselves into a peanut gallery—*God bless ‘em.* Because some of them dance. Some sang. Some do both; an ensemble of sound and motion. *Alexa, Alexa. Come outta there ‘Lexa. Alexa, Alexa.* We are all doing something.

And through the symphony of voices, there is a new song, clamoring with life.