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Retirement Shim Shim

I could ruin this ruin party for everyone, I thought. I entered through the lobby entrance as usual, though not normally at this hour. The fluorescent lights in the dark of night. My reflection off the glass. I couldn't see the parking lot. I come here nearly every day, and not even this felt familiar anymore.

My phone rings, it's Gary again. "hey, are you close? We're almost about ready for cake." "Uh ya, I just got in the lobby. I'll be right up in a minute," I reply. "Alright, sweet, this place is actually a lot more crowded than I thought it'd be. I never realized how many people in the office knew Hank pretty well. I mean, damn, even Susan from hr is here. She hates parties, there's no way her humpty dumpty lookn ass is here this late just for some free pizza and dessert. Oh, I gotta go. Kay is calling me over. Let me know when you're up. The drinks are flowing tonight."

The call ends, and before the music starts playing in my earphones. There's a split second of silence. Enough time to bring my mind back to reality. My stomach drops. A leaden weight of dread that anchors me to the spot. A frigid wave of anxiety washes over me, its icy tendrils coiling tightly around my chest, squeezing until each breath becomes a laborious task. The air grows thin as whispers of panic begin to chatter in the back of my mind, and questions begin to manifest. Why me? Why did I have to be the one to do

this? I could have been up there by now, enjoying the party in ignorant bliss. Why did Hank have to pick me? Why did I agree?

The music resumes a relentless pulse of the kick drum paired with a bassline that's raw and distorted. It floods my mind, a myriad of sounds that drowns out the whispers of anxiety. Each beat is a hammer strike against the walls of my consciousness, reverberating through my thoughts, shaking the foundations of my fleeting stillness. I push the decision away, letting it hover in the distance. There's time still before the podium calls. To dwell on it now would only cause me to lose my composure. Anything more would be too much, tipping the scales towards an unease I'm not ready to hold. So I let it be, a question I try to save for later in an attempt to hold onto my sanity a little longer.

I enter the elevator and press the button to the eighth floor. It's the eighth of August, just five minutes shy of 8 o'clock. I couldn't help but laugh. I wanted to be thorough. When Hank asked me if I wanted to be one of the speakers, I agreed. Hank was a fixture here, held in high regard by everyone, but most profoundly by those with tenure stretching back years, much like his own.

Hank was the kind of figure you noticed the moment you stepped into a room, not just for his stature but for the sheer force of his personality. At 6'2" and built like two convection ovens stacked on top of each other, he had a presence that was both imposing and incredibly warm. His hearty laugh could echo down the hallways. His physical appearance was as distinctive as his character. Hank's neck, almost as wide as his head, supported a shiny bald dome that gleamed under the office lights, a stark contrast to the bushy white beard that framed his face. He was also a family man and philanthropist. He had a wife and two little girls that he would often bring around the

office. He also founded the Sembritldty Creek Foundation to help preserve and protect the creek and its surrounding ecological environment. This creek was an integral part of the community, so many of the employees here donated to the foundation.

Before this, I had come to admire that man. He had a way of motivating me in a way I couldn't quite understand. So when he gave me this one last task, I aimed to come prepared, to honor his career and accomplishments with the weight of my words. This was a huge opportunity. I knew everyone would be there, and having been here only two and a half years, I could make my presence felt throughout the company just as he had. Yet now, this once thrilling opportunity has lost its luster. In my quest for perfection, I delved too deep.

I walked into the office and was immediately confronted with a hoard of bodies, divided into smaller groups leading their own socratic discussions of politics, pop culture, and the occasional office drama. I recognize most of the people here, even the ones outside of my department. However, something was clearly off. Their faces, usually contorted inwards, exhibiting misery beyond what was palpable for even a 9-5 office job, were now unrecognizable. They weren't feeding off their own compounding sense of doom and gloom and actually enjoying themselves for once. It was a sight to see. Immediately, I noticed Gary and Kay standing out in a sea of revelers, seemingly inebriated beyond measure, at an impromptu blackjack table. Now, this was a familiar sight in and outside the office. I never gave it much thought, but that's probably why they're the only ones that I would consider a step above just co-workers.

The party planning committee outdid themselves this time, I thought to myself as I took a moment to take everything in. Decorations draped the office, adding splashes of color and vibrancy that contrasted the sterile environment we were all too accustomed

to. Balloons bobbed against the ceiling, and streamers lined the tiles. The usual desks and workstations were cleverly repurposed. Some became buffets, creaking under the weight of the food, which ranged from exotic cheeses to miniature gourmet treats. Others hosted an assortment of beverages, from sparkling waters to fine wines, ensuring that every toast was a moment to remember. I stopped to try some, but then I heard Gary. “Yo I thought that was you, what the hell took you so long fucker, Me and Kay just finished two more drinks and I just lost the rest of my cash hitting on 17 but hey win some lose some amiright.” He threw an arm around me and leaned in unnecessarily close in an attempt to whisper, but was only a decibel under what I would call yelling in my ear. “Ya know what? We gotta get you some drinks, loosen you up a bit. You’re stiff as hell. What you nervous for the old man’s speech?” I manage to create some space between us before I muster a reply. “No, it’s not that it’s just...” We were then interrupted by Kay’s raspy voice.

“Quit clownin around dickheads, are y’all goona come watch me wack this pinata or not. I hear it’s filled with Twix bars, lottery tickets, and old Happy Meal toys.” We both followed her down the aisle to the pinata. Halfway there, I noticed a couple of people standing grouped together in an office. Cups in hand, they looked to be laughing hysterically as the man in the middle was talking. Maybe telling some sort of joke or story. I could tell who it was instantly.

While I’m used to seeing Hank in his sweaters, bowties, and khakis, today, he showed up to the party in some khaki cargo shorts with about 8 velcro pockets, too many. A pair of yellow Crocs. A Hawaiian shirt and a white cowboy hat. I didn’t mean to, but I stared intently, taking in every detail. My mind drifted to my bag. In it, I had prepared two separate speeches. Each one brought its own misery. I wish we could

unlearn things that grow to eat at us from within. I look over at the pinata. Gary's already swinging blindly. A broken lamp and a couple staplers are on the floor, but still no candy or lottery tickets. A wave of jealousy washes over me. I tell myself over and over if only I had stayed ignorant, that could've been me right now. I was ignorant to the fact that I'd been staring at the man long enough for him to notice me. He yells over for me. "Ahah there's one of my elite employees, how ya doin' son. Enjoying the party, I hope." "Oh, for sure, it's really quite the spectacle. It's truly a party fit for someone as special as yourself, sir." I replied anxiously. With a hearty laugh and a slap on the back, he tells me, "Ah cut the shit, I don't want to hear none of that. I'm no better than any single person here, I can guarantee you that. Though I am pretty happy to see everyone enjoying themselves. In all my years here, I haven't seen a party like this in, well... never!"

He turns to everyone, yelling, "Come on y'all, I think it's just about time that we..."

Crash! Everyone turned.

Standing over a smashed computer while holding up half of his blindfold. Gary broke the silence as he hid the bat behind his back. "Oh Uh, sorry boss that was uh. It was Kay's fault. All her fault. Yup. I was uh, ya."

I heard Kay just slightly over the music calling Gary a dumbass. I chuckled.

"Thank you, Gary," Hank replied. "Well where was I? Ah yes, retirement can't come soon enough. Let's pack in the conference room for the final ceremony and, more importantly, some cake!"

Someone turned off the music. All I hear are the many footsteps reverberating toward the conference room. Reality sets in again. There's not much longer until I'm

forced to choose what to say. My knees shake, and my hands clamor. I feel around my bag. They're still there. I wait for everyone to funnel in. I wait outside for a bit. Staring out the window. I still can't see anything, only my reflection. I chuckle. This is how I see myself every day, a reflection of reality. This isn't truly how I'm perceived by other people. Oh well, people's own perceptions are no business of mine. Just then I hear a bout of laughter and clapping. I decide to head in.

I enter the conference room just before the last speech, just before it was my time to speak. I walk up to the podium. The room is quiet, the sound of my heartbeat is pounding against my ears from the inside. I set my bag down and pull out the two papers. I shuffle them a couple times and clear my throat. I start by introducing myself and describing my relationship with Hank. I had prepared well, getting some hearty laughs and jabs in at Hank which spread rapidly throughout the room. I had their attention. I took one of the papers and folded it up, placing it in my back pocket. I had made my decision.

"As many of you know by now, Hank isn't just a boss, he's a mentor, a friend, [idk insert something here I can't think of shit for this].

"Woo!" Frankie yelled.

I continued, "My thoughts exactly. See, there are countless stories I could share, but perhaps what stands out the most is Hank's unwavering belief in us. In a world that often demands we prove our worth, Hank has always been there to remind us that we are valued, that we are capable, and that we can make a difference, and in turn, we believe in him. As we stand on the brink of Hank's retirement, it's not just the end of an era; it's the beginning of a legacy. A legacy built on laughter, hard work, and an immense heart. Hank, as you embark on this new chapter, know that you leave behind not just a

team but a family. A family that is better for having known you, worked with you, and learned from you." I raise my glass high.

"So, here's to Hank. May your retirement be filled with the same joy, passion, and adventure that you've brought to our lives. And remember, no matter where you go or what you do, you'll always have a home here with us. Thank you, Hank, for everything."

The crowd erupted. The room filled with tears, clapping, and people lining up to congratulate Hank personally. Amongst the chaos, I finished my drink and swiftly made my exit. I walked back to the elevator. I made it back to the lobby. I exited out into the parking lot. I've never seen everyone together like that, in such high spirits. I wish I could've been a part of that, but I made my decision to spare them the truth. I couldn't find it in me to ruin a man's entire career and image in front of the people who adored him, no matter how much of a deceitful prick he really is.

I make my way over to a luxury Benz. The sign in front reads "Reserved for VP." I lift up the wiper blade and place down the folded paper from my back pocket.

"This should be enough," I say to myself. If he was the only one to know that I knew, that would be enough. I breathe a sigh of relief and walk off.

Back at the office, it's nearly midnight. The rest of the office is long gone. Gary, Kay, Susan, and Hank are the only ones left. Spending the last hour or so chatting away over a game of chess. Eventually, the group grows tired, Susan leaves, and Kay drags Gary back down to the lobby. Hank leaves them behind, deciding to stay in his office just a bit longer. Kay was just about sobered up by now, but to her dismay, Gary could not say the same. Making it apparent as he stumbled his way twice around the revolving door, almost falling flat on the final rotation. As they made their way out, Gary stopped in his tracks. "Come on already. I want to get home I'm tired." Kay insisted. "Shhhhhh

wait. Somebody gave Hank a ticket, I want to see how much,” implored Gary. “
Whatever I’m leaving, you can walk home.”

Breaking the moment of silence that followed, Gary muttered to himself, “Oh
Shit.”