



UP

GLENN GILLIS

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BY

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UP

The late afternoon sun shone down brightly on the cherry red Ford Mustang in front of the Barrington Real Estate building. It was July 16th, almost the middle of summer, and one of the hottest days in July. Derek Young looked admiringly at his latest acquisition as he walked towards the red car. The 2016 Ford Mustang came with all the most modern conveniences; tinted windows, all around, electric windows on the two doors, electrically adjustable mirrors, an A.M./F.M. radio equipped with a CD player, four on the floor stick shift. The dash had a wood laminated counsel with all the gauges well in view. There was a wood laminated storage area on the transmission mound between the two front seats with two-cup holders. The highlights were the black leather-bound bucket seats in the front. The uniform seat in the back was also bound in black leather, as was the steering wheel. He had specifically asked for black leather when he had made his purchase. He smiled to himself as he neared the car. Life was good. Seeing his reflection in the side window, he nodded to himself as he reached for the door handle. At 43, standing six foot two and weighing 174 pounds, he was still in pretty good shape. The many hours he spent at the gym and on the golf course, paid off in three ways. It kept his body in shape, brought him into contact with prospective customers, and allowed him to hobnob with

important business people who from time to time would slip him lucrative investment tips that paid off handsomely. On top of his salary of being a Grade-A real estate agent, his investments had made him a very wealthy man. When he thought back on it, he marveled at how fast the years had gone by.

Sixteen years ago, fresh out of college, he had stood in the Barrington front office, CV in hand, waiting to meet with James Barrington, the owner. James Barrington had been in the real estate business for 40 years and had done very well for himself. Barrington had liked what he had seen in Derek right off the bat. He had hired Derek on the spot. Derek had reminded him of himself, James Barrington when he had been Derek's age. Derek possessed the same drive and ambition to succeed that had allowed him, James Barrington, to be successful in the real estate business. Derek Young didn't disappoint. Year after year, his sales increased. It didn't matter how difficult the sale proved to be, each time Derek managed to sell the piece of real estate with a profit to the company and a hefty bonus for himself. He was confident, had a good business sense, and had a trusting way with his clients. It wasn't long before Derek became a junior partner in the firm. Three years ago, at the age of 75, James Barrington had finally retired. Plaguing health problems had probably given him the final push to do so. Old Mr. Barrington had sold the business to Derek. Derek had kept on the old team. Sandra Livingston, the secretary/receptionist, had been with the company for 6 years.

At 27, she was not only pretty but intelligent and efficient as well. The two other male real estate agents, David Green, and Oliver Casey were both in the 50s. When the time of the company's sale had come around, they had both passed on

the opportunity, content to stay on in the position that they were in.

They would be retiring in a few years themselves and didn't want to be saddled with running a business. Brenda Walker was the only female real estate agent in the group. She was a pretty, 22-year-old buxom blue-eyed blond with a bubbly personality. She still had a lot to learn about the business and gleaned every bit of advice she could from her two senior co-workers. And they were only too happy to give it while staring down the front of her loose blouse. Derek liked her. She had drive and ambition and a willingness to learn. He had a sneaking suspicion that she deliberately unbuttoned the two top buttons of her blouse to distract the two old fellas from what she was really after. In a way, she got the better part of the deal. She got the information, education, and some of their juicy sales. They got a view of her cleavage and ample bosom, the thought of which kept them waiting for the next time she would ask for one of their help.

Derek frowned as he opened the car door. The smell of hot leather assailed him and he backed away. Mingled with the smell, was the smell of something rotten. When he looked inside the car, he pinpointed its source right away. Derek had a good business mind, but he wasn't infallible. He had two faults. One of them was a weakness for fast foods. Many times, during a busy day, with no time for a regular lunch or supper, he'd stop by a MacDonald's restaurant to pick up a burger and a Coke or a Sausage Mac Muffin and a cup of coffee; depending on the time of day. An empty MacDonald's coffee cup in the cup holder and burger wrapper on the floor of the passenger side testified to that. But the rotten smell, that was another one of his faults; forgetfulness. Sometimes, in the heat of concluding his deals, he'd forget all else about him. This was the case with the brown paper bag in the back seat. Last week, he'd had a

very important closing deal late in the afternoon with a prospective client. His wife, Harriet, afraid that he wouldn't be home for supper, had prepared a lunch for him in case he worked late. He had put his briefcase on the seat beside him and the brown paper bag in the back seat. The client could only meet with him after business hours. He had shown him the house and after several hours of haggling, they had come to a reasonable understanding. Derek had called the owner of the house and he had agreed on the price that Derek and the buyer had come to. All that was left to do is to prepare the paperwork for the sale. By the time everything was concluded, it was after 7 p.m.

Derek dropped by his office to leave the details of the sale and instructions for Sandra to prepare the necessary documents the next day. The seller was happy with the price he got for his house. It had been evaluated at \$247,000. They had upped the asking price to \$298,000 and finally sold at \$270,00. The buyer was happy because he had saved \$20,000. The seller got a return about the evaluation price and Derek had snagged another hefty commission. What was there not to be happy about? All week, whatever was in the bag, had sat in the back seat, in the closed car, and the heat. The result was the smell that now assailed him. With the car door wide open, he leaned over the seat and picked up the empty coffee cup, then he walked over to the other side of the car and opened the passenger door and picked up the burger wrapping. Leaning the passenger seat forward, he nearly gagged when he picked up the brown paper bag. Walking back rapidly to the office, cup, and wrapper in one hand and holding the paper bag at arm's length, he threw everything in the garbage bin behind the real estate office. He couldn't go driving down the highway with that God-awful smell permeating his car. He shuddered at the thought of the smell as he walked back into the office to pick up a

can of air freshener. Without a word, he headed to the bathroom to wash his hands. Sandra looked up questioningly from her work as he passed by. When he came back with the can of air freshener, the same look was still in her eyes. Derek simply shook his head as if to say, "Don't ask" and stalked out the door. She watched his frame recede through the glass window in the door and returned to what she was doing. The red Mustang, with both doors wide open, looked like a tomato that had been sliced on both sides. Derek was glad that he had had the presence of mind to leave both doors open. Most of the rotten smell had dissipated in the open air, but there was still a slight lingering odor. He sprayed the inside of the car generously with the air freshener, giving extra attention to the back seat. The inside of the car instantly smelled like a field of strawberries. Putting the cap back on the can of air freshener, he looked at his watch. It indicated 3:35. Throwing the can on the floor of the back seat, he hopped into the front seat. He had an appointment at 4 o'clock with a young married couple to show them a prime piece of real estate in the suburbs; about twenty minutes outside of Portland. He lowered the sun visor to check his features in the mirror. He always wanted to give a good impression when meeting prospective customers for the first time. Perspective was everything. It was always good to make a good impression on the people you're intending to make a deal with. He slicked his blond hair back, frowning at the beginnings of a receding hairline. He wrinkled his nose and shrugged his shoulders slightly, resolutely accepting the receding hairline as part of growing older. He was lucky he still had hair. Many of his acquaintances were already bald, and some were younger than him. He lifted his upper lip with a finger and checked to see if there was anything stuck between his teeth. There was nothing. Satisfied with his inspection, he turned the key in the ignition. The twin

Hollywood mufflers sprang to life. God, he loved that sound. He stepped on the gas pedal and revved the motor a couple of times. The powerful motor roared and the car rocked slightly each time. This car was a beast. He wondered if this beast could really go 190 mph as the speedometer indicated; not that he would ever think of going this fast. He had watched plenty of Nascar races and marveled at the cold-blooded dexterity in which the drivers controlled their vehicles at such high speed. Oh sure, sometimes collisions and pile-ups did happen; sometimes even serious crashes. But most of the time, the races were uneventful and the only injuries sustained, were to the egos of the drivers who didn't finish in the top three.

“Okay, enough doodling around,” He thought.

It was going onto a quarter to four. He'd better get a move on if he wanted to make it to his destination by four. It was only 10 miles away, and if there wasn't much traffic, he could probably make it by four or four oh five. He backed the Mustang out of its parking space and pointed it towards the exit of the parking lot. Waiting for a couple of vehicles to pass, he turned his car into the traffic lane. Soon he was out of the city and heading down the highway toward the suburb. He stepped on the gas and the car obeyed his command. Traffic was light and soon he was going 140 mph. With both windows lowered about four inches, the air speeding through the car soon chased the overbearing odor of strawberry out of the car. He had overdone it a bit with the air freshener.

The young couple he was about to meet, both had good-paying jobs and could well afford the payments on the mansion he was about to show them. He had an engineering degree and worked for his father's engineering company. She had a degree in finances and worked for the U.S. Health Department in Portland. The property he wanted to show

them was a two-story brick mansion on a two-acre lot that was partially forested. The home had five bedrooms; large enough for a couple who planned on having a family. Three of the bedrooms were on the top floor. One bedroom, serving as a guest room, was a little smaller and was beside the walk-in closet off the entrance. The other guest room was in the basement. The house had a spacious kitchen with ceramic tile flooring and a large dining room with polished hardwood flooring off to its side. The large entrance had a marble floor with a walk-in closet to the left. A few feet down the hall gave way to an entrance to a 12 X 10 sitting room with a bay window facing the front of the house. The former owners had turned the greater part of the basement into a family/rec room. One side of the large room was set off for the usual furniture and entertainment systems. At the other end of the room, there was a rich eight-foot mahogany bar with all the bar fixtures on the wall behind it; the ideal setup for a large family gathering, or any other kind of party. There was ceramic tile flooring from one end of the room to the other. There was also ceramic flooring in both bathrooms. The upstairs bathroom had a sunken bathtub with a bubble bath system and a shower. The second bathroom, a bit smaller, stood right off the family room. It had a simple stand up shower compartment and the necessary installations; a toilet and a sink. Down the hall from it, was a fairly large storage room, and right across, was the fifth bedroom. Off the patio from the back door, was a large 20-foot sunken swimming pool and off to its right stood a gazebo with a hot tub in it. The well-trimmed lawn was rimmed all around with various floral arrangements. The total cost for this gem was a cool \$745,000. In this day and age, and in this coveted area, a real steal. Some folks would have begged to differ with Derek, but Derek didn't care about what some folks thought. He was out there to sell and to make money while doing it.

The miles passed by quickly and he was making good time. Along the way, he passed a large billboard sign announcing a getaway beach resort. The picture showed white, sandy beaches with palm trees, but what really attracted one's attention, was the beautiful dark-haired girl in the skimpy red bikini holding a beach ball. With all the right curves in all the right places and an enticing smile, she really was an attention-getter. The message on the sign, in large black letters, was an attention-getter as well. It was something even he could have thought up. Simple and efficient, it read: DREAM GETAWAY! YOU DESERVE IT! ENJOY YOURSELF AND HAVE FUN AT THE BARKEY ISLAND RESORT! MEET INTERESTING PEOPLE! 50% OFF THE REGULAR PRICE UNTIL THE END OF THE SEASON. Derek wondered if one of those interesting people was the girl on the billboard. Suddenly all reality was forgotten. He allowed himself to dream. Boy, would he love to meet a woman like that. He imagined himself lying on one of those lawn chairs on the beach with the waves lapping in the background and her tanned, oiled body lying next to him on another chair. Deeper and deeper he allowed himself to be drawn into his fantasy world. The woman sat up, swung her shapely legs over the side of her lawn chair, and reached behind her back. With a wicked smile, she undid her bikini top and threw it playfully at him. Her beautiful, lush breasts came into view a split second before she jumped up and rushed towards the water.

“Ok ok that’s enough of the dreaming. He entered an intersection towards a country road. He would be there in about twenty minuts.

Derek raised himself quickly to give chase and at that moment, his cell phone rang, jerking him back viciously to reality. His fingers fumbled hurriedly in his coat pocket for the phone and as he pulled it out, the phone slipped from his

fingers and fell to the floor on the passenger side of the front seat.

"FUCK!" he exclaimed in anger. The phone kept ringing on the floor. Buckled in his seat as he was, he couldn't reach the phone. He would have to unbuckle himself and wait for a moment when the road was clear. The phone kept ringing angrily.

"ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT!" he snapped angrily.

"HOLD YOUR FUCKING WATER!"

He looked straight ahead. The coast was clear. There were no oncoming cars in sight. He looked in the rearview mirror. No one was behind him. What a stroke of luck. He was all alone on the road. Unbuckling his seat belt he took a chance. Holding the steering wheel with his left hand and taking his foot off the accelerator, he reached across the transmission mount for the phone. It had finally stopped ringing. His movement caused the car to swerve to the left and he quickly righted himself before he went too far into the other lane. He straightened out the car and the phone started ringing again, adding to his exasperation.

"Alright, hold on," he muttered to himself and tried once more to reach the phone.

This time, he held onto the steering wheel at its bottom and shifted his weight closer to the transmission mound. The change in his stance gave him extra leverage and got him closer to the phone. Now, almost lying on both of the seats, the upper part of his body almost over the transmission mound, his fingertips brushed the surface of his phone.

"Come here, you fucker," he muttered. He gave a final push and his fingers closed over the phone. It had stopped ringing again. Triumphant and breathing hard, he tried to right himself. At the same time, the exertion caused a strain on his left hand, making it pull the steering wheel to the right. That action caused the car to swerve to the left once more.

His ankle, pressing down on the gas pedal, caused the car to accelerate once more. Suddenly, there was a loud crashing sound and then nothing.

Moments later, Derek was wakened by the sound of a loud, blaring sound of a car horn. He blinked his eyes, trying to clear his vision and get the grogginess out of his head. It took him a while to realize that the blaring sound came from his own car. Outside, the sun was going down. He didn't know how long he'd been unconscious. His windshield was smashed. There was broken glass on the dash and his lap. In front of him was the wall of an overpass. He knew about the overpass along this road but hadn't thought about it while he was trying to retrieve his phone. Now he had run right smack into it.

The front of his Mustang was completely smashed in. He had been lucky that he didn't have the motor on his lap. A stroke of panic hit him. He quickly touched his face. His hands came away clean. There was no blood on them. He looked down at his clothes. There was no blood there either. The speedometer on the console showed 160 mph. He had been going 160 mph when he'd hit the wall? By rights, he should be dead, but he wasn't. How was that possible? Geez! Harriet would have been really pissed if she'd found out that he had killed himself in such a foolish manner. He had to laugh at the grim humor of it, but when he did, his abdomen hurt. So, he decided not to laugh anymore, one thing was for sure. The sun was going down and he couldn't sit here in this wreck, waiting for someone to come along. He needed to get help. The pain in his abdomen was real. There was something wrong with him. He pushed against his car door. After some effort, he got the door open. Stumbling out of his seat, his legs felt like rubber and he fell to the ground. By sheer will power, he turned his body around and on hands and knees, crawled back to his car. Raising himself by

holding onto the side of the car, he fumbled in his coat pockets for his phone. He had to call for help. His hands came up empty. He was about to search his pants pockets when he realized that he had dropped the phone in the car; probably when the car hit the wall. Leaning on the door, he looked inside the car and saw it on the floor beside the gas pedal. Squatting and still holding onto the door, he reached for the phone.

* * *

Standing up gingerly, he dialed 911. There was no sound. He couldn't remember if he'd charged his phone or not before leaving the office. That was just great! He stood there for a moment trying to think about what to do. He couldn't stay here and it was getting darker. Pretty soon the stars would be out. So, on wobbly legs at first, he struck out. He didn't know how far he was from the suburb, but he did know there were some houses along the highway after the overpass. He had never bothered about the distance because he had always driven by. Now he would be lucky if he only had a short distance to walk. He didn't know how long he'd been walking when he spotted the silhouette of a house in the distance. It looked dark and abandoned and the sight filled him with foreboding. What if it was abandoned and there was nobody there? How much further would he have to walk until the next house? But as he got nearer, his spirits were raised. He could see the faint glimmer of light in one window. There must be somebody there. He quickened his pace as best he could. Finally, he was in the front yard. He could see that the front door was on a raised level. There were four steps to the front porch. He put his left foot on the first step, holding onto the railing. As he put his right foot on the second step, the plank creaked and the front door opened. The door opened and a woman stood silhouetted in the doorway by a light inside the house. Her features were hard to distinguish in the

dark, but he thought she was smiling as she reached out her hand to help him up the final two steps.

Closer to the light that was shining past the woman, Derek saw that she was a rather tall woman. Perhaps it was only an illusion since she was standing on the porch and he was standing 4 steps below her. He judged her to be in her forties. She was neither beautiful nor ugly. Pretty, would be a more reasonable description of her. Mind you, she might have been a beauty in her younger days, but as it goes, time affects everyone. Some people age gracefully and others not so gracefully. She had aged gracefully. Her high cheekbones and slightly slanted eyes hinted at Hispanic or Indian origin as did her tanned complexion. Still smiling, she put her arm in his and said, "Come on in. We've been expecting you." Derek blinked as he let himself be led into the foyer of the house.

"Expecting me? What was she talking about? Why would she say something like that?"

He didn't know this woman. If this house was here beside the highway, he had never paid attention to it let alone set foot inside it. She led him into a larger room where the light was brighter and he saw that several people were standing around, chatting. He judged there to be 7 or 8 men and women in the group.

"Must be some kind of party," he thought.

He halted their progress.

"Listen," he said, "I've been in an accident and I think I'm hurt. I have to call for help. My phone is dead. Is there a phone I could use?"

The woman said, "Oh dear!" with a look of concern on her face.

"Of course you can call for help."

She clapped her hands rapidly and called out.

"ATTENTION! ATTENTION EVERYONE!"

The group of people stooped talking.

"This man has been in an accident and he needs to use a phone to call for help. Does anyone have a phone on them?" Everyone looked at Derek with a blank stare on their faces and then went back to what they were doing. In shocked disbelief, Derek looked at the woman beside him.

"Ask them again," he said, "Maybe they didn't hear you." The woman looked at Derek sadly and replied, "Oh, they heard alright. They just don't care. They all have their problems."

She shrugged her shoulders apologetically as if to say, "Sorry."

In the light of the large room, the woman had suddenly gotten younger-looking and prettier. Had Derek not been so intent on securing a phone, he would have noticed the change, but he didn't. Suddenly, he spotted an old dial phone on a small coffee table beside an armchair.

"Can I use your phone over there?" he asked. Without waiting for a reply, he headed for the phone.

"Of course, you can," he heard the woman's voice float behind him.

He picked up the receiver and dialed his wife's number. Now, why had he done that? Hurt as he was, he should be calling 911. There was no dial tone. The line was dead.

"What the fuck?" he said.

He replaced the receiver in its cradle, picked it up and dialed again. The same thing happened; still no dial tone.

"What the fuck is going on here?" he thought.

"A bunch of brain dead egotistical people who don't care about anything but themselves, and phones that don't work. Geez!"

He slammed the receiver back onto its cradle. Turning to the group of people, he confronted them directly.

"Does anyone have a cell phone I can use?" he asked.

One of the men in the group reached into his pocket and pulled out a cell phone. He handed it to Derek. Derek took it

and thanked him. It was a flip cover phone. Derek didn't care what kind of phone it was, as long as it worked. He flipped the cover and punched in his wife's number again. Once more he was met with the same result. There was no dial tone. The man's cell phone was apparently dead, just like his own, and the line connected to the dial phone. In anger, he threw the cell phone down. It slid across the floor. The man who had given him the phone never bothered to pick it up. Derek gave the man an apologetic look but the man didn't respond.

"Damn, Damn, Damn," the words resonated in his brain.

"OK. OK, calm down. Calm down. There must be a logical explanation for all the shit that's going on here."

Across the room, the Hispanic woman was watching Derek with a glint in her eye. She seemed to be amused by it all. Except for the man who had lent him his phone, Derek hadn't really paid attention to anyone in the room. Now, leaning against the wall, he began to look at the people a little more closely. Some were about his age. Some were a little older and a couple was very young; perhaps in their late 20s. Among the people, an elderly man seemed to have detached himself from the group and was slowly making his way to him. The face looked familiar, but Derek couldn't put a finger on it. He knew he had seen the man somewhere before, but he couldn't remember where.

"Hello Derek," the man said with a smile when he finally stood before him.

"It's been a long time since we've seen each other. I always knew we would meet again."

Derek gave a hesitant response, still trying to figure out where he had seen this man. Maybe, he thought, in the impact of the accident, he had also hit his head. He couldn't remember, but his brain didn't seem to want to function properly. Could that have caused the blank in his memory?

"What is going on here?" he asked the man.

"Is this some kind of party?" he said looking on both sides of the man in front of him.

The man smiled sadly.

"Not exactly, Derek," he said.

"We're all here, waiting."

Derek frowned. The man's reply didn't make sense.

"Waiting for what?" Derek asked with both arms spread out.

The man didn't seem to hear. He was looking at a woman sitting in a chair, across the room. She was sobbing uncontrollably. Derek followed the man's gaze.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked.

"Oh," replied the man, looking at him,

"That's Anna. She's new here, just like you. She misses her husband and her two children." The man shrugged.

"Oh well, " he continued with a sigh,

"She'll get over to it." He said, and so will you," he added. Derek frowned.

"So will I? So will I what?" he asked angrily.

He didn't like the turn this was taking.

"Will I what?" he asked again.

The man gave him a kindly smile. He tapped Derek comfortingly on the arm.

"Just be patient," he said. From across the room.

The Hispanic looking woman was still watching him. She seemed to have gotten even younger. Her facial features had tightened and her lips were like ripe cherries. The room was brighter than before. Derek wondered where the light was coming from. He looked up at the ceiling. There was one light bulb in a socket, and it was off. He was about to exclaim:

"What the f..." but stopped in mid-thought. The phones didn't work in here. The light bulb didn't seem to work, but there was light. At this point, he thought, nothing would surprise him anymore, but he was wrong.

"Say," Mr. he said, turning to the man.

"Darin, Derek," "My name is Darin.

"Darin, do you think there's a house further down the road?"

The man raised his eyebrows.

"Maybe," he replied.

Derek was encouraged by the response.

"Maybe they have a phone that works, there," he continued.

"Maybe," Darin replied, giving him a sad look, "But I highly doubt it."

Derek wondered why he was being so negative.

"Look," said Darin, pressing a white business card into Derek's right hand.

"You're a good person. Just wait for your turn."

With that, the man turned and began to walk away.

"Wait my turn for what?" Derek thought looking at Darin walk away.

He looked at the card in his hand; an ordinary white business card. There was nothing written on it. He turned it over.

There was nothing written on the reverse side either. He closed his fist on it.

"Wait for what?" he thought.

He was about to say, "What are you talking about," when the man called back,

"The card will tell you, Derek." Suddenly the man was nowhere to be seen.

At this point, perplexity was beginning to transition into angry annoyance. What was with all this mystery and innuendos floating around in here? Half phrases that keep you guessing. No phones working. Lights without electricity. People with blank faces. Nothing made sense here. He had to get out of this Looney bin; find somewhere where people were normal. Something was seriously wrong

with this place. Suddenly, the palm of his right hand began to tingle. He had forgotten that he had clenched his fist in anger on the card as the man had walked away from him.

"Poison," he thought, "Or some kind of abrasive substance in the composition of the card."

The card was slightly bent from having been crumpled in his hand, but not so bent that he couldn't see a tiny black spot just above the mark where it was bent. At first, he thought it was dirt. After all, he had fallen to the ground on getting out of his car. His hands were scraped and dirty. Slowly, he unfolded the card and to his amazement, a word appeared in bold black letters. He frowned in disbelief and wonder. The card had been blank and spotless on both sides, not two minutes ago. How could a word suddenly appear on it? It had been in his clenched fist all the while. He rubbed his eyes to see if he was dreaming.

Sure enough, the word was still there. Not a very big word, but a word nonetheless. Only two letters: UP.

"What the fuck is going on?" the words echoed in his brain.

"A magic trick. That old man is a magician and he just played a trick on me. Very funny. Well, he'd had just about enough of all this bullshit. He was getting out of here. The man had said, "Wait your turn."

Suddenly he remembered. He suddenly recognized him. The man said his name was Darin. He knew who Darin was, but...that was impossible because Darin Miller had died a year ago.

He began to freak out. Derek started to make his way towards the front door when suddenly everything went silent in the room. Everyone stopped talking at the same time. The sudden shock of it made Derek stop in full stride. A soft woman's voice resonated in the room.

"Mrs. Anna Walker," it said, "Up."

That was it, just "Up." Derek searched the walls for a loudspeaker, but couldn't find one. Another mystery. The voice just seemed to float out of thin air. He watched, along with the others in the room, as the woman who had been crying in her chair stood up. She had stopped crying. Without a sound, she directed her steps to a far wall where there was a staircase. As he watched, a dim light seemed to appear at the top of the staircase. He could have sworn there was no staircase there a moment ago. He wasn't stupid and he wasn't crazy. He knew what he had seen. There definitely hadn't been a staircase where there apparently there was one now. He continued to watch wordlessly. As the woman mounted each step, the light at the top of the steps got brighter. At the last step, there was a bright flash of light. He and the others in the room had to close their eyes. When Derek reopened his eyes, the woman was gone. So was the staircase. If it hadn't been for the fact that Anna Walker was no longer in the room, Derek would have had a hard time believing what he had just seen. Another mystery? Then he thought about how the word "Up" had suddenly appeared on the blank card.

"Of course, he thought. "Another magic trick."

That's it. The old man was a magician and this Walker woman was part of the act. He had to admit, that disappearing act, the mysterious voice from beyond, that was some trick. The other people in the room were just spectators who had either wandered in or had been invited to the show. There was a moment of silence after the woman disappeared. The people

were waiting in anticipation as if something more was about to happen. Derek's curiosity was peaked as well. The disappearing act had been great. What could happen to top that? He didn't have much longer to wait for the answer. The woman's voice resonated again in the air.

"Mr. Donald Johnson." "Down."

From the far side of the room, a small, agitated man walked hesitantly towards the wall. Derek could see that he was advancing against his will. Some unseen force was pulling him, just like it had pulled Anna Walker. He could see the fear in the man's eyes as he turned his head from side to side, stretching out his left arm for someone to grab hold and stop his progression. Another staircase had opened in the wall, only its opening was pitch black. There was no light; not even the faintest hint. The man stepped over the threshold into the darkness. Derek heard a faint moan and then the man was gone. A cold chill swept over him. If this was a trick, he didn't like it at all. If the first trick was interesting, this trick was scary. The dark stairway disappeared and the blank wall was once more in place.

"This shit is crazy! I got to get out of here."

He started making his way to the front door. His hand was on the doorknob when the woman's voice resonated once more.

"Mr. Derek Young." "Up."

Try as he could, he couldn't turn the knob to get the door open. Some invisible force was pulling him back, back into the room; back to the wall. He felt his fingers slip off the doorknob. Slowly, against his will, he turned around. His feet had a mind of their own and they were leading him gradually, inexorably to the wall. The staircase with the light had reappeared. He began to mount the steps one at a time. With each step, the light got brighter. He could feel his heart thumping wildly in his chest. He felt as if it was going to jump right out of his chest cavity. Just as the bright light was swallowing him, he heard a voice calling his name; a man's voice.

"Mr. Young, Mr. Young," the male voice was saying, "Can you hear me?"

At first, the voice sounded from far away, as if it was coming through a wall from another room, but each time his

name was being pronounced, the voice got stronger. The bright light was no longer there. Instead, it had been replaced by one tiny bead of light. Still strong, Derek felt it flashing across his closed eyelids. It was getting annoying. His eyelids began to flutter. He wanted to tell whoever was flashing a light into his eyes, to stop. "He's coming around," he heard the male voice say.

"Mr. Young," the voice said again, "Can you hear me?"

The light stopped flashing. Derek was thankful for that. He now heard the voice quite clearly. He was slowly regaining his consciousness; conscious that he was lying on his back. His eyelids fluttered open and he quickly closed them again.

* * *

Wherever he was, the light hurt his eyes, making them sting and tear up. His breathing was laborious and he wondered why he had so much trouble breathing. This time, he opened his eyelids more slowly, letting his eyes get used to the light. That he was laying on his back that he knew already. Any proof needed for this, was the ceiling he was staring at; a white ceiling. He was lying in a bed, in a room, staring at the ceiling, he had a hard time breathing and he couldn't move. It wasn't his bed. It wasn't his room, and it sure as hell wasn't his ceiling. Where was he? "Mr. Young," the male voice came again, pulling him away from his thoughts.

He turned his head to look into the face of a young man dressed in hospital garb.

"Where am I?" he croaked, through a hoarse throat.

The young man smiled.

"You're at Mercy Hospital, Mr. Young," the young man replied.

"I'm Doctor Gillis."

Derek smacked his dried lips together, licking them with his tongue. His mouth was dry. Someone put a straw between his lips and he turned his head to his left. Although he had heard only the doctor's voice, he had felt another presence near him. Now he saw that it was a nurse and she was holding a cup of cold water in her hand. She smiled down at him as he greedily drank the cold comforting liquid. The cold water had never tasted so good before.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," the doctor said as he leaned over Derek with his stethoscope.

"You gave us quite a scare."

He put the hearing pieces in his ears and pressed the metal piece against Derek's chest, listening intently.

"Take a deep breath," he said.

Derek took a breath. It was difficult. The doctor nodded.

"Breathe again," he said.

"Now, I'll have to ask you to move forward slightly," he continued, giving the nurse a nod.

She complied by raising the head part of the bed slightly.

"Not just yet," he said to Derek, who was trying to raise himself on his own.

"Miss Perkins will help you."

At the same moment, Derek felt the nurse's hand slip behind his lower back. It felt cool and he realized that he was dressed in an open-backed hospital gown. He winced with pain from the effort. The doctor quickly sounded Derek's lungs and the nurse helped him lie down again. She lowered the head part back to a comfortable position. Derek felt a tightness around his abdomen area, where the pain had been when the nurse had helped him sit forward a bit.

Doctor Gillis hung the stethoscope around his neck.

"You were in a very bad accident, Mr. Young," he said.

"You suffered a diaphragmatic rupture, a tear in your diaphragm along with two fractured ribs."

"We had to perform a laparotomy; an operation to repair the tear. Otherwise, you could have died. It's a very delicate operation. Forty percent of patients don't survive. Fortunately, you have a strong constitution. In time, you will heal. So will your ribs."

While he was talking, the nurse had taken his blood pressure.

"It's a little high," she said.

Sticking a thermometer in Derek's mouth, she watched the seconds on her watch tick by.

"You've been in a coma for 4 days," the doctor continued, "Most probably due to head trauma."

Derek felt ashamed. He didn't want to tell the doctor that he had been lying halfway across the passenger seat while the car was rolling at 160 mph. He would have thought that Derek was the stupidest man in the world and he would have been right.

"In a way," the doctor continued, "It probably was a good thing that you were unconscious. You had no awareness of what was going on around you. When you were brought in, our medical team went right to work diagnosing your injuries and we could operate on you quickly."

The nurse had allowed the appropriate time to elapse and take the thermometer out of Derek's mouth. To the doctor's questioning look, she replied, "A little high, but not excessive." The doctor nodded. It was normal for a patient to have a higher rate of blood pressure and temperature after having been subjected to bodily trauma, and this patient had certainly had his share of that.

"Your wife has been here by your bedside every day since you were brought in. She'll be happy to know that you're awake. I'll let her know. However, I'd like to keep you here under observation for another week to see that you're healing properly and that there are no complications from the

operation. That doesn't mean that when you're released, that you can partake in any strenuous physical activity. It takes 2 to 8 months for a laparotomy to heal. At the same time, I want to make sure there are no complications from your concussion. Sometimes, victims of a concussion can have recurring side effects long after their accident. To be on the safe side, when you're released from the hospital, I prescribe medication for this and antibiotics to help you heal." With that, he bid Derek a good day and when to make his phone call. Nurse Perkins made Derek as comfortable as could be. "If you need anything," she said with a smile before leaving, "don't hesitate to press the button. Someone will come to you."

Forty minutes later Harriet was at his bedside. She came every day, twice a day during the time of his convalescence, bringing him fruits and other refreshments. The week passed quickly. Derek improved day by day. His temperature was down to normal and so was his blood pressure. On the day of his release, Harriet had brought a fresh set of clothes for him to wear. She had taken the clothes he had worn the day of his accident home on the second day of her visit. She had sent his suit to the cleaners, but before doing so, she had gone through his pockets, as was her custom. Her husband, like her two boys, were prone to forget things in their pockets, so she had started going through them before putting her men's clothes in the wash. She had learned it the hard way. Her little Jimmy had forgotten a package of Bazooka gum in his jeans pocket. The result had been gum all over the clothes in the washer. Derek had forgotten a twenty-dollar bill in his back pocket. The result had been tiny shreds of green paper stuck to all the clothes. While going through Derek's pockets that day, she had found the wrinkled white card with the printed word "Up." She had put it aside, intending to as Derek the meaning of it. On the second evening of Derek's

return back home, she raised the subject. Going into the kitchen, she came back into the living room with the little card in her right hand. Tapping the card on the open palm of her left hand, she began,

"You know, honey. I always go through everyone's pockets before I do the wash."

Derek nodded with a short laugh. He remembered Jimmy's gum nightmare and the shredded twenty-dollar bill.

"I know honey," he replied not comprehending what she was getting at.

"Well," she said. "When I went through your pockets, I found this card."

She held the card up for him to see.

"Is it important, or something?" she asked.

"What is it about?"

Derek looked at the card in her hand as if he had been struck by lightning. A strange demeanor came over him as he got up from the armchair he had been sitting in. Seeing the strange look on her husband's face. Harriet felt a rising hint of fear coming over her.

"What?" she asked in a frightened tone.

"What is it?"

Derek took the card from her hand.

"Not, nothing," he stuttered.

"It's nothing."

He wrinkled his nose and stuck the card in his pocket. Without a word, he sat down again.

"Honey," his wife said, still worried.

"What is it? Talk to me."

Derek just shook his head. How could he explain the card? His wife would think he was crazy. Had everything that had happened to him been real? Could it be possible? The card was real. He had it in his pocket.

UP

“Could it be like a "Get Out Of Jail Free" card in the Monopoly game?”

Was that room in that deserted house Purgatory? Were all those people dead? Had he been dead? Was what everyone was waiting for, a word in which direction they would go? The staircase that was going up? Was that the staircase to Heaven? And the one descending into darkness, the staircase to Hell? How could he tell Harriet something so far-fetched as that? A vivid picture flashed in his mind; the frightened look on Donald Johnson's face just before he disappeared into the darkness. Derek decided to hang on to the card and he resolved to live a better life from then on. He sure as hell didn't want to get stuck with a "Down" ticket.

END