

GOD BLESS

It should have been me. A soundtrack for his life. Those five words played over and over in Donald Markman's mind as he emptied plastic champagne glasses of Korbel Extra Dry and halfheartedly applauded as Martin Lieberman hoisted the Top Sales, Integrated Technology Solutions trophy over his head. Starla from the front desk, Abby from Accounts Payable, Nikeya the budget analyst, they all cozied up to Lieberman as if he had just won the Heisman trophy instead of some little fake metal dude holding a laptop.

Donald rolled his Ho Ho tie up in a tight coil and let it go, over and over. It should have been me. It should have been me. Better than the stupid trophy was the \$1,500 check and two-night stay at the Bavarian Inn. If it hadn't been for that humorless bitch at ZZZ mattress who couldn't take a joke about trying out the Sealy Posturepedic Ultra Plush after the store closed, he would have had that commission for December, and the \$1,500 and weekend would have been his. He could picture himself flicking on the gas fireplace by the king size, then maybe a bath with those little candles burning all around, and maybe a massage with the old Jergens. One account short, the story of his life. Donald glanced from rep to rep, but none of them seemed to give a damn. Underachievers. All they cared about was stuffing their faces with crab dip and chicken fingers.

Donald covered a little champagne belch with his fist, then raised it to Lieberman, "Way to go, Lieb. Next year, you hear," and he thumped his chest. "Next year." Lieberman bumped fists with him and turned back to Lindsey, the new intern with a jingle bell in her cleavage. Donald smoothed his Ho Ho tie down over his gut, swallowed

the last bit of Korbel, and crushed the plastic glass in his hand before firing it into the trashcan. Asshole.

After slipping away from the Integrated party with a few shouts of “Happy Holidays,” Donald walked through the dark parking lot of the industrial park lot and clicked open the door of his Charger. He wasn’t a particularly heavy man, although there was the beginning of a paunch under the Ho Ho tie. But Donald figured that came with the territory. That’s what you get wining and dining the accounts. But whoever had parked the Prius next to him had left what felt like two damned inches to squeeze through into the driver’s seat. Donald stepped sideways between the two cars, opened the Charger door, and sank into the seat at the same time the door hit the side of the Prius. He pulled it closed and looked through the window. A noticeable ding appeared on the Prius. This, definitely, should not have happened to him. At least, the “it should have been me” soundtrack stopped.

Heat crept through his body, and his bowels clenched. Beyond the dancing lights from I83, the whole world seemed to give him the finger. Briefly, he considered shouldering his door open again, hard—might as well go for broke—and writing “spend your Xmas bonus on this, sucker” in the dirt and salt around the ding, but he wasn’t 100% sure he couldn’t be identified by his fingerprint or handwriting on the panel. Screw it. Donald looked around the lot, but he was alone. All the others were still partying inside. He turned the key in the ignition and backed out, clipping the rear fender on his way for good measure. For a second, in his rear-view window, the letters D and M seemed to draw themselves on the rear window. That finger of the world again. Donald looked at the mirror and returned the gesture.

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A warm rotisserie chicken, a pint of Boston Market garlic mashed potatoes, and a bottle of Tullamore Dew Irish whiskey—now that was a party meal. Before exiting the Giant shopping center, Donald unscrewed the cap and took a drink, then one more for good measure. Instantly, Lieberman and the dinged Prius didn't seem to matter so much. Next year, the money and getaway weekend would be his. Maybe he would rethink his thinking about the female accounts, work on his sensitivity. Recalibrate his hormone detector or something. He worked like a sonuvabitch. Donald took another quick drink from the bottle as he approached the red light out of the shopping center.

From a couple of cars back from the light, Donald saw a guy in a hoodie almost covering his face, and drooping pants that he yanked up a couple of times, while holding up a cardboard sign that said God Bless in big letters and something else too small to read. Probably something about being homeless or a vet and “will work for money.” Maybe the homeless dude would have aced the mattress account. Donald laughed and coughed. Right.

A backpack rested at the base of the Goodyear sign that lit the begging guy up barely enough to see. It seemed to Donald that more and more of those guys were standing at intersections and shopping centers everyday. It was like they all bought the cardboard signs at the same God Bless cardboard sign company, customized with a choice of two or three smaller print options. Same hoodie, too. Donald thought about how hard he worked for his commissions and how some months he had could take dates to Tio Pepe's, and some months he just managed to scrape the Charger payment together. Somewhere he had read an article about how well those God Bless guys could actually do

in one day. An amazing haul in one day and for, what, standing in place all day looking pathetic. He felt a flush of heat go through him again and a throbbing begin in his forehead.

Donald wondered about the guy with the God Bless and hoodie, and what had gotten him from point A, maybe some little kid playing shortstop on a rec league team, maybe a Cub Scout or a senior pinning a corsage on his prom date, to point B. He had no frigging idea. And what the hell was in the backpack, he wondered. What do they carry with them? In the flush of Korbel and Tullamore Dew, he suddenly had to know.

The light turned green. He glanced at his rearview mirror, pulled at the knot of his Ho Ho tie, and checked for cars behind him. Nada. He yanked out his wallet, pulled out a \$20 in the spirit of Xmas, and hit the button to open the driver window as he rolled closer. And as he approached, Mr. God Bless's face seemed to open up to him, to light up in the Goodyear sign, awaken, and recognize Donald, almost like a guy from school or one of the other reps. As he came alongside the God Bless man, he extended the \$20 from the window, opened the Charger door, grabbed the backpack by a strap, swung it onto the passenger seat, and exited left onto York, yelling, "And Ho Ho Ho to you, too," But as he turned, he sensed a flash of shadow behind him and felt a thump on his trunk that bounced him in his seat. For only a fraction of a second, he took his foot off the accelerator and looked back. God Bless was waving the \$20 toward him like a lifeguard signaling about someone drowning and yelling, "My life. Give me back my life." That couldn't be right. A radio somewhere? Donald steadied the Tullamore Dew on the passenger seat and accelerated toward home.

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When Donald took the bags of food and liquor and the backpack from his car in the driveway, he noticed a red Pontiac Firebird on the road in front of his house, probably about 1973, he guessed, by the chrome and screaming chicken on the hood, no 5mph rubber bumper that came after '73. Sweet. Just the sight of the old Firebird perked him up, put him, finally, in the Xmas spirit. As he turned the key in his door, the decal seemed to glow like something out of an old TV show, making him think warmly and fuzzily of holidays past. Good Bless. God bless us one and all. Donald set his rotisserie chicken and mashed potatoes down inside the door, grabbed the mail out of the mail bin, and, feeling some vague discomfort likely from a mix of drinks and buffalo wings, slung the backpack onto the recliner next to the aluminum tree. Later, he'd open it, when he could deal with the lifetime of dirt on the thing. He bent over and plugged in the string of blinking lights.

Of course, there would be the usual stack of last-minute catalogs promising free shipping, and solicitations for donations before the end of the tax year. Donald flipped through the stack. Not the usual LL Bean or Best Buy. Odd. Plus most of the first-class mail seemed short on postage. 22¢. 33¢. How did they get through, he wondered. Hell, he'd wasted who knows how much money if the post office didn't even check.

He looked over a card-size envelope, what he figured to be a Happy Holidays card, with a 6¢ stamp, and turned it over. The name and address, handwritten in an old-fashioned sort of script, Grandma and Grandpop Davis at some address in Philadelphia, didn't ring a bell at all. He flipped it over again. Sure enough, his name written as Master Donald Markham, and his correct address, were there on the front under a 6¢ Walt Disney stamp. He opened it and pulled out a "Happy Birthday to Special Grandson!"

card, and inside the card signed “Love, Grandma and Grandpop” was a crisp dollar bill. Donald knew his name wasn’t particularly unique. There must have been another Donald Markham, a kid, who lived nearby, and the grandparents had gotten the address wrong. Weird about the stamp though.

Donald took the mail and his bags into the kitchen and poured some Irish whiskey into a glass. After settling onto a stool, he propped the birthday card on his kitchen counter by the sugar bowl and sighed. The dollar bill he rolled and released like a spring, kind of like an old Slinky, he thought. Maybe God Bless had a Slinky once. Suddenly, his stomach felt hollow, so he popped the plastic dome off the rotisserie chicken and picked at it. But it tasted greasier than usual. He doubted even God Bless would be able to stomach it.

A red 2 blinked from the phone by the fridge. Two messages. Usually, calls came in on his cell, or clients emailed. Donald walked over to the wall phone and reached out, then paused. The phone looked different. The color was different. It wasn’t black and metallic gray. It was avocado, and a long, coiled cord dangled from the phone to the kitchen floor. His index finger hovered around the strange phone. There was no button to push to hear the messages. There was a round rotary dial thing with little holes for the numbers. The word Tuxedo and five numbers appeared in center of it. The red number 2 had disappeared from wherever it had been.

The phone rang again, and Donald lifted it from the cradle and held it a couple of inches from his ear.

“Is this Donald’s dad?” The voice was female, and indignant.

After holding his breath for a few seconds, Donald muttered, “Who is this?” and the voice said, “Your Donald gave my Bobby a bruised arm and cut lip after school today, I want you to know, and if you don’t do something to make sure this never happened again, I’ll be taking matters into my own hands, do you hear?”

“Look, lady, you got the wrong—“

A loud dial tone rang in his ear, and Donald replaced the large receiver carefully into the pronged metal cradle. Wrong number. Prank call. Even if this Donald had split the kid’s lip, stupid kid stuff, right? But the retro phone, what about the phone? Who would do this? Lieberman. Kravitz. Baer. Practical jokers with a collective IQ that dropped when the three of them were in the same room. But he had seen the red 2 blinking. And now it was gone.

Donald paced the kitchen and dining room, taking small sips of Dew from his glass, and smoothing the Ho Ho tie over his gut. Every time he turned back toward the kitchen, he expected to see his little black and gray portable there, with the little red numbers and function buttons. But no. And now beside the “Happy Birthday to a Special Grandson!” card and crisp new dollar next to the sugar bowl, there was a white envelope with a 18¢ stamp on top of the mail stack. Again, his name and address were on the envelope, but this time, the salutation was “Mr.” He slit it, then skimmed the typed letter inside, which informed him, regretfully, that he had not been selected for fall 1978 admission at the University of Maryland College Park. Donald turned it over and looked inside the envelope again, looking for some kind of indication that this was a joke, or maybe an ad of some sort, although what it could be an ad for he had no idea. Sometimes ads were like that. The whole idea was to get your attention. Like the girls in bikinis in

new car ads. If there was a point to this one, some product, he was damned if he could find it. He crumpled it in his fist and fired it at the phone, which rang as if it had been jolted awake. It sure as hell jolted Donald awake. Despite the alcohol, he felt more sober than he wanted to be.

Donald took his last drink and let the phone ring. Four rings. Then he heard a tape-like whirring and saw, on a small, unfamiliar metal stand next to the stove, a large box from which a voice said, "This is Donald. Wait until you hear the beep, then leave a message." Wheels from a cassette tape began to turn, and the scratchy recording of a female voice played, "Donald if you're there, pick up the phone." Silence. "OK, you're either not there, or you want to play games. Or your little girlfriend is listening to this, and I hope she's enjoying the hell out of herself. I talked to my lawyer, and I've packed your clothes and miscellaneous crap and put the boxes on the side porch." There was a sound like a stifled cry, a sniff. "If, at some future date, you get your life straightened out, we can talk about visitation," then quietly, "Dee Ann still loves her daddy," and a click.

Donald looked at the glass in his hand and saw that it was shaking, bad. He put the glass in the sink, which he remembered from that morning as deep and stainless steel with his coffee-stained Integrated Technology Solutions mug, cereal bowl, and a couple of spoons waiting to be put in the dishwasher that night, but which was now a scratched enamel, with a faucet that dripped, slowly, like the ticking of a clock. He reached for the dishwasher latch but felt only a cold cabinet door. A gummy gray-blue dish rack sat on the yellow Formica counter next to the sink, a dish rack with a few chipped and mismatched plates and highball glasses with "Pimlico Racetrack" and different racehorses on each one. He had been to the track once or twice. Sweat trickled down his

sides, and he felt lightheaded. He had never bought any racehorse glasses. He didn't gamble.

Granite. That morning, the countertops had been granite. When he got home from the party with the backpack from God Bless, they had been granite. Black. Granite.

Donald crouched on the kitchen floor with his throbbing head in his hands, and his bladder, he now realized, about to burst. What had God Bless said? "My life," he'd said. "Give me back my life." What had he taken, he wondered, that was now in a backpack slung sideways on one of his living room chairs? Every possible option, he thought, spun through his head. Money. Dope. Booze. A change of clothes. He tried to picture the face lit by the Goodyear sign, replayed the opening of the mail and listening to the recordings. A wedding ring? A picture of the kid, Dee Ann?

There were two more envelopes on the counter he knew he had to open, both with 33¢ stamps. He inserted his thumb through the more official-looking one and ripped the flap away. Inside was one of those medical "this is not a bill" statements, for oncology services rendered to Mrs. Marcia Markham, February 1999 through October 2000. After insurance, a lot was still owed, he could see. The other envelope, small, also with a 33¢ stamp and neatly addressed in blue ink to Mr. Donald Markham, he couldn't open. Somehow, he knew it was a note of condolence, and he couldn't bear a note of condolence, no matter how sincere. For some reason he couldn't fathom, since he had never gotten married, never got past being briefly engaged, this unopened note doubled him over with pain. He sobbed. Sobbed for all the little screw-ups that had snowballed into gut-wrenching loss.

The backpack. He had to give God Bless his life back. There must have been something good. After all, he had kept it, hadn't he? Donald took the backpack from the living room chair, sank onto the rug, and unzipped it. Whatever was in there, no matter what, he would return. He swore to God.

He reached in and pulled out a ring. This was his senior ring from Milford Mill High, the one he had lost in the Magothy River. Another glint of metal and gem. This was the engagement ring that Darlene had returned to him, that he had planned to return to the jewelry store. His GI Joe, 5 ¼ floppy disks, the box of offering envelopes from the Methodist church he had briefly attended, the white carnation the minister had handed him from the top of his father's casket, and keys, lots of keys. His life. The sum of his own losses. Small potatoes compared to God Bless. He stuffed it all back in.

Stumbling to his feet, he slung the backpack on his back, then remembering the birthday card and dollar, he took them, too. Carefully, he smoothed the birthday dollar, put in back inside the envelope, and headed to his car. The Firebird was still parked at the curb in front of his house, but the decal's glow had dimmed to nothing, and the side of the car had been gouged. A sheet of plastic had been duct-taped to the left passenger window. He could smell rust. But it could be fixed. It could all be fixed.

The Charger, at least for the moment, looked unchanged, but he now knew that could change in an eye blink. Donald lay the backpack and "Happy Birthday to a Special Grandson!" card carefully on the passenger seat and drove the short distance to the Giant shopping center, praying for the first time in years, praying hard that the God Bless man would still be there.

As he pulled into the shopping center, he could see him by the light of the Goodyear sign, as if he hadn't moved in the lifetime Donald had spent after leaving with his rotisserie chicken and Tullamore Dew, and the backpack. God Bless still held his cardboard sign. He still wore his hoodie with wool cap underneath it. He still stood statue still, his face hidden, like the whole world had to come to him.

Donald parked in the Goodyear lot and approached God Bless with the backpack and card, holding each one high in his hands and calling out to him, "Look, dude. Your life, you can have it back. All yours." And God Bless held out his sign to him and an empty hand, and in his face up close and in the full Goodyear light, Donald saw his own true face and all he would ever lose.

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