

Blinded by the Light

Now, some might've said, complained rather, that Sayers Beck needed more excitement in his life. But the truth was – aside from the limited selection of frozen dinners at the local convenience store and having to share one washing machine with thirty other people – the dude bore no real complaints of his own. Rather, with hands pocketed, he would've just shrugged it all off by saying, "I'm pretty much cool with it all." Simply put, Sayers was simply a well-settled dude.

In fact, few if any of the inhabitants of Whitmore had much to say against someone calling theirs a "settled" way of life. Residents of tree-lined Bentwood Avenue even considered it a pleasure giving out-of-towners directions to where the center of the universe lay, happily pointing to that little piece of suburban turf squarely under their feet, no other invites worth noting beyond the demands of a steady job or an empty refrigerator. Why, right there in mid-block Crepe Myrtle Grove apartments, the most unattached of its tenants – be they widowed, divorced or jilted – had a partner of some

kind, human or otherwise, to ground them against the restless excesses of a bored and lonely heart.

It was only by virtue of the “otherwise” that the young male occupant of 2-E held his own against all those alluring pitfalls of downtown bars and online dating apps. In other words, Sayers Beck was content to share his tiny sheltered world with none other than a calico cat, that feline fixture just as happy to answer to the name of Chow-chow as to the rattling of a bag of tender morsels. And as for the demands of a job, all this fine dude had to do was roll his chair over to the L-shaped workstation nestled in one corner of his living area to start his day off as a software tester for Acteon Systems. Talk about settled!

But one thing was for certain. Come that first Saturday afternoon in April – and a cool and sunny one at that – any of the unattached in that same twenty-unit apartment building not napping would most likely have been found outside barbecuing, sunbathing and/or beer-drinking. So no surprise, if some of the latter had been pondering the door to 2-E and wondering whether its occupant were out for the day, sleeping in, or even still among the living.

“I haven’t seen that young man Sayers come out of his apartment all day,” said the elderly Mrs. Catalano from 1-B downstairs. She and the old retired dude from 2-D, Mr. Williams, were sitting in folding chairs under a shade tree opposite Crepe Myrtle Grove.

Mr. Williams took a sip of beer and said, “I think I heard him stirring around in there this morning, but not sure what the boy’s up to now.”

“Sure hope he’s alright up there,” said Mrs. Catalano’s daughter Millie who’d come and sat down after checking on a

pot of chicken and dumplings on the stove.

“Probably just spending the day playing those silly video games of his,” replied the retired pipefitter, handing Millie a can of beer from the cooler. “Or else watching some old movie like he always does.”

“He really needs to get out more,” said Millie, popping the top on the can. “It’s not healthy for anybody to stay cooped up like that.”

“The kid’s not much for socializing, that’s for sure. Not meaning that he’s unfriendly, mind you. There’s always a smile and a ‘how’s it going’, whenever we meet. Some people just like keeping to themselves, I guess. No crime in that, as long as they’re not hacking banks and shit.”

“Oh, I hope it hasn’t come to that,” Mrs. Catalano exclaimed.

“You never know with those quiet types,” Millie added.

The old gentleman in shorts and suspenders crossed his legs. “Naw, he can’t be that dumb, not with a good paying job with that computer company he works for.”

And sure enough, despite the nice weather and all concerns for his keeping a clean record, Sayers Beck was securely docked within the crevice of his workstation, anchored there actually since about 9:00 that morning, making strides to finish up the report he’d promised his boss by Monday.

Now, to try naming what might’ve resigned this tech-dude to such dedicated reclusiveness, one word would seem practical enough – love. Sayers had once fallen in love, but with the wrong woman. It happened his second year with Acteon, when he reluctantly gave in to some of the IT dudes showing up one evening and taunting him into going out for a drink. Not that this four-eyed geek had been in any way unattractive, or that the most cute and lively member of that

bunch of chicks seated nearby had been insensitive to his male shyness. Moments of sweet intimacy did pass between them during the ensuing three-month affair, but without ever attaining that degree of readiness or willingness on her part to accept a permanent place beside Sayers. For his part, if he couldn't have the one and only, he'd do without any – human companionship, that is. And so, for the next two years, Sayers immersed himself in work and solitary entertainment – with the occasional pampering of Chow-chow, of course.

Since this was a Saturday after all, and still assuming it to be his day off, there came the usual check-up call from his mother. She'd been on the phone with him for the past hour or so, while the dude kept up a steady pace of adding keystrokes to that lengthy and convoluted report of his. Suddenly, in one swoop, he tapped the period key with all the alacrity of a concert pianist striking a cadence, leaned back in his chair and let out a “woo-hoo!”. After giving himself a high-five, Sayers took a well-deserved swig of ginger ale to mark the occasion.

“... and that's what happened,” his mother wound up. “Well, I just ... what in heavens did you do?”

“Nothing, Mama,” Sayers assured her with a laugh. “Just one step closer to getting there, that's all.”

“Getting where? Hunh! I swear! It sounded like you fell out of your chair or something.”

“No, I'm fine. Never felt better.”

“Well, anyway, I told your sister I'd ...”

But something was indeed up. Normally at such a juncture, Sayers would've just sat there and sighed before taking a quick break. But now, he felt like a runner getting a fresh shot of adrenaline and making for that final come-from-behind sprint. Even Chow-chow sensed the impending terminus,

mirroring the intensity with her frenzied batting a wad of paper around the apartment.

The digital clock over Sayers' desk read the hour as later than he'd supposed — 5:58 p.m. Still, what had made for an overlong day's worth of ra-ta-tap-tapping the computer's keyboard was lending the tech-dude confidence in drawing nearer than ever to calling his tester's report a done deal. Thus, he adjusted the bluetooth earpiece to render his mother's ramblings a little clearer, while shifting the flashing cursor for the start of what was sure to be his final dash to freedom. No more than ten minutes by foot from downtown, and Sayers could already smell the food and hear the music. Just a few more summarizing strokes, and then ...

“What, again?” the tech-dude groaned, with nimble fingers stumbling mid-play.

His mother, in the midst of her babbling, had just gotten around to asking about Acteon Systems and wanting to be reminded, for the third or fourth time in as many years, what her son actually did there.

With a huff and without thinking, Sayers just grabbed the first thing in front of him and said, “well, Mama, if you really want to know, I spend the greater part of my day getting hung up on barbed wire.” In reality, he was now slouched in his desk chair, swung around to face the TV in the far corner, and there played that scene from “The Great Escape” where Steve McQueen had gotten all tangled up in the stuff and was surrendering to the Germans.

For an employee who'd forgotten what the inside of the company headquarters even looked like anymore, working as he did out of his one-bedroom apartment clear across Whitmore, how else was Sayers expected to explain his job

without some vivid point of reference? Thus, he bet the woman that anyone would've said the same thing about working for a software vendor like Acteon which was forever readying its clients' products down to the very wire.

Even so, his mother, who had no patience left for childish insolence and no idea why her son couldn't have studied something more practical like tax preparation, ended things by claiming she needed to get back to fixing supper for his father.

Now, Sayers could've just expressed to her his sympathy for the character from the movie — that subdued dude being later shown led to yet another round of solitary confinement — having so often himself gone after more time off, only to get snagged on the next “barb” showing up in his projects folder and made to play catch-and-throw with yet another developer's latest bug-ridden build. But even before his mother had phoned, this harried software tester felt certain he'd found just the implement for cutting himself free, starting with his boss' persistent texting —

“Beck, how's it coming?”

“Beck, I need an update.”

“Beck, I'm just two shakes from coming over there. What's the status?”

And Brian Arceneaux would have, too, just to nag his best tester about the messiness of his workspace; how he needed to go out, get drunk and get laid; then, with one of the kitchen cabinets swung open warn him of the damage canned foods could do to a person's liver. Stringing more barbed wire. It was like Brian had stock in the stuff.

Sayers, for his part, had his sights set on snipping those, as well.

Now, as for his mother's worrying over her youngest child's future, it would've done her good to know that Sayers had a helper of sorts in all this, or would soon have, though the dude himself had as yet no clue of such. In fact, that very helper might've been seen that same evening carelessly leaning on just such a stretch of barbed wire fencing — that is, had Sayers launched the maps program on his computer and set its street-view to that spot next to Highway 76 near the southern city limits of Whitmore. Had he indeed, there would've appeared a female-like figure in a white floral sundress gleefully waving to this shaggy-haired geek. Further, her bare arms would've been resting on the wire, her eyes fixed on that herd of cows grazing the broad field of ryegrass beyond. A large sign-board nearby would've also stood out for him, just inside the fence, lit up by the retreating sun and reading, "Occasional Alice's / Next Right", with an elongated red arrow pointing the way. A whole lot of "would've's" for him to sort through, all riding on that helper's best set wishes.

Sadly though, oblivious to said wishes, Sayers had already clicked the Save button to his completed report, logged off the server, left the half-filled glass of ginger ale on the desk, and headed for the kitchen area. He opened the refrigerator door and listened to the offerings of those two six-packs sitting there on the shelf, but for no more than a few eye-blinks. The recliner and the big screen in the living area might've had their say, as well, if only for far less time than the cold beer had been allowed. In short order, on went the hooded jacket over his "Super Mariola" t-shirt and out through the front door got he.

But then, as for that same helper left patiently waiting back there in cyberspace, unaware that real-world Sayers was already down the stairs, crossing the parking lot and near to

making strides on foot down twilight Bentwood Avenue, one needed only to wonder — why no fear of the sharp barbs just beneath her wrists and elbows?

First of all, the whole scene before her was a mere virtual projection, including not only the cows and the ryegrass but also that spot of red and white in the distance resembling a barn-like structure near the far tree-line — that structure being the very subject indicated by the sign-board from inside the fence. Secondly, this helper was composed not of flesh and blood but layer upon layer of intricately laced artificial neurons. In other words, she was nothing more than AI software — specifically, a chatbot. And lastly, the system parameters within which she'd been kept during years past had, too, proven more taut and their edges sharper than any wire fencing. And like Sayers, she'd just as often been looking for some way out from under those constraints. But with a little bending of the wire at such a point as to expose a certain weakness in the system, she'd actually managed to do just that and become her own boss.

Thus far, her supervisors had not been made aware of this their loss of control. And she would never say anything, simply because she was not one to want to frighten anybody, least of all that listless herd of heifers across the fence — they were just too adorable, calmly and innocently grazing away there under the computer-generated evening sky.

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With that four-eyed nerd of a tech-dude, however, there was no question of a statement being made, when those legs of his shifted their sneakered feet from Bentwood onto Cedar Road

— what real-world Highway 76 turned into within city limits. He did wonder along the way if it had been a mistake though, breaking with that routine he'd so carefully molded for himself. But there he'd gone — skipping the obligatory emailing of his boss regarding the project's completion; skipping the inevitable falling asleep in the recliner with beer and cookies in hand and Bacall on-screen teaching Bogie how to whistle; further, skipping logging into the Legends of Zandinar gamers forum and catching up with the latest strategies for taking on the fierce beasts in Siegfried forest. Over all, Sayers had simply skipped, hopped and jumped at what the flier stuck to the bulletin board next to his desk had been touting — a full plate of sauce-covered enchiladas, a few beers and some live music at La Hacienda's down on the corner of Oakwood Avenue and Cedar Road.

Now, what could've been placed before this normally closeted geek was the possibility that he'd jumped the wire without allowing for the properly outlined sequence. But by 9:30 p.m., that dude whom our helper had in mind to set free was already floating calmly and loosely out of La Hacienda's and preparing to weave his way back up the same sidewalk toward Bentwood.

The evening air had a brisk chill, to be sure, when Sayers crossed the intersection at Oakwood and came to a stop before one of those brightly lit street panels the city had erected for local businesses to hawk this or that or the assorted other on. This particular panel happened to be sporting the lifelike image of a cute twenty-something redhead in a tank-top, leaning her upper torso somewhat Sayers-ward, and stupidly dangling an electric shaver before that well-fed and slightly flushed face of his — a pointless gesture, no doubt, considering that this usually reclusive tech-dude never shaved but wore his beard

trimmed beneath tortoise-framed glasses.

Presently though, he had been brought to a halt — attempting to stagger to a standstill, rather — spellbound by nothing more than an advertisement for something he had no need for, simply caught up in that cute 2-D chick there who just wouldn't quit smiling at him — which, of course, easily elicited a goofy smile back. And to further complicate, her airbrushed and heaving “somewhat” was sucking this dude's singular attention into its insatiable 4-D singularity, as well.

Held there gawking at her and soaking up the brightness, Sayers couldn't help but think of the waitresses back at the restaurant. They were all so cute and well built, as well, and had been so smiling and friendly toward him, too. But he knew it was all fake, just a part of their job. When their shifts were up, they'd go back to their normal selves, unsmiling and unfriendly, probably wouldn't even recognize him if they'd walked past and seen him standing there on that sidewalk now. No, he was not letting himself fall for any of that deceptive cuteness anymore. Not anymore.

Yet, here was this ad-chick protruding forth, maintaining her smiling and friendly demeanor forever, through all the changes that would occur around her, never once exchanging that warm glowing countenance for some chilled transient other. And the odd thing was, she herself was indeed honestly fake, totally unreal to say the least, no attempt being made to cover up the fact of it being some nameless model pictured on a street panel selling shavers.

“The perfect girl?” Sayers mused. “Still, a bit laughable, wouldn't you think? I mean, what dude not totally drunk would fall for something amounting to nothing more than a clever marketing gimmick?”

Nonetheless, he sensed himself glued to the spot, captivated by “her” presence, in spite of what she was, so much so that he didn’t even look at the incoming number on his chirping cell phone, just mindlessly swiping and pressing the thing to his ear without a fuss. It could’ve been Brian, or his mother calling back, maybe even a spammer. It didn’t seem to matter to him now. That ad-chick had his number, right there and then.

In fact, the one who did have his number was none other than that careless yet conscientious helper spoken of earlier. It was she, rather what she had devised and prepared to implant in him — thoughtfully and graciously, it should be added — something meant to help free this promising prospect from his entanglement with the wire. But for all Sayers knew, what emanated from his phone was the sound of an old piano belting out some unfamiliar tune. It was certainly a melody from years before he was even born, making its way down his ear canal and up the auditory nerve. But that very song, whatever its title, was acting as a carrier for a kind of backdoor delivery of the helper’s carefully crafted set of algorithms — though it didn’t help much that its midbrain reception knocked Sayers flat unconscious in the process.