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JOURNEY AT DUSK

Martin

Sometimes I get confused.

Like now. It upsets people and they start shouting at me. I think it frightens them. It used to frighten me—not anymore.

“Do you know your name? Do you know who you are?” A young woman is speaking to me with that concerned, slightly annoyed look on her face that I’ve become accustomed to. I answer her calmly and try to soothe her concerns with a smile.

“My name is Martin,” I tell her, clearly, decisively, without raising my voice. Of course I know my name. It wasn’t like I fell and hit my head on the sidewalk. I don’t have amnesia.

“Always has been Martin and always will be Martin,” I add. Sometimes I can be a smart-ass. The girl doesn’t smile at my wisecrack, but she does seem pleased that I know who I am and stops frowning at me for the moment. I give her my friendly smile again, and this time she manages to smile in turn. I know that her smile won’t last. Soon, she’ll ask her next question, and I’m afraid I won’t have much of an answer for her. I’m enjoying her company and don’t wish to anger her, so when she asks her inevitable follow-up question, the one that I’ve asked myself over and over this very morning, I am very careful with my response, trying my best not to upset this pleasant young woman who is giving me her

kind attention. I wait for it, like an actor waiting for his cue.

“Do you know where you live?”

That’s it. That’s the one, the riddle that I’ve been trying to unravel in my mind all morning. To be honest, this one has me worried. It would seem that a grown man should know where he lives, yet at this moment, I haven’t got a clue. I don’t want this nice young woman to walk away exasperated and angry, leaving me here alone to sort things out, so I try to buy some time. In the same clear, decisive voice with which I answered her first question, I declare that I’m sure that I live nearby.

She is looking around us at the rows of nearly identical ranch houses, pretty much the same as I’ve been doing for over an hour now. She is bewildered, no doubt, as anyone would be by their similarity. She looks this way and that; her blond hair, cut in what we used to call a pageboy, swings back and forth with her head, catching the morning sunlight with its youthful shimmer. Trying my best to be helpful, I do my part, looking both ways with her.

“But, do you know where you live—which block, which street?”

Her voice gets louder and begins to take on that shrill tone that female voices get when a woman is on the verge of losing her patience. I do my best to maintain my friendly smile because I know she is just trying to help me. I don’t say to her what I am thinking.

I don’t yell at her in frustration that if I knew which house was mine I wouldn’t be out here about to suffer heat stroke in the blinding hot Florida sun. That would be unkind, and then I wouldn’t blame her for walking away. I remind myself before speaking that she is only trying to be helpful. Everyone is always trying to help me. It’s

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nice. I just wish they wouldn't raise their voices. It doesn't help. I'm not deaf, just a little bit confused.

"You don't know, do you?" Her voice is calmer now.

"No," I finally admit, embarrassed.

I look at the young woman's face. She's just a girl really. She looks very familiar, but I'm sure I don't know her. She is a well-meaning stranger trying to help an old man who is lost. I've been lost before.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she says sadly. This is where she will start talking to herself as if I wasn't standing right in front of her. I feel a little bad for the girl. There's not much that I can do to help her. She tells me her name is Susan. She looks around again at the rows of little houses in the complex. They really do all look the same. I fear that she is as confused as I am, the blind leading the blind. I have a granddaughter named Susan. This girl looks a little like her. I'm happy that this young lady has stopped to help me, but now I'm beginning to feel guilty for taking up her time and mostly for getting her upset.

"It's okay, Susan," I say and she looks surprised that I remember her name even though she just told me a minute ago. "I'll find my way," I say to let her off the hook. "Thank you for trying to help me. It's a beautiful day. I'll just walk around awhile and maybe someone will recognize me and tell me where I should go."

"I recognize you," she says softly. Her voice sounds sad again. "I'm Susan—remember, you just said my name. I'm your granddaughter."

"You can't be my Susan. My Susie is just eight years old. She comes to visit me and her grandmother, my wife Betty, every other Saturday, and we go to the beach in the Mustang. She loves it when I put the top down and the wind blows up her long blond hair. She's none too

happy, though, when Betty tries to brush out the tangles later on. You don't have long blond hair. No dear, you're a very nice young lady and I appreciate you taking the time to help me, but you're not my little Susie."

Now I've done it. And this is what confuses me the most. I've somehow hurt this poor girl's feelings. When am I going to learn? She is no longer shouting at me. Now she looks down at the ground and pushes a small tear from the corner of her eye, followed by a little sniff. Why did I have to argue with her? I should have let her be Susie. Lately, it seems everyone is telling me things that don't make sense. They tell me I don't understand. That I am confused, but I think it is they who are confused. It is true that at this particular moment, I have forgotten which one of these damn look-alike houses is the one that I live in. I'd be the first to admit that I get confused about directions and such. Who doesn't from time to time? But I think I know my own granddaughter, for Christ's sake!

"I don't know what to say, Grandpa. Why don't I just take you back to your house? I'll show you, and you'll probably remember where you live when you see it."

"You know where I live?" I say to the girl, trying my best to hide the annoyance in my voice. I don't want to make her cry again. "You've known all along?"

"Of course, Grandpa. I just wanted to see if you might remember this time."

"Like a game," I say, trying to sound lighthearted.

"Yes," she says with a small sigh. "Like a game." She doesn't seem to be enjoying the game, and quite frankly, neither am I. The summer sun is hot on my pale skin, and right now all I want is to get indoors, put on the window fan, and turn on some golf. I hadn't planned to be outside for so long. Just went out to get the paper. In

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fact, if I had known I'd be out walking all morning, I would have put on some decent shoes instead of these old bedroom slippers.

"Let's go home, Susie." I say. "I'm a little tired."

"Let me help you, Grandpa. It's not too far. You probably just took the wrong path and got lost."

This strikes me as funny, and I can't help but laugh.

"Who gets lost going out for the morning paper?"

I make no attempt to hide my amusement. I've always found that no matter what the situation, it always helps to keep your sense of humor, but it seems from the look on the girl's face that my sudden outburst of laughter is disturbing to her. Maybe she thinks that I'm laughing at her, which I'm not. It looks as though she may start to cry again, so I do my best to try and look serious, which probably has the effect of turning my face into a comical grimace. She looks up at me, and my scrunched-up face makes her laugh, too. Shaking her head, she leads me down what I assume is the proper path that will take us home.

"What are we going to do with you?" she asks, more good-naturedly now.

"You could start by getting me out of this hot sun," I suggest and gladly follow her lead. We walk past a golf course and a small pond. I am enjoying the brightly colored perennials lining the path as we proceed, but the girl frets and repeatedly checks her watch.

"Got a hot date?" I inquire.

"I wish," she says. "No, it's my job. They don't like it when I'm late."

"They're right not to like it. You shouldn't be late for work." She casts me a sideways glance and I get its meaning. "I've made you late, haven't I?"

“It’s okay. I can push back my appointments. It’s not a big deal. Getting you home is more important right now.”

“If you can just point me in the right direction, I’m sure that I’ll find my way back.”

“Oh no, we’ve come this far. I’m not leaving until you’re inside the door.”

“You’re a nice girl. I could write your boss a note or call your office to explain how you rescued me; then you won’t get in trouble.”

“It’s really not necessary, but thanks. I’m a big girl now. I can take care of the people at my office, but tell me something, Grandpa.”

“Again with the Grandpa . . .”

“Sorry, it doesn’t feel right calling you Martin.”

“Well, that’s my name.”

“Tell me then, Martin, now that you’re . . . older, when you look back at your life, is there anything you would have done differently?”

“You know, I’m so damn lucky. I’ve had a great life. I survived the war. A lot of my friends never came back. Got a job at the bank as a gofer and worked myself up to vice president. Now, I don’t mean to sound all highfalutin about it; there were a lot of other vice presidents, but I was the only one who never went to college. I just worked hard and made sure I was nice to people, the customers, my boss, and later the people that worked for me, and you know, most of the time, they were nice to me in return. Then, of course, I had my family and a house. When I was a kid we grew up crammed into a tiny cold water flat in Brooklyn, but once I had my own family I moved them into a house, a whole house of our own. Jesus, I thought it was a castle. Signed the mortgage papers two weeks after getting promoted to head teller. Even with my ten-dollar-a-week raise I still

couldn't afford it, but my boss, old Grabowski, the guy everyone thought was a mean, nasty son-of-a-bitch, called me into his office one day and shoved an envelope in my face. I thought I was cooked, fired. I was sure that envelope contained my pink slip. He said, 'Martin, I hear you're looking at houses. You're a damn fool. I know what you make and you can't afford a house. Take this and pay me back when you can; don't worry about interest, it's not an official bank loan. It's just between you and me.' Then the old curmudgeon—we called him Ebenezer behind his back—winked at me and said, 'Don't you dare tell a soul.' Well he's been dead for years, so I can tell you now. I wanted to tell everyone that story at his funeral, but there was hardly anyone there except for me and some of his business associates I didn't know. Yeah, I am damned lucky. Old Grabowski, huh, haven't thought about him in years. How did I start talkin' about him? Did you bring him up?"

"My mom told me about how you whistled every morning while getting ready to go to work. She said it drove everyone crazy that you could be so cheerful in the morning."

"Why not, I had a good job to go to. Did I know your mom?"

"Yes, Martin, you *know* her."

"Oh."

"I know you liked your job, but was there ever anything else that you would have rather—"

"History!"

"What?"

"I've loved history ever since grade school. I would have liked to have been a historian."

"Wow, no one ever told me that. Why didn't you?"

"How does a historian buy groceries and pay the doctor when his kids get sick?"

“You could have been a teacher.”

“You need college for that. When I got out of the service I was in a hurry to catch up with my life. There was no money for college. Could have cashed in on the GI bill, but I met my Betty, and the GI bill would have helped with tuition, but not rent and groceries, so history became my hobby, a secret passion. But, I’m not a history buff.”

“A buff?”

“I always hated that. It makes it sound trivial, like it’s some joke. Whenever I was fool enough to tell about my interest in history, they’d say, oh, you’re a history buff. History is no joke, young lady. It may have had to stay a hobby because of circumstances, but I always took it seriously. I still take it seriously. I’m not a buff.”

“No, I can see that. You are definitely not a buff. You’re very passionate.”

“People don’t realize that almost all of their problems have already been solved for them if they would learn their history and stop trying to reinvent the wheel, but they don’t. I guess every generation’s got to start over and learn from its mistakes. It’s a damned shame. They’re too busy making the same mistakes over and over again to get ahead. Mankind is in a rut.”

“I never knew you were so philosophical. Mom never mentioned—”

“Philosophical, ha! You know what Betty says whenever I get philosophical. She says, ‘Stop filling the air with nonsense.’ And then she reminds me that the toilet is broken again and won’t stop running or some such thing.”

“That’s too bad.”

“No, that’s just life. What do you do? This job I’m making you late for?”

“You remember. I’m a drug pusher.”

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I stop dead in my tracks and stare at this sweet wisp of a girl. I try to imagine her selling crack on the streets of Miami and laugh. This time I *am* laughing at her. “Now you’re pulling my leg, kiddo.”

“That’s what you called it. You don’t remember, do you? I promote pharmaceuticals to private practitioners and hospitals in the northern counties. You know, I’m a sales rep. You blasted me for selling out to *Big Pharma* when I dropped out of grad school to take the job. You weren’t very nice about it.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t remember. Do you like your job?”

“I’m good at it.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“It’s okay. They send me on trips, give me a nice car.”

“Is it like history?”

The girl, I think she said her name was Susan, looks up at me as if I’ve just said something important. I am about to ask her to remind me of what that might be when she announces, “We’re here.”

I squint as the blinding glare of the morning sun obscures my vision, but can’t really see where “here” is until we pass into the shade. The first thing I notice is that the lush green lawn is cut to an even length, and the edges along the path leading up from the sidewalk are neatly trimmed. I don’t remember mowing the grass recently, so it must have been cut by my son Andy while I was at work. I am pleased and say so.

“Looks like he did a good job this time, don’t you think? Last time he cut it so low along the edges that it turned brown. I keep telling him he’s got to adjust the blade.”

“Yes, the landscapers here do a nice job. Home sweet home at last,” she announces with a weary sigh,

too weary I think for such a young person so early in the morning.

I look at the small ranch house in front of us. The siding is a nice shade of blue. I've always liked that color. Dresden blue I think it said on the can. The hedges around the colorful garden are as neatly trimmed as the lawn, just the way I would have trimmed them if they were my hedges. It's a good-looking house, well maintained and decorated just the way I like it, right down to the crisp white trim and barn-red shutters flanking the windows. It's a lovely house, but it's not my house. I know that I should break it to my young guide gently, but I'm hot and my feet hurt and I'm afraid that I'm more than a little cranky.

"This is not my house," I say, refusing to take another step toward the front door.

"Now Grandpa . . ."

"Please don't call me that, young lady. My name is Martin. You wouldn't like it if I kept calling you little girl or honey."

"Okay, Martin, but, this *is* your house. You've lived here for the last ten years since you moved to Florida."

"If this is my house, then whose car is that in the driveway? I always park my car in the driveway and that's not my car. I'm sorry, but you've taken me to the wrong place."

"That *is* your car in the driveway."

"That's not my car!"

"This is the car you have *now*. Are you thinking of the old Mustang, Gran—" She stops short and corrects herself, "I mean, Martin?"

"Oh a Mustang would be nice, wouldn't it? I'd like a convertible, but then how would I fit you, Andrew, your bicycles and all your stuff into a Mustang? I'm talking about our car, the station wagon. I distinctly remember

parking it yesterday when I came home from the bank. This isn't my house; this isn't my car. You've taken me to the wrong place, Dana."

"Ohhh," she says and I think that I'm making some headway until she says in that voice that people use when they're trying to convince me of some nonsense, "You think that I'm Mom. Mom and Uncle Andy don't live with you anymore, Martin. They're all grown up. I'm Susan, your granddaughter."

I stop looking at the strange car in the driveway and focus on the face of the girl. It's a very pretty face, a little smug and know-it-all at the moment, but pretty nonetheless. It's a kind face, a familiar face, but it's not quite the face of my little girl Dana. She could be Dana's sister if Betty and I had decided to have a third child—which we didn't. Could this girl, all grown up, really be my little Susie?

"People say I look a lot like Mom."

My head is spinning and I decide, oh what the hell. I'd be more than happy to believe that this charming young woman is my granddaughter, and even though I still don't see how it could be, I'm ready to go with it. Still, I've got my pride. I'm not ready to concede all just yet. I want to be right about something, so after allowing Susie to savor her moment of victory over my befuddled memory, I shift the focus of my protestations.

"Susan," I say, looking the girl squarely in the eye and pointing at the light blue sedan in my driveway, "this is still not my car!"

"Okay, Grandpa, I give up. It's not your car. Your car must be in the shop."

Now she's placating me, and I don't like it.

"Listen, young lady, I would not drive a car like this. Look at it. It's all banged up. The taillights are broken. It looks like it's been hit by a Mack truck."

“It was the garage door, actually. Then the mailbox and finally the fire hydrant next door.”

Now I remember. How could I forget such a big god-awful fuss? I’ve driven all my life. Even drove a newspaper delivery truck around Newark when I first got my license at seventeen. Had my share of speeding tickets and fender-benders. I told my son Andrew after his first minor accident that if you drive in New Jersey, you’ve got to do your best to be alert and defensive, but eventually even the best driver is going to hit something or get hit. So I forgot that the garage door wasn’t open—big deal. It wasn’t like I killed anybody. And I couldn’t exactly see where the mailbox was with half of the garage door covering up my rear window. It was the fire hydrant, I think, that got everyone so upset. Knocked the cap clean off and created a geyser like the one we saw at Yellowstone years ago. Such drama, like a Bruce Willis movie. These big Mercurys can take out the wall of a house once they get going. Who needs a Hummer? I only took down a cheesy fiberglass roll-up door. Such a fuss!

“They didn’t have to take my license away,” I complain to Susie.

“Oh, so now you remember,” she says, stifling a little laugh. “It really wasn’t funny—you could have been killed.”

“Like the Geyser at Yellowstone!” I egg her on, laughing with her at the now-vivid memory of the water shooting up from underneath the car. “You’re right, it’s not funny—I could have drowned in front of my own house.”

“Yes, Grandpa. In front of *your* own house. I’m glad we got that settled.”

“You tricked me. I still don’t think this is my house.”

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“Let’s get you inside; it’s not getting any cooler out here.”

I could tell that the girl, Susan, is relieved. We shared a good laugh together and for a precious moment all of our troubles went away. Her brow is smooth again and she is smiling. For a second, her smile reminds me of Betty, my wife, when we were young. But, I know she isn’t Betty. This girl is young enough to be my daughter.

Susan reaches into her purse and fumbles with some keys, but before she can put her key in the lock, the front door of the Dresden Blue house swings open to reveal an agitated old woman in a yellow robe and curlers. My greeting should have been more cordial, but I’m eager to use this stranger’s presence to prove once and for all that Susan is wrong about the house, and I am right. I turn away from the crabby-looking woman, who we’d obviously disturbed from her much-needed beauty sleep, and ask my guide in a superior tone, “So who the hell is this and what is she doing in *my* house?”

My inquiry causes the old woman to go into near hysterics.

“What does he mean, who am I?”

“Martin, you remember Harriet, *your wife*.”

I look at the old woman in the curlers, and I fear that my face falls into a disdainful frown before I can remember my manners. “Where’s Betty?” I ask the girl.

“Oh my God, he’s acting crazy again. You see, dear, it’s not my imagination. He’s getting worse. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“It’s all right, Harriet,” the young girl says as she tries to calm the distraught woman. “We’ve had a rough morning.”

I’m beginning to feel guilty about my disapproving grimace and continued unkind thoughts. It’s not as if the woman can control the way she looks. She’s old and

obviously not at her best, and I should be kinder. Since when did I begin to judge people by their appearances? I'm not pleased with myself at the moment and tired or not, I do my best to come up with something nice to say to make up for my poor behavior.

"You have a lovely home," I offer with my best smile replacing the offending frown.

"Crazy old man," she says to me. "This is your house. Our house!"

Now I see that the poor woman is delusional, so I clam up and let Susie do the talking. To my surprise, perhaps in an attempt to humor the old woman who seems now to be on the verge of some violent act, the girl turns to me and whispers, "Martin, you're not helping here."

"What's this Martin business?" asks the woman in the robe.

"That's my name, Martin Fielding."

"I know it's your name. Since when does your granddaughter call you Martin?"

"He doesn't like Grandpa; it doesn't matter. Besides, I'm twenty-three; I think I prefer calling him Martin." She looks at me and passes me a sweet conspiratorial smile. I don't know what she's smiling about, but her smile is infectious and I smile back.

"Don't humor him, Susan," she says sharply to the girl, and then in an even more offensive tone says to me, "Snap out of it, Martin. What's wrong with you? Snap out of it immediately!" Now she's waving her big hands in my face.

"Harriet, stop that!" says Susan. The girl gently takes my arm and leads me through the vestibule hall to a comfortable-looking recliner in front of a console television while Harriet rattles on, "I don't know what I'm going to do with him. I'm an old woman. I've got

my problems, too. I have palpitations and my bunions are killing me. I need to go to the doctor, but how can I take care of myself with this craziness going on every day? Now he's asking for Betty! You don't know how that hurts me—more than my bunions. He doesn't even know who I am. Where is the strong, kind man that I married? This isn't fair. I'm an old woman. I have my own problems. And you, dear, I'm so sorry I had to call you, but when I woke up this morning and Martin was gone, I panicked. I didn't know where to look. For weeks, Martin's been unable to figure out the latch on the front door. Can you imagine that? Your grandfather was such a smart man. I still don't know how he ended up wandering around outside."

"I guess he figured it out, Harriet."

"I'm going to put a bell on that door, in case he tries this again. You go now, honey. I can handle him now that he's back inside. You must be terribly late for work. Will you get in trouble?"

"Maybe it doesn't matter. Grandpa and I had a nice talk this morning. He's still a smart man."

"He's not the man I married, but yes, dear, I'm sure you're right. Take this glass of ice water to your grandfather and say goodbye, then go before you get fired."

I am only half listening as the women drone on in the background. I sit in the big comfy chair. The air in the room is cool, and Susan appears at my side with a tall glass of ice water. Something is uncomfortable about the chair, and I fish around in the crease of the cushion to find that I'm sitting on the TV remote. I sip my drink and flip the channels until I find the station televising the highlights of the Masters Tournament. I resist the temptation to point the control at Harriet jabbering on and on behind me in the kitchen and settle in to watch some golf. Suddenly everything is familiar: the picture

on the wall above the television, the drapes, even Harriet's relentless chatter. Susie kneels in front of me, blocking the screen. "Feeling better now, Martin?" she asks. She must be able to see that I am because before I can answer, she smiles again. Such a pleasant girl.

"You were right. This is my house. I remember now. But where is Betty and who is that woman in the kitchen?"

"Grandma passed away ten years ago. Harriet is your wife now. You married again after Gram died and moved down here to Florida into this house."

"Oh," was all I could say. I wasn't totally convinced, yet her story had the ring of truth to it and after all, she was right about the house. "I believe you, dear," I say, eager now to get back to my golf, but the girl has more to say and continues to block the screen, even when I attempt to peek around her head to watch a critical putt.

"Try to be on your best behavior with Harriet. She has had a difficult morning, too. She was very worried about you when you disappeared. That's why she called me to find you. Promise me that you'll be nice when I leave."

"I promise," I say solemnly and this does the trick. The girl pats my knee and at last removes herself from my field of vision, just as the white ball slips past the cup and the crowd moans in disappointment.

"Good-bye, Grandpa Martin. I'll check in on you later today. Remember your promise."

"Good-bye, Susan," I say cheerfully, revived by the cool drink and happy to be in my comfy chair again. A caring *daughter* is a treasure in old age. I'm a lucky man.