

REAL FALL WEATHER

Mark McGraw

I tried not to look at the place where Big Don Cagle's sweaty scalp shined through his hair implants. I had just shifted into my pitch to ask for a contribution to the school of business when he interrupted me, "That ground the bidness school sits on now wasn't nothin' but pasture when I was in school here." He looked at his reflection in the window while pretending to fix his gaze on something on the other side. Then he leaned against the arm of his chair and continued, "Hell, they even tried to get me to give 'em money for the indoor football practice facility this year. Who ever heard of such a damn thing? I told 'em no sale. *Indoor* football practice field. Good Lord. That ain't how it's done. I r'member when the coach used to drive out to the country to recruit. He'd ask them ol' boys out plowin' how to get t' the church. If the boy pointed with his finger the coach'd keep on drivin'. If the boy pointed with the whole plow, well, they'd recruit him. We need to get back to that, son, I'm tellin' you. Just mow 'em down. That's how you do it." Big Don's wife, Dotty, beamed at him, a halo of permed hair around a drumtight visage. A half hour later, though, through patience and promises and appeals to the man's vanity, I was walking out of the front door of the best Italian restaurant in town with a pledge card for a half mill in my pocket. I had won another round. That was nearly a year ago.

Real fall weather had just hit central Texas; what my dad used to call "squirrel huntin' weather," when the wind shifts one day in early October and a hint of brisk cool unexpectedly shows up like a stranger who took the wrong exit off the interstate. Life was good. Good gig, hot wife, two cute kids: one a cheerleader and the other a great little football player. I drank it all in with fullbellied satisfaction as I made my way toward my Lexus alone at the other side of the parking lot.

And then I saw him walking straight at me. This guy I had never seen before.

"Sir," he started as soon as he could get me to stop. "Could ya please help me?"

I stood there with my hands in my pockets and didn't say anything.

He continued, "I don't have no money on me and I need to get my medicine at Albertson's before the pharmacy closes." He motioned to the lights of the grocery store visible through the trees on the other side of the busy four-lane. "I need eight dolla's for ma' co-pay, but if you could give me anything I'd appreciate it." His accent lilted Ville Platte, Morgan City or Plaquemines Parish; somewhere in small town South Louisiana.

His story had all the necessary ingredients: courtesy, believability, immediacy, and flexibility. And I had to also consider that it might be entirely or partially true. My standard reaction to such requests was "I don't

give money, but if you're hungry I'll take you right now to get something to eat." Now, as you might imagine, this technique got some fascinating responses. In Houston a guy told me to go do something to myself that was sexually and geometrically impossible. But in Chicago I bought a Potbelly's sub with extra peppers and a large Coke for a guy with a lazy eye and white stubble who slurred to me over and over that he would keep me and my family in his prayers.

The man facing me on this fall night under the bluish parking lot lights was a white guy, a little shorter and maybe five to ten years older than me. The scuffed leather toes of his work boots and his thread worn jeans indicated days spent on construction sites or in the oil fields. He was dirty, but it was long work-day dirty, not a homeless funk.

I told him, "Look, I don't have any cash on me, but I can go over there with you and pay your co-pay with my credit card." He wordlessly blinked at me and his lips moved slightly before saying, "OK." We started walking through the parking lot toward the edge of the busy four-lane.

My pride in my ability to spot accents compelled me to ask him, "So where are you from in Louisiana?"

"Oh, ma' accent gives it away, huh? Yeah, we cain't hide too good. As soon as we op'm our mouth y'all know we from Louisiana. I'm from Houma, you know where Houma is? Eva' heard of it?"

I admitted I had.

"I was a welder out there on the rigs in the Gulf befo' Katrina. Made a good livin' too, you hea'? Good money. They got us offa the rigs right before the storm hit, just in time to get us back to dry land, or what was passin' fa' dry land. I got back to the house and told my wife, 'Baby, we got to go, this whole area's gon' flood.' But her mama was in a nursin' home there in town and she wouldn't leave her. She never did trust them people to take care of her mama. So that storm hit and we just had to hunker down and wait it out. I had my wife and little girl lay down in the bath tub and I put a mattress over them and I went and got in the closet. Well, Katrina blew out most of the windows and there wasn't much roof left to speak of. We tried to collect up what we could and went to a shelter at the high school but the roads was closed between the high school and the nursin' home. By the time we could get ova' there they had evacuated most everybody."

We reached the sidewalk that parallels University Drive, packed with cars driven by students going about the business of good-time Friday night. We waited shoulder to shoulder and I looked past him to try to estimate a safe crossing of at least half of the four-lane.

He continued, "When the hurricane hit the power went out at the nursin' home and they didn't have nobody there that knew how to run the generator. See, my wife's mother was on a respirator. It had a battery to it, but that only lasted a few hours. So after while she died. Well, that hit ma' wife real hard, you know. And the insurance wouldn't cover most of the repairs we needed on the house because they said it was in a flood plain. I came over hea' fa' work after some friends of ours moved up to here and told us folks was real

nice ova' hea'."

We got enough of a break in the stream of traffic to jog over to the median and we waited again, now looking east as cars thumping music dopplered by at forty miles an hour, rustling our hair and clothing.

I sensed a shift in his posture that told me what was to happen just a fraction of a second before he put his entire body weight behind his shoulder to knock me in front of an oncoming Ford F-250. Even though the span between realization and reaction was too brief for me to save myself from being hit, I was given a full consciousness and a clear certainty of what was happening. And in that instant I calculated all that I was losing. One-on-one basketball games with my son in the driveway. Running fast in the humid darkness before work. Cooling down with satisfaction at the end of a sixty miler with the bike club. The heaving chest and honest sweat in the cold air of a mountain summit. Some of the most fundamental human activities that made life most real for me were shifted from present into preterit. From I do to I did. From I am to I was.

The impact of the truck crushed my pelvis and shattered both my femurs. Landing sixty feet away on University Drive resulted in a compound fracture of my lower right leg. I also had four broken ribs and a concussion. The EMT who got to me first told me later he took me for dead. The repair of the pelvis was the most complex of many operations. Surgeons rebuilt it with the help of a paste made from cow bones. Fifteen minutes after I was hit they caught the guy who pushed me. He was in the Albertson's with my credit card.

I have burned much of the year since then in an oily flame of anger. But physical therapy became my Bowl Game, my daily National Championship. Like a prisoner who memorizes every square inch of his cell, I developed a special taxonomy for my pain: the annoyance of bedsores, the humiliating and bullet-biting catheterizations, and the dull swells born in the fetch of my pelvis whose plunging waves crashed against the backs of my eyeballs. I could take it, the pain and everything, because listen, the desire for vengeance is all-natural male enhancement. Whether I was asleep or awake the guy's face has been seared into my conscience. I had learned his name but I refused to name him. He was just The Guy Who Pushed Me. And I seethed with desire to stand and to walk to face him again.

What I didn't count on was being abandoned. The groups of visitors who initially crowded in rows around my hospital bed thinned out to a trickle over the coming months and eventually stopped by the time I was able to "walk" on a treadmill while ninety percent of my body weight was supported by a big sling. My wife said I was nasty and short tempered with them. I don't know. I suspect they just came out of curiosity to see the crippled guy they used to be friends with and, curiosity satisfied, decided there was nothing else to see. My wife would coo, "I know you're hurting, baby, but why do you have to be so angry with people who love you? It's gonna be OK." She just didn't get it. Nothing would be OK until I could settle the score with that guy. About the time I was able to use a walker she told me she was

leaving. She would wait, she said, until I was discharged from the hospital to file for divorce. What a gal, huh? She said every time she came to visit I would hang my anger around her and the kids' necks like millstones and she felt like she had a right to be happy. I still don't know what that means.

When I wasn't at PT I thought about how to get back at the guy. My attorney connections found out he was at the John B. Connally Unit of the Correctional Institutions of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice at Kennedy, Texas. I thought about hiring a hit on him but that wasn't going to work. It had to be personal, face-to-face and by my hand. That's why I had to get much stronger. The next problem would be how to get at him. I scanned the state jobs website for positions that would give me access to the prisons and the most promising one was as an accounts auditor who visited the forty-six prison units run by the state. "Must be willing to travel in-state," it said. I was. I was willing.

The next graduation was to forearm crutches. And yesterday I was spidering along the halls of the hospital, just getting into the rhythm of plunking down my crutchbearing left arm before sliding my right foot forward when I got a call on my cell phone. I was out of breath and sweaty as I dug the phone out of my bathrobe pocket and answered it. It was my attorney buddy, Gary. "Good news, man!" he gushed. "Your convict got what was coming to him last weekend. Somebody stabbed him with a shiv over a carton of smokes. Killed him. I just thought that would make your day." Drymouthed, I thanked him and hung up. How could this be good news? I had absolutely nothing left, no way to make it right. This guy had taken everything from me.

What was I supposed to do now?