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Sixteen Minutes in the Morning

It was instinct for Frank to pull his car to the left so that the small furry thing, the struck squirrel, would pass between his tires. The buoyant tail quivered, and before the animal disappeared from his sight and under his car Frank saw a hind leg paddling quick circles in the air. It had been hurt badly enough to immobilize it, but not enough to kill it. The roar of engines, the rush of hot air redolent with gasoline, and the cars passing ceaselessly overhead, Frank imagined, must be like the apocalypse to a small rodent. He had to circle back around and do something.

He merged to the right, fighting the steady strong current of commuter flow, and mentally took inventory. In his car he had nothing more useful than the rag he used to check the oil. With this he could wrap up the squirrel and take it to the park, where it would slowly die, or to an animal hospital, where it would probably be euthanized—after, that is, enduring the further terrors of being handled by a human, restrained in an oily cloth and transported inside a thrumming, alien machine.

Frank had no time to take care of doomed squirrels. He was running a little late, which was not good, given that he, as department manager, was supposed to be cracking down on lateness, as well as on leaving early, taking long lunches, and using the internet for anything not directly related to work. As Frank was supposed to be watching his employees, he knew that his bosses were watching him. He'd survived the sale of Gardner Peebles to the giant Banner-Brigman four years ago, and even the massive reorganization last year. They'd shut down his entire department, and the fact that he had been offered a position in another was due only to Vern, one of the V.P.s, who liked him. Now that Vern had retired, upper management only wanted a good pretext to replace Franklin G. Williams, formerly of Gardner Peebles, with someone younger, cheaper, and more malleable.

Craig and Jonas were both extra chummy and extra yes-sir towards him of late, each hoping that by being Frank's favorite they'd become the prime candidate to take over his position. Frank himself, though he hated brown-nosing, had made some compromises on that front in order to stay relevant and competitive. He'd taken online management training classes from his home computer, on his own time, stayed late and came in on weekends, and, though it nauseated him a little, had used words like "synergy" in his own sentences. His department was arguably the tightest ship in the fleet.

Frank had never found his job thrilling or fascinating, but he'd

steadily and contentedly plowed away at it throughout the Gardner Peebles era. Since the sale, however, he'd felt a dismal strain of anger and helplessness underlying even his best days at the office. Things that wouldn't have fazed him five years ago—accusations of character defamation and petty theft between employees, the computer network crashing, last-minute changes of plans—now made him red-hot irritated. It took physical effort to keep himself from sighing and rolling his eyes during meetings. With the new internet usage policy, Gwynnie had stopped sending her wordy, loving, breezily written emails, as she had almost daily for over a decade. They were replaced with stilted cellphone text messages full of typos: “sick oe the cass2erole! grill 2night? i wikl get chicken. xoxoxo - g.” Both of them found this mode of communication frustrating, and it hurt their fingers.

This was where Frank was headed, at 8:07 a.m., when he passed over the squirrel. If he continued on, as he should, he would arrive only ten or fifteen minutes late, talk to Melia about disciplining two of her supervisees because of their error rates (even though they were the best processors on the team, and therefore always got the hardest cases), reply to his emails, go to the 10 a.m. bullshit meeting, work on the quarterly reports, then go to lunch. He might wonder, periodically, about the squirrel, whether it had died a few moments after he passed over it or if it was still there, dodged by all the drivers, its panicky hind leg slowing incrementally. To a rodent with a short lifespan and a little brain, a few hours like that might seem like human days or weeks. It would be cruel to leave it.

He circled around, turning onto the parallel avenue until he was pretty sure he had passed the spot where the squirrel was. It might be a fool's errand; in the five minutes it took him to circle around, another car could've done the job. Back on Thirteenth, however, a leaden tremor went through his gut and chest as he saw the squirrel, untouched since he'd last passed. He found a clear spot in the lane to the right, and pulled a couple feet over into that lane to set his left wheels on course. This felt perverse to him. It would be quick, he reminded himself, and the animal was suffering horribly right now. He was close enough to see the leg still moving, perhaps slower than before, in hopeless circles. He gripped the wheel firmly with both hands, steeled himself against reflexive flinching, and aimed for where he thought the head was.

The animal disappeared from view. A blink later there was a slight bump and pop under the tire, as if he had run over a damp acorn. The car shuddered slightly. He felt suddenly sick, his vision dimmed. He swung sharply left, relieved to find that the street led into the park,

and was able to pull over and shut off the car before he stumbled out, up onto the spring grass, and vomited. His tie, he remembered, clutching it fumblingly to his front and bending over as far as he could so he wouldn't splash his shoes.

Two women, one with a sleek Weimaraner, paused in their walk, taken aback by the shortish, pasty, graying businessman, holding his conservative blue-and-red striped tie to his chest with one hand and his wire-rimmed glasses to the bridge of his nose with the other, leaning over at a right angle and throwing up on the grass. When he straightened up, they continued on, casting their eyes downwards towards the dog. "Come on," the owner said, as if they had just paused to let the dog sniff at something.

Frank didn't even register the presence of the women and the dog. He would be even later now, and there was no way he could go in with puke on his breath. A few blocks east and a few blocks north there was a Walgreen's. He would have to stop there for mouthwash and a toothbrush and toothpaste. He looked down to check his shoes and his shirt. His vision was grainy, spattered with tiny red and purple starbursts, his head light and dizzy. That had happened a couple times in the last few weeks. It might be high blood pressure, Gwynnie said. It might be stress.

He got back into the quiet car, but needed to wait a moment before driving off. His ears were ringing, and when he leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes he remembered the bump and pop of the animal's life ending. He drew in a deep breath, and let it out slowly. It helped clear the sick, slick fog from his head a little.

After a minute or two he started the car and pulled off. He was still feeling woozy, but he needed to pull himself together, go into work and be a strong leader, prove he was still worth keeping around. He turned left, onto the road that cut through the park. Frank felt a mess, but at least he'd done his good deed for the day—macabre sort of good though it was. Encountering a dying squirrel, he thought with a twinge of cynicism, made for an oddly fitting start to his day, given that his career was similarly moribund. It was true, though he hadn't much cared to think about it, that he wouldn't be making this morning commute much longer. With effort, he could hold on for a few years, but no amount of online classes, punctuality, mouthwash, head-nodding or ass-kissing could make for a happier ending. And, as with the squirrel, perhaps the best thing to do would be to put the damn thing out of its misery.

He could step down on the gas, point his tires straight at the vital parts. That would mean managing the way he wanted to manage, and the rest would take care of itself. His employees could use the internet for whatever they wanted apart from (or hey, perhaps

including) porn as long as they made a reasonable effort to get work done. “So getting back to the topic of,” he’d say in meetings, when his colleagues started in on a bout of oxygen-sucking, pointless dithering tangents. Casual Fridays would be reinstated on a weekly, rather than mere monthly, basis. He would email his wife when he fucking felt like it.

Frank’s thoughts built to a wave, a crest, that broke and roiled gleefully. The good old days of Gardner Peebles were gone, and Banner-Brigman could fire him if they wanted to. He didn’t want to work for that miserly, mismanaged, ass-kissing, flavorless bloated turd of a company anyway. Banner-Brigman in fact could suck his balls. He’d be happily tending bar at the P.K. Lounge, stocking produce at Whole Foods, or flipping burgers alongside high school kids, with just as little care about career advancement or annual reviews. His choices, constrained by necessity though they might be, would be his own. Again he pulled off to the side of the road, by the open field in the park’s center: fuck it if he was late. He wouldn’t be a coward any more.

The wave fizzed and hissed, simmering down, bubbles popping before the undertow began sweeping the water back out to sea. What about Jeff and his three more years of college, what about Gwynnie and their daydreamed retirement travels? The house would cry out from its depths for a new furnace, in its displeasure it would shake the driveway until the concrete cracked. There were the dozens of small things they had gotten used to: pre-washed baby spinach, high-speed wireless internet, semi-weekly excursions to one of the new restaurants opening everywhere.

Quick mental calculations provided him with some numbers. There were their 401ks, shockingly dwindled but not completely without value. There was the house, which they could mortgage again if need be, or sell for over three times what they’d paid for it (even adjusting for inflation). He would need to work, and they would need to give up things. Yet it seemed like, as Frank thought it through and thought it through again, they might be able to make it work.

His hands had never stopped shaking since he hit the squirrel, but it was with a different feeling, the unease and queasy thrill of a precipitous decision, that he fumbled his phone from his pocket. It was eight twenty-three. In the park around him the animals had woken up and begun the day: a northern flicker flashed its white rump as it flew up, startled, from the ground. Mice emerged from a tangle of backyard rosebushes to forage in the grass, a pigeon cocked its head towards a cigarette butt, and a squirrel jumped from a trunk through the air, thirty feet above the ground, to grab onto a branch no thicker than Frank’s thumb and continue running without pause.

His heart beating, he felt, nearly that fast, Frank dialed his

Kestrel

wife's work number. "Hey, honey? Listen, are you at a point where you can take a break? I need to talk to you about something."

