

Jim didn't want to go to jail. This much I knew. He'd told me about the night back in college that he'd spent locked-up in the campus drunk-tank. He told me that even though he was as high as a kite and only had a few polaroid memories from that evening that the experience had shaken him to his core. He wasn't sure why. If it was the thundering silence of the isolation, the cold damp concrete that encased the basement cell, the knobby, paint-chipped iron bars that felt like the swollen arthritic digits of a corpse. Whatever it was, Jim was etched with a deep and lasting scar from this encounter. That was many years ago and, lucky for Jim, incarceration wasn't in his offing. After all, he was a relatively honest guy, working in a relatively honest business, making a relatively honest living. He wasn't a criminal. This I much I knew too, or did I?

Jim hired me straight out of college the previous summer. My undergraduate studies were completely outside of his field of business but he agreed to meet with me based on a recommendation from a mutual friend. It's a mystery as to how or why he chose to hire me, but that's of little consequence now. I was keen to join the industry and seize the opportunity to author my own edition of the American Dream. Jim was a poster-marine mentor. He was intelligent, charismatic, honest, engaging and patient. Despite having zero experience, I was hard working, technologically savvy, analytical and loyal. We were a quick fit and soon became an effective duo with Jim the face of the business and me in the background running support. Jim was adored and admired by our clients and respected and revered by our colleagues. Things were perfect for me, a professional Utopia.

Jim liked to have a few drinks but he didn't advocate the traditional work-hard, play-hard culture that ran rampant throughout our industry. He wasn't "handsy", was never caught sobbing "I love you brother" and, though he didn't drive, was never spotted in public over the legal limit. He wasn't fiercely private but I never heard him complaining about problems at home, neither about his wife, Elaine, nor about his two kids, Bo and Deborah. I'd never met them. In fact, I'd never seen any pictures of them, which was fine by me. I liked the separation of Church & State philosophy that Jim practiced. Besides, notwithstanding our common goal of professional success and excellence, the generational gap between me and Jim precluded us from sharing a lot of common interests, except for one, baseball. Even at that, our baseball interaction was limited to a single \$10 bet at 10-1 odds of the Red's winning the World Series that year. That bet was made over a couple of a late night Johnny Walkers on March 29th, Opening Day. The following day, March 30th, things began to change.

"The Jeopardy champion is never the smartest guy in the room. Ever. Not by a fucking long shot, and that holds true even if there's only one other person in the room." I wheeled around in my chair, dazed by confusion, wondering where that unsolicited indictment had come from. There was Jim, looking in my direction but staring right through me like I was a ghost. His eyes were hollow and his expression was empty, void of emotion. I asked him "what did you just say?" He didn't respond, didn't unfold his gaze. He just kept staring through me. I didn't realize it then, but that was when "it" happened. Actually, "it" had already happened but Jim's seemingly random observation to no one in particular was the first evidence that something had exploded within his psyche. Though both of us were oblivious to it, Jim's fallout from the detonation was just in its infancy stages. I'd never know Jim to be the same again.


A couple of days went by without a repeat performance out of Jim. I chalked up his curious episode to a "personality out" event, a syndrome that I'd read about in Men's Health magazine regarding bizarre behavior reported out of people under unusual stress. For his part, Jim wasn't showing any signs of stress. He was as engaged, professional and productive as ever. In fact, our sales numbers were great, meaning Jim's numbers were great. I hadn't earned through my probation period to qualify for the revenue share program. Though I looked forward to those days, I was very content working with Jim and helping him grow his business and happy to see that he had evidently

graduated beyond his “trouble”. Then it happened again. “What do you call a barber that will only shave his patrons but not himself?” It was barely more than a whisper that only I could hear. I glanced at Jim. “Jim, what did you just say?” If he heard me, he didn’t acknowledge it. “What the fuck do you call a barber that can’t shave himself... only his patrons?” he asked himself again in a mumble of frustration, clearly searching his head for an answer. “Jim, listen to me, are you okay? You’re acting really weird. Are you feeling okay?” I asked him. This time he pivoted his head towards me and offered sincere smile. “Right, of course, sorry, yes everything is fine” Jim assured. “I just need this AA meeting,” he said, to no one in particular. This struck me as a very odd admission. I’d never seen Jim drunk.

The next day Jim didn’t show up for work. He didn’t call and he didn’t write. Neither did his wife. I was worried about him. I replayed the riddle that was seemingly haunting him over and over in my head, determined to crack the cipher that could ease my friend out of his new found burden. I was snapped back to reality by the irritating pinging that was resonating from Jim’s “Skycap.” Skycap was an e-solution that I had architected and built to provide an electronic atrium for our clients to congregate in for business purposes. The name was a play on the word “porter” or “butler”, ie. “at your service”. It was very well received and enjoyed a fast and broad adoption by our clients. The electronic chirping emitting from Skycap that morning confirmed that our atrium was busy and that folks were eagerly looking for Jim. So was I.

My concern for Jim was soon overwhelmed by the litany of requests emanating from Skycap. Data requests, order commitments, delivery notices. It was torrential and exhausting, but, at the same time, exhilarating. I had under-appreciated Jim’s ability to calmly conduct the chaotic orchestra of Skycap. I didn’t have time to impress myself with my seeming ability to handle the reigns. But handle them I did, and my obedient software generously reported back to me a swelling revenue line. Who needs Jim? And, more importantly, when do I get onto the bonus scheme? No sooner had I asked myself those questions than Jim came strolling into the office. He didn’t need to ask how it was going, Skycap was keeping him up to speed on his mobile. He offered no explanation for his absence and nor did I ask for one. I was too content with the welcome feeling of satiation. What happened next was surreal and inexplicable. Jim sat down and placed his cup of coffee on his desk. He reached into his pocket and retrieved an Oxo cube, or so it looked like to me. He un-wrapped the cube and promptly dropped it into his steaming mug. He then opened his desk drawer and brought out a pack of tic-tacs. Two of those were added to the coffee as well. Finally, he reached into his wallet and withdrew a plastic card, likely a credit card, and proceeded to use it to stir his coffee. My mouth gaped open in disbelief. What the fuck was Jim doing? I’d have kept staring if something out of the corner of my eye hadn’t caught my attention. It was the visual simulation that I had created of the Skycap atrium. There, at the very edge of the atrium, I spotted something that I had never noticed before and wondered how long that it had been there. It was a Barber Shop.

I hadn’t created a Barber Shop in the atrium. I also was the only person with coding permission to edit and evolve Skycap. How did a Barber Shop miraculously grow itself in my atrium? I navigated my mouse onto the icon and double-clicked. The barber shop promptly appeared on queue, complete with a twirling pole of red-white-and-blue swirls. But it wasn’t the pole that I noticed but rather the sign in the window. “Free shave with every haircut. Jim’s compliments, courtesy of Albert Andrews”. The message was oddly familiar but I wasn’t sure why. “Jim’s compliments courtesy of Albert Andrews”? Who offers someone else’s compliments courtesy of themselves? I was puzzled and intrigued. Clearly it was an insight into Jim’s recent peculiarity, but how?. More importantly, how did the Barber Shop get there? Who could’ve hacked my impregnable code?. Like a district attorney, I had far more questions than answers. Suddenly, my phone rang. I was about to slip down the rabbit hole.

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