

Bent, Not Broken

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Dwayne Johnson recognized early in life that he was different. Over his thirty-five years, individuals had gone to great lengths to make sure he knew he was weird, creepy, queer, and not right in the head. As a child, the kids called him retard, and at work he was Duh-Wayne. High school was no different as his senior class voted him most likely to lapse into madness and murder his parents.

He stood in the kitchen of his apartment, sipping tea, staring at the calendar that hung on the same nail as the clock on the wall. He knew that the clock was in the absolute center of the wall panel. It was three feet from the front door and also three feet from the bathroom door; furthermore, it was four feet from the floor and four feet from the ceiling. He was certain of these dimensions; however, he wouldn't hesitate to measure again and again.

On the calendar was a glossy black star on the eighteenth of November. It wasn't to remind him of his father's birthday; his dad had long ago estranged himself from his only son. The day was the second anniversary of the day that Leah Flanagan broke up with him. Throughout the calendar were thirty-seven such stickers; most were black and a few were gold and each indicated some event either pleasant or not.

He set his mug on the kitchen counter; and he knew that the mug was nineteen inches from the refrigerator, nineteen from the sink, eleven from the back-splash, and eleven more from falling to the floor. He washed his hands for exactly one hundred and nineteen seconds and ran a hand through his hair for the third time.

His wallet was in his right front pocket; garage door clicker in the front left, car keys in one hand, and lunch box in the other. He made a quick turn to survey his apartment and opened the door to the hall. The clock told him it was 8:01 AM. He was running on

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schedule. He made sure that the stove elements were off, the kettle was unplugged, and checked all these items three times before he felt confident enough to leave his home.

From his apartment to the elevator were thirty-three steps. Over the same distance seven light fixtures and only five electrical outlets were on the walls. He saw a dark trail of liquid coffee leading from suite 309 that had most likely leaked from a garbage bag when somebody dragged it to the lift. The line was new and Dwayne took a moment to assess it and decided that it was longer than a meter and not quite five feet. "Fifty-five

and a half inches,” he whispered and nodded.

Dwayne couldn't ride any elevator without imagining it breaking loose and achieving terminal velocity before crashing to the basement. This horrendous plunge would not occur as long as he was on the lift for no longer than one minute and fifty-nine seconds. Any longer was insanely dangerous.

He sat at the wheel of his Toyota Corolla and made sure the seat was properly adjusted and both side mirrors were also set. After overcoming the urge to check the fluid levels for the fifth time that week, he started the engine. He reached into his blazer and pulled out a flask, uncapped, and took a long swallow. The clear odorless liquid warmed his mouth and all the way down his throat. Two more long gulps would calm his nerves enough to have him on his way.

Dwayne talked his way through the morning commute. “Drive and drive—thirty-one MPH. Turn right at the lights, signal, break, and turn and turn. Now accelerate to the speed limit. Drive and drive.”

This went on for the entire twenty-nine minutes of the journey. “At the next stop light,” he whispered, “look left for the girl in the dark raincoat.”

Sitting at the bus stop was a woman reading a tattered paperback. She was in her late twenties, and Dwayne had first noticed her several weeks earlier. He glanced at her, looked away, and then looked again. He began to feel nervous, and he felt his face flush.

Ten seconds to green.

Then the woman looked up and grinned. She gave him the I-see-you-looking-at-me smile, proving to Dwayne that she recognized him from previous days. He believed that she thought of him as White-Car Boy. She, of course, was Black-Coat Girl.

The light turned green, and the moment ended.

At the next light, he reached and opened a small notebook. Black-Coat Girl was at the stop four times a week now, up from the previous three. Of those four sightings, she had looked up from her book only twice that week, down from the four of the previous week.

Despite the gold hoop ring in her lip and the twin spikes through her left eyebrow, he had feelings for Black-Coat Girl. She was one of the few things on which Dwayne could depend. Even though he did not know her, not even her real name, he felt like he could love her. He daydreamed about a life with her. She would accept his stuff and teach him all kinds of things about piercings and tattoos. The harshness of her appearance hid the kind gentleness inside. She was a good person who wouldn't harm him emotionally or otherwise. He decided that most people she knew misunderstood her.

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Dwayne made sure that he did not enter the main entrance of his work office until exactly eight thirty-three each morning. He didn't begin work until nine and couldn't punch in until then. He arrived early to check that his coworkers hadn't completely destroyed his cubicle. Rodger Babcock, Mike Shannon, and Danny Wallace, “the Gang of Three” as Dwayne called them, took great pride in screwing with his head.

Dwayne knew that his personal belongings had suffered yet another ambush. It could be a subtle rearrangement of something on his desk or the entire room could be messed with. At first glance, nothing seemed out of place, so he began to count the pens in the glass jar that sat nine inches to the left of the computer monitor.

Six! He counted six pens. To the right of the monitor was an identical jar with pencils—also six. There should be five or even seven pens, and as many pencils. There should never be six! He counted each jar for the second time and then a third, and the count remained six. He took a long breath and glanced back and forth between the jars. He remembered the bottom drawer of his desk had boxes of writing instruments, and he quickly yanked the drawer open.

None! The boxes were gone. Dwayne's heart began to pound. He looked at the jars, still

twelve writing implements in total. He heard giggling from across the office floor.

“Don’t panic,” he whispered.

Dwayne took one of the pens and dropped it in the wastebasket next to his desk. Then he removed a pencil. He hesitated to add the pencil to the trash, as two together would not do. He stood and walked to the cubicle on the far wall, looked over, and noticed that Gabrielle Martinez was not yet at her desk. Dwayne tossed the pencil and smiled when it landed on the floor near Gabrielle’s chair. Crisis averted, he sighed and sat at his desk.

Just to make sure, he counted the jars’ contents and was pleased to count five of each. He turned on the monitor and tried to move the mouse to jolt the PC from sleep mode. The mouse would not move without considerable force. He pulled and then turned the mouse over and noticed that the bottom of the mouse was coated with peanut butter.

“Damn it!” He was deathly allergic to the beige goop.

Dwayne then pulled out the tray from just below his desktop and stared at the keyboard. All the odd number keys were missing. He struggled each time he used a computer, bothered to no end by those even-numbered keys. The equal balance of even to odd keys was the only thing that allowed him to function and do his job. He was extremely perturbed by the empty square slots where 1, 3, 7, etc., should sit.

“Oh, Dwayne! Not again?” Leah Flanagan said when she arrived at his cubicle with the day’s floppy disk. It was Leah Masterson now as she had married the office owner only six months after breaking up with Dwayne.

“I—uh, um . . .”

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she said, as she turned and walked away. He heard her shoes clop-clop on the floor. Those long legs and wonderful feet were once his and his alone—well, for three months at least.

Minutes later, Leah’s heels could be heard signalling her return to his desk. Dwayne heard laughter first as Leah passed Rodger’s desk and even louder from the direction

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of Mike and Daniel’s. Dwayne was the joke of the office, just as he was in college, and everywhere else for that matter.

He took a long swallow from the flask in his pocket and smiled as the liquid warmed his body. After another sip, he hid his medicine, as he called it.

Leah appeared with a new keyboard and mouse and a roll of paper towels. Dwayne took the computer hardware and began to unplug the damaged equipment, as Leah wiped the peanut butter mess from the desk. After Leah finished, Dwayne hosed everything down with cleaner and then wiped and rubbed until he was satisfied that his work area was unsoiled. In the bathroom, he turned his efforts to making sure that his hands had no signs of filth, and he wouldn’t return to his desk until he was thoroughly sanitized.

At his desk, Dwayne slipped the 3.5-inch floppy disk into the drive and punched up the day’s files. It contained the phone numbers of ninety-one potential customers. Dwayne’s job was to call each person on the list, the mark, and ask five questions. Today, the topic was about coffee and what chain the person preferred, if Tim Horton’s or Starbucks. At the end of the survey, the mark is offered a package of coupons. All the marks had to do was give Dwayne their home address or e-mail. The name and addresses were sold to companies that then sent dozens of coupon packages for different products.

The other phone marketing staff received disks with eighty numbers. Leah always made sure that he had a disk with ninety-one because if he was given a batch of eighty he would only do seventy-nine.

Eighty calls was considered a good day’s work; however, Dwayne was the only caller who had beaten the ninety-call plateau, and he did that routinely. His one-day best was also the office record and still stood at one hundred and eleven calls. Even the afternoon-shift

callers couldn't match his scores.

Dwayne still remembered the day he set the record. Bill Masterson, the boss, stopped everyone and announced the accomplishment. Bill took Dwayne's photo and made an employee-of-the-month diploma that still hung on a wall of the call floor. Dwayne received a certificate for a free meal at a nice steak house. He of course took Leah, back at a time when she was open to such things.

Dwayne realized that he was getting a late start on his list. He quickly dialed the first number and began the survey. He successfully got the required information and entered the digits on the phone pad to begin his next call.

Staff members stopped for a ten o'clock break. Dwayne made calls. Smokers stepped out to light up. He queried old men and housewives about whether they preferred lattes to cappuccinos. Dwayne was mediocre at best at most of life's pursuits; however, at work on the phones he was unmatched.

Soon it was lunch break, and he only stopped for a minute to open his lunch box and take three bites of his jam sandwich. When he decided no one was looking, he took a swig from his flask.

"Hey, no slacking off in there, O.C.," Danny Wallace said, as he passed Dwayne's cubicle.

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Dwayne was startled at Wallace's voice and spilled a few drops of vodka on his slacks. He used a liberal amount of jelled hand sanitizer on his hands and then made another call.

Danny wouldn't finish his list and around four o'clock would be bugging Dwayne to take some of his work. Dwayne told himself that he would not help complete Wallace's list although he knew that he couldn't resist a chance to break a hundred.

At one thirty-one, Dwayne stood and stepped back from his desk. He crossed his cube, entered the hall, and counted the one hundred thirty-seven steps to the lunchroom. At the door, he paused to appraise the room for coworkers.

He saw only one and he smiled. Leah was bent over washing the bottom shelf of the refrigerator. He wondered why women didn't just kneel instead of leaning over with their butts sticking out. He enjoyed the view for a few seconds and tried to figure out how to announce his presence without startling her.

She continued to clean, and then she knelt as she turned to face him. "Hello, Dwayne." She stood and closed her sweater as if she was worried that he might take a peek at her cleavage. He remembered a time when she allowed him to see and touch anything he wanted. He glanced at the wedding ring on her finger and wondered what Bill thought of his new wife remaining friends with her ex at work.

"Hi."

"That time again?"

"Uh-huh." He nodded. "Is everyone doing okay?"

"Yes, I don't think you'll have any extra today."

"Oh?"

"Almost eighty percent of the calls are getting results today," she said, as she filled with water and then plugged in the kettle.

"Wow, Bill must be happy."

"I doubt that," she said at a barely audible level.

"Pardon?"

"Oh, nothing." She set three mugs on the counter, added teabags to two, and then hot water when the kettle whistled. The third cup was for him because she knew him so well. He wondered if Black-Coat Girl would ever know him in that way.

Dwayne remembered all those conversations where Leah had told him over and over to get help with his—problem. He never did, and her concern for him caused her to leave

him. He washed his hands—this time with extra soap. Now their only time together was the one-thirty tea. And that was becoming a rare occurrence of late. He carried his cup to a table and wiped the chair and counter with a wet paper towel.

Leah sat across from him with a worried look on her face. He knew that look. Something was very wrong. Dwayne thought that he should ask her if something was troubling her. Instead he studied the number of chairs and remained silent.

He sipped his tea and then he removed the bag from his mug, stood, and tossed the bag in the nearest trashcan. Leah joined him in standing, forced a smile, and then said

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something about some unfinished work that needed her attention. She left him there with the two tables and eight chairs.

Dwayne glanced at the wall clock and smiled when he saw that it was one thirty-nine. He reached one hundred and thirty-eight steps at his cubicle and took one more to feel comfortable.

At his desk, he took a deep breath to cope with the thought of what he might find. Rodger and the others hardly ever did anything to his office during the day, especially if they were falling behind with their lists. Everything appeared to be in order when he made a quick check.

The third drawer of his desk contained a notebook, and he opened it on his desk. He flipped to a fresh page and jotted down a few lines describing the mess he found that morning. On the previous page was a note about the saliva that was deposited with mucus on his keyboard the day before. Spitting on his things was a favorite prank of the three of them. They kept themselves amused at his expense, and Leah had the chore of cleaning up and keeping the boss from learning of the pranks. Not that her husband would do anything about the problem. Terminating three of his staff would cripple the operation.

Dwayne shivered when he remembered some of the disgusting things that the Gang of Three had inflicted. He shook his head and squeezed out a palm full of hand cleaner and rubbed his hands together until all the liquid was used.

By three fifteen, his list was completed and he checked over his results on the screen and saw that he had achieved the 75-percent-success quota. It had been a good day after all, just as he had suspected. He smiled.

He burned all the info to CD, removed the disk, and with the floppy, made his way to Bill Masterson's office. He paused outside the door when he heard Bill and a female voice laughing. As he raised his hand to knock on the door, it opened and he stepped back to allow Rachael Creed to exit Masterson's office.

Creed was twenty-one and extremely attractive. Leah was not happy when Bill hired Rachael as his new secretary. Dwayne watched Creed walk away, and as she did so, she stopped to fasten a button on her blouse.

"Come on in, Johnson." Masterson had a deep low voice that demanded and received respect.

Dwayne slowly entered the office. He didn't like being in the room at all. Not because Masterson made him nervous—he did. It was the layout. Everything was cluttered to the north side of the office where the south side was nearly empty.

The room was a minefield for Dwayne with four chairs and two clocks and two stuffed fish on the walls with those four glassy eyes staring at him. Six bookshelves, each with four shelves, and Bill's desk was messy and jammed with papers; and Dwayne almost gagged—dirty dishes left over from lunch.

"Problem, Dwayne?"

"All good, sir."

"Leah. Something is bothering her. Any ideas there, chief?"

“Ah . . . um—” Dwayne noticed that a pair of Bill’s pants were piled on the floor near the corner of the room. One shoe was upside down on the pile of slacks. The other loafer was out of view. Dwayne couldn’t be sure if his boss was wearing trousers as he was still seated.

“Leah is on me about going to the opera again. Johnson—Dwayne buddy, do me a solid and take her for me.”

“Pardon?” As if the room wasn’t bad enough. Now this. He was beginning to lose his breath.

“Rachael got me a pair of tickets for tomorrow night. Some Christmas thing. You game?”

“Ah, sure . . . why not?” He had no interest in going to the opera; however, another minute in that room and he would vomit for sure.

“Great. Always good to know I can count on you, Dwayne.” Masterson opened a drawer in his desk, removed an envelope, and then handed it to Dwayne. “Take her for dinner as well, okay?”

He nodded and noticed that Masterson was wearing short pants.

“Great work today, Johnson, as always.”

Dwayne couldn’t breathe, let alone answer. He nodded, turned, and exited the room. Moving so quickly and without thought, he almost knocked Rachael Creed over and spilled the dual cups of coffee she was carrying.

“Damn it, Dwayne, be careful!” She made eye contact with him. There was purpose in those blue eyes; he was certain that she was trying to tell him something with her glare.

“I . . . um . . . am sorry.”

As Dwayne walked by the cubicles of the other call staff, he noticed that Mike and Rodger were still working their call lists. Rodger glared at Dwayne and Mike made a rude hand gesture. Daniel sounded like he was rushing through the questions, in a hurry to finish the allocation that Bill expected from each team member. Haste never helped make the quota nor did it do anything for achieving a successful contact.

He smiled and whispered good-bye.

After powering down his PC, counting everything on his desk, dropping the floppy in a bin outside Leah’s office, and washing his hands, he left the building.

Three hundred and twenty-seven was the number of days in a row that he had made seventy-seventy-five. Seventy calls with 75 percent of the marks giving up the goods.

Dwayne walked toward his car. He knew that there were twenty-one parking spots before he reached his Corolla. He made three circles around the car to make sure it had not received any tampering.

He was vocal as he drove for home. “Turn left at the lights, signal, break, and turn—and turn. Now accelerate to speed. Drive and drive.”

Driving by the bus stop he, as always, looked for Black-Coat Girl. Dwayne wondered about her day and if she ever thought about him. He decided that she did and this made him happy.

After waiting his turn behind two of his neighbor’s cars at the automatic gate at the parking level of his building, he maneuvered the Toyota to his designated stall.

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Dwayne put a hand inside his jacket and touched the envelope with the opera tickets. Black-Coat Girl wouldn’t take pleasure in the show; however, if invited, she would be a good sport and play along. She would enjoy the dinner before, engaging him in intelligent conversation about her European backpacking trip from her high school grad year. Her face would light up as she speaks of London, Paris, and of course, Venice.

“You’ll come with me, Dwayne, to Venice, won’t you?”

“Well yes, of course.” Dwayne saw his neighbor Mrs. Feldspar looking at him as he conversed with himself. The woman stared like it was the craziest thing she had ever witnessed.

As he moved around the Toyota for a second time, he knew that he could not leave the bird dropping on the roof of the vehicle overnight. He popped the trunk and removed a bottle of spray cleaner and a rag and went to work on the mess. He dared not look at the gunk, as he knew it would turn his stomach.

Satisfied that his paintwork was no longer fouled, he made his way to the elevator and rode to his floor, holding his breath the entire way. Outside the lift door, he noticed that the maintenance people had attempted to clean the coffee stain from the morning. He could still see the blemish in a few areas and that bothered him. There was no possibility that he would be able to last the evening without working the carpet until it was immaculate.