

FALL FROM GRACE

by

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I tried wiggling my toes again. Nothing. I tried to move my fingers from the coarse aggregate concrete of the stairs leading to our law offices. Not even a millimeter.

The warm, bright June sun was blinding. The way the rays cut across my retinas like lasers reminded me of a time in my boyhood when I used to burn my initials into an old pine with my father's magnifying glass.

The routine every Monday through Friday was steady and constant, never changing. Jump in the car, head down the hill, get on the freeway, get off at exit 84, wave to the old man with the walking stick, get my Double Caramel Mocha Espresso, and blueberry muffin. Then down Second, up Lincoln, over to Fourth, turn into the parking lot of Dunning, Tracht, and Zelman, Attorneys at Law.

The irony was that it had been *my* idea three years before to move the firm from our former location a boring, drab, military-grey concrete building to this white Southern goliath plantation type home on Fourth Street. When asked about the idea, I had argued that it would be more comfortable and relaxing for the clients, and also for us. Quite possibly it might add a tiny bit of class to the firm's somewhat dubious reputation. But the real reason eluded me. A kind of

powerful energy exuded from the building. You couldn't explain to anyone, really. It was just something you had to feel for yourself.

The building had held my fascination since my youth. I never saw it until the summer of my senior year. Isn't it funny how you can live in a city for eighteen years, and look at something on a daily or near-daily basis and never really *see* it. It seemed unlikely that such a building would escape my attention, but it had.

When it came up on the market, I persuaded our partners to purchase it.

In my experience, unique, special, and cataclysmic things only happen on the most ordinary of days. My son's birth had been on an ordinary Monday in March. My wedding had been on an ordinary Saturday in September. This June day had been typical, perhaps even dull, until I had arrived at the offices.

On most mornings I would climb from my blue BMW, precariously balance my coffee in one hand, and lug my overworked black leather briefcase gently up the stairs, where upon I would go through a gentle, precise ritual while I unlocked the door to our offices.

This morning was of course *the* exception to the rule, causing a minor, but important change of routine. My coffee had been warmer than usual that morning, which wasn't altogether uncommon since Susan liked to make it noticeably warmer (let's just say burn it) than Brenda (the better Barista of the two). Thus, after climbing a few stairs, the temperature, required me to switch the cup from one hand to the other, lest I leave a trail of puffy blisters across my palms. In hindsight, I am not entirely sure why I didn't just set it down on the porch while I unlocked the door. In any case, I carefully balanced my briefcase under my arm, in the armpit of my white-collared shirt and shifted the coffee from my right hand to my left, then removed the briefcase with my now-free right hand. As I finished this maneuver, I felt my weight teeter, shifting ever so

slightly. There was enough time for one deep breath, and a quick prayer, before I crashed down the twenty-three cracked and chipped, concrete stairs.

The cup exploded. Caramel Mocha spilled over my chest. It trickled against me. My skin was awakened by a warm sensation that felt oddly like soft butterfly kisses. The coffee seeped into my Brooks Brothers white button-up shirt. Somewhere behind me, a loud crack escaped like that of a child snapping a twig. I came to rest just above the sidewalk, my head lurched over the bottom stair, resting on the pavement of the sidewalk.

My thoughts danced, spreading the illusion of colors racing across the lids of my eyes. I attempted to move myself from my precarious position on the stairwell.

But nothing happened.

I tried looking around, in order to better observe my situation, perhaps even find the source of my bondage, but my head would not move. I was able, only if I strained my eyes, to make out the overturned coffee cup to the left of my head. I could even make out the 'car moch dbl', scrawled on the side of the cup with a black marking pen, apparently written in the language Barista-ese.

In a massive oak perched in front of the old red-brick Carnegie Library, I could hear the chirp of two birds, perhaps conversing, taking note of my predicament and finding amusement in my folly. Their notes echoed in my ears, rising, swelling, like waves of the ocean, until they crashed inside my throbbing temples. I could only wonder what kind of spectacle my position was for the morning pedestrians, who routinely jogged during the summer.

I tried to wiggle my toes again. Nothing. The first thing they tell you in any emergency is to calm down, right? And to breathe. . . Everybody is always telling you to breathe. I tried to remember all that Yogic mumbo jumbo that my wife had been so excited to tell me about. *Solve*

this like it's a case Tom, the little voice inside me screamed. I just had to evaluate my situation and take everything one step at a time.

But that's what got you into this, Tom. . .

Quite obviously I fell, and I can't move. *But why can't you move, Tom?* Okay, I thought. Lets evaluate the situation. I strained my eyes, trying to really *see* around me. I noticed that my point of view was at an extreme and odd angle from the rest of my body, so much so, it almost seemed impossible for my sight to originate from my eyes. My head clearly was tilted dramatically to the left.

Shaken, there was no sensation, a clear absence of pain in my limbs. There were no sore spots from my fall. I was not obese by any standard, really, but surely I must have bruised, or at least a created some sore spots on my gluteus maximus. I had been a personal injury lawyer for a little over eighteen years, having been a partner for sixteen of those years, and I knew right away what likely happened.

Broken neck, Tom.

Of course it was also possible and likely that I'd just pinched the nerves of my spinal cord. It happened all the time I told myself. No need to despair, it would do nothing but cause more problems...I would just have to wait until some help arrived.

An inner voice mocked me with a childlike voice *Tom, don't kid yourself. You know you've broken your neck.*

I tried to scream, but my mouth and tongue wouldn't form the words. I couldn't even hear my own breathing.

What to do? If I could have, I would have glanced at my gold watch. The other partners should be in by eight. What time is it? And what if I sustained mortal injuries? Perhaps, even

downright grave ones? If I'd injured my neck, would I feel a compound fracture? It was possible I could bleed to death before anyone found me.

Tiny rainstorms bombarded me from the automatic sprinklers in the manicured lawn. Now if the fall wasn't enough, I was going to be forced to drown too. *No Tom, you're not going to drown. They shut off at eight.* Right, I said. I could handle this. I just have to get a grip.

Again I asked myself what time it was. I tried to remember when I'd left the house. Was I early to the office? My son Kevin had been camped out in front of the T.V. in the plaid robe that his grandmother had given him for Christmas, holding a bowl intended for popcorn, but which was instead filled to the brim with Froot Loops and milk. He'd waved hello, but I couldn't remember if I'd waved back. Groggy-eyed, I'd made my way to the garage, searching for the remote to open the garage door. I had the car running for a mere ten seconds, before I realized that I was still in the enclosed garage. That had concerned me... How many people has died of asphyxia merely through absent-mindedness?

Ka-plop. A splash of water from the sprinkler pulled me out of my trance.

There was another sound, gradually getting louder. *Clickety-Clack, Clickety-Clack....* It seemed to come from the street. Try as I might I couldn't seem to place it. And then the heavy, and foul breathing began. My heart raced, playing turgid rhythms against my breastbone. The sound approached closer until it peaked within the edge of my vision. With some relief I noticed it was only a black Labrador dog.

The coffee must have attracted him, Tom.

Time passed, but it was impossible for me to determine how much. Others had also become attracted to the coffee. The buzzing flies gathered, until they sounded like an electric hum as they laid their eggs in the pools of my espresso. The dog sniffed me for awhile, before recoiling

quickly. A low moan escaped from the animal before it disappeared from my vision. The *clickety-clack* of its long claws against the pavement faded.

The canvas of sounds blended together, from the *tch-tch-tch-tch-chicka-chicka-chicka* of the sprinklers, the buzz of the flies, the pant and sound of the dog's overgrown nails on the concrete, to the gossiping birds in the oak.

The glaciers of time crawled.

A car drove by. For the first time since the fall I heard something that was familiar to me. The car turned into our parking lot and stopped. The driver opened the door, which squeaked and emitted a loud, hollow thud as it was slammed shut. Soon there was a click of heels on the pavement.

Heels, Tom.

I wondered what Miriam our receptionist would say when she saw me sprawled on the stairs.. I heard her speak before I saw her head over me, peering at me with a horrified expression etched onto her thickly made-up face. The sun poking through the Sumac trees created a halo effect with Miriam's dirty blond-grey hair.

"Tom?" she said softly, almost reverently.

I tried to utter a sound, unsure whether my lips were moving.

"Tom? Oh God...Tom?" she cried, her voice rapidly climbed octaves with hysterics.

Why did she keep screaming at me like that? Couldn't she see I needed help?

Miriam brushed past me, up the stairs and into our offices. I was afforded a glimpse of her bronze legs. I had never realized how attractive her legs were until this moment. She encased them in stockings, not the pantyhose of my wife. Stockings! I could see their silken tops where they were fastened to her garters. *Nobody wears those anymore, Tom.* Where was she going?

Focus, Tom. Focus. Stockings are not the most important thing to think about at this time. The sprinklers were reduced to a drizzle and finally ceased all together.

More glacial time passed.

Just when I wanted to scream to release the tension, there was crunch of gravel beneath the tires of a vehicle as it pulled into our parking lot. The brakes squeaked, and I could hear the click of the transmission as the driver shifted into a new gear. I could hear a metallic crunch as the emergency brake was applied.

Two EMTs wearing dark navy blue cotton pants, and light blue button-up collared shirts emerged into my tunnel of vision. Miriam must have called for an ambulance.

The two, neither older than twenty-five, rolled up a gurney to just within my sight, and carefully lifted me from the concrete. I heard the crunch of a plastic blanket as they lay my body on it.

Rapidly they zipped something up, covering my head in darkness.

I screamed and screamed and screamed. It didn't matter. No sound uttered from my dead useless throat. *They think you're dead friend...*

I can't be dead! I'm still thinking. I can still hear them. I could still smell the inside of the black body bag. I heard the click of the rear doors to ambulance, or was it a coroner's vehicle? I tried to remember what the coroner's uniforms looked like but couldn't seem to find the thought. Did they also were light blue shirts? Then they switched into gears with a crunch, and pulled into traffic. *How many men have been in this body bag before you?* Losing my grip..... What have I done to deserve this? Who ever deserves this?

I'd always wondered my whole life about the existence or absence of God. I was never one for the belief in the afterlife with the big J.C. But I did believe in something. *Didn't I?* I just

didn't know what that was. I always pondered my death. I always thought it would be as an old man, in my bed, or on the crapper, with old man polyester pants curled around my ankles, shit dangling from the hairs on my ass, as my heart stopped beating. Never once did I imagine a death like this.

But how could I explain the thoughts I was thinking at this minute? Were they real? *Maybe no one loses consciousness when they die, Tom.* Maybe they go on feeling, seeing, smelling, and hearing the world as they always had But not for me.... I broke my neck... Surely that stopped the activity in my brain, right? And yet I could see, smell and hear? So how was that to be explained? Could I trust my senses? What if I was only remembering what Caramel Mocha smelled like, what a dog's nails sounded like.

When we die, everything fades to black, until everything, EVERYTHING is turned off.

Right? Cue the music, roll the credits.

I was struck by the absence of the ambulance sirens. *They really think you're dead, Tom.* Dead men don't need to be raced through red traffic lights.

Dead men don't have emergencies.

What would happen next? *You're a personal injury attorney, Tom. You've worked with law enforcement for over sixteen years, you know what happens next. They will bring your wife down to identify your body. She will sign your death certificate....*

My death certificate...

Sixteen years....

Sixteen years...

Sixteen years ago, I married a twenty-three year old girl named Erin Ann Spring. Erin possessed a dimple in her right cheek when she smiled, and an annoying (and endearing) habit of

playing with a strand of her hair while she read. This was just a few months after I was made partner at the firm and became not just Tom Zelman, but *the* Tom Zelman, of Dunman, Tracht & Zelman.

The year following our marriage brought the house, health insurance, life insurance, and... *death benefits. A purple cross plan, Tom.*

Shortly after my son Kevin celebrated his tenth birthday, Erin and I sat down with Justin Dunman, the senior partner of the firm to discuss a rough draft of our will that I had worked up. Ever the attorney I was prepared. Erin would receive everything in the case of my death, as would I would receive everything in the event she passed away. In the case of both of our deaths, or after the initial benefactor's death, the estate would be turned over to Kevin to be spread out to family on both sides according to the instructions we had enclosed.

Memories are flashing through my mind like still photographs, before burning brightly with a red light and then white light. It was if the very memories themselves burned away, stripped down to their core, until there was nothing left. There was something important there, it glared at me, spoke its secrets, but for the life of me I couldn't seem to figure it out.

The body bag stank of rank flesh. I wondered how recently this bag had been cleaned out and sanitized. From the indications my nose gave, it had not been often. My world folded in on me. Someone once told me that you could only fold a piece of paper in half seven times. That the eighth was impossible... *What does that have to do with anything?*

A creepy old woman with a shiny bald head kept speaking in my head. "...put your hand in the box." she kept saying. "In the box... in the boooxxxxx." Her booming, throaty, gravel-laced voice cut across my vision, increasing the deep sense of dread that pooled in my temples.

I tried to figure out the source of this bizarre intrusion when the ambulance stopped. I

could hear the squeaking doors of the ambulance as the men pulled me out. The gurney squeaked as they pushed it up a raised incline. I recognized this ramp. I myself had walked up it many a time.

The morgue was not one of my favorite places in the world. This was in contrary to my partners who seemed to get a G.I. Joe or Hawaii Five-O kind of rush from the whole idea of entering a morgue on a wrongful death case.

My instincts sharpened as my senses dulled. I wanted so much to just let everything go, to peacefully drift off into comforting darkness, but I was incapable of it. After all if I was dead, then I probably would float away, if I were only brave enough to just let go of this material world of ours and become the pioneer, or explorer I had always imagined myself.

So what's keeping you here?

Many times over the next four hours (noted by the constant barrage of ticking from the cheap clock on the wall) I would venture to close my eyes, hoping for solace and comfort, only to find that my eyelids would not follow the instructions that flowed down the crowded freeway of neurons in my brain. And all, I was sure, was only to remind me that I was not in control! I could not control the situation... “....in the box..” came the bald woman’s voice again... she cackled and her seemingly translucent image floated away like some kind of balloon, dissipating against the dark, of the body bag.

You’ve never let go of control, Tom. Isn’t that why you became a lawyer?

No, I was never that arrogant... Besides, judges hold all the power in a courtroom.

Do they? Do they also hold control over your clients in your office? Do they control how you touch your clients? Control how you slip your hands into their underwear, while your wife waits at home, feverishly helping the children and sacrificing her dreams, for you?

The divorcee? Is that what this about? Am I being punished? But if I were to take it back.

. . . *There is no going back Tom.*

But again, there was. . .

There was.....nothing. . . A nothing that pierces your senses, like the end of some demonic hypodermic needle that fills your every desire, craving, obsession, and then leaves you with only a cold aching post pleasure vacuum.

A raucous tune from that children's film about the Candy Factory from Hell kept ringing in my ears. Visions of orange-skinned dwarves with green hair, carrying a bloated bag over their heads, swept across my vision.

There was a ripping sound, and light flooded the body bag. My wife's face leaned over the table, the tips of her chestnut hair swept forward, jangling the large gold hoops in her lobes, gazing down at me with those eyes... They seemed to ask me a question, a question that I didn't understand.... Couldn't understand... What was she thinking? I had never felt so incomplete, unconnected.... and absent from her as I did in that all-too-brief vision.

Knowing that she would eventually view me before signing my death certificate, was a final sanctification. I just wasn't sure if it was something that I could endure.

What if you are dead, Tom? Don't you want to see your lovely wife one more time?

I am not dead!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. I won't go!

Erin grasped the wide ballpoint pen in her hand, and laid her name to paper. No sign of our children yet. I wondered if they knew.

Erin and the coroner spoke in hushed tones that I couldn't make out. I assumed it was my funeral arrangements they were making. Erin was quite animated when she spoke, using her hands and ring-covered fingers emphatically.

I avoided thinking of my burial with the utmost strength I could muster, but the inevitable questions slipped around my defenses and posed themselves, three-quarter to me. Would it be painful, I wondered? Would I sit for eternity passive and unable to do anything, while I watched worms work their way into my coffin? Would I smell my flesh peel, blister, decay and fall from my bones? Would my sight gradually dim as my eyes dried and brittled before inevitably crumbling to dust?

Shortly after Erin had left the morgue and the coroner had gone home for the night, I began realizing that I was losing my senses. Pun not intended. My sense of smell had dropped off considerably, like when one gets a cold. My hearing, which had up until then had been quite acute began dampen. I was losing some of the upper frequencies and lower frequencies of hearing. It wasn't until the next morning that I discovered what was happening with my eyes.

The coroner was no longer in care of me... They had apparently moved me to a new site, a funeral home I presumed. This I discovered when an elderly man with enormous thick, grey eyebrows unzipped my bag.

His eyes worked over my body and appraised me, much as a new car buyer. I wondered if he was tempted to kick my tires. He disappeared momentarily and re-appeared with some tools. After he seemed satisfied with their arrangement on the table, he turned my body over and I heard the rip of my shirt, and the characteristic, sound of scissors cutting. In short order, he removed the rest of my clothes, turning me back over in the process.

When I was just as bare as the day I left my mother's womb, lying there on the table, like a piece of dead fish awaiting filleting, he rummaged through his tools once more, picking up a shiny scalpel. I suddenly wished I had the ability to sweat for if I could have, I would have. I wished I could just get up and run out of there. To keep running forever, only to feel the exquisite

laboring of my lungs as I gulped down the air of life, and to feel the pounding of my Nike Cross-Trainers on the earth as my arms reached for the sky to grab hold of the stars and hold on, never letting go. Never, for anything... The novelty of being dead didn't interest me any more. What could he want with that scalpel?

Carefully I watched as he raised the sharp point of the instrument and held it over my left eye. I could see the fine markings on it that came from repeated use. His hand wavered slightly as he lined up his cut, and then he plunged the instrument into my frontal lobe. I could hear a sickening sound, like the insides of a dead chicken, and immediately lost sight as he rummaged around.

I churned, and wanted to shout for him to stop this instant! But he did not. When he had finished his cut, he put the remains of my left eye, and all of their gooey substance into a disposal tray of some sort.

My wife had suggested I become an anatomical donor on my driver's license. *Had I? It is so hard to remember anything.*

What was it like for other recently dead? Could they feel the blade pass through their cornea, through the nerves and veins that jumbled together behind the pupil of our eyes? Had I been spared because I was fortunate enough to break my neck?

I tried to memorize every last detail left within the vision of my one good eye. At least then as they lowered by body into the cold earth and for the duration of my burial I would have something to see, to imagine, and to feel. Losing my sight had always been one of my greatest fears.

An eye for an eye, right Tom? That's true justice, now isn't it?

That mysterious voice swirled in my head once more. The damn old woman began her

chants about the box again, repeating over and over, like a religious mantra the phrase, “In the box..... Put your hand in the box....” A ridiculous, unrecognizable tune played itself out on my brain. I wanted to scratch my skin away to get at the god awful sound.

Meanwhile the man lovingly prepared me for the afterlife, raising his instrument once more over my sole remaining eye before plunging me into eternal darkness...

Everything seemed to lose its place after that. Pictures of things raced across my brain as if an inane channel clicker lived there. Sounds faded and resounded with horrible volumes. It felt like a looney bin. I could still hear the shuffle of the old man’s shoes on a squeaky linoleum floor.

Tom? You still there? You should probably think about things. I don’t think you’re getting everything here...

“In the box...in the box.....in the box.....in the box..... put your hand in the box.....in the box....”

Wasn’t that a scene from a science fiction movie? What did the box represent? A test of manhood? Endurance? Change?

What did the voice mean by that? What am missing? I concentrated back to the day when I carried the double caramel mocha up the stairs of my law firm, and how this all started.

I could not see now, but I knew without benefit of sight the sounds of the furnace being lit... the grating sound of the conveyor belt. Slowly my coffin crawled towards my destiny.

I tried wiggling my toes again. . .

Nothing....