

So It Spins

“Dan, Olivia would like to see you now.”

Summoned, I hang up the phone, lift off my chair, and exit my corner office. A year in the making, it’s about to happen, and even though I had a hunch it was coming, nothing has prepared me for the end walk. As I’m heading to Olivia’s office, the last months flash in Technicolor until the credits, the epitaph rolls—*He put his head down, tried to rekindle the wildfire he helped birth years ago, tried to daydream down a riven path. Didn’t work, but hey.* Midway, my legs go wobbly, so I restroom to regroup. After I wash my hands and face and adjust my tie, I stare at my regrouped selves in the mirror and recite Willow. She sent me one of her poems the other day after we chatted about my current predicament: *When sudden loss dances/ When the inexplicable fogs/ When you’re about to lose what you love most/ Remember this: You’re fucked.* Well, that’s not exactly the poem. Her last line made some poignant point about all the “When’s” being gifts, but I like my version better.

When I arrive, Olivia, who’s waiting for me at her door, blank-faces me into her glass-walled corner office. The place reeks of new paint, new rugs, new leather, power. She sits, calm, hands folded on her mahogany desk, dyed chestnut hair expertly styled, wearing one of her many black bespoke suits. Gold and diamonds adorn her hands, her ears, her neck. Directly over her heart, pinned perfectly, is a pendant shaped like a sickle. I touch down

across from her in the seat I've frequented countless times over the years. At least she didn't swap that out. Awards and photos line the wall behind her—RadioRadio Software named one of the best companies to work for in America, opening bell on the day of our IPO, CEO of the Year back in 2008, she and the Dalai Lama at a leadership retreat, the anniversary she gave me a Martin guitar. I'm in one of the awards ceremony photos with her, wearing a black tuxedo with my hair slicked back. When was that one? I had much less gray.

Another picture of the two of us in jeans and T-shirts, during our first year when we still worked out of her house, is still my favorite. I had long hair then; Olivia did too, all the way to the middle of her back. That day, we ate Chinese take-out and background-marathoned Pearl Jam and Nirvana for sixteen hours straight as we worked well into the night. Sometimes I shake my head at how far we've come since those early years in the nineties. I reach down and stroke my plastic employee badge, number 2, securely fastened to my belt. It feels like skin.

The room is unnaturally quiet until Olivia clears her throat and says, "This is going to be a difficult conversation, Dan." Instantly, I zone out. Why listen in the middle of an avalanche when I already know my fate? "Blah. Blah. Blah. We're no longer simpatico. Blah. Blah. Blah. HR will contact you with your package. Blah. Blah. Blah. We'll spin a positive message about your departure."

Right.

I push off my chair, make my way over to one of the glass walls, and stare out into a sea of color. New England in fall. What beauty. Barely touching the glass with my index finger, I cursive R, R, R, R. Sixteen years in this place. Why so long? Well, until recently Olivia touched me. Honestly, if she were a man, she would have been a priest. She rocketed RadioRadio Software from

nothing to greatness in a decade, a decade in which we grew triple-digit fast, a decade in which she had the team, the Street, our customers, me, fully bought in. Her sermon—we will change the world; we will do work faster, cheaper, better; we will give the power back to the people. It was the same pitch all hi-tech CEOs used, but nobody delivered it better than Liv. During the ascent, she golden-girled through, well, everything, and I was her right-hand man, helping her craft and implement the vision. Our vision. For fifteen of the sixteen years, she trusted me, respected me, believed in me, valued my advice. Until she didn't.

Olivia joins me at the window and places a hand on my shoulder. “We’ve been through a lot of autumns, but I don’t recall one this vivid.”

“I love the fall.”

“If there were any other way, Dan.”

When growth stopped a year ago, for the first time, big-league adversity loomed over RadioRadio, over Olivia. The stock fell to fifty percent of its fifty-two-week high. We lost two hundred million in a quarter. Many called for her resignation, but somehow she held on. Still, the spotlight judge rocked her, made her second-guess long-standing goals and values, made her hire consultants. Like cancer, they spread through the company; like brain cancer, they crowded me out.

At first, I coped. Olivia had to have her reasons for not inviting me to the consultant meetings, for not wandering into my office every day, for no longer asking my opinion. The board, the Street, had put her under a lot of pressure, and she needed space to search for an answer. I got that. Sometimes, like during our Friday lunches, I convinced myself that we were going through a rough patch, that we were still best friends, that everything was going to be okay, that I would weather the storm of consultants.

But most of the time I buried the abundant signs under the now replaced carpet.

Then, about a month ago, in their full Ivy League, overpriced splendor, after eleven months with little impact, the consultants designed a new narrative. We owe it to our shareholders to reduce spending. Lean and mean is the name of the game. Cut the deadweight. Their goal: rationalize the harm Olivia was about to do to her employees, to the very people who had dedicated their lives to helping her build the twenty-second largest software company in the world. One day, shortly after the new narrative had taken hold, I asked Olivia: “How exactly are living, breathing human beings who built this place deadweight?” That was probably mistake.

I turn my back to the fall foliage and lean against the window, hands behind my back as a cushion. Olivia takes a step away from me, readies herself for the last barrage.

“We could still pull this thing out together,” I say.

“It’s too late for that, Dan. I have a board-approved plan.”

“But the company is in a death spiral.”

“That’s why I need to make these changes.”

“Thirty percent of the workforce?”

“If there was any other way.”

“But there is.”

“No, Dan, there isn’t.”

Olivia folds her arms across her chest. Her face is blank, except that her eyes keep wandering off trying to hide something. But what? Does she agree with me, but believe her hands are tied? Does she believe Wall Street screwed us? Does she believe that I failed her in some way? Or maybe there’s nothing hidden underneath. It wouldn’t be the first time this year I couldn’t read the woman.

My black loafers, normally grounding, threaten to levitate and whisk me out of the room before she can say another safe, canned, board-approved thing. Couldn't she at least have had a real conversation after sixteen years? I manage a fake smile, though my eyes, filled to the brim, betray me. Did she really just fire me? After everything we've been through, how could she walk away? In twenty-five years weren't we going to be the last two standing at this place? Wasn't what we had stronger than any marriage?

As I leave the corner office for the last time, Olivia says, "We'll stay in touch, Dan. Our relationship transcends work." She hugs me. The same perfume she's worn for years, Tom Ford, induces a dry heave. I can't ditto her hug. Billions of prickling needles freeze my arms at my sides. Am I bleeding? Don't look down, the pinpricks have spouted and are covering the new carpet in blood.

Moments later, somehow magically transported back to my office, I have a brief conversation with a friend, Sally, the HR VP, who hands me the severance document that apparently details what Olivia overviewed. I phone my lawyer, fax the document, and after I talk him through the details, manage the strength to scribble a signature on the voluntary severance package: Daniel Underlight. By taking the high road to a golden parachute, one that is fully extended and generous, I'm agreeing to never publicly say anything negative about the company or Olivia. At least one will be easy. My secretary, Annette, who's been with me since the start, who will be assigned to someone new tomorrow, helps me clean out my office. The keepers: my infinite number of management books, a few early awards, a bursting-with-color glass paperweight my wife gave me years ago, a picture of my son playing soccer, a stone arrowhead. Everything else we throw away.

I slowly drift out of the office building, stopping often to shake hands or say good-bye to boatloads of friends and colleagues, most of whom seem genuinely sympathetic. You'll be missed. RadioRadio won't be the same without you. Let us know where you land. Forty years old, divorced, with a dead son who paid a heavy price for my long work hours, I've come untethered. What was that line in the poem? *When the inexplicable fogs.*

As I pull out of the parking lot in Gordon Bell, a name I've given my 1972 Triumph TR6 convertible, and race onto Route 128 away from corporate headquarters, toward my oversized Concord home, the wind washes my face. Even at seventy miles an hour, the air is warm and embryonic, temporarily warding off the vast blackness of non-RadioRadio closing in. But oblivion won't wait for long. Yes, I could easily get another job, but there is no other RadioRadio. Yes, I have enough money, but there is no other RadioRadio. Yes, there are other strong CEOs, but none like Olivia. Do people wear firings like a missing wedding band, like an old soccer jersey, like a medical bracelet after an unwanted surgery? I survived my firing and had my heart removed and replaced with an artificial one. It's as good as new. I'll see you at the health club tomorrow.

A short time later, I pull into my driveway. The crunching sound of rubber against gravel causes me to stop midway up and run my fingers through my hair until the rearview mirror reveals Einstein-hair in the making. How to net out my time with Liv? That was always my strength. Analyze. Strategize. Synthesize. Net Out. ASSNO. I even had it added to the RadioRadio list of corporate acronyms. After a few rationalizations, which are surprisingly easy to do when unemployed, I zero in on the truth, the main takeaway, the sixteen-year NO—I got all caught up.

So it spins.

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In the living room, I take my guitar from its stand and study it. The best gift Olivia ever gave me, given at my five-year RR anniversary party. Even though I'm a novice, I relish the particulars. A Martin OM28, built using East Indian rosewood for the back and sides and solid Sitka spruce for the top. The body has scalloped braces, a bound ebony fretboard adorned with abalone rosette and top trim, a tortoise pickguard, and a gold open geared tuning machine with butterbean knobs. Custom pearl inlays of old-fashioned radios are on the first, third, and fifth frets, added at Olivia's request. I've loved this instrument for a long time.

Guitar in hand, I make my way out to a spot behind my garage and place the guitar across the truck-size tire that I've been sledgehammering for the last week since I got fired. Each day I wallop the tire hundreds of times until I'm completely exhausted or too depressed to continue. Each day, after surviving the onslaught, the tire resumes its shape, regains its strength, confirms its readiness for another go in the near future.

For today's round, the air is thick with fall, and dead leaves color the ground. The twenty-five-pound sledgehammer stands waiting next to me, the heaviest one Home Depot had to offer. Led Zeppelin blasts through the garage speakers, one of a few artists on my pommeling playlist. Like most aspiring guitarists, one of the first songs I learned was "Stairway to Heaven," though I could never master the rhythm of the fast part. Even then I guess I knew the Martin was more of an object to admire than an instrument to play. I've destroyed other Olivia gifts this last week, but nothing this big, this valuable. A framed picture of the two of us during our first product launch. A gold paperweight shaped like a radio with the inscription, *Thank you, Dan. Olivia. January 30th, 2002.* A

leather briefcase monogrammed D.Z.U. They were all buildup to this moment, to the big one.

I raise the sledgehammer over my head and hold it there in perfect form, one hand near the hammerhead and the other at the bottom of the wooden handle, mimicking the how-to Internet video. In no time, my arm starts to shake. Am I going to do this? Am I really going to destroy a work of art? I take a deep breath and strike the guitar at the sound hole again and again in a groove much better than I was ever able to achieve while strumming the thing. Over countless blows, I pulverize the guitar. Wood becomes sawdust; metal strings snap; tuning knobs pop and degear; pearl radios shatter. When I'm done, I rest the hammer on its head and lie down on the ground faceup. Some of the guitar dust settles on my skin, invades my nostrils, and smells like new construction.

Later, I roll out a Shop-Vac close to the mess, vacuum until there's no visible sign of my no-longer prized possession. I empty the Shop-Vac into a black trash bag and immediately drive the bag to the town dump. I toss the bag in the compactor, and watch as it's slowly crushed with the other local garbage until indistinguishable.