

All in a Day's Work

“It’ll be fine. It’ll all be fine...” he mumbled to himself. “She’ll be there.”

Samuel has never been one to be claustrophobic, but something about the grueling nine hours in that stuffy metal bird made him anxious in a way he just couldn’t describe. Oh, and not to mention the smell. God, was he glad that he was finally released from that unholy agglomeration of over-applied perfumes and musty body odor. As he stepped across the metal frame and into the modest morning sun, he stopped and took in a deep breath of fresh air. A cool breeze blew across his face, and it felt nice against his congested skin. But alas, his bliss was short-lived.

“Move,” came a gravelly voice from behind.

Before Samuel could react, he was unceremoniously shoved to one side and into the family of four who had only seconds ago, stood unobtrusively steps away, minding their own business. After promptly apologizing with brisk bows and clasped hands, Samuel turned with an untold ire boiling up from his chest and prepared to unleash his fury onto whoever had the audacity to do such a thing. But as he spun, his eyes met with that of a 6’ 9” giant of a man and his face dropped. And so, like any rational person would have done, he morphed right back into his apologetic facade, muttered “sorry,” then quickly fled down the stairs.

Of all the hundreds and thousands of words in the human dictionary, a single one was enough to capture it all: Pathetic. Simply pathetic. But what more could he have done? Nothing good comes out of punching above your weight class.

Samuel wasn’t sure how long he had been in line, for he lost track of time after the first half an hour. On the bright side, he now looked exactly like how he felt—take that however you will. As he took yet another half a step towards the slowly nearing end of the customs line, his eyes were caught by that of a child’s—a girl barely the age of 2—leaning over the shoulder of her father in the next line. She reached out an eager hand towards him and her pink lips curled up to form a winsome smile.

“Hi!” Samuel leaned in and whispered in a sing-song voice. “Aren’t you just the cutest little thing? You look just like my daughter when she was-”

But before he could finish his thought, he found himself face to face with, no longer the child, but an older man with a clear look of displeasure on his face.

Samuel cleared his throat and bolted upright with an awkwardness painful to describe. “Sorry...” he said with his regular voice.

After what seemed to be days, Samuel found himself approaching the arrival gates. Quickly weaving through the stream of people, he made his way towards the rowdy shouts coming from beyond the glass railings.

“Dad!” came a shout from ahead. “I’m over here!”

From within the impatient gathering, he saw a girl in her late teens, waving excitedly towards his direction, looking at him, yet right through him. Samuel turned just in time to watch a man rush past him and right into her arms, melting into her embrace.

At the sight of this, Samuel couldn’t help but smile. Now... where was she? Carefully sifting through the crowd, examining each face and outstretched arm, he searched—yet he failed to find a single familiar feature. With his hopes still up, but hanging by a thread, he wheeled his luggage around the glass and out into the opening. But after scanning the crowd for the seventh time, he sighed and pulled out his phone.

Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt!

Samuel tapped on the handle of his luggage as he stood waiting, an inscrutable expression plastered onto his face.

Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt Bzzzt! Bzzt-

“What?”

“What do you mean what? Where are you guys?”

“... at home? Why?”

“I- I’m at the airport!”

“Oh. That’s great.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah...?”

With a bitter scoff, he hung up the phone and flounced towards the nearest exit.

Marching along the crowded sidewalk, his luggage, once light and dextrous, now seemed almost to be a brick, dragging him down further and further into the ground. As he trudged on, he suddenly felt a rough tightening around his ankle and he lurched away in shock but found himself anchored down—for real, this time. Looking over, he saw a dirtied pair of hands clasped around his wool pants, refusing to let him free. The hands belonged to a figure with a tattered shawl over his shoulder and tousled grey hair that obscured most of his face.

“Leave them,” he hissed. “Leave them like they left you. Make them feel the pain—really feel the pain.”

Then, without warning, he jerked his head up and looked right into Samuel’s eyes.

“You know what you have to do.” His eyes widened. “Leave them. For good. And they’ll regret treating you like this. They’ll regret it for the rest of their lives...”

Samuel stood, rooted in place, and stared—unsure what to make it all. Still in a daze, he shook off the man’s now loosened hand, and continued forward, as if nothing had happened. And everyone else seemed to have gotten the message and they too continued on their way, trooping towards wherever it is they were headed, not even casting a glance at the strange figure sprawled across the pathway.

As he dragged on in a drunken stupor, he felt a faint vibration coming from his coat pocket. Without looking, he answered the phone.

“What do you want?”

“Oh, sorry, I was just calling to see if you were back yet...” came a needled voice from the other line.

Suddenly wide awake, Samuel ripped the phone away from his ear and saw that he had picked up a call from his project manager.

“Sorry, I thought you were someone else...” He rubbed his forehead with a grunt, attempting to rid himself of the migraine that was slowly creeping forward. “Yeah, I just go back. Is there anything I can do?”

“Oh, good. There’s a team retreat happening tonight and the boss thinks it’ll be a good opportunity for everyone to get to know each other before the big project so, be there.”

“Oh, I... No, I can’t, I don’t have time, unfortunately, I-” Samuel trailed off as his eyes met that of the uncanny figure who looked right into his eyes and smiled a toothy smile. There was something infectious about that look, and Samuel paused.

“Actually... I’ll be there,” he said at last. “What time?”

“We’ll pick you up at 3.”

“Yeah, perfect. Thanks, Leo, I’ll see you guys s-.”

Before he could finish his sentence, he was met with the flat tone of an ended call.

Just as well, for an empty cab was headed his way, and he quickly flagged it down and climbed in.

“Hi, take me to 134-” the door slammed shut behind him, and within seconds, they were off.

Opening the door to the apartment, he stepped into the familiar interior and sighed. At long last, he was back. As he wheeled his luggage through the hallway, his wife passed him by and barely gave a nod of acknowledgment. He scoffed inwardly and headed straight for his room.

Digging through his closet, he pulled out a large duffle bag and began to pack.

“What are you doing?” came his wife’s voice from behind.

“Packing.”

“For what?”

“Work trip.”

“Work trip? You literally just got back.”

“I know.”

“Heh,” she gave a dry laugh. “You come home after a week away and you don’t even say hi, and now you’re just gonna take off?”

“Oh, so I have to come greet *you* when I come back to *my* house? I’m sorry, I didn’t know that was a requirement!”

“Here we go again! Why can’t we ever just have a normal conversation?”

“I’m not the one who started this!”

“Fine! Leave! Why do I care? It’s not like the musical your daughter’s been rehearsing for... for like months now is showing for the first time tomorrow or anything!”

“It is?”

“Shouldn’t you know by now?” came a voice from behind.

Samuel spun to see his daughter standing in the doorway, her eyes narrowed and her brows drawn firmly together.

“Okay that’s not fair. How am I supposed to know this stuff when no one ever tells me?”

“You’d know if you cared to ask,” she replied with an apparent coldness.

“I-”

“Just go,” she signed, then disappeared down the hallway.

His wife threw him a complacent look and followed suit, slamming the door behind her

“You can make them regret this you know?” came a voice through the television. “You know just what to do...”

Samuel stared at the screen, unable to recall when he had turned it on, and tilted his head in wonder.

Just as he began to feel yet another migraine creeping forth, he heard a faint vibration coming from beneath the pile of clothes tossed offhandedly on his bed. Digging through, he unearthed his phone and swiped right.

“Hello?”

“We’re down downstairs, hurry up.”

Samuel hastily stuffed a couple of shirts into the duffle bag, changed out of his day-old plane clothes, then rushed down the building.

“Hey, sorry for taking a bit, I hope I didn’t make you guys wait too long.”

“Well, this is Samuel, our *trusty* business analyst. Um, you know, great guy and all that,” Leo introduced. “Samuel, meet Eric, he’s our newest guy in human resources.”

“Oh, hi, pleased to meet you.” Samuel reached out a hand.

“I’ve heard great things about you! I look forward to getting to know you better!” Eric promptly shook his hand and gave a diplomatic nod of the head.

“Well, get on! We’ve got places to go and things to do!”

Samuel scrambled on and the car took off. As the group chatted away, he caught sight of that same strange figure through the rear-view mirror, sitting on the side of the road. Samuel stared in perplexity as they drew away. At the very last second, just before he was fully out of view, the figure looked up and straight into his eyes. Though by now it was too far to tell, he knew, he just knew, that the figure smiled.

A shiver ran down his spine.