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## Running on Empty

“Take your shirt off, please,” Dr. Yantzi said. “Looks like you’ve put on a few more pounds. Take deep breaths.”

“Whoa, that thing is nice and chilled,” Pete said. “Remember, you’re the doctor. It’s your job to prevent heart attacks, not deliver them by stethoscope.”

Dr. Yantzi continued checking Pete’s chest. “So what exactly are the symptoms you’re experiencing and when did they start?”

“About four o’clock yesterday morning, I woke up with my heart racing, chest pain, and some trouble breathing. I got out of bed, took a stiff drink – for medicinal purposes – and walked around the family room for a while. Things seemed to settle down a bit after that. Michelle came down and wanted me to go to the hospital, but I was feeling a little better and I had far too much to do to spend all morning sitting in a crowded emergency room.”

“How are things at work?”

“Oh, the usual. Same crap, different pile. Our company is sliding into the swamp, and my boss isn’t doing anything about it.”

“And home?”

“Michelle’s job is fine – but we hardly see each other these days. Amanda is her usual screaming hormonal self, and Ryan is off at college drinking his way to the bottom of his class. Other than that, things are just peachy.”

Pete looked out the window at the gray sky. A fine cold rain blew against the window, leaving beads of water that occasionally gathered and raced down the pane. There weren’t any clouds, just a mass of dirty drabness hovering overhead. In the dying afternoon light, the leafless branches of the small tree below were like gray tentacles grasping for the sky.

“What made you decide to come see me today?”

“Last night I hardly slept at all. I was shaky and dizzy and had trouble breathing. I kept having this nightmare of some big animal bearing down on me and crushing my chest against a tree with its big horns. Michelle finally threatened to do even worse if I didn’t go the hospital or see you today.”

“You can put your shirt back on,” Dr. Yantzi said. He sat down at his desk, opened a file, and made a few notes. He motioned Pete to sit across from him.

“I have the lab results from your annual check-up last month,” he said. “You’re not exactly ready for the Olympics. Your bad cholesterol is very high, you’re about fifty pounds overweight, and your blood pressure is way up. It also sounds like you’ve got a lot of stress in your life at the moment. How much are you drinking these days?”

“I like a glass of wine or beer once in a while.”

“How often?”

“Just a couple a day.” That couldn’t be *too* far off, Pete thought.

“You said you’ve had a lot of headaches. Are you taking anything for that?”

“I take an occasional pain reliever when it gets real bad.” A montage of the large bottles in his bedroom, desk, car, and travel bag flashed before his eyes. He almost reached for a few of the pills he always kept in a plastic case in his coat pocket. Michelle called them his “stress beans” because he ate them like jelly beans.

“I noticed in the paper the other day that NMTS is having financial problems. That must be adding to your stress at work,” Dr. Yantzi said in a questioning tone.



Pete thought back to yesterday’s conversation with his boss, the senior vice president of client services at Newton-Millbank Tech Services. Pete was the head of that division’s operations department. His intrepid leader was not one for making small talk. He led off the conversation with: “We’ve got a problem in this company right now and we need strong leadership from you to keep your team focused.”

Now *that’s* rich, Pete thought. He looked at his boss sitting in his overstuffed fake brown leather chair glaring at him through his steel-rimmed glasses – the biggest horse’s ass to ever put on a suit and pretend to be a leader, he thought. And now he’s going to give me lessons? He stared at the large white letters loudly proclaiming “Doug Drake – Senior Vice President” on the phony gold plaque sitting directly in front of him on Doug’s desk.

“I’ve been reviewing this year’s organizational survey results,” Doug said, as he picked up a thick report. Little red cellophane flags stuck out of the report like rectangular tongues. They mocked Pete as Doug waved the report up and down. “Trust and communication has really dropped off in

your department. No wonder morale is in the basement. Some of the written comments show you've got a very unhappy bunch of campers. That clearly explains why absenteeism is up and our client service levels suck. There's obviously a leadership problem here and I think I'm looking at him."

Then Doug paused for dramatic effect. "What are you going to do about it?"

Pete fidgeted with the Doug Drake desk plaque. "Well, I ... I think there's, uh, a lot of misunderstanding in my department. These survey responses are just their perceptions; they aren't reality. People just don't understand how much we're doing for them and just how good they have it as the industry goes through this tough time."

"Well, let me give you a dose of reality, Mr. Pete Leonard. If we don't turn this company around, we won't make it through this tough time either. Last month's financials are just in and we're sinking deeper into a big pool of red ink. If we don't reverse this trend now, our creditors will pull the plug or sell us to a competitor. Can you see it, Leonard? The vultures are hovering, and it's up to you to do something before it's feeding time."

Doug grabbed the report and began pacing magisterially around his spacious office. "Your department is the key to holding on to customers," he said. "Your service levels have to improve. I just had a call from Bryon Hammond at Cowersill. I hope you realize they are one of our best customers. He heard that their technician was leaving us. Bryon thinks his tech walks on water. If he goes, they go with him. With morale levels like the ones in your department, we're not only going to lose some of our best people, we're going to lose our best customers."

Doug gave the giggling red tongues another good shake

for good measure. “You better get control of your department. Show some leadership! Let them know who’s boss and just how dire the situation is. Tell them that if they don’t start talking to each other and communicate more, we’ll all drown together when the ship finally sinks.”

Pete ventured in cautiously. “Maybe I should start by reviewing the report and trying to figure out why the scores are so low and what we can do about it.”

“For god’s sake, man! Do you want the inmates running the asylum? You’re the leader. Get in there and shake them up. Make them feel your presence. This isn’t the time to go soft. Holding hands and singing Kum Ba Ya just isn’t going to cut it. We don’t want the workers to see these survey results. That would just add fuel to the fire and make them bitch and moan even more – especially when they see the low communication scores.”

Doug landed back in his chair and threw the report on his desk. “If you’re not up to the job ... Well, let me put it this way: We’re looking under every rock and into every cubicle for savings. We’re determined to root out each and every expense that isn’t adding value to the business. Pete, we’re reviewing your job. We need to see you adding value – now!”



“... Earth to Peter. Hello, Peter!”

“Oh, sorry, Doctor. What were you saying?”

“I was asking if the financial problems at NMTS were adding to your stress.”

“It’s hard to add more water to a glass that’s already full and overflowing.”

“I see. Well, Peter, I am very concerned about you. If you stay on this road, you’re heading for a crash. It might be a

heart attack, stroke, or something else. But one thing is clear: it won't be fun for you or your family. The physical factors – like your weight, cholesterol, and blood pressure – are bad enough. But research is now showing that emotional state is a major variable in heart disease and a host of other illnesses. You're not the aggressive and hostile Type A personality that most people think of as high risk."

Pete grabbed onto this statement like a drowning man clutching a piece of driftwood.

"But it looks to me like you're in that equally dangerous category of 'quiet desperation.'"

Pete sank back under the waves.

"I just read about a study of over ten thousand heart-attack victims from dozens of countries. It showed that in the year before their heart attack, most were under much higher levels of stress from work, family, financial, and other factors than a comparable control group. With your severe stress and anxiety, you might as well be a heavy smoker on top of all the other health factors."

"I was once a Type A with some hostility," Pete said. "But it was getting me nowhere and leaving me frustrated. Now I just try to go along to get along."

Dr. Yantzi pulled out his prescription pad. "I am writing you a prescription for antidepressant pills. I hope they can help get you through this tough time in your life. You might want to find a new job, because frankly, Pete, this one is killing you. And you really need to lose some weight and start an exercise program. I'd prescribe pills for that, but Magic Pharmacy is all out."

Pete took the prescription and tried to decipher its squiggles and lines. He folded the paper and put it in his shirt pocket. "Yeah, I guess I do need to get my life in order."

“You sure do. The next time I see you it could be under much more serious circumstances.”

Pete poked the elevator button and rocked gently from foot to foot. He took the prescription out of his shirt pocket. Has it come to this? he wondered. Have I reached the point where pharmaceuticals are the only things keeping me going? How did I get here?

He was a few months away from his forty-eighth birthday. His fifteen-year-old daughter, Amanda, and nineteen-year-old son, Ryan, were from his “first big mistake” – his turbulent six-year marriage to Chantal. Chantal and he were both twenty-eight when they got married. They had dated on and off in college and stayed in touch after graduation. She loved his high energy, ambition, athletic skills, and humor. They laughed a lot in that enchanting year before they “tied the noose,” as Pete later put it. He loved her beauty, creativity, vigorous independence, and intelligence. They danced, partied, and made love with wild abandon. She could be overbearing at times, but Pete could live with that. When he did push back, Chantal’s fiery temper would escalate and sparks would fly. He was always so sorry afterward and would be the first to make up – which would end in passionate fun.

It wasn’t clear just when their marriage took a wrong turn, though it may have started before the honeymoon was over. The big fight they had during that Caribbean frolic certainly didn’t make for a storybook beginning. Chantal stormed out of their resort room and flew home on her own. Pete followed her and spent the next few days apologizing – although he wasn’t quite sure why and for what.

It was the start an all-too-familiar drama played out repetitively over the next six years. Chantal was most irritated when Pete stood his ground and argued with her. That was always

certain to end with her exit from his life for a short time. When Ryan was eighteen months old, she took off with him for three days. Pete phoned and drove everywhere he thought she might be. When he finally found her, at her parents' cottage, it took hours of apologizing and pleading to get her to come home. But once Ryan was tucked in and asleep, they had an enthusiastic make-up session in their bedroom.

Pete crossed the dim beige lobby into the white glare of the pharmacy. It smelled like perfumed medicine mixed with ammonia and rubbing alcohol. He could feel a familiar thirst on the back of his tongue. There were four people lined up at the prescription counter. He stood behind an elderly lady at the end of line. She was meticulous in her gray three-quarter-length cloth coat, dark caramel nylons, and black vinyl boots. She smelled like mothballs and damp wool. He stared at the prescription paper, but nothing sensible formed out of it. The elderly lady turned and glanced at Pete.

"Pardon me. Are you by any chance Peter Leonard?" she asked.

"Yes, I am."

"I am Donelda Peugot. I was your guidance counselor back at Waverly High."

"Mrs. Peugot, of course. I thought you looked familiar. It's been a long time."

"Many years. I barely recognize you anymore. You've changed a lot in thirty years. How are you? What are you doing these days?"

"Oh, I'm just getting along. I'm manager of the operations department in a technology services company."

"You always were so strong with technical subjects. You stand out in my memory as one of Waverly's most-likely-to-succeed students. You had a rare combination of technical aptitude, athletic talent, and social skills."



“Yeah, I guess I was lucky once. What brings you to the big city?”

“When my husband died, I moved here to be closer to my children and their families.”

They chatted for a few more minutes. Pete rocked gently from side to side. The line still hadn't moved. He looked at his watch and then at the prescription. He excused himself, explaining that he had to get back to his office. Mrs. Peugeot grasped his forearm with a wrinkled hand covered in light brown spots. “It was so nice to see you again, Peter. I hope life is treating you well and you've put many of your gifts to good use.”

When Pete graduated from college with an advanced technology degree, he went to work for Newton-Millbank Tech Services. The company was just starting up, which made for exciting times. The company was growing, the industry was growing, and Pete was growing. His technical abilities quickly made him a troubleshooting star with NMTS's key customers. His easygoing manner made him popular inside and outside the company. He worked with the sales department to help close a couple of key accounts. Just a year after he started, he was promoted into his first management role. He loved it. Years of leadership on sports teams had given him strong instincts for rallying his group of techs to solve impossible problems under unreasonable deadlines.

It didn't take long for the industry to notice, and Pete's reputation and responsibilities grew. As his marriage to Chantal wilted, he spent more time at the office, increasing his profile. Throughout his thirties he moved to ever higher management levels while NMTS's growth exploded.

When both the market and the company slowed and stalled, work became work. Pete started to dread, and then resent, the numerous bosses who came with the continuous

company reorganizations, and the unreasonable demands of both customers and the ungrateful people in his organization. Stress, anxiety, and irritability became his constant companions.

When they were thirty-three, he and Chantal divorced, with joint custody of the kids. Six years later Pete took the marital plunge again, this time with Michelle, a high-school drama teacher – who fortunately was not as dramatic as Chantal.

However, it wasn't long before he took his stress out on Michelle. Chantal's vitriolic barbs whenever they crossed paths while picking up or dropping off the kids didn't help much. He kept applying Chardonnay and beer to his nerves to keep himself sane. But lately, even increasing the dosages of these self-medications and throwing in extra-strength pain pills wasn't relieving his throbbing head.

Pete walked out the front door into the cold drizzle. Dark heavy clouds were sinking earthward from the dreary gray mass above. He zipped up his coat and raised his collar to shield himself from the sharp wind that was driving tiny wet needles into his face. He hurried across the front of the building toward the parking lot, catching a glimpse in the first-floor office windows of a fat, balding old man hunched over and shuffling sideways like a crab against the current. Poor old guy, he thought. Then he looked again and stopped dead. So did the old man. He stared at himself in the window. I sure could use a drink, he thought as he scurried to his car. He watched the pathetic old guy in the window try to straighten up and walk with dignity.

Once inside his car, Pete called to check his voice mail. The first message was marked urgent. He pressed the key to listen. He recognized the voice of his boss's assistant: "This is Rhonda Donald with a broadcast message for the client serv-

ices management team. Mr. Drake is calling an emergency meeting tomorrow morning at nine in conference room two. Attendance is mandatory. Cancel whatever you have booked and be there.” There was a click followed by the voice-mail lady declaring, “End of message.”

Pete felt his heart pounding. Sighing, he deleted the message and started his car. The rain began pelting his windshield with a torrent of angry water.