

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

Dana Donovan

Wants Are Needs

“Brothers and Sisters, listen to the Lord’s promptings and not your own feelings and desires,” the man with the Abraham Lincoln beard read from his prayer book.

Blake sat next to Sandra in a circle of folding chairs, an Oregon fruit salad: farmers, tech company managers, former grunge musicians, truck drivers, teachers and stay-at-home dads. Sandra’s eyes remained clenched in a private reckoning. Sandra ran Quality for Omega Corp. She lived, breathed and bled Omega Corp. The one time he’d taken her to dinner, she insisted on splitting the check.

“Let the Holy Spirit touch you. Surrender your cares, sorrows and fears to our Lord. Ignore anything that is negative and anything that will hinder you in coming to our Lord . . .”

Blake worked for Cerplex, selling equipment that made computer chips. His boss questioned the likelihood of landing an order from Omega which purchased from AlphaTech, Cerplex’s competitor. *You’re pissing your time and my money down a fucking rat hole!* Though Omega’s patent filings suggested a revolutionary new generation of chips, Blake’s boss wasn’t convinced. *Drop. It. Now.*

Blake continued his weekly pilgrimages to Omega’s Hillsboro campus – pitching, schmoozing and cajoling every VP and SVP who’d take a meeting or a night out. Over three years, he had treated their execs to PGA golf tournaments, pole-dancing clubs, weekends in Vail, Palm Springs and Burning Man. This was his first prayer meeting.

“Ask and you will receive God’s guidance, healing and forgiveness. God loves you.”

A month after the prayer meeting, Omega Corp announced an open bid – a Request For Proposal (RFP) – for their new factory. Blake felt vindicated, his boss not so much. *Tell me you’re still dating that fucking corpse. Drop. It. Fucking. Now.*

Blake called Sandra and suggested another prayer meeting. “I’m David, battling Goliath.”

Sandra demurred, saying it could be a conflict. She wished him luck though.

Blake and his assistant, Rachel, worked nights and weekends, filling out every line of every form exactly as specified in the 200-page (24 MB pdf) RFP instructions. They kept it hush-hush – code words and hidden directories. Blake felt like a kid sneaking out at night. He hired a Private Investigator out of San Francisco; he wanted dossiers – and dirt – on Omega’s senior managers. After three years, he needed them more than they needed him.

Omega scheduled Blake’s presentation during early February’s doldrums – after the Super Bowl but before Valentine’s Day. With an epic storm bearing down the Alaskan coast, Blake flew up early. He rehearsed in a rented conference room, presenting to thirty-six empty chairs set

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

behind a dozen tables, each with a pad of lined paper, bottled water and a bowl of hard candies. Despite hundreds of revisions, he couldn't hit the mark. He tinkered with words and graphics, showered and presented again. He stopped at 1 AM because it wasn't getting better.

The big day dawned with hail ricocheting off his hotel window, visibility reduced to yards. Blake's driver took twenty minutes to make the one-mile drive. Accidents clogged highways and secondary roads without bias. Key decision-makers hadn't arrived by the scheduled starting time. Engineers cycled in and out of the presentation room for coffee and donuts. Blake stalled, waiting for Randy, a critical supporter for whom he had scored weekend VIP passes to Pebble Beach's Pro-Am. He kept an eye out for Sandra, but Kevin, an engineer with a penchant for belly shots in strip clubs, said Sandra's road was closed.

Riding back to the airport, he stared into the whiteout. Despite years of calling, months of preparation, his talking points fell like clay pigeons. His words might as well have been an ancient language spoken by his intestines. The wipers groaned, pushing heavy arcs of slush. Each groan a reminder that Rachel waited. He always called after pitches. She knew he'd call first thing and would interpret his two-hour silence as a good sign. He felt like he might burst. He could he tell her? Not that he blew the pitch, but that he swallowed the sucker's bait, hook, line and sinker. There was no open competition. There never had been. The RFP was a sham. AlphaTech would keep the business. He never saw it coming. He dragged her on a fool's mission, commandeering three months of her life. Why would she ever trust him? She might quit.

He called from the airport, spinning the pitch positively, avoiding specifics then shifting to the ice storm which left a wide swath of canceled flights. He wondered if he would make it out.

On the flight down, he thought she knew. Not that she said anything – she wouldn't – but he was sure she knew. The irony was AlphaTech reached out to him last summer, letting him know they had a spot for him. He never pursued it, but, if he had, he would have brought her along. They were that close. They talked a dozen times a day. He called with on-the-fly requests accompanied by convoluted instructions; he called to field questions, offer encouragement or thank her. Mostly he called to hear her voice. Susan, his fiancée, never took his calls. She was impossible to reach during the day. If he texted her in the morning, she wouldn't respond until night. By then he would have to go back and look up his original message to make sense of her reply. But Rachel always took his call. Sometimes he called out of sheer guilt. She was so good at keeping so much off his plate: customer problems, change-requests, forecasts, presentations, expense reports. And she made him look good. He never worried about misspellings, wrong logos or any of a thousand other things that could go wrong. "That's my job, Boss," she said. The 'boss' thing drove him nuts, like being stuck on an elevator between two floors. "We're a team," he said. He racked his brain trying to come up with something better than 'team.' Figure skating pairs came to mind but Rachel did all the heavy lifting. (It had been a long time since he watched figure skating but he was sure women skaters didn't twirl their partners over their heads like propellers.) "We're world dominators," he said, trying a new angle, "like Anthony and

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

Cleopatra." She thought about it and replied, "Peter Pan and Wendy." His come back, "Bonnie and Clyde." She countered, "Peanut butter and jelly." Later, he realized that her buzzkill pairs, like her use of "boss," was her way of deflecting praise. Loaded with drive, resiliency, scary smarts and a smile that made him forget to breathe, she expected more from herself that he could ever ask, yet, with all that going for her, she stayed on the phone for as long as he needed, rambling on about nothing.

He called her cell as soon as his flight touched down in San Jose.

"Got one for you."

"Okay."

"Tarzan and Jane."

"Pumba and Timon."

"Rappers?"

"Close."

"So, what's going on?" He heard the TV in the background. She rented an in-law apartment from a Stanford professor – Japanese something – on sabbatical. Rachel had the place with the Kobi fish pool to herself.

"Quarter past nine on a school night. Take a guess?"

"Wishing you had dinner plans?"

"For what night would that be?"

"Tonight. I'm thinking Casa Lisbon."

She didn't respond. He hung on; not admitting it was late, letting his offer dangle in gray space between them. He hated the thought of pressuring her. He wasn't forcing her out or, worse, taking her for granted. They were a team! And teammates – world dominators – didn't feel the awkwardness that stymied other people. A talking baby commercial played in the background. It sounded new, and he wondered if she was distracted by it. "I love the talking baby commercials."

"You're engaged, you know."

Casa Lisbon shared a one-story stucco building with an insurance agency, a block off Camino Real. Blake arrived ten minutes early. Whenever they met for dinner, he always swept the place for Cerplex people. Unlikely at that late hour, but he promised his boss he wouldn't feed the feral rumor mill.

She looked fantastic, a black turtle neck sweater with a pair of mother of pearl earrings, like she'd been planning on dinner for months. They took a table against the wall. A bunch of grey beards with wire-rimmed glasses (someone's dissertation committee) occupied a big round table in the middle. He ordered Bife a Casa and a bottle of Stag's Leap. She ordered the Caldo Verde, kale soup.

"I could tell from your voice that it didn't go well."

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

He waved his hand as if she had blown cigar smoke in his face. "Let's play a game. It's called where would you go?"

"For dinner?"

"A trip. You get to take a trip anywhere in the world."

"Why only one place?"

The waiter arrived with the bottle of Stag's Leap.

"Because that's the game. It can be a city, country or an island, but not . . ."

"Ready."

"I was about to say continent, no continents." He tasted the wine.
"Fine."

"I've played this game before."

"Where?"

"Where have I played it?"

"No. Where do you want to go?"

"You go first."

That's why he loved Rachel. Susan didn't play games. She would have studied the menu, complaining about missing lunch and about it being too late for an entrée. Then, after the business of ordering, she would have talked shop – hers, then his. She wouldn't have known that three years had been flushed that afternoon, or, if she did, she would have demanded a full report. She wouldn't let him get off with a hand-wave or a let's-play-a-game diversion. *You have to learn to talk about these things!* But he didn't. That was the thing. Chucking it in the dumpster and going out for a house steak, a bottle of wine and a game of make-believe worked fine.

"No. See, it's my game. I initiated it. I asked first. Those rules have been handed down for centuries."

"Pass."

"Okay. Pass is an option. Cheers."

"Salud."

"Mmmh. Good. Okay, there's a resort built on an atoll in the Maldives. Each guest has their own cabin with private pool, sparkling beaches."

"Predictable."

"Ouch. Okay, your turn."

"Sea of Cortez."

"Spain!"

"Mexico."

One of the greybeards made a show of turning around in his chair to see who thought the Sea of Cortez was in Spain. Blake waved. The guy

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

turned back to his table. The dissertation committee shook their heads. "Cabo, right?"

"No. No resorts. The sea. I want to go on a cruise."

"Why not cruise the Maldives? I know a good resort you could stop by."

"Have you heard of Steinbeck's *Sea of Cortez*?"

"Is that a vodka? No, it's a movie, right?"

"Try a book."

"That explains the Steinbeck part." The grey beards shook their heads. *Did you hear that? He thought it was vodka.*

"I read it in high school, in the dead of winter when Scranton was frozen solid. Just breathing felt like inhaling shards of glass. The leaves on the big rhodos around my parents' house were shriveled into sickly little umbrellas. I had mono and spent a week sleeping and reading *Sea of Cortez*. It was like a message in a bottle. I dreamt of swimming with dolphins, swarmed by yellow and blue angelfish, anemones waving their orange-pink tentacles."

"What do they give you for mono in Scranton?"

"It's not going to be around much longer. Steinbeck wrote about fishing trawlers slaughtering the Sea then, and that was in the 1940's. He went into a tide pool and found a universe of species." She looked at the ceiling. "He said, 'Men really do need sea-monsters in their personal oceans.'"

"Didn't know sea-monsters were an option. Thought they came standard equipment."

"He said, 'need.'"

"That would be a great slogan for the drug companies. Need a break from your sea-monster, try Xanax. Or Oxy-Contin. You could have competing brands depending on the sea-monster."

"He also said, 'Most people don't like themselves at all.'"

"So true."

"What about you?"

"Do I seem like someone who hates himself?"

"There's a big difference between hating and not liking. Anyway, he had you in mind when he said, 'A busy man can't find time to balance his values against the world's.'"

"Wrong. False. Not true. I balance my values all the time. But, P.S., the world always wins. Trust me on that. Anyway, I'm sticking with the Maldives. The beaches are better and no one is allowed to quote – it's a law."

"It's not the beaches. The best part is underwater," she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "The reefs are supposed to be unbelievable. Pufferfish, angel fish, every color you can imagine, rays, eels and gorgoni-

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

ans and striped nudibranches. I remember looking outside my bedroom window at the icicles hanging off the roof and promising myself I'd see it before it was too late."

"But you haven't?"

"Haven't found the right person."

He spreads his arms. *I'm right here.*

"You're engaged."