

Another Vanishing Act

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Also by Pat Russo

One Marshal's Badge: A Memoir of Fugitive Hunting, Witness Protection, and the U.S. Marshals Service

Be careful what you wish for.

That's what Pops, my grandfather, told me. Today I figured out what he meant.

This sudden enlightenment didn't occur while I was lost in meditation. It came to me while I was mopping the flooded floor in the second-floor laundry.

Mopping up is a job you'd expect the maintenance staff to handle, right? Me too. Lately it's become part of my growing list of responsibilities here at the Excelsior Senior Apartments.

I started out as both building manager and activities director. A few weeks into this gig, the maintenance super jumped ship and I temporarily picked up that job. Then the maintenance guys stopped showing up and I became my entire staff. I'm still waiting for the help-wanted ads to run in the paper.

It's not that the Excelsior needs a big staff. This isn't a nursing home, so we don't need a medical department. An occasional visiting nurse works fine for us. We don't serve regular meals like an assisted living, so we don't need cooks, dishwashers, and waitresses. We call a caterer when we need food for some special occasion. The people who live in these apartments are fairly independent folks who have hit retirement age.

We really need a better term than "senior citizens." I've never run into any "junior citizens" so the term doesn't even make sense. If you use the term "golden agers" around any of the tough old birds I know, they'd either challenge you to arm wrestle or laugh you silly. Sure, age has caused a few problems for some of them but it's also improved them – like fine wine, classic cars, or vintage jazz. I like to think of them as "antiques."

Still, as I was wringing out my mop in the laundry, it occurred to me that maybe this isn't quite the plum job that I thought it was some weeks back. That maybe if I was more careful about what I wished for – by thinking things through and checking them out – I wouldn't end up disappointed when my plans didn't work out. Pops always spotted the signs whenever I was heading for trouble and threw me warnings, ones that even I couldn't miss.

He was always quoting these cockeyed sayings to me, ones that are nothing but head-scratchers to kids. As I got older, I knew another one was headed my way when I'd hear those famous words, "You know what they say..."

“Danny,” he’d tell me, “you know what they say, Don’t count your chickens before they hatch” or “Early to bed, early to rise,” or some other nonsense. Every dusty proverb still haunts me like some cosmic “I told you so.”

I was moving the waterlogged peel-and-stick tiles in the laundry back into position with my soggy sneakers when I realized that Pops would have warned me away from this place. I could almost hear him saying, “You know what they say Danny, the grass ain’t always greener on the other side.”

Even I knew that I was seriously under-qualified for anything but a maintenance manager’s job here. But I had myself convinced that I could help the people living in this place. That I could run the facility and make everybody’s lives a little happier with a few well-planned activities. During the world’s shortest job interview, I even convinced Mr. Fryer, the director of the board that runs this place.

Less than ten minutes later I walked out of there, fat, dumb, and happy, with the job in hand – and without a clue about what I was getting myself into.

It didn’t take long for me to hear complaint after complaint – from the few people who worked here and from the residents too. Getting gripes from unhappy residents was nothing new; I’ve handled them before and knew what to do. I listened, nodded my head, maybe asked a few questions, and promised to take care of the problem. Sometimes, a listening ear was all it took to remedy things. If not, I’d hear about it again. Then I’d get around to fixing the complaint. You know what they say, “The squeaky wheel always gets the grease.”

This was the first time that I was getting dumped on by other employees, some of whom worked for me. Well, at least they worked for me at the time.

“No matter what we do, nothing is done fast enough for these people,” the maintenance super said grouchyly when I introduced myself. I looked at the piles of old coffee cups strewn on the workshop floor with the rest of the mess. Not surprisingly, he and his assistants looked equally unkempt.

“We can’t keep them happy,” he continued. “It would help if the penny pinchers running this place got us some supplies. And if the darn tools stopped disappearing.” His last statement was accompanied by a cold stare at an assistant, who was nodding his head in rhythm to whatever was playing on his iPod.

I quickly learned that nearly every maintenance expense had to be approved by the board, accompanied by request forms, and amply justified. Who would generate this paperwork? Me. No wonder the place looks like it hasn’t been painted since I was in grade school.

Rose – the woman who gives tours to potential residents, handles the phones, and the office work – barely spoke to me during my first few weeks here. Eventually, I learned that she applied for my job but the director never acknowledged her application or gave her an interview. It doesn’t surprise me that she’s not coming in very regularly.

Bob, who regularly drives the residents to the grocery store and the pharmacy in our bus, was the most pleasant of the bunch. He greeted me with a smile, pumped my hand, and rattled off a list of all the things in the aging vehicle that need attention. The maintenance people wouldn’t touch it and he knew there was no budget, so he’d managed to keep it going. But the old rig was headed to the scrap yard, he warned, unless I started the paperwork to get some parts or hire a mechanic.

“It’s just a matter of time Dan,” Bob said with a smile. “If the bus breaks down, these people will be climbing the walls. They live for these little trips, to get their prunes and their prescriptions. You don’t want to rile them up Dan,” he warned with raised eyebrows. “I hear them talk on the bus. They’re scary.”

Right now, I'll bet Pops is smiling, shaking his head at me, and saying, "Tried to warn you, you dumb cluck."

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I'm not opposed to physical work. After all, it's probably my construction background that landed me this position. But I'm too busy with the maintenance jobs and paperwork to think about planning activities. My guess is that Mr. Fryer merged the building management and activities positions to pinch a few pennies.

It's disappointing because coming here was supposed to be a fresh start. I'd had my fill of construction jobs, even apprenticed a few times, and then moved up to managing an apartment building near Tucson. At least I thought I'd traded up – until I found out that being the "super" involved having residents ring your phone night and day.

The job became fairly routine. I'd start to fall asleep and the phone would ring again. I'd answer it, dress, and then sleepwalk over to 14C or 7B and deal with the overflowing toilet, the noisy garbage disposals that somehow set off smoke alarms, or the lousy air conditioners that sputtered and wheezed worse than my Uncle Charley, who smoked unfiltered Lucky Strikes. The sleep deprivation was making me punchy. I even started sleeping in my clothes to save time.

I knew that things had gone far enough when I kept dozing off on the rare dates I lined up. There's nothing like suddenly waking up in a restaurant, blinking your bleary eyes, and watching yet-another woman leave your table and make tracks for the door.

I'm convinced that the area ladies rooms and local blogs are still littered with embarrassing pictures of me snoring at the symphony, snoozing with my nose in my spaghetti, and in other unflattering displays of public REM sleep. Bold headlines loudly advise other women against wasting an evening with the pathetic narcoleptic captured by these unforgiving camera phones.

Obviously, the "super" job and my terminal social life weren't all I wanted to leave in the dust. I've always had a weakness for the races – horse, dogs, or anything else that runs. Once, I even bet on cockroach races at the county lockup – but that's another story. Anyway, I figure that my habit would only be classified as a problem if I had anything that remotely resembled luck. When a certain ill-tempered financier made it clear that he was growing increasingly tired of my rising losses and my empty promises to pay him next week, it was time to make a move.

So late one night, I packed up the Honda and quietly drove away with a week's pay in my pocket and the extra cash I'd managed to squirrel away in a savings account. I decided to find another state with a mild winter, but this time, I wanted a body of water nearby. The Sunshine State seemed like the right choice, but I didn't have any other plans than heading in this general direction. Less than a week after I crossed the state line, I managed to land this new job. Heck, I'd barely managed to find a decent motel to give as an address.

At first, working here made me a bit sad. I wondered how many of our residents are here against their wishes, sent by sons, daughters, and their respective spouses who couldn't bear the thought of taking them in. Many of these nice old ladies in their sweaters and running shoes were sent here when a spouse died, their children sold their homes – all in their best interests, of course – and Medicare and Social Security checks paid their rent and provided the small subsistence payments they spend when our bus chauffeurs them to the local Walgreen's or Publix.

Their loneliness is apparent every time I walk into the building's large lobby in the morning. I'm always amazed at how many residents are there. One day, I asked a perpetually smiling grandmother why so many of

them sat there so early. “We’re waiting for the mail dear,” she replied, looking at me somewhat indulgently, like you’d look at a child who had just asked a question with an obvious answer. Problem was that it wasn’t even 9:00 a.m.; the mailman doesn’t arrive until 11:00. Often, he comes later. The mail is the big attraction of the morning and the only explanation for our crowded lobby.

It also saddens me to think how many of them are waiting in vain, rarely getting a letter or a visit from their children or grandchildren. I’ve overheard many conversations by visiting families that confirmed this sad fact. The worst one occurred recently, a few weeks before the holidays. I was in the utility room off the lobby, performing emergency maintenance on the only working vacuum available to clean the lobby’s well-worn carpet. I was clearing the junk jamming the cleaning rotors that prevented this ancient machine from giving us a clean sweep. That’s when I heard them.

“Natalie, I’m feeling very guilty about her,” said a man’s voice. “We really haven’t spent any time with my mother since she’s been here. And it’s been nearly five years since we moved her in after dad passed.”

There was a long sigh, followed by a woman’s voice. “Look Shawn, we’ve been over this before. Why bring it up again? We don’t have room for her and when you’re around her for more than five minutes, she drives you crazy. Besides, you don’t need to suck up to her; it’s not like she’s going to leave you anything. She had to part with the few assets she had to get in this place.”

“That’s not the point,” the man’s voice replied. “I’m thinking that maybe we should invite her for dinner on the holiday. Let her see her grandkids. Don’t you think she’d like that?”

“Look sweetie, that’s not going to work and you know it. Let’s get this visit over with and go have a couple of drinks. God knows we’ll need them. And maybe we won’t have to do this for much longer.”

I fired up the old vacuum cleaner so I didn’t have to hear the rest. I didn’t really have to hear anymore. I’m pretty sure that even I can predict those results. By the time I rolled that noisy upright into the lobby, there was no one in sight.

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Once I finished up in the laundry, I went back to my office. My office – I never grow tired of saying that. One of the luxuries of having an office – even one that’s barely bigger than a broom closet – is occasionally putting my feet up on the desk like I’m a big shot. I swivel that chair around, lean back and get comfortable before I grab the racing form. Coming to Florida has meant entering a new universe of racetracks and opportunities. Not only are there the horses at Calder, Hialeah, and Tampa Bay Downs, there are greyhounds in Miami, Naples, and West Palm Beach.

When I first got here, I placed my bets using a computer in the local public library. When the librarian saw what I was up to, she made it clear that my behavior wasn’t appropriate. Not long after, Bob introduced me to a local bookie. I’d rather have more human interaction anyway. Sometimes, I can even pick up some decent tips from the old timer, who gets pretty talkative after a couple of scotches.

Today my reading period is cut short by the phone. The interruption is annoying, but I put the racing form down and plant my feet on the floor again. Whenever I grab the handset, I always try to answer the residents’ calls the same way: “This is Dan. How can I help you?”

I hear a weird rustling on the line, like someone is dragging the receiver across a table. Then a loud voice, nearly shouts, “Helloooo, hellooo.” I immediately recognize Mrs. Zimmer, a fairly new tenant who moved in after her husband’s death. Since she calls nearly every day, it didn’t take long to learn that she’s extremely hard of hearing. The few times I’ve been to her apartment, I saw the volume controls on her phone. Despite the

technological assistance, phone conversations with her make me think I'm talking over a transatlantic cable.

Raising my voice to a suitable level, I say, "Hi Mrs. Zimmer. This is Dan. How are you today?"

She never bothers to answer; she starts speaking in that quavering voice of hers. "I got up early today. I don't sleep well anyway since the good Lord took my Winston, bless his soul. I forgot to take out the garbage again because Winston always did that, so I got myself dressed because I didn't want anyone to see me in my nightclothes. And do you know what I saw in front of the trash room? The ugliest bug I have ever seen!"

This is an ongoing conversation that we have and I've begun to like the familiar routine. Maybe Mrs. Zimmer needs someone to talk to, so most of the time I don't really care.

"Yes Mrs. Zimmer. You told me about that bug yesterday and the day before that. In fact, we talked about the bugs you've seen nearly every day."

"This is a very different bug, young man. It's bigger and it's uglier."

"Mrs. Zimmer, like I've been telling you, I have the exterminator coming first thing Monday morning."

She sounds like she's getting upset now. "But what am I to do in the meantime? What if this bug attacks me? What if they come into my apartment? I don't move as fast as I used to. You have to do something now!"

I try to be reassuring. "Mrs. Zimmer, I'll be upstairs to head off that bug invasion as soon as I can."

That seems to satisfy her and we end the conversation with me estimating when I might be up. As soon as I put the receiver down, the phone rings again. For a moment, I stare at it with a weird feeling of déjà vu. The back-to-back calls create the same anxious feeling in my stomach that I'd often had in Tucson.

I'm interrupted before I get out half of my standard greeting.

"This is Sally Upchurch in 119. There's a big spot on my ceiling. I thought it was that problem with my eyes again, but they've gotten better since the cataract surgery. I'm worried because it's getting bigger. Can somebody look at it?"

Darn. I was hoping that the flood in the laundry room wouldn't affect any of the rooms on the first floor. Time to add that to the to-do list.

After fielding back-to-back calls, I'm ready for a break – even a quick one. Just as I pick up the racing form, I hear a voice.

"Dan, you promise these people that you'll look into their problems or stop by, but you never do."

I don't even have to look up. It's Simon, one of the residents whose company I've been enjoying. Simon is a different animal. While he's never told me much about himself, he's obviously been around the block a few times. I wouldn't be surprised if he hasn't exactly been a law-abiding citizen.

I can't help but smile at this guy, so I switch on the answering system, and see him leaning against the open doorway. "Simon, most of them don't even remember that they called. I learned that my first few days here. So what's new?"

Simon shrugs his shoulders. "Same old same old." Then he points toward my racing form and asks, "You

doing any better with the ponies?” I’m sure my expression answers that question, because he immediately follows up with another one. “How much are you in for these days.”

I held up four fingers. “Four hundred huh? That’s not too bad.”

Even though I don’t like reporting my losses, I shake my head and tell him, “No man; that’s four large.”

“Wow, you don’t waste any time digging a hole.” After pausing for a beat, Simon continues. “You interested in an opportunity to make a few bucks to put toward filling that crater you’ve dug?”

I surprise myself by saying, “Why not. Things couldn’t get much worse, could they?”

Simon smiles back with a broad wink and then answers. “If you got the cojones pal, I got the plan. Here’s the idea. Next time one of your antiques kicks the bucket, don’t report it. Dispose of the body and cash the Social Security and pension checks.”

Talk about crazy. “Sure Simon,” I tell him. “Sounds like a free ride – to the state pen. You’re nuts. You can’t get away with that.”

Simon cocks his head and never stops smiling. “Dan, would it surprise you if I already had? Remember the sweet old lady in 323 that moved out a while back?”

“Sure, Mrs. Lewis, right?”

“Right. Well, she didn’t exactly move out. I hadn’t seen her during any of the excursions to the stores – and I knew she was pretty regular about getting her cough medicine and the other garbage she took. So I went up one day and knocked. There was no answer, so I used my passkey...”

“Passkey? How the heck did you get a passkey?!”

“Ahh Dan, sometimes nature provides. Careless people leave things lying around. I take what opportunities fate offers.” Simon’s grin is starting to unnerve me.

“Anyway, I go into the dame’s place and there she was sitting in her rocker.

A closer look told me that she’d already bought the farm. I never saw nobody visit her, so I gave her a ride to her final resting place late one night. Then I began passing it around that she told me she was moving to California with her niece. Been cashing her checks ever since.” Before the words completely leave his mouth, Simon pulls a huge wad of bills from his pocket. I can’t take my eyes off it.

“Right. Next you’re going to tell me that Mrs. Pembroke didn’t move out either. Did you waste her?”

“Nah Dan, I never ice ‘em. I just show up at the right time and take advantage of the opportunity that fate delivers. Been doing that my whole life. In this case, it adds up to a few extra bucks a month for yours truly.”

When it hits me that he isn’t kidding, I feel myself turning red and I start stammering. “But, what about the city inspectors? What about the nosy board that has to approve everything? What about...”

“Hey relax, pal. Nothing to inspect and nothing to worry about. They disappear without a trace. It’s fool proof.”

“And what happens to the bodies? You carve them up in the same butcher shop they used on *The*

Sopranos?”

Simon laughs and gives a dismissive wave of his hand. “Nope, but my brother-in-law does have some deserted farmland that I’m fertilizing.”

“Doesn’t it occur to you that eventually their family will show up?”

“Dan, think about it – the average check is at least 700 smackers a month. At the rate folks here are failing, it won’t be long before there’s a pile of monthly checks. You do the math pal. That fills up that hole of yours and gives you plenty of reserve.”

“You’re nuts. Get out of here!”

“Okay Dan,” he says laughing. “Hey, I’m just yanking yer chain man. Listen, no hard feelings, right? Hey, how about us hitting the track on Saturday? Lunch is on me. I might even be able to coach you into winning back some of that cash. Whattya’ say pal?”

“You know me; even a bad day of betting beats a good day at work.”

“Great, great! Meet ya’ there at high noon.”

With that, he steps back into the hallway and disappears.

I sit and stare at the doorway, not quite sure if this guy is kidding or not. I’ve heard scams and get-rich quick schemes before, but this one seems – I don’t know, creepy. I see the message light blinking on the phone, but I ignore it for now. I need a few minutes to think about what just happened.

* * * * *

I pull into the motel parking lot, still thinking about the day’s activities. There were more calls from Mrs. Zimmer, complaints from residents who were either too hot or too cold, and an upcoming board meeting for which I’m unsuccessfully trying to prepare.

I turn the car off and glance at the microwave dinner and the brand-new six-pack sitting on the passenger seat.

Before I can grab my food, a fresh breeze from the waterway brushes against my face. As I lean back, I take a deep breath of the salty air wafting through the open windows. It’s so quiet that I can hear the clicks as the streetlights blink on.

That’s when somebody changes the channel.

The car door suddenly opens and my arm nearly leaves its socket as I’m yanked outside, spun around, and bounced against the car a few times.

A beefy arm is firmly imprinting my face into the paint job while ratcheting my left arm behind my back in a direction it doesn’t normally go.

I think the evening is ruined.

“You really know how to hurt a guy’s feelings,” croaks a raspy voice that’s likely in cahoots with the beefy arm. “You leave without a forwarding address. Didn’t you ma teach ya’ any manners?”

At first I didn't recognize the voice. Now that I do, I don't find it the least bit reassuring. My future is ruined too.

"Bruno? Ahhh, how are you?"

"Like I said, my feeling's hurt. But mine's nuttin' compared to Mr. C's."

"Oh, Mr. C told you to come here?" I sound like I've had a lobotomy. Don't all bookies call the muscle when a guy runs out? Duh.

"Nah, I came here fer fresh grapefruits. Whattya' think?"

"How did you find me?" There's nothing quite as wimpy as making small talk with some gorilla who has pinned you helplessly against your car while he's frisking you for cash.

"Yah think we don' know people? We hear tings. We hear youse lost four large on da' ponies again. Dat's fast work pal."

"Hey, I've got a good job here Bruno. I can put away lots of cash to pay everybody off. Scouts honor!"

"You nuts? With your job at the ol' folks home? I'll be in a wheelchair before I can collect. Remember, youse in fer almost ten Gs."

"Ten? I only owed Mr. C four. And it's only four down here. That's eight."

"Who's paying my travel expenses? I don' travel cheap, ya' know."

"But Bruno, I've got good inside info on the races down here. I can pay it back. Really!"

"Sure pal. You telling me dat' your luck's changed?"

Then I hear something that sounds suspiciously like a laugh. But with Bruno, you can never be too sure – or too careful. And even though he calls me "pal," I'm not fooled. Bruno calls everybody that – even after he's broken your thumbs. Your knees. And he's sinking his beefy mitts into your collarbone.

Then, something strange happens. Bruno sounds almost – sympathetic.

"Listen pal. I always liked youse. Don' ask me why, but I'm gonna' visit some friends down here fer a while. Den I'll be back. You better have some dough; lots of it. Yah' get me?"

"Sure Bruno. I understand. Thanks."

"Jus' stay put an' count to somethin'. Pick a big number." Bruno may have a way with words, but he's not too keen on figures.

I slowly count to fifty before I start to rotate my neck and massage my arm. Nothing's broken, but it's amazing how sore you can get with your head plastered against a car.

The car door is still open. My empty wallet is on the ground near my feet. But the six-pack I bought is gone. And so is Bruno. For now...