

Soul Man

Excerpt

After the meeting, we all shook hands. Linda and Don took the elevator upstairs to finish the paperwork. Given it had gone about as well as it could have, I did not rush out. Instead, I played the gentleman and waited for Sonya to retrieve Amy's coat, so she and I could walk out together.

The air had grown chillier outside. The gray sky was now black, the darkness interrupted only by city lights and tiny white specks floating down innocently, swirling in the light wind, reflecting rainbows from the streetlights. Flecks, like God's dandruff, momentarily appeared on my shoulders before dissolving.

Amy congratulated me on surviving the proceeding, although that's like being praised for surviving a car wreck with only severe injuries. Exchanging small talk, I escorted her to her car. She informed me that the paperwork would take a few days to be completed before it was ready for my signature. She anticipated no surprises or problems.

I opened the car door for her.

"Thanks, David." Amy smiled and slipped into the driver's seat.

"I still believe in old school chivalry. Thanks again for your help, Amy. Have a pleasant evening."

I know I'm not. A bottle of bourbon with my name on it awaits me in my new home, and I fully intend to utilize its numbing abilities.

As I turned to make my way to my car, I bore the blast of an emotional tsunami washing over me, halting me in my tracks. My marriage was over. Eighteen years of living with one woman, gone with a stroke of a pen. No kids running around, no sharing their every triumph and turmoil. My stomach added its protest, threatening to reject my lunch. Water welled in my eyes, preparing to escape as flakes of snow touched my cheek, melting instantly.

Her smile, her laugh, her fragrance, her gentle touch. God, I still love her. What the hell am I doing?

I resumed my erect crawl toward the car, completely distraught, aware of nothing but my sorrow.

The emotional fog enshrouded me as I reached for the door handle. To my surprise, the door failed to open. I tried again and again, with each repetition leading to increasing frustration, then giving way to anger.

Haven't I been through enough today?

I rammed my hand into my pocket and withdrew my keys. Spying the unlock button, I repeatedly mashed on it, to no avail. Frustrated and angry, I banged on the door, cursing loudly—mad at the door, mad at the divorce, mad at Linda, mad at McFadden, mad at me, mad at the world.

Somehow in my anger, I noticed a Starbucks coffee cup in the cupholder. I did not have coffee in the car today—I hadn't been to a Starbucks in weeks. Feeling very foolish, I realized I was at the wrong car. Anger became embarrassment, which only made me madder.

As I wallowed in anger, frustration, and self-pity, I saw out of the corner of my eye a man approaching, striding purposefully through the quickening snow. His very appearance intimidated. He was several inches taller than me, thinner, younger, with a significantly more athletic build and long black hair with matching thick beard. His broad shoulders and muscular frame were noticeable even though he wore a heavy black jacket, Chiefs' cap, and carried a backpack slung over his left shoulder. The coat was open, revealing a gray sweatshirt underneath, matching the sweatpants he wore. The ever-swirling snow, now coming down harder, partially obscured the shadowy figure, making him even more mysterious. His sunglasses, perched on his nose in the darkness, added to his mystique.

Who the heck is this? Sunglasses? Really? Is he expecting a blinding snowfall?

I assumed he owned the car I appeared to be breaking into. I was about to apologize. As he approached, though, he did not seem like a guy who had a \$70,000 plus car. His clothes were old and well-worn, his beard unkempt, and his shoes dirty and tattered.

Given the circumstances, I wasn't in the mood to be trifled with, as the emotional turmoil returned with a vengeance, especially my anger. The well-lit parking lot had obvious cameras covering every inch, making it unlikely the man was there to rob me, although I could not rule out the possibility.

Truthfully, part of me relished a confrontation—I needed something, someone, on which to vent my pent-up anger and frustration. This panhandler picked the wrong time to approach me.

"Look," I said to him in a stern voice as he drew nearer. "I'd like to help, but I have no change. Sorry." I started to turn away, but he kept coming. Now fury prevailed.

"Listen..." my speech stopped by the sudden appearance of a gun in the man's left hand—made more threatening due to the silencer attached.

What the hell?

The absurdity of what I was experiencing delayed any flight. Instead, I simply stared at the weapon then at the man—frozen—not from fear, but complete lack of comprehension. My brain refused to process what my eyes saw. Slowly I began to raise my hands in surrender.

I was not given time to complete the act.

The flash, pop, and pain came nearly simultaneously. Agony such as none before overtook my being, the impact slamming me against the car. Still conscious, I clutched at my chest, hands wet with warm blood against the cold air. As I slowly slid to the pavement, another flash, pop, and phenomenal pain. I lacked the breath to scream.

Why?

My mind filled with anger, anguish, agony, and astonishment.

The moment froze in time. My senses flared with hypersensitivity. As the third bullet tore its way into my flesh, the nerves sent waves of pain to my brain; the sound of it impacting my rib cage made its way to my ears, as the odor of burning flesh assaulted my nose. Intense agony overwhelmed me.

Then nothing. Nothing at all.

The excruciating torment vanished in an instant. The joy from the release of pain overwhelmed. Darkness. Silence. No sensation. Emptiness. Astonishment accompanied relief. I was still there...

How am I still conscious?

Gradually I became aware of a soft light glowing dimly ahead of me, growing slowly in intensity. As I watched, a long, dark tunnel formed, stretching before me, inviting.

This is it. I'm really dead...

What do I do now?

The light grew more intense.

Is it approaching me or I it?

The last of the air escaped my lungs, mixing with the snow-filled cold air, as I headed toward the light.

The welcoming glow beckoned at the tunnel's far end. It radiated peace, tranquility, love, along with warmth and light.

What do I do now? We're not given instructions...

Yes, I joked. Humor had always been my favored coping strategy. My apparent death had not changed that.

I hesitated.

I can't go. I must take care of my kids...

The light called. I took a step forward. Then another. My pace was very deliberate.

How am I walking? This has to be my imagination.

I was in no hurry to recognize the reality of what seemed so absurd. Yet I continued onward. The beacon became so brilliant, I paused and closed my eyes for a moment. Dizziness instantly overcame me. Then once again, complete darkness.

My eyes opened. A deep fog replaced the bright, singular light. Gradually, the mist cleared and resolved into a scene.

In front of me was the BMW. Only the color was off. A reddish-brown streak flowed down the door. On the ground next to it, bleeding profusely, was me—or rather my body. Beside it, a growing pool of red on black mixed with pure white of the falling snow. But the snow wasn't white, but greenish-gray.

How am I seeing my body?

The scene was cloudy. I tried to blink to clear my vision, but my eyes failed to respond. I tried to rub my eyes, but my hands refused to move.

No! This can't be happening!

As the shock faded slightly, I tried regaining rational thought.

Strange. I see my body over there. This must be an out-of-body experience like those I have heard so much about occurring in near-death situations. I never fully believed it until now.

Except I still sense my body. Only, I can't move. I am standing, yet I'm lying there, bleeding.

The scope of my vision gradually expanded and I became aware of more than my bleeding body. A left arm and hand stretched out in front of me on its own. I felt it move. The hand wore a glove, its fabric providing warmth..

It's fingers, my fingers, wrapped around the handle of a gun.

Not my glove. Not my hand. Not my gun.

Yet, I feel them, not just see them. What the hell? My mind is playing tricks on me.

Another hand came into view. This time the right. I not only saw, I felt the hand move. Together, the hands quickly removed the silencer, which went into the pants I now wore. The right hand put the gun back in the shoulder holster under the coat pressing on my shoulders.

I felt my head bend as I, we, looked down at the pavement, searching and soon finding three shell casings. The hands scooped them up and stuffed them in the jacket pocket.

What the hell is happening to me?

We began moving, running. I had no control over our actions.

Our feet rapidly beat on the street, but they didn't generate noise, making brief footprints before vanishing. The snow had not yet started accumulating on the pavement.

Why am I looking at footprints?

My senses worked—the movement of my legs, the slapping sounds of the shoes against the slush, my heart pounding against my chest, whipping wet snow that crashed into my face.

Are they my legs? My heart? My face? They feel like they are mine, but I cannot move them.

I/we crossed the street and headed toward an alley.