

Temporary Insanity

by William Arthur Holmes

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Benny Reed was riding the elevator in a building he had never been in before. It was climbing surprisingly fast. Too fast, he thought.

"It didn't stop on those floors," he said softly, half to himself, as it sped upward. When no one replied, he glanced around to see if anyone had heard him. Apparently not.

To his right stood a smartly-dressed thirtyish blonde woman in a blue blazer, matching skirt and white silk blouse. Seeing the crazed look in Benny's eyes, she quickly turned away and clutched her purse with both hands.

To his left stood a young couple. The woman's long black hair hung down over most of her face. She seemed intent on avoiding eye contact. Her heavily-muscled male friend met Benny's gaze with a silent glare.

Benny returned his attention to the elevator control panel. He seemed to be the only one concerned or even aware that the elevator was not stopping on their floors. *What is with these people?* he thought. *He* hadn't pushed all those buttons. Didn't *they*? He hadn't noticed.

The elevator continued upward with increasing speed. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach. *It's going too fast!* They were just a few floors away from Benny's, and the knot in his stomach was cinching tighter. Feeling as if he'd been stabbed, he fell to the floor, doubled over in agony.

Then the phone rang.

What the ... ? Benny's mind gasped. Embedded in the wall near Benny's head was the elevator's emergency telephone. The ringing was so close and loud, he thought his eardrums would burst. The other passengers looked at Benny expectantly. "Aren't you going to answer it?" the blonde woman whined. "You're closest."

Through blurred vision, Benny saw his fellow passengers standing over him, waiting. The younger, dark-haired woman was shaking her head disapprovingly. With a clear view of her face now, Benny was shocked to realize it was his wife; or, rather, his *ex*-wife as of a couple weeks ago. Her new boyfriend was now stretching his hamstrings against one of the elevator walls. *Athletic type*, Benny thought. She always did like that sort.

Benny turned and stared at the ringing phone and wondered what could possibly happen next.

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He woke up.

The phone was still ringing when Benny shot up in bed in a cold sweat. Whipping his head around to get his bearings, he was relieved to find himself back in his apartment, his *ex*- nowhere around. The sun leaked in through a crack in the curtains. Birds chirped happily outside his window. Just another normal day in L.A.

Rubbing his still-aching stomach, Benny slowly made his way toward the phone. He cursed himself for drinking so much last night. Eating half a large pizza just before passing out didn't help. It gave him nightmares every time.

"Mmm, hullo?" he struggled to get the words out of his mouth.

"Wake up!" a woman screamed in his ear. "We have a job for you downtown!" It took Benny a moment to realize with disgust that it was Margaret calling from the temporary employment agency, *Your Temps*. There was no way he could work today. He just wanted to sleep. Well, throw up, then sleep. The past two weeks of his life had consisted almost entirely of drunken celebrations of his divorce. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a good night's sleep.

"Be there by 8:30!" said Margaret, then proceeded to give directions — rapid-fire — to his latest temporary assignment. Benny glanced at the alarm

clock next to his bed. It was a couple minutes before 8. In L.A. morning traffic, there was no way he could be there by 8:30.

Feeling like hell and thoroughly hung-over, Benny arrived half an hour late at the downtown law firm of Thompson, Thompson & Duchinski. They were on the 23rd floor of the building in which that old TV show, *L.A. Law*, supposedly took place. He hurried off the elevator, glad to be out of it, and stepped into the lobby.

Staggering up to the reception desk, he announced his arrival in a croaking half-whisper: "Benny Reed, Word Processor."

The receptionist made a point of ignoring him as she shuffled through a stack of papers. Benny cleared his throat and repeated himself, sure to enunciate this time. The young woman shuffled a few more papers for good measure then looked up to see who she was ignoring. There stood Benny leaning on her desk for support, his eyes half closed. He looked as bad as he felt.

A sneer formed quickly on the receptionist's face. "Don't lean on the desk," she snapped. Benny obligingly stepped away from the desk.

The receptionist did a double-take. "Don't I know you?" she asked.

Benny raised an eyebrow and tried to get a better focus on her face. She *did* look familiar. The nameplate on her desk said "Venelia Dumas." An unusual name, but not familiar.

"I ..." Benny shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Have a seat, Mr. ..."

"Benny Reed ..." he began.

"Yeah, yeah. Word Processor," she finished the sentence for him. Frowning, she said, "I'll call Ms. Puppitt."

Benny bent an eyebrow at this new name, but said nothing as he made himself comfortable on a plush leather chair in the reception area. Venelia kept a watchful eye on him while speaking in hushed tones to Ms. Puppitt over the

phone.

Benny found himself quite impressed with the chair he was sitting in. Incredibly comfortable. And it made a nice squeaky, leathery sound as he moved around in it. He smiled and closed his eyes. The next thing he knew, the receptionist was yelling at him.

"I *said*, Ms. Puppitt will be with you shortly!" she shouted.

Benny jumped out of his chair and looked around wildly. "Thank you," he mumbled, wondering how long he had been asleep.

A few minutes later, Ms. Puppitt charged into the reception area and greeted Benny with a firm hand shake and winning smile. *Something she learned in assertiveness training*, he thought, cynically.

"Pat Puppitt, Human Resources," she introduced herself, pumping Benny's hand vigorously. Benny appraised her casually while she pumped. She looked to be about 40, thirteen years his senior; attractive in a stiff, professional sort of way.

"We're happy to have you," she said cheerfully. Glancing at her watch, she said, "You're a little late"

"I got here as soon as I could," he struggled for a plausible excuse. "Traffic was bad ... 'cuz of an accident on the freeway." There were no accidents on any part of the freeway he'd traveled.

Accepting this temp assignment was probably a mistake, he said to himself.

"Well, never mind," she said. "You're here now, and that's all that matters" She then paused, cocked her head to one side and asked, "Have we met?"

The knot in Benny's stomach started coming back. It occurred to him perhaps Ms. Puppitt and Venelia Dumas were at one of his recent parties. He could only hope he hadn't said or done anything too terribly disgusting with either of them. Or, if he had, he hoped they enjoyed it.

His response to Ms. Puppitt was a weak smile and shrug of the shoulders.

Words eluded him.

Ms. Puppitt continued staring a moment before continuing. "Well, anyway, call me Pat. Everyone's on a first name basis here." She pulled an adhesive paper label out of her suit pocket and wrote Benny's name on it. Peeling it away from its backing, she attached it to the left lapel of Benny's jacket. "This way, everyone knows your name!" she said enthusiastically.

"If they don't already," Benny mumbled under his breath.

"What's that?"

"Nothing."

Ms. Puppitt then quickly and efficiently led the march to his cubicle. There she introduced Benny to his desk, his chair, and his PC. Benny stared at the chair. It looked so comfortable. Probably not as good as the leather chair in the reception area, but still

With horror, he suddenly realized Ms. Puppitt was speaking to him. "... but he's not here today," she was saying. "When he returns you will report to him. You can use today to get acclimated. Okay?"

Benny nodded, with no idea what he was agreeing to. Ms. Puppitt then pulled him down the hall for a tour of the rest of the office. It was all too fast for Benny, but he trudged along gamely.

Taking the typically short, precise steps of a woman in heels, Ms. Puppitt pointed out landmarks and points of interest as she continued the office tour. Benny lagged behind, wondering where the coffee machine was. When they finally reached the employee lounge, Ms. Puppitt placed a friendly hand on Benny's shoulder — almost *too* friendly, he thought, wondering if she was hitting on him. With a smile, she said, "Pour yourself a cup, Benny. You need it."

Benny's instincts told him to laugh. Something humorous had just been spoken. He hadn't actually heard the whole sentence. All that registered in his mind was her hand on his shoulder, the smell of coffee, and the command to pour himself a cup. He laughed anyway, not sure why.

Ms. Puppitt pulled a company-logoed mug from the cupboard and, with a cheerful smile, handed it to Benny. As Benny poured his coffee, a tall distinguished gray-haired gentleman stuck his head in and mumbled something in Ms. Puppitt's ear. She jumped as if bitten.

With her demeanor completely changed, agitated now, she barked at Benny, "Wait right here. I'll be back in a minute." With one last glance over her shoulder as she marched off, she added, "Don't go anywhere."

Benny nodded lazily and did as he was told, taking a seat in the lounge. He sipped on his coffee while awaiting further instructions. This was back in the days before cell phones, or at least before everyone, including the homeless, had one. There was not much for Benny to do but inspect the room in which he sat.

An attractive brunette in a tight white dress entered the room. This got Benny's immediate attention. He almost spilled his coffee. "Hi!" Benny said happily, suddenly alert.

The woman ignored him and lit a cigarette. This was also back in the days before smoke-free buildings. Taking a long drag off it, she moved toward the window and stared down at the city below.

Benny did not like how she was ignoring him. He decided to lecture her on the hazards of smoking. To her backside, he said, "You shouldn't smoke those things, you know."

"I know," she said, not bothering to turn away from the window.

"Cigarettes killed my wife," Benny said very seriously.

"I'm sorry," she gave an appropriate, insincere response, still staring out the window a moment before turning around and exhaling smoke through her nostrils.

"She was walking to the store on the corner for a pack of cigarettes," Benny explained, "when a speeding truck went out of control and ran her over, right there on the sidewalk." He pointed to the floor for emphasis. "If it wasn't for that pack of cigarettes, my wife would be alive today."

In reality, his ex-wife was still very much alive. It was just a story he liked to tell. The thought of her being run over by a speeding truck always cheered him up.

As he and the smoking brunette in the tight white dress stared at each other, he struggled to keep a straight face. A thin smile forced its way through his struggling lips. The brunette shook her head in disgust, mashed her cigarette in an ashtray and left the room.

Benny considered following her, but remembered Ms. Puppitt's explicit orders to stay in the lounge and wait for her. Half an hour later, however, he decided to go and find his cubicle on his own. He only hoped he could remember where it was.

His search eventually brought him to the reception area. Venelia, the receptionist, stood up and shouted at him from only two feet away: "Hey!"

Benny cringed. He was afraid he was now in trouble for leaving the employee lounge.

"I just remembered where I've seen you before," Venelia said loudly.

Benny tensed. "Look, it was just a party," he rambled blindly. "Things happen. Don't hold it against me."

"What are you talking about?" she shook her head and frowned at him before continuing. "Do you ever hang out on Hollywood Boulevard?"

"Not as a rule," he answered warily. He was not so sure he wanted to find out where this conversation was going. His first thought upon hearing "Hollywood Boulevard" was that maybe Venelia was a transvestite. She *was* tall and sort of masculine-looking for a woman. Besides, who else would hang out on Hollywood Boulevard?

"I sold you a book!" Venelia proclaimed cheerfully.

"Huh?" Benny stared at her blankly.

"Dynametrics: The Metric Science of Human Dynamics," she replied. "Remember?"

Benny did remember. Dynametrics. Its followers called themselves

"Dynamos." Benny would have preferred her as a transvestite. He had only bought that book so she would go away.

It was a couple of months ago when Benny and his wife were in one of their "reconciliation" phases. They were "doing the town," strolling hand-in-hand down Hollywood Boulevard, when Benny noticed something coming at them from out of the darkness. Concerned for his wife's safety, Benny valiantly pushed her out of harm's way — into the gutter, unfortunately — and instinctively reached behind to protect his wallet. When Venelia Dumas came fully into view Benny realized her intent was not to rob him, but to sell him one of those stupid "Dynamo" books.

Since he had his hand on his wallet anyway, he bought the book, then rudely told her to go away. Checking out his new purchase, he absently turned the book over in his hands. The childish cover art evoked his disdain. It was a poorly-drawn depiction of a man surrounded by star bursts and a halo — a "human dynamo," he supposed.

"Hey babe," he turned to his wife, "look at this stupid ..." He stopped mid-sentence. He hadn't realized he had knocked her into the gutter. And now, after getting up and wiping herself off, she wore the most hateful look Benny had ever seen — and that was saying something because she was capable of some of the ugliest expressions.

Through clenched teeth, she seethed with a false sweetness in her voice, "It's a good thing you bought that book, Benny."

"Why's that?" he asked cautiously.

"Because now you'll have something to *do* the rest of the night. You're history, Benny!" She marched the two or three blocks back to her car while Benny bounced up and down alongside her, apologizing profusely.

When they reached the car, she flung the door open and jumped in. Benny could have kept her from closing the door behind her, but didn't. He knew she would take off with or without him hanging onto the door.

He backed away and gave her room to back the car out. Gunning the engine, the tires squealed as she swerved toward Benny. She would have run him over if he had not dived out of the way at the last second.

"See how *you* like it!" she screamed as he tumbled on the dirty pavement.

On his knees in the wake of exhaust and bits of gravel, he watched her disappear into the night. This time it was forever, he knew. He felt bad about pushing her into the gutter. But, he was just protecting her from what he thought was a mugger! It was almost heroic, but she never gave him the chance to explain that.

"So, how do you like it?" Venelia was asking him now, obviously hoping for an endorsement.

"What!?" Benny jumped, thinking Venelia had just repeated his ex-wife's final words.

"How do you like the book?" she repeated the question.

"Oh, the book. It has ... an interesting cover," he replied weakly, then hurried off in the general direction of his desk.

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It was several hours later, while on his way for his fourth or fifth cup of coffee, that Benny took a detour into the office supply room. He always liked to check out office supply rooms; keep up on the latest office supplies technology; steal a few pens.

He was in the pen and pencil section inspecting the inventory when he noticed the smoking girl from the employee lounge — the brunette in the tight white dress — over by the pencil sharpener. She was watching him. She looked good — even better, it seemed, than she had first thing in the morning. Of course, by now he was wide awake and better able to focus on things. He thought he would make another attempt at conversation.

He played it cool. He looked at this box of staples and that box of paper clips, just biding his time for the right moment to make his move. He thought for a moment as to what he should say. After long and deep consultation with himself, he came up with, "So, what's your name?"

"Cassie," she said, eyeing him suspiciously.

Benny ventured a wary step forward. "I'm Benny ..." he began, only to be interrupted by one of the firm's lawyers entering the room.

"Hey, Cassie," said the lawyer.

"Brad!" she smiled.

Lawyers always reminded Benny of car salesmen. The level of formal education was about the only difference. The worst thing about lawyers, as far as Benny was concerned, was that they were almost always movie-star good-looking; the young ones, anyway, like Brad here. How was Benny ever going to attract any women at these temp assignments if there were all these rich young good-looking attorneys running around? The only consolation was that due to the ravages of their profession those who made a lifetime career of it usually ended up looking like gargoyles.

Completely ignoring Benny, Brad eyeballed Cassie and flashed a wolfish grin. Cassie smiled back and, while Benny looked on jealously, she began some sort of mating ritual.

First, she stuck the end of a pencil in her mouth and bit lightly on the eraser, spinning it ever so gently with her fingertips. Next, she thrust her hips to the right and sort of twiddled her left foot from left to right. Any minute now she would start doing the "hokey-pokey," Benny mused. She never did. Just when Benny thought she had finished her dance, she added one last maneuver. She began a gentle caressing and massaging of the pencil sharpener, slowly moving her hand back and forth across the top, around the sides and down the stem. It was the most erotic use of a pencil sharpener Benny had ever witnessed.

"Tonight? Eight o'clock?" the lawyer asked simply, confidently.

"Eight o'clock," Cassie confirmed, practically yanking the pencil sharpener off its base as she spoke. The lawyer winked and glided out of the room, stopping only to grab a couple of pens and smirk at Benny.

With the lawyer gone and her hand still on the pencil sharpener, Cassie slowly returned her attention to Benny. She looked flushed. Benny realized that now was probably not a good time to ask her out. He ducked out of the room without another word.

In his attempt to beat a hasty retreat, he ran into Venelia Dumas, literally, in the doorway. "Hey, watch where you're going!" Venelia shrieked.

"Sorry, I wasn't watching where I was going," said Benny.

"I just said that."

"Yeah, okay," Benny replied vaguely and attempted to get past her and out the door. Venelia grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him roughly to one side. Benny thought she was going to beat the crap out of him. She was an inch taller and apparently much stronger than Benny.

Benny could hardly believe this was happening. Even his ex-wife never did this to him. Of course, she was small and slight of build, unlike Venelia. Benny glanced over at Cassie for help, but none was forthcoming. She merely watched with amusement as Venelia bandied him about.

Venelia then abruptly let go of Benny's shirt and apologized for her outburst. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've been under some stress lately."

Benny was dumbstruck for a moment, then mumbled, "Oh, it was nothing." Not wanting to excite her further, he refrained from straightening out his shirt or making any other sudden moves.

"Well, I just wanted to apologize," Venelia insisted.

"It's okay. Really. Just don't let it happen again," Benny made a nervous stab at humor.

Bad move. Venelia's back stiffened, her arm shot out with lightning speed, and again she gripped Benny's arm with all her strength. A snarl came across her face. Wincing with pain, Benny said quickly, "Just kidding! Kidding!"

To prove it, he laughed. It was forced and his voice squeaked slightly. But it was a laugh and Venelia seemed to fall for it. She loosened her grip and, in a stilted, halting sort of way, she laughed too. They were laughing together now. Even Cassie giggled slightly. They were laughing as one. They were all one with the universe! At least, that's what Venelia thought. Benny just wanted to get the hell out of there.

"Let's go to an *event* tonight!" Venelia suggested excitedly, now that they were all so chummy. Cassie quickly turned away and pretended to be busy taking inventory of her many office supplies.

"An event?" Benny asked. "Uh, what kind of event?" He could guess she was inviting him to one of her "Dynamo" functions.

"Oh, a bunch of friends just get together and talk and stuff." She tried to make it sound like a party. A boring party.

Benny edged his way toward the door. "I can't make it tonight," he lied. "Cassie and I have, uh, plans. Maybe some other time, huh?" And, again, he ran to the relative safety of his desk.

iv

Once home from work, Benny heated up a can of beef stew for dinner and scarfed it down. Flipping the TV. on, he came upon a show called *The Love Connection*. It was a popular, if insipid, little *Dating Game*-type show Benny hardly every watched. Instinctively, he flipped past it, only to return to it half a second later after catching a glimpse of a woman who looked just like his ex-wife.

Sitting there with his mouth agape, Benny realized that it *was* his ex-wife. This woman just continued to haunt him! And, while Benny watched in disbelief, she happily explained to the show's smarmy host how "a date" had once pushed her into the gutter and left her there.

"I didn't just leave you there!" Benny stood up and shouted at the

television.

"The worst date of my life," she added with a sigh of exasperation. The studio audience sighed with her.

"It wasn't a 'date,' either," he pouted. "Married people don't go on 'dates.'"

"That's horrible," the game show host empathized. "But, I'm sure the man you pick tonight can do better than that!" Benny's ex- and her audience heartily agreed.

Benny switched the television off. He didn't want to see who her next date would be. He felt sick. As if things weren't bad enough, now his ex-wife was embarrassing him on national television.

He couldn't stand it. He had to see who she would pick. He flipped the TV. back on and instantly regretted it. She had picked a disgustingly handsome Greek god-type — *probably a lawyer* — as if to say, "See, Benny? I only date gorgeous men now. I'm so much better off now that we're divorced." It disgusted him. He knew that *he* was better off for the divorce, but didn't want *her* feeling good about it. She was supposed to mourn his loss for the rest of her dating life, as far as he was concerned.

He felt a powerful need to talk to someone. Anyone. Digging out his little book of phone numbers, he made a few calls. Several answering machines later, he came to the unhappy conclusion that he didn't have a friend in the world. None answering their phone, anyway.

Finally, in disgust, he grabbed his favorite black leather jacket and hustled out the front door. He jumped into his car and proceeded to wander aimlessly along the never-ending Los Angeles freeway system. It was something to do.

An indeterminate amount of time later, he found himself on Hollywood Boulevard in front of the Dynamo Center, Venelia Dumas's "church," or whatever it was. As luck would have it, there was an open parking spot right in front. Venelia would later explain that this was no coincidence. Their lives were "cosmically intertwined."

As Benny got out of his car, some freak accosted him. It wasn't just any freak, though. It was a "Dynamo" trying to get him inside the Center. Benny brushed him aside and stood with his hands on his hips in front of the building entrance, asking himself if he really wanted to go inside.

From inside, Venelia spotted him standing there and ran out to greet him. She gushed enthusiastically and talked Benny into going inside. She asked him to sign the guest list, but, not wanting to be on their mailing list, Benny begged off.

Taking a look around the place, Benny realized he was standing in the foyer of a formerly grand hotel, now gone to pot along with the rest of Hollywood. On its walls were nothing but photos of the Head Dynamo, Dynametrics founder Elroy Smith. In various poses, Smith played the role of the wise, benevolent father figure. Benny wasn't given much time to study his surroundings, however, as Venelia insisted on escorting Benny to the "event room." "It's about to start!" she giggled.

"What's about to start?" he asked.

She never answered as she led him into a large room — probably what used to be the dining room of the old hotel, now filled with row upon row of tan metal fold-up chairs, most of which were empty. She seated him in the front row with the other three people in the room, then made an excuse and left him there alone.

Benny immediately abandoned his assigned spot and found a seat in the very back of the room. He kicked his feet up onto the chair in front of him and waited for the show to begin. He had no idea what was going to happen. Judging by the podium up front and the portable movie screen behind that, however, he guessed there would be a speech or a slide show or both. He could hardly wait. *Probably somebody's vacation slides*, he thought.

Over the next few minutes, several more people were escorted in. And that's when Venelia reappeared wearing her pious and blissful look. She made a great usher, Benny mused. He smiled and waved. She frowned. Benny was

not sure if the frown was because he had abandoned the spot she had chosen for him or because she was so engrossed in her ushering. After some thought, she did eventually crack a thin smile.

A dark-haired man dressed in some sort of military uniform then entered the room from a side entrance and approached the podium. The hitherto chattering crowd immediately quieted down. Venelia and the other ushers positioned themselves in strategic locations around the room and remained standing throughout the "event."

Footlights came on and illuminated the portable movie screen. The uniformed man stepped in front of it and greeted the crowd with a cheerful hello. To Benny's surprise, the entire audience gave a hearty "hello" back.

Glowing ethereally now due to the reflected footlight effect, the speaker donned a pair of sunglasses and went into an impassioned speech on "learning to be one with the universe and making lots of money in the process." Or something like that.

Whatever the speaker said after the first couple of minutes, Benny could not remember. He had stopped listening. He was more interested in the various members of the audience; specifically, a gorgeous redhead in the front row. She seemed to be a favorite of the speaker, too, for he spent most of his time speaking directly to her and smiling coolly behind his dark glasses.

After the speaker finished his presentation, members of the audience stood up one by one to "confess their sins and celebrate their wins." That's when Benny decided he had had enough and stood up and turned to leave.

"Yes, sir! And what do you have to tell us?" said the man at the podium.

Benny had a bad feeling as he turned toward the front of the room. Just as he feared, the speaker was addressing him.

"Oh, I ... uh ... I don't ... I was just leaving," Benny babbled.

But, like most Dynamos, the man at the podium was irritatingly persistent. "Surely you have a win or two you can share with us?"

"No, really I don't," Benny said. "I've actually led a very dull ... winless

life." And he bolted into the aisle and walked briskly toward the rear exit. Strangely, the crowd cheered.

From the back of the room, almost free of this bizarre scene, Benny turned to see what they were cheering about. He was horrified to see everyone staring at him, clapping and cheering wildly.

"This is too weird," he said to no one in particular as he melted through the door. He decided that now was a good time to just forget about Venelia and go home before that mob in the "event room" grabbed him and sacrificed him to the gods, or something. He made a mental note to tell Venelia next time he saw her exactly what he thought of her "religion" and fellow "religiots."

Sometime in the middle of the night, Benny woke up on the floor of a strange apartment. He had no idea how he got there.

He heard the sound of a shower going. *Who takes a shower in the middle of the night?* he wondered. He wanted to get up, but couldn't. So, he lay back on the floor. A few minutes later, he tried again and was able to prop himself up on his elbows. It was then that he noticed he was completely naked.

A few minutes later he was on his feet and wandering into the bathroom. He went in and relieved himself at the toilet. The bathroom was all fogged up, but he could see the shape of someone through the smoked glass shower doors. As he stood naked in front of the toilet wondering whose bathroom he was in and who was in the shower, the shower door opened and Venelia Dumas stuck her head out.

"Well, hello there," she said, casually appraising Benny's naked body. "Care to join me?"

With his head throbbing and his mind reeling at the thought of being naked in Venelia Dumas's apartment, Benny finished his business at the toilet and stepped into the shower. And that must have been when he slipped on the wet floor, hit his head and knocked himself out.

When he came to a few hours later, Venelia was gone. She had left a note:

"Borrowed your car. Love, Venelia."

'Love, Venelia'!? he thought. Oh god.

Oh well. She was gone. That was the important thing. He could always get another car.

Rummaging through her kitchen, he found what he needed for a cup of instant coffee. As he boiled the water, hazy, slightly frightening images from last night came to him. How could he have slept with Venelia? Did he have sex with her? Yes, he now remembered, he did.

He vaguely recalled that as he left the Dynamo Center, Venelia had followed him to his car and invited him out for a drink; as a way of apologizing for abandoning him at the "event," she explained. He was surprised she drank, being a religious fanatic, and all. But she did, and they did at some hell hole across the street from the Dynamo building.

Needing a drink anyway, plus the fact that Venelia was buying, Benny decided this would be a good time to get stinking drunk. At some point during this drinking binge Venelia looked Benny straight in the eye and said, "Have you ever had sex with a Dynamo?"

There was something menacing in her tone. A certain crazed look in her eyes. She frightened him. But then, most women did. He knew he'd better just do as she said.

V

Benny's second day at Thompson, Thompson & Duchinski, once he managed to catch a cab to work, was a fairly memorable day. Upon arrival at the office, he was met by Ms. Puppitt. That wasn't the memorable part.

"Venelia hasn't shown up for work yet," Ms. Puppitt explained.

Hasn't shown up for work yet? Benny thought. She borrowed my car! Where the hell is she?

"Could you sit at reception until she gets here?"

When Benny reluctantly agreed, she started to walk away. She then turned and gestured toward Benny's suit. "Isn't that the same thing you wore yesterday?"

Looking down at his crumbled clothing, he said with a shrug, "Yeah, I guess it is."

"Temps!" Ms. Puppitt grumbled under her breath and shook her head as she walked away.

Ten minutes later, while Benny was at the reception desk, minding his own business and letting the phone ring off the hook, two paramedics stepped out of the elevator and approached him. He tried to ignore them, just as Venelia had done to him yesterday, but they wouldn't go away.

Without looking up, Benny asked, "Can I help you?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," said one of the men. The other man stepped to one side and stood with his hands folded across his chest. Benny now saw that they were paramedics and he eyed the one at his side curiously.

"Is there some sort of emergency?" Benny asked the man in front of the desk.

"Oh, no no no. Nothing like that. I was just wondering if you could tell me how many lawyers it takes to screw in a light bulb."

"What?" Benny shook his head.

He never got a reply. The second man pulled out a handkerchief and sneezed. Only, instead of putting the handkerchief to his own nose, he reached out and placed it over Benny's. Benny inhaled instinctively, and that was all they needed.

Benny was suddenly very light-headed and dizzy. The men each grabbed one of Benny's arms, pulled him out of his chair and dragged him into the elevator. In the elevator stood a young woman, also wearing a bogus paramedic's uniform, holding the door open with one hand and clutching a wheeled stretcher with the other. Once she let the elevator door close, Benny

felt a stabbing sensation in his butt. Aside from a fleeting mental note to stay off elevators from now on, that was the last thing he remembered. He was unconscious by the time they strapped him onto the stretcher. On their way down, one man asked the other, "Are you sure we got the right person?"

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Well, I figgered the receptionist would be a girl, is all."

The woman chimed in, "There's no rule that says a receptionist has to be a woman."

Both men ignored her.

"Hey, they said grab the receptionist," the second man explained. "That's what we did. So what's the problem?"

"None, I guess."

When the elevator reached street-level, they wheeled Benny's stretcher quickly across the building's courtyard and into a waiting ambulance. Though there were numerous passersby looking on in curiosity, no one seemed to care that Benny was being kidnapped.

Venelia didn't care. She was just now arriving for work, across the street and waiting for the WALK light to flash before crossing. She ignored the ambulance completely. Dynamos were taught to ignore unpleasant things. Thinking unpleasant thoughts, they were told, ruined one's outlook on life. Had she looked, she might have recognized Benny. But she didn't look, so it didn't matter.

Venelia walked into the office and took her seat at the reception desk as if nothing had happened. As far as she knew, nothing had. When Ms. Puppitt showed up several minutes later, she wanted to know where Benny was.

"In his cubicle, I guess," said Venelia.

"You're a half hour late," Ms. Puppitt said in agitation. Venelia had no excuse. None that she felt comfortable in giving, anyway. She merely made a meek, contrite face in lieu of explanation.

"You have a bad habit of tardiness," Ms. Puppitt scolded. "And I'm not

about to let it go. Putting temps like Benny, *someone with no receptionist experience*, at the reception desk in your place just ain't gonna cut it, Venelia."

Venelia made a face at the mention of Benny sitting in for her, but said nothing of it. She apologized and promised it would never happen again. Ms. Puppitt said it had better not, or Venelia was "out the door."

vi

It wasn't until Benny woke up in a strange room on a strange couch that it was explained to him that he had been kidnapped "for his own good." The man doing the explaining was a short, balding man with a goatee. Ignoring the man momentarily, Benny surveyed his surroundings. They seemed to be in some sort of office — a very nice office, with wood-paneled walls, a large cherry wood desk, and a Persian rug covering most of the hardwood floor.

On the wall behind the desk was a poster with the words "JumpStarters" in large bold print at the top. Underneath the heading was a black and white picture of a hypnotist holding a stopwatch presumably swaying in front of an open-mouthed young subject. Superimposed over the photo was a red circle with a diagonal line through it. The international symbol for "Not allowed!" Underneath that was the JumpStarters motto: "We're The Good Guys!"

Benny had no idea what that meant. He guessed the man addressing him was some sort of doctor, though he could not be certain. *A psychiatrist, maybe.*

"Cigarette?" the doctor asked, pulling two Dunhills from a gold-plated cigarette case.

"No thanks," said Benny, rubbing his temples and wondering why he was feeling so drowsy. "I don't smoke."

"You're kidding!" the man was aghast. Benny shrugged his shoulders and once again glanced around the room, looking for possible escape routes. "Do you mind if *I* smoke?" the doctor asked.

"Well, actually . . ." Benny began, then suddenly didn't care as he

slumped heavily into the deeply cushioned couch, not bothering to finish the thought.

The doctor began the interview. "I would like to start with a little bit of background information. First of all, what is your name?"

"Benny Reed, Word Processor," he replied automatically.

"*Benny*? What is that, a nickname or something?"

"No, it's my name."

The doctor furrowed his brow, picked up a manila folder and studied the documents within. "So, you prefer the name 'Benny' then?" the doctor asked.

"Why not?" said Benny, slightly upset. "Would you prefer another name?"

"No, no, of course not," the doctor spoke in soothing, measured tones and scribbled a note to himself in the manila folder. Setting the folder down, only to replace it with a clipboard, he continued the interview.

"Would you describe yourself as a happy person?" the doctor asked.

Benny stared blankly at him. "Huh?"

"Happy," he repeated, taking a drag off his cigarette and staring at its ember as he twirled it between his fingers. "Are you a happy person?"

"What the hell is this?" Benny shouted, or thought he shouted. Whatever was making him so drowsy also took all the force from his voice. He attempted to rise from the couch, but could not gather enough strength and collapsed back into it.

"Now, now, uh ... Benny. Just relax. Just a few more questions, then you can be on your way. Okay? Okay."

Crossing his legs and taking up the clipboard and pen like a secretary about to take dictation, the doctor resumed the interrogation. "Where were you at ten o'clock on the night of February 30th?"

"Huh?" Benny winced, wondering if this was another one of his stupid dreams.

It wasn't.

"Just kidding," the doctor laughed. "I always like to ask that. It usually

helps to break the ice."

Benny shook his head in exasperation. "Maybe I *will* have that cigarette."

The doctor handed Benny a cigarette, lit it for him, and continued the interview. "I will be asking these questions quickly, you see," he explained. "All you need to do is nod your head 'yes' or 'no.' Got it?"

When Benny only stared at him with the cigarette hanging limp out the corner of his mouth, the doctor continued. "Number one: When you see a telephone cord all twisted up into a knot, do you feel the need to untangle it?"

"Mo," Benny replied. Not having the energy to take the cigarette out of his mouth as he spoke, it slurred his speech.

"If you notice dirt under your fingernails, do you clean them?"

"Yooshly," he mumbled.

"If you saw someone crossing the street about to be hit by a car, would you: (a) Shout a warning; (b) Run for help; (c) Call the Police; or, (d) Just watch?"

"Just watch," Benny sneered. The drugs were beginning to wear off and he was getting surly.

"What do you want more than anything else in the world?"

"The perfect wave," Benny replied with a wicked grin. He liked that one. The perfect wave. He would have to remember that for his next interrogation.

He dropped his cigarette onto the Persian rug and stamped it out with his foot. The doctor stared at the cigarette, horrified. Before he could protest, however, a bushy-haired man in a suit and tie barged into the room.

"Who the hell is this?" he pointed at Benny.

"Venelia Dumas, I'm told," the doctor explained, "though he prefers to be called Benny, for some reason."

"That's probably his real name!" the bushy-haired man screamed.

"Venelia Dumas is a woman! Whoever he is, get him out of here." He paused at the doorway, turned back to the doctor and whispered in his ear, "And make him forget he was ever here."

"Always," said the doctor.

vii

When Benny came to, he found himself underneath some bushes in the hills above Hollywood. If his memory of the past couple of days had not been wiped clean, it would have occurred to Benny that he "came to" an awful lot lately. But, his mind was a blank slate, as usual, so it was a moot point.

As he got up and dusted himself off, he noticed several cigarette burn holes down the length of his pants. *What the ...* He wondered what time it was. Looking at his watch, he noticed it wasn't there, but he was too disoriented to care much. It was a cheap watch. Judging by the position of the sun, he guessed it was mid-afternoon. What day it might be, he had no idea.

He then noticed that his wallet was also missing. This was more distressing than the missing watch. Frantically checking his pockets, front and back, he discovered a few loose paper clips, the cap to a ball point pen, and fifty-three cents in change. No wallet.

He clawed his way through the bushes and down the hill. With his hair disheveled, his tie loose around his neck, and his pants full of tiny burn holes, he straggled down the street to the nearest bus stop. There, he talked an old lady on the bench into "loaning" him the other fifty cents he needed for bus fare. The woman agreed, on the condition that he not board the same bus as she.

viii

"So, you say you were drugged and kidnapped, but you don't know by whom," the woman from Benny's temp agency was asking over the phone. "You don't know where they took you. And you were released, unharmed, somewhere in the hills above Hollywood. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yeah," said Benny. "That's basically it."

"And you expect me to believe that?!" the woman screamed.

"It's the truth," Benny croaked. He was not feeling so good. What he wanted more than anything was to just go to sleep.

The agency woman sighed deeply on the other end of the line and said, "Benny, I've dealt with all kinds of flakes in this business, but you ... you take the cake. Don't bother calling us for any more temp assignments." Before Benny could respond, she hung up in his ear.

So, Benny had blown it with yet another temp agency. It was not the first time, and probably would not be the last. Flopping himself down on the bed for some much needed rest, he resolved to find a new temp agency first thing in the morning.

ix

"First thing in the morning" turned into several days before Benny finally forced himself to sign up with a few more temp agencies. One of those agencies, "Temps Galore," was particularly disheartening. It was not so much anything they said or did. It was their brochure that got Benny depressed.

The brochure was titled "The Temporary's Guide to Permanent Success" and consisted mostly of glossy, cheerful photos depicting "successful" temporaries standing proudly in front of copy machines; temporaries typing happily away in front of computer screens; temps cheerfully answering phones; and, of course, temps serving coffee to smiling men and women in dark suits.

Disgusted, Benny had slapped the pamphlet down. If serving coffee was this agency's idea of success, he told himself, maybe he should find another agency. While he was at it, maybe he should find another line of work altogether. Get a "real" job — a "man's job" like digging ditches, driving a forklift, or something.

It was a couple of nights after this, around 3 a.m., that Venelia showed up at his door. She was wearing a fisherman's hat, complete with fish hooks, and a dark blue trench coat for some reason. Half asleep and still in his underwear when he opened the door, Benny did not care enough to take note of her strange attire.

"They're after me, Benny!" Venelia hissed as she pushed her way inside. "But there's no time to talk." She pushed him onto the bed.

He happily fell back asleep. She didn't let him sleep long, though. She took off all her clothes and jumped into bed with him. Through quick, skillful work with her hands, she soon got Benny sexually aroused in spite of the fact that he was already fast asleep.

Before Benny knew what was happening, they were having sex. He thought it was rather strange to actually be having sex while still asleep. He'd had imaginary sex in dreams, of course. Practically every night, actually. But to actually be having sex while still asleep; well, this was new.

He did not remain sleeping for long, of course. He soon became an active, enthusiastic participant in the enterprise. For about ten minutes, anyway. When he was done, he promptly fell back to sleep. Half an hour later, he was awakened with Venelia on top of him again wanting more sex. He groaned and mumbled curses, and performed as best he could. This sort of thing continued throughout the night, pretty much every hour on the hour.

Around 8 o'clock that morning, to Benny's complete shock and disgust, Temps Galore called saying they had a temp assignment for him. It was at another downtown law firm, they explained. "And," they stressed, "this is strictly a day-to-day thing." This last bit was nothing new, of course. With Benny, every job was a day-to-day thing.

After hanging up the phone, Benny realized Venelia was nowhere to be found, which was just fine with him. If she was around, she just would have wanted more sex.

The receptionist at the next assignment was a bleach-blonde, gum-chewing young woman named Liza.

"Hi, Liza," Benny said, looking at her nameplate.

"It's pronounced 'Lizzza,'" she huffed, as if any idiot should know how to pronounce her name.

"Okay, Lizzza," he said. "I'm with Temps Galore."

"Who?" she glared at him, chewing her gum incessantly.

"Temps Galore," he repeated. He hated the idea of being associated with a temp agency with such a stupid name and he hoped she wouldn't ask him to repeat himself. When the girl only returned a blank stare, Benny took a deep breath and explained further. "It's a temp agency. I'm a temp. They sent me here. I'm supposed to see your personnel lady, Holly something-or-other. Is she in?"

"Oh!" the girl shrieked, finally understanding. "No, she won't be in today. I'm supposed to show you to your desk." And, without bothering to get up, she pointed Benny toward his destination. "It's through there, past the elevators. It'll be the first door on your left."

Benny followed her directions exactly, only to end up in the men's room. Since he was there, he decided to have a look at himself in the mirror. He must look like hell, he thought. Upon entering, the rhythmic sound of a man and woman groaning and sighing emanated from within one of the stalls. Its walls wobbled under the pressure.

Benny tried to ignore it. After last night with Venelia, the last thing he cared about was sex. When he turned on the tap to splash cold water on his face, the groaning stopped.

"Somebody's here," Benny could hear a woman whisper from within the stall.

"So?" a man whispered back

"So," the woman giggled. "Hold still until he leaves."

Out of the men's room and further down the hall, Benny eventually found

the file room. A middle-aged woman was exiting just as Benny was about to enter. Benny said hello. The woman frowned and said nothing.

Irritated by this, as he was with most things after a night without sleep, Benny smiled bitterly at the woman and said: "Two people are having sex in the men's room. If you hurry, you might be able to join them."

The woman choked and gagged, then turned and marched down the hall in a huff. Moments later, a well-dressed man straightening his tie and a young woman adjusting her skirt exited the men's room. They looked around nervously, but didn't notice Benny.

Benny finally entered the file room and went through the motions of introducing himself and being introduced to everyone else. As soon as he could, he settled down at his desk for a nice quiet day of work. For lunch, he slept.

On his way home that evening, Benny flipped on the car radio just in time to catch the end of the news: "The fire that swept through the 23rd and -4th floors of the 444 South Flower building yesterday morning has officially been called an arson fire by arson investigators. According to investigators," the reporter continued, "the fire appears to have been started by, now get this, a flame thrower, of all things. How they can deduce that, we have no idea. But for you firebugs out there, look out, these investigators know what they're doing!" The news reporter stopped preaching long enough to add: "Miraculously, no one was seriously injured in the blaze. Police are now on the lookout for a mysterious woman seen leaving the scene, wearing a fishing hat and dark blue trench coat."

They didn't mention it by name, but Benny knew Thompson, Thompson & Duchinski was on one of the floors destroyed. He had no idea who was on the other floor. Figuring it was probably just another law firm, Benny laughed and didn't give it another thought until he got home. That last bit about a woman wearing a fishing hat and an overcoat bothered him, though he could not quite figure out why.

Turning left onto his street, he found a police barricade around his apartment building. Cops and their vehicles of every sort crawled all over the ground, while helicopters buzzed incessantly overhead.

Asking a bystander what was going on, Benny was told "a crazy woman is threatening to blow up the building."

"Which building?" Benny asked.

"The one the cops have surrounded."

Benny's next-door neighbor happened by and explained that the crazy woman was in Benny's apartment.

"My apartment?" he gasped. "Why *my* apartment?"

"Well, she's your girlfriend, isn't she?"

"What the hell are you ..." he began, then grabbed the closest policeman. Benny explained that it was his apartment about to be blown up and it was his "girlfriend" who was about to do it. The cop escorted Benny immediately to the forefront of the barricade where the hostage-negotiating team was hunkered down.

After informing Benny that she seemed to be well-armed "with all sorts of stuff," the sergeant in charge asked Benny if he would like to try and talk her out of blowing up the building.

"Not particularly," said Benny. The police sergeant frowned at him and punched up Benny's phone number with his mobile phone. When Venelia answered, the sergeant stuck the phone in Benny's face and said, "Talk to her."

Reluctantly, Benny took the phone and said hello.

"Hi, Benny," Venelia answered casually.

"What the hell are you doing?" Benny asked.

"I'm going to blow up the building."

"Yeah, I heard. Why?"

"Why not?"

Benny had no answer for that one. "Okay. But why all of a sudden? I mean, why now? Why the day after we ... uh ..." He cupped his hand around the

mouthpiece and whispered, "Was the sex that bad?"

Everyone within earshot turned and stared. Benny merely shrugged back at them.

"No, the sex was okay," Venelia said.

"Just 'okay'?" Benny said dejectedly. The surrounding cops glanced at one another and grinned. They were glad to hear they weren't the only ones unable to satisfy their women.

"Benny?" said Venelia.

"Yes?"

"I'm gonna blow up the building now."

"Wait! Venelia!" Benny shouted into the phone. But she had hung up on him.

"She's gonna blow up the building now," Benny relayed the message.

Everyone braced themselves for the explosion. When it didn't happen right away, Benny did something stupid. He climbed over the barricade of patrol cars and walked into the apartment building's courtyard. Moving slowly yet deliberately, he eventually got close enough to see Venelia through the window.

He waved.

Venelia waved back, detonator in one hand, Uzi sub-machine gun in the other.

"Hey, Venelia?" Benny said loudly, but trying not to sound too demanding.

Staying inside the apartment, Venelia opened the door. "What now?" she asked.

"Why?" was all Benny could say, holding his arms out in the universal body language that says "why?"

"Did you hear about Thompson, Thompson burning down?" she asked.

"Yeah ..."

"That was me."

"That was you?" he laughed, just as he had when he first heard of it. When Venelia only smiled coolly at him, he became serious and said, "I, uh, hate to keep asking this ... but ... why? What'd they ever do to you?"

"They fired me, Benny," she spat on the ground.

"Yeah, well, they fired me, too," Benny replied. "But you don't see me putting a flame thrower to the place."

"You were just a temp," Venelia spat.

"Hey, temps have feelings, too."

She ignored this last comment. "They replaced me with some 20-year-old blonde bimbo, Benny! God, I hate bimbos!" When Benny only grimaced at her, she explained further. "You should hear her answer the phone!" She laughed then, bordering on hysterics. "It's disgusting! I never in my life sounded so unprofessional over the phone. Never! I was always very professional. You know that."

Benny knew no such thing. In the one day he had spent working with her, he felt she was anything *but* professional. Of course, he never told *her* that.

"So I torched the place. The Dynamos teach you to take care of your problems. They teach you the importance of justice. I'd planned on killing the blonde bimbo, too," she spat again, "but the little bitch hadn't even shown up for work yet! It was ten after eight and she hadn't even shown up for work yet! She's so-o-o unprofessional!"

"Good receptionists are hard to find," Benny agreed nervously.

"You got that right! Wanna see my flame-thrower?" she offered suddenly. "I've got all kinds of neat stuff in here. Plastic explosives, hand grenades, a flame-thrower, this Uzi. All *kinds* of stuff."

An unbearable silence ensued, forcing Benny to fill the void with conversation.

"So ... you're going to blow up my apartment?" he said. He never was good at small talk.

"Yeah," she giggled insanely.

He looked back at the police barricade. Several officers were gesturing for him to move away from the apartment. One was pointing at his watch. Benny ignored them.

"Where'd you get all that stuff?" he asked Venelia.

"From the Dynamo Center," she said. "They keep it there. For protection, you know."

"I guess they *are* in a pretty rough neighborhood, huh?" Benny reasoned weakly. And again they found themselves looking at each other for too long, saying nothing. Finally, nervously, Benny said, "Uh, Venelia?"

"Yeah?"

"If you really are going to blow the place up, could you maybe throw a few of my things out first?"

She stared blankly at him, wondering if he was serious. Realizing that the was, she asked, "Like what?"

"Well, how about my leather jacket? I always liked that jacket."

"I guess so. Sure. Anything else?"

"Well, would it be too much trouble to bring the TV out? It's almost new, and ..."

"*Benny!*," she warned, then disappeared into the apartment. Afraid he had angered her and that she might return with the flame-thrower blazing, Benny edged back toward the building exit.

She soon returned with Benny's leather jacket in one hand, the Uzi still in the other. "Hey! Where you going?" she shouted.

"Nowhere," Benny jumped, holding up his hands as if being held at gun point, which, technically, he was.

"Here's your jacket," she threw it to Benny, again careful not to show herself to police sharpshooters, if there were any.

"Great! Thanks!" he said, forcing enthusiasm into his voice, just like a Dynamo.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"Uh, is there any beer in the fridge?" he asked, meaning it. "I'm getting thirsty out here." She rolled her eyes at him. "Never mind," he apologized. Then he added very seriously, "You don't have to do this, you know."

"I've got no choice."

"You've got your whole life ahead of you!" he hated sounding so trite, but it's all he could think to say.

"Yeah, a life behind bars," she laughed bitterly. "I can't go to jail, Benny. Do you know what they *do* to people in jail?"

"I've heard stories," Benny replied with a shrug. "But how many years would a person do for arson?" he asked. "Five at most? With time off for good behavior, you'll probably only do two, max!"

Venelia started to laugh, but it quickly turned to anger. "Go away, Benny. I've got things to do."

When he didn't move, she raised the Uzi at him.

"Well, see ya later," he said finally.

"I doubt it."

Benny slowly backed away several steps before turning his back on her. He was almost out of the apartment's courtyard when Venelia shouted after him.

"Hey, Benny!"

He turned. "Yeah?"

Poking her head out the door, she said, "Thanks again for last night. Maybe I *will* see you later."

She tossed him what looked like a rock. Benny caught it and looked at it. It wasn't a rock. It was a live hand grenade.

"Aaaaaa!" he said, and tossed it high into the air. When he realized it would be landing on top of him, he made a run for the police barricade. He was out of the building's courtyard and halfway to the barricade when the building blew up. The blast sent him flying the rest of the way to the street.

Scrambling into a sitting position in the middle of the street, he turned to watch the destruction. Several of the apartment units evaporated, with his apartment at the center of the blast.

"One hand grenade did all that?" he asked the police sergeant behind him.

"Don't be stupid," the sergeant replied. "C-4 and your girlfriend did all that."

"She is *not* ... *wasn't* my girlfriend."

X

As Benny bedded down that night in his motel room, he resolved to get a "real" job; a man's job, driving a forklift or something.

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