

Time to Wake Up

Rose Pollard

Albert lifted the black patches from his eyes, rolled over, and looked at the window. Morning again. It seemed to reappear at regular intervals and squeeze itself uninvited through the small gaps in the blinds. Albert expected it. He calculated the time he would have to endure before nightfall, the same way he did every day. He peeled the covers from his body and stiffly swung his legs off the side of the bed. Every morning, for the past year and a half, Albert had given himself the same silent pep talk before allowing his sock-covered feet to touch the floor.

You can do this. You did it yesterday. You'll do it again tomorrow. Not much, but it served his purpose. He scratched himself three times and slid off the bed.

His wife Hope had been sympathetic in the beginning. Every day she had cleaned and redressed the charred mess that had once been a rather pleasant-looking face. As the wounds gradually healed, she looked at him with increasing infrequency, and when she did look, she didn't speak, until one day she didn't look at him at all. By the end of the first year, she was living with her sister in Denver, seven hundred miles away, which seemed no further than when she was sleeping on the couch in the den.

"I can't watch this anymore," she said as she calmly clicked the latches of her suitcase. She had told him once that it wasn't his appearance that had driven her from him. She said that she was lonely—that she had been for years. Albert knew the real reason was what he was staring at in the bathroom mirror.

He poked at the lump in the middle of his face that used to be a slightly large, but completely acceptable nose. His eyes bulged out from sunken pockets of shiny pinkish purple skin. He took the drops that he kept with him at all times, tilted his head back and counted to himself, *one, two, three...one, two, three*. He wiped his cheeks and turned on the faucet. Hooking one finger into the left side of his mouth, he gently pulled back just enough to insert his toothbrush. Then the other side...*rinses spit, rinse, spit, rinse spit*. Albert lathered the lower part of his face, and although he no longer had even a stubble of beard, mechanically went through the motions of shaving. The lumpy surface made it impossible to escape this process without severe nicks, which required several applications of doubled over pieces of toilet paper.

By the time he finished dressing, it was almost eleven. He would try on and remove several white shirts and twice as many ties before he finally settled on the right one. His suits were old, but they were neat, and the first one off the hanger was usually not the one he would end up wearing. When he felt that he was suitably shoed and socked, he smoothed back his few remaining wisps with his palm, grabbed his brief case, and walked down the hall.

The coffee was set to brew at exactly 11:45 a.m. Albert filled his travel mug, added three packets of sugar, and screwed down the lid. Feeling somewhat presentable, with coffee and briefcase in hand, Albert walked into the living room and stopped in front of the sofa. He set his mug on the table and laid his case sideways, perfectly centered on the left cushion. He scratched himself three times and sat down in the center of the center cushion. Albert aimed the remote and clicked, opened his brief case, and from the vast selection of neatly arranged snacks, he

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chose a package of tiny chocolate-covered donuts. He closed his eyes and indulged himself in one more pep talk before commencing with his breakfast routine.

Before the accident, Albert never watched TV. He didn't have time. He never missed one day of work, never took a vacation. His days were filled with clients, and meetings, and numbers on paper.

Each morning, the alarm clock would explode at a quarter to five, dancing around the nightstand like an overloaded washing machine. He used a wind-up clock because he didn't trust electricity. His father had given him the clock when he graduated college.

"If you want to keep a job, you have to get to work on time." His father told him. "I've fired many a good worker for showing up late."

He hadn't heard his father's voice in years, but those words played in his head as clear as the day he first heard them.

Albert would tap the alarm, and without lingering, spring from his bed. He didn't know what it felt like to lay in the comfort of the cool morning air, snuggled up in soft blankets, or hear the sounds of the world waking up outside. He never stayed long enough to watch the room change from the gray haze of pre-dawn to the warm, bright yellow that happened while he rode the subway to his office on the Southside of town.

The summer before his last semester of school, Albert started work for the Northeast Insurance Company. It wasn't long before he was the top salesman in his department, and a couple of years later, he opened the doors to his own business. Albert rented an office space on the third floor of a small brick building on Commerce Street. He hired his sister-in-law to answer the phone and keep the books. Within five years his company had grown to encompass the entire floor with a staff of sales people, a full-time bookkeeper, three secretaries, and a receptionist. With the hiring of each new employee, Albert lost a little more time.

A giant calendar hung on the wall to the right of his desk. The squares were filled with appointments and meetings, and each day at 5:00, Albert would smile as he made another perfect, black X in the box. At the end of each month, the wastebasket in the corner held the remnants of time that were Albert's existence. He loved his work, but as the pages fell like the leaves of a dying tree, Albert couldn't help but feel that something was missing. He never took the time to figure out what it might be, until one day, he just knew.

It was a day just like every other. Up before dawn, subway ride to work, appointments all morning, and lunch downstairs at 12:30. Albert rode the elevator down to the little café in the basement where Jill always had his plate ready on the counter, second seat from the end. Ham and cheese on rye, mustard on one slice of bread only, pickles on the side. A tall glass of unsweetened tea with no ice sat next to the plate.

"What if I didn't want ham and cheese today? You'd have to eat it," Albert joked.

"If that day ever comes, I'd not only eat it, I'd buy your lunch for a year." Jill wasn't worried. She'd known Albert since his first day in the building. She knew that in ten minutes, he would set a dollar on the counter, and without saying good-bye, would hurry back to the elevator.

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His mind was on the meeting scheduled later that afternoon when the elevator stopped. As he prepared to disembark, he noticed that he was only at the first floor. He stepped back and muttered something under his breath. When the doors finally opened, a woman stepped in. She was barely five feet tall with heels. Her brown hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail, and its honeysuckle scent put Albert into a weird trance-like state. He didn't realize he was staring at her when the sound of the doors opening snapped him back into reality.

To Albert's surprise, the woman stepped out, spoke to the receptionist, and took a seat in his waiting area. He wanted to talk to her, but he could barely walk. Finally, Albert took a deep breath, walked over to where she was sitting, and stood in front of her. She looked up and smiled.

"Hi. I'm sorry I'm late. You must be Mr. Evans." She held her hand out. "I'm Hope Forrester."
Hope. Her name is Hope.

Without thinking, Albert took her hand. "Nice to meet you, Miss Forrester. Please, follow me."

He led her down the hall to his office and told her to have a seat as he stepped out to tell his secretary to cancel his afternoon appointment.

"You want me to cancel an appointment? Are you okay?"

"Just do it," he said as he disappeared through the door.

He wasn't sure what he was going to say to the woman waiting in his office, or how he was going to explain that he wasn't Evans, but when she started to speak, it didn't seem to matter. Hope told him that she had just moved from Denver a few months before. She was working at the hospital and had been staying with a friend from nursing school until last week when she moved into a small apartment downtown.

"They told me I needed to get renters insurance. I didn't even know there was such a thing."

By the end of the meeting, he had sold her an insurance policy, and had convinced her to have lunch with him the next day.

Their date at Gino's was perfect. They talked for hours, and for the first time in his adult life, Albert was not aware of the time. She thought it was sweet when he told her how he pretended to be one of his employees, and she was truly impressed with how he had built his business at such a young age. She told him about her life in Denver, how her mother had died when she was twelve and how her older sister, Natalie, had been like a mother to her. They didn't notice the other people in the restaurant coming and going while they talked, and ate, and drank nearly two bottles of wine. Albert didn't go back to work that afternoon. It didn't occur to him at the time, but later he smiled when he thought about Jill eating his ham and cheese on rye.

Six months later they were married. For a while, they were happy. Albert promised his new wife a honeymoon in Cancun as soon as he got caught up at work. His sales had been slipping, and his employees seemed to be showing up late and missing work more than usual. He blamed himself for spending so much time away from the office and decided he needed to get things back on track before taking time off for pleasure. The honeymoon never happened and

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before long, Albert fell back into his old habits. When Hope started talking about wanting a baby, he panicked. That's when things started to fall apart.

As the years went by, things only got worse. Hope worked nights at the hospital, and when she got home, Albert was already gone. They rarely saw each other during the week, and on the weekends, they fought.

"I just want us want us to spend some time together. I don't think that's too much to ask." The argument always began the same.

"It's not my fault you work nights and sleep all weekend," he would say.

"How would you know? You're never here."

Hope had started sleeping in the den when she was off work because she couldn't stand the sound of that awful clock. Albert had lost interest in sex when the baby talk started so it was a relief to him not to have to make excuses. He felt bad about his broken promise, but he couldn't risk an accident. There wasn't time in his life for babies.

The morning she left, Albert almost missed the note she left for him next to the coffee pot. He hadn't bothered to turn the lights on when he poured his coffee and on the way out the door, noticed something stuck to the bottom of his mug.

Dear Albert,

I've decided to spend a few days at Nat's. I need to clear my head. Neither of us has been happy for a long time. I think we need to make some decisions. I'll be back Sunday afternoon. I hope we can talk.

I miss you,

Hope

Albert was frozen. It was true, neither one of them had been happy for a long time, but he never considered the possibility that she might leave him.

The next three days were the longest days he'd ever endured. He couldn't imagine his life without Hope even though he'd been living in the same house without her for years. He thought about the first time he saw her on the elevator and how light and happy he had felt on their date at Gino's. He thought about how scared and selfish he'd been and decided he was going to make a change.

He told his secretary to call a travel agent and make arrangements for two weeks in Cancun.

"I want first class tickets, and the best hotel you can get. I don't care what it costs. I'm taking my wife on a honeymoon"

Her mouth gaped as she stared at him without answering.

"Don't look at me like that," he said as he turned and headed back to his office. "Just do it."

He decided that Monday morning, he would start interviewing for a manager. He could spend more time at home, and maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing to have little ones running around. He only hoped it wasn't too late.

On Saturday he cleaned the house and bought fresh flowers for every room. His heart raced and he couldn't eat. The thought of making Hope happy, made him happy. He couldn't imagine how so much time had passed without remembering this feeling. That night he didn't set his alarm.

Sunday morning, he awoke with the sun. He showered and dressed, and while he was trying to decide what to do with himself, he had a flash of genius. He would make a Thanksgiving dinner and have it all laid out for her when she walked in the door. Thanksgiving was a month away, but it was her favorite holiday, and it would be a perfect way to show her how thankful he was to have her for a wife. He grabbed his keys and raced out the door.

Once in the store, he headed straight for the turkeys. He hadn't thought about how long it would take to bake a turkey until he picked one up and realized they were all frozen. He thought his plans were ruined when he saw a stack of boxes out of the corner of his eye. Turkey fryers. The Gods were on his side today. He threw one in his cart and finished his shopping. A half hour later, he was in his kitchen unpacking the groceries.

He set up the fryer outside the back door and began his grand project. He feverishly chopped and sliced, timing everything just right. He set the dining room table with the good dishes. It was spectacular. There were flowers, candles, and his grandmother's turkey platter in center, surrounded by all the food that he had prepared that morning. All that was left was the turkey. He grabbed his giant forks and went out the back door. Just as he realized he'd forgotten the platter, he heard Hope's car pull into the driveway. Without thinking, he grabbed the potholders from the little table and lifted the container out of the fryer. He carefully backed up to the door and pushed it open with his shoulder. Once inside, he heard his wife's keys opening the front door. As he was about to set the pot on the stove, his foot slipped, and his legs flew out in front of him. Hope squealed with excitement when she saw the spread on the dining room table. Albert heard his wife call his name as he lay on his back watching in slow motion as the turkey and hot oil fell toward his face.

Then, everything went black.