

The Retirement Party

My retirement party took place at the Lenox Hill Hospital atrium. My mind drifted as I listened to the speeches, remembering my forty years as a physician helping obese people lose substantial amounts of weight. I was surprised when the head physician presented me with a plaque saying I was voted by my colleagues as ‘The Best Physician in New York City’ who took upon himself the difficult task of treating obese people.

At that moment I remembered the Overeater’s Anonymous meetings I attended when I was an Intern despite the fact that I only had to lose twenty pounds.

“You don’t have an overweight issue so why are you attending the Friday night OA meeting?” my friend Jim, also an Intern, asked me.

“I plan to treat obese people and would like to learn more about their personality traits. It’s the only way I’ll be able to help them.”

“You’ll be wasting your time. They’re the most difficult patients you’ll ever have.”

“I know, but I still would like to try to help them.”

“Good luck. Hopefully, you’ll get better results than all the other physicians who failed.”

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The men's OA meeting took place every Friday night in a church basement on Park Avenue and 28th Street and was modeled on the Alcoholic’s Anonymous program. We sat in a circle around the group leader who spoke about the Ten Steps to Recovery by giving

control to a higher power. After the group leader finished speaking people took turns describing their success or failure in controlling food binges since the last meeting. The ones who had a mentor and didn't call for help had sheepish looks when they came up with excuses about why they didn't make the call. We took turns describing what had happened during the week, blaming the food binges on family, friends and work related issues.

I spoke about my long work hours at the hospital, not getting enough sleep and not eating when I should which resulted in over-eating when I finally had the time to eat. The suggestions I got from group members varied from carrying a snack in my white jacket pocket to questions about why I chose to be a doctor working such slavish hours getting paid so little.

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Three people who attended the meeting attracted my attention. The first one was five feet eight inches tall, a skinny police Captain who always spoke about his difficulty controlling food cravings.

When we walked to the subway after the meeting I asked him,

“Why are you attending the meeting? It looks to me as if it wouldn't hurt you to gain a few pounds.”

“You should have seen me when I was a police Sergeant and weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. When I took the Lieutenant's test I got the highest grade in the city and

expected my Commanding Officer to tell me I would be promoted. Instead, he closed his office door and chose his words carefully."

"The Commissioner discussed your test results with me. We would like to make you a Lieutenant and give you the position that just became available in the South Bronx. The issue we have is that we can't afford to have an obese Lieutenant. You must lose weight before we can promote you. I suggest you start attending the Overeater's Anonymous meetings. They can help you lose the weight. After achieving your goal you'll be next in line when a Lieutenant's position becomes available."

"You must have been upset," I told him.

"I was and couldn't do anything about it. That's why I decided to attend the men's Friday night OA meeting. At the meetings I spoke about my anger at not being promoted. The group members helped me get over the anger and control my eating habits. I started to jog five miles every evening around the Central Park Reservoir. After I lost one hundred pounds I was promoted and never gained back the weight."

"The Park is a high crime area. Aren't you afraid of being mugged?" I asked him.

Instead of answering, the Captain lifted his right pant leg and showed me a snub-nosed 38 revolver attached to his ankle.

"They would be sorry if they tried. Soon after I started jogging, word spread around the Park that I'm a policeman and carry a gun. It resulted in a big crowd of joggers running with me. Many were women who felt safer after hearing stories of rape and muggings in the Park."

I enjoyed the Friday night men's meeting, made a point of never missing it and often I had to change my shift with another Intern, taking their Saturday night shift. They felt I was out of my mind going to the meeting instead of going out with my girlfriend. Frustrated, she asked me to stop attending the meetings. When she realized I wouldn't, she walked out on me saying she didn't want to stay home on weekends.

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The second person was a giant man who always wore tailor made suits when he attended the meeting and spoke about having to give his ex-wife large alimony payments. At one of the meetings he made a fist that was as big as both of mine when he said,

“Last night I drove by the house that used to be mine before I married that bitch and was tempted to go in and squeeze her goddamn neck until her face turned blue. At the last minute, trying to cool off, I changed my mind and drove a three-mile detour around the house. On the way home I stopped at the Italian restaurant where I often eat, ordered a hot appetizer and chicken parmesan with spaghetti. After I finished my meal I had a tartufo, double espresso and two Sambucas for dessert. The owner, who was used to me having grilled fish with salad and only coffee for dessert, looked surprised but didn't say a word.”

“I can understand your frustration,” one of the group members told him, but the Captain had a different opinion and said,

“You're a rich man and should not let your anger take over. Next time you drive your fancy Mercedes, stay away from her neighborhood and take a five-mile detour.”

“Why should I do that?”

“If you walk into her house you’ll hurt or kill her, you’ll be put in jail and never get out. It’s 1975 and as a black man, rich or not, the judge will throw the book at you. Forget about how much money you lost and the alimony you have to pay her now. It’s not worth going to jail over it.”

The man stared at the captain as if he had just woken up from a bad dream, opened and closed his fist and shook his head. Nobody said a word and the only noise was the mechanical humming coming out of the air conditioner vents.

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The third group member was a good looking movie producer who spoke about his fast-paced life before he started attending the Friday night meetings. He told the group,

“I was a rich man who didn’t enjoy his life, got drunk and experimented with drugs. I slept with beautiful women who wanted parts in my movies. I didn’t enjoy their company and couldn’t wait to get rid of them in the morning. It all changed when I met Kathy, my fiancée. She convinced me to attend these meetings and keeps me going on the straight and the narrow. I love her and we plan to get married in the fall.”

At that moment I understood why he was in love with her since she was a tall, slim, plain looking woman who chose her words carefully when she joined us for coffee at the diner after the Friday night meetings.

A few weeks later the movie producer came to the group frustrated and wasn’t able to talk at the go-around.

“You look upset. What happened this week?” the group leader asked.

“Yesterday I almost went on an eating and drinking binge. At the last minute, Kathy stopped me from doing it. We were having dinner at a restaurant that has a pre-fixe menu. I ordered a bottle of wine to go along with the veal parmesan and spaghetti, and for dessert, I was going to have cheesecake, espresso, and Sambuca. Kathy told the waiter to ignore what I ordered and instead got me Pellegrino, broiled salmon, salad and espresso for dessert.”

“I’m glad she prevented you from going on the food binge,” the group leader said. “What made you want to go on a binge?”

“Kathy and I have been looking for a house for the past six months and couldn’t find one we liked. Discouraged, I was ready to give up but she kept reminding me it’s a process and eventually we’ll find what we wanted. Last weekend we finally found our dream home in Westchester. The house has a large backyard with a beautiful Japanese garden. It belongs to an elderly couple. The husband told me that they planned to retire and relocate to Florida. The asking price was two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I pointed out to him what needed to be fixed and offered him two hundred thirty thousand dollars. When he heard my offer, the man had red blotches on his face, took my arm, walked me to the gate and said, "Young man, my wife and I have lived in this house forty years and carefully developed the garden that we love. We would not sell it to somebody who doesn't appreciate it".

“Next he opened the gate and asked us to leave. The following day I called him and offered the asking price. The man turned my offer down saying that he and his wife had decided to wait until they found the right buyer who would appreciate what they had built. Frustrated, I called him a few minutes later and offered a higher price. He asked me not to call again and hung up the phone in my face.”

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My train of thought was interrupted when Jean, my nurse for the past twenty-five years, came over and presented me with a Rolex watch. I stared at the watch and couldn't believe what I saw. When Jean saw my reaction she laughed, hugged, kissed me and said, “You always spoke about wanting to buy the watch but never did. The medical staff decided that it would be a nice goodbye present that will go together with the ‘best doctor’ plaque the hospital gave you. We’re sorry you’ve decided to retire and will miss you. I hope you’ll enjoy your retirement in good health.”

My eyes filled with tears realizing how my colleagues felt about me. When they asked me what I planned to do I told them that I always wanted to take a cross-country camping trip to visit the National Parks in the West and now I’ll have the time to do it.

“You’re too old to sleep on the ground,” Jean told me.

“I bought a Mercedes Camper that is the size of a large van,” I said. “It has a solar roof that will provide me with electricity, eliminating the need to stay in crowded campgrounds next to other trailers that have TV, radios and noisy children. I’ll be able to camp in the National Parks that have only running water and pit toilets while having the

comforts of home: electricity, air conditioning, a hot shower, refrigerator and gas stove. When it's time to empty my septic tank, I'll visit a trailer campground that has facilities for that."

"Did you have difficulty finding the right vehicle?" Jean asked.

"Yes, it took me a while. I didn't want a big RV. The camper is twenty-five feet long and is a silver color that will not attract heat. It has a big diesel engine and a car chassis. The engine will give me the power needed to carry such a heavy vehicle with fairly good gas mileage and the chassis provides the comfort of riding in a car, not a truck. Last spring when I took my month's vacation I traveled to the West to visit the National Parks."

"We were wondering why you took such a long vacation since you usually took only one week at a time," Jean told me.

"After I came back I kept asking myself why I'm working so hard. Since I'm not married I decided it was time to achieve an old dream to travel without having to coordinate my vacations around colleagues' schedules that had to cover for me."

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The retirement was an easy decision but giving up my apartment in Manhattan where I had lived for thirty-five years was not. Ten years prior to my retirement I had hired a decorator and contractor who renovated the apartment to my specifications so I couldn't make up my mind if I should sell it or not. The reason I finally decided to sell the apartment was because Mandy, my blond Cocker Spaniel, who had lived with me thirteen years, had just died. I couldn't face the fact that she was aging and when we traveled in

my new camper to the National Park campgrounds she met other dogs and behaved like a puppy, giving me the hope I'd have her a few more years.

Six months after we came back from that vacation she stopped eating and drinking.

Steve, the chief surgeon at the East Side animal hospital who has been a personal friend for many years, examined her and took a CT scan and told me:

“Mandy has a large tumor in her stomach that is pressing on her liver.”

“Could you remove it?”

“I don't think so. It looks like it's a cancerous growth and she probably wouldn't survive the surgery.”

“You never know.”

“David, why prolong her agony. Let her die in peace. I love her as much as you do. For the past thirteen years, I babysat for her when you went on vacation. It's time to say 'goodbye.' Be glad she had such a good time when you traveled with her to the National Parks.”

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“Mandy's death is the reason for my retirement,” I told Steve when we had dinner, still not able to accept the fact that she was gone.

“You should get another dog. It will not replace Mandy but will ease the pain.”

“I can't go through it again.”

I tried to stay out of the apartment during the day and in the evening, when I came home, I expected to find her waiting for me at the door excited, wiggling her short tail. At dinner time I had difficulty eating remembering her sitting next to me pushing her snout against my leg to remind me that I should share my dinner with her.

Our evening activity was going to the dog playground that bordered the East River. While she played with the dogs I sat on a bench enjoying my conversation with the other dog owners. On one of my visits, a young man sat next to me and had his dark sunglasses pushed above his forehead. I was surprised to see him since he wasn't one of the regular dog owners I met every night. He had an intense look, staring around the play-ground. When I looked in the same direction, I recognized the Israeli Ambassador to the UN who had brought Barak, his large black poodle, to play with the other dogs.

"I don't see the ambassador here often," I told the young man.

He didn't respond for a second, staring at his boss who sat on a bench across from us talking to a young woman whose dog was playing with Barak.

"I'm part of his bodyguard team. We've asked him many times to let his dog walker bring Barak to the playground instead of doing it himself. He always responds that because of his long working hours and frequent travel he doesn't spend enough time with Barak. Therefore when he's home he'd rather take him for long walks and bring him to the playground himself. We're not happy about it. It creates a security headache for us but we can't convince him not to do it."

While talking to me he glanced at the far side of the park. I looked in the same direction and saw another young man staring at the ambassador. At that moment I noticed the bulge in his tailored jacket and realized that he carried a gun. It reminded me of the captain at the Overeater's Eaters Anonymous meetings and told him,

“Years ago I met a police captain who jogged in Central Park in the evening. When I reminded him the park was a high crime area and asked him if he wasn't afraid of being mugged, he lifted his right pant leg and showed me a snub-nosed 38 attached to his ankle.”

The young man didn't respond. Without taking his eyes off the ambassador, he opened his jacket flap and showed me a big gun in his shoulder holster.

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I was camping in Bryce Canyon National Park looking at the green spruce trees that grew on the sides of the pink hills across the dirt road. Between the trees, I saw fragile orange and pink rock formations that looked like a colorful chessboard and told myself that I should sell my apartment. At that moment I visualized Mandy's happy face greeting me when I opened the door but realized that I couldn't.

Manhattan was experiencing the coldest winter in twenty years and forced me to make the decision to sell the apartment. The freezing wind off the East River blowing in my face and arriving in the empty apartment every time I came home convinced me that I must sell it and move to a warmer place.

The reason why I decided to live in Scottsdale, AZ was visiting Monument Valley where I camped when I traveled to the National Parks in the southwest. I chose Scottsdale because it was a metropolitan city and borders the Four Corners where Monument Valley is located. This National Park was my favorite of all the places I had seen. It has large red rock formations that looked like pagodas in the middle of the desert. The rock formations standing tall against the light blue sky during the day and their changing color to orange-red at sunset time created a mystic image against the deep pink twilight sky.

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Half-heartedly I contacted the real estate agent who lives in my neighborhood and asked him to sell my apartment.

The following week he came to see me and said.

“I have a prospect that loves your apartment and wants to buy it.”

“I’m surprised you found somebody so fast.”

“Your apartment, besides being renovated, is the largest one bedroom line in the building. It has a wall of windows, a view of the East River and a terrace.”

“Have his lawyer contact mine.”

“He has an issue with the bedroom.”

“What it is?”

“He wants you to remove the built-in furniture.”

“Why would he want to do that?”

“He would like to bring his own bedroom furniture and insists that you pay for their removal.”

“I can’t do it.”

“Why? Removing the built-ins will not be expensive. I’ll be happy to recommend a contractor to you who will do the job at a reasonable price.”

“The bedroom can’t be changed. Mandy, my dog who lived in it for thirteen years loved to sleep in her bed next to my desk.”

“But she won’t know the difference.”

“It doesn’t matter. I won’t sell the apartment to somebody who does not appreciate it.”

“What you’re saying doesn’t make sense.”

“You wouldn’t understand if I tried to tell you.”

He stared at me not responding and shook his head before he left. For the next six months, I tried to sell the apartment by advertising it on my building’s website and posting it in the mail room where other people in the building were able to read about it.

“You’ll never find a buyer the way you’re going about it,” the realtor kept telling me every time I ran into him in the street. I realized he was right but couldn’t give him the listing because he wouldn’t guarantee that I’d have the final say as to whom the apartment should be sold.

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It all changed on a Sunday afternoon when I stood by the elevator ready to go to the laundry room to put my clothes in the drier. A couple I didn't recognize standing by the elevator got my attention and I stared at them.

"We just came out of an open house on your floor," the wife told me.

"I'm selling mine but it's not listed on the market," I told her.

"Would you mind if we see it?" the husband asked.

Something in the tone of his voice reminded me of my father's who managed to escape from Crete before the Nazis invaded the country.

"I'll be happy to show you the apartment," I told him.

The couple walked around the apartment and complimented me on the nice job my decorator had done. They won't come up with the unreasonable demand to remove the bedroom built-in's I told myself, remembering the OA producer who was turned down by the husband who felt he would not appreciate the home he and his wife had loved for forty years.

For the next couple of hours, we sat in my living room and spoke. The husband told me that he's a self-made man who worked since he was very young, had a difficult time when he came to New York and graduated from college in two and half years after he got 90 credits for life experience that he earned reading computer manuals with the aid of a dictionary.

"I'm surprised you managed to do that."

“I had no choice. After working eighty hours a week making one dollar per hour for three years I got a job as a computer operator. In those days we used tape drives and it took twelve hours to sort the data that now takes milliseconds. I had plenty of time on my hands, picked up computer programming manuals and a dictionary and studied.”

“Why did you have to use the dictionary?”

“My command of the English language was poor.”

“You’re a determined person. I admire your being able to do it. Why didn’t you attend school at night?”

“I wish I could have. My family made sure I wouldn’t be able to.”

“What happened?”

“It’s a long unpleasant history and I’d rather not get into it. Despite the obstacles they put in my way I managed to build myself a successful career and in 1985 was invited to meet the IBM executives at a roundtable seminar in Atlanta representing the Mid-Atlantic States.”

“What was it about?”

“The IBM distribution software had deficiencies and I discussed with them what issues needed to be fixed.”

“You must be a computer expert.”

“Not really; it happened a long time ago and I haven’t kept up with changes in the field. Today I’m a businessman who works on a handshake.”

His words reminded me of my father who had had a difficult start when we lived on the lower East Side walking from door to door selling various small appliances to the neighborhood housewives. Eventually, he became successful after he opened his own distribution business and worked on a handshake with his customers and suppliers. Through my entire upbringing, my father kept reminding me that my reputation is the most important thing I will ever have.

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My mind drifted thinking about my father as I listened to the man describing his background and told myself that history repeated itself. My daydreaming was interrupted when the husband saw the small ceramic pen holder of a blond Cocker Spaniel on my desk and told me that it looks like his dog.

“Jean, my nurse, gave it to me when my dog Mandy died, realizing I couldn’t get another one,” I told him.

“I can relate to you. When our previous Cocker Spaniel died at the age of fifteen and a half I couldn’t work for a month until I got the one we have now.”

Without saying another word he took his smartphone out of his pocket and showed me his current dog's picture. For a second I thought I was dreaming. His Cocker Spaniel looked like Mandy and I felt my heart throbbing.

“Does my dog look like the one you lost?” the man asked, seeing me staring at the picture.

I couldn’t respond, just shook my head.

At that moment I knew I had found the right buyer for my apartment. After agreeing on the purchase price we shook hands and I asked him to email me his lawyer's information. The minute they walked out I called my lawyer and told him that I had found the perfect buyer for my apartment.

"Don't get excited," my lawyer told me. "Let's see what kind of demands he will come up with tomorrow."

"I don't think he will. He works on a handshake."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

True to his word the husband didn't come up with new demands and instructed his lawyer to put in the contact what we agreed on. Through the entire sale process, I communicated with the husband on a daily basis and felt as if we had known each other for many years. Before I left for Scottsdale I gave the couple Mandy's warm winter coat telling them that their dog should wear it on cold winter days when the freezing wind was blowing off the East River. I also left them the little Cocker Spaniel statue that looked like my Mandy and their dog, feeling it belonged in the apartment.

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On my way to Scottsdale, I kept wondering if I had made the right decision selling the apartment. When I drove through the switchback roads of the Valley of the Gods the wind was howling and I visualized the spirits of the Indians who roamed on their horses in the meadows. Did I make a mistake selling the apartment? I asked myself. At that moment I visualized Mandy giving me a warm welcome the minute I opened the door and realized

that I made the right decision because a Cocker Spaniel who looks like her will welcome her parents when they open the door. I often hear from the husband and remind Mandy that we made the right choice finding the perfect buyer.