



THE
PROBLEM
WITH LOUIS

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For My Girls

*“Short stories are tiny windows into other worlds
and other minds and other dreams. They are
journeys you can make to the far side of the
universe and still be back in time for dinner.”*

— Neil Gaiman

LOUIS' PROBLEMS

LOUIS DeVILLE sat behind his desk wondering just what to do. He wasn't outraged. He wasn't baffled. He just had a lot on his mind this morning. A lot on his plate, his wife would have said. Piled right up to the office ceiling, in fact. Piled like a mound of rotting garbage that had been dumped in the IN tray and marked to his attention. It was piled so high he could almost see it spilling against the bookshelves and the filing cabinets. Spilling, still more, out the tenth-story window onto the pedestrians scuttling along Broadway.

Good ol' Lady Di, he mused. She might not be right about many things, but she was right about that; and wouldn't she just love to rub it in? He could see her now at the Becker Street penthouse. All five-foot two of leanness and exuberance in her leotards and legwarmers, pedaling on her Ezy-Cycle in front of some celebrity aerobics video or the Home Shopping Channel, burning off the calories in some vain attempt to defeat the aging process, stretching muscles and joints he didn't even know existed. He could even hear her nagging at him while she did it.

"It's your own fault. You're a workaholic, Louis," she would be saying. He hated the way she deliberately called him *Lewis*. It was *Lewey*, like Donald Duck's three sons, Hewey, Dewey and Lewey. "You're going to die at your desk one day, believe me." She wouldn't stop there either. "You're never home before eleven. It's not good for a man your age. You should be thinking of retirement, not expanding the business. Leave that for the *younger* men," and she would say *younger* in such a tone that would make him want to throttle that slender neck of hers.

He clenched his fists and thumped the desk. The intercom jumped and the computer monitor flickered momentarily, then switched itself off. Retirement? Hells bells, he was too damn young to retire. He was only sixty-six, and as fit as a goddamn

fiddle. Not quite what he was in his mid-twenties when he started the company, but who the hell was when they had been steering the helm for over forty years? Sure, he would pay the price for it one day. There was always a price. Cardiac arrest. Heart attack. Flat line. He had thought about it often enough, whatever name you wanted to call it. Hadn't everyone his age? But he had no concerns except his goddamn gastritis. That was all. Got himself checked up every six months. Still had a good twenty years left in him before he had anything to worry about.

“Do you really think so, Louis?” he heard Dianne DeVille say in his head again. He could even see her taut legs pumping the Ezy-Cycle in a blur of pink and blue in front of the TV, her bouffant hair as motionless as her silicon breasts. “Do you really *think* you've got twenty good years left? I mean, look at your waistline.” It was always waistline, never belly, or guts, or stomach, words that were just too crass to ever spill out of her surgically perfected lips. “It's not what it used to be, is it dear?”

He could feel the burn of his gastritis just thinking about her, like he had swallowed one of those stupid party candles that never went out when you blew on it. He rummaged through the top drawer looking for his antacids while Lady Di kept nagging in his head.

“Your poor heart,” she said. “I'm surprised it hasn't given up already.”

Ha! Really? he snapped back, vaguely aware that he was talking aloud. He had already outlived Peterson, that good-for-noth'n union slob, not to mention several others who she had thought would live to a ripe old age. So much for them, huh? Look who's had the last laugh!

Lady Di had no reply. Her pedaling image began to fade like some overused videotape that could no longer record. Then she was gone and he was alone again, back in his office with his pile of problems stacked to the ceiling.

Walter Peterson, though, stayed fresh in his mind. The old

toad who had stolen from the rich and kept every cent for himself, good old Mr. Fat and Ugly with a hairy wart on his right cheek (and probably on the cheek of his ass, too), always sticking his pug-nose in business that wasn't his. Coronary got him a few years ago, no surprises about that. Only surprise was that it didn't happen earlier. Would've saved GRN thousands in "charity donations" if he had croaked it when he should have. That chain-smoking scumbag had taken more money from his pocket than his yoga-stretching wife, and that was saying something. He was better off dead. Never did any good for anyone.

Like that rat from Morgan Divott. Another scumbag he had had the misfortune of sharing business intercourse. He had been the first to go. Now that *was* a surprise. Coronary, too, wasn't it? Or was it the big CA? One of his clients once told him over lunch it was actually that faggot disease, the one all the heroine junkies were dying of too. Whatever it was, the end was sudden, that much he knew. Here one minute, gone the next. Almost too young to die really, still in his forties, but he had never forgiven the little vermin for trying to force him out in the eighties.

Damn near succeeded too. Had almost two-thirds of the board on his side. Bunch of backstabbing mongrels. They had ambushed him in the boardroom with a vote of no confidence and almost succeeded. Taken completely by surprise, too, he was. Hadn't even the foggiest clue his own vice presidents were scheming behind his back. He had trusted them, he guessed. That was his weakness. Too much goddamned trust. Well, it was a hard earned lesson, but he was still here, and where were they? Gone to hell, as far as he cared.

"Ha!" he said. "There you are."

Goddamn bottle of Kwel-Amities hidden right at the back of the drawer. About goddamn time. His gastritis was really fired up and frying the inside of his lower chest. He removed the bottle, unscrewed the cap and peered inside, then grunted and rolled his eyes. Wasn't that always the goddamn way? Just when you really

needed two or three, there was only one of the little buggers left. Just typical. Just goddamn typical.

Before he took it, he got up from behind the desk and lugged his hefty frame to the window. Horns blared somewhere downtown, the angry howls of New York's mechanical wildlife. Directly below in the shadows of the highrises and skyscrapers, grazing animals crawled along Broadway. Every goddamn creature in the jungle was down there. A cement truck bull-rhino charged anything that moved. Buffalo buses chewed the cud, not in any hurry at all. Yellow deer taxis moved in herds, nervous and alert, ready to dart away at any sign of danger. Even the monkeys of the jungle were there, scuttling along the sidewalk in office-wear, head down, briefcase in hand, not one of them lifting their eyes to see who was looking down on them.

He imagined a rifle in his hand, picking them off one by one. Not that he had ever shot someone before. God knew he had often wanted to. His wife for instance. Could do it too, and not so much as bat an eyelid. If he could get away with it, that was.

Ah, the perfect murder. Did it exist? Probably not. Everybody got caught at some point, usually when they bragged about it. Which was a bitch, because what was the point if you had to keep it secret? That's what trophies were for, weren't they? But if he could get away with it, ah yes, he had no qualms about picking someone off from his tenth-story window every once in a while, especially when his gastritis was playing up. Like that good-for-noth'n bum at the Metro corner always begging for money. He would be the first to go. Then that jogger who thought he owned the sidewalk. Then the hippies cleaning windscreens at the traffic lights, even when you told them you'd got no loose change to pay them. Ping. Ping. Ping. All three gone to meet their maker courtesy of Sniper Louis, the only CEO with big enough balls to rid the city of its filth.

He laughed a little. Sniper Louis. That was a good one.

While he took a couple more imaginary potshots from the

window, the noonday sun peeked from behind a drifting cloud and shone directly into his eyes. He winced with pain. The burning from his stomach had turned up a notch like some god-damned internal boiler running on solar energy. Cursing, he yanked the drapes and tipped the remaining Kwel-Amity straight from the bottle into his mouth, then made his way back to his chair crunching the pill into sharp little shards that stuck between his teeth.

Goddamn it, he grimaced, these buggers tasted awful.

At the desk he chased the bitterness down with a swig of scotch from the bottom drawer, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He slipped his thumb between two shirt buttons to give his sternum a massage. The skin felt hot and sweaty, as if a boiler really had been fired up beneath it. Still grimacing, he took another swig of scotch for good measure, and as he tilted his head he caught himself staring back.

“I know, I know. It’s getting worse,” he said, thumb-massaging his sternum. He could still taste a lingering bitterness in the back of his mouth, so he took another swig of scotch. “I need to see the doc again.”

The portrait behind the desk kept staring its frozen accusation. The painter had captured all his best features (as he had been paid a goddamn fortune to) – his dark hypnotizing eyes; his broad shoulders; his expansive chest – and had managed to minimize his less noble attributes – his double-chin; his overhanging gut (*Waistline, dear, it’s a waistline!*); the thinning patches on his scalp. Done a pretty damn fine job, too, he might add. At the time he was posing for it though, he had reckoned the idea of wearing a laurel and toga was kind of prissy, but the painter had assured him that the Caesar look with the backdrop of ancient Rome oozed the essence of success and power he needed in his line of work. Louis had paid him cash straight away. Best goddamn five grand he had ever spent.

He tossed the empty drug bottle into the bin beneath the desk

and took a final swig of scotch before putting it back. Just as he sat down, his secretary buzzed on the intercom. The image of her abundant cleavage drifted in front of his eyes like two untethered helium balloons. “What is it?” he said.

“David Epstein’s on line one for you.”

Goddamn it, he had told her he was busy. No interruptions. Wendy would have understood. Now there was a damn fine secretary. Damn fine woman too. Not keeping her at the firm was the only thing he truly regretted. These young women nowadays didn’t understand what a boss needed. He should have sacked Sarah ages ago, although he had to admit she was a hell of a lot better than the previous one. Frumpy bitch was nothing but trouble from the day she started. Stirred up all sorts of legal mess the company didn’t need, and was still stirring. Damn shame they didn’t make secretaries like they used to. In fact, you weren’t even allowed to call them secretaries anymore, were you? Personal Assistants, PA’s, or some or other bullshit term for someone who didn’t type or do anything of the “personal” nature Wendy used to provide.

The red light on Button-1 kept flashing. “What does Epstein want now?”

Sarah’s voice fluttered across the intercom: “Didn’t say. You know he won’t leave a message. He’ll only talk to you.”

Louis rolled his eyes and said, “Okay. Okay. I’ll take it.” He picked up the handset and punched the flashing red button. “This had better be good,” he said to Epstein. “I don’t wanna hear the contract hasn’t been signed.”

There was a pause on the line from the LA office. Either it was a bad connection or Epstein had taken fright. “That’s what I want to talk to you about,” Epstein said eventually. Louis had been about to growl at him to speak up. “Collins wants another week to think about it.”

“Think about what?” Louis thumbed his sternum. “He’s had six goddamn months! We need that signature! We’re hedged to

our teeth over here. If he doesn't do it today, there won't be any goddamned contract to sign. D'you hear what I'm saying?"

Epstein paused again. "I've been my persuasive best. The guy just won't put pen on paper. I think he's holding out for a higher offer."

"What kind of bullshit is that? We've already doubled our original bid. We're the only ones interested in his goddamned business and we're not offering one more cent than what's already been agreed. Tell him he can take it or leave it."

"Do you really mean that? I thought..."

Louis rolled his eyes and gritted his teeth. "No, I don't really mean that," he said. "Of course we're not going to let him go. We're in too deep." Still massaging his chest as he had, Louis could feel the thumping of his heart against his thumb. Then, remembering his favorite line from *The Godfather*, said: "Make him an offer he can't refuse."

Epstein paused again. "What does that mean?"

"Just do what you're paid to do. Get the signature on the contract."

Louis slammed the handset down and clasped his hands behind his neck. Tilting back in his manager's chair, he released the pent up air with a long exaggerated sigh. Hells bells, he thought, the garbage was really piling up today. It was never ending.

Still, he had faced worst and gotten through in one piece, hadn't he? He was a goddamn survivor. History had proven that.

COUP-D'ETAT

HIS memory of the attempted *coup-d'etat* was a little hazy, what, nearly two decades ago now. He couldn't remember exactly who was in attendance or where they were sitting, he couldn't even remember all of their names, but he certainly remembered Johnny Winterbottom and the guy who had almost choked to death on the ice cube. He could actually picture the scene in the boardroom, now that he thought about it. The blinds were drawn, just as he liked it, the bare white walls reflecting the artificial light as though they were glowing with radioactive energy. Suits and ties occupied all thirteen seats around the table (no skirts or "power suits" back then, not on *his* board of control), except for one, the one next to Johnny at the other end of the table, the only vacant bay in the parking lot. He hadn't known it then, but that empty seat had saved him.

"We've... got something else on the agenda," Johnny Winterbottom had said that Friday back in '84.

Louis had already stood, tired and cranky at the end of another long week of eight-till-late. "This isn't protocol. The meeting's over," he said, then hit upon the most likely reason for the delay. "Is it the damn unions again? I thought we'd fixed that last month. Does that greedy bastard Peterson want more money?"

A couple of vice presidents shuffled in their seats and fidgeted with their ties, eyes fixed to the new mahogany desktop. "Not... exactly," Johnny said.

There was something in the way the young lawyer was trying to appease him that Louis immediately disliked, as if he had a poisoned water cooler he wanted the CEO to drink from.

Go on, try it, his look was saying. *It's kind of refreshing. You'll like it.* The look of a lizard trying to coax a fly onto its forked tongue.

One of the VP's on Johnny's immediate left, Louis' right, clear-ed his throat and took a sip from a glass of water. It was the

Irish kid he had employed on Johnny's advice a few years back; a clever mathematician who had already made an impact by halving company tax, but had all the social skills of a frightened guinea pig. He took a long swig and then began to gag on something, turning red in the face as if someone had snuck from behind and started throttling him. Nobody moved to slap him on the back or do anything to help. Nobody did anything except stare. The kid brought his hand to his throat, gagging and gasping for air, and Louis could actually see his temple veins beginning to throb like engorging bloodworms. Then, just when his face was turning deeper crimson, he spat the offending item across the table. An ice cube slid across the mahogany and landed in the empty seat directly opposite, the seat normally occupied by the financial advisor from Morgan Divott. All the VPs watched the ice cube hit the leather upholstery, stunned into frigid silence.

Louis, too, watched the ice cube's route. He wasn't thinking the tax whiz lucky not to choke on a frozen piece of H_2O ; rather he was thinking it completely unlike Herbert Grimsby to miss the board meeting. The closet faggot was usually the first to plunk his scrawny ass in his seat. That's what Louis had initially liked about the guy; eagerness, promptness, willingness (not his cutesy-wootsy ass), qualities he wanted – no, demanded – from someone in control of the company funds. Why he wasn't in attendance, he didn't know. Neither did anyone else. Not at that moment, anyway.

All the VPs around the table turned and faced Louis, including the kid who had spat the ice cube across the table. His color had mostly returned, but his mouth was gaping and his eyes were bulging, not quite believing what he'd done in front of the boss.

"*What*, not exactly?" Louis said to the lizard at the end of the table.

Johnny's expression hadn't changed. In fact, now that the atmosphere inside the hothouse had chilled to something like the ice-cube, he didn't like the expressions on most of his

subordinates. They looked like members of a jury not sure which way the evidence was pointing, evidence that could send him all the way to the gallows. It was like that movie, *Twelve Angry Men*, his VP's turning on him like the jury who wanted to hang the kid. Something was up. Something rotten. He could smell its stench like Peterson could smell a bribe.

No, he reckoned, *it's not Twelve Angry Men. It's The Dirty Dozen.*

"Are you going to tell me what this is all about?" he said to Johnny, and glared at the rest of them.

They all averted his gaze, apart from Johnny, who maintained his stare but still couldn't say what was on his mind. Except he didn't have to; Louis had a pretty good idea what was going down, and company protocol wasn't going to save him.

"Go on!" he said, almost growling. "Be a man. Have the balls to say what you want to say."

Johnny glanced at the empty chair, the one in which the accountant's cutesy-wootsy ass should have been parked. The ice cube had begun to melt in a little pool of water.

So that was it, Louis thought, he's stalling for Herbert. Johnny wasn't the leader in all this. That rat from Morgan Divott was, but he wasn't here, was he? Something had happened, something the rest of them hadn't planned on, especially Johnny. That's why they were stumbling all over themselves, why Johnny had taken it upon himself to take control. Thrust the first dagger, so to speak. They had meant to catch him by surprise (and they had, hell's bells yes they had), but he'd had a little slice of luck; their leader had gone AWOL, and just for the moment the mutineering sons of bitches didn't know what to do. Goddamn it, the company was his, and his alone, and he wasn't going to let some lizard-kid come in and steal his baby from under his nose.

"There... there's a significant majority of the board..." Johnny began, once again glancing at the empty seat.

Here it comes, Louis smirked. *Et tu Brutus?*

Perhaps he should have seen this coming. When he had

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