

Wrong Number

Flash Fiction for Guests of the WordFeeder
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It was early on a beautiful Thursday morning in the city, on the kind of day that gave Spring its well-deserved reputation. The flowers in the large pots on either side of the stone platform outside his front door were blooming. The trees that lined the street in front of his and the other townhouses were beginning to fill in, some of them with delicate white blossoms.

And his suit... Yes, the suit that he wore every day – a medium gray this morning with an almost imperceptible blue fleck – fit his tall and trim 40 something body perfectly, the way expensive, custom tailored suits do. Nice suit, to be sure, but it was all about his choice of ties, the lead singer in his ensemble, with just enough color to make him feel good without attracting too much attention.

"Lock the door, please," he said as it began to close behind him. There was no one there, but the lock, indeed the entire house, recognized his voice. "Of course, Mr. Street, I'll take care of it immediately," the soft professional voice of his "House Nanny" reassured him, followed by the "chunk" of his dead bolt lock.

Stepping briskly down the stairs, he turned right, walking quickly to the corner, saying, "Hi," and "Good morning," to passersby who invariably smiled back at him, a reflection of the friendliness, sincerity and success he radiated. Down to the corner, and then right again, without crossing the street, he barely stopped in front of the fifth stoop, snapping up the six steps to his company's main entrance.

It was a block of what appeared to be 38 recently refurbished townhouses, each one slightly different, just a bit unique, but none so much so that it didn't complement the ones on either side of it. And yet, almost no one lived in any of them. They were purchased over the course of a few years, carefully remodeled and integrated into a city block of offices for his company, and his company alone. No sign of anything corporate, they blended inconspicuously into the cityscape around them. A small park in the middle of the complex gave all the interior offices windows and balconies, many with hanging plants and flowering vines intermingled among the dark green leaves of ivy clinging to the brick. It was expensive, this invisible office building, but no more than a rounding error in the fortune that Innovative Concepts had amassed from its handful of patents on uncommonly useful items, from residential escalators, to GPS devices for keeping track of your children, to interactive voice activated household appliances and electronics.

"Good morning, Janet." He said to the receptionist. She was real, and not one of the AI devices they were developing.

“Hey, Will. How are you today?” Regardless of status or authority, everyone who worked there was on a first name basis. That was the rule.

“Fine, thanks. “

“You’ve had three calls which I e-mailed you, and this,” she said handing him an envelope, “that arrived by messenger just a couple of minutes ago.”

Two flights up, and down the hallway through what would have been three more houses, he was at the senior executive suite of offices where he would spend most of his day. The two outer desks were for Diane, his assistant, and the new person, “Bobbie?” he tried to remember, who would be working for her. He had the bigger of the two street-front offices. The other was where Jack worked, doing the daily routine of running the company, while he, Will, concentrated on... on whatever he wanted to.

No one was in yet, but the phone on Diane’s desk was ringing so he picked it up. “Good morning. Can I help you?” And then he listed for a minute. “No, I’m sorry. You’ve misdialed. ...No problem.” And he hung up the phone.

“Good morning.” It was Diane and Bobbie, the new person holding a bag of something from “Sweet Cakes,” the bakery down the street.”

“Good morning, ladies. Smells good.”

“We got an extra one for you?” Diane opened the bag, waving her hand over the open top to waft the smell of fresh cinnamon in Will’s direction. “How about it?”

“Tempting, but no thanks.” And then turning to Bobbie, his hand extended to greet hers. “Hi. You must be ‘Bobbie.’ Welcome aboard.”

“Hi,” she responded warmly, shaking his hand and returning his smile.

“Thanks for coming to work for us,” he told her, concerned that she might be a bit nervous on her first day, just as the phone on Diane’s desk rang again.

“Good morning. Innovative Concepts, can I help you? ...Sure. No, you’ve got the right number. Let me transfer you to accounting. ...Thanks.”

“Thanks. I’m looking forward to...,” but then Will cut her off as soon as Diane put down the phone.

“Diane, I’ve got stuff to think about. If anybody calls, would you tell them, I don’t know, whatever?”

“Sure thing,” she nodded back to him, and he turned, walked into the larger, much nicer of the two executive offices and closed the door behind him. Jack, on the other hand, still not in, would

leave his door propped open with a cheap bookend he got from Staples, so he could shout to them without using the intercom.

“Well,” Bobbie turned to Diane, still standing in front of their desks. “Mr. Street seems nice.” And then, noticing the large cut out from the Times front page framed on the wall outside his office, “Wow, how long ago was that?”

The picture in the story was Will, the suit he was wearing at the time in surprisingly good shape under the circumstances, his smile and confidence apparently unaffected what had just happened. He was shaking hands with an odd looking, unkempt, poorly dressed disheveled person next to him, apparently unable to smile. Even in a still photo like this one, the other man seemed visibly shaken. “Homeless Man Saves Invention Mogul in Street Attack,” the headline read in bold type above the picture.

“Quite the story, isn’t it?” Diane had walked to the frame to stand next to Bobbie who was reading the story. “Three men, one with a gun, the other two with knives, attacked him, and this homeless guy comes out of nowhere and takes the three of them out without so much as breaking a sweat.”

“Ehemmm.” Jack was almost coughing as he came through the outer door, not to attract their attention, but to clear out whatever had accumulated in his throat since the last time he’d said anything. “Hey,” was all he managed on his way to his office, ignoring the new staffer and completely without ceremony.

“What’s he doing here?!” Bobbie whispered to Diane?”

“Are you kidding?”

“It’s the guy in the picture,” she said turning to the wall to make sure. “...wearing the same clothes? Is that even possible?”

“Of course it’s the guy in the picture. It’s Jack, the guy who invented everything. It’s his company,” she whispered back.

“Well, what’s Will doing there?”

“Bobbie, Will’s the homeless guy who saved Jack’s life. Jack didn’t know how to thank him, so he gave him a name. There’s no record of him anywhere. No fingerprints, no DNA, no ID. No missing person reports. Nothing. So Jack gave him a name – “Will Street,” because of the way he was dressed that night – a business card and...”

“Why not ‘Walter Street’?”

“Because no one calls people named ‘Walter’ ‘Wall’ for short. I don’t know,” just a touch of exasperation showing in her voice. “Besides, are you going to question someone who’s made \$5 billion, and given 5% of it to his employees?! The same guy who signs our checks?” Eyebrows

raised, her head cocked slightly to the right, she continued her thought... So Jack gave him a name, one of our executive apartments to make sure he had a place to stay, and this office. He doesn't get any calls or mail except what one of the interns in our marketing department sends him. He just hangs out. The only meetings he has are with somebody he thinks needs his help on some community development project, but it's really a shrink Jack hired to help him, and there's a private detective that's trying to figure out who he is. Taking care of him, playing along is one of our jobs."

"So," Bobbie asked, looking through the glass walls of Will's office, "what's he typing?"

"Who knows? Notes, random thoughts, uh, letters to someone he calls "Sugar," and an occasional piece of flash fiction he publishes on the blog they set up for him."

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