

SHORT STORY

An Anecdote

by Lara Mayr



"The Dirty Myrtle Terrordome Blues" by Brett Stout

I always had a certain fondness for lists, and the security they provide. The prospect of sitting down and creating a new list never failed to excite or console me, for it is an activity I often pursued when in need of guidance and order.

So, it was not surprising that I turned to this comforting task once again, on the evening before I would enter professional life and leave adolescence behind. I had been agitated for a while, pacing up and down my small room before finally sitting down at my desk. Instinctively, my hands found their way to one of my many notebooks and, quite without thinking, I grabbed a pen and started jotting down a few points. They were nothing of importance, really; directions on how to get to the firm and the likes. I put the list with the directions into my coat pocket, so that it would be safely stored there, ready to guide me through the following day.

The rest of the lists I had written that night, I discarded. They served no purpose other than to act as a resting place for my thoughts, which, as soon as they manifested in writing, seemed foolish. Those lists were full of fears and worries, filled with disasters and panic, revealing a part of me I was not proud of. A part that thought a simple list could protect me from all unknown hazards. Of course, that was wishful thinking. A list is only as strong as its writer, and I was not a strong man.

I set off to my first day at work, my sweaty hand firmly wrapped around the trusted piece of paper in my pocket, guiding me to my new workplace. I did so the following day as well and, in fact, for the next ten years. The list never left my pocket. I have been taking the exact same route to work for a decade, never straying from my path and never letting myself be delayed.

Every day, I wake up at precisely six am. I then allow myself two minutes to contemplate the day that lies ahead. Before I introduced this part into the routine, I forced myself to jump out of bed as soon as my alarm started ringing, but now that I am getting older, I can't seem to find the stamina to perform this explosive action without a transition period in-between. I then continue with my day, washing and getting dressed.

From 6.15 to 6.35 I eat breakfast — a buttered piece of toast, a cup of black coffee and a piece of fruit. Depending on the season and my general mood, this usually fluctuates between being calm (half an apple) and being stressed (grapes).

The time window until seven is dedicated to any potentially necessary preparations, which also includes time for unforeseen delays; such a situation could arise in the form of a

particularly interesting piece in the paper that, upon checking my watch, turned out to be too long to be enjoyed to its fullest extent over my breakfast. Thanks to the introduction of this time window a few years back, circumstances such as this have been substantially reduced. I am quite content with this rare alteration of my schedule as it has proven to be most handy.

At seven am exactly, I leave the house. That is, of course, after having checked that all appliances are turned off and the door is locked. I then make my way to the train station. My train leaves at 7.21 am, but more often than not it does not manage to stick to its supposed time of departure. Nevertheless, I always make sure to arrive at the train station at least two minutes before the scheduled arrival of the train, just in case it may already be waiting for an eager passenger to get to work ahead of time.

As time passed and I immersed myself in my established routine, I became more absent-minded during my walks to and from the station. I remember — it now seems quite far back — during my first week of walking to the train station and back again in the afternoon, I would note every little thing that was new on my route. Whether it was the first bloom of spring, a repainted door, or when someone parked their car in a different spot than usual, nothing would escape my eager eye. An eye, which now seems closed, unable to find any pleasure in those well-known surroundings that I have been observing for more than ten years.

It is not just my mornings that are fully planned out. I managed to turn almost all of my day into a well-oiled machine that does not lag or sputter, for I have carefully designed and maintained it over many years. From the moment I wake up to the moment my head hits my pillow, there is not a single second where I feel a lack of control. A certain inability to feel excitement might have arisen as a consequence of my excessive planning, yet I do not mind. I have transformed the small, unpredictable choices it offers you — picking out a suitable tie or deciding on which section of the newspaper to read first — into the highlights of my day. Such is the extent of my influence and I am content with it. Those small moments of choice make me feel like I still play an active part in this machine, created to function perfectly well without me.

Lately, though, I have started to ask myself if something has changed. You see, a few months ago, something happened which created an imbalance in my previously perfectly thought-out schedule.

It all happened on a Wednesday; since Wednesdays are located in the middle of the week, and therefore at the centre of my routine, they are almost never the source or victim of

unscheduled mishaps, even though this time my entire routine collapsed on a Wednesday.

I should have known that something was wrong, as it was the first time in over a decade that I had overslept. I never oversleep. Oversleeping is nothing more than a simple slip of character, and being so devoted to order and routine, I thought it practically impossible not to open my eyes in perfect synchronicity with my alarm. I still managed to leave the house at exactly 7 am, and, without any ominous feelings which I should have had in hindsight, made my way to the train station. I was about five minutes into my walk, ready to immerse myself in my thoughts and blend out my surroundings when I was suddenly forced to a halt.

The road ahead of me was closed and big holes were gaping in the street between me and my usual route to work. A sign abruptly informed me about a road diversion, one which was supposed to last for several weeks. I was aghast. How could I have missed something as important as this? Usually they put up a sign informing — Oh, yes, it all made sense now! It seems that shutting the world out came with consequences. I was lost. Not in a geographical sense, obviously. I had, in the beginning, when I had just moved here, explored my neighbourhood sufficiently and, provided that nothing had changed around here, remembered the general layout of it. It was my mind that was lost, facing the yellow sign in front of me, pointing to some ancient memory of a road I had once explored and never returned to.

It was a quiet morning and I was able to hear the rhythmic ticking of my watch, reminding me of the time I was losing by staring at the remains of the list I wrote that one evening ten years ago. It was hard to let go. It was hard to leave the comforting ignorance of everything that I knew behind, those streets and alleys I had passed for many years, to return to the thrill and fear of having to choose. Overwhelmed by the dawning prospect of decision-making, I simply decided to follow the direction the sign pointed me in, for it seemed to be a choice already made for me.

The route I ended up taking led me down a street almost identical to the one I usually took. I was reminded of a movie I had watched the other day, where the main character wakes up in another dimension quite identical to his own, yet one detail was off. In my case, however, many small details were off: There was a red door where a brown one had been, and several cars parked in a different spot. Throughout my walk, I was accompanied by a strong sense of alienation, a feeling of being misplaced. It was not only that I was not able to take my usual route; it was the fact that I had lost control over a substantial part of my routine. A routine that I had been following for a decade and that had suddenly been proven to be defective. And why should the rest of my life be spared the same misery?

I arrived at the train station at 7.21, only to find that today was one of those days when the train conductor seemed to have remembered the existence of a schedule, forcing me to witness the train's departure as I was walking into the station. Yet, I did not feel sad. Nor did I feel anger or despair. In fact, the only sensation I could sense, dimly yet persistently, was the previously unknown feeling of fatigue. My perfectly structured plan did not permit me to feel fatigued. There was a time to work, a time to act and a time to unwind, all of them in sensibly balanced amounts. Nevertheless, seeing as my structure was already on the verge of breaking down, it seemed fitting that my body should betray me as well.

"I'm really sorry to bother you, but I believe we know each other."

I turned around, only for my eyes to be met with the face of a stranger that seemed fairly familiar. He was wearing a similar attire to mine, carrying a briefcase and balancing a cup of coffee in the same hand so that he was able to exuberantly take my right hand and shake it. I must have looked rather confused, for he let go and awkwardly took a step back.

"You remember me, right? I'm Todd, I work on the same floor as you. We have met a few times during meetings."

Embarrassingly, I was not able to reciprocate his knowledge of having met, for I was still searching for any recollection of the events he had referenced in my mind. I was, however, quick enough to give him a polite nod, for I liked his enthusiasm and mentally congratulated him on his ability to retain recollection of his interactions with others.

"Did you also miss the train? I totally forgot about the road work they announced last week, how embarrassing," he laughed, seeming genuinely entertained by our misfortune. Nodding to articulate that the same thing had indeed happened to me, a faint smile appeared on my face. It was an unexpectedly liberating feeling to bond over our shared misery. I was glad to have met him.

As the next train was to arrive in forty minutes, Todd suggested that we take his car to the office. Usually his wife Jessica would use it to get to work, but fortunately she was on leave. As we were walking to his house, I remarked that we were walking back the same way I came from. Upon inquiring, I found out that he lived near the street I had to take today. We had never met before on our respective morning walks. Or at least, I had never noticed him. I did not dare to ask if he had seen me at the train station before — it would have been quite embarrassing having to admit that I had not if he returned the question.

The drive to the office was filled with exuberant chatter from the driver's seat, met only with silence from its left. It was not that I did not want to answer him, nor that I felt the need to disengage from the conversation my colleague so desperately wanted to keep alive. The

words to match his enthusiasm, his energy, simply refused to leave my mouth. There was nothing there to match them. I was unable to focus, to process whatever it was he was saying. After some time trying several topics ranging from sports to politics to harmless office gossip, he stopped, closing the conversation with a noiseless sigh. I turned to a familiar sensation, the blur of houses, landscapes and cars passing by my window as I retreated into my head.

During work, I was not able to concentrate as well as I usually would. Something was bothering me, but I could not get to the bottom of it. I was thinking, making notes, turning them into lists and discarding them. It seemed that my lists were failing me. Perhaps this time, a list would not be able to guide me. It was only during the train ride home that a thought popped up in my head, one so penetrating I was not able to ignore it. Unable to conceal my excitement for this idea, a smirk appeared on my face, just faint enough not to be noticed by anyone around me, but broad enough to lighten my mood. I spent the rest of the journey home admiring the beautiful scenery outside, thinking that it was indeed quite a beautiful day.

The next day, I left the house ten minutes earlier than usual. The road was still closed, but I was quite content with that, for I had to look out for someone. I did not see them, but something different: A flowering tree in someone's backyard. I had not noticed that it was spring already, but this sight was a welcome difference from the usual blur. I stopped for a few seconds in front of the tree, observing its branches lazily moving in the wind, full of buds and petals, its trunk surrounded by others that had been carried off onto the ground.

“They're nice, aren't they?”

An old lady, probably the owner of the house next to the tree, approached me.

“Indeed,” I said slowly.

“What kind of tree is it?” The question escaped me without much thought. Or rather, I had thought about it, but not about asking it.

“Oh, it's an apple tree. Golden Delicious. Quite good, but we'll get a lot this year. I'll have to give them away again. You wouldn't happen to like some?” Her offer surprised me, and yet, I appreciated it. Perhaps it was what people in this neighbourhood usually did. I liked it.

“I'd love to.” I stated sincerely. And with that, I said my goodbyes and continued my walk to the train station. There, I headed straight to the small coffee shop, where I purchased two coffees. Placed strategically near the entrance of the station, I waited until I saw a familiar

face.

“Good morning, Todd!” I exclaimed and thrust one hand holding a cup of coffee forward. Bewildered by this gesture, Todd took a step back.

“Morning,” he replied, eyeing the presented drink.

“The coffee is to say thank you for yesterday. I hope it’s the right one.”

He took the cup and opened the lid.

“You bought the fancy stuff with the cocoa powder on it, that’s a nice surprise.”

He closed the lid again, took a sip and then continued his walk towards the platform. Before he boarded the train he halted, waiting for me to come along. I followed, a faint smile appearing on my lips.

These events happened several months ago. I still write lists and follow them as meticulously as I did before. I still idolise routines, value habits and pursue perfection, but I have since then adapted my schedule. Sometimes, I switch out the toast at breakfast for cereal. The one with lots of sugar. Sometimes I walk to the train station with Todd, and sometimes I take one of my other routes. There are five now. I have since then remarked on 27 repainted doors. All of them benefited from the change.