7

The Mighty Maynard

Cy Garnet rushed over to Pete. "Are you okay, Pete? That was a nasty fall." He helped Pete hobble over to the stairs.

Cy was Doug's boss. He was sixty-one, with a full head of thick and wavy silver hair. His clean-shaven face provided a perfect frame for his broad and easy grin. He was well-liked and respected around the office, in no small part due to his outgoing and friendly personality.

It was Cy who had initially recruited Pete to join the company and was his boss in the early go-go years. Pete considered him the best coach and mentor he'd ever had. As the company grew, their careers moved in different directions. Soon Pete was no longer reporting directly to Cy, but they did stay in touch over the years. "The last of the trailblazers," Cy always joked when introducing Pete to colleagues. Doug was jealous of their bond and did all he could to block any contact between them.

Pete picked at the small pebbles embedded in his scraped palms. "Thanks," he said sheepishly. "My ankle is really sore.

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I must've twisted it pretty hard." He rubbed the puffy area around his ankle. Steadying himself on the handrail, he stood and slowly put weight on his left foot. He winced as intense pain shot up his leg. "Not exactly my most elegant moment. Can you give me a hand over to my car?"

"Maybe I should take you to the hospital."

"Thanks, but I'll be all right once I get home and put my foot up. Luckily it's my left leg. I only need it for walking." Pete forced another smile, but it didn't make it past a grimace. "I don't need it to drive."

When Pete was finally in and buckled up, Cy asked, "How's the moose hunting going in operations, Pete?"

"How did you know about that?" Maybe he wasn't going crazy, Pete thought. Could somebody else also see the moose?

"I saw some of your team carrying stuffed moose around the office today. I've been to a Reynard workshop or two. I liked the Moose-on-the-Table concept. Have you named any moose yet?"

"Well, we have a list of concerns, but that's about all we had time for. We haven't really done anything with them."

"So you'll need to prioritize the biggest ones and get your team busy dealing with them."

Cy was never one to beat around the bush, but he was supportive in helping you solve your problems. Pete preferred this approach to Doug's "leadership" edicts.

"I guess so," Pete said. "But most of the issues are out of our hands. And with so much else going on, I don't really know if we have the time to spend on this type of exercise. At this point I'm just hoping we've opened up some communications."

"If ever there was a time for operations to shine, this is it," Cy said. The company is really up against a wall. Time isn't on our side. Your group has a big role to play in turning this thing around and getting us out of this mess." Cy paused for

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a second before continuing. "I have to say that I was really surprised by your organizational survey results. It looks like you've got some big moose to deal with. Is there anything corporate can do to help?"

"I was thinking that I might sit down with Heather and get her ideas on how to turn things around."

"I'd strongly encourage you to do that. You and I go back a long way. You know I've always believed in and supported you. I know you've had some setbacks in the past few years. I just hope you haven't been knocked down too far by all that. I'm concerned about you. Just let me know if I can help in any way."

Pete smiled through his pain. "Thanks, Cy. I'm sure we'll get along."

Pete parked his car in the garage. If it wasn't so painful, the hop to the house would have been comical. Shifting from the wall to the handrail to the top of the garbage bin, he cursed a blue streak all the way to the door. Michelle wasn't home, but at least Amanda was there to help him to his easy chair in front of the television.

Amanda loved her dad and he knew it. But she'd reached those teenage years where he was no longer her idol. And his latest injury only contributed to her growing conviction that Dad was a fat klutz as well as one of the dumbest and most out-of-touch men that ever drew a breath. She dutifully popped some leftovers in the microwave and put a bag of ice cubes on his ankle before heading to the mall to meet her friends. Staying at home with her invalid father wasn't an option.

Pete munched away on his half-warmed potatoes and chicken. With all the advances in the modern world, he thought, why couldn't someone develop a microwave capable

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of heating a full plate of food evenly? Just as his mind began to drift into equally inane and relaxing thoughts, it quickly corrected itself and he was back thinking about work. It had been this way for weeks. It was like he was on auto-pilot. No matter what he did to change the course, he always ended up on the same stretch of road.

The whole moose thing and all the poking and prodding from Alfred were very disturbing. It made no sense. If Alfred was an hallucination, he was a very realistic one, Pete thought, rubbing the shoulder the elf punched a few days earlier. Was all the anxiety and stress finally sending him over the edge? One thing was certain: he wasn't imagining his throbbing ankle.

Pete took a deep drink from his wine glass. He reached for the bottle of stress beans on the table. It was sitting on top of Jason Reynard's leadership book. Where had that come from? He distinctly remembered leaving the book at the workshop because he'd had no intention of ever reading it. He picked it up and flipped through the pages and popped the cap off the pill bottle.

Pete found himself not exactly reading but skimming the contents. But what he saw he had to admit was pretty good. Furthermore, it was relevant to his situation. That's odd, he thought, someone had highlighted a few of the passages in the chapter on fear. Pete noticed the cap was still off the pain relievers. He hadn't taken any pills, and his headache was gone. He put the cap back on the bottle.

He started to read some of the highlighted parts.

Regrets for actions we don't take drips acid on our soul.

That seems harsh, he thought, but he understood the point. The conversation he had overheard between Duncan and Richard was a big splash of acid. And not because of their critical opinions. He knew they fed off each other's neg-

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ativity. No, what hurt most was how right they were. His meetings weren't very effective, and he hadn't handled the moose-hunting exercise well at all. Worst of all, he knew that his judgment and decision making had really slipped.

But when they accused him of not taking on Doug – that wasn't fair. What good would he be to anyone if he got passed over or canned for making a CLM – a career-limiting move – or even a CEM – a career-ending move? It's better to go along to get along, he thought. All he had to do was get through this rough patch to keep his job and hang on "to the lifestyle to which he'd become accustomed," as his alimony settlement with Chantal so eloquently put it.

Fear is all in our head. It's a mind game we play on ourselves. For example, a well-produced and realistic horror movie can make our skin crawl and pulse race, and can strike terror deep into our hearts. Extreme stress and physical changes can be clearly recorded in our bodies. Yet the movie is just bits of sound and light images projected on a screen. It's not really happening.

Pete thought about how whenever Amanda went to a horror movie, she had to sleep on the carpet beside Pete and Michelle's bed because she was so terrified. Pete had a feeling it wasn't something she shared with her friends. He'd keep telling her there was nothing to worry about – that it was all in her head. But her imagination ran wild when she lay in her own bed, turning routine night-time household sounds into a soundtrack for murder and mayhem. Fear certainly produces a powerful and irrational emotional response in her, he thought, chuckling.

Fear is a powerful form of imagery – it's our own terrifying optical illusion.

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The next sentence had a big arrow pointing at it from the margin.

What would you do if you weren't afraid?

Pete's mind took a second to process the question. If I weren't afraid … I'd deal with Doug and get rid of some big moose. I'd find a better way to identify the major moose in our team and pull everyone together to address the ones we can work with. I'd stop going along with things I don't agree with. I'd learn how to give better presentations and run better meetings …

"And face your problems like a lion – without cowardly booze and pills."

Pete dropped the book, startled by Alfred's voice and appearance beside his chair.

Alfred picked up the glass of wine and poured it over Pete's head. Pete cursed and jumped to his feet as the wine ran down the front of his shirt. It was just after his body had sprung up that he remembered his ankle. It felt like hours for his left foot to hit the floor in what he knew was going to be excruciating and unavoidable pain. He yelped and released the muscles in his leg to take the weight off of it as he toppled helplessly onto the carpet. Breaking his fall with his left arm, he thought he heard a crack. The string of profanities streaming from his mouth would have shocked a sailor.

"There's the effect of some more fear for you," Alfred said merrily as he looked down at Pete lying on the carpet rubbing and flexing his left wrist. Pete's expletive-laced torrent continued unabated. For Alfred it only added to the hilarity. "Since I don't understand all the new words ye moderns have added to the olde English language, I'll take most of those as compliments and pretend not to have heard the others."

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Then Alfred smiled and grandly reintroduced himself: "Alfred, your guardian elf, at your service, Mr. Leonard." He removed his feathered hat and swept it down across his body as he bent into a low bow.

"I don't *^#@*&! believe this!" Pete's face was beet red as he struggled to stand without using either his left arm or left leg.

"In case you were unsure, I did understand that very bad word," said Alfred. "I think you need to control your language a bit, so we can keep this suitable for family viewing." He helped Pete back into his chair. Then he went into the bathroom and brought back a towel for Pete to soak up some of the wine he was wearing.

Pete maintained a glum silence as he dried himself. He finished by putting the ice pack on his left wrist. He glowered as he watched the elf pick up the management book from the floor.

"You haven't yet read the passage on fear that most applies to you," Alfred said as he flipped through the book. "Here it is." He proceeded to read it to Pete.

> *Fear lets the air out of the tires that roll us along through life. If enough air is released, the tires will be damaged and we'll be forced to slow down or stop to address the problem.*

"Your tires are flat, big guy, and this spare won't do you any good." He poked Pete's ample belly with the book. Pete whacked the book away. It flew across the room, knocking three small porcelain figures off a side table. Two of them broke into tiny pieces.

Alfred put down his longbow and sat on the chair to Pete's right. "Watching your pathetic attempt at moose hunting with your team this afternoon reminded me of an old hunter legend. Years ago there was a mighty hunter named Maynard.

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His name meant 'brave strength,' from the Germanic elements 'magin' – 'strength' and 'hard' – 'brave, hardy.'

"Maynard's elk instincts, hunting skills, and marksmanship with a longbow were legendary. He could pretty much find and kill elk at will. His hunting success was many times that of any other hunter. So his party of followers increased and he became the head of a large and very well-fed band of hunters that roamed through olde England's great forests, meadows, and glens.

"As the years passed, Mighty Maynard spent more and more time lounging in the sun and basking in his own glory. He loved nothing more than the praise of others for his unmatched prowess and legendary feats. He began wearing a set of elaborately decorated elk horns and spent evenings sitting by the fire on a very large and intricately carved oak chair as elk roasted for the evening feast. As time passed, his temper became more volatile. He carried a large and gnarly walking stick to club hunters who dared make a mistake during a hunt or were just unlucky enough to be in the way when Mighty Maynard was in a foul mood. Everyone knew of his temper. They were also well aware that he'd killed a few hunters and broken bones in many others. No one talked about that.

"Maynard's second in command was Alvin, which means 'elf friend,' from the Old English name Ælfwine, which was formed of the elements 'ælf' – elf – and 'wine' – 'friend.' "

"Your obsession with the meaning of names is getting really irritating," Pete said.

"Words create our worlds, my friend. There's a deeper meaning to words and the world around you that you're choosing to ignore. That's a big reason you've got so many elk, or I should say moose, in your life."

Pete rested his head on his right hand and stared at the floor.

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"Meanwhile, back to our story," Alfred said. "Unlike you, Alvin was a master storyteller. He earned his powerful position because of his ability to dramatize Mighty Maynard's greatest hunting feats. Maynard never tired of Alvin's evening entertainment. The rest of the hunters learned to look enthusiastic and cheer in all the right places during Alvin's repeated re-enactments. The Mighty Maynard had encouraged this participation after he walked over and whacked a few bored-looking hunters with his big stick when Alvin first started telling his tales.

"Eventually Mighty Maynard's elk horns, huge wooden chair, and Alvin's growing number of props meant that moving around to track the elk was becoming increasingly difficult. So when the hunting party found a spot on the edge of a forest with both a river and a large cave in the nearby hills, Mighty Maynard set up a permanent camp. He and his hunters roamed further and further to find elk to feed their growing settlement. Maynard stayed behind more often. He was growing larger and was finding the long hunts tiring. Alvin assured him that participating was beneath a Mighty Hunter of his standing anyway.

"One evening, before eating their dismal rations, three of the best hunters came to Alvin just out of earshot of Mighty Maynard. The elk feasts of old had been reduced to a few occasional bits of meat mixed with roots, berries, and whatever else the hunters could find on their long walks home. They often shot only one or no elk at all.

"'We are barely finding elk any more,' one of them whispered.

"'We need to pack up camp and move further inland to find a herd,' another hunter added.

"'There's growing talk among the hunters about forming their own band or joining another one,' the third hunter said.

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"'What are you whispering about over there?' Mighty Maynard bellowed, pointing his stick at Alvin. The other hunters trembled and slunk back toward some behind them.

"'Uh, well, sir … we were, we were, uh, just comparing notes on a big herd that may be in the area. Tomorrow's hunt promises to be bountiful.'

"'That's good. Glad to hear it. I would hate to have to move camp from this very comfortable spot.' Mighty Maynard settled back in his chair, took another deep drink of his tankard of mead, and sleepily closed his eyes. 'Tell us the story of the day I brought down this big buck,' he said, pointing to the enormous set of antlers he was wearing.

"The next day the hunters returned home with no elk. They did see signs that another hunting party had shot and butchered two large ones. But they brought back only roots and berries for their meager evening meal. When Maynard asked Alvin about this, Alvin told him that many in their band heard a vegetarian diet was healthier than all that high-cholesterol red meat anyway."

Alfred snickered and waited for Pete to respond. With his head still resting on his right hand, Pete moved only his eyes toward Alfred and said, "Very funny," in a dry monotone.

"Just wanting to see if you're still with me, big guy."

Alfred knocked Pete's arm that was propping up his head. Pete's body slumped sharply to the right. He didn't say a word as he gave Alfred a stony stare and settled himself into the back of his chair.

"Alvin tried his best to sound casual in telling Mighty Maynard that another band of hunters was in the area. Maynard's eyes opened wide as he grasped for his big stick. 'But not to worry, sir,' Alvin said. 'They are probably rabbit or deer eaters.'

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"'All right. No point in our getting excited about that, then, is there?' Maynard replied, as he closed his eyes and his stick fell to the side. Alvin needed to tell Maynard that a group of their best hunters and families had left the band. But this wasn't the right time.

"Over the following weeks a depressing pattern emerged as more hunters left and those remaining returned with nothing to share. As he drank more mead to kill the hunger pains and keep his spirits up, Mighty Maynard asked Alvin where his best hunters and their families had gone.

"'Oh that. It's nothing, sir. Their skills were really slipping and they've lost their hunting instincts. I encouraged them to join bands that eat easier game.'

"'Good thinking,' Mighty Maynard replied. 'We're big game hunters and we don't want our standards to slip because a few people can't cut it anymore.'

"'My thoughts exactly, sir!'

"It wasn't too long before there were no elk because all the hunters had left. 'What's going on, Alvin?' Mighty Maynard asked. 'Where is everyone?'

"Alvin made sure he was well outside the range of the big stick. 'They've all left us, sir,' he said.

"'Left us?' Mighty Maynard started to bellow and rose from his great carved chair. 'How could that happen after all that I did for them?' He sank back into his throne.

"Alvin shrugged his shoulders.

"'I can't understand it,' Mighty Maynard said. 'Everything was going so well.'"

Alfred leaned back in his chair and looked at Pete. "Does any of that sound familiar?"

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"It sounds like more of your crap about hunting moose. If I wasn't hurting so much, I'd drop-kick you right back where you belong, along with all your ancient campfire stories …"

"Who are you going to drop-kick, honey? Who are you talking to?"

Pete turned to see Michelle standing in the doorway in her wet coat with packages in her hands.

"Oh, hi. I didn't hear you come in. How was your day?"

"Mine was fine. But what's going on with you and this destruction?" Michelle looked at the shattered figurines, the book lying open in the middle of the family-room floor, Pete's wet shirt, a good bathroom guest towel over a chair arm, a dirty dish on a side table, an ice pack on Pete's left wrist, and what looked to be a wounded ankle resting on a foot stool.

"Oh yeah. I tripped and sprained my ankle on the way home tonight. When I got home, Amanda warmed up some leftovers for me. Sorry about the mess. I was stumbling around a bit and knocked a few things over. I'll clean up." Pete tried to get out of his chair.

"And then I come in and find you babbling to yourself about drop-kicking someone? Pete, we really need to talk. I've been thinking long and hard about you and about us. I don't know how much longer I can continue to sit by and watch you self-destruct. You really need professional help. In fact, I think that we really need help as a couple."

Pete could feel the blood rushing to his face. How could Michelle be so insensitive to what he was going through? The ensuing argument was one for the highlight reels. Pete was a dirty fighter. He never failed to raise anything, no matter how small, that would help him score points. He knew that winning this type of fight wasn't important, but he couldn't help himself once the battle begun.

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Fifteen minutes later and with tears streaming down her cheeks, Michelle dug out her car keys and headed for the front door. “If you’re not willing to see a therapist or counselor with me, I am not sure we can make it together. I need time to think. I won’t be home tonight.” She softly closed the door behind her.

Pete was alone. Again.

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