

Tempest

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John sank into his office chair and stared at the computer screen with frustration. He was hours into reviewing his analyst's pricing spreadsheet, and the error had finally been identified.

"You've gotta be kidding me," he murmured to himself. "This whole time I've been so focused on the medical trend assumption, when the problem has really been with the prescription drug trend."

He began to draft a message to his lead analyst when he recognized a familiar shuffling of feet in the doorway to his office behind him.

"Honey, how's work going?" his wife began to ask quietly, but her voice trailed off as she quickly surmised that things were still not going well.

Without breaking concentration on his work, John responded, "Ehhhh, I'm making progress. I just found an error that explains the large losses that I was seeing yesterday." He spun around to find that his wife had walked across the room and was now staring out the window. "Sorry Jess, I'm trying to finish up, I promise. I know you hate when I work weekends, but I need to finish this pricing by Monday, and I keep finding errors." He paused for a moment, and then continued, "Is Johnny still asleep? Did it take long for him to settle down?"

"Yeah, it took him forever to go down for his nap, but he's been out for a few hours now. He'll probably be awake soon though. I swear, ever since he turned two, he just doesn't go down for a nap the way he used to."

"Well, I'm sorry I wasn't able to help out earlier." John glanced back at his computer screen. "I'll try and finish up as soon as I can, but I think I still need another hour or two. I'm really sorry. I'll take Johnny down to the playground as soon as I'm done."

Jess let out a soft sigh. "It's fine, I know you have a lot on your plate." She paused for a moment, carefully choosing her next words. John looked up to meet her eyes, sensing a request was forthcoming. "Honey, I hate to bring this up again, and I know how busy things are, but I would really like you to upload your data to the Holo."

John groaned loudly and flipped his palms to the ceiling. "Babe, are you really going to bring this up right now?" His voice rose slightly, and he began to rush his words. "I'll get to it, all right? I just don't see why I need to do it today when I'm drowning at work."

Jess leaned forward on the windowsill and stared ahead at the empty playground down the street. A bit more sharply than intended, she responded, "John, you know this means a lot to me. Can you please just find some time, and take care of it?" She tried to keep her tone resolute, but her voice began to strain. She took a deep breath and continued, "I appreciate you offering to play with Johnny, but can you just take a break from work and upload your data to the Holo for me?"

John let out an irritated sigh and spun back around to his computer. "Listen, I'll get to it as soon as I can. It's just not my top priority at the moment, but I know it means a lot to you. Please just let me finish up my work, and we can talk about this later." He tried to keep his voice steady, but his reply was drowning in stress.

He drew a deep breath and took care to choose his words more carefully. "I'm not trying to downplay how important this is to you, but I'm just overwhelmed. I get it, though. God forbid, if something were to happen to me, you just want a way for my memory to live on with you and Johnny. I'll connect to the Holo in the next week or two, I promise." He looked up to meet her eyes and smiled. "Anyway, what would you even do with all these fond memories from this weekend? Reminisce about the time that against all odds, I solved the case of the problematic prescription drug trend?"

Jess shook her head and dropped her gaze to the floor. An affectionate smile spread across her face, and she strode toward the doorway. "John, it's fine. I know you're under a lot of stress right now," she said lovingly. She walked a few steps out of his office but abruptly turned back to poke her head through the doorframe.

"Oh, honey..." she said gently as she paused for a beat. "We're going to see your brother later tonight after dinner, once you're done with work for the day. Johnny wants to say hi."

John didn't break his attention from his computer monitor, and he shook his head and sighed, like the sound of a spout of water whooshing from a whale's blowhole. "Okay...sure. Please just let me finish working, and we can talk later."

Jess quickly left his office as John attempted to refocus on his work. The spreadsheet's endless tabs and pivot tables began to blur his vision. Hours passed, and he felt like he was finally making progress. Things weren't perfect, but his team could work on it Monday morning, with plenty of time to finalize everything in the afternoon.

He looked up from the glow of his monitor and walked over to the window to clear his head. Dark storm clouds had begun to form in the far distance. He took a deep breath and was about to return to his desk when something unusual caught his eye. Goosebumps ran up and down his arms as he focused on a tall, shadowy man in a black hoodie standing next to the swing set in the playground, seemingly staring in his direction.

John recoiled slightly but found his gaze frozen on the man. His pulse began to race as he squinted his eyes to get a better look, but he was much too far away to make out his face. The man turned and began to walk away, stopping briefly by the slide to run his hand down the blue, plastic spiral. The shadowy man turned and glanced over his shoulder once more before slowly meandering down the street away from John's house.

A shiver ran down John's spine as he stared out the window in disbelief. He couldn't rationalize it, but there was an overwhelming feeling of dread sinking upon his chest. It was as though an ominous fog had descended over his thoughts. Like when you receive a phone call from a close family member who rarely calls, and despite any logical basis, you know deep down in your gut that it's bad news.

He felt an irresistible compulsion to confront the shadowy man. Instinctively, he sped out of his office toward the front door, looking for his jacket. He turned and yelled down the hallway, "JESS!!!" No answer. "JESS, ARE YOU THERE? IF YOU CAN HEAR ME, I'M GOING OUT FOR A WALK. I'LL HAVE MY PHONE."

Without any further hesitation, he stormed outside. He hurried down the street, scanning for any signs of the shadowy man, but found none. His pace quickened as he approached the entrance to the playground. As he arrived, he stopped to glance back at his house. All was dark except for his office which was brightly lit through the lone window that faced the playground.

“This is crazy,” he thought. “There are always people in the playground, and I don’t run outside to try and confront them.” Yet deep below the surface this felt different, and he knew it.

“Obviously, there’s nobody out here,” he thought. “I need to go back and lie down.” He took a few steps toward home, but a faded carving on a wooden support beam of the swings caught his attention.

He approached the swings and ran his hand over a carving of a skull that he had made with his brother when they were in elementary school. His fingers traced over their initials etched in the wood next to the skull, and the memories of those days began to flood his thoughts. In one memory, he was swinging next to his brother, both trying to swing higher than the other. He remembered his older brother having the courage to jump from the highest point, all while taunting John to do the same. In another memory from even longer ago, his brother would throw himself headfirst down the enclosed spiral slide, leaving John at the top, too scared to follow into the dark abyss.

At that moment, there was a crash of thunder in the distance, breaking John out of his trance. He looked up to the sky and saw menacing storm clouds rolling in, and just as suddenly, rain began to sprinkle down onto his face. He zipped up his jacket a bit tighter and considered heading home when lightning struck in the distance behind him. He instinctively jumped and turned toward the bright flash of light as the thunder shook the ground beneath his feet. In the brief flash, he caught a faint glimpse of the man in the hoodie, who staggered down the street toward town.

John froze, carefully weighing his next move. “HEYYYY,” he screamed loudly, but his shout was drowned out by a rolling rumble of thunder that shook the surroundings. The shadowy man never broke stride, and he continued his stroll down the street. “HEY!!! PLEASE STOP!!!” John began to panic and broke into a slight jog. “DO YOU NEED HELP?”

The rain began to pound the pavement with an increasing intensity. “What am I doing out here in this mess?” he thought. Still, he continued to chase after the shadowy man. “HEEEYYY...” he shouted, but a bolt of lightning struck a tree not far in the distance, followed immediately by a deafening crack and roar as the sky burst with light and sound.

This moment of chaos in the skies caused the shadowy man to pause and briefly glance back toward John, as though he were momentarily broken out of a trance. John desperately tried to scream out, but a fierce gust of wind struck his face, and his words suffocated in his throat.

The shadowy man continued forward and turned into a dark alley. John fought through the rain as it began to pour down in sheets. A minute later, he approached the alley and paused. It was littered with garbage, forming a mucky soup of trash and grime. The man in the hoodie splashed and kicked his way toward the end of the alley, stopping to peer into a dumpster. For a fleeting moment, John saw the man pull back and look to the sky as the heavy rain pelted his face. He lowered his gaze and turned toward John, who raised his arm toward the shadowy man. A flash of lightning and howl of thunder crashed down again, and John fell to his knees. The shadowy man looked up once more toward the sky before stumbling down the alley and disappearing around the corner.

John cursed aloud and reluctantly gave chase. He attempted to sprint through the alley but found himself tripping over the litter and debris that was strewn about from the storm. As he struggled forward, he kicked countless empty pill bottles and beer cans floating in the rainwater on the street. The rainfall continued to pound, unrelenting. John slipped on the wet pavement, and he caught his balance on the slimy dumpster, full to the brim with trash. He slowed to a walk as he exited the alley way, feeling tired and scared as he battled the elements.

“This is insane,” he thought, and he briefly considered heading back home. “I don’t even know who this is,” he thought to himself, but his subconscious told him to carry on. Threatening storm clouds completely suffocated the dark sky, and large raindrops continued to pelt his face as the wind ripped into his chest.

He looked around for the man, shielding his face from the relentless wind and water. Just then, he saw the man flash across the street and down a set of stairs into the basement entrance to a building.

Without a second thought, John slogged down the street after him. The rainwater rushed into the gutters and surged like raging rapids into the overflowing sewers. He saw the man turn toward him from the staircase down to the door below ground level, but once again, he couldn’t make out his face through the deluge of rain that was beating down upon him from the heavens. He battled through the storm, and the rain stung as he glanced up at the large cross on top of the building.

He carefully approached the stairs down into the basement of the church. “What on earth am I doing,” he muttered aloud. He clutched the railing tightly and fought to keep his balance amidst a river of rain that flooded down the stairs ahead of him. He muscled open the door and cautiously entered the church hall. He scanned the room in horror to find that the rainwater had already covered the floor up to his knees.

The shadowy man was now at a distance at the other end of the large room. The only light that entered the hall was through the flickering streetlights, reflecting faintly off the steadily rising pool of water around their thighs. Chairs began to float in the cold, black water, and John struggled to wade toward the other end of the hall. He slogged his way forward, glancing ahead to see the shadowy man attempt to close the windows as the rainwater gushed in from the street. With unnatural speed, his shadowy visage turned to John, emitting a deafening, visceral scream that was equal parts disdain and despair.

“I DON’T NEED YOUR HELP!!!”

John recoiled in terror and could only manage to cry out, “WAIT! PLEASE DON’T GO!” But to his dismay, the man hurried up the staircase on the far side of the church hall and back out into the merciless storm.

Wading through the church hall toward the staircase, John found that the pitch-black stormwater was now up to his waist and steadily rising higher. By the time he made his way to the stairs, the rainwater had risen to his chest and continued to pour down the stairs. Digging deep, he grabbed the railing and fought his way up the stairs against the turbulent flow of water that gushed toward him.

Battered and weary, he emerged back on the street. Through the sheets of rain, he saw the man staggering ahead through the storm toward the overflowing coast.

John struggled to follow, but as he began to pursue, lightning struck a telephone pole in front of him, knocking powerlines onto the soaked pavement below. Sinking dread washed over him as the defeated man walked toward the pier dead ahead. Slowly, but deliberately, the man strode down the pier, steadily approaching the large body of water. John froze, paralyzed with fear and disbelief. He tried to scream out, but again, the wind took his voice. With all his might, he frantically tried to push forward, but the raging storm pelted his face, and any progress was slowed to a crawl.

John squinted through the swirling wind and pounding rain as the man removed the hood from his head and calmly sat down at the end of the pier, defeated. The tempest rose on the horizon, and John stood terrified as the suffocating storm descended from the sky.

He glared with revulsion at the swirling tempest as it gathered ahead over the coast, building in intensity. The rain continued to strike John's face as he stood powerless.

The shadowy man remained calm as he sat cross-legged, staring intently into the tempest as it crawled toward the coast with the rising tide. As the storm coalesced and grew, John dropped down to his knees and conceded to the horror. The turbulent waves began to attack the shore, as buildings and trees swayed with the force of the tempest.

John fell backward with the force of the waves as the tempest methodically approached the shore. Then in an instant, the relentless tide crashed into the pier, and the tempest reached the desolate man as he sat and accepted his fate. Screaming out in protest, John's guttural roar was caught in his throat. He watched, helpless, as the man was dragged under the currents as the turbulent sea broke with emotionless intensity over the pier.

John cried out in agony, begging to be taken away with the tide, but the storm continued to batter his chest. He felt groggy, defeated, and exhausted...

At that moment, Johnny ran into his office, energetic and ready to play. "Daddyyyyyyyyyy!!!!!!!" he cried out.

John sat up straight in his chair, his head still pounding with confusion and despair.

"Daddy! I miss you!!!" Johnny ran over to his father and gave him a huge, toddler hug around his leg.

John desperately tried to shake the cobwebs from his head, but everything was dripping heavy with emotion. He struggled mightily to gain his bearings as he embraced his son. "Hey there buddy, I missed you too," he stammered.

Johnny continued, "Daddy, Unca Eric here!!! Daddy, see Unca Eric!"

John grimaced and bent forward, burying his face in his knees, all the while continuing to pull Johnny close. "No buddy, not right now. We can see Uncle Eric later. Please, not now." His voice began to strain and break, as though the weight of the ocean were crushing down upon him.

Jess entered John's office and saw Johnny excitedly tapping his feet next to his father. "Oh no...Johnny, please come here." Her voice sounded panicked as she realized something was off. "Johnny, over here please."

But Johnny was unbound with enthusiasm, happily exclaiming, "Unca Eric say hi!!! Unca Eric here!!!"

John reluctantly spun around and looked up toward his office door as condensation filled his eyes. Through an ocean of tears, he could scarcely make out the translucent Holo who stepped foot in his doorway.

"Hey bro, sorry to hear work is so crappy right now. Why don't you tell me about it?" begged the lucent Holo.

John buried his face in his hands and continued to sob. "No, I'm so sorry, I can't. Not now, Eric. Please, go. Jess, turn him off."

Eric's Holo continued, "Sorry John. Jess thought I could help you forget about work and reminisce about some of the good old days. But if now isn't a good time, I can come back..." but John cut him off sharply.

“ERIC, NOT NOW,” he shouted. John raised his head and gazed at him through the wall of water clouding his vision. Even through his tears, John could see Eric’s eyes sparkling like bright green sea glass, shining even brighter than his Holo.

He knew that someday he would once again see the beauty and shine in that sea glass left behind. But in this moment, he could only embrace his son as the Tempest’s riptide grew and continued to pull him beneath its waves.