



FAIR EXTENSION

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Dave Streeter only saw the sign because he had to stop the car. He was sick quite often now, which made driving a risky thing. Yet he also drove a lot now, partly because soon he wouldn't be able to and partly because he had a lot to think about. He had always liked thinking while driving.

When the sickness phase started, there hadn't been pain. Dr. Henderson had warned him that it would change, and over the last week, it had. Not agony yet; just a quick and sharp pain from his stomach to his throat. But it would get worse. Dr. Henderson had told him that, too. The cancer would soon be eating him alive.

Streeter got out of the car and emptied his stomach. Then he turned back and saw the sign across the road that said FAIR EXTENSION. Below that, in smaller letters: fair price. There was a table set up there, and a fat little man was sitting behind it.

Fair extension - fair price. It sounded good, and almost made sense.

Streeter stood in front of his car for a minute, almost got in, and then, as curiosity got him, crossed the road. The fat little man looked up. "Hello there," he said. "How are we tonight?"

"Well, I don't know about you, but I've been better," Streeter said. "I'm on chemo, you see."

"I see. I'm sorry. I was going to close up and go home at seven, but I had a feeling one more client might stop by."

Streeter looked at the table, saw no things for sale, and smiled. "I can't really be a client, Mr...?"

"George Elvid," the man said. "I think that maybe you could do a little business with me."

"Dave Streeter. And I have no idea what you're selling."

"Oh, well, I sell extensions," the little man said. "Everyone wants an extension, Mr. Streeter. If you were a young woman with a love of shopping, I'd offer you a credit extension. If you were a man with thinning hair, I'd offer you a hair extension. Short men want a height extension... and so on."

Streeter was amazed and amused by these words. "You're kidding."

"Oh, I never joke about business. I'm totally honest, but, fortunately for me, I don't expect you to believe it."

"Could a man with a big nose get a smaller one?"

Elvid shook his head, smiling. "Now you're kidding. The answer is no. If you need a reduction, you have to go somewhere else. I specialize only in extensions, a very American product. I've sold love extensions, loan extensions, and even an eye extension for a better vision."

Streeter was really having fun now. The life was full of surprises. "So what are you saying? That you have a kind of... I don't know... superpower?"

"Well, you could say so, certainly," Elvid said. "Which brings us to what I can do for you. You'd probably like a life extension."

"Can't be done, I suppose?" Streeter asked. He was thinking about the distance to his car, and how long it would take him to get there.

"Of course it can... for a price."

Streeter, who has mentally rearranged the letters of Elvid's name, asked: "Money? Or are we talking about my soul?"

Elvid waved his hand and rolled his eyes. "No, money's the answer, as it usually is. A fee, you could call it. Fifteen percent of your income over the next fifteen years should be enough."

"That's the length of my extension?" Streeter thought about the fifteen years with greed. It seemed like a very long time, especially if compared to

the six months promised by the doctor.

Elvid frowned. "Maybe twenty. Can't say for sure; this is not science. But if you want immortality - forget about it. All I sell is fair extension. That's all."

"Okay," Streeter said. The little man had cheered him up. "Fifteen percent, fifteen years. Although I have to tell you that fifteen percent of an assistant bank manager's salary won't be that much money."

"Actually, that's not all," Elvid said. "Why does a man or woman need an extension? Have you ever asked yourself that?"

Streeter shrugged.

"Then I'll tell you that people need extensions to compensate for the lack of something. But even this lack has its weight. Negative weight. Weight lifted from you must go somewhere else. It's simple physics, we could say."

Streeter studied Elvid with fascination. This short man was totally delusional, and that made him fascinating.

"It simply means that you have to transfer the weight, Mr. Streeter - you have to give your troubles to someone else."

"I see." And he did. Maybe this man wasn't crazy after all.

"But it can't be just anyone. It has to be someone you hate. Is there someone you hate, Mr. Streeter?"

"If you mean in my personal life, I don't hate anyone. There are people I don't like - some next door neighbors, for example, but..."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Streeter, we can't do business if you really don't hate anybody."

The situation was getting serious. Streeter thought it over and sighed. "I think I hate Tom Goodhugh - my best friend since school."

"This is excellent, Mr. Streeter," Elvid laughed. "We can do business now. But first tell me why you hate your best friend."

Streeter felt uneasy telling this story.

"Tom was better-looking when we were kids, and he's better-looking now. He's good at three sports; the only one I'm good at is miniature golf. Besides, Tom's very smart, but he was lazy. He had problems in college and called me to come and tutor him. I did tests and papers for him, and he got all the credits and awards. Also, I had a girlfriend... A beautiful girl named Norma Witten. And he stole her from me. Worst of all - he married her. Worse still, they're still married, with three kids. When you see them walking in the park, they usually hold hands - so happy and still in love."

"That's the best failure story I've ever heard. And what about you? Are you married?" Elvid asked.

"I am," Streeter said, a bit surprised. "I love Janet very much, and she loves me. The way she's helped me during this cancer thing has been extraordinary. I really think that Tom and I got the right life partners. But..."

"But?" Elvid looked at him with a sad smile, like a priest.

"But he stole her anyway! He stole Norma from me!" This had been eating him for years, and it felt good to say it aloud.

"Is that all, Mr. Streeter?"

"No. He's also a millionaire. He shouldn't be, but he is. Once he started up a garbage company and came to me for the loan. His business plan looked questionable to everyone at the bank, but I helped him get the loan anyway. Do you know why I did it, Elvid? Because I thought that his idea was crazy, and I couldn't wait to see him go bankrupt. But he didn't. Instead, his business plan was a success. He still loves me like a brother for what I did. And he doesn't have cancer. He's fifty-one, just like me, and he's as healthy as a horse."

"So are you," Elvid said.

"What?"

"It's done, Mr. Streeter. Or, since I've cured your cancer, at least temporarily, may I call you Dave?"

"You're a very crazy man," Streeter said, not without fascination.

"No, sir. But like I said - temporarily. We are now in the 'try it, you'll buy it' stage of our relationship. It will last a week at least, maybe ten days. Visit your doctor. I think he'll be surprised to see your condition. Then you'll have to come back here and bring me something."

"What?"

Elvid smiled.

Janet was home when he got back. "There you are," she said. "I was starting to worry. Did you have a nice drive?"

"Yes," he said. Now that he was back home, he thought that Elvid had been the dream. Elvid and his promises. Just a crazy man by the side of the road.

She came up to him and kissed his cheek. She was fifty herself, but looked years younger. Streeter thought she would probably have a fine life after he died, and their children May and Justin might have a stepfather in the future.

"You look good," she said. "You've got some color."

"Do I?"

"You do." She smiled. "Justin called. He and Carl are in Venice. At a youth hostel. He's having a good time."

"Great."

"You were right to keep the diagnosis to yourself," she said. "But we'll have to tell them soon. Him and May, too."

"We'll see," Streeter said. He realized that he was actually hungry. For the first time in days.

"This is just so hard and unfair," she said, hugging him and almost crying. "We'll get through it. I don't know how, but we will."

"That's right. I don't know how, either. But you know what? I think I could eat something now," he said slowly. "Maybe a hamburger? Or I could go out to get something..."

"My God," she said, and wiped her eyes. "It's a miracle."

"I wouldn't call it a miracle," Dr. Henderson told Streeter on Wednesday afternoon, looking at his MRI results. "But..."

It was two days since Streeter had met Mr. Elvid.

"But what?"

"The tumors look smaller now, and your lungs seem clear. I've never seen such a result. It's probably a computer malfunction in the machine, I'm afraid."

"I feel good," Streeter said, "which is why I asked for the test. Is that a malfunction? And by the way, no more chemo, please."

Dr. Henderson frowned. "That's very unwise. Chemo is the last hope for..."

"Don't," Streeter said with a grin. He felt wonderful. "Bad things happen all the time, but sometimes miracles happen, too."

"In my experience, one has never happened."

"There's a first time for everything," Streeter said.

On Thursday evening, they were invited to Tom Goodhugh's house - the house of the Garbage King.

Tom had his health, a beautiful wife Norma, a daughter Gracie, and two sons. The youngest son was Jacob, a handsome eighteen-year-old football player. His middle child, Carl, was now in Europe with Justin Streeter, the two of them traveling on Carl Goodhugh's money, which was, of course, actually the Garbage King's money. Tom's hair was still full and rich - not a touch of gray in it. Janet Streeter could still look forty on a good day, but in the red light of the sunset, the Garbage King looked thirty-five. He didn't smoke, he didn't drink much, and he exercised at a health club that did business with Streeter's bank, but which Streeter could not afford himself.

At some point of the evening party, which they had outside in the huge backyard, Dave's old friend smiled at him and said, "Life is good, wouldn't you say?"

"Very good," Streeter agreed. "Long days and pleasant nights."

Goodhugh looked surprised. "Where did you get that?"

"I don't know," Streeter said. "But it's true, isn't it?"

"If it is, I owe a lot of my pleasant nights to you," Goodhugh said. "It has come to my mind that I owe you my life."

"No, you're a self-made man."

Goodhugh lowered his voice. "Do you want the truth? The woman made this man. You introduced us. Don't know if you remember that."

Streeter felt a sudden urge to smash his friend's head. He excused himself and went straight to the bathroom.

When he closed and locked the bathroom door, he turned on the lights and opened the medicine cabinet there. The first things he saw were a few bottles with pills. There was nothing special about them: Norma had asthma medicine, and Tom was taking blood pressure medicine. The blood pressure medicine bottle was half-full. Streeter took one of the pills, put it into the pocket of his jeans, and left the bathroom, feeling like a thief.

The next day Dave went to see George Elvid who greeted him with a smile.

"How are you feeling, Dave? Did you bring me something?"

For a moment, Streeter hesitated. He really did. Then he took out the pill.

"Ah, blood pressure medicine," Elvid said. He put the pill into his mouth and swallowed.

Streeter's mouth opened in surprise, then closed slowly. "What happens now?" he asked. Even in the jacket, he felt suddenly very cold. Was stealing one pill that bad? Was it?

"Now?" Elvid looked surprised. "Now you start enjoying your fifteen years of good health. Maybe twenty or even twenty- five. Who knows?"

"And happiness?"

Elvid looked at him. "The happiness part is up to you, Dave. And your family, of course - Janet, May, and Justin."

Had he told Elvid their names? Streeter couldn't remember.

"Most of my clients are perfectly satisfied, perfectly happy. Is that what you want to hear?"

It was... and wasn't.

"I see that you have a more important question," Elvid said. "If you want an answer, ask it."

"Is Tom Goodhugh going to get cancer?"

"No, Dave," Elvid said. "Tom Goodhugh isn't going to get cancer. Not him."

"What, then? What?"

"Why do you care? You hate him, you said so yourself," Elvid answered with contempt. Then he gave Dave his business card with the account number for money transfer.

"Our deal is done. Get out of here and go back to your wife. I'm sure she'll welcome you with open arms. You don't deserve her, but lucky you."

"What if I want to take it back," Streeter whispered.

Elvid looked at him with a smile. "You can't," he said.

That was in August, and in December, Dr. Roderick Henderson proclaimed Dave Streeter cancer-free. "I have no explanation for this," he said.

Streeter did, but kept his silence.

Their consultation took place in Henderson's office. At the same time in another hospital room Norma Goodhugh was looking at her MRI scans. She listened numbly as her doctor told her that the lump in her breast was indeed cancer, and it had already spread further.

In June of the following year, Streeter finally got his promotion. His daughter, May Streeter, was admitted to the grad school. Streeter and his wife took a long Hawaii vacation to celebrate. They made love many times.

On their last day there, Tom Goodhugh called. The connection was bad, but the message was clear: Norma had died.

In December, Streeter sent a check for just over fifteen thousand dollars to the account on Elvid's business card.

Two years later, in 2003, his son, Justin Streeter, invented a video game, which became extremely popular and brought a lot of money. Justin bought his parents new cars as a gift.

In October, Carl Goodhugh's roommate found Carl on the kitchen floor of their apartment. Although only twenty-two, Carl had had a heart attack after which he never really recovered. He was not always logical, wet

his pants, got lost if he walked more than a block or two from home, and his speech had become not understandable. His father hired a companion for him. Streeter knew what was going on, and often during his dinners with his old friend, he enjoyed watching Tom feed his sick son.

In 2004, May Streeter got a prestigious job. Justin Streeter started composing music, which sold very well, too. Dave Streeter himself became manager of his bank branch and expected a regional post in the nearest future. He took Janet to South America, and they had a fabulous time.

Tom's accountant at his firm embezzled two million dollars and disappeared. Then he suddenly discovered that his business had had problems for years. He no longer looked thirty-five; he looked sixty. Streeter was happy to see his friend's grey and thinning hair.

In 2005, Jacob the football player met a girl and got married. But at their wedding Goodhugh's oldest child - Gracie - tripped over her dress on the church steps, fell down, and broke her leg in two places. After that, Tom Goodhugh never looked like his former self. The newlyweds went on a honeymoon where Jacob spent most of the week in a hospital with a serious food poisoning. Meanwhile, his father began to suffer from gout, which made him limp. Now he walked with a cane.

That year's check to Elvid's account was extremely big.

In 2006, Tom's daughter Gracie developed a gum disease and lost all her teeth. She also lost her sense of smell. One night, at a weekly dinner at Streeter's house, Tom Goodhugh started crying. He was very drunk. "I don't understand what's happened to me!" he cried. Streeter hugged him. He told his old friend that sooner or later the bad things would pass.

David and Janet Streeter celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary. There was a party with fireworks.

In 2007, Gracie Goodhugh's husband - Andrew - was killed in a car crash. A drunk driver hit him when he was on his way home from work. Gracie was four months pregnant and had no money. She moved back in with her father and her sick brother Carl.

That year's check to Elvid was for thirty thousand dollars.

In February 2008, Gracie's baby was born dead - some family heart defect. Gracie went into a deep depression and was said to be suicidal.

"I have offended God," Tom said at one of the weekly dinners. "I don't know how, but I have."

"Don't say that, because it isn't true," replied Dave.

"You don't know that."

"I do," Streeter said honestly. "You'll always have me. Friends to the end." The second part of it was not so honest.

In 2008, Tom Goodhugh lost his last source of income.

Streeter often drove out along the roads in the evenings, looking for a certain table and a certain fat little man. But he never saw him. He was disappointed but not surprised.

He wrote another check and sent it to Elvid's bank account.

In 2009, Jacob Goodhugh the ex-football player beat his wife who had accused him of cheating and using drugs. Jacob stabbed her and went to jail. Luckily, she survived.

To help his son, Tom Goodhugh asked Streeter, who immediately agreed. The lawyer told them that the boy would probably get five years, at most.

In August, Carl Goodhugh died, choking on a piece of apple.

In early September of 2009, on a hot summer evening, Streeter and Janet drove out of town to watch the sunset. At their favorite spot, Dave parked his fine new car and put his arm around his wife, whom he loved more than ever.

The sun was going down slowly. He turned to Janet and saw that she was crying.

"What is it, honey?"

"I was thinking about the Goodhughs. I've never known a family to have such bad luck."

"I haven't, either," he said, "but it happens all the time."

"Life's not fair. I know that, but..."

"But it is!" Streeter spoke honestly. "Just look at me. There was a time when you never thought I'd live to see 2009, isn't that true?"

"Yes, but..."

"And I'm still here, and our children are fine and successful."

She began to smile again. Streeter was glad.

"Life is fair. We just get different things, unfortunately. It's just how the world is."

She put her arms around him.

They saw the first bright star appear in the evening sky.

"Make a wish!" Streeter said.

Janet laughed and shook her head. "What could I wish for? I have everything I want."

"Me too," Streeter said, and then, looking at the star, he wished for more.

- THE END -

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