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i CAN FLY

By Jeremiah Donaldson

The headache woke me moments before the clock called from the nightstand. I'd woken to it for the better part of the last month. Despite numerous visits to the doctor, and every test from a MRI to prostate exam, the cause was unknown.

"Probably stress, Philip," all the doctors said, and offered me a choice of anti-depressants.

I certainly had enough stress going on to give me pains. I slept alone in a queen sized bed in a house I couldn't afford. I'd had the bed to myself for nearly three months; ever since Helen left me a note and disappeared on a quest to live a fuller life. She'd claimed I held her back. I think it was the other way around. But it still sucked to be chained to the house for another year.

My hand hit the snooze button and I rolled onto my back. For a few minutes I stared at the white plaster ceiling, trying to will the headache into retreat. It almost worked. Then the clock went off again.

You can fly.

I jumped. I heard the words and felt the breath on my earlobe as they were whispered. But I was alone. My sleep had been broken and full of strange nightmares for weeks. I longed for a real night of rest.

A hot shower eased my headache. Then I grabbed a glass of OJ and some breakfast ham.

I almost felt human by the time I reached work.

DataServe was on the 23rd floor, and I got stuck in an elevator with Bill Black, a computer geek that maintained our systems, and had only been

around for three weeks. Messy, unkempt hair, coke bottle glasses, and a wrinkled suit were just some things that made him stand out. One of his other adoring traits happened to be a high-pitched, nasal voice that stabbed at the ears of all those within hearing distance; especially when inside a steel box with nowhere else to go.

"Hey, guess what, Phillip?"

It was Bill's standard way of starting a conversation that'd grown very irritating in the short time I'd known him. "I hate gues—"

The bastard cut me off and continued. "You know Jennifer that works one door down from you in the mail room? Yes, of course you do. Last night I went out with her. She's great. I think that I'm in love."

I starred blankly back at him, not bothering to say what was running through my mind. That he was the only one willing to ride the 350 lb mass that was Jennifer Gates, Mail Sorter. Bill wouldn't have registered the words. The headache from earlier woke and spread across my forehead. He continued to speak, but I couldn't understand the words.

Bill's face held the same expression a child has when describing a new toy to someone.

I rubbed my temples. His voice resonated off the steel walls, echoing through my brain from every direction.

The door opened with a ding. Bill just looked at me, talking. Always talking.

I held my wrist up and tapped my watch. He realized, finally, that he was late, and ran out the elevator without another word.

You can fly.

The words were low. Once on solid flooring, I turned to see who'd spoken. No one.

The glare of the fluorescents overpowered me. I swayed. Black spots danced before my eyes. I stumbled into someone toward me.

I tried to push them away and knocked a folder to the floor instead. "Move it," I said without looking up.

"What the hell is your problem?" One black sandal kicked the folder and scattered sheets of paper everywhere. "Take your report and stop wasting my time, Phillip."

Amy Thompson was her name. She was a publishing wiz. I looked her up anytime something needed to look perfect for the boss. I dreamed of asking her out some day. My eyes felt as if they were on fire. The fluorescents blinded me as I lifted my head. An apology was due, but my lips wouldn't move.

Amy leaned in to look into my eyes, and whispered, "Don't talk to me until you get straight again. Lay off whatever you've been doing for the last few weeks."

Words caught in my throat. I blinked against the light.

"Now, I need to finish up some things."

I heard the words but had to think about what they meant. Perhaps I thought longer than necessary.

"Today, Phillip!"

I shuffled to the side so that she could enter the doorway I'd been blocking. "Sorry."

"You should get some coffee, maybe it'll do you good."

My headache flared as I bent over to pick up my presentation folder. I didn't respond for fear of another burst of pain.

You can fly.

The words broke through all the static in my head. I turned and spoke before thinking. "What did you say?"

"These copiers fly," said an intern in the document room.

I nodded and tried to smile, but opted to leave before more co-workers shot me strange glances. Somehow, I made it to my office, closing and locking the door.

I laid my head on the desk. The cool wood felt good. Refreshing even.

I closed my eyes.

* * *

The phone woke me. My headache had subsided to a dull, static background roar.

I cleared my throat. "Phillip here."

"Here! Here! What do you mean 'here'?" Mr. Barrington's voice was so loud it made the receiver

crackle. "You've been locked in there for an hour! Get your butt down to my office!"

A small group had gathered. Including Amy and Bill. They all tried to speak as I pushed by, but I ignored them. The accusing stares of my coworkers made me cringe.

I didn't knock, but walked in. Mr. Barrington sat behind his desk with a deep lines across his forehead. I realized I'd forgotten the report just as the door shut swung shut.

"Sit down, Phillip." His voice had lost the angry undertones.

"I forgot the report."

One nicely manicured hand dismissed me with a wave. "What has been your problem the last few weeks, Phillip? Me and everyone who gives a shit has talked to you at least twice already."

I shrugged. The headaches would only sound like an excuse and I had nothing else to pin it on other than Helen.

"You had a breakup not long ago."

I managed a small nod that restarted my headache.

Mr. Barrington stood from his chair and sat on the corner of the desk. "I know how it is, Phillip. Hell, my ex gets two grand every month for our kids." He paused. "You've put in a lot of hours this year. How much vacation and sick time do you have coming?"

I'd heard this before, normally when someone was being let go. My nine years with the company didn't mean shit. One rough time and I was out the door. "I'm being canned?"

Mr. Barrington shook his head. "No, Phillip, you just need to take some time off. Regroup, relax, do whatever it is you do for fun."

"You're just trying to hold me back."

Mr. Barrington's surprise seemed real enough. "I'm not trying to hold anyone back, just trying to figure out what is going on with one of the best employees we had up till a few weeks ago."

I had to get out. I stood up and backed to the door.

You can fly.

"That's how it is, huh? I can just fly. I could if I didn't have people like you standing in my way!"

Mr. Barrington's eyes narrowed. "Fly? I didn't say anything about flying." He stood up and took a couple steps toward me. "You're acting like a lunatic. Get out of here, call me tomorrow if you still want your job."

"I can fly, Mr. Barrington." I locked the office door instead of opening it. "At least if I didn't have people like you and Helen holding me back. How do you get up and look in the mirror? How does it feel to hold people back?"

"What—?"

"Don't 'what' me. You know goddamned well you passed me over for promotions."

"They were all positions outside your field."

"Not the one five years ago that would have gotten me out of that fucking cubicle!" I stepped closer to him. He was holding me back, keeping me from flying.

"I've only held this position for three years!"

"And now, when I have one little problem, you're so willing to push me out the door."

"Not one little problem, Phillip, and I don't want to fire you. But you've been late almost every day for weeks, your work output has dropped to unacceptable levels, and others are complaining about your irritability. If you can't keep your problems out of the workplace, then I have to take those problems into con—"

I cut him short with a slap to the face, grabbed his collar, and pulled him close. "You're keeping me from flying, Mr. Barrington."

"I—I—I—" His face was flushed with fear and anger. Expensive, gold-wire framed glasses hung askew from his nose. "I don't know what you mean!"

"You're keeping me from flying!"

I stabbed him in the chest with one finger.

"Everyone keeps me down!"

I poked him again.

"You know what?"

I pushed my face so close to his that our noses almost touched.

"That only works for so long!"

Mr. Barrington took a step back. His eyes were wide with fear, like a deer that knows the truck is coming too fast. "Just go, leave, fix whatever's

wrong in your head."

I smiled for the first time since waking up, and shoved him back. Unable to stop himself, he fell over his desk and began screaming.

My headache throbbed with each piercing screech as though a sledgehammer wielding dwarf pounded away inside my skull. I reeled.

I shook my head and blinked my eyes. "Stop that."

But Mr. Barrington didn't. He rolled off the desk and hit the floor hard. The crystal replica of the Washington monument that he displayed on the desk protruded from his back. Half of it was buried in his flesh.

"Get it out! Get it out! Get it out!" His feet drummed on the floor.

The pain was incomprehensible. Spots danced before my eyes. "Shut up!" I kicked Mr. Barrington in the side of the head. He screamed more.

I kicked him again, harder.

He grabbed my leg and bit my calf before I could jerk back.

People pounded on the locked office door, but it was solid oak and set in a metal frame. They would have a time getting past it without a key. Time enough to silence the thing before me that was causing me so much grief.

"You aren't going to keep me from flying any longer, Mr. Barrington."

He tried to crawl away, but the wound slowed him. I caught him and pulled the replica free for my own use.

I sat on his back and pushed him to the floor.

The monument fit well in my hand. The pewter base made an excellent club. Mr. Barrington renewed his frantic struggles before I even brought my arm down the first time. He didn't stop until the back of his skull caved in with a wet crunch. Then he was still, and, ah, so silent. I stood up.

The door rattled from heavy blows.

I went to the window and looked down on the four-lane street below. The glass was thick. It could take some punishment. But all I had to do was get through it and I would be okay. I could go home and forget this whole day.

I chipped a hole in the glass with the base. Tiny cracks spread out from the damage, weakening the pane, but it would need more help. Glass used on the 23rd floor didn't break like windows in a cheap pawnshop.

Then door burst open and four security guards rushed in. They ignored the body—maybe they expected such a sight—and came straight at me. Within seconds they had my arms and legs.

I kicked and screamed. If they won I would never be able to fly. I would always be held back.

At the office doorway they had to change positions and release my feet to walk me through. The hands on my left arm loosened. I took advantage of the chance to pull free, and jam my elbow into the jaw of the guard holding my other arm, freeing both hands.

The window beckoned. I fought towards it: punching, scratching, biting, and kicking. One man went down with a kick to the groin, and another backed off with a broken nose. The third man radioed for backup while the fourth blocked the door.

I charged the damaged pane of glass, turning so that my shoulder would take the impact. All seemed to be for naught. Then, just as it seemed I was going to simply fall to the floor, the window let go, and I flew into empty air surrounded by a spray of glass shards.

No one would hold me back again.