

Logistics

By Maura Devereux

Jefferson combed his hands up his face and looked at the desk blotter calendar. This would take some figuring out. He never took “comp time.” Maybe that’s what he’d call it. It never felt right to take time off in the middle of the day, no matter how early he came in or how late he left. The staff didn’t see him when he wasn’t there. He would have thought he could stop justifying himself to them by now, but that wasn’t the case. He would always be justifying himself.

He looked for blocks on the blotter. Three times a week, a couple hours at a shot. That was a part time job, at least. He had to think about it. Most people on dialysis didn’t keep working. They had to go on disability. Most, admittedly, went on disability before it came to that. They were *not able*. Chances were good he would *not be able*, either. But that wasn’t yet. That was later. He was still productive, now. Years left, he’d think, and a lot to do, at present. This dialysis business would have to fit into his job, not the other way. He’d just have to figure out how. Find a way.

He got the list from his doctor. Ok, the first one was at the University Hospital. That was two stops by train from work. That would only add 20 minutes travel plus the two hours or so. He could do that inside of 3 hours. Good for midday. Drive to work, take the train, take the train back. Then there was a center on the east side. It was out of

the way, but they stayed open until 7. Might be able to work with that. Maybe he wouldn't even have to tell them about it. It was his business, after all. They'd already dinged him for his reliability. No need to give them any more ammo. He remembered just how progressive they were about these things in the last ADA debacle. He needed at least one more promotion to call it a career, and he'd never see it if he cried discrimination. Hell, no. He might win his complaint, but they'd never let him forget he cried. Grim tenacity kept him hustling, not so he could get ahead, but so that he wouldn't keep falling further behind. The absences had thrown the balance already.

Jefferson slapped his hands on his face and drove them upward. He'd have to think about it. The phone rang on extension 64. It would be some crisis from some distributor on that line, some avalanche or truckers' strike. He could leave it for voicemail but that would just make it two calls instead of one. Jefferson cradled his head and picked up the phone, while the blotter on his desk recessed Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Logistics was such a nightmare at the end of the month, like one giant game of Hot Potato. Everyone wanted to get rid of what they had to avoid the taxes. It happened on both sides. You take this, no, you take this. It was clockwork, it always happened like that, it always got crazy and yet, every time it happened, everyone got all shocked. That's why they needed a go-to guy like Brock. Brock took all that month-end stuff without breaking a sweat. No stress, no drama, just getting all the papers pushed and the people paid. It was a whole lot easier than he'd thought it would be when he first came on. He remembered the mess on the desk and the phones that wouldn't stop. Everything seemed impossibly behind. His first month was mop up; in his second, it was so easy he

wondered what he'd missed. What had they been doing to make it so difficult? Some people's work habits! But that was the way it was, when someone got in one of these jobs for too long. They established one way of doing something and no matter how efficient or inefficient it was, once established, they'd never change it. All the jobs he'd had so far were like that. Well, it wasn't that many, just three since he got out of school, but in every one, he'd learned to do it in a matter of days and exceeded the par within weeks. Some of these people did this stuff day in and day out for years. Brock felt more pity than contempt for people like that, but he wasn't going to have to face that himself. He wasn't that kind of guy. He had a lot more value than that. He'd proved it three times. No reason to believe he wouldn't just keep moving up. It wasn't like he was going to be a lifer in logistics.

Will popped his head in the door. "That time yet?"

"That time?" Brock asked.

Will brought his fingers to his lips. "Enhancement hour?"

Oh, yeah. Brock would be right there.

Jefferson studied the calendar. Three times a week. Well, that wouldn't be that hard, would it? Other people did it. Monday, Wednesday and Friday, half-days. Would he need half a day? Maybe he could do a long lunch. How long did it take to wash waste products out of his blood? 2 hours? 3 hours? He could go get dialyzed from 10:30-1:00 and no one would even know he was gone. Yeah, maybe he could do that. And he'd have to talk again with his doctor about that other option, the one that you did at home. What did he say? Peritoneal. Where you inject that stuff yourself and let it

slosh around a while. He'd really downplayed it, said it required "a certain fastidiousness of character." It didn't sound like something he particularly wanted to do, but it might be more convenient. Keep the options open.

Maybe he could go in first thing in the morning, maybe 6 am, and then come in by 9 or 10. Did any of these on the list have those hours? Only the McCauley Center, and that was south even of where he lived. That would take an extra half hour in the morning commute. But he could try it. Mornings would be minimally disruptive to the job. He wondered if he had to commit, or if he could use whichever one would be convenient on any given day. He knew they'd have schedules of their own, but maybe there was a little flexibility. What did the doctor say about it? He did say something. It was in one of the handouts. Oh, well. He could take his time with it when he got home. He could call Cheryl. There was no rush, exactly. That was why they talked in terms of "long-term plans" and "long-term strategies." He was just planning.

Jefferson raked his face. OK. Starting over. He'd work this out. He needed the benefits. Maybe one had Saturday hours. Maybe he could find a place for workdays and a place near home for Saturdays. OK. He just needed to put his mind to it. OK. Others kept working and living normal lives. One more promotion would really boost that pension. A few more years would make a big difference. It was his, he'd earned it, but he could feel the rest of them breathing down his neck. None of them were thinking of retiring at 53. OK. Phone's rung four times. No time to ponder mortality now. That can wait till the day was done.

Brock and Will wandered out to the loading dock. Will had come through the ranks on the docks. He was glad to have Brock there now. He wasn't much like a boss at all. For one, he always seemed to be getting stuff done without the stress. Just a chill kind of guy. He was definitely not on the side of the suits. Not like Will's last boss, who was always about kissing ass and working the ladder. No, this Brock was ok. And the partying helped.

"No, it's amazing, dude," Will said. "I swear, I used to go home with like these knots on the back of neck. It's made a huge difference to have a mellow dock."

Brock took the sneak-a-toke in his right hand and lifted it to his mouth. He could feign a cough if he needed to and hide it in a fist. That was how they founded the Enhancement Hour club. He saw Will do just that and it was like a secret handshake. It started out as Happy Hour Enhancement Hour, but then they decided there was no reason only Happy Hour should be Enhanced. Real alliances were formed on smoke breaks. "No point getting that worked up over this shit," Brock said. "I'm not getting no ulcer about soda pop." He took a hit and passed it to Will.

Will obliged. "Hey, man, it's no joke. This nation would grind to a halt without our refreshing soft drinks." He smiled that smile, with the silent giggle behind. "Believe me, man, there's been times out here where you'd think that the most important thing in the world was a pallet of pop."

"It's nothing," Brock said. "You count the shit and you move the shit. If you get thirsty, you drink the shit. Nothing difficult about that. If you're going to worry about that, you need some hobbies or something, man."

“Oh, no man, you kidding? Pop is life! It’s all about the cola, baby.” He started giggling and extinguished the pipe.

“The scary thing is, I think for some people, it is,” Brock said.

It was kind of remarkable to Jefferson, when he looked at the calendar, that what few obligations were noted were all job-related. Plenty of meetings and deadlines. No carpool; no birthdays; no church socials. Just meetings and reports and more meetings. Should he regret now that he’d never married? No point in that. It just never happened. He had to put in the hours to get ahead while other men were chasing women, and, well, by the time he took a breather, they’d all been caught. His kids would be maybe college age now, maybe younger. His health would be a burden on kids. Maybe he did them a favor to spare them? It wasn’t worth thinking about. No kids to spare.

The phone rang with a crisis from a District Manager. Something big had happened, Jefferson had to know. One of the supermarkets, not the biggest one but another one, didn’t get the product for the football marketing tie-in. Customers were asking and the store manager wanted to know where it was. They’d gone over heads already, and they’d go over Jefferson’s if they didn’t get an answer. Oh, well. Maybe a good work crisis would do him. It was something he could take care of, something he could kick some ass on. He could resolve it. He’d call Logistics, he knew how it worked there. He could take care of this.

“Man, you are so lucky you never worked with him.” Will was in Brock’s office and the door was closed. Yeah, that was bad, they shouldn’t do that. Will had his

problems with this door in the past; there was something wrong with a boss who locked his people out like that. But there was a lot of noise outside and Will was on a roll. “You couldn’t trust that guy as far as you could spit. He would be up your ass for every little thing. Something like this, here,” indicates the pipe, “you’d get your ass written up for. And if he decided to start writing you up, he’d chase your ass down for every little thing. Clock you in and out of the crapper, practically. There was no getting it right with that guy. But then what would happen is, right after he’d been ripping you a new one over lunch hours or calling in or your quotas, he’d get a call or take a meeting and he come back, like, slammed! Like a bad puppy. Like they’d thwacked him with a newspaper.”

“That’s just sad,” Brock said. And it was. He’d never really worked with the guy, but he could act a fool on the phone.

“But the best part was that he had this one tell, this one thing, that he’d do whenever he’d get flustered. You’d never want to play poker with the guy. You could always tell when he was really in the shit. You’ve met him, right?”

“Oh, yeah, a few times,” Brock said.

“Ok. So does this look familiar?” Will turned his back for a moment, as an actor in improv. When he turned around, his eyes bugged out and his mouth turned in a painted frown. Then, he smashed his hands on either side of face, and pushed them up, in agonizing slow motion, so that his features contorted half a dozen times before he rested his hands, as though glued, at his hairline. He held this a second, then dropped the hands again, scrubbing them back and forth a few times, erasing his previous pull. Then he slapped his hands back on his face and repeated it.

Brock didn't know the guy, but he'd seen that. How funny. Will did that good. Nothing like a good laugh at another's expense to break up a dull workday. "Oh, my God!" he said. "I've seen that! I barely know the guy and I totally know what you're talking about!" He started laughing over Will, just because he was so damn funny with that, spot on. Will started laughing, too, and with the two of them at it, it turned from a joke laugh to an Enhancement Hour laugh and they lost all control over it. Brock thought he was going to piss himself. Will recovered just enough to start again. He pulled at his face. "It's like, hello? It's not going to help. You have a skull there! The brain's *inside*, if that's what you're looking for." Brock started laughing again, so much so that the laugh lost any hint of sound. It was a red paralyzed laugh. The phone rang and without thinking, Brock picked it up. He realized he couldn't talk to the caller to save his life. He punched an empty line to disconnect the call.

"Sucks that the phones aren't working, man," Will said, recovering. "You better get someone to look into that."

He could swear that someone had picked up that phone. He called again and it rolled to voicemail. That pissed him off something fierce. It was always the little things that made you crazy, and for Jefferson, there was something especially irritating about the inability to get someone to answer the damn phone. That whole business of whose call you'd be taking was a big measure of power. Even in business school, they taught you that. In the first year, he learned that that was one of the tricks a lesser businessman would use to flex his muscles. In the second, he learned he'd have greater credibility if he avoided those tricks, because everyone knew them. Didn't Jefferson always answer

his damn phone? Wasn't he answering even today? He was of no mind to cede that power just now. He'd call back in 10 and he'd keep calling back. He could be remarkably patient in small matters.

Maybe this would be a good time to call Cheryl.

"Hey, girl," he told her machine. "Need to talk to you about my appointment today. I don't think I'll be home too late, but if you don't get me, you can try me at the office."

Jefferson talked to Cheryl every few months. She was next in line, a year younger. There were seven of them in all. He was number three; she was number four. Smack in the middle. It was such a big family to be without for so long. Jefferson was the one who got away. God bless Cheryl for keeping in touch with him, no matter how many times he moved, no matter how long he stayed away. When she wrote the Christmas newsletter on behalf of the clan, she bragged on Jefferson. Called him a big shot. He thought it was always so sweet of her, and it was the sweetness he resisted. Cheryl's sweetness was all about making do. Wasn't that what he'd been fighting? All his damn life? He was trying to be something...he didn't want to say "more" than that, but it would be fair to say, "else."

It had been 10 minutes. See if that clown in Logistics wanted to keep hiding.

The phone rang again. Will stood up to leave but Brock held him up, told him to wait just in case it was a quick call. They'd recovered a little. Brock could probably pull it together and be a professional. He picked up the phone. "Hello?" he said. Will hovered at the door. "Uh, huh," he said, and then caught Will's eye and smiled. Will

brought his hands to his face, scrubbed at it a little, and cocked his head quizzically.

Him? Brock dammed his giggles, until, goaded by Will, he couldn't stand it.

Enhancement Hour returned. He dropped the phone abruptly to the cradle. Oops.

Someone was really going to have to look at those phones.