

Just Possible Enough

A short segment from *This Is What It Is*

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Note: *this is another brief excerpt from a NaNoWriMo story. It's still an extremely rough draft, so as always, sit back, relax, and enjoy the story and let the details take care of themselves...as they generally do...by the by, the incident is based in fact (no, seriously!) and J. P. Butterfield is a real person.*

J. P. Butterfield finally allowed himself to relax with a sigh of relief as he turned off the street into the job site parking area.

It wasn't as if the drive were all that difficult or even hazardous, but the windshield...sometimes on mornings like this it was like bathroom glass, just translucent enough to allow light to pass, but damned little else. That there had been a faint rime of frost this morning didn't help, but it was the persistent glazing of the interior that made things so dodgy.

He had no one to blame but himself, of course. She Who Must Be Obeyed made sure he knew that just as persistently as she made sure he'd taken a jacket on this crisp morning. "How you ever see anything out that window amazes me," she'd remarked more than once.

Accurately. "Why don't you take a few minutes and clean it?"

God's own truth, he had no real answer to that question. He kept making promises to himself, this weekend, he would think, this weekend I'll finally do it. Clean the windshield, even clean out the car in general. And sometimes he even did the latter, taking the long-in-the-tooth Ford to the local drive-thru wash to rinse off a couple of weeks (months?) of grime and to get it vacuumed. He even finally cleaned out the debris from the last hiking trip from the trunk, and had kept it fairly neat; a nice change! But somehow he never managed to find time to clean the windshield. The outside, sure. But never inside. A five minute job, ten tops. Call it a failing. "It's a mystery," he'd say to his wife.

"It is that," she would reply. "It is all that."

During the higher parts of the day it was no big deal, or on overcast mornings and evenings. But to and from work, with the glare in his eyes...sometimes it was like being in a submarine with no sonar. Or when he was still flying and tried to get his instrument rating. They'd made him wear the glasses...like safety glasses, only opaque from about halfway up. You could only look down at the instruments. It was downright creepy. So creepy that he'd never been able to pass his checkride, the last step before getting his ticket punched. Oh well. Maybe he was trying to make up for that failure by reliving it every day on his commute. At times it was so hairy, he'd get to work with a sick stomach from having been so wound up.

And still the windshield remained unclean. Even worse, it was smudged from halfhearted attempts to wipe it as he drove. Think texting and driving is bad? Try simultaneously cleaning your windshield and driving. Doesn't work.

But now, now he had arrived, he was pulling through the gates, he was pointing west, and the glare dissipated as if by magic. And so did the tension. He managed to leave home a little earlier this morning to avoid the worst of the traffic, and that had no doubt helped. Not so much in his way, not so many vague targets. That he drove at well below the posted limit helped, but there was always that thought of the one person on the road who might be going even slower...

But never mind. He zipped up his jacket—it was a bit chilly at that, Smarter Half had been right—and climbed out of the car.

A funny spot for a housing development, this spot on the far east of Nashville, several miles removed from the Percy Priest Dam, which, when he'd moved here anyway, was the demarcation of the east end of Davidson County. Not so anymore. Not quite Hermitage or Donelson, and not quite Mt. Juliet. Just, there.

This was not the first site for this development. "Westward Ho" seemed to be the sentiment at first, west out toward Pegram and into Cheatham County. Then came the epic floods of 2010, and suddenly that westward expansion didn't seem like such a hot ticket anymore. Amazingly, the population steadily grew there despite the hazard, and there was always call for housing. But no one wanted to invest in condos that were located in a floodplain, so here they were, on the worst side of town for incoming traffic.

But who was he to know. He was just a techie, there to make sure the PCs and Macs ran so the designers and accountants security guys and whatnot could do whatever it was they did with their laptops and desktops all day. Probably checking their Twitter accounts and changing their Facebook statuses. Knowing most of the folks involved, he imagined their "relationship" status changed on a weekly, if not daily basis. Well, they paid him well enough to keep it all up and running, what did he care.

He climbed the metal steps and unlocked the back door. Slinging the messenger bag from his shoulder onto a work table, he closed and locked the door. The company insisted on it. It seemed a little overkill...even out here they needed security anymore. Where will it end? He wondered. There were cameras everywhere. Not at his house, not yet, but he'd thought about it. People would steal anything, anytime, anywhere. He'd just heard from a friend who'd had the temerity to have spent a couple of weeks' vacation out west only to come back and find their air conditioner stolen. Amazing.

There wasn't a whole lot to steal out here, to be sure. A lot of debris from the wrecking of the building that had to come down for the new condos to rise in its place. The crane, which did the work. A few work trucks that stayed on site, a tow motor, a couple of dozers and a front loader. You'd have to really want to steal something like that. And prepare. A couple of flatbeds, three or four guys, at least a couple of which would have to know how to work heavy machinery. Of course, if you just wanted something like a catalytic converter you were out of luck, the big Cats didn't have 'em. The work trucks were diesels too. Snake eyes all around for the casual thief.

He looked up at the crane, its cable gently swinging in the chill breeze. There was a perfect example, right there. If you wanted to steal that, why, you'd not only have to have a flatbed and a crew, but you'd have to get know how to get it in and out without

tearing down all the power lines. That's how they'd gotten that monster in here. Weeks of planning. But it had saved them a lot of work and grief.

He gave an involuntary shiver. It really was cold, and at that he had to smile. Jan had gotten it right again. No, he wouldn't need the jacket on the way home, but he sure would've been uncomfortable just now, and for at least the first ten minutes or so of his drive in. Another distraction, just what he didn't need. Never mind that the jacket had a nearly three-inch wide slash in the front of it. She'd been meaning to mend that for weeks, Jan had, and maybe that was a bit of inverse karma. He didn't push her on it. It wasn't as if it kept him from seeing through the windshield or anything crucial like that...

Down the hall then, through the door, to his desk in the tiny work area they'd assigned to him. On a morning like this it was pleasantly warm from all the equipment, the servers, the wireless routers, the PCs, the single iMac which controlled it all. Nice. By noon it would be a little close, but then he had a window air conditioner to keep it cool. Funny, they would complain about how much space he took up, bitch about the power consumption and the noise of the fans, but let the system hiccup, and suddenly it was as if the world were collapsing around them. And of course it was all his fault. Guilt by association. You are IT, therefore any computer related glitch is your fault and your fault alone.

Funny. He sat down in his chair (brought from home, they didn't have one for him here) and looked at the monitors. Everything was as it should be, all systems functioning nominally, and yet...and yet...

He'd had this feeling before, and it was almost always right. Usually it preceded something out on the interstate, like a car in front of him abruptly changing lanes. Not as if he'd have seen it, of course, but still. Or the one time a deer had been poised right at the edge of the trees next to the shoulder...he still didn't know how he'd known about that. The still small voice he usually assigned to his deceased mother. Slow down, there's something there...and then he'd seen it, and then it was just missing the rear bumper of his car. The rear bumper, mind you. The car that had been following him so closely...well, call it karma. He'd pulled over long enough that day to check and make sure that no one had been hurt. Except for the deer, anyway.

Still, there was that feeling. He'd noted it as he backed out of the carport, had nursed it all the way to the interstate, and all the way to his exit. Nothing bad had happened.

Not yet, anyway. But he watched his monitors carefully anyway, looking for anything that might alert him to early problems with his equipment. And the more he looked, the less he worried. Whatever was about to happen, it wouldn't be anything to do with anything to which he bore responsibility.

Or not.

It was about that instant which Will Gunn chose to come banging on the door. Will was young, early twenties, tall, slim, and terribly earnest in his desire to do a good job as the site supervisor. And he did, too. Everybody liked Will because he did the job, did it well, and spread out the work fairly. His one failing, if indeed it was a failing, was that he was prone to excitability, and it was because of this that when he burst through the trailer door, Butterfield as much as ignored him. It's just Will, thinks he's late. Which of course he wasn't, but there you go. Impetuosity of youth and all. Butterfield got up to unlock the door.

Thump, thump, thump on the door went the heavy Asolo boots Will habitually wore. No proper work boots for him; he lived in his hiking boots. Butterfield could understand that too though, being an inveterate hiker himself who was usually in the woods every other weekend. He was wearing a pair of trail-worn Columbias. The thumps were more insistent than usual though, and applied with more force. Something obviously was up.

Will peered in through the door, his face a brighter shade of red than even that chill morning wind could've produced. "You called the cops yet?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yeah, that's the first thing I do every morning when I get here," Butterfield replied as casually as he could. "Call the cops. Why on earth would I do that?"

That's when Butterfield noticed just how wide Will's eyes were, like he'd been startled. Or scared, or both. Something was obviously very wrong. "What's up, Will?" he asked.

The younger man shook his head. "It's not 'what's up' that's important, John." Will Gunn was one of the few people in Nashville who knew J. P. Butterfield's given name, which happened to be John Paul. For the race car driver, he insisted, not the Pope, though his parents would likely argue that point. "It's what isn't up. Come out here, I'll show you."

Butterfield followed him outside, the steps creaking under their combined weight, mostly Butterfield's. Got to cut back on the Klondikes, he thought with a wry grin, which disappeared as soon as he walked outside and saw the distressed look on Will Gunn's face. "All right, my friend, tell what it is that's got you so riled. Every little thing looks hunky-dory to me."

"You're not looking in the right place." Will pointed up. "See what I mean?"

Butterfield had to admit that he did not. Not at first, anyway. Will was pointing in the general direction of the crane, the same crane which Butterfield himself had considered this morning, its stout cable swaying gently in the chill (crisp, remember, crisp) breeze...

...and that's when he started to swear, in words very unbecoming a practicing Catholic.

"That's what I was thinking," Will said quietly. "Just not saying."

Butterfield's mouth hung open unashamedly.

"Moreland's not going to be happy," Will added needlessly. Moreland was Keith Moreland, the owner and operator of the crane. Not that there was anything wrong with the crane. That looked just fine. As previously noted, there's not a whole lot the average criminal would steal off such a crane. For the sake of completeness, it also bears repeating that there was damned little to steal on the rig as a whole. Oh, the cable might fetch a price from a metal recycler, but removing it was an all day job. And that wasn't the issue anyway.

No, it was what hung on the end of the cable that was the concern. Or rather, what should have been hanging on the end of that cable. Namely, the enormous steel wrecking ball, the wrecking ball that had hung from that cable as recently as the previous evening. The wrecking ball that weighed somewhere in the neighborhood of five to six tons, Butterfield wasn't exactly sure. It was pear-shaped, made of forged steel, and it was gone.

Gone.

A ten thousand plus pound mass of steel, gone. Now Butterfield understood Will Gunn's perplexed look.

"John, what are we going to do?" Will asked Butterfield.

"Do?"

Will shrugged. "Well, we've got to do something. Keith's going to be here in about five minutes and he's going to end up in orbit when he sees this."

"More likely security will be the ones lifting off," Butterfield said. "Come on, let's run back the footage from last night. Keith's going to want to see it anyway, we might as well be prepared." He didn't add it, he didn't find it necessary, but he also wanted to find out exactly how who had done it, had done it. The impossible, in other words.

The security footage didn't reveal much. And in that, perhaps, lay the greatest mystery. Butterfield ran the video back in hourly increments till he discovered what time the ball had...well, gone missing, for want of a better term. Turned out it was between 4:30 and 5 AM.

"That's not possible," Will said. "Thirty minutes to steal a five ton wrecking ball?"

"We still don't know it's stolen," Butterfield reminded him. "And it's probably closer to six tons."

"Yeah, right. And if it's not, stolen, John..."

Butterfield nodded. "I know, I know. It's a mystery. Now we isolate the last thirty minutes of video. There's got to be something in there somewhere." Or so he fervently hoped.

A car, a person, Godzilla perhaps. Anything but what they had right now, which was nothing.

Nothing but trouble. That was when Keith Moreland rolled in. It didn't take him more than twenty seconds to discover the loss, and when he did, he was apoplectic, so much so that he was unable to form a coherent sentence. But perhaps that was understandable given the circumstances. Certainly neither Butterfield nor Will had anything to say that made any sense.

It took seven endless minutes for Butterfield to finally isolate the precise instant the ball had gone missing. And when he did...

"Oh-my-fricken-God," Will Gunn muttered. And Will Gunn was not one to utter (nor mutter, for that matter) God's name thus, so great was his astonishment. Butterfield just shook his head in slack-jawed amazement. And Moreland finally managed to thaw his frozen tongue.

"That's not possible," he said softly. "Not possible." He looked at Butterfield. "You're sure there's nothing hinky with the system?"

Butterfield shook his head firmly. "Time readout never stops counting."

"Those things can be wrong, can't they? I mean, computers aren't perfect..."

"Wait," Will prompted. "Look in the background." He pointed to a sign easily visible on the display. "See the clock for First Farmers?"

They hadn't, but now they did. The bank's digital sign had a time and temperature display. The time read the same from one frame to the next. The frames were precisely the same...except for the missing wrecking ball.

So, Keith Moreland repeated: "That's not possible."

And he was right.

Or, at least, he had been right. At 5:41 AM that morning, it was physically impossible for a nearly 12,000 pound wrecking ball to simply vanish from the end of the cable from which it had been suspended thirty feet off the ground.

At just before 5:42, however, it apparently had become just possible enough.

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