

One Way Out
By Michael Danese
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Jim came through the front door and was greeted by the sweet aroma of meatballs and gravy slowly simmering on the stove. He didn't notice. The puss on his face was more sour than usual. He's in his early 30's, tall and lean, with thinning brown hair. He loosened his tie and bleated, "Joan? Joanie?"

"You're home early!" said Joanie. She is petite and athletic with short blond hair. Her good mood is sharply in contrast to his. As usual.

Jim threw his briefcase onto a chair and said, "It's over. I got laid off today. The standard line of shit – budget cuts, low profits, downsizing, the economy . . ."

"Oh, Jimmy, I'm so sorry. I'll fix you a drink," she said, hugging him and trying in vain to console him. She knew that it was no use. In the long history of rock bottoms, this would be rock bottom for him. Jim's been a downer for a long time. Things were great for the first few years, but he had been more like Eeyore for a long while. Everything was, "Whoa is me."

A few weeks ago, they went out to dinner for their anniversary. They went to the best steakhouse in town. His filet was a little overcooked. Joanie insisted that he send it back, especially at *that* price. Jim decided to eat it anyway, then complained about it for the next several days.

Two days ago, they went to the grocery store. The store was out of his favorite orange juice. That sent him into a funk for hours.

Last week they were at Joanie's sister's house. While Joanie played with her two nieces, Jim complained about a headache and sat in the corner, and acted like he was dying.

Joanie has always been a positive person. She constantly looks for the good in people. She strives to make sure that everyone is comfortable and having a good time. Lately, his negativity has been wearing on her to the point where she turned down a few social invitations because she anticipated Jim's complaining.

In the back of her mind, she considered the possibility that Jim lost his job because the people in the office grew tired of him constantly bringing down the mojo in the room.

The gloomy mood was shattered by a knock at the door. Jim's best friend, Bob, opened the door and entered, saying he came right over after hearing the bad news. Bob lived down the street. He's a little shorter than Jim, with wavy brown hair. His dimples give him that college boy look. Since his divorce last year, he's been a constant fixture at their house, and Joanie was more than fine with that. Lately, she was fine with anything that broke the solemn air.

"Wow, it smells amazing in here!"

"Thanks, Bob, I agree," Joanie said, giving a smirking glance toward Jim. "I was just making drinks . . ."

"Sure, I'd love one," Bob interrupted. The three commiserated about the bad news over a few more drinks. "Come on, buddy, chin up, it's just a setback, you're a talented guy, this won't last."

“Yeah, right!” said Jim. “Do you have any idea how hard it is for a white guy to get a corporate job in today’s world? They only target women and minorities. I’ll probably end up working nights at MacDonald’s with all of the pimply-faced teenagers.”

“Well, at least those kids would be jealous of you after getting a look at your trophy wife!” said Bob, trying to lighten the mood.

The remark got a chuckle from Joanie but went right by Jim. Then he whimpered, “Do you guys remember Brooks Evans? He also got the axe. He said he was going to jump off the 12th Street bridge!”

“I’ve heard worse ideas,” Joanie said jokingly, “but he should probably pick a higher bridge!”

Joanie offered another round of drinks. Bob raised his hand for one. As Bob and Joanie shared another laugh, Jim went to lie down.

Bob was well aware of Jim’s emotional decline. Both he and Joanie, together and separately had suggested counseling to Jim, but he wouldn’t hear of it. “That’s for crazy people, and I ain’t crazy!” he always said.

The next morning Jim was even worse. He stayed in bed until 11:00 am, came down and grabbed some coffee, then went back to bed. Joanie was afraid that she was starting to think like her downtrodden husband. Her mood also hit a low recently because of their debt and other financial challenges. She went upstairs and climbed into bed next to him. “Maybe Brooks has the right idea. Perhaps we should just end it all.”

“It’s certainly crossed my mind several times lately, and I agree,” whispered Jim. “I even thought of a plan. It was just for me, but much better for us to do it together. We could write individual suicide notes, thanking our friends and families for their love and support, and saying this was our personal choice, to try to alleviate others from blaming themselves.”

Joanie squeezed his hand, “Let’s do it tonight,” she suggested.

They lined the basement with plastic to ease the “clean up” after the fact. That was Joanie’s idea, always thinking about others.

They agreed that they would sit side by side, close their eyes, and on the count of three, they would shoot themselves in the head.

“We will finally get a chance to use those overpriced guns we bought for our own protection,” said Joanie, at a poor attempt at gallows humor. There was no reaction from her husband.

After they set the scene with their chairs, they sat silent for several seconds. They both stared forward, clutching their guns. Joanie said, “Hey, it isn’t too late to change your mind. We can always get the best therapist, as we discussed several times, I’ll gladly go too. I’m sure there is a way out of this, and I know I can use it too.”

“No! Asked and answered over and over again. Things are never going to get better. Let’s just get this done. Close your eyes.” He began to count slowly, “One, two, three.”

Nothing happened. He turned his head toward her and was about to ask her why she didn’t shoot when she shot him under his chin. He fell back with a horrified look in his eyes.

She slowly stood, then took her gun and wiped it off. She held it by the barren with a cloth and pressed his hands firmly around it. She was sure to put his index finger on the trigger. She then

let the gun fall to the ground. She grabbed her phone and called 911 and gave a hysterical account of her husband's suicide.

She moved her chair away and put it in the closet. She hid her note and his gun upstairs in a bedroom and quickly changed her clothes in case there was any blood splatter on them. She also washed her hands and checked her face in the mirror. She rubbed under her eyes hard until they were red so it looked like she was crying. Just as she reached the bottom step the paramedics and police arrived. She was sobbing and appeared to be in shock.

"We are sorry for this tragedy, but could you please tell us what happened?" asked the first policeman as he took out a notepad.

She took a long pause as she cried, then said, "Well, I was calling down to Jim, that's my husband, I knew he went down to the basement," and then she started to cry again.

"I know this is difficult, but please continue," the officer asked after a few seconds.

Joanie wiped the tears from her eyes. "I called down to him. He had been down there some time while I was upstairs folding laundry. I went down the stairs and walked into the room just as he shot himself. I still can't hardly hear anything." She began to cry again.

"Hey, I have a faint pulse," said one of the paramedics.

"The heart doesn't know that the brain is dead yet," said the other paramedic, almost offhandedly.

They quickly loaded him onto the gurney and rushed him to the emergency room.

"Do you want a ride to the hospital?" asked the officer.

"No, no, I'll drive over. I need a minute," whispered Joanie.

After everyone cleared out of the house, she punched a few numbers into her phone. "Bob, he went for it, it all went down perfectly. I need to go to the hospital now, but soon we can finally be together!"

"Well, at least he's now out of his misery," Bob said about his friend.

"His *and* mine!" said Joanie.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Well, it was truly horrible. Worse than I thought it would be. The look on his face, the blood, the questions from the police. I'm still shaking."

"Think about the future. Things will be better, I promise," he said.

"I know, and I will. I'm thinking, I need to get far away from here. Maybe we can move down south, someplace close to the beach. I need to feel the warm sunshine on my face. A new start. A new life," she said.

"Yeah, maybe. I want to see the sun on that precious face of yours. Should I come over and go with you to the hospital?" asked Bob.

"No, we need to let some time pass. Maybe lots of time. I don't want to take any chances of messing this up. I'll call you later," said Joanie.

When she arrived at the hospital, she sat in the waiting room, staring blindly at the wall for what seemed like hours.

A doctor came out to greet her. “Hi Mrs. Good, I’m Dr. Weston. I’m the head of surgery,” he said, extending his hand to hers. “The good news is that he’s still alive. He’s in surgery now. Our best team is working on him. They’re doing everything they could. We will just have to wait and see what direction he takes. He’s strong and otherwise healthy. I’m hoping for the best.”

“Thank you, Dr. Weston,” said Joanie, almost in a whisper.

“I’m sure you’re tired. Why don’t you go home and get some rest and I’ll call you as soon as we know anything, probably in a few hours,” said Dr. Weston.

The second she got to her car she called Bob. “He’s alive and in surgery. If he recovers, what am I going to do? He will know that I shot him! I’ll go to jail for attempted murder! I won’t survive in jail! What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do?” she rattled on manically.

“Stop! Take a breath,” Bob said in a calming voice. “Come on, first, he may not survive. And if he does, his brain may be mush! And if he does think he remembers, you can certainly contradict him. His memory of the event will be hazy at best, but most likely he will not remember a thing and will just be glad to see you smiling at him.”

Several hours later she received a call from the hospital asking her to please come back. This gave her some relief, as she was thinking the doctor wanted to tell her about the sad outcome in person. Shortly after she arrived and checked in, Dr. Weston emerged.

“Thanks for coming in so soon. The surgery was a success. It looks like he’s beginning to regain consciousness,” Dr. Weston said. “However, there is more that I need to tell you. The bullet hit the part of his brain that controls motor functions. I believe that he will recover, but he will most likely be a quadriplegic in need of constant care. He will remain in the hospital for three or four days, then he will need about a month of rehab at St. Michaels. We will handle the transfer and the other arrangements. I’ll let you know when you can see him.”

“Thank you, Dr. Weston, and please thank the team for me,” muttered Joanie.

A bit later a well-dressed woman greeted her. “Hello, Mrs. Good. I’m Janice Owens, the social worker assigned to your husband’s case. I’m sorry about your situation, but at least he will be able to still have a long life, with your help, of course. I’ll arrange for all of the services and the equipment you will need, the hospital bed, lift chair, wheelchair, bedpans, and more. I’ll also arrange for an aide to come to your home for a few hours in the mornings. She will help you to get him out of bed and into a wheelchair. You will need to take the lead with feeding him every meal, bathing him, and changing his diapers. With your insurance, the aide will be provided for the first 30 days. After that, you will need to pay out of pocket for your help. But don’t worry, I’ll refer you to the best providers. Can I answer any questions for you now?”

Joanie nodded her head and said, “Thank you. No, I’m sure I will have lots of questions, but nothing right now.”

After Ms. Owens left, Joanie sat there for several minutes as her bleak vision of the future ran through her mind. She knew she was responsible, and in her heart, she knew that Jim needed her, and she had an immense responsibility to him. She reached into her purse and pulled out her phone. The phone had been set to silent. There were several missed calls and texts from friends

and family and a number of messages from Bob. She put the phone back into her purse and left the room, almost floating.

She managed to drive home and make her way back into the house. She remarked to herself how normal the living room and kitchen looked. She thought that any second Jim would walk into the room, probably complaining about something. She wished so hard that he would. She thought the constant complaining really wasn't that constant. She knew that she could never have a life with Bob. Not after all of this.

She looked out her kitchen window, thinking to herself how wonderful her home was, and how much she appreciated her life up until quite recently. She hated herself for taking it all for granted and for what she had become.

She went up to the bedroom and found her suicide note and read it over. She then pulled out Jim's gun that she hid what seemed like a lifetime ago. She went down the stairs to the basement and was instantly horrified by all of the blood. The smell almost made her gag. She up righted Jim's chair and sat down. She held the gun under her chin and counted out loud, "One, two three ..."

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