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Downsizing – A Short Story
733 Words
First serial rights

DOWNSIZING

Phillip woke to emptiness. At first, he wasn't sure if he had opened his eyes. When he was, he was certain he was blind. He tried waving his hand in front of his face, just to make certain, and was startled when it bumped into something wall-like a few inches from his face. He started to feel around, unease growing in the pit of his stomach as if he had swallowed a cold iron ball. Phillip could feel a wall before him and one at his back. Narrow walls, no longer than a few feet, were on either side. Unease became panic.

"My God, it's a coffin!"

He tried to press against lid, but it wouldn't give way. He fought to bring his arms up, barely finding the room between his chest and the unseen force in front of him. He pounded – weakly, dully. There wasn't enough room for a good, solid swing.

"Help!"

Phillip's voice sounded dull and muffled.

"Somebody please! Help me!"

He continued to scream and yell and pound, until his hands were throbbing and he felt as if he had gargled broken glass. He started to hyperventilate. He felt dizzy.

“Calm down. You can’t think if you don’t calm down.”

He took several deep breaths. It was difficult. The air was heavy, moist and warm. He struggled to get his arms back to his sides, and when he finally did, started fishing around in his pockets for anything he could find. Amongst nickels, dimes quarters, and a stale, half-eaten roll of cherry Life Savers, his questing fingers came across his cell phone and a lighter. Phillip had given up smoking years before, but he made a habit of carrying a lighter anyway. One never knew, after all.

He pulled out the phone, fingers seeking out the power button. When they found it, the face of the phone lit up in a pale blue glow. Phillip noticed the light made his hands look corpse-like, and he shuddered. He fumbled around the keypad, feeling his way towards 9-1-1. When he thought he dialed the right keys, he pressed what he hoped was the “send” button, and struggled to get the phone up to his ear.

He couldn’t hear it ring – there was only silence. Phillip maneuvered the phone to his face and looked at the screen.

No signal. The message icon blinked at him, a steady rhythm in time with his pulse. He fumbled again with the keypad, pulling up the text message screen, to find a note from his wife.

“Phil, called 2 ask if u could pick up the kids, but Schneider said u were buried under a mountain of paperwork. Call me if ur going to be late. Love, Steph.”

Phillip laughed morbidly. *“If I don’t get myself out of this, I’m going to be really late - as in The Late Phillip Spencer.”*

He fought his arm back down to his side and slid the phone in his pocket. With his other hand, he grasped the lighter, and struggled to get it up to his face. When he succeeded, he spun his thumb along the flint wheel. Sparks burst into a small steady flame that hurt Phillip's eyes. The brightness of the light and the heat of the flame made Phillip wince. As his eyes adjusted, he started to decipher his surroundings. He was surprised to find what appeared to be a very official looking memorandum taped to the lid, directly in front of his face.

"Dear employee:

As you may already be aware, our third-quarter profits were far below forecasts. In the ever-competitive world of business, this means that changes must be made to accommodate a stronger business model. At the last Shareholders meeting, the Board of Directors proposed a downsizing program, which was approved by the stock holders of this company. This program includes provisions to radically reduce overhead associated with employee benefits. In accordance with this program, your department has been terminated. All data relevant to continuing or future projects will be transferred to Corporate Planning, for further distribution to new departments once the reshaping of our company is complete. Irrelevant personnel, materials and archives will be disposed of in a manner decided upon by the board.

Thank you for your service, but it is no longer required."

Phillip read the memo twice, before the lighter burned his fingers and he dropped it.