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“I’m only going to say this once, so listen up. Mark Twain was right. ‘There is no God. No universe. No human race. No earthly life. No heaven. No hell. It is all a dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists, but you. And you are but a thought – a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities.’”

When teaching tennis to 10-year olds, it is customary to start with the forehand grip, but I was fired last night from the Eggroll Ranch, where I worked part-time as the assistant head cabbage cutter, so I’m feeling angry and unfocused.

“Mister, did you say there’s no heaven?”

I memorized Twain’s bitter pronouncement at the end of his life for a public speaking class in high school and, unlike most things, it had stayed with me.

“That’s right. The whole heaven thing is a big fat lie.”

With Mr. Wang’s words “you MUSS chop FASSER!” still ringing in my ears, I find myself face-to-face with seven overindulged fifth-graders ready to break my heart like the rest of the world and its grasping, grabbing inhabitants. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t think of letting my new students step between the lines without committing the first three chapters of *The Inner Game of Tennis* to memory, but I’ve lost heart and with one look I can tell that these three-car garage nambies don’t have the moxie to play the sport of kings. They’re doomed, dandified muffins; miserably weak and soft, and wholly unfit for mental and physical, mano-a-mano warfare.

“But if there’s no heaven, where’d my dog go when he died?”

“Who knows? It’s really anybody’s guess.”

So how did I get such an enormous, throbbing mean-on? It wasn’t just my demise as assistant head cabbage cutter, though that was a shock given my contributions to the organization, including a revolutionary expansion of the menu beyond eggrolls. No, like most people, I had a hostility tree with many roots, some deeper than others.

After yesterday’s firing, on my birthday no less, despair accompanied me all the way to my girlfriend Miranda’s apartment, where I sought a pair of understanding lips and perhaps a Carvel cake, but instead found a pair of men’s zebra-print bikini briefs on the stairs leading to her bedroom. Having risked life and limb to reach my beloved by speeding 85 miles-per-hour through a school zone, I was mortified to discover her twisted like a balloon animal around her yoga guru and moaning to the rhythm of a Ravi Shankar

sitar medley. Her claim that they were merely trying a back-bending, Bhagavan Rajneesh prayer position quickly gave way to attempted assault (I took a swing at Casanova with a candlestick) and the sudden departure of Miranda's snake-charming suitor and his stinking exercise mat.

I was devastated. Inside my pocket was a three-quarter carat diamond ring I'd purchased on layaway. I'd finally decided to pop the question and start my life as one half of a legally-recognized, honor-bound institution with all of its rights, responsibilities and semi-regular booty. Unfortunately, I hadn't anticipated someone else's booty getting in the way. Worse yet, Miranda was the sixth woman in a row to leave me for someone else.

"How could you do this?" I asked.

"What's the difference, David? Our relationship is over," Miranda said. "It's been over for awhile."

"Well, this is a hell of a way to let me know. I think I would have preferred an e-mail or a text message."

"It's taken me awhile to figure it out, David, but I finally get it. I finally understand. You are *incapable* of moving your own life forward."

"That's not true."

"You can't hold a job."

"I haven't found the right career," I said.

"You haven't found *any* career. You're all talk. You never follow through on anything."

"So you start sleeping with this guru guy? That's fair."

"I want to be with someone who's going places. And Guru Ganges, for your information, is planning on franchising his yoga studios across the country. You, on the other hand, have no ambition."

"I can't believe you're saying that to me. You work part-time as a cleat specialist at Lady Foot Locker. That doesn't make you Donald Trump in case you're confused. Does someone with no ambition buy the Tony Robbins tapes?"

"That was a year ago, and you've never listened to them."

"It takes time to awaken the giant within. You have to trust me. I've got a long-range plan to improve every aspect of my life."

“Oh, really? Six months ago, you dragged me to that Carlton Sheets no-money-down real estate seminar at the Dome Arena and charged \$500 worth of DVDs to my credit card. Have you bid on a single property since then?”

“The market’s soft.”

“So’s your brain. You’ve let it atrophy. Look at the book you left on my nightstand. *Who Moved My Cheese?* You want to know who moved your cheese? Nobody. You don’t have any cheese to move.”

“Maybe not, but I’ve got five of the seven habits of highly effective people. Two more and I’m golden. *We’re* golden.”

“I’m not buying it anymore, David. Face it - you’re a loser and you’ll always be a loser.”

Try as I might to teach these ghastly kids standing in front of me now, I couldn’t shake Miranda’s parting words. By her estimation, I had numerous deep-seated Freudian and ESPN-related issues. In attacking me, she employed hurtful adjectives including insensitive, lazy, emotionally distant and poorly dressed, and said she’d moved beyond me with the Chakra breath work and brain respiration techniques she learned from her yogi. She even had the nerve to tell me that I was spiritually bankrupt while she stumbled around looking for her Wonderbra.

I couldn’t see it then but Miranda isn’t anything special. She’s kind of plain and pudgy; not particularly bright or charming or accomplished. She isn’t a woman of incomparable grace or unending patience and, on a scale of one to ten, I’d rate her compassion for pets and old people a three. She just turned 30, the age at which some women panic about being unmarried and begin hunting for a mate with a single-minded ruthlessness. Yet, here I’d been on the verge of doing something that countless men and women do every year – marry the wrong person. Why does this happen? It’s complicated, isn’t it? For me, the answer resided in my subconscious. I didn’t think a bumbler with ebbing testosterone, non-existent job prospects and thirty-four dollars in his checking account deserved better. My disregard for myself, my fear of being alone and my growing sense of mortality were pushing me toward the precipice like an aging convertible being driven by Thelma and Louise.

In my weakest moment, I listed Miranda’s positives and negatives on a piece of paper; desperately trying to quantify her; hoping to find some equation that would convince me of the things I didn’t feel in my heart. If this is your preferred method of deciding yes or no on a potential mate, the answer is always no. To let your marital choice become a gradual acquiescence due to pressure, fatigue and a ticking clock rather than an affirmative act powered by illogical inspiration is a mistake.

For months, Miranda had continually talked about rings, china patterns and girlfriends who were getting married, setting up house, having children and moving on with their lives. All the talk, however, was less about me than it was about the deeds; about the need to check these items off some list that would make her complete in the eyes of others. What changed was she found a better prospect.

In retrospect, I admit that ramming her pre-owned Nissan Altima with my '75 Ford Mustang (pumpkin-colored with an odometer stuck at 368,312 miles) was a bit rash, but after explaining that "Gigi" was a curry-flavored freak who satisfied her sexually in ways I never could, Miranda kicked me out of her house. Understandably, this threw me into the type of vengeance spiral I was warned about previously by Judge Stander, a local mediator and hostage negotiator, following an unfortunate incident involving my favorite shirt and a local dry-cleaner.

One piece of advice: never give the woman you love a gift certificate for 24 sessions at the Indo-Aryan Yoga Shack. Now, besides my twice-weekly tennis gig, all I had in life was a part-time job selling slightly-used Tibetan prayer rugs at Who's Your Llama?, an upscale boutique catering to mooks who say things like, "I'm bringing my iPad to base camp so I can blog." With neither love nor meaningful work to speak of, I took some small comfort in warning my students about life's predators.

"Don't wait. Start your enemies list today," I said.

"What's an enemies list?"

Danny Cohen, a four foot three inch student with a yarmulke pinned to his head and a massive Prince racket in his right hand, was momentarily intrigued. Nixonian paranoia may be unbecoming but, after last night, I realize I should have started scrawling down the names of the awful people who mean me harm much, much sooner.

"It's a record of every subhuman cretin draining the marrow from your bones. Start with your ex-girlfriend's yoga instructor, then add every boss who's ever fired you, particularly ones with cabbage fetishes from cowboy-themed, eggroll eateries located in strip malls."

"I don't get it."

Danny and the rest of the class looked confused.

"Let me try again. It's a list of every bloodsucker plotting your downfall."

Danny never heard straight talk like that. Not even in temple. He pondered my words for a moment before losing interest. He was, after all, only 10.

"Are you a pirate?" Danny asked.

“No, I’m not a pirate. Do you see a parrot on my shoulder?”

“Why do you wear that eye patch?”

“Mind your own business, okay?”

“Why are your shorts so short? They look gay.”

This insensitive question came from Willa Nash, the only 165 lb. fifth grader I knew with a monogrammed water bottle, invariably filled with Pimp Juice, an energy drink for malcontents and their snowboarding instructors. By failing to demand a more respectful tongue from their tomboy daughter, Willa’s father, Kit, and her absentee mother, Missy, an area veterinarian/plastic surgeon specializing in extreme makeovers of pets and their owners, had loosed yet one more monster on society.

“There is nothing *gay* about these shorts. They’re timeless, both in fit and style,” I said.

“Timeless, my butt.”

“Stifle it, Willa, or I’ll drop you like a bag of mulch!”

If this girl, with her low-hanging Bermudas, “Skate or Die” T-shirt, and maddening ’tude, continued her line of questioning, she would soon find her name added to the list of those I would lay to waste. My shorts, which covered the uppermost portion of my thighs at rest and much less upon flight, admittedly challenged most public decency laws, clinging to my rear end like Saran Wrap stuck to a Mylar balloon. But there was a perfectly good reason why I wouldn’t abandon them or my shirts, relics from the Ivan Lendl collection, complete with tattered necks and yellowed underarms: I didn’t have the disposable income to buy a Blizzard at Dairy Queen let alone a new tennis ensemble.

On most days, my money woes sufficed as a valid justification for my current mental condition and freed me to ponder more pressing concerns like who to vote for on *American Idol* or which whitening toothpaste I needed. Unfortunately, my prior evening’s disappointments (e.g. the Eggroll Ranch and Miranda) coupled with the incessant prattling of Willa, the poster girl for childhood obesity, forced me to confront a second, less practical but more honest reason why I wore my old athletic clothes.

The truth was that these aging tennis outfits reminded me of who I’d been at one time during a period in my life when anything seemed possible and stitched to the sleeve of each of my shirts and every pair of shorts was a symbol of strength adorned by my mother.

“What’s that stupid lizard on your shorts?” Willa asked.

"It's not a stupid lizard. It's a dragon," I said.

"Well, it looks gay. Are we gonna play tennis or what?"

"Watch your tone, Calamity Jane. And put down the Pimp Juice."

I never knew that "gay" was such a popular word with ten-year olds, but Willa used it more often than an Oscar Wilde scholar discussing his Keith Haring collection.

"Why do you have a dragon on your shorts?" Danny Cohen asked, suddenly interested again.

"It's a long story so never mind. Everybody shake hands with their racket," I said.

I held out my Wilson T-2000, perpendicular to the ground, and demonstrated the Eastern forehand grip. "Today, we're going to learn how to hit a forehand."

"David, am I doing it right?"

"Let me see, Becky."

I pulled my smallest student, Becky Pardi, clad in a pinafore and wearing pigtails, away from the procession of Violet Beauregardes and Augustus Gloops lining up to take their turns on the ball machine. Becky held out her racket to show me her grip.

"Turn your hand a bit to the right," I said.

"Like this?" Becky asked.

"That's it. You've got it. Now try again."

Trying again. Getting the right grip. Actions easier said than done and increasingly improbable in my mind as I assessed my life less than twelve months from my fortieth birthday. Someone once said that 40 is when your life comes together and your body falls apart, but in my case, both were falling apart. Ten years ago, I'd never experienced the joys of lower back pain, acute shoulder bursitis or overgrown nose hair. Today, they were welcome distractions from my plantar fasciitis and sore Achilles that made standing for hours on a tennis court a curse.

"Huddle up, group. We're almost out of time . . . Listen, I owe you guys an apology."

To theseimps and the rest of the world, I am David Horvath, part-time teaching pro, late night cabbage cutter and frequent wearer of unmentionable atrocities. But years ago, when I took lessons for everything from tennis to chess to tae kwon do, and

competed in spelling bees, soap box derbies and ski races, I went by the name of Dragon, a nickname my mother gave to me for reasons that remain unclear. It may have been just a clever device she used to change my self-perception after I was diagnosed at age two with a degenerative condition in my cornea that caused intense light sensitivity and required me to keep my right eye covered at all times with a patch. More likely, she knew that the absence of my father, and my growing awareness of its significance, created a void in my life and necessitated assurance that I was not merely okay but, rather, indomitable.

Whatever the case, the name change worked for awhile as my mother bolstered my confidence by extolling the virtues of these scaly beasts and, by association, me. According to her, I was going to be great and the records of history, as well as the scrap books she purchased at Woolworth's for \$4.99 a piece, were waiting to be filled with pictures and tales of my future achievements. I imagine she thought I would scale Everest, win an Oscar, advise presidents and inspire a dance craze. I would sing at Carnegie Hall, collect gold at the Olympics, marry a princess and end world hunger. No accomplishment was beyond my reach, and the mark I'd leave on this world would be lasting and large. Mind you none of this jibed with the team of specialists trying to teach me to read at school, but this was my mother talking and who was I to disagree? If I hadn't been petrified of heights, I would've grabbed a red cape and jumped off the roof of our house.

My mother was a strong believer in self-fulfilling prophecies and once she started sewing dragons on every pair of Toughskins and second-hand Lacoste shirts I owned (replacing the crocodile), the idea that I would rise to the level of her expectations became less far-fetched. The yellow, red and green threads embedded in my clothes infused me with energy; the tight stitching holding me and my fragile psyche together. I wore my dragons the way a Marine wears his patches – *Semper Fi*. I was an army of one plus one, my mom, who, in addition to using needle and thread, wielded a paint brush to put a fire-breathing hydra with a pair of flaming nostrils on just about everything I owned from the banana seat on my bike to my skateboard to my bedroom wall, all in an attempt to spur me on to the summit. Her technique would have made for a wonderful article in the kind of hyper-parenting magazines you see today, squeezed somewhere between anxiety-provoking pieces about 529 college plans and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, if not for one fatal flaw: I stunk at everything.

Now, before you think I'm being too hard on myself, let me clarify. When it came to receiving athletic instruction, I was an above-average, some would say highly proficient, listener, but my lack of depth perception prevented me from converting words into deeds and soon I had one of the largest private collections of light blue honorable mention ribbons and certificates of participation on the East coast. If a major league scout from any sport had been watching me, his critique would have read, 'too slow, too short, too weak, but gives it holy hell.' Indeed, nobody tried harder than me, but effort only takes you so far when you're throwing up on the coach after each set of wind-sprints and sweating through your eye patch.

Baseball proved particularly challenging though no sport came easily. Mr. Saunders, my little league manager, who had one tooth, no conscience and a pronounced limp from “killin’ a man” in self-defense according to local lore, instructed me to start a fight every time we got behind by spitting a wad of chewing tobacco into the opposing team’s dugout or kicking their coach in the nuts. As I recall, we were the only team whose skipper provided each player with sharpened, steel-tipped cleats and a tin of Skoal before all games. Mostly I remember right field in the hot summer and the staring contests I’d enter with random dandelions. Standing firmly in the ready position during my league-mandated two innings, I kept waiting for my volcano of baseball heroism to erupt at any moment, but it never did. All my dreams of hitting a home run over the centerfield fence at Bob Ford Field remained buried in the soil of some Mudville Nine nightmare scenario of strikeouts and weak, Texas-league singles struggling mightily to make it over the first baseman’s head.

My mother, who loved Louis Armstrong, thought cornet might be my calling and bought me a beautiful vintage brass instrument from a yard sale. My music teacher, Miss Lovell, wasn’t as enthusiastic informing her soon thereafter that I was tone deaf and rhythmically-challenged unlike any other student she’d been affiliated with while suggesting that I give up the pursuit. I can still hear my mother arguing my case until Miss Lovell, in a fit of frustration, said that Stevie Wonder could read music better than me.

When I moved on to the dramatic arts, things looked promising initially as I landed the role of munchkin number 27 in the junior high school production of *The Wizard of Oz*. After explaining that it was a non-speaking part, Mr. Denison, the drama coach, told me to hide behind a crudely-constructed wooden bush for the entire play, sapping my enthusiasm for acting and, for that matter, set design. Nevertheless, despite the disappointments, I was continually assured by my mother that my time was coming and that these were minor setbacks on the way to major victories.

Athletic, musical and dramatic mediocrity wouldn’t have been so bad, but I wasn’t much of a wiz in the classroom either. In the sixth grade city-wide spelling bee, I forgot the first ‘e’ in ‘excellent’ causing a collective groan in the audience so loud, it’s still remembered vividly by event organizers to this day. No matter how much my mother helped me with homework, quizzed me with flash cards or promised me cash, I always came home with a report card full of C’s and D’s. Notably missing were any remarks about not working up to potential. I wasn’t dumb, but my loose grip on phonics put me at a disadvantage when compared to my classmates.

Through it all, Peggy, as my mother was known to the women she worked with at Betty’s Beauty Nook, continually tried to help me in ways both obvious and subtle. Among other things, I give her credit for never bad-mouthing my biological father. Instead of trying to convince me that he was a bastard who’d screwed us over, she insisted that he was a handsome, smart, funny man who left with her blessing and loved me though we’d never met. Year after year, she kept the details of his whereabouts sketchy, insinuating that he was off on a quixotic journey far, far away, fighting the

forces of evil. And notwithstanding my hurtful discovery that Han Solo was not my dad after three years of insisting everyone call me Chewbacca, I intuitively understood and appreciated my mother's efforts to mythologize this man in order to protect me.

At night, sitting on the edge of my bed made up with NFL sheets, her head eclipsing the hallway light, my mother led us in the Lord's Prayer, read me a poem from her Norton Anthology, and then told me tales about dragons. According to her, ancient civilizations from the Sumerians to the Babylonians to the Aztecs feared dragons as evil, but the Chinese saw them as emblematic of everything good and called themselves Lung Tik Chuan Ren, descendants of dragons. To them, dragons brought abundance, prosperity and good fortune, and were courageous, wise, strong, heroic, perseverant and noble – all the things I was going to be. My mother *insisted* that I, too, was a descendant of Chinese dragons and a celestial creature who would overcome all obstacles in my path on the way to greatness. And though she never focused precisely on how I would become dragon-great as opposed to the slightly above-average yet content person I'd originally envisioned, she insisted my greatness was inherent, pre-destined and waiting to emerge, a theory as water-tight as an Indonesian ferryboat, but one I bought and gladly climbed aboard.

Growing up, I constantly looked to my mother for assurance about my direction and prospects and then, without warning, everything changed when I was nineteen. She died on a Saturday and, immediately, the robust force at my back disappeared and my forward momentum slowed. Soon, thereafter, I stalled out. More than 20 years later I'm stuck, and lately I'm gripped, unlike ever before, by the type of fear that paralyzes a man for whom greatness is predicted, but not yet achieved: the fear of leaving this world without a legacy. Halfway through life, I'm still waiting for the moment to arrive when the promise of the past will be realized and, for the first time, wondering whether my mother was wrong. To wake up one morning and find yourself to be ordinary and average, entirely unremarkable, is easier for those of whom little is hoped. But for those who have feasted on a diet of expectations, it is a staggering blow followed by a creeping sense of dread and moments of panic. Did dragons exist or was I just a mythical beast conjured up for the sake of my self-esteem? Had my mother simply soothed my childhood wounds with her stories or did she know something about me that would yet be revealed?

The answer would seem obvious. Anthropologists agree that dragons never existed. According to these experts, they have always been a mere figment of imagination – a mental morphing of the most feared animals in the Earth's history. Given this fact, maybe I should relegate the winged dragon to the dim place where Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny reside after children no longer believe. After all, overwhelming odds say the experts are right. Plus, I'm not stupid. I can look in a mirror and see that I bear no resemblance to anything other than what I am: a 39-year old, emotionally arrested man clinging to his youth the way a white-knuckle flyer clings to his armrest during severe turbulence. I'm not green. I have no scales or tail. And, except for a brief bout of madness last summer involving grain alcohol and a Bic lighter, I have no ability to spit fire.

Am I a dragon? Is it possible that I'm the latest incarnation of a beast that came before me, imbued with all the characteristics of such a creature as my mother described them? Am I a living heir, like the Lung Tik Chuan Ren? I don't know. What I do know is that I must embrace the dragon dream that something better, some kind of greatness, exists within me just waiting to ignite like flames from the nose of an ancient green monster. I can no longer rely solely on cosmic forces unknown to sweep me up and deliver me to my rightful place and destiny. Instead, I need to act in concert with these forces, consciously reinventing myself, in order to have any chance at something resembling a life; and I need to do it by the time I turn 40.