

Mr Ex.

On a cold, overcast Sunday afternoon a shiny, black Chrysler drove through an abandoned industrial area, before pulling up outside of an old brick factory. The driver got out and promptly opened up a rear car door. A pair of shiny Italian shoes emerged and planted themselves on the gravel driveway. The man they were attached to stood up and adjusted his expensive, tailored pin-striped suit. He ran his fingers back through his oily black hair and adjusted his sunglasses. Two men, dressed in dark suits, both tall and muscular, exited the car and stood behind him.

He smiled and looked up at the building. “It’s good to be back home, boys.”

They opened the door and entered. The building was large and mostly empty space, with a few crates stacked against a wall. Their footsteps echoed as they made their way to the back of the building, where there was a mezzanine working area, two floors of offices where he ran his business from. During the week these offices were usually full of goons yelling threats into phones, but today, besides a few men to guard the place and his armed entourage, the building was deserted. Despite the size everything was clean, from the plastered walls to the polished concrete floor. He strode towards his office, his men in tow.

Opening his door he paused, looking over his shoulder.

“You guys can take the rest of the day off.”

“You sure, boss?” One of the men asked.

“Yeah, of course. You guys did good today. Go spend some time with your families. I’ll call you if I need you, but we don’t have anything important scheduled until Tuesday.”

The men looked at each other and one of them shrugged.

“Ok boss. Thanks. We’ll see you later.”

They turned and headed towards the exit.

He watched them leave, before entering his office and switching on the lights.

“Wow, did I have a big week!” he said, removing his jacket and hanging it on a hook. His office was impressive in size and design. Despite owning an over-sized expensive desk, leather couches and mahogany bookshelves, he had opted to keep the concrete floor uncarpeted. Most of the other offices were carpeted, but he had instead used rugs beneath the seats and couches to make the office comfortable. Grabbing a crystal bottle of cognac and a glass, he walked around his desk and sat down in his executive-style chair, taking his sunglasses and shoes off. He poured himself a generous glass and chuckled.

“You should have seen it! I don’t know who they were expecting, but they weren’t expecting Mr Chilinski himself! You should have seen their faces! They barely even put up a fight. One guy was even apologising to me as I was beating him. Apologising!” he laughed. Nearly choking on his cognac, he coughed into his fist. He noticed a few drops of blood on his cuff. His smile vaporised. “God damn it! This was a gift! If I find out which one of those lousy crack-heads bled on my French-cuffs, I’m going to feed him this shirt!”

He licked his thumb and started scratching at the stain. It wasn’t coming out. He sighed, his cheerful mood destroyed. Turning his chair around, he stared at the large cube against the wall. It was the height of his desk and nearly as wide, covered with a black, silk sheet. Grabbing a corner of the sheet, he tugged it and it fell to the ground, revealing a steel animal cage. It was mostly empty, except for the clothed torso of a man lying face-down on the floor.

He downed the last of his drink and topped up his glass, placing his feet up on the corner of the cage. He leered down at the limp torso, sipping his drink. “Ahem!”

The torso stirred.

“Ha! I thought you had gone and died on me!”

The torso moaned.

“Sorry, what was that?” he asked it.

The half-body pushed up off the ground with its only arm until it was lying on an angle. Tired, bloodshot eyes met his as the pale, drawn, bearded face let out a dry rasp.

“I didn’t catch that. You are going to have to speak up Mr Ex, if you want me to hear you.”

“Good morning, Mr Chilinski,” Mr Ex managed to spit out.

“Morning? Ha! It’s late in the afternoon. We are going to have to get you a watch! No, wait. Your watch is supposed to go on your left arm, right?” Mr Chilinski laughed hard at his own joke, his face going red, tears running down his cheeks. “I knew you would make me feel better, Mr Ex. Did you miss me?”

“Sure,” he said, dryly.

“Anything happen while I was out?” Mr Chilinski asked, chuckling again.

“Not a lot. I wish you’d leave me something to do when you go away for long stretches. It really gets boring in here.”

“Ah. So *I* am supposed to be the one entertaining *you* now, is it?” From his tone Mr Ex knew better than to push him much further.

“No, not at all. Just an occasional book and some light to read it with,” he mumbled.

Mr Chilinski grunted. ‘We’ll see. You’ll have to start pulling your weight around here first. Sorry, I didn’t mean that literally!’

Mr Ex waited patiently for him to stop laughing. “What would you like me to do?”

“Well, half the reason I keep you here is for the entertainment. So, here I am now. Entertain me!”

“Is the cage really that necessary? I mean, I’m not exactly going anywhere. And while we’re talking, some food would be nice.”

“Not very entertaiiiiiinning...”

“Okay. What would you like from me?”

“Maybe a joke?”

“Umm. Alright. What do you get when you cross an elephant and a rhino?”

“Heard that one.”

“What’s the difference between Bitcoin and NASA?”

“Heard that one, too.”

“What is the difference between an ATM and a Jewish scuba diver?”

“My mother is Jewish,” Mr Chilinski warned.

“Well, I don’t know! I probably only know about five jokes. It’s not like I have access to the internet, or anything.”

“Well then, sing me a song!”

“A song? Are you serious?”

“Do I look serious?” Mr Chilinski asked. He did.

Mr Ex grimaced. He didn’t exactly feel like singing, but he knew better than to disobey his captor. He tried to think of a song, any song he could remember. One came to him. He cleared his throat.

When you were here before

Couldn't look you in the eye

You're just like an angel

Your skin makes me cry

You float like a feather

In a beautiful world

I wish I was special

You're so fuckin' special!

His voice began breaking as he tried to hit the higher notes.

But I'm a creep!

I'm a weirdooooo

What the hell am I doin' here?

I don't belong here!

“No, no, no! Not like that! C’mon man. That was horrible! What even was that? You can’t tell a joke, can’t sing a song. What can you do? You probably aren’t even that good in the bedroom, I’m guessing,” he said, smirking.

Mr Ex winced. The jab hit hard. He knew he would never know the touch of a woman again. He thought back to all that he had lost. A tear ran down his cheek.

Mr Chilinski threw the remains of the cognac in his face. Mr Ex looked up at him surprised. Despite himself, he sucked what he could from his moustache. He hadn’t had anything to drink since he could remember. The alcohol burned his dry, cracked lips.

Mr Chilinski leaned forward.

“I’ve warned you about crying,” he said in a low voice. “Remember, if I grow bored of you there are still things you can lose. That right arm of yours, perhaps?”

“No! Fine. I’ll tell you a story then.”

“A story? You mean, like a bedtime story?” He asked, a dumb smirk on his face.

“Umm... sure! But not one for kids. One for adults.”

Mr Chilinski undid his cuff links and placed them on his desk. He unbuttoned his collar, refilled his glass and put his feet back on top of the cage.

“You have my attention. Proceed.”

Mr Ex took a deep breath and began.

“Once upon a time there was a man named Doug. Now Doug was a very ordinary person. He had a very ordinary childhood. He had an ordinary job, lived in an ordinary house, with his ordinary family. He had ordinary friends, some ordinary hobbies and would take ordinary holidays in the same ordinary places every year.”

“This story sounds pretty ordinary,” Mr Chilinski complained.

“Be patient, it’s going somewhere. Now, Doug had a very ordinary life. Until one day he lost his ordinary job. Someone had realised that paying people in this country was costing more than paying someone else in another country. So Doug was made redundant by his company. Unfortunately for

Doug the market was flooded with redundant office workers with the same skill-set as he had. As you probably guessed, Doug's resumé was ordinary."

"Now Doug's wife was a pleasant enough person when she got what she wanted. But, apparently, an unemployed husband was not something that she wanted. So after a few weeks of losing his ordinary job, Doug found that he had lost his ordinary family and ordinary house as well. It wasn't long before his ordinary friends too, made themselves scarce. This made Doug very sad, so one day he found himself standing on the ledge of an ordinary building."

Mr Chilinski's blurry eyes opened wide. He had not heard this story before.

"With one small step Doug fell from a thirty storey building onto his head. Now, this would usually be the end of the tale, but Doug woke up after a little while with the realisation that he wasn't ordinary at all, but he was extraordinary. He stared up at the building astonished. He wiped his head and found that the blood had already dried. He stretched his muscles, twisted his back and checked for broken bones but, besides the initial pain he suffered when he landed, he had no signs of injury. That was when Doug realised he was invincible."

Mr Chilinski closed his eyes. Watching him, Mr Ex continued.

"Doug had no idea what to do with his new-found talent, namely that of not dying. He tested it out just to make sure it wasn't a fluke, grabbing hold of live electrical cables, holding bricks on the bottom of a lake; he even lit a rag hanging out of the gas tank of his car and sat inside until it exploded. After a lot of this... unpleasantness, we'll call it, he realised two things; One: that he was indeed invincible and, Two: he was now without a car."

Mr Chilinski didn't react. Mr Ex guessed that he must have fallen asleep.

"Go on. I didn't tell you to stop," he said, eyes still closed.

"Right! Sorry. So, Doug decided that he wanted to be a vigilante. You know, like the movies. Except no spandex. No cape. No mask. No catch-phrases. No side-kick. Just an angry unkillable man and his fists.

He walked around the city late at night, looking for a group of guys up to no good to vent his anger on. It didn't take him long to find one. The thing that Doug didn't understand at first was that to be an effective vigilante it helps if you know how to fight. The men in the alley took turns at beating him and, after they tired of that, they took his wallet, watch and phone. Being a vigilante turned out to be an expensive hobby. So he figured he needed to find a job.

So, Doug took an open position at a security company. It seemed like the logical choice. They trained him how to deal with violent people, how to use a night-stick, mace and handcuffs. In his spare time he took self defence lessons, all that he could attend. He started with boxing, then Muay Thai kick-boxing, but before long he was mixing Kung-fu, wrestling and Krav Maga, broadening his skills. After a couple of years he turned into a pretty decent fighter, too. He could take on two or three people at a time and, because of his drive, found himself winning nearly all of the matches he entered. But Doug never lost his direction. He didn't view fighting as a sport, but an instrument, a tool to be used for a purpose. When he felt that he was ready, he tracked down those same guys in the alleyway, surprisingly they hadn't changed their hang-out spot and their second encounter turned out a lot different to the first. He even managed to get his watch back.

Fuelled with the adrenaline of success, Doug decided that he was going to make a difference. Too old to start any kind of military career, he resolved that he was going to clean up his city and he was going to start from the top. He was going to tackle its organised-crime problem.”

Mr Chilinski opened his eyes and smiled, showing his teeth.

“Sounds like a brave man, this ‘Doug.’ ”

“He was, at least he tried to be. He saw a problem and wanted to fix it. Surprisingly, it wasn't hard to track down a crime family. Their restaurants and cafés were notorious, always in the news, but the police gave them a wide berth, not wanting to stir the hive. He became a regular at these places, paying attention to the suits who came and went. Until one day he hit the jackpot. The son of a notorious gangster walked in unexpectedly and ordered a chicken and avocado linguine. Doug couldn't believe his luck.”

“After he finished his meal, the gangster left in a black car with some of his henchmen. Doug followed them back to a factory. He thought he had caught them in the act of a crime. But when he forced his way inside he found the factory was empty and was only being used as office space. When I say empty, I’m ignoring the twenty-or-so men he had in there with him. Having blown his cover, all Doug could do was fight. And fight he did. Using his training and the few weapons he had on him, he punched, kicked, stabbed and used men as shields as he took them down, one by one. He must have put at least half of them in hospital before he started losing steam.”

“Eight.”

“Sorry?”

“You put eight of my men in hospital.”

“Right. Anyway, this is my story. May I continue?”

“Of course! Sorry for interrupting,” he said, sarcastically.

“So, after he had taken down at least twelve of the men, he began to tire. And, despite being invincible, the pain from the bullets and blades became unbearable. He realised that yet again he had underestimated his opponent. Held against the ground with his hands tied behind his back, the last thing he saw that night was a metal baseball bat being dragged on the floor towards him.” He paused. “When he woke up... darkness.”

Mr Chilinski smiled. He was enjoying the story. Mr Ex could see the cold cruelty behind his eyes.

“So what happened next?”

“Well, the men had realised after a few attempts that Doug was in-executable. So the crime-boss decided on a cruel and unique punishment for the intruder. He had his men concrete him into his office floor, leaving one hand free for him to feed himself. He then bolted a cage over the top of his prisoner, to give the impression of an animal, a freak. From then on, every-time he had a meeting with new partners or rival gangs he would remove the cage cover, showing them his prize. All men that entered his office could never forget what they saw and they would agree to most anything he

asked for, their uneasy eyes constantly returning to his captive. It was a warning to anyone that would dare oppose him; there are worse punishments than death.”

“Correct!” Mr Chilinski agreed. Putting his shoes back on, he stood up and stretched. “That was a really good story! I especially enjoyed the ending. This ‘Doug’ character thought he had lost everything. Until he found out he had yet more to lose. He still had his health. He still had his freedom.”

“He still had his name,” Mr Ex said, emotion creeping into his voice.

“Anyway,” Mr Chilinski said abruptly, walking to the door and putting his jacket on, “We have a big day of work tomorrow and I need to get home for some rest. I will see you tomorrow!”

“Goodnight Mr Chilinski.”

“Goodnight Mr Example.”

With a soft click, the room returned to darkness.