

"Fuck this!" She crawled out from under the Corpse, leaving him on the floor, crumpled in a fetal position, moaning into the carpet. "Pam Anderson couldn't get him hard!" She flipped open the bedroom door and stomped out of the room. "I'm *sobbb* *sorry*." The Corpse groaned and clawed at our heels as Bennett and I stepped over him on our way out. "Come back . . ."

Back in the living room, Martin was under the coffee table, rummaging around on all fours. "Have you seen my shoes? I have to go and I need my shoes!"

"Go where?" Bennett asked.

"I just have to go!" His eyes were wild and darting all around the room. "Now!"

The room was at a tipping point of sorts. Every binge has a crossroads moment where you make a conscious decision to kick in the second wind and keep going or give up, let the booze take over and pass out drooling on the sofa. Liguor's the first ledge on the mountain. It only gets you so far, and that gets dull quick. No euphoria, just a "different" stage as common and predictable as sobriety. Where did we go from there? What was the next level?

I didn't know the answer. All I knew was we couldn't stop. This wasn't a random nihilist romp through a Saturday night. It was a statement—an exhibition of a way of life on one hand, a reaction to a way of life on another. It probably didn't stand for anything deep, meaningful or right or wrong, but I knew on some basic level it was important, about restoring a sense of balance.

To a lot of lawyers facing thirty, the tyranny of the time sheet is total and terminal. The pressure to give up, make the work your life and sprout roots from your ass into the swivel chair is

overwhelming. When you're a kid, the idea of becoming a workaholic seems ludicrous, something out of a Monty Python skit. Then you start working in a field like law and realize how, even if you're consciously trying to avoid it, you can become exactly that. Your every minute of the day becomes a possible billing event, and the more time you trade away, the more you assume you'll get paid. It's such a shit-simple business model you start thinking, *Well, I'll just work around the clock and then I'll get rich!* And it's not just a law thing. They might not be kept in a tablet like a lawyer's but in any job the hours pile up quickly if you let them. Once you buy into the notion that your time belongs to someone else, the game's over. You'll be on the merry-go-round for years before you even realize you're there, running in circles.

Some of us, however, react differently. We're slaves to the time sheet like everyone else, but not in the ordinary sense, indentured instead to something I'd call the "3-to-1 Ratio." The first time I considered the ratio had been months earlier, 2:00 a.m. EST to be exact. Alex called me drunk off his ass from San Francisco, where his firm had temporarily reassigned him to work on some big case.

"Do you know what time it is in the East?" I yawned, wondering why I'd been stupid enough to pick up the phone at that hour.

"I've been standing outside a bar waiting for a cab for forty-five minutes. You were the first person dumb enough to answer my call."

"You're fucking lit."

"Oh yes. Yes I am. Some lawyer out here told me about this strip club called the Mitchell Brothers Theater. I spent the last three hours in this thing called the 'Flashlight Room' where these dancers fuck each other with those huge wands they use to guide aircraft on the runways. It's mesmerizing. The sword fights look like something out of *Star Wars*."

"So you're enjoying the Left Coast. Good for you."

"The job sucks, but the per diem isn't bad, and I will say this: You forget a lot of shit watching chicks screw each other with lightsabers. One hour of that erases three at work."

It was drunken gibberish, but the wisdom of the ratio struck me immediately. Three-to-one—it represented a perfect balance in our situations. If you had to give away sixty hours a week, the only way to keep things even in your life was to max out each of the twenty or so you had on the weekend, making every one a “superhour” worth three of the ones lost in the office.

Hearing the “3-to-1” concept articulated wasn’t really an epiphany. Alex hadn’t stumbled into a new mantra or mission statement. I’d been a slave to the ratio for years and didn’t even know it. It explained all the lost weekends and Monday morning hangovers. It explained why I could never sit still for even a moment on a Saturday afternoon and felt guilty if I wasn’t out of my mind or engaging in something hyperstimulating every second of my free time. It explained why Martin was running around the suite looking for his shoes so he could take off on a quest for something he couldn’t even describe. The ratio distilled a simple concept we all understood. At our age, in our stations, you could never get high enough to be truly, completely free, back to that ignorant optimism you had from eighteen to twenty-three, where the world seemed open in every conceivable regard. But that wasn’t a reason not to try.

“Goddammit. I can’t believe I lost those fucking shoes!”

“Have a shot, Martin. You need to calm down.” Bennett spanked the short girl, who was bogarting a joint. “I have good lungs.” She slapped her breasts on his cheeks and blew smoke in his face.

“Fuck it.” Martin slammed his fist on the coffee table. “I don’t need them.”

“You can’t go anywhere barefoot!” I screamed, but it was too late. The door slammed behind him and I heard the elevator bell ring in the hallway.

“That’s it! I’m getting new strippers.” Jerry grabbed the phone book and started flipping through the escort listings. I’d only met the guy that day, but I already knew one thing about Jerry: he hadn’t been laid in a damn long time. Jerry was a strip-club, steak-and-cigars kind of guy, the sort of “man’s man” who seems

to materialize out of thin air at any of these sausage parties. I like strippers as much as the next guy, but more as party ornaments than anything else. Jerry was the kind of guy who really dug that scene—got a “control” high from telling a naked ex-cheerleader what to do. All the guy talked about were topless bars he’d been to from Tampa to Toronto, and how he wasn’t pleased with the entertainment so far.

“Come with me.” I grabbed Bennett and took off. I figured we’d run into Martin in the lobby, but he was nowhere to be found. We hailed a cab and five minutes later we were in my apartment.