



The Plumber

Paul the Plumber was airwalking when he left the office of Frank the Financial Guy. According to Frank, a combination of social security and draws from his 401(k)s (or what-the-hell-ever it was that Frank had him set up thirty years ago) would keep him in his customary lifestyle indefinitely, so long as the politicians didn't screw up the stock market.

R-E-T-I-R-E-D, find out what it means to me.

He could sell *Paul the Plumber* to Bob the Plumber or Ted the Plumber or any random fool who wanted to take on this business he'd loathed from the day his dad, Paul Sr.'s, idea of a college graduation present was a toolbox and a *Paul the Plumber* cap and uniform with *Paul, Jr.*, printed on them.

No matter that his diploma said Bachelor of Arts. In actual *Art*. But that was their deal: Art School in exchange for at least two years of indentured servitude.

Sixty-two years old, looking back on forty years of work that he wanted to wipe from his hard-drives, the literal one on his desk and the one humming behind his eyes. After he sold the business he would purge his house and garage of every item that could be associated with a life that he would, so-help-me-god, refuse to acknowledge from this day forward.

Henceforth, when asked about what he'd done for a living, he'd say he taught art and social studies in a junior high school in a small town in Nebraska, or South Dakota. He'd check a map and pick a place his questioner couldn't possibly have been. Who would second-guess him?

He stopped at the art supply store. Instead of ten minutes borrowed from a thirty-minute lunch, now he could roam around for the rest of the damn afternoon if he wanted. He left an hour later with a bag full of

enough art supplies to stock several junior high school art classes. Plus a book called *Grandma Moses: A Late Bloom Is Better Than No Bloom At All*.

When he pulled into the parking lot of the apartment he'd been in since the divorce, he noticed that someone, probably the kids from the end of his wing, had built a fort from branches knocked down by last week's windstorm. Kids now probably wouldn't call it a *fort*.

Whatever they called it, something about it made him grab his phone and click some photos. He imagined a watercolor - lots of blue and shades of green and brown, and the red from the wheelbarrow the kids had been using. Like that William Carlos Williams poem. He'd need something white. Pigeons maybe, or a white dog.

He was halfway through the doorway into his apartment when he heard Mrs. Levowitz, from across the hallway, clear her throat and say *good morning*.

"Yes it is," he said. She had no idea how good it was.

"Could you come and talk to me for a minute, when you've had a chance to put your stuff down?" she asked.

"Sure," he said, after a pause that was a few seconds too long for neighborliness.

He went inside, put his bags on the kitchen table, then shambled dutifully across the hall.

"What's on your mind?" he asked her.

"Everybody says you're a kind man," she said.

"By everybody you must mean Mr. Haverford," he said. He had once cleared the old guy's toilet and didn't charge him. Ever since then Haverford would show up at Paul's door with cookies he'd baked, or invite him over for lunch, or a Super Bowl watch party, which Paul never had time for. He wondered what Mrs. Levowitz had tried to flush.

"It's not just Mr. Haverford," she said, "although he's the one who recommended you."

"Really," he said. "For what? Not for a plumbing job I hope. I just put my business up for sale. I'm not taking new business."

"Oh, this isn't business," she said.

"Well, then. I'm all ears," he said.

"I was hoping you'd consider replacing the toilets in the Senior Center in exchange for being featured in our newsletter," she said. "It goes out to five-hundred post office boxes."

"There's no reason for me to be featured," he said. "I don't need that anymore," he said.

"What about whoever might buy your business?" she asked. "We'd

pay for the actual toilets, you'd contribute your labor." She turned and walked over to open the door and nudge him toward it.

"Why don't you think about it and let me know," she said.

He left without saying anything, didn't even wave. He'd thought to spend the next several hours putting down some color for *A Fort of White Pigeons*, which is how he was thinking about the watercolor he wanted to make. Instead he reheated some coffee and futzed around with his new website, *PaulThePainter.com*. The domain name had cost him five-hundred dollars, but he couldn't think of another name he wanted as much as *PaulThePainter*.

Three hours later he hadn't gotten past setting up the first page. He realized he might have to hire somebody, or take a class. He heard a knock on his door. It was Mrs. Levowitz. Of course.

"Sorry to barge in," she said, "but I need to know about what we talked about so I can tell the Senior Center Board this evening. I forgot that we have a seven-o'clock meeting."

She started moving around his entryway, looking at some of the watercolors he'd done after taking a class at the Community College.

"These aren't half-bad," she said.

"I guess I should say *thanks*, right?" he said.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was thinking out loud. I used to teach art at Seattle Central," she said, naming the same place he'd taken his class. "I'm used to seeing some pretty dismal efforts and these are a notch or two above that. You've got some talent, Paul."

"Oh, my goodness," he said. "I painted these in a class I took there last spring."

"Well, we just missed each other," she said. "A year earlier and I would have been teaching that class. If you'd like, I'd be happy to show you a thing or two."

She pointed to a painting he'd done from a photograph of Pike Place Market.

"The colors are really good, Paul," she said "but you could learn some tricks about perspective. None of the technical stuff about painting is that difficult. It just takes practice, and it sounds like you'll have more time to do that now."

"But that's not why I came over. What do you think? Can you help us?"

He'd have more time to practice if people would just forget that he was once a fucking *plumber*. Screw it. There was no way out.

"Sure, Mrs. Levowitz," he said. "I apologize for my attitude when you

first asked me. I was coming off a bad day. Trust me, you don't want to hear what a bad day is for a plumber, not before dinner.

"Remember," she said, "we can't pay anything."

"I remember," he said, "and that will actually make it all the more fun. Trust me, you don't want to hear what *fun* is for a plumber."

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Once he got busy picking out toilets - with special raised seats and grab bars for people who weren't as agile as they had once been - and a few sinks and faucets thrown in because, after all, he still had some standards, he felt better than he'd expected. He was actually a little exhilarated.

At one point, during installation of the final toilet, a little boy, who couldn't have been much older than his own 6-year-old grandson, wandered into the bathroom and plopped down on the floor. He didn't move for half-an-hour, except to ask questions about what Paul was doing.

When the toilet was ready for testing, Paul brought the boy up close and showed him where the water went when the toilet was flushed and how the tank filled back up until the float rose high enough to close the inlet valve.

Good lord, he thought, *this is how I was when my dad showed me this stuff. This little guy could be me.* Though odds were the kid wouldn't have the experience of working alongside his father for a lifetime, even a lifetime shortened a few decades by cancer.

He wondered what might have happened if he'd taken the job he was offered, the day after graduating, working in the graphics department at Boeing. His buddy who did take the job ended up transferred to South Carolina. After a few phone calls they fell out of each other's lives.

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The day after final inspections and cleanup at the Senior Center, he found a manila envelope slipped under his door. Inside were photo prints of the plumbing job, start to finish. He'd seen Mrs. Levowitz lurking around with an old-school camera and some professional looking equipment. Maybe by time her newsletter came out he'd have a buyer, and Whoever The Plumber could benefit by the publicity.

He flipped through the photos. He looked more professional than he'd ever felt. *Damn. I'm hanging these in the apartment somewhere. And*

the kid! She'd caught the two of them lying on their backs under a sink, examining the fittings they'd just tightened. The boy's face looked like he'd put the finishing touches on an installation of a Michelangelo in the Louvre.

There was a post-it note stuck to the back of the photo. "Paul," it said, "why don't you turn this into a painting we could hang over the little plaque we're going to make, about the gift you've given the Senior Center? It'll make these old folks smile, don't you think?"

Whatever. One thing for sure, the idea of a watercolor commemorating the installation of a toilet was sure making him smile.