

## DRIVEN EXPECTATIONS

*It's not that I wanted fame, nor did I need to be rich. That's just life's ultimate goal, isn't it?*

I adjusted the foreign hand knot on my sheen, blue tie, and locked eyes with myself in the mirror.

*The truth was, I was happiest when I was in sales. I made enough money and had stable friends and a wife I loved. Our team had a friendly rivalry that no one took too seriously, and we always went out for drinks on Friday after work.*

Sighing, I scooped up my overpriced diamond inlaid gold cufflinks.

*Then came the day I was offered a management position. I had been the top salesman, three years running. When our director moved companies, my manager took his rung on the corporate ladder, primarily due to his sales staff's incredible job. I was the heir apparently, as his best salesman. Pregnant with our first child, my wife was ecstatic at the pay bump. However, our ignorance and eagerness to impress would eventually run headlong into the impenetrable wall of reality.*

I resentfully popped each cufflink on, one at a time. I hated these pompous jewels so much.

*It happened gradually at first. A few late nights at the office, Friday drinks with my staff only once a month, and my wife's ultrasound I skipped for an office meeting.*

I rolled my eyes as my personal stylist stood up from her stool. She had finished buffing my handcrafted Italian loafers. Since I was perfectly capable of dressing myself, the only reason to keep a stylist was so that I could tell my colleagues/competitors, "I have a stylist. You?" With the mature taunting of a five-year-old on a swing set.

*Managing was tough, and I had to put much of my life on hold. However, four years and several sacrificed friendships later, we had things under control. Then came the buyout. A behemoth absorbed our moderately successful company. These new guys did it all from toothpaste to auto accessories, and they expected unheard of numbers.*

The short Asian stylist hurried up her step stool to run a comb through my hair for the third time. An involuntary groan crawled up my throat. Raised in a small suburb town outside Indianapolis, my first job was digging ditches, which I finally traded in for swinging a hammer part-time while I was in college. My young blue-collar self would have driven cross country in his twenty-year-old Chevy pick-up to kick my own butt!

*By hook and by crook, my team and I made the new numbers our demanding new parent company asked of us. I had to live at the office. I rode each of my employees so hard that by the time the six month allotted period was over, I had slept in my bed eight times, seen my family a combined 2 hours a month, and lost what few friendships I had left in the office. However, I was the only one to meet the new company standards. Six months later, I replaced my old boss as director; the same month, my wife served me with divorce papers.*

The tiny stylist went for her make-up bag. I clenched my jaw and was about to say something when my second assistant laid a soft, calming hand on my shoulder. I rolled my eyes, probably for the fifth time, and sighed. I was resigned to the inescapable fact that I had become soft.

*“She didn’t understand. She would miss out on the new perks, the money, the success! I’ll show her!” These were just a handful of the cliched reactions those of us who leave spouses for careers come up with to justify ourselves. My drive to climb the next rung in the company ladder was fueled by those doubts, driven by the need to prove to my ex that she messed up - NOT ME!*

A young man in a dark suit and sporting a headset popped his head into my dressing room. He held up three fingers, warning us of how much time we had left. As if this were the Oscars or the state of the union address. I rolled my eyes and wondered how much money we would save our shareholders by ridding ourselves of all this fluff.

*As I finished my third year as a VP, I realized that I had only made every other one of my son’s birthdays, from ages two until ten, which was pretty good, compared to others who joined me in the giant company boardroom. To my left, Fred, divorced twice, engaged to a woman one year his daughter’s senior. To my right, Evette married three times, widowed once because of cancer, but she missed her husband’s passing due to quarterly reports. Every person in the group of 35 around me was identical. An affair, affair, divorce, divorce, never married, but arrested three times for solicitation...and the list goes on. “Ladies and gentlemen, we can make you billions, but don’t you dare trust us with a houseplant, much less a person.”*

I chuckled silently to myself with a smile. The stylist tisked with a look that only a mature mother could give, so I straightened up quickly and lost the smile.

*Compromise some friendships, compromise your marriage, compromise your parenting, and you might find yourself in the same headspace I did just five years ago. You see, I still had to prove to my ex that she messed up. Her new, overly affectionate husband, who gave her and MY son, sooo much attention, had her convinced that a VP making half a million a year wasn't something of which to be proud. So I upped the ante. I set my sights on the top. I had come this far; I might as well go all the way!*

The same self-important stage director in the dark suit and headset stuck his head in the door and gave me the nod. I waved him away without a glance. I looked to be focusing, but really, this guy was just annoying.

*Compromise is more a habit one falls into than an action you might choose. I like to run along to the wharf. That's the habit I made an effort to create. But the lousy posture I hunch over at my oversized mahogany desk with is something developed over years of not making an effort while sitting. Compromise is the same, but in a corporate setting, excuses for my compromises stare me in the face everywhere; the atmosphere is almost made to convince yourself that cutting this corner, this ONE time isn't just ok, but justified, maybe even expected.*

My assistant stepped up behind me, holding my suit coat.

*The first of these corners was four months into my directorship of all sales. After meeting the impossible goals the company had laid out, I had to make sure the board saw me take the bull by the horns and continue to succeed!*

I stood and reached both arms behind me, waiting for my coat. Tissue paper stuffed between my collar and my neck was pulled out just before a double-breasted suit coat was slipped over my arms, shoulders, and back.

*To show the board that I meant business, I needed to get our sales up, just a little bit. The problem was that since I had just posted insane numbers, not understanding that the company never intended for anyone to meet their impractical goals, there was nowhere left to go but down. Nope, not on my first report; I would never let that happen! Now listen. I didn't steal any money, and I didn't hurt anyone; I just changed a zero into a two.*

I shook my shoulders and straightened the coat before fastening gold-plated buttons on my handcrafted Parisian suit, turned to the door, and waited for it to be opened for me.

*The quarter after that, we reached our real numbers from the previous quarter, so I naturally just added a two again. After two more quarters like this, sales had gone up by 8%, even with some very stagnant products. You'd think when the annual audit passed through my accounts; the game would be up. But, since the auditors were so easy to fool, I became bolder than ever!*

The door swung open, and I stepped into the backstage of a New York City Opera House. Tassels hanging from ropes brushed the side of thick velvet curtains.

*Those were the days: A live show of costumes, singing, and fiction was entertainment and fun. Now, "fun" was beating my coworker to the next rung on the ladder and crushing my competitor so I can buy his company for pennies on the dollar, putting thousands out of work....to me, that was 'fun'!*

I readied myself at my waiting spot, glaring at the hand in my face of the self-important dark-suited stage director, listening for my cue to go on.

*My "boldness" in creative reporting meant I was the only department from last year's annual report to manage growth...in a recession. My CEO was out, and I was in! The youngest CEO Ever!*

I pasted on a smile as heavy metal doors swung open to enormous applause. Spotlights and flash photography chased me across the stage as I strutted towards a waiting lectern, arms wide, offering every shareholder and fan a practiced gleam of charm sparkling from my eyes.

*I wondered if my ex was watching? No worries, if not, I'd send her a copy of the video and a bottle of Dom Perignon.*

But then it finally happened. "The chickens come home to roost." They emerged from off stage and from amongst the crowd. The first said he was with the SEC, the second the FBI. As the charges were presented and the handcuffs slapped on, I noticed I was still standing behind the microphone. I turned and grinned at the stunned audience as I leaned into the mic, "The truth is, I was happiest in sales."

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