

The Lot

“What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.” T.S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’

“Give me that dickweed” Doug said to Billy.

Running across the parking lot pushing a lumber cart, Billy apologized for the delay. Billy had not seen Doug and his friend Tony until they had almost made it to the front entrance to the store. Doug and Tony were the only two customers that were mean to Billy. Everyone else loved this **MegaGrande™** employee.

“When you ever going to get it right?”, Doug said. “Probably thinking of Aaaamanda”, Doug added.

“Thinking of getting married and having little retards”, chimed in Tony.

“Ahhh, he..he..herre is your ca.ca.cart” said Billy.... “And have a na..na..nice day”

Doug and Tony strolled into the store laughing and making bug headed faces with their hands and eyes. Billy considered what they just said. Yes he did love Amanda, or “Manda Panda” when they were alone together. And marriage was just possible when she turned 18 and got SSI in her own name, and Billy got that raise. Then it might be just possible.

MegaGrande™, where Billy worked is the largest big box retailer in the country. With over 1000 stores, each with over 500,000 square feet of space, it was truly a mega-shopping experience. Items sold included everything from artichokes to zebra leotards.

From groceries, to lumber, to small personal watercraft, a shopper could find most of what they needed. Quality was average., the selection was huge, and prices could not be beat.

Whole communities formed around a **MegaGrande™** store. City downtowns declined and ‘mom and pop’ enterprises folded wherever in America a **MegaGrande™** store opened.

Usually the largest employer and tax generator in the local community, a **MegaGrande™** store, meant big political clout. A proposed new **MegaGrande™** store was both sought after and shunned by the local citizens. It seemed to depend on your political and social economic perspective as to which side you were on in the local debate

Billy was not a debater... just happy to have the job that was offered to him through the community outreach program that the company ran. Until this store had opened he could not find work in this small California town. Now he saw a future. Now he saw...

“Mr. Tidesworth gh..gh.. good to see you today!”, Billy said.

Mr. Tidesworth had just pulled up in his late model Lincoln Continental and Billy was ready for him. Billy was always ready with a happy smile and the right cart. The “right one” was a lumber cart for the builders, a flatbed for the gardeners and a sleek 1950’s rocket ship on wheels for the mothers and their 2.3 children.

In fact it was rather amazing to the store management² the way the lot worked when Billy was on shift. The operations manual was very explicit that all carts should be returned to the designated ‘cart corrals’ within 5.3 minutes of a customer leaving them by their now departed car. Depending on the time of day, day of the week, the weather, or whatever other criteria Billy used, carts appeared almost randomly throughout the lot. But random they were not!

Some customers preferred waiting until just entering the store to pick up a cart. Others needed a cart the minute they got out of their car to help with the walking. Some would use different kinds of carts depending on today’s shopping needs. It didn’t matter. That exact right cart would be in exactly the right place at the precise time for each customer, and no one knew how Billy did it. All the customers loved Billy.

All the customers except Doug and Tony. For some reason they always snuck up on Billy. It was like they, and they alone, were not on his radar. They always parked in the same place with the same beat-up pickup truck. They always used a lumber cart to pick

² At least for the store management that paid any attention to the lot operations.

up their ten bags of 80 pound concrete and four ten foot rods of 3/8 inch rebar³. And they always came on a Friday, because that was payday. Yet Billy never saw them in time to have the cart ready.

Why did Doug and Tony always buy the concrete and rebar was a question nobody asked until it was way too late.

Emily looked out the door from her position as cashier and saw Doug and Tony hassling Billy. She sighed and thought the world was a tough enough place without those two. Overweight and haggard, Emily's feet hurt after working seven hours of an eight-hour shift. She would get out just in time to pick up her two boys from 'after school' and fix dinner, help with homework, clean dishes, do some light housework and usually fall asleep in front of the TV. Tomorrow would be the same.

Emily often wondered what would have happened if she had moved away from Forkdale and not married her high school sweetheart. She cherished the two sons he had left her when he ran off with the aluminum siding saleswomen. Still her life seemed unfulfilled and empty at times. Maybe she would take the offer and pack up her family of three and move to the new **MegaGrande™** store that was opening in Gun Nevada. She liked the mountains and wide-open spaces. She liked the price of housing. And for some reason she could not understand, she liked the idea of living in a town called 'Gun'.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Tidesworth", said Emily. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Another day in paradise", said Mr. Tidesworth. "How is your daughter?", he asked.

"My sons are doing fine", said Emily.

"Good, Good", Mr Tidesworth mumbled as he set off in search of the store manager.

Emily looked out to the lot and saw Billy helping an old lady lift a new hydraulic mining pump into the back of her car. Must have been on sale, she thought and turned to ring up the next customer.

Meanwhile, Billy was having a heck of time squeezing the pump into the car. *"Are you sure you don't want us to deliver it to you",* he said.

"No, I'm figuring on leaving right from here to start working the claim", said the old woman in the flowered dress and beat up army boots.

"Ok," said Billy as he gave one final heave barely missing the small poodle and neatly crushing the large bag of tobacco chew in the backseat. *"Good Luck. I hope you find what*

³ This, of course, was exactly the wrong cart for the their purpose, but no one thought to tell them this fact.

you are after", said Billy as he turned and pushed the rocket ship on wheels back to the next customer.

Just then a fire truck, two police cars, and the van from the county Hazmat Team arrived near the front entrance. The possibility of some overtime danced in Billy's mind.

Back in the office, the store manager, a certain Frank Smith, was worried. Very worried. And with good reason. He had followed all the rules. He was always good with following the store procedures. The leaking liquid from the twenty gallon barrels was causing his employees to get sick. This required immediate action according to the "Store Proceed #2003.12 Section A" (How to deal with Oops Spills). First Frank evacuated the immediate area, and then he called the Hazmat Hotline, upon whose direction he dialed 911. Next he called his boss; Mr. White the District Manager.

Part of the problem was that Frank Smith had no idea what was in those barrels. He was supposed to have a data sheet complete with warnings, antidotes, and containment options for all chemicals kept in inventory. But this was a special deal worked out between Mr. White (the DSM) and a very large customer... a Mr. Tidesworth. All he knew was that **MegaGrande™** was buying large quantities of this substance from the US Navy Weapons facility that was being decommissioned about 90 miles away. Mr. Tidesworth's company was purchasing the entire shipment from **MegaGrande™**. Storage at his store was planned for only about one week.

Mr. White had been furious that Frank had not called him before calling the authorities and now he just heard that Mr. Tidesworth was in the store storming for his office. As much as Frank looked, he could not find a company procedure for this situation. And now Mrs. Frank Smith was on the phone making sure he would be home in time for dinner to meet their son returning home from his drug rehab program.

Frank grabbed his hat and ran out the back door, bumping into something.

"Sorry Mr. Smith", said Billy pushing a flat cart down the receiving ramp. *"Are you OK?"*, he said.

"Yes, yes Billy. I'm fine. Everything is fine." Billy was about to tell Frank about the excitement in the front of the store when a shout from the back room interrupted him. Billy turned around to look, and when he turned back to Frank all he saw was his car screeching out of the parking lot.

Darn, thought Billy. I didn't even ask if he would authorize some overtime. But this thought was cut short when "Mad Dog" ran out the back with flames shooting off his head.

The Spill

Mad-Dog was a scare-crow thin six foot-three white man with unruly medium blond kinky hair. His eyes were red with similar colored blotches covering his face. He had arrived early for his six pm to three am shift to talk with the human resources manager about the problems he was having at work. Chuck Wringer had requested the meeting so that they could work out what was wrong. Chuck knew that Clancy (aka: Mad-Dog) was a hard worker, but he was incredibly accident-prone. Chuck also believed Mad-Dog was a substance abuser, but had no proof.

For Mad-Dog's part this meeting was not at all welcome. From the way he saw it, he just had a run of bad luck. Besides he hadn't smoked any crack yet today and he was tweaking badly. He thought for sure Mr. Wringer was going to have him drug tested. Nervous as hell Mad-Dog knocked on the office door.

"Come on in and shut the door," said Mr. Wringer.

Mad-Dog glanced down to the floor, moved his eyes over to the legs of the chair, sat down, and looked straight ahead. Then with a start, he kicked his leg out slammed the door shut; knocking the picture of Chuck's wife and kids off the wall.

"*Sorry Mr. Wringer, let me get that*", said Mad-Dog as he quickly picked up the picture hitting the edge of the desk and shattering the glass into a tapestry of many colored lights. "Looks kinda pretty", thought Mad-Dog before the sense of dread overwhelmed him. "*I will get that fixed on my lunch hour in the framing department*," trembled Mad-Dog.

"Don't worry about that. Sit down and be still will you", said Mr. Wringer. "Now what is this I hear about the shipment from Taipei yesterday."

"*Abbb*", stumbled Mad-Dog. "*The truck came in late and I was the only one left to unload*".

"But your fork-lift license has been revoked since the last incident involving those barrels from the Navy", said Mr. Wringer.

"I know," said Mad-Dog apologetically. *"But I knew that those 'Evil Santa's Helper' dolls needed to get unloaded before the sale today."* he added hopefully.

"Yes, and it did work out ok this time, fortunately for you", barked Mr. Wringer. "But we need to discuss the big picture here." Why do you suppose that we have your name on almost every incident report involving injury and breakage over the last three months?"

"Bad Karma" explained Mad-Dog. *"See sir, none of those things were my fault. They could have happened to anybody. Even the explosion in the Garden Department was just a freaky thing. How was I supposed to know the barrels still had fuel oil in them when I put the split bags of nitrogen fertilizer on top?"*

"And left the forklift running hot next to them for the next several hours", added Mr. Wringer.

"No one was hurt", said Mad-Dog in his defense.

"True, and the fork lift on top of the roof does add some character to the place", thought Mr. Wringer to himself.

"Still, I have to inform you that you now are on probation", said Mr. Wringer. "Anymore incidents and you will be subject to termination. And a final word Clancy. Remember that all employees are subject to drug tests if we feel there is a need".

"Yeess Sirrr", said Mad-Dog. *Is that all?"*

"Yes, now go ahead and get to work, and remember.... BE CAREFUL OUT THERE", shouted Mr. Wringer.

Closing the door carefully behind him, Mad-Dog left the office while wiping his head with relief. No tests today. Good thing, since he hadn't been clean that many hours. Taking his shaking hands off his head he walked quickly to the back of the store. He thought to himself... just enough time for one little thing before he had to be back to the receiving department.

Michelle was just walking out of the bathroom when Mad-Dog walked by her. Michelle in her late twenties was impeccable groomed as always with a sharp pants suit and face and eyes gleaming. Michelle was an up and coming department manager. Many that worked for her in the store considered Michelle a bitch. She knew it was a hard place, which required a tough professional exterior. When self-doubts appeared she overemphasized the female dog.

"Well Clancy, you are looking a bit more ragged then usual today" said Michelle. "Look at that hair all sticking out like a comb hasn't seen it for weeks".

“It’s Mad-Dog, everyone calls me Mad-Dog” said Clancy.

“Well I can understand why” huffed Michelle. “Come here and let me take a look.” Michelle stood on her tiptoes and proceeded to arrange Mad-Dog’s hair and before he could say anything had produced a bottle of something from her purse and was spraying it on Mad-Dog’s hair.

“Hey cut that out” said Mad-Dog. *“What is that stuff”*.

“Just some special hair spray I have... it will hold you together all night” explained Michelle.

“What’s that smell?” said Mad-Dog.

“Just some alcohol and some other ingredients” said Michelle. “They will all evaporate in a few minutes and the smell will go away, but the hair will stay...ALL DONE”.

Mad-Dog said his goodbyes and hurried down the hall to the back of the receiving department. He took a quick look around and went behind the paper compactor while pulling out his pipe. Nervously, taking a quick look over the top of the machinery, he bent down and brought the lighter to the pipe. The lighter wouldn’t work at first, so he shook it and bent down closer. Suddenly the lighter flared to life. This was followed immediately with a big WOOF and his newly cuffed hair was dancing with flames.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!” exploded Mad-Dog as he ran through the receiving door, out into the lot. Yellow flames were shooting off his head as he goose stepped towards Billy. Billy acting quickly ran inside and got a dry chemical fire extinguisher, returning immediately and started spraying Mad-Dog head to foot.

The fire was immediately extinguished to rabid cheers of the arriving night crew and the people queuing up for the last movie matinee next door at the 40 screen Cineplex.

Cell phone cameras chirped away at this monstrous creature. Steam pouring out of the neck of his shirt. His body covered with the white fire retardant provided stark contrast to his black face and singed yellow, now very curly, hair.

Watching all this an elderly black gentleman with a yellow **MegaGrande™** apron walked slowly over to the paper compactor and gently kicked the pipe and lighter underneath the machinery. Turning he saw the HR manager, Mr. Wringer, walking towards the exit door with Mad-Dog still outside.

“Excuse Me,” said the elderly man to Mr. Wringer, *“I saw the whole thing. Clancy was working the compactor when a spark came out of the ‘sandangle capacitor’, next to this here ‘neuron ax-matic’ and landed on Clancy. The boy didn’t do anything wrong as far as I could tell and this machine has been acting up lately. I think I better take a look at it tonight and make it right.”*

“Yes, ahh ‘Thank-you George’” said Chuck Winger. Please do take care of that ‘phantom neurotic’ or whatever it is called. And look after that boy and make sure he is ok. I’m late for the last interview of the day. I’m glad I don’t have to do a termination as well. Good night then.”

Chuck Winger walked off thinking what a good man George had turned out to be after all. Chuck was one of the few that had been around enough years to remember when George first arrived. What a mess this man had made of his life, and now he seemed to be irreplaceable to the store and his community. I mean who else knew what a ‘flatulent corpuscle’ was anyway... OR how to fix one.

George walked over to an embarrassed Mad-Dot and grabbed him by the shoulder and told him to take a walk with him for a bit. “*Now Clancy, do you think you might have a problem that you need to talk to someone about?*” said George.

“Nah”, said Mad-Dog. “Just having a run of bad luck is all.”

“*Clancy, you got to fess up on this one. I saw the whole thing. I know what happened*” said George. Mad-Dog’s face now turned a bright shade of red as he slumped and stared at his feet.

“I don’t know, I guess I was just getting ready for the shift. It gets really busy and everyone is yelling, and I’m always being blamed for stuff and it just helps me relax you know” said Mad-Dog.

“*I do know*” said George. “*I used to smoke crack myself*”.

“You!” exclaimed Mad-Dog. “Why you’re an old man”.

“*Yes, and I was an old man when I stopped*” explained George. “*In fact, it has only been about five years since my last time*”.

“What happened?” asked Mad-Dog. “Why did you stop?”

“*Well, it just about ruined my life*” said George. “*I had no friends, no work, no family that would speak to me and I owed a lot of money,*” continued George.

“Well I just smoke crack on occasion.. You know, like recreationally,” said Mad-Dog.

“*Yes, I DO know,*” said George. “*But if it ever does become a problem in the future, you know you got a friend you can talk to*” Said George.

“Yes, I’ll keep that in mind... just in case” said Mad-Dog. “And thanks George. Thanks for everything”.

“Now go wash up and get back to work young fellow” said George as he turned and walked back into the store.

“Imagine that, George an old man crackhead” thought Mad-Dog. “I guess that must be in his blood or something. Him being black and all. Sure glad I can control it” he continued his muse as he turned the other way and walked quickly to his car, peering back over his shoulder.

While Mad-Dog was preparing for his shift, the receiving department was in chaos. Normally, the start of the shift was a time of relative calm before the large trucks with merchandise made from all over the world arrived for delivery and night stocking. On most nights the shift supervisor would be going over the computer reports and scheduling individual tasks.

Tonight in receiving there were men in hazmat suites gently approaching a large batch of barrels with the US Navy blue lettering. Police had cordoned off the area with caution tape and employees were busy redeploying the tools of their trade such as fork lifts, hand-trucks, warehouse reaches and the like to areas away from the outsiders activities.

George was washing his hands at the sink as a lift roared by with a “Santa’s Evil Helper” speared through one of the forks. One of the assistant store managers, Jim “Also Ran” Hunter walked up and said, “Evening George, crazy start to the night don’t you think?”

“That it is.” said George. “I’m thinking I’ll spend most of my time working on the “space patrol” and stay out of the way back here”, continued George.

The “space patrol” that George was referring were miles and miles of pneumatic tubes, pumps, relays, junctions, and stations that carried bright yellow “**MegaGrande™**” plastic containers (called torpedoes) that were used to carry money and paperwork throughout the store. The tubes came straight down from the ceiling to each cash register. They were there to carry large bills back to the vault (beam to the “mother ship”) and “bomb” small change (shrapnel) back to the register (the “target”). So throughout the day the “mother ship” would “bomb” the “targets” with shrapnel in the form of US Quarter, Dimes, Nichols, and Pennies. When everything ran right it was a very efficient system. However, it was mostly 1920 department store technology and was very finicky. One person knew how it worked and kept is flight ready. That person was George.

“Yes, staying clear of this mess sounds like a good idea. One I wish I could use.” said Jim. “But keep your phone so we can call you if we need you. Hey, have you seen our esteemed store manager?”

“No,” said George, “but I heard he left just before the fire department got here.”

“Figures,” sighed Jim. “See you later”.

Jim had been at this store from day one when it opened. He was resigned to the fact he would rise no further than assistant store manager and was looking forward towards retirement. Then he could spend his days with his real love, the local racetrack. His nickname of “Also Ran” came either from his twenty years as assistant manager, or from his notorious bad luck at picking horses. But this would change when he had more time to devote to his sport. First, he would retire in a about a month, but even before that he would need a good stake. For that he had a plan that had been developed over the years for which his old friend George would be a key unwitting participant.

Mr. Tidesworth eying Jim across the aisle of large pots used for frying turkeys in peanut oil said “Jim can I have a moment of your time?”

“Sure”, said Jim, “what can I help you with today?”

“Well, my understanding is that Frank is cut out for the day and I need a small favor. The two of us have always worked together much better than that stick up his ass poor excuse for a store manager anyway. Damn shame you never got that promotion. Anyway, the thing is, we have a small problem with that navy shipment of heavy water.”

“Heavy water? Is that what it is?” said Jim with no better understanding of what was in those barrels.

“Yes,” said Mr. Tidesworth “I need that shipment tomorrow at the latest, but my guys can’t come for it until late tonight, or actually until early tomorrow morning... say about 3:00am. Is there anyway we can have the barrels out on the shipping dock so they can stick them in the truck without bothering your crew anymore?”

“Well, I don’t have a problem with that, but the city and county sure might. I mean, it is not very likely that they will be done with whatever they are doing by this evening” said Jim.

“We will have all that handled, don’t worry. Just make sure the barrels are out on the loading dock by 2:00am at the latest. Oh, and here are some passes to the Turf Club at the track for your next visit” replied Mr. Tidesworth.

“Why thanks sir! When the crew gets the ok, I’ll make sure our guys get it done” said Jim.

Meanwhile, the captain of the fire crew got a strange call over his radio from the fire chief. Seems he was to button down the situation and pack up and leave. Something about they couldn’t afford any more overtime for police and county workers and that they would all be back on Monday. When the captain explained that they still did not

have any idea what the substance was in the barrels, or if it presented a hazard, the Fire Chief told him that the word had come in from the Navy and... “not to worry”. “Oh, and one other thing,” said the Fire Chief, “tell them it is ok to move them outside, just so long as they remain on the property. That will help in airing out the warehouse of the nasty, but non dangerous fumes.”

“Got it Chief”, said the captain and prepared his crew for leaving.

Happy, that this situation would not interfere with his plans for watching his son play in his High School football game, the Captain called over Jim, the assistant store manager. When asked, he told him that they were free to move the barrels outside.

“Hey, Mad-Dog, come here a second” said Jim. “I need you to do something for me tonight.”

“Yes sir, what can I help you with?” said Mad-Dog.

“I need you to move all these barrels back outside on the loading dock” said Jim.

“But sir, I’m barred for life from operating the fork lifts, sir!”

“Yes, all because of these damn barrels to begin with”, said Jim. “I’m making an exception in this case... and if you do good, then I will put in the word and have your license to operate reinstated.” Jim figured this was all for the best as he was still concerned on what was in those barrels and Mad-Dog was already exposed. And anyway **The Spill** was all his damn fault to begin with!