

By Abi F. May

THE TALE OF A

self- made MAN

Joseph Penrose Barnes smiled smugly to himself. He had just acquired another share of the market in a hostile takeover. He lived for moments like this. Dressed immaculately in a tailor-made suit and looking every inch the tycoon he was, he reflected on how far he had come from his humble beginnings.

Barnes settled into his leather chair and surveyed the inner sanctum of his growing empire. Plaques on the wall proclaimed his success as an entrepreneur. Every item in the room was top quality, from his latest hi-tech gadgets to the rich mahogany paneling and the plush carpet. Each detail was impressive on its own, but together they had an overpowering effect on those Barnes invited there for private negotiations.

Only the most observant noticed that there were no pictures of family. In truth, Barnes stayed remotely in touch with only one relative, his father. The elder Barnes had been in a senior's home ever since Alzheimer's papered over reality, leaving him oblivious to his son's success. Perhaps that's why Barnes stayed in contact. His father was the one person who didn't try to sponge off of him.

Barnes kept himself so busy with his expanding business that he seldom thought about just how alone he was. Apart from business contacts, there was only one person he spoke to most days, and it wasn't Magda, the housekeeper who arrived each morning after he left for work and finished before he returned, or the doorman or security guards, whose existence he barely acknowledged. The one person he was more or less forced to speak with was his secretary, Dorothy.



Dorothy was in her late 30s and had worked for him for about four years. She was probably the best assistant he had ever had. She was conscientious, thorough, and willing to put in the long hours the job demanded. She probably could have used an assistant herself, but Barnes figured that was unnecessary. That she had two school-aged children who also needed her hadn't crossed his mind since he interviewed her for the job.

He had worked on this new acquisition for six months, and now that the papers were signed his revenue was about to increase substantially—perhaps as much as 40% in the next year. He smiled that smug smile again. *Now that's growth!* He only allowed himself to gloat for a few minutes, however, and was soon fixed once more on his computer monitor, analyzing the other new developments in the market and plotting his next move.

Nothing was amiss when Barnes got home that night, apart from what seemed to be a bad case of indigestion. The feeling had been building all day, but he had attributed it to the stress of weeklong around-the-clock negotiations. He microwaved the beef casserole that Magda had prepared for him, ate it as he watched the financial

news on a cable channel, puffed halfheartedly at a celebratory cigar, and retired early.

The indigestion didn't pass however. Before he could drop off to sleep, the pain worsened to the point that he wished he wasn't alone. His jaw began to ache, then his arm. He gasped for breath and realized that the intense pain that had now moved to his chest was a heart attack. He reached for the phone, but before he could dial the emergency number, the pain overwhelmed him and everything went black.

When Barnes opened his eyes, it seemed as though he had just awakened from a long, strange dream. His mother was standing in front of him, beaming a smile that was almost surreal and looking somehow younger and slimmer than he remembered her. Barnes was confused. Hadn't his mother died fifteen years earlier?

He looked around for something familiar, something to help him get his bearings, and quickly realized that he was no longer home. Instead, he seemed to be in motion, traveling through a long, dark tunnel with a light at the end. His mother never left his side and never stopped smiling. There was sadness in her eyes, though—a sort of gentle reproach for having neglected his brothers and sister, for having been put off by their requests for help, for eventually becoming oblivious to their struggles, for being so wrapped up in himself and his own plans that he hadn't given a thought to anyone else, really. She didn't speak a word, but he knew exactly what she was thinking.

For an instant he seemed to be back at his desk, scrutinizing the latest balance sheet, and he sensed that someone was looking over his shoulder. Then he was back in the tunnel and picking up speed, this time in the opposite direction. Barnes knew in that moment that his life had been given back to him and that he was being given another chance. His balance sheet had been checked, and his accounts weren't so healthy after all. Now was the time to put things right and become the man he should have been. •

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The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, "What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?" So he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry."

But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?"

So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

—Jesus, Luke 12:16–21