



Gary

ORDINARY

Gary was a good man. For twenty years he had been living with the same woman, Angela. For fifteen years he had been working at the same company as an accountant, usually to be found in the top ten list of accountants of the whole firm. Closing in on the forties, he was planning to have two children in the coming few years - should his wife agree. There was nothing out of the ordinary with Gary, everything had its order and its place. His desk at the company was a famous sight, where even pencils were lying parallel to the edges, and not the slightest trace of dust covered the whole working space. For sixteen years Gary and Angela had been living in the same village. Out of the 3,300 people populating that place, at least half of them knew the couple.

Gary wasn't proud of himself, but he was happy. Not happy in the sense of jumping around with glee, but confident and satisfied. He had reached every goal he had ever wanted to achieve - except for the children and maybe a journey around the world, but there was still time.

As already stated, nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened in Gary's life. Thus, it was a bit of a shock when one day his wife woke up next to him in bed and sat up with an unusual expression on her face.

"I'm feeling sick," she said simply, holding her hand on her forehead, as if measuring her temperature.

"Sick? Angela," Gary said, spelling her name clearly and with utmost precision, "didn't you wear enough clothes when the weather man described the cold breeze we would be getting yesterday?"

"I'm not sure, I just feel weak, my head is spinning like crazy," Angela explained, even rolling her eyes for a bit.

"Hm," Gary sighed. "Can you drive to the doctor in that condition? You have to see the doctor, you know that, don't you?"

Before Gary finished his sentence, Angela jumped out of the bed and ran into the bathroom. Gary blinked as he listened to his wife throwing up into the toilet and flushing afterwards.

"Angela?" He sat up in bed, moved to the edge and placed both feet on the ground at the same time, just like every day.

He rose and walked towards the bathroom, where Angela fell into his arms.

Quite surprised, Gary barely caught her and was now holding her firmly in his arms.

"Angela," he said with a worried glare. "I will drive you to the doctor and call my boss that I'm going to be late."

"Thank you," Angela mumbled, looking for some clothes while Gary was constantly standing right beside her in case she would lose balance again.

The usual breakfast got skipped. Gary didn't have time to take a shower. For the first time in years Gary didn't take the newspaper off the lawn in the morning. Gary's hair didn't meet his own requirements. All because his wife was sick and he was on his way to drive her to the doctor, taking a route he would never have dreamed of taking at this time of the day. Whenever he took a glance at himself in the driving mirror he would look away in horror. He knew that person in the mirror, but that Gary belonged into bed, not in his car, not outside of the house, where everybody

could see him.

A few minutes later they arrived at the doctor's place. Gary parked the car parallel to the pavement, and helped Angela walk inside the practice. To Gary's surprise the waiting room was empty, except for the woman at the reception. A tiny loudspeaker played Paul Simon's "You Can Call Me Al" in low quality.

"Please," the woman said with a broad smile. "Take a seat, you're the first ones today!"

"Thank you," Gary replied and sat down with Angela next to him. He looked her straight into the eyes, examining her carefully. "Angela, are you feeling any better?" His wife slowly shook her head.

The loudspeaker rattled and the doctor's voice announced Angela's name.

Without a word, Gary stood up and helped Angela to the doctor's door.

"Please stay outside, Gary, give her some space," the receptionist said, smiling even broader.

At first Gary stood still and blinked at the woman, but then he nodded repeatedly.

"Of course, of course," he said. He opened the door for Angela and closed it again behind her. Slowly he strolled back to his seat.

His mobile roared with the sound of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Not a bit embarrassed Gary took the screaming device out of his right pocket and looked at the caller's name. "Oh," he said, as he remembered that he had wanted to call the company. He answered with a quick press of a button.

"Yes," he said.

"Gary?" the caller yelled into the phone.

"Henry?" Gary breathed deeply and with his free hand he took a deep stroke through his short and chaotic hair, as if Henry could see him. "Oh, thank god, it's you! I thought my boss would call me. Listen, Henry, my wife is sick and I had to drive her to the doctor and..."

"It's too late, pal. Boss's already mighty angry at you," Henry said.

"No, no, no," Gary cried, wandering in circles.

The receptionist was calmly chewing gum and stared at the monitor in front of her.

"Yes, yes, yes, Gary, this is serious, you're in serious trouble, pal," Henry said.

"But I know Jeff, he wouldn't be angry at me over such a matter," Gary said. "He is married as well, he should understand, go on and tell him!"

"Can't do," Henry answered. "The boss won't listen, it's like in those movies where they put red cloth in front of a bull, you know? You're the red cloth, and he's-"

"I understand, I understand," Gary said, waving his free hand around in a calming motion. He closed his eyes hard, and pressed his thumb and index finger on the nasal bone.

"Hold on, he's coming," Henry said and hung up.

"No, wait!" Gary yelled. Realizing that Henry had indeed ended the conversation, Gary slowly moved the mobile away from his ear and stared at the floor.

The doctor's door swung open.

"Ah, Gary!" The doctor marched towards Gary, Angela close behind him. There was no smile on the doctor's face.

"Doctor," Gary said. He wanted to shake the doc's hand, but the general practitioner evaded.

"I'm afraid," the doctor began and took a deep breath. "I'm afraid I've got bad news." Gary took Angela to his side.

Both hands in his pockets, the doctor continued his diagnosis. "Your wife apparently suffers from an unknown disease, at least not one that I could recall ever having witnessed with my own eyes. And I have seen a few, believe me, I have." He pushed his glasses up on his nose with his index finger, and let the hand slip back into the pocket.

"An unknown disease, oh my god, Angela," Gary said, eyes wide open, softly holding Angela's face with his hands, then stroking her hair.

"Now," the doctor continued. "I need to ask a friend of mine what to do. Also, there's a high chance that she infected you as well. From what I've seen it seems highly contagious, assumingly through contact of skin."

The receptionist blew a bubble and let it burst, moving the gum back into her mouth with her tongue.

"What are you talking about?" Gary frowned.

"Isn't it obvious?" Angela said, slightly hysterical. "We're probably going to die soon, Gary!"

The world collapsed for Gary. Death! That was one thing he would have never thought would catch up to him so soon, not in his grand and perfectly thought through plan his life resembled.

"I..." Gary stuttered. "I'm not ready for this! My life-"

"Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium," Gary's mobile blared.

"Yes," he answered.

"This is Jeff speaking," his boss said.

"Jeff, what a pleasure to talk to you," Gary said nervously. "I wanted to tell you earlier, but I-"

"There's no need to apologize, Gary, you're fired as of this very minute. You can come in and clean your desk whenever your wife feels better, or whatever. I hope she'll recover soon. There should always be at least one person in the household with an income. Farewell, Gary," Jeff said and hung up.

In slow-motion Gary's eyes met with Angela's. Gary's Adam's apple moved up and down as he swallowed. "This is a most peculiar day, Angela," he said.

"I tell you what," the doctor said, ignoring the phone call that had just happened.

"You both drive home now and I'll ring you up when I know what's going on exactly. I already have Angela's blood sample, that should suffice for now. Prepare for a possible hospital visit and pack a few things. Okay?"

Gary's mouth was wide open.

"Alright, thank you very much," Angela said to the doctor. "Come, Gary, let's go." Gary blinked and followed his wife outside.

On the way home Angela coughed a few times. Sometimes Gary would look into the driving mirror and check his eyes. Maybe he did indeed look a bit ill, he thought.

"You know," Angela began after a while. "Yesterday when you were already asleep I saw the midnight news and they said that physicists in Germany have finally discovered the ability to produce vehicles which travel at speed of light."

Gary kept staring at the road.

"Isn't that amazing?" Angela asked, coughing again, looking at the trees passing by.

"Indeed," were the words Gary forced out of his throat. "Yes, it is, Angela."

Too bad we will never sit in such a vehicle, Gary thought.

On an intersection the traffic light showed red and Gary was forced to stop, when the mobile again utilized Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to gain attention.

"Maybe you should turn down the volume of that thing," Angela moaned.

"I will," Gary said and answered the call. "Yes! Mother?"

"Gary! How are you, my boy?" his mother greeted him.

"I'm fine, how about you? You sound a bit sad, mother, is something the matter?"

The lights turned green again and the car began to move.

"You're jumping to conclusions, boy, just like usual," his mother said, ending the sentence with a forced laughter.

"I'm not, it's just that you sound somehow sad, that is all," Gary reasoned.

"Ah, well, there's no sense in hiding it any longer anyway," she said, letting out a loud sob. "Your father is dead."

Gary froze. He looked at Angela who sat next to him, eyes closed.

"Hello? Gary?"

"Yes, yes, I'm still here," Gary said. Something close to his heart fell apart, and out came a feeling he had never felt before. Something grim.

"Your father died from a heart attack last night. The doctors couldn't do anything anymore. It just seemed like it was time for him to go, you know?" She sobbed again, probably crying now.

"I don't really know what to say, mother," Gary said. It's like somebody shot a bullet in his stomach and the pain wasn't recognized by his brain. "It's like somebody shot a bullet in my stomach and the pain wasn't recognized by my brain."

"What? I understand, you're confused now, I shouldn't have told you such terrible news through the phone. I'll come over. I need you now, you see, you're my only child. You and Angela are the only ones left now," she cried.

Gary's mouth opened, but all the words he wanted to say tried to come out at the same time and ended up being stuck in his throat.

"I'll be there soon," his mother said and cut the line.

Gary kept staring at the road. His hands and feet moved unconsciously, like the car was using him and not the other way around.

"What's wrong?" Angela said, with her eyes closed.

"Apparently my father passed away," he answered.

His wife suddenly seemed to burst out into laughter, but then he realized she was obviously crying, holding her hand before her face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just so ironic that everything happens all of a sudden at the very same time. I don't know whether to cry or to laugh."

Both remained silent until they arrived home.

Inside they both didn't get out of their shoes or coats, they just sat down on the couch in the living room.

"What if this is the last day of my life?" Gary began. "And on this very last day all the good days must be balanced out with bad days. Since it is only one day everything bad has to happen at once."

"What are you talking about?" Angela scoffed.

"Angela, I'm talking about our disease, my lost job, my dead father!"

"You lost your job?" Angela asked, frowning.

"The minute our doctor diagnosed our infection," Gary said.

Angela shook her head and looked away, holding her mouth. Gary hid his face in his hands.

"I need to go for a walk," Angela said and rose from the couch.

"Did I say something wrong?" her husband asked.

"Not at all, I just want a few minutes alone. This day is just too much to digest."

"Of course, take your time, Angela," Gary said and looked after his wife as she left the house. The infection's effect seemed to have lessened a bit on her, he thought.

Gary looked at the dinner table and imagined the world of yesterday when it still seemed to turn in the right direction. He stood up and called his mother. She answered.

"Gary, I'm on my way, I'll be right there," she said, and hung up again.

Gary stared at his mobile, confused. It wasn't mere confusion anymore. It was frustration, it was sadness, it was bitterness, and it was so overwhelming that every emotion slowly turned into something so big it was too much for him to care anymore. A huge pile of garbage he could simply ignore. He just stood there, miserable, afloat; hovering above everything, like a machine that had been kicked repeatedly and yet was still functioning well enough. Gazing at the mobile, he came to a strange realization. The date displayed on the screen reminded him of something. The doorbell rang. It took a while for Gary to realize, but when he did, he quickly jumped to the door, thinking it would be Angela. He looked through the spy hole and was about to turn the knob. But his whole body stopped moving, as if out of power.

Outside he saw - grinning and giggling - Henry, Jeff, his doctor, his mother, his father - in best condition -, and his wife Angela. Together they were holding a large white cloth in front of them with huge black letters.

"April Fool's."

Thank you:

Auri, Nina, Franz, Astrid.

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