

The Forever Principle

By Pete Planisek

My hand is shaking as I hold the phone; not a gentle tremor or slight tick, but hard enough for me to fight to keep the phone near my ear. I'd put it on speaker but I'm not ready for my girlfriend to hear the news. Her face is anticipation, concern, curiosity; framed by the crescent-shaped morning light sneaking through the blinds. We should have been up two hours ago but we spent a late night celebrating my failure. I lost the race.

"You're the winner," the voice on the other end of the call proclaims again to my disbelieving ears.

"How?" I demand more harshly than I mean to. This is some sick trick. If I can only figure out whose voice is really on the other end of the line. "Four people finished ahead of me in a five person race so..."

The voice is speaking again so I listen. The man's accent is thick and my head is throbbing. How many places did we go last night?

"Okay," I pause, "Okay, yeah great. I'll...I need to shower but ... yeah tomorrow would probably be better. Nothing but water. Got it. Okay. Okay. Yeah, 8:30. Thanks. Uh huh. Bye."

I click a button and the room fades to silence for a moment. She's still waiting.

"Baby, what was that all about," she asks in a tired voice.

I can't look her in the eyes so mine drift to her chest. Why'd she have to be here now? If they'd just waited until later...

“That was ... ah...think he said his name was Lessmen.”

Rubbing my eyes I glance at the clock. Oh yeah, it is later. I work more moisture into my mouth.

“Lessmen from the racing association. He says I...ah... I won, now. Now he says I’ve won.”

“You won,” she says incredulously. It could be a question but it isn’t. We both know what this means. She shifts, fully awake now, into a more confrontational posture.

“So what are you going to do?” She demands, giving voice to the only thought echoing through my still dull mind.

“Shower,” I answer into the awkward silence.

“You do that,” she responds, drawing the covers back up.

I stand in the shower letting the water run over me a long time before I actually start to get cleaned up. She’ll probably be gone by the time I emerge from the bathroom. She’s not stupid. Who’d want to stick around for what’s coming? I hate how bathroom towels always feel like you’re drying yourself with steel wool. Why do people steal this crap?

The room’s empty when I finally open the bathroom door and start to get dressed. Well, it was fun while it lasted. Now where’d I put my wedding ring this time? A few minutes tick away as I doggedly search before retrieving my prize from deep inside my sports bag. If I was smart I wouldn’t call her at all but I’ve got to kill a few minutes anyway since my supplier’s so many time zones removed. But Kassie should be up; if not her then the kids. To my surprise she answers on the first ring.

“Hey, honey,” I begin. “Sorry I didn’t call last night but it was a rough day.”

I hear her breath change as she shifts the position of the phone and tells Olivia to start the washing machine.

“Tough break,” Kassie agrees when she returns her attention to me. “Figured you weren’t in the mood to talk. How are you today?” Her voice sounds strained.

A knocking begins at the door.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing Kassie. I overslept a little. Just housekeeping. Probably forgot to leave the sign out last night,” I say nonchalantly as I look through the peephole. “Shit.”

“What is it?”

The knock repeats followed by a muffled voice.

“I gotta go. Love you, bye.”

The call done I take a step back and open the door with unspoken imprecations flooding my mind.

“What? Forget your toothbrush again?”

“I wanted some coffee asshole,” my mistress states as she rolls her eyes and pushes past me into the room before heading into the bathroom.

“Where’s mine?”

“Why don’t you run and get your own,” she says before smugly shutting the bathroom door. Now I get it. I’ve ruined her fun. She’ll have to find another athlete to live off of; I’m already yesterday’s news.

My phone rings again. It’s Kassie calling back. I move to take the call in the hallway and almost run into my coach. I silence the call.

“I assume you know,” he says flatly by way of greeting.

“I’ll handle it,” I say dismissively. What else can I say?

The man practically knocks the phone, ringing once again, from my hand. Angrily I turn my face to confront him only to find his alive with agitation. It’s not just my career. The phone vibrates minutely upon the floor before going silent.

I study my coach. This is a man I’ve known for the better part of five years since joining the national team. We sum each other up, unwilling for now to take things any further, before he begins to walk away.

“I want this affair business of yours to end here,” he demands, only half turning to momentarily face me before haltingly continuing on his way. “It’s a damn disgrace.”

Who’s he to lecture me about my own choices? He’s as dirty as the rest of us, only he doesn’t realize it. I grin as I retrieve my phone off the floor.

The affair is the least of my concerns right now. Besides, by this point in our marriage it isn’t like Kassie doesn’t know who she’d married to. This isn’t the first and won’t be the last; it’s the latest, nothing more. The blood test tomorrow though could alter everything. If they confirm that I’ve been doping too...

A familiar chorus of excuses rushes through my mind. I've recited this list so many times it's like reading off a script so well timed and memorized that I struggle to get to the end of it. Just because I'm bored with it all doesn't make it any less true. People love competitors, heroes on the field, larger than life accomplishments that they don't want to explain, only to marvel at and bet on for their own selfish gain. If I hadn't started leveling the situation for myself then I'd never have gotten this far. Too many others cheat making it impossible for an honest man to find success in this business. What was I supposed to do, abandon my dreams while other dishonest men pursued theirs?

Sure I could have reported what I knew but I'd be a pariah; my career just as dead. It's better to take the risk. Techniques and chemists keep us well ahead of rules and testing. Besides, nobody wants to hear it; hear the names of the heroes we've rooted for and accept that miracles don't happen. The lie gives us hope, has given me and my family a very comfortable existence, given me an edge over countless others who are more idealistic than me.

I've been lucky. Maybe the true competition is simply not to get caught. If so, why did four other runners yesterday make that mistake? I've tried to do this smart. Don't always go for the win; that's when they get suspicious; that's when they single you out. No, stay in the races, give just enough to stay a threat, win some lose some but make it all look normal.

The shadow of a fallen hero can eclipse that of the legend. We like stories of heartache, redemption, the will to fight on against the odds. Legends have their moment, get their rewards and trot off into the record books. A fallen hero always has the advantage of existing in the shadow of one simple question attached to them: what if? The legend reaches their full potential, people celebrate it, and then there's no mystery left; the fallen hero keeps it more interesting

since their full potential is an unknown. It will never be known, just lost to time. It's the forever principle. What if?

I've been standing in the hall letting my phone ring for a few minutes now. I'm not going back in that hotel room. I always keep my valuables in the hotel safe in case I have to make a quick exit or on the off chance one of the mistresses decides to have a little financial fun at my expense. Usually the prepaid credit card each month takes care of such issues but you never can tell who you can trust.

Kassie isn't calling anymore and I've got eight messages from unfamiliar numbers. I listen to them as I walk. That didn't take long; the media sharks are circling around this one. Doping stories always play well in the ratings; better than the ratings for the races actually. They all want a comment from me about my unprecedented win. Yesterday I was just another loser but suddenly today the situation makes me worthy of their attention. How flattering.

I'm feeling good until I hear the last message. The one from a news service that has been looking into my testing records and noticed some abnormalities and is looking for me to comment on their findings. It's begun. A hound has caught the scent of the fox.

How's this for a comment: cheating is a team effort. Complacent people are drawn to liars; they want share in the success not questions. The path of least resistance includes finding a network of suppliers, doctors, agents, publicists, teammates, coaches, and sports officials who will give you the means to beat the test. But these people are rarely found guilty in the court of public opinion. It's the user who's singled out while that support network distances itself from the matter.

My phone just keeps ringing with messages of congratulations, interview requests, and ... I pause in front of the TV in the lobby. The images play out and I don't really hear anything the reporter's saying as I see faces appearing on the screen, including my own. The supplier, my supplier's offices have been raided. He must have been helping one of the guys they've already caught. The phone rings. I feel myself slam it down to the marble flooring more than I'm mentally aware of doing so. I'm a victim. Why are they going after me? I haven't even had my latest blood test.

Some stooge in a suit is now on the screen explaining ... what? How new testing requirements exposed us, integrity of the sport, and on and on.

"Like you know," I shout, drawing the attention of others in the lobby.

I'm sick of this. I cheated to entertain these people and now they're going to judge me because some reporter keeps flashing my picture up on a television screen.

"So I cheated," I laugh. "Prove it," I demand of the man nearest to me. "Prove it," I repeat as people begin to shuffle nervously away.

What's the worse they can do?

My phone is finally silent. And all the people turn away; what I don't realize in that moment is that they'll never turn back or ask the question: what if?



“The Forever Principle” by Pete Planisek

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