

Continuum
Sample
by
Seth Kerin

Identity Theft

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Jonah made his way deftly down the crowded Manhattan sidewalk, easily evading an open manhole cover and shifting his way among countless other business folk and tourists alike. His eyes, however, were focused not on the milling swarms of pedestrians around him, but were planted firmly on *The Wall Street Journal* that he held folded neatly in one hand. He scanned down the quarter page he had opened up to him, searching with practiced eyes for tidbits of information that were useful. His left hand clutched protectively his double mocha latte from Starbucks.

Seeing nothing new, he had already searched online news sites that morning, he dexterously shuffled the paper about with one hand, looking as though he were performing one-handed origami, and began scanning the next quarter page.

For Jonah Dough, sidewalks in New York City were a direct parallel to his Wall Street job. His feet instinctively knew where to go to avoid the next late executive who wasn't paying attention. His legs knew just when to pick up the pace to narrowly avoid impatient cabbies – which would be all the cabbies in the city. He trusted his gut the same when it came to the NYSE as he did in his walk to his classy office.

He noted a blurb in the *Journal*, just before another sleight of hand gesture that shifted him to the bottom right corner of the next page, which mentioned the improvement of MCI and its narrow escape from bankruptcy. While most had been furiously selling off their shares of WorldCom in a desperate bid to unload the volatile company, he had quietly followed his gut and bought up enough to put him out of business if MCI did go under.

Many on Wall Street took gambles, but few put all their chips on the table like Jonah did. Some of his colleagues thought him brave, others foolish, but every man and woman who did business with him knew that he was fearless. If he had a gut feeling, he went with it without ever looking back. It was the way he had been raised – with a strong sense of purpose – by his father. His mother had run off while he was still in diapers.

He pushed the uncomfortable thoughts of his mother away, burying deep in the back of his mind. It was weak to think so much about someone he had never met and, in all likelihood, would never meet. His father had rarely mentioned his wife of so long ago, and all hints pointed to drugs as the likely culprit for her flight.

Jonah stopped and looked up from his newspaper, nearly spilling his latte on the businessman in front of him. The crowd had stopped rather suddenly, and only his keen instincts had allowed him to stop in time to avoid a collision.

“What the hell?” he muttered, taking the moment of stillness to take a sip of the still scalding hot mocha latte.

He heard similar mutterings ahead, as well as less subtle musings on what the construction workers who were holding up the mob could do with their wrenches.

Finally, after about thirty impatient seconds, the crowd began to move again at a slow waddle.

Jonah glanced at his watch; 9:17. He was going to be late if the schmucks in front of him didn't get their collective asses in gear.

Shit!

He looked up at the battered blue scaffolding that bridged the sidewalk, creating a chokepoint that forced the crowd through single file. Grumbling to himself, Jonah stepped toward the road and then skittered along the curb, passing the still griping group of people who were waiting as patiently as hungry sheep to get into the pen.

Just like sheep, he thought. Just waiting there to be herded on to the next point.

He slipped to the front of the throng, stepping toward an alternate path under the scaffolding that was open. *Of course, no one was told they could use this path, so naturally they're all just waiting.*

Noticing the bold man who had stepped to the fore of the line and was about to cut through the delay unhindered, another businessman realized that, rather than wait for the two people in front of him, he could cut ahead of the man who was moving steadily toward the open pathway.

Jonah saw the man skip in front of him. The man's shoulder hit his latte and sent the Starbucks cup whirling out into the street, trailing hot mocha in its wake. He saw clearly the man's bad comb-over as he slid roughly past, striding into the clear path beneath the scaffolding, a triumphant smirk on his roundish face.

Jonah stopped, accepting his gut feeling and acting on it.

A loud crash came from above them – high above – and the man who had cut in front of him stopped dead in his tracks, looking up as though he could see something through the plywood boards that covered the makeshift tunnel. One crash after another sounded in rapid succession as something very heavy fell through one level after the next, shattering the relatively thin plywood and not seeming to slow.

Realistically, Jonah knew that the man probably would not have had time to move, but it seemed more foolish not to even try. He was like the hero of a bad movie who tried to outrun the enemy's car down the middle of the road rather than simply dashing into someone's yard.

The boards above the man's head split down the middle and a large metallic object careened through with little to no resistance. With vivid clarity Jonah watched as the safe – looking astonishingly like something out of Looney Toons – struck the man's head. His cranium compressed downward, shattering like a watermelon hit by Gallagher. His legs buckled with sickening crunches in the wrong direction as the man's rib cage did its best accordion imitation.

The safe hit the ground with a watery metallic clang and made the bile rise in Jonah's throat. He, along with everyone else within sight of the man who had just been splattered, stood completely still – their shock at the sudden tragic end was palpable.

Then the reality of the situation hit the onlookers with all the force of the safe.

A woman screamed.

Her scream brought another woman to her senses. She fainted.

An elderly gentleman cast down his eyes and quietly prayed.

The man next to him heaved up his breakfast on a snooty looking woman in front of him.

The snooty woman looked with horror on her newly stained shawl, her lack of concern over the dead man evident.

Three people whipped out cell phones like old time gunslingers. Two dialed 911. The third, a college student by the disheveled appearance, had called a friend.

“Holy shit dude, a guy just got crushed by a big safe like in the Roadrunner cartoons. Except this guy didn’t spring back up like that dumb coyote does.”

A man wearing a pinstripe suit ducked under a rail of scaffolding and approached the safe and the mess it had caused. He reached out with what looked like a classroom pointer – he had a professorial look to him – and touched the poor man’s remains.

Jonah watched in horrified fascination as the man glanced at his watch – *Time of death, 9:18 AM* – and then began speaking softly in the direction of his cufflink. No one else noticed that little detail. They were too busy making phone calls, praying, vomiting, being unconscious, screaming, or worrying about how much their dry cleaner bill was going to be. Jonah saw the professor look back over his shoulder at him. He saw the man’s black, uncaring eyes. There was a spark of familiarity there. Just a spark, flashing by so quickly that Jonah barely noticed.

But he did notice.

His gut, sympathizing with the man who had lost his breakfast, told him to get the hell out of Dodge. He turned his back on the professor and shouldered his way through the still stunned crowd. As soon as he was free on the other side, hugging the storefronts as he walked back the way he came, he picked up his pace. Paranoia, he knew, but a little healthy paranoia never hurt anyone. His gut never had led him astray before and, despite having no reason to have such a bad feeling, he was not about to ignore his gut after nearly being crushed by a thousand pound safe.

Jonah climbed into a cab that was just waiting for someone like him to come along. “Wall Street, Stock Exchange,” he said to the man who undoubtedly spoke English as well as the average toddler. He sat back as the cab bolted forward as though the cabbie’s very life depended on a speedy ride, listening as the voice of William Shatner told him how important it was to buckle up for safety.

* * *

Nothing says paranoia like seeing inordinate numbers of black, ominous looking cars. Of course, realistically, Jonah knew that there were many black cars in New York City. Looking at the street from a high rise often gave the appearance of looking down at a bee hive with swarming yellow taxis and black caddies and limos. He had, after all, just seen something completely unrealistic occur – a man getting inexplicably crushed by a falling safe – and now his traumatized mind was working overtime to compensate and generate explanations.

At least that’s what Jonah was currently attempting to convince himself. He had arrived in the lobby of the NYSE and now found himself unable to tear his eyes away from the revolving doors and, beyond the protective glass, the strangely large number of black cars that seemed to be passing by on the street.

Just my overactive imagination.

He was only a few minutes late – the cabbie had whisked him to work in short order. The ten dollar trip was worth it though to get well away from the horror of what he had seen. Now, he determined, if he could get lost in stocks; catching tips, making gambles, putting pressure on competitors, he could put the horrible beginning of his day well behind him.

Taking a deep breath - an act that seemed to focus his mind away from the confusing tumult of thoughts that the morning's events had brought about - Jonah made his way toward the metal detector. His job was to make money, not to figure out why some poor schmoo had gotten splattered all over a Manhattan sidewalk.

"ID please, sir," the guard said.

Jonah looked over his shoulder but no one else was behind him. The detector line was longest at 9:00 and was negligible from then until noon. "You're shittin' me, right Frankie?" he said. Frank had been the elevator guard for three years.

"No sir. Since 9/11 nothing slides. ID please," Frank repeated.

"Ah, I get it. Higher ups comin' down on ya," Jonah said, nodding as he dug his ID badge out of his pocket. He passed it over into Frank's meaty hands and the guard looked it over with great scrutiny, scratching at his balding head.

"Well, I guess this checks out," Frank said with a puzzled look on his face. He shrugged and waved Jonah through the metal detector. "Don't worry, they're always changing badge formats and security is the last to know. You're new obviously, so you aren't up to speed on the rules and regs," Frank added with a conspiratorial look. "The bosses don't like it when people are late, especially new people. Get to your office quick and I'll tell them you came through here on time."

Jonah nodded, though now it was he who had the puzzled expression. He and Frank had swapped greetings, rumors and various other good cheer for the past three years. Perhaps, he surmised, good old Frankie was subtly trying to clue him in that the bosses were on the prowl. It seemed odd, but certainly not safe-falling-on-guy odd.

"Right, Frank, I'll get right on up to my office. Hey, did Annie put you up to this?" he asked.

Frank obligingly took back the puzzled look. "No, sir. Look, if you're keen on keeping this job for more than a week, you best get yourself upstairs and looking busy."

"Right," Jonah repeated, backing away from Frank the guard and thumbing the up button on the elevator. There was a long, uncomfortable pause before the doors opened.

Okay, easy, Jonah thought, trying to calm himself as he stepped into the elevator and hit the button for the thirty-fourth floor. *It's just people messing with me since I'm late. I'm never late, so they've probably been planning this for a long time. They don't know about pancake man. They don't know about the black cars that are suddenly everywhere. But Frankie . . . would he do that to me?*

The answer was yes. Had to be yes. He was not going crazy. It was just his normal, healthy paranoia going a little overboard due to his recent trauma. As the elevator doors closed, leaving Frankie and his puzzled look behind, Jonah had nearly convinced himself that it was all in his mind.

It was an express ride to floor thirty-four. The doors opened, the metal sheets sliding into the recesses of the elevator shaft to reveal, to him, a pleasing sight. Annie, his immediate superior, stood there as though waiting to get on the elevator herself.

"Surprise," he said, glad to see his gorgeous boss. At least now things might get back to normal.

Annie stepped back, indeed looking quite surprised. Almost scared. Her short brown hair, styled after the strangely endearing ruffled look made so popular by Friends, framed

her big blue eyes, button nose and serious lips. She looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

“You okay, Annie? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Uh . . . yes . . . I’m fine, thank you,” she said, but her black pumps were riveted to the faux marble floor. She held a manila folder in one hand, pressed against her simple yet elegant white blouse. Her black pleated skirt showed just enough leg to catch the eye, but not enough to break the company’s unspoken dress code.

He and Annie had shared a fair bit of flirting and even a few lunch dates that had little work-related involvement. Jonah was fairly confident that things with his boss could be pushed further, given appropriate timing and discretion, but the look on her face as the color drained from her cheeks did not bode well for his aspirations.

“Are you here to see someone?” she asked, her voice calmed somewhat but still only a light covering over her obvious unease. Her eyes flicked over his ID badge that he had clipped to the pocket of his shirt as though she were not sure who he was.

“Just here to do my job, boss,” Jonah replied. “Is there a problem, cause Frankie downstairs gave me some strange vibes too.”

“Oh god, Frankie . . .” she said, almost too quietly to hear.

Jonah did hear though, and despite the fact that he had no idea why she was concerned with Frankie, the sad catch in her throat as she whispered the words sent a chill up his spine. It was almost as if she thought Frank were dead.

“Maybe we should go to your office and talk,” he said.

“Yes, of course, talk,” she said with feigned enthusiasm. “Please, follow me.”

Like I don’t know where your office is, Jonah thought, but her tone made it sound as if he did not. *Paranoia. Remember that. It’s just paranoia. Mind is on overdrive. Pancake man.*

Annie led the way down the hallway, passed a dozen closed doors to various suites on the floor. Jonah followed a respectful distance behind, allowing his eyes to linger on her backside. *Maybe the day is improving after all.*

She led the way into the suite that was her office, nervously waving one well manicured hand at the chair in the reception area. Her secretary’s desk was empty. “Please wait here. I just have a few things to take care of and then we can . . . talk.”

“Right,” Jonah said without much conviction. “Talk.”

She flitted into the office proper, though she did not close the door entirely behind her. Jonah was more confused than ever. What exactly did “talk” mean to Annie? Was it some manner of innuendo, or was she going to can him just for being late?

As soon as these thoughts crossed his mind, he heard her talking. She was on the phone. His gut told him he needed to hear. He needed some answers and needed them soon or he was going to go nuts. He stood up and walked to the mostly closed door, holding his breath and hoping he could hear her voice over the sudden nervous pounding of his heart.

“. . . security, yes. He’s here. He’s in my office. That guy . . . his face is all over the news. The TV in my office is on, but muted. Says his name is Jonah Dough on his ID, but he doesn’t work here. Report says he pushed a big safe off a building and crushed someone flat! Damn it, get someone up here before this maniac kills me or rapes me or

whatever maniacs do.” All this came out as a hushed rant as though her only chance was to say everything as fast as she could.

Jonah had heard enough. The joke had gone far enough. It wasn't funny to begin with and it was getting exponentially less funny as the morning went on. He pushed the door open and stepped into Annie's office, closing the door fully behind him.

“April fools,” he said. “Joke's over, ha, ha.”

“Shit, he's in here, get security up here now!” she yelled into the phone.

“Of course I'm here!” he yelled, figuring he best get in on the act while the getting was good. “I work here you dumb bitch!”

Right. I mean I did work here. Now she will can me.

“You don't scare me. And maybe you didn't kill that guy like they say, but you better sit down until security comes,” Annie said, hanging up the phone. Security was never particularly efficient and with her life on the line, she didn't expect that to change just because she was on the phone yelling at them. She was on her own.

“I'll sit down when you tell me just what the hell is going on,” Jonah said. “Frankie acted like I've never been here before. Asked if I'm the new guy. Says my badge is wrong, but probably new.”

“He's alive?” she asked, her voice quivering just slightly. She was putting on a good front.

“Yes, he's alive. Unless he's had a heart attack in the past three minutes or so. I've been telling him for years to lose some weight.”

“Who are you?” she asked, gaining some confidence it seemed as she realized that he did not seem intent on murdering her, raping her, or dropping a big safe on her head.

“Jonah Dough. You hired me more than three years ago as a level three broker. I've made this company twenty-six million in that time. You'd think that would earn me a little respect. The joke is now over.”

“This isn't a joke, Mr. Dough,” she said. “The news report claims that you killed a man . . .”

“. . . by dropping a safe on his head. I heard, from you. I saw it happen. I saw the guy get squashed like a very large, juicy bug, but there's no way in hell I could have moved that safe, carried it to the top of God knows how many levels of scaffolding, and then pushed it down just in time to squish some guy whose only crime was to cut ahead of me. He evidently saved my life,” Jonah said, realizing that was at least a large part of his paranoia. The squished guy should have been him.

“So you really didn't kill anyone?” Annie asked, leaning forward over her large mahogany desk. “What are you doing *here*?”

“No, I didn't kill the guy. I told you, I just saw it happen. I'm *here* because, like most folks, I get paid for showing up at a certain place for certain times on certain days. They're called jobs, perhaps you've heard of them.” He was getting more than a little exasperated.

“Mr. Dough, I don't know you from anyone else who walks in off the street. I know every single person I've hired. I know everyone by name on this floor and the two above and below it. I know every face in this building.”

She paused, perhaps for dramatic effect, but it served only to irritate Jonah.

“Mr. Dough, I have never seen you before in my life.”

“So then how do I know your middle name is Eunice, your mother died last year of lung cancer, you have a cabin on a lake in Vermont, and you’ve never been married?” he asked.

Annie seemed a bit taken aback by that. “Anyone could come up with those things—”
“If they spent three years working for you. Yes, it would be obvious to such a person. I also know that you always order a turkey melt on rye from the deli and that you carry ‘emergency’ packs of sugar in your purse because ‘they never put enough sugar in your coffee.’”

Annie looked about to say something and then checked herself, pursing her lips at having her usual logic turned upside down. “Okay, I admit this is interesting. Not saying I believe you, because I don’t, but if you were going to kill me you would already have done it.” She paused and glanced at the clock, her thin eyebrows furrowing in annoyance. “And its obvious that in the event of an actual emergency, I might just as well give up. Fucking security anyway.”

Jonah grinned. He’d always thought it was sexy when she cursed. At least he’d thought that he’d thought that . . . apparently he hadn’t really, or she would know who he was. He scratched his head as he felt the first tinges of a migraine coming on.

“Point is, Mr. Dough—”

“Jonah,” he interrupted.

“Fine, Jonah, point is, get the hell under my desk and I’ll get rid of the security guys. I want to know why you know so much about me and by the look of you, you’d like to know the same.”

“Yeah,” he said absently, his mind working furiously to try to make sense out of a very bizarre morning.

“Get the hell under the desk then and keep your mouth shut,” she ordered.

Jonah did as he was told, cramming himself beneath the center drawer and pulling the faux leather chair in behind him as best he could.

Satisfied that he was hidden well enough for the moment, Annie opened the door and stepped back into the reception room of her suite. She started to close her office door, but thought better of it and left it open. *No need to make it look like I’m hiding a fugitive under my desk*, she thought.

Security took that moment to burst into the reception room with a great amount of gusto. Three of the guards had tasers out while a fourth had a black baton that he looked far too eager to use. Mark from two suites farther down the hall was with them, looking curiously over their shoulders.

“If you idiots value your jobs you’re going to tell me that you’ve caught the maniac,” Annie said. Though she was petit at just over five feet tall, her words had all five men back on their heels. “I take it from your blank expressions that the maniac is still about. So let’s up the ante a bit. If you value your collective balls, you’ll have a detailed security report on my desk by three o’clock this afternoon explaining why the fuck you imbeciles took ten fucking minutes to get to my office when I could have been killed, maimed and eaten for breakfast by some maniacal killer!”

Annie glared at the guards, her eyes boring into them with all the fury she could muster. It was no act, for if Jonah had proven violent she would be long dead. The guards stood there, stunned. “GO!” she shouted.

Muttering apologies, the guards turned and left, their heavy boots thumping down the hall as they ran off in search of the fugitive. Mark remained behind, leaning casually against the doorjamb of the suite, one eyebrow raised in what could only be amusement.

“Rough morning?”

“You could say that,” Annie replied. “Assholes,” she added, nodding her head in the directions the guards had gone.

“Wanna talk?” Mark inquired.

“No,” she said flatly. “I’m going home early. I’ve had quite enough shit for one day.”

“What about the report?”

“Fuck the report. They’ll probably use crayon anyway.”

“Ah,” he said, nodding knowingly. “That time of the month eh?”

“Watch it, Mark. You’ve been okay over the past few years but your sudden turn to jackass is going to land you on the shitlist right above four inept security guards.”

“Sorry, boss,” Mark said, holding his hands up defensively. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Just trying to lighten the mood.”

“Well you failed,” she said. “Now get back to work unless you’d care to take up panhandling.”

“Yes, Ms. Jenkins,” he said obediently, closing her suite door behind him.

Taking a deep breath, smoothing out her blouse, and patting her hair to make sure it hadn’t gotten too mussed in her tirade, Annie Jenkins returned to her office to retrieve the strange man who had barged in on her life and seemed to know her better than most of her closest friends.