

Smitty



...old friends, lost and found

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Smitty

Author's Note

Smitty grew from a magazine article I read in the mid-1990s. The article outlined a construction accident that made no sense to me. I asked a few questions, received a few reports, and still did not understand what happened. The wounds were too raw to pursue further. Smitty sat unfinished for twenty years. What follows is a story of friendship built around my conjecture. Obviously, this is fiction. The characters are fictional, my solution is fictional. I trust enough time has passed to protect all who were affected. My apologies if I failed to provide sufficient protection. If I've hurt you, let me know what I can do to make it right.

As I said, this is really a story of friendship—its durability and value. Hope you enjoy it. I like John, Linda, Fred, Meg, and the girls. If I can get a feel for ranch life, you can expect to see them again. As always, any comments welcome. If you know about ranching and rodeo, I could use a good subject matter expert. Volunteers welcome.

Haven't worked out a 'reward' for Smitty beta readers. I'm open to suggestions. Thanks for taking the time to look at Smitty. Have fun.

Prologue - The Fall

04Nov: Sunday

He watched as the crane lowered the ten-ton concrete floor panel through the steel exoskeleton of columns and beams. The panel drifted much like a large leaf through the naked branches of a winter-bare tree. No sooner had he grabbed the tag line to turn the panel, when it was yanked from his hand. He was weightless, a pleasant surprise.

Knifing into the floor below, surprise became terror—he wasn't stopping. The momentary impact passed from the soles of his feet through his legs, past his hips, up his spine, to the base of his skull. No pain, just the heaviness of compression as his head merged with his shoulders. Striking floor 21 was different. Now there was pain—sharp, searing pain, as his spine fused to become a spear thrust into his brain. At floor 20, his diaphragm pushed upwards collapsing his lungs. He blacked-out. The rising mass of stomach, liver, and intestines constricted his heart. It quit beating by floor 17. The cascading concrete pile stopped at floor 16. A swirling concrete cloud rose from the stack of broken, jagged panels.

The settling cementitious mist shrouded the compressed form. After the din of the rent steel and fractured concrete, there was silence. The spewing dust expelled all sound as it billowed upwards and outwards. Co-workers kept away when the panels were overhead, rushed to the well made by the absent panels and stared into the void. He'd gone into the hole.

Chapter 1 - The call

09Nov: Friday

The day was long—too many hours and too little to do. Tired from doing nothing. Thank god it was Friday night. Looking forward to a few beers, a TV dinner, and anything on the boob tube. This was my life—long boring days, long boring nights. As I punched holes in the cellophane of my combination plate Mexican dinner, the phone rang. I let the machine take the message. “John? John Smith? This is Fred, Fred Samson. There’s something I need to tell ...”

Took less than a second for the name to register. Even after all these years, the recognition was immediate. I dropped the fork and grabbed the handset, interrupting Fred’s message. “Fred? Fred? That you? It’s John.”

“Good. Glad you picked up. Don’t like talking to those damn machines.”

“Couldn’t have that,” I said, shaking my head. “Can’t be, can it?”

“It can. It is.”

“Been a long time Fred, a real long time.”

“Far too long.”

“That it has. What you been up to? God, it’s been ages.”

“That, and then some.” After a moment of silence, Fred continued in a much softer voice. “Sorry I didn’t call until now. Even sorrier because I’m calling with bad news, real bad news.” I could hear him take several deep breaths. “Mel’s dead,” he whispered.

Now it was my turn to take a few deep breaths.

“Mel?”

“Yes.”

“Dead?”

“Ah huh.”

“How? How did it happen?”

“Killed in a construction accident here in Vegas.”

“When? How?”

“‘bout a week ago. Don’t have all the details. He fell.”

“Damn, damn, damn.” I stared off into space.

“My sentiments.” I had nothing to say. “Took me a while to find you. You any idea how many John Smiths there are?” He waited for me to say something. “Got your address and phone number this morning. Waited until now to call, hoping you’d be home.” There was nothing to say. “Figured you’d want to know.”

He waited. “Ya, thanks,” I finally said.

“Sure.”

I leaned against the counter. “I appreciate the call, Fred. I really do. This couldn’t have been easy.”

“It wasn’t.”

“Give me a second. It’s a shock.”

“Sure, take your time.”

I held the phone at my side. Closed my eyes and took three deep breaths. Tried to smile. Had no idea

what to say. "Heard he married Linda. How's she doing?"

"Doing as well as we can expect."

"Good." More silence. "I've lost track. Haven't talked to anyone in the old crowd in more than twenty years."

"Same here. We all drifted apart. Well, not all. Married Meg."

"You did?" Now I smiled. "Damn, that's great to hear." I slapped the side of my leg.

"Ya, seemed like the right thing to do."

"It was." Silence. "Meg and Linda are still tight."

"Good. Figures. They should've been sisters."

"As you and Mel were brothers."

"Thought we were—for a while."

"You were. Damn."

"Damn." Silence.

Fred broke the tension. "You and Mel were the best team ropers on the circuit."

"We were more than that."

"I know."

"Funny what can happen—best friends one minute, mortal enemies the next. Take it I missed the funeral."

"Two days ago in Laughlin. Heading back down there tomorrow to see how Linda and the kids are holding up."

“The kids?”

“Two girls. Well, they’re not kids any more. Should be in their twenties now.”

“Been that long?”

“Been that long. Lot has happened.”

“Suppose it has.”

Silence. “This hit the kids hard. They adored Mel.”

“Mel would’ve made a good father.”

“He was.”

“Why construction?”

“No money in rodeo. Had to make a living.”

“Know how that goes.”

“You have kids?”

“No. Know how tough it is to make money rodeoing.”

He laughed. “We both do. The circuit’s a hard life.”

“Been there, done that.”

“Things got tough after Suzy came.”

“Suzy?”

“The eldest. He tried to find another partner. Never had much luck.”

“Neither did I.”

“Became a rodeo clown, so he could be around the life.”

“Sounds like Mel. Was he happy?”

“Think so. He couldn’t give it up.”

“Tough for me, too.”

“Sure it was. You two had a love for it.”

“Love. Yea, that pretty well sums it up.”

“What’ve you been up to, if I can ask?”

“You’ve more right than most. You were, are a good friend.”

“Same here.”

“Sorry we lost touch.”

“So am I.”

“I’m in Houston now, but you know that. Knocked around some and settled down, of sorts.”

“Married?”

“Nah, no one will have me.” He snorted at that. “I’m a superintendent at the Knowlton refinery nearby.”

“Superintendent? Sounds impressive.”

“Sounds more than is. Not a bad life.”

I heard a sigh. “Haven’t thought about those times in years. We had some good times, didn’t we?”

“Sure did.”

He laughed. “I couldn’t do that anymore, even if I wanted to. Twenty years makes a big difference.”

My turn to laugh. “Sure does. What of you? What you been up to? How’s Meg?”

“Meg’s still with me.”

“Figured that. Somethings are meant to be. You belong together.”

“We do?”

“Sure, play dumb. You fit better than any two people had a right to. Any kids?”

“No.” Silence. “Tried. Doesn’t seem to be our luck.”

“Sorry. The two of you would’ve been great parents.”

“Not all bad. Meg has a day-care service here in Henderson. We have kids around most of the time. We’re a foster family. Have been for a long time now.”

I smiled. “Yes, I can see that. Seems right.”

“It is. We’ve had a lot of good kids come into our lives.”

“That’s good. That’s real good. I can see the rightness in it. This way you two are doing a lot of good for a lot of people.”

“Hope so.”

“It is. That it?”

“I’m LVMPD.”

“LV what?”

“LVMPD, Las Vegas Metropolitan Police,”

“You a cop? Now that’s hard to believe.”

“Surprises me now and then, too.”

“Wouldn’t have guessed it.”

"I like it." I said nothing. "Let's me get out in the open. Now with seniority, the hours aren't so bad."

I shook my head. "Not possible you're a cop."

"I wasn't that bad."

"Yes, you were."

"I've mellowed."

"We all have."

"Happy?"

Had to think about that. "Not as much as I'd like. More than I have a right to. How about you?"

"About the same. Life has been good to me."

"Good to hear. How'd you find me? What'd you do, put out an APB?"

"No APB, but I did a lot of checking."

"Glad you did."

"Wished it could be under better circumstances."

"So do I." Silence. "Being a cop could come in handy. Thank your boss for me."

"Better not, wasn't official business."

"Your secret's safe."

"Better be, it's a good job. Every once in a while, they pay me to ride a horse."

"Bet it's more than you made riding the circuit."

"That's cruel. Probably true, but still cruel."

"Probably true? It's the truth that hurts."

“Easy for you to say. You had talent.”

“For all the good it did me. Vegas, huh?”

“Yeah, good old ‘Sin City’. My area is Lake Mead and south.”

“Keeps you out of trouble. Away from all that vice and corruption.”

“Which reminds me, Meg wants you to drop by.”

“Vice and corruption reminds you of Meg?”

He laughed. Nice healthy laugh. “No. I was thinking of you.”

“Thanks. Drop by? It’s fifteen hundred miles from Houston to Vegas.”

“A couple hours.”

“Appreciate the thought though. I’d like to see you guys and catch up on old times.”

“Look, if you’re ever in the neighborhood, please for God’s sake call us.”

The little seed Fred planted instantaneously sprang full grown into a plan. “Just thinking, the National Finals is the first week in December. That’s just a few weeks off.”

“You still keep track?”

“Never changes, does it? If it’s all right, I’d like to say my goodbyes to Mel and take in the rodeo. Would you ask Linda if I could see her and the kids?”

“I’m sure it’ll be okay, but I’ll ask all the same. Damn, be great to get the old gang back together.” His voice softened. “Well most of it, anyway.”

“Ya, most of it.”

“I’ll call you after I talk to Linda. Might take time off about then. Show you around a little.”

“I’d like that. Say Fred, give me your phone number and address. You have an email address?”

“Sure.”

“Want to stay in touch. Won’t let us drift apart again. You’re too good a friend.”

“Glad you think so.”

“Missed you and Meg.” I scrambled to find something to write on. Had to settle for an envelope. He rattled off his work number, beeper number, home number, Meg’s work number, their email address, their home address. We had bridged the distance made by twenty-three years of anger and stupidity with no recriminations. Fred did the bridging, because I was the stupid, angry one.

“We’ve missed you. Wasn’t right it ended the way it did.”

I shook my head. “No, it wasn’t right. Now there’s no way to make it right.”

“There’s a lesson in there somewhere.”

“Probably, one learned too late.”

“Better late than never.”

“Not so sure. Lost something I didn’t have to.”

“We all did, Jack.”

“Threw something important away. Now, there’s no way to get it back.”

“Better hang up. Meg’s calling me for dinner.”
His voice cracked. “Want to talk to her?”

“Not now. Want to think about this before I talk to anyone else. Okay?”

“Understand. Call you after I talk to Linda.”

“So glad you found me. Didn’t realize how much I missed you guys.”

“When I call you tomorrow, I’ll put Meg on the extension. We’ll have a little reunion.”

“That’d be great. Be just about perfect. Again, thanks.”

“Sure pal. My pleasure, bye.”