

## Final Exam

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AS HIS THIRD PENCIL LEAD SNAPPED, Barry thought this must be some kind of premonition. Three strikes and you're out. Forget graduate school, forget the law career, the sports car, the large house and everything else he had tricked himself into believing he could have. Traveling around the country in a beat-up VW van and following *The Dead* seemed to be the more likely path of this West Coast washout.

The sign above the entrance to the lecture hall read "Occupancy 350" and every seat was filled. The air was like a stagnant fog hanging over the expressionless faces. The only person he knew in this class was a guy he met at the library who was now sitting in back of him humming 'Taps'. He did not know anyone else, nor did anyone else know him. He would probably never again see these people or the professor after today.

The minute hand on the clock on the wall seemed to be clicking along at an incredible pace. It didn't help that he was struggling with almost every single question. To top it off, he was straddling between a "C" and a "D" for a final grade. The voice in his head kept echoing with the conversation he had while packing his bags for this institute of higher education.

"You'll never make it at a big East Coast college. You won't fit in, and you won't make the grades. Those kids are sharp. I'm surprised you were even accepted."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence," Barry said as he chucked a rolled-up sock at his brother. "Your support is overwhelming."

"Hey, that's what big brothers are for. If I were you, I'd hit dad up for a job at the plant. At least you could be around the family and make some cash."

"Well, I'm not you, thank God. I'd probably get drafted and end up getting shot in some rice paddy."

"You need to wake up and get a little dose of reality. Those East Coast preppies will do anything to get ahead. Hell, they'd step over their own dead mother to get to the keys to their daddy's sports car. You just don't have that edge and aggressiveness to keep up with those guys."

Ah, that word again. Aggressiveness. How many times had he heard that while playing high school sports. The face to face (or nose to nose) confrontations with his coach were forever etched into his brain. The veins in his coach's eyes were like a road map of Los Angeles. The Jack Nicholson eyebrows capped off with pooled beads of sweat, neck bulging and spit flying out of his mouth as he spewed his weekly sermon.

"Aggressiveness!" he shouted, as all the guys in the locker room began to laugh and mimic the tirade. "That's what you lack son. That team beat our ass today because they did everything and anything to win. That's what I need from you. One hundred and ten percent effort, one hundred and ten percent of the time. Do you want to be like some of these other maggots? When are you going to wake up and act like a winner?"

"Act" like a winner? Working after school at the Shell station down the street became the preferred option after one too many of these little discussions. That was where most of his friends came by late at night to pop a couple of cold ones in the back room amidst the smell of oil and gas. They would strut around talking about what they were going to do after High School, each

one trying to out-do the other. Whenever it came to Barry, all the lawyer jokes came up. What do you call 5000 dead lawyers at the bottom of the ocean? A good start. What is the difference between a dead dog in the road and a dead lawyer in the road? There are skid marks in front of the dog. And the jokes rolled on and on.

While going out front to pump gas for a customer and scrape the bugs off of their windshield, he watched his friends pass a joint around. He began to laugh. Someday he was probably going to represent some of these losers in court. The only question was, which one of this group would become the first felon. The sadder question was, which one would be the first to end up dead in the streets.

His old girlfriend had often questioned his taste in these friends. Her idea of his future was a little different from his, and the harder she tried to hold on to him, the farther away he went.

“I don’t understand you. You’re going to get into some big trouble if you hang out with those guys. You never say no to them.”

“Weren’t you the one that said nice guys never win?”

“Yes, I did say that, and no, nice guys don’t win.”

“Well, these guys are definitely not nice.”

He remembered the look on her face the night he told her that he was moving away to college. It was assumed he would stay in the old neighborhood and that they would go on to be married. As it was every Friday night, they were parked in his ‘67 Chevelle on a high bluff overlooking the San Francisco bay. After he broke the news and began singing a crude rendition of the Stones’ *You Can’t Always Get What You Want*, she slapped him hard enough to loosen three teeth and send his baseball cap soaring out the car window.

His mother cried the day he left. His Father said, “Be tough.” His brother said “See you in a month.”

Barry checked another box with the number two pencil. He might be able to slide through with a passing grade if he could just answer a few more of these questions. Maybe, just maybe he would be back for the next semester. He tried to concentrate, and tried to remember everything he had read. Unfortunately, keeping good focus today was like herding cats. It doesn’t help that the professor kept pacing back and forth, eyes surveying the class like an over zealous preacher at Sunday service.

“You all have five minutes to complete the exam.”

Five minutes? How could he complete all these questions in five minutes? Barry tried to shut out all of his outside thoughts, took a long deep breath and tried to finish up. Over two thirds of the class had already completed the exam and he could hear their voices out in the hall. He thought he could hear a couple of people crying as he tried to concentrate harder. If only he had crammed a couple more hours longer last night, but it was four in the morning when he started to fade. Having to work all weekend didn't help either.

“One minute,” said the professor.

Shit, another broken pencil. Just four more boxes to fill in and he would be done. Good thing he had brought five pencils, four down one to go. The questions began to blend together and he felt a weird disassociation with the exam, the room, the University. The clock continued to tick away the time.

“Okay, everyone bring up their exams.”

There were only seven students remaining. Six of them slowly walked to the front of the room to hand in the exams. It was as quiet as a morgue. The professor glared at Barry, and like a couple of gunslingers, their eyes were in a standoff.

“If you do not hand in your exam immediately, it will not be accepted.”

Barry had to complete this, and he put his head back down and continued to fill in the final boxes. Almost there, he said to himself as his heart pounded like he was just crossing the finish line of a marathon. He promised that if he passed this test and went on to continue his career in law, he would always work hard and fly straight. It was very much like the promise he made to himself two days ago when he was hungover from partying all night. Finally, he filled in the final box as the last pencil lead snapped.

He slowly stood up from his seat, gathered his books, and began the long walk down the aisle towards the front desk. On top of the desk was the pile of completed exams. Nothing more than pieces of paper he told himself. He could feel the constant glare of the professor piercing his consciousness. Looking like a fighter that just went ten rounds and lost, he stood before the professor, test in hand.

“I’m sorry,” the professor said as the edges of his mouth turned slightly upward, “I cannot accept your exam. “I asked you twice, and we do have our time limits.”

Barry lowered his head and stared at the floor as his mind began swimming with all of the questions and thoughts he had fed it the past hour. His hair was mottled, and the skin under his eyes hung down, void of any elasticity. He again met the eyes of the professor. His mouth was as dry as it had ever been in his life as he cleared his throat.

“Do you know who I am?” he said in a scratchy, challenging voice.

The professor flinched, as though a small electric shock went through his body. There was a long silence and then the man's face tightened.

“No. I certainly do not know who you are,” he answered in an indignant voice that only certain type of elite people could master.

“Good,” Barry said. He quickly picked up half of the stack of exams like a deck of cards, inserted his in the middle of the stack, and put the top half back down. Then he turned and walked straight down the aisle and out the front door.

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Authors Note:

*The inspiration for this story was an incident I witnessed while attending the University of Colorado. Enrolled in a Chemistry class with an attendance of over three-hundred students, I was overwhelmed by the impersonal structure and feeling of being just another number. When one student used this imperfect system to his advantage, he forever became our hero and symbol of resourcefulness.*