

## **Pro Bono**

No. Not imagining. Rattle, somewhere in the back. Fish! Alright, think. Think. Could it be object in boot rolling around, dislodged by sudden braking as a result of being cut off by *ah beng* car (either Mitsubishi or Subaru, cannot remember which)? Cannot be. Nothing in boot yet, have not had time to put anything inside, not even car washing equipment. Possible that Mr. Puvan and Mr. Marshall dropped something in the back seat when I drove them to lunch at Prive this afternoon? Unlikely. Neither of them would be so careless. Senior partners do not make mistakes of such magnitude. Terribly unfortunate. On the one day when I leave at 7pm, this has to happen. Perhaps punishment from God for leaving work early. Must work hard as new associate. Must prove I belong. Will not prove anything, except own dispensability, by leaving at 7pm.

Remember, you are lawyer now. Think like lawyer. Be like lawyer. Prep case to Performance Motors. Yes, just bought the car yesterday. Brand new, practically drove it off your lot. Like that how can – no, cannot. No Singlish. Gives impression of being lesser man. Redo. How can it be possible that there are already strange, ugly noises coming from the car, my car? Salesperson told me – brand new, state of the art, first time this model released in Singapore. Is this a good advertisement for the car, that it has issues within the first 24 hours after purchase? I know it is under warranty, but considering all the undue emotional and mental stress this entire affair has put me through, I feel I am entitled to some greater recompense than just a quick check-up and fix. And on the first day in half a year that I left at 7pm as well!

Where am I now? Ok, Bukit Timah Road. Will turn onto side street here and park. See what the problem is. Maybe I was at fault. Should not have been so easily taken in by marketing. Brand New + State of the Art + First Time Released = Using

Me as Guinea Pig so that BMW can Work Out Kinks. No, must not think like that.

That is thinking like Beta, not like Alpha. Remember last week's corporate speaker.

Thought Defines Action. Action Defines Consequence. Consequence Defines You. If

I think I am loser, I act like loser, I receive consequences of being loser, I become

loser. QED. Think like winner. This model is brand new. Only one of it's kind in the

Financial Centre carpark. Got admiring glances from everyone worthwhile.

Caucasian bankers on expat packages. Corporate-chic ladies moonlighting as social

media influencers. And senior partners. Would never have had private lunch with Mr.

Puvan and Mr. Marshall if they had not noticed brand new model and suggested to

me that we should take it for a spin. Clearly an investment that will pay off great

dividends. Exactly. Car a reflection of what I am. Unique. Trailblazer. One of a -

Oh fish! Freak, freak, FREAK! Did not look at rear-view mirror before opening.

There was a Deliveroo motorcycle approaching from behind. Swerved to avoid the

open door, rider thrown off bike. Thank God only clipped the edge of the door. Could

have really caused harm to car. Only one ugly scratch in the door. Did I just use

God's name in vain? Unlikely, was praising him for car not suffering further damage.

Still, must remember to be mindful of words, especially re: His Name. Pastor Tim has

brought it up as point of improvement. Most importantly, car ok. Just the one scratch.

Noticeable by naked eye, unfortunately. Rider still lying on ground. Not moving. Bike

lying on side in the middle of road. Rear wheel still spinning. Rider still not moving.

Should get out of car. Exchange insurance details. Hopefully can talk him into

taking cash to avoid rise in premium. Best approach to persuade him that it is his

fault, make him more amenable to not get police involved. Rider still not moving. Oh

shucks. Ok. Ok. Ok. Assess situation. Nobody around. Likely that families in

surrounding houses having dinner. Amazing nobody heard sound of crash. Must be

that He was looking out for me. Rider still not moving. Must settle this logically. Will adhere to following steps, in order:

1. Lift bike (surprisingly heavy!) and place by side on pavement.
2. Drag rider (surprisingly light!) and place next to bike.
3. Position bike and rider to create suggestion that bike hit pavement,

resulting in it toppling over on side and flinging rider off.

Rider still not moving. Can now confirm worst suspicions. Know that not supposed to move body, but unfortunate necessity in this case. Innocent life at stake. Must do due diligence. Look at bike and rider at different angles. Convincing enough for investigating officer. Unfortunate accident. Sad loss of life. Open and shut case. Should leave before somebody comes upon the scene. Enter car. Start engine. Drive off. Yet, cannot help but brake next to bike and rider. A voice nags at me. Maybe His voice, maybe Mine. Bike lying on its side. Rider still not moving. Ugly scratch on edge of door. Must leave now. Cannot look back. Looking back sign of Loser. Winners look ahead into future. Keep moving forward. Never look back. Mistakes best left in rear-view mirror. But yet.

I park the car and get out. Cannot just leave him like that. Must do more. Have idea. In firm interview, described myself as 'ideas man'. Glad to say that six months in firm has provided sufficient corroboration, especially re: Starhub and JP Morgan cases. I remove the rider's helmet. He's Chinese. Surprising. Young. Less surprising. Sufficient superficial similarities between him and I. Good. Means I do not have to wear helmet. No doubt smelly as result of lack of hygiene. I open metal box on back of bike (note to self, find out what box is called. Can use in next week's Firm Fact of the Day). Food still packed up, not a single spill. Surprising again. Clear sign of His favour. Final step, check rider's phone. His name is Jarrond. Unsurprising, obviously

he chose his own name for maximum uniqueness among his social circle. Delivery is for nearby address. Condominium near Sixth Avenue. Pad Thai.

Necessary components of idea in place. Idea put into practice = plan, according to Marshall. Now embarking on plan. Place Pad Thai in front seat of BMW. Wind down window to avoid replacing new car smell with food smell. Stand bike up by side of the road. Unobtrusive. Now place (surprisingly light) rider in boot of car. Thank ~~god~~ goodness no blood. Would be terrible if upholstery was stained. Throw helmet in next to body. Close boot, get into car, and drive home. Think of it like going to court. Rehearse prepared arguments to state after arriving home.

“Hi Mom!”

Too enthusiastic. Suspicious.

“Hello Mother.”

Too formal. Suspicious.

“Hey.”

Perfect. Pulling into driveway of home now. Can see Mother sitting at dinner table. Ready to present case.

“Oh no, I’ve already had dinner. Yes, really, I ate at the office with Sasha. No, we are not seeing one another. I told you before, we are just colleagues. I am not interested in finding anyone until my career really takes off. Yes mom, I really mean it. Grandchildren can wait. Anyway, I’m just going to go and rest in my room. Managed to get off early today, I just want to unwind. Alright. Love you too.”

It worked. Now wait. Unlikely she will come and look for me until her Korean drama is over. Wait for her door to click shut. Patience. Also another value that Pastor Tim said I must work on, corroborated by cell group leader. Good things come to those who wait. From Proverbs, I believe. Deep meaning to be found in

scripture. Mom's door closed. Ok. Leave now. If Mom asks about absence, just say that I was downstairs polishing car. Believable alibi. Car could actually use a polish. Might go ahead after finishing the plan. The rattle is still there. Shucks. A rattle and a scratch. This is just terrible. Why me? Relax. Remember, today is for unwinding. Breathe in the new car smell. Ignore the pungent Pad Thai. Will be gone soon.

Here is the Sixth Avenue condo. Rehearse prepared arguments again. Can never be too prepared.

“Hi, I'm just here to visit my friend in unit...”

Well. Totally unnecessary. Security guard just lifted the barrier and let me in. Might consider saying something to the management of this condo. Clearly slacking off at his job. Can never be too safe. What if I was some kind of criminal? Guard could be endangering everyone in the estate. Understand that it is probably due to the car, but cars can be stolen. Ignore last thought. Cannot afford to have negativity at this point. Purge the negativity. Remember the speaker: positive thoughts lead to positive outlooks lead to positive outcomes. Yes. Outcome today will be positive. I believe it, therefore it will happen. All the unfortunate troubles will end up only being hurdles along the way to success. Necessary to undergo tribulations to become best possible version of me (i.e. Senior Partner, either at current firm or at different, better firm).

Will park in visitor's lot. Further away from lift lobby, but must take necessary precautions. Do not want wheel clamp at this time. Furthermore, clamp might scratch rims. Quick scan of carpark – nobody around. Good. Open the boot. Rider still in the same position. Still not moving. Can almost certainly say that worst has happened. Starting to feel anger at this massive inconvenience. I want to scream at him for ruining my day. Could he not have ridden more carefully? Probably not, just based

on the way they ride and the way they behave, plain to see that motorcycle owners seldom ascribe great value to their own lives. Must calm down. Will give myself away. Shall be magnanimous to him, difficult as it may be. Now carefully unzip and remove his jacket so that I can wear it...

Jacket is scratchy. Would chafe if not for the Ted Baker shirt I am wearing. It is a hot night. Beginning to sweat while waiting for lift to reach basement. This is one of those old condos, with slow lifts where you can feel the effort of the grinding gears bringing you up and down. Similar to childhood house. Feel pang of nostalgia despite self. Would be good to go back to childhood home one day. Probably has not changed. Good selfie opportunity to be had at playground. “Back where I spent most of my childhood. #tbt #allgrownup.” Could possibly imbue with learning point re: how important it is to treasure the happy moments in life.

Nobody else in the lift, thankfully. Food order is for the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. Pad Thai still warm. Cannot help feeling this place is familiar. Not just because of cosmetic resemblance to boyhood home. Like I’ve been here recently. Lift has wooden rails on the sides, topped at both ends with faded brass bulbs. Mirrored ceiling surrounding single faux-chandelier light fixture. Square plastic buttons with embossed floor numbers that turn yellow when pressed. All rings a bell.

No answer. I ring the bell again. One of those bells which plays shrill tinny version of song that I cannot recognise. The back door opens instead. A woman’s face pokes out. Oh no. Not expecting this. Panic. Don’t panic. Remember advice Nadine from HR gave on first day – in real world, the best laid plans often do not work out. Will face unexpected challenges and hurdles. True strength of character in how one resolves said challenges. Fall back on prior preparation. Remember rehearsed arguments practiced in car.

“You order Pad Thai?”

Still panicking. Need to confirm suspicions that she is who I think she is.

“Oh yeah, that’s me. Oh yah I selected pay by cash right? Dammit I think I left my wallet in the room. You wait first, I go and take. Eh, actually, why don’t you come in and wait in the kitchen? I’ll get you a glass of water. Cannot be easy, your job.”

“Uh, ok, thanks.”

Remove shoes and follow her in. Do not let her see panic. Back door leads directly into kitchen. Looking at kitchen confirms suspicions. I have been here before. She opens the fridge, takes out a jug of water and pours it into a glass. She hands it to me. Makes direct eye contact. Her name is Su-Ann. Studied International Relations at the LSE. One year my junior. Vice-President of the LSE Singapore Society. Invited entire SingSoc to her house for fresher’s orientation. Three years ago, was standing in this house, talking to this girl. She will recognise me. Will be suspicious of possible malfeasance, thereby ruining alibi, resulting in high probability of arrest. Or even worse, might think I have fallen so far as to be delivering food for living. Nobody does this kind of work. Nobody. Everything worthwhile – house, car, degree, path from associate to partner, preferred status at companies such as SIA, Banyan Tree, etc. – all comes crashing down around me until I stand in the rubble of what was once a good, fulfilling, meaningful life. It is gone. I have nothing. I am nothing.

“Keep the change!”

There is a \$10 bill in my hand. Su-Ann opens the door. I walk out of the house. The door closes. I stand in the common corridor, staring at the \$10 note. ~~My~~ his the delivery person’s phone buzzes. You have a notification from Deliveroo. I

click on it. She gave me him three stars. Comment: “Food was cold and delivery guy took a long time to arrive. Unsatisfactory.”

She doesn't remember. I do. House decorated in style of mid-90s Courts lavishness – marble tiled living room, parquet floored bedrooms, with telltale scratches and grooves created by children growing up. Living room couch softened from years of use into a warm enveloping hug. Su-Ann talked about: 1) shopping at Covent Garden, 2) exorbitant prices of gym memberships, even at the LSE Student Union, 3) rate of change on Orchard Road (“Just one year away, and it's practically unrecognisable!”). Drinking Absolut Citron, mixed with Sprite. Lipstick stain on glass (same glass used to pour water into?), a dark red smear. My memory clear as day. But hers?

Nothing. Deliveroo jacket over Ted Baker shirt, Armani slacks, Ferragamo shoes. Phone, with app showing 3 stars. \$10 in hand – \$6.50 for Pad Thai, \$2.00 delivery charge, \$1.50 in tip. This is all that remains. Did not even see Ted Baker shirt, etc. Only saw Deliveroo jacket and stopped there. Looked right into eyes. No glimmer of recognition. She never saw me, not now, not then. I remember her. Why does she not remember me? Was I not worth remembering? Difficult to maintain control in lift after all that has happened. Start weeping copiously due to feelings of insignificance. Understand that this is number four sign of weakness in a businessperson as written in Peter Thiel's new book, but cannot help myself. “Only the inadequate individual claims ‘I cannot help myself’ This is not to say that there isn't a conspiracy by the weak and feckless to shackle and tether the would-be creators, entrepreneurs, and great men of the world – there most certainly is – but to surrender in the face of their persecution, to cry that you are defeated, to claim you are unable to impose your will on your circumstances, these are the signs of



inadequacy. You may fail, you may fall, you may falter, but they must never see you tremble. Never.”

The lift door opens and a teenage girl steps in. Hurriedly attempt to wipe tears with only available source of paper-like product, the \$10 bill. She takes one look and glances away, determinedly keeping gaze at corner of lift. I feel her pity cast in my direction. Everything burning. Eyes, nose, heart, all on fire. What am I? As door opens and teenage girl runs out to avoid further embarrassment, I see the car. Built on the backs of hardworking honest individuals (e.g. me) who have been put upon and exploited by uncaring society, who have been lied to about advancement (e.g. why did Janet make associate half a year before me?), who work and work for no reward, not even a single early night off. Instead, only suffering and punishment. This is what that car represents. She is beautiful though. She is the night sky, clothed in midnight blue, with the subtle curves of the distant horizon. That’s good. Feeling poetic. Melancholy, as British law prof used to say. Even with her slight imperfections – the scratched door, the boot lying open – the car is still a sight to – wait, why is boot open?

Run over to open boot. Deliveroo person gone. Thankfully, no bloodstain on interior of boot. Must appreciate small miracles (amen). But where is he? Frantically and fruitlessly search boot, as though he could possibly be hiding in the corner. Nothing. Only bike helmet. Scan basement carpark. Nobody around. Then I hear it. Like the sound of gentle breeze sweeping dead leaves across pavement. Soft, dragging sound coming from behind silver Mercedes S-Class. Walk over carefully, still dumbly holding bike helmet. Yes. It is him. He turns around upon hearing footsteps, and makes strangled cry. I look at him again. Superficial similarities, yes, but that’s it. I feel the burning return. This is what Su-Ann thought I was? Pathetic

creature pulling himself to lift? Person with no prospects, plans, purpose for living, etc.? A three-star delivery boy? Burning is in my eyes. He is weeping.

“Stop it!”

He refuses. Still blubbering, trying to speak to me but sound is caught in throat, possibly due to buildup of blood from incident earlier. Does not help that he’s speaking Chinese.

“I said stop it! Shut up!”

He refuses. This is me. Think like Alpha? Impose will on circumstances? I cannot even get delivery boy to keep quiet. I start crying too. Crying for my lost night, for the scratched door, for the humiliation inflicted by women, for being forced to lie to own mother and for that fucking rattle in the back of that fucking car. Through veil of tears, I see him, trying again to crawl to lift. He is reaching out towards the lone light over the lift lobby, like some sort of animal. Him. This is all his fault. He has ruined me, and is still selfishly trying to ruin me further. There is a heaviness in my hand. I look down. I am holding the helmet. I walk over to him. I raise the helmet over my head. He looks up and gargles a single word. “Please.” I bring the helmet down on his head. I raise the helmet again. And then I bring it down again. I repeat this, twice, thrice, four times, until no more sound comes from him. Only then do I breathe again.

Rider not moving. Will not move again. Must think logically. Adhere to steps. Remember you are Alpha, you cannot surrender to persecution by the weak. No security cameras. Old condo. Divine providence, possibly. Wipe down helmet and phone to remove prints. Leave helmet. Leave Deliveroo jacket. Drop phone, still showing three stars. Get into BMW. Drive. No security cameras at guardhouse. Security guard waves me out without hesitation. Fairly confident he did not see plate

number. Drive home, adhering to all traffic laws. Park. Sneak into house. Close door carefully. Nobody around. Enter room. And done. It is finished.

I feel better. Action has purged some of the negative energy. “Negativity is a virus that can only be purged by positive action”. Peter Thiel. Or possibly last week’s corporate speaker. Or was it Pastor Tim? Does it matter? Does anything matter? All will still end, through no fault of my own. The unfairness of it hurts. I cannot cry any more. It feels like there is nothing left inside. Suffering has killed everything of importance – my job, my car, my life. How to tell mother, boss, colleagues? How to be led away in handcuffs, in front of judge who I formerly argued in front of? What now?

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No. Not imagining. Rattle, still somewhere in the back. Louder this time. Not going away. Why bother now? Barely any sleep the previous night. Kept seeing his face, next to puddle of blood. Or his body, with my face, also next to puddle of blood. Not the same. Not even close. Lord, please grant me the strength to forgive Su-Ann for her transgressions.

All morning, wait in office for police to call. But not idle. Idleness a sin, work still continues. At least can offer value to firm and society before chance to do so cruelly and unfairly taken away from me. Everything around is normal, as though my life has not been ruined. I keep as straight a face as I possibly can. My composure is admirable.

At lunch, Mr. Marshall comes in. Asks if him and Puvan can take “your sweet ride” to Dempsey for some Mexican food. Before can agree, Marshall asks if I read

“the crazy shit” in the news today. Apparently some Deliveroo guy was found dead in condo carpark. Beaten to death with own helmet. Weird thing is, his delivery bike found about 5km away, in a side street on Bukit Timah Road. But the last person he delivered food to swears that she received her order, albeit a little late, and has positively identified the dead man as the one who delivered it to her. Total mystery. Police stumped, at least according to Marshall’s contacts in Cantonment. Most likely gang related though. Apparently driver had “gang issues” stemming back to secondary school days. Clearly not worthwhile sort, otherwise would not be doing Deliveroo, right?

“You know, these people. The way they fuck up their lives, and refuse to take responsibility for their own decisions – this is why we at this firm always recommend that our young associates like you do pro bono work whenever you can. Of course, do your actual important work first, but when you have time, give back. Makes you a better person, giving back to the less fortunate. So, you ready to go get your fajita on?”

We take the lift down to the basement. Everything is frozen, moving in slow motion. Marshall and Puvan banter about whether the proper terminology is ‘hot new HR intern’ or ‘new hot HR intern’. They pay no attention to me as I mouth the words “it’s over” again and again. Cannot tell if it’s a declaration or a question. Do not know how I feel. Not relief, as was expected. Not happiness, or even sense of calm. No. Feel justice. Yes. World at equilibrium again. Things progressing as they should. Good things happening to good people. A deserved happy ending.

“Eh, what happened here?”

“Oh, it got scratched by some motorcycle. Just an inconsiderate rider who ended up wasting my time and ruining my early night. But it’s just a scratch. No point getting all worked up over such a minor affair.”

Puvan says that it’s rare for a young man like myself to exhibit such maturity. Marshall says that if only more young lawyers could understand that there was more to life than material objects. This is the right attitude to have. This is the way to true success. The car roars to life. Think I see something hazy, indistinct on the basement carpark floor out of the corner of my eye. Ignore it. Move forward. Leave it in the rearview mirror. I drive out into the sunlight, and that’s when I hear it. Or rather, that’s when I don’t hear it. The rattle is gone. There is nothing but me, the sound of silence, and the open road ahead.