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about 3,500 words

The Airman

By Eric M Hunter

Mr. Dixon stirred from his afternoon nap by a small chime that echoed throughout his home: the doorbell. He waited a few moments, satisfied the nuisance had left, then burrowed his shoulders back into his worn chair, and closed his eyes.

But the chime came again.

Mr. Dixon's eyes shot open, and he looked about his study. Shelves lined the walls that Mr. Dixon meticulously filled with memories he created throughout his life. Books, paintings, news briefings, awards.

Maybe Marge would get the door and tell whoever it was to go away. But the scratchy, shrill tone from his wife's dry tongue crushed his hope.

"Hank. The door, Hank."

He rubbed the remaining sleep from his eyes and stood up. For a moment, his vision became blurry, and he held tight to the armrest to steady himself. He took slow, short breaths in through his nose and out his mouth. His head pounded. Soon after his vision cleared, he left the study and walked out into the entryway.

Just then Marge came into view. He studied her face for a clue who their unwelcome guest was. She shrugged.

Mr. Dixon took the last steps up to the landing and placed his hand on the doorknob. His balance shook underneath him and he closed his eyes again. Once he was steady enough, he opened his eyes and peered through the curtains.

It was a sunny day, a rarity, and the ground seemed to crack under its own weight. Sanders' car still sat on the side of the road. The driveway up to the garage, empty. He huffed and shook his head.

He knew that Sanders would be a pain the second he moved into the neighborhood. It happened straight away; him parking his car on the side of the road when a perfectly good driveway sat empty. Mr. Dixon caught him outside one day and questioned him.

Marge, ever loving, reminded him to put on his Royal Air issued breather before leaving. With a sour face, Mr. Dixon reluctantly grabbed the busted breather and hoped that it would last long enough to give Sanders a good what for.

"But you have a driveway," Mr. Dixon exclaimed, pointing to the patch of concrete right behind them. "Why do you have to park it on the road?" Sanders lifted his Public issued breather and spat on the ground beside him.

"What do you care, old man? You ain't needing this side of the road. Plus, it's in front of my house. It's mine."

"It's not yours. It's everyone's. What if someone has a party and needs the extra space?" he reasoned. Sanders lifted his Public issued breather and spat again, this time closer to Mr. Dixon's shoe. Mr. Dixon was sure Sanders had forgotten to lift his breather before spitting once before. He was sure of it.

"I guess they'll have to park somewheres else then, huh?" He smiled, teeth black. No amount of glass between the two would stop the stink of his breath, Mr. Dixon thought.

The view to Sanders' empty driveway was blocked by a square, pink face with big brown eyes, and a toothy grin. Mr. Dixon didn't recognize the face and looked back over his

shoulder to Marge. She confirmed his suspicions: a salesman had come knocking.

"Mr. Dixon? Hi. Gary Flannery. From Airman." He shouted, pointing to the embroidered patch on his blue canvas button up. His faint voice traveled through two panes of glass from the door and his Airman issued breather. He smiled another toothy grin. Mr. Dixon shook his head and shouted back.

"We don't need none. Already got Royal Air. Thank you anyway. Bye, bye." Mr. Dixon waved and turned to walk away. Gary Flannery knocked again.

"Mr. Dixon, if I could just have a moment of your time. We have some amazing promotions for new customers that I can offer you. Ah, we just got your neighbors, the Sanders across the street already set up for next week's install. I can offer you one hell of a discount. One that I couldn't do for him." Mr. Dixon breathed a swallow breath. The sound of Sanders' name made that pit in his stomach boil.

He looked back at Marge who carelessly threw her hands up into the air and journeyed back to the kitchen. Mr. Dixon turned back to see Gary Flannery smile again. Cautiously, he unlocked the door and cracked it open a bit.

"What sort of discount?" he asked. The thought of flaunting a deal over Sanders would be a minor victory that he could hold on to for a while.

"Look," he started composing himself. "I know what you're thinking. Yes, we are hitting every home up and down the block. But I'll tell you this, you seem like a straightforward guy so I'm not going to pull your leg. I already got my quota in for the month. Truly, I do. I can go home now to the wife and kids and let the missus cook me my favorite meal. But I thought to myself, this is a home that may actually be in need of my services." Mr. Dixon considered the thought, and the Airman saw his hesitation. "All I'm asking for is five minutes of your time."

Mr. Dixon was many things. A sucker, he was not. He could smell a con from a mile away, told Marge that all the time. No, sir, no fool. But an expert negotiator, now that was something.

He smirked. "What's the meal?" he asked. Gary Flannery looked back oddly at the question, his smile no longer toothy but skewed up confused.

"What meal, sir?"

"The meal. If you went home, to your wife and kids and all that, what's the meal she would cook for you?" Gary Flannery

widened his smile and bit his lip. He looked up at the sky and half laughed. Mr. Dixon closed the door.

"Wait, wait, wait," Gary Flannery pleaded, but the door stopped just short. "It's spaghetti. Spaghetti and meatballs. Swedish meatballs if she can find them. Don't know where she gets them, but boy are they delicious." Gary Flannery tried to laugh off his slow reaction. "Please, Mr. Dixon. Five minutes. That's all I ask." Mr. Dixon felt powerful in that moment; a winner. And he had him right where he wanted him.

Mr. Dixon opened the door just far enough to allow the Airman to slip through and closed it behind him. Gary Flannery took off his hat and fiddled with it. Then, almost as an afterthought, pulled his breather over his head. The Airman's face went flush in that moment. He squeezed his eyes shut, holding back tears. He raised his fist to his temple and waited for the pounding to stop. When it did, he stared blankly back at Mr. Dixon who waited patiently.

Now his vision was clear, Gary Flannery looked about the Dixon house. Papers scattered all about the floor, dust collected on untouched books, and the air had a brass taste to it. He noticed the Royal Air issued breather hanging on a nail beside the front door. It had seen better days.

Marge crept out of the kitchen holding a metal tray of mugs filled with something that was pouring over with each step she took.

"Ah, and you must be Mrs. Dixon." Gary Flannery strolled down the landing and right beside Marge extending his hand. She looked to Mr. Dixon and then back to the Airman and nodded politely. "Oh, I'm sorry, here let me take that." Gary Flannery sat his briefcase down and went for the lemonade tray but Marge pivoted away.

"Here, let's have a seat in the study. Marge?" Mr. Dixon gestured towards another room and Marge receded back to the kitchen. He nodded to Gary Flannery and followed behind him.

The Airman walked into a small and dingy room, not much bigger than a walk-in closet. The painted walls were dull from age and Gary Flannery thought better than to sit in the broken down recliner. There was no telling what or for how long those stains had been there. He opted to stand, clutching his briefcase tightly at his waist.

Mr. Dixon sat in his napping chair and gestured to the Airman to sit opposite him. Gary Flannery looked at the chair again and carefully sat on the end avoiding anything that may

attach themselves to his back side. With his briefcase teetering on his knees, he flicked a few dials and popped open the top.

Gary Flannery took out a small wooden stand and placed it on the small coffee table in front of them followed by four transparent tubes with corked tops. Carefully, he lowered them down, one by one, into the stand affixing them into place. Now, he could start.

"Before we get into the mundane logistics, I wanted to share with you some of our newest samples. This year, we had a surplus of scents come through. Some, I dare say, are the best we've ever had. See, we've designed a new bit of technology that--" Mr. Dixon waved the Airman quiet and motioned for the first vial. Gary Flannery's smile grew tight, and he reached for the first tube passing it to Mr. Dixon's waiting hand. He placed his briefcase closed on the floor next to him and waited.

Just then, Mrs. Dixon walked into the room. "Can I get either of you two a drink? I just made a fresh pitcher of lemonade?" Gary Flannery gave her a dazed look. Mr. Dixon waved his free hand at her, not looking.

"No, thank you, dear," he said with a smile. Mrs. Dixon nodded and left the room.

Mr. Dixon stared at the vial, spun it a few times in his hand, popped the cork with his thumb, and took a deep breath in. Instantly, he was sitting on a beach just north of the equator. He could feel the sun beat down on his face and a distant cry of children playing in the sand. Sunscreen filled his nostrils followed by the sound of gulls calling in the distance. He could almost taste the salt from the ocean breeze.

"Nikoi Island in Summer. Right before old Daddy Warbucks' 'Big Idea'." He laughed to himself. Mr. Dixon sucked wind slowly through his perched lips. The vision faded.

"OK, try the next one." Gary Flannery pulled the second tube and swapped it with the empty one. Mr. Dixon pulled the cork and took a deep breath.

Again his mind was whisked away this time to stale carpets, the smell of cigarettes, the sounds of jackpots of a casino. Oh, old Vegas; the signs, the shows, the ladies. Mr. Dixon squeezed his eyes tight and tried to build the entirety of Vegas that was into his mind's eye. He suddenly felt sick to his stomach and frowned as the vision quickly slipped away.

"Didn't like that one, I could tell." Gary Flannery said, looking discouraged. He took back the empty tube as Mr. Dixon sunk deeper into his napping chair to relax. He grabbed the

third tube and handed it to him sitting back confidently with crossed legs. This one felt cool to the touch. Mr. Dixon became intrigued. He uncorked it and placed the opening to his nose. He took a deep breath in and closed his eyes.

Opening his mind's eye again, Mr. Dixon found himself on a snowy mountaintop. The arctic wind hit his face like a ton of bricks and he instantly lost his breath. He could see the surrounding mountains far off in the distance. The clouds hung low, and the air felt still. A wave of calmness flowed over him. A small tear formed in the corner of his eye. It's been a long while since he's felt this close to... anything.

He came out of it. Gary Flannery sat hunched over, elbows on his knees, chin in the palm of his hands, grinning his toothy grin right at Mr. Dixon.

"That was the one, wasn't it?" he asked. Mr. Dixon took a moment and found himself back in his study with the Airman. For a moment, he saw with a clarity he hadn't felt since he was young.

He sat in the house he and his wife purchased over sixty years ago. A house filled with all of his memories of times passed and times lost. Covered with all the things he loved and hated nestled in a neighborhood that was once nothing but a

field. He married a woman his younger self fell in love with but now, he realized, was a complete stranger to.

Mr. Dixon hated himself. He hated that he never took those risks his dad always told him to take. He felt the urge to be out on the road, to taste food he couldn't pronounce, see sights he'd only seen in pictures.

Mr. Dixon felt his life had been stolen from him, and he wanted it back. But his body was broken from a long career of manual labor. He had told his younger self that he would do all those things when he retired, but then Marge got sick and their bank account took a hit they could never recover from.

So here is where he would spend the rest of his days: tired, resentful, and longing for more. Stacks of unread books in the corner. The powerful smell of brass in the air. Oh, what a life he wished he could get back.

"I liked that one the best," Mr. Dixon said at length. The Airman nodded in agreement.

"You seemed to have gotten lost there. That's my favorite part: seeing people experience something they never thought they could with Airman. Feeling actual dreams if only for a second. That's why I love what I do." Gary Flannery sat back in his

chair, threaded his fingers together, and smiled confidently. He had closed his sale.

Mr. Dixon spent a long time staring at that empty vial. He inhaled deeply feeling exhausted.

"Now," Gary Flannery started. "That was only a taste, of course. You could go for the full package and have that mountain air pumping through this house all day or you can have enough supply to celebrate with and get your basic O2 like you normally do. Like I said at the door, my guys will already be in the area so the install fee will be dramatically lower than normal. Airman is zero maintenance, clean air that's worth every penny. We have 24/7 customer service and I can give you my personal ID number so if anything crazy comes up, I can come a-callin'." He reached down to his briefcase again and pulled out a large screen. He thumbed it a few times then turned it over to show Mr. Dixon his brand new Airman contract.

"Well?" he asked, feeling antsy. "Just need your thumbprint right here and I'll get the install crew here first thing in the morning. Whaddya say?" It was a long time before Mr. Dixon replied. And when he did, his mind was clear; focused. His words dripped with venom.

"Do you know how I know you're full of shit?" Mr. Dixon asked. The Airman stared back blankly.

"I'm sorry?" was all he could come up with. He repeated his question, but this time he put emphasis on the last few words. Gary Flannery sat back and dropped the screen into his lap and shrugged his shoulders.

"No, Mr. Dixon. Why don't you tell me?" Mr. Dixon cleared his throat.

"Not remembering your favorite meal your wife makes would be a cardinal sin in my house. You aren't married. Don't even have a wedding ring on. Either that or you're an awful husband Your socks are black but your shoes are brown and your belt doesn't match either which probably means you got dressed in the dark and only a man down on his luck won't waste credits turning a light on to dress. And you showed up on my doorstep at 6 p.m. which means you've been working the beat for probably twelve maybe thirteen hours now. You haven't hit your quota. I'll bet you're still trying for your first sale. And assuming that I would want to get something over on Sanders is a softball. You found out what everyone on the block already knows: that he's an asshole and anyone would want to get the best of him. So no, Mr.

Airman, I will not be giving you my thumbprint today." Mr. Dixon chuckled to himself triumphant in his win.

For a long while, Gary Flannery's face didn't change. He stared intently back at Mr. Dixon. Finally, he opened his briefcase and put away each tube and the wooden holder carefully back, closing the lid. He exhaled loudly in Mr. Dixon's direction and frowned. A strange tick showed at the corners of his mouth.

"Let me ask you a question, Mr. Dixon. Do you know how full of shit you are?" Mr. Dixon tilted his head amused.

"Please, go on." Gary Flannery cleared his throat mockingly.

"Before I even came to your neighborhood, I could see your exhaust blowing out from your roof: it's dark tan. That's the first sign that it's gonna go anytime now and you'll need to replace it. And by the smell in here, I'll bet your cleanser went down too, what, six maybe seven weeks ago? You've been breathing your own CO2. Sure it might just be a little bit now, but as time goes on, it'll get worse. You're already starting to show signs of it: the shaking hands, poor Mrs. Dixon's forgetful memory, the dying house plants in the corner. But you don't have Royal Air anymore, do you? They haven't returned your call or

they'd have this all fixed up by now. I'll bet you decided to put your name on the list for Public but with the size of this town, you're on the bottom of a very, very long list. And you're praying for someone, anyone, to call you back. And yes, I did come knocking at your door at 6 p.m., but it's not because I haven't made a sale today. It's because I've made a shit ton of sales today. Because I'm a damn good salesman and when I saw this little house, I thought to myself, Gary, this is going to be a fucking steal. Why not try one more?"

Gary Flannery sat back in his chair, threaded his fingers again. His face was flush and his foot tapped in a quick rhythm that echoed throughout the study. Mr. Dixon's eyes darted to the corner where a clay pot sat holding the brown plant. Mrs. Dixon walked into the study just then.

"Can I get either of you two a drink? I just made a fresh pitcher of lemonade." Neither of them looked at her this time.

"No, thank you, dear," he said through clenched teeth.

"This gentleman was just on his way out." Mrs. Dixon smiled at the two of them and left.

Gary Flannery smirked, leaved over to pick up his briefcase, then stood up straight. Mr. Dixon stood as well and gestured to the door. They turned and walked out of the study.

Together, they made their way to the front door. Mr. Dixon stepped out and grabbed the knob twisting it open. The Airman strode through but spun back on his heel.

"One last thing, Mr. Dixon. Whenever you do get around to getting your return call from your Royal Air tech, you'll be told that you're being routed to Airman to set up a new contract. Because, in a few weeks, we will own Royal Air. We will be the only supplier in your area. And our rates are going to skyrocket because that's how capitalism works." Mr. Dixon searched his eyes. He felt that Gary Flannery was telling the truth. He set his briefcase to the ground by his feet.

"Mr. Dixon, I didn't make the world we live in, but I do prosper from it. But your generation refuses to bend with the current times. And because of that, you are going to die, Mr. Dixon. Very soon, I'm afraid, and I will continue on living for many years after. And that will be that. Or--" Gary Flannery turned his screen over again to him. "You can put your thumbprint right there and get a little extra time to do whatever it is that you should be doing when you smelled that mountain air."

Mr. Dixon looked down at the Airman contract, his eyes gazing over the fine print. It was a standard contract:

undisclosed time frames, price inflations, no guarantees. Just like the one he signed so many years ago with Royal Air and before them it was United Air and before them American Air and Gas. He heard a shuffle of feet behind him.

"Who's at the door, Hank?" Mrs. Dixon asked, appearing out from the kitchen. Mr. Dixon exhaled deeply, raised his hand, and pressed his thumb to the Airman's screen.