

The Trader - by Andrew Chamberlain

Joseph Morantz was at the top of his game. People wanted to hear his opinion. When he was rude, they weren't offended -- they just kept listening. He was that good.

Joseph was a trader. He knew his business; he knew how to bargain with and bully the people around him. In fact, he thought he knew it all, until one day a new opportunity came up. A new kind of trade.

He was in at seven the day it started. The office was quiet and he liked to spend the first hour thinking, reflecting on where he would strike next. At seven-thirty the phone rang and he grabbed the receiver.

"Yes?"

It was an investor relations guy from one of the automotive giants, talking about a new tranche of stock.

Joseph cut in on him.

"Why are you calling me?" he shouted, rubbing his eyes. He listened to the voice impatiently before interrupting again.

"Yes, but why are you calling me now? You don't need to be calling me now. Forward it to me, and do not call me before nine in future, is that clear?"

He slammed the receiver into its cradle and leaned back, rubbing his eyes again and sipping hot coffee, trying to rid himself of the taste of a sleepless night. Two pieces of paper sat in the middle of his desk; each had a title of "buy" and "sell." A list of companies were on each page, some of the names scribbled out.

His office door opened and his secretary came in;

"Good morning Mr. Morantz."

"Morning, Fiona," he mumbled back at her.

Fiona was the ideal secretary. Smart, discreet, and able to guess most of what he wanted before he asked for it. She wasn't old enough to remind him of his mother, and she wasn't pretty enough to distract him.

"Do you want these now?" She offered a stack of letters.

"Leave it there," he indicated the corner of the desk. "I'm going to try to take a nap between twelve-thirty and one every day for a while. Unless it's the CEO, I'm not available."

"I'll make sure you're not disturbed."

"And, can you make this phone ring only after half past eight?"

"Sure."

She came over to his desk and started to tap numbers in to the phone. He rubbed his eyes as she worked.

"Another sleepless night, Mr. Morantz?"

"I'd forgotten what it was like to live with a baby. He's eight months old and the term "business hours" means nothing to him. I feel like I'm on call twenty four hours a day."

She smiled and replaced the phone. "Anything before eight-thirty will divert to your messaging service."

He leaned back in the chair again and looked at her, she read his unspoken thanks in the dark rings around his eyes.

"Twelve-thirty, for half an hour, Fiona. Every day if I can manage it."

"I'll keep the visitors at bay," she said, "but you'll have to switch your phone to messages only again for that time."

"Whatever it takes." Joseph put his head in his hands again, and she offered to show him how to do divert the phone.

"No," he said, waving her away, "I'm just going to turn the volume down."

At twelve-thirty he stumbled out of a two-hour investment meeting. He couldn't be sure that he hadn't fallen asleep during one of the discussions. In fact, he couldn't be sure he hadn't snored.

This next half an hour might well be the highlight of my day.

"Thirty minutes, Fiona," he said, not checking his stride. She nodded to him as he passed.

Joseph shut the office door, and stretched as the disorientation crept over him again. He picked up the phone and turned it over, setting the ring tone to silent; and then he slumped in to his chair, spinning it around towards the urban view offered by the twelfth floor window. The distant sounds of office life floated over him.

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"Soporific," he mumbled, waiting to drift away.

"It is rather, isn't it?" a voice, just behind him, in the room.

"What the...?" He spun the chair and stared at an impeccably dressed young man seated on the chair in front of his desk. Joseph squinted at him, taking in the detail: Talbott Shirt, Tower Bridge shoes, titanium links. Joseph hated the guy already.

"Who are you? How did you get in here? How'd you get past Fiona?" He could not believe she had let this guy in to her office. He had expressly asked her to guard this time for him.

"Fiona is unaware of my presence," said the young man casually. "I suggest you don't raise the matter with her." He eased back in the chair, making himself comfortable. "I have come to trade," he said, smiling. "I believe that is what you do."

Joseph looked at his visitor. This is a dream, he thought. I'm just dreaming. I should maybe just ride with this.

"Who do you represent?" he barked. He knew he would wake up any moment, and Fiona would come in and rouse him with another coffee. "What's your name?"

"My name is Noah. Noah Prentice."

"As in, the guy who built the Ark?" asked Joseph, smirking.

"Yes," said Noah, "I represent a global partnership, and I wish to trade with you, Mr. Morantz."

"A lot of people do."

"This is a little different," said Noah, he leaned forward and made a steeple from his fingertips. "Tell me, do you go to church very much?"

"As it happens, I do," said Joseph, beginning to enjoy himself. "Me, my wife, the kids -- we go."

"Indeed," said Noah, "although your approach is what one might call "church lite" don't you think?"

"I'm a busy man, Mr. Prentice. Mrs. Morantz likes me to attend. It looks good for us to be there together, from time to time."

Noah nodded. "I understand your wife had a baby recently."

"Eight months ago, a boy. He's keeping us awake all night. I'm trying to get half an hour of sleep in the office each day. Half an hour which you are currently interrupting."

"I think you will find the interruption worth it, Mr. Morantz. Now do you wish to do business with me?"

"No," said Joseph, standing up behind his desk, "I want to throw you out of my room and get some sleep."

He turned to walk around the edge of the desk, but suddenly Noah was there right in front of him, just a few inches away. He was sniffing the air.

"Nice cologne," his pale blue eyes focused on Joseph's. "Did Erica buy it for you?"

"Erica?" Joseph fidgeted with his tie, and stepped back. "What? Who is Erica?"

Noah Prentice just continued to look at him.

"What is this, blackmail?" hissed Joseph.

"No, Mr. Morantz. Now, do you want to trade?"

Joseph held Noah's gaze, the two men facing each other. Thank God this is only a dream, he thought.

"Yeah, okay, I'll trade," said Joseph finally. "Sit down Mr. Prentice, and let's see if we can do business."

Joseph sat back to his chair. "So, what do you want to trade? What have you got to offer me?"

Noah sat back and smiled again. "Let's start with what I want. You see, if we are to trade, you must let me take whatever I want from you -- anything I want."

"What?" shouted Joseph, incredulously.

Noah ignored the outburst. "There's a blue casino chip in your top left hand drawer," he said. "Let me borrow it for twenty four hours. I will give it back to you at this time tomorrow if you want it back."

Joseph slowly opened the drawer, knowing that the chip was there, though no one else did. He took it out and weighed it in his hand. "This is worth five thousand dollars, Mr. Prentice. I will lend it to you for twenty-four hours, ten dollars interest." He fingered the little blue plastic disk, feeling the ridges at its edge.

"Give me the chip and you will be ten dollars richer by this time tomorrow," said Noah.

"Deal," said Joseph. He fingered the chip a moment longer, as if he were sorry to let it go, and then with an effort of will he flicked it across the desk to Noah.

"Thank you," said Noah, pocketing the little blue disk. "You won't regret this Exchange."

"We'll see," said Joseph. "You can see yourself out."

He withdrew his hand and looked at his watch. It was still only half past twelve, so he turned his chair again and closed his eyes.

When Fiona came in at one she found his chair still turned away from the door, he was snoring gently. The top left-hand draw of his desk was open.

Later that day, Joseph visited the "Power Up Poker" website. Gambling was his indulgence, and easy to justify when he was buying and selling stock in multi-million dollar tranches.

Of course, the online gaming was small change compared to the trips to the casino. They were something different, and they could get expensive, even for him. Joseph could handle it of course, and he never bothered Mrs. Morantz with the worry of his losses.

Staring at the homepage, he tapped in the code for his personal account. The cards were ready to deal. He looked at the screen, ready to play the first deal. The starting bid was ten bucks.

But he couldn't do it.

Well, that wasn't true. It was more that he didn't want to do it. He simply wasn't interested.

"Weird," he muttered to himself.

The phone buzzed, it was Fiona.

"John from Lifestyle Pharmaceuticals," she said. "Do you want me to take a message?"

"No," said Joseph, "put him through." He closed the poker site and called up his business files.

"John," he shouted, grabbing a pen with his free hand, "so tell me why I should buy your stock."

Noah visited him again the next day.

"Where's my ten dollars?" said Joseph.

"You have your ten dollars," said Noah. Joseph smiled quizzically at him and turned his head to one side.

"Huh?"

"I said to you that if you gave me the gambling chip, you would be ten dollars richer by today."

"Indeed you did," said Joseph.

"You are ten dollars richer," said Noah spreading his hands as if the gesture might help to explain what he was saying. "You almost took a hand on 'Power Up Poker' yesterday afternoon, did you not?"

Joseph was silent.

"As I said to you Joseph, I take whatever I choose. I have taken your desire to gamble. In due course, you will be richer by a great deal more than just ten dollars." He took the blue gambling chip from his top pocket of his expensive suit, and spun it between his fingers.

"Do you want this back?" he said. "The choice is always yours."

"No," said Joseph after a moment.

"Shall we trade again?" said Noah.

Joseph looked at him. "Maybe."

Noah sighed, and stood up, looking past Joseph's shoulder to the view beyond. "Can't see that much from here, really, can you?" He leaned towards Joseph, fixing him again with his pale blue eyes.

"You have in your case a gold bracelet, set with three flawless diamonds. I believe that you were going to give it to Erica when you saw her next."

Again, Joseph said nothing.

"It's her birthday next week, isn't it? What did you get her last year? A rather splendid necklace, wasn't it? I imagine it cost rather more than the present you bought your wife."

Joseph found himself clenching the pen in his hand. Black ink had leaked out on to his thumb, just above the joint.

"What do you want?"

"You know what I want, Joseph. I want to trade."

"Give me the bracelet," Noah continued. "If you wish to have it back again tomorrow, I will give it to you."

"This bracelet," said Joseph hoarsely, "will give me happiness, satisfaction, and the attentions of my lover."

"Give me the bracelet, and you will find a satisfaction untainted by lust," said Noah.

Joseph took the box out of his case. He placed it on the desk, next to the framed picture.

"Deal," he said.

At around four in the afternoon, Joseph's wife phoned. Her mother had offered to come down for Thursday and Friday night to look after the baby, and give them a break.

"If you could take Friday off," she said hesitantly, "I thought we might be able to get away to the cottage. I could pick you up on Thursday and we can get away. We'd come back on Saturday."

Joseph was silent. He already had Friday booked as holiday -- he had planned to see Erica. It was all arranged.

"Look, don't worry if you're busy," said his wife anxiously. "Really, we can do something else, or I can tell mum not to come over."

Joseph was silent.

"Joseph, hello? Are you there?" She was sounding worried now.

She's afraid of me, he thought.

"Joseph?"

My wife's afraid of me.

"Let's do it," he said, "I can leave early on Thursday, you could pick me up from the office."

He could taste the relief in her voice. He hadn't shouted at her for a change. Joseph put the phone down. It would be best to make the next call as soon as possible.

He took the lift down to the ground floor, walked through the atrium and out on to the street. He got about a hundred yards away from the entrance, away from the reception area. Then he found Erica's number on his mobile, and pressed the call button.

The next day, Noah visited him again. When Joseph turned around, Noah was holding out his hand. Resting in it was the small jewellery box containing the bracelet.

"I don't want it," said Joseph, blinking. He felt terrible. Erica had taken it badly, and he still needed to talk to his wife about it all.

"You look pretty rough," said Noah. He sniffed at the air, "Are you wearing a different after shave today?"

Joseph sipped his coffee and hid his face in his hands.

"Do you want to trade?" said Noah, smiling as he placed the little box back in his pocket.

Joseph was silent for a moment, then he reached across his desk to the framed picture of his wife and child.

"My wife is afraid of me." He said, "Take away her fear."

Noah stopped smiling. "I am here to trade with you, Joseph, no one else."

"I need to talk to her about something."

"I know," said Noah.

Joseph wanted to protest, but the energy wasn't there. "Deal with me," he said finally, "take away my anger and my fear." He got up from his chair and came around to where Noah was sitting. He knelt down on the carpet so that their eyes were level.

"Set me free," he said.

Noah leaned forward slightly. "If you want to trade, you must let me take whatever I wish."

"Deal," said Joseph.

"You may seem to get nothing in return," continued Noah. "Management decides what dividend to release."

"It's a deal," said Joseph.

"He will demand your all," whispered Noah, into Joseph's ear.

"It's still a deal," said Joseph.

"Excellent," said Noah standing up. He looked at his watch.

"Well it was a pleasure doing business with you, Joseph."

"Don't you want something from me?" said Joseph.

"What else is there to take?" replied Noah. "Don't worry, you'll have a wonderful weekend with your wife. She's not stupid Joseph, she's just waiting for you to be honest with her."

Joseph nodded.

"In fact, I think she has just arrived," said Noah, "so I'll be off now." He stood and seemed to look down through the floor beneath them. "Ah, yes your wife is at reception."

As he spoke, the tone and pitch of the words changed and became Fiona's voice.

"Your wife is at reception, Mr. Morantz."

Joseph opened his eyes and looked out through the glass at the urban landscape. On the street below he could see his wife's car in the visitors bay, and there was a suitcase on the back seat. He turned the chair round, and his secretary was standing in the doorway.

"Shall I ask them to send her up?"

"No, no, it's okay, "said Joseph, "I'll go down to meet her."

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