

## A Stroll through Bathroom Lighting

by Vince Sosko

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Next week I have to remember to take my slacks to the dry cleaners off Monroe Street so that they will be ready for the trip to Detroit at the end of the month. Let's hope they don't do to my slacks what they did to my wife's blouse last time I used their services. To be honest, that was not the first time they returned clothing to me with rips in the seams and a bend to the collar. It's a wonder why I keep going to them. Must be the company they keep. For the past year, that company has been the man wearing gym shorts and dress shoes while awaiting his dry cleaning. That man is Elliott Meeks.

I could wonder if he'd be resigned to his usual post in the left chair of the tiny lobby at Costello Cleaners when I go in next week, but that would be wishful thinking, seeing as he was reportedly imprisoned in Pennsylvania. That is how the desk clerk told the story when I went in last time to retrieve my wife's mangled garments. (It's a funny thing that we do, storytelling. We do it in so many different ways for an inordinate number of reasons.) That last time I was in Costello's a story was told so as to avoid the uncomfortable fact of the matter that a torn flower dress hung fatally from my fingers. The desk clerk was not much of a storyteller, but he gave the facts well enough to render a detracting interest about why the usual suspect of the left chair was not patiently awaiting his Tuesday morning suits while reading *The Salt Lake Tribune* with a ruffled copy of the *Deseret News* atop his lap.

No good story is ever told without some dose of history though, so to not betray the integrity of *The Elliott Meeks Tale*, a bit of backstory. (How does one define their own backstory? In what ways do we intentionally construct our backstory? Wouldn't it be awfully dingy to read an entire story of just the back? Can we tell things called frontstories?) The man Elliott Meeks was a transient storyteller of the terrible fates our lives can deal us without ever consulting us or our loved ones. He was a life insurance agent who travelled quite often for his work. Selling people on their inherent fears was not a constituent of most of his travel however. Hearing how those fears could be spun into Level A, B, or C policies while on the phone with wives and husbands made up the larger sum of Elliott's travel. He was a life insurance convention junkie.

Aside from the Saturday badminton get-togethers that Elliott's wife assembled, these conventions were the main source of his physical interaction with others. (Truly, I must say it is amazing the information we offer up to people at times, complete strangers, yet somehow the desk clerk at Costello's was able to gather this assemblage of facts and inferences about Elliott Meeks from several weeks of the fear mongering man occasionally letting down his guard as he waited the one hour for his slacks and jackets.) Elliott spent his weekdays at a desk dialing numbers from a random name generator and introducing himself as the first line of security towards an uncertain future. He, of course, would have figured out a better way to say this after seven years of making these calls. But once or twice every three months he would pick up a folder at the Human Resources office containing his boarding pass, hotel reservation, and

convention program, and come Friday morning his wife would kiss him on the cheek while standing curbside at the Salt Lake City airport.

(Enough backstory yet? When is it too little, too much? I guess there is just one more note of importance.) Elliott Meeks, someone unaccustomed to the feeling of heartache, was never sure if this phenomenon of the ailing heart that he read about in novels was one that should be taken into account when filing a person's life insurance policy. Was a broken heart the sort of thing that people should fear when facing an undefined future?

So back to the story, and no more of the backstory. It all started when Elliott was in Vancouver on a four-day collision between home, automobile, and life insurance consultants on how to merge their practices into the "Symbiotic Future of the Insured World." He spent the first ten hours of the conference sorting out his reservation dispute with the downtown Howard Johnson's and thereafter relocating to a Howard Johnson's 33 miles away, where room 211 had been awaiting him all along. Part of that adventure also included settling a hold on the company card that Janice at HR included in his folder. When Elliott awoke the next day, having already missed the plenary talk and still unregistered for the conference, his lower left molars panged and the cheek that Patricia had kissed the day prior was purpling.

He tried to grit through the growing pain of his mouth as he muttered words to the short gentleman behind the registry counter. It took four attempts of slurring the words "Elliott Meeks, Salt Lake Life Partners" before the gentleman was able to assist Elliott with attaining his name badge and drink vouchers. Midway through the fifth speech he was numbly sitting in on, Elliott stood to get some ice and splash water around with the blood seeping from his gums. After causing a scene by aggressively sneezing mid-splash and spewing blood and ice on the tan wall, Elliott took the elevator alone down to the lobby, where he struggled to communicate his need for a cab to the nearest dentist who accepted international health insurance.

The dental receptionist's collar was marked with a red streak and as she shuffled through the day's appointment schedule, Elliott wondered whether the streak were a misfortune of her ability to apply lipstick or if it were the gingival blood of a patient who rushed in in much the same condition as Elliott. He was prone to peculiar curiosities, no matter how improbable they may have been. At least that is how the desk clerk at Costellio's pinned Elliott after months of intermittent conversations. (Either way, part of me questions whether details of this sort are simply fodder to further supply the delineation of our focus from my wife's torn dress.) Once the receptionist had fit Elliott into the 4:40 slot, he thanked her while inconspicuously pocketing a pen from her desk. (This latter detail surely must be hollow banter.)

It was while sitting in the lobby of Levi Tuss, D.D.S. that Elliott's life would encounter literature that would alter its course thereafter. Sitting on the side table just below his resting elbow was a catalogue. This catalogue was a mixture of pink and deep purple with arched headlines spread across the page and a blotch of ketchup in the bottom corner. Elliott read the catalogue with a hypnotic fascination and when he reached the end of it he felt a newfound perspective on the types of bathroom lighting that he not only had in his house, but also a deeper consideration of all the bathroom lighting he had faced throughout his life, especially the bathrooms he had occupied in various friends' houses while having sleepovers as a child.

As Elliott reviewed the breakdown of pricing on the styles of bathroom lighting, the red-collared receptionist announced his name and gestured her hand to the side door with the illuminated light overhead. He slipped the catalogue into the side pocket of his briefcase and entered into a two-hour procedure of local anesthetic and tubes vacuuming fluid out of oral crevices that Elliott's toothbrush never knew about.

Driving home from a checkup with his local dentist days later, Elliott pulled off the regular route and continued to take left and right turns with the aimless ambition of a fly in someone else's home. At a stoplight on Roland Ave. he bent into his briefcase and lifted his sunglasses out, incidentally bringing out the bathroom lighting catalogue too. He holds the catalogue in his lap and stares at it with a clarity of sight that escaped him at a young age. A honk from behind rips through him suddenly and he accelerates through the intersection of the past seven years, towards the new nature of who he could be, towards 1968 E. Roland.

He parked his car curbside opposite from the home with the white door and a porch light on in the clear sun. After knocking twice he stood and thought about a time when he sat in his bathing suit on the doorstep of a friend's house waiting for the family to return from a swim meet. Finally the white door swung open and an elderly woman half his size smiled at Elliott with expectant eyes. Elliott began to compliment the refreshing austerity of the woman's home and asked her if she had some time to discuss the lighting of the rooms in her house where all of her guests would form the biggest impressions of her home. She continued to smile and gave a slight nod as she gestured her open hand toward the dinner table. He was halfway through his cup of coffee when he closed his pitch and slid the open-faced catalogue over to the aged hands of the woman. She told him that she always wondered why guests left shortly after using her bathroom, and that her favorite of the displays was the second one he talked about. Elliott complimented her on what an appropriate choice that was for her and then explained that she could simply put a 20% down payment on it today, or she could pay the full amount while he is there to process the order. He walked out her door forgetting the bathroom lighting catalogue, but not the check for \$10,572.

When Elliott parked the car in his driveway not ten minutes after he left the house with the white door, he sat and could feel a tingling start in his feet and rise up through his body. He sat perfectly still with the seatbelt pressed against his stomach. The check the elderly woman had written sat in the cup holder. Elliott glanced down at it as though it were a stranger he had picked up along the way and they had arrived at the destination, but the stranger wouldn't get out of the car and allow Elliott to continue on. Eventually he and the check made their way into the house where Patricia was tending to the smoke rising off the stove as she shouted out directions to their daughter on how to perform long division. Elliott stood still in the doorway to the dining room and watched his daughter hover atop a white sheet of paper while his son reached for her pencil from his high chair. Without announcing himself or rendering even a hello, Elliott interjected the question, "Patty, has Colby eaten recently, or has that red sauce been smeared onto his tray for some time now?" into the disordered domestic scene. Patricia slammed a pan into the sink and glowered back at her husband from behind a plume of rising smoke.

A week later as the nightly news was coming on, Elliott undressed next to the bed his wife lay in and when he pulled his wallet out of the back pocket of his slacks, the \$10,572 check fell to the floor. Her voice crept out from under the sheets asking “what was that?” while her eyes remained shut. Without pause, he responded to her by saying it was just some information about an upcoming convention that he would have to attend. Once all of his clothes were either hung up or folded away, he lay down next to Patricia and dreamt.

In the morning, they awoke and Elliott let his dream seep through his head for a while before he said something to his wife. “Would you and the kids want to come?” The dream Elliott had was of a time when he was no taller than four feet and his dad packed up their family to visit a great aunt or someone with that type of familial tie, and they stayed in an old house with one of those reading rooms that stood high above the rest of the home and was enclosed by circutal windows whose drapes hadn’t been opened for ages. He floated above the outfield of a baseball diamond where he and his father had watched the Wilkes-Barre minor league baseball team play an extra innings game once. At the moment when his body was flying over second base, he was taken by an aggressive gravitational pull further up into the sky, so high that he started to lose clarity of the baseball field’s colors. That was all he could remember of his nostalgic chimera.

Patricia was taken aback by his asking her and the kids to tag along to one of his conventions. Not only did he never mention the idea before, but he had rarely ever given any details about any of his conventions when he returned home. “What would we do while you’re at the conference?” Elliott explained to her that there was a local minor league baseball team that would have home games while they would be in town, and he also spoke of how he saw Colby grab a plush baseball the other day while he rolled around in the foyer. (All this speech was missing was Elliott hearing voices calling him to baseball fields across the country and the ghost of his father emerging from cornstalks. I wonder if the Costellio desk clerk had recently seen “Field of Dreams” before he spelt this story out for me?) Before Patricia could tell him how ludicrous of an idea that was, he informed her that the company would pay for all of them to go.

Elliott’s daily chores for the following two weeks consisted of opening a private savings account at a bank that he and Patricia were not members at, unassumingly gathering the necessary information about his family members to purchase airline tickets, scouting online ticket dispensaries for the outfield seats of the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre RailRiders, and requesting a vacation from his work for what he called “a spur-of-the-moment extended weekend getaway.” Furthermore, he stopped by the nearby Salt Lake City Water and Waste division to gather some forms about a recent proposal for renovating the City’s septic system. When the new month arrived, they departed for Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

He unloaded the baby stroller from their rental car and kissed his wife on the cheek outside of the baseball stadium’s home base entrance, then drove east for the duration of four Motown songs, until he happened upon a neighborhood where over half of the houses had sprinklers running in the front yards. In his briefcase he sifted through the stacks of life insurance registration forms to grab a group of papers that he had doctored to emulate the septic renovation proposal flyers he collected from the SLC Water and Waste building. Midway through his walk down the entry path to a rather large house, he started to feel tingling again, and took a hard left to the next house over – a ranch with its Christmas lights still hanging from the gutters. This time he reached

for the doorbell, but was met with crossing strips of medical tape over the ringer. Several episodes of knocking later, he was greeted by another elderly woman who smiled at him, albeit with eyes that were suspect of his presence, but seemingly impressed with his attire. His introduction was brief, yet granted him entrance to her outdated decorating and colorless walls.

No coffee was offered at this home. In fact, Elliott did not spot a coffee maker anywhere in the adjacent kitchen. The woman spoke in hasty spouts of accusation. "What did you say your name was again?" Prior to parking the rental car, Elliott had thought of how foolish it was to give the name Elliott Meeks at the house where he sold a bathroom makeover, so this time he went by the moniker Donovan Daley. This was the acting name of a man who was Elliott's childhood mentor while at the New York School of Swing. The school was an independent institute primarily enrolled with European immigrants who had aspirations in the art of Jazz music and Dance Theater. Elliott's parents and himself were none of these things, but his father placed him there, believing it to be the best chance for Elliott to make something of himself in a New York that was growing its stage presence of second generation immigrants, as his father saw it. The School of Swing, of course, no longer exists.

Halfway through his rouse about the best way to avoid unnecessary taxes in the wake of Wilkes-Barre altering the sewer system over the next two years, Elliott was met with confused looks from the woman and a startling garage door opening on the other side of the wall. Her husband gave a look of shock when he saw the scattered papers between his wife and Donovan Daley. This tall and grey-haired man spoke even more hastily than his wife and within minutes of him setting down his things, Mr. Daley had excused himself from their home.

Two blocks away, Elliott sat in his car waiting for the tingling to fall back down his body and subside, and once he could pick up his feet he strolled up to a house with a minivan in the driveway. The discussion he and the younger housewife shared was filled with jokes and plenty of head nodding. Things could not have gone more smoothly. Then her husband came in from the rear sliding door smelling of cut grass and a sweat-lined brim of a backwards ball cap. As he was filled in with sporadic details by his wife and Mr. Daley, his forehead began to furrow, and he started to tell Donovan Daley about a recent 48 Hours investigation show he had seen in which the unsolved case dealt with a nationwide scam that tricked innocently daytime dwelling homeowners into signing over information and sometimes writing checks for services that were falsely presented. Elliott remained calm and still, but he could sense the tingling start, this time in his fingertips. He was informed by the grass-cutting husband of a video clip that was shown of a poor elderly woman in a Salt Lake suburb that lost her retirement savings to this type of marauding. Needless to say, the jig was up for Donovan Daley and Elliott Meeks would pay the price.

With the handcuffs tightly clenching his wrists, the tingling persisted, but Elliott did not sense any feelings of loss, fear, or concern within himself. Even through the trial that prosecuted him of more than 31 counts of false identity, grand larceny, and money laundering, Elliott sat and listened to the heinous crimes that he never even knew existed and watched his still hands rest on his lap as a stinging sensation occurred underneath the skin. It was not until he sat in a federal prison, sharing a cell with a twenty-year-old kid, that he saw his hands start to shake. They never shook before.

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