

ADD VALUE

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CHAPTER ONE

What separates people from each other are different portfolios of marketable assets; strength, presence, charm, intellect, creativity, beauty. Give people the same portfolios of these assets and they will live their lives in very similar ways.

Mike Goodman had an abundance of these assets; lucky him. Others, with different portfolios of assets, acted both reactively and proactively, to the events that unfolded in very different ways. Had their portfolios been the same then they would have acted in a very similar way to Mike.

Mike was sitting at the head of an oblong table about thirty-five feet long. He was staring out of the tinted windows of the recently constructed First White Building, which were automatically tinting against the rays of the setting sun.

“Mike, that was bloody brilliant”.

Those were the whispered words from Tom O’Leary, the managing partner at Firm One, as Mike sat down.

At least once in your life, I bet you’ve had the feeling that the world is your oyster. Maybe you were sitting on a beach on holiday with your mates, with the sun setting over the distant horizon. You could visualise the steps it would take to achieve your wildest dreams. You could just see them in your mind’s eye as you sat there staring at the sunset. It all looked so very easy.

Later, the dream may have crystallised. You were probably still relatively young, perhaps after winning your first contract, or saving your first patient. You were probably totally shattered; you’d worked through the night. And after you finished, someone said “congratulations, that was excellent”. You could feel a rush of adrenalin from a body totally exhausted but a mind at its peak of euphoria. You felt your

heart beating wildly, as if it would burst out of its cage. You got a tremendous feeling of confidence that can last for years, and for some, that really is the road to making their dreams come true.

As it happens, the moment Mike's dreams crystallised, he felt as sick as a dog. He was faint and sweating. His heart was beating so hard he seriously thought he was in line for a heart attack. He didn't know what the symptoms of a heart attack were, but felt that this had to be one of them. That would have been ironic. Realise your life's ambition only to drop down dead.

Perhaps he was exaggerating a bit. He started to perform some discreet breathing exercises, taking a deep breath in, then out, then in, then out; always concentrating on a fixed point in the distance.

Mike was concentrating on the skyline of Manhattan. The city's haze and the setting sun bathed the island in a surreal golden blanket. In the far distance a tall building - it looked like the Empire State Building but he could have been wrong - now just concealing the sun, was lit up like the coming messiah, with golden rays streaming out from behind a thorny crown of mobile phone transceivers and satellite dishes.

Both Mike and Tom had earned themselves a few moments to look out of the window. Their presentation had been a bombshell, and the assembled directors of Global Foods needed a few moments to collectively gather their thoughts.

Mike gathered up his notes, trying to appear as calm as possible. He was no natural presenter, so he would rehearse the presentation over and over again, as if learning his lines in a play. On the first few runs he would stop every few seconds, checking his words, and then writing them down in scribbles on pages of notes. By about the twelfth run, Mike would just need to refer to the notes, and could focus more on the style, and the intonation. By about run twenty, he would be perfect.

This presentation was forty-five minutes long, and he had

worked bloody hard on it. Mike had flown from London for this meeting, and was on about run thirty when he disembarked from the plane, meaning that he had spent the entire eight hours of First Class bliss immersed in the details of food processing value chains, when any normal twenty three-year old would have been savouring the experience. The trip from the airport to the meeting had been in a corporate limousine provided by Global Foods. For the last few hours Mike had been treated like royalty.

Finally, Sir James Baldwin, the Chairman of Global Foods, cleared his voice and started to speak. The rest of the room fell silent.

"I think that your case, Mike, has been effectively presented. If I may summarise, you and your colleagues at Firm One believe that you have identified process improvements to our operations which could cut operating costs by around eighty percent, mainly by the intelligent application of new developments in artificial intelligence, with what you call Universal Programming Language, or UPL. What you are also saying is that these savings are available to any organisation, irrespective of industry or geography, and that if we act now to implement these process improvements, Global Foods will benefit from significant first-mover advantages."

"Well summarised. Yes, that is what we are saying".

"And if I understand correctly, you've been instrumental in pioneering UPL at Firm One."

"Yes".

"Why us Mike? Why do you want to use Global Foods as the test case for these new ideas?"

"Because, Sir James, you are very big. You are also very diverse. Your company represents a perfect microcosm of industry as a whole. It is not just about food and drink; it includes banking, electronics and many other areas. And yet, in spite of its diversity, it is a very well-run company. You

seem to defy the conventional wisdom that conglomerates destroy shareholder value. If we can demonstrate that we can revolutionise your company we will have proved that our ideas have universal applicability.”

There was a pause, followed by a smile from the old man. “I think that there is a compliment hidden in there somewhere. Thank you. Would you give us a couple of days to consider this?”

As the meeting broke up, Tom and Mike made their way down to the lobby. Tom relaxed for the first time in weeks. You could almost feel the tension evaporate off him.

“They’re hooked, Mike. They can’t say no. I’m not a betting man, but I am prepared to bet next year’s bonus that we are going to get a call authorising the go-ahead on Monday morning. In this game, the first mover takes all. He must know that we are in discussions with all the major corporates on both sides of the Atlantic and in Asia.”

They stood outside, waiting for their respective limousines.

“I need to talk to some people in New York over the weekend so I’ll see you on Monday. Are you flying back tonight, Mike? You’re booked First Class aren’t you? I guess this time you will get to enjoy it.”

Tom smiled at Mike, and then walked towards the open car door, handing his overnight bag to the chauffeur. He turned before he got in.

“This is going to be very big, so let’s not screw things up. Let’s just take things smoothly and calmly. I’ll see you Monday”.

The fatigue began to get to Mike as he relaxed, for the first time in over a week, in the leather seats of the limousine on the way to the airport. The sun had set now, and the streetlights were beginning to come on, mile after mile. Alone in the back of the car, Mike felt almost depressed. Having ascended the

adrenalin peak, the first few steps on the way back down can be something of an anti-climax.

Mike was going to be back in London by late evening, so he made a few calls to arrange a party to go to. On arrival at the airport, he checked in and made his way to the First Class departure lounge.

He ordered a Bloody Mary; his mood had improved substantially, and a Bloody Mary was the only drink he allowed himself when feeling this good. Mike looked around the room at his fellow passengers. All of them were in their mid-forties, no, maybe one man in his late thirties. There was another man in his late forties trying to appear twenty years younger, and who should have known better.

Then there was Mike, at just twenty-three. When Mike had started flying First Class, he used to feel so superior about being twenty years younger than all his fellow passengers. Mike was pretty contemptuous of them. He had had a brilliant academic career and had been chosen as one of the top graduates for Firm One. He was doing what the other passengers did, but better, more quickly and - most important of all - he was younger than all of them.

Now, though, Mike felt that he was about to move into a different league. It was almost as if he felt pity towards them. He knew that he was going to be far bigger than any of these people could even dream of. It wasn’t just that he was playing their game. Mike was about to change the rules. Now Mike had invented a new game in which he was going to be the game-master. He was going to be the master of their corporate universe.

The flight was called, and the passengers were asked to make their way to the aircraft. As everyone walked towards the gate, a lady with show-stopping legs walked in the lounge and smiled sweetly at the ticket staff, apologising for her late arrival. Every man in the room stared at her, appraising her, some discreetly, some less so. Mike lost sight of her in the

passenger tube that led to the aircraft. He took a window seat near the front, and sipped the champagne.

What a pleasant surprise. She sat next to Mike. While she sorted herself out Mike discreetly eyed her up and down. He estimated that she was in her mid-twenties, northern European and that she spent a good portion of her life in the gym, toning what was already an extremely athletic figure. She had nice eyes. She smiled at him.

Mike smiled back, and picked up the Corporate Finance Weekly from the newspaper holder and spent the next few minutes trying to look as cool as possible. He had a moment's panic when he realised that he was reading the magazine upside down.

Half an hour later, they had risen above the clouds. Outside the window, he could see the full moon, which had lit up the whole horizon. There were stars, but Mike focused on the sea, which miles below looked like a silvery pond. To the left, there were a couple of islands, and just in front of them, barely visible, was the wake of a large ship. It was an absolutely beautiful night.

More drinks came, and Mike gave the stewardess his order for dinner. He caught the girl's eye and was rewarded with another smile. He put out his hand and gave one of his shiniest white teeth laden smiles. "Hi, I'm Mike".

"Hi, I'm Naveen. So tell me, did Daddy let you fly First Class this time?"

Naveen was in the art dealing business. She seemed to spend her life travelling between New York, Los Angeles and London and she clearly knew about art. She represented major buyers, who trusted her to differentiate between an up and coming artist and utter crap and between a newly discovered old master and a fake. She was on her way back to London after a three month stay in New York, where her client had been generous to a fault, putting her up in a fully serviced penthouse flat overlooking Central Park. All she had had to do was be on

hand while he selected a variety of modern art works for his houses in California and Europe, for advice and to look good. His taste was dismal, but his fees were astronomical. She had many friends in the city and she had had a tremendous time. What a life.

"I'm a consultant with Firm One. You probably haven't heard of us. We specialise in corporate change management".

Naveen thought for a moment.

"Yes, the name rings a bell. I read an article somewhere recently. You specialise in a new sort of software, don't you? I can't remember the details exactly, but some young guy wants to use it in companies; something like that".

Naveen looked at Mike as the realisation dawned. She looked genuinely impressed.

"You're Mike Goodman aren't you? You are the "next generation computer geek who is going to change the world". I suppose you're going to spend the rest of the journey thrilling me with epic tales of eighteen-hour days in front of a computer screen writing code."

Mike flashed another brilliant white, winning smile. "That's right, I'm Mike Goodman. But I don't write Universal Programming Language, or UPL. No, I just try and think of clever ways of using it. You're right though, we are going to see some big changes, and Firm One is a world leader in this area."

They spent the rest of the flight talking about every subject under the sun. Mike was no expert in interpreting women's sign language, but even he could see that she was interested. He started planning ahead, thinking about the next move after they had got off the plane.

Naveen, meanwhile, had to admit that her fellow passenger was very cute. He seemed incredibly young. He had piercing blue eyes, slightly effeminate hair and cheekbones to die for. She was bored senseless about the computer stuff, but Mike

tactfully kept that to a minimum. He was clearly very good at what he did and pretty excited about what he was going to do. For someone who spent much of her professional life dealing with old men and art bores, she found his limitless, youthful, almost innocent confidence and sense of humour enormously refreshing.

They touched down at Heathrow Airport and the aircraft taxied to the gate.

“Look, Naveen, I’m free tonight, why don’t you join me?”

They took a taxi to the centre of London to one of Mike’s sort of club, filled with chrome, glass tables and barmen in black polar neck sweaters preparing cocktails. The girls and boys in their city suits talked with impossibly loud voices about corporate deals and corporate events on yachts.

“I don’t think you are really one of these people are you?” That was Naveen’s opening statement as they sat down in a corner table.

Mike was momentarily blind-sided. “it’s a fair cop, I’ll come quietly” he laughed, careful to show his excellent teeth in a brilliant smile.

“Not saying that’s a bad thing, of course. I can’t stand these people. I can’t believe that you seriously enjoy these places”.

“An overdose of ego, you mean? I’m not sure I would put you down as a shrinking violet either”. Mike wanted to play this carefully. Naveen was demonstrating her ‘man of the people’ streak, but Mike didn’t want to antagonise her.

“But I take your point. This place is wall-to-wall full of nasty pieces of work. Let’s get out of here; the night is yours, Naveen. Where are we going next?”

Then they moved on to one of her places. It was decorated like a student party, with dread locked barmen dressed in Thai beach gear and serving beer, herbal tea and joints. The girls and boys were all dressed in long flowing clothes and started their conversations with “*Daahling*”.

Mike gave one of his winning smiles again. “Same guys and gals, but different clothes and bigger trust funds from daddy . . . “

Naveen laughed a lot at that. Mike kept smiling, and adjusted his conversational pitch to focus more on spikey jokes about Naveen’s crowd without getting too close to the bone.

Throughout the evening, they moved closer and closer to each other. By about bar six, when they were both pleasantly stoned, they kissed. By about bar nine, they were intertwined and Mike got them a taxi back to his flat in fashionable East London.

It was the weekend so they could spend some time together. Naveen had to fly to Milan on Monday, and then back to her Paris flat on Thursday to attend two more art exhibitions. The more they talked, the more comfortable they felt with each other. They went to bars, made love and walked around London. Mike hadn’t felt so good in years, but he knew that their diaries would mean that this weekend together was probably going to be a one-off.

On Sunday evening they were sitting on Mike’s veranda, overlooking the City of London watching the sunset, drinking wine and listening to some of her music.

The phone rang. It was Tom.

“I’ve just got off the phone with Sir James. He called about twenty minutes ago. Apparently the whole board has been talking about this all weekend. We’ve got the go ahead. He wants us to get going immediately so as not to lose any momentum. Can you get a team together and prepare a presentation to give to the headquarters of Global Foods either Monday or Tuesday? Good. Well done Mike. This is it. It’s all systems go now. I’ll be back on Tuesday”.

Mike took a deep breath.

“I take it that’s good news,” said Naveen.

“That means I am going to be very busy for the next couple of months”.

They had a long, passionate, farewell lasting the rest of the evening. Mike put Naveen into a taxi to the airport the next morning and got into the office at about eight am.

CHAPTER TWO

John Unwin watched planes take off and disappear into the clouds. John liked planes.

He was sitting in his boss's office on the second floor of a seedy office block in Hayes, the headquarters of Bradbury Imports International. From that window, you could always get a good view of the planes as they took off and landed at Heathrow. When he could get away with it, John would sneak into the computer room, which was adjacent to this office, when he was supposed to be working, and he would stare at those planes. He would fantasise about taking one of them to some far off exotic location. He would imagine the hot tropical air and the sweet smell of kerosene as he stepped out of the plane at his destination.

John didn't fit in at this company. He didn't fit in at any company. Why he didn't fit in was a total mystery to him, but he didn't. Is it the fault of the misfit, for not learning the basic rules of social interaction, or is it the fault of the crowd, for deeming the misfit unworthy of those rules in the first place?

John was sitting in his manager's office because he was facing a disciplinary hearing. It was not his first at this company, although John realised that it would probably be his last. He had been told to document a procedure. It was a procedure relating to the management of Letters of Credit. The task that he had been given was essentially pretty straightforward. But, as ever, John had taken the task far, far too seriously. He would get in at seven in the morning, and he would leave at nine at night, and he had worked the weekends. He so wanted to please with this job. He tried so very, very hard, which was another thing that other people found infuriating.

The procedure that he wrote was extraordinary. It was