

Deadly Negotiations

The things we cherish.

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, 1890

It was a bright summer day on Duke, a busy main street in the heart of town. A few fluffy clouds dared to race across the sky, as the strong breeze blew in from the sea. Mr. Johnson, from Johnson's Watch Co. had acquired his skills from his Swiss Father. He passed away from the cold, damp air, of a nasty Maritime winter. Mr. Johnson had left his store, and his knowledge, to his son, Nathaniel Johnson. The store was now safely in the custody of a long line of watchmakers. Nathaniel lacked confidence; he'd not earned the reputation as a gifted watchmaker. The truth was still waiting to be discovered; Nathaniel was perhaps the finest, most creative, watchmaker in North America.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but that man is back again and he's asking for you." Nathaniel calmly rested his tools and stared beyond the bright light that illuminated his delicate work. Daisy was Nathaniel's wife. She knew instantly that Nathaniel was the man she'd dreamed about meeting. They married quickly and she could not have been happier. Daisy had a pleasant disposition, perfect for her job; greeting customers in the front of the store. The customers seemed to like her easy-going approach and the fact that it was a family business. Her growing stomach reflected an imminently new addition to their family. Since Nathaniel took over the store, business had been steady. They'd discussed changing the design of their watches; they needed an update, a more modern look. The store looked old and staunchly traditional. For now, they couldn't afford to modernize its appearance. They did manage to increase the price and complexity of their watches. Nathaniel's first set of complicated watches, sold out in two weeks. His reputation was starting to travel nicely within the influential crowd.

"Is it the same man as yesterday?"

"Yes, he said it's important." Daisy rubbed her ample belly, drawing Nathaniel's eyes to the impending delivery.

"Let me go and see what he wants." Nathaniel gently rearranged the components of the watch under construction. He moved his delicate tools to rest upon a black velvet cloth and rubbed his hands upon his apron. He seldom ventured into the store; he spent most of his time in the back, making new watches or repairing old ones. Nathaniel emerged to see a well-dressed man admiring the watches proudly displayed within the glass cases. He was a tall, slim man, wearing an immaculate tweed suit and expensive black polished shoes. The man had graying hair and a crisp white shirt, black waistcoat, and a brilliant blue silk tie. "How can I help you Sir?"

The man straightened his back and approached the counter confidently. "Mr. Nathaniel Johnson, I presume?" His accent was clean and crisp, obviously from the old country.

"That's correct, what can I do for you Mr....?"

"My condolences about your Father, he was a good man; an honorable man."

"Thank you," said Nathaniel, still perplexed.

"I knew your Father well. In fact, before he died, we'd conducted some business together. My name's Mr. Pike, I'm a banker."

"Well Mr. Pike, I don't mean to sound rude, but I have uncompleted work that I need to attend to." Nathaniel glanced at the door leading to his workshop. He let the sentence hang, trying to instill a sense of urgency to the conversation.

"As do we all, Mr. Johnson, as do we all." Mr. Pike leaned over the counter and pulled an envelope from his jacket pocket. "You'll need to have a look at this. It's the documentation your Father signed; a loan I made to your Father, on behalf of the Old Dominion Bank. It states that, should your Father pass away, rendering him incapable of fulfilling his obligations, then all of this," the man swept his hands in a circular motion, "is now mine. The store, the fixtures and the watches, now belong to me."

Daisy gasped and immediately wished she hadn't. She dug her nails tightly into her palms in self-disgust. Nathaniel tried to act calm, although his heart was beating hard within his chest. He reached for the documents, tucked neatly within the envelope. For a brief moment he reviewed the terms of the loan and stared at his Father's signature. Two people, bearing their names and signatures, had witnessed the document. He glanced at Daisy's expectant face and turned his attention to the banker. Mr. Pike, is there something that we can do? Perhaps we can assume the loan and continue to repay my Father's debts?"

Mr. Pike had noticed Daisy's expectant condition. He had little empathy and prided himself on conducting business, as stated within the agreed terms of the contract. That, in his opinion, was why we had contracts, to cut through cloudy sentimental feelings. "I'm afraid I can't do that. We're going to confiscate the inventory and close the store, unless you can afford to buy it?"

"Listen, I beg you, there has to be a suitable arrangement?"

"Careful Mr. Johnson, I'm a man of great integrity." Mr. Pike stiffened his posture to match his attitude.

"Of course, I understand, but does the bank really want a dusty old store and a few watches that are out of style? Wouldn't you rather have me assume the loan and continue to charge me interest? I mean, in the current economy, this store will remain empty for quite some time. Come on Mr. Pike, you're a businessman, and you're looking for the best deal."

"What are you suggesting Mr. Johnson?"

Nathaniel moved from behind the counter. It was a sales trick his Father had taught him, to close a deal. He approached Mr. Pike, to make the following proposition. "I cherish this store, it means so much to me. My father dreamed of this store. He came to Canada, searching for a better life. I want to carry on his tradition and passion. Please let us work a deal with you, a deal where we can all win. I'm willing to assume the loan and pay you back in full. I want to clear my Father's debt, please Mr. Pike, we're hard working people."

Mr. Pike leaned across the counter; he paused, deep in thought. His tweed suit was exquisitely tailored, a fine Yorkshire woolen weave. His white shirt and starched collar, shone like a ships beacon, within the dark store. His cufflinks were made of gold circles, with deep black onyx stones, set perfectly in the center. Mr. Pike looked expensive, except for one thing, the watch. The leather strap was worn and the watch model was adequate, at best. It was clear that Mr. Pike was not yielding. As he opened his mouth to decline the desperate offer, Nathaniel silenced him with one last attempt.

"And, of course, I'll custom craft the watch of your dreams; as a token of my family's appreciation. A fine banker of your standing should have a bespoke watch, one like no other."

Nathaniel caught the glint in Mr. Pike's eye. Appealing to his sense of vanity, he'd certainly struck a chord. "Do you know anything about me boy?"

Nathaniel had to choose his next words carefully, to coax the conversation along. Daisy shot Nathaniel a look that suggested he'd made the situation worse. "No Sir, that's why you need to give me some ideas; I'm sure that a man of your standing knows exactly what he wants to see in his watch."

A smile flashed across the banker's stern face. "I like this," he said, pointing to a large masculine watch, proudly displayed in a glass case. "But I want something very unique."

"Good, tell me what you have in mind." Daisy pushed her heavy body from the support of the doorframe. She walked slowly towards the two men, who were deep in conversation.

"Ever since I was a young boy, I've collected spiders. At first, it was catching spiders on the dock, using a glass jar. Today, I have means; I collect exotic specimens, artfully mounted in beautiful display frames. Some people don't like spiders, but I do. They're wonderfully efficient creatures. They never show mercy." He stopped and glanced at the young couple expecting their new arrival. "I must be going soft but I'll draw up the new paperwork. You'll be heavily in debt and you can't afford to miss a payment, or the bank will foreclose on you, understand?"

Daisy stood motionless, in shock. Nathaniel nodded eagerly.

"One day a dock worker brought me a spider, he'd found it on the docks. They often hitch a ride on the cargo ships. I paid him handsomely, had it mounted and framed, and now it's my favorite. They call it a Black Widow spider. I want my watch to look like a Black Widow spider. Can you do that?"

"Bring me the framed spider and I'll craft you a watch that has elements of the spider in its design."

"Good, then we have a Gentlemen's agreement," Mr. Pike extended his hand. Nathaniel shook his hand vigorously, "We do."

"I'll be back tomorrow with the new paperwork and a framed Black Widow. Don't lose her." He gave Nathaniel a chilling stare to underline his point. He glanced at Daisy, motionless. "Good day Madame, I hope your husband is as talented as I have heard, for both of your sakes."

Mr. Pike shuffled his way from the store in an ungainly way. As he left, Daisy seemed to emerge from her subdued state. "What have you done? How much do we owe?"

"I couldn't let this store close, I cherish it too much."

"How much Nathaniel?" Daisy crossed her arms, resting them on her bulging belly.

"Ninety dollars, and a watch." Daisy winced at the amount. She knew this would keep them enslaved to the bank for a long time. "We've a new born coming soon, and this old store is worth that much to you?"

Nathaniel felt bad. "I'll make it work Daisy. I'll pay the money back and keep the store. I promise we'll have a good life, with fine things." Nathaniel said the words, but he felt they were a little hollow.

"I hope so," was all that Daisy could muster; she ran crying into the back room, still shaking from the experience. She didn't trust Mr. Pike; he seemed evil and callous. The door to the store opened, striking the little bell, which cheerfully clanged into life. It was Meg, Daisy's sister. "Just on my lunch break and saw my Boss, Mr. Pike, coming out of the store. Did he buy a watch Nate?"

"No he didn't." Nathaniel wasn't his cheerful self and Meg recognized his demeanor instantly. "What's wrong, are you two fighting?"

"No, she's in the back, she'll tell you." Meg rushed to the back.

After a while Meg returned to the store. She walked past Nathaniel without acknowledgement. She was almost at the door, when she spun with so much haste, she almost lost her balance. "You're a fool Nate, a damn fool. I work for this despicable man.

He doesn't have a soul; he's the biggest spider in Halifax, sat in his web, the bank. He can't be trusted, he'll bleed you dry, mark my words." Before Nathaniel could respond, she was gone, slamming the door as she left.

That evening, Daisy had worked herself into a panic. Her heightened state of anxiety triggered an unfortunate series of events. A dry mouth resulted in a short walk to the kitchen. The darkness of the night resulted in a misplaced step. A tumble on the stairs and a severe blow to the neck, meant Nathaniel would lose his wife and his child, a daughter.

Nathaniel was distraught and spent the next day making arrangements and grieving. Meg tried to console him, but he was inconsolable. He closed the store for the day. At three o'clock in the afternoon, a loud tapping sound could be heard at the store's front door. Nathaniel stumbled to receive his unwelcome visitor, with tears still welling in his eyes. He pulled back the lace curtain to reveal Mr. Pike, the banker. He pointed at the handle impatiently. Nathaniel unlocked the door.

Mr. Pike barged his way in unceremoniously. "Here's the paperwork, sign here," he said, offering an expensive fountain pen. In an unconscious state, Nathaniel grabbed the pen and scribbled his signature. "Good, I'll leave this with you, the watch better be nice." Mr. Pike slid a black, square frame, onto the glass counter of a display case. It contained the mounted body of a spider. The spider was coal black with a distinctive red marking, splashed across its bulbous abdomen. Nathaniel looked at the poor spider, pinned to a white contrasting board.

"Do you even know what happened to my wife and my child last night?" he said grabbing the banker's elbow firmly.

Mr. Pike pulled his arm from Nathaniel's firm grip. "You told me that you cherish this store. Sometimes the things you cherish will kill. Your store killed your family, now you have a watch to make." Mr. Pike grabbed the paperwork and shuffled his way impatiently out of the store.

That afternoon, Mr. Pike was exceptionally rude to Meg. She visited Nathaniel after work and was informed of the conversation. They spent the evening talking.

One morning, a few months later, the buzzer sounded on Meg's desk at the bank. She quickly scampered into Mr. Pike's office. "Do you know what's supposed to happen when I press this button Meg?" he said, with a sarcastic flip of his wrist.

"Yes Sir, I need to come into your office."

"Quickly, you need to come into my office quickly, that's the point. You don't have all day. Do you want this job?"

"Yes!"

"Yes what?"

"Yes, Sir." Meg shrunk a little, hunching her shoulders.

"Then act like you do, I could replace you easily. Now type this lot up and don't make any mistakes." Mr. Pike threw a pile of papers, containing his handwriting, across his desk. Meg gathered them up efficiently. She turned to leave but Mr. Pike wouldn't let her. "Before you disappear. When will that no good watchmaker brother-in-law of yours have my watch ready? He took my spider and I haven't seen him since."

He usually comes into the Bank every Thursday night Sir, to deposit his payment on the loan."

Mr. Pike's face reddened. "I don't give a damn about his payment habits. When do I get my watch and when do I get my spider back! Ask him, I want answers." Mr. Pike slammed his fist down onto the desk in pure frustration.

"I will Sir. I'll see him tonight and ask him." Meg made her exit while she could.

It was another two months before that fateful day arrived. The watch was now complete. Nathaniel visited the bank and waited patiently for Mr. Pike. Meg was excited that Nathaniel had managed to build the watch. Nathaniel was invited into Mr. Pike's office. "Come in, finally the day has come. This has been a long wait, I hope it was worth it."

Nathaniel took a chair at the side of the large mahogany desk. He held items wrapped in a blue cloth. He carefully removed the cloth to reveal a square black frame. It contained the Black Widow spider. Nathaniel placed the frame upon the desk for inspection. An impatient nod of approval moved Nathaniel onto his next item, the watch. With keen anticipation, Mr. Pike stared at the cloth-covered shape, nestled within the watchmaker's palm. Nathaniel removed the cloth and gently placed the watch upon his desk.

The watch was outstanding, hand crafted to the finest quality. The face was inlaid with mother of pearl; a black onyx spider straddled the dial. A cut ruby represented the distinct mark usually found on the abdomen. The watch's bevel tightly clasped a crystal face. Running down each side of the watch, was a very unique series of cylinders. They tucked neatly into the thick body of the watch. The cylinders were styled to look like spider legs. A black leather strap was held together at the back with a very unusual clasp. It sported the shape of the spider's red marking.

The watch was stunning, unique and advanced, beyond any design of its day. Nathaniel had worked tirelessly, making the watch to perfection. He'd never made such a challenging watch before and was pleased with the result. Mr. Pike picked up the watch and studied it from every angle. A smile permeated his crusty exterior; he was pleased with himself. He'd managed to reposition the loan from a default position and negotiated the delivery of this unique watch. He was delighted with the result, he didn't have a lot of faith in Nathaniel, but this was an amazing piece of work.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes, now get out of my office. You have watches to sell, in order to repay your loan." Mr. Pike barked out his order and pressed his buzzer button. Meg arrived promptly to escort Nathaniel out. Nathaniel looked worried, but Meg took him by the arm and guided him to the bank's waiting area.

"I think he liked it?" Nathaniel looked nervous.

"I'm sure he did, now go home and get back to work. Your obligation has been fulfilled."

Mr. Pike quickly placed the watch upon his wrist; it was a perfect fit. It looked elegant, smooth and modern. No watch in the world looked like this and he knew it. Over the next month clients and fellow bankers commented on his watch, inquiring where he got it. His watch became the envy of his friends and elevated his status in the banking community. News spread and he received a visit from the regional manager, from Montreal. An excuse was made to check the branch's deposit numbers, but the regional VP couldn't take his eyes off Mr. Pike's amazing watch. When asked, he would never tell where he got the watch. It didn't match any of the watches displayed in the store down the street. The quality alone meant it couldn't have come from Canada, perhaps Switzerland?

In one particularly boisterous meeting, three bankers were sitting around laughing and smoking cigars. The buzzer summoned Meg. She entered Mr. Pike's office and peered through a cloud of smoke. He was trying to impress the neighboring bank heads. "Meg, come in so we can see you." Meg walked towards the mahogany desk, until she could see Mr. Pike clearly. As she came to a stop, one of the bankers pushed his chair back from the desk and looked her up and down. She felt embarrassed as his eyes came to rest on her rear end.

"What can I do for you Mr. Pike, Sir?"

"Whiskey Meg, pour each of us a glass of whiskey, straight up."

"Meg knew the whiskey decanter was housed in a concealed cabinet at the back of Mr. Pike's office. She made her way to the cabinet and the men continued talking.

"It's an amazing watch, Gerald."

"Yes, I don't think you'll ever see anything like it. I would wager a weeks wages that you would never see this watch anywhere else in the world, other than on my wrist." He held his arm aloft and pulled at his sleeve to showcase the unique timepiece.

The men craned their necks to see it more closely. Meg delivered the whiskey tumblers, relieved that she didn't spill a drop. The one banker continued to leer at her, smiling a

sickening advance. Meg smiled back politely and beat a hasty retreat. As she was leaving, she heard Mr. Pike say, "I don't cherish much, but I do cherish this watch."

It was a repeating pattern with the bankers and clients whom came to do business. Each would receive a viewing of the fabled watch. Meg was getting sick of hearing the same line, "I don't cherish much, but I do cherish this watch." Winter came and went, giving rise to the spring air. The warmer weather brought increased shipping traffic to the busy port of Halifax. Nathaniel continued to pay his loan installments and managed to keep his business operational. There were some lean times, but he made do with a few food handouts from Meg.

As summer arrived, the port was bustling with ships from exotic locations. Mr. Pike was particularly obnoxious and his watch was the talk of the town. All morning he'd been snapping at Meg. He threatened to replace her, citing that a hundred women would line up around the block, for a chance to work at the bank. She was about to leave for lunch, when he dropped off four memos that needed typing. They could have waited until she returned, but he did it with malice. "I need these done now, no lunch until they're complete."

"Yes, Sir." She smiled at him and began to arrange the papers. She waited until he shuffled into his office and cursed him under her breath.

Mr. Pike relaxed into his large leather chair. He loved his office, and he loved the power that his job gave him. The sunlight streamed through his office window and he glanced at his calendar. The date looked familiar, it was one year to the day, that he'd received his watch. He glanced at the watch and saw the sun glisten upon the slim black watch hand. It was twelve noon and the watch hands both pointed straight up. The watch started to vibrate and captured his attention. To his amazement, the dial rotated and the spider that normally faced upwards now faced the other way. As it rotated, a clicking sound could be heard, but he couldn't recognize its origin.

Mr. Pike did not realize that the clasp, holding the leather strap, had locked. The watch was now securely fastened to his wrist. The watch continued to vibrate, holding his attention in some strange state of frozen fascination. The sides of the watch started to move and the cylinders pushed out from their embedded casing. Mechanical wheels were turning inside of the watch, triggered by the current date and time.

The cylinders continued to move and started to extend, like a telescope unfolding. The cylinders extended to a longer length; two on each side. The wheels and gears continued to turn. Inside the watch, a reservoir opened, allowing a dark fluid to run into the small cavity, within the cylinders. With increasing speed the cylinders wrapped around Mr. Pike's wrist. The end of the cylinders pushed out a metallic spike, as sharp as a needle. The spike was coated in the liquid released from the watch's reservoir.

Fascinated by the transforming watch, Mr. Pike was slow to react, the watch kicked into its next set of gears. The cylindrical arms wrapped around his wrist and plunged the four

spikes deep into his skin, piercing veins and vital arteries. Mr. Pike screamed and slammed the buzzer to summon assistance from Meg. The poison coursed through his veins, paralyzing him. He started to shake violently, and could not react to the watch's attack. He tried to rip the watch off with his free hand, but the clasp had locked tight. He banged the buzzer button feverishly.

Meg walked calmly into the office. She could see the watch impaled into Mr. Pike's wrist. She could see the paralysis and his obvious distress. "Meg, help me. Get this thing off me."

Meg closed the office door. She walked over to the cabinet and poured herself a whisky. Sipping the whisky, she watched Mr. Pike fight against the Black Widow spider venom. She walked over to him, realizing that he didn't have much time left. She knelt at his side, watching the life drain from his body. He flicked his eyes in her direction in a desperate plea for help; his body was still and lifeless. She raised her lips to his ear and whispered, "You really cherished that watch didn't you. Remember, sometimes the things you cherish will kill you."

As the last spark of life drained from his body, the watch started to reverse. The cylinder spikes retracted and disappeared. The cylinder legs folded back into the body of the watch. The dial's spider motif turned and the clasp unlocked completely. The watch hands resumed their movement. The watch fell from the dead man's wrist and lay upon his desk, in front of him.

"That's for my sister," she whispered.

Meg took the whiskey glass and washed it clean, leaving it in the kitchenette area. Using a pencil, she'd managed to move his watch to a credenza, behind his desk. She'd seen him place it there, when he would use his fountain pen. He didn't want to smudge the ink.

On her way out of the office, she closed the door and went for lunch. When she returned, the police, medical staff and senior bank management, were all on the scene. Days later, the Halifax Gazette ran an article about the curiously strange case of the banker who loved spiders. Apparently, he'd died as a result of two spider bites; four puncture wounds were found on his wrist, from a poisonous spider. Police suspected that he'd received the spider from a sailor working on the docks. Most sailors knew of the banker who collected rare and dangerous spiders.

It is said that a banker bought the watch from his grieving daughter.

The End

A short story written by Phil Armstrong.

This short story is a unique piece of work featuring fictional characters, companies and names, brought to life by Phil Armstrong.

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