

The Photo of the Bulletproof Man

by Mike Todaro

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The photo was arresting, over 30 years old. They both looked to be in their mid 30's. It was 5 X 7, black and white, held by a thumbtack to a cork board by his desk.

He was corporate then, young, his wife gorgeous, his collar flipped up on his twill overcoat, a lit cigarette in one hand, the other around his wife's waist. They stood outside. It looked chilly. She wore a hat. He looked bulletproof.

Later, he opened his own factory, he knew how to run them. The order was there and it was forever. He did this for his family, brought his only son into the business. It prospered.

His son's destiny was ordained by King Cotton and the simplest, highest volume garments that came from his bounty, t-shirts. He was in the heart of the region where this all happened. He was in the South.

They came to all of our industry meetings, even after the big shift and the unforeseen hurricane force winds of the giant sucking sound. At the last meeting he ever came to, his wife said angrily I don't recognize a single damn person here. He left his son out of meetings, out of sales, out of most things.

Show them how it works he would tell Billie, not Billy, Billie. Billie would show how it worked. Don't tell anyone else he would say. It

works only with our biggest customer. I'm really not sure I should have shown you this. Should I have Dad? Its OK, his Dad said.

His daughter was sick with cancer in the hospital at his university, down the mountain, in the middle of the state below. He drove down to see her often. He drove down to sports events too. He was big in his town but felt closer to his school.

His son always looked at his Dad before answering anything, showing anything, doing anything. His Dad ran the show. His son enjoyed the ride, if looking over your shoulder all the time is a form of joy. But it seemed to work for Billie. They were a pair alright.

The business changed. It got tougher, stressful, surprising. Links in the supply chain took hits. The community too, the state, the region, the industry, the country, the Whole West. Seismic shifts. Maybe he saw it coming. Most didn't and wondered what the hell happened when they woke up one day closed.

Treaties signed. Trade pacts. First stage — rationalization — who made it better, faster, cheaper. Second stage — displacement — who lost. What happened Dad, Billie was want to say. What does it mean. Billie did not come to meetings, he was operations. He followed orders and he followed Orders.

Came to work, checked in, sat down, read the list of the day, stood up, got started and spent the rest of the day checking in. Billie was prematurely bald. He did not look corporate. His wife was plain, local, ingrained. They had kids. He had it made.

I didn't recognize a single damn person here were the last words I ever heard from his wife. They went home from that meeting and we never saw them again. They went back up the mountain. Their daughter never came home. They still never missed a big game.

The call was shocking, he had died. It's not that he was sick, the rumor went. The industry got to him. Nothing made sense. No-one's word meant anything anymore. It got competitive. It had never been. The order was forever. More machines meant more shirts.

That was the problem right there. The order wasn't forever. He lost workers to higher paying jobs at Red Roof and Hardees. Now he began to not recognize a single person as the young came in and the borders fell and the new world order became a flatter filterless funless formula.

Nothing of this added up for him so as the facts went, one morning he didn't wake up. Up there, they all said they would try to make it work, would carry on. The workers would pull together. They had Billie. The first response was they would make it work.

Billie never said that. It was the receptionist who told me that when she called with the news. (The order was forever)

The funeral was huge. The industry came, what was left of it. The community came, the university, his suppliers, his customers and peers. They blew up the photo of over 30 years ago. It stood on an easel up front. He looked so corporate, so bulletproof.

His family was there. They grieved in a way all too familiar yet at the same time horrific.

Somehow they would make it work. They had Billie.

Five days after his father died, four days after not breathing, three days after crying all day, two days after the service and the easel and the picture, one day after the first day of him running the place, Billie came to work, looked around, found no list for the day so walked into the woods out back and shot himself.

