AN ESSAY

The Other Guy

On a weekly pill organizer, a favor with no handoff, and the only way to thank someone who is never in the room

BY CHRIS WYATT · A FIVE-MINUTE READ

It is eleven at night and I have nothing left. I open a little plastic door, tip tonight's pills into my hand, and for about a second and a half I feel taken care of. Someone did this for me.

Then I remember who.

The thing with the door is a pill organizer. A large one, with a lid for every day of the week. The pills are supplements. I am into supplements, which is a sentence I would rather not have typed, and the tray does nothing to help: a grown man with a grandmother's apparatus. I was embarrassed enough by the whole arrangement that I nearly wrote this without saying what was in it.

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I used to count. Every night, at about this hour, I would stand at the bottles and do the arithmetic. Open this one, take two. Open that one, take one. A small pile of lids. Nothing difficult. It was annoying in the specific way of a chore too small to complain about and too late in the day to do well. One more small tax on a day that had already taxed me, collected at the exact moment I had the least to give.

Now someone does it for me on Sunday. The someone is me. Sunday me opens every bottle once, lays out the tray, and fills the whole week in one sitting. He does not enjoy it. It takes longer than any single night ever did. He snaps the lids shut and goes about his day.

I will grant the obvious point. Opening each bottle once a week instead of once a night probably saves a few minutes, and I am glad to have them. But nobody feels looked after by a few minutes. The pills still have to be counted by somebody, and the only thing the tray really settles is who.

The job on a Sunday afternoon goes to a different employee from the one it used to go to at eleven at night. Sunday me has slack in him. He shows up rested, does dull work without complaint, asks for nothing, and would be an excellent hire if he were available more than one afternoon a week. Eleven o'clock me has no slack in him at all. He is a man on fumes, everything you hand him costs triple, and some nights he cannot reliably count to two.

I run a company. Most of my day goes to deciding who should do what. It had not occurred to me that I was on the org chart twice.

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Seinfeld did a bit about this in 1993. Night Guy stays up as late as he likes, because getting up after five hours of sleep is Morning Guy's problem. "Night Guy always screws Morning Guy," Jerry says, and the only revenge Morning Guy has is to oversleep often enough that Day Guy loses his job and Night Guy has no money to go out. My tray runs the joke the other way. For once the guy who goes first is doing the later one a favor. It is a worse bit and a better week.

The one who filled the tray and the one who opened it tonight have never been in the same room. They cannot be. Sunday gets the chore and none of the relief, unless you count the faint administrative glow of having been responsible, and nobody does. Most gifts have a handoff, a

moment when giver and taker are both present and something passes between them, a look, a thank-you, at minimum an awkward hug. Even the anonymous donor gets to drive past the building. This one has none. It is a gift from a man who will not be there to a man who cannot say thanks.

I know the catch. A future self you think of as another person is exactly the kind of person you short-change. Strangers get the bill. But the man at eleven o'clock is a stranger only on paper. Sunday has been him every night of his life. He knows how this hour feels better than anyone alive, and he knew it on Sunday afternoon with a bottle in each hand. The favor came from remembering being him.

Procrastination is Night Guy's move. A chore that is coming regardless still gets done, by the other guy. I take a pleasant evening from him and leave him the bill.

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We talk about procrastination as a willpower problem, and for the small, certain chores I have mostly stopped believing it. It takes very little willpower to do a small favor for someone you like. The harder question is whether you like him. The man standing here at eleven o'clock next Wednesday has not happened yet, and he has never once said thanks.

He cannot. I stood there tonight feeling looked after, understood who had done it, felt something go out toward him, and found there was nowhere to put it. Gratitude wants a recipient, and this one had cleared out on Sunday.

In a few days I will be him, the one on a Sunday afternoon with a tray of open lids, not enjoying it. And I will remember tonight, how it felt to find the work done, the way he remembered eleven o'clock. The thank-you cannot go backward, so it goes forward, as labor, to a man who is not here yet. The handoff happens every week after all. It just takes the whole week.

I was embarrassed by the wrong thing. The grandmothers got there first. Tonight's door is empty now. The ones after it are still full, a small favor behind each for someone who has not turned up yet.

Goodnight, Sunday. They were right where you left them. ◆

Sources

Tom Gammill and Max Pross, "The Glasses", *Seinfeld*, season 5, episode 3, NBC (aired 30 September 1993). Fan transcript of Jerry's opening monologue, including "Night Guy always screws Morning Guy" and Morning Guy's oversleeping revenge.

Wikipedia, "The Glasses (Seinfeld)". Episode credits, season and episode number, and air date.