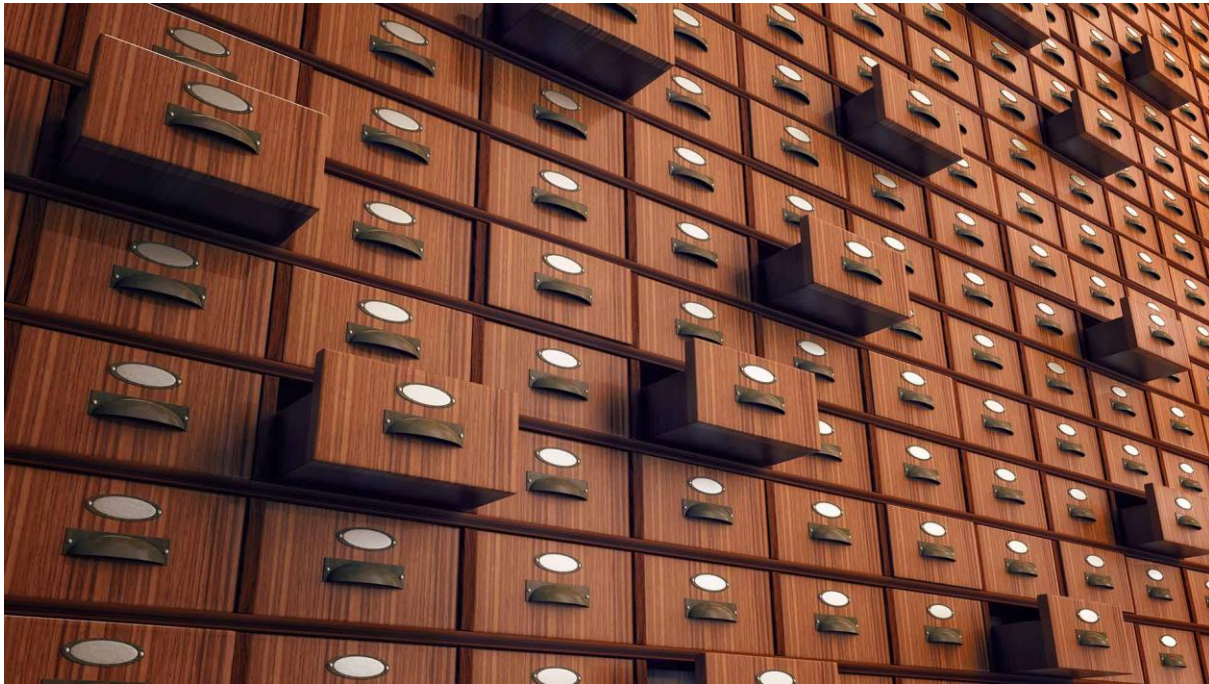




Lost in Administration

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Prologue

“Tomorrow will be different,” he promised himself. After two deployments in quick succession, Captain James Dunkerd tried to get back into the routine of life as a civilian back home. He had not left a real existence behind the day he flew out for his first tour. His second tour was more a flight forward, an escape from the emptiness of the hours outside the barracks. Now, he had to face reality and try to make the best of it. Not very successful, but at least he did try. Having no family, no wife and far away from the few friends outside the military, his homecoming was an uneventful day.

Now, he was laying in his bed staring at the inspirationless ceiling of his small apartment. After another day, he fully realized the big void of his current reality. His commanding officer had told him to face reality before going on a third mission. Leading troops in combat was too serious a business to be a personal escape. He was more than welcome when he had reconnected with himself.

“Tomorrow will be different,” he repeated himself well aware he said the same thing yesterday, and the days before yesterday. With thoughts drifting towards the camaraderie of brothers in arms, he fell asleep.

Do you exist?

“Shit!” was the first word of James the next morning. Even without looking around he knew he had overslept.

“Stupid alarm. Why didn’t it go off?” He looked at the clock radio and saw the display was dead. Strange. He had replaced the batteries a few weeks ago, so they should have been okay. The room felt a bit weird. He could not pin down why, but something was odd.

“Strange night,” was all he could say. He got out of his bed and started his morning routine of physical exercises, a quick breakfast, a refreshing shower, a shave and getting dressed for a visit to the base. Although he was still on leave, driving to the base was part of his daily routine. But first, he would check his mailbox. Not that he expected to find something of any significance in it, but the routine provided him with some kind of normality.

“What the heck?” was his reaction when he opened the box. It was completely filled. He had never received that much mail in a month, let alone a day. Reluctant to get back in the house, he decided to leave everything there and get it out when he returned. There was no urgency. He headed to the parking lot, stepped in the car and drove away.

The road looked similar but different. The drive felt familiar, yet something was not right. Was he still rocked by last night’s sleep? He shook off the feeling. Today would really be different.

Nearing the end of his morning drive, the main gate appeared. Its familiarity was comforting.

“Nothing wrong, just a normal day with an unusual start.” He did not recognize the guard, but that was not exceptional as they frequently change post. Approaching the checkpoint, he instinctively reached for his ID card. It was not there. Strange? While he slowly approached the guard, he felt in the other possible hiding places. Nothing. Did he forget it at home? That had never happened before. He mentally searched in other spots.

“Good morning, sir. How are you?”

“Good morning. I’m fine. Having a busy day?”

“Busy as usual this time of the day, sir. May I have your ID card please?” asked the guard in a professionally polite way.

“I have a small problem. I don’t find my card right away.”

“Sorry to hear that, sir, but as you understand I cannot let you in.” He could ask the guard to look him up in the database, but he knew that would not help him to get in. The only option was to turn around and drive home to get his card.

“Yes, I understand. Sorry about that, but I thought I had it with me.”

“No problem. Welcome back with your card, sir. Please, make a U-turn there and leave the camp.”

“Wilco. Bye.” He drove back home wondering how he could have forgotten his card. Well, there must be a first time for everything. This was certainly a strange day. He turned right onto the driveway of the apartment complex to be startled at what he saw. Was this the place he had left this morning?

“What has happened here?” he wondered. The place looked much older than he remembered. It looked like the building needed a paint job and the common garden needed reseeding. As he stepped out of the car, people were looking strangely at him. None of them appeared familiar and they did not recognize him either. He might as well be a stranger visiting a friend. He was not alarmed by it as he rarely walked on the parking lot at this hour. He walked up the stairs to his apartment only to discover that his key did not fit. Double-checking the key, he tried again. No luck. Then he heard somebody inside. Strange. The cleaning service was not scheduled for today. Well, lucky him. He reached for the bell.

“Who’s there?” the voice in the room responded. No voice he recognized. A new employee?

“It is me, James. I’m living here.”

“I don’t know any James living here,” was the reply. He checked the number next to the door. His apartment, although he saw the number nine was fixed. It was not hanging upside down. But the number read 139. This must be a joke.

“This is 139 and that is the number of my apartment. Can you please open the door?” he asked with an authoritative tone in his voice.

“You must be mistaken. This is my apartment and I don’t know any James,” responded the female voice.

“Please open the door so that we can solve this issue, mam,” he replied in a more friendly manner. He felt the hesitation and then the decision. Shortly thereafter he heard the noise of the lock being opened. A short, nice looking lady appeared in the opening and introduced herself as Sarah, the owner. With the door barely open, his instinctive reaction was to glance quickly but thoroughly into the interior of the room. His safety scan made it clear that he was mistaken. This was certainly not the room he had left this morning. He considered to ask to be let in for a better look inside, but decided against it. It was not his and no further disturbance of this lady’s daily routine would change that.

“Nice to meet you, Sarah. Sorry to bother you but I see now that I must have the wrong apartment. Really sorry. Before I go, may I ask you how long you have been living here.”

“Almost a year now,” she answered. A pity I never have met you, he thought. She was a beautiful appearance.

“Thank you. Have a nice day, Sarah.” With a last look at the familiar number, he turned and walked away puzzled. He felt she was observing him while he strolled away.

He noticed some pain in his leg. Nothing serious and nothing that needed immediate attention. How could he be so confused to knock on the wrong door? Back down, he looked around for something familiar. He was trying to find something that would confirm he was in the wrong place and give him some peace of mind. Nevertheless, everything felt strangely familiar. Walking to his car, he recognized the office at the far end of the building and decided to ask the clerk running the place.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning. How can I help you?” He did not know this face but decided to try it. He assessed that asking for the owner of number 139 would, if given that information, turn out Sarah’s name, so he tried another approach.

“I’m here to visit a friend, but I forgot the number of his apartment. I don’t want to knock on all the doors, so I thought that maybe you could help me. It has been a long drive and I hate the thought of turning back without seeing my friend.”

“Normally, I’m not allowed to give you that kind of information, but you look like a decent guy after a long day, so I will help you. What is your friend's name? “

“Oh, his name is James Dunkerd.”

“James. Can you spell his last name for me?”

“Dunkerd. Delta – Uniform – November – Kilo – Echo – Romeo – Delta.”

“Are you military?”

“Yes, I am. Just returned from my second tour.”

“Must be quite something over there. Give me a minute to finish this work and look him up in the computer.”

“Thanks. I’m really appreciating this. Please take your time, I’m not in a hurry to return home.”

He turned around to hide his frustration with the situation and killed the time searching for clues of what was happening to him. Although Sarah was living in his apartment, he was sure he was in the right building. What was going on? He felt the pain again, but now in his other leg.

“James Dunkerd. No nothing. You are sure it was with a ‘D’?”

“Yes, 100 percent sure.”

“Nothing. According to the files, your friend did never live here. Of course, by never I mean the last year. These files only go back one year. If you want, I can call my boss to ask if he knows about your friend.”

“Don’t bother. If he is not living here now, I must be at the wrong address. I will check it in my car. Sorry to have kept you away from work.”

“Sorry I could not help you. I hope you find your friend. Have a nice day.”

What was happening to him? How could he be so mistaken? He needed to find his place to get his ID card. His hand felt something in his pocket. A note. He looked at it. A name and a telephone number. A fellow officer from his last tour. She had told him he could call her anytime he felt the need. Although nothing had happened during those months abroad, she came close to be a girlfriend. He suspected she wanted more, but he was not ready for any kind of commitment. At least not outside the military. But this moment was a time of need. Most probably not the kind of call she expected, but that was something to worry about later. She could get him on base and that would solve this awkward puzzle.

He was not fond of cell phones. Too dangerous. Luckily, he knew a payphone close by. Five minutes away from this place. Not taking up his environment, otherwise he would have noticed the changes, he drove absorbed by his personal mystery to the public phone booth.

“Three-three-one-five-two-two-three-six-two-one,” he said loudly as he typed in the number. The connection took ages, or so it seemed. He knew from experience in

combat that time in moments of anticipation slowed down. This call would return everything to normal. Meaningless normality was preferable to the mysterious situation he was in now.

But the period of silent waiting did not end with the sound of relief. No ringing to attract the other side's attention but the signal that the line did not exist. He must by accident have introduced the wrong number. He took the note and pressed the keys in again. More determined. Silence and again the no-such-number tune. Her handwriting was clear. It was not possible to read it the wrong way. She had made sure of that. The stress seemed to increase the pain in his legs. It was climbing up. He would check it later this evening.

While he had a last look at the note, the thought of being on candid camera came up. Although he did not believe this to be the case, he could not resist the temptation to look around. His developed ability to scan his surroundings for anything alarming convinced him nobody was observing him. Not even hidden cameras. His day so far would not look bad in a collection of stories written by Stephen King.

No, he had dialed the number on the note. He considered calling the helpline, but with only a name, they would not be able, nor willing to help him. In his box isolating him from the rest of the world, he tried to come up with the next step. Being boxed in looking for a way out of physical harm was no stranger to him, but this was a completely different situation. There was no bodily threat, only his mental health was at stake. Was he turning crazy?

He decided that the best option was to drive to the town hall to get a provisional ID card. He could explain he had lost his card. They would be able to look him up, verify his identity with the picture on file and even give him his correct address. That was the way out.

He opened the booth and trotted to his car. Exited to end his ordeal, he sped off to the place of salvation. Town Hall looked like he expected. Like somebody on the wrong way to a destination, he neglected or distorted the things that did not fit expectations. Reaching the end was more important than the signs indicating something was wrong.

Luckily there was no long waiting line. It would soon be over.

“Good morning.”

“Good afternoon,” the clerk greeting him with a slight smile. He looked at his watch to verify this statement and saw that it was indeed already afternoon. “How can I help you today?”

"I had a strange day. Too strange to explain. To keep it short: I have lost all my paperwork, even my ID card," he explained with some relief.

"Sorry to hear that. Let me see how I can help you."

"Thanks that would be great."

"What is your name?"

"My name is James Dunkerd."

"Can you spell your last name?"

"Dunkerd. Delta – Uniform – November – Kilo – Echo – Romeo – Delta."

"Military?" he asked while he was typing the name.

"Yes. Back from my second tour."

"Getting used being home again?"

"Hardly."

"Sorry to hear that. But trust me, it will get better. Trust me, I've been there too."

"I hope so. I really hope so." Then he saw the same expression on the young man's face. The same look as on the office assistant's face. This meant bad news.

"It seems like you are not in our system. How long have you been living in our city?"

He felt a sting of pain in his left hand. He instinctively looked at it and did not see it clearly. With a quick gesture before anybody could notice it, he put his hand in his pocket.

"I was born here."

"Strange. Let me try something else." The pain traveled to his upper arm.

"Nothing either. Wierd. Let me think. How did you get here?"

"By car," he wondered where this was going.

"Great. Do you keep your papers in the vehicle?" Now he knew why the man had asked that question. Of course, his name and address would be on those papers. That would prove he existed and that somehow his data was deleted from or misfiled in the computer memory.

"Yes, right. I will get to it and be right back."

“You see. We can solve everything here. Don’t wait in line when you return with the papers. I will take care of you as soon as you are back.”

James marched as quickly as he could to the exit straight to the parking lot. He reached for his keys only to discover they were not in his pocket. Strange. He had never left his keys in the car. But then again this was not a normal day. Certainly not what he had meant by “Tomorrow will be different”.

He arrived at the spot where he had parked the car. That is where he thought he had parked it because it was nowhere to be seen. He looked around in confusion only to conclude that this was indeed the place. But, where was his car? He remembered the tree a few meters away. The cars parked near his now empty spot. Did somebody steal his car because his keys were in? What else could go wrong today? What now? With no document, the helpful clerk could do nothing, and he was the only one who could help him to escape this day turning into a nightmare.

Dead man walking. That is how he was feeling now. He was condemned to a life without identity, without existence. He stepped with the pace of a fully equipped old-style helmet diver. The friendly administrator saw him coming and waved him forward.

“No paperwork?” inquired the clerk with some surprise in his voice.

“My car is not where I parked it. Somebody must have stolen it,” was his meek reply still shaken by the incident.

“That would be very bad. But, before you can go to the police, you need to be able to identify you. You cannot declare a car theft if you do not exist. And according to our system, you do not.” The pain in his left arm and legs reminded him he had to take care of this problem too, soon. First, he needed to solve this identity problem.

“But I’m alive and standing here before you,” in an attempt to prove he existed.

“I know, but if you are not in the system, you officially do not exist. No matter how real you look to me. Let me think. You told me you were born here, right?”

“Yes, that is right.”

“Your birth certificate is not in our database, but that does not mean that it does not exist on paper.”

“Okay, where can we find my birth certificate on paper?” He had a flash of hope that this bad day would soon end.

“Give me some time to walk over to my colleague and to search in our archives. It should not take long to find your certificate and help to get you your life back.”

“Great. That would be great if you could do that.”

“While we do that, you can walk through that corridor,” he pointed to a hallway to the left. “Take the second door left and you will find a small waiting room. There is coffee and water. Help yourself.”

“Thanks. I could use some.”

“Anything to help somebody protecting our nation. Glad to be of service.” The man put a sign that his office was closed and that he would return shortly. He turned and walked to the back of the room towards archives.

James turned and headed towards the waiting room. Before taking a cup of coffee, he would check his legs and arms. He suddenly felt a bit wobbly and went over to a cozy chair. He lifted the lower part of his pants and was shocked at what he saw, or rather not saw. His hands had disappeared. He could feel and move them, but he did not see them. As if they did not exist. Regaining his posture, he proceeded towards his feet. Afraid of what he would discover he hesitated for a moment. Nothing there either. Worse, it seemed like he had lost the sense of the lower part of his legs. His hands tried to touch those parts, but they went right through it. What was happening to him?

Meanwhile in the archives, although doing their utmost best the sympathetic clerk and his colleague did not find any birth certificate referring to James Dunkerd. Not even a trace of any family member. It was like that person did not exist. After more than an hour of opening drawers, they called it a day. They would renew their efforts in the morning. He walked to the waiting room to tell Mr. Dunkerd the bad news, but he would stress that he had always found a solution to an administrative issue and he had no intention to change his perfect record. Just a matter of time.

However, the room was empty. No trace of Mr. Dunkerd. Gone. He wanted to turn back to his desk thinking lowly of his people skills because he was sure that Mr. Dunkerd was profoundly desperate. And desperate people never leave without some form of hope for a solution. In his movement, he discovered a note on the table next to a cozy chair. He picked it up.

“Thank you for believing I existed, J.D.”

“Of course, I did. Why wouldn't I?” He shredded off a creepy feeling coming over him. A shiver ran down his spine. No, that could not have happened. There must be another explanation.

“This is the strangest of days,” he said aloud to cast away his dark thoughts.

Epilogue

Moments before the clerk entered the waiting room, the janitor threw a plastic bag in the trash container. People sometimes leave strange things behind in the city hall. Why would somebody leave his clothes behind in a waiting room? Certainly, neatly placed as if somebody was sitting in a fauteuil. Maybe some kind of bad joke. Anyhow, it was no longer his problem.

A year later, while moving the city archives to a new storage area, an interim found a half-destroyed barely readable birth certificate in the drawer 'DM – DV'. The name read something like "Jane D i n k r □". Thinking everything in the archive was important, he walked to his supervisor.

"Look what I found. An old, barely readable birth certificate. I think the name is Jane Dunkirk, or something like that." He handed the document over to her. She gave it a quick look.

"Throw it away."

"Why?" he replied surprised.

"First, that file will already be in our database. Secondly, it will take some time to link this document with the right name. Time we don't have. We must move the archive and we will not waste time with one document while we have tens of thousands to ship. Destroy and get to work."

He watched the shredder eating the birth certificate. What a strange thing to do.

Afterthought

Sometimes the feeling that administration defines who and what we are, creeps on me. In those moments if feel we are no longer defined by our actions or memories, but by what is known by some alien bureaucracy. The French philosopher René Descartes' "Cognito ergo sum" replaced by existence on 'paper'. It is as if flesh, blood, and thought are only a representation of what is filed. No existence without a file. Virtuality taking over reality. A creepy feeling leading to the unusual story above. I hope you have enjoyed it.