

# Prewitt's Plans

By Eric D. Goodman

Prewitt stood facing the closed doors of the train; he was the first in line at Baltimore's Penn Station. Dozens of passengers swarmed behind him, but even in his stillness he remained at the front of activity. To them, he knew he was just another aging businessman, too antiquated to matter. The younger ticket holders wanted to take his place, to pass him by, but Prewitt wouldn't have it. He'd planned ahead and arrived early, earning his position. He'd been here before the others had even awakened. The crowd hummed anxiously, but Prewitt remained calm as he waited with his back to them.

The train doors opened.

"C'mon! Let's move it!" A kid in a business suit nudged him with an elbow. All around Prewitt, young professionals yapped on cell phones, typed text messages, and read emails as they pushed impatiently onto the train. They reminded him of the young people who'd infested his workplace.

Prewitt knew his unhurried stride annoyed some of the restless ticket holders in back. But he took no more time than he needed. He hadn't come early to stand in line for the fun of it.

"Times have changed," Prewitt said under his breath as it was nearly knocked out of him by another aggressive passenger — a girl with wires sprouting from her ears. When Prewitt was young, people didn't act this way. People had respect for one another instead of contempt. There was a time when you could say *hello* to those you met on a train or at the office and they'd actually hear you and care enough to return your greeting. Now, everyone was in a rush and no one had time to pay attention.

Once he'd settled into his private room, Prewitt pulled out his planner. He opened to yesterday's date so he could close everything out. The planner vibrated in his lap with the train's movement.

*Pack for conference. Check. Call daughter. Check. Spend time with wife. Check. Go to bank/handle accounts.* No, he hadn't accomplished that. He drew an arrow and

carried the task over to next week.

Though it had never been urgent, he considered it important to put his secret account in both their names. When he'd opened it decades ago, he'd kept it from Anna, knowing she would find an excuse to spend it. Now that they were getting older, it was time to share the wealth instead of accumulating it.

He felt a nervous fluttering in his chest and took a slow, deep breath to calm it. Already he was exhausted. Pouring over the things to do created tension in his neck and shoulders. He wanted to rest, but it was too early.

*Now, for today.* Prewitt turned the page. Some would write today off. Not Prewitt. Even train time was a valuable resource, if only for planning itself.

He looked at the tasks on his list.

*Retirement.* He closed his eyes and the word ran around his head like an electric train set around the Christmas tree from his childhood. He'd toyed with the idea of retirement for so long, it seemed a plaything, something not quite real.

He looked up from his planner and peered out the window. The urban landscape greeted him: office buildings surrounded by trees, the trees planted by the very companies that had cleared the original foliage back when raping the land hadn't mattered to mainstream America.

Prewitt was one of those old trees. He knew the young management would gladly cut him away were it not for age-discrimination laws. They remained polite—the references to clearing the dead wood were subtle—but the message was there.

He'd not reached full retirement age, but he had thirty-five years in and his pension checks were ripe for the picking. His plan was to wait a little longer. But he didn't need his planner to remind him the most important things in life could not be found at the bank.

Anna, Prewitt's wife, had nearly broken down when their daughter and her husband moved away. Rusty had found the career of a lifetime working for a British company in Russia.

“Suzy, you can't do this!” Anna had a way of blowing things out of proportion. “You can't go live on the other side of the Iron Curtain! It'll kill your father!”

“Now Anna,” Prewitt had said in his calming voice. “Those days are gone. Besides, this isn’t about us. They have their lives to live.”

“Lives without us?”

“Mom, we’re not leaving you,” Suzy had assured. “We’re only an email away.”

Anna threw up her hands. “An email! Not even a phone call!” She frowned at Prewitt. “I don’t know how you’re taking this sitting down! You’re going to let her go?”

“It’s not the end of the world.”

“It’s the *other* end of the world!”

Prewitt tossed a gentle look to Suzy that told her not to worry, that everything was fine, that it was just Anna’s temperament and they both knew it would pass. But the truth was, Prewitt wished Suzy would stay. He wished his daughter was innocent again, sitting in her room and playing with her dolls. Back then, he’d spent more time focused on her future than her present. Now that she was attached to another man and in another country, he wished he could re-plan the past. He looked back to his planner.

He could imagine his co-workers now. “The old man took work with him!” Of course, Prewitt knew his work ethic was something from the past. How many times had he walked by the team leader’s cubicle on his way to the bathroom during his designated fifteen minute break only to find the kid playing a video game or looking at lewd women on MySpace? Even his manager was a loafer, doing as little as possible, just enough to get by.

Prewitt needed to stretch. He went to the lounge car. Passengers came and went, restless in general seating or lonely in their compartments.

Already, he missed his wife, just as he missed his daughter residing on the other side of the world. It wasn’t a painful want — he knew he’d return to his wife in a matter of days and that he’d see his daughter again in another year. The missing came as a light, repetitive itch in need of scratching.

Anna hadn’t been thrilled about this business trip. “Another conference?”

“What can I do?”

“You can quit and live by *our* schedule — before it’s too late!”

There was a lady at the office in her eighties who worked until the day she died. Bessie had a husband and grown children. “But there’s no way I could retire to that bunch,” she’d said with a cheery cackle. “It’d drive us all to our graves.”

At her graveside, after the funeral service, Prewitt met the broken survivors. They’d have been happy to have her to themselves for a few years.

Prewitt caught himself staring out the window. He’d been through the area in spring when the trees had been green and lush. Now, their colors had changed, were changing still. Some excited red and innocent yellow; others calm orange and decrepit brown. The leaves were numbered; they would soon be buried beneath a blanket of snow.

There wasn’t time to focus on an individual tree from the moving locomotive. Like the pages of his life, the scenery passed too quickly to fully grasp. He turned from the window.

Another item on his task list for today’s considerations: *Anniversary*. He wanted to do something special, take Anna out for a nice dinner and show.

“You like to get away, don’t you?” she had said a few days ago. “To get a vacation from me?”

He knew that she knew better. He wanted to be away from work, not home. Now, on the train, he realized his fault, but at the time, her words had touched a nerve already uncovered at the office. “Sure,” he’d said with an irritated sigh. It sometimes seemed easier to mock her irrational gripes than to manage them.

When he got back home from Chicago, Prewitt planned to tell her all the things she already knew but hadn’t heard in far too long. He turned to the day he was scheduled to return and wrote *Heart-to-heart with Anna*.

A few seats away, a young woman — probably about Suzy’s age—talked with an older man — probably his own age — about her boyfriend. She exuded generation-x nonchalance as she told the stranger how she’d sacrificed her fiancé to pursue a career in Chicago.

The man raised a mixed drink to her white wine. “You made the right choice. In my experience, long-lasting relationships never last long.” They laughed. Prewitt didn’t usually meddle, but he had an urge to enter this conversation.

“They do if you want them to. My Anna and I have been married twenty-five years.”

They looked at him. “That’s great,” the woman said.

“I mention it because I overheard you talking about your boyfriend.”

“Oh, Craig. He’s history.”

Prewitt smiled gently “At the end of the line, success is measured in love, not money — in people, not position. Relationships depend on compromise.”

As she finished her wine, she seemed to be absorbing his advice as well.

The last time Suzy had asked for advice, they were at a Mongolian barbeque in Moscow. As she and Rusty told Prewitt and Anna about their adventures finding an apartment near Red Square, Prewitt half listened, distracted by the bill to come, tallying the costs, and converting rubles to dollars in his head.

“So should we get the dacha, Dad?”

Prewitt stopped calculating the tip for the bill they’d not yet received and refocused on Suzy’s inquisitive expression. She and Rusty sat across the table with red and black lanterns casting an otherworldly glow upon them.

“What’s that again?”

“The weekend cottage. Should we get it?”

“Why not?” Prewitt said without taking the proper time to examine the pros and cons. Why was it that he planned so hard to make moments like this one, but when he got to them, he wasn’t fully there, already planning the next moment?

Time slipped away; late afternoon inched into twilight.

A loud voice carried across the lounge. “Are you looking forward to

retirement?” a passenger asked the conductor.

“Oh, you know. You spend your life doing something for so long, spend your time talking about retiring and thinking about it like it’s the reward at the other end of a tunnel. Then, when the time comes, what’s there to retire for? I’m doing what I do, what I’ve always done, what I like to do.”

Prewitt returned to his compartment. He turned to the day he was scheduled to return to work and wrote one word on the daily task list: *Retire*.

Not that he would forget, but writing it down helped make it real. An abstract *retire* floating in the back of his mind like smoke from a train’s stack was not concrete; the key was to pin the task down, make it precise. *Some say the devil’s in the details; deliverance is there too.*

Prewitt looked through the pages of his planner. Tension built in his neck. He wondered if these countless tasks that never seemed to end would ever all be checked off. *Not as long as I live. There’ll always be more to do than time to do it. Otherwise, what’s the point?*

He thought about that for a moment. “What *is* the point?” he asked his planner as it looked up at him. He imagined the twelve volumes back in his office, the heavy pages overtaking an entire shelf. Retirement sounded like the best plan he’d come up with in years. He decided to march into the office next week and tell them he quit. “And I won’t even write it down!”

He looked at the open book as though he expected it to object, but it just lay there. “Maybe I don’t even need you anymore.”

Trembling with excitement, Prewitt broke the posted rules and opened the window to his compartment. He half expected an alarm to go off or for the train to screech to a halt. The wind blew his ashen hair and the pages of his planner fluttered violently. He hurled the planner out and then lunged forward to close the window, as though the planner might fight to get back in.

“There!” He let out a lungful of breath and plunked down to his bunk.

He couldn’t wait to get home to Anna. He decided that as soon as he got to the Windy City, he’d change the date of his return ticket and go back to Charm City straight away.

Out of habit, Prewitt reached for his planner to make a note of the change. His

chest tightened. He fidgeted with his thick hands and stared at the speeding scenery outside. Standing up to his planner had felt good. Now, he wished he could sit down with it. He'd cut away a vital organ.

His heart pounded and his breath was heavy with excitement, but Prewitt assured himself that he was headed in the right direction, that for the first time in his life, he had his priorities in order.