6:00 A.M. Why would anyone choose to wake up at 6:00 A.M? Stewart Hinckley turned of his alarm, breaching the perfect cocoon of warmth that had surrounded him in his sleep. He tried to shift his weight, but his limbs defied him. He realized that somehow, perhaps in his sleep, he had fallen into middle age. Mustering what willpower he found he still retained, he sat up.

Black socks. Black slacks. White dress shirt. Grey tie. Glasses. A brief sojourn to the kitchen led to day old coffee, and some stale, bran-based cereal. The brand didn’t matter, but Hinckley had found that as he grew older, the fiber level had increasing importance to him. He sat, ate, and looked out the window. He watched the traffic out his apartment window. Hinckley caught himself staring at a woman in a blue pea coat standing on the corner of the intersection he was above. With each of her movements he felt he knew her better. He startled himself by catching sight of his own reflection in the window.

He took a deep breath, and he heard his name called from on stage. It was his cue. He bounded on stage, microphone in hand. He couldn’t hear himself thinking over the deafening cheers of his audience. He turned towards the sound, and was greeted by blinding lights. As his eyes adjusted, he could make out the faces of those who had cared enough to get front row seats, and the shapes of those who didn’t care where they sat, just as long as they could experience what he had to offer.

The woman crossed the street, and Hinckley turned away from the window. He moved to his bathroom. He put on some deodorant, and combed his hair. He sighed. Should he just let it go grey? The color it was now seemed unnatural. With a bittersweet epiphany, he realized that soon he wouldn’t have to make that decision. He turned on the faucet, neither too hot nor too cold. He grabbed off-brand cinnamon toothpaste, and a toothbrush he really should have thrown out months ago. He glanced up into the greasy mirror that hung above his sink.

Stewart waited for the applause to cease before starting his set. He thanked the crowd for coming out to see him, and poked fun at them for having to pay to see him, when he felt his wife and children would, in fact, pay not to see him. The audience laughed. That laugh felt good. It filled him with a kind of warmth from the inside out. He smiled, and went on with his act.

Black shoes. He grabbed his coat, and opened the door into the hallway of his apartment building. The smell hit Hinckley like a slap in the face. He locked the door behind him. The elevator was at the other end of the hall. He felt the weight of his briefcase, and wondered what was inside. What has worth hauling this weight around everyday of his life? He felt as is he was Atlas, holding the weight of the earth, but instead lead graced his shoulders. Hinckley hit garage button on the elevator panel. He walked to his 1998 silver Toyota Camry. He opened the door, and sat in the drivers seat. He buckled the seat-beat, and adjusted the rearview mirror.

Another one-liner. Stewart riffed on politics using a light touch, just enough to inspire levity and not despair into the hearts of his audience. He wanted them to smile, and feel what he felt. He spoke about his family. About his little girl, who was just learning to write, and how he felt her handwriting was better than his own. About his first job, when he had accidently spilled coffee on his boss on his first day. They laughed. Stewart listened to their response, trusting his instincts to let him know when to deliver his next line.

Hinckley started the car. He left the parking garage, nearly missing a speeding SUV that had cut him off at the last second. He exhaled, and continued on his way. As he drove he noticed trash littering the sides of the road. Fast food wrappers blanketed the median, and plastic cups rolled aimlessly in the street. He blinked and the next thing he knew he had hit a pothole. His coffee spilt from his cup, and his black slacks were drenched. He was thankful that the coffee had cooled off some. He had lost the top to his thermos years ago. Forty-five minutes later he arrived at work. He turned down the visor, and unsent bill payments came fluttering out.

He had saved his best for last. He knew it would get the biggest laugh, and he would leave the audience on the right note. Stewart paused, and thought of how proud his children would be when they got older and realized that their father had been a comedian. The most important job on earth, he thought. He delivered his closer, and thanked the crowd. They cheered, still laughing. Steward took a small bow, and stepped off stage.

Hinckley sighed. He opened the door to his place of work, and the same tired bell chimed, signifying that he had arrived, but it hardly ever told him a customer had done so. When he got to his desk, he placed his briefcase and what was left of his coffee on his desk. He walked off into the showroom, turning on the light. Light blinded him momentarily, as his eyes got used to the glare. He sold mirrors to banquets halls and dance schools, and in each of them, he saw what could have been.